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The Future of Work: Worker Organizing and Power in Africa's Informal Economy



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The Future of Work: Worker Organizing and Power in Africa's Informal Economy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CALS	Centre for Applied Legal Studies
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DWCP	Decent Work Country Programme
ETIP	Energy Transition and Investment Plan
ETP	Energy Transition Plan
FIDA	International Federation of Women Lawyers
GBVH	Gender-Based Violence and Harrassment
GHETIP	Ghana Energy Transition and Investment Plan
IDWF	International Domestic Workers Federation
ILAW	International Lawyers Assisting Workers Network
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
JET	Just Energy Transition
JET-IP	Just Energy Transition Investment Plan
LRC	Legal Resources Centre
MELR	Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations
MIWUSA	Migrant Workers Union of South Africa
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
NCCC	National Council on Climate Change
NCCP	National Climate Change Policy
NETF	National Energy Transition Framework
NGEP	National Gas Expansion Programme
NGJS	National Green Jobs Strategy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLC	Nigeria Labour Congress
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
NUPENG	Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers
PAGE	Partnership for Action on Green Economy
PCC	Presidential Climate Commission
PCJT	Just Transition Framework (Presidential Climate Commission)
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
SADSAWU	South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union
SAFTU	South African Federation of Trade Unions
STATA	Stata Statistical Software
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TWU	Transport Workers' Union
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIWA	Union of Informal Workers Associations (Ghana)
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Association is any group of persons who have joined together under some agreement or constitution or rules for the purpose of carrying out some common object.

Algorithmic Invisibility is a phenomenon where individuals, groups, or content exist online but are effectively hidden, deprioritized, or suppressed by algorithms. This can happen intentionally or unintentionally, often because of system design, engagement-based ranking, or content moderation, limiting visibility and control over one's own narrative.

The **care economy** refers to the sector of the economy that provides services related to health care, childcare, elderly care, disability care, and other forms of personal and social care.

Care workers are individuals whose work supports the care and well-being of people. It includes workers in sectors such as childcare, elderly care, disability care, domestic work, or healthcare, and can refer to paid or unpaid work.

Collective bargaining is the process through which workers, usually represented by a trade union or other worker organization, negotiate with their employer or employer representatives to reach agreements on various workplace issues. These issues typically include wages, working conditions, benefits, job security, and other terms of employment. The goal of collective bargaining is to secure fair and favorable terms for workers while balancing the interests of both parties, the workers and the employer.

"Conditions of employment" refers to all the provisions relating to a worker's employment.

Decent work refers to work that is productive, provides fair income, ensures workplace safety, offers social protection, and respects workers' fundamental rights and dignity.

Digital organizing refers to the use of digital tools and platforms such as social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok), instant messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram), and dedicated websites to mobilize, connect, and engage people around a common cause or goal. In the context of labor movements or workers' rights, it involves harnessing technology to organize workers, raise awareness of important issues, coordinate actions, and foster solidarity among participants.

Disability results from the interaction between persons with long-term impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society, including the world of work, on an equal basis with others (UN CRPD, 2006).

Domestic work means work pertaining to the home or household. This definition establishes the workplace—the household—as the defining feature of the sector.

Domestic worker generally refers to an employee who works in someone else's home, whether on a full-time or part-time basis. This includes a person engaged to undertake duties such as household chores, babysitting, driving, gardening, assistance with petty trading and security services.

Employer: The ordinary sense of the term employer is someone who pays another to work for her or him, either on an indefinite basis or for a fixed term.

Employment: Work, which is wage or self-employment, comprising work performed for others in exchange for pay or profit, such as salaries, allowances, wages, etc.

Informal work refers to work not regulated, protected, or recognized by formal state institutions. Workers in informal employment typically are characterized by a lack of legal contracts, social protection, job security, undefined workplaces, and access to formal labor rights (Hassen & Emont, 2023).

Just transition refers to a framework for addressing the challenges that arise when shifting from an economy heavily reliant on fossil fuels or environmentally harmful practices to a more sustainable, low-carbon, and green economy. This transition must be fair and inclusive, ensuring that no one is left behind, especially workers and communities who are adversely affected by these changes.

Migrant worker is a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a place or geography other than not their usual place of stay or domicile. This brings into context international migrant workers and internal migrant workers, although both involve mobility.

An **international migrant worker** is a person who is engaged or has been engaged, in a remunerated activity in a place or geography outside their country of nationality.

Migration policies are the rules governing entry and exit from a country, quotas and special arrangements for particular groups of people, settlement and naturalization rights, as well as employment, social, political and civil rights accorded to migrants.

Platform economy refers to economic activity facilitated by digital platforms, such as apps (e.g. Uber, Bolt, Hubtel), websites and online marketplaces. These platforms act as a third-party digital interface connecting two-party transactions (a sale of a good or service from a vendor to a buyer) (Migai et al., 2019).

Social dialogue includes all types of negotiation, consultation, or information sharing, either between representatives of government, employers and organized labor (at a tripartite level) or between employers and organized labor (at a bipartite level).

Trade union: an organization of workers, in formal or informal employment, formed to defend and promote their rights and interests usually through collective bargaining, representation, and collective action.

Work is any activity that an individual undertakes using effort and skill to earn a living, support themselves and others, or contribute to society. It encompasses both paid and unpaid activities, formal and informal arrangements, and temporary or permanent engagements.

Worker cooperative (also known as a worker coop) is business owned and democratically controlled by its workers.

Worker organizing is the process by which workers come together to form or join organizations, such as unions or worker associations, to collectively advocate for their rights, improve their working conditions, secure better pay and benefits, and influence labor policies.

Worker power refers to the ability of workers, individually or collectively, to influence workplace decisions, shape policies that affect their working conditions, and secure better terms of employment. It encompasses workers' capacity to advocate for their rights, improve their wages and benefits, and shape the direction of the workplace through collective action, bargaining, and solidarity.

Worker solidarity refers to the unity and mutual support among workers, especially when they face common challenges or struggle for shared goals, such as better wages, improved working conditions, or stronger labor rights. It involves workers coming together, regardless of their individual differences, to support each other in collective efforts to secure and defend their rights.





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across Africa, the structure of work and of labor markets are undergoing a profound transformation driven by a range of developments. These include the rapid digitalization of work, growing demand for care services, rising levels of labor migration, and the pressures of climate change which are propelling a transition across sectors (Kwanhi, 2024, Vogt, 2025). As a result, informal and non-standard forms of employment are increasingly common. Historically, trade unions played a central role in shielding workers from unsafe and underpaid conditions, but across much of the Global South their influence has declined, weakening worker representation and protection.

In response, new worker organizations are emerging outside the bounds of traditional unions to fill this gap, developing new forms of collective power and solidarity. In addition, unions and worker groups are increasingly advocating for reforms that not only seek protection for their members but also influence policies toward a more equitable future (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024).

This study sought to explore how worker organizing and power-building are evolving in response to these major trends. It presents four case studies that highlight successful organizing and power building strategies alongside key challenges. It also identifies the drivers of these strategies and draws replicable lessons for new worker groups. It aims to help organizers, civil society, and policymakers better understand how to build inclusive, and sustainable labor movements. The study involved 61 key informant interviews and 14 focus group discussions across five countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. A survey was administered to 497 respondents using a multi-stage sampling strategy, including worker group leaders, members, and non-members. While the findings provide practice-based and policy-relevant insights, some limitations apply. In particular, the analysis relies on self-reported survey and interview data, which may constrain representativeness.

Selected Findings

Organizing and Structuring Worker Power

In all five countries, non-traditional workers are organizing themselves. These include caregivers, waste pickers, migrants, workers whose labor is mediated by digital platforms, and wage earners in sectors undergoing just transition. In each context, diverse forms of collectives have emerged: associations, cooperatives, networks, unions, and in some cases, federations. The many forms of collectives expand inclusion and outreach to workers, but also risk fragmentation, uneven legitimacy, and diluted bargaining power.

Some worker groups are adopting hybrid models of governance, registering as nonprofits but employing governance based on union principles. This hybrid model helps navigate bureaucratic barriers to establishing worker organizations, although it may limit a group's legal recognition for collective bargaining rights.

Organizing among migrant workers and around just transition remains weak and uneven. Unlike Uganda and South Africa, where dedicated migrant worker organizations exist, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya lack comparable structures. Migrant workers are instead represented through mainstream unions, community associations, or ILO and IOM initiatives. While this enables collaboration with established institutions unlocking coalitional power, it often sidelines migrant-specific concerns and limits sustained transnational organizing. Similarly, organizing around just transition among informal and non-standard workers is underdeveloped, risking their exclusion from shaping climate narratives, institutional pathways, and net-zero transitions. Organizing efforts and power building are evident among the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa and various waste picker associations across the countries, particularly in response to mine and landfill closures and the growing pressures of land grabbing.

Many new worker groups expand their recruitment strategy through diverse tactics such as digital outreach and impromptu meetings at shopping malls, publishing success stories, partnering with influencers, and offering legal support. Together, these tactics are effectively expanding membership. Crucially, they also shape public opinion in favor of workers' demands.

Digital organizing has become the most widely used organizing tool, enabling rapid mobilization and scalable digital power, but also risking digital exclusion. **Social media is a valuable tool for recruitment and timely updates**, namely because it lowers the cost of joining, builds cohesion, and coordinates collective action at speed. However, barriers to digital inclusion remain, including: fear of surveillance by employers, digital literacy gaps, device and connectivity inequality, algorithms which deprioritize union-related content, and lack of digital strategy. Despite this, most groups continue to rely on traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings, peer recruitment, and one-on-one onboarding.

Many leaders find that social dialogue is more effective in meeting demands than confrontational strategies, especially where in sectors where the work is precarious. About half (50.2%) of surveyed leaders reported that dialogue with employers and government has enabled unions to secure



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responses to needs. This reflects replaceability, legal insecurity, and dispersion across workers in informal labor markets. These conditions constrain the strategic use of service withdrawal, leading to selective, carefully timed confrontational actions amplified through digital visibility.

A common challenge is that worker groups are invited to policy discussions after the framework has been set, or not invited at all. Late-stage participation reduces their influence and reinforces the very power imbalances social dialogue is meant to address. Similarly, most workers in the informal economy have no direct representation in formal tripartite dialogue such as the International Labour Conference, and are left with proxy representation via the main trade unions.

The strategic combination of tactics such as public protest, advocacy, and solidarity efforts was found to be most effective. The effectiveness of these tactics depended on implementation, including timing, level of member mobilization, alignment with public sentiment, and media visibility. Lawsuits were also reported as effective, particularly for migrant workers and those in isolated environments. Disruptive tactics produced stronger outcomes when combined with conciliatory approaches such as dialogue.

Important strides have been made in women's representation in leadership and recognition of GBVH risks especially among ride-hailing drivers, waste pickers and domestic care workers migrating from parts of Africa to the Gulf-region. But the current approach across all worker groups remains largely gender-responsive; achieving gender-transformative change will require systemic reforms that address the structural organization of work, economic inequalities, and institutional accountability.

Engagement with Civil Society, Unions and Worker Groups

Union and civil society partnerships are successful when they are co-designed with workers as equal partners. Specific positive outcomes for worker groups include:

- *Greater legal and policy support* that enhances leaders' legal literacy and capacity to advocate for rights. Members' understanding of the labor laws that affect them was ranked highly influential in building the power of worker groups, as was access to legal assistance and targeted trainings.

- *Improved organizational structures* through support for outreach and training in organizing, governance, and member mobilization.
- *Enhanced framing of demands* to learn how to frame their demands in ways that shape public narratives and influence decision-makers.

However, partnerships are often constrained by structural tensions that weaken solidarity. Many CSO initiatives are not grounded in a proper needs assessment of worker groups, are poorly coordinated, and often duplicate earlier efforts instead of building on them. These tensions include:

- *Asymmetrical partnering.* CSOs shape the agenda, and worker organizations play a reactive role. Genuine partnership requires co-learning and mutual recognition of expertise.
- *Unequal power dynamics and representation.* Some CSOs prefer to speak for workers rather than amplifying the narratives of the workers themselves, leaving workers feeling sidelined.
- *Lack of infrastructure for collaboration.* Few platforms exist to facilitate sustained dialogue. Memoranda of understanding, where they exist, are often symbolic rather than operational.

Many new worker groups maintain relationships with traditional labor unions. This may be through *formal affiliation, provisional affiliation* while working to meet requirements such as a constitution, secretariat and audited financial records, and *solidarity partnerships* in joint initiatives.

41.1% leaders of newer worker groups rated their relationships with traditional labor unions as influential and lent credibility. Other benefits included: **Access to infrastructure** such as office space, **capacity-building opportunities**, including training in organizing, negotiation, leadership, and **conflict mediation** to help resolve internal disputes.

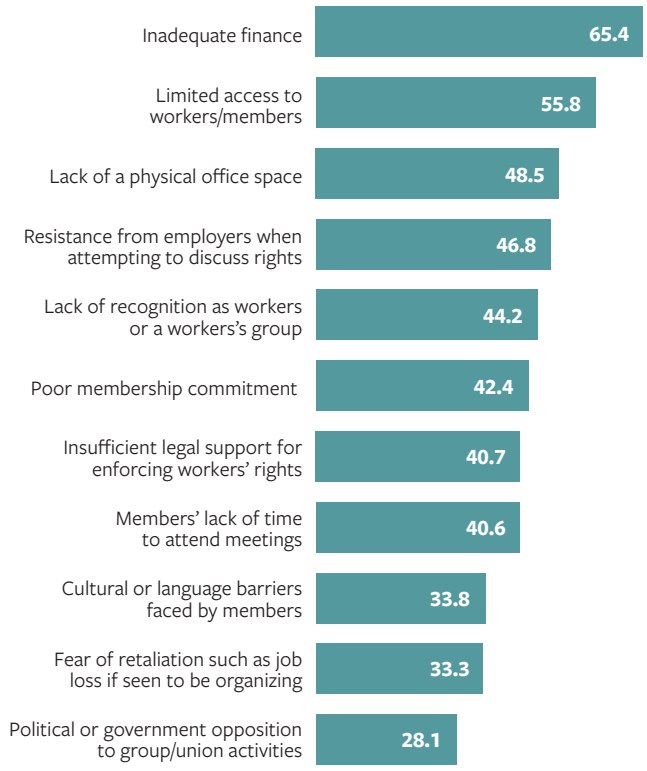
Nevertheless, not all affiliations work out. Large established unions can come across as bureaucratic and slow to act for workers affected by rapidly changing work trends. Several leaders of the newer worker groups feel that their specific concerns are not adequately reflected in dialogues, pointing to an institutional gap where formal-sector interests dominate the structures of representation.

Focusing on just transition, the movement is emerging across Africa but remains thin and siloed. South Africa shows modest traction, particularly among energy workers, while waste picking, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing workers remain largely excluded despite vulnerability and significant exposure to decarbonization. In the advanced industrialized nations of Europe and Americas, just transition narratives typically include social protection, but in Africa its meaning continues to be shaped by local politics, historically unjust arrangements, and exclusionary development priorities. More than half of leaders of new worker groups expressed clear expectations of a just transition and acknowledged ongoing efforts by relevant stakeholders. However, a substantial disconnect remains between workers' expectations and the perceived reality and pace of implementation. The most prominent concerns center on inadequate social protection and tokenistic participation.

Barriers to Organizing and Power Building among Emerging Worker Groups

Despite the growing visibility of the diversity of worker groups, many groups face constraints in mobilizing active member participation and building sustainable power. Across virtually all types of workers in the informal sectors and countries, common barriers to organizing and power building include limited funding, difficulty reaching members, a lack of dedicated office space, pushback from employers, and not being recognized as legitimate workers.

Obstacles Faced by Worker Groups Attempting to Organize



Percentage of respondents (n=231)

In terms of member participation, 82.5% of respondents reported that joining a worker group had met or exceeded their expectations. Yet those reporting dissatisfaction may have

insights which can strengthen organizing efforts. These reasons included: **low member engagement (50.4%)**, when members felt their voices were not heard; **poor communication (48%)** about decisions and group direction; **limited support for members** when work-related or personal challenges arise **(36.6%)**; **poor organizing (33.3%)** and **unclear goals or direction (23.6%)** leaving workers questioning whether their groups were equipped to address issues; and concerns about **gender washing in leadership**.

For those who were not part of any organization, lack of awareness was a major reason. **56.6% of non-members surveyed reported** simply not knowing that worker groups exist; 31.3% mentioned not knowing about the benefits of joining; suggesting that organizing campaigns have not penetrated many trade areas, particularly informal or fragmented labor environments. A notable **27.7%** of respondents feared that joining could trigger retaliation or job loss, indicating that employers may still wield coercive influence. Irregular or demanding nature of their work left them little time to participate in union activities **(25.3%)**.

Selected Recommendations

These findings inform the recommendations outlined below to strengthen collective action and policy engagement for meaningful worker power and wellbeing.

For Worker Groups and Trade Unions

- Share evidence-based success stories to motivate unorganized workers and demonstrate the value of joining a worker group. Design organizing strategies which focus on delivering concrete improvements to workers' immediate concerns, and communicate those results to members to feed into success narratives.
- Trade unions should continue to make their structures more flexible to enable meaningful partnerships with new worker groups. This includes creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, ensuring these groups have genuine voice and representation, and managing expectations to foster mutual understanding.
- New worker groups should integrate just transition into their agendas and move from reactive advocacy to proactive agenda setting, such as negotiating skilling or pathways into higher-value green jobs.
- Unions and worker groups should center care and GBVH as core labor and bargaining issues and negotiate enforceable protections, benefits, and workplace standards that directly reduce barriers and enable women's full participation in their working environments and organizing movements.



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For Governments and Regulators

- Respect, recognize and extend full legal recognition to workers and self-organized groups in the informal economy within labor codes and bargaining statutes, paired with a phased pathway to formalization aligned with ILO R204, beginning with legal recognition of them as workers. Develop inclusive policies and measures to facilitate the transition to the formal economy. Penalize retaliation swiftly when employers intimidate organizers.
- Institutionalize the inclusion of new worker groups in social dialogue with decision-making authority. Guarantee equal or proportional seats and procedural safeguards to prevent formal-sector interests from dominating

For Donors, Multi-lateral organizations and Civil Society

- Fund advocacy, evidence generation, and strategic litigation to advance workers' institutional power by securing legal recognition and inclusion of informal and non-standard workers in labor frameworks.
- Build the research capacity of worker organizations to advance policy positions informed by evidence, with clear outcomes to support each position.
- Provide technical and financial support to build the capacity of worker groups to conduct gender audits and restructure governance to ensure gender equity.
- Facilitate digital literacy and security training to enable digital organizing and protect worker groups from surveillance and online harassment



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BACKGROUND

Traditionally, trade unions have represented workers trapped in unsafe, unhealthful, underpaid, unjust, and unstable employment conditions (Johansson & Partanen, 2002). But in Africa and other regions of the Global South, labor movements have not played as active a role as in the Global North (Mosoetsa et al., 2016). Most Africans work in the informal economy and do not belong to a union or worker organization. Partly because of this, they often earn low wages, face poor working conditions, and lack access to social and legal protections. Even in the formal economy, union membership has been declining, and the influence of traditional labor institutions is weakening (Lévesque& Murray, 2010;[1] Akorsu, Wamai, Britwum, 2022[2]).

The question is whether there are any organizational structures arising, or that could arise, which are robust enough to fill the worker protection gap left by the waning influence of unions relative to employer power. It is thought that this decline results from unions' weakened capacity to protect and improve their members' working conditions, and from their weakened influence on economic and social policies that benefit members (Lévesque& Murray, 2010). In some contexts, these gaps are further shaped by an inhospitable enabling environment for union formation and representation, characterized by weak enforcement of freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, high levels of labor underutilization, and concentrated industrial ownership and power (Bishara, 2026). Few African workers today are joining unions because they feel that unions lack the power to represent their needs and effect the kinds of social and legal changes that would safeguard their welfare and protect their interests. (Kalusopa, 2021)

In response, new worker organizations are emerging outside the bounds of traditional unions to fill this gap. These new groups, which include associations of street vendors, ride-hailing drivers, domestic workers, waste collectors, and content moderators, are developing novel forms of collective power and creating new forms of solidarity.

Across Africa, the structure and nature of work and of labor markets are undergoing a profound transformation driven by a range of developments. These include the rapid digitalization of work, an increasingly youthful workforce, growing global and regional demand for care services, rising levels of cross-border labor migration, and the pressures of climate change, which are propelling a just transition in sectors such as energy, agriculture, and manufacturing. Under the combined influence of these drivers, informal and non-standard forms of employment, freelance, on demand "gig" work, short-term contracts, and undocumented care work, for example, are increasingly common. While they bring new income-generating opportunities, informal non-standard work also intensifies workers' vulnerability, limits their access to

labor protections, and exposes them to precarious conditions, including weak or nonexistent social safety nets (Adongo et al., 2022; Hassen & Emont, 2023). Such precarity can lead to an estimated 5-10% reduction in national GDP contributions from informal sectors and a 15-20% increase in public health burdens due to poor working conditions, directly impacting national economic development and societal well-being (Aronsson & de Soysa, 2025).

For example, digital work platforms[3] for ride-hailing, delivery services, micro tasking, and domestic care have sprung up to offer new ways for people to find and undertake work, but the legal frameworks of many countries have not yet caught up with these emergent forms of work, making it difficult for platform workers to protect their rights. Similarly, in response to the rising demand for care services in regions such as the Gulf States, women from many African countries are migrating there to take on care work. But they often work in informal and legally ambiguous environments, and face xenophobia, unclear immigration status, and institutional neglect. Additionally, although climate action is fueling a range of positive changes across sectors such as energy, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing, these green transitions inadvertently often introduce new forms of job instability or social displacement for workers in the informal sector (Lévesque & Murray, 2010).

A good example is Facebook content moderators. Content moderators who work for giant social media and technology companies like Facebook and YouTube report extreme mental health challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For up to eight hours a day, they review large volumes of disturbing, harmful, and potentially traumatizing content, including graphic violence, suicides, child sexual abuse, hate speech, and exploitation, videos and images that they often replay in their mind or reexperience in their dreams. The unrelenting exposure and uncertainty, as they never know what is coming up next when they click on a link, can take an enormous emotional toll.

Some moderators report being required to acknowledge the psychological risks associated with content moderation work. Faced with these severe conditions, content moderators in Kenya (2023) and Ghana (2025) organized themselves to advocate for better conditions and took legal action against Facebook's parent company, Meta. Their reform effort drew global attention. It signaled a new and growing wave of collective organizing among digital workers, pooling their power resources to challenge poor treatment.

The traditional labor union format is not yet dead. Many African workers, empowered by recent success stories of collective action, are advocating for inclusion and recognition in mainstream labor movements. And some institutions are beginning to respond. In Uganda, the National Organization of Trade Unions has revised its constitution to include informal-sector workers and to offer them some protections (ILO, 2022). In Ghana, Kenya, and other countries, the unions are increasingly using social media and other digital platforms to connect with disaffected workers and inactive members (Akorsu et al., 2023).

The advocacy work of these emerging worker groups goes beyond challenging the company they work for because, quite often in Africa, the legal system itself remains poorly equipped to regulate and protect workers engaged in platform work, migrant labor, or green transition roles. Recognizing that governments and institutions often lag behind technological advancements reshaping the world of work, workers in the informal economy are also pressing for policy reforms and legislative changes, as outdated legal frameworks hamper workers' efforts to engage in collective organization.

For example, many domestic care workers and migrant laborers face legal exclusions or ambiguities that make formal organizing risky. On the other hand, Uber drivers and food delivery workers frequently complain about being classified as independent contractors, which means they receive no benefits. These regulatory gaps in national legal frameworks leave many workers stranded in legal grey zones, with limited protections against exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and arbitrary termination (Adongo et al., 2024).

Consequently, worker groups, both traditional and emerging, are increasingly advocating for labor law reforms that legally recognize platform-based work arrangements, expand labor rights to cover informal and migrant workers, and facilitate a just transition in sectors undergoing environmental transformation. The worker organizations pushing for these reforms are not only seeking protection for their members; they are trying to alter the policy architecture toward a more equitable future.

What We Set Out to Solve

Many groups are attempting to organize under tough conditions, navigating terrain marked by unclear labor laws, weak protections, fast-changing technology, and shrinking spaces for collective action. That their ability to do so effectively is limited is nothing new to workers on the ground. What is deficient is research on exactly how these legal, social, and technological challenges hinder the deployment of organizational capacity and strategies by new worker movements. The few existing studies tend to focus on isolated worker sectors or movements, leaving unanswered the broader question of what transferable cross-sectoral learnings and unifying themes can be gleaned from these studies to build solidarity, scale organizational efforts, and enhance collective action. We also do not optimally understand which organizing methods are most effective and which carry risks, such as online surveillance or division among groups.

Lévesque and Murray (2010) highlight that it is not enough for informal worker groups to have solidarity networks and communication tools, which emphasizes the strategic use of these tools through connecting interests, storytelling, and continuous learning. They must also know how to use them by connecting different interests, telling powerful stories, building over time, and learning as they go. But the Lévesque/Murray framework has not yet been widely applied to African worker movements, let alone those organizing outside traditional unions. In short, there is a need to understand what is working, what is not, and why.

This research responds to the need for more empirical learning and reflection on how workers in Africa are building power. It aims to support movements on the ground by uncovering practical strategies, spotlighting success examples, and helping activists, organizers, and policymakers better understand how to build strong, inclusive, and sustainable labor movements. The findings are translated into actionable policy recommendations, informing stakeholders such as governmental bodies and CSOs on effective models for enhancing worker protection and promoting economic justice across Africa. This would contribute to significant societal impact at a policy level, fostering a more equitable future of work.

The Future of Work: Worker Organizing and Power in Africa's Informal Economy Study seeks to explore and document how worker organizing and labor power-building are evolving in response to major shifts in the structure of work throughout the continent. The study focuses on five countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. These countries were selected because they represent diverse economic landscapes within the African continent and their respective subregional blocs, exhibit varied approaches to labor organization, and have a significant presence of emerging workers in the informal economy.

