

# Digitalization, COVID-19, and the Future of Women Workers in the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

*Even before the pandemic, digitalization had been rapidly changing life for all workers, women and men, inside and outside the workplace. Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, it has presented opportunities and threats, tending to reproduce inequalities based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and other differentiating factors. Using desk review, key informant interviews, and participant observation, the study looks in general at the experiences of female workers in the Philippines during the pandemic but focuses in particular at their COVID-related adaptations at the formal, informal, and gig economies. Examining the responses of organized women workers to the impact of digitalization during the pandemic reveals their exercise of agency and collective action. Adapting the future of workers approach—which reframes the discourse away from technology and brings it back to people and their perspectives on the changes in work—and a gender perspective, the research argues that harnessing the benefits of digitalization for the future of women workers in the Philippines depends on effective regulation and positive action. The paper makes recommendations to create an enabling policy environment for all citizens, especially women workers, in the digital world and to fulfill human rights towards realizing digital, gender, social, and economic justice.*

*Keywords: future of work, digitalization, COVID-19 pandemic, women workers, Philippines*

## **Introduction**

Even before the pandemic, digitalization had been rapidly changing life for all workers—women and men, inside and outside the workplace (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018; Picot & Spath, 2020). Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, it has presented opportunities and threats, with the latter tending to reproduce inequalities based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity, nationality, and other differentiating factors (UN Women & Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022).

This paper contributes to a robust literature on the responses of organized women to the gendered impact of digitalization during the pandemic. While the literature is substantial on the regional scales, little has been written on the Philippine case and thus the study focuses on this experience. The research remains exploratory as data gathering during the pandemic presented limitations, but the findings nonetheless can serve as take-off points for further study.

Using desk review, key informant interviews, and participant observation, the study looks in general at the experiences of female workers in the Philippines during the pandemic but focuses in particular at their COVID-related adaptations at the formal, informal, and gig economies. Examining the responses of organized women workers to the impact of digitalization during the pandemic reveals their exercise of agency and collective action. Adapting the future of workers approach—which reframes the discourse away from technology and brings it back to people and their perspectives on the changes in work—the research argues that harnessing the benefits of digitalization for the future of women workers in the Philippines depends on effective regulation and positive action, such as government subsidies and support by the private sector and civil society.

The next section reviews the related literature and reveals the gap in assessing the Philippine case. The succeeding section explains the theoretical framework of the study and describes the methodology. The main section discusses the findings and analysis by exploring the experiences of organized women workers during the pandemic in relation to digitalization. The paper's conclusion summarizes the findings and provides a tentative set of recommendations.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Well before the onset of the pandemic, a digital gender divide limited the possibilities for women to benefit from digitalization. Indicators such as access to a phone, a computer, and the internet reveal gendered disadvantages (Picot & Spath, 2020).

While digitalization opens up opportunities for women, the existing gender division of labor still presented limitations. Thus, in India, the advent of online payments is a boon to small enterprises, many of which are owned and operated by women, and who may have been unbanked and unable to benefit from modern finance (Picot & Spath, 2020). Yet, due to the wide digital gender divide in the country—with only 15% of women being internet-enabled and only 25% owning a smartphone compared to 41% of men (GSMA Intelligence, 2021)—male entrepreneurs instead of females may gain more from digitalization. Some 30% of micro and small businesses are owned by women in Asia (ILO, 2018). But only 17% of females had internet access across South Asia (ILO, 2018). These bare both the possibilities and limits of digitalization for improving women's outcomes.

The rise of the platform economy may be an advantage to women as it affords them livelihood and income generating engagements even though they are mainly at home fulfilling family and community responsibilities (Partenio, 2020). Yet, the technical skills required of platform work presents a barrier to many women (Picot & Spath, 2020). Thus, on the one hand, the number of women engaged as drivers in Grab, a popular Southeast Asian ride-hailing app, rose by 230% in 2017 year-on-year (Grab, 2018). But on the other hand, the freelancer status of employment might mean the maintenance of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Further, vulnerable work conditions persist in app work without lightening the double burden of women (ILO, 2018; Picot & Spath, 2020).

