

# Decent work for platform-based food delivery workers in Delhi – A long-term perspective

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## Abstract

*The research focuses on examining the evolving nature of employment for platform-based food delivery workers (FDWs) in Delhi, with an emphasis on their socio-economic backgrounds, work quality, and working conditions, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) objective of ensuring 'decent work' for all. It utilizes tabular analysis and the 'Decent Work Index' (DWI) proposed by Standing (2002) to evaluate the quality of work among FDWs. The results indicate that the sector is predominantly male and largely comprises migrants from northern India, who work overnight, treating it as a full-time job. The findings show low levels of decent work, with around 70 % of FDWs scoring a DWI of 0.21, attributed to factors such as piece-rate payments and unclear employment status. The study underscores that the working conditions of FDWs resemble precarious employment rather than decent work, highlighting that achieving social security benefits and decent work for FDWs in developing nations like India remains a distant goal.*

**Keywords:** *Platform work, precarity, decent work index, piecewise-payment, male-dominated.*

## Introduction

When people are asked about their work-related priorities and goals, they often mention the importance of employment and stability, as well as the availability of healthcare and other facilities for themselves and their families. They also emphasise the value of having a voice in their society and workplace, as well as having their rights and personal dignity recognised at work. Such aspirations of individuals fit well in the umbrella term 'decent work' as Blustein *et*

*al.* (2023) define it as fundamental working conditions to which all workers are entitled. These conditions include opportunities for employment and income, rights at work, rights to fair labour practices, dignity at workplace, better quality of social security and social dialogue (ILO, 1999).

However, the real picture of working conditions as reflected in the recent evolution in the global labour market, often called

the ‘gig/platform economy’<sup>1</sup>, seems far removed from what constitute decent work. Several scholars have attempted to define this economy. In the words of Farrell & Greig (2016, p. 5), “an online platform economy refers to economic activity involving an online mediator that offers a marketplace for independent contractors or sellers to offer a specific commodity or service to consumers”. The nature of employment-employee relations has continued to change from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist society, now further transformed by the fourth industrial revolution and technological mediation in employment. These transitions reflect broader structural change brought by neoliberal reforms—including globalization, privatization, and deregulation—resulting in a decline in union power and workers’ rights (Kalleberg, 2013; ILO, 2009), impacting the quality of work. It also influenced developing countries, including India.

In India, neoliberal economic reforms since 1990s have deepened labour market flexibility and contractualization, even in the organised sector. The state facilitated this shift by promoting capitalist mode of production, leading to weakened labour protections and increased employer dominance (Chang, 2009; Mehta, 2023). The workers, by losing their rights and autonomy, transformed into wage labourers under capitalism. The economic

crisis of 2008–2009 exacerbated this trend by a rise in unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, informal work, flexible contracts, and insecure employment (ILO, 2009). In response, the decent work agenda emerged globally to counter deteriorating labour conditions and has since been embedded into international frameworks such as the UN SDGs. By 2021, the ILO extended the scope of ‘decent work’<sup>2</sup> to include platform-based FDWs (ILO, 2021), and India’s 2020 labour law reforms also recognised the need for social security<sup>3</sup> for platform workers (SSC, 2020).

Several studies have explored different dimensions of gig economy in the last decade including (a) ‘the technological facilitation as whether it is mediated through online platforms (Stefano, 2015) or both online and offline mediations (Friedman, 2014; Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Prassl & Risak, 2015), (b) gig workers as independent contractors (Stefano, 2015; Loffredo & Tufo, 2018), (c) gig work as paid work (Farrell & Greig, 2016) or raising concern about minimum wages (Stanford, 2017), (d) gig work as service providers (Farrell & Greig, 2016), triangular relationships of gig work (Stanford, 2017; Kaine & Josserand, 2019) and vulnerabilities of power relation in gig economy (Steward & Stanford, 2017; Graham *et al.*, 2017) and the issues of gig workers (Friedman, 2014;

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Online platform economy’ means a work arrangement outside of a traditional employer-employee relationship in which organizations or individuals use an online platform to access other organizations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services or any such other activities which may be notified by the Central Government, in exchange for payment; A “gig worker” means a person who performs work or participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of traditional employer-employee relationship; (Social Security Code, 2020, p. 10-11). Hence, the term gig or platform economy has been used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> “Decent work” principles apply not only to employment relationships but to all work arrangements, including work mediated through digital labour platforms (ILO, 2021, p. 203).