The primary research questions that guided this study were:

1. How are new worker groups organizing—attracting, recruiting, and mobilizing—outside the traditional labor movement in response to Africa's changing work landscape?
2. Which strategies have proven most effective for building and sustaining union power in the current labor environment?
3. What relationships or linkages exist between new forms of worker organizing, traditional labor unions, and cross-sector civil society coalitions?
4. How can new forms of organizing and power-building enhance or complement traditional labor representation models?
5. What capacity gaps, policy barriers, or institutional weaknesses hinder effective responses to shifts in worker economies?

How Do We Define Power?

This study is guided by the Power Resources Theory,[4] which posits that the employment relationship is characterized by a continual struggle between workers and employers arising from divergent and competing interests. The theory asserts that employers hold a structural advantage because of their control over the means and organization of production. The application of power resources theory has largely been confined to contexts of formal employment and unionized labor. Additionally, it has rarely been applied cross-nationally.

In this context, we define power resources as the various means that workers use to exert influence, negotiate, and drive change in pursuit of their interests. These resources represent the assets and capacities that workers can mobilize to strengthen their collective power and amplify their impact (Refslund & Arnholtz, 2024). The classical Power Resources Theory identifies five distinct but interrelated forms of power, each capable of reinforcing or constraining the others. These include (i) **associational power**, which derives from solidarity, membership, and the ability to mobilize numerous workers for collective action, typically through unionization or associations; (ii) **structural power**, which arises from workers' position in the production processes of the economy, giving them the leverage to disrupt or influence key economic activities; (iii) **institutional power** is the ability to influence and reshape formal institutions, policies, and laws, making it easier for workers to advocate for labor protections, rights, and social change; (iv) **coalitional power**, similar to associational power, stems from workers building coalitions with other societal groups, while (v) **discursive or ideational power** is their capacity to influence public opinion, and frame labor issues "in line with prevailing views of morality" and thereby mobilize public support (Schmalz et al., 2018, p. 123).[5] Other forms of power, including **societal power**, have been added to the five classical types. While sometimes critiqued for not being entirely distinct, societal power in worker organizing captures the influence that emerges from the interaction of coalitional and discursive power, where unified groups leverage their collective voice to shape public opinion and social norms in ways that advance their struggles for justice, fair work, and dignity. This form of power extends beyond the workplace and formal industrial relations systems into the broader arenas of social groups, including civil society, media, and politics, where narratives about labor, fairness, and rights are constructed, contested, and reshaped.

Drawing on cross-country evidence gathered through mixed methods, this study examines the relevance of these power resources under conditions of informality and precarity and extends the framework by conceptualizing **digital power** as a distinct and increasingly important dimension of worker power.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches was employed for this evidence-based study. The study began with a systematic literature review of English-language publications from 2010 to 2025. This review focused on Africa, the informal economy, new forms of worker organizing, and their intersections with broader workforce trends. The PRISMA framework[6] guided the literature review, ensuring a transparent and replicable search process. A broad search strategy was applied across multiple academic databases, and grey literature, such as reports from government agencies, NGOs, civil society organizations, and notably the International Labour Organization (ILO), was included. To refine the search, Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used. Keywords included: *informal economy, platform work, gig economy, sharing economies, care work, domestic care work, migration, just transition, climate change, worker organizing, trade unions, Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa.*

Phase 1: Qualitative Data Collection

This phase involved key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives from worker groups, trade unions, government ministries, regulatory agencies, and both local and international civil society organizations. To maximize variation in the data (for example, capturing diverse ages, geographies, genders, and sectors) and to reach saturation across participants' demographic and experiential profiles, 61 informants were purposively selected based on their expertise and accessibility and interviewed. Where appropriate, additional participants were conveniently selected across the five study countries to ensure broad representation. In addition, 14 focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with both leaders and non-leaders within worker groups. Each group averaged around seven participants. Further in-depth interviews were conducted with workers who were not affiliated with any union or worker organization. These participants were identified through snowball sampling, in which existing contacts helped identify non-members in similar trade areas.

Structured interview guides were developed based on the study's research questions and on insights from the literature review. Interviews were conducted both in person and online, with online sessions lasting approximately 2 hours each. Data were captured using audio recordings and field notes. For



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participants who declined to be recorded, detailed notes were taken and, in some cases, follow-up conversations via WhatsApp were held to clarify or expand on earlier insights. Interviews were conducted primarily by members of the research team, with support from trained research assistants in some instances.

Phase 2: Quantitative Data Collection (Survey)

A survey was administered to 497 respondents using a multi-stage sampling strategy. We first compiled the list of worker groups through desk research and updated this during in-depth interviews across the sectors and countries under study. An initial list of worker groups was compiled through desk research and subsequently updated during in-depth interviews conducted across the sectors and countries under study. Within each country, at least two worker groups per trade area were included, depending on the number identified. Some groups, such as those with union status, were purposively selected, while others were randomly selected. For each category of worker population, including digital platform workers, care workers, migrant workers, and just transition–relevant workers[7] in sectors such as energy, agriculture, and tourism, at least 16 respondents were sampled in Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya, while 32 respondents were sampled in Nigeria and South Africa to reflect their relatively larger populations of organized worker groups. The study recognized the multiple and intersecting identities of workers across these categories, which informed both data capture and analysis.[8]

Participants were grouped into three categories:

- Worker group leaders
- Worker group members (non-leaders)
- Non-members (workers not affiliated with any organization)

The sample size was first stratified by country, worker group type, membership status, leadership status, and gender, based on estimated total population of workers in each category and country. Owing to the absence of an official register of workers in each country and sectors of interest, different sampling approaches were used at different levels to select respondents:

- **Leaders** were purposively selected because of their knowledge of organizing strategies, membership trends, and power-building efforts. This included the secretary, the president/chairperson, the women's commissioner and the board chair.
- **Members (non-leaders) were conveniently selected,** and **non-members** were selected using snowball sampling, identified through referrals because of the absence of a formal register.

A total of 15 gender-balanced enumerators and gateway providers[9] were recruited and trained in the five countries. All the research tools were piloted in Ghana across all four categories of worker groups: digital platform workers, care workers, migrant workers, and workers engaged in the green transition. Feedback from this pilot exercise led to refinements to the qualitative and quantitative instruments used across the five countries.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using STATA software. All measures and their disaggregation codes were documented in a dedicated do-file (STATA.do) to ensure transparency and replicability. The analysis primarily involved descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages, disaggregated by the relevant variables outlined in the study's results framework. To ensure the accuracy of the quantitative data, the team conducted thorough spot checks on the survey data and made call-backs to respondents whose data included outliers or 'anomalous data points.

Both inductive and deductive approaches were used to analyze qualitative data, allowing the research team to remain grounded in theory while remaining responsive to participants lived experiences and insights. A content analysis strategy was employed, starting with a deductive framework based on established theoretical constructs drawn from the power resources theory and other labor organizing and power building literature. As analysis progressed, new codes emerged inductively from recurring patterns, issues, and perspectives within the data. These deductive and inductive codes were refined, merged, or expanded, resulting in a comprehensive and dynamic coding framework.

This hybrid coding strategy was adopted for two main reasons: First, the subjects under investigation, such as worker organizing strategies, power-building efforts, and privacy expectations, are under-researched in the African context. Thus, blending existing theoretical perspectives with new participant-driven data helped to provide a richer understanding. Second, this approach enabled the study to test key elements of the underlying theories while remaining open to discovering context-specific insights that might not be captured by existing frameworks.

The qualitative data analysis involved five stages: the first was transcription, in which audio recordings were iteratively transcribed and combined with detailed field notes to create a comprehensive dataset. At the second stage, researchers familiarized themselves with the data by thoroughly reading the transcripts and field notes. The third stage, indexing, involved identifying recurring subthemes and topic sentences based on both the theoretical framework and emerging participant insights. This was followed by charting, where themes and subthemes were compared across transcripts, field notes, and

audio recordings to ensure consistency, accuracy, and depth. Peer debriefing and member checks were used to validate findings. The final stage was interpretation, where the research team synthesized the findings, ensuring that interpretations aligned with theoretical foundations, and incorporated contextual explanations that reflected the realities of the participants.

This comprehensive and iterative process allowed for a nuanced understanding of worker organizing dynamics, challenges, and opportunities across diverse labor sectors and national contexts. It also ensured that the findings were both empirically grounded and theoretically informed.

Generation of Recommendations and Calls to Action

Preliminary recommendations and calls to action were initially developed by the research team based on insights from the fieldwork. These were subsequently refined and expanded through a facilitated World Café-style participatory workshop. Participants, including worker leaders, civil society organizations, government ministry representatives, and the research team, were organized into small discussion groups that rotated across thematic tables. Each table was supported by a designated rapporteur who remained in place to document key insights and brief incoming participants on prior discussions. This iterative design enabled ideas to accumulate progressively, moving from established experiences to emerging priorities, and supported collective sensemaking across diverse stakeholder groups.

Survey Respondent Characteristics

The 497 survey respondents exhibited the following key characteristics:

- 46.5% were leaders or executives of worker groups who responded on behalf of their groups; 32.8% were non-leader members; and the remaining were workers who were not members of any worker group.
- 21.5% identified themselves as care workers while 26.8% identified as digital platform workers, including ride-hailing, content moderation, content creation and data annotation. The other 51.7% were from sectors undergoing green transition, such as energy, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing.
- Of the 53.7% of respondents identified as migrants, 49% were internal migrants who had moved within the same country, usually because of work, while the remaining 51% were international migrants. These were mainly from other African countries: Benin, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Zimbabwe.
- Of the care economy workers, 79.4% live outside their employer's home. Care workers performed multiple roles with about 55.1% engaged in housekeeping, 37.4% in catering, and 32.7% in childcare. Other tasks included errands, elderly care, and driving.



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- Among digital platform workers, 69.4% were engaged in ride-hailing services, 21.6% were into content creation and 9.7% worked as content moderators. The remaining were into data annotation and AI training tasks.
- In every sector, 88% of the workers surveyed engaged in the current work as their main job; the other 12% moonlighted.[10]
- 65.5% (especially in ride-hailing) provide their services and/or connect with customers through digital platforms.
- 70.1% of the worker groups were formed less than 12 years ago. Across all groups, women represented an average of 31 percent, although their representation was significantly higher in care work, where 79 percent of workers identified as women.
- Each worker group, on average, had 13 leaders and of these 46% of them women.
- Leadership believes that about half (51.1%) of workers in their sector currently belong to no organized worker group, such as a union or association.

Limitations

While the findings offer robust practice-based and policy-relevant insights, some limitations should be noted. First, reflecting the realities of researching informal and often undocumented worker groups, the analysis has had to draw on self-reported survey and interview data, including membership information. Second, participants were recruited using convenience and snowball approaches, which enabled greater access to hard-to-reach populations but may have limited broader representativeness. Finally, the quantitative findings are descriptive and should be interpreted as indicative rather than causal. Despite these limitations, the consistency of the results across countries and data sources provides a strong foundation for policy dialogue and future program design.

RESULTS

PART 1: NEW WORKER ORGANIZING AND STRATEGIES

Over the past several decades, the economic clout, social reach, and political influence of unions have been in a slow decline for reasons that are well discussed in the literature. New waves of immigration, newly emergent forms of work, and the increased mobility of global labor have conspired to decentralize bargaining structures and diversify the social identities of today's workforce, making it a challenge for unions to achieve internal cohesion and solidarity, and leading to a noticeable swing toward employer-centered analyses of labor relations and labor markets.

Into this gap in traditional union power, a new kind of worker group has emerged, and to adapt to the changing world of work, it is using innovative methods to pursue collective action and build power. Specifically, in areas such as digital outreach, some groups have demonstrated considerable practical problem-solving ability by deploying compelling narratives to build credibility, social capital, and discursive power. To this end, we asked the following three broad questions, which this section of the report addresses.

- What are new worker groups doing differently to organize, attract, recruit, and mobilize members in response to the changing nature of work across Africa?
- Which organizing strategies amplify and empower the voices of marginalized workers?
- What strategies are most effective in building power within worker groups?



Courtesy of Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

Organizing and Structuring New Worker Power

In all five countries, we found clear evidence of organizing among non-traditional workers, including caregivers, migrants, workers whose labor is mediated by digital platforms, and wage earners in sectors undergoing just transition. In each category and national context, diverse forms of collectives have emerged: associations, cooperatives, networks, unions, and in some cases, federations. The many forms of collectives expand inclusion and outreach to workers, but also risk fragmentation, uneven legitimacy, and diluted bargaining power.

The geographic diversity and scale of the countries, coupled with leadership competition, an enabling ecosystem for organizing, digital organizing, and identity-based and intersectional mobilization, drive the emergence of various forms of worker collectives. Small groups continue to emerge, creating multiple points of entry but diffusing their voice and bargaining capacity. This creates coordination challenges, weakens unity and collective voice, and thereby undermines broader efforts to build cohesive organizing structures. As a result, their ability to mobilize workers for action (associational power) at the country level and beyond remains uneven and patchy. This pattern is particularly visible in the e-hailing subsector, where an average of eight different collectives per country were identified. In all five countries, most groups lacked structured member databases or monitoring systems, limiting their capacity to track membership numbers, composition, and growth. This undermines their ability to credibly demonstrate membership numbers, thereby impacting their legitimacy and associational power negatively.

New worker groups like Motorcycle Couriers Union of Ghana and National E-Hailing Federation of South Africa (NEFSA) are adopting hybrid models of formalization, registering as nonprofits but employing union-style governance based on constitutions inspired by union principles. This helps navigates some of the bureaucratic challenges of registering a union. Other groups, using a cooperative model, are starting out as private limited-liability companies with a small team of directors to test models and ideas. They then transition to nonprofit status if the model proves viable. In one case, for example, the worker group began as a private limited liability company and is now seeking to transition to nonprofit status. This illustrates a creative approach to organizing,

of which other emerging examples may follow. Besides the representational functions of a traditional union, several of the new worker groups are also offering skills training, safety workshops, digital literacy, and incubation partnerships with universities and innovation hubs.[11]

Although this nonprofit-based hybrid model has had some success in addressing bureaucratic barriers to formal worker organization and in building associational power, it also presents challenges for legal recognition. One major drawback is that registering as a nonprofit limits a group's collective bargaining rights. Labor laws in many jurisdictions, including those in Africa, reserve collective bargaining and the conclusion of binding collective agreements for legally recognised trade unions or workers' organizations operating within defined employment relationships. Existing labor laws, often rooted in industrial-era definitions of employment, struggle to accommodate such innovative structures. This constrains the group's formal negotiating power even if it has a large membership. Second, when nonprofit incorporation is paired with union-style constitutions, it complicates legal recognition, governance clarity, financial compliance, and bargaining legitimacy.

Gender and Social Inclusion

Important strides have been made in advancing women's representation in leadership. To foster inclusion, amplification, and empowerment of marginalized voices, worker groups are increasingly mainstreaming gender, youth, migrant, and disability considerations. In sectors where one gender predominates, such as men in the digital economy, women-only groups, either as stand-alone initiatives or as wings within larger organizations, have emerged to catalyze participation, provide support, and build associational power among the relatively small number of women. Examples of such groups among app-based platform works include La Femme Chauffeur in Ghana, Piki Dada Services in Uganda, and AUTON's Women's Wing in Nigeria. Similar strategies to amplify marginalized voices, such as reserving leadership quotas for women, men, migrants in committees and boards, have also been observed. For example, care worker organizations often reserve leadership seats for men, since the care economy is predominantly female.

> *"Without intentional gender-sensitive strategies, unions risk alienating young women and migrant workers, whose representation and voice are critical to inclusive and meaningful associational and discursive power for decent work."*
>
> —Worker Leader, Digital Platform, Ghana

On average, worker groups reported 13 leaders, of whom 46 percent were women. These initiatives enhance discursive power by re-framing worker organization as inclusive, diverse, and representative. Yet hesitation persists; women and migrants remain reluctant to assume leadership positions because of cultural norms, care burdens, lack of confidence, and concerns about tokenism. While some women are elected to leadership roles, many felt these appointments were often symbolic, designed to "tick the box" rather than empower. As one respondent noted: *Even when women are elected, their voice doesn't really matter. Some don't even include them in important conversations.*

Organizing in response to Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) is emerging but remains uneven and sporadic. Across the five countries, worker groups are increasingly recognizing GBVH risks, particularly among waste pickers (see the case study of the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association) and domestic care workers migrating to the Gulf region. At the Dandora dumpsite in Kenya, the scale of the problem is stark: 53% of workers have experienced or witnessed violence, 43% report bullying, and 13% have faced sexual harassment, with women and newcomers disproportionately affected. Comparable risks are also evident in digital platform work in Uganda and Kenya, particularly in customer-facing roles, where algorithmic management, weak labor protections, and entrenched power asymmetries between workers, platforms, and clients significantly heighten exposure to GBVH.[12, 13]

However, the current approach of organizing in response to GBVH across worker groups remains largely gender responsive. Achieving gender-transformative change will require systemic reforms that address the structural organization of work, underlying economic inequalities, and institutional accountability. Existing GBVH interventions remain largely reactive, focused on reporting rather than prevention, while care work continues to be implicitly treated and not systematically addressed. Furthermore, there are no institutionalized mechanisms such as gender quotas in bargaining processes, formal GBVH workplace protocols, or childcare and broader social protection systems to support women's participation. These challenges are compounded by limited influence at the policy design stage, where key decisions are shaped.

Persons with disabilities are less visible in leadership largely because few members self-identify as PwDs, and those who do often shy away from leadership roles due to a fear of stigma, limited accessibility, and a concern about not being taken seriously. This reflects a gap where associational inclusivity has not fully translated into discursive legitimacy.

Some organizations center identity-based concerns, like migrant worker-led organizations, but this varies by geography. Unlike Uganda and South Africa, which have vibrant migrant worker groups, such as the Migrant Workers Union of South Africa (MIWUSA) and the Federation of All Uganda Migrant Workers' Associations (FAUMA), no

comparable dedicated migrant worker organizations exist in Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya. Instead, migrant workers are typically represented through initiatives of mainstream labor organizations, resource centers, project-based interventions (often donor-supported), and traditional unions. In some cases, representation also occurs through country-based associations, such as Association of Togolese Communities in Nigeria, whose mandates extend to worker-related issues and broader welfare concerns. From a power resource perspective, this form of incorporation strengthens coalitional power by enabling engagement with recognised labor institutions and conferring legitimacy and access to resources. However, it often weakens associational power, as migrant workers have limited autonomy to define priorities, control leadership, or mobilize independently.



Courtesy of Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

While sector-based organizing facilitates coordinated labor action, where safeguards for inclusion are absent, identity-based concerns are frequently deprioritized or siloed within broader sectoral agendas. As a result, distinct issues for migrant workers such as recruitment abuse, documentation challenges, cross-border mobility, and deportation risks are diluted. This dilution constrains migrants' discursive power and undermining their capacity for sustained transnational organizing, which is critical for building coalitional leverage in cross-border labor markets.

Fear of deportation and imprisonment actively suppresses migration-specific organizing and discourages migrants from joining worker groups, even where such opportunities exist, as these organizations are widely perceived as soft targets for surveillance, repression, and punitive state action. In most African countries, labor laws and union registration regimes are predominantly structured around sectoral or enterprise-based collective representation. They provide limited institutional space for identity-based unions such as those representing migrant workers. Legal and implementation gaps further restrict migrant workers' ability to exercise freedom of association and collective bargaining in practice, even though international standards affirm these rights.[14]

Strategies for Recruiting Members to Build Power

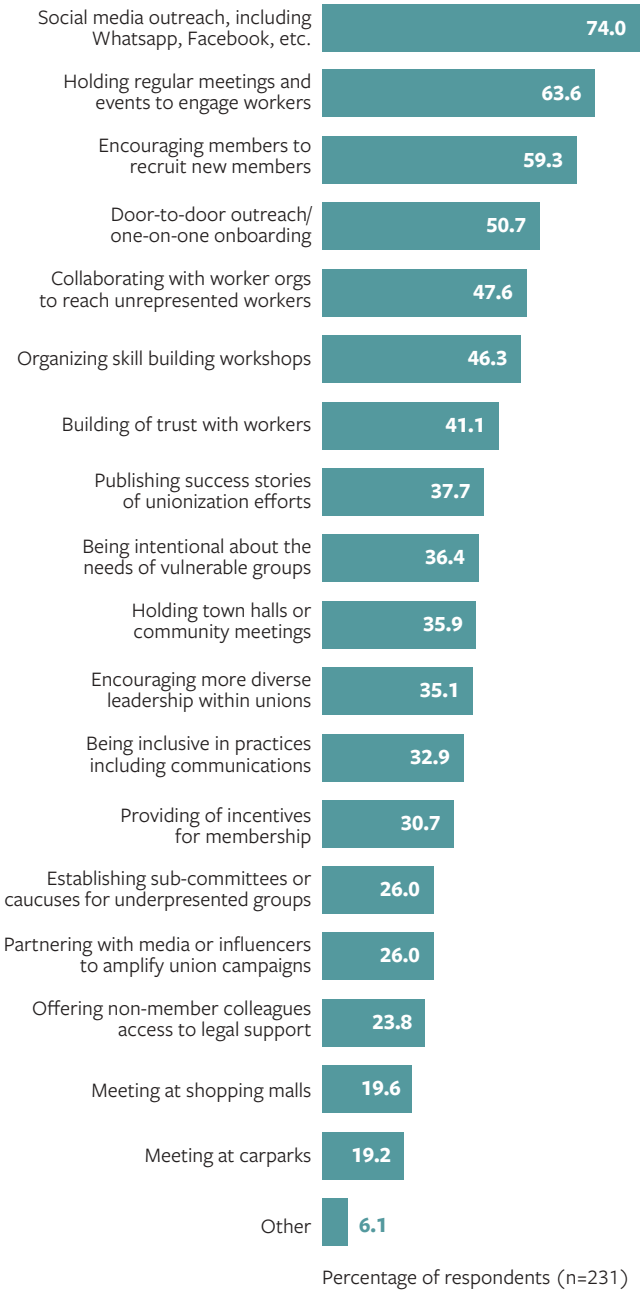
In response to the difficulties new worker groups face in holding formal meetings, the most distinctive strategies they employ to build associational power involve digital and public space outreach. As illustrated in Figure 1, worker groups employ various strategies. Their tactics range from digital outreach and impromptu meetings at shopping malls, to publishing success stories, partnering with influencers, and offering legal support to non-members. Together, these tactics are effectively converting followers into active members and expanding membership. Crucially, they are also shaping public opinion in favor of workers' demands.[15]

Social media outreach, including WhatsApp and Facebook, stood out as the most effective strategy (74%), especially for dispersed or mobile workers or those constantly online, such as ride-hailing drivers and home-based caregivers. Done well, social media outreach lets worker groups meet a critical mass of people where they are, lowers the cost of joining, builds cohesion, and coordinates collective action at speed. It does this by offering an easy way to share updates, coordinate actions, and stay visibly connected to those who may not attend in-person meetings.

Social media outreach also builds up a group's discursive power. As a narrative resource, it allows workers to frame their concerns, developments, and demands, ultimately controlling the public story about who workers are, what they deserve, and how they should be treated.

Finally, the non-geographic digital presence created by social media outreach offers the advantage of blurring the divide between, on the one hand, unions and worker groups as formal, brick-and-mortar organizations and, on the other, social movements as loosely structured networks of collective action—what Schmaltz, Ludwig, and Webster (2018) refer to as social movement unionism.

Figure 1: Strategies Worker Groups Consider Effective in Recruiting and Engaging Members



It should not come as a surprise that, in enhancing membership density and voice, more than half of new worker groups rely on the same fundamentals that have anchored union organizing for decades (Figure 1): face-to-face meetings (63.6%), peer-to-peer recruitment (59.3%), and one-on-one onboarding (50.5%). These trust-based tactics leverage the basics that work, especially for isolated migrant and care workers who tend to avoid large gatherings.

Although meeting at car parks and shopping malls were generally rated less effective among leaders of the worker groups in organizing (Figure 1), further analysis revealed notable value. Similar to social media, meetings in public spaces such as car parks and shopping malls were rated as effective by 51.4% and 41% app-based transport leaders, respectively. Drivers often wait for ride requests or rest during downtime in these locations, making meetings convenient and low effort. These locations help build associational power by offering convenient, low-barrier meeting points that mitigate the time constraints that prevent some workers from attending traditional meetings. An impromptu meet-up also reduces reliance on hired venues or union offices, provides greater anonymity and makes it easier to recruit new members.

Tactics for Collective Action

Workers wield power in many ways, including by protesting, striking, taking legal action, lobbying, joining forces with others, and speaking out through advocacy.[16] They do so pragmatically and fluidly, typically in response to the resources available to them, the goals they want to meet, the opportunities and constraints their work and personal circumstances present, the problems they are trying to solve, and even by trial and error. They may therefore shift from one kind of power resource to another, employ different combinations, and even forfeit the use of one simply because they are currently investing their limited time and energy in another. Each of the collective actions signals a distinct power resource, ranging from workers' ability to collectively renegotiate working conditions to their capacity to win cases in court or influence public opinion on issues that affect them.

This next section examines what kinds of worker groups use these collective actions, and how effective they believe these actions are in achieving desired target goals. When asked which actions they had engaged in as a worker group, 66.7% of the groups, irrespective of worker type, mentioned advocacy as the most common activity, followed by solidarity actions (51.1%)[17] and lobbying (48.9%). Only 39.4% reported participating in strikes or protests, and even fewer, 24.7%, in lawsuits (Table 1). In contrast to high-skilled workers who can issue credible threats to exit their job and have a higher chance of finding alternative employment, the vulnerable position of these newer wage earners gives them a low appetite for, and capacity to, strike, protest, or exercise other forms of disruptive workplace and marketplace bargaining power.

