



Exploring Rights Issues of Delivery Riders in Davao City

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Glades Jane B. Maglunsod, ORCID No. 0009-0009-8299-6385

Doctor of Philosophy (Cand.), Graduate School of Development Management, University of Southeastern Philippines, Mintal Campus, Davao City, Philippines

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the essential role of delivery riders, who continued working despite exposure to health risks and insufficient labor protections. In the Philippines, many riders operate as "independent contractors" on digital platforms, excluding them from social security benefits, insurance, and other labor rights. This study examined the working conditions of delivery riders in Davao City, focusing on labor rights issues such as job misclassification, unfair treatment, and lack of social protections. It aims to analyze whether existing legal frameworks adequately protect delivery riders and to assess potential policy reforms. Qualitative research design was employed, utilizing Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), alongside a policy analysis of Philippine labor laws and relevant international rulings in Spain and France. The research setting covers urban delivery networks in Davao City, where gig work serves as a primary or supplementary source of income for many workers. Findings indicate that delivery riders experience long working hours, inconsistent earnings, and occupational hazards without proper protection. The misclassification of riders as independent contractors prevents them from accessing employee benefits, leaving them vulnerable to economic instability and workplace exploitation. International legal precedents, particularly rulings in Spain and France, provide a basis for reclassifying gig workers as employees, ensuring fair compensation and workplace protections. The study recommends legislative reforms to redefine the employment status of delivery riders, enforce fair wages, and improve working conditions on digital platforms. Future research should explore the financial and operational implications of gig worker reclassification and examine collective bargaining mechanisms for digital laborers in the Philippine context.

Keywords: delivery riders, gig economy, digital platforms, independent contractors, labor rights, workers' protection



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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the precarious working conditions of delivery riders in Davao City, most of whom work under crowdsourcing arrangements with no formal employment protections. Digital labor platforms have reshaped urban logistics, offering convenience at the expense of workers' rights. Studies show that platform workers face extensive labor exploitation, job insecurity, and lack of access to legal protections (Defossez, 2022).

As e-commerce boomed in the Philippines, demand for delivery services surged, yet riders continued to face long working hours, dangerous conditions, and economic instability.

Unlike traditional employees, they are excluded from benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, and job security. Furthermore, reports of maltreatment, excessive workloads, and unsafe job environments indicate human rights violations that necessitate further investigation. Despite being at the core of the business, delivery riders remain marginalized in their work arrangements.

The rise of digital labor platforms has introduced flexibility but at a cost—labor insecurity. Platform companies often classify riders as "independent contractors" rather than employees, depriving them of rights under Republic Act No. 11058 (Occupational Safety and Health Standards Law), which mandates safe

working conditions for employees, and Republic Act No. 11165 (Telecommuting Act), which acknowledges digital labor but lacks clear protections for gig workers. Additionally, the Labor Code of the Philippines provides criteria for determining employer-employee relationships, which many riders would arguably meet under the "control test" used by labor courts.

While platform companies argue that flexibility benefits riders, this study examines how such arrangements contribute to extreme financial insecurity, mental health struggles, and even cases of suicide due to work-related stress. Given these realities, it is crucial to reassess whether existing labor laws provide sufficient protection and whether legal precedents, such as those in Spain and France, could inform policy reforms in the Philippines.

Defossez (2022) has suggested that online platforms reshape daily life with numerous innovative services, which make work easier. However, it denies workers their right to regular employment status and pushes many workers to precarious working conditions. In this regard, Ermagun and Stathopoulos (2021) have pointed out that crowd selling-the innovative delivery model linked to shipments in excess transport capacity-has received attention as a solution to urban delivery challenges. It also exposes workers to the risk of exploitation. For Metro Manila alone, LTFRB estimates that around 22,000 delivery riders service the growing demand. Lockdowns shuttered thousands of micros, small, and medium enterprises when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. An Ibon Foundation report estimated 64 percent of MSMEs, employing 3.8 million workers, were immediately affected once the enhanced community quarantine was implemented in March 2020. In the meantime, the Asian Development Bank similarly reported that 60% of MSMEs have experienced "zero income" during the temporary closures and forced many workers into either gig jobs or delivery services.