<sup>3</sup> Social security benefits such as life and disability insurance, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, education and any other benefits (SSC, 2020).

Parwez & Ranjan, 2021). However, there is a dearth of research investigating the quality of work of platform-based FDWs in developing countries like India at a time when the world is aiming towards having the right to decent work for everyone. Although online platforms gain traction as key sites of employment and are framed as the ‘future of work’ (Healy *et al.*, 2017), this area is worth exploring because the growing use of ‘slot-booking, hourly basis contracts’ signals a new phase of contractualization and technological exploitation within the platform economy.

This particular study is important as it deals with the working conditions and quality of work in the developing world, specifically India, where negligible authentic government data is available about FDWs. It also deals with the socio-economic and working conditions, including the quality of work among FDWs in a capitalist market created by online food delivery platforms for more profit generation in Delhi. It uses the DWI as suggested by Standing (2002) to explore the quality of work among FDWs in Delhi.

### **Overview of food delivery platforms in India**

According to the government, these platforms create self-employment and the opportunity to increase or supplement one’s income, and it has recognised the freedom and choice that attract workers. NITI Aayog estimated around 7.7 million workers involved in the gig economy during 2020-21, and predicted this sector to employ 23.5 million workers by 2029-30 (NITI Aayog, 2022, p. xvii). The popularity of on-demand food delivery is proliferating, where ‘Swiggy<sup>4</sup> and Zomato’ are at the forefront of food aggregators in India.

Although the practice of delivering food to residences or offices is not a novel concept, the rapid innovation in modern technologies significantly transformed this system (Carby-Hall & Méndez, 2020) with the entry of online platforms between 2012 and 2014. Delhi, with an extensive urban population, acts as a hub of demand. With an estimated 7.7 million workers, the gig economy accounts for 2.6% of the non-agricultural workforce or 1.5% of the total workforce in India (NITI Aayog, 2022, p xvii). According to the National Industrial Classification (2008), the estimated number of gig workers engaged in accommodation and food services was 4 lakhs during 2019-20 (NITI Aayog, 2022, p. 3). Although there is a lack of official data available at the city level in Delhi, some estimate that the number of FDWs in Delhi as of September 2023 is around 30000-35000 (/news/business/Delhi).

### **Methodology**

The research relies mainly on a primary survey of FDWs using purposive sampling at four locations in Delhi—Connaught Place, Hauz Khas, Vasant Vihar, and Vasant Kunj. These areas have a high density of restaurants, making them significant locations for food delivery. Places such as Connaught Place and Vasant Kunj are strategically located being close to residential, institutional, and commercial complexes, and exhibiting high demand for food delivery services. 72 FDWs were interviewed employing semi-structured schedules. Informed consent was taken from each participant, and anonymity was strictly maintained during analysis. Interviews were carried out in the evening (4 pm to 7 pm) in October, November, and December

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<sup>4</sup> Swiggy & Zomato employ over 2 lakh FDWs (NITI Aayog, p. 30).

2023, with duration of 20-35 minutes and were manually written down. Data was then transcribed manually and organized in Excel for analysis. If participants received delivery notifications during interviews, telephonic follow-up interviews were conducted at their convenience, typically between 8 am and 12 pm. The same structure was followed in telephonic interviews as well, and interviewer bias was minimised in both modes of data collection. The sample size of 72 participants was based on the principle of data saturation. This point was reached around the 63<sup>rd</sup> interview, but additional interviews were conducted to ensure diversity in FDWs' experiences. While the results offer rich insights into the working conditions of FDWs in selected areas, they may not capture the heterogeneity of Delhi's FDWs, particularly in peripheral areas. The study begins by analysing the socio-economic characteristics of FDWs, followed by their working conditions and quality of work. Decent work index (DWI), suggested by Standing (2002), is used for assessing the quality of work among FDWs. It is computed as:

$$X_i = (X_{\text{actual}} - X_{\text{min}}) / (X_{\text{max}} - X_{\text{min}})$$

Where;

$X_i$  = Normalised value of index,

$X_{\text{actual}}$  = Actual value for the individual,

$X_{\text{min}}$ . = Minimum value for any individual,

$X_{\text{max}}$ . = Maximum value that any individual achieves.

DWI is an aggregate of six indices:

Income security index –includes income adequacy, income assurance, comparison with peers, and availability of non-wage benefits such as health and accident insurance.

Employment security index – includes protection in job, nature of employment, characteristics of firm, place of work, and number of employees.

