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Urban gig workers in Indonesia during COVID-19

The experience of online 'ojek' drivers

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses case study evidence to examine how COVID-19 has impacted on the working conditions of urban gig workers (online 'ojek' riders). Initial findings suggest that the platform companies use the term 'partner' to commandeer low-cost labour and thereby avoid the obligations required of a contract of employment, and that this vulnerability has become more evident in COVID-19 pandemic conditions. The findings suggest that the platform companies should pay more attention to worker feedback to create a better working environment, as decent work will better be achieved with responsible corporate governance, good management, and strong worker-management relationships.

KEY WORDS

Gig workers, online drivers, urban, decent work, COVID-19, job creation, motorbike taxi, transportation

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has shone a harsh light on the viability of urban agglomeration economies and the social consumption sectors that they support. Key here has been the nature of the gig economy, with its platform-mediated work on demand from individuals who do not have formal employee status, but are treated by platform providers as independent contractors. Across developed and developing economies alike, the non-employee status of gig workers has generally excluded them from employment benefits such as sick pay that would serve to insulate them against having to work should they fall ill. In emerging economies that lack an attendant welfare state safety net, these problems are especially acute.

Indonesia provides a key illustrator in this regard. In common with other emerging economies, such as Brazil and Nigeria, the period of globalisation has seen the emergence of megacities that have served to attract FDI, have a majority of jobs in the export-oriented formal sector, and have witnessed a growth of attendant service sector jobs to service these industries. The same cities have also seen considerable slum development as rural migrants seek better employment opportunities in crowded urban areas. Jakarta alone saw its population increase four-fold between 1975 and 2015 to over 10 million (McCarthy, 2003; Central Intelligence Agency, 2015) and its share of GDP is currently more than one-sixth of total Indonesian GDP (Hendartyo, 2020). The appeal of Jakarta of course is reinforced by its capital city status. However, other cities, such as Yogyakarta in Java and Palembang in Sumatra, have also witnessed significant population growth in this period.

Within these emergent urban spaces in Indonesia, the gig economy has gained increasing attention since 2015, when platform-based online transportation, particularly that of the 'ojek' (motorbike taxi), first emerged in several big cities. The online ojek provides a wide range of services – not only transportation for human mobility, but also food and package delivery. For a long time, Indonesian urban society relied heavily on motorbike taxis as public transportation to avoid traffic jams and parking issues, the two most notable problems in big cities in Indonesia (Fanggidae et al., 2016). Therefore, ojek as an online platform-mediated form of transportation has been favoured for its convenience and ease of access in the urban society of Indonesia.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the online motorbike taxi received a positive response from the public, because it was seen as more affordable and fast compared to taxi cabs (Risdiyanto et al., 2019). The motorcycle taxi has its own advantages and uniqueness, such as providing door to door services, and also can reach difficult locations such as alleys and narrow roads. However, while customers experience convenience from the service, the gig workers who provide the services have a more mixed experience. A positive aspect is that the platform provides them with job opportunities, which can be challenging in large urban areas with a high degree of surplus labour. There is no validated data on how many online drivers are registered, as the platform companies never reveal the data; however, according to the President of GARDA, an online ojek drivers' association, there were around 4 million online ojek drivers in April 2020 (Nugraha, 2020), who mainly rely on this job as their primary source of income.

Against this, security and safety issues have been contentious for ojek drivers, which arises from their non-employee status. Ojek drivers are formally designated by platform providers as ‘partners’ or ‘independent contractors’. As such, they bear all the costs and risks of undertaking platform work. The implications of this are that they have to cope with any issues or problems that arise when they take an order through the application by themselves. Ojek drivers are assumed to have the ability to determine their own work conditions, including how they manage their working time; how ‘hard’ they work to achieve their target income and how they manage the risks of doing the job (such as traffic accidents and street crimes).

