International Journal of Social Science Research and Review

ijssrr.com
editor@ijssrr.com
Volume 9, Issue 11
November 2026
pp. 37–51

The Unseen Humans of the Gig Economy: Platform Work, Labour Protection, and Worker-Centred Responses in India and Singapore

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47814/6wwc5a46

Abstract

In India and Singapore, the gig economy has grown much faster than the policies have caught up. Gig work is more often than not perceived as flexible and autonomous, but it is also becoming synonymous with income insecurity, inadequate labour rights and protection, and low levels of worker voice. This paper compares the economic and social landscape of gig workers in India and Singapore based on the Decent Work framework and platform capitalism theory, focusing on major platforms such as Zomato, Blinkit, and Grab. India and Singapore were picked as a comparative pair because they are two different trajectories of regulation in the same region, a fragmented, welfare state framework of labour codes in India and a more centralised framework, the Platform Workers Act (2025) in Singapore. The paper reviews existing peer-reviewed literature, platform accountability reports and recent empirical research on the experiences of delivery workers and ride-halers to understand how platform policies, algorithmic management, and national regulatory frameworks all contribute to the workers' experience. The examination reveals that, despite the different regulatory contexts, gig workers in both countries are structurally precarious, both due to risk transfer and to the classification of the gig workers as contractors. The paper suggests that, as they stand, platform and state-based interventions are still inadequate as they target damage minimization instead of worker stability, growth or voice. It ends by calling for the creation of independent, worker-centred support mechanisms that do not replace, but complement regulation, while offering a blueprint for addressing ongoing gaps in growth, safety and representation for gig workers and platform workers with The Unseen Humans (UNHU) platform, an active worker-centred model.

Keywords: *Gig Economy; Labour Protection; Platform Work; Worker-centred Solutions; Algorithmic Management*

1. INTRODUCTION

The gig economy refers to a labour market characterised by the use of temporary or freelance workers to perform jobs typically in the service sector, rather than through traditional, permanent employment relationships (Merriam-Webster, 2019). It is not an occasional phenomenon but a reality in the modern Asian labour market (Visa, 2019) due mainly to the density of the cities and the labour surplus. Zomato (India), Blinkit (India) and Grab (Singapore) have become a part of the economic landscape, delivering food, transport and household services at scale to hundreds of millions of users.

This paper uses "gig work" and "platform work" as related but distinct terms. Gig work refers broadly to any temporary, task-based work performed outside a standard employment relationship, while platform work refers specifically to gig work that is mediated, allocated, and managed through a digital platform's algorithm. This distinction is made explicit in law in Singapore's Platform Workers Act (2025), which defines a "platform worker" as specifically a ride-hail or delivery worker operating under a platform work agreement and subject to the platform operator's management control (Ministry of Manpower, 2026), a narrower category than "gig worker" would capture on its own. This paper focuses primarily on platform-mediated gig work, particularly delivery and ride-hailing, which is also where the bulk of the existing empirical and regulatory literature in both countries is concentrated.

Gig work has offered flexibility, autonomy and low entry barriers and has provided jobs for millions of people across the globe. But this expansion has created a legal and regulatory dilemma: most gig workers are not covered

by fundamental labour law principles, including the right to a minimum wage, benefits and injury compensation, and bargaining rights, because they are usually classified as independent contractors. The classification allows scaling the platform but puts the economic burden on the workers (Kalleberg, 2009; Srnicek, 2017). Thus, the question of whether flexibility actually balances insecurity is becoming a central issue in debates on the gig economy, as is the extent to which the traditional employer-employee relationship can be adapted to accommodate a workforce it was never meant to serve (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

India and Singapore offer a useful comparison since they lie at opposite ends of this regulatory spectrum. In India, the platform has grown rapidly with few measures taken to protect the workers, whereas Singapore has a more regulated approach, with the Platform Workers Act (2025) coming into force recently. By looking at both contexts, the question of whether or not the structural vulnerabilities found in the literature can be solved with regulation alone would be considered, or whether regardless of the regulatory context, other worker-based models are necessary, as this paper emphasizes

By 2030, India is expected to have 23.5 million gig workers, most of whom will have no access to minimum wage, social security or job security (NITI Aayog, 2022). Some of these gaps, however, Singapore has taken steps to fill head-on, with the Platform Workers Act 2025. This is because India's quick and loose development process and Singapore's more centralised regulatory approach provide a useful comparison to see if there is a gap in the ability of regulation to safeguard gig workers or if there are structural problems inherent in the regulatory model that is being used.

The paper aims to first explore the economic and social conditions of gig workers in each country, as influenced by platform business models and national regulatory frameworks, and second to examine to what extent current platform-based and state-led approaches – including the emerging platform models from the Urban Company – take a step in meeting their needs, or whether they are simply limited to alleviating the visible harms while maintaining the structural precarity. This assessment motivates the paper's final contribution: introducing UNHU as a worker-centred model designed to fill the gaps that neither platforms nor regulation have closed.

UNHU, described briefly here and developed fully in Section 9, is a worker-centred platform based on three interlinked pillars: growth pathways - direct links between workers and financial literacy and skills support; safety nets - a cross-employer partner network to link workers to healthcare, legal and insurance support services; and worker voice, which gives workers a direct channel to raise concerns and be heard. These three pillars are not random – they reflect the ILO's Decent Work framework (Section 3) and, as the comparative analysis in Section 7 illustrates, they are targeted explicitly at social dialogue - the pillar India's labour codes leave largely unaddressed, and which Singapore's Platform Workers Act formally establishes but has not yet demonstrated in practice. In essence, UNHU's premise is that independent, cross-platform infrastructure can do what neither state regulation nor platform self-governance has so far achieved.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review draws primarily on peer-reviewed sociology and labour studies literature (identified through Google Scholar), supplemented by platform accountability reports and international organisation publications, and is limited to sources published within the last fifteen years (2011–2026), consistent with the methodology detailed in Section 4.

