



Regular Article

Social business and tech-driven entrepreneurship: Inclusion or exploitation? A critical interpretive analysis from the Global South

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Business technology
Digital social business
Gender
Gig economy
Global South

ABSTRACT

Digital platforms and tech-driven social businesses are increasingly promoted as pathways to inclusion and entrepreneurship in the Global South. This study critically examines whether these models genuinely advance economic empowerment or reproduce precarious labor relations under the rhetoric of innovation. Using a critical qualitative methodology, the study conducts a comparative interpretive analysis of secondary sources, including academic studies, policy reports, and platform documents from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Comparative analysis across sectors such as digital finance, ride-hailing, delivery services, and online marketplaces reveals persistent tensions between inclusion narratives and material labor conditions. While platforms expand access to work, they frequently rely on algorithmic control, externalize risk, and reinforce gendered and structural inequalities. The findings highlight a pattern of “inclusive exclusion,” whereby marginalized workers are incorporated into platform economies through expanded access but remain structurally excluded from meaningful agency, protection, and redistributive benefits. Reflecting on these dynamics, the study calls for stronger regulatory oversight, algorithmic transparency, and participatory governance models. Overall, the research contributes a critical perspective on the limits of tech-driven social entrepreneurship in promoting equitable digital development.

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital platforms and technology-enabled business models has fundamentally restructured economic activity in the Global South (Heeks, 2022). Framed within discourses of “inclusive innovation” and “social business,” these platforms—ranging from ride-sharing apps and digital marketplaces to mobile finance and gig economy services—are often celebrated as democratizing forces (Karahana, 2024; Yunus, 2017). The gig economy refers to a labor market

where work is organized through short-term, task-based, or on-demand jobs rather than permanent employment (Khan et al., 2023). Workers—often called gig workers or independent contractors—are paid per task, ride, delivery, or project instead of receiving a fixed salary (Sony, Nupur, et al., 2025). Proponents argue that such models foster entrepreneurship, expand access to income-generating opportunities, and empower marginalized groups, particularly women and youth in countries such as Bangladesh, Nigeria, Kenya, and India (Islam, 2024). International development institutions, technology corporations,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2026.103128>

Received 18 July 2025; Received in revised form 12 June 2026; Accepted 15 June 2026

Available online 20 June 2026

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and local policymakers frequently champion these digital solutions as catalysts for inclusive growth and sustainable development (Islam, 2024; Rakshit et al., 2025).

However, these optimistic narrative obscures the exploitative and uneven dynamics underlying platform-mediated economies. As critical scholars have pointed out, digital platforms do not emerge in a vacuum (Hasan & Sony, 2022; Sony, Nupur, et al., 2025); they are embedded in existing social, economic, and political hierarchies (Harracá et al., 2023). The gig economy, for instance, while marketed as a vehicle for flexibility and empowerment, often externalizes risk to workers, undermines labor protections, and relies on opaque algorithmic systems that reinforce managerial control and deepen precarity (Harracá et al., 2023; Törnberg, 2023). Moreover, gendered barriers to digital participation, limited digital literacy, and infrastructural deficits further entrench inequality, even as platforms claim to promote inclusion (Naveed et al., 2025).

This paper interrogates the tension between the eloquence of empowerment and the realities of exclusion within tech-enabled social business models operating in the Global South. Specifically, it asks: Do these platforms foster meaningful economic inclusion, or do they merely reconfigure exploitative labor relations under the guise of innovation? Drawing on critical comparative interpretive analysis of secondary literature from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the study explores how digital platforms restructure labor, governance, and value extraction in contexts shaped by postcolonial legacies and systemic underdevelopment.

By situating platform economies within broader theoretical frameworks—such as digital capitalism, feminist political economy, and critical development studies—this analysis challenges the assumption that technology is inherently emancipatory. Instead, it views the phantomization of labor through a structural lens that foregrounds power asymmetries, historical marginalization, and the commodification of social relations (Huda & Sony, 2024; Törnberg, 2023). It critically examines how platforms influence access to work and resources while simultaneously imposing new forms of surveillance, fragmentation, and control over laboring bodies.

Moreover, the study explores how discourses of “social business” function ideologically to depoliticize development, masking the exploitative conditions underpinning these new forms of enterprise (Yunus, 2017). The convergence of market logics with development goals often results in hybrid models that prioritize profitability over social justice, repackaging neoliberal governance as social innovation (Huda & Sony, 2024; Huyler et al., 2024). As such, platform capitalism in the Global South frequently operates less as a mechanism of inclusion and more as a vehicle for capital accumulation, data extraction, and labor flexibilization (Anwar et al., 2024).

In illuminating these dynamics, this research advances critical scholarship on digital labor and platform governance by explicitly challenging the normative assumption that tech-enabled social businesses represent a progressive alternative to capitalist platform models in the Global South. Rather than occupying a neutral middle ground, the study demonstrates that the convergence of social impact eloquence and platform capitalism constitutes a distinct mode of governance—one that simultaneously expands access while normalizing precarity, algorithmic control, and conditional inclusion.

By foregrounding this contradiction, the authors move beyond descriptive accounts of platform work to offer a critical re-theorization of “social business” as an ideological formation that can depoliticize labor exploitation under the language of empowerment. The study therefore pushes the literature forward by arguing that meaningful digital inclusion cannot be achieved through platform expansion alone, but requires structural interventions—including enforceable labor protections, democratic platform governance, and feminist and decolonial design principles—capable of redistributing power rather than merely extending participation. In doing so, the paper positions digital social business not as an inherently emancipatory solution, but as a contested

terrain whose outcomes depend on the political and institutional conditions under which platforms operate.