Two contrasting and incompatible conditions occur as the consequence of their status as partners or independent contractors. First, gig workers are far from being ‘independent’ in determining their behaviour and work conditions as they are highly controlled (Wu et al., 2019) through algorithmic management (Wood et al., 2018). As such, they are vulnerable to negative customer reviews, which could in turn lead to job loss, and are forced to work in ‘regular time’ to get bonus points. On the other hand, they are neglected in terms of job stability, security and social protection (Goods et al., 2019) because they are regarded as non-employees (De Ruyter & Brown, 2019).

The underlying vulnerability of ojek drivers has been severely exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly after the Government of Indonesia enacted large-scale social restriction measures in March and April 2020. These regulations allowed local government municipalities to apply social distancing measures after these were approved by the Ministry of Health; two provinces (DKI Jakarta and West Sumatra) and 16 main cities applied this policy.

Hence, the Government of DKI Jakarta Province imposed an interdict on ojek drivers, forbidding them to accept passengers but allowed them to continue to take and deliver packages. Similar policies were also applied in several other main cities, including Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Palembang, Bogor and Depok. The platform companies also responded to these stringent measures by removing the human mobility menu from their application. As a result of this, the drivers were faced with reduced opportunities, which in turn adversely affected their incomes.

Although the restrictions were removed after about one month, the impact of the pandemic continued to be felt by ojek drivers in that many people continued to use their own private transport (car or motorbike) in order to try to reduce their exposure to the virus. In addition, many offices continued the practice of requiring their employees to work from home, which served to depress the demand for ojek driver services still further (Pratama, 2020). Despite this, the platform companies were under no compunction to take any measures to prevent ojek drivers from losing any of their primary income.

This is the context in which this paper aims to objectively evaluate how the working conditions of ojek drivers have been impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on primary data collected via telephone interviews and on-site interviews (conducted with strict socially distanced public health protocols) with active online ojek drivers in seven main cities in Indonesia. The following section provides a review of the relevant literature, followed by discussions of methodology, data analysis, conclusions and implications for policy and practice.

Gig workers as independent contractors?

Some researchers highlight the positive impact the gig workers could bring for the economy with the flexibility and ease of use of platforms encouraging workers to become 'free agents' (e.g. Pink, 2001; Hill, 2016). These workers are argued (ibid.) to have more power and control over their working lives being able to determine when, where, how, how much work and even the type of work they want to perform (Harris & Krueger, 2015). In turn it is argued that the flexibility gig work provides leads to increased labour market participation. There is *prima facie* evidence for this in Indonesia, where platform work was first documented in 2015; within a year, the number of transportation sector workers immediately increased by 500,000 from 5.11 million to 5.61 million people (Databoks, 2016). Commensurately, Indonesia's unemployment rate fell from 6.18 per cent in August 2015 to 5.61 per cent in August 2016 (BPS, 2020), lending support to the view that platform work could serve as a way of reducing unemployment in Indonesia.

However, in practice, the 'independent' status of gig workers is highly questionable, with platform providers exerting considerable control (Wu et al., 2019), via their ability to undertake 'algorithmic control' or 'algorithmic management', as technology-based labour management is often termed (Goods et al., 2019). In online transportation, this system provides control to platform providers based on their access to data arising from customer feedback and evaluation of the journey 'quality', enabling them to rate gig workers accordingly, which directly affects their job continuity (Gandini, 2019). Platforms are also able to direct how work should be performed (Amorim & Moda, 2020), which eventually impacts on workers' incomes (Kaine & Josserand, 2019). Moreover, platform companies exercise control in terms of the policies and instructions that platform workers must follow when taking orders and interacting with customers (De Stefano, 2016).

Gig workers and COVID-19 in Indonesia

Adding to the insecurities detailed above, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the platform economy as a majority of the populace have stayed and worked from home since the Indonesian Government enacted social restrictions earlier in 2020. This affected ojek drivers in a number of ways. On the one hand, it was evident that the need for food and package delivery services by ojek drivers would rise (De Vos, 2020) as individuals switched their shopping habits to home delivery of goods purchased online (Shi et al., 2019). In a crowded urban environment during the pandemic, the reluctance to use public transport and shop in close proximity to others fuelled this demand. On the other hand, platform companies temporarily removed the human mobility feature from their apps, resulting in a sharp decline in demand for ojek drivers to taxi people to their destinations.

