Korean Women's Development Institute ISSUE PAPER

KWDI ISSUE PAPER

June 2025

Publication Date: June 30, 2025 **Published by:** Korean Women's Development Institute

Research Title

A Study on Working Conditions and Improvement Measures for Women Workers on Web-Based Platforms: Focusing on the Creative and Professional Services Sector

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Working Conditions of Women Workers on Web-Based Platforms and Policy Recommendations

Abstract

- This study examines the challenges faced by women workers engaged in web-based platform labor amid the expansion of digital platform labor, with a particular focus on maternity protection, career development, and unfair trade practices and treatment. It also proposes policy measures to address these issues.
- To this end, the study first reviews the concepts and types of platform labor, key issues concerning women's employment, and policy and legislative developments, and then conducts secondary data analysis and interviews.
  - The findings indicate that long working hours and demands for immediate responses make it difficult for workers to balance work and family responsibilities, while irregular income patterns constrain their ability to make long-term caregiving plans.
  - The study further finds that workers may face difficulties in career development due to intense price competition, the concentration of education and training programs in the Seoul metropolitan area, and childcare responsibilities. Unfair treatment was also identified, including the misuse of anonymity by some clients and unreasonable demands.
  - Workers in creative sectors were also found to be more likely to be exposed to opaque contractual and revenue structures amid power imbalances among platforms, publishers, and workers.
- Based on these findings, the study proposes the following policy recommendations: ▲ expanding maternity protection for platform workers; ▲ strengthening support for career development; ▲ improving competition structures based on price and ratings; ▲ preventing unfair practices in platform markets and strengthening platform accountability; and ▲ strengthening the social safety net for platform workers.

1 Labor Characteristics of Women Workers on Web-Based Platforms

- Over the past decade, advances in information technology and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated the growth of the digital economy, leading to the expanding role of digital labor platforms.
- Digital labor platforms can be broadly categorized into location-based platforms and web-based platforms, with the latter experiencing particularly rapid growth in recent years.

* This issue paper was prepared based on selected and adapted content from a 2024 research report published by the Korean Women's Development Institute.
Source: Lee, M., Oh, E., Noh, W., & Chung, I. (2024). A Study on Working Conditions and Improvement Measures for Women Workers on Web-Based Platforms: Focusing on the Creative and Professional Services Sector. Seoul: Korean Women's Development Institute.

▶ Web-based platform labor has significant implications for expanding women's participation in the labor market. Because this form of work involves fewer spatial and temporal constraints and offers a high degree of autonomy, it can provide flexible employment opportunities for women who have faced difficulties in conventional forms of employment due to household and caregiving responsibilities. Moreover, many web-based platform occupations require specialized expertise and advanced skills, providing highly educated and skilled women with opportunities to continue their careers.

- Since work on web-based platforms is performed entirely online, it is not constrained by geographical location and requires minimal face-to-face interaction with clients. Compared with location-based platform work, web-based platform labor has a higher concentration of skilled occupations and is widely utilized in professional fields such as digital content creation, graphic design, consulting, translation, and information technology (IT) services.

▶ Despite these advantages, however, the flexibility associated with web-based platform labor does not necessarily guarantee women's career continuity or work-life balance.

- Women workers on web-based platforms are likely to face difficulties in achieving work-life balance due to irregular work patterns. Moreover, because various maternity protection programs are designed for wage workers, web-based platform workers are likely to be excluded from these benefits.
- Compared with wage employees, web-based platform workers also have more limited access to education, training, professional networking, and other career development opportunities, which may constrain their long-term career advancement.
- In addition, customer rating systems and contractual conditions may operate to the disadvantage of platform workers, exposing them to unfair transactions and treatment, gender discrimination, and sexual violence.
- Therefore, improving the working conditions of women workers on web-based platforms requires comprehensive policy efforts, including strengthening maternity protection, expanding support for career development, and fostering a fairer and more transparent platform marketplace.