Crowdsourcing, especially through platforms like Grab and Food panda, played an important

role in keeping the economy running during the pandemic. Public transportation remained limited, and thus delivery services saw a surge in demand when businesses were forced to close walk-ins altogether. The restaurants moved to online delivery, and digital platforms became inevitable in the "new normal." However, while their contribution was invaluable, the riders were largely left unattended, and their needs regarding in pursuit of fair remuneration and improved working conditions became loud.



Source: Momentum Works
Figure1 2020 Food delivery GMV in Southeast Asia
Figure 1
2020 Food Delivery GMV in Southeast Asia

LITERATURES

Human Rights Issues Faced by Delivery Drivers (2014-2024). The rise of the gig economy has exacerbated labor rights issues worldwide, with delivery drivers often facing precarious conditions. Studies from 2014 to 2024 highlight persistent challenges in both global and national contexts.

Legal Precedents and Employment Misclassification. Studies in Europe and North America have demonstrated the legal struggles of delivery drivers fighting for employee status (Aloisi, 2020). Court rulings in Spain and France have classified riders as employees rather than independent contractors, granting them social security and labor protections (Graham & Woodcock, 2018). These rulings provide a strong precedent for recognizing gig workers as employees entitled to benefits and protections.

Health and Safety Risks. Research from the International Labour Organization (2021)

underscores the high accident rates among delivery drivers due to long working hours, lack of rest periods, and unsafe road conditions. Schor (2020) found that the absence of safety regulations and the pressure to complete more deliveries often lead to severe injuries and fatalities. In addition, delivery riders experience physical strain from carrying heavy loads, prolonged exposure to pollution, and mental stress due to customer demands and unpredictable earnings.

Algorithmic Control and Wage Exploitation.

Veen, Barratt, and Goods (2020) explored how digital platforms use algorithmic management to dictate riders' earnings, limiting their bargaining power and subjecting them to wage fluctuations. The use of performance-based incentives and opaque wage structures has been found to create financial instability among workers (Chen & Sheldon, 2022). Algorithmic control also increases workload pressures, as riders must accept consecutive deliveries to meet platform requirements and avoid penalties.

Economic Precarity. The Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2020) noted that many Filipino gig workers, including delivery riders, lack savings and social protection, leaving them vulnerable to financial instability. Due to the absence of employer-provided benefits, riders must cover their own medical expenses, vehicle maintenance, and insurance. The irregularity of earnings further complicates their ability to meet daily financial needs, making them susceptible to debt and financial crises.

Workplace Maltreatment and Retaliation.

Studies by Chen and Sheldon (2022) and Tubao and Dadole (2022) documented instances of workplace mistreatment, including verbal abuse, lack of due process in employment terminations, and riders being offboarded for raising complaints. Many riders report being unfairly penalized for customer complaints, which they cannot dispute, and experiencing sudden account deactivations without explanation. Such practices undermine workers' rights to fair treatment and due process.

Legislative Efforts and Policy Gaps. While the Philippines has made attempts to address labor concerns in the gig economy, such as the Freelance Workers Protection Bill, significant gaps remain in enforcing fair wages, job security, and safety regulations. Current labor policies do not fully recognize gig workers as employees, excluding them from essential benefits such as social security, paid leave, and health insurance. Furthermore, enforcement mechanisms for labor standards in digital platform work remain weak, allowing companies to continue exploitative practices without accountability (International Labour Organization, 2021). Notably, House Bill 8817, which was approved on third reading by the Philippine House of Representatives on March 25, 2021, aims to provide better protections for freelance workers, yet its full implementation and impact on delivery riders remain uncertain.

This study builds upon these findings by analyzing the lived experiences of delivery riders in Davao City, highlighting the ongoing labor rights violations they face. By situating these issues within the global and national context, the study underscores the urgent need for policy reforms to ensure fair treatment and legal protections for gig economy workers.

