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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Essential Workers Without Job Protection: Workers' Power and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Indonesian Gig Workers

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**Abstract:** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has not only undermined global health but has also shaken the economy at large. Gig workers in the ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery sectors, which are predicted as future jobs and categorized as essential jobs, are one of the jobs hardest hit by COVID-19. Gig work, currently characterized as piecework and without job security, where the workers depend on daily income, makes it one of the most vulnerable jobs. So when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, their income decreased drastically, and the lack of job protection forced them to live in poverty. This article analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gig workers in Indonesia. This study uses a mixed method in data collection that was carried out by in-depth interviews (52 people), focus group discussions (two times), and surveys (290 gig workers). We found that: (a) there was a 67% decline in income during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a downward trend also occurred before the pandemic due to the end of the honeymoon period; (b) the lack of job protection during the COVID-19 pandemic forced gig workers to work longer and work harder to get bigger income opportunities; and (c) gig workers' gain position is weak due to large queues of workers (marketplace power), jobs that can be replaced by other people at any time (workplace power), and weak organization of gig workers (associational power) makes them unable to win demands for protection and rights for digital gig workers.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, gig workers, social security, workers' power, precarious work

In 2009, *the Atlantic* media described the “freelance surge” as the “industrial revolution of our time and referred to the surge as the rise of the gig economy, which caused a major shift from an agricultural mode of production to an industrial economy (Horowitz, 2011). Other mainstream media have also glorified the presence of the gig economy by calling it a sector that fulfills the entrepreneurial needs of young people with free and unfettered working relationships. The president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, said that the gig

economy is a future job that can absorb many workers and improve the national economy, so according to him, it needs to be facilitated and given convenience (Jordan, 2019). They praised the gig economy as a future job that can develop human capacity and creativity with the flexibility it provides and is able to advance the national economy.

The current gig job—a job in which the worker earns on the piece rate instead of being paid based on working time (Woodcock & Graham, 2019)—has

absorbed a lot of manpower. In the United Kingdom, it is estimated that there are around 1.1 million people working in the gig economy (Balaram et al., 2017); in the United States in 2016, it is estimated that around 8% of the population works in the gig economy, rising to 16% for people aged 18–29 over the previous year (Smith, 2016). Meanwhile, in the Global South countries, it is estimated that there are 30–40 million gig workers (Heeks, 2019). In Indonesia, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, freelancing jobs (mostly gig work) has absorbed 4.55% of the total productive workforce, or around 5.89 million people (Hadi, 2020), and is expected to continue to increase every year. In the ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery sectors, when Gojek merged with Tokopedia, Gojek showed that the number of gig workers or *Ojek Online (Ojol*, both motorcycle and car drivers) partnered with them was two million gig workers in Indonesia (Gojek, 2021). At the global level, the growth of gig workers from 2016 to 2020 is 12% per year (Online Labour Index, 2020), and it is estimated that by 2025, one out of three workers will work on digital platforms (Standing, 2016). There are at least nine preconditions that encourage the expansion of the gig economy, namely the strength of (a) workers' power and (b) state regulation, (c) the desire for flexibility, (d) gendered and racialized relationship of work, (e) consumer attitudes and preferences, (f) mass connectivity and cheap technology, (g) digital legibility of work, (h) platform infrastructure, and (i) globalization and outsourcing (Woodcock & Graham, 2019, p 21).

The glorification of the gig economy does not necessarily have a positive impact on the millions of workers who depend on this work for their livelihood. The classification of gig workers as independent contractors, not as employees, prevents gig workers from obtaining various rights and job security as formal workers receive, namely minimum wages, vacation rights, 8 hours/day working hours, overtime pay, health insurance, safe working conditions, and other protections. The gig economy model that is currently mostly run by platform companies is by paying workers according to the quantity completed or piece work and with a partnership relationship, not an employer-labor relationship (Novianto et al., 2021).

The above conditions make gig work vulnerable, which Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) referred to as a form of economy that has provided cheap labor

in which low-income people are mobilized to perform daily tasks. Meanwhile, Friedman (2014) showed in his study in the United States that gig economy work relations have increased job uncertainty and risk for gig workers. Various other academics have highlighted that the risks of work in the gig economy have been transferred and must be borne by the workers (Woodcock & Graham, 2019; Bieber & Moggia, 2021; Tran & Sokas, 2017) because the gig workers themselves provide the means of production, the risk road accidents are also the responsibility of the gig worker, and control of service assessment is left to the consumer. Thus the gig economy has enabled platform companies to avoid business risks and reduce the cost of capital as they pass it on to gig workers and consumers.