**Job security index** - represents stability in position, increase in earnings, responsibility, and job assurance in the future.

**Work security index** - measures safety at work, handling of hazardous equipment, perceptions about safety, and availability of accident insurance.

**Skill reproduction security index** - captures training opportunities, application of educational qualification and employment of skills.

**Voice representation index** - captures the accessibility of unions or workers' organizations.

Each index is calculated on the basis of a weighted sample of applicable variables specifically suited to FDWs and varies between 0 (poor quality) and 1 (best quality of work). The DWI also varies between 0 (poor quality of work) and 1 (best quality of work).

### **Socio-economic profile of platform-based food delivery workers in Delhi**

Sex-based occupational segregation is still prevalent in regions, economic systems, and cultures, perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting women's entry into the labour market (Anker, 1997). The study reveals that this sector is mainly male-dominated, with 100% of workers being men. The absence of women is linked to safety and deep-rooted social norms, as women should be engaged in occupations 'appropriate' for them such as teaching, medicine and so on. Apparently, even in platform economy, women are engaged in home-based cleaning services (e.g., helping in UK), personal

Table 1: Socio-economic profile of platform-based FDWs

<b>Socio-economic backgrounds</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	100
Female	0
<b>Age</b>	
15-29	59.70
30-45	40.30
Above 45	0
<b>Educational qualifications</b>	
Illiterate	3
Below primary	1
Middle	13
Secondary	21
Higher secondary	22
Graduation & above	40
<b>Marital status</b>	
Unmarried	68.10
Married	31.90
<b>Housing type</b>	
Rent	81.90
Own	18.10
<b>Religion</b>	
Hinduism	84.70
Muslim	13.90
Sikh	1.40
Christian	0
Others	0
<b>Social groups</b>	
General	26
OBCs	56
SCs	12
STs	6

*Source: Primary survey, 2023*

grooming (e.g., Urban Company in India) and care services (Ramachandran & Zaidi, 2021). Instead, platforms offering digital

ride-hailing services and food delivery have an overwhelming presence of men (Morell, 2022). The food delivery work in

Delhi represents the concentration of adults and well-educated individuals as the study indicates that almost 60% of FDWs are in the 15–29 years age category, followed by 40.3% in the 30–45 years age category (Table 1). Educationally, the majority of them are graduates (40%), followed by higher secondary (22%) and secondary schooling (21%). This concentration of young, male, and educated workers in food delivery can be seen as evidence of recent labour market trends in India characterized by increasing labour supply-absorption mismatch. Even with education, a significant majority do not possess technical skill restricting their career opportunities in the services sector (State of Working India, 2023, p. 12). In light of the deceleration of job growth in majority of the industries, individuals are driven to informal and insecure work, like food delivery. This situation is aggravated by minimal state action in matters regarding social and economic protection (Chen, 2012). The platform economy, while providing flexible entry for unskilled or semi-skilled individuals, often results in insecure and exploitative conditions impacting individuals' personal lives as evident from the data showing over 68% of FDWs are unmarried and seeking permanent employment, which remains elusive due to shrinking formal sector opportunities (Table 1).

As the table 1 reveals, majority of the FDWs in Delhi are migrants from Uttar Pradesh (56%) and Bihar (25%) who usually live (82%) in rental houses. Only 18% own residences. Some are native to Delhi, whose families immigrated decades ago. Over 85% of these workers are Hindus, followed by Muslims (13.9%) resembling the religious composition of Delhi's resident population.

The food delivery services require pre-access to a few resources such as a vehicle, a smartphone with continuous internet, a food delivery kit and a dress. It is a fact that access to resources and information assimilation in Indian society largely depend on the hierarchies of caste which impact one's social networking. Approximately 56% of the FDWs are from Other backward classes (OBCs), followed by the unreserved General category (26%), with SCs and STs underrepresented as a result of historical resource deprivation (Thorat & Joshi, 2020)

### **Working conditions**

Unlike developed economies where the platform economy is mostly part-time and complementary to other sources of income (Stewart & Stanford, 2017), an overwhelming 97% of FDWs work full-time in Delhi (Table 2). They earn an average of Rs. 30,000 per month, which is insufficient to sustain a good standard of living. They are not considered employees; rather, as Friedman (2014) argued, are best described as 'independent contractors', because they must pre-book 'gig' or time slots 2–3 hours in advance in which they are obligated to make deliveries. Missing these deliveries results in the loss of incentives for the following days. They are paid not on an hourly basis but on the number of deliveries made—familiarily described as 'piecewise payment'. This implies the profit-maximising, capitalistic interests of platforms that value profit over the welfare of workers, resulting in precarious work characterised by unstable and low wages, and lack of security.