It is thus evident that online ojek drivers became vital in helping people to fulfil their daily needs during the pandemic (Tiku, 2020). However, against this, ojek drivers were badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic due to decreasing demand and safety concerns and lost over 60 per cent of their earnings (Moulds, 2020). With neither social safety net nor health protection (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), ojek drivers were particularly at risk of contagion through having to keep in close proximity to individuals who might have contracted COVID-19 during the pandemic. With no other employment options readily available, they continued to be at high risk of contracting the virus in order just to attain a sufficient income.

Hence, insights into the working conditions of precarious gig workers such as ojek drivers in Indonesia can reveal wider patterns in the impact of an economic disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of a contemporary urban space in an emergent economy as well as linking to wider debates over 'decent work' (De Ruyter & Rachmawati, 2020) and an accompanying appropriate welfare system. However, there is a lack of knowledge on how COVID-19 has impacted on the work experience of gig workers beyond what has been reported above. Accordingly, this paper seeks to shed light on the lived experience of ojek drivers, by drawing on qualitative primary data sourced from interviews and focus groups.

The paper aims to describe the online ojek drivers' experience in relation to decent work standards by exploring employment creation, rights at work (adequate earnings, working time and safe work environment), social security and social dialogue.

Methodology

The primary data were collected in several main cities which also serve as centres for business, tourism and education in Indonesia: Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Palembang, Bogor and Depok. Data collection was conducted in two phases: the first phase was in September–December 2019 (before the pandemic) and the second phase was conducted between April and September 2020 (during the pandemic). The first phase was primarily based on face-to-face semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 55 ojek drivers from seven different cities. The second phase of data collection was conducted primarily through platform-assisted interviews, due to the enactment of physical distancing policies. The second phase, with 27 ojek drivers, involved respondents from the same set of participants to examine the (possible) differences between two conditions, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the cities that were the subject of this research conformed with the policy of large-scale social restrictions, with different time spans. All FGDs and interviews were audio recorded with the permission and consent of participants and were subsequently transcribed.

Results

Job creation, reasons for joining the platform and independence

The data from phase 1 (which was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic) revealed a wide age range among the participants. It was evident that this type of work attracted both younger people who were seeking a foothold in the labour market and middle-aged persons who had experienced difficulty in obtaining formal sector jobs due to their age. A majority of the participants were high school graduates, reflecting the wider demographics of the unemployed in Indonesia, where a majority have matriculated (BPS, 2020). Unemployment has historically been a deep-rooted problem in Indonesia where the majority of the population is within productive age. The unemployment rate before COVID-19 was 5.3 per cent in 2018, higher than other Southeast Asia Countries (such as Thailand at 1.1 per cent, Vietnam, at 2.2 per cent and Singapore, at 2.9 per cent) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019), with youth and high school graduates dominating the unemployment profile.

Table 1: Online ojek drivers' income and working time

Phase	City	Method	Number of interviews	Gender		Range age (years old)	Average tenure (years)	Average work hours/day (hours)	Range of average income (USD)
				Male	Female				
Phase 1 (Sept–Dec 2019) Before COVID-19	Jakarta	FGD	11	11	0	26–48	2	12	71.5–428.5/month
	Surabaya	FGD	10	10	0	20–53	3	11	71.5–200/ month
	Bandung	IDI	2	2	0	20–31	2	12	133–400/ month
	Yogyakarta	FGD	9	8	1	19–56	2	12	71.5–286/ month
	Palembang	IDI	3	3	0	19–21	2	10	71.5–200/ month
	Bogor	FGD	10	10	0	19–46	2	12	71.5–286/ month
	Depok	FGD	10	10	0	26–56	2	12	71.5–357 /month
	Jakarta	IDI	5	4	1	33–48	2	12	0–3/day
	Surabaya	IDI	3	3	0	40–53	3	12	0–3/day
	Bandung	IDI	3	3	0	19–39	2	12	3–7/day
Phase 2 (April–September 2020) Post-COVID-19	Yogyakarta	IDI	3	2	1	26–46	2	12	4/day
	Palembang	IDI	3	3	0	19–21	2	8	0–7/day
	Bogor	IDI	3	2	1	30–47	2	12	14.2–21.3/ week
	Depok	IDI	7	6	1	26–46	2	10	2–5/day