Gig workers often staged various protests to fight for their rights. Three forms of resistance are usually carried out: by demanding as employees of platform companies, by demanding various basic rights as gig workers, and by organizing gig workers to create their own platforms. In the United Kingdom, the Supreme Court decision on February 19, 2021, determined that gig workers at Uber were not independent contractors but employees of the Uber company (Barratt et al., 2021). The same thing happened in Spain, where gig workers are employees of platform companies, and they can also access and manage algorithms in work processes in the gig economy (Pinedo, 2021). Meanwhile, a gig worker cooperative in New York initiated the establishment of a self-owned platform for drivers (Conger, 2021). The formation of the platform under the auspices of the gig workers cooperative is an effort to fight exploitation and alienation carried out within the framework of platform capitalism. Various other resistances were also carried out by gig workers around the world (Chan, 2021), including gig workers in the ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery sector in Indonesia (Novianto, 2021a; Nastiti, 2017; Mustika & Savirani, 2021), to obtain decent and fair working conditions.

In the midst of various efforts to obtain protection, until now, most gig workers are still working without any job protection. The job protection in question is a guarantee in the form of pay in accordance with the components of a decent living (after costs), decent working hours (40 hours per week), social benefits, protection from risks arising from the processes of

work, not fired at any time, and freedom of association or the expression of gig worker voice.

This article describes the condition of gig workers in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Income that depends on daily wages, the absence of social security, and the lack of assistance from the government during the pandemic have made many gig workers in Indonesia drain their savings, sell their means of production (motorcycle, car, or handphone), and have to save money by reducing their daily expenses, even though this type of work is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic are categorized as essential work. This paper also explores the conditions that prevent gig workers in Indonesia from being able to win various demands for improving their working conditions using the “source workers’ power,” namely structural power (workplace and marketplace power) and associational power, approach from Wright (2000) and Silver (2003).

## Literature Review

### *Gig Workers, Precarious Job, and Workers’ Power*

The presence of transportation services for delivering goods, food, and people mediated by digital platforms has sparked a lot of debate. Some academics consider that the presence of platform-based transportation, such as Uber, is a positive thing because it has expanded the sharing economy that benefits many parties (Sundararajan, 2016). One form of benefit is the existence of “employment opportunities” (D’Cruz, 2017) for workers in the Global South as platform companies develop, such as Uber. Meanwhile, several academics have strong criticism of the work practices of platform companies. These criticisms, among others, highlight the nonsense of the sharing economy (Frenken & Schor, 2017), the misclassification that harms workers (Cherry, 2016; Dubal, 2017), control algorithms that dehumanize workers (Woodcock, 2020; Rosenblat, 2018), the myth of work flexibility (Anwar & Graham, 2021), and the vulnerabilities experienced by gig workers on the platform company (Berg, 2016; Stanford, 2017).

About work flexibility, for example, most studies of flexible work relations place the form and system of the working relationship as the latest breakthrough in the relationship between employer and employee that will benefit both parties. In this case, flexible

working relations are seen as a cheap labor market condition for companies in diversifying the number of workers they employ, increase efficiency, and able to increase the number of workers (Tjandraningsih, 2012). Meanwhile, for workers, flexibility in working relationships is claimed to make it easier for workers to determine what they want to do and what they do to fill their spare time or work time that can be adjusted to the interests of workers (Vallas, 2001).

Richard Hyman (1989), in *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, opened his analysis of labor flexibility with the questions “who benefits and who loses,” whose interests are achieved, and whose interests are not achieved. Flexible frameworks in the digital gig economy, such as ride-hailing and food delivery, create illusions (Peetz, 2019); the mention of “partners” gives the illusion of flexibility for workers to determine working hours, turn on or turn off the application so that they seem to have control over what they are doing. Behind that, the flexible working relationship described in the term “independent contractor” actually distances the company’s obligation to fulfill various obligations such as paying overtime wages, health insurance, pension insurance, and social security (Tjandraningsih, 2012). This flexible working relationship then imposes work risk on gig workers and increases the return on capital (converting the share of capital growth into labor and profits; Peetz, 2019). Flexibility that is not accompanied by decent income and job security is closely related to exploitation, often abbreviated as flexploitation (Wood et al., 2019).

Various studies have demonstrated the precarity of workers in this gig economy model (Berg, 2016; Stanford, 2017; Woodcock & Graham, 2019) and the efforts of gig workers to obtain decent and fair working conditions (Woodcock, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). However, the study was conducted under normal conditions. Our contribution to this research is to try to show the deep vulnerability of gig workers on platform-based transportation during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Another contribution of this research is to fill in the gaps from previous studies, especially from a labor process perspective (Lei, 2021; Gandini, 2019; Kougiannou & Mendonça, 2021), which looks at the vulnerability of gig workers due to information asymmetry, tight management controls (including algorithms), gamification practices, and utilization of gray space in regulation to pay cheap drivers but has not been able to explain why gig

workers accept these conditions and continue to work on the platform.

