

# DELIVERING THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

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*African Migrant Workers in the United Arab Emirates E-Commerce and Delivery Sectors*



## Introduction

The rapid growth of the digital platform economy has transformed how goods, food, and services move through cities across the world. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), e-commerce and app-based delivery platforms have become central to everyday urban life, promising speed, convenience, and technological innovation. This labour system is sustained by migrant workers whose experiences remain largely invisible within discussions about the future of work.

African migrant workers are increasingly central to this hidden workforce. Men and women from countries including Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Cameroon, and Sudan are travelling to the Gulf in search of economic opportunity, only to encounter labour systems marked by debt-financed migration, subcontracting, surveillance, and precarious work. Recruited through transnational labour brokers and employed through third-party logistics firms (3PLs), workers occupy positions at the intersection of digital platform labour and restrictive migration regimes. Their experiences reveal how technological innovation in the platform economy continues to rely upon deeply unequal labour systems.

Equidem research found that African migrant workers in e-commerce and app-based delivery platforms experience overlapping forms of vulnerability shaped by race, migration status, debt, and labour precarity. Workers frequently arrive in the UAE already indebted from recruitment fees and migration costs, leaving them economically dependent on employers and vulnerable to coercion. Once in the Gulf, they face long working hours, wage insecurity, unsafe environmental conditions, and barriers to accessing remedies or changing employment. These vulnerabilities are intensified by outsourcing arrangements that fragment accountability between platform companies, labour suppliers, and recruitment agencies.

The experiences documented in this briefing demonstrate that exploitation in platform work often begins long before workers log onto an application. Recruitment debt, migration dependency, outsourcing systems, and algorithmic control together create layered systems of coercion that shape the everyday realities of African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics.

This moment is particularly significant as governments, employers, and worker representatives negotiate new international standards on decent work in the platform economy at the International Labour Organization (ILO). Commendably, debates at the

International Labour Conference (ILC) have increasingly focused on worker classification, algorithmic management, occupational safety, and platform accountability. Yet without explicitly centering migrant workers, particularly workers employed through subcontracting chains, there is a significant risk that emerging global standards will fail to protect some of the workers most vulnerable to exploitation in the digital economy.

The experiences documented in this briefing underscore the importance of ensuring that any future ILO standard on decent work in the platform economy explicitly covers migrant workers employed through subcontracting arrangements, including workers recruited through third-party logistics firms and labour intermediaries. Without clear protections addressing recruitment systems, outsourcing chains, and platform accountability, significant gaps in protection will remain for workers operating at the bottom of digital labour supply chains.

This briefing contributes directly to ongoing negotiations at the International Labour Conference by providing worker testimony that strengthens key worker-rights positions across multiple draft articles under negotiation. The experiences of African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics demonstrate why the proposed ILO standard must more clearly address subcontracting chains, recruitment-related debt, algorithmic management, occupational safety and health, remuneration, workplace violence and harassment, and access to remedy. Throughout this briefing, Equidem identifies specific gaps in the current Blue Report text and highlights areas where stronger protections are necessary to ensure that migrant workers employed through platform logistics systems are not excluded from meaningful labour protections.

## **Methodology**

This briefing is based on testimonies collected from 13 African migrant workers employed in e-commerce logistics and delivery systems in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Workers interviewed for this briefing originated from Cameroon, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, and Sudan. This briefing provides new evidence reinforcing the findings of Equidem's latest report, *Free To Be Exploited: the abuse of platform-based food delivery riders in Saudi Arabia and the UAE*, which documented rights violations faced by migrant riders from Asia and Africa who ride for digital platform-based food delivery companies and are hired by third-party logistics providers (3PLs). The report documented instances of forced labour, workplace violence, wage theft, occupational health and safety risks, extreme weather exposure, denial of employment benefits, abusive living and working conditions, and significant barriers to accessing remedy. For this briefing, interviews

focused on recruitment processes, working conditions, remuneration, occupational safety and health, migration-related vulnerabilities, and workers' experiences with platform and subcontracting systems.

To protect workers from retaliation, all testimonies have been anonymised and pseudonyms have been used throughout this report. Several workers expressed fear that speaking publicly about labour conditions could result in dismissal, visa cancellation, blacklisting, or deportation. The name of the company under investigation has therefore been withheld.

### **African Migrant Workers in UAE E-Commerce Logistics**

The UAE has emerged as one of the fastest-growing digital commerce markets in the Gulf region. E-commerce apps and rapid delivery services now form a central part of urban consumption patterns, particularly in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Consumers increasingly rely on app-based logistics systems for food, groceries, household goods, and retail products.

This rapid growth has generated high demand for low-cost labour capable of sustaining rapid delivery infrastructures. Delivery riders and warehouse workers have become essential to the operation of platform logistics systems, ensuring goods move efficiently across urban centres. The labour systems sustaining this e-commerce boom remain heavily dependent on migrant workers.

African workers are increasingly entering Gulf labour markets through recruitment channels promising stable employment and higher wages. Workers interviewed for this briefing described migrating to the UAE because of unemployment, economic insecurity, and family obligations in their countries of origin.

### **Third-Party Logistics Firms and Fragmented Accountability**

A defining feature of UAE e-commerce and app-based delivery systems is the widespread use of third-party logistics firms (3PLs). Rather than directly employing delivery riders and logistics workers, platform companies increasingly outsource recruitment, workforce management, payroll, and labour administration to subcontractors and labour intermediaries.