Source: FGDs and interviews

In this context it was therefore not surprising that, due to the difficulty of finding work, a majority of participants stated that being an ojek driver was their primary source of income. The lenient job requirements, including age as well as skills and educational attainment, were the main reasons why a majority of participants became ojek drivers:

First, because it was really hard to find a job. But it was very easy to join the platform companies. Second, my previous company went bankrupt so I was forced to find another job. Third, as I am too old, no company will accept me except the platform company. (FGD Participant 1, phase 1, Male, Surabaya)

Furthermore, short-term contracts had also characterised employment in the formal sector, particularly after the implementation of the Labour Act No. 13 Year 2003. Although there is no official data on this trend, data from ADB (Allen, 2016), which looked at the tenure of workers, showed that 40 per cent of regular employees had job tenure of 36 months or less. This condition indicates that many regular employees were employed on short-term contracts. This condition was confirmed by FGD participants who stated that they had worked on short-term contracts and never been made permanent workers.

I've worked as a contract worker for five years and the company never made me a permanent worker. Then I think it would be better to become an online driver. (FGD Participant 3, phase 1. Male, Jakarta)

However, after they joined the platform, the participants realised that performing in the job was not as easy as getting it. There are many rules they have to follow, which are mainly to warrant customers' satisfaction. For example, they are required to speak and reply directly to chat messages posted by customers, and keep their motorbikes in good condition so as to ensure customer convenience.

The Indonesian Government predicted that COVID-19 would trigger a rise in the number of the unemployed, with one estimate forecasting an increase of 5 million due to the impact of the pandemic (Ahdiat, 2020). Among many newly unemployed people, working as online ojek drivers could provide an alternative form of earnings, although there are income issues which will be explained in the next section. Furthermore, two of the biggest platform companies in Indonesia have restricted the recruitment of new drivers since mid-2020, although new (and smaller) platform companies have recruited new drivers. However, there is no official data to show whether the number of online ojek drivers has increased, decreased or remained the same post-COVID-19.

Rights at work: adequate earnings, working time and a safe work environment

Turning to working conditions, during a 'normal' shift, participants worked for 12 hours a day on average. This exceeds the ordinary work time determined by Undang-Undang No. 13 Tahun 2003 (Indonesian Labour Act No. 13 Year 2003), which lays down a norm of eight hours a day, for a total of 40 hours a week. Working hours are effectively set by an algorithm which dictates that a driver must have attained a consistent pattern of working time in order to get more orders at a particular hour. If at any time the driver has taken time off or does not take orders in a consistent time pattern, then it becomes more difficult to receive additional job requests:

If during a particular month we don't take many orders, our performance would drop and worsen the scheme, so in the end it would be difficult to get orders. (Interview Participant 2, phase 1, male, Palembang)

Hence, the monthly income of our respondents was not stable – on some occasions they earned less than the minimum wage. Thus, the variability of hours worked and consequent income attainment conformed to a highly precarious work cycle experienced by online ojek drivers, who had limited choice for a decent job in the labour market (De Ruyter & Rachmawati, 2020).

Other than working hours and adequate earnings issues, the participants also reported that they had to bear all the risks that arose from their job, such as traffic accidents or street crime. In 2017 there were more than 5,000 cases of motorbike accidents in Jakarta alone, with over 500 fatalities in 2018 (CNN, 2018). Although the platform companies could provide insurance for traffic accidents, this came with strict requirements and did not cover the driver's motorbike, even if the motorbike was badly damaged. Drivers had to spend their own money to fix their motorbikes, which were their principal means of gaining work and income. In terms of the risk of theft, if a driver's motorbike got stolen, or they were robbed, the platform company would not accept any responsibility even it occurred during the hours of work.