Meanwhile, several studies on gig workers in the platform-based transportation sector during the COVID-19 pandemic have been carried out by several scholars, but these studies have limitations. Studies on precarious work experienced by gig workers during the COVID-19 pandemic are mostly dominated by analyzes conducted on drivers' conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic only and do not link these vulnerabilities to the response of drivers in fighting for their rights (Huang, 2022; Apouey et al., 2020; Rachmawati et al., 2021; Parwez & Ranjan, 2021; Puram et al., 2021). This made the scholars unable to obtain the full conditions experienced by gig workers and what conditions made the vulnerability continue and actually get worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using a political economy analysis, we see that the non-fulfillment of the rights of gig workers is inseparable from the situation where the power of drivers in Indonesia tends to be weak (Novianto, 2022). The weak power of gig workers allows companies not to fulfill their basic rights and makes government policies not to defend them, even though they are called essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, when the power of gig workers is strong, it will be possible for them to win their various demands.

In this article, we analyze the gig workers' power with the approach of Wright (2000) and Silver (2003), who see that the source of workers' power comes from

two things: (a) Structural power, which is then divided into marketplace power (the power obtained from the labor market) and workplace power (the power that comes from the workplace); and (b) Associational power, the power that comes from worker associations, either pre-existing or self-organized. It is through this workers' power of workers that determines whether they get their rights during the COVID-19 pandemic or not.

## Research Method

This study uses a mixed method in data collection, namely quantitative and qualitative. This mixed method collection was carried out by in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and surveys. We have conducted this research from June–December 2020 & May–July 2021 and have conducted semi-structured interviews (52 informants) with the Indonesian government, gig worker cooperative, and gig workers. Meanwhile, our FGD was held once by inviting government officials (two people), gig worker cooperatives (three people), and gig workers (seven people, the platform company refused to attend and refused us an interview). The survey in this study was conducted on 290 gig workers in three provinces in Indonesia, namely DKI Jakarta, DI Yogyakarta, and Bali. Information about respondents in the quantitative survey is detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information of the Respondents*

Number	Respondent Information	Percentage of Respondents
1	Gender	Male: 87.9% Female: 12.1%
2	Platform Company	Gojek: 45,9% Grab: 44,8% Maxim: 9,3%
3	Education	Elementary + Middle School: 11.4% High School: 60.7% University (D3, S1, & S2): 27.9%
4	Age	17-30 years: 24.48% 31-45 years: 52.76% >46 years: 22.76%
5	Transportation type	Car drivers: 47,59% Motorcycle drivers: 52,41%
6	Type of work	Primary job: 90% Side job: 10%

The focus of our research is gig workers in the ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food-delivery sectors who work with Gojek, Grab, and Maxim companies (both motorcycle and car). The three companies were chosen because they dominate the ride-hailing and food delivery industries in Indonesia (Mutia, 2022), with a total of 2.5 million driver “partners” on Gojek, 2.5 million driver “partners” on Grab, and about half of them on Maxim (Novianto, 2023). DI Yogyakarta, DKI Jakarta, and Bali became the locus of research because they represented different socio-economic characteristics. DI Yogyakarta is a regional representation that has the lowest minimum wage value and the highest Gini ratio nationally, according to BPS (Ahdiat, 2023). DKI Jakarta is the center of government and business in Indonesia and one of the areas with the highest minimum wage. Meanwhile, Bali was chosen because it is a tourist industrial area that absorbs the number of tourists and with a medium minimum wage among the lowest minimum wages in DI Yogyakarta and one of the highest in DKI Jakarta.

In the data collection process, we used decent work indicators from the International Labor Organization (ILO) to see the condition of gig workers in the platform-based transportation sector. This decent work indicator consists of 10 items: employment opportunities; adequate earnings and productive work; decent working time; combining work, family, and personal life; work that should be abolished; stability and security of work; equal opportunity and treatment in employment; a safe work environment; social security; social dialogue, employers’ and workers’ representation (ILO, 2013). We also compared the working conditions of the gig workers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to find out the impact of the pandemic on gig workers. In this article, to protect research respondents, we anonymize all respondents’ personal identities, including names.

This research is designed to understand the condition of gig workers in the platform-based transportation sector in Indonesia and how drivers respond to the absence of job protection in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We combined a qualitative approach and a quantitative survey to obtain data that we analyzed to reach conclusions about the research findings. As was done by Schneider and Harknett (2019), we started data collection by conducting a survey, followed by semi-structured interviews. The results of the interviews in this study were coded, then

we compared them with other results to contextualize the research findings. Meanwhile, we analyze the results of the qualitative survey descriptively to show the working conditions of gig workers and compare them with indicators of decent works.