Objectives of the Study. Below are the specific objectives of the study:

1. To describe the sociodemographic and socioeconomic profiles of the study participants.
2. To identify and describe the human rights abuses confronted by the study participants.
3. To determine the extent of human rights abuses experienced by the study participants.
4. To analyze variations in the extent of human rights abuses of the study participants based on sociodemographic factors.

These objectives provide a structured approach to examining the systemic challenges faced by delivery riders, ensuring that human rights abuses remain the focal point of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to examine human rights violations among delivery riders. The collected data were processed using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, and presented in percentage units for descriptive purposes. The study focused on exploring the lived experiences of delivery riders through in-depth narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of labor rights violations from a qualitative perspective.

Population and Sampling Technique. The study utilized purposive sampling to select delivery riders from various digital platform companies, including Grab, Foodpanda, J&T Express, and Flash Express. The selection criteria included active employment as a delivery rider for at least six months, ensuring familiarity with platform working conditions. A total of fifteen (15) participants engaged in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to provide collective insights into their experiences, while 5 delivery riders who had encountered direct abuses participated in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to offer in-depth personal accounts.

Research Instruments. Data was collected through three primary instruments:

1. **Focus Group Discussions (FGD).** Facilitated among fifteen (15) delivery riders to capture shared experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in navigating gig work conditions.
2. **Key Informant Interviews (KII).** Conducted with five delivery riders who have directly experienced abuses, providing first-hand accounts of exploitative labor conditions and rights violations.

Data Analysis. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools to determine the prevalence, frequency, and patterns of labor rights violations. The results were processed using SPSS.

The qualitative data collected through Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were analyzed using Dedoose, a web-based tool designed for coding, organizing, and identifying patterns in textual data. This software streamlined data management by enabling systematic categorization while preserving contextual depth. The analysis followed Saldaña's (2021) open coding process, which involved three key stages:

1. **Initial Coding.** Transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose, where text was coded line by line to identify key concepts based on recurring phrases and participant experiences.
2. **Categorization and Axial Coding.** Related codes were grouped into broader categories to highlight patterns and relationships, using axial coding to examine theme interconnections.
3. **Theme Development.** Thematic analysis, grounded in Grounded Theory, was employed to allow themes to naturally emerge, shaping the study's conclusions.

Dedoose improved the reliability and transparency of the analysis by systematically tracking coded segments and generating percentage distributions of coded responses to illustrate theme prominence. This qualitative approach ensured that findings were rooted in participants' narratives, providing a structured yet in-depth understanding of delivery riders' experiences with human rights violations.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Profile of Delivery Riders.

The participants of this study consisted of fifteen (15) delivery riders from various platforms, including Grab, Foodpanda, J&T Express, and Flash Express. The majority of them are primary breadwinners, emphasizing the economic significance of delivery work in their households. However, their classification as independent contractors restrict them from labor protections such as health insurance, paid sick leave, and job security.

Figure 1 illustrates the educational attainment of the respondents. Despite their qualifications, many riders engage in delivery work due to limited job opportunities in their field or the flexibility of gig work.

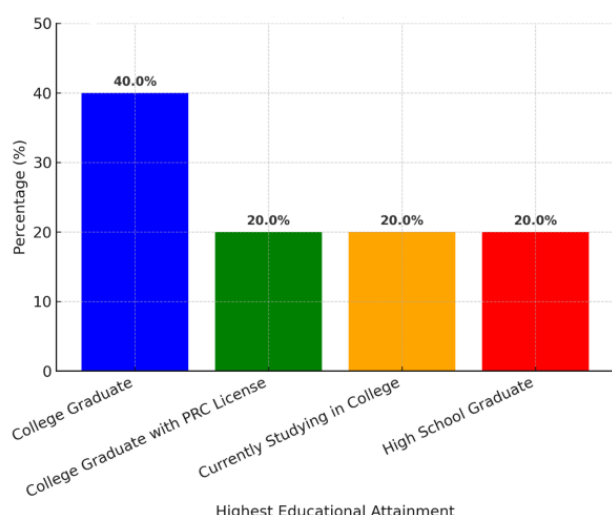


Figure 2
Educational Background of Delivery Riders

These results highlight a trend of educated individuals engaging in delivery work, either due to job scarcity or financial necessity.