During the pandemic, the online ojek drivers continued to work 12 hours a day. Some informants even stated that they turned on their application from early morning to late evening, hoping to get orders for that day. However, they did not earn as much as in normal conditions. Their income severely declined due to large-scale social restrictions as the platform company removed human mobility features from the platform, which then left the drivers only with food and package delivery services. However, consistency is very important for algorithms; if prior to the pandemic drivers mainly had passenger orders, it was more difficult for them to obtain food and package delivery orders during the pandemic. Those ojek drivers who had secured food delivery orders prior to the onset of COVID-19 also found work difficult to obtain, as many restaurants were closed or had reduced their opening hours, since many customers avoided purchasing restaurant meals in order to prevent contagion. Therefore, participants in phase two of the research might not receive any delivery orders for days:

Well, during this pandemic, I rarely take orders. In a week sometimes I only get one order with 30,000 Rupiah (US \$2) at most . . . even if we activate the application for 24 hours there still aren't any orders. (Interview Participant 1, phase 2, male, Jakarta)

When social restrictions were eased or temporarily relaxed, the income of online drivers did not increase immediately, as the quarantine period had altered people's behaviour. Those returning to work in an office environment tended to avoid public transportation and chose to bring a packed lunch from home instead of using food delivery services, to avoid virus contagion.

In terms of work environment, with rising joblessness during the pandemic (the unemployment rate was predicted to jump from 4.8 per cent to 9.2 per cent by the end of 2020), the crime rate in Indonesia was also predicted to rise (Oktavianti, 2020). According to the Head of the Provincial Police of Jakarta, criminal activity, including

motorbike theft, increased by 6 per cent during the pandemic in Jakarta and surrounding cities (Motorplus-online, 2020).

Apart from the risk of crime and work accidents, during the pandemic drivers faced other risks in the form of exposure to the COVID-19 virus. During large-scale social restriction, the drivers play an important role in helping people meet their basic needs through food and package delivery services (Tiku, 2020). While working, drivers encounter many people whose health is unknown, which puts them at high risk of exposure to the virus. Despite these risks, the precarious income situation for ojek drivers means that many still search for customer orders even late at night to fulfil their daily needs:

So, to say that we're worried, of course we're worried (to get infected). But this is the matter of our basic needs, to feed our family. We have to go (to work). If we don't, we can't have anything to eat. (Interview Participant 1, phase 2, male, Surabaya)

There are national insurance schemes provided by the Indonesian Government, for which drivers could register and pay the premium themselves. However, our participants generally felt that the premium they had to pay for this insurance was too high to be affordable, relative to the uncertain income they received during the pandemic, meaning that many of them were unable to register for this.

In addition, the platform company provides guidance on health protocols that drivers must undergo while working during a pandemic through notifications in the app. The company's platform also regularly sprays disinfectant onto drivers' motorcycles and distributes medical equipment (e.g. medical masks and hand sanitisers) and vouchers to buy basic necessities. When social restrictions were eased and the driver was able to carry passengers, one platform company introduced a simple divider to separate the driver and customer called 'protect'. However, the cost of the divider used to protect the driver and the customer turned out to be borne by the driver, who had to pay for it and was made responsible if the barrier was damaged or lost.

Well, it is outside the 20 per cent fee for the platform company. We have to pay it, and if 'protect' (the divider) is damaged, we have to pay the replacement. So what is the 20 per cent fee used for? (Interview Participant 6 phase 2, female, Depok)

Despite company assurances, some participants reported difficulty in obtaining the health equipment and vouchers for basic necessities and their motorbikes had never been sprayed with disinfectant, because these services were not distributed evenly. Furthermore, the lack of a social security safety net to fall back on was noted by participants, with the last recourse being to fall back on to private charity:

[My income] decreased dramatically. If the order is cancelled, I only get nine thousand rupiahs. However, if there is an order for goods delivery, then my income is still decent. If not, then I can only hope that there are 'Hamba Allah' (generous people) who are willing to donate. (Interview Participant 2, phase 2, male, Bogor)

In this context, various philanthropic organisations reported an increase in the number of donations they received during the pandemic. For example, Dompot Dhuafa reported

an increase of 16.5 per cent in donations compared to the previous year (Tejomukti, 2020). Similarly, Kitabisa, a fundraising platform, reported that the number of donations related to the COVID-19 pandemic reached IDR 119.1 billion in mid-March 2020 (Annur, 2020). Many of the donations collected were in the form of food and were intended to help freelancers such as ojek drivers who had been unduly affected by the pandemic. Fully aware of Indonesia's generous culture, many ojek drivers actively relied on (and looked forward to) donations to support their livelihoods.