2.1 Defining and Theorising Gig and Platform Work

Scholarship on gig work has come a long way from the initial conceptualization of platforms as neutral technological mediators. Kalleberg's (2009) seminal work on the precarious nature of work singles out two key features of the post-1970s labour market: increasing job insecurity and the increasing prevalence of non-standard contracts, which the gig economy did not create but has reinforced. Building on this, Vallas and Schor (2020) compile the sociological understanding of platforms into opposing metaphors, platforms as entrepreneurial incubators, as ‘digital cages', as accelerants of precarity, and as adaptive chameleons, before claiming that platforms are a new form of governance between externalization and concentration of responsibility. This framing directly leads into the theoretical approach that is taken in Section 3 of this paper.

At the business strategy level, Srnicek (2017) puts this into a different perspective, claiming that platforms are companies that rely as a fundamental basis of their business on extracting value from user data and the labour of their users. This reading suggests that the very nature of the platform business model is what renders it profitable, namely via the classification of contractors and their allocation to jobs by algorithms.

2.2 Algorithmic Management and Worker Control

There are extensive studies of the types of control that platforms can have on workers, and how this control is manifested in algorithms rather than direct managerial control. Empirical studies of the food delivery market in India reveal the practice of ‘invisible labour' in the form of waiting time for food delivery workers, which the platform does not acknowledge or pay for, and the adaptation of their work behaviour to satisfy the app's performance measurements, such as marking the status of an order as ‘arrived' before actually reaching the destination to prevent penalties in the event of a supposed delay (Suvarnapathaki et al. 2025). This is in keeping with Vallas and Schor's (2020) general argument that algorithmic management mimics management by the employer, without the legal responsibility that would normally be attached to it.

In addition to behavioural adaptation, algorithmic management also works by threatening to deactivate, or to penalise based on a rating, a mechanism that is parallel and perhaps more coercive than just task metrics. A rating drop, or an account suspension, is usually automatic, and generally cannot be appealed to a human manager to the same extent as an actual termination in a regular job, and may result in a worker losing all access to income. The asymmetry in this respect – unilateral authority of the platform over the worker's access to earnings, and limited or nonexistent oversight – is at the heart of what Vallas and Schor (2020) describe as algorithmic management replicating employer control with the removal of employer accountability.

2.3 Migrant and Cross-Border Dimensions of Platform Precarity

Recent scholarship also has a focus on the intersections of platform work and migration status, which further contributes to precarity. Lata's (2023) review of algorithmic control and migrant labour in the gig economy finds that platforms often reproduce, rather than resolve, the vulnerabilities migrant workers face in traditional labour markets as the gig economy reclassifies migrant labourers as self-contractors, and in ways that might technically bypass visa and residency requirements, yet at the same time intensifies their reliance on the platform. This literature is of immediate relevance to Singapore's context where a significant proportion of platform and informal labour – including in adjacent low wage service sectors – are worked by migrant labour.

This is a dynamic that is represented by the two nations in this comparison. In India, the vulnerability described by Lata (2023) is played out largely in relation to internal migration, in that people migrate from the rural and/or lower-income areas to the cities, like Delhi and Bengaluru, where they take up gig work and have little to no experience in the formal sector and therefore no local safety net. In Singapore, the relevant vulnerability lies with cross-border migrant workers; many of whom are on Work Permits attached to a single employer and are engaged in gig or informal platform-adjacent work, which is not an ideal match for the legal system. Both patterns reflect Lata's (2023) broader point that platforms tend to reproduce, rather than resolve, the structural vulnerabilities migrant workers already face, and the means of migration (internal economic migration versus cross-border employer-tied migration) varies significantly across the two settings.

2.4 Regulatory Responses: India

The regulatory action in India so far is narrated primarily in terms of a legal and policy analysis of the situation, but not with any significant empirical study. The inability of the labour codes to differentiate between the different types of people working through gigs, and the fact that gig workers are neither full employees nor traditional independent contractors creates an awkward situation for them, as Bali (2025) explains. This is corroborated by platform accountability data: Fairwork India's annual ratings (2023, 2024) consistently find that even platforms with comparatively strong policies, such as Urban Company, retain full control over commissions, customer access, and task allocation, limiting workers' bargaining power regardless of formal legal recognition.

Specifically, through the mandatory aggregator levy, the Code on Social Security puts this recognition into practice: platforms like Zomato will pay 1-2% of their annual revenue to a government welfare fund, which will be accessible to the workers through the e-Shram portal. This is the first time in India where the financial contribution platforms have been legally required to pay towards the gig workers. But in reality this mechanism has proved to be a symbolic rather than a substantive one, as the Code fails to create enforceable rights to minimum wages, to job security, or to collective bargaining – leaving the fundamental employment relationship, and the risk it conveys on workers, largely unchanged.

2.5 Regulatory Responses: Singapore and the Region

One of the more detailed regulatory measures in the region is Singapore's Platform Workers Act (2025), which has been examined as a legal classification for "platform worker" (Tan, 2025). Nevertheless, Tan (2025) also reports that the Act does not actually guarantee a minimum income, and remains focused on mitigating harm rather than enabling career progression. This aligns with the broader regional evidence provided by ILO (2021) and

Leliaert et al., 2025, which reveals that in Asia, well-resourced regulatory frameworks have yet to bridge the legal and substantive divide on worker security.