## Results

### *Gig Worker Background in Platform Transportation in Indonesia*

The gig economy in the ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery sectors began to develop in Indonesia in 2015 (Ford & Honan, 2017). At first, the platform company had difficulty finding “partner” drivers as gig workers or online motorcycle or car driver. The absence of a market for passenger, food, and goods delivery services mediated by digital platforms, uncertain incomes, and resistance from conventional transportation workers and entrepreneurs are the reasons for the lack of interest in becoming a driver in Gojek, Grab, or Uber—three platform companies that in 2015–2016 started operating in Indonesia. The low desire to become gig workers, in the midst of a large number of informal workers in Indonesia (Habibi & Juliawan, 2018), makes platform companies run two strategies. First, they had the honeymoon period through a “money-burning strategy” through various promotions and big bonuses for gig workers (Wulansari et al., 2021). During this honeymoon period, the income earned by gig workers at Gojek, Grab, and Uber is large, which has prompted many people to be interested in becoming “partner” drivers for platform companies. Second, they recruited gig workers in exchange for compensation; for example, at Gojek, online drivers who succeed in recruiting others to join as driver-partners in the platform company will be rewarded 700,000 rupiahs per person recruited. In that initial period in 2015, Paryono (one of the gig workers at Gojek) was able to recruit eight people to become gig workers (personal communication, December 12, 2020). After 2015, there was no longer any reward mechanism for those gig workers who succeeded in recruiting; instead, many people were queuing up to become gig workers.

In this early period of gig workers in platform transportation, the bargaining position of gig workers was so great. This is influenced by the lack of willingness to become gig workers, resistance from

conventional modes of transportation, and the absence of government regulations that provide legal protection for the ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery industries. The strong bargaining position of workers in this early period came from marketplace power, a condition where the labor market has not yet allowed platform companies to get many gig workers. The main focus of platform companies initially was to ensure their business ran without a hitch. Because in 2015–2016, there was often persecution of gig drivers in conventional transportation, and there is still a legal vacuum in Indonesia in regulating this industry. Various areas are also labeled “red zones,” a zone where gig workers are prohibited from picking up or dropping off passengers. In addition, various large-scale actions were also carried out by entrepreneurs and conventional transportation workers, such as those carried out by the taxi industry, *ojek pangkalan* (Opang), pedicab drivers, and others (Nastiti, 2017). Conventional transportation workers and entrepreneurs also pressured the government to stop ride-hailing operations because the transportation mode mediated by the platform violates Law No. 22 of 2009 concerning Road Traffic and Transportation and Government Regulation No. 74 of 2014 concerning Transportation. Uber, Grab, and Gojek are only registered as companies engaged in the “application” field, do not have a license to operate public transportation, the vehicles used do not have yellow plates, and the vehicles do not go through the vehicle eligibility test, so they have been banned from operating twice, namely on November 2015 and October 2017. However, through lobbying by platform companies, President Joko Widodo lifted the ban on ride-hailing operations because the platform company has absorbed a lot of manpower and is needed by many citizens. In its development, even President Joko Widodo appointed Gojek founder Nadiem Makarin as Minister of Education and Culture in 2019.

The battle between platform-based transportation versus conventional transportation was finally won by platform-based transportation companies when there were already regulations that legally regulated ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery, and most consumers switched to Grab, Uber, and Gojek. Consumers prefer platform-based transportation because of lower prices and easier shuttle processes. Meanwhile, starting in 2019, the ride-hailing industry officially received a license to operate after being regulated by the Minister of Transportation Regulation

Number PM 118 of 2018 and Minister of Transportation Regulation Number PM 12 of 2019, thus making employers and workers in conventional transportation no longer have room to press the government stopped ride-hailing from operating. After the victory of this transportation platform, resistance to gig workers has decreased drastically. Many areas that were previously “red zones” for gig workers have become free zones for them to use. Meanwhile, conventional taxi companies, such as Blue Bird, finally chose to cooperate with Grab and Gojek.

The resistance to the problems in the gig economy was initially related to efforts to open and obtain markets and obtain operating permits from the government. The consumer market is successfully achieved when it has been able to get rid of the dominance previously held by conventional transportation. This is a battle between capitalists (whether with large or small capital). Shaikh (2016) called it “real competition” when every company tries to get rid of its competitors in various ways, such as by giving lots of discounts to consumers (a “money-burning strategy”) or by selling the same product at a lower price than its competitors. The goal is that consumers prefer to use the services of that platform company compared to other companies. The impact of real competition is the creation of an oligopoly or monopoly, where companies that are not able to compete will be eliminated. It can be seen how gig companies in the field of transportation and online couriers have sprung up with small capital, many of which have collapsed and were unable to shake the dominance of Gojek and Grab (in 2018, in the Southeast Asia region, Uber merged with Grab). In 2020, Maxim was able to push between the dominance of Gojek and Grab by waging a tariff war. Maxim gained market share not through a “money-burning strategy” but by promoting cheaper fares from Gojek and Grab, where the tariffs set violated the regulation of the Minister of Transportation Number 348 of 2020.