Jobs that are lower on the pay and skill scale are most at risk of being lost due to the fourth industrial revolution (ILO, 2018). Unfortunately, these are also the occupations and industries, such as retail and manufacturing, and administrative and clerical work, that are disproportionately feminized (Picot & Spath, 2020; Wesley & Midgley, 2019).

In India, Thailand, and the Philippines, there is an above average number of female researchers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). However, women are underrepresented in the upper levels of management in STEM disciplines everywhere (Thornton, 2019). Thus, it is imperative to promote and incentivize girls and women to enter STEM for them to take up emerging jobs in technology and gain the dividends from automation and digitalization (ILO, 2018).

The pandemic and its attendant lockdowns have affected sectors in the Philippines that are tightly integrated in the global economy, such as business process outsourcing and export processing zones, where women workers are predominant. There has been a sharp rise in unemployment and underemployment and an ominous decrease in the labor force participation rate (de Vera, 2020), especially for women (Cabegin, 2020). There also has been a large shift from formal to informal work (ILO, 2020a, 2020c; International Trade Union Confederation [ITUC], 2021). Informal workers have fared much worse than formal sector employees who have been partly shielded by social protection safety nets (ILO, 2020b). With women accounting for the majority of informal workers, they have been rendered worse off than men by the pandemic's impacts (Velasco, 2022). Online work, such as online selling and platform work, has prospered and became the recourse for many laid-off workers (LinkedIn, 2020).

Because of the pre-existing digital gender gap, the acceleration of digitalization due to the pandemic has worsened outcomes for women (Jiexi, 2021; Nortajuddin, 2020; Rahmadani et al., 2021; Sey, 2021). Restrictions on mobility in the first two years of the pandemic made it difficult for women workers in the informal economy to collect emergency cash assistance. Many of them do not have digital bank accounts and lack access to mobile money transfer services (Ratan et al., 2021; WIEGO, 2020).

The increasing prevalence of work-from-home arrangements may have allowed more women to enter the labor market. Likewise, jobs in online platforms in such lines as transcription or tutoring may have favored women. E-commerce also allows unemployed or underemployed women to acquire gainful employment (ADB, 2021). On the other hand,

working from home blurs the boundaries between work to earn an income and domestic work and so, in most cases, it aggravates the burden of unpaid care work of women. Confinement in the home, coupled with misogyny in cyberspace, have rendered many women and girls vulnerable to gender-based violence (Fitzgerald, 2021; Julliand et al., 2021).

Although the pandemic has spurred positive impacts for women in the digitalization rush (Human Resources Online, 2021), the general trend is that the COVID-19 crisis has widened the gender gap at global, regional, and national levels (Dalal & Mathews, 2021; WEF, 2021). Whether the positive or negative effects will continue to predominate will depend on effective regulation and positive action, ranging from digital skills trainings at the micro level to digital access and rights at the macro scale (Colclough, 2021; ILO, 2018; Picot & Spath, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

A search on EBSCO using the setting “all time” and the keywords with Boolean operators “Philippines AND (woman or female or women or females) AND (pandemic or epidemic or outbreak or COVID-19 or coronavirus) AND (digitalisation or digitalization or digitization or digitisation or digital transformation)” yielded only three references with none relevant to the study. While not exhaustive, the result suggests that the Philippine case is understudied. Thus, the current research fills in the gap.

The literature review bared that digitalization has impacts on the formal, informal, and platform economies and so it is important to look at these three sectors. The study sought to answer this key question: What do the COVID-related adaptations of women workers in the formal, informal, and platform economies reveal about the contradictory impact of digitalization and the enabling role of regulation?

To supplement the main research question, the study has the following specific objectives:

1. Examine how women’s agency and the collective actions of women’s and workers’ organizations have favorably influenced the way digitalization affects women’s participation in the labor market.

2. Describe good practices implemented by trade unions, informal workers' associations, and women's rights organizations to narrow the digital gender divide and enable women to harness the benefits of digitalization.
3. Draw policy recommendations that can realistically respond to the challenges posed by digitalization to the attainment of women workers' rights.