What the Act does not do is, in some respects, as significant as what it does. It does not guarantee a lower limit of income, and there is little regulation of algorithmic processes of task allocation and pay-setting. But the Act is not limited to these gaps; it provides a legal framework for representation through registered Platform Work Associations, which are then able to engage in collective bargaining, conciliation, and arbitration with platform operators (Ministry of Manpower, 2026). As a result, Singapore has institutionalized worker representation, but the meaning of this in terms of worker voice and bargaining power in practice remains an open empirical question. This is the prism through which the role of the Act can be best understood: it is a step towards addressing the social protection gap identified by the Decent Work framework – injury compensation and welfare – and a formal but new channel for social dialogue, while rights at work – guaranteed minimum income – are left largely untouched.

2.6 Gaps in the Existing Literature

Collectively, the literature highlights three clear points: firstly, that gig work is structurally precarious, rather than a mere sideshow of the labor market, as outlined by the work of Kalleberg (2009) and Srnicek (2017); secondly, that algorithmic management represents a new and largely unaccountable form of control, as demonstrated in the work of Vallas & Schor (2020) and Suvarnapathaki et al. (2025); and thirdly, that regulatory action across India and Singapore, albeit different in terms of scope and detail, has failed to alleviate this precarity (Bali, 2025; Tan, 2025). The literature lacks a systematic comparison of India and Singapore specifically, but also an analysis of whether independent, worker-centred support platforms are an adequate alternative to state regulation or platform self-governance. This paper is aimed at both these gaps.

The special contribution of this paper is, then, in two ways. First, it uses a single, consistent evaluative framework to both national contexts – the ILO's four Decent Work pillars – compared to much of the existing single-country literature which inevitably does this. Second, it does more than diagnose the problems: Bali (2025) and Tan (2025) both highlight the defects in their own countries' frames without proposing a specific, cross-platform solution to remedy them. This paper is an attempt to fill that gap for UNHU.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

However, this paper takes the assistance of two complementary theoretical lenses from the larger theoretical landscape reviewed above to explain and assess the conditions of gig workers in India and Singapore.

The first is by Srnicek (2017) and titled 'Platform capitalism', which explains the business logic of conditions mentioned in section 2. In this view, platforms are considered not simply to be neutral intermediaries, but rather companies whose principal business model is to create value out of data and labour, while shifting risk (such as vehicle costs, insurance, income fluctuation) onto the workers themselves. Contractor classification, algorithmic task allocation and surge-based pay are the very foundations of gig work, not just its unfortunate by-product, and form the structural profitability of the platform model. This framework outlines how these patterns - the risk transfer (Section 5), algorithmic control (Section 6), and unpaid waiting time - make sense, and why they do not constitute separate instances of policy failure. It is a natural fit for this paper as the precarious employment theory that Kalleberg (2009) has developed is broadly concerned with the overall trend in the labour market, and platform capitalism specifically theorises the role of platform capitalism firms, which is the unit of analysis for this paper.

The second is the ILO's Decent Work framework, as it is used as a benchmark to assess platform practices and national regulation. Decent Work is based on four pillars: Job creation, Rights at work, Social protection and social dialogue (ILO, 1999; 2015). The four pillars are also employed in this paper to compare and contrast India and Singapore in Section 7, and to review the effectiveness of platform-led responses (Section 8) and of regulatory responses (Sections 5.3 and 6.2). It also aligns UNHU's three-pillar approach (growth pathways, safety nets, and worker voice) with those of Decent Work by tracking the employment creation, social protection, and social dialogue pillars to the growth pathways, safety nets, and worker voice pillars respectively, explicitly linking the two. The Decent Work framework was chosen over alternatives such as the Capability Approach (Sen) because it is the standard already used by the ILO to assess platform labour markets in Asia (ILO, 2021), making the paper's evaluation directly comparable to existing international assessments.

This paper brings together these two frameworks, not only to explain the structural mechanisms of gig worker precarity (platform capitalism), but to also test the relevance of the responses other countries have to the world's established international benchmarks (Decent Work).

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a comparative policy analysis with a conceptual contribution, rather than a systematic literature review, primary case study, or empirical study. It synthesises secondary and peer-reviewed literature, government and platform accountability reports, and regulatory texts to build a holistic, cross-national picture of gig worker conditions in India and Singapore, and evaluates an active worker-centred model (UNHU) against the gaps this synthesis identifies.

Component	Description
Databases	Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science
Search period	January 2009–August 2026
Search terms	"gig economy" AND India; "platform work" AND Singapore; etc.
Document types	Peer-reviewed articles, government documents, ILO reports, Fairwork reports, legislation
Geographic scope	India and Singapore
Exclusions	Opinion pieces without evidentiary basis, duplicate reports, non-relevant platform studies
Analytical framework	ILO Decent Work framework
Secondary theoretical framework	Platform capitalism
Analysis	Structured qualitative comparative analysis

4.1 Country Selection

India and Singapore were chosen as analytically contrasting cases, given the significant differences in regulatory practices towards platform work, while sharing certain other aspects of the region, such as the high level of urbanisation, digital connectivity and platform-mediated service employment. The comparison is meant to uncover similarities and differences in the regulatory design and protection of workers, not to demonstrate a causal effect of regulation. This common regional context reduces the chance that the patterns expressed across the two countries are driven just by variations in wages or variations in infrastructure, etc., and increases the probability that they are driven by genuine differences in regulatory design. It doesn't remove the confounding factors but it does make the comparison more solid than an India-to-a-structurally-unlike economy one would be able to make.