African migrant workers interviewed by Equidem repeatedly described confusion regarding who their actual employer was, who was responsible for their wages and working conditions, and where responsibility lay when labour abuses occurred. Workers often wore the branding of major e-commerce or delivery platforms while formally employed by separate subcontracting firms.

Daniel, a Ghanaian delivery associate working directly for the e-commerce platform in the UAE, explained:

*They don't hire direct anymore. I think for the past two years they stopped hiring direct. They're always outsourcing the guys.*

Other workers described being recruited under the impression that they would work directly for a major platform company, only to discover after arrival in the UAE that they had instead been employed through a third-party logistics provider.

Coffie, a Ghanaian rider recruited through a 3PL, told Equidem investigators:

*I signed a contract in Ghana which they explained. The contract said I would be working directly with [the e-commerce platform]. We didn't have a conversation about the 3PL from the beginning at all.*

Workers also reported that subcontracting structures created major barriers to remedy and accountability. Louis, a Cameroonian rider working through a subcontractor, explained:

*No I am not able to make a complaint to [the platform] as I am supposed to complain to my subcontractor. I am not able to make a complaint because my contract is under [the 3PL].*

Similarly, James, a Kenyan rider working through a subcontractor, stated:

*I can't complain because there is nothing binding me and [the platform company].*

These testimonies underscore how subcontracting structures allow platform companies to maintain operational control over work allocation, targets, and productivity systems while distancing themselves from direct labour responsibility. The 3PL model fragments

accountability across platforms, labour suppliers, and recruitment agencies, making it difficult for migrant workers to seek accountability for decent work, including wages, working conditions, occupational safety, or grievance resolution.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Definitions & Scope (Article 1(a),(b),(c)); Employment Relationship; Access to Remedy*

The experiences documented in this briefing demonstrate significant weaknesses in the current [Blue Report](#) regarding subcontracting chains and platform accountability.

- ❖ Current draft language does not sufficiently clarify that platform companies may still exercise control over workers through third-party logistics firms and labour intermediaries. African migrant workers repeatedly described situations in which platform companies controlled productivity expectations and work organisation despite workers being formally employed by subcontractors. The ILO standard should therefore explicitly include workers employed through subcontracting arrangements and clarify that platform companies cannot evade labour obligations by outsourcing employment relationships through third-party logistics firms. Stronger accountability provisions are also needed to ensure that workers can access remedy regardless of whether they are directly hired or employed through intermediaries.

## **Rights violations facing African migrant workers in e-commerce and delivery**

### **1. Recruitment, Debt, and Deception**

#### *Recruitment Fees and Debt*

Workers interviewed for this briefing reported paying substantial recruitment fees in order to secure employment in the UAE. Workers described borrowing money from family members, taking out loans, or selling personal property in order to finance migration costs:

*Coffie, a Ghanaian rider working through a 3PL, reported paying USD 650 in recruitment fees to an agency in Ghana and later having AED 4,800 deducted from his salary in monthly increments to pay for a driver's licence.*

*Amani, a Kenyan rider working through a 3PL, described borrowing money from a cousin in order to pay KES 120,000 in recruitment costs.*

*James, a Kenyan rider working through a 3PL, reported that his mother took out a loan from her welfare association to finance his migration costs.*

Workers often arrived in the UAE already carrying significant debt burdens, increasing their dependence on employers and limiting their ability to leave exploitative conditions.

These conditions highlight the need for stronger protections within the proposed ILO standard regarding recruitment fees, recruitment-related debt, and responsibility across labour supply chains. Workers in platform logistics should not bear the financial costs of recruitment, migration, visas, or work-related licensing.

### *Deceptive Recruitment Practices*

James, a Kenyan delivery rider working for a 3PL in the UAE for as a food delivery rider reported he was never given a contract to sign.

Other African workers described recruitment processes that involved never receiving contracts, and misleading information regarding wages, hours, accommodation, and employment arrangements.

Coffie, a Ghanaian rider working through a 3PL also told Equidem investigators that the salary and benefits promised during recruitment differed substantially from the conditions he encountered after arriving in the UAE:

*From the start they told us our basic salary was 2,080 AED and a 7 AED commission per delivery. After I arrived, I learned the basic salary was 500 AED and we still get commission, but it depends on the distance of the delivery. Sometimes it's lower than 7 AED and sometimes it's higher. They also initially told us we would be working 8 hours a day, but I actually work 10. And they said we would have free food and accommodation, but the company only provided this for the first 3 months, now I am on my own.*

Workers consistently reported signing contracts for eight or nine-hour working days but later being required to work substantially longer hours without overtime pay. For instance, Elijah, a Ugandan worker, also reported that workers regularly worked from 7am until midnight despite contracts specifying nine-hour shifts.

These findings reinforce the importance of ensuring that platform companies cannot evade labour responsibilities through outsourcing and subcontracting arrangements. Ongoing ILC discussions regarding the scope of platform labour protections should explicitly include workers employed through third-party logistics firms and labour intermediaries where platform companies continue to exercise operational control over work allocation, productivity, and performance systems.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Definitions & Scope (Article 1(a),(b),(c)); Definitions – Remuneration / Payment (Article 1(d))*

The experiences documented in this briefing shed light on the importance of strengthening protection in the current Blue Report text regarding subcontracting chains and work-related costs.

