



# Platform economy

## Findings on the risks of forced labour for workers

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## Introduction

The platform economy, a business model centred on the use of digital platforms,<sup>1</sup> is attracting growing attention from human rights and civil society organisations, trade unions, international organisations and governments. This business model is reshaping ways of working, which evolve with technological advancements. It allows businesses to cut operating costs and expand quickly. Consumers, in turn, should enjoy greater convenience, more choice and simplified transactions.

Despite the many possible benefits for platforms and consumers, emerging evidence has shown how this business model is also leading to platform workers experiencing human and labour rights violations. These are exacerbated by the limited legal protections in this non-traditional sector, where workers are mostly (mis-)classified as independent contractors, which denies them the enjoyment of basic labour rights. Evidence suggests that workers are treated as disposable resources and managed through impersonal algorithmic systems, designed to maximise efficiency and profit for platforms. Additionally, they often have little to no control over their working conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Concerningly, a 2023 report from Equidem,<sup>3</sup> with testimonies from 43 migrant delivery workers, unveiled specific experiences of forced labour indicators in the platform delivery sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Building on desk-based research conducted by Anti-Slavery International and the evidence collected by Equidem, this paper aims to further investigate the experiences of platform workers in relation to forced labour. It does so through a snapshot analysis of the specific experiences of a small sample of delivery and ride-hailing workers in Kenya and Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> These case studies serve to test the assumption that the manifestation of forced labour indicators could result in actual cases of forced labour. We identified this as a crucial step to effectively advance discussions around comprehensive labour protections for platform workers.

In this paper, we support the argument that the platform economy is structurally exploitative, with risks of labour rights violations and potential risks to forced labour rooted in its core business model,<sup>5</sup> particularly due to the nature of the relationship between platforms and workers and the use of algorithmic management to allocate

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<sup>1</sup> See the “Glossary” section below for a comprehensive definition.

<sup>2</sup> See “The problem” section for more details.

<sup>3</sup> Equidem, [Unjust Transitions. Climate Migration, Heat Stress, and Labour Exploitation in the United Arab Emirates](#), 2023

<sup>4</sup> See the “Analytical framework” section, under “Methodology”, for more details.

<sup>5</sup> Further evidence on the manifestation of the risks faced by workers hired through intermediaries in the platform economy are laid out by Equidem, in “Realizing Decent Work in the Platform Economy – Addressing Intermediated Platform Employment in Food Delivery and Data Work.” Drawing on field research including perspectives of 224 workers across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Gulf, this briefing documents how these intermediated employment structures obscure accountability and enable forced labour, unsafe working conditions, economic exploitation, and violations of freedom of association.

work. Yet, we also acknowledge that these same elements make it difficult to capture the concrete manifestations in this sector of the concepts underpinning the definition of forced labour, i.e. involuntariness and coercion, making more research crucial to further unpack the findings and analysis this paper offers.

By having in-depth conversations with a small select group of workers in two jurisdictions, this paper hopes to contribute to the evolving discussions on decent work in the platform economy, to improve labour protections for workers by addressing the complexity of the risks to which they are exposed. It also hopes to encourage further research and analysis on how international forced labour indicators frameworks can be applied to this growing business model, including how to make sure that relevant frameworks can be contextualised and adapted to respond to the evolving and emerging business models and employer-employee relationships of the future.

## Glossary

**Algorithmic management:** the use of algorithms, i.e. a set of instructions given to a computer, to handle management tasks automatically, such as work assignments and performance evaluation.

**Debt-bondage:** Where an individual is compelled to work to repay a debt, whether earned or inherited.<sup>6</sup>

**Delivery services:** in this paper, the term refers to the provision of on-demand dispatch services, within a certain geographic radius, to consumers that have placed orders online via apps. It mostly, but not exclusively, refers to the provision of food orders.

**Digital platforms:** in this paper, the term refers to apps that facilitate interactions and transactions between consumers and workers who provide delivery services.