4.2 Platform Selection

To capture the essence of the food delivery service, as well as quick-commerce sector in India, Zomato and Blinkit have been selected as representative samples of India's food delivery and quick-commerce industry, respectively, as they employ the largest number of gig workers in India and are studied the most in existing literature (Fairwork India, 2023, 2024; Suvarnapathaki et al., 2025). Grab was chosen as the leading platform in Singapore's gig economy and the platform that is most likely to be impacted by the Platform Workers Act. Urban Company is additionally examined in Section 8 as a comparison case from an adjacent platform-work category - at-home services rather than delivery or ride-hailing - to determine whether newer operating models have a meaningful impact on worker conditions or simply repackage the same underlying model. In India, Urban Company's workers fall under the Code on Social Security's broader definition of "gig and platform work" (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2026), which does not distinguish by service type the way Singapore's law does. Because Urban Company's workers provide at-home services rather than ride-hail or delivery, they would fall outside Singapore's specific legal definition of "platform worker" (Ministry of Manpower, 2026) were the company to operate there; its inclusion here is for comparative purposes only, given that Urban Company itself operates in India.

Other platforms discussed in this paper - such as Swiggy, Ola and BigBasket - were not specifically identified as primary case platforms because they play a similar business model and regulatory role as Zomato and Blinkit and including them would have not been analytically different, but descriptive in breadth. The comparisons made in this paper are to Zomato, Blinkit and Grab, where relevant, especially in Section 5.2, which discusses workers' experience, but primarily to these three, with Urban Company as a separate experiment in a different model of operation (Section 8).

4.3 Search Strategy and Sources

The sources were mostly identified using the Google Scholar, for the peer-reviewed academic literature. The search was deliberately broadened to build a comprehensive picture of the policy, which was widened to include several additional categories of sources: (1) Platform accountability reports (e.g. Fairwork India); (2) Government publications and policy sources (e.g. NITI Aayog, government reports and policies, and e-Shram portal by the National Informatics Centre); (3) publications by international organisations (e.g. ILO); (4) reputable news and financial press (e.g. The Times of India, The Economic Times, and The Financial Express) for developments in the policy and labour actions that are timely; and, (5) primary sources within companies, where appropriate, such as official press releases (e.g. Grab), and company websites (e.g. Singlife).

4.4 Inclusion Criteria and Time Frame

The sources range between 2009 and 2026, with a particular focus on the past five years as the last five years have been when the regulation governing the platform workers (India's labour codes, 2020; Singapore's Platform Workers Act, 2025) has developed. Theoretical sources covering a range of fundamentals such as Kalleberg (2009) or Srnicek (2017) were included irrespective of their date of publication and their regional focus, provided they have a direct relevance to the theoretical framework in Section 3. In addition to these groundbreaking studies, sources that discussed the role of gig work or platforms in South or Southeast Asia, labour protection or classification, algorithmic management, or platform-based worker support models were also selected.

A necessary caveat follows from this recency: because India's four labour codes took effect in November 2025 and Singapore's Platform Workers Act in 2025, this paper is assessing both frameworks largely on their stated provisions rather than their demonstrated outcomes. The paper relies on preliminary evidence from the implementation of the codes (in the case of Fairwork India, published after the codes have been implemented) where possible, but a more extensive empirical evaluation of the actual impact of either framework will only be possible with a longer implementation time. This restriction is expanded upon in Section 10.2.

4.5 Type of Analysis and Comparative Framework

The paper first compares India and Singapore on each of the four pillars of Decent Work, through a structured qualitative approach (Section 7), before scrutinising platform-based (Section 8) and conceptual (Section 9) responses to the same framework. This provides a systematic comparison, not a narrative, and a level playing field between UNHU's proposed contribution and existing platforms and regulation.

In an operational sense, the term "systematic" implies that all statements on India and Singapore in Section 7 are systematically allocated to one of the four pillars of Decent Work, and not pulled out of the hat and loosely compared as a narrative. It means, for example, that both countries have to answer the same four questions: Does this framework create employment, does it protect rights at work, does it provide social protection, does it enable social dialogue? It is the same four questions which are asked of both countries, one after the other, and which thereby make it possible to identify social dialogue specifically, rather than impressionistically, as the pillar most unevenly addressed in Section 7.

4.6 Research Questions

This paper is guided by two questions: (1) How do platform business models and national regulatory frameworks jointly shape the economic and social conditions of gig workers in India and Singapore? (2) To what extent do existing platform-led and state-led responses address the structural precarity these workers face, and what role could an independent, worker-centred model such as UNHU play in closing the gaps that remain?

5. THE GIG ECONOMY IN INDIA

5.1 Growth and Structure

India alone is projected to reach 23.5 million gig workers by 2030; however, this growth is accompanied by deep structural inequalities and infrastructural challenges (NITI Aayog, 2022). Gig work is expanding at a rate that the legal system has yet to catch up to, and it is in need of protections that will benefit gig workers, gig platforms and the consumer. Food delivery and quick-commerce apps like Zomato and Blinkit have boosted growth with their extensive delivery manpower networks to cater to the demand for speed and convenience among consumers. These platforms encourage low barriers to entry, making gig work an available way to generate income for students and those not in the formal labor market. But there is a strong link between this accessibility and labour oversupply. High worker availability enables platforms to keep base pay low while using incentives to encourage longer working hours, which is similar to what Srnicek (2017) describes as platforms lowering the cost and risk and maintaining the control over pricing and allocation. Therefore, earnings are not guaranteed, and rely mainly on the

random assignment of tasks, variable pricing, and customer feedback. An often-discussed example of this is when workers who have indicated an order has "arrived" earlier than it actually has to meet the app's metrics to avoid getting penalized for a perceived delay (Suvarnapathaki et al., 2025).

5.2 Worker Experiences

Income volatility and work intensity have been prevalent themes across various food delivery platforms, such as Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit, and BigBasket, in India (Suvarnapathaki et al., 2025). The working hours are flexible, and workers are expected to select their shifts but have to work long hours to meet income goals when financially necessary. These employees also have to cover expenses for fuel, cars and parts, mobile data, and insurance, which also take a bite out of their net income. Many are also not aware about how to manage their finances and the facilities offered to them. As well as influencing worker behaviour, algorithmic management also plays a key role in influencing workers' behaviour, with workers reporting that the algorithmic control platforms effectively mimicked employer control without legal protections or accountability, precisely the dynamic Vallas and Schor (2020) describe as platforms functioning as a distinct governance mechanism rather than a neutral marketplace.