> *"Their ability to strike, as an expression of structural power, is weakened because they are easily replaceable, legally insecure, and dispersed across informal labor markets. These conditions undermine their ability to withdraw services effectively."*
>
> —Labor Expert and Unionist, Nigeria

Table 1: Collective and Power-Building Actions Reported by Leaders, by Worker Type (n = 231)

	Overall (%)	Care workers (%)	Digital platform workers (%)	Migrant workers (%)	Just transition workers (%)
Advocacy	66.7	59.6	66.7	69.6	69.4
Solidarity actions	51.1	51.1	45.0	45.7	54.0
Lobbying	48.9	48.9	40.0	43.5	53.2
Protest	39.4	34.0	41.7	37.0	40.3
Strike	39.4	27.7	41.7	21.7	42.7
Lawsuits	24.7	29.8	15.0	30.4	27.4
Other	3.9	4.3	0.0	0.0	5.7

Overall, the data indicates a preference among new worker groups for less confrontational and more strategic forms of engagement. This reflects a rebalancing of worker power away from overtly confrontational structural and associational expressions toward institutional and discursive resources, including negotiation platforms, policy advocacy, and coalition building.

This orientation should be understood not as a rejection of traditional labor movement strategies in Africa, but as an adaptation to contemporary work contexts. Historically, African labor movements have combined confrontation with negotiation, alliance building, and political engagement (Von Holdt, 2002). What distinguishes the current moment is the structural position of workers. Many new worker groups operate in informal, precarious, or digitally mediated labor markets where employment relationships are unclear, legal protections are limited, and direct confrontation carries heightened risks of exclusion or retaliation. Consequently, these groups prioritize dialogue, incremental gains, and public legitimacy over direct industrial action. Rather than signalling a rupture with labor traditions, this preference reflects continuity in the adaptive capacity of worker organizing under changing labor market conditions and power relations.

Collective Actions, by Worker Type

Some of the collective and power-building actions varied across the different types of workers. For example, filing lawsuits, although generally infrequent overall (Table 1), was relatively more common among migrant workers (30.4%) and those in the care economy (29.8%). These workers often operate in isolated environments where traditional organizing is difficult and therefore rely more on legal avenues to challenge unfair treatment, wrongful dismissal, and other labor rights violations, especially when formal contracts are absent or rights are repeatedly denied. In Kenya and Ghana, more than 100 former Facebook content moderators, many of whom were hired as migrant workers, filed lawsuits against Meta and its contractor for severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), unfair dismissal, and alleged union-busting after attempting to organize.[18]

But lawsuits were much less common among digital platform workers, because exercising structural power such as service disruptions is easier than engaging in a protracted lawsuit in a legal jurisdiction where judges can be influenced by powerful corporations. The effectiveness of a work disruption, such as a strike, rises in economic sectors where the demand for service is relatively price-inelastic, as in the case, of morning commuters who simply need to get to work by a certain time. This would give ride-hailing workers the structural power to disrupt service "virtually at the touch of a button."

As a result, protests and strikes were more frequently reported by digital platform workers and those in sectors undergoing a green transition. Being part of more visible workplace landscape, such as ride-hailing, package delivery, renewable energy projects, or coal mining, makes mass mobilization easier. Additionally, the unstable conditions, and the algorithmic tracking and control, faced by platform workers tend to trigger frustration that result in public demonstrations. In green transition sectors, strong institutional backing and a history of labor organizing give workers the confidence to engage in reform measures like strikes.

Workers' Goals in Engaging in Power-Building Collective Action

Advocacy and lobbying were commonly used to influence policy or legislation—that is, to build institutional power. As Schmaltz, Ludwig, and Webster (2018) noted, groups can fall back on institutional sources of power when structural and/or

associational power is weak. Nonconfrontational advocacy, deployed by groups such as platform workers and migrants who often fall outside existing labor laws, typically involves engaging stakeholders, legislators, and the public to shape regulations that improve working conditions or extend protections.

Strikes and protests were strongly associated with efforts to resist unjust practices (50.9%) and raise labor concerns (51.8%). These more visibly disruptive actions are employed when dialogue fails or where injustices, such as wage theft, unsafe conditions, or unfair dismissals, persist. They serve as public expressions of worker dissatisfaction and collective resolve, especially among digital platform workers and those in green transition sectors.

Lawsuits were pursued to secure agreements or settlements (36.0%) and address violations. Cost and legal literacy can be challenges, but litigation offers a structured avenue to demand redress.

Solidarity actions (51.1%), critical in building coalitional power and solidifying worker identity, were often driven by a goal to achieve unity (32.1%) and to demonstrate cross-sectoral or cross-border support. They include joint mobilizations, sharing resources, or supporting change efforts in other regions or sectors.



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Effectiveness of Collective and Power-Building Actions

Overall, 60.9% of the worker groups reported that the actions they undertook were effective in meeting their immediate demands. The gains achieved were often issue-specific and short-term. They include outcomes such as halting unfair dismissals, improving hourly wages, reversing unjust deactivations, accessing mental health support, and gaining formal recognition from employers or regulatory bodies.

The groups attributed these successes to the strategic combination of tactics such as public protest, advocacy, and solidarity efforts. The effectiveness of these tactics often depended on not only which ones were selected but also how they were implemented, including timing, level of member mobilization, alignment with public sentiment, and visibility in the media, particularly social media.

Although less utilized, lawsuits (68.4%) and protests (68.1%) were reported as the most effective measures in yielding positive outcomes, followed by advocacy (63.6%) and solidarity actions (Figure 2). They appear to amplify worker demands, help secure legal recognition (institutional power), and build public and institutional pressure (discursive power). In contrast, strikes (50.6%) and lobbying (54.9%) were seen as relatively less effective. In some contexts, this may reflect structural challenges such as limited negotiating power, weak enforcement environments, or the absence of sustained political engagement frameworks. Strikes and lobbying also tend to be expensive and are sometimes undermined by weak cooperation from members.

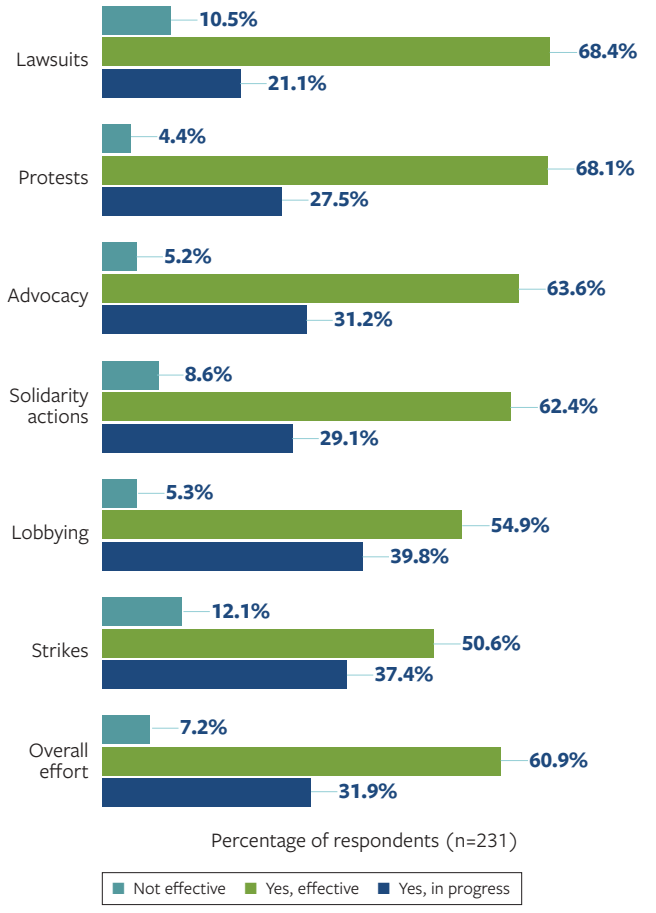
> Through various dialogues with government agencies, strikes and digital campaigns via WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and MCUG News Flash bulletins, MCUG contributed to lowering the minimum age for couriers from 25 to 20 years (drawing in younger workers), helped broaden the definition of "employee" to include e-hailing couriers, influenced regulations that govern app companies, and contributed to the recognition of motorcycle couriers as a distinct transport mode in the 2003 Postal and Courier Services Regulatory Commission Act (Act 649).

Actions that were coordinated, sustained, and strategically targeted tended to yield more tangible results. Workers said that protests and other disruptive tactics produce stronger outcomes if they are combined with more conciliatory, discursive approaches such as strategic communication, social dialogue, and media campaigns to gain public visibility. Although disruptive tactics may strain relationships in the short term, they create urgency and compel stakeholders to respond, especially when reputational risk, operational disruption, or legal accountability is at stake.

About a third (31.0%) of the groups said they were currently engaged in ongoing efforts, particularly in relation to deeper structural issues such as the revision of labor laws, correcting worker misclassification as independent contractors, freelancers, consultants and entrepreneurs,[19] ending precarious contracts, and addressing chronically low pay. These demands require longer-term engagement, including persistent mobilization, legal challenges, and sustained social dialogue with institutions and policymakers.

Even where immediate policy shifts have not yet been observed, many groups said that their actions have helped raise public awareness, build solidarity among workers, and increase pressure on employers and state actors, laying the groundwork for future systemic change.

Figure 2: Perceived Effectiveness of Collective Action among Worker Group Leaders



For those who find their confrontational collection actions ineffective, this is due to the limited capacity of such workers to stop production or services by withdrawing their labor. Their structural power is weakened by their replaceability, legal insecurity, and dispersion across informal labor markets, all of which diminish their ability to withdraw services effectively.

Hafiz and Marinescu (2023) posit that worker power rests on two levers: voice (speaking and acting together) and exit (real options to leave for better work). When workers can exit en masse and create labor shortages, employers are pressured to improve wages, conditions, or contracts to retain or attract workers. However, work creators, whether disguised employers, de facto employers, or intermediaries, can easily replace informal workers if they withdraw their services, as many others are waiting in line. Work in the informal economy often takes place in settings where collective withdrawal is difficult to coordinate. Migrant workers with insecure status fear deportation, dismissal, or legal penalties if they strike. In addition, labor laws and unions often exclude informal sectors, leaving workers without the right to strike or legal protections for withdrawing their labor.

In Africa, high rates of underemployment and unemployment, coupled with low barriers to entry into informal work, further weaken workers' structural power in disrupting services in the sector. Moreover, unlike in some parts of the global north, the relative absence of protections that cushion workers, such as unemployment insurance, discourages workers from embarking on industrial actions.



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PART 2: DIGITALIZATION AND DIALOGUE

Across Africa, newly emergent worker groups are building power using a diverse range of tools. Digitalization, for instance, enhances their associational and discursive power, enabling wider organizing and strengthening their collective voice. Social dialogue enhances institutional power through negotiation and engagement with employers and policymakers. And partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) and traditional labor unions expand coalitional power, offering legitimacy, resources, and broader platforms for advocacy and influence.

This section therefore details how new worker groups leverage digital tools, dialogue, and partnerships to sustain and improve their visibility, solidarity, and bargaining power, to address the questions:

- What role does digitalization play in worker organizing and power building, and what are the perceived risks associated with it?
- How does social dialogue contribute to worker power-building?

Organizing through Digital and Social Media

Most worker groups reported using at least one social media platform to build community. In all five countries, they indicated a preference for affordable, widely accessible platforms, with WhatsApp being the most widely used platform: 100% in South Africa, 95.8% in Ghana, 92.9% in Nigeria, and slightly lower in Uganda and Kenya. In second place is Facebook (71%). Facebook is used by 94% of worker groups in South Africa, 81% in Nigeria, and 66.7% in Ghana, but in Kenya and Uganda, usage is significantly lower (Table 2). Instagram lies in third place, but LinkedIn and Telegram remain the least used platforms.

WhatsApp and Facebook were ranked first and second, respectively, as the most effective social media tools for worker organizing and power building.[20] These platforms are widely accessible, incur relatively low data costs, and enable real-time communication and coordination. Indeed, most workers already have these apps on their phones. WhatsApp supports instant messaging, voice notes, and group chats. On the other hand, the public advocacy capabilities of Facebook and Instagram allow worker groups to post videos, testimonials, and campaign materials that increase visibility and attract external support. Their multimedia features and user-friendly interface help build a sense of community, particularly among informal or dispersed worker populations. In addition, Facebook and Instagram's algorithmic reach enables posts to gain traction beyond the group, facilitating agenda-setting and public influence. Together, these platforms not only promote internal cohesion but enable the groups to advocate for better conditions and fairer treatment.

Table 2: Percentage of Worker Groups that Use Social Media Platforms, by Country

	Ghana (%)	Nigeria (%)	South Africa (%)	Kenya (%)	Uganda (%)	Overall
WhatsApp	95.8	92.9	100.0	65.8	85.0	88.7
Facebook	66.7	81.0	94.0	47.4	55.0	71.0
Instagram	29.2	16.7	53.7	39.5	8.3	30.3
X (formally Twitter)	16.7	14.3	40.3	34.2	21.7	27.3
TikTok	33.3	0.0	10.45	13.2	30.0	16.5
YouTube	8.3	2.4	11.9	10.5	10.0	9.1
Telegram	8.3	7.1	6.0	0.0	15.0	7.8
LinkedIn	4.2	0.0	9.0	10.5	8.3	6.9

The limited adoption of digital organizing and power-building tools, including Facebook and WhatsApp, by worker groups in Kenya and Uganda, relative to other countries surveyed, reflects a combination of organizational, political, and infrastructural constraints. But for those working in the digital economy, some worker groups remain conservative in orientation and are slow to adopt digital approaches to organizing, particularly those led by older leaders. Older leaders often perceive online platforms as less effective than traditional face-to-face engagement. These organizational constraints are reinforced by periodic government media censoring, internet shutdowns or restrictions on social media platforms, especially during and after election periods.[21] While such practices are not unique to Kenya and Uganda and occur in parts of the continent,[22] their frequency, duration, and limited legal oversight significantly undermines sustained digital organizing. The risk of prolonged shutdowns discourages worker organizations from relying on platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, for mobilization, communication, or sustained organizing. A worker leader remarked that:

> *Facebook has been blocked for almost five years, since the 2021 election period. Without a VPN, which many members do not know about or know how to use, you cannot access it in Uganda. So the question is, how many of our members, especially those who are less technologically inclined, can realistically manage this constraint?*

These challenges are compounded by low levels of digital literacy and uneven internet infrastructure. Reliable connectivity is concentrated mainly in urban areas, while rural and peri-urban regions continue to experience weak or inconsistent network coverage. More broadly, despite Africa's ongoing digital transformation, only 38% of the continent's population is online, well below the global average of 68%, with access particularly limited among women and rural populations. While South Africa's internet penetration approaches 75%, many East and Central African countries lag significantly behind, with Uganda at around 19%. Digital skills gaps remain pronounced across the continent, with most African countries scoring between 1.8 and 5 on the Digital Skills Gap Index, compared to a global average of six.[23]

Custom-made digital platforms for organizing and power building remain limited among new worker groups due to high upfront costs, constrained in-house technical capacity, and insufficient financial resources to sustain ongoing maintenance. One of the few exemplary cases, however, is the Federation of Migrant Workers Union of Uganda. The union developed the *Kyeyo* and *Tuliwamu* apps to support organizing and monitoring of welfare of migrant workers both within the continent and abroad.

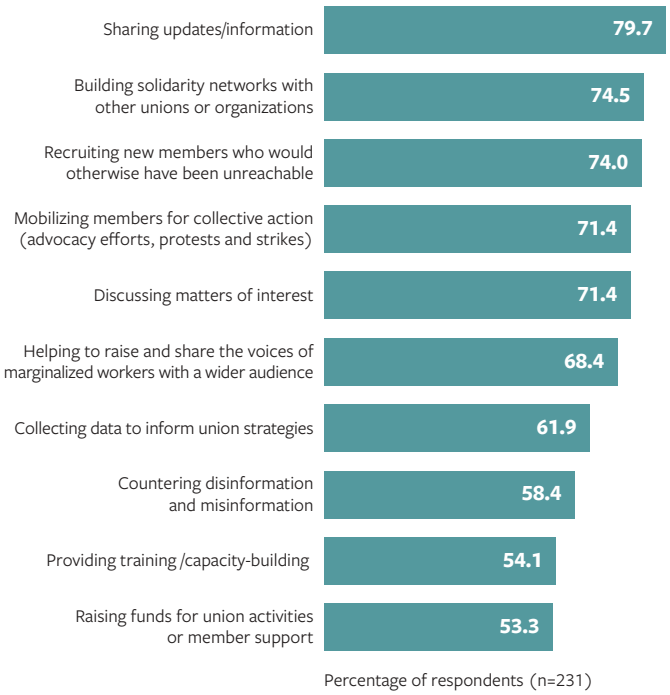
Perceived Effectiveness of Digital Tools for Worker Organizing and Power

Worker groups emphasized the effectiveness[24] of platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook in facilitating organizing and power building. The most valuable feature, cited by nearly 80% of leaders, was sharing timely updates and critical information (Figure 3).

Building solidarity networks and a sense of connection across widely dispersed geographies ranked second (74.5%). Attracting new members (74%) and mobilizing for campaigns (71.4%) also ranked high, indicating that beyond building awareness, platforms help drive action. "This is where we now do the real work. Reaching people, getting them on board, and keeping them engaged," one union leader said.

Additionally, 71.4% of leaders said online platforms were valuable for hosting meaningful discussions, and 68.4% said they were good for amplifying the voices of workers who often feel left out, including women, migrants, and persons with disabilities. This points to how digital spaces are supporting organizing that is more inclusive and organic. These tools make them heard and involved (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Effectiveness of Digital Tools for Worker Organizing and Power Building



But leaders also pointed out that online platforms are less good at other things. Fundraising (53.3%) and training or capacity building (54.1%) were the least effective uses of online media. Fundraising, some noted, is still best done in person or through more formal channels. Training, on the other hand, often requires a more structured environment.

Digital Tools, Organizing and Power Building

Building on the effectiveness of digital tools discussed in the previous section, this part delves into how digital tools, especially social media, specifically contributes to worker power-building and organizing. Table 3 provides a detailed summary of these dynamics, illustrating how various digital tools align with and contribute to different forms of power resources in worker organizing.

Table 3: Mapping Digital Tools onto Power Resources in Worker Organizing

Power Resource	Digital Tools	Main Contributions	Insights and Capabilities
ASSOCIATIONAL POWER **Internal cohesion & collective identity**	WhatsApp Facebook	• Assists real-time communication via chat and voice notes • Connects dispersed members across diverse geographies • Aids recruitment (74.0%) • Facilitates solidarity building (74.5%)	WhatsApp enables low-cost, low-barrier organizing, especially valuable in informal sectors. Supports associational power through internal communication and trust-building Associational power is limited by distrust in leadership.
DISCURSIVE POWER **Agency & voice**	Facebook Instagram X (formerly Twitter)	• Visibility for campaigns and worker stories • Influences public opinion through videos and testimonials • Amplifies marginalized voices (68.4%)	Framing capability: social media helps shape public narratives on labor justice. Expands the group's reach beyond its base, attracting allies and public support. Media visibility supports narrative-setting, but public mistrust and a perception of leaders as corrupt impede credibility.
STRUCTURAL POWER **Economic leverage**	WhatsApp Facebook (limited)	• Supports mobilization for strikes or protests (71.4%) • Limited impact on wages, contracts, or working conditions • Less effective for fundraising (53.3%) and training (54.1%)	Digital tools do not replace the need for economic leverage or formal bargaining. Structural power remains weak in digitally mediated informal labor contexts. Structural power is undermined by members' dependency on digital platforms, which, when withdrawn, collapse local organizing.
INSTITUTIONAL POWER **Influence over rules and policies**	Facebook WhatsApp (indirect) Cross-platform tools	• Aids the coordination of advocacy campaigns • Enables alliances with other worker groups, CSOs, and funders • Strengthens visibility in policy arenas	Intermediating capability: social media helps to broker institutional alliances and to facilitate participation in governance processes.
DIGITAL POWER[25] **Platform control, reach, and data-mediated capacity**	WhatsApp Facebook Cross-platform ecosystem	• Enables rapid mobilization and scale at low cost • Facilitates recruitment (74%) • Publication of grievances and message amplification • Supports countering misinformation/ disinformation (58.4%) and internal gatekeeping[26]	Ensabling capability: digital power lowers coordination costs and expands reach but is contingent on internet access, platform access and algorithms, etc. Digital power is fragile and externally governed, exposing worker groups to censorship, shutdowns, and account suspension. Without anchoring in associational, structural, or institutional power, digital power remains volatile and reversible.

Digital tools now sit at the center of how new worker groups build power. They intermediate by linking workers across sectors and regions and by helping small groups find allies, share contacts, and act together. Social posts lift worker voices, shape the public narrative, and draw the attention of the media, regulators, and employers, building their legitimacy. Group chats and lists let workers coordinate actions, air grievances, and agree on common demands. Such steady, shared messaging strengthens associational power (members acting together) and discursive power (workers framing the narrative in their own voices).

Barriers to Digital Organizing and Power Building

Although digital tools enhance worker organizing, systemic barriers in the digital ecosystem, such as the seven discussed below, continue to undermine sustainable power-building.

1. Surveillance and Social Listening by Employers

"[Employers] use each and every social media platform to monitor our existence."

From the interviews, workers expressed concern that digital platform companies are increasingly using digital surveillance and social-listening tools to monitor their communications. In some cases, these tools are used to suppress dissent and preempt collective action. About 17% of surveyed workers reported fear of such surveillance (Figure 4). This limits associational power (internal organizing) and weakens discussive power by discouraging the open expression of grievances or demands. For ride-hailing drivers and other platform workers, who often rely on WhatsApp and Facebook to coordinate actions, surveillance creates fear, hindering their ability to trust and to organize freely. Without protection from surveillance, workers sometimes risk retaliation for asserting their rights, which undermines efforts to improve wages, safety, and conditions.

2. Exclusion by Platform Design

"Even on Facebook or TikTok... we [worker groups] have to push premium versions for your info to go viral."

Most digital platforms are built on the pay-to-play model, which ties the visibility of a brand or group to its ad spending via algorithms. The model therefore privileges better-resourced actors. For informal sector worker groups, limited funds mean that many powerful stories of injustice may go unheard. The pay-to-play model also reinforces the digital divide, marginalizing those groups that are likely to suffer the most if they lack public visibility.

3. Algorithmic Invisibility

Even when content does get posted, algorithms often deprioritize union-related or political content, especially if it does not meet commercial engagement metrics. In some cases, content moderation policies have led to the removal or shadow banning of labor organizing posts,[27] constraining workers' ability to control their own narratives (Savolainen, 2022).

4. Digital Literacy Gaps

"Many are semi-skilled or unskilled and don't know how to use the media to communicate."

Many workers, particularly migrant and domestic care workers, lack the digital literacy to participate fully in digital organizing spaces. This limits their associational and societal power because they cannot access information, share experiences, or participate in collective action online. Until they receive training, they remain digitally excluded, even when organizing opportunities exist.

5. Financial Barriers to Visibility

Both digital media and traditional forms of advocacy require levels of funding that many grassroots unions and federations cannot afford. For some unions, a single roadshow or media appearance can exceed the entire year's budget. This undercuts discursive power and restricts the growth of institutional power, since policy actors often respond best to sustained public pressure. When strategic visibility is unaffordable, a campaign for better working conditions may never reach the public or policy sphere even if those conditions are unjust.

6. Lack of Digital Strategy

"We haven't been able ... to turn the dark side of social media to our advantage."

Many worker groups, especially newer federations in the informal sector, lack clear internal communication strategies or social media policies. This inhibits cohesive messaging and intermediating capabilities, and fragments communication internally. Without a social media strategy, teams become reactive, and digital engagement becomes inconsistent and ineffective. Organizing tends to be personality-dependent rather than institutionally grounded, and progress can become vulnerable to leadership changes or internal disputes.

7. Device and Access Inequality

"Someone loses their phone. They say, 'I'll be back online soon' but they end up missing a lot."

Digital access is demographically uneven. The high cost of data, poor connectivity, or even smartphone loss cut off informal workers from key organizing channels like WhatsApp, Facebook, or Zoom. For workers in rural areas, in precarious housing, or in cross-border jobs, this results in digital exclusion that reinforces class- and migration-based inequalities. Their inclusion in worker organizing can become tenuous and intermittent if important updates on policy, protests, training, or legal assistance cannot reach them.

"Limited access to smartphones, reliable electricity, and affordable data continues to constrain digital participation among our low income and less digitally savvy members [Care workers]. These challenges are most pronounced in rural and peri urban areas, where basic infrastructure is weak and household priorities such as food security take precedence over digital connectivity.

We at the National Union of Hotel and Personal Service Workers (NUHPSW) of Nigeria is responding to this constraint through collective device access and shared connectivity arrangements. When organizing online meetings or programmes, the union brings together small clusters of members to participate using shared devices at union offices or local hubs. Members within the same locality pool resources and convene at designated state or branch offices, where the union provides the necessary digital infrastructure and support. This collective approach enables members to engage in national discussions and decision-making processes despite persistent barriers related to digital access, electricity, and data affordability."