**Forced labour:** According to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), forced or compulsory labour is: “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.”<sup>7</sup> The ILO’s Indicators of Forced Labour<sup>8</sup> and the Hard to See, Harder to Count guidelines<sup>9</sup> present an operational definition of forced labour, and indicators to help identify it. Forced labour can also occur if someone agrees to work but once they start working, they discover that they were deceived about the

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<sup>6</sup> Anti-Slavery International, [What is bonded labour?](#)

<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organization, [C029 - Forced Labour Convention](#), 1930 (No. 29),

<sup>8</sup> Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour “[ILO indicators of Forced Labour](#)”, International Labour Organization, 2012

<sup>9</sup> International Labour Organization, [Hard to see, harder to count Handbook on forced labour surveys](#), 2024

conditions or the nature of the work and that they are not free to leave without repercussions.

**Indicators of forced labour:** The ILO's Indicators of Forced Labour lists and describes the eleven signs that can point at a situation of forced labour.<sup>10</sup> The presence of a single indicator in a given situation may in some cases imply the existence of forced labour. However, in other cases several indicators, taken together, point to a forced labour case. The ILO 2024 Hard to See, Harder to Count handbook provides a new set of non-exhaustive core indicators that could signal situations of involuntariness and coercion, both essential to determine the presence of forced labour. The handbook highlights that “no fixed list of indicators of involuntary work and coercion is valid everywhere.”<sup>11</sup>

**Ride-hailing services:** in this paper, the term refers to transportation services offered to passengers who requests rides via an app.

## The problem

The platform economy is a growing business model.<sup>12</sup> Standard business models are rapidly changing, with platform work expected to become a dominant feature in the world's future economy. Forecasting suggests that platforms could mediate over 30% of the global economy by 2029.<sup>13</sup> Food delivery, security services, care work,<sup>14</sup> and cleaning and other home services are, for example, increasingly provided through digital platforms.

This growth could bring benefits to workers. Globally, many workers see it as an opportunity for flexible employment, including due to lower requirements to access jobs.<sup>15</sup> As the use of platform models grows, however, so too are reports highlighting the labour abuses that platform workers experience, particularly providers of 'location-based services', such as food delivery and ride-hailing.<sup>16</sup>

Evidence from both the Global South and North shows that platform workers often endure extremely long working hours,<sup>17</sup> poor and insecure pay,<sup>18</sup> and threats of

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<sup>10</sup> Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour "[ILO indicators of Forced Labour](#)", International Labour Organization, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> International Labour Organization, [Hard to see, harder to count Handbook on forced labour surveys](#), 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Colback, L., [The rise of the platform economy](#), Financial Times, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Global Business Outlook, [Rise of the Platform Economy](#), 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Deutsch, V., "[Why are Care Workers Missing from the Conversations about the Gig Economy in the UK](#)", Oxfam, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> International Organisation of Employers and World Employment Confederation, [Diverse Forms of Work in the Platform Economy](#), 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Batha, E., "[UK: Migrant care workers face exploitation, long hours & fee-charging on tied visas; incl. statements from Ease Healthcare & IMTP](#)", Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024; see footnote 1 for a definition.

<sup>17</sup> Malik, N., "[When your food comes via a delivery app, the exploitation is baked right in](#)", The Guardian, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Roscoe, J., "[Reddit Is Full of DoorDashers Begging Customers for Tips](#)", VICE, 2023.

harmful consequences if they do not perform their job in the way their employer wants.<sup>19</sup>

These labour rights violations in the platform economy stem from its underlying business model, which commodifies workers, treating them as disposable resources to maximise platforms' profit.<sup>20</sup> A central feature of this business model is also the frequent misclassification of workers as independent contractors,<sup>21</sup> despite platforms often operating as "de facto" employers.<sup>22</sup> This strips workers of fundamental labour rights like social protection<sup>23</sup> and collective bargaining,<sup>24</sup> increasing their vulnerability to labour abuses. It also shifts employment-related costs onto workers, such as those related to health and safety or unpaid waiting time.<sup>25</sup>

Algorithmic management further exacerbate these issues.<sup>26</sup> This is the reliance on the use of computer-programmed systems that track data to allocate work, assess service quality, and calculate pay based on rigid performance metrics, that underpins the platform economy. Algorithmic targets are often unrealistic<sup>27</sup> and lead to workers being pushed toward precarious conditions and risks of severe labour exploitation.<sup>28</sup> This dynamic is worsened by a stark power imbalance among platforms and workers, exacerbated by a lack of accountability of platforms for workers' labour conditions and the labour rights violations they experience.