No end of mental stress is also placed on workers by repetitive app usage. They need to constantly switch from their delivery app to their navigation app, update order status, post delivery photos, and do common phone calls to customers for directions etc. All of these tasks make up cognitive fatigue, exhaust phone batteries and impede productivity without reward.

There is another aspect that is the problem of ‘invisible labour'. According to many workers, 25 to 33% of their working time is dedicated to waiting or being on standby which includes when orders are placed on the app and orders are not ready, after delivery and while waiting for new orders to come in, etc. (Suvarnapathaki et al., 2025). This common waiting is not recognised or remunerated, and therefore the workers feel that their time is not valued or appreciated, and that the job in form (occupation present) is not in substance (fair and predictable income).

5.3 Labour Rights and Policy Responses

India has no adequate labour protection of gig workers. It starts with Indian labour law which, like many other laws around the world, is based on a clear distinction between the two groups, namely ‘employees' and ‘independent contractors' (Bali, 2025). The classification is not strict enough to capture the nature of gig work, which has some aspects of autonomy but also features a high degree of control over workers by the platforms, therefore failing to confirm the notion of gig workers being independent. This means gig workers are caught in between the existing laws.

The recent labour reforms in India try to solve this problem. The Indian government has enacted four labour laws which for the first time formally acknowledge gig and platform workers. These include the Code on Wages, the Industrial Relations Code, the Code on Social Security and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2026).

The most important change in regard to gig workers is outlined in the Code on Social Security (2020). It provides a legal definition of gig and platform work, and creates a structure to protect gig and platform workers through welfare. Under the Code, platforms such as Zomato are required to contribute 1% to 2% of their annual revenue to a government fund that provides gig workers with essential safety nets, including accident insurance, accessible through the e-Shram portal. This code has been described as more symbolic than substantive, as it creates more legal visibility and less vulnerability for workers, but failed to inspire real change (Bali, 2025). It would not create enforceable rights to minimum wages, job security, collective bargaining or protective working conditions, but rather put gig workers into welfare-oriented schemes, like life insurance and accident cover.

This is further confirmed by other labour codes. Gig workers are not covered by minimum pay guarantees in the Code on Wages because the code does not cover informal employment. The right to form unions is limited by the Industrial Relations Code and there is no power for platform workers to negotiate as a group, a clear omission in relation to the Decent Work pillar of social dialogue. Likewise, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code does not apply to platform-mediated working environments (Bali, 2025).

Moreover, there are disparities in implementation of these codes; some states have different codes and some have not implemented any codes at all. These changes also rely on platform compliance, which, of course, is not financially attractive for platforms, mainly because of the advantages they obtain due to the misclassification of workers. This has meant that legal recognition has not led to effective labour protection, highlighting the disjointed nature of the policy response in India (Bali, 2025).

Overall, the policy response in terms of labour codes in India is partial in relation to the Decent Work framework, as they promote employment generation and provide low level of social protection, while lacking in rights at work and social dialogue. The restrictions point to the disconnect between the law and real-life practice, and emphasize the importance of having localized, workers-driven frameworks that focus on economic security and collective voice over compliance with regulations.

6. THE GIG ECONOMY IN SINGAPORE: GRAB

6.1 Platform Work in a Regulated Context

The gig economy has grown across Asia, and Singapore is no exception, with more residents taking up less conventional jobs each year. In 2025, over 71,600 residents were reported to be gig workers, a sharp increase from 67,200 in 2024 (Ministry of Manpower, 2025). Grab is the ride-hailing platform that dominates Singapore's gig economy, contributing approximately S$5.2 billion to Singapore's economy in 2023 (Oxford Economics, 2025).

Compared to India, gig workers in Singapore generally earn higher gross incomes, reflecting higher living costs and a tighter labour market. Nevertheless, income volatility and dependence on platform algorithms persist, consistent with the regional pattern the ILO (2021) identifies across otherwise dissimilar Asian labour markets.

6.2 The Platform Workers Act (2025)

The Platform Workers Act (2025) is one of the most holistic regulatory actions taken in Asia (Tan, 2025). It came into existence because of the rising worry of having gig workers without the same rights as traditional workers, yet they are dependent on platforms for their livelihood. The Act establishes a specific legal status for “platform workers” because they do not unambiguously fall into existing categories of workers. This recognition improves legal visibility but does not equate platform workers with employees. Some of these limitations continue to exist: There is no guaranteed minimum income provided by the Act, and algorithmic control is not effectively regulated, and is largely unchecked. The Act, in contrast to India's Code, does provide a formal mechanism for worker representation, in that Platform Work Associations (PWAs) can pursue collective bargaining, conciliation, and arbitration with platform operators (Ministry of Manpower, 2026). Singapore has formalised worker representation, but the extent to which this translates into effective worker voice and bargaining power remains an open empirical question, particularly given that Platform Work Associations are newly formed and must first secure recognition before they can engage in collective bargaining on workers' behalf. Overall, the Act is more concerned with minimising harm and affording formal representation than to offer opportunities for career progression or skill acquisition of gig workers (Tan, 2025). Even in a well regulated environment like Singapore, the gig workers continue to be structurally dependent and vulnerable to platform control and still need additional, worker-based protection mechanisms beyond the law.

The pattern is less regular than one would expect, based on social protection alone. Singapore's Act is more expansive than India's Code on Social Security in the protection it affords to gig workers, and even more so in the representation that it provides - no such representation exists in India under the labour codes, while under Singapore's Act gig workers are formally represented through registered Platform Work Associations. This divergence, rather than a convergence, is a key element in the argument this paper develops in Section 7, which finds worker voice to be the pillar most unevenly - not uniformly - addressed between the two countries.