2. Literature review

The study is primarily anchored in the theoretical frameworks of platform capitalism and critical development studies, which together provide the central lens for analyzing how digital platforms restructure labor, governance, and value extraction in the Global South. Platform capitalism highlights how platforms commodify labor and data through algorithmic control and market intermediation, while critical development studies situate these dynamics within postcolonial inequalities and the politics of inclusion. Complementing these overarching frameworks, the study draws selectively on feminist political economy, socio-technical imaginaries, and moral economy as subsidiary, domain-specific lenses to capture the gendered, discursive, and experiential dimensions of platform-mediated work. This integrated approach ensures theoretical coherence while enabling a nuanced analysis of the tensions between empowerment and exploitation in tech-driven social business models.

2.1. Social business in the digital age

The notion of social business, popularized by Mohammad Yunus, was initially framed as a mission-oriented enterprise model that merges commercial sustainability with social impact (Huyler et al., 2024; Yunus, 2017; Yunus et al., 2010). In recent years, this concept has been reconfigured through its intersection with digital technologies—most notably mobile platforms, fintech solutions, and online marketplaces (Harracá et al., 2023; Qureshi et al., 2021). These tech-enabled social enterprises, particularly in the Global South, are often funded through development aid, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, or impact investment, allowing them to rapidly scale while claiming legitimacy within developmental discourses (Emmanuel et al., 2023; Yunus et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, critical scholars challenge the normative assumptions embedded in these models. For example, O'Connor (2024) argues that social entrepreneurship, in its digital form, is increasingly co-opted by neoliberal ideologies that privilege market logics over structural transformation. By contrast, Lizzi et al. (2025) extend this critique to the postcolonial context, contending that such enterprises, despite their progressive eloquence, often re-inscribe classed and gendered exclusions under the guise of empowerment. These critiques, advanced by Emmanuel et al. (2023), O'Connor (2024), and Lizzi et al. (2025), underscore a growing tension between the promise of inclusion and the practice of containment in digital social business models.

Yet, there remains a lack of empirical interrogation into how these contradictions manifest in everyday platform-intersect labor. Literature often stops short of analyzing the material consequences for marginalized workers (Alacovska et al., 2024; Arubayi, 2022), especially in relation to algorithmic governance and labor precarity.

2.2. Platform capitalism and the reconfiguration of digital labor

Raimi (2025) characterizes platform capitalism as a dominant economic model in which platforms act as monopolistic intermediaries extracting value from data, labor, and infrastructure. In the Global South, platforms such as Uber, Jumia, Pathao, and SafeBoda have restructured informal labor markets by converting them into digital gig economies (Anwar et al., 2024). While these platforms are often celebrated for offering flexible, scalable income opportunities, critical labor scholars have exposed the embedded precarity, algorithmic opacity, and asymmetrical power relations that shape workers' experiences (Alacovska et al., 2024; Cini, 2023).

Piletić (2024) highlights how digital labor is “taskified,” fragmented, and regulated through customer reviews, ratings, and automated

nudges—resulting in intensified labor discipline without corresponding worker protections. In weak regulatory environments, such models exacerbate historical patterns of labor informality and disempowerment (Jeong, 2023). What remains underexplored, however, is how tech-enabled social businesses, distinct from commercial platforms, replicate these dynamics while simultaneously deploying humanitarian or developmental rhetoric (Emmanuel et al., 2023). The hybridization of social impact goals and capitalist imperatives remains analytically underdeveloped (Egger, 2023).

2.3. Gender, digital labor, and structural inequities

Feminist scholarship critically foregrounds the gendered dimensions of digital inclusion. Rani et al. (2022) show that while platforms expand women's economic participation, they often reinforce traditional roles—placing women in low-paid, home-based, and invisible labor. Therefore, gendered labor segmentation is shaped not only by patriarchal norms but also by platform design, regulatory gaps, and safety concerns.

Furthermore, existing studies largely focus on binary gender experiences. Rogers and Christian (2025) reveal how gender-diverse individuals are structurally excluded from platform economies due to ID requirements, algorithmic assumptions, and cultural stigma. Moreover, van Esch et al. (2024) critiques the tokenistic inclusion efforts of tech platforms, which often serve as reputational strategies rather than vehicles for structural transformation. Few studies, such as Mohiuddin (2024) and Naveed et al. (2025), adopt an intersectional perspective to examine how race, class, gender identity, and digital infrastructure shape experiences within tech-driven social enterprises and whether gender inclusion initiatives produce meaningful redistributive outcomes rather than merely increasing visibility.

2.4. Sociotechnical imaginaries and the rhetoric of inclusion

Drawing from Kuchler and Stigson's (2024) concept of *sociotechnical imaginaries*, digital development narratives are often framed by utopian visions of progress and empowerment. These imaginaries, perpetuated by global institutions and tech elites, depict platform formation as a universal solution to poverty, unemployment, and marginalization (Islam, 2024). Yet, such narratives tend to depoliticize structural inequalities and reframe systemic problems as entrepreneurial challenges (Heeks, 2022).