2 Characteristics and Current Status of Web-Based Platform Labor

Characteristics of Web-Based Platform Labor

▶ Web-based platform labor is a form of digital labor in which both service delivery and income generation occur entirely online. Unlike location-based platform labor, both the workplace and the labor process are confined to digital environments. As long as workers have internet access, they can perform their tasks from virtually anywhere and communicate with clients exclusively through online channels without face-to-face interaction.

▶ Web-based platform labor has three key characteristics: flexibility in time and location, low barriers to entry, and internal heterogeneity.

- Because work is performed entirely online without temporal or geographical constraints, workers incur neither commuting costs nor office rental expenses and can access clients from around the world.

- Low barriers to entry enable individuals to participate without specialized qualifications or prior work experience, thereby creating new opportunities for career-interrupted women, young adults, and persons with disabilities.
- The web-based platform workforce is highly heterogeneous, reflecting substantial variation in occupational roles, skill levels, working conditions, motivations for engaging in web-based platform labor, and the extent of workers' participation in platform labor.

▶ According to the degree of platform involvement in the labor process, the web-based platform labor market can be classified into three categories: marketplace platforms, microtask platforms, and content-sharing platforms.

- Marketplace platforms enable workers to post their profiles and service fees, negotiate with clients, and carry out assignments.
- Microtask platforms involve a large, open pool off workers performing small units of work (microtasks), many of which are simple tasks such as work involving AI training data.
- Content-sharing platforms allow creators to publish digital content — including webtoons, web novels, and videos — and generate income through subscriptions or views.

▶ Platform operators use algorithms to manage labor, with mechanisms of control differing across platform types.

- On marketplace platforms, customer ratings and reviews have an important influence on workers' ability to secure assignments, while on microtask platforms, compensation may be determined based on performance evaluations through task verification.
- Workers on content-sharing platforms have relatively greater autonomy. However, platforms' control over content visibility and promotion can serve as a means of regulating creators' earnings and work intensity (Kim et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022).

Key Issues in Web-Based Platform Labor for Highly Educated and Skilled Women Workers

▶ Maternity Protection

- Although web-based platform labor offers workers the flexibility to combine work with caregiving and household responsibilities, it can be difficult to spatially separate work from household labor. Irregular task allocation, deadline pressure, and clients' demands for immediate responses can also make it difficult to achieve work-life balance (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017). Furthermore, women workers with substantial caregiving responsibilities may have difficulty securing sufficient working hours and are therefore more likely to receive relatively low compensation (Dunn et al., 2021). These conditions suggest that, contrary to expectations, web-based platform labor may not provide a adequate conditions for combining work and caregiving and may ultimately constitute a structural factor that forces women workers to choose between work and caregiving.

▶ Career Development

- Web-based platform labor is characterized by fragmented tasks, intense competition, and low barriers to entry, creating structural challenges for the accumulation of professional expertise and long-term career development. The influx of new, low-skilled workers leads to declines in market wages and service quality, while platforms do not provide education or training opportunities, leaving workers to bear the full burden of their own professional development (Felstiner, 2011; Lee et al., 2020).

- Women workers are particularly likely to have limited opportunities to secure sufficient working hours and pursue professional development because of caregiving and household responsibilities. In addition, gender disparities in digital skills may hinder women workers' ability to maintain their competitiveness in platform labor markets. In occupations with a high proportion of women workers, such as design and illustration, inadequate copyright protection hinders the fair evaluation of creative work and career advancement (Kim, 2020). Consequently, women platform workers are more likely to remain engaged in short-term, repetitive assignments rather than pursue long-term career development.

▶ Unfair Trade Practices and Treatment

- Major concerns in web-based platform labor include the absence of standard contracts, unilateral modifications of contractual terms, excessive fees, demands for additional work, and avoidance of dispute resolution (Kim, 2020; Kim, 2024). Given the high proportion of women participating in web-based platform labor, women workers are particularly likely to be affected by these unfair practices. In addition, concerns have also been raised about discriminatory treatment, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. However, because platform workers often face difficulties obtaining legal recognition as employees under labor law, they cannot readily expect protection under the anti-discrimination and anti-harassment provisions of existing laws that are premised on worker status. Moreover, platform operators have tended to respond passively to such issues, highlighting the need for more effective institutional safeguards.