7. DISCUSSION

Clear gaps exist between the gig worker experience in India and Singapore. India's gig workforce, numbering in the millions, is much larger, with young, less-educated men dominating ride-hailing and food delivery, while Singapore's is smaller (around 3% of the workforce), more mature, and spread across more diverse platforms. The sections below assess both countries against each of the four Decent Work pillars in turn, before a short synthesis draws the pattern together.

7.1 Employment Creation

Both countries have been successful in creating a large number of employable gigs: India's platforms have succeeded in creating large and fast job creation (NITI Aayog, 2022) and Singapore's is smaller but growing at a steady pace, indicating a more developed and diversified market. However, both Bali (2025) and Suvarnapathaki et al. (2025) argue that the job gains in India are of low quality due to job earnings volatility and a lack of paid waiting time. Both countries therefore satisfy this pillar in form - jobs plainly exist - without fully satisfying it in substance, a distinction the ILO's Decent Work framework treats as significant precisely because job creation without job quality has historically preceded, rather than resolved, labour precarity.

7.2 Rights at Work

On rights at work, India's fragmented labour codes leave gig workers largely outside minimum wage and job-security protections (Bali, 2025), while Singapore's Act, though more comprehensive, still stops short of equating platform workers with employees (Tan, 2025). In other words, neither country has filled the classificatory void that would let firms classify gig workers as economically dependent but legally independent. This is the area in which the two countries have the most noticeable difference in the comprehensiveness of their regulatory regimes: Singapore's is clearly the more robust of the two, but the two still do not fully measure up to normal employment protections.

7.3 Social Protection

Singapore's Platform Workers Act (2025) offers significantly more fundamental benefit coverage, such as injury compensation, than India's welfare-fund model outlined in the Code on Social Security, which Bali (2025) describes as symbolic instead of substantive. This is the place where the two countries are most at odds, indeed the very place that both governments' last round of reforms have focused on - a pattern discussed further in Section 6.2.

7.4 Social Dialogue

The area of social dialogue, rather than one area both countries neglect equally, is where India and Singapore are at their furthest remove. The Industrial Relations Code in India does not provide much support for collective bargaining of platform workers, in particular (Bali, 2025). Singapore's Act, by contrast, establishes a formal representation process, with registered Platform Work Associations (PWAs) gaining recognition to collectively bargain with platform operators, having unresolved differences subjected to conciliation and, ultimately, the Industrial Arbitration Court (Ministry of Manpower, 2026). Singapore has formalised worker representation in a way India has not. However, the extent to which this translates into effective worker voice and bargaining power in practice remains an open empirical question: because the Act only took effect in January 2025, and Platform Work Associations must first be formed and recognised before they can bargain on workers' behalf, whether meaningful collective bargaining actually occurs - and shifts outcomes for workers - is not yet observable in the available evidence (Tan, 2025).

7.5 Synthesis

Decent Work Pillar	India	Singapore
Employment Creation	Large-scale job growth (23.5M workers projected by 2030); undercut by low job quality	Smaller, more mature market (71,600 workers, 2025); higher gross incomes
Rights at Work	Labour codes recognise gig workers but exclude them from minimum wage guarantees	Legal category created, but not equated with employee status
Social Protection	Code on Social Security levy characterised as symbolic (Bali, 2025)	Act provides stronger baseline coverage, including injury compensation
Social Dialogue	Industrial Relations Code restricts union formation and provides no gig-specific bargaining mechanism	Act formalises representation via Platform Work Associations (collective bargaining, conciliation, arbitration); real-world effectiveness not yet established

This comparison suggests a more precise conclusion than "India needs more regulation and Singapore has enough." Instead, it indicates that the two countries have taken meaningfully different approaches to social dialogue specifically, even as they converge on social protection: Codes in India for gig workers don't have any specific mechanism for collective bargaining or organisation, whereas the Act in Singapore makes such a mechanism a reality. This aligns with Vallas and Schor's (2020) argument that platforms are a governance mechanism because they focus the power, while at the same time shifting responsibility to the platform users (in this instance, workers); regulation constrains the harm platforms can cause, and in Singapore's case creates a formal channel through which workers could, in principle, contest that harm - but a formal channel does not, on its own, guarantee real bargaining power, especially for newly formed worker associations facing an established platform operator. India highlights the cost of regulatory delay, including on representation; Singapore emphasises that even comprehensive regulation raises the practical question as to whether formal rights are being put into practice effectively. In both contexts, there is a gap, namely the need for systems that enable stability, growth and voice

that are not simply dependent on the robustness of formal legal frameworks but on the infrastructure that facilitates the use of the legal frameworks by workers.

8. Structural Failures and Worker Needs

Current systems are not built to accommodate gig workers, as they focus on efficiency and growth, rather than sustainability and employee well-being. Predictability of income routes, access to safety nets, training opportunities and representation needs that align closely with the pillars of decent work outlined by the ILO (1999; 2021) are consistently cited as needs by workers.

8.1 Platform Responses and Emerging Gig Models

In addition to government policy, the gig platforms are increasingly under pressure to address worker concerns. While there is some public criticism, worker protests and scrutiny, these are more likely to be about mitigating visible harm than changing the foundations of work structures, as would be required to change the foundational business model of a platform, as argued by Srnicek (2017). Typical platform responses encompass accident coverage, limited health care coverage, cash for fuel and equipment, and performance-based pay changes. An early example of the pattern's shortcomings is the Fairwork India Ratings 2022, which discovered that Uber, Dunzo, Ola, and PharmEasy all received a score of 0 out of 10 on fair pay and working conditions – the lowest of the 12 platforms rated – despite all four entities' public assurances of employee well-being (Chadha, 2022).