When these factors combine with weak regulations and inadequate labour protections, they create an environment ripe for severe labour abuses, including risks of forced labour. This puts at even higher risk those with limited job options or precarious status. This includes migrant workers, who face greater barriers to traditional employment,<sup>29</sup> are often excluded by labour rights protections in foreign

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<sup>19</sup> Singh, J., "[India's gig economy drivers face bust in the country's digital boom](#)" TechCrunch, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Graham, M. and Wood, A.J., "[Networked but Commodified: Digital Labour in the Remote Gig Economy](#)", New Internationalist, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Piasna, A., "[Precariousness in the Platform Economy](#)", Bristol University Press, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> This is increasingly challenged in courts across the world (see, for example: ITUC, [A closer look at the health of platform workers](#), 2025) with a significant step forward in favour of workers in the European Union, where a presumption of employment was introduced in 2024.

<sup>23</sup> PTI, "[Exploited and unprotected: Life as a gig worker](#)", The Economic Times, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Singh, J., "[India's gig economy drivers face bust in the country's digital boom](#)" TechCrunch, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Bates, O. and Florisson, R., "[Unpaid minutes are a sign of the times: financial insecurity in the gig economy](#)", Work Foundation, 2022. The issue of waiting time relates to the wider 'piece-rate pay' versus 'hourly pay' issue. This is touched upon in the case studies.

<sup>26</sup> Gong, R. and Tan, J.T., "[The Plight of Platform Workers Under Algorithmic Management in Southeast](#)", Carnegie India, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Nguyen, A. and Matescu, A., "[EXPLAINER: Algorithmic Management in the Workplace](#)", Data & Society, 2019

<sup>28</sup> Bandyopadhyay, O., [India's female gig workers: digital strike opens new battleground for better conditions](#), British Safety Council, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Latar, N.L. et al., "[New tech, old exploitation: Gig economy, algorithmic control and migrant labour](#)", Sociology Compass, 2022. A 2021 ILO report found over 70% of delivery platform workers in Argentina and Chile were migrants: see "World [Employment and Social Outlook: The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work](#)", International Labour Organization, 2021.

legislations, and may already be experiencing situations that aggravate their vulnerability to risks of forced labour, such as isolation or extreme need. A 2023 report by Equidem,<sup>30</sup> for example, documented the experiences of 43 platform workers in the delivery sector in the UAE. It found widespread indicators of forced labour, including workers having to take loans from their employers to cover the costs associated with visa and licensing fees to work, effectively tying them to the job until repayment. Some had their passports confiscated, preventing them from seeking alternative jobs. Others were deceived on the terms of employment during the recruitment process, which were not upheld upon arrival.

All these issues underscore the urgency to better understand platform workers' experiences. By examining their specific situations, and how the manifestations of forced labour indicators pose the risk of forced labour cases, we can begin to prevent emerging risks and create effective solutions to ensure they are eradicated in this growing business model.

## **Why we need to give attention to this now and what this paper aims to do**

Globally, workers and trade unions are fighting to claim platform workers' fundamental rights at local and national levels.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, at the international level, a process is underway to create a new international standard (a Convention and/or a Recommendation) on decent work in the platform economy, led by the International Labour Organization.<sup>32</sup> These discussions should ultimately lead to an internationally agreed-upon labour standard on decent work in the platform economy, establishing basic rights for platform workers. This should then bring the issue to the forefront of national agendas, with the aim of reducing the vulnerability of platform workers to labour rights abuses worldwide.