## **Framework and Methodology of the Study**

Understanding the connection between digitalization, COVID-19, and gender inequality is sharpened by key analytical ideas from the future of workers approach and a gender perspective. Deploying these analytical concepts aids in unpacking the digital gender gap and enlarges the context for understanding the impact of the pandemic on women workers in the formal, informal, and platform economies.

The future of workers approach (Gupta et al., 2018; Schulze-Cleven, 2021), reframes the discourse away from technology and brings it back to people, particularly workers, and their views on changes in the world of work. It provides an important perspective in analyzing the impact of digitalization during the pandemic on the labor market prospects of women workers in the formal and informal economies. The approach emphasizes human agency amidst digitalization and emphasizes the crucial social issues of inequality, exclusion, informalization, and insecurity that cannot be resolved by technological change alone.

The popular narrative on the future of work tends to slide to technological determinism. The pessimistic interpretation predicts the disruption of workplaces and the abolition of work due to accelerated automation and robotization, especially with the advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning. The optimistic view asserts that the most pressing social issues, such as climate change, can be solved by technological fixes (WEF, 2016). The future of work discourse, however, narrows the scope too much to the role of technological disruption to the neglect of human agency.

For Schulze-Cleven (2021, p. 25), the future of workers approach

“advocates for revaluing workers, exploring possibilities through collective agency and appreciating reproductive work as a crucible of innovation.” Changes brought about by technology on the lives of working people are indeed important but no more than other crucial trends in society. A perspective focusing on the future of workers necessarily looks at the possibilities of workers exercising collective agency to change the balance of power.

Moreover, Schulze-Cleven (2021) insisted on highlighting the role of paid and unpaid domestic care and community work as essential to any interrogation of the reality of work at present. Transforming the gender division of labor inside and outside the home is a necessity to enable women and men to share household and care responsibilities and enjoy the benefits of gainful employment in an equitable manner.

Employing a gender perspective necessarily involves using key analytical concepts, such as the gender division of labor and occupational segregation. A closely related concept is intersectionality, or how gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, location, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and other differentiating factors impinge on women’s perceptions and realities of digitalization during the pandemic (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2020). As Bachelet (2021, para. 5) succinctly described when analysing the global reality of digital exclusion:

The offline population is disproportionately poor, rural, older and female. Women and girls form the majority of the estimated 3.7 billion unconnected people in the world. Those who are subjected to intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination are even less likely to be online.

A gender perspective reveals the male domination in the ownership, control, and management of digital technologies. The STEM disciplines, which are the source of digital expertise and innovation, are predominantly male fields of knowledge and practice with only 36% of STEM graduates being women and out of which a bit less than half are actually employed in STEM fields (Mondares, 2025). Algorithms used in artificial intelligence have been found to be gender-biased.

Work from home and repeated lockdowns have intensified the

multiple burdens on women and appear to have further entrenched the gender division of labor (UN Women, 2020). Work from home provides some flexibility on the part of wives and mothers to juggle their time between their paid work and their unpaid care work. Still, online work from home often is just an updated version of the traditional, insecure, and unprotected forms of home-based, often subcontracted work that grassroots women continue to undertake because it is compatible with household work.

Despite the daunting and immense challenges posed by digital exclusion amid the pandemic, many women have responded to these challenges with creativity, resilience, and solidarity. Empowerment anchored on women's agency and participation in various forms of workers' and gender-based organizations, often working in tandem with other stakeholders, remains a beacon of light in these challenging times. As these organizations weave together the strands of digital, gender, social, and economic justice (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2020), it becomes even clearer that human rights and freedoms comprise the foundation of women's entitlements and the types of work they want to pursue in the digital future.

The future of workers approach and a gender perspective guided the study in critically understanding the possibilities of digital technology to both improve and worsen the lives of women in their various roles in the household, community, workplace, and society.