Insurance schemes were launched by food delivery platforms in India (Fairwork India, 2024). Grab also pledged to spend S$4 million per year on an expanded welfare programme in Singapore, prior to the implementation of the Platform Workers Act (Grab 2024). But there is a definite void: all these measures address the immediate threat, but they do not offer long-term protection. Many of these benefits are also subject to rating, hours worked or performance targets; and cases have been reported of workers losing access when their scores lower (Fairwork India, 2023).

Gig platforms operating in India also boast different operating models. One such example is the online marketplace Urban Company, which matches customers with independent service providers for various at-home services (beauty, cleaning, repairs). On the other hand, Fairwork ratings indicate that Urban Company has a better standing compared to many delivery platforms in relation to its policies on pay transparency and safety (Fairwork India, 2023). However, the workers continue to be treated as independent contractors, and the platform still determines commissions, access to customers, and task allocation; studies indicate that these continue to limit bargaining power and income control (Fairwork India, 2023). This is a useful test of the paper's theoretical framework: even a platform that scores comparatively well on Fairwork's transparency measures has not altered the underlying platform-capitalist structure of risk transfer and control retention, suggesting that better platform-level practice improves conditions at the margin without resolving the structural issue.

The overall trend in Fairwork's 2024 ratings was also towards a "de-flexibilisation" of the sector, as since 2022, most major platforms have moved from open-ended allocation of tasks to fixed work slots, and penalties have been imposed on those who were unable to commit in advance; the flexibility originally envisioned by gig work was the first thing to go (Financial Express, 2024).

There are some variations in services provided across platforms but not in the structure. Platforms are continuing to pass economic risks onto workers, algorithms dictate who can get a job, social protection is still only partial, and career paths are still uncertain. Evidence from comparative analysis demonstrates that platform-level reform can help to improve baseline conditions but does not solve the issues of income stability, worker voice and the long-term mobility of platform workers (ILO, 2021; Fairwork India, 2024). This disparity between the better conditions and the not-yet-resolved structure is the very reason why independent and worker-centred support systems are important.

9. INTRODUCING UNHU

9.1 UNHU's Mission

The Unseen Humans platform (UNHU) exists to serve the needs of workers who are underserved or marginalised and frequently not formally covered by protection or economic opportunities. The platform's mission is to enhance the dignity of work, expand access to essential services, and make the contributions of unseen workers and their families seen. UNHU is not a proposal, it is an active platform run by Unseen Humans Pte and Unseen Humans India that has expanded to include gig and platform workers as well as other informal laborers like truck drivers, ship breaking workers, sanitation workers and asha workers in India (Unseen Humans, 2025).

The structural findings outlined in Sections 5-8 are the basis for the case for an independent platform, as opposed to better enforcement of existing law, even where there is legal recognition of platforms, as is now the case in both India and Singapore, because platforms still have significant discretion over commissions, task allocation, and workers' access to benefits (Fairwork India, 2023). Singapore's formal representation framework is a meaningful exception to this pattern, but it depends on workers first organising into a registered Platform Work Association before any bargaining can occur - a structural and coordination burden that a lower-barrier, immediately-accessible channel could complement rather than replace. There is no requirement in either country to make benefits cross-platform portable, provide for financial literacy, or ensure a unified system of worker representation across platforms and employers. UNHU has been created to exist in this unoccupied middle ground – not to replace regulation, but to act as infrastructure that can get up to speed quicker than regulation, and can track a worker from one platform and employer to another, that no one national law can do now.

9.2 Platform Services

UNHU's services are provided via two mechanisms, a mobile app for workers, which gives them access to key services, awareness tools and reward-based engagement; and a benefits portal for employers and partners, which allows them to provide benefit schemes, monitor worker engagement and uptake of services and communicate directly with workers (Unseen Humans, 2025).

The two components are intended to work together as a combined feedback loop and not as separate, standalone tools. Employer data about workers' engagement and benefit taking, which is collected on the app, is exposed to employers and partners through the portal and in aggregate, it provides an overview of what benefits workers are actually taking up and where, while workers are able to see through the app which employers and partners are fulfilling their obligations. This bi-directional approach is designed to address the information asymmetry that was discussed in Section 5.2 as a key driver of gig worker precarity – where workers are often not aware of the services or protections that are technically available to them.

9.3 Addressing Structural Gaps

UNHU is a worker-centred platform structured around three pillars which align with the Decent Work framework adopted across this paper:

The first pillar - growth pathways - relates to job creation, and links people to services that help them build their economic security, financial literacy and future opportunities. The second is safety nets related to social protection, which coordinates access to healthcare, legal aid and insurance-related services – services not usually available on gig platforms. The third, worker voice, is related to social dialogue and offers avenues for more straightforward negotiation and understanding with employers, so that workers' needs and concerns are heard.

The three pillars will not be released simultaneously. UNHU's first implementation is focussed on the worker voice pillar because it addresses the gap that remains most unevenly resolved across India and Singapore, as detailed in Section 7 of this paper: India's regulatory framework leaves gig workers with no equivalent mechanism at all, while Singapore's newly-formalised representation framework has not yet been shown to translate into effective worker voice in practice. UNHU's model offers an immediately-accessible, cross-platform communication channel that complements Singapore's formal association-based mechanism rather than duplicating it, and fills the gap entirely absent in India; the growth pathways and safety nets will be added as its own worker base, and its partnerships with employers, grow. This sequencing reflects a deliberate choice to address the gap regulation has left least addressed, rather than the gap that may be easiest to build first.