If previously looking to finance recruitment to get a partner, now many workers are queuing up to become a partner for a platform company. With their vulnerable conditions, these informal workers, whom Marx called the reserve army of labor (Foster & McChesney, 2017), queued up to register for Gojek and Grab. Their reason is that this gig work in 2015–2018 (in the honeymoon period) provided a higher income than their previous job and more flexible working hours. In fact, many people who cannot (because their partners have

terminated their accounts) or want to register with Grab and Gojek but cannot (because there is no opening to become a driver-partner) are willing to rent an account to buy Gojek and Grab driver accounts which cost between 1.5-2.5 million rupiah for motorcycle accounts, and 3-4 million rupiah for car accounts.

### ***Working Conditions of Gig Workers Before the COVID-19 Pandemic***

From 2015 to 2018, gig work in the ride-hailing and food delivery sector is a job that promises a sizable income. Gig workers, based on the results of our survey, showed that in 2018 their average gross income per day was 315,713 rupiah for 12.19 hours of work. Meanwhile, workers with four-wheeled vehicles in 2018 earned an average of 581,892 rupiah/day for 12 working hours. Rinto, a motorbike gig worker, shared his experience, that “in 2018, you could earn 10 million per month, almost equivalent to the salary of a mid-scale company manager.”

High incomes have made many people leave their old jobs to work as gig workers at Gojek or Grab. Sabrina, a 47-year-old woman, was even willing to leave her permanent job with a salary of 6 million rupiah/month at a private company in 2017 to work as a gig worker in Gojek. Kemal (44 year) did the same, who in 2016 left his job as a distribution officer at a cigarette company whose wages were 5 million/month, considering that gig workers would earn him a higher income and allow him more time for his family. Even though they do not get a minimum wage, decent working hours, overtime pay, paid vacation rights, and social security, their high income subsidizes the various benefits they do not get. This is in the midst of the fact that the labor structure in Indonesia is fragile, with a minimum wage that does not represent a decent living component, an abundant reserve army of labor (Habibi & Juliawan, 2018), and wage inequality between regions (Wulansari, 2021). That is why when Gojek and Grab opened registration, thousands of people queued up to register as driver-partners.

However, the success and happy story of the high income of gig workers at Grab and Gojek did not last long. Over time, platform companies began to pull the brakes on the “money-burning strategy” (honeymoon period) by reducing bonuses, increasing the prerequisites for getting bonuses, remaining stagnant basic rates, adding costs for consumers, and increasing rents. From 2018 to 2019, our survey

showed a decline in income even though gig workers had increased their working hours. At the end of 2019, Sabrina expressed her disappointment with the policy of the platform company because the change in policy made it difficult for her to pay for the car loan that she used as a vehicle to become a gig worker. The survey results showed that almost 84.83% of gig workers felt aggrieved by the unilateral policy change from the platform company. In this context, the concept of partnership between platform companies and online drivers is being questioned. If in the past the protests were more frequent with a focus on platform-based transportation versus conventional transportation (Nastiti, 2017), in 2019, protests were more often directed at platform company policies that further reduced the welfare of gig workers and the rule of law from the government to protect gig workers. This can be understood that the end of the honeymoon period made the gig workers protest to get work protection and decent living conditions.

However, the protests carried out are still quite small and disorganized. This condition is because there is no strong organization of gig workers in Indonesia (weak associational power), and the gig workers place themselves in competition with each other to get orders. Algorithms controlled by the company play an important role in making gig workers compete with each other and control work processes (Woodcock, 2020). The weak political power of gig workers is also due to the large number of offers or queues to become partners (weak marketplace power), and they can be replaced at any time because their work does not require high special skills (weak workplace power), so platform companies are not afraid of lack of labor; queues also make it possible for them to apply low rates and enforce discipline.

### ***Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Condition of Gig Workers***

The weak bargaining position of Indonesian gig workers, which is influenced by the abundance of the reserve army of labor and the weak organization of gig workers, makes it possible for platform companies not to provide driver rights. As gig workers who are paid on a piece-rate basis, their income has dropped drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, because their status as partners are not employees of the platform company, they do not get job security obtained by formal workers. So when the