Despite this, Rogers and Christian (2025) argue that the language of “inclusion” often obscures the commodification of marginalized labor under exploitative conditions. Building on this critique, the paper conceptualizes a pattern of “inclusive exclusion,” defined as a condition in which marginalized populations are incorporated into platform economies through expanded access, yet remain structurally excluded from meaningful agency, protection, and redistributive benefits. While this formulation resonates with existing critiques of adverse digital incorporation (Heeks, 2022; Sony et al., 2025) and platform-mediated inequality (Egger, 2023; Rogers & Christian, 2025; Sony, Nupur, et al., 2025), it is used here to capture the core contradiction identified across the literature analyzed in this research. Despite the growing body of critical scholarship, there remains a limited empirical and theoretical integration of how sociotechnical narratives of inclusion are operationalized through platform governance. Specifically, the mechanisms through which inclusion rhetoric legitimizes exploitative labor arrangements in such models remain insufficiently theorized.

2.5. Informality, precarity, and the moral economy of work

Informality remains a central feature of labor markets in the Global South (Heeks, 2022). Scholars such as Harracá et al. (2023) note that digital platforms tend to *reform* informality by embedding control mechanisms through datafication, gamification, and performance

monitoring. Rather than formalizing work, digital tools often introduce new layers of insecurity and dependency (Sony et al., 2025). Furthermore, the moral economy framework offers a lens to understand how workers interpret fairness, reciprocity, and exploitation (Hasan & Sony, 2022). Platforms that fail to meet these expectations, even if they are technically profitable for workers, are often rejected on moral or cultural grounds (Khan et al., 2023). This dimension of worker agency and resistance remains largely absent in studies focused exclusively on economic metrics or platform efficiency.

2.6. Synthesis and literature gap

Collectively, the reviewed literatures (i.e., Naveed et al. (2025), Harracá et al. (2023), Heeks (2022), Emmanuel et al. (2023), Raimi (2025), and Rogers and Christian (2025)) provide valuable insights into the promises and perils of platform, particularly concerning labor precarity, gendered exclusions, and the ideological framing of innovation. However, four key gaps emerge:

1. Insufficient focus on social businesses operating within platform economies—particularly those that blend humanitarian and capitalist goals under the guise of digital inclusion.
2. Limited analysis of how inclusion discourses intersect with algorithmic governance to normalize exploitation in postcolonial labor markets.
3. Underexplored intersectionality—especially the experiences of gender-diverse individuals, rural workers, and those excluded from formal identification systems.
4. Lack of empirical attention to worker perceptions, moral economies, and resistance practices in relation to tech-enabled social enterprises.

The paper addresses these gaps by critically analyzing secondary data from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, foregrounding how platform-based social businesses restructure labor relations while deploying ideological strategies of inclusion. It is primarily grounded in the theoretical frameworks of platform capitalism and critical development studies, which together provide a coherent lens for examining how digital platforms extract value, govern labor through algorithmic systems, and externalize risk, while situating these dynamics within broader postcolonial inequalities and the politics of inclusion. Building on these frameworks, the study selectively draws on complementary lenses such as feminist political economy, sociotechnical imaginaries, and moral economy to capture the gendered, discursive, and experiential dimensions of platform-mediated work, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the contradictory logics of empowerment and exploitation that define digital development trajectories in the Global South.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a critical discourse-analytical approach, following Sony (2023), to examine how digital social businesses and platform-based enterprises in the Global South construct, circulate, and legitimize narratives of inclusion, empowerment, and innovation. The methodological orientation is rooted in critical political economy and constructivist epistemology, which conceptualize platforms not merely as technological infrastructures or market actors, but as discursive formations embedded in power relations, development ideologies, and moral economies of labor. Accordingly, the study does not aim to produce a comprehensive or exhaustive mapping of all relevant literature—as would be required in a systematic literature review—nor does it seek to quantify textual patterns through content analysis. Instead, it focuses on conceptual argumentation and comparative interpretive discourse, examining how meanings, assumptions, and normative claims are produced and contested across contexts.

The discourse material consists of qualitative, literature-based (see

Table 1

Overview of analytically selected secondary sources.

Platform	Country/Region	Platform Sector	Source Type	Empirical Basis in Source	Analytical Relevance
Kiva, Rang De	India	Digital microfinance	Peer-reviewed field studies	Interviews with borrowers; platform analysis	Inclusion rhetoric vs. digital literacy and gendered mediation
Tala, Branch	Kenya	Mobile lending	Policy reports; qualitative case studies	User surveys; debt outcome analysis	Financial inclusion vs. digital debt traps
bKash, ShopUp	Bangladesh	Mobile finance/E-commerce	Academic case studies	Gendered usage patterns; platform governance	Passive inclusion and data-driven exclusion
Uber, Bolt	Nigeria, South Africa	Ride-hailing	Labor studies; strike documentation	Driver interviews; protest records	Algorithmic control and precarity
iFood	Brazil	Food delivery	Labor movement research	Collective action analysis	Platform resistance and governance opacity
Gojek, Grab	Indonesia	Logistics	Ethnographic platform studies	Worker narratives; pay structure analysis	Risk externalization and informalization

N.B. These cases are treated as analytically illustrative rather than exhaustive and are drawn from empirically rich secondary sources that explicitly engage platform labor and social business discourse.

Table 1) sources drawn from academic studies, policy reports, development agency publications, worker advocacy documents, and publicly available platform materials. In total, 46 scholarly and policy sources inform the manuscript, of which a subset provides the empirical grounding for the critical discourse analysis presented in the Results section. These sources span multiple Global South regions, including South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, and cover a range of platform sectors such as fintech, ride-hailing, delivery services, e-commerce, and digitally mediated domestic work.