Although the platform economy is presented as providing flexibility and self-determination in task choice, scheduling, and where tasks are performed (Duggan *et al.*,

Table 2: Working conditions of platform-based FDWs

<b>Working Details</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
<b>Work-type (%)</b>	
Full time	97.20
Part time	2.80
<b>Work during night (%)</b>	
Yes	95.80
No	4.20
<b>Average daily working hours</b>	
Less than 10 hours	0
10-12 hours	4.20
13-15 hours	54.20
More than 15 hours	41.70
<b>Waiting time (at the restaurant)</b>	
10-15 minutes	8.33
15-20 minutes	72.22
More than 20 minutes	19.45
<b>Get a waiting incentive</b>	
Yes	13.89
No	86.11

*Source: Primary survey, 2023*

2022), these assertions are rooted in neoliberal rhetoric (Anwar & Graham, 2021). In reality, FDWs are confronted by rating and ranking schemes that limit their potential to grow economically (Graham *et al.*, 2017; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). FDWs work in a triangular relation between restaurants, platforms, and customers with contracts that grant platforms excessive control over workers (Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Customers are prioritized over employees, even when the customer is wrong, with FDWs being compelled to be polite under any situation. This turns FDWs into ‘emotional labourers’ in the capitalist labour market (Gandini, 2019). They frequently have to run upstairs to deliver food, which is not even included in addresses, without any extra pay. Platforms directly

order FDWs to do this as part of their service requirement.

Moreover, incentive mechanisms motivate FDWs based on the achievement of a specific number of deliveries with additional pay (Lazear, 2000; NCAER, 2023). They usually receive Rs. 20 for a normal delivery and get Rs. 325 upon delivery of 24 orders. This pushes them to work for long duration, frequently at night, to achieve the milestone of 12, 24, or 36 deliveries. The statistics show that 96% work at night, 54% for 13–15 hours a day; and 46% work for more than 15 hours a day. Approximately 81% complete almost 23-30 orders per day. These findings affirm Lehdonvirta’s (2018) criticism of the myth of flexibility in gig work, emphasising that managerial power over work scheduling is

strongly connected with power relations. The constant driving and long working hours cause physical problems such as sleep deprivation, irritation, and back pain. Furthermore, FDWs have to wait at both restaurants and customers' houses. Approximately 72% wait 15–20 minutes for orders, while 19% wait over 20 minutes. Though Swiggy provides Rs. 1/minute up to Rs. 25 for waiting time, it is valid only before the restaurant confirms that the order is ready. Delays after confirmation are not paid, as approximately 86% of the FDWs are not paid for waiting time. Therefore, it is clear that they are not paid on the basis of the time or effort spent, cementing their position as low-paid and precarious workers.

### **Decent work and platform-based food delivery workers in Delhi**

The globalization and digitalization processes have reshaped work, raising concerns about the quality of work. Decent work as a concept has gained widespread acceptance as a global goal of UN 2030 agenda for SDGs, which argues that everyone has a right to decent work. Platform work, however, tends to negate this idea. Platforms present themselves as facilitators rather than employers. In developing countries, these platforms have fostered inadequate working conditions as they have failed to offer employment benefits, job stability, and possibilities for advancement. Kellogg *et al.* (2020) and Gautie *et al.* (2020) refer to it as 'digital-taylorism'<sup>5</sup> that will erode income certainty.

Further, greater flexibility in this economy transfers the burden of economic swings onto

the workers. Because platforms work based on the demand, FDWs are provided more incentives on weekends and festivals. Here, workers are ensnared in perpetual cycles of exploitation due to the apprehension of job loss, abrupt termination of contracts, and wage withholdings (Friedman, 2014). Such factors impact the quality of work of FDWs. The DWI is one of the best methods to measure the quality of work because it covers various aspects of working rights. It provides a broader picture of the quality of work among FDWs which is as follows:

### **Income security index**

The income security index among FDWs in Delhi varies between 0.1 to 0.6, indicating high income insecurity. Around 70.83% of FDWs have an index of 0.5, followed by 4.16% of FDWs who have scores of 0.6 and 0.3. Moreover, 2.80% of FDWs have an index of just 0.1 (Fig. 1). This indicates that most FDWs are not receiving enough earnings to maintain a standard level of living. Their earnings are unstable, never adjusted to inflation nor guaranteed by minimum wage. Moreover, they are not covered by any social security measures like health or life insurance, paid leave, or accidental coverage, which only makes them more financially exposed.