The study employed a qualitative method through semi-structured key informant interviews of mostly female but also a few male leaders of Homenet Southeast Asia, Homenet Philippines, PATAMABA, Rosario Workers Association (RWA), United Cavite Workers Association (UCWA), Partido Manggagawa, Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa (SENTRO), and Kapatiran sa Dalawang Gulong (KAGULONG). They shared their experiences, advocacy campaigns, and good practices as well as proposed policy recommendations. Respondents gave their consent to reveal their names but their members' identities—who were mentioned in their stories—were anonymized. The interviews were conducted through Zoom and phone as the study was conducted in 2021 during the pandemic. Participant observation was also used as the authors were, separately, members of

Homenet and Partido Manggagawa. The authors' own insights informed the questions for the semi-structured interviews and were used to validate data gathered from respondents.

## **Findings and Analysis: Response of Organized Women in Informal, Formal, and Platform Economies**

### *Home-Based Women Workers Confront the Crisis*

As soon as the pandemic struck and lockdowns were imposed, there was no alternative but to explore existing means of communication, such as mobile phones and internet services, to provide home-based workers organized by PATAMABA and Homenet Philippines with updated news, knowledge, awareness, and motivation to engage in collective responses. Soon, meetings, webinars, and assemblies mediated by Zoom became the principal mode for re-establishing social connections beyond the household and for continuing work that was rudely but unsuccessfully interrupted by the pandemic.

Ana (not her real name) is an active member of a PATAMABA chapter in Sta. Cruz, Laguna. She is an informal worker, a self-employed entrepreneur who sews and sells rags for household use. When the pandemic struck, Ana and her fellow PATAMABA temporarily lost their livelihoods due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. The stores from where they bought cloth and other sewing materials shuttered. Public transport was prohibited and so they could not market their products. Other members of the same chapter who were home-based workers and engaged in manufacturing of rice cakes and other foodstuffs were similarly affected.

However, their chapter was a recipient of PATAMABA training sessions on business development and building a savings and loan association before the pandemic. Thus, they had the skills, knowledge, and attitude on how to navigate the transition to online selling. With moral and material support from Homenet Philippines, Ana and her colleagues were able to shift to sourcing materials and sewing face masks using the internet. Still, this was not without challenges. "Signal was sometimes weak and so internet connection was spotty. Worse, we were forced to walk at times to consummate transactions as the limited transport options were very expensive," Ana related.

Nonetheless, their sense of organization, the skills trainings they acquired, and experience as a cohesive group facilitated their adaptations. They pooled part of the emergency COVID-19 cash assistance that they received so their chapter could set up a mini-wet market in the vicinity of their houses as the lockdown eased. This hybrid livelihood—engaging in online and traditional vending—augmented their incomes amidst the difficulties of the pandemic.

Josephine Parilla of Homenet Philippines explained that the experience of Ana and her fellow home-based workers was replicated in many instances across other PATAMABA chapters across the country. Online selling became the usual recourse of most members. Homenet Philippines provided concrete solidarity, ensured lessons learned were disseminated, and advocated on a societal level.

There are similar examples of capacity-building, organization-strengthening, and networking through digital means from other country Homenets (Homenet organizations). In the Philippines, home-based work leaders of Homenet Philippines and PATAMABA used digital technology to do participatory action research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis in four localities. They conducted and attended online training and webinars on social protection advocacy, youth entrepreneurship, e-marketing, and other topics in cooperation with regional and international organizations, such as Homenet Southeast Asia, Asian Solidarity Economy Council, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). Due to COVID-19-imposed restrictions on face-to-face organizational meetings and assemblies, Homenet Philippines conducted its fourth congress and elected a new set of officers via Zoom.

All the country Homenets belonging to subregional networks, like Homenet Southeast Asia and Homenet South Asia, look for inspiration to the “mother” of all Homenets—the more than 1.9 million-strong Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) based in Ahmedabad, India, and in existence since the 1970s. SEWA has been “handholding” or providing steady and consistent support to its members to clamber up digital platforms knowing that these are new and strange vantage points for the empowerment of grassroots women. Through such careful and patient

capacity-building, its members are slowly able to stay connected, access important information, develop and expand markets for their products and services, and engage in business-to-customer transactions. Beyond handholding, SEWA, which runs its own bank, is engaged in large-scale financial inclusion initiatives by building and expanding networks of grassroots banking correspondents called *saathis*, lately with support from the State Bank of India (Ratan et al., 2021).