—Leadership, National Union of Hotel and Personal Service Workers

Factors Which Discourage Members from More Active Digital Engagement

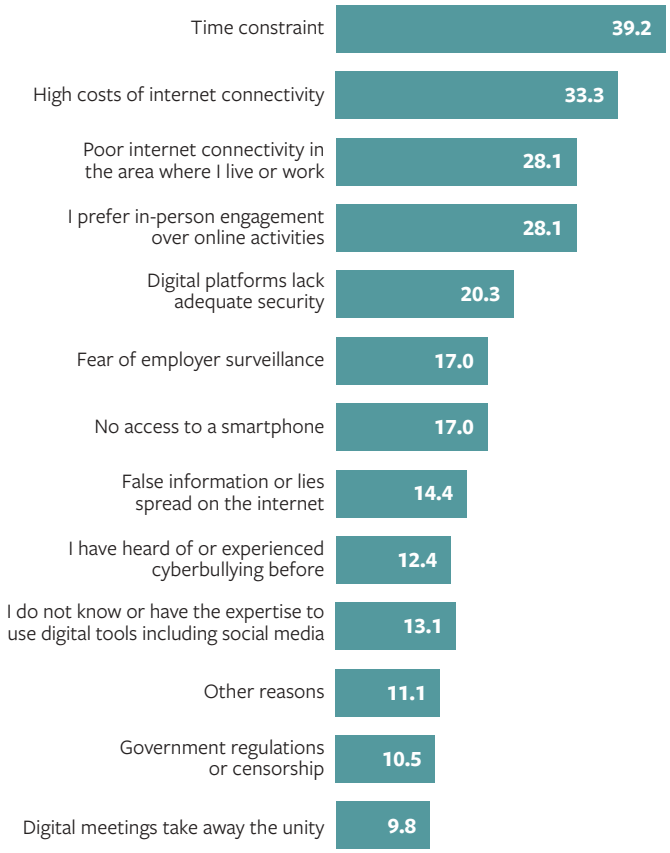
Most members of the worker groups (90.1%) belong to their union's social media platforms—91.6% are on a WhatsApp group, 62% on Facebook, 55.7% belong to both—but only 68.5% of members are actually active on their worker group's social media platforms, regularly posting and commenting. The remaining 31.5% of members are passive, reading but not contributing. Some of these workers are held back from fully engaging online not because they do not care but because real, everyday barriers stand in their way. Some do not have the time (39.2%). They are busy juggling job and family responsibilities. Others mentioned the high cost of connectivity (33.3%) and poor network quality, even where internet access was available (Figure 4).

The qualitative data also highlighted fears of scams, especially among less digitally savvy participants, which limited their engagement on social media.

Social Dialogue as a Power-Building Tool

In this section, we sought to answer the question of how social dialogue contributes to worker institutional power-building. Institutional power-building refers to how workers influence and reshape formal institutions, policies, and laws, making it easier for them to advocate for labor protections, rights, and social change.

Figure 4: Why Some Workers Struggle to Engage Actively Online



Percentage of respondents (n=153)

Altogether, 89.6% of leaders reported that their groups engage or have engaged in some form of dialogue. This is predominantly bilateral, between their leaders and their employers' representatives, or between their leaders and government officials. While the former is often undertaken to get employers to improve their conditions of service, the latter seeks to get the government to enact or implement regulatory policies responsive to worker needs.

A recurring observation by group leaders is that social dialogue is more effective in getting demands met than confrontational strategies such as strikes or demonstrations, especially where in sectors where the work is precarious, specialized skills are lacking, and structural power is low.



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"Dialogue works better because there are so many workers out there. If you go on strike or stage demonstrations, you can easily be replaced. It's more effective to take a softer approach by engaging stakeholders in one-on-one conversations, appealing to their conscience and emotions, so that both sides can find common ground."

—Leader, Migrant Workers, Uganda

About half (50.2%) of surveyed leaders reported that social dialogue with employers and government has enabled informal economy unions like theirs to secure responses to needs. New worker groups said fair wages were their most pressing priority (78.4%) in social dialogue, underscoring their concern to obtain immediate, tangible improvements in income security. Health and safety were prioritized by 59.7% of worker leaders in their dialogue with employers and governments. This emphasis signals that workers are concerned not only with earnings but also with exposure to physical, psychological, and environmental risks. Platform workers highlight road safety, fatalities, algorithmic pressure, and fatigue; care workers prioritize exposure to disease, overwork, and emotional strain; and migrant workers raise concerns about trafficking, unsafe housing, abusive conditions, and hazardous workplaces. Skills training/capacity building was prioritized by 59.7%, reflecting a demand for opportunities to enhance their employability in the changing labor market. These concerns reflect broader demands for fairness, inclusion, and protection within formal labor frameworks. In addition, calls for the formalization of new workers groups signal efforts to recognize and integrate informal and marginalized workers into established labor institutions (Figure 5).



Courtesy of Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

Figure 5: Priority Issues Addressed by New Worker Groups in Social Dialogue with Employers and Governments



Of the groups that have participated in dialogue sessions in the past, 90.3% of leaders felt their voices were adequately represented.

To facilitate dialogue, groups collect member feedback through channels like in-person meetings, social media platforms, and surveys, enabling members to voice their concerns and suggest improvements without fear. The feedback is then consolidated to build an advocacy position that is presented to employers or government representatives. One leader explained:

"We sometimes send out a survey for colleagues to complete. When we notice that members are consistently reporting the same issue, we prioritize it for our advocacy campaign. Or we guide members to consistently raise the concern in weekly surveys sent out by platform companies. That way, the companies are more likely to respond. But when you take a more radical approach, they usually just ignore it."

—Leader, Digital Platform Worker Group, Ghana

Some ride-hail drivers and couriers occupy a dual position as both workers and small-scale business owners/employers because some of them own the vehicles they use and, in some cases, rent out to other drivers. This hybrid identity gives them certain advantages: they can negotiate from the standpoint of small entrepreneurs and have market exit options such as switching platforms or redeploying their cars for other services. Yet the same status fragments solidarity. Drivers who view themselves primarily as business owners may resist union-style organizing. This hybrid positioning poses a novel theoretical challenge to existing

labor theories, including Power Resources Theory, which are largely premised on clearly defined employment relationships and bounded workplaces. By combining elements of labor and asset ownership, this dual role complicates traditional understandings of worker solidarity, collective identity, and the locus of power in employment relations. It therefore points to the need for theoretical approaches that move beyond binary distinctions between employer and employee.

Additionally, platform companies may use contractor classifications to deny them employment status, benefits, and collective bargaining rights. The result is a weakening of institutional power because the legal and collective mechanisms that convert worker voice into enforceable rights become harder to establish. For example, as a CSO representative from the informal economy in South Africa noted:

> *"Misclassifying employees as "independent contractors" cuts off their legal base for institutional power. Contractors sit outside labor laws that enable union recognition, collective bargaining, minimum wage, social protection, and binding grievance procedures, so any dialogue with them is voluntary and unenforceable. Such misclassification also fragments the workforce, making associational organizing harder."*
>
> —CSO, Informal Economy, South Africa

Moreover, misclassification leads to a loss of several millions of dollars in potential tax revenue and social security contributions annually, directly weakening state capacity to fund public services and perpetuating cycles of informalization.[28]

A parallel dynamic of hybrid worker-employer identity appears among some highly educated care workers who also act as recruitment or placement agents for both employers and third-party agencies. Their insider knowledge of the local landscape of labor supply and employer demand can increase their personal influence in the market, but it can also create a conflict of interest. Serving both as caregiver and recruiter can pull them toward agency or employer priorities and away from collective organizing. Combined with the dispersed, often informal settings of home-based care, this dual role limits the formation of strong associations and undercuts efforts to secure legally recognized bargaining rights. In both cases, hybrid worker–employer identities provide market leverage but simultaneously erode the solidarity and legal clarity essential for building lasting institutional power.

A common challenge many new worker groups face during bilateral social dialogue with employers and government is how the consultations are conducted. Often, these new workers are not invited to the policy discussion, and when they are, it happens toward the tail end of process, after much of the policy framework has already been set. Late-stage participation reduces their ability to shape labor standards, social protections, and transition plans in ways that reflect their lived realities. Late-stage "consultation" begins to look more like rubber-stamp validation rather than genuine co-creation, and it reinforces the very power imbalances social dialogue is meant to address.

Most workers in the informal economy across the five countries have no seat or direct representation in formal tripartite dialogue. Tripartite structures such as the ILO's International Labour Conference generally involve representatives from the national trade union congress. With little voice for groups representing informal workers, they are left with proxy representation via the main trade unions. The weakness in proxy representation is that their priorities can be diluted, delayed, or traded off (bargained away) without their consent. The risks of proxy representation include:

- Agendas that skew to the union's core members, not informal workers
- Limited accountability and weak feedback loops to the grassroots members
- Gatekeeping that results in migrants, women, and platform workers being left out
- Slow or no escalation on urgent issues that affect new worker groups



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PART 3: ENGAGEMENT WITH WORKER GROUPS AND MOVEMENTS

Across worker groups and countries, partnerships with local and international civil society organizations remain central to efforts to mobilize resources, build capacity, increase visibility, and improve working conditions. This section explores the questions:

- What role do partnerships with civil society organizations play in strengthening the power of new worker groups?
- What connections exist between emerging worker groups, the traditional labor movement, and cross-sectoral civil society coalitions?
- How can new methods of worker power-building improve traditional forms of representation?

Worker groups reported partnering with various international civil society organizations that provide crucial support tailored to specific sectors. While a few of the worker groups, particularly the Federation of All Uganda Migrant Workers Associations (FAUMA), reported collaborations with local CSOs and community-based organizations, the most frequently mentioned successful ones across the groups tended to be with international CSOs. The Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO) of South Africa is another notable local CSO providing education and advice to workers in the informal economy in the region.

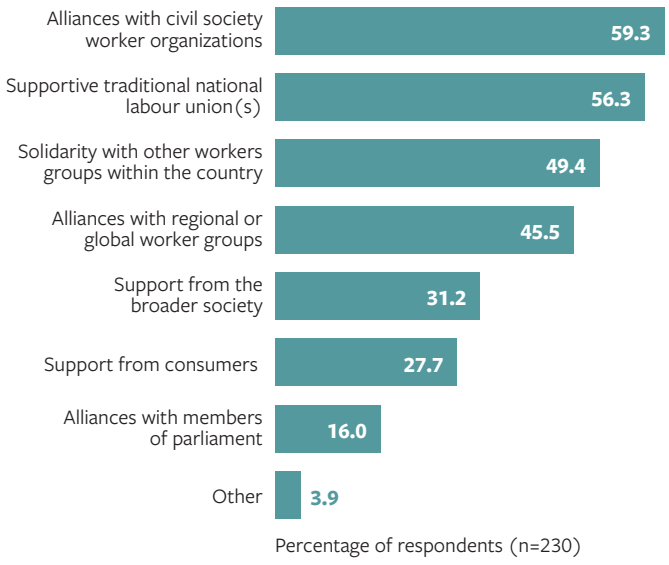
International CSO partners reported by digital economy workers included the Solidarity Center, Fairwork Project, and the International Lawyers Assisting Workers (ILAW) Network, while care worker unions most often cited and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). The ILO was unanimously recognized as a key ally for expanding strategic reach, promoting social protection, facilitating dialogue, and strengthening rights at work.

Concrete collaborations on just transition remain limited. Apart from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa, few worker groups reported active engagement with CSOs in this area. While initiatives such as the Africa Just Transition Network—a coalition of CSOs and CBOs across 25 African countries—are advancing discourse on fair energy transition, their efforts have yet to translate into significant engagement with worker movements.

Views from both CSO leaders and worker representatives suggest that successful partnerships are those that result in measurable improvements in workers' lives or institutional recognition of their rights. For those that regarded their collaborations successful, they were made possible through the upfront alignment of goals that reflect the lived realities and priorities of workers. These collaborations are co-designed around worker-led principles that position workers as equal partners rather than beneficiaries. Success also depends on clearly defined roles that draw on each side's complementary strengths, preventing duplication, blurred boundaries, and tension. This requires recognising worker groups' strengths in strategic agenda setting and objective formulation, grassroots mobilization and logistical coordination, representation, negotiation and social dialogue. Moreover, partnerships that prioritize regular and transparent communication foster trust, strengthen accountability, and help manage expectations over time.

Worker group leaders ranked alliances, or partnerships with civil society organizations as the relatively most influential (59.3%) external support factor in meeting their needs (Figure 6). This was followed by having a supportive traditional labor union (56.3%) and solidarity from other worker groups (49.4%).

Figure 6: Ranking of Partnerships and Other External Support Factors that are Influential to New Worker Power

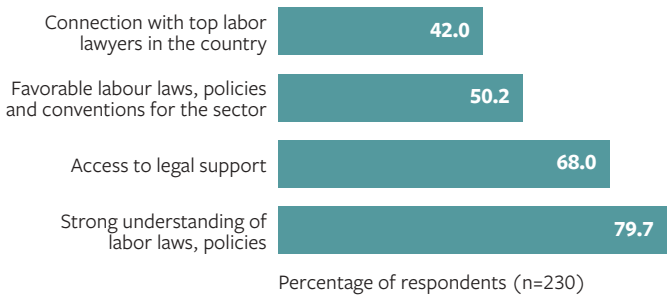


These collaborations (coalitional power) serve as an entry point for the worker groups to leverage support from CSOs to strengthen their membership and voice (associational power), influence and shape policies and laws (institutional power), and frame collective narratives that command legitimacy and social recognition (discursive power). Such collaborations help worker groups to stay a step ahead by allowing them to build their capacity, track employer tactics across countries, and adjust organizing strategies. According to worker group leaders, several useful outcomes from these collaborations include:

1. **Improved organizational structures**. Partnerships with CSOs help to strengthen the membership reach of new worker groups through funding support for outreach and training in organizing, governance, and member mobilization.
2. **Enhanced legitimacy and visibility**. Association with influential and reputable CSOs attracts recognition from government agencies, employers, and international organizations. This is particularly critical for new worker groups operating outside traditional union frameworks because they often lack formal recognition, institutional credibility, and representation within established labor institutions.
3. **Greater access to shared platforms for advocacy**. Such collaborations create opportunities for worker groups to attend international events, engage in transnational solidarity movements, and amplify their collective voice at local, national, and international levels.
4. **Enhanced framing and narration of demands.** Through partnerships with CSOs, worker groups are also learning how to frame their demands in ways that resonate with broader social justice agendas by linking labor rights to gender equality, human rights, and climate justice. This significantly strengthens their discursive power, their ability to shape public narratives and influence decision-makers. This finding represents a novel tactical evolution compared to more traditional labor narratives in Africa that focus primarily on wages and working conditions. This intersectional framing enables the construction of a form of social justice coalition power that extends beyond conventional labor concerns (Chen, 2013).
5. **Greater legal and policy support**. Legal support enables worker groups to structure their constitutions, file claims, interpret and apply national and international labor laws, and engage effectively in institutional dialogue. Often offered on a *pro bono* basis, such support enhances leaders' legal literacy and builds their capacity to advocate for rights and social protections. Members' understanding of the labor laws and policies that affect them was ranked highly influential (79.7%) in building up the power of new worker groups, as was access to legal support, including legal assistance and targeted trainings from legal-based CSOs (68.0%). At least 60% of worker group leaders said that these were crucial to the power they wield (Figure 7). Such legal support from CSOs is useful in dispute resolution, contract enforcement, strategic litigation, and the enhancement of inclusivity. This also enables partner worker groups in other sectors and countries to engage their legal systems with greater confidence and to resist unfair practices.

The groups received legal assistance from CSOs such as the International Lawyers Assisting Workers (ILAW) Network, the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, and other individual lawyers who offer pro bono services.

Figure 7: Legal and Policy Support as Enablers of Worker Power



Other sources of legal support mentioned include the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) in South Africa, both of which defend marginalized workers through constitutional litigation. In Kenya, organizations such as Kituo Cha Sheria and Haki Mashinani were noted for providing legal aid and education to informal workers. In Nigeria and Ghana, university-based legal aid clinics and bar association pro bono units have contributed legal expertise to worker groups in matters like wage theft and structuring of their constitutions. Such legal partnerships not only provide immediate relief but also contribute to longer-term empowerment through rights education and strategic case development.

> *An international legal CSO highlighted the role of such support, stating: "Resource constraints limit many unions' ability to interpret, leverage, or innovate within legislation, leaving valuable legal tools underused or unknown. This is where we step in."*



Courtesy of Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

Although favorable laws and conventions are important for worker organizing, they were among the factors least frequently cited by worker groups as influential (50.2%). This modest rating is partly attributable to low legal literacy, which limits workers' understanding of the relevance of legal frameworks. Additionally, inadequate access to legal support services impedes their ability to enforce their rights. Without the tools to deploy legal mechanisms, the mere formal presence of protective laws does little. In short, favorable laws, while symbolically important, fail to serve as reliable safeguards unless accompanied by accessible legal support, institutional accountability, and worker legal literacy.

Partnership Challenges

Although CSO-worker group partnerships do help to amplify workers' voice and strengthen collective power, the practical outcomes of these collaborations are often constrained by structural, relational, and ideological tensions that limit their transformative power. These tensions manifest in recurring challenges that weaken solidarity, blur accountability, and impede the capacity of such partnerships to deliver sustained gains in worker power and representation. Six such challenges are discussed below:

1. **Divergent agendas, misaligned priorities, and differing time horizons**

   CSO-worker group collaborations can struggle to achieve long-term results because their goals and approaches tend to differ. Worker organizations pursue long-term outcomes such as membership growth and better working conditions, while CSOs often work on short-term projects influenced by donor interests and a desire for quick outputs.

   Many CSO initiatives are not grounded in a proper needs assessment of worker groups, are poorly coordinated, and often duplicate earlier efforts instead of building on them. Some CSOs emphasize advocacy outputs such as media campaigns and public events, whereas worker groups seek tangible improvements such as job security, fair wages, and legal recognition. These differences can make collaborations short-lived and unsustainable once project funding ends.

> *"As migrant workers, although we have collaborations with some CSOs, some of their priorities and interests deviate from the rights and welfare of the migrant workers who are being externalized. This imbalance sidelines the very constituency that worker groups aim to protect, reducing the effectiveness and credibility of such partnerships."*
>
> —Leader, Migrant Union

2. **Asymmetrical rather than mutual partnering.** Many CSOs train workers, but seldom do worker groups train CSOs. The result is asymmetrical learning: CSOs shape the agenda, and worker organizations play a reactive role. Genuine partnership requires co-learning spaces and mutual recognition of expertise.
3. **Unequal power dynamics and representation.** Some CSOs, especially those with donor funding, prefer to act as "voice brokers," speaking *for* workers rather than amplifying the narratives of the workers themselves. The result is that worker groups—especially informal or precarious groups like domestic workers, platform workers, or waste pickers—can feel co-opted or sidelined.
4. **Lack of institutional infrastructure for collaboration.** Few formal coordination platforms exist to facilitate sustained dialogue between unions, worker associations, and CSOs. Memoranda of understanding, where they exist, are often symbolic rather than operational, lacking joint monitoring mechanisms, resource-sharing frameworks, or shared strategies for policy engagement.
5. **Uncomfortably radical language.** Some CSOs perceive certain worker groups as too radical or confrontational in language and tactics. The assertive framing that unions use to demand rights, fair wages, or accountability is sometimes seen by CSOs as politically risky or overly aggressive. This can create tension in joint advocacy efforts, leading partners to feel compelled to "balance" or moderate union messaging to maintain government relations, donor relations, or institutional neutrality. Such communication misalignment undermines solidarity and dilutes the transformative intent of collective action. Over time, it leads to self-censorship, reduced visibility of workers' real grievances, and the softening of campaigns that should challenge structural inequalities head-on.

> *"There are some partner CSOs that feel we are too radical and controversial in our approach to advocacy. Others think our choice of language is sometimes too assertive or confrontational, which makes them uncomfortable and forces them to adopt a more cautious or balancing stance in joint engagements."*
>
> —Worker group leader, South Africa

Relationship between Worker Groups and Traditional Labor Unions

Many new worker groups also maintain diverse relationships and affiliations with traditional labor unions. These relationships reflect both strategic alignment and the evolving nature of labor organizing in Africa. The relationships tend to fall into one of three categories with varying rights:

- **Affiliates/Associate:** Formal affiliation with national labor centers or sectoral unions.
- **Provisional affiliates or members:** Transitioning toward full affiliation, having initiated the membership process but still working to meet formal requirements such as establishing a constitution, setting up a secretariat, and maintaining audited financial records.
- **Solidarity partnerships with memorandum of understandings:** Several emerging worker groups are not yet formally affiliated but enjoy solidarity support from traditional unions through joint campaigns, advocacy initiatives, and training.

Generally, new worker groups are the ones that initiate contact with traditional unions to gain recognition, mentoring, and institutional support. But there are notable instances where traditional unions, recognizing the growing influence and numbers of informal and nontraditional workers, have proactively reached out to organize them into sector trade unions, associations or cooperatives in pursuit of a stronger, more inclusive labor movement. To accommodate these emerging groups, several unions have revised their constitutions, revised dues structures and collection approaches, removed exclusionary language, redefined mandates, and adopted broader and more inclusive identities.

An example is from Kenya, where the Transport Workers Union (TWU-K) and the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA) revised their constitutions, including membership requirements and dues contributions, to accommodate the full spectrum of workers within their domains, including those in the informal economy. This for instance led to the birth of the KUDHEIHA Migrant Domestic Workers Association, an appendage of the Union. Through these reforms, the unions seek to extend protection and representation to groups historically excluded from formal labor structures, such as domestic workers and casual hospitality staff.

In Ghana, the Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA) began organizing informal economy workers in 2013, initially under the name Council of Informal Workers Associations (CIWA). It later adopted the name UNIWA and became formally affiliated with the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in, serving as the TUC's recognized structure for informal workers. Under UNIWA, new groups such as the Domestic Services Workers Union Ghana have been organized. Some critics argue that while integrating informal workers into unions is important, a one-size-fits-all umbrella union may struggle to meet the diverse needs of these workers. This points to a structural tension between Ghana's historical trade or sector-based unionism and contemporary efforts to organize a fragmented and heterogeneous informal economy.[29]

Nevertheless, these initiatives reflect a growing recognition among traditional unions of the need to adapt, broaden their membership base, and integrate workers previously excluded from formal labor representation. In Ghana, the Ghana Private Road Transport Union (GPRTU) also admits all categories of workers and operators within the transport sector as members. By contrast, the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) do not admit informal economy workers as members but instead engages them through memoranda of understanding with transport-sector associations.[30]

Just over half (56.7%) of leaders of new worker groups rated their relationships with traditional labor unions as influential in their power and working conditions. For these leaders, such affiliations make their voices more credible, especially when engaging with government agencies, employers, and international organizations, ensuring that they are taken seriously in policy dialogue and regulatory spaces. In Nigeria, for instance, the backing of the NLC was instrumental in securing AUATON's 2023 certification as the country's first legally recognized union for app-based transport workers.

Other benefits associated with affiliation or collaboration with traditional unions are:

- Access to infrastructure and logistical support such as office space, conference facilities, and administrative assistance
- Capacity-building opportunities, including training in organizing, negotiation, leadership, and labor law
- Conflict mediation, where traditional unions help resolve internal leadership or representational disputes among emerging groups
- Amplified collective voice since traditional unions provide broader platforms for joint national advocacy, policy engagement, and representation of their concerns in tripartite social dialogues

> *"The TUC has been invaluable, offering us free access to conference facilities, materials, financial support, and even personnel to help with documentation and organizing. Whenever we call for help, they respond, providing both resources and human support that strengthen our activities and give us legitimacy."*
>
> —Domestic Workers Union, Ghana

Enablers and Constraints for Successful Relationships between Worker Groups and Unions

The most successful partnerships between the new worker groups and traditional unions tend to share certain characteristics:

- **Mutual recognition and respect:** Each side acknowledges the distinct identities and organizing model of the other. Traditional unions respect the autonomy and grassroots nature of new worker groups, while new worker groups value the institutional experience and political leverage of established unions.
- **Shared, strategic goals:** Collaborations are more effective when guided by common goals such as working to ensure legal recognition, improved working conditions, or social protection for the worker group rather than situations when it seems rather more of the traditional union aiming to collaborate for increased membership at their end.
- **Open, transparent communication:** Regular dialogue and joint decision-making help manage expectations and reduce the likelihood of mistrust.
- **Flexibility and adaptation:** Traditional unions that revise their constitutions, mandates, or structures to accommodate new sectors such as informal, gig, or care work tend to build more sustainable partnerships.

Nevertheless, not all affiliations work out. Some leaders described the support their group received from traditional labor unions as symbolic and inadequate. Given the agility and flexibility needed by new worker groups in the fast-moving organizing environment of the informal economy, large established unions can come across as bureaucratic, slow to act, and rigid in their procedures. In several cases, after affiliating with a national center, worker groups reported poor follow-up, weak communication, and limited inclusion in decision-making.

Many new worker groups feel that their specific concerns are not adequately reflected in the agendas or priorities advanced by traditional unions during tripartite dialogues. This perception helps explain the continued emergence of new worker groups organizing independently around their own issues, as existing institutions are seen as no longer sufficiently representing workers' interests.

Although some leaders acknowledge that such alliances enhance visibility, these collaborations have not yet translated into meaningful inclusion in policy deliberations that shape labor standards and protections. This points to a deeper institutional power gap, where formal-sector interests continue to dominate the structures of representation and negotiation, and a discursive power imbalance, where the narratives, identities, and lived realities of workers in the informal economy struggle to gain recognition within established union frameworks.

Some leaders of new worker groups expressed concerns that certain established trade unions are internally divided and too closely aligned with ruling political parties or employers, which deters them from engaging with traditional unions. These alignments lead to internal divisions and limit unions' independence and effectiveness in representing workers' interests, a concern also documented in earlier studies.[31,32]

> *"Traditional unions are deeply divided, and these divisions often discourage new organizations like ours from working with them. Many traditional unions across the continent, particularly in Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria, have become heavily politicized, which deters organizations that prefer to remain neutral. This politicization frequently leads to internal power struggles, including competition for leadership positions linked to national politics, intensifying internal conflicts and, in some cases, pitting members against one another."*
>
> —Migrant Worker Leader, Uganda

Under conditions of internal division and politicization, traditional unions struggle to act as credible or attractive partners, limiting their capacity to build inclusive and sustained collaborations.

Misalignment in how new forms of work, particularly in the gig economy, are understood also strains collaboration. Some traditional unions continue to see new worker groups, such as app-based workers, as "independent contractors" or "informal workers" rather than employees. This framing legitimizes institutional gatekeeping and hierarchical arrangements within traditional unions. These unions are historically organized around a relatively small core of formal-sector workers. As a result, new worker groups often face restricted access, limited recognition, and constrained influence within established labor structures, weakening solidarity. In one country case, a domestic workers' group, despite meeting the requirements to become directly affiliated with a national labor union on its own, reported losing much of its autonomy after it acquired indirect affiliation by being reclassified under another affiliate informal worker union under the national union. Group leaders also said that although they value the solidarity and legitimacy gained through affiliation, hierarchical arrangements, bureaucratic rigidity, and political co-optation that characterize some of the traditional labor unions limit the transformative potential of these partnerships.