- ❖ The current draft does not explicitly require platform companies to assume responsibility for recruitment-related costs or costs shifted onto workers through subcontractors and labour intermediaries. Workers interviewed by Equidem described paying recruitment fees, migration costs, and work-related licensing fees before and after arrival in the UAE, often through debt-financed migration arrangements.
- ❖ The current Blue Report also does not sufficiently address platform company practices of evading labour obligations through third-party logistics firms and labour intermediaries. Testimonies from African migrant workers demonstrate that platform companies continue to exercise operational control over work allocation, productivity systems, and labour conditions even where workers are formally employed by subcontractors. The ILO standard should therefore explicitly include workers employed through subcontracting chains and clarify that platform companies cannot avoid responsibility by claiming they merely “facilitate” work rather than organize and control it.
- ❖ The standard should also strengthen remuneration provisions by recognising workers’ rights to compensation for work-related costs and expenses, including licensing fees, recruitment fees, transport costs, and equipment costs shifted onto workers.

## **2. Excessive Working Hours and Unsafe Conditions**

*Productivity Targets and Algorithmic Pressure*

African migrant workers in e-commerce and delivery repeatedly described workplace systems organised around strict delivery targets, performance quotas, and productivity incentives. Workers reported that failure to meet targets resulted in wage deductions, disciplinary threats, loss of incentives, or pressure to work significantly beyond contractual hours.

Coffie, a Ghanaian delivery rider working for a 3PL in the UAE, explained:

*You have to do 15 deliveries per day or you will not get some payment incentives. It's a bonus.*

Workers described these targets as difficult or impossible to complete within their contracted working hours. John, a Ugandan delivery associate working directly for the e-commerce platform in the UAE, stated:

*Of course you can't hit the target they gave us in 9 hours.*

Francis, a Cameroonian delivery rider working through a 3PL, explained that wages were directly tied to productivity targets:

*I am given a target of 25 deliveries daily and if I don't reach, I don't get my salary in full.*

These reports suggest that target-based management systems intensified excessive working hours, unsafe workloads, and financial insecurity. Workers repeatedly described feeling compelled to continue working despite exhaustion, dangerous weather conditions, or physical pain because failure to meet targets carried financial and disciplinary consequences.

The experiences documented in this briefing also raise significant concerns regarding algorithmic management and digitally mediated labour control. Workers described labour systems in which productivity expectations, incentives, and penalties were structured around delivery quotas and continuous performance pressure. These systems shifted operational risks onto workers while encouraging unsafe work intensity and excessive hours.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Algorithmic Management; Occupational Safety and Health Framework (Article 4); Fair Remuneration; Workplace Violence and Harassment*

The testimonies gathered for this briefing demonstrate important gaps in the current Blue Report regarding algorithmic management and productivity-based labour control.

- ❖ Current draft language does not sufficiently address how target-setting systems, digitally managed productivity quotas, and incentive structures can contribute to unsafe workloads, excessive working hours, psychosocial harm, and wage insecurity. African migrant workers repeatedly described situations in which unrealistic productivity targets effectively forced workers to work beyond contractual hours in order to avoid wage penalties, disciplinary action, or loss of incentives. The ILO standard should therefore include stronger protections requiring transparency in target-setting systems, safeguards against unsafe productivity expectations, and protections against financial penalties linked to algorithmically managed performance systems.
- ❖ The experiences documented in this briefing also demonstrate the need for the Convention to explicitly recognise target-based overwork and digitally managed productivity pressure as occupational safety and psychosocial risk factors within platform labour systems.

### *Long Working Hours*

African migrant workers in e-commerce and delivery consistently reported excessive working hours, far beyond the hours specified in their contracts.

Mary, a Ugandan worker, told Equidem investigators:

*There was no time we worked for less than 12 hours... We would sometimes work 15–16 hours.*

Daniel, a Ghanaian worker, described regularly working 12 to 14-hour shifts and completing up to 150 deliveries in a single day. Elijah, a Ugandan worker reported working up to 18 hours daily while handling between 150 and 200 customers during busy periods.

Workers also reported working continuously for extended periods without rest days. Mary, a Ugandan worker reported to Equidem investigators:

*I work seven days a week sometimes, especially when there is a sale.*

Daniel, a Ghanaian worker described having no choice but to work a full week with no days off when asked:

*I work six days a week with one rest day. Sometimes when you are off, they still call you to come to work and you have to because you have no options.*

### *Heat Stress and Dangerous Conditions*

Workers consistently described unsafe working conditions linked to extreme heat, exhaustion, traffic risks, and pressure to continue working despite fatigue.

Coffie, a Ghanaian delivery rider working for a 3PL in the UAE for an e-commerce platform company told Equidem investigators:

*The heat is very disturbing and makes us uncomfortable. The temperatures are unthinkable.*

Grace, a Ugandan worker, described severe physical and emotional consequences resulting from prolonged work under extreme temperatures:

*I got an infection due to too much walking in the heat. Long hours in the hot climate, you deliver until all your clothes are soaked in sweat... I was fatigued, I was stressed, I lost weight... I got depressed, sad and sick.*

Several workers described fears of traffic accidents resulting from exhaustion and long working hours. Elijah, a Ugandan worker stated that constant pressure from customers and the company contributed to an accident he experienced while working:

*I got in one accident which was caused through pressure from the company and customers at the same time... 18 hours of delivery is a lot. It is dangerous because you are required to work using the phone, driving, customers are calling because they expect their delivery. You just have to be careful for your life because you are told to never refuse picking up a customer or any company call.*