SEWA led efforts for the establishment of Homenet International, built from existing subregional and regional home-based workers' networks in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It was supposed to be launched in Nepal in early 2020, but due to COVID-19, it was launched virtually via Zoom in February 2021. Homenet International now regularly organizes global Zoom-based celebrations and webinars with multiple-language translation channels for consolidating, capacitating, and inspiring home-based workers all over the world. This example illustrates how the use of digital technology can be maximized for the empowerment of grassroots women.

Displaced garment workers, mainly women, in the Philippines became home-based workers engaged in value chains for local apparel manufacturers. Situated at the lowest end of the garment supply chain, these workers are paid at piece rates, without benefits and lack social security. This situation was forced on them since they could not find work in the export processing zone due to being blacklisted as unionists. Nonetheless, they found a certain autonomy because they can work at their own pace and without a boss. They own, individually or collectively, high-speed sewing machines due to investments using the separation pay they received when they were terminated as export processing zone workers.

A group of them is composed of former union members who had been fired by their Korean employers in order to bust their fledging organizations. Their unions are affiliated to RWA, a legitimate labor organization that is registered with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and whose mission is to organize workers in the Cavite Economic Zone, the biggest government-operated export processing zone in the Philippines.

When the pandemic struck, many value chains were disrupted, and thus many of these Cavite home-based workers faced loss of their livelihood. To adapt, they made ready-to-wear clothes and washable face masks but started selling them online using social media platforms like Facebook. Unlike Homenet, this was without any institutional support. Thus, they had difficult barriers to surmount—mainly lack of training in forming a small business as well as in online marketing, and most importantly in generating capital—because the shift was made as an individual or small group effort. RWA had neither the material resources nor the expertise in digital skills to support the home-based workers. Thus, the groups of home-based workers have remained dispersed and without coordination despite doing the same kind of work and facing the same predicament.

The group Partido Manggagawa discussed with the workers the option of pooling part of their cash assistance so they can form an informal cooperative for a livelihood project. Partido Manggagawa sought the support of other groups so that training in digital skills can be provided to the workers, as well as additional capital. RWA's Jessel Autida said that this is in response to the lessons from the experience of the home-based workers who faced challenges in transitioning to online selling without any institutional backing.

The future of workers approach shines a light on the contradictory experiences of home-based workers of PATAMABA and RWA. On the one hand, the vulnerabilities they suffer due to the informality of their livelihood was exacerbated by the pandemic. On the other hand, the exercise of agency by organized women to respond to the extreme challenges they faced amidst COVID-19. The future of workers lens provides a more granular understanding of the lived experiences of informal women workers. Reframing away from the mainstream future of work narrative rebalances a one-sided view that either treats digitalization as a blessing or a curse. In reality, as the stories of home-based workers reveal, technological change amidst a pandemic brings challenges that can be overcome through collective action and adaptation. Still, as Ana's story shows, collective strength cannot completely overcome structural barriers like poor mobile phone signal for rural areas.

Nonetheless, the contrasting experiences of the members of

PATAMABA and the RWA reveal the material difference that a more cohesive organization provides. PATAMABA was better prepared to face the disruptions brought by the pandemic unlike RWA. A more robust institutional scaffolding afforded PATAMABA and Homenet Philippines members better outcomes. Though delayed, RWA was basically traversing the same path as PATAMABA with their plan to pool their members' small surplus for a cooperative livelihood project.

### *Unionized Women Cope With the Pandemic's Impact*

Workers of several garment factories in the Cavite export processing zone sought the assistance of RWA for their labor cases after suffering from pandemic-related closures. Likewise, workers at an apparel firm in Bulacan and a glass firm in Laguna approached Partido Manggagawa, according to Judy Miranda, Secretary General of the group. With guidance from organized groups, workers called the attention of DOLE, which called for mediation meetings, but employers invariably did not even bother to attend. Subsequently, complaints regarding illegal dismissal, non-payment of wages, and separation pay were lodged with the labor court.