Organizing for a Just Transition

All around the world, worker organizing and cross-sectoral partnership has a pivotal role to play in social movement goals, namely, achieving a green just transition to the low-carbon economies of the future. A just transition agenda is emerging in Africa but remains limited, with weak practical understanding of the concept.

Organizing for just transition in informal and non-standard work, even within vulnerable sectors such as circular economy, energy, ecotourism, agriculture, and manufacturing, remains underdeveloped. While discourse about transition occasionally surfaces, concrete actions are infrequent. Within the informal economy, however, some meaningful organizing efforts are emerging, particularly among waste pickers in the circular economy. Notable examples include the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association and the Kpone Waste Pickers Association in Ghana, which are actively mobilising in response to landfill closures and land grabs. These initiatives are further strengthened through collaborative support from the International Alliance of Waste Pickers and a broader network of civil society organizations. In contrast, more established and structured organizing for just transition is evident in parts of the formal sector. Notable examples include South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), and the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), which have engaged more systematically with transition-related issues within extractive industries.

Waste picker organizations rely mainly on associational, discursive, and emerging institutional power to resist exclusion and assert their role in the circular economy. They use clear narratives through social media, forums, and art exhibitions to highlight their contributions to CO_2 reduction, material recovery, urban sanitation, and reduced pressure on landfills. In contrast, formal sector unions such as NUM, PENGASSAN, and NUPENG draw on strong associational, institutional, and structural power. This enables them to engage more directly and effectively in shaping just transition policies and outcomes.

The fledgling state of organizing for just transition poses a challenge to building associational power: until just transition demands are more centrally embedded in the organizing agendas of unions and other groups, workers in the informal economy risk being excluded from shaping the narratives and institutional pathways of climate and technological restructuring. Failure to embed just transition demands in organizing agenda is a missed opportunity not only to create a stronger collective voice through industry-level coalition-building, but to build discursive power by framing the goals of a just transition as integral to livelihoods and economic justice. This gap also risks increased social inequality, significant brain drain of skilled labor from declining sectors and delayed overall economic transformation. The dual pressures of transitioning away from fossil fuel-based economies and the rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence, which is expected to automate millions of entry-level and routine jobs globally, particularly in the Global South (Pandey, 2025), underscore the need for urgency of embedding just transition demands into organizing strategies.

By geography, South Africa shows the most traction, Nigeria is promising, while Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya are emerging. South Africa leads just transition organizing in Africa because its carbon-intensive economy, with coal central to jobs and energy security, made the transition existential for organized labor. This, combined with a relatively open civic space and early policy anchoring, turned climate transition into a core labor issue.[33] Just transition debates continue to be dominated by energy sector workers, while workers in tourism and manufacturing, though heavily impacted by decarbonisation strategies, remain largely absent from organized transition discussions. Across sectors, workers' awareness and understanding of just transition is limited, a finding also documented by the Nigeria Labour Congress and Environmental Rights Action in their study in Nigeria.[34]

Throughout the continent, worker organizing around green transition is limited, poorly understood, and siloed. Part of the problem is that policy-level just transition narratives are not grounded in workers lived realities, particularly among informal, low-education, and rural populations. There is a communication gap between these narratives and on-the-ground worker consciousness. Informal, precarious, and low-wage workers struggle to grasp the concept's rationale, even after explanation in their native languages. Unless the concept is demystified, just transition risks becoming a top-down, elite-driven agenda that leaves behind those most vulnerable to climate and labor market disruptions.

In Africa, the meaning of just transition is shaped by local politics, historically unjust arrangements, and exclusionary development priorities. Although African countries are beginning to engage with just transition frameworks, it is often through state-led, donor-driven, or extractives-based discourses that do not fully reflect the circumstances of workers. For example, although South Africa's *Just Energy Transition Investment Plan* (*JET-IP*), adopted in 2022, is among the most advanced in Africa, labor unions there say it privileges elite consultation and inadequately addresses job loss in the coal and informal sectors. In Uganda and Kenya, worker group leaders noted that although investments in renewable energy are increasing, they often do not include worker groups at the design stage to ensure that decent work principles are integrated into transition policies and investment decisions.

In sum, although just transition narratives at the global level foreground and embrace inclusivity, decent work, and social protection, in Africa it is different. There, the narratives lay insufficient emphasis on reparative justice, distributive justice, historical redress, and the protection of informal and precarious labor. Trade unions and grassroots movements across the continent are beginning to demand these but organizing remains uneven, constrained by political repression, limited resources, weak environmental-based civil society alliances with worker groups, and a low level of public understanding, awareness, and involvement.

An African just transition must therefore contend with development asymmetries, legacies of extraction, and ongoing labor market informality. This will require worker-centered approaches that go beyond green policy textbook prescriptions. Currently, the agenda is top-down, technical, and under-communicated. The bright spot is that many workers are beginning to make intuitive connections between climate action and their livelihoods and are proposing concrete, context-specific solutions. The path forward will require:

- **Localizing just transition discourses** in everyday language and in grounded realities
- **Broadening access to information**, skills, and infrastructure
- **Expanding worker organizing**, especially in informal and precarious job sectors
- **Making justice, not just jobs, central in green development frameworks**

Persistent Gaps between Just Transition Ideals and Implementation Realities

Among the trends in work covered in this report, just transition is unique, considering that many sectors are affected by climate impacts. This section further explores the gap between ideal and reality for organizing, in light of this challenge.

Experiences from worker groups, particularly waste pickers and coal mining organizations, point to the emergence of "transition-washing," where just transition rhetoric is not matched by material inclusion. This reflects weak worker associational and institutional power and the dominance of state and corporate actors in shaping transition processes. It is evident in consultations without outcomes, exclusion from technology-driven solutions, limited access to institutionalized waste management contracts, and landfill and mine closures without viable alternatives. These dynamics result in symbolic participation and persistent economic marginalization.

Overall, a relatively substantial disconnect exists between workers' expectations for a just transition and the reality and pace of implementation. Although approximately 63% of worker groups expressed clear expectations of such a transition, only 42.7% reported that their expectations are being met. The fact that only around six out of every ten leaders reported having expectations of a just transition is striking relative to our expectations. This finding reflects a combination of constrained understanding of what a just transition entails, its low immediate salience relative to members' pressing day-to-day needs such as wages and safety, and a cautious realism among leaders. Based on past experiences of exclusion and weak policy delivery, some leaders noted that they have learned to keep their expectations low.

The expectations are clustered into four groups: (i) meaningful social dialogue, (ii) access to retraining and economic diversification opportunities, (iii) strong social protection measures, and (iv) robust systems for equity monitoring and inclusion audits. The expectation–implementation mismatch highlights the need to move beyond rhetoric and ensure that just transition frameworks translate into concrete, inclusive, and enforceable outcomes for all categories of workers (Table 4).

From Consultation to Co-Creation

Most leaders of worker groups (85%) emphasized the importance of meaningful engagement in decision-making processes, particularly through open meaningful consultation. Approximately 69% of the group leaders reported that some form of consultation is occurring, an encouraging sign of progress.

However, many raised concerns that this dialogue remains largely rhetorical, lacking the depth of co-creation necessary for true procedural justice. In fact, 13.2% said that workers are not meaningfully involved in co-developing transition-related policies or investments. Their concerns include:

- Tokenistic participation, where workers are merely informed or consulted after the fact, without being offered real decision-making power, even though they are central to the challenges of the just transition
- Top-down policy processes driven by government or corporate actors with limited understanding of workers' lived realities
- Capacity constraints, including limited technical knowledge or institutional support for worker groups to contribute effectively
- A conceptual disconnect, reflected in the fact that many have never heard of just transition, or struggle to understand the concept even after repeated explanation

These findings signal a need to build worker capacity and move beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine power-sharing in policy design.

Table 4: Assessment of Just Transition Measures: Expected vs. Actual Implementation and Gaps

	Support Measure	Expected/Ideal (%)	Perceived Implementation (%)	Gap (Ideal/Actual)
Worker retraining and economic diversification	Offering training (skilling, re-skilling, and up-skilling) for emerging green jobs or other jobs	74.4	61.2	13.2
Social dialogue	Policies/investments co-created with affected worker groups	69.9	55.3	14.6
Social protection	Offering compensation (e.g., pay, pensions, health insurance) for affected workers	59.4	25.6	33.8
Equity/justice monitoring and inclusion audits	Regular assessment to ensure no worker group is left behind	48.4	28.8	19.6
Overall	Average	63.0	42.7	20.3

Compensation Gaps and the Absence of Justice in Practice

The most significant shortfall reported by new worker leaders was in social protection. While 59.4% of workers expected employers and/or government to provide income continuity, severance packages, health insurance, and pension guarantees during layoffs or displacement, only 28.8% confirmed that any such compensation had ever been offered, a gap of 33.8 percentage points. This is especially the case for informal and domestic workers such as pump attendants, transport workers, construction workers, artisanal refiners, informal gas vendors, waste pickers, and informal recyclers.

When compensation does occur, leaders said it often does not reflect core principles of justice (McCauley & Heffrong, 2018).[35]

- **Restorative justice:** Workers expect tangible remedies, such as social protection and compensation, to address transition harms; however, they reported that such remedies are rarely provided and often inadequate.
- **Procedural justice**: Workers expect meaningful involvement in shaping compensation rules, but in reality, they are rarely included in determining these rules or conditions.
- **Distributive justice**: Workers expect fair and proportionate compensation across affected groups, but support is uneven and often not commensurate with need or level of disruption experienced.
- **Recognitional justice**: While workers expect their specific vulnerabilities to be acknowledged, the unique needs of informal, migrant, and women workers are often ignored or glossed over.

Put simply, compensation tends to be patchy, opaque, irregular, and unjust, reinforcing rather than remedying systemic inequalities.

Limited Emphasis on Monitoring and Inclusion Audits

Few worker groups emphasized the importance of regular impact assessments or "no-one-left-behind" audits. This is somewhat surprising because, internationally, such mechanisms are seen as essential for making climate and economic transitions fair, inclusive and accountable. Only 48.4% of workers expected monitoring to ensure equitable outcomes (Table 4). Some respondents attributed this to:

- Historical weaknesses in transparency and accountability, making workers skeptical about whether assessments will lead to real change
- A lack of awareness of how monitoring can become a tool to secure justice and equity
- A tendency for workers in precarious environments to prioritize immediate, tangible protections, such as fair wages or legal status, over more foundational and long-term but abstract-sounding accountability mechanisms

Still, without robust monitoring systems, the transition risks entrenching preexisting exclusions under the banner of green development.



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Drawing on the experiences of worker groups organizing for a just transition, it becomes evident that unions can shape, rather than merely respond to, structural transformations. The following lessons are derived.

1. Early, organized, and sustained engagement in transition governance enables worker organizations to influence both the pace and design of transitions towards more just outcomes, even under structural constraints.
2. Evidence-based advocacy strengthens influence in just transition processes. NUM leverages evidence from the Komati plant closure, particularly its impacts on workers' livelihoods and their families, to strengthen its position in negotiations and policy debates.
3. Continuous workplace education and dialogue help workers understand transition dynamics and remain actively engaged in shaping outcomes.
4. Effective just transition strategies require navigating complex political economies. Worker organization must balance cooperation with contestation to protect livelihoods.
5. Strategic partnerships with civil society, environmental groups, and international unions expand advocacy and open access to national and global decision-making spaces.
6. Collaboration with human rights, faith-based, and environmental organizations connects workplace struggles to broader justice agendas and amplifies impact.
7. Embedding gender inclusion in organizational structures and policies advances gender-transformative change by addressing structural power imbalances and enabling equitable participation and voice in transition processes.
8. Partnerships with skills development institutions, including TVET providers, and the establishment of training centers support training and redeployment while equipping workers with technical skills for green and digital transitions.
9. Experiences from worker groups, particularly waste picker and coal mining organizations, highlight the risk of "transition-washing,"[36] where just transition rhetoric is not matched by material inclusion. This reflects weak worker associational and institutional power and the dominance of state and corporate actors, resulting in symbolic participation and persistent economic marginalization.

Policy Implications

To close the gap between expectation and delivery, just transition frameworks in Africa and elsewhere must:

- Prioritize co-creation over consultation, investing in the capacities of worker groups to shape policies
- Guarantee fair compensation mechanisms rooted in justice principles, not only payouts but also participatory design and equitable coverage
- Build awareness and infrastructure for monitoring the process of inclusion, with clear feedback avenues for worker groups
- Apply justice frameworks practically, translating abstract ideals like "procedural" or "restorative" justice into tangible tools, redress mechanisms, actionable steps, measurable outcomes, and shared governance processes

PART 4: BARRIERS TO ORGANIZING AND POWER BUILDING AMONG EMERGING WORKER GROUPS

Despite the growing visibility of new worker groups across Africa, many continue to face significant constraints in building sustainable power and mobilizing active member participation in union-building activities. This section examines these constraints, highlighting how they intersect to shape the capacity of emerging worker groups to organize, sustain participation, and build lasting power. It answers the questions:

- How do workers perceive the relevance of their groups in addressing conditions of service?
- What hinders workers' organizing and power building, and what hampers the active participation of members in unionization activities?
- What gaps or barriers exist in terms of capacity, institutional frameworks, labor policy structures, and implementation in responding to transformations in new worker economies?

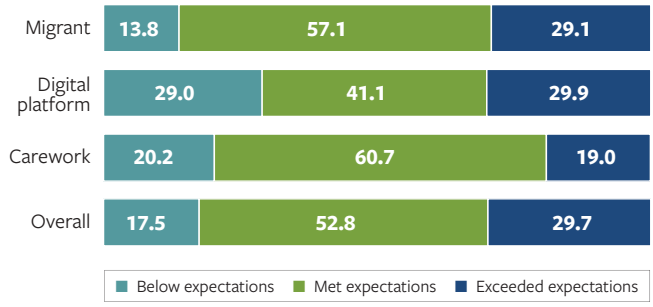
Perceived Relevance and Responsiveness of Worker Groups

Understanding how new worker groups are perceived by their members is critical for assessing the strength and legitimacy of collective voice and whether these groups are meeting members' expectations. Members' perceptions reflect how they evaluate their group's relevance in improving their conditions of service by influencing policies and framing their concerns credibly in public and policy arenas.

These differences are partly attributable to the tactical approaches adopted across sectors. Migrant and care workers frequently rely on formal mechanisms such as filing lawsuits or lodging official complaints, which are more likely to produce concrete, case-specific outcomes for identifiable grievances. Their demands are often issue-specific, such as unpaid wages or contract disputes, and are therefore comparatively easier to resolve within existing legal and institutional frameworks. In contrast, digital platform workers tend to employ collective actions such as protests and strikes aimed at broader systemic reforms, including changes to pay algorithms, commission structures, and deactivation policies. Such structural demands are inherently more complex and difficult to achieve in full. This challenge is further compounded in many developing economies, where regulatory and legislative frameworks have yet to catch up with the rapid expansion of the digital economy.

Worker groups are doing a lot right. When workers were asked if joining a worker group had met or exceeded their expectations, 82.5% said yes. Disaggregated by sector, care workers showed the highest satisfaction (60.7%). Among migrant workers, 57.1% said their expectations were met, and nearly 30% said they were exceeded, reflecting fairly strong satisfaction. Digital platform workers were the least satisfied: 29% felt their expectations had not been met, and just 41.1% said they were met (Figure 8). This is partly due to the tactics used by these sectors respectively. Migrant workers and care workers tend to use tactics such as lawsuits targeted at identifiable employers and agencies, which relatively leads to concrete results for the specific issue or person in question. Their demands are often issue-specific, such as unpaid wages or contract disputes, and are therefore comparatively easier to resolve within existing legal and institutional frameworks. In contrast, digital platform workers operate within algorithmic management systems where accountability is diffused. They tend to use collective actions, such as protests and strikes, aimed at broader systemic reforms, including changes to pay algorithms, commission structures, and deactivation policies. Such structural demands are inherently more complex and challenging to fulfill. This challenge is further compounded in many developing economies, where regulatory and legislative frameworks have yet to catch up with the rapid expansion of the digital economy. This limits digital workers' avenues for redress.

Figure 8: Workers' Satisfaction with Their Group Membership, by Sector



At the country level, worker groups in Uganda and Kenya stood out for exceeding member expectations, while workers in Ghana reported the lowest satisfaction levels, 60.7% saying their expectations were not met, the highest disappointment rate in the five countries (Figure 9). Those who reported high satisfaction in Uganda and Kenya named specific ways that the worker groups benefited them, from learning new skills, accessing legal support, improvements in wages, or a strong sense of community to seek advice. Those in Ghana who reported low satisfaction appreciated the information and awareness-raising provided by their groups but had not experienced concrete benefits to their livelihoods as a result of membership.

In Ghana, dissatisfaction was especially high among migrant workers (79.2%) and workers in sectors going through a green transition (77.3%). Among workers who reported

being unhappy with aspects of their worker groups, the most frequently cited concerns centered on weak communication and lack of meaningful engagement (Figure 10). Worker organizing among new worker groups, such as e-hailing drivers and workers vulnerable to the green transition, is evolving and remains relatively nascent in Ghana. Within this context, there are ongoing initiatives by TUC Ghana, mainstream new worker groups, UN bodies such as the ILO, the African Trade Unions Migration Network (ATUMNET), and the Government of Ghana aimed at improving access to decent work and amplifying migrant workers' voices.

Figure 9: Worker Satisfaction with Group Membership, by Country

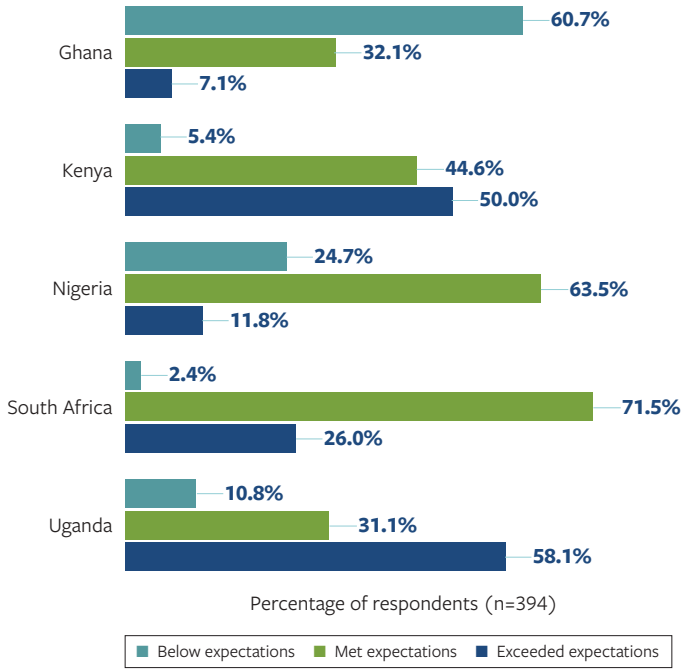
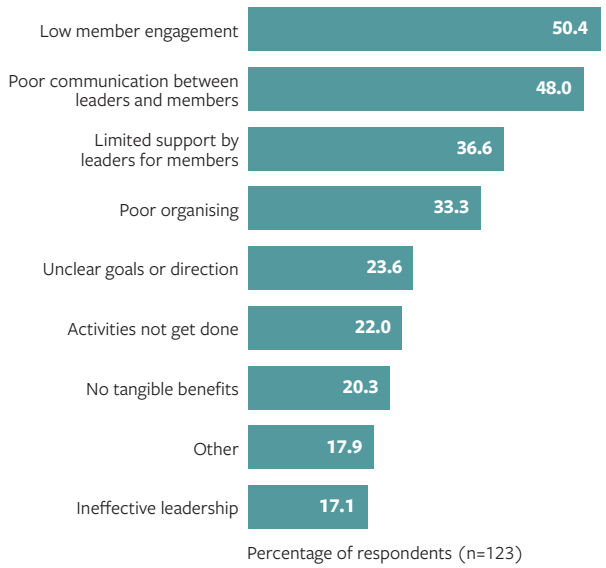


Figure 10: Key Reasons for Dissatisfaction with Worker Groups



However, these initiatives are constrained by their siloed, small-scale, and project-based nature, weak institutionalisation, and limited capacity to support sustained, migrant-led organizing and agenda-setting. For worker movements, migrant issues are often mainstreamed into broader labor agendas rather than supported through migrant-led organizing, limiting migrants' associational power and agenda-setting capacity. Moreover, migrant-related initiatives led by UN agencies such as the IOM and UNHCR, as well as government efforts through the Ghana Refugee Board (GRB), primarily focus on refugees' living conditions, leaving the broader organizational needs of migrant workers only partially addressed.

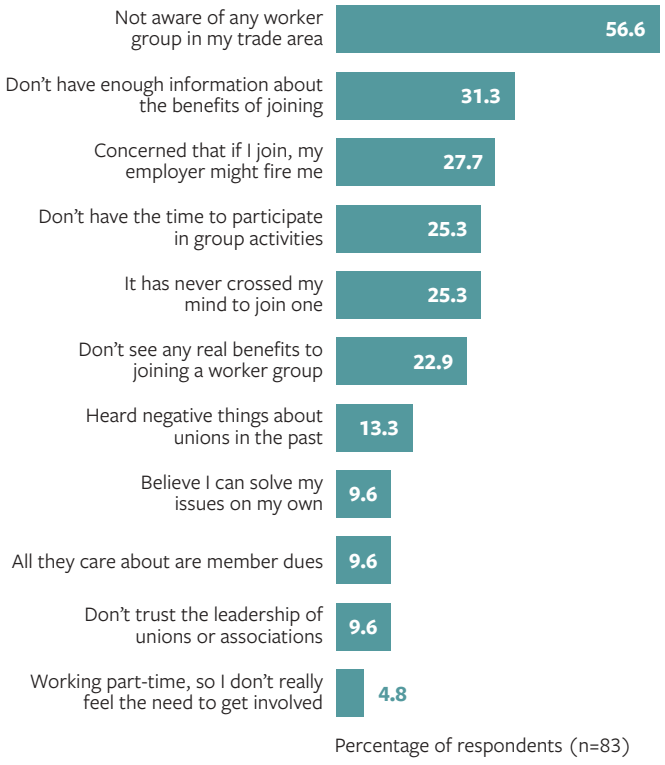
1. **Low member engagement (50.4%)** was the most pressing issue. Many workers felt that their participation in the group lacked purpose or was not encouraged, or that their voices were not heard. Only the few who are close to the leaders are engaged when there is an event.
2. **Poor communication between leaders and members (48%)** followed closely. Some said that information about decisions, events, and group direction was either lacking or not clearly conveyed, as so they felt excluded from critical discussions and updates.
3. **Limited support for members from the leadership (36.6%)** was another major concern, with many stating that when work-related or personal challenges arise, their leaders often fail to respond effectively or advocate on their behalf.
4. **Poor organizing (33.3%)** and **unclear goals or direction (23.6%)** reflect internal structural weaknesses. Workers questioned whether their groups had strategic direction or were equipped to mobilize members around important issues.
5. **Activities not getting done (22%)** and **no tangible benefits (20.3%)** were additional concerns. *"I have been in this group since the start and I can tell you I have not seen anything come out of our meetings."* Some members said that organizing was symbolic rather than impactful, and that it lacked tangible outcomes such as improved working conditions, training sessions, legal support, or job-related gains, causing members to lose motivation.
6. **Gender-lens washing and tokenism in leadership.** Some workers, particularly women, voiced frustration over the lack of genuine gender inclusion in union affairs. Although some leadership roles are occupied by women, many felt that these appointments were often symbolic, designed to "tick the box" rather than actually empower. One respondent noted, *"Even when women are elected, our voices don't really matter. Some don't even include you in important conversations."*

Barriers to Participation by Non-Members in Worker Groups

Among the 103 non-member respondents, 19.4% had once belonged to a workers' group but dropped out of it. Several factors, some systemic or structural rather than reflecting an outright rejection of collective organizing, explain why some workers decline membership in worker groups and unions.

Among the 80.6% who have never been members, a lack of awareness and information about worker organizing and its associated benefits were major factors: 56.6% cited simply not knowing that worker groups exist; 31.3% mentioned not knowing about the benefits of joining; and 22.8% believed joining did not offer real benefits (Figure 11). This suggests that organizing campaigns have not penetrated many trade areas, particularly informal or fragmented labor environments. Reflecting a lack of visibility and proactive engagement by unions and associations, 25.3% said that joining had never crossed their minds. A notable 27.7% of respondents feared that joining could trigger retaliation, even job loss. This indicates that employers may still wield coercive influence over worker organizing, and that many workers may not know about, or trust, laws protecting their freedom of association. Finally, 25.3%, especially domestic care and digital gig workers, said that the irregular or demanding nature of their work schedules left them little time to participate in union/association activities.

Figure 11: Barriers to Joining Worker Groups or Unions



Although their numbers in the sample were low, some migrant workers said frequent instances of legal exclusion, regulatory ambiguity, xenophobia, and institutional neglect discouraged them from joining. As one said: *"If the laws are clear for foreigners, I'll join."* Some migrant workers, especially in informal sectors like domestic work or ride-hailing, mentioned their fear of arrest, deportation, or social exclusion. Others felt disliked or unwelcome in the country. For others without immigration documentation, joining might draw unneeded attention. *"If I join, it becomes easy to find me,"* one said.

Although only a few respondents mentioned distrusting their leaders in the survey, this concern emerged strongly in the interviews. Many members perceive union leaders as self-interested "money siphoners" focused more on personal benefits such as travel opportunities, fringe perks, and easy access to dues, than on advancing collective interests. This image profoundly undermines trust, discourages dues payment and registration, and ultimately hinders union vigor.

Institutional Barriers and Obstacles to Organizing

Across virtually all types of workers in the informal sectors and countries, common barriers to organizing and power building include limited funding, difficulty reaching members, a lack of dedicated office space, pushback from employers, and not being recognized as legitimate workers (Figure 12).