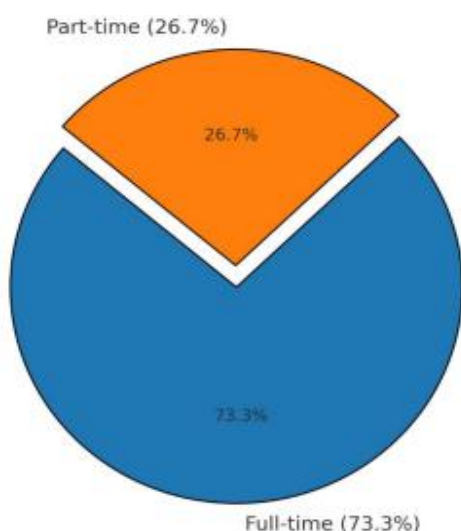


Figure 3
Employment Status of Delivery Riders

Figure 2 presents the employment status of the respondents. Most riders (73.3%) work full-time, relying solely on delivery work for income.

Socioeconomic profile of the delivery riders. This part presents the socioeconomic

background of delivery riders, focusing on their educational attainment, employment status, and financial conditions. Most participants (40%) are college graduates, while 20% hold Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) licensure. Additionally, 20% are currently studying in college, reflecting the gig economy's role in supporting students and professionals seeking alternative income sources.

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Table 1
Highest Educational Attainment of Delivery Riders

Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percentage (%)
College Graduate	6	40.0%
College Graduate with PRC Licensure	3	20.0%
Currently Studying in College	3	20.0%
Total	15	100.0%

The findings highlight that delivery riders are not limited to low-education backgrounds; rather, many are degree holders forced into gig work due to financial difficulties and limited employment opportunities.

For instance, "Kimmy," a Criminology graduate working part-time at J&T Express, struggles to make ends meet despite holding a degree. This aligns with studies (e.g., Woodcock & Graham, 2019) that emphasize the precarious nature of gig work, where platform workers lack social security and job stability despite their qualifications.

Table 2
Average Working Hours per Week

Working Hours per	Frequency	Percentage
10–20 hours	2	13.3%
21–30 hours	3	20.0%
31–40 hours	4	26.7%
More than 40 hours	6	40.0%
Total	15	100.0%

More than 40% of riders work over 40 hours per week, indicating their reliance on gig work as a primary income source.

Table 3
Monthly Income from Delivery Work

Monthly Income (PHP)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 5,000	2	13.3%
5,001 – 10,000	3	20.0%
10,001 – 15,000	5	33.3%
15,001 – 20,000	3	20.0%
Above 20,000	2	13.3%
Total	15	100.0%

The results reveal that over 50% of riders earn PHP 10,000–15,000 per month, which is below the living wage standard in many Philippine cities. Despite long hours, the gig economy fails to provide financial stability, reinforcing existing research on gig work exploitation (International Labor Organization, 2021).

Labor Rights Violations and Workplace Challenges. To assess the extent of labor rights violations, riders were asked about non-payment issues, lack of benefits, and exposure to unsafe working conditions.

Table 4
Types of Violations Experienced by Riders

Type of Violation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unpaid Wages	5	33.3%
Parcel to be Delivered is Doubled as Agreed	14	93.3%
Exposure to Road Hazards	11	73.3%
Harassment from Customers	6	40.0%
Total Respondents	15	100.0%

Findings indicate that 93.3% of riders reported receiving double the agreed-upon parcels for delivery, while 33.3% experienced wage theft or delayed payments, a common issue in platform work (Aloisi, 2019).