While the cases were being heard, UCWA and Partido Manggagawa empowered the workers through labor education and union formation. The workers participated in a rights advocacy project with the Danish Trade Union Development Agency on promotion of decent work and freedom of association. The increased awareness among the workers of their labor and human rights led to their active participation in several labor activities. Levy Equipado of UCWA stated that among these activities was a protest at the DOLE national office just before International Women's Day in 2021. The women's rally was timed for a dialogue with labor officials. Although without any previous experience in social dialogue, the women garment workers tabled their demands and negotiated with DOLE officers. The labor officials promised to look into their cases and offered to provide immediate assistance through the government's cash-for-work program.

Judy Miranda described how unions in the Philippines, as elsewhere, adapted to the extended and strict lockdowns by shifting their work and activities online. The labor coalition Nagkaisa conducted an online rally

on Labor Day in 2020 that gathered several thousand participants over Zoom and Facebook Live. Labor education as well as organizational meetings went virtual. The shift faced difficulties at the start because many workers, especially members belonging to the informal economy, were not familiar with Zoom or had no access to Zoom-enabled gadgets. But as the pandemic progressed and the lockdowns extended, a combination of training and practice proved useful in getting more members onto Zoom for meetings, webinars, and online events.

Aside from digital skills, access was also a major concern. Most trade union members from both the formal and informal economies do not have internet connections at home due to their prohibitive costs. Purchasing a mobile data package is expensive for many people. Thus, trade unions have provided communication allowances to some members, especially to women in the informal economy, who could not otherwise afford to participate in online meetings. As a result, attendance in labor meetings and webinars became more consistent. Local unions also did the same thing to incentivize membership participation.

Judy Miranda explained that Partido Manggagawa, which is a member of the Nagkaisa labor coalition, took it a step further by convening small groups of informal workers and union members in backyard open-air settings as hubs. In these hubs, small groups were able to participate in online events using just one smartphone connected to a mobile data package.

Partido Manggagawa also launched a weekly podcast during the pandemic with women workers as the main target audience. The podcast started in 2021 and discussed topics as varied as expanded maternity leave, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and COVID-19-related labor issuances. The podcast is shared on social media and is boosted on Facebook to reach a wider audience.

Similarly, SENTRO, another constituent organization of Nagkaisa, has been hosting a twice-a-week radio show for workers, according to CJ Castillo, a member of the union. Started in 2016, the radio program continues to this day. To adapt to the lockdown and social distancing protocols, hosts pre-recorded the show and then sent the episode to the radio station for airing. The recording is also shared on social media to

reach more members and the public too.

The stories of the respondents who were export zone workers, mostly engaged in apparel manufacturing, suggest an experience that is different from the findings of studies that predict significant job losses as a result of technological innovations. Gurumurthy and Chami (2019) cite that 57% of jobs to be lost by women will be a result of automation in labor intensive manufacturing in garments, footwear, electronics, and auto industries. Similarly, ILO (2018) predicted mechanization will displace low-skilled work in manufacturing. The Philippine case does not appear to be an outlier as other studies of mass terminations during the pandemic point to economic losses, if not union busting as causes (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2020, 2021; Kyritsis et al., 2020). One way to understand this is that “job automation takes place only where it is both technically and economically feasible” (African Development Bank [AfDB] et al., 2018, p. 49). Thus, paradoxically, the low technology character of garment manufacturing in the Philippines made it resilient to digital job displacement. This aligns with the future of workers approach which rejects the monocausal view of digitalization but opens to a multivariate causality—that workers’ woes owe more to employer exploitation, state abuse, and other sociopolitical factors.

Similar to home-based women workers, unionized women in export zones also exercised agency by forming unions, for some of them; and for all of them, by launching protests and lobbying authorities for the redress of their grievances.

While home-based workers shifted to online selling, unionized workers navigated a steep learning curve to online modalities of education and advocacy. Further, the digital divide created extra challenges as women workers had to be supported by subsidies for mobile load and internet access, or by the formation of hubs to compensate for members who lack smartphones.