Productivity pressures and excessive hours significantly increased occupational safety risks. The experiences of African migrant workers in e-commerce and delivery

underscore the urgent need for stronger international standards on occupational safety and health within platform work, including protections against excessive working hours, mandatory rest periods, heat stress protections, and safeguards against unsafe productivity targets. The experiences documented in this briefing also raise important concerns regarding algorithmic management systems that incentivise workers to continue working despite exhaustion, illness, or dangerous conditions.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Occupational Safety and Health Framework (Article 4); Preventive OSH Obligations (Article 4(1)); Allocation of Responsibilities (Article 4(2)); Hazard Prevention*

The testimonies gathered for this briefing expose significant weaknesses in the current Blue Report's occupational safety and health framework. The revised draft shifts responsibility primarily onto Member States while weakening direct obligations on digital labour platforms themselves. However, the experiences of African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics demonstrate that many workplace risks are directly created or intensified by platform business models, productivity systems, and algorithmic management practices.

- ❖ Workers described impossible delivery targets, excessive working hours, pressure to remain online, dangerous heat exposure, and exhaustion linked to platform productivity systems. These risks emerged from how work was organised and managed. The ILO standard should therefore restore stronger language requiring direct occupational safety obligations for digital labour platforms, including obligations to prevent excessive workloads, mitigate psychosocial risks, and eliminate unsafe productivity incentives.
- ❖ The testimonies also demonstrate why detailed hazard prevention provisions should remain within the Convention itself rather than being moved into the non-binding Recommendation. African migrant workers repeatedly described dangerous conditions linked to fatigue, heat stress, traffic exposure, and algorithmic pressure. The Convention should explicitly require preventive measures addressing physical and psychosocial risks associated with platform work, including protections against excessive working hours and digitally managed overwork.

*Denial of Rest, Leave, and Recovery Time*

African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce and delivery systems repeatedly described being denied adequate rest, breaks, leave, and recovery time. Workers reported

excessive schedules, pressure to work continuously during sales periods, cancelled rest days, and penalties for taking leave or refusing additional work.

Several workers described working continuously for extended periods without a day off. Mary, a Ugandan delivery associate working directly for the e-commerce platform, reported:

*I once worked 14 days in a row without a day off.*

Daniel, a Ghanaian delivery associate, similarly described workers accumulating unpaid and unused days off:

*Some people in the company here have days off pending. They've been working continuous for 14 days, and they haven't gotten their off day. They are just waking up, coming to work, going back home to sleep, the next day same. It's work-home-work-home without even getting rest.*

Workers also described management practices that effectively penalised workers for taking leave, reporting illness, or being unable to work. Coffie, a Ghanaian rider working through a 3PL, explained:

*If you cannot go to work for any tangible reason, they will deduct 40 AED from your salary.*

Mary, a Ugandan worker, described how sick leave was discouraged and difficult to access:

*They even told us we weren't supposed to get sick. Sometimes the sick leave would not be approved or you have to tell them in advance but who knows that they will get sick on a particular day.*

Elijah, a Ugandan delivery associate, reported that after suffering a back injury linked to lifting heavy items, his supervisor refused to accommodate medical recommendations:

*They said I am lying about my back injury and told me I had to resume duty if I need the job.*

Workers also described situations in which they were required to work during scheduled rest days without additional compensation. Daniel, a Ghanaian delivery associate, stated:

*Sometimes when you are off, they still call you to come to work and you have to because you have no options. There is no extra pay you just get your normal salary.*

Others described being unable to take meaningful breaks during the working day because of delivery pressure and workload intensity. Grace, a Ugandan worker, explained:

*With so many packages there was no stopping. I could only buy drinks and fast food, eating while I was driving.*

As Louis, a Cameroonian delivery rider working for a 3PL in the UAE for an e-commerce platform company explained, exhaustion heightens risk:

*This job is extremely dangerous because if am tired and they're still sending me with orders, I might cause an accident and lead to loss of lives or even serious accidents.*

These worker accounts reveal how platform logistics systems are organised around continuous availability and relentless productivity demands that deny workers adequate opportunities for physical recovery, sleep, healthcare, family life, and psychological rest. Workers repeatedly linked these conditions to exhaustion, stress, chronic pain, burnout, and emotional distress.

Denial of rest and recovery time should be understood not only as a labour standards issue, but also as an occupational safety and health risk and a form of psychosocial harm. Excessive schedules, cancelled rest days, pressure to work while injured or sick, and penalties for taking leave significantly increased workers' vulnerability to accidents, illness, fatigue, and mental distress.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Occupational Safety and Health Framework (Article 4); Working Time Protections; Workplace Violence and Harassment; Paid Leave and Sick Leave Protections*

The testimonies gathered for this briefing expose important gaps in the current Blue Report regarding working time protections, rest periods, paid leave, and psychosocial risks in platform work.

- ❖ Workers repeatedly described systems in which productivity demands and staffing shortages resulted in continuous overwork, cancelled rest days, pressure to work while ill or injured, and financial penalties linked to absence or leave-taking. The current draft does not sufficiently address how digitally managed productivity systems and target-based work organisation can undermine workers' rights to rest, recovery, and safe working time limits. The ILO standard should therefore include stronger protections guaranteeing adequate daily and weekly rest periods, paid sick leave, freedom from penalties for taking leave, and safeguards against excessive work intensity and continuous availability requirements.
- ❖ The experiences of African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics also demonstrate the need for platform labour standards to explicitly recognise fatigue, burnout, and denial of recovery time as occupational safety and psychosocial risk factors within digitally managed labour systems.