### **Employment security index**

It is zero among all FDWs in Delhi. It shows that they lack any protection against arbitrary dismissal, including employment stability not compatible with economic dynamism, and lack a fixed workplace.

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<sup>5</sup> Digital Taylorism, defined as an optimisation of Taylor's principle of simplification and control of the work process [...] facilitated by digital technologies, and characterised by strict performance measurement, and control (Gautie *et al.*, 2020, p. 775) employed by digital platform companies in the gig economy to maximise workers' value creation (Kellogg *et al.*, 2020; Gautie *et al.*, 2020).

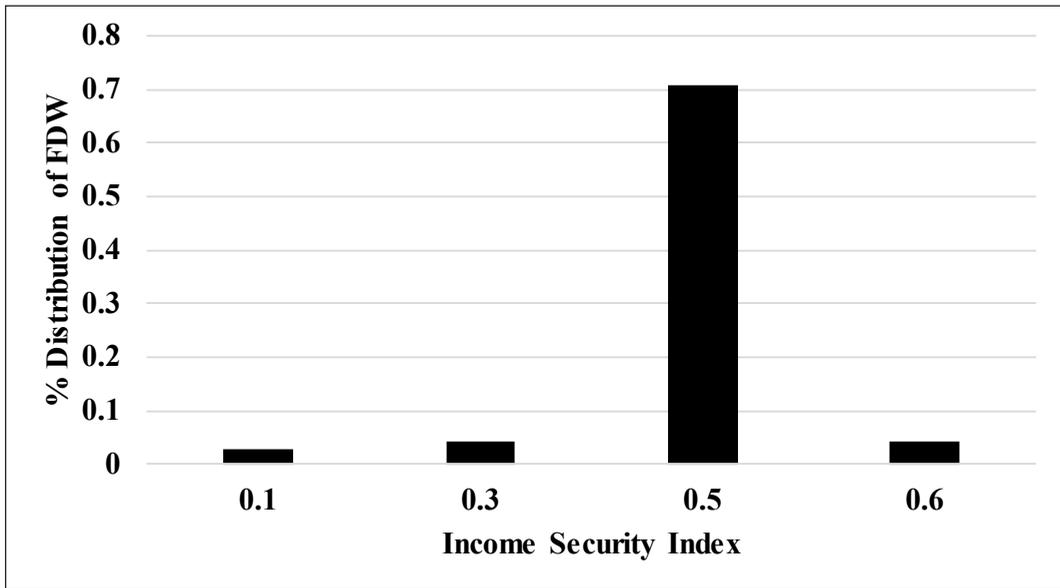


Fig. 1: Income security index among platform-based FDWs in Delhi

### Job security index

This is zero in all FDWs in Delhi. This indicates that there is no improvement in their income, no improvement in their status since they joined this activity, and there is no certainty that they will have a reasonably good job in the next 12 months.

### Work Security Index

It is also zero in all FDWs. It shows the non-availability of a safety department at the workplace as the workplace itself is dynamic, lack of safety and poor working conditions as most of them do not possess accident insurance.

### Skill reproduction security index

As food delivery work requires almost no skill, this aligns with results, as 100% of FDWs have zero skill reproduction security index. Workers in this activity lack the opportunity and exposure to gain and retain skills through apprenticeships or vocational

training. There is no use of their possessed skills in the present occupation, and they have received no formal or on-the-job training.

**Voice representation security index** - It is zero among FDWs. They do not have the protection of a collective voice in the labour market through independent trade unions, employers' associations and other bodies able to represent their interests.