### *Outbreak of Protests and Organizing by Platform Workers*

Straddling the twilight zone between the formal and the informal economies, the gig economy was both disrupted and enabled by the COVID-19 crisis. Constructed on the ramparts of digital technology,

firms and workers engaged in the platform economy arguably had better chances of navigating the labor market troubles created by the pandemic. An estimated 1.3 million to 1.5 million Filipinos, many of them women, engaged in the gig economy and online freelancing prior to the pandemic, in such jobs as web designing, multimedia content and editing, advertising, accounting, IT networking, engineering, architecture, data science and analytics, film, animation, and game development (Ofreneo, 2019). These jobs were reported as least affected by the pandemic (Piadano & Lirio, 2021).

The pandemic generated an outbreak in grievances and even protests among platform workers, specifically food-delivery riders. Among app workers, food-delivery riders have been the most militant in terms of engaging in organizing into associations or unions and mobilizing actions and protests (Trappmann et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, several high-profile protests broke out among workers in different food delivery and courier apps, who had a visible role as essential workers during the pandemic. In November 2020, some 700 riders of the food delivery app Foodpanda held a protest in the form of a unity ride that ended at the national office of DOLE. The riders were protesting the reduction in pay and new rules that endanger their safety (Partido Manggagawa, 2020). About one in 10 of the participants in the protest were women, according to Don Pangan, KAGULONG leader. Then in 2021, a group of 300 Foodpanda riders from Davao City organized another mass action to protest low pay. However, before the group could stage its offline action, Foodpanda jumped the gun and suspended them for 10 years (Mendoza, 2021). Similarly, riders in the courier app Lalamove also organized a protest by going around Manila to highlight their demand for higher pay and for scrapping the delivery bag rental fee. The protesting riders were also terminated by the app company (Sandoval, 2021). All these labor disputes led the Philippine government to issue an “advisory” on July 2021 that sought to clarify the applicability of labor regulations to app riders and their employment status (DOLE, 2021). But since the advisory merely reiterated the vagaries of existing government rules and app practice, it really did not resolve anything.

Workers in ride-hailing, courier, and food delivery service are predominantly men, and women are an exception. The few female riders

face discrimination from fellow riders, app users, and the platforms, which are definitely not equal opportunity employers. Patriarchal traditions and beliefs continue to be barriers to female jobs in transport (Sil et al., 2023). Maui de Jesus, coordinator for KAGULONG's women's collective stated that women riders face sexist remarks on the job that belittle their abilities. Among these are snide remarks like, "Are you capable of such a job?", "How many hours can [you] manage working as a rider?" or "You are too pretty to be a rider." De Jesus also recalled that female riders also had to navigate gender stereotyping and being labelled lesbians. In one egregious incident during the pandemic, female rider and KAGULONG member Bea (not her real name) was confronted at a checkpoint near the boundary of Marikina and San Mateo after delivering a package and was asked by a male police officer to remove her helmet and reveal her long hair to prove that she was a woman rider. She refused since the helmet also doubled as a protection against COVID-19.

The motorcycle riders' rights group KAGULONG was founded in 2020 in response to the discriminatory COVID-19 protocols issued by the government. KAGULONG's initial demand was the repeal of a policy banning riding in tandem, which is commonly a male driver and the female partner in the pillion seat. Riding in pillion was the recourse of many couples when public transportation was banned but women workers needed to go to work. In the course of the pandemic, KAGULONG initiated the formation of a women's committee and all-female riders' clubs. It also engaged in advocacy around violence against women and children along with awareness-raising about human rights among riders.

The gender dimensions of work in the platform economy come out clearly in the Philippine case. Correlating with the literature, jobs in digitally-enabled platforms opened labor market opportunities for women. Yet, its precarious nature and decent work deficits led to a rise of riders protests during the pandemic. The minority of female riders faced sexual harassment and gender stereotyping, a problem not confronted by male counterparts.

