



A. Context & Purpose

On June 18, 2026, the Global Fairness Initiative (GFI) and our partners Informal Sector Federation of Kenya (ISFEK), Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals & Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), the Amalgamated Union of Kenya Metal Workers (AUKMW) and Dataworld Research convened the Grassroots Forum on the Future of Work in Nairobi, Kenya. The forum intentionally brought together a diverse group of 180 stakeholders, with 70% of attendees representing worker organizations to ensure that lived experience was central to the conversation. Stakeholders included representatives from government, trade unions,

worker organizations, civil society, academia, the private sector, and the media, ensuring that multiple perspectives informed the dialogue.

Rooted in GFI's belief that worker voice is key to equitable and sustainable economic growth, the forum provided a unique platform for informal economy workers to shape the dialogue on Africa's rapidly changing labour landscape.

Africa stands at a critical juncture: informal employment accounts for more than 85% of all jobs across the continent¹, and in Kenya, nearly nine out of every ten new jobs created over the last five years have come from the informal sector². Yet the workers who sustain this economy remain disproportionately excluded from the conversations designed to address their needs.

The forum explored three interconnected themes: pathways to formalization and social protection; the specific realities of women and youth in the informal economy; and new and emerging forms of work reshaping employment across the continent.

B. Key Figures

67%
Youth unemployment
(2025)³

85–90%
*New jobs created over the
last five years are in the
informal sector⁴*

KES 2–2.5 trillion
Estimated annual value
of unpaid care work⁵

C. Voices from the Forum

“Your future is in your hands, and retirement is your own responsibility.”

Millicent Awiti

GM Strategy, Research & Risk, NSSF

“Can work really provide dignity, decent work, and innovation? How decent are the realities of work in Kenya today?”

Jacqueline Wamai

Regional Coordinator, ILAW

"Inclusion must be valued for its substance and impact, not simply counted as numbers."

Rachel Keeru

Researcher, Women Economic Hub,
University of Nairobi

"Existing laws still fail to adequately address the informal economy."

Joshua Ombuya,

Representative, Amalgamated Union of
Kenya Metal Workers (AUKMW)



"Your skill is your capital – we need to organize, unite, and influence."

Hillary Oluoch Oketch,

General Secretary,
Ambira Juakali Workers Association

D. Key Insights

i. Social Protection Systems must evolve

Participants noted that current social protection systems still fall short of addressing the realities of informal and platform work. While programs like the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and the Social Health Authority (SHA) provide an important base, workers spoke of affordability challenges, administrative barriers, and the difficulty of fitting irregular incomes into rigid schemes. Many welcomed NSSF's HabaHaba initiative which allows contributions from as little as KES 25 a day as a step toward flexibility and inclusion. Yet awareness remains low, and uptake limited, underscoring the need for stronger outreach and genuine worker involvement if its promise is to be realized.



ii. Formalization Must Be A Pathway

Participants consistently reframed formalization not as a compliance exercise but as a route to dignity, opportunity, and access to services. Key barriers include costly and complex registration processes, punitive enforcement by county authorities, lack of designated trading spaces, and skills that go unrecognized for lack of formal certification. The Jua Kali sector that employs millions of skilled youth remains largely excluded from resource allocation despite

underpinning broader economic activity. Workers called for incentives, simplified pathways, and a national federation to give informal economy workers a unified policy voice.

iii. Platform Work Is Outpacing Policy

The rapid growth of gig and platform-based work has created a legal grey zone. Workers classified as 'independent contractors' are denied minimum wage, maternity leave, social security, and collective bargaining rights despite being algorithmically managed and monitored. Customer ratings directly determine wages, meaning workers effectively report to an algorithm. Psychosocial hazards including burnout, PTSD from content moderation, and digital fatigue are not recognized as occupational hazards under existing frameworks. Attempts to organize collectively are actively suppressed by platform algorithms.

iv. Women and Youth Bear the Sharpest Edge of Inequality

Women and young people continue to face structural barriers that limit their participation in the labour market. Participants highlighted the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, unequal access to finance, persistent discrimination, and limited representation in decision-making, despite women accounting for nearly 80% of informal cross-border trade under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).⁶

*"Women spend up to seven times more on unpaid care and domestic work than men, yet this work remains unrecognized and unrewarded."*⁷



v. Worker Voice Matters and must be Strengthened

Despite representing the majority of Kenya's economy, informal economy workers have limited influence over the policies that govern their work. Participants raised concerns about public participation processes that rarely produce visible feedback, policy spaces that favour government-mobilized supporters over independent worker voices, and governance structures where youth, women, and persons with disabilities remain systematically underrepresented. Trade union membership was cited as the most effective existing pathway for informal economy workers to be heard.

"Workers are not bystanders; they are experts in their own right."
- Dr. Mohammed Mwamadzingi

E. Key Recommendations

Social Protection & Formalization

- Expand flexible, income-responsive social protection contributions that reflect the irregular earnings patterns of informal workers
- Simplify and digitize NSSF claims and SHA enrollment, resolving system downtime and removing barriers such as tracing former employers
- Support county-level registration and designated trading spaces for informal businesses and tradespeople
- Create recognition-of-prior-learning pathways through National Industrial Training Authority (NITA) for skilled but unpapered youth
- Establish visible, mandatory feedback mechanisms for public participation forums so workers see outcomes
- Strengthen trade unions and actively encourage informal economy workers to join them as a pathway to policy influence
- Ensure explicit inclusion of PWDs, hawkers, and other marginalized groups in all planning and policy processes

Youth and Women in Work

- Invest in affordable, accessible childcare and care infrastructure to reduce the unpaid care burden limiting women's participation
- Institutionalize meaningful participation of women and youth in labour market governance and policy design
- Scale youth entrepreneurship support through access to financing, incubation, and markets

Emerging and New Forms of Work

- Enact a Platform Workers Act formally recognizing and regulating gig and digital work in line with emerging ILC standards
- Strengthen data protection, algorithmic accountability, and digital workers' right to freedom of association
- Integrate digital literacy, responsible digital citizenship, and labour rights into education and vocational training systems
- Adapt labour inspection systems and occupational safety frameworks to cover platform and digital work environments



F. Conclusions

The Forum reaffirmed that creating an inclusive future of work requires policies that reflect workers' lived realities, stronger social protection systems, investment in skills, and collective organization.

- Policy responsiveness must be grounded in lived realities, ensuring that interventions reflect the experiences of workers rather than assumptions made on their behalf.
- Formalization should be understood as a pathway to dignity, protection, and opportunity, not a compliance or taxation exercise that penalizes the very workers it should serve.
- Skills development remains central to the future of work, requiring sustained investment across all age groups, and recognition and certification of prior skills.
- Strengthened solidarity and collective organization are essential for amplifying workers' voices in policy processes and ensuring accountability from all stakeholders.



- 1 International Labour Organization. (2024). *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office.
- 2 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Economic Survey 2025*. Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.
- 3 <https://www.fke-kenya.org/policy-issues/youth-employment>
- 4 (KNBS, 2025)
- 5 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Economic Value of Unpaid Domestic and Care Work in Kenya*. Nairobi, Kenya: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.
- 6 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2025, April 16). *The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade – Africa's blueprint for inclusive trade*. <https://www.uneca.org/stories/blog-the-afcfta-protocol-on-women-and-youth-in-trade>
- 7 (KNBS, 2025)