As new evidence will continue to emerge,<sup>33</sup> now is the critical time to unpack how indicators of forced labour manifest in the platform economy and whether and how they can amount to forced labour cases. If ongoing discussions fail to give sufficient attention to this problem, the risk is that workers will remain vulnerable to any potential risks of forced labour and proposed solutions fallible.

This paper was drafted to specifically inform workers, trade unions and governments working on collective bargaining and the development of normative

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<sup>30</sup> Equidem, [Unjust Transitions. Climate Migration, Heat Stress, and Labour Exploitation in the United Arab Emirates](#), 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Bandyopadhyay, O., [India's female gig workers: digital strike opens new battleground for better conditions](#), British Safety Council, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> This is a complex process (called a "double discussion procedure"), during which the Standard-Setting Committee on Decent Work in the Platform Economy will engage in discussions with governments, employers and workers in the lead up to and during the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2025 and beyond.

<sup>33</sup> See footnote no. 5 on Equidem's upcoming report.

standards. It also hopes to contribute to relevant debates, including in the context of future standard-setting discussions on platform work at the International Labour Conference (ILC), beyond 2025, to ensure potential forced labour risks are taken into account from the onset.

More broadly, this paper aims to inform the anti-slavery sector and to galvanise efforts to shed more light on this issue, foster further research, and improve protections for platform workers.

## Methodology

### Field research

This small sample field research was carried out between June and July 2024. Equidem reached out to a random selection<sup>34</sup> of 20 local workers in the delivery and ride-hailing sectors in Kenya and Indonesia, identified through their delivery-rider networks in these two countries. Due to fear of retaliation from platforms, only nine workers (4 in Kenya and 5 in Indonesia) agreed to have their experiences recorded.

All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants in private locations to respect confidentiality, in line with Equidem's duty of care policy and procedures. The workers we interviewed requested that their identity not be revealed. Accordingly, this paper uses pseudonyms to shield workers from retaliation from their employers or other actors. Where possible, Equidem researchers collected photographic evidence, including photos of their deductions and work status on their platforms.

The decision to focus this small sample field research on Indonesia and Kenya, specifically in the delivery and ride-hailing sectors, was influenced by several factors. These include:

- Equidem's ability to safely access platform workers on the ground;
- The (projected) relevance of the platform economy within the national economic context, given the growth of this sector in both countries over the past few years;<sup>35</sup>
- Providing insights from countries in different world regions, where no in-depth research on platform economy and the manifestation of forced labour indicators had already been conducted;
- The potential for future legislative changes on platform workers' status at national levels, identified at the time of study design. These are specifically

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<sup>34</sup> Workers were not selected based on specific criteria. An indistinct sample of workers was contacted, and responses were collected by those who came forward as willing to engage.

<sup>35</sup> See references no. 34 and no. 35 for an overview of the impact of platform economy in both countries.

existing gaps in the case of Kenya<sup>36</sup> and initial steps in introducing legal protections for some platform workers in Indonesia.<sup>37</sup>

This sample research was also envisioned as the foundation for a more comprehensive research project to follow, to cover a wider geographic area and other sectors (e.g. care, cleaning) that increasingly rely on digital platforms. This would allow to:

- Identify systemic patterns of labour rights abuses experienced by platform workers, through a forced labour lens, across diverse contexts and sectors;
- Draw global conclusions to increase protections for platform workers world-wide.
- Adopt a more nuanced unpacking of the application of forced labour indicators' frameworks to the platform economy.
- Driving a more targeted debate for the development of effective solutions to minimise any potential risks to forced labour.