Platform workers exercised agency by forming associations, launching protests, and lobbying for reforms, such as better pay. The formation of KAGULONG was one response of aggrieved riders. It is noteworthy that KAGULONG's birth was occasioned by the demand for the lifting of

the ban on pillion riding, a reform that had a distinct gender dimension during the pandemic period. Since then, KAGULONG continued to integrate women's concerns and advocacy despite male dominance within the riding community. Still, it remains to be seen whether KAGULONG's push for female involvement and leadership are scalable and replicable.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of the study contest the mainstream future of work account that the changes wrought by the fourth industrial revolution will usher in a brave new world for workers, in its optimistic sense, or tip the world to a dystopian future, in its pessimistic version. Instead, the Philippine case shows that digitalization can be a force for good, only if purposive regulation and action are undertaken to mitigate the risks, including surmounting gendered barriers. Across the different sectors within the informal, formal, and gig economies, women workers in the Philippines have faced difficult challenges in navigating the disruptions brought about by digitalization and the pandemic. In certain circumstances and for a select number of women, digitalization and even the pandemic may have opened up livelihood possibilities and improvements in working conditions. But the gender division of labor remains well-entrenched inside and outside the home, creating hindrances for improved outcomes for women amidst changes in the world of work as a result of digitalization and the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis like no other that the world has ever seen, claiming the lives of millions, and triggering economic losses in the billions of dollars. Nevertheless, it also has moved organized forces of grassroots women into action to address the pandemic and spur livelihood recovery. This was done using digital instruments to raise awareness, coordinate solidarity-based activities at many levels, and build online commercial markets necessary to survive the crisis and overcome its negative effects. Women workers generally do not sit idle as their lives are wracked by crisis after crisis. They resist when they can, and they adapt as best as they can to changing conditions. They grab at viable alternatives when they are presented, or create them when there are none. Women workers in the Philippines exercised agency by creating adaptations to the crisis of the pandemic and utilizing the benefits of digitalization. Outcomes are improved for women workers when they act collectively

and leverage their organized power.

Given the results of this study, a multistakeholder approach is necessary to build synergy among the various social actors, focusing on creating an enabling policy environment for women workers in the digital world. The main players are trade unions, informal workers' associations, and women's and other organizations of the marginalized who are the claim holders in terms of demanding respect, protection, and the fulfilment of human rights towards eventually realizing digital, gender, social, and economic justice. The principal duty bearer is the State, which is obliged to provide an enabling environment for the progressive realization of human rights.

The following are the recommendations of the study for women's organizations, trade unions, and informal workers' associations:

1. Develop knowledge and awareness regarding urgent digital issues, such as internet access and gadget ownership, with a human rights and gender perspective. Consider how they can be concretely addressed through collective action, as evidenced by good practices.
2. Provide capacity-building opportunities for union members, informal workers, women, and other marginalized groups in the use of digital tools and data analytics for organizing, awareness-raising, advocacy, networking, and participation in social dialogue and policy-making bodies at various levels.
3. Facilitate access to and use of e-wallets, e-commerce and marketing facilities, e-portals for job placements, local digital supply chains, and alternative state-provided and/or non-profit platforms that enable workers in both the formal and informal economies, farmers, women entrepreneurs, and producers to recover and sustain their incomes and livelihoods.
4. Campaign for the digital rights of all citizens, especially women and workers, that ensure privacy rights, governance of big data, and the eradication of gender-based and other forms of violence in the cyberspace while ensuring freedom of expression.

5. Increase networking among women's rights organizations, trade unions, informal workers' associations, youth groups, coalitions of older persons, and other marginalized sectors, which can in turn create forums for advocating universal and gender-responsive social protection and services to effectively respond to the impacts of the pandemic, accelerated digitalization, the climate emergency, and other crises of global proportions.

Meanwhile, the study proposes the following reforms for action by the government:

1. Provide digital public goods and services for all people, with a focus on ensuring that women and girls can acquire digital skills, education in STEM and new technologies, internet access, and gadget ownership.
2. Ensure data governance at the national level, effective regulation, and fair taxation of big technology companies.
3. Institute robust and gender-responsive social protection mechanisms, such as income and job guarantees, and unemployment insurance to mitigate the impact of the pandemic-related economic, health, and social crises on working people (especially working women).
4. Foster participatory mechanisms that will enable organized workers in both the formal and informal economies as well as women's rights and other civil society organizations to represent themselves in policymaking on digital concerns.

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