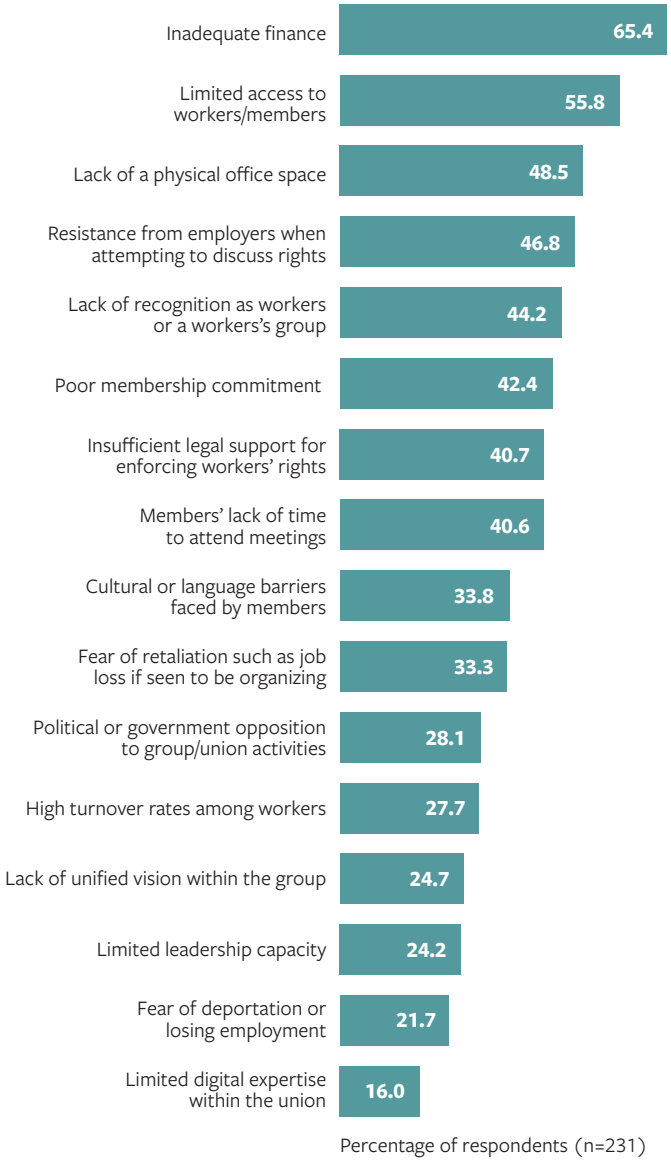
Inadequate group finances, reported by 65.4% of respondents, tops the list of constraints. This financial fragility leaves worker groups unable to sustain consistent operations, respond swiftly to crises, launch campaigns, communicate efficiently, or pay legal fees when needed. One organizer said: *"Even printing flyers or following up with members can be a burden; we rely heavily on volunteers."* Some reasons are that some members do not pay their dues regularly, or do not pay on time, and/or that membership rates are declining (24.2%).

Constraints such as limitation participation from workers (55.8%), low membership commitment (42.4%), and members' lack of time to attend meetings (40.6%) directly weaken associational power. Without regular engagement, sustaining momentum becomes nearly impossible. This challenge reflects the informal, dispersed, or highly mobile nature of work in sectors like domestic work or gig platform work. Where workers are scattered across cities with no shared physical workspace, organizers struggle to locate, contact, and retain members.

Limited access to workers in turn reinforces low membership commitment, which is often linked to a lack of time to attend meetings (40.6%) or a fear of retaliation and mistrust. Faced with precarity, long hours, and/or unstable income, many members find it hard to prioritize organizing activities. As

one participant explained, *"Many want change, but they don't believe it's possible or they're too afraid to risk their job."* Collectively, these factors diminish associational power by reducing the density and cohesion of worker networks, the foundation for collective identity and mobilization.

Figure 12: Obstacles Faced by Worker Groups Attempting to Organize



Without a shared physical space to meet, store materials, and coordinate activities (48.5%), workers find it harder to connect, plan, and sustain their group identity, all of which weaken their collective strength. Worker groups in Ghana (66.7%) and Uganda (61.7%) uniquely reported concerns about how the rigorous regulatory requirements for trade unions to maintain office space affect their organization's recognition (Table 5). Without this, unions and associations lose coordination capacity as well as legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders and potential members.

Fear of retaliation, fear of deportation, and negative media portrayals weaken workers' ability to frame their narratives publicly and challenge dominant discourses about "informal" or "illegitimate" work, undermining their discursive power. For migrant workers, especially in South Africa and especially in relation to organizing, fear of deportation was particularly pronounced. Because of concerns about legal status, group formation can become a soft target, rendering individuals vulnerable to arrest or deportation. Many workers cope with this fear by keeping a low profile, avoiding public gatherings, and allying themselves with informal, small-scale networks rather than unions to avoid drawing attention from the authorities.

> *"Joining or forming groups for collective action draws unwanted attention and can lead to our arrest and forced removal. To cope, we prefer meeting informally in small groups to check on each other and quietly solve problems. But this also means we can't really fight for our rights, because in such situations, those rights are curtailed."*
>
> —Anonymous migrant worker

Finally, 40.7% cited inadequate legal support to enforce workers' rights. Even when abuses occur and rights are violated, worker groups often lack the legal or institutional backing or knowledge to act. Many felt that this fuels a cycle of impunity and disempowerment.

Nonetheless, certain barriers are more pronounced in some work sectors or countries, reflecting differences in the robustness of legal protections, working conditions, and other support systems. In Uganda, for example, worker leaders reported more obstacles to organizing and building collective strength than those in the other study countries. The only area in which Uganda differed, however, was members' lack of time to attend meetings, with only 18 percent of leaders indicating it as a barrier (Table 5).

Multiple factors converge and reinforce one another to create a particularly restrictive and challenging organizing environment in Uganda. Organizing takes place in a persistent state monitoring context, characterised by political interference, media censorship and shrinking civic space (Byaruhanga, 2026). In this environment, the political risks associated with organizing and the weak institutional protections available to informal sector workers outweigh routine participation barriers such as time constraints. Widespread poverty further constrains organizing capacity, as many informal workers prioritise daily survival over collective action. These barriers are compounded by the concentration of worker groups in urban centres that excludes rural populations, and poor internet connectivity and restrictions on digital platforms by government that limit outreach and coordination.

Attending physical meetings in traffic-congested urban centers, such as Accra in Ghana, often entails foregoing daily income, posing a significant challenge for low-paid informal workers. In South Africa, security concerns further constrain participation, particularly for migrant and racially marginalized workers who face heightened risks of harassment, policing, or xenophobic violence. Across contexts, unpaid care responsibilities, disproportionately borne by women, further limit availability outside working hours.

Table 5: Challenges to Worker Organizing and Power Building among Worker Groups, by Country

	Ghana (%)	Kenya (%)	Nigeria (%)	South Africa (%)	Uganda (%)
Inadequate finance	87.5	29.0	92.9	55.2	71.7
Lack of recognition as workers or as a workers' group	75.0	29.0	38.1	20.9	71.7
Limited access to workers/members	70.8	36.8	38.1	65.7	63.3
Lack of a physical office space	66.7	44.7	45.2	34.3	61.7
Low membership commitment	45.8	10.5	40.5	37.3	68.3
Members' lack of time to attend meetings	41.7	63.2	23.8	58.2	18.3
High turnover rates among workers	33.3	13.2	16.7	13.4	58.3
Resistance from employers when attempting to discuss rights	20.8	31.6	31.0	58.2	65.0
Cultural or language barriers faced by members	20.8	0.0	38.1	23.9	68.3
Lack of unified vision within the group	20.8	0.0	16.7	6.0	68.3
Insufficient legal support for enforcing workers' rights	16.7	23.7	42.9	34.3	66.7
Fear of retaliation such as job loss if seen to be organizing	16.7	15.8	21.4	29.4	63.3
Dwindling membership	12.5	0.0	9.5	17.9	61.7
Limited leadership capacity	12.5	0.0	21.4	11.9	60.0
Fear of deportation or losing employment if identified as a group member	12.5	5.3	7.1	25.4	41.7
Unsupportive media	8.3	2.6	7.1	22.4	41.7
Political or government opposition to group/union activities	4.2	23.7	11.9	16.4	65.0
Limited digital expertise within the union	0.0	0.0	9.5	7.5	46.7

Cross-country differences in organizing challenges are also strongly shaped by variations in institutional environments. For instance, in South Africa, the legal environment has relatively progressively opened space for informal and atypical workers, the other countries are now evolving. Ghana only recently, in 2025, passed legislation to legalize the commercial use of motorcycles, tricycles, and quadricycles, including for e-hailing and motor courier services, despite these activities having operated informally for decades.

A recurring concern among group leaders was the legal and regulatory barriers that limit workers' ability to organize or influence decisions affecting their welfare. In many countries, the absence of a comprehensive legal framework recognizing

workers in the informal economy perpetuates their exclusion from labor protections and social benefits. This legal vacuum undermines institutional power, the capacity of worker groups to influence formal labor relations, participate in dialogues, or hold employers accountable within recognized systems. The result is persistent precarity, where workers remain outside the protective reach of labor laws.

In Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, for instance, workers pointed to the lack of clear laws classifying or defining their employment status, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion from fair work protections.

> *"There is a lack of a supportive law in Ghana that properly classifies gig workers. There is still a misclassification."*

> *"Kenya still lacks a comprehensive Domestic Workers Bill that would provide a clear legal framework to protect their rights, including issues like working hours, rest days, and termination procedures."*

Regulatory frameworks, policy instruments, and supervisory oversight of platform work remain underdeveloped too in many developing economies. This gap limits the formal recognition and governance of new worker groups as the rapid expansion of technology-enabled new forms of work outpaces regulatory adaptation (Adongo et al., 2024). Moreover, for digital platform workers, it is hard to make their voices heard or to influence rules and decisions because laws and platform policies do not adequately protect or include them. Unfair content moderation policies, opaque algorithms, and limited creator rights restrict their ability to frame narratives about fairness, autonomy, and creative ownership.



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As several participants explained:

> *"Lack of clear regulations for gig economy workers. Drivers have no control over fare setting, leading to unpredictable income."*

> *"Data protection laws have limited us from personalizing our content."*

> *"Existing intellectual property rights limit us from publicly performing our creative projects."*
>
> —Various gig workers and content creators

Even where laws exist on the books, enforcement remains weak or inconsistent, particularly for health, safety, and minimum wage regulations. On the other end of the spectrum, in addition to under-enforcement, some workers cited overregulation and excessive bureaucracy, including burdensome licensing fees, zoning restrictions, and compliance requirements that disproportionately affect small-scale or unregistered businesses. These barriers not only restrict formal recognition but also signal how power asymmetries are embedded in regulatory systems that privilege formalized, capital-intensive enterprises over low-income or informal workers.

Table 6 below summarizes the key obstacles identified, linking each to the groups most affected, its underlying causes, and the specific ways it limits organizing, advocacy, and institutional engagement. The final column highlights the dimensions of power most directly undermined by each challenge.

Table 6: Constraints on Power-building: Causes, Mechanisms, and Affected Worker Groups

	Challenge	Especially affects	Cause(s)	How it constrains power-building	Types of power affected
1	Inadequate finance	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work, transitioning sectors	Poor payment of dues due limited perceived benefits and perceived misappropriation of dues by leaders	Starves recruiting, follow-up, campaigns, legal/media work etc.	Associational, discursive, institutional
2	Limited access to workers or members	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work	No shopfloor; dispersed/home-based work; algorithmic scheduling	Hard to find/retain members; weak contact frequency; low turnout	Associational, coalitional, discursive
3	Lack of a physical office space	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work	High rents	Lower visibility/ coordination; can block recognition/ affiliation	Associational, discursive, institutional
4	Employer/platform resistance to rights dialogue	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work, transitioning sectors	Power asymmetry; denial of employee status; avoid high labor cost	Chills organizing; deters reps; fragments units	Associational, institutional, structural
5	Lack of recognition as workers or a workers' group	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work	Misclassification; legal gaps for informal/ home-based work	Excluded from protections and bargaining venues	Associational, discursive, institutiona, societal
6	Poor membership commitment	Care work, digital platform work, transitioning sectors	Precarity; low trust; limited quick wins	Low participation/ retention; fragile cohesion	Associational
7	Insufficient legal support	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work	Costly/complex litigation; few pro-bono options; weak institutions	Violations go unenforced; deters complaints/actions	Associational, discursive, institutional
8	Members' lack of time to attend meetings	Care work, digital platform work	Unpredictable hours; multiple jobs; limited perceived benefits	Fewer mandate cycles; low turnout	Associational
9	Cultural or language barriers	Care work, migrant work	Multilingual memberships; low literacy	Weak trust/ communication; parallel subgroups	Associational, coalitional, discursive, societal
10	Fear of retaliation or job loss/ replaced if seen organizing	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work	Informal contracts; lack of work permits; Surplus labor; low entry barriers; high unemployment	Suppresses sign-ups, spokespeople, public actions	Associational, structural
12	Political or government opposition	Digital platform work, migrant work, transitioning sectors	Protect image	Blocks registration, pickets, access to policy forums	Associational, discursive, institutional
13	High worker turnover	Care work	Seasonal demand; low pay	Constant re-onboarding; weak leadership ladders and poor momentum	Associational

Continued on next page

Table 6 *continued*

	Challenge	Especially affects	Cause(s)	How it constrains power-building	Types of power affected
14	Lack of a unified vision within the group	Care work, digital platform work, transitioning sectors	Heterogeneous members; divergent goals (advocacy vs. services)	Factionalism; muddled narratives; harder coalitions	Associational, coalitional, discursive
15	Dwindling membership size	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work, transitioning sectors	Weak value proposition or limited perceived benefits	Weakened collective voice, low member contributions (including dues); weaker mandate	Associational
16	Limited leadership capacity	Care work, digital platform work, migrant work	Few trained organizers; burnout; rapid growth	Slow response; thin representation	Associational, coalitional, discursive
17	Fear of deportation or losing employment	Migrant work	Lack of work permits	Low visibility; avoidance of formal structures/actions	Associational, coalitional, discursive
18	Unsupportive media	Digital platform work, transitioning sectors	Employer influence; stigma against informality/migrants	Hard to shift narrative; fewer allies	Coalitional, discursive, societal
19	Limited digital expertise within the union	Care work, migrant work	Digital divide; limited training opportunities	Slow mobilization and weak framing	Associational, discursive
20	Algorithmic control	Digital platform work	Quest for control; regulatory lag, externalisation of risk; high informality and surplus labor	Fragments labor and weaken collective identity; discourages unionization and shifts grievances toward individual self-blame. Causes legal ambiguity and weak enforcement, further constraining collective action.	Digital, Structural, Discursive
21	Media censorship / platform shutdowns	Digital platform work and migrant work	Political control	Disrupts communication; suppresses narratives; and weakens coalition-building and public legitimacy	Digital, Discursive, Associational, Coalitional
22	Misclassification/legal ambiguity on status	Digital platform work and migrant work	Regulatory lag; weak enforcement capacity; employers quest for profit; informality; surplus labor	Criminalizes collective action; creates uncertainty in enforceable pathways and enables unilateral control	Structural and Associational
23	Misaligned coalitions with CSOs, unions, media	All groups	Power asymmetries; poorly defined roles		

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is among the first cross-country, mixed-methods, evidence-based analyses to apply power resources theory to new worker organizing and power building in Africa. It examines how emerging worker groups organise and build power in response to a changing labor landscape and to the limitations of the traditional labor movement. The study draws on qualitative data from 55 key informant interviews and 12 focus group discussions, and on a survey of 497 respondents. We engaged leaders, members, and non-members of worker groups across Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa.

The insights from these data lead to the following conclusions. Overall, new worker organizing and power building are gaining traction across Africa, with notable successes, even as policy gaps, organizational barriers, and structural hurdles persist. Outside the traditional union movement, hybrid nonprofit–union models are helping new worker groups navigate organizing hurdles, adapt and learn, and deliver services to members. However, without legal reforms that recognise these entities and confer bargaining rights, their formal power and representation will remain limited.

Hybrid organizing that blends social media with personal outreach is an effective and scalable way to build collective voice beyond traditional labor structures. Our study identifies digital power as a novel and distinct dimension of worker power, and an explicit extension of the power resources theory. We conceptualize digital power as the capacity to mobilize, coordinate, and amplify worker voices and other power resources to influence demands and visibility through social media, data platforms, and networked communication ecosystems. It lowers entry costs, accelerates coordination, and enables rapid communication and action. It functions as a cross-cutting enabler that strengthens associational, discursive, and coalitional power by supporting framing and coalition building across sectors and borders. However, the risks of digital organizing are real, ranging from digital divides and surveillance to misinformation and algorithmic deprioritization. Therefore, freedom of association online, inclusive access, secure data practices, and basic digital infrastructure should be treated as core organizing investments rather than campaign extras.

The current labor-representation architecture is slow to respond to rapid work changes and remains dominated by formal-sector interests, leaving newer worker groups underrepresented. To translate voice into outcomes, social



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dialogue remains the most reliable path to concrete gains, but only when new worker groups are included early and directly in the talks. Used in sequence with awareness raising, visible pressure, and broad participation, dialogue converts voice into agreements, timelines, and enforcement. Late or proxy participation leaves power gaps in place and weakens results.

At the organizational level, representation rules equally matter for inclusion and legitimacy. Intentional provisions in constitutions, including leadership quotas for women and migrants, do more than include marginalised workers; they amplify and empower them and convert presence into discursive power. Yet people with disabilities are still overlooked. Saying that few members report disabilities is short-sighted, since disability is under reported and can emerge over a lifetime. Constitutions should add disability representation, leadership pathways, and clear accessibility standards.

Partnerships with traditional labor unions and civil society work best when workers co-design them as equal partners and when partners make room for these groups, including adapting constitutions where needed. Such arrangements build coalitional power, strengthen associational power through enhanced capacity and services, and expand institutional power by opening recognized channels of engagement. In doing so, these partnerships confer legitimacy, resources, and critical capacity support to new worker groups and their members. Nevertheless, where collaborations are

characterized by unequal power relations, misaligned priorities, or divergent approaches to framing and advancing demands, their capacity to sustain collective action is weakened.

A just transition agenda is emerging in the Africa but remains thin. Practical understanding and policy focus are still weak, with South Africa showing more traction than most countries, although Nigeria is also beginning to show promise. Overall, irrespective of geography, energy workers are the most visible. Whereas, tourism, and manufacturing workers, even though they are heavily affected by green transitions and decarbonisation strategies, are not yet systematically included. These omissions risk perpetuating and even widening the inequalities that sustainability agendas aim to address. However, we argue that new worker groups remain underrepresented, limiting their direct ability to shape policy outcomes and constraining their institutional power. Traditional trade unions are treated as the default representatives of workers.

While signs of member apathy exists, but it is not the main cause of falling union density. Most new worker groups struggle to mobilize active participation and build lasting power because of institutional, structural, legal, and political barriers. They face limited funding, no dedicated office space, employer pushback, weak recognition of their status as workers, and insufficient legal support. Leadership capacity is also stretched because many leaders juggle paid work and organizing. For non-members, low participation is driven mainly by awareness gaps, not rejection: many workers simply do not know these groups exist or what benefits they offer.

Recommendations

We propose the following recommendations aimed at strengthening the organizing capacity of new worker groups, enabling effective collective action, and improving policy engagement to generate meaningful and sustained worker power.

For Worker Groups and Trade Unions

Lack of legal recognition within labor laws

- Work closely with government labor departments to expand education and outreach on informal workers' rights and entitlements.
- Strengthen cross-border organizing and legal support for migrant workers.

Low worker commitment to organizing

- Share evidence-based success stories to motivate unorganized workers and demonstrate the value of joining a worker group.
- Design organizing strategies which focus on delivering concrete improvements to workers' immediate concerns, and communicating those results to members to feed into success narratives.

Inability to afford physical office or secretariat spaces.

- Trade unions should continue to serve as institutional anchors by providing shared meeting and secretariat spaces for affiliates, as demonstrated by the Trades Union Congress of Nigeria, the Ghana Trades Union Congress, and the Nigeria Labour Congress.
- New and emerging worker organizations with established secretariats should benchmark these traditional models by extending similar support to smaller or less-resourced worker groups.

Digital divide / fear of digital surveillance

- Worker groups should invest in social-group management, especially well-moderated WhatsApp and Facebook groups, backed by content calendars and rapid-response protocols.
- Activate end-to-end encryption on union social-media channels to enhance group privacy and build confidence. Peer trainers should also lead quarterly "Digital Security 101" hands-on workshops for non-savvy workers.
- Scale up collective digital access for worker representation. Where individual access is limited, worker organizations should support shared device and connectivity solutions through their local hubs.

Excessive fragmentation of worker groups

- Consolidate smaller groups into fewer, well-coordinated and representative structures, such as federations or national associations. New worker groups should develop clear leadership structures, accountability systems, and representation criteria to reduce duplication and competition among groups.
- Trade unions should continue to make their structures more flexible to enable meaningful partnerships with new worker groups. This includes creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, ensuring these groups have genuine voice and representation, and managing expectations to foster mutual understanding.

Social Stigma: Socially devalued, reducing their status, legitimacy and influence.

- Build discursive power by shaping narratives around dignity and contribution. This involves challenging stigma by highlighting the economic and social value of workers' contributions using evidence. To achieve this, worker organizations should use storytelling strategically through case stories, social media reels, documentaries, art exhibitions, and engagement with journalists.

Poor understanding and weak implementation of just transition

- New worker groups should integrate just transition into their agendas and move from reactive advocacy to proactive agenda setting, such as negotiating skilling or pathways into higher-value green jobs.

- Worker groups and civil society organizations should help raise just transition awareness by training worker groups using clear, everyday language.

Gender gaps in leadership, strategy, and responses to violence and harassment

- Center care and GBVH as core labor and bargaining issues and negotiate enforceable protections, benefits, and workplace standards that directly reduce these barriers and enable women's full participation in work and organizing movements.
- Redistribute power within organizations by guaranteeing women's decision-making authority through quotas linked to voting rights, budget control, and leadership pipelines.
- Set up and embed binding gender accountability systems within MEL frameworks, with clear targets, public reporting, and consequences for non-compliance

Weak and tokenistic inclusion of new worker groups in social dialogue and policymaking

- New worker groups should engage proactively in policy spaces with clear demands, evidence, and unified positions. Develop technical capacity to participate effectively in policy design, negotiations, and implementation.

For Governments and Regulators

Lack of legal recognition within labor laws

- Respect, recognize and extend full legal recognition to workers and self-organized groups in the informal economy within labor codes and bargaining statutes, paired with a phased pathway to formalization aligned with ILO R204, beginning with legal recognition of them as workers. Develop inclusive policies and measures to facilitate the transition to the formal economy. Penalize retaliation swiftly when employers intimidate organizers.
- Ensure portability of rights, protect against exploitation, and include migrant workers in national labor and social protection systems

Low worker commitment to organizing

- Integrate worker organizations into public programs that deliver tangible benefits such as livelihoods support, social protection, and skills. Support awareness and outreach to increase participation and trust.

Inability to afford physical office or secretariat spaces.

- Provide access to zero- or low-cost office or secretariat spaces through public facilities by converting unused municipal buildings or community centers into organizing hubs.

Digital divide / fear of digital surveillance

- Invest in last-mile broadband and public Wi-Fi and subsidize devices and data to enable digital organizing. Where data protection frameworks already exist, such as the Data Protection and Privacy Act, 2019 of Uganda and the Data Protection Act, 2012 (Act 843) of Ghana, they should strengthen enforcement, ensure independent oversight, and regulate surveillance practices.

Excessive fragmentation of worker groups

- Establish legal frameworks that formally recognize emerging worker organizations transitioning toward unions, including nonprofit based hybrid worker groups, as a distinct category of labor institution. Such recognition should grant sector specific collective bargaining rights and enable structured social dialogue.

Poor understanding and weak implementation of just transition

- Adopt an equity first just transition clause, with implementing rules, in all labor, climate, and sector policies that: (i) provide skill building, job placement, and social protection; (ii) allocate dedicated funding for just transition programs to ensure resources are protected and used as intended; (iii) give worker organizations early seats in policy design and decision-making; and (iv) publish who benefits and how complaints are resolved, so that fairness and redress are built in.

Gender gaps in leadership, strategy, and responses to violence and harassment

- Enact and enforce gender-transformative labor and social protection laws that address pay equity, job security, and access to decent work across platform, care, migrant, and informal sectors. This is essential to enable women's full participation in labor markets and organizing movements.
- Invest in care infrastructure (childcare, parental protections, income support) to reduce unpaid care burdens and remove barriers for women in leadership and collective organizing.

Weak and tokenistic inclusion of new worker groups in social dialogue and policymaking

- Institutionalize the inclusion of new worker groups in social dialogue with decision-making authority. Guarantee equal or proportional seats and procedural safeguards to prevent formal-sector interests from dominating.
- Consider four-constituency models, as used in South Africa, which include government, employers, organized labor, and a dedicated community or informal sector constituencies.

For Donors, Multi-lateral organizations and Civil Society

Lack of legal recognition within labor laws

- Fund advocacy, evidence generation, and strategic litigation to advance workers' institutional power by securing legal recognition and inclusion of informal and non-standard workers in labor frameworks.

Inability to afford physical office or secretariat spaces.

- Fund shared secretariat spaces and operational costs.

Digital divide / fear of digital surveillance

- Subsidize low-data digital toolkits and basic smartphones for groups in low-connectivity zones.
- Facilitate digital literacy and security training to protect worker groups from surveillance and online harassment

Social Stigma: Socially devalued, reducing their status, legitimacy and influence.

- Partner with worker organizations to co-produce evidence-based campaigns that highlight and amplify the economic and social contributions of informal workers through media, research, advocacy, and participation in global and national dialogues.

Poor understanding and weak implementation of just transition

- Fund research programs on just transition that include worker organizations in data collection
- Fund awareness, training, and accessible materials to improve understanding of just transition. Support worker groups to integrate just transition into organizing and advocacy.
- Fund implementation of just transition, not just dialogue, including pilot projects, infrastructure, worker support schemes and track outcomes transparently.