FGDs revealed that riders feel powerless in labor disputes due to weak enforcement of worker protections. "Lance," a Foodpanda rider, shared his experience of being underpaid for completed deliveries but had no legal recourse

due to his status as a freelancer rather than an employee.

Platform Policies and Institutional Support.

Delivery riders were asked whether they were aware of labor laws protecting them and if they had access to grievance mechanisms.

Table 5
Awareness of Labor Protections

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Aware	4	26.7%
Unaware	11	73.3%
Total	15	100.0%

The majority (73.3%) were unaware of their rights, demonstrating a gap in worker education and access to legal protection mechanisms.

Table 6
Access to Legal Support Services

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	3	20.0%
No	12	80.0%
Total	15	100.0%

Only 20% of respondents had access to legal assistance, indicating limited institutional support for gig workers facing labor disputes.

FGDs revealed that most riders lack knowledge of grievance mechanisms, making it difficult for them to report labor violations or seek redress. Riders expressed the need for associations or collective bargaining rights to advocate for better conditions.

These findings confirm that delivery riders face systemic labor rights violations due to their classification as independent contractors, resulting in low wages, job insecurity, and lack of legal protection.

Work Conditions and Economic Challenges. A heatmap (Figure 3) visualizes the common financial and occupational challenges reported by the riders. The intensity of color indicates the severity of each issue.

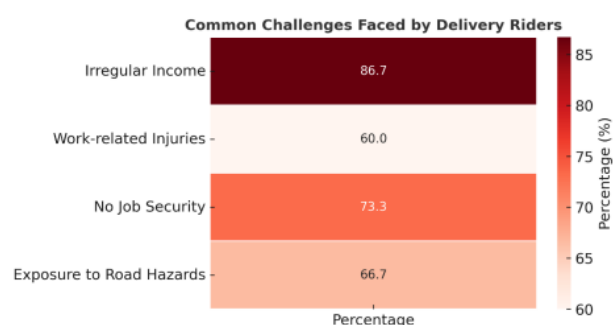


Figure 4
Common Challenges Faced by Delivery Riders

A survey of delivery riders identified the most pressing challenges affecting their financial stability, job security, and overall well-being. The data below highlights the prevalence of these issues.

Table 7
Challenges Experienced

Challenges	Percentage (%) Reporting Issue
Irregular Income	86.7%
No Job Security	73.3%
Exposure to Road Hazards	66.7%
Work-Related Injuries	60.0%

Irregular Income (86.7%). The majority of riders face income instability (86.7), as earnings are directly tied to fluctuating order volumes, algorithmic assignments, and unpredictable peak hours. This financial uncertainty makes long-term planning difficult and increases reliance on incentives that may change without warning.

No Job Security (73.3%). Most riders are classified as independent contractors rather than employees, making them ineligible for labor protections such as paid leave, health benefits, or severance pay. Sudden account suspensions and deactivations further contribute to employment precarity.

Exposure to Road Hazards (66.7%). Traffic congestion, poor infrastructure, and the pressure to meet fast delivery times increase riders' risk of accidents. Many reports frequent near-misses and collisions while navigating unsafe road conditions.

Work-Related Injuries (60.0%). Physical strain from long hours on the road, repetitive stress injuries, and accidents contribute to a high rate of work-related health issues. The lack of company-sponsored health insurance or compensation for injuries exacerbates these risks.

Key Qualitative Insights. Based on the foregoing results, the following were the key qualitative findings.

Labor Rights Violations. Key Informant Interviews (KII) revealed common workplace abuses, such as unpaid wages, sudden deactivations, and unsafe conditions.

"I was deactivated from the app without warning after a customer complained about an issue that wasn't my fault. There was no way to appeal."

Financial Insecurity and Lack of Benefits. Fifteen (15) Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants emphasized financial instability, as their earnings fluctuate based on demand, platform fees, and incentive structures.

"We work long hours, sometimes even when we're sick, because if we don't, we won't earn enough to survive."