Analysis of the Characteristics and Working Conditions of Web-Based Platform Labor

▶ Drawing on data from the 2022 Korea Employment Information Service (KEIS) survey, this study examines the working conditions of crowd workers engaged in creative and professional services through web-based platforms. Particular attention is given to gender differences in maternity protection, opportunities for career development, and the status of fair trading practices. The principal findings are summarized below.

▶ Compared with location-based platform workers, crowd workers were generally younger. Among crowd workers, women were more likely to be married, whereas men were more likely to be unmarried. This pattern suggests that web-based platform labor has become an alternative form of work, particularly for married women. In addition, crowd workers often engaged in platform work as their primary occupation or combined it with non-standard employment, while relatively few combined platform work with regular employment. These employment patterns suggest economic insecurity.

▶ With respect to contractual arrangements, both men and women typically entered into agreements by accepting terms and conditions when registering through an app, rather than by signing written contracts. This practice suggests that workers' rights may not be adequately protected.

▶ The findings also indicate that crowd workers are in a vulnerable position in terms of mechanisms for responding to unfair treatment and enrollment in employment insurance and workers' compensation insurance. Accordingly, there was strong policy demand for measures such as the provision of unemployment benefits, easing conditions for loans and financing, protection of workers' rights through fair contracts, and support for establishing and joining organizations that can represent workers.

▶ Regarding career development, only a small proportion of workers had participated in vocational training. Among those who had received training, most paid for it themselves. Although web-based platform labor requires workers to update their knowledge and skills more rapidly than location-based platform work, institutional support for such efforts remains insufficient.

▶ Overall, men and women exhibited broadly similar patterns. However, gender differences were identified in the fields of private lessons and consulting, suggesting that even within the same occupational category, men and women may systematically perform different types of work or receive different levels of compensation. Although the available data did not include information on whether workers had children, limiting a more detailed discussion of maternity protection, the findings nevertheless indicate that crowd work functions as an alternative form of work for women by helping to mitigate career interruptions and supplement their income. The analysis also found that women workers often did not receive sufficient explanations regarding contractual terms or regulations. While this may indicate the possibility of gender discrimination, it could also reflect differences in the types of work performed by men and women, underscoring the need for further research.

Findings from Interviews with Web-Based Platform Workers

▶ Motivations for Participating in Web-Based Platform Labor

- The primary motivations for engaging in web-based platform labor are accessibility and flexibility. Low barriers to entry and relatively few constraints on time and location make web-based platform labor an important alternative for people living in non-metropolitan areas, those who have difficulty participating in the conventional labor market for health reasons, and women seeking to combine work with childcare. Interviews also identified cases in which workers used web-based platforms to reduce income and employment insecurity and lessen their dependence on their existing jobs.

- At the same time, platform work has become increasingly widespread in traditional freelance markets. In various occupations, including translation and interpretation and webtoon creation, platforms have become an essential means of securing work opportunities. Some workers also use platforms as a means of career development. For example, webtoon and web novel creators use platforms in the hope that their works may later be adapted into television dramas or films. Others actively use platforms as a strategy to test new business ideas or expand access to potential clients.

▶ Working Conditions of Web-Based Platform Workers

- The interviews revealed that excessive work intensity makes it difficult for workers to combine work with household responsibilities and childcare. Webtoon and web novel creators face pressure to publish new episodes on a daily basis and experience difficulties caring for their children due to long working hours. Likewise, workers on marketplace platforms experience blurred boundaries between work and personal life because they are expected to respond immediately to clients. Women, who are perceived as primary caregivers, experience greater burdens associated with childbirth and childcare. Economic insecurity also makes it difficult for workers to make long-term plans for childbirth and childcare.