Moreover, in this research, an ‘example’ is not treated as a bounded empirical unit but as a discursive and institutional configuration documented in existing empirical research. The selected materials were analytically chosen as secondary exemplars that illuminate how platform-based social businesses articulate inclusion, organize labor, and govern participation across different contexts. Analytical rigor is achieved not through replication or representativeness, but through cross-contextual comparison of recurring discursive patterns, contradictions, and silences across sectors and regions.

Document sourcing followed a theoretically guided and purposive strategy, rather than a protocol-driven systematic search. Sources were identified through iterative searches in major academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar), complemented by targeted identification of influential policy reports and empirically rich interpretative studies frequently cited in the digital labor and development literature. Inclusion criteria emphasized: (1) substantive engagement with platform-based or tech-enabled social business models in Global South contexts; (2) empirical depth sufficient to illuminate labor relations, governance practices, or inclusion dynamics; and (3) analytical relevance to questions of power, inequality, and development discourse. Sources were excluded if they were purely technical, descriptive without analytical reflection, or focused exclusively on Global North contexts. The objective was not representativeness in a statistical sense, but discursive significance and conceptual leverage.

Analytically, the study employs interpretive discourse analysis primarily informed by platform capitalism and critical development perspectives, and complemented by feminist political economy, sociotechnical imaginaries, and the moral economy of labor. Rather than coding texts for frequency or prevalence, the analysis attends to how key concepts—such as empowerment, flexibility, entrepreneurship, and inclusion—are framed, normalized, and mobilized across examples. Attention is paid to silences, contradictions, and disjunctions between platform rhetoric and documented worker experiences. Through iterative reading and comparative interpretation, discursive patterns were identified across examples, leading to the consolidation of five interrelated analytical themes.

These five themes—(1) social business narratives versus operational realities, (2) platform capitalism and labor exploitation, (3) gendered and algorithmic inequalities, (4) sociotechnical imaginaries of inclusion, and (5) informality and moral economies of labor—structure both the Results section and the analytical contribution of the paper.

Importantly, these themes did not emerge inductively from textual aggregation alone, nor were they imposed deductively in advance. Rather, they were theoretically sensitized constructs, refined through engagement with documented examples and ongoing dialogue with critical platform and development scholarship. This abductive logic allows the analysis to remain conceptually grounded while responsive to empirical variation across contexts.

The theme of gendered and algorithmic inequalities, for example, emerged through an abductive process that brought empirical observations into dialogue with feminist political economy and digital inequality literature. Initial readings of studies on mobile finance platforms in Bangladesh, such as bKash, suggested constrained access, as women's participation was often mediated by male family members. Nevertheless, engagement with feminist political economy reframed this observation as a deeper condition of “inclusion without agency,” where access does not translate into control or decision-making power. This reinterpretation was prompted by a tension between the platforms' empowerment narratives and the empirical evidence of mediated usage. Cross-country comparison with similar patterns in India and Kenya—where women's platform participation was similarly structured by gendered constraints—did not generate the theme but confirmed its broader analytical validity. Through this iterative process, the theme was consolidated as a recurring structural dynamic rather than an isolated empirical observation.

To enhance analytical rigor and reduce interpretive bias, several strategies were employed (**Table 1**). First, cross-country comparison was used to examine how similar discursive claims (e.g., empowerment or flexibility) manifest differently across regions, sectors, and institutional arrangements. Second, the analysis deliberately includes narratives with mixed or ambiguous outcomes, rather than focusing solely on overtly exploitative or exemplary platforms. Third, triangulation across academic research, policy discourse, and worker-centered accounts mitigates the dominance of platform or donor narratives. While discourse analysis does not claim replicability in the positivist sense, the transparency of analytical lenses, thematic structure, and example selection logic supports interpretive reproducibility.

This methodological approach aligns with established practices in critical platform and development research, where scholars employ interpretive and discourse-analytical strategies to examine the socio-political implications of digital technologies. Rather than pursuing statistical generalizability or replicability in a positivist sense, such studies emphasize analytical generalization, theoretical engagement, and contextual interpretation, reflecting norms within digital labor and platform studies that rely on cross-country qualitative synthesis and critical theoretical framing to uncover patterns of power, inequality, and governance. By foregrounding discourse, this work also interrogates how digital social business models in the Global South operate as discursive and institutional projects rather than merely economic or technological interventions, revealing how claims of inclusion and innovation can enable access while legitimizing precarity, informality,

and exclusion. Accordingly, the findings should be read as analytically generalizable insights into platform-mediated development, rather than as exhaustive empirical coverage of all platform activity in the Global South.

4. Results

The examples discussed in this section are analyzed comparatively rather than individually. Within interpretative analysis focuses on the tension between platform narratives of empowerment and the documented labor or access conditions experienced by users, while cross-country comparison traces how similar inclusion discourses—such as entrepreneurship, flexibility, and empowerment—recur across diverse national and sectoral contexts while producing analogous outcomes of precarity, gendered exclusion, or informalization. This approach allows the study to identify structurally shared logics of platform capitalism without presuming institutional uniformity, using analytically selected examples as comparative illustrations of broader discursive and institutional dynamics shaping platform-based social businesses in the Global South. To support this analysis, Table 2 provides a cross-country overview of representative platform examples across regions, sectors, and platform types, highlighting key patterns, contrasts, and recurring tensions by juxtaposing platform narratives of inclusion with empirically documented labor conditions and governance practices.