## Analytical framework

The evidence collected through the field research was analysed to identify whether cases amounted to forced labour. This was done by examining each case study in full to identify whether indicators pointing at situations of both coercion (the means by which someone is forced to work without free or informed consent) and *involuntariness* (working conditions that the worker has not freely or fully agreed to) were present.<sup>38</sup>

The manifestation of these indicators was assessed through the guidance provided by the ILO in the 2024 version of “Hard to see, harder to count: Handbook on forced labour surveys”.<sup>39</sup> There, the ILO provides a non-exhaustive list of conditions or practices that could signal situations of involuntary work, and listings of common forms of coercion.<sup>40</sup> These are a more elaborated upon version of the well-known summarised ILO forced labour indicators.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fairwork, [Fairwork Kenya Report 2023: The Promise and Perils of Platform Work in the Kenyan Platform Economy](#), 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Fairwork, [Fairwork Indonesia Ratings 2023: Labour Standards in the Platform Economy](#) 2023.

<sup>38</sup> This reflects the ILO definition of forced labour as requiring the co-existence of instances of coercion and involuntariness. See the “Glossary” section for a full definition.

<sup>39</sup> International Labour Organization, [Hard to see, harder to count: Handbook on forced labour surveys](#), 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour “[ILO indicators of Forced Labour](#)”, International Labour Organization, 2012.



## Limitations

This paper is not intended as a comprehensive, large-scale exercise. It is an in-depth, limited-sample research project undertaken with the aim of unpacking further the issue of forced labour in relation to platform economy and prompting further research. It hopes to complement existing and upcoming evidence.

While desk research was conducted prior to the undertaking of this research, it has not been included in this report, due to constraints in time and resources. Similarly, the report does not delve into recent updates on the progress of collective action around this issue.

Concepts and definitions have been elaborated to the extent possible.

## Case studies

### Overview of cases

This section provides an overview of the findings drawn from interviews with platform workers in Kenya (four) and in Indonesia (five). As discussed in the “Methodology” section, the case studies were assessed against the 2024 ILO ‘Hard to see, harder to count’ framework on forms of involuntariness or coercion. Where possible, i.e. where explanations matched, we have used the category titles that correspond precisely to those in the 2024 ILO handbook.

The resulting analysis of these case studies is presented further below.

### Risks of involuntary working conditions

#### Hazardous or degrading working conditions

Two workers in Kenya reported having to endure unsafe working conditions, while working for a ride-hailing platform. For example, the same workers reported a lack of secure working conditions because they are unable to search clients, some of whom carry weapons. The workers reported that this exposes them to the risks of being robbed or carjacked. One worker reported rejecting orders due to security concerns at night, but that this affects their driver score – see below. Additionally, they had to tolerate customers who were smoking and vomiting while being transported, and customers who refused to open windows. These repeated behaviours expose workers to the risk of illness.

One worker in Indonesia reported that they often receive orders that are beyond the capacity of their motorbike in weight, and that they are only able to find out this information once they are dealing with the client. The same worker reported that it is impossible for them to cancel the orders, because it will affect their account performance – see below under abuse of vulnerability.

## Pay below minimum wage

Given the setup of platform work, where workers are generally considered self-employed, workers are expected to cover all the costs associated with job performance, effectively reducing their net income. These include the purchase of vehicles, petrol, internet data, as well as key essentials such as drinking water, toilet access, safety masks, etc. Alongside the adoption of 'piece-rate pay'<sup>42</sup> instead of hourly wages, this contributes to exacerbating the likelihood of income below the minimum wage.

Three out of five workers interviewed in Indonesia reported having a salary between 1.5 and 3 million IDR (ca. US\$ 89 and US\$ 178.50) a month. The minimum wage in Tangerang City, where all three workers work, is just under 5 million IDR (ca. US\$ 280).<sup>43</sup> When drivers do not have enough income to meet their daily needs, they survive by reducing expenses, food costs, taking on additional work and/or online loans.

The monthly income of all workers in Kenya reportedly amounted to at least the minimum wage. However, all workers reported feeling their incomes are not sufficient to make ends meet:

*"It's not enough that's why I sometimes do manual<sup>44</sup> because income is not sufficient to meet my family needs." Chipeta*

Living on a low income, especially when below the minimum wage, means that workers cannot afford healthy food or adequate accommodation. This is to the detriment of their health and enjoyment of their human right to a decent standard of living.

