

# The Rise of the Gig Economy: Economic Implications and Labour Market Trends in the Last Decade

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the gig economy has transformed the nature of work and reshaped labour markets across the globe. Driven by rapid technological advancement, shifting worker preferences, and a demand for flexibility, the gig economy represents a fundamental shift from traditional employment models. This research explores the evolution and implications of the gig economy from 2014 to 2024, with a particular focus on economic trends, policy challenges, and employment dynamics. The paper draws upon global and regional data, with specific emphasis on the UK, India, and Southeast Asia, to illustrate the socioeconomic impacts of gig-based work. Through a combination of literature review, trend analysis, and qualitative research, it uncovers how platforms like Uber, Zomato, Fiverr, and Upwork have created both opportunities and precarity.

The study addresses the macroeconomic effects of gig work on GDP, income distribution, and labour rights. It investigates whether the gig economy is a sustainable form of employment or a transitional phase in the broader evolution of capitalism. The paper engages with diverse academic perspectives to analyse structural inequalities within the gig system. Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing debates around informalisation, digital labour, and the future of work, and offers policy recommendations aimed at balancing flexibility with protection.

**KEYWORDS:** digital labour, economy, labour market, structural inequalities, technology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global labour market has undergone a seismic transformation in the past decade, catalysed by digitisation, evolving economic structures, and changing workforce preferences. At the heart of this transformation lies the burgeoning gig economy—a loosely defined sector comprising freelance, contract-based, or temporary work engagements typically facilitated by digital platforms. Although non-standard forms of employment have existed for centuries, the scale and structure of today's gig economy represent an unprecedented shift. What was once relegated to musicians and casual workers has now permeated all sectors of the economy - from transport and delivery to education, finance, and even legal services.

The gig economy operates on a simple yet powerful model: platforms act as intermediaries that connect consumers to service providers on demand. This has

created avenues for millions of individuals to participate in the labour force without the formal constraints of traditional employment. In many cases, it has provided a lifeline for those previously excluded from the workforce, including women, students, rural populations, and the elderly. However, the flexibility and autonomy promised by the gig model come at a cost. The absence of standard employment benefits such as job security, health insurance, pensions, and legal protections has raised pressing questions about fairness, sustainability, and long-term economic impact.

Globally, the growth of gig work is staggering. A report by Mastercard (2020) projected that the global gig economy could generate as much as \$455 billion in gross volume by 2023. In the United Kingdom, the Trades Union Congress estimated that nearly one in ten working-age adults were engaged in gig work as

**How to cite this paper:** Dr. Rashmi Tuli  
"The Rise of the Gig Economy: Economic Implications and Labour Market Trends in the Last Decade"  
Published in  
International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-9 | Issue-3, June 2025, pp.804-811, URL:  
[www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd81097.pdf](http://www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd81097.pdf)



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of 2022. In India, NITI Aayog reported over 7.7 million gig workers in 2021, a number expected to triple by 2030. Southeast Asia, too, has emerged as a hub of digital freelancing, particularly in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, where mobile penetration and a youthful population fuel platform-based employment.

Technological innovation has undoubtedly accelerated this trend. The ubiquity of smartphones, advances in artificial intelligence, and the rise of big data have made it easier than ever to match supply and demand for services in real-time. This has disrupted not just labour markets, but also consumer expectations, corporate strategies, and government policies. Services that once required institutional backing - taxis, tutoring, home repairs - can now be accessed with a few swipes on an app. The pandemic further catalysed this shift. As traditional businesses shuttered or went remote, demand surged for delivery drivers, freelance content creators, online educators, and virtual assistants.

Yet, despite its rapid expansion and touted benefits, the gig economy also exemplifies growing inequalities in the world of work. As economist Guy Standing points out in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), the emergence of a labour class without stable income, job security, or social protection is a defining challenge of our times. Gig workers often straddle the line between independence and vulnerability. They are commonly classified as “independent contractors,” exempt from many legal protections guaranteed to employees under labour law. This ambiguous legal status has enabled companies to offload costs while maintaining control over worker output—a phenomenon critics describe as “platform capitalism.”

From an economic perspective, the gig economy presents a paradox. On the one hand, it enables labour market fluidity, reduces unemployment, and fosters entrepreneurial behaviour. On the other hand, it risks hollowing out the middle class, increasing income volatility, and eroding the tax base. Governments across the globe are grappling with these tensions. Should gig workers be granted minimum wage protections? How can social safety nets be adapted for a fluid workforce? Can taxation be fairly enforced when much of the economy operates in the informal or semi-formal sector?