9.4 Platforms Similar to UNHU

e-Shram Gateway. e-Shram is the Indian national database for registering platform workers to enable them to access social security benefits, which connects platform workers with insurance, pension and welfare schemes (National Informatics Centre, 2026). It provides registration for insurance schemes, access to government welfare policies (including accident and disability, pension schemes) and a nationwide database of informal and gig workers. Compared to UNHU, however, it provides no day-to-day guidance on the use of these benefits, no training or growth plans, no platform interface for workers, and no voice or representation.

This is an example of a state support system that is very wide (many workers reached), but very weak on usability, service integration, empowerment aspects - in principle strong in social protection, but without the delivery system or social dialogue aspect that UNHU proposes.

Singlife. Singlife's platform-worker insurance initiatives are one of the most mature private safety mechanisms for gig workers in Singapore, and centre on financial protection (Singlife, 2023). The advantages are medical expense insurance for platform workers, income replacement insurance in the event of injury or disease and

insurance products for non-standard workers. Compared with UNHU, it has a restricted product scope (insurance products), and there is often a need for partnerships with platforms or employers to get access to it, and it provides no support on skill development or income planning, no tools to give voice to the worker or to represent them collectively, and no guidance on navigating the wider welfare system.

Singlife is different from UNHU in that Singlife supports workers after they have been harmed, but UNHU supports them before they are harmed. It strengthens social protection, but not the way it works or through participation of workers. UNHU, by contrast, is designed to address all three pillars - growth, safety, and voice - together, offering support across platforms rather than tied to a single employer, access to healthcare, legal aid, and insurance navigation, tools for financial literacy and economic planning, growth pathways through skills and service access, and channels for communication and worker voice.

10. CONCLUSION

The central aim of this paper was to explore two questions relating to the economic and social status of gig workers in India and Singapore: how platforms' policies and algorithms affect their experience, and how a worker-centred solution like UNHU could address the gaps left by these. Examined through the prism of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) and measured against ILO's Decent Work framework, the empirical evidence indicates a regular pattern: despite rights to work and social protection being only partially covered, and social dialogue being even more woefully underdeveloped, the shift to the gig economy in Asia has paved the way for the creation of jobs and, in some cases, social protection. In terms of vulnerabilities, it is not just about the quality of national policy: India and Singapore illustrate that there are common vulnerabilities shared by gig workers despite the stark differences in regulatory contexts.

It is a significant paper, as it considers the "regulation gap" differently and reframes it as less an enforcement matter, more a design and implementation challenge. The weaker results in India would easily be interpreted as a lack of regulation, and the Singapore side as a near-completion of regulation; Section 7 complicates this story. India lacks a comparable mechanism entirely, while Singapore has formally established one whose real-world effectiveness remains untested. But across these two very different regulatory types, this uneven path forward in workers' voice is most pronounced – a gap that is only partly a matter of policy choice, and partly a question of whether formal legal rights translate into workers' lived ability to organise and be heard.

This analysis has two main implications. First, for researchers and policymakers looking at the reform of gig work: India's labour codes are not the end of the story to compare with Singapore's Platform Workers Act; they are just two data points in a wider pattern. Comparative studies in the future should examine if the same issue - social dialogue - is present in other Asian gig economies, or if this is merely the beginning of a longer story in the region. Second, for practice: UNHU is independent, worker-centred infrastructure, and not an alternative to stronger regulation, but its necessary complement – and for good reason, it can move faster than laws, operating across platforms and borders which no single national law can. These challenges are not likely to go away without further changes to the legislation, most importantly through independent, worker first types of support systems that expressly address the gaps in the current legislation, above all regarding worker voice. This paper has argued that one model, which is already in play among other groups of invisible workers in India, has been designed around this neglected pillar, and provides a blueprint for how to directly support workers' well-being, growth and agency.

10.1 Policy Recommendations

The recommendations below are derived from the gaps identified across the four dimensions of the ILO Decent Work framework and should therefore be understood as policy implications rather than as empirically tested interventions. Each recommendation is linked explicitly to the evidence and specific gap in the analysis that motivates it.

1. Evidence: Bali (2025) finds that India's Code on Social Security's 1-2% revenue levy has functioned as a symbolic gesture rather than an enforced obligation. Gap: compliance currently relies on platform self-reporting, with no independent verification. Recommendation: India should require independent, third-party auditing of aggregator compliance with the Code's revenue contribution requirement.
2. Evidence: This paper's analysis (Section 7.4) finds that Singapore's Platform Workers Act has established formal representation rights through Platform Work Associations, but that whether this translates into effective worker voice and bargaining power in practice remains untested, given the Act's recency. Gap: no assessment mechanism currently exists to track whether Platform Work Associations are actually forming and bargaining. Recommendation: Singapore's Ministry of Manpower should commission an

early assessment of Platform Work Association formation and bargaining activity following the Act's 2025 representation provisions.

3. Evidence: Section 8.1's comparison of platforms finds uneven transparency practice — Urban Company performs comparatively well on Fairwork's transparency indicators, while other platforms do not. Gap: transparency disclosure is currently voluntary, producing this inconsistency across platforms and countries. Recommendation: both governments should mandate algorithmic task allocation and pay transparency disclosures, requiring platforms to make comparable, standardised disclosures modelled on the Fairwork transparency framework.
4. Evidence: This paper's review of India's Code on Social Security (Section 5.3) finds that earlier welfare-oriented reforms have not translated into felt improvements for workers, per Bali's (2025) assessment. Gap: no follow-up evaluation is currently planned for the newly-operational labour codes to test whether this pattern repeats. Recommendation: India's Ministry of Labour and Employment should commission a follow-up assessment of the labour codes (effective November 2025) within two to three years, specifically testing whether legal recognition has translated into felt improvements this time.
5. Evidence: Section 8.1 finds that most existing platform benefits are conditioned on performance ratings or hours worked, meaning workers can lose access to core protections through no fault beyond an algorithmic score. Gap: neither country's current regulation prohibits this