Gender gaps in leadership, strategy, and responses to violence and harassment

- Provide technical and financial support to build the capacity of worker groups to conduct gender audits, and restructure governance to ensure gender equity.

Weak and tokenistic inclusion of new worker groups in social dialogue and policymaking

- Provide technical and financial support to enable worker participation in social dialogue, facilitate inclusive governance models, and advocate for early and sustained inclusion in policymaking processes.
- Build the research capacity of worker organizations to collect and analyze data, and advance policy positions informed by evidence, with clear outcomes to support each position.



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CASE EXAMPLES

This section presents four case studies drawn from across the African continent. The cases spotlight how new worker groups mobilize different power resources across the digital economy, care work, migrant labor, and just-transition contexts. Selected to reflect sectoral, geographic diversity and organizational maturity, the cases also illuminate effective power-building strategies and pathways, successes and enduring constraints, drawing out replicable lessons for new worker groups.

CASE 1: THE AMALGAMATED UNION OF APP-BASED TRANSPORTERS OF NIGERIA (AUTON)

Building Blocks

AUATON was born out of crisis. In 2016, in Nigeria, drivers faced low fares, arbitrary deactivations, safety risks and lack of social protection. Ride-hailing platforms cut drivers' earnings by up to 40% and introduced exploitative commission structures. The initial response from fragmented groups was ineffective. But in 2017, Ayoade Ibrahim, currently AUATON's secretary general, began mobilizing e-hailing drivers, couriers and bikers through WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, and X (Twitter), integrating the groups into a nationwide organizing base. The result was AUATON. Formally registered and recognized by Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment in 2023, AUATON is Nigeria's first grassroots amalgamated union of non-salaried, app-based workers. It draws members from organizations such as the National Union of Professional App-Based Transport Workers (NUPA-BTW), the National Coalition of Ride-hailing Partners (NACORP), and the Professional E-Hailing Drivers and Private Owners Association (PEDPAN) of Nigeria.

AUATON's women's wing serves as the platform for enrolling and empowering the few women working as app-based transporters in Nigeria. It advocates against gender-based violence and promotes the safety of women drivers and riders by addressing harassment, passenger violence, road risks, and platform vulnerabilities. The wing carries out this work through sustained activism, campaigns, rallies, and by leveraging events like International Women's Day. It also conducts policy advocacy at both state and national levels, often aligning its activities with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) Women's Committee.

AUATON's leadership and governance model follows a traditional trade union framework but adapts it to the decentralized, app-driven nature of modern gig work, emphasizing democratic decision-making, constitutional adherence, and multi-level accountability. The union's structure includes a National Executive Council (NEC) as the primary governing body, which convenes for key



decisions such as officer removals, policy approvals, and strategic planning. The NEC comprises elected national officers (e.g., National President, General Secretary) and representatives from state branches, ensuring representation across regions. National leadership sets overarching policies while state councils delegate day-to-day execution, such as inaugurating local branches or leading protests. State-level executive councils, such as those in Lagos, Kano and Ondo, handle local issues like driver welfare, taxation protests, and company negotiations, while deferring to national oversight for broader matters. Supporting bodies include a Central Working Committee for operational coordination, Disciplinary Committees for internal accountability.

Achievements and Enabling Environment

AUATON's organizing efforts to build associational, institutional, coalitional, and discursive power have yielded significant results, notably through expanding its membership base and strengthening drivers' influence in company-level negotiations and national policymaking. Membership has grown substantially, from an initial base of 7,000 (at NUPA-BTW before the amalgamation) to approximately 12,400 members nationwide, and AUATON continues to expand its reach across Nigeria.

In 2024, AUATON's nation-wide strike helped secure a 200% increase in fares to help offset rising fuel prices, and compelled platforms to reduce their commission rates from 25–30% to

as low as 5–10%. In Rivers State, the union mobilized drivers to demand a 50% fare increase on Bolt trips. The launch of a membership-linked compressed natural gas (CNG) retrofitting scheme provided drivers with a way to save on fuel costs and enjoy stable CNG prices, making union membership directly beneficial to their everyday lives. The union has also worked with government agencies to improve driver security and physical safety, provide insurance coverage, and address rising insecurity. Beyond material outcomes, AUATON has raised gig workers' awareness of their rights, rolled out financial literacy programs, and positioned itself as a credible, evidence-driven voice for Nigeria's digital labor force.

These victories, while incremental, have been enabled by the union's organizing strategy, a global momentum in gig work organizing which created a ripple effect in Nigeria, a relatively favourable political environment, and collaborations with traditional unions and civil society organizations.

Unlike traditional unions that rely on physical meetings in offices, AUATON's digital-first-led hybrid methodology structure brings dispersed drivers, delivery riders, bike couriers, and other self-employed transport workers under one umbrella. By embracing an inclusive strategy, and engaging grassroots influencers in driver communities to serve as mobilizers and administrators of online groups, AUATON has built broad associational power, giving visibility and voice to thousands of workers long excluded from formal labor protections.

Prior organizational experience and institutional relationships acted as key enablers. The forerunners of AUATON, many of whom emerged from pre-existing worker associations, had already established relationships and experience, including engagement with the Trade Union Congress (TUC). This prior exposure accelerated organizing efforts and facilitated the timely completion of procedural and documentation requirements necessary for formal affiliation and collaboration.

By growing its institutional power through roundtables and other dialogue-based engagement with transport regulators, platform representatives, and officials from the Federal Ministry of Labour and the Nigeria National Assembly, AUATON advocates for policy reforms, push back against exploitative fare structures, and demand greater driver protections and the recognition of app-based gig workers as legitimate stakeholders in national conversation about fair work. By systematically gathering earnings data, driver testimonies, and its own commissioned research insights as well as those from collaborators, the union grounds its demands in the lived experiences of workers. This not only strengthens its bargaining credibility with regulators and platform companies but also ensures that advocacy efforts are informed by real industry standards and best practices and supported by verifiable evidence. The use of data-driven arguments has allowed AUATON to objectify workers' grievances, move beyond anecdotal claims, and present compelling cases in negotiations, policy discussions, and public campaigns.

To humanize drivers and publicize their struggles, AUATON reframes drivers as essential service providers rather than disposable gig workers using social media campaigns, interviews, press releases, online campaigns, street protests, hashtags, viral videos, and public storytelling. The union has also invested in legal literacy, financial literacy, and driver education programs to teach members about contracts, platform policies, and labor rights, empowering them to make informed decisions and to challenge unfair treatment. Data-driven advocacy, through surveys and testimonies, further enhances its credibility in negotiations and wins public support.

The early 2020s saw landmark milestones worldwide in the legal classification and labor rights of app-based workers, such as the UK's 2021 Supreme Court ruling classifying Uber drivers as workers entitled to minimum wage and holidays, and California's Proposition 22 debates on app-based worker rights.[37] These events amplified calls for unionization in emerging markets, inspiring Nigerian drivers to formalize their efforts. AUATON explicitly drew from this global narrative, positioning itself as part of a broader push against platform exploitation. AUATON leaders also reported drawing on international labor discourses in their engagements with Nigerian authorities. They referenced the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 2021 *World Employment and Social Outlook* report on digital labor platforms.[38] The report highlighted the rapid expansion of platform work and the risks of precarious conditions. It also underscored the importance of representation and social dialogue.

As digital labor issues and heightened government focus on regulating the informal economy began to gain global attention, the Nigerian government began to take notice. This created space for recognition and reform. Nigeria's constitutional protections for freedom of association, while imperfect, provided legal recourse for AUATON's registration and advocacy. Nigeria's enabling civic space, despite occasional restrictions, including the shutdown of specific social media platforms, allowed AUATON to organize without severe repression. Drivers also used social media platforms to amplify grievances and coordinate actions.

The union has strengthened its legitimacy by formally affiliating with the Nigeria Labour Congress, signalling coalitional power and reinforcing the openness of traditional unions to work with emerging worker groups. AUATON's affiliation with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) formally provided the union with institutional backing, resources, and credibility. This support accelerated AUATON's certification as Nigeria's first app-based workers' union and amplified its voice in negotiations with key stakeholders. The NLC also mediates AUATON'S internal leadership disputes and strengthening the union's negotiation and legal capacity through targeted

trainings. AUATON's own digital-native organizing capacity and leadership agility complemented NLC's institutional weight, making this alliance effective.

AUATON's collaboration extends to external partners. It is deeply connected to the global gig worker movement through its affiliation with the International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers (IAATW). This affiliation has expanded AUATON's reach beyond Nigeria, giving it access to global expertise, solidarity networks, and best practices in advocating for app-based transport workers' rights. Through IAATW, AUATON not only draws on international legal and advocacy tools but also contributes to shaping global strategies for fair platform work.

In addition, AUATON maintains alliances with national, pan-African, and global sister worker organizations and networks, such as the National E-hailing Federation of South Africa (NEFSA) and the Digital Transport Workers Union of Ghana. These partnerships enable the co-creation and exchange of power-building strategies, the adoption of new organizing practices, and joint advocacy through joint workshops, conferences, and meetings. These partnerships develop leadership skills, enable coordinated struggles through solidarity actions, and amplify drivers' voices across borders.

The process of forming and initiating such partnerships has taken multiple routes. In many cases, personal leadership connections opened doors to regional and international collaborations. AUATON also engages in formal outreach, sending representatives to conferences and proactively seeking collaboration with like-minded unions. At other times, shared campaigns, such as coordinated action against exploitative platform policies, have provided natural entry points into cooperation. Partnerships have also been brokered by civil society organizations and academic institutions such as the Solidarity Center, University of Cambridge, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), the Oxford-based international action-research project Fairwork and ILAW. These partnerships have brought legal expertise, global visibility, and opportunities for joint advocacy. Finally, AUATON's formal membership in IAATW came through invitations from international networks that recognized its pioneering role as Nigeria's first legally registered app-based transport union.

Challenges

Certain hurdles, nevertheless, test the durability of AUATON's power. First, gig workers are still legally classified as independent contractors. This makes them easily replaceable, strips them of the right to strike or bargain collectively, and weakens their structural power. Second, platform companies like Uber and Bolt continue to resist reforms, limiting the scope of AUATON's institutional power even after official recognition. Third, the union is struggling with some internal leadership conflicts, and financial fragility because many members pay their dues irregularly. This limits its resources to launch sustained legal battles, extensive outreach, or welfare programs, weakening its associational power in practice. Fourth, workforce fragmentation across different platforms and cities makes it difficult to maintain cohesion and unity of voice. Finally, reliance on digital tools, while innovative, carries risks such as surveillance, intermittent blockage of some social media platforms, misinformation, and uneven access, all of which undermine power building.

Replicable Lessons

AUATON's experience, which fuses digital activism and mobilization with traditional tactics such as demonstrations and lobbying, offers valuable lessons for shifting the balance of power in labor–employer dynamics throughout Africa:

- Digital-based mobilization works. Using WhatsApp, Telegram, X, Facebook, and other social media enables the wide-reaching organization of geographically and sectorally dispersed workers through a low-cost, decentralized, tech-savvy approach that couples rapid communication of real-time information with extensive reach.
- **Hybrid activism is effective.** Combining online campaigns with physical (street) protests maximizes visibility while reducing risks. Online campaigns through hashtags, viral videos, and digital petitions lets workers express dissent without the need to gather physically, lowering the risk of mass arrests, police harassment, or clashes during demonstrations. Online campaigns also engage workers who may be afraid to attend street protests, thus broadening participation and reducing over-reliance on risky public action. Nonetheless, the judicious use of physical protests maintains symbolic power and visibility, while online campaigns ensure that demands are amplified to regulators, media, and the public.
- Enlisting the leadership of grassroots influencers builds trust. Empowering online group administrators who are already trusted within the driver community builds legitimacy and accelerates recruitment.
- Strategic alliances deepen knowledge, provide new models, and expand power. Partnerships with traditional union, CSOs, academics, legal experts, and international labor movements provide legitimacy, build global solidarity, raise the efficacy of advocacy, and strengthen the union's bargaining power.
- Narrative reframing matters. Presenting gig workers as essential service providers boosts dignity, raises self-confidence, and enlists public support.
- Evidence-based, data-driven advocacy builds credibility. Using earnings and other data gathered through surveys and testimonies objectifies union demands, grounds them in workers' lived experiences, and results in compelling arguments during negotiations and policy discussions with regulators.

CASE 2: KENYA NATIONAL WASTE PICKERS WELFARE ASSOCIATION (KENAWPWA)

Building Blocks

In Kenya, about 22,000 tons[39] of waste are generated every day, equivalent to about 8 million tons annually, according to the National Sustainable Waste Management Policy (2021). Within this vast and under-resourced system, waste pickers perform essential environmental and economic work, recovering recyclable materials, keeping streets clean, and easing pressure on overflowing landfills. Their role is particularly critical as counties continue to face weak infrastructure, fragmented governance, and inadequate funding for sustainable waste management.

Despite this contribution, waste pickers in Kenya's informal economy remain largely invisible. They are often labelled with derogatory terms such as "chokoraa" (homeless scavengers), treated as intruders, and excluded from decisions that shape their livelihoods. Many work in unsafe conditions, facing violence, bullying, and sexual harassment, often without basic protective equipment. They also remain underpaid and excluded from decision-making. As one respondent noted, "we are earning peanuts... two, three hundred shillings a day, barely enough for survival."

Just transition agendas seek to mitigate the socio-economic challenges of transitioning from fossil fuels to a green economy, yet the impact on livelihoods which rely on recyclable materials is not fully recognized. These shifts risk undermining livelihoods by restricting access to recyclable materials and weakening waste pickers' position within the value chain (O'Hare & Talbott, 2025). At the same time, formalization efforts and investments in modern waste infrastructure frequently fail to integrate informal workers, reinforcing systemic exclusion.

It is within this context that the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association (KeNaWPWA) emerged in 2022 as a unified worker voice. By consolidating previously fragmented workers into a national platform, the Association has strengthened associational power and built a shared identity across landfill and household-level waste pickers, supported by elected leadership across counties.

In response, KeNaWPWA is mobilizing multiple forms of power. It is strengthening institutional power through engagement with policy processes, advocating for legal recognition, labor rights, and inclusion in governance structures. It is also working to enhance structural power by pushing for fair pricing, improved access to markets, and support through Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes. At the same time, it is building coalitional power through partnerships with civil society organizations and international networks, while expanding discursive power by reshaping narratives around waste and labor. As Chairman Brian Gisore Nyabuti noted ahead of global negotiations, waste pickers in Kenya "collect, sort, and recycle up to 60% of the plastics that would otherwise choke rivers, pollute soils, and harm communities."

Achievements and Enabling Environment

The association has made notable gains. Membership has grown to approximately 46,000 waste pickers across seven counties, representing an increase of nearly 40 percent since 2022. This reflects strong internal legitimacy in a historically fragmented sector. Growth has been driven by grassroots mobilization, local leadership, and digital coordination, reinforced by a shared understanding that "this is a job like any other job." This associational strength has translated into influence. Waste pickers have organized protests and rapid mobilizations to defend their interests, including shutting down a major trans-African highway, prompting swift government response. These actions demonstrate how collective organization can be converted into structural leverage.

The association has also been the defense of livelihoods from dispossession, particularly through resisting landfill land grabbing. As one leader noted, "since our inception... we put the land grabbers in bay," despite the fact that "there have been a lot of people grabbing landfills." These sites are not marginal spaces but large, economically valuable areas, with members working in 40-50-acre landfills. This achievement has been enabled by strong grassroots leadership and collective vigilance rooted in lived experience. Leaders emerge from within the waste picker community, allowing them to anticipate threats and mobilize quickly to protect access to these critical workspaces.

The association is advancing a cooperative-based economic model that strategically reconfigures its power resources by institutionalizing collective market participation. By positioning itself to access municipal contracts, the model strengthens institutional power, while simultaneously consolidating associational and structural power through enhanced bargaining capacity and coordinated service delivery. This transition marks a shift from fragmented, informal survival activities toward more formalized and recognized waste management services.

In parallel, KeNaWPWA is developing a worker-owned digital platform that further deepens these power transformations. By enabling the tracking of recyclable volumes, standardizing pricing, and enhancing transactional transparency, the platform reduces information asymmetries and limits



intermediary extraction, thereby reinforcing workers' market (structural) power. Collectively, these innovations signal a deliberate move toward embedding waste pickers within formal governance and value chain systems while retaining worker control over the terms of inclusion.

Through strategic storytelling, partnerships, and public engagement, the Association has amplified visibility and reshaped narratives around waste picking. Initiatives such as the photography exhibition *Unseen Frontliners: The Invincibles in Plastic Recycling and the film A Waste Picker's Story by Greenpeace Africa* have highlighted the significant role of waste pickers in the recycling ecosystem. These efforts demonstrate the Association's leveraging discursive power, influencing public perception and policy discourse around dignity, recognition, and inclusion.

Securing visibility and early inclusion in just transition processes has also been a significant achievement. The Association has engaged in international forums, including the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) processes on plastics, where waste pickers have increasingly been recognized as stakeholders. As one participant noted, "most of our officials were involved in the meeting... that was the first time to hear things of just transition." They have since pushed for formal recognition within legal frameworks both in Kenya and internationally. Institutional power is being strengthened through sustained engagement with policy processes, including interactions with the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA), participation in Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks, and efforts to draft a national bill to secure formal recognition and rights. This progress has been enabled by strategic advocacy, policy engagement, and coalition-building with civil society organizations such as Tearfund and Greenpeace Africa, alongside international networks, particularly the International Alliance of Waste Pickers. However, leaders emphasize that progress on just transition remains largely rhetorical, with the transition still "easier said than done," underscoring that current gains are foundational rather than transformative.

Finally, the KeNaWPWA has made important strides in advancing gender inclusion by ensuring women's representation in leadership and addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities. There is near gender parity in national leadership, with similar efforts replicated at the county level. Women's voices are actively incorporated, with structures that ensure "every woman is comfortable working... and can report if they are being abused." As one participant noted, "without women... the association cannot work." These efforts are particularly important given the scale of risks faced by waste pickers. Evidence shows that 53% have experienced or witnessed violence, often linked to competition over recyclables and conflicts at dumpsites, 43% have experienced bullying, including harassment and intimidation, and 13% have experienced sexual harassment, disproportionately affecting women and newcomers.[40]

In response, the association has begun to establish GBVH prevention systems, including survivor referral pathways, partnerships with human rights organizations and the police, member awareness and rights education, and emerging internal reporting and leadership structures aimed at strengthening women's voice and protection. As one leader explained, "We link every lady to organizations where they can report if they are being abused." These efforts are reinforced by inclusive welfare structures and sustained awareness-building, which collectively strengthen voice, trust, and accountability within the association. While these measures are perceived to have contributed to a reduction in incidents, leadership was unable to provide quantitative evidence to substantiate this, reflecting limited measurement of GBVH outcomes.

Challenges

However, persistent barriers continue to deter reporting. Many victims fear retaliation and livelihood loss due to entrenched power asymmetries and the informal nature of the sector. Daily survival is often tied to access to specific sites, intermediaries, or local authorities, meaning that reporting abuse can lead to eviction, exclusion from waste streams, or blacklisting. In addition, the reporting process itself carries significant costs, time away from income-generating activities, transport expenses, and the burden of navigating complex bureaucratic systems. Low trust in law enforcement, shaped by past experiences of inaction or inadequate response, further discourages victims from coming forward.

Despite these achievements, the association continues to face persistent and structural challenges rooted in systemic exclusion and power imbalances. A fundamental constraint is the lack of formal legal recognition, which limits waste pickers' access to labor rights, social protections, and government contracts, leaving them highly vulnerable to policy shifts and exclusion from formal waste systems. Although Kenya's National Sustainable Waste Management Policy (2021) outlines efforts to formalize the sector, weak implementation has limited its impact on improving working conditions and securing livelihoods.

In parallel, emerging technology-driven waste management models are introducing new forms of exclusion. Private companies are increasingly digitizing waste collection, tracking, and recycling systems through platforms and data-driven logistics. While framed as efficiency-enhancing, these developments risk displacing informal workers who lack access to digital tools, capital, or formal registration systems. In practice, such platforms often priorities formal actors and aggregated supply chains, bypassing waste pickers or relegating them to low-value roles. Without deliberate inclusion mechanisms, digitalization may reinforce existing inequalities by concentrating control over data, pricing, and market access in the hands of private actors.

These challenges are compounded by severe resource constraints, which limit the association's ability to scale organizing, invest in equipment, and provide basic welfare support. Waste pickers also remain marginalized within just transition processes, where participation is often tokenistic. At the same time, they face market exploitation by intermediaries who control prices and limit bargaining power, trapping workers in low-income cycles. The threat of displacement further intensifies insecurity, as landfill closures and relocation policies are implemented without viable alternatives.

Although the association is advancing community cooperatives to build economic power, enabling members to bid for contracts and engage government, their effectiveness remains limited. As noted, "we haven't yet [secured contracts]... working with the government is a little bit tricky," with processes often shaped by "dirty politics" and non-transparent tender allocation. Even where opportunities arise, projects have been awarded to external actors or individuals outside existing waste picker networks. This highlights how, despite efforts to formalize through cooperatives, waste pickers continue to face exclusion from meaningful participation in formal waste systems.

Beyond structural constraints, there are also challenges related to the just transition concept itself, particularly in terms of awareness and practical translation. Evidence suggests that understanding of the concept among waste pickers is still emerging, often introduced through external engagements rather than grassroots processes. This points to a broader translation gap, where just transition remains



largely rhetorical, and to an epistemic imbalance in which waste pickers are incorporated into externally defined frameworks rather than shaping them.

These constraints are further shaped by gendered vulnerabilities, with women facing heightened risks of harassment, particularly at household collection points, alongside limited access to capital, equipment, and economic opportunities. Together, these challenges reflect deeper structural inequalities across institutional, market, and social domains.

Replicable Lessons

- Worker organizations expand power when they strategically link their struggles to broader societal agendas. In this case, reframing waste picking as dignified, climate-relevant work not only challenges stigma but also positions waste pickers within climate justice and urban sustainability discourses. This alignment enhances legitimacy, facilitates coalition-building with environmental and development actors, and creates pathways for institutional recognition and policy influence.
- In contexts where formal labor protections are weak, combining informal support systems (peer networks, associations) with formal institutions creates more effective protection mechanisms. Partnerships with police, human rights organizations, and civil society actors increase credibility and provide additional layers of protection that informal worker groups cannot guarantee on their own.
- Establishing clear and trusted reporting and support pathways is critical for addressing abuse and vulnerability among members. However, their effectiveness depends on being embedded within inclusive welfare structures and sustained awareness-building efforts. Together, these elements foster trust, strengthen collective voice, and enhance accountability, creating an enabling environment in which members feel safe and supported to report abuse.
- Organizing workers into associations or groups transforms the reporting of GBVH from an individual burden into a collective responsibility. This collective approach reduces fear of retaliation, provides a layer of protection, and strengthens workers' bargaining power when engaging authorities, intermediaries, and other duty bearers.

CASE 3: FEDERATION OF ALL UGANDA MIGRANT WORKERS ASSOCIATIONS (FAUMA)

Building Blocks

For decades, workers, particularly care workers, have migrated from East African countries such as Uganda to the Gulf region in search of employment opportunities. However, migrant workers in these destinations have faced a wide range of injustices and mistreatment, including discrimination, exploitation, torture, imprisonment on false charges, *de facto* slavery, and even fatalities, in some cases, fatalities.

Back home, their families are often kept in an information blackhole, with little in the way of updates on what is going on with their relative in the host country. To add insult to injury, upon returning to their homeland, they often face social and economic reintegration challenges, including trauma, discrimination by the public, lack of employment opportunities, weak social support systems, and in some cases, discovering that the money they sent home has been misappropriated by the relatives to whom they entrusted it. Yet these distressed migrant workers, especially in the informal economy, lacked the collective organization and leadership to share their experiences and voice their demands. Since 2015, traditional unions in Uganda have been perceived by migrant workers as largely passive and ineffective in representing their interests, a factor that contributed to the formation of FAUMA.

In response, in 2024, the Federation of All Uganda Migrant Workers Associations (FAUMA) was established as an umbrella body that integrates together 23 associations to confront widespread exploitation, abuse, and lack of representation. By pooling experience and resources, FAUMA strengthens associational power, enabling collective action and representation beyond what fragmented groups could achieve. It also builds coalitional power by engaging governments, publics, and international actors to advance migrant workers' rights.

Unlike other federations that focus solely on in-country associations, FAUMA has extended its reach by organizing across borders by integrating diaspora associations, strengthening transnational associational and coalitional power. This inclusive approach strengthens the collective voice of migrant workers, giving them a sense of belonging and ownership within a unified structure. Through FAUMA, migrant workers' associations abroad are not only connected to their homeland but also empowered to participate actively in decision-making and advocacy. Its member associations include the Kyeyo Initiative Uganda, Association of Ugandans in the Middle East, Association of Ugandans in Scandinavian States, Association of Ugandans in the UK, Xmaids Family Initiative, Mwagale Foundation, the Khwinyukhe Khurambebe Initiative, and Rights for Maids Association Uganda.

The leaders of these associations serve as coordinators, mobilizing and organizing members to participate in FAUMA's programs and initiatives. FAUMA has 75 leaders, of whom 60 per cent are men and the remaining are women. Women are most represented in departmental leadership and least represented in country-based and diaspora roles. Leadership is drawn intentionally from varied associations and diverse geographies, with quotas to ensure adequate representation of women and persons with disabilities. This design guarantees that Ugandan migrant workers, wherever they are, have a channel of representation and that remediation efforts to help them can be coordinated globally. Through engagement with Ugandan embassies and host governments, FAUMA develops institutional power, creating channels for dialogue and policy influence. In this way, FAUMA bridges the gap between home and diaspora, creating a dynamic network that ensures that migrant workers are heard, supported, and effectively represented wherever they are in the world.