As Table 2 demonstrates, despite significant variation in platform sector, ownership model, and national context, common patterns emerge across examples. Inclusion is predominantly articulated through narratives of access, flexibility, and entrepreneurship, while structural inequalities—such as labor precarity, algorithmic opacity, and gendered exclusions—persist across platforms. These cross-country dynamics underscore the central argument of this study: that digital social businesses frequently reproduce rather than transform informal and unequal labor relations, even as they adopt the language of social impact and development. The thematic sections that follow unpack these patterns in greater depth, tracing how they manifest through narratives of empowerment, platform labor governance, gendered access, socio-technical imaginaries, and moral economies of work.

4.1. Social business in a digital age: narratives vs. realities

Across the Global South, tech-enabled social businesses frame themselves as innovative tools for poverty alleviation and economic inclusion (Emmanuel et al., 2023). By contrast, interpretative studies reveal significant tensions between decorative empowerment and actual practice. In India, digital microfinance platforms such as Kiva and Rang De position peer-to-peer lending as a democratizing force (Lagna &

Ravishankar, 2022). Yet field studies have found that borrowers often lacked digital literacy, relied on male family members for app navigation, and reported anxiety over automated repayment reminders (Lagna & Ravishankar, 2022). Additionally, the platforms’ default reliance on English interfaces compounded exclusion for non-urban borrowers.

Similar concerns have been documented in Kenya’s digital lending ecosystem, where platforms such as Tala and Branch have been criticized for high borrowing costs, repeated borrowing cycles, and the potential for over-indebtedness among vulnerable users (Sommer et al., 2025). While digital lending expands financial access, scholars have warned that easier access to credit may simultaneously increase the risk of household debt distress and financial vulnerability.

In Bangladesh, platforms such as bKash are heralded as financial inclusion success stories. Yet, Liu et al. (2025) show that female users often remain passive recipients, with men acting as intermediaries. Moreover, digital social enterprises such as Shop Up claim to empower small retailers, but Jeong (2023) found that these platforms often lock users into loyalty schemes with restrictive data-sharing conditions. Shop Up’s data-driven profiling mechanisms privilege vendors with higher sales volume or longer platform history, sidelining newcomers and small-scale, often women-led, businesses.

Additionally, in Brazil, app-based marketplaces aimed at supporting informal vendors have been found to redirect consumer attention toward larger vendors through algorithmic prioritization, effectively marginalizing micro-entrepreneurs (Harracá et al., 2023). These developments illustrate how platform dynamics and digital hierarchies can perpetuate structural exclusion, even within ostensibly inclusive business models.

These examples demonstrate that while social businesses adopt empowering language, structural constraints such as digital illiteracy, gendered access, and asymmetric power relations limit transformative outcomes. The promise of scalable inclusion is often undermined by deeply rooted socio-economic and technological asymmetries that platform models fail—or choose not—to address (Naveed et al., 2025; Raimi, 2025).

4.2. Platform capitalism and digital labor: new boss, same exploitation

Digital platforms are often marketed as innovative models of work that offer flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurial opportunity. However, in practice, they frequently reproduce—if not intensify—existing forms of labor exploitation. Across ride-sharing, delivery, and freelance sectors, platforms have restructured traditional labor arrangements while avoiding employer responsibilities. This results in precarious working conditions veiled as digital freedom (Cini, 2023).

Table 2
Cross-country comparative overview of platform-based social businesses in the global south.

Region/ Country	Platform Type	Representative examples	Inclusion Rhetoric	Observed Structural Dynamics	Key Analytical Insight
India	Fintech/Ride-hailing/ Food delivery	Kiva, Rang De, Uber, Swiggy, Zomato	Financial inclusion, flexibility, entrepreneurship	Digital illiteracy, algorithmic control, cost externalization	Inclusion framed as access while risk and precarity are individualized
Bangladesh	Mobile finance/E- commerce/Ride- hailing	bKash, ShopUp, Shohoz	Women's empowerment, SME digitization	Male intermediation, data-driven exclusion, informal labor reliance	Gendered inclusion operates symbolically rather than structurally
Kenya	Digital lending/ Delivery	Tala, Branch, Sendy	Poverty alleviation, fast income access	Debt traps, lack of insurance, long working hours	Platforms formalize informality without providing protections
Nigeria	Ride-hailing	Uber, Bolt	Youth employment, autonomy	Wage volatility, sudden deactivation, opaque algorithms	Algorithmic governance replaces managerial accountability
Brazil	E-commerce/Food delivery	Mercado Livre, iFood	Informal sector upliftment	Algorithmic prioritization of large vendors, worker strikes	Collective resistance emerges against platform opacity
Indonesia	Logistics/Domestic services	Gojek, Grab, GoLife	Inclusive urban services, women's participation	Gendered task segmentation, unpaid emotional labor	Platform design reinforces traditional gender roles
Rwanda	State-backed ride- hailing	Yego Moto	Local empowerment, data sovereignty	Limited divergence from global platform labor practices	National framing does not guarantee participatory governance

(Source: Compiled by the authors based on reviewed literature.)

In Nigeria, Uber and Bolt drivers have repeatedly gone on strike to protest declining wages, sudden deactivations, and algorithmic penalization (Arubayi, 2022). Despite this, Stemler et al. (2025) demonstrated widespread dissatisfaction among drivers, who reported opaque pricing structures, lack of communication, and arbitrary enforcement of platform policies. Similarly, in Pakistan, Careem drivers have demonstrated against increasing commission cuts and unaccountable account suspensions. Drivers cite the absence of clear guidelines and collective bargaining mechanisms, with algorithms acting as invisible managers.