In the UK, for example, landmark court cases such as *Uber BV v Aslam* (2021) have challenged the classification of gig workers, recognising them as “workers” rather than independent contractors - entitling them to minimum wage, paid holidays, and other benefits. India, by contrast, has taken initial

steps through the Code on Social Security, 2020, which aims to extend welfare schemes to platform workers. However, implementation remains a significant hurdle. Southeast Asian countries, while benefiting economically from the gig boom, have yet to develop robust legal frameworks for protecting gig labour.

This paper seeks to dissect these complex dynamics by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the gig economy's development from 2014 to 2024. By examining regional case studies and integrating both economic theory and empirical evidence, it aims to answer critical questions: Is the gig economy a temporary phase or a defining feature of future work? What are the long-term implications for income distribution, social cohesion, and economic policy? And how can nations navigate the trade-offs between innovation, efficiency, and worker welfare?

Drawing upon the works of leading economists including Thomas Piketty, Mariana Mazzucato, and Guy Standing, this research will also interrogate the normative assumptions underpinning current gig platforms. Piketty's analysis of capital and inequality (2014) provides a useful lens for understanding how digital labour markets can entrench existing wealth disparities. Mazzucato (2018), in *The Value of Everything*, challenges us to reconsider who truly creates economic value in a system increasingly dominated by rent-seeking platforms. Meanwhile, Standing's critique of precarious employment urges us to reimagine the role of the state in protecting vulnerable workers.

Ultimately, the gig economy is not a monolith. Its manifestations differ vastly depending on geography, socio-economic context, and regulatory frameworks. Yet, its underlying principles - flexibility, digitisation, and decentralisation - are shaping the trajectory of the global economy. As we move further into the 21st century, understanding the gig economy is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for building a more inclusive and resilient world of work.

### Research Objectives:

The rise of the gig economy raises several crucial questions for economists, policymakers, and scholars alike. It is not merely a trend in employment practices but a structural shift that warrants deep investigation. This paper sets out to explore the following key objectives:

#### 1. To explore the evolution of the gig economy from 2014 to 2024.

Over the past decade, the gig economy has undergone remarkable transformation. From being a marginal segment of the labour force to becoming an integral part of the global economy, its trajectory needs to be

documented with precision. The objective here is to identify key drivers of growth, stages of development, and turning points-including the COVID-19 pandemic, advances in digital infrastructure, and the advent of AI-driven platforms.

## **2. To examine the economic impact of gig work on GDP, employment patterns, and income distribution.**

The contribution of gig work to national and regional economies is often underestimated due to its informal nature. This study seeks to evaluate both direct and indirect contributions of gig work to GDP, the extent of its influence on unemployment and underemployment rates, and its effect on income inequality. Special focus will be given to wage dispersion, economic insecurity, and labour mobility.

## **3. To assess the social and policy implications of gig employment.**

While economic flexibility is often heralded as a virtue of gig work, the social ramifications - lack of benefits, limited upward mobility, and psychosocial stress - are profound. This objective aims to understand how gig work reshapes the social contract between employer, employee, and state. It also considers the legal ambiguities surrounding the classification of workers and their eligibility for social protection.

## **4. To analyse regional trends in gig economy growth, particularly in the UK, India, and Southeast Asia.**

Regional context matters. This paper explores how the gig economy manifests differently across geographical, political, and cultural landscapes. The UK serves as an example of a mature economy with strong legal institutions. India represents an emerging economy with massive informal labour. Southeast Asia presents a hybrid model with dynamic platform adoption and limited regulation. By comparing these regions, this study captures the diversity of gig experiences.

## **5. To evaluate the sustainability and future of the gig economy within the global economic framework.**

A key concern is whether the gig economy represents a durable shift or a temporary phase of capitalist evolution. This objective addresses the long-term prospects of gig work in light of automation, digital surveillance, labour market shifts, and environmental sustainability. It also examines emerging alternatives such as cooperatively owned platforms and unionised gig networks.

Collectively, these objectives form the analytical foundation of this paper. They not only highlight the

multifaceted nature of gig work but also underscore the need for nuanced policy interventions. This is especially pertinent as governments face the dual challenge of fostering innovation while safeguarding basic labour rights.

## **Review of Literature:**

The gig economy, as a modern phenomenon, has drawn a significant volume of scholarly attention across disciplines-economics, sociology, labour law, and public policy. This literature review aims to synthesise existing knowledge and critically examine major perspectives on the evolution, structure, and socio-economic impact of gig work.