These quantitative and qualitative results illustrate the financial precarity and occupational hazards faced by delivery riders. Their dependence on gig work, despite educational qualifications, highlights labor market gaps and employment insecurities.

Lengthy and Flexible Working Hours. Delivery riders frequently work long and unpredictable hours, especially those handling parcel deliveries. Many participants reported working beyond 10 hours per day, with some exceeding 16-hour shifts. The physically demanding nature of the job, combined with high delivery quotas and unpredictable traffic conditions, contributes to exhaustion and stress. Participants emphasized difficulties in balancing personal well-being, nutrition, and rest while meeting work demands. The lack of labor protections

exacerbates their vulnerability, making them prone to burnout and serious health concerns. This growing issue highlights the urgent need for industry regulations to prevent worker exploitation and protect gig workers' welfare.

High-Risk and Unsafe Job Conditions. By its nature, delivery work exposes riders to significant safety risks. Participants reported frequent traffic accidents, unpredictable road conditions, and unsafe delivery environments. "FIVE," a Foodpanda rider, shared that over four years, he experienced multiple accidents, often receiving little to no support from the platform. Additional risks include fraudulent bookings, unresponsive customers, and exposure to harsh weather conditions. Without employer-provided safety measures or health insurance, riders bear the full burden of medical expenses and job-related injuries, leading to severe financial instability.

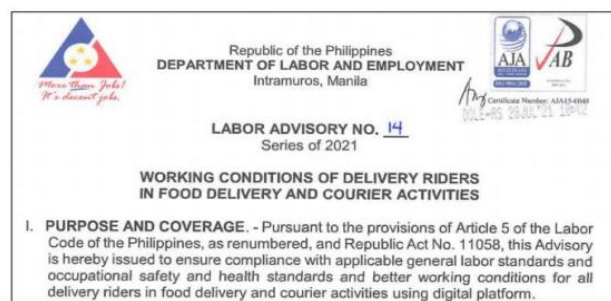
Abuse and Exploitation. Several participants recounted experiences of workplace mistreatment, ranging from verbal abuse by customers and supervisors to unjust employment practices. "Tres," a J&T Express rider, described the strict and unfair policies imposed on workers, including unpaid hours and lack of grievance mechanisms. In contrast, riders at Flash Express reported better working conditions, suggesting that labor standards vary widely across platforms. The stark differences highlight the urgent need for uniform labor regulations to protect riders from unfair treatment.

Offboarding and Rights Violations. Many riders faced arbitrary termination from digital platforms as a form of retaliation for raising concerns about wages and working conditions. "Boo" revealed that Foodpanda terminated several workers without prior notice or due process. Others reported being denied access to platform support after speaking out against unfair policies. The absence of labor unions and bargaining rights further marginalizes gig workers, leaving them vulnerable to sudden unemployment with no legal recourse.

Hunger, Maltreatment, and Human Rights Violations. One of the most alarming findings was the prevalence of hunger and maltreatment among delivery riders. "Kimmy" shared that she and her coworkers were denied access to food while working long shifts, with some collapsing from exhaustion. The dismissive attitude of platform administrators and lack of welfare provisions underscore a blatant disregard for workers' basic human rights. These findings call for immediate policy interventions to ensure food security, fair treatment, and the implementation of humane labor standards in the gig economy.

DISCUSSION

The rapid expansion of the gig economy necessitates stronger protections for workers, particularly in the digital labor sector. In response to this evolving workforce, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) issued Labor Advisory No. 14 in July 2021 to improve working conditions for delivery riders engaged in food and courier services via digital platforms. However, this advisory largely reiterates traditional employment tests that determine labor code applicability for transport network vehicle service (TNVS) workers. While these provisions attempt to extend employee benefits, they fall short of implementing robust mechanisms to safeguard TNVS drivers from exploitation and impose strict penalties on companies violating labor rights. As a result, significant legislative gaps remain unaddressed (Department of Labor and Employment, 2021).