### **3. Wage Insecurity and Financial Pressure**

#### *Unpaid Overtime and Wage Deductions*

African migrant workers in e-commerce and food delivery reported not receiving overtime payments despite consistently working beyond contractual hours.

Mary, a Ugandan worker told Equidem investigators:

*We signed a contract for 8 working hours but we were doing more than 12 hours and were not paid overtime.*

Elijah, another Ugandan worker, similarly reported repeated promises of overtime payments that were never fulfilled:

*They used to tell us that they would pay overtime but my salary would come without overtime and they tell you next month and again and again.*

Workers also described target-based incentives and deductions that pressured them to complete high numbers of deliveries daily. Francis, a Cameroonian rider, stated that failure to complete 25 deliveries daily resulted in reduced salary payments.

Workers also reported confusion regarding how incentives were calculated and frequent changes to incentive systems. Deborah, a Ugandan worker stated:

*We don't even know how they calculate our incentives. We can't know because they take a month without posting the incentives you are getting.*

### *Salary Delays and Financial Instability*

Workers employed through subcontractors reported salary delays and financial insecurity. Amani, a Kenyan rider working through a 3PL reported that salaries were “not always on time,” while Francis, a Cameroonian rider working through a 3PL stated that payments were sometimes delayed by up to five days.

Through unpaid overtime, wage deductions, and salary delays, platform labour systems transfer substantial economic risk onto African migrant workers while maintaining highly flexible compensation structures.

The findings reinforce ongoing ILC concerns regarding remuneration, transparency, and fair compensation within platform work. Workers repeatedly described opaque incentive systems, unpredictable pay structures, unpaid overtime, and deductions linked to delivery targets. These testimonies underscore the need for binding standards requiring transparency in wage calculation systems, protection against unfair deductions, timely payment of wages, and compensation for all hours worked, including overtime.

### *Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Definitions – Remuneration / Payment (Article 1(d)); Fair Remuneration Provisions; Algorithmic Management*

The testimonies of African migrant workers reveal important shortcomings in the current Blue Report regarding remuneration transparency and economic risk allocation within platform work.

- ❖ Workers repeatedly described opaque incentive systems, unpredictable payments, target-based deductions, unpaid overtime, and delayed salaries. These findings demonstrate how platform labour systems can shift substantial

- economic risks onto workers while retaining flexibility for platforms and subcontractors. Current draft language remains insufficiently clear regarding workers' rights to transparent remuneration systems and reimbursement for work-related costs. The experiences documented in this briefing demonstrate the need for stronger obligations requiring platforms and labour intermediaries to clearly disclose how incentives, deductions, targets, and performance-based payments are calculated.
- ❖ The testimonies also highlight the importance of addressing algorithmic wage-setting systems within the Convention itself. Workers described situations in which incentives changed unpredictably, or deductions were imposed without explanation. The ILO standard should therefore include stronger provisions guaranteeing transparency, contestability, and human oversight in algorithmically managed remuneration systems.

#### 4. Workplace violence

*I'm thinking they are doing this to touch us mentally and physically because if this was your brother or sister, you wouldn't be doing this to them. You can't treat them like donkeys. Sometimes I think these people think we don't have blood, we are not humans.*

—Deborah, a Ugandan delivery associate for an e-commerce platform in the UAE

ILO Convention No. 190 recognises violence and harassment in the world of work as a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm. The testimonies gathered for this briefing show that African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics experience multiple, overlapping forms of workplace violence, including racial discrimination, verbal abuse, intimidation, physical exhaustion, psychological distress, and economic coercion.

##### *Racial and Nationality-Based Discrimination*

Workers repeatedly described racial and nationality-based discrimination within workplace hierarchies. African migrant workers told Equidem investigators that they were assigned more difficult routes, denied promotions, or treated differently from colleagues of other nationalities.

John, a Ugandan delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE as a direct hire reported:

*Africans were given only hard jobs, hard work.*

Elijah, a Ugandan delivery associate, reported that a supervisor told him:

*You black people want to behave like lawyers but soon you'll be eliminated.*

Daniel, a Ghanaian delivery associate, explained that promotions were distributed by nationality:

*If any promotion comes, it only goes to Indians.*

Workers also described management structures dominated by specific national groups, fostering nationality-based exclusion and favouritism. Aisha, a Ugandan delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE as a direct hire reported:

*There is always discrimination. I mean it's obvious - the entire supervision and management is 90% one race. I think if they try to mix up it will make a difference.*

These practices contributed to a workplace environment where African workers experienced racialised control, humiliation, and unequal treatment.

### *Verbal Abuse, Threats, and Intimidation*

Workers reported verbal abuse, insults, threats, and intimidation from supervisors and managers. James, a Kenyan rider, reported that his manager told him:

*You will die stupid and you will forever be a rider.*

Mary, a Ugandan delivery associate, described threats of removal from teams and disciplinary warnings if workers failed to meet targets:

*They would threaten us to remove us from the team so by all means you have to finish the target, and by doing so you're working more hours. [They would] Sign warning letters.*

Louis, a Cameroonian delivery rider working for a 3PL in the UAE for an e-commerce platform told Equidem investigators that he felt he was targeted based upon his nationality:

*I have one Indian manager who I don't get along well with. He keeps abusing me and I don't hear him abusing my Asian colleagues. He says that I am stupid and he never appreciates my work.*

In these accounts, verbal abuse and threats are used to discipline workers and pressure them to continue working under excessive and unsafe conditions.