In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, platforms such as Gojek and Grab have revolutionized urban logistics, yet their workers remain highly vulnerable. Studies document the experiences of app-based couriers who face declining pay-per-task rates and expanded delivery zones. This increases their labor input without corresponding remuneration, effectively deepening their exploitation (Panimbang, 2022). These workers, lacking any formal employment contracts, are denied basic protections such as insurance, health benefits, or grievance redressal systems.

Elsewhere, in South Africa, drivers working with Uber and Bolt are similarly classified as “independent contractors,” a designation that strips them of legal protections. Moreover, workers face unilateral changes in platform policies, often without notice, and can be removed from the system entirely through algorithmic assessments (Kornhauser & Sena, 2024). In Brazil, iFood delivery workers organized mass strikes under the *Breque dos Apps* movement, demanding transparency in order allocation, improved pay, and worker protections. Their digital resistance, coordinated via WhatsApp and social media, shows how gig workers are developing new forms of collective action.

In India, Swiggy and Zomato workers have protested declining incentive structures and rising operational costs, such as fuel prices, which they must bear themselves. Across these global examples, platforms externalize risks—including vehicle maintenance, insurance, and time—to the worker, while maintaining strict control through algorithms. This reflects the logic of platform capitalism, where exploitation is disguised as innovation and capital accumulation is enabled through digital voluntarism rather than secure employment (Törnberg, 2023).

4.2.1. Gender, work, and technological mediation: access, agency, and algorithmic inequality

Platform-based work in the Global South is often portrayed as inclusive and accessible; yet, empirical evidence reveals that women and gender-diverse individuals encounter significant structural and technological barriers in accessing and benefitting from these systems. These barriers are shaped by a combination of socio-cultural constraints, infrastructural gaps, and algorithmic design, which together reinforce existing gender inequalities.

In Bangladesh, female participation in ride-sharing platforms remains exceedingly low. Despite targeted recruitment efforts by companies such as Pathao and Uber, several studies indicate that women constituted less than 1% of platform drivers (Hamal & Huijsmans, 2022; Rani et al., 2022). Key deterrents include concerns about sexual harassment, inadequate safety infrastructure (e.g., secure rest stops), and familial or community-level resistance to women's mobility and employment in public spaces (Rani et al., 2022). Comparable dynamics are evident in Egypt, where Swvl's initiatives to recruit women drivers encountered resistance due to entrenched gender norms, public safety concerns, and lack of institutional support (Mohiuddin, 2024).

In the e-commerce sector, Brazil offers a salient example of algorithmically mediated gender inequality. Studies of digital labor and platform economies suggest that algorithmic ranking systems may reinforce existing inequalities because visibility and market success are often tied to resources and digital capabilities that are unevenly distributed across social groups (Alacovska et al., 2024; Rani et al., 2022). The study by Liu et al. (2025) revealed that businesses led by women were systematically underrepresented in algorithmic product rankings. This disparity is linked to factors such as fewer customer

reviews, less aggressive advertising, and reduced marketing budgets—criteria prioritized by platform algorithms but structurally harder for women to optimize due to persistent gendered barriers in access to capital and digital literacy.

Moreover, gender-diverse individuals remain largely invisible in the design and operation of most platform economies. In India, major gig platforms do not offer non-binary gender registration options, effectively excluding transgender and non-binary workers from equal participation (Mohiuddin, 2024). Additionally, Rogers and Christian (2025) documented numerous instances in which qualified non-binary applicants were denied access to platform-based jobs due to identity documentation mismatches or explicit discrimination by platform gatekeepers. Collectively, these examples underscore how platform-mediated work, despite its ornamental commitment to openness and neutrality, frequently reproduces and amplifies gendered inequalities. Algorithmic systems—when designed without attention to local social contexts and intersectional identities—can exacerbate exclusion, marginalize already vulnerable groups, and limit meaningful access to labor markets for women and gender-diverse populations (Alacovska et al., 2024).

4.3. Sociotechnical imaginaries and the rhetoric of inclusion

In the Global South, technology-driven social enterprises and platform economies often adopt the language of inclusion and empowerment. These narratives, while rhetorically compelling, frequently lack substantive mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation, accountability, or structural equity (Heeks, 2022). The concept of *sociotechnical imaginaries*—collectively held visions of desirable futures enabled by technology—plays a central role in shaping such initiatives. Despite this, as empirical evidence suggests, these imaginaries are often performative rather than transformative (Kuchler & Stigson, 2024).

In Rwanda, the government-backed ride-hailing service Yego Moto positions itself as a socially responsible, “Rwanda-first” alternative to multinational platforms such as Uber. It emphasizes local data sovereignty and community development (Bordenkircher & Egan, 2022). Available evidence suggests that despite its local-development framing, Yego Moto exhibits several governance characteristics similar to those observed in other platform-based mobility services (Bordenkircher & Egan, 2022). The inclusionary discourse, while regionally framed, remained largely symbolic and unaccompanied by mechanisms for participatory governance or improved worker protections.

A similar pattern emerges in Bangladesh, where platforms such as Shohoz and Daraz incorporate images of women and minority workers into marketing materials. Nonetheless, inclusion at the level of branding is not mirrored in institutional practices (Islam, 2024). Rogers and Christian (2025) revealed that, apart from non-binary genders, female workers reported a lack of gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms, insufficient safety protocols, and negligible representation in decision-making roles. These gaps underscore the disconnect between representational inclusion and structural support.