## Onerous working hours or work schedule

All workers in Indonesia reported working between 10 hours and 15 hours, 6-7 days a week.

In Kenya, some apps put limits on working hours at 12-15 hours per day.<sup>45</sup> Despite this, two workers reported working excessively long hours, one up to 12 and one up to 16 hours. However, a worker specifically complained about the hour limits put by the app as, in their view, that can limit the number of requests they receive, in turn

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<sup>42</sup> The risks associated with piece-rate pay are elaborated at p.9 in Verite's report "[Piece Rate Pay and Production Quotas in the Latin American Coffee Sector](#)", 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Hanif, I.F., [Complete List of City/Regency Minimum Wages across Java Unveiled for 2024](#), Jakarta Globe, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Here manual work refers to the physical work performed by an individual, in contrast with work delivered using machines or animals.

<sup>45</sup> While the majority of apps do not define limits to working hours, some have implemented measures that require workers to take breaks after a certain amount of time.

affecting their income. Another worker, who did not provide an indication of the hours they work, suggested that the number of hours they work is dependent on being able to earn enough to provide for their family.

One of the workers interviewed in Indonesia recently gave birth. Due to the time she had to take off, her account performance rating dropped. One of the platforms she works for implemented a policy that if an account is inactive for one consecutive month, the collaboration would be terminated. In the absence of maternity pay, this created additional pressure on this new mother to continue working despite her need to look after her child.

### **Deceptive or fraudulent recruitment**

Two workers in Indonesia reported feeling deceived by the platform, due to the failed promise of guaranteed income and/or flexibility. One of these workers felt deceived by the platform advertising which had suggested it offered partner working arrangements, i.e. operating on equal terms. In reality, they found out, they are not able to freely manage their own workload, and the platform implements a 'sanctions mechanism', i.e. unilaterally decided financial deductions or actions such as accounts deactivation, when its service delivery parameters are not met.

### **A lack of transparency on the calculation of earnings and unfair deductions**

Three workers out of four interviewed in Kenya stated that they had no control over what they earned per gig. They only learn what they earn after the delivery of the service:

*"They pay as per distance now the problems come with calculation because I don't know which criteria they use to calculate; I don't have control on that." Chipeta*

Two workers in Indonesia reported platforms applying unfair deductions to rates. Another worker reported dissatisfaction with the platform's practice of combining multiple orders in one delivery, taking off 20-30% from each order's earnings while paying the driver for one delivery only.

In addition, workers reported losing income overall to meet some orders. In Kenya, two workers reported that clients changing demands meant that they lost income, as the income they receive did not reflect the final service provided.

Furthermore, in Indonesia, two workers denounced the practice of fictitious orders. In these instances, workers receive a delivery order to be paid in cash upon delivery,

and thus workers incur the initial cost of the ordered product. However, in these fictitious orders, there is no real client at the other end to pay for the order. In these cases, the platform does not repay the work for the service provided and the loss incurred, at times imposing unrealistic rules to claim back the expenses incurred for the fictitious order.

### **Risks of coercion**

#### **Abuse of vulnerability – feeling compelled to accept orders due to fear of consequences**

All workers in Kenya reported that there were consequences for rejecting orders, while acknowledging their ability to do so, nonetheless. The consequences for this include rate deductions, account blockages and impacts on their rating score.

*“I can reject depending on the situation, but the consequences are there.” Duna*

*“Sometimes I follow my instinct especially when I get a trip at night. I feel like am not safe especially when they come in large numbers more than what is required, I sometimes choose to reject, which affects my driver score.” Juma*

*“My account was blocked for one year because I declined 41% of total requests which I don't know the criteria they are using to calculate the requests of which I declined with a [valid] reason.” Juma*

Similarly, four workers in Indonesia reported being aware of having the option to decline orders but being aware of the consequences if they refused them.