### Decent work index among platform-based food delivery workers in Delhi

Employing the weighted index of 'income security index, employment security index, work security index, job security index, skill reproduction security index, and voice representation security index, the study indicates that all FDWs fall into the very low category of DWI, where slight variations are observed among individual workers; the aggregate index shows precarity. Approximately 70% of FDWs possess a

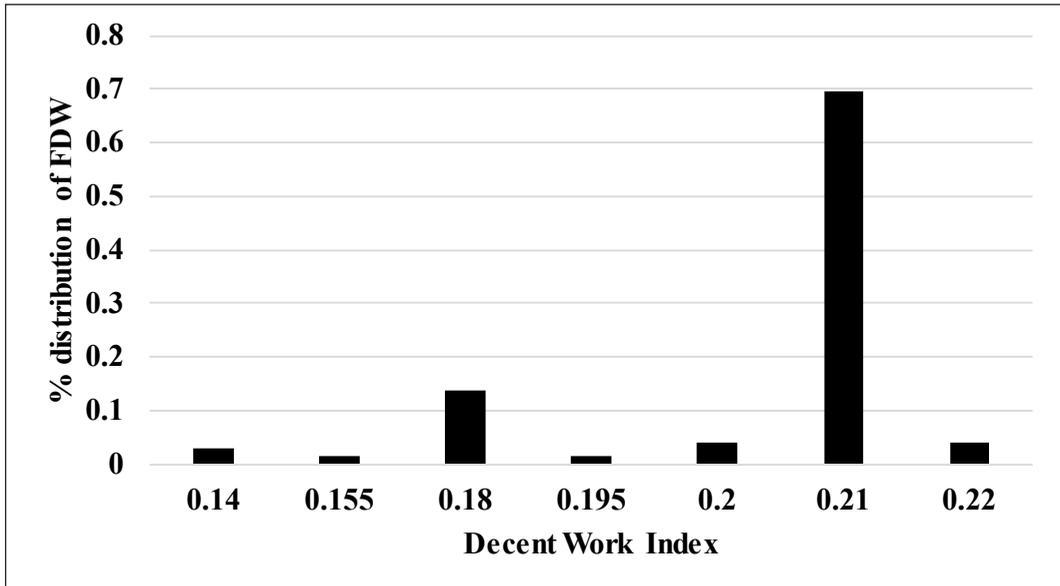


Fig. 2: Decent work index among platform-based FDWs in Delhi  
*Source: Prepared by author*

DWI score of 0.21, followed by 4.16% having a slightly higher value of 0.22, and the rest scoring below 0.21. These very slight differences are mainly due to slight differences in the income security index, as others like work security, job security, and representation security always have a score of zero (see fig. 2).

Those reporting a slightly increased DWI (0.22) are likely to enjoy some type of non-wage enterprise advantage, e.g., life insurance or punctual payment of incomes during the past three months. Instead, workers lacking any type of non-wage enterprise or income guarantee report a low DWI value of 0.14. These workers have irregular and inadequate incomes and lack the security of a consistent income as they earn on a daily basis and risk high chances of job losses. The ‘lack of regulatory protection’ for FDWs is evident. Without a designated workplace,

they tend to sleep on their motorbikes or in parking lots, travelling through heavy traffic every day. There is no opportunity and hope that their working status will improve later, given the current situation of the employment crisis in India. Though fairly educated, most English-fluent, their status is boiled down to gaining favourable customer reviews to retain access to order notifications. Additionally, the lack of trade unions alienates them, while overstocking of workers in this sector creates fierce competition and suppresses wages. As Berg (2016) and Wood *et al.* (2019) highlight, platform workers receive low pay, have no social security, and earn less than their counterparts in developed countries (e.g., UK and US). This also indicates the lack of control over the labour process, which leads to low control over the working conditions. All such factors indicate more precarious working conditions rather than decent

working conditions among FDWs. They seem to be ‘precariat’<sup>6</sup> in India’s platform economy, as there is no security or assurance that one will get the opportunity to work tomorrow, reducing the hope of achieving decent work.

## Conclusion

Platform-based food delivery work exhibits a profit maximisation-motivated work under state-supported globalized and neoliberal policies. While mostly referred to as flexible, it exploits workers through piecewise payment, absence of social security, and control by algorithms. In Delhi, food delivery work has become a full-time need, particularly among youth, working long hours with minimal pay. Apparently, high flexibility implies low income, employment, work, job, and voice representation security. Consequently, FDWs are like a ‘reserve army of labour’ (Marx & Engels, 1848/2019). The ambiguous employment status excludes them from any kind of protection, resulting in very low decent work. Although India has recognised platform workers as an employment category and has stated to provide them social security benefits, the goal of achieving decent work for FDWs appears far off. Implementing the 2020 code on social security to protect their rights and impose protections may improve their working conditions.

## Competing interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Precariat’ workers are characterized by unstable labour, low and unpredictable incomes, and loss of citizenship rights (Standing, 2014)

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