In India, the state-led *Digital India* program promotes rural digital entrepreneurship, particularly among women (Rakshit et al., 2025). Yet, several studies, including Rani et al. (2022), demonstrated that women trained through the initiative often encounter significant barriers to market participation. Many rely on male family members to conduct digital transactions or manage financial operations, thereby reinforcing rather than disrupting existing gender hierarchies. The promise of digitally enabled autonomy is thus undermined by persistent socio-cultural and infrastructural constraints.

Collectively, these examples illustrate how sociotechnical imaginaries centered on inclusion and empowerment often operate at the level of discourse rather than practice. Without embedded institutional reforms, accessible infrastructures, and accountable governance structures, the eloquence of inclusion risks becoming a mechanism for legitimizing extractive or exclusionary platform models under the guise

of innovation.

4.4. Informality, precarity, and the moral economy of labor

Digital labor platforms in the Global South increasingly operate within, and reproduce, longstanding informal labor dynamics. These models blur the boundaries between formal and informal work, producing conditions marked by precarity, lack of protection, and moralized narratives of self-reliance. While framed as entrepreneurial opportunity, tech-mediated work often reinforces exploitative labor relations through appeals to duty, adaptability, and economic survival (Harracá et al., 2023).

In Kenya, motorcycle delivery drivers—commonly referred to as *boda-boda* workers—frequently work across multiple digital platforms such as Sendy and Glove. The African Platform Workers Association revealed that over 60% of riders lacked health insurance, formal contracts, or predictable income streams, despite routinely working 10 to 14-h days (Sadiq Okoh & Chidi Onuoha, 2024). These workers expressed ambivalence about their conditions, often characterizing platform work as “better than nothing.” This sentiment reflects a *moral economy* in which precarious labor is tolerated and rationalized as a viable livelihood amid broader economic insecurity (Khan et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, gendered informality is evident in platforms such as GoLife and Sociolla, which recruit women for domestic services including cleaning, personal grooming, and elder care. These roles typically lack formal employment contracts, with workers evaluated through opaque customer rating systems that directly impact their access to future work. The emotional and affective labor expected—smiling, politeness, and “going the extra mile”—is unpaid and undervalued (Panimbang, 2022). Yet, many women persist in such roles due to entrenched social norms around female domesticity and limited alternative employment options, particularly for low-income women.

In Bangladesh, the digitalization of informal trade is similarly underpinned by familial and unpaid labor. Interviews with small-scale e-commerce vendors reveal that business operations are often sustained by invisible contributions from family members—especially women—who manage inventory, communications, and logistics without formal recognition or compensation. These arrangements echo historical patterns of informal work, where women's labor remains undervalued and structurally marginalized despite being critical to household and enterprise survival (Islam, 2024).

Together, these examples underscore how platform-based social business models in the Global South thrive on informal labor regimes. Rebranded through digital interfaces and entrepreneurial eloquence, these models continue to rely on moral expectations of resilience, self-sacrifice, and hustle. While offering new modalities of income generation, they seldom provide the protections, stability, or dignity associated with formal employment, thus reinforcing a precarious moral economy of labor.

5. Discussion

The study asked whether tech-driven social businesses in the Global South foster meaningful economic inclusion or reconfigure exploitative labor relations under the guise of innovation. The existing scholarship suggests that while such platforms may expand access to income-generating opportunities, they often appear to reproduce and restructure existing inequalities rather than fundamentally transform them. Consistent with scholarship on platform capitalism (Harracá et al., 2023; Törnberg, 2023) and critical development studies (Heeks, 2022), the analysis shows that inclusion is largely conditional and mediated through algorithmic governance systems that externalize risk, obscure accountability, and limit worker agency. In this sense, the analyzed examples suggest that digital social businesses may function as hybrid formations that extend participation while, in some contexts,

normalizing precarity and structural exclusion.

Consistent with critiques of platform capitalism (Harracá et al., 2023; Törnberg, 2023), the analysis suggests that algorithmic governance may enable platforms to externalize risks, obscure accountability, and maintain control over labor while presenting a veneer of flexibility and entrepreneurial opportunity. From a critical interpretive perspective, this illustrates how digital infrastructures may intersect power: they individualize responsibility, valorize resilience and self-sacrifice, and depoliticize demands for structural protections (Hasan & Sony, 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Sony et al., 2025). In reflecting on these findings, it is evident that the unique contribution of this analysis lies in linking these mechanisms not only to labor exploitation but also to the ideological construction of inclusion, showing how the eloquence of social impact can legitimize unequal socio-technical arrangements.

The research reveals that digital social enterprises operate as hybrid entities, blending developmental goals with market-driven imperatives (Emmanuel et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2024). While humanitarian and donor-oriented eloquence bolsters legitimacy, labor practices often mirror commercial platforms, producing what can be described as inclusive exclusion. Marginalized workers, especially women and gender-diverse individuals, gain visibility without meaningful agency, protection, or voice within platform ecosystems (van Esch et al., 2024). Reflecting on this, the study highlights that the material and symbolic forms of inclusion are not necessarily aligned, underscoring the importance of analyzing platforms as socio-technical systems rather than mere technological interventions.