### *Physical Harm from Excessive Workloads*

Workers described severe physical exhaustion, chronic pain, and health problems resulting from long working hours, heavy workloads, heat exposure, and pressure to meet delivery targets.

Mary, a Ugandan delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE reported persistent backaches and chest pains caused by heavy workloads and lifting bulk items:

*Extended work hours can lead to driver fatigue, which may impair their ability to stay alert and focused while on the road. Working long hours can contribute to high levels of stress and burnout among delivery drivers, as they may feel pressured to meet tight delivery schedules. Spending long hours behind the wheel can take a toll on the driver's physical health, leading to issues such as back pain, muscle strain, and overall fatigue.*

Amani, a Kenyan rider, told Equidem investigators that he had visited hospital more than five times within a year because of back pain:

*I have been to the hospital more than five times this year because of back pain. This is because I put everything in the truck, drive, and offload.*

Other workers also described exhaustion, fatigue, heat-related illness, and physical pain linked to prolonged work in dangerous conditions. Elijah, a Ugandan delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE as a direct hire reported:

*The bones on my low waste of the backbone had issues due to my work lifting heavy stuff.*

### *Psychological Harm and Emotional Distress*

Workers also described serious psychological and emotional impacts. Long hours, impossible targets, fear of dismissal, lack of rest, and isolation from family caused stress, depression, and emotional fatigue.

John, a Ugandan delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE as a direct hire reported:

*They stress you until you get out. They would toss me anywhere. They could change the area of work every day, but I just left them for my survival.*

Mary, a Ugandan delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE told Equidem investigators:

*Mentally, I really had no time for my family.*

Francis, a Cameroonian rider, told Equidem investigators:

*Mentally I feel like I need to be helped, otherwise I am going to lose it soon.*

James, a Kenyan delivery rider working for a 3PL in the UAE for a food deliver platform reported:

*Mentally I am not okay as road users are very careless. Most of the time I am fighting in the traffic which makes my brain not function properly.*

Workers described feeling dehumanised, exhausted, and trapped. Several compared their treatment to being treated like “machines,” “horses,” or “donkeys.” These practices inflict psychological harm and undermine workers’ dignity and wellbeing.

### *Economic Harm*

African migrant workers in e-commerce and delivery also recounted the economic harms they face at work. Unpaid overtime, unclear incentive systems, deductions, delayed salaries, and financial penalties tied to targets, leave, or work performance

intensify workers' dependence on employers and subcontractors. For migrant workers who had already paid recruitment fees or taken on debt to migrate, wage insecurity and deductions increased vulnerability and reduced their ability to leave abusive conditions. Economic harm therefore operated alongside physical and psychological harm, reinforcing workers' precarity and limiting their freedom to challenge exploitation.

International standards on decent work in the platform economy must adequately address workplace violence and harassment in platform labour systems. Platform work standards should recognise that violence is not limited to physical assault. It can include racial discrimination, verbal abuse, threats, excessive productivity pressure, unsafe workloads, unpaid overtime, arbitrary deductions, and retaliation.

For African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics, these harms were interconnected. Digital and managerial systems imposed intense work demands, while migration dependency and subcontracting limited workers' ability to refuse unsafe work or seek remedy. A strong ILO standard should therefore require protections against physical, psychological, and economic harms in platform work, including for migrant workers employed through subcontractors and third-party logistics firms.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Violence and Harassment Protections; Occupational Safety and Health; Equality and Non-Discrimination*

The testimonies gathered for this briefing demonstrate that workplace violence within platform labour systems extends beyond physical assault and includes racial discrimination, verbal abuse, threats, humiliation, economic coercion, unsafe workloads, and psychological harm. African migrant workers repeatedly described experiences that align with the ILO Convention No. 190 understanding of violence and harassment as conduct likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm.

- ❖ Current platform work negotiations risk treating workplace violence too narrowly or failing to sufficiently recognise how algorithmic management systems, excessive productivity pressure, racialised labour hierarchies, and migration dependency can contribute to workplace violence and harassment. The testimonies in this briefing demonstrate the need for explicit protections addressing psychosocial risks, racial discrimination, abusive management practices, and economic coercion within platform work systems.
- ❖ The ILO standard should therefore explicitly recognise that violence and harassment in platform labour can occur through digitally mediated

management systems, excessive productivity targets, discriminatory work allocation, threats of dismissal, and retaliation linked to migration dependency and precarious status.

## **6. Barriers to Remedy and Fear of Retaliation**

African migrant workers consistently described fear of retaliation for raising complaints or challenging workplace conditions.

Daniel, a Ghanaian delivery associate working for an e-commerce platform in the UAE explained:

*They say if you don't like it, leave.*

Workers also reported that complaints to supervisors or team leaders produced no meaningful changes. Further, workers employed through subcontractors described uncertainty regarding who they could complain to because they were not directly employed by the platform company.

Other workers reported direct retaliation following complaints. John, a Ugandan delivery associate, stated that after raising concerns to a regional supervisor, his manager warned him, saying:

*After what I will do to you, you will never like me again.*

Shortly after this incident, John's contract was not renewed.

Fear, immigration dependency, and fragmented accountability structures significantly limited workers' ability to access remedy.

These testimonies highlight the importance of ensuring that workers in platform labour systems can safely access remedy without fear of retaliation, dismissal, deportation, or blacklisting. Ongoing ILC discussions should include strong protections for whistleblowing, freedom of association, collective organising, and protection against retaliation for workers who report labour abuses or unsafe conditions. The findings also demonstrate the need for clear accountability mechanisms where workers are employed through subcontracting chains and third-party logistics firms.