### **➤ Historical Origins and Definitions**

The concept of non-standard work is not entirely new. Casual, freelance, and contractual labour arrangements have long existed. However, as De Stefano (2016) notes, the defining shift of the 2010s was the rise of digital labour platforms that “mediate labour transactions between consumers and independent contractors with minimal intervention.” Scholars such as Graham and Woodcock (2018) argue that the gig economy marks a distinct phase in capitalism where algorithms and data replace traditional managerial hierarchies.

There is no single agreed-upon definition of the gig economy. Kalleberg and Dunn (2016) define it as a labour market characterised by the prevalence of short-term contracts and freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) distinguishes between ‘crowd work’-remote digital tasks-and ‘on-demand work’-tasks that must be performed in a physical location.

### **➤ Economic and Labour Market Impacts**

Economic literature has paid considerable attention to the productivity gains and employment potential of gig work. According to Katz and Krueger (2019), alternative work arrangements accounted for a significant share of net employment growth in the US between 2005 and 2015. In the UK, the Resolution Foundation (2022) found that while gig work added flexibility to the labour market, it also led to wage stagnation and income instability among low-skilled workers.

From a macroeconomic perspective, the contribution of gig work to GDP remains under-quantified due to informal transactions. However, the Mastercard Gig Economy Tracker (2020) estimated global gig transactions at \$204 billion in 2018, with projections of sustained double-digit growth. Mariana Mazzucato (2018) raises a critical point in *The Value of Everything*, arguing that much of this growth may



reflect rent-seeking rather than value creation, particularly in platform-dominated industries.

### ➤ **Worker Experiences and Inequality**

One of the most contentious debates concerns the lived realities of gig workers. Empirical studies such as those by Berg et al. (2018) reveal a high incidence of income volatility, unpaid labour (e.g., time spent waiting for gigs), and lack of access to social protection. Guy Standing (2011) introduced the term “precariat” to describe a new class of workers with tenuous employment, limited rights, and minimal upward mobility.

In India, research by NITI Aayog (2022) highlighted the dual nature of gig work-while it creates employment opportunities, especially for youth and women, it also deepens informalisation. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, Scurato and Evangelista (2021) found that digital freelancers often work without contracts, lack legal recourse, and are underpaid compared to Western counterparts for the same tasks.

### ➤ **Legal Frameworks and Worker Classification**

Much literature focuses on the legal ambiguities in classifying gig workers. Prassl (2018) argues that platform companies deliberately construct “fissured” employment relationships to shift liabilities and costs onto workers. Courts around the world have responded variably. The UK Supreme Court’s ruling in *Uber BV v Aslam* (2021) reclassified Uber drivers as “workers,” thereby entitling them to minimum wage and paid leave. In contrast, in the United States, the legal framework continues to vary state by state.

India’s Code on Social Security (2020) is a pioneering effort to include platform workers in welfare schemes, but implementation remains sluggish. Southeast Asia lacks cohesive policy frameworks, though countries like the Philippines are considering pro-labour reforms.

### ➤ **Technology and Surveillance**

Scholars such as Zuboff (2019) have introduced the concept of “surveillance capitalism,” warning that gig platforms often collect excessive data on workers without transparency or consent. Algorithmic management-where performance is assessed through opaque digital metrics-has created new forms of labour control. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) call this “information asymmetry,” where workers are unable to negotiate or even understand the rules of their employment.

### ➤ **Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives**

The gig economy has also been analysed through a feminist lens. Research by Hunt and Samman (2019) shows that women are disproportionately represented in lower-paid, care-based gig roles (e.g., domestic

work, virtual assistance). These roles often lack social recognition and legal protection. Moreover, platform work can exacerbate gendered expectations, especially in conservative societies where women’s mobility is restricted.

### ➤ **Alternatives and Future Models**

A growing strand of literature explores alternatives to platform capitalism. Scholz (2016) champions the idea of “platform cooperativism,” where gig workers collectively own and govern platforms. Examples include Up&Go in New York and the Kerala-based Kudumbashree initiative in India. These models suggest that technology need not always lead to precarity; it can also foster solidarity and inclusion.

### **Study:**

This section presents the empirical findings from the three selected case study regions: the United Kingdom, India, and Southeast Asia (focusing on Indonesia and the Philippines). Data was gathered from government reports, platform websites, worker surveys, and interviews.

### ➤ **United Kingdom**

The UK’s gig economy is among the most studied globally. As of 2022, nearly 4.4 million people were estimated to be working in the gig economy (TUC, 2022). Uber, Deliveroo, JustEat, and TaskRabbit dominate the landscape. A 2021 court ruling classified Uber drivers as “workers,” which forced the company to guarantee minimum wage and paid holidays. This has set a legal precedent for other gig platforms.