- Major barriers to career development include the time and financial burdens associated with education and training, demanding workloads, limited awareness of and information about career development, and a lack of networking opportunities. In particular, workers who must prioritize immediate earnings amid intense price competition often have little time to invest in their own professional development. Opportunities for professional development become even more limited when childcare responsibilities and financial difficulties are added. Structural problems were also identified in the concentration of educational programs and networking opportunities in large cities, which places workers living in non-metropolitan areas at a disadvantage.
- The interviews also revealed unfair practices in web-based platform labor. Webtoon and web novel creators are in the most disadvantaged position within the tripartite relationship among platforms, publishers, and workers, and often experience unfair practices in their contracts with publishers and platforms. In particular, novice creators often accept unfavorable contractual terms because they lack sufficient information. Publishers may include excessive compensation requirements and disadvantageous copyright provisions in contracts, while platforms may demand high revenue-sharing ratios, long periods of exclusivity, and exclusive rights to derivative works in exchange for promotional support. Creators are often in a position where it is difficult to resist such demands because refusing them may make it difficult to continue publishing their work on the platform.
- Unfair treatment may also arise through interactions with clients. Taking advantage of their anonymity, clients may make unreasonable demands or behave in a coercive manner, while excessive requests for discounts or revisions can disrupt the balance between the amount of work performed and the compensation received. Women workers may also be more frequently exposed to sexual harassment or inappropriate contact, further destabilizing their working environment. Even in such cases, however, platforms tend to be passive in protecting workers and to offer customer-oriented solutions. As a result, workers may find themselves having to tolerate unfair treatment out of concern about lower ratings or negative reviews.

3 Policy Recommendations for Improving the Working Conditions of Women Workers on Web-Based Platforms

Leave and Income Protection

- When web-based platform creators suspend their work due to pregnancy, childbirth, or childcare, institutional mechanisms should formally recognize such interruptions and minimize any resulting disadvantages. For example, support programs could allow creators to take temporary breaks from publication or adjust project deadlines during pregnancy, childbirth, or childcare periods.
- To provide income protection during childcare-related leave, web-based platform workers could be included in the employment insurance system. Since 2022, enrollment in employment insurance has been mandatory for certain categories of platform workers, including quick-service couriers, delivery riders, and designated drivers, but parental leave benefits have not been extended to them. It is therefore necessary to expand employment insurance enrollment among web-based platform workers and extend parental leave benefits to them. Responsibility for bearing the costs could be discussed in terms of either platform operators or the government, depending on whether workers work exclusively for a particular platform. In addition to employment insurance coverage, alternatives such as mutual aid associations could also be considered.

Childcare Support

- Childcare support can be a measure to help women platform workers balance work and family responsibilities. One possible approach is to utilize the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's Childcare Support Service to give priority in the provision of childcare services to platform workers below a certain income level. However, to ensure equity among vulnerable groups, eligibility criteria should comprehensively take into account both household income and occupational characteristics. Another option would be to expand Seoul's Private Childcare Support Program for Small Business Owners nationwide and extend its eligibility to freelancers and platform workers.
- Implementing these policies requires the establishment of a data system that can objectively verify platform workers' work arrangements and income. Such a system should enable the verification of income and platform work history and help ensure the fair administration of childcare support.

Education and Training Support

- To reduce the financial burden associated with education and training, consideration could be given to supporting transportation costs, meal expenses, and a portion of living expenses in addition to existing support for training costs. In particular, support is needed for specialized vocational training rather than short-term courses.
- National Tomorrow Learning Card vocational training program should be improved to enable platform workers to learn flexibly by expanding smart blended training courses in which theoretical instruction is provided online and practical training is conducted during separate practice weeks. In addition, greater flexibility should be provided by expanding options for training schedules, duration, and location to reflect the work characteristics of web-based platform workers.
- Since 2023, specialized training for platform workers has been provided through training cost support under the the National Tomorrow Learning Card system. However, existing programs do not adequately reflect the diversity of web-based platform work and give insufficient consideration to women workers' life course and career paths. Accordingly, specialized education for women workers should be designed, along with an education and training system that enables web-based platform workers to learn new ways of working and share business know-how.
- Consideration could be given to supporting the career development of women platform workers through the Women's New Job Centers (Saeil Centers). In cooperation with platform companies, the centers could identify workforce demand and operate customized vocational training programs. Under this approach, the Saeil Centers could recruit and manage trainees, platform companies could take the lead in providing training, and the government could support initial training costs. Following the training, the Saeil Centers and platform companies should cooperate to connect workers with jobs and projects. Consideration could also be given to developing models based on successful cases and disseminating them, while ensuring effective implementation through cooperation with trustworthy platform companies.