*Decent Work in the Platform Economy, Relevant Articles: Access to Remedy; Freedom of Association; Protection Against Retaliation; Definitions & Scope*

The experiences documented in this briefing expose significant barriers to remedy for migrant workers employed within platform logistics systems. Workers repeatedly described fear of dismissal, deportation, blacklisting, and retaliation for raising complaints or refusing unsafe work. Several workers also expressed uncertainty regarding who held responsibility for addressing grievances because they were formally employed by subcontractors while operating under platform-controlled systems.

- ❖ These testimonies demonstrate why the current Blue Report should be strengthened clearly guarantee workers' rights to safely report abuses, organise collectively, challenge unfair treatment, and access remedy regardless of contractual classification or migration status. The Convention should include stronger anti-retaliation protections covering dismissal, deactivation, visa-related retaliation, and discriminatory treatment linked to complaints or organising activity.

The findings also reinforce the need for stronger accountability provisions ensuring that platform companies remain responsible where labour is outsourced through intermediaries or third-party logistics firms. Without explicit accountability across subcontracting chains, migrant workers may remain unable to effectively access remedy or enforce labour rights protections.

## **Conclusion**

The testimonies documented in this briefing reveal patterns of exploitation, excessive working hours, wage insecurity, racial discrimination, unsafe conditions, and retaliation experienced by African migrant workers employed within UAE e-commerce logistics systems.

Workers described labour systems characterised by recruitment debt, outsourcing, algorithmic pressure, and fear of dismissal. Many reported conditions that differed substantially from those promised during recruitment, while others described working hours and productivity expectations that posed serious risks to their physical and mental health.

The experiences documented in this report demonstrate how platform logistics systems can rely upon highly vulnerable migrant labour while diffusing accountability across subcontractors and digital management structures.

As international discussions continue regarding decent work in the platform economy, the experiences of African migrant workers in UAE logistics highlight the urgent need for labour protections that address recruitment practices, subcontracting chains, excessive working hours, occupational safety, discrimination, and barriers to remedy within platform labour systems.

The testimonies documented in this briefing demonstrate that platform labour exploitation cannot be understood solely through the operation of digital applications themselves. Recruitment systems, migration governance, subcontracting arrangements, algorithmic management, and unequal labour hierarchies together shape the realities faced by African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics. As the ILO continues negotiations on decent work in the platform economy, ensuring that future standards explicitly protect migrant workers employed through outsourced logistics chains will be critical to preventing some of the most vulnerable workers in the digital economy from being excluded from meaningful labour protections.

The testimonies gathered for this briefing demonstrate that the current Blue Report still contains important gaps that could weaken protections for migrant workers in platform labour systems. In particular, stronger language is needed to ensure that platform companies cannot evade responsibility through subcontracting chains, that occupational safety obligations apply directly to platforms, that remuneration systems are transparent and fair, and that workers are protected against retaliation, discrimination, and workplace violence in all its forms.

African migrant workers in UAE e-commerce logistics are already experiencing the consequences of regulatory gaps within platform labour systems. Their testimonies provide urgent evidence for why future ILO standards must adopt a worker-rights approach that centres accountability, transparency, occupational safety, equality, and access to remedy across the full digital labour supply chain.

## Annex: Recommendations by Draft Article for ILC Negotiations on Decent Work in the Platform Economy

| Draft Article                 | Issue Area            | Evidence from African Migrant Workers in UAE E-Commerce Logistics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Recommended Worker-Rights Position                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 1(a), (b), (c)</b> | Definitions and Scope | Workers repeatedly described being employed through third-party logistics firms (3PLs) while remaining operationally controlled by platform companies through targets, delivery allocation, discipline, and performance systems. Workers also reported confusion regarding who their actual employer was and who was responsible for labour conditions and grievances. | Ensure the Convention explicitly covers workers employed through subcontractors, labour intermediaries, and 3PLs where platforms exercise operational control. Clarify that platform companies cannot evade labour obligations through outsourcing arrangements or intermediary contracting structures. |

|                                                       |                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 1(d)</b>                                   | Remuneration / Payment Definitions         | Workers reported recruitment-related debt, deductions for licensing and work-related costs, unpaid overtime, opaque incentives, delayed salaries, and target-based wage penalties.     | Strengthen remuneration provisions to require payment for all hours worked, prohibit unfair deductions, guarantee transparency in incentive systems, and ensure workers are not required to bear recruitment, licensing, or work-related costs. |
| <b>Article 2 / Employment Relationship Provisions</b> | Employment Relationship and Accountability | Workers described situations in which platforms controlled productivity expectations, delivery systems, and labour discipline while formally outsourcing employment to subcontractors. | Clarify that platform control may exist regardless of formal contractual classification. Require accountability across subcontracting chains and establish joint responsibility where platforms organise, supervise, or control work.           |

|                     |                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 4</b>    | Occupational Safety and Health Framework   | Workers described extreme working hours, dangerous heat exposure, fatigue, traffic risks, pressure to continue working while sick or injured, and unsafe productivity targets linked to platform systems. | Restore stronger direct OSH obligations on digital labour platforms. Require platforms to identify, prevent, and mitigate occupational risks linked to work organisation, productivity systems, excessive hours, and algorithmic management. |
| <b>Article 4(1)</b> | Preventive Occupational Safety Obligations | Workers repeatedly linked unsafe conditions to platform productivity systems and target-based work organisation.                                                                                          | Require preventive measures addressing heat stress, fatigue, excessive workloads, dangerous delivery targets, and psychosocial risks. Ensure these obligations apply directly to platforms as well as subcontractors.                        |
| <b>Article 4(2)</b> | Allocation of Responsibilities             | Workers experienced fragmented accountability between platforms and subcontractors, leaving uncertainty regarding responsibility for safety, wages, and remedy.                                           | Clarify that outsourcing labour through 3PLs does not remove platform responsibility for occupational safety, labour rights protections, or access to remedy.                                                                                |