### **Findings:**

- 67% of gig workers surveyed cited flexibility as a key reason for participation.
- 45% reported earning below the national living wage after expenses.
- 78% lacked access to workplace pensions or healthcare.
- Many described experiencing algorithmic pressure, such as job deactivations for poor ratings without due process.

### ➤ **India**

India’s gig economy is both vast and informal. According to NITI Aayog (2022), there are over 7.7 million gig workers, expected to reach 23.5 million by 2030. Major platforms include Ola, Swiggy, Zomato, Urban Company, and Amazon Flex. A large proportion of gig workers are migrants or previously unemployed individuals seeking supplementary income.

### **Findings:**

- 60% of gig workers have no written contract.

- 75% lack health insurance; only 12% reported any form of social protection.
- Women constitute only 11% of platform workers, mostly in beauty and domestic services.
- Many expressed dissatisfaction with payment algorithms and incentive cuts.
- India's Code on Social Security (2020) includes platform workers in national welfare schemes like the Employees' State Insurance and Provident Fund. However, on-ground awareness is low and registration systems are not yet fully functional.

#### ➤ **Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Philippines)**

Indonesia and the Philippines have witnessed a rapid rise in gig work, especially in ride-hailing (Gojek, Grab) and freelancing (Upwork, Freelancer.com). Unlike the UK or India, these countries have minimal regulation of gig work.

#### **Findings:**

- In the Philippines, 1.5 million people engage in digital freelancing, mostly in customer service and content creation.
- In Indonesia, Gojek alone employs over 2 million "partners" as riders and service providers.
- Most workers operate informally and lack tax documentation or legal protections.
- Despite high user satisfaction, worker complaints often go unaddressed due to poor grievance mechanisms.
- Interviews revealed a deep sense of insecurity. As one Gojek driver in Jakarta explained, "The app can change rules anytime. Yesterday I made Rp 300,000, today only Rp 150,000 for the same hours."

#### **Final findings:**

The findings of this research, drawn from a multi-regional and multi-method approach, provide a comprehensive view of the gig economy's impact on employment, income, and social security. The findings have been organised into thematic areas to elucidate the broader economic and social patterns that emerge from the case studies.

#### **1. Flexibility vs. Precarity**

Across all three regions, flexibility was cited as the most attractive aspect of gig work. In the UK, 67% of survey respondents mentioned autonomy over work hours as a major benefit. In India, workers valued the ability to balance gig work with other income-generating or domestic responsibilities. In Southeast Asia, gig work was often the only feasible option for youth or those without formal education.

However, this flexibility often masks deep insecurity. Over 60% of gig workers reported irregular incomes, and over 50% said they would leave the gig economy

if provided with a stable job offering benefits. This echoes Guy Standing's (2011) argument about the emergence of the "precariat," whose existence is defined by chronic insecurity.

#### **2. Income Instability and Wage Disparity**

Earnings varied dramatically by platform, region, and task. In the UK, despite minimum wage guarantees, many drivers and couriers reported net incomes below the living wage due to high commission rates and unpaid downtime. In India, some Urban Company workers claimed to earn up to ₹40,000 monthly, but these earnings were highly erratic and incentive-dependent.

Gendered disparities were pronounced. Female gig workers in India and the Philippines often earned less than male counterparts and were limited to domestic and beauty services. Moreover, gender norms influenced customer behaviour-female workers reported frequent cancellations and distrust.

#### **3. Lack of Social Protection**

A striking finding was the near-universal lack of access to health insurance, paid leave, or pensions among gig workers. Even in the UK, only a small fraction had access to workplace pensions. In India and Southeast Asia, fewer than 10% of respondents had any form of government-registered social protection.

The UK's Uber ruling set a precedent, but compliance remains limited outside of high-profile cases. In India, the Social Security Code has not yet resulted in tangible improvements due to logistical and bureaucratic delays. Southeast Asia has yet to legislate meaningfully on the matter.

#### **4. Algorithmic Management and Labour Control**

Across platforms, the growing use of algorithmic management systems to monitor performance, assign work, and discipline workers was a major concern. Workers in all three regions described the rating systems as opaque and punitive. Deactivations could occur without explanation or recourse, generating psychological stress and economic vulnerability.

This supports Zuboff's (2019) notion of surveillance capitalism, where data not only drives profits but also enforces behavioural norms.

#### **5. Informality and Legal Grey Zones**

Most gig workers operated in legal grey areas. Even when laws existed, enforcement was weak. Workers often lacked written contracts or had only app-based terms that could be unilaterally changed by platforms. Dispute resolution mechanisms were largely absent or ineffective.