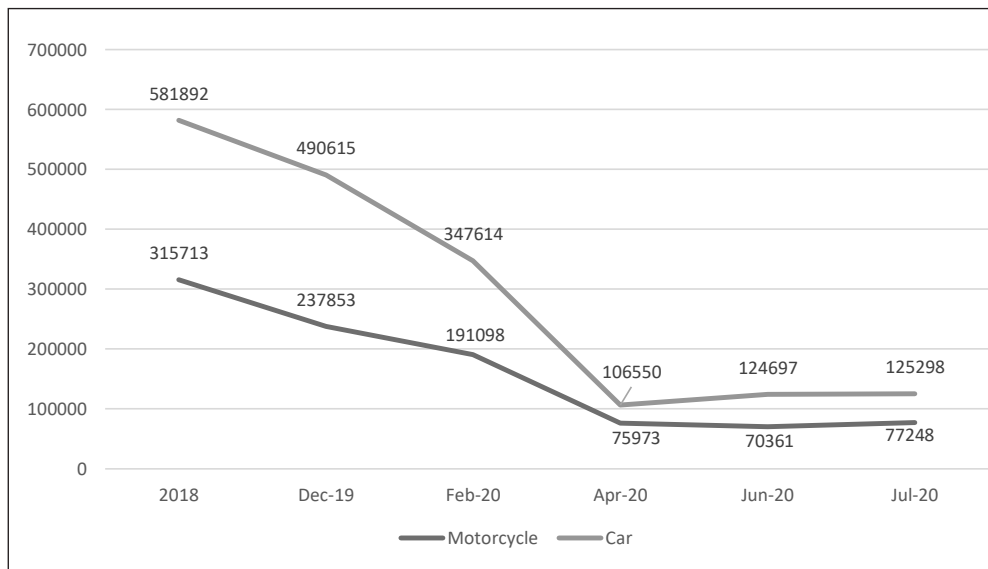
COVID-19 pandemic began in Indonesia in March 2020, workers did not receive the minimum wage due to social, causing their income to decrease drastically. On the other hand, the strength of gig workers who are still weak makes them unable to push for various work improvements and protections.

Our survey findings with the 290 gig workers show that flexible and partner relationships actually put pressure on drivers to work longer and harder at the risk of the job being entirely the responsibility of gig workers. The company's platform implements technological control over the work of workers with algorithms that make working conditions inflexible and force them to work harder and longer if they want to earn more income. Work control on workers is also carried out with bonus tools, consumer ratings, and flexibility to encourage partners to work harder and be more disciplined (Wu et al., 2019).

The absence of a guaranteed minimum income that is in accordance with the components of a decent living has caused the gig worker's income to drop drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sharpest decline occurred between February 2020 to April 2020, from an average of 226,225 rupiah/day to 89,267 rupiah/day, or a decrease of 67%. When the Indonesian government implemented the new normal policy in June 2020,

there was a slight increase in income for gig workers using cars, but there was a decrease in income for gig workers who use motorbikes from April to June 2020 (see Figure 1). The new normal policy carried out by the Indonesian government was to relax social restrictions, in which platform-based transportation is allowed to operate and drivers were considered as essential workers. However, on average, there was a slight increase in income from April 2020 to June 2020 and then July 2020, but still unable to achieve income before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The downward trend in gig worker's income did not only occur due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but before the pandemic, the downward trend had occurred. Figure 1 shows that the decline in gig worker's average income from 315,712 rupiahs/day in 2018 to 237,852 rupiahs/day in December 2019 and again fell to 191,097 rupiahs/day in February 2020. The end of the honeymoon period caused a downward trend in income. Since 2018, bonuses for drivers have been gradually cut, bonus requirements have been made more difficult, the base rate has remained stagnant, rent for platform company have been gradually increased up to 20%, and platform companies have continued to recruit new partners who will allow them to impose sanctions and discipline the gig workers.



*Note.* What is meant by “motorcycle” is a driver who uses two-wheeled motorbikes and works in ride-hailing, goods delivery, and food delivery services. Meanwhile, what is meant by “car” is a driver who uses a car and works in a ride-hailing service. The survey was conducted in June–December 2020 in three provinces in Indonesia: DI Yogyakarta, DKI Jakarta, and Bali.

**Figure 1.** Gig Workers' Revenue per Day in 2018 – 2020 (in Rupiah) in Gojek, Grab, and Maxim platforms

The honeymoon period has brought down revenue for drivers and made the platform company try to make real profits after the previous period of money-burning strategy made them lose financially.

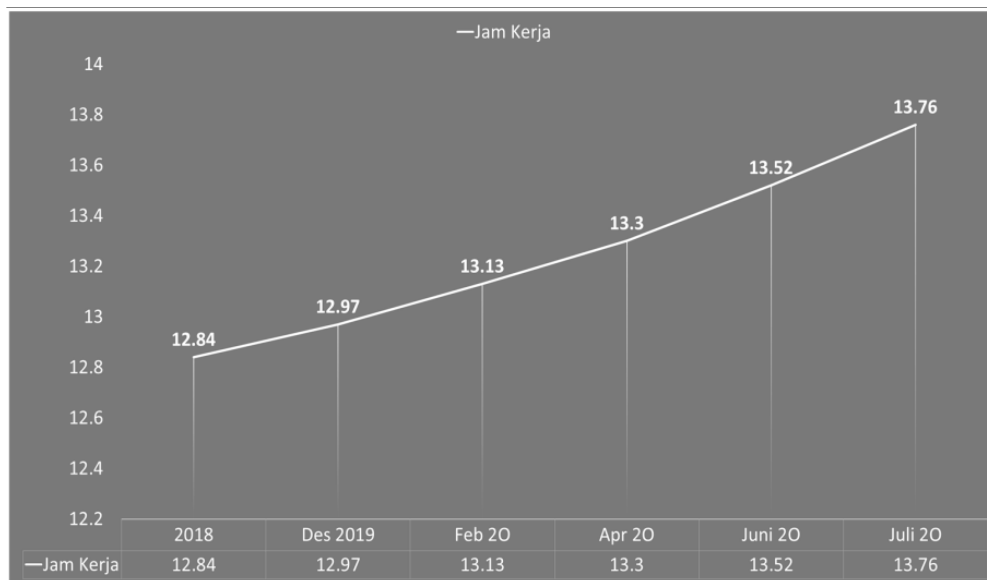
Income declined and the average working hours of gig workers increased, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because income was decreasing, gig workers tried to increase their working hours to open up opportunities to get more orders to increase their income. In 2018, the average working hours of drivers was 12.84 hours/day, increasing to 12.97 hours/day in December 2019, again increasing to 13.13 hours/day in February 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started hitting Indonesia in March 2020, the working hours of gig workers again increased to 13.3 hours/day in April 2020 and increased to 13.76 hours/day in July 2020 (see Figure 2).