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|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 5 / Working Time Provisions</b>        | Excessive Working Hours and Rest        | Workers reported routinely working 12–18 hour shifts, cancelled rest days, continuous work without leave, and pressure to remain constantly available. | Include enforceable limits on working hours, guaranteed daily and weekly rest periods, and protections against excessive digitally managed workloads and continuous availability requirements. |
| <b>Article 5 / Leave and Recovery Protections</b> | Sick Leave and Rest Periods             | Workers described penalties for taking leave, denial of sick leave, pressure to work while injured, and salary deductions linked to absence.           | Guarantee access to paid sick leave and adequate recovery time without retaliation, penalties, or loss of wages. Prohibit adverse treatment for reporting illness, injury, or fatigue.         |
| <b>Article 6 / Fair Remuneration</b>              | Wage Transparency and Economic Security | Workers described unexplained deductions, unpredictable pay, changing incentives, delayed salaries, and penalties tied to delivery targets.            | Require transparent wage calculation systems, timely payment of wages, disclosure of deductions and incentives, and protections against arbitrary or target-based financial penalties.         |

|                                                            |                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 7 /<br/>Algorithmic<br/>Management</b>          | Targets,<br>Productivity<br>Systems, and<br>Digital Control | Workers repeatedly described unrealistic productivity targets that forced them to work beyond contractual hours in order to avoid penalties or loss of incentives. | Require transparency, human oversight, and contestability in algorithmic management systems. Prohibit unsafe productivity targets and algorithmically managed systems that undermine occupational safety or labour rights protections. |
| <b>Article 8 /<br/>Equality and<br/>Non-Discrimination</b> | Racial and<br>Nationality-Based<br>Discrimination           | African migrant workers described discriminatory treatment, exclusion from promotion opportunities, and nationality-based workplace hierarchies.                   | Include explicit protections against race- and nationality-based discrimination in platform labour systems, including discriminatory work allocation, promotion practices, and management structures.                                  |

|                                                                      |                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 9 /<br/>Violence and<br/>Harassment</b>                   | Workplace<br>Violence and<br>Harassment   | Workers reported<br>verbal abuse,<br>humiliation,<br>intimidation, threats,<br>racial insults,<br>excessive productivity<br>pressure, and<br>economically coercive<br>management systems. | Align platform labour<br>standards with ILO<br>Convention No. 190<br>by recognising<br>physical,<br>psychological, and<br>economic harm as<br>forms of workplace<br>violence and<br>harassment. Explicitly<br>include psychosocial<br>risks, intimidation,<br>discriminatory abuse,<br>and economic<br>coercion within<br>protections. |
| <b>Article 10 /<br/>Psychosocial<br/>Risks and<br/>Mental Health</b> | Mental Health<br>and Psychosocial<br>Harm | Workers described<br>stress, burnout,<br>exhaustion,<br>depression, isolation,<br>and emotional distress<br>linked to excessive<br>workloads and<br>constant productivity<br>pressure.    | Explicitly recognise<br>burnout, fatigue,<br>isolation, and<br>excessive productivity<br>pressure as<br>psychosocial risks<br>requiring preventive<br>protections and<br>occupational health<br>measures.                                                                                                                              |

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|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Article 11 /<br/>Access to<br/>Remedy</b>                   | Grievance<br>Mechanisms and<br>Accountability | Workers described ineffective complaint systems, uncertainty regarding who held responsibility, and inability to safely challenge abusive conditions. | Guarantee accessible grievance and remedy systems regardless of contractual classification. Ensure workers can pursue complaints directly against platforms where platforms exercise operational control.      |
| <b>Article 12 /<br/>Protection<br/>Against<br/>Retaliation</b> | Retaliation and<br>Immigration<br>Dependency  | Workers feared dismissal, visa cancellation, blacklisting, and deportation for reporting abuses or refusing unsafe work.                              | Include strong protections against retaliation, including dismissal, deactivation, visa-related retaliation, threats, and discrimination linked to complaints, organising activity, or refusal of unsafe work. |
| <b>Article 13 /<br/>Freedom of<br/>Association</b>             | Collective<br>Organising and<br>Worker Voice  | Workers described fear of speaking out, lack of worker representation, and inability to collectively challenge abusive conditions.                    | Guarantee platform workers' rights to organise, collectively bargain, report abuses safely, and participate in worker representation mechanisms regardless of migration status or contractual classification.  |

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|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cross-Cutting<br/>Across<br/>Convention</b> | Migrant Worker<br>Protections | Workers' vulnerability<br>was intensified by<br>recruitment debt,<br>migration dependency,<br>subcontracting, and<br>fear of deportation. | Explicitly recognise<br>migrant workers as a<br>high-risk group within<br>platform labour<br>systems and require<br>protections addressing<br>recruitment practices,<br>migration dependency,<br>subcontracting,<br>retaliation risks, and<br>access to remedy<br>regardless of<br>immigration status. |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



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