Although there is no specific assistance programme for the online ojek drivers, the Government of Indonesia provides financial assistance by giving cash through its Bantuan Langsung Tunai (BLT) programme (direct cash assistance programme). The aim of this programme is to assist those whose earnings are impacted by COVID-19, including the online ojek drivers, by providing cash of Rp 600,000 (US\$ 43) per month for three consecutive months. There are also similar local (provincial) initiatives for providing cash assistance; the Government of Jakarta Province, for example, provided cash assistance of Rp 800,000 (US\$ 57) per month for two consecutive months for its residents.

Below is a comparison of gig workers' condition of rights at work before and post-COVID-19.

Social security: stability and security of work

For ojek drivers, our findings suggest that the lived experience of platform work was generally characterised by deep insecurity about their job. Workers could be suspended by the platform provider at any time for various reasons without any proper

Table 2: Rights at work before and after COVID-19

	Before COVID-19	Post-COVID-19	Policy/Regulation
Adequate Earnings (in US \$)	71.5–286/month	0–7/day*	260–280/month
Working Hours	12 hour/day	12 hour/day	8 hour/day
Safe Work Environment	Threatened with: street accidents street criminals	Threatened with: street accidents street criminals virus contagion	
Protection	Insurance for the driver only during traffic accidents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Insurance for traffic accidents – Health protocol guidance – Health equipment – Voucher for basic necessities – Disinfectant spraying 'protect' 	Direct cash assistance programme (during pandemic)

Source: FGDs, interviews and Indonesia Labour Act 13, 2003

*Some participants stated that they sometimes could not get any orders for a whole day post-COVID-19

explanation. For example, when a customer raised a complaint about a driver and gave a poor performance rating, then the system just accepted that complaint without further investigation. In contrast, it was much more difficult for an ojek driver to file a complaint about bad treatment from a customer.

Suspensions were notified through the application and drivers were unable to access their application soon afterwards. A suspension could last from 30 minutes up to seven days. Many participants (from five out of nine focus groups/interviews) also stated that they could get a permanent suspension or be 'fired' if the system indicated that the driver had been found to have committed 'cheating' or when there was a very strong negative complaint from a customer.

Social dialogue

Finally, we consider the nature of worker representation. The status of 'partner' means that ojek drivers are not entitled to form and join a trade union. Given this situation when drivers had a grievance, some would try and express their dissatisfaction by going to the head office or branch offices. Nonetheless, there have been several incidents of unofficial industrial action in which drivers have mobilised and protested in front of platform company offices. However, these actions have had no effect on platform company policies;

The company didn't care about it. The principle of presumption of innocence does not apply to them, it is the system [algorithm] that is important for them. We could do nothing if it was the system. Yes we could raise appeals, but the company would say 'Sorry, it was the system'. (Interview Participant 2 phase 1, male, Bandung)

Even though they are not entitled to form a union by law, drivers across Indonesia still self-organise and form small, geographically-based communities. These communities serve to support each other in day-to-day work activity such as helping fellow drivers in an accident, sharing information about new updates on the app and collecting donations for those in need. These communities were seen by participants as helpful in supporting individual drivers but not strong enough to strengthen their status as gig workers by enabling them to negotiate and collectively bargain with platform companies to affect structural change (Ford & Honan, 2019).

That said, platform companies have tried to get in touch with communities across the country to discuss and hear their complaints by coming to several community gatherings. It was said that the representatives of platform companies who came to community gatherings would collect drivers' complaints and deliver them to company decision makers. Some participants saw hope in such actions, but the majority regarded them with scepticism. A majority of our participants saw these actions as little more than token gestures by the platform providers and thought that they would provide no solution to the complaints made by drivers. Furthermore, the topics discussed during these sessions were restricted to day-to-day activities such as account terminations and how to get more orders and did not provide a place for challenging workers' legal status and other industrial relation activities.