FAUMA's multi-tiered structure is distinctive: At the base are the associations. The next layer is representatives in each host state, then regional coordinators (for example, Middle East and Scandinavia), then continental leaders, and finally an overall Head of Diaspora who coordinates all these external representatives. This federated structure ensures that, from individual workers dispersed in local community groups in the various host states, to the continental blocs, each collectivity can speak with consolidated leadership through a unified platform.

It also has specialized departments such as occupational health and safety, women and children, and people with disabilities (PWDs). FAUMA avoids bureaucratic or siloed communication through a flexible, issue driven approach. Issues are addressed at the lowest appropriate level, whether at country, association, or departmental level, with referrals used only when escalation is necessary. When information is intended for all leaders, the primary responsible officer (PRO) communicates it through shared digital platforms, including a dedicated leadership forum, enabling rapid information sharing and coordinated action without bureaucratic delays.

The federation is governed by a constitution and strategic plan. At the apex of governance is a democratically elected Executive Committee[41] responsible for strategic direction and accountability, supported by specialized functional departments covering welfare, crisis response, anti-trafficking, legal affairs, advocacy, training, research, ICT, and monitoring and evaluation. The structure is further decentralized through

continental, regional, and country-based coordinators embedded within diaspora communities across Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and North America, ensuring transnational representation and rapid response. In addition, leaders of affiliated associations and returnee-led organizations are formally integrated into committees and departments.

FAUMA also exercises discursive power by reshaping narratives around migrant workers. Through social media (e.g Facebook, Twitter, TikTok) and public campaigns, it reframes migrants as rights-bearing economic actors rather than passive victims, strengthening legitimacy and public support. It ensures workers' voices are heard in policy by organizing consultations and bringing migrant representatives into discussions. Outreach includes home and community visits, contact lists, and support groups to mobilize workers and keep them informed. FAUMA researches migration issues and shares clear briefs with the responsible government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), and engages recruiters and employers to strengthen corporate social responsibility. It also operates justice and case-management services that document cases, provide legal aid or referrals, and mediate disputes. Ongoing case management and dispute resolution are handled by FAUMA's labor officers, both in Uganda and in host countries, through physical and digital engagement. When crises arise, it liaises with repatriation agents, embassies and families of the victims rescue and dignified repatriation for distressed or deceased workers.

Achievements and Enabling Environment

FAUMA currently has 175,000 members, 70 percent of whom are women workers. This provides a large and representative base through which the federation collectively advances the interests of migrant workers, especially women. Digital organizing via social media has been a significant enabler of this gain. These tools allowed the federation to mobilise and reach members within and outside Uganda while shaping public narratives on migrant worker rights. FAUMA leverages blogs, television and radio engagements, and commentaries disseminated through Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and its website. Nevertheless, FAUMA and other digitally organizing worker groups in Uganda face constraints arising from periodic media censorship, internet shutdowns, and restrictions on social media platforms, including Facebook, which has been blocked for several years. In response, FAUMA, with partner support, developed the Kyeyo and Tuliwamu apps which facilitate organizing, monitoring, and responding to migrant worker safety concerns across the continent and abroad. For workers with limited digital access, FAUMA also relies on phone calls, messaging, emails, and in-person outreach.

FAUMA engaged the Ugandan government and other stakeholders to support the operationalization and improvement of pending bilateral labor agreements with Qatar, Jordan, and the UAE. It advocated for the expansion of such agreements to additional destinations in Europe and the Americas, alongside winning FAUMA's formal inclusion in national policymaking to ensure migrant workers' voices are heard. This has strengthened its institutional power.

Through rural sensitization campaigns, the association is shaping public narratives around safe migration. FAUMA is reframing the image of migrant workers away from narratives that portray them as hapless or passive "victims of trafficking." Instead, it presents migrant workers as purposeful economic actors with clear goals and rights. FAUMA further challenges portrayals of migrants as desperate opportunists by highlighting them as serious-minded workers with family responsibilities who contribute substantial foreign exchange to the Ugandan economy through remittances.

FAUMA organized Uganda's first migrant returnees' meeting, and participated in more than 20 high-level dialogues, including engagements with embassies and the Ugandan Parliament. Its leadership capacity building, quarterly diaspora reports, and grassroots sensitization position FAUMA to reconnect stranded and vulnerable migrants abroad with their communities back home. Through its advocacy and lobbying, FAUMA secured for itself and other stakeholders regular policy updates and consultative engagements with the Ugandan government toward a comprehensive labor-externalization law. FAUMA collaborated with the Uganda Private Migrant Labour Training Centres to roll out standardized training and pre-departure orientation for all migrants. The Federation also established migrant-worker desks in Ugandan embassies staffed with labor attachés and legal experts.

While the abolition of the *Kafala* system in Saudi Arabia in 2025[42] was ultimately a state led reform under their Vision 2030 agenda, migrant worker organizations such as FAUMA contributed indirectly by documenting labor abuses and engaging sending state institutions. Through advocacy and solidarity building, they strengthened transnational networks that sustained normative and reputational pressure for labor reform.

FAUMA has nurtured and entered into partnerships with a range of Ugandan government agencies, including the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Office of the President, as well as with embassies and parliamentarians, strengthening its coalition power channels for policy influence and recognition. Internationally, FAUMA collaborates with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), Kyeyo Initiative Uganda, civil society organizations, and media outlets such as Voice of America. These alliances broaden its reach, enhance its legitimacy, and supply technical support for repatriation and advocacy programs. Through these partnerships, the federation has rescued, repatriated, and reintegrated more than 400 migrant

workers since 2024, particularly from the Gulf region. Of the migrant workers thus far re-integrated, 80% are female who worked in the care economy. To strengthen longer-term economic reintegration, FAUMA has established two skills development centres: one in Mityana, focusing on shoemaking, belt making, crafts, and tailoring, and another in Mukono, specializing in hairdressing and soap making.

Over the past two years, the federation, working with allied organizations such as the Uganda Human Rights Commission, Voices for Labour, the Women Probono Initiative, and Candia Advocates, has provided legal representation to 65 migrant workers. These cases involved exploitation, abuse, contract violations, and disputes with employers or recruitment agencies. This support gave the migrant workers a voice by enabling access to justice and formal dispute-resolution mechanisms. It also strengthened associational power by demonstrating the federation's capacity to defend its members and hold employers and recruiters accountable.

Challenges

Despite these advances, FAUMA faces significant challenges. FAUMA's ability to scale its influence across Africa is constrained by the limited presence of migrant worker organizations in key sending countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya. This gap restricts sustained coalitional power for cross border coordination and the formation of strong continental alliances. Collaboration with traditional unions also remains challenging. In Uganda, migrant workers report that longstanding divisions within traditional union movements, combined with increasing politicization, hinder cooperation and further constrain the coalitional power that could emerge from partnerships between new worker groups and established unions. Many migrant worker organizations seek to maintain political neutrality to protect members operating in sensitive migration contexts.

High upfront costs of maintaining bespoke digital organizing platforms constrain FAUMA's digital capacity. Together with government surveillance, censorship of public social media platforms, and the digital divide, these constraints weaken both FAUMA's sustained digital mobilization and its public visibility. Its structural power is weakened by the precarious status of migrant workers in host countries, where protections are limited and legal insecurity is widespread. Even for a federation of 23 associations, financial constraints limit FAUMA's ability to offer training in financial literary, for example, teaching migrant domestic workers that they should open a bank account in Uganda and deposit their wages in it to prevent misappropriation. Meager finances also constrain FAUMA's capacity to scale its rescue missions and social reintegration programs, while the wide geographic spread of migrants can complicate coordination. Additionally, it takes resources to assist returnees with housing or job hunting, let alone psychological counseling, or to develop the leverage to persuade local councils to compel next of kin who squander a migrant's funds to reimburse the defrauded worker, with penalties. Moreover, entrenched stereotypes of migrants as helpless victims persist, requiring that FAUMA to continue to reframe and shift narratives in Uganda and abroad.

Replicable Lessons

- FAUMA's experience demonstrates that fragmented migrant worker groups can build associational power through federation, multi-tiered leadership, and unified representation.
- Dedicated migrant-worker focal points in missions (embassies and consulates) strengthen institutional power, shortening response times for detention, abuse, and deaths. These officers coordinate directly with host authorities and home institutions to resolve issues quickly.
- Sensitization through public campaigns builds discursive power, shifting mindsets viewing migrants as "victims" to "workers with rights and responsibilities," unlocking public and political support. This shift builds empathy, reduces stigma, and mobilizes public and political support. It also legitimizes migration as decent work deserving protection and respect.
- Strategic partnerships with ministries, IOM, ILO, and media, convert goodwill into coalitional power, enabling coordinated action and policy influence for migrant welfare.
- Digital tools, despite constraints, expand associational and discursive power and sustain organizing across dispersed contexts. Despite the high upfront costs, developing bespoke digital tools reduce vulnerability to censorship by limiting dependence on a single commercial social media platform, especially in contexts prone to censorship and internet shutdowns. Despite disruptions, worker groups can sustain organizing by adapting technologies to context, rather than waiting for political conditions to improve. Combining apps with phone calls, messaging, emails, and in-person outreach ensures continuity when digital access is uneven or restricted.

CASE 4: DOMESTIC SERVICES WORKERS UNION OF GHANA (DSWU)

Building Blocks

Ghana's Domestic Services Workers Union (DSWU) was founded in September 2015. The union was established to address the widespread and longstanding exploitation and precarity faced by domestic workers in Ghana's private households. Its formation was catalyzed by the personal journey of its former secretary, Esther Kosi, herself a former domestic worker and trade unionist. Esther repeatedly encountered cases of unpaid wages, religious coercion, social isolation, and extreme employer control, including young migrant women brought from rural communities of the north under the guise of "help" and then denied basic rights. These experiences, combined with the widespread perception of domestic workers in Ghana as "family helpers" rather than employees, limited their recognition and weakened both institutional and structural power within labour markets. This also made conventional union models that rely on employer-employee relationships and formal workplace structures ineffective.

Through her involvement in the Ghana Actors' Guild, which was affiliated with organized labor, she was exposed early to trade union principles, workers' education, and collective bargaining. She earned a college degree in Labor Studies and focused her project work on domestic workers. Her trio identity as a domestic worker, a college-trained labor student, and a union activist placed her in a unique position. She was not an external organizer mobilizing others but an insider who experienced the same precarity, fear, and dependency as the workers she later organized

Early mobilization and organizing of the Domestic and Social Workers' Union (DSWU) took place in churches, neighborhoods, and personal networks. This process marked the emergence of associational power, transforming isolated experiences into collective consciousness. Through shared stories, the union also leveraged discursive power, reframing individual struggles as collective ones. This early approach later became the union's foundational strategy. The global recognition of domestic work as "decent work" through the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 strengthened DSWU's institutional power by legitimizing domestic work as formal labor, providing a global framework for rights claims.

DSWU developed as a locally rooted response that combined rights advocacy with mediation and social support. With support from networks such as Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and later the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), Esther and her colleagues began to see that domestic workers' struggles were part of a broader global movement.

DSWU is a democratically structured, membership-based organization with elected leadership. Its National Executive Council consists of 7 national executives, 5 regional leaders, and 25 zonal leaders. The union's executive body coordinates advocacy campaigns, manages training programs, and represents workers in negotiations and policy dialogues. It currently has around 1,800 members, including domestic workers who live in their employer's home and those who commute from their own homes, primarily in the Greater Accra, Eastern and Ashanti regions. However, estimates suggest that there are approximately 58,000 domestic workers in the country. This highlights the significant gap in reach and underscores the ongoing challenge of worker organizing.

Achievements and Enabling Environment

DSWU has made decent strides in organizing and building worker power through a blend of key enabling factors. Currently 1800 members-strong, the union has brought together workers who have long been unorganized, isolated from one another, and invisible. Because domestic workers are dispersed, isolated, and often fearful of employer retaliation, DSWU recruitment relies mainly on informal word-of-mouth—"tell a friend to tell another friend" and social networks, which leverage trust-based peer-to-peer, door-to-door, and church-based relationships. Besides offering discreet, culturally familiar entry points into the union, these relational approaches have low literacy barriers and bypass the stigma often associated with domestic work. This is especially important because some 80% of the union's membership are not literate, have limited digital access, use phones irregularly, and have low data affordability, making online engagement less feasible. Although DSWU is beginning to employ digital and media organizing through social media, radio, and television, this is aimed more at building public awareness and societal support than at recruiting new members.

The union's current secretary, a journalist and former domestic care worker with a strong media network, has expanded access to radio and TV platforms and improved the union's discursive power. These media partnerships enable DSWU to publicize abuses and challenge sterotypes. These platforms also enhance societal power by attracting public attention and influencing policymakers.

To build member consciousness and unity, DSWU uses a blend of skills training, advocacy, and grassroots education. Its workshops focus on negotiation, financial literacy, leadership development, and occupational safety. To manage its limited resources, the union proactively practices circularity by reusing generic placards, banners, and training

materials. These initiatives have also raised awareness and understanding of ILO Convention 189 among members.

This has strengthened the union's ability to advocate for decent work rights because they are better equipped to recognize violations, assert their rights, and participate confidently in policy campaigns. This shared knowledge builds a stronger collective identity, enhances bargaining power, and positions the union as an informed actor in national labor reform discussions. The union, with support from international movements at the IDWF enabling coalitional power, continues to pressure the government to enforce decent work rights. These include the roadmap to Labour Regulations 2020 (Domestic Workers L.I.2408) in Ghana, which was passed in 2020, and ratification of ILO's C189, which remains ongoing. Consequently, the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations' roadmap is integrating domestic workers into the Ghana Labour Market Information System (GLMIS) and enrolling them in the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), thereby expanding access to social protection. This marks a significant step toward decent work, dignity, and formal recognition for domestic workers in Ghana. Although enforcement remains slow, the passage of LI 2408 reflects formal recognition of domestic work and has created advocacy space that previously did not exist.

The good political will DSWU enjoys, especially at the Ministry of Labour, Jobs and Employment Relations, has enabled it to participate in policy dialogues on labor reforms and push for the recognition of domestic workers' rights. DSWU is capitalizing on Ghana's enabling legislative and institutional framework for worker unionisation and decent work, including domestic workers.[43] The union leverages formal mechanisms for worker representation, including freedom of association and speech under Ghana's 1992 Constitution and ILO Conventions 87 and 98. These rights allow DSWU to organize members safely, advocate in policy dialogues, raise awareness of domestic workers' issues, defend workers' rights, and build national and international networks. The union has built strong working relationships with key ministry officials, which has helped secure political support for its initiatives. DSWU is also supported by a range of legal and advocacy allies, including Alumnae Incorporated,[44] ActionAid, Netright, and other NGOs working on child labor and forced labor. These partnerships strengthen the union's ability to apply pressure on government, navigate complex legal cases involving members, and access technical and advocacy expertise.

At the grassroots, the union also employs cultural engagement tools, such as dramatized role-plays in various workplace scenarios, to help its members understand their rights in simple, relatable language. These participatory methods enhance inclusiveness and enable members with low literacy to grasp complex ideas. Through cross-border exchanges, media storytelling, and solidarity actions, DSWU has made progress in building a strong, credible foundation for domestic worker organizing. Its engagements on radio, on TV, and in community drama challenge traditional perceptions of domestic work, positioning it as valuable, legitimate labor deserving of dignity, respect, and protection. As a result, domestic workers are increasingly gaining greater public visibility, increased confidence in asserting their rights, and stronger support from allies, policymakers, and the broader community.

DSWU's ongoing partnerships and alliances with other worker groups, traditional labor unions, civil society organizations, and government ministries in Ghana and abroad form the backbone of its growth, strength, and voice. The union has significantly advanced the visibility and recognition of domestic work within Ghana's labor discourse. Its advocacy has further influenced national discussions about domestic workers in labor law and raised awareness about ILO Convention 189 in Ghana.

Nationally, DSWU is an affiliate of the TUC and, internationally, a dues-paying member of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). These relationships have broadened its access to resources, including knowledge exchanges, finance, and legal and logistical support. These alliances have strengthened its social and political capital, although some challenges still remain. Regionally, DSWU's collaborative approach and participation in African and global domestic worker networks have helped build shared strategies for organizing and contributed to a growing continental movement for domestic workers' rights. Its collaboration with sister domestic worker organizations in Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda has enabled it to build transnational alliances and develop a shared repertoire of organizing practices adapted to the African context.

Challenges

Several structural and operational obstacles persist, nonetheless. The slow ratification of ILO Convention C189 by the Government of Ghana, similar to most African countries, remains a legislative gap that continues to enable violations of domestic workers' rights across the country. When seeking affiliations with trade union federations, bureaucratic or stringent membership requirements may inadvertently create dissonance among affiliate member unions. In this case, DSWU was once an associate member of the TUC, then reclassified as a member of UNIWA which is in turn an associate member of the TUC. However, this reclassification under Ghana's Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA) threatens DSWU's autonomy, its leadership says. It complicates its direct access to TUC leadership and risks diluting its representation.

Second, varying literacy levels and language barriers make it difficult to fully utilize the resources offered by international partnerships. Although DSWU's partners, including the IDWF, provide the union with resources and materials, varying

literacy levels among members make adaptation to suit each member's needs challenging, constraining both associational and discursive power. Many members struggle to understand materials written in English, French or Spanish, and require translation into local languages. Disseminating information through multiple layers such as from international offices to national executives and then to grassroots members sometimes lead to delays or distortions in understanding, especially where digital or literacy barriers exist. These barriers limit members' ability to fully understand key advocacy issues, such as ILO Convention 189, and reduce their ability to engage actively or deeply in policy discussions. In other cases, there may be disparities in how effectively different countries or unions can adapt, reproduce, and use materials shared by international partners. Translation aside, not all resources or tactics are easily transferable given the context of work in a given country.

Third, organizing migrant domestic workers in Ghana remains difficult owing to their high mobility and employer-controlled living arrangements. This makes identification and sustained engagement challenging. Most domestic care workers in Ghana are rural–urban migrants. Fourth, DSWU continues to struggle with weak institutional memory because most of its documentation and organizational resources were lost after the death of its former general secretary, who had been the sole custodian of union records. This loss created a major operational gap undermining its institutional power. Although efforts are underway to rebuild a centralized system, recalling past financial logs and membership data remains challenging. Finally, limited financial resources and the absence of a formal secretariat further restrict the union's ability to coordinate activities, support members, and strengthen organizational systems.

Lessons Learned

- Strong, equal partnerships with established labor unions and civil society organizations build coalitional power, enhancing legitimacy and access to resources. When collaborations are co-designed rather than top-down, new worker groups like DSWU gain legitimacy, access to resources and meaningful support that they would otherwise lack.
- Participatory tools such as drama and role-play enable discursive power and inclusive engagement in low-literacy contexts. They simplify complex ideas, making learning engaging, and help workers internalize rights, responsibilities, and organizing strategies through relatable storytelling and shared experiences.
- Leadership transitions pose risks when institutional knowledge is poorly documented or not shared, reinforcing the need to plan for succession in advance, robust documentation systems, and distributed responsibilities to preserve organizational memory and avoid dependence on individual leaders. The same may be said for stakeholder relationships, which can facilitate cooperation with relevant government ministries and decision-makers.
- With low-cost strategies such as reusing placards, banners, and training materials, unions can stay visible, active, and consistent even on modest financial resources. This shows that efficient use of existing resources is itself a power-building strategy, enabling sustained mobilization despite financial constraints.
- Cross-border linkages and learning between global, regional, and local worker groups expand coalitional power, helping both sides to anticipate employer strategies, strengthen their collective voice, and build more powerful alliances.
- Finally, narrative reframing that dignifies informal work shifts public attitudes, strengthens worker identity, and wins broader societal support.

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ENDNOTES

1 Lévesque, C., & Murray, G. (2010). Understanding union power: resources and capabilities for renewing union capacity. *Transfer: European review of labour and research*, *16*(3), 333-350.

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3 Digital platform work refers to technology-mediated work that is facilitated through an app, website, or online marketplace. The platform serves as an intermediary that connects clients with service providers or vendors, often in real time. They are increasingly shaping the nature of work in various sectors (Hassen & Emont, 2023).

4 Classically conceptualised and developed by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1985a; 1985b), John D. Stephens (1979), and Korpi (1978)

5 Arnholtz, J., & Refslund, B. (Eds.). (2024). *Workers, power and society: power resource theory in contemporary capitalism*. Taylor & Francis.

6 The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework is an internationally recognised set of guidelines designed to improve the quality, transparency, and completeness of reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

7 Just transition–relevant workers are those whose jobs, livelihoods, or working conditions are directly or indirectly affected by climate change mitigation, adaptation, and environmental sustainability policies, as well as the shift toward low-carbon and climate-resilient economies. This includes workers who may gain, lose, or experience significant transformation of work as economies transition away from carbon-intensive or environmentally damaging activities, or toward green and climate-resilient sectors.

8 Sample allocation details are available upon request.

9 Individuals who facilitated access to worker organizations and respondents we would otherwise have struggled to reach directly. They served as crucial 'entry points,' enabling trust-building and initial engagement for the data collection process.

10 Moonlighting refers to a situation where a worker holds one or more additional jobs alongside their primary job, usually to supplement income, manage risk, or cope with unstable or insufficient earnings from the main job.

11 Traditional unions also offer training, but the new groups make enterprise and digital platform-building functions fundamental to their work to fit the needs of informal and platform members.

12 Women of Uganda Network. (2021). *Not just a trend: Assessing the types, spread, and the impact of online gender-based violence in Uganda*. https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Research_Report_Not_Just_a_Trend__Assessing_the_Types_Spread_and_the_Impact_of_Online_Gender_Based_Violence_in_Uganda.pdf

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15 Traditional unions are also now leveraging digital tools, but for most new worker groups the channels are primary organizing instruments rather than a supplement.

16 Lawsuits highlight institutional power; protests and strikes draw on associational and structural power; advocacy and lobbying exercise discursive power; and solidarity actions signal coalition power, reinforcing associational power through pooled resources and cross-group legitimacy.

17 A solidarity action is a collective act taken by workers or allied groups to support others making demands, such as striking against injustice, exploitation, or repression, even when the issue does not directly affect them.

18 Rachel Hall and Claire Wilmot, "Meta faces Ghana lawsuits over impact of extreme content on moderators," *The Guardian* (Ghana), April 27, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/apr/27/meta-faces-ghana-lawsuits-over-impact-of-extreme-content-on-moderators?CMP=share_btn_url.

19 Worker misclassification happens when an employer labels workers as **independent contractors, freelancers, or partners** instead of **employees**, even though the nature of their work fits the legal definition of employment. Digital platform workers also called gig workers, such online and location-based platform

workers are frequently classified as "independent contractors" on the promise of flexible remote work that will enable them to set their own hours and be their own boss. But this classification status gives them poor access to employee benefits and protections and leads to financial and work precarity.

20 When asked to rank the social media platforms their groups find most effective for organizing and building power, WhatsApp emerged as the first-choice platform, ranked first by over three-quarters of leaders (76%). In contrast, Facebook was rarely the primary platform (16% ranked it first) but emerged as the most common second-choice platform (62% ranked it second). All other platforms (Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, X, YouTube, and Telegram) lagged far behind.

21 *Egbejule, E.* (2025, March 9). *Internet shutdowns at record high in Africa as access 'weaponised'*. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/mar/09/internet-shutdowns-record-high-africa-2024-access-weaponised

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24 Responses were gauged using a Likert scale with the following response options: very ineffective, ineffective, somewhat ineffective, very effective, effective, somewhat effective, don't know, and the 'group has never used digital tools or social media for this purpose'. For the analysis, responses of very effective and effective were collapsed into a single category labelled 'effective'. Responses of somewhat effective, very ineffective, ineffective, and somewhat ineffective were grouped into an 'ineffective category', while don't know and the group has never used digital tools or social media were grouped into an otherwise category.

25 Digital power operates as a cross-cutting but fragile resource that amplifies associational, discursive, institutional power and structural power. It amplifies structural power only when workers already occupy strategic positions within production or service delivery systems. The effectiveness of digital power depends on platform access, trust, and governance conditions. Unlike other power resources, digital power is governed by platforms and states rather than by workers themselves, creating vulnerabilities to internet shutdowns, censorship, account suspension, algorithmic visibility that cannot be democratically negotiated, and the sudden reversibility of gains. By contrast, associational power is governed internally by members, structural power is embedded in workers' positions within labor markets, institutional power is mediated through formal rules and representation, and discursive power rests on narrative legitimacy and public credibility.

26 Internal gatekeeping refers to the regulation of access, voice, and participation within a group, often exercised through control over digital communication channels and administrative privileges. Digital platforms give administrators disproportionate control and power shifts from collective deliberation to platform-based control.

27 Shadow banning is a form of online moderation in which a platform limits the visibility of a user's content without informing the user. The account remains active, and posts appear normal from the user's perspective, but other users see the content far less or not at all. In the context of digital organizing, shadow banning significantly weakens mobilization efforts because messages, calls to action, and advocacy posts do not reach the intended audience. This reduction in visibility hinders collective engagement, suppress organizing momentum, and limit the ability of worker groups to build discursive and networked power online.

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35 McCauley, D., & Heffron, R. (2018). Just transition: Integrating climate, energy and environmental justice. *Energy policy, 119*, 1-7.

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41 The Executive Committee comprise the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, President, Vice President, General Secretary, Treasurer, PRO, and Legal Director. It consists of 10 members, with men holding six positions and women four. Departmental leadership roles account for approximately 24 individuals, with a near balanced gender composition of 13 men and 11 women. Continental and regional coordination positions comprise around 13 leaders, of whom eight are men and five are women. Country based and diaspora representative roles account for a further 15 leaders, with men occupying 11 positions and women four.

42 The *kafala* system is a labor sponsorship framework historically used in several Gulf countries, under which a migrant worker's legal residency and employment status are tied to a single employer (*kafeel*). This system grants employers' significant control over workers' mobility, including the ability to change jobs or exit the country, and has been widely criticised by human rights organizations for enabling exploitation, forced labor–like conditions, and abuse, particularly among domestic and care workers.

43 https://bentsienchill.com/domestic-workers-regulations

44 LAWA, which stands for Leadership for Advocacy for Women in Africa, is anNGO of female lawyers that advocates for the rights of women and children.



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