In this context, four out of five workers interviewed in Indonesia reported feeling compelled to accept orders to avoid being penalised with the account being temporarily locked, orders cancelled, reduced order allocations and/or account termination. One of these workers reported that it feels impossible for them to cancel orders for fear it will impact their account performance even when conditions are unsafe, such as when their motorbike's weight capacity is exceeded. One of these four workers did report that they do refuse a job if they have a strong reason, such as the volume and weight of goods, but that this affects their ability to receive other orders/their rating.

## **Feeling compelled to accept additional demands from clients**

Three workers in Kenya reported feeling compelled to accept additional demands from clients, such as completing additional trips and taking detours during the requested journey, even when this results in them making a financial loss/not being paid for this additional demand. The risk if they refused to accept that condition was further rate deduction and/or negative rating, and thus ultimately job termination.

*“You are forced to stop.”<sup>46</sup> It really affects the minutes and kilometres which were never calculated when she was requesting. Hence, they only pay the initial price.” Juma*

## **Abuse or manipulation of debt**

All workers in Indonesia reported having to incur debt to make ends meet, including to pay for expenses associated with performing their platform work (mobile phone, motorbike engine repairs, petrol). In three cases, the workers reported taking the loan directly through a provider collaborating with the app. The loan model works in that payments for these loans are automatically deducted from the daily income. If they have no income in one day, the deduction amount is accumulated the following day. One worker reported that “having his income automatically deducted was a form of withholding of his income.”

The online loan application requires you to use personal identity. As long as you have debt, the personal identity deposited to the online loan platform is recorded in the Indonesian government's financial services authority system. If the worker experiences failure to pay the online loan debt, their identity will be blocked, and they will not be available to apply for another loan.

In Kenya, while debt was not accumulated directly through the employment relationship, all four workers reported incurring debt to pay for the expenses associated with performing their platform work. An example is when unexpected expenses arise, such as motorbike repairs. In one case, debt was incurred due to the app providing unilaterally decided discounts to clients, which resulted in income loss to the worker:

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<sup>46</sup> Here ‘forced to stop’ means that the platform does not allow for more orders to come through so effectively a worker has to interrupt their service, even if they did not want to take a break.

*“That is the main challenge. I faced this because the app gives clients offers and maybe that day, I don’t have money to even add fuel to my car. It leaves me with no option but to borrow.” Jade*

## **Analysis**

Some workers appreciate the flexibility provided by platform work and the low barriers to entry, conveying a sense of empowerment and independence from being able to enjoy flexible hours and earn an income, albeit limited, in situations where there are no alternatives.

However, the preliminary findings from the field research suggest that there are serious risks of forced labour, including debt-bondage, in the platform economy.

The case studies collected warrant particular attention towards the manifestation of the risk of *abuse of workers’ vulnerability* by platforms. The evidence collected suggests that platforms take advantage of workers’ reliance on platform work to meet their basic needs, such as to provide for their families and repay debts, to put them in situations of *involuntary working conditions* that guarantee a financial gain for the platform. Workers would not endure those conditions if they had alternatives or could denounce these instances under better labour protections, to enjoy decent work.

In the interviews, workers reported feeling compelled to:

- Deliver orders and accept additional demands from clients to avoid incurring penalties, even when detrimental to their health or resulting in financial loss;
- Work excessive hours to attempt earning at least the minimum wage;
- Stay in the job due to financial pressures or lack of alternatives; and
- Having to incur debts to work.

The *abuse of vulnerability* is a form of coercion that can manifest in platform work, for example, through platforms’ ability to arbitrarily terminate workers and suspend accounts when too many orders are rejected, with “too many” arbitrarily defined by the platform itself irrespective of the reasons for the rejection.

Similarly, coercion can be exercised through the *manipulation of debt*. When debt was incurred through platform-mediated providers, workers reported feeling penalised by debt accumulation or payment deductions. As a result, workers can feel *forced to work every day to avoid debt accumulation and/or unable to leave until the debt is repaid through the platform*.