Source: Department of Labor and Employment

Labor Advisory No. 14, Series of 2021: Working Conditions of Delivery Riders in Food Delivery

and Courier Activities (Department of Labor and Employment, 2021).

Prior to this advisory, Congress passed House Bill 8817, the Freelance Workers Protection Act, on March 25, 2021. This legislation defines freelance workers as independent service providers operating without direct control from hiring entities. The bill mandates written contracts, a 10%-night shift differential, and 25% hazard pay for deployments in risky environments. While hailed as a step forward, it fails to address fundamental issues such as job security, excessive working hours, and freedom of association. The absence of unions in the gig economy leaves freelancers with minimal bargaining power, making this a critical weakness in labor protection frameworks.

The gig economy, characterized by short-term, on-demand work through digital platforms, has redefined labor practices by shifting risks onto workers while offering flexibility. Graham and Woodcock (2018) argue that platform-based jobs expose workers to various vulnerabilities, including misclassification, precarious employment, and inadequate occupational health protections. These issues are compounded by the lack of employer accountability, leaving workers susceptible to human rights violations. Occupational health professionals emphasize the importance of implementing structured support systems to mitigate workplace hazards in non-traditional employment structures.

While digital labor platforms promise autonomy and adaptability, they often lead to instability and the erosion of workers' rights. Location-based labor platforms further introduce spatial risks, exposing delivery riders to increased traffic accidents, assaults, and hazardous work conditions. Defossez (2022) highlights the emergence of 'cyberthreats' in the gig economy, where digital platforms generate disproportionate profits by exploiting labor without adequate safeguards. This exacerbates inequalities within employment relations, where companies benefit from cost-cutting measures while workers shoulder greater economic and physical risks.

Applying Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, it becomes evident that the struggles faced by gig workers – such as low wages, unsafe job conditions, and lack of social security – hinder their ability to achieve human flourishing and dignity. Abusive work environments compromise workers' well-being, limiting their agency and eroding fundamental labor rights. The cases of Tres and Kimmy illustrate how exploitative conditions degrade worker dignity, while positive experiences – such as those at Flash Express – underscore the benefits of fair treatment and supportive work environments. Such nurturing conditions align with Nussbaum's vision of fostering human capabilities, ensuring that workers can lead dignified and fulfilling lives.

This study exposes widespread human rights violations among delivery riders, particularly regarding unsafe work conditions, low wages, and the violation of labor rights. It also highlights the social dimensions of gig work, where flexibility fosters job satisfaction and social relationships, yet does not compensate for the inherent health risks and economic insecurities. Despite these challenges, many riders prefer gig work over traditional employment, citing greater autonomy and humane treatment in the digital labor economy. However, to ensure fair and sustainable work, stronger legal protections, collective bargaining opportunities, and occupational health safeguards must be established to support workers navigating this evolving labor landscape.

Conclusion. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the human rights abuses encountered by delivery riders in Davao City, grounded in their sociodemographic profiles and varying levels of exposure to labor rights violations. The findings reveal that riders face systemic challenges, including unsafe working conditions, economic precarity, and inadequate legal protections. Moreover, the study establishes that the extent of these abuses is not uniform, with notable variations based on age, income level, employment status, and other sociodemographic factors.

By situating these findings within the broader discourse on platform labor and labor rights, this research underscores the urgent need for structural interventions. The persistence of precarious employment conditions necessitates comprehensive policy reforms that include the enforcement of fair wages, the establishment of occupational safety measures, and the formal recognition of delivery riders as employees rather than independent contractors. Furthermore, strengthening regulatory oversight and fostering collective bargaining mechanisms are critical to mitigating the exploitation embedded in platform-based work.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital labor rights and advocates for a multi-stakeholder approach – involving policymakers, labor organizations, and platform companies – to ensure equitable labor protections. Addressing these systemic issues through legislative action and institutional reform is essential to upholding the dignity and well-being of delivery riders in the evolving gig economy.

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