Gendered labor hierarchies and algorithmic inequities are especially pronounced. Women are frequently pushed into low-paid, home-based, or invisible labor, reinforcing domestic norms while digital infrastructures valorize quantifiable tasks and obscure affective work (Rani et al., 2022). Structural barriers such as limited digital literacy, poor connectivity, and restrictive platform design exacerbate exclusion, particularly for rural and gender-diverse users (Mohiuddin, 2024; Rakshit et al., 2025). These findings suggest that digital platforms should not automatically be assumed to function as neutral tools of economic inclusion. Rather, they are deeply embedded in local socio-cultural, infrastructural, and political-economic contexts, which shape access, agency, and outcomes.

Finally, the study's engagement with sociotechnical imaginaries reveals that discourses of inclusion and empowerment often function performatively, legitimizing existing inequalities under the guise of innovation (Islam, 2024; Kuchler & Stigson, 2024). The reflection emerging from the results is that platform-based social businesses risk being hollowed-out forms of ethical capitalism (Yunus, 2017; Huyler et al., 2024): they articulate aspirational futures but fail to embed participatory governance, labor protections, or structural accountability. This paper underscores the value of critical, interpretive, and context-sensitive analysis in uncovering how digital social enterprises mediate inclusion, and it contributes to the literature by foregrounding the intersection of technology, labor, and social justice in the Global South.

Building on these insights, the study underscores that platforms do not operate in isolation; they are intertwined with broader political-economic structures and postcolonial development legacies. The interpretive analysis shows that platform design, governance, and labor allocation are not neutral, but actively reproduce existing hierarchies of power, gender, and economic opportunity. By critically situating these findings within existing platform and development literatures, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding digital social businesses as both technological and social constructs—where eloquence, policy, and technical design converge to shape who benefits and who remains marginalized. This perspective also highlights the value of reflexivity in research, as interpretations must account for the interplay of local contexts, structural constraints, and platform-level interventions.

Likewise, the findings suggest that the emancipatory promise of digital social enterprises cannot be evaluated solely through access

metrics or user numbers. Instead, the study reflects on the broader implications of algorithmically mediated inclusion, illustrating that empowerment is contingent, partial, and often symbolic. From a critical perspective, the study provides evidence that current platform models risk entrenching the very inequalities they claim to address, reinforcing conditional inclusion while legitimizing exploitative practices. This reflection contributes to ongoing debates on digital labor, ethical innovation, and technological governance, offering a nuanced lens through which policymakers, scholars, and practitioners can critically assess the social impact of platforms in the Global South.

5.1. Policy implications

The findings of this study emphasize the need for a fundamental rethinking of digital development policy. The analysis suggests that policymakers may need to look beyond platform access alone and address the structural conditions that shape exclusion in platform-mediated labor. This includes improving infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and challenging entrenched gender norms that limit equitable participation, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Regulatory frameworks could incorporate algorithmic transparency, protect worker data rights, and formally recognize platform workers under labor laws. Besides, policy must consider unpaid and affective labor, especially in feminized contexts, and encourage participatory governance models, such as cooperatives or community-led initiatives, to ensure accountability and align platform design with social justice objectives. Future evaluation frameworks may benefit from shifting the focus from innovation and efficiency toward capturing labor precarity, power asymmetries, and gendered outcomes.

5.2. Limitations

The paper is constrained by its reliance on secondary sources without original fieldwork or quantitative data, which may limit the generalizability of its insights. While regional diversity is addressed through selected examples from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, intra-regional variations and local nuances may not be fully represented. Additionally, the interpretive and discourse-analytic approach, while enabling rich conceptual insights, is inherently shaped by the researcher's analytical perspective, which may introduce elements of interpretive bias. Beyond these methodological constraints, the study is then subject to conceptual limitations. In particular, aspects of the analysis draw on innovation frameworks and models—such as those associated with the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL)—that originate in Global North institutional contexts. While these frameworks provide useful analytical entry points, their applicability to Global South settings may be partial due to differences in governance structures, informality, and socio-economic conditions. As such, there is a risk that certain dynamics of platform-mediated labor are interpreted through conceptual lenses that do not fully capture local complexities. These limitations highlight the need for future research incorporating primary empirical approaches, including ethnographic, participatory, or mixed-method designs, as well as the development of more contextually grounded theoretical frameworks to better understand the socio-economic and gendered dimensions of platform-mediated labor in the Global South.

6. Conclusion

This paper critically examined the emancipatory narratives surrounding digital social businesses and platform labor in the Global South. The reviewed literature suggests that promises of inclusion and empowerment may, in some contexts, coexist with structural inequalities, labor precarity, and gendered exclusions. By situating platform-mediated work within broader political-economic, cultural, and technological contexts, the reviewed examples indicate that social

businesses, despite ornamental commitments to equity, may reproduce existing hierarchies under certain conditions. The analysis highlights the importance of critically assessing not only access to digital platforms but also the socio-political and structural conditions of participation, emphasizing the need for labor-focused, gender-sensitive, and socially accountable interventions to transform platform economies into genuine tools for social justice.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nitai Chandra Debnath: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **K.M. Anwarul Islam:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Mohammad Bin Amin:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Suman Paul Chowdhury:** Writing – original draft, Software, Project administration. **M. M. Abdullah Al Mamun Sony:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision. **Gouranga Chandra Debnath:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Project administration.

Informed consent and patient details

Not applicable.

Ethical approval

Not applicable.

Declaration of the use of AI

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used [Quillbot.com](https://quillbot.com), a paraphrasing tool, in order to improve English writing. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Data availability

Not applicable.

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