Additionally, workers denounced:

- Feeling deceived by platforms' false promises on the terms of collaboration.
- A lack of transparency in calculation of costs, leading to the potential payment of due earnings; and
- A lack of control over their income.

Furthermore, the findings suggest there are inherent risks resulting from automated and arbitrary rating calculations, alongside algorithmic control over account blockages. This automated/algorithmic process does not take into account the reality of working conditions, such as changes in client demands that lead to financial loss. This may lead workers to feel coerced into accepting an order for fear of penalty and having to endure poor working conditions that can violate their human and labour rights.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the limited sample size, the reports collected in Kenya and Indonesia raise serious concerns about the presence of both elements of coercion and involuntariness in the platform economy.

Yet, these conclusions need more testing through additional research to unpack further how the forced labour indicators framework can be applied to this growing business model. The manifestation of risks of coercion and involuntariness may emerge differently in platform economy work, due to the complexity of work relationships. Future research should in particular consider and examine the following:

- Evidence of how debt is accumulated by workers and the extent to which it may be used as a form of control to force platform workers to continue to work under conditions they would otherwise refuse;
- How deception occurs in practice, including whether certain apps deliberately hold back information about the employment terms;
- The relationship between platforms and workers and how workers' agency is exercised;
- What choices platform workers can make, and if and how they may be pressured to accept working conditions for fear of income loss or other consequences;
- What role algorithms play in creating an enabling environment for situations of coercion and involuntariness where forced labour risks could emerge. This merits special attention as we transition into technology-driven employment relationships.

In the immediate term, it is crucial that policymakers and other relevant actors at both international and national levels pay greater attention to this issue. In particular, ILO constituents should give adequate attention to serious risks of forced labour in the platform economy to ensure that a future international standard on Decent Work in the Platform Economy fully protects the rights of all platform workers, including from severe forms of exploitation. It is also paramount that policymakers and platforms put in place mechanisms and safeguards that can prevent these high-risk situations from arising in the first place, by addressing the broader labour exploitation from which the forced labour risks manifest.

This will require great effort by the whole collective of trade unions and workers' representatives alongside the anti-slavery sector, labour rights movements, governments and platforms. By working together, there is true potential for the platform economy to be beneficial to both workers and employers, but the time to act is now.

In particular, we recommend:

- **ILO constituents to raise concerns and ensure adequate attention is paid to the risks of forced labour in the platform economy** during ILC negotiations, and to advocate for the inclusion of specific language in the text to ensure protections from these risks. In particular, they should raise questions on the role of algorithmic management as a possible driver of forced labour risks in the platform economy.
- **Governments to develop and implement adequate legislation** at the national level to protect platform workers and hold platforms, and businesses who benefit from them, accountable for the harm they cause, and **to actively engage with trade unions and platform workers to improve their understanding of workers' needs.**
- **Trade unions, alongside other forms of collective action, to continue and deepen their engagement with platform workers** to understand the specificity of the ways in which coercion and involuntariness manifest themselves in this sector.
- **Platforms to review their algorithms** and programme them to ensure that workers are not penalised unfairly for rejecting orders and they can find redress for any harms (physical or economical) suffered.
- **Donors to take concrete actions to support** further research into this topic and collaborative work to bring together key stakeholders and supporting collective bargaining efforts by platform workers.



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**Anti-Slavery International** exists to bring freedom from slavery for everyone, everywhere. We are part of a movement, working in partnership with survivors, businesses and grassroots organisations to deliver projects and advocacy that challenge the root causes of modern slavery at the national and international levels.

**Equidem** is a labour rights and human rights organisation focused on the needs of rights holders, particularly within the Global Majority. Composed of workers and community members, it has significant expertise in engaging with rights holders and conducting field research in challenging contexts. It is known for its participatory investigations of human and labour rights abuses in various sectors.

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For discussion or further information on the background, methodology and findings of this paper, please contact Anti-Slavery International at [media@antislavery.org](mailto:media@antislavery.org).