Furthermore, participants felt that the platform providers always made 'one-sided' decisions, which often disadvantaged drivers. This made many of our participants feel

that their voices were futile, as the decisions made by the platform never matched with the expectations of the online ojek drivers. This condition shows that an aspect of 'decent work', namely 'human dignity', does not apply well to gig workers.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the availability of work for online platform workers, specifically ojek drivers. In contrast to explanations that have sought to explain the growth of platform work in choice-theoretical terms, our research found that platform work was very much an inferior option for ojek drivers, and that the majority of participants undertook such work because they were unable to find a more secure footing in the labour market, namely that of a regular (permanent) job in the formal sector.

Our results also reiterate the findings of previous literature that conclude that rather than being 'independent contractors' with a high degree of control over their working lives, the balance of power lies very much with the platform provider. In this context, the use of the term 'partner' by platform providers appears to be driven by a business interest to use low-cost labour to deliver services and avoid the obligations embedded in employment law (Graham et al., 2017). To the extent that platform work is determined through a company-imposed algorithm that forces ojek drivers to work in a specific manner, such as a following consistent patterns of work and fulfilling certain incentive conditions, their freedom and autonomy to work in a desired manner is severely limited (Kaine & Josserand, 2019).

The term 'partner' also limits their ability to access voice mechanisms and, if the company provides a voice channel, it is only used as a formality and the company mostly ignores suggestions and feedback from drivers (Heiland, 2020). This suggests that they should be regarded as surrogate employees, albeit without any recourse to employment benefits such as sick pay.

The inherent vulnerability and precariousness of working as an ojek driver was made manifest by the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of our participants reported lost orders and income, primarily due to the imposition of social mobility restrictions in urban areas. With a severe accident and contagion risk, most drivers were not protected with any health insurance because they were regarded as partners, not employees (Friedman, 2014). Therefore, in a pandemic situation, they either had to protect themselves from the virus and lose their income or keep working with insufficient health protection. As a result, our findings revealed that their income fell significantly during the pandemic, yet they had little choice but to continue to take the risk. Limited job opportunities in urban environments with surplus labour, lack of skill and lack of education were the main reasons many people still depended on gig work, even though this offered them unfavourable work conditions (Goods et al., 2019).

Turning to the implications for policy, enhancing a human resources quality employment strategy that goes beyond simply trying to resurrect the urban service/social consumption economy to employ the abundant workforce in Indonesia in higher-skilled jobs would be necessary long-term to protect the workforce from being forced into precarious work (such as becoming online ojek drivers). However, the issue of COVID-19 induced unemployment and under-employment also necessitates fiscal

stimulus measures by the Indonesian Government to increase labour demand and as well as extending social welfare coverage to all workers, including gig workers and others in the informal sector (De Ruyter et al., 2017).

Regarding voice and feedback, companies must take the voice of drivers seriously not only to improve working conditions and work performance, but also because eliminating someone's opportunity to convey their voice will adversely impact the human dignity of the drivers (Wilkinson et al., 2018). There are thus clear implications for policy in terms of trying to tackle the precariousness of gig/platform work and thereby facilitate a shift to decent work in accordance with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda to meet the 'four pillars' of job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue (ILO, n.d.).

It should, however, be noted that this article's conclusion was derived from data collected from seven main cities in Indonesia that serve as centres for business, tourism and education, with a higher user of online transportation services than other cities in Indonesia. The results might differ in other cities with a lower user of online transportation services. Moreover, as a male-dominated occupation, it was hard to find female online ojek drivers; thus, this study has only five female participants. There is a possible difference between male and female workers as each has different roles in Indonesian society, which still adheres to patriarchal values. Therefore, further research could extend our findings by focussing on female workers to gain further insights into platform work and how the pandemic has impacted on the working lives of those in urban areas.

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