In some cases we encountered, gig workers even activated the application as drivers up to 24 hours a day; Warno (54 years old) is one of them. Warno has been a gig worker at Gojek since 2016, but in April 2020, he was terminated as a partner, or his driver account was unilaterally deactivated by Gojek, because he was considered to be using a third-party application or mod application to outsmart Gojek’s algorithm system. Warno said that he did not do that, “Gojek so far cannot prove that I use the mod application. I have tried to

appeal but it was rejected.” As a result of being cut off by a Gojek partner, he finally signed up to become a gig worker at the Maxim platform company, and on the same day, he was able to start working straight away. Warno related that:

Maxim because the company is new to operating in Indonesia and does not provide discount promotions to consumers, so the demand is still small, different from Gojek or Grab. To get consumers, Maxim slams lower prices. Currently for distances up to 2 km, the cost is only 5,000 and is cut by 20%, so the driver gets 4,000 rupiah. . . . Because it’s still quiet, I activate the driver account for up to 24 hours, if I get an order while I’m sleeping, I set my cellphone so that when I get an order, my cellphone rings loudly, allowing me to wake up. After that wash your face, then serve customers. If you don’t, you won’t be able to meet your daily needs.

In addition to obtaining greater income opportunities, the algorithm systems of platform companies such as Gojek, Grab, and Maxim are designed to make gig workers work more diligently and be more disciplined. If there are gig workers who are judged not to be diligent and undisciplined because they have fewer



Note. Calculated based on the average working hours per day of Gojek, Grab, and Maxim drivers, both drivers with motorbikes and cars. The survey was conducted in June - December 2020.

Figure 1. Gig Workers’ Revenue per Day in 2018 – 2020 (in Rupiah) in Gojek, Grab, and Maxim platforms

working hours and working days, often refuse orders, and get bad reviews from consumers, then they will be “punished” to become “unprioritized to get orders” so that the daily income they receive becomes less. Such control of work carried out by platform companies makes work as a partner no longer possible to do part-time or as a side job. Our survey shows that as many as 90% of gig workers place their work as their main job, with only 10% making it a side job. Many drivers are forced to work longer hours to get a bigger opportunity to receive orders so that their driver accounts are not sanctioned by the platform company’s algorithm as “unprioritized.”

Income that depends on the number of orders offered by the platform company, with no guaranteed orders or minimal income, makes the driver’s life uncertain. Of the 290 platform workers that we surveyed, 16.3% of gig workers chose not to work as gig workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, either because they were unable to pay the cost of a vehicle loan, resulting in their vehicle being confiscated, to health problems. Another problem faced by gig workers is that they can be sanctioned and terminated by the company’s partners unilaterally, even without valid evidence. Therefore, declining and low incomes, high working hours, and lack of job security are the things that are increasingly driving the vulnerability of gig workers in Indonesia.

### ***From Vulnerability to Lack of Job Protection***

When compared to formal work regulated in the Employment Act, gig workers do not get many things, making this job vulnerable. Gig workers in Indonesia do not have job security and social protection guarantees, so they are one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gig workers in the platform economy during the COVID-19 pandemic also did not receive much social assistance and did not receive social security from the state.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, gig workers were included in the category of essential work because it served as the backbone of the delivery of goods and food when social restrictions or lockdowns were imposed. While other people are self-quarantining at home, the gig workers continue to work from house to house and continue to move on the streets: classified as an essential job but not accompanied by sufficient income. In DKI Jakarta, gig workers in the same day delivery department at Gojek only earned 1.6 million/

month (converted in 40 working hours/week and minus the cost of production facilities) in May 2021, compared to the minimum wage in DKI Jakarta, which is 4.4 million/month (Novianto, 2021b).