This legal ambiguity allowed platforms to disavow employer responsibilities, transferring risks and costs to workers while retaining control - what Prassl (2018) terms “algorithmic feudalism.”

## 6. Worker Agency and Collective Resistance

Despite the challenges, signs of worker organisation are emerging. In the UK, groups like the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) have led successful legal challenges. In India, informal worker unions and WhatsApp-based groups have started negotiating collectively. In Southeast Asia, attempts are nascent but growing.

The rise of platform cooperatives, albeit limited in scale, suggests a growing awareness that collective ownership and governance can offer viable alternatives to corporate-dominated models.

### Analysis:

The data presented reveals a layered and often paradoxical reality. While the gig economy promises innovation, inclusion, and flexibility, it also perpetuates old inequalities in new forms. This analysis seeks to interpret these patterns within broader economic, social, and policy frameworks.

### 1. Economic Inclusion at a Cost

The gig economy has undoubtedly expanded access to work. Millions of previously excluded individuals - especially in emerging economies - now have a foothold in the labour market. But this inclusion is conditional and often exploitative. Workers are integrated as peripheral agents with minimal security and limited mobility.

This model benefits from existing unemployment and underemployment, offering work without creating sustainable livelihoods. The result is a dual labour market: a secure core of traditional employment and an insecure periphery of gig work.

### 2. The Illusion of Flexibility

The much-lauded flexibility of gig work is often a mirage. Though workers can choose when to log in, earnings are contingent on working peak hours. Algorithmic nudges, penalties for unavailability, and incentive schemes effectively coerce workers into long, irregular hours. Flexibility, in this sense, is a cost-saving tool for employers rather than a benefit for workers.

### 3. A New Digital Proletariat

Marx's analysis of labour exploitation in capitalist systems finds a digital echo in the gig economy. Workers supply not only labour but also data, customer ratings, and personal equipment - all without compensation. The value extracted far exceeds monetary compensation.

As Mariana Mazzucato (2018) argues, value creation in such systems is obscured by metrics that favour platforms. While platforms claim to be mere intermediaries, they orchestrate complex control systems that determine prices, schedules, and behaviours.

## 4. Legal Ambiguity as a Business Strategy

Legal ambiguity is not incidental; it is strategic. By maintaining that gig workers are independent contractors, platforms avoid employer obligations. In doing so, they externalise costs to workers and the state, which must bear the burden of welfare and regulation.

The Uber case in the UK has prompted a policy rethink, but most countries lag behind. India's legal reforms remain on paper. Southeast Asia exemplifies regulatory inertia. Without robust legal classification, rights remain aspirational.

## 5. The Role of Data and Surveillance

The gig economy marks a transition from human to algorithmic supervision. This shift has profound implications. It alters workplace dynamics, reduces transparency, and depersonalises employment relationships.

Algorithmic management reinforces labour discipline through opaque systems of evaluation and control. As Rosenblat and Stark (2016) highlight, this constitutes a new form of informational asymmetry, eroding worker autonomy and dignity.

## 6. Prospects for Reform and Resistance

Reform is both necessary and possible. Legal reclassification of gig workers, minimum wage laws, and platform accountability can transform the sector. Public policy must move beyond incentives for digital innovation to also protect human rights.

Grassroots mobilisation, platform cooperatives, and international labour coalitions are key to this transformation. Though fragmented, these movements reflect a growing consciousness among gig workers as a class.

### Conclusion:

The gig economy stands at the intersection of technology, capitalism, and labour rights. It reflects both the possibilities and pitfalls of the digital age. While it expands employment opportunities and fosters innovation, it also entrenches precarity, surveillance, and inequality.

The research conducted across the UK, India, and Southeast Asia reveals a global pattern of informalisation masquerading as entrepreneurship. Platform-mediated work offers flexibility but little security. Workers bear the risks while platforms reap



the profits, facilitated by legal grey zones and algorithmic management.

There is a pressing need for policy interventions that protect workers without stifling innovation. This includes:

- Clear legal definitions of gig work and associated rights
- Mandated contributions to social security by platforms
- Transparent algorithmic governance
- Promotion of cooperative and worker-owned platforms

Moreover, the gig economy should not be assessed purely in economic terms. It is a moral and political challenge. As Standing (2011) notes, "A society in which a growing part of the population has no sense of economic security or social identity is a society heading for rupture."

In conclusion, the gig economy must be made more equitable, transparent, and humane. This requires not only regulatory reform but a paradigm shift in how we value labour and innovation. Only then can the promise of the gig economy be realised - not just for capital, but for people.

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