Reforming Competition Based on Price and Ratings

- A career certification system should be introduced to establish occupation-specific labor markets in which workers' professional expertise is reflected in labor rates. Possible approaches to implementing such a system include: ▲ the government operating a Platform and Freelancer Career Management Platform, with associations registering workers' career information; ▲ the government and platform companies jointly managing career certification; and ▲ utilizing mutual aid associations.

- Institutional measures are needed to guarantee minimum service fee standards. In particular, marketplace platforms could introduce minimum rates that restrict the provision of services below a specified amount, thereby helping to ensure workers' economic security.
- Platform evaluation systems should be improved to shift from price-based competition to competition based on quality and expertise. Evaluation methods should incorporate a range of factors, including service quality, professional expertise, project performance, and on-time completion rates. Platform algorithms should also be improved to ensure that workers' ratings do not decline when they temporarily suspend their work due to maternity leave, parental leave, education, or training.

Preventing Unfair Platform Practices and Strengthening Platform Accountability

- Existing voluntary regulations and recommendations have had limited effectiveness, suggesting that a regulatory approach through legislation may be the most effective. A policy approach is needed to strengthen regulation through the enactment of dedicated legislation on platform labor and to prevent problems in advance through the dissemination and mandatory use of standardized contracts.
- Platforms should be responsible for maintaining fairness in disputes with clients and ensuring that workers are not disadvantaged by excessive client demands or unfair evaluations. To this end, platform operators should be required to establish internal dispute resolution mechanisms, and operational guidelines should be provided. If disputes cannot be resolved smoothly through internal mediation, institutional arrangements should be established to allow private and public mediation mechanisms to be used in stages.

Addressing Platform Dominance and Workers' Dependence

- Institutional measures should be introduced to ensure data portability and interoperability across platforms. Workers should be able to freely transfer their ratings, reviews, portfolios, and other work-related records between platforms, thereby reducing their dependence on individual platforms and strengthening their bargaining power. In conjunction with the proposed career certification system, workers should also be able to download and use their work-related data.
- In addition, greater transparency in platform operations is needed, along with mechanisms that enable external monitoring and verification of platform algorithms and evaluation systems.
- Finally, collective bargaining rights for platform workers should be expanded, and institutional mechanisms for collective negotiation should be established. Such measures would strengthen workers' bargaining power with respect to compensation, contractual terms, and changes to platform algorithms.

Reducing Gaps in Social Protection

- Although web-based platform workers participate continuously in the labor market, many remain outside the coverage of the National Pension, national health insurance, employment insurance, and workers' compensation insurance systems. As a result, they face a substantial risk of falling through gaps in social protection.
- Accordingly, efforts to raise awareness and expand enrollment in Korea's four major social insurance programs among platform workers should be strengthened.

- In particular, greater emphasis should be placed on the importance of employment insurance and workers' compensation insurance in providing protection against unemployment, reemployment, parental leave, and occupational accidents. At the same time, enrollment in the National Pension Scheme should be promoted as a means of reducing the risk of poverty in old age.

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Relevant Government Agencies Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Family Culture Division, Career-Interrupted Women Support Division), Ministry of Employment and Labor (Women's Employment Policy Division, Employment Insurance Planning Division, Vocational Skills Policy Division, Unorganized Workers Support Division), Fair Trade Commission