The status of essential work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic also threatened the health condition of gig workers. Working to deliver goods, food, and even passengers makes drivers vulnerable to being infected with COVID-19. The threat of infection does not necessarily make platform companies or the government provide health insurance and income guarantees when infected with SARS-Cov2 to gig workers. Our survey shows that only 54.48% have privately financed health insurance and a year after the pandemic, many gig workers do not have health insurance and no longer pay their regular insurance dues due to declining income (Kusnanto, personal communication, August 13, 2021). Meanwhile, regarding the fulfillment of daily life support, when a gig worker is infected with COVID-19, there is no guarantee of income or provisions governing social assistance or cash to gig workers in the platform economy.

Platform companies, such as Gojek and Grab, implement a policy of financial assistance when a driver is positive for Sars-Cov2 infection. The funding assistance is more of a philanthropic nature because there is no mandatory provision of funds to meet the subsistence needs set by the Indonesian government for platform companies. This is what makes the amount of funds for gig workers infected with COVID-19 different between Grab and Gojek. Besides, platform companies such as InDriver, Lalamove, Mr. Speedy, Maxim, and Jogja Kita do not have a policy regarding cash assistance for drivers infected with COVID-19. At Gojek, assistance for motorcycle drivers who are positive for COVID-19 is IDR 1.4 million and IDR 2.8 million for car drivers. Meanwhile, at Grab, assistance is given to drivers who are positive for COVID-19 worth 3 million rupiahs. Yanti (a Gojek car driver) said that the assistance was far from sufficient. Moreover, the cost of the PCR test as a prerequisite for applying for assistance was charged to the driver, which amounted to around 800,000-1 million rupiah.

The problem arises when drivers who were previously positive for COVID-19 later tested negative for COVID-19. Their driver’s account is sanctioned by the platform company’s algorithm in the form of unprioritized to get orders. The sanctions that apply

to all these drivers tend to be inhumane because the drivers were positive for COVID-19 or because health problems make them unable to work for the platform during the healing period can also be sanctioned as not prioritized to get orders. Off-bidding due to illness is still categorized as an undisciplined action by the algorithm controlled by the platform company, so the driver's account is sanctioned, making it difficult to get orders. Before doing isolation and off-bid for about 14 days, gig worker Yanti's account, on average per day, could get 10-15 orders, but after self-isolation due to COVID-19 positive, his account was sanctioned with no orders by the platform company, so per day he only got 0-3 orders. The same thing was experienced by Rina (the Gojek motorbike driver); after self-isolation due to positive COVID-19, her driver's account for five days only got three orders. Meanwhile, the assistance provided by the platform company has run out during self-isolation.

The application of work sanctions, even when drivers finished isolating due to positive COVID-19, shows that even in a pandemic situation, the platform company still carries out its algorithm control. This condition is what gig workers are worried about, such as Samuel (motorbike driver from Gojek), who said that "if we are positive for COVID-19, it could be one month of not getting income, because 15 days of self-isolation, 15 days of account being sanctioned it becomes difficult to get orders because the system is judged driver during self-isolation to be undisciplined." In fact, some gig workers are afraid of being vaccinated because there are concerns that the effects of the vaccine will make them have to take a break from work for 2-4 days, and this causes them to have the potential to be penalized for not having orders because they are judged by the platform company's algorithm to be undisciplined. The problem of work control through this algorithm shows its negative side, namely being inhumane, forcing all workers to work hard and be disciplined even though their health conditions do not allow it to do so, to the point of alienating gig workers from their social life.

## Conclusion

This research shows that the current gig work in Indonesia is a precarious and unprotected job. The precariousness and lack of job protection occur

because gig workers do not get paid according to the components of a decent living, have long working hours (above 13 hours per day), can be fired at any time, and there are no social benefits. These conditions have pushed drivers in the platform economy to become one of the types of work most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, even though this work is classified as essential work during times of social distancing. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, their income fell sharply by 67% compared to before the pandemic, and as many as 16.3% of gig workers are no longer gig workers in platform transportation after losing their vehicle due to not being able to pay amortization and health issues.

Precarious and lack of job protection are influenced by the weak workers' power of gig workers in Indonesia. In terms of marketplace power, in the midst of abundant reserves of workers in Indonesia queuing up to become gig workers in platform transportation, gig workers' gaining position is weak. The same thing happens in workplace power because gig workers do not require high skills, so they are easily replaced by other backup workers. Meanwhile, in terms of associational power, the gig worker movement in Indonesia is still not strong. This was influenced by the suppression of the tradition of progressive movements in Indonesia during the counter-revolution in 1965 and the implementation of floating mass politics during the Suharto regime (1965-1998), thus making gig workers start learning from scratch to build a trade union. Weak associational power is related to gig workers' weak gaining position, which makes them unable to improve their work vulnerabilities and encourage job protection and decent and fair working conditions.

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## Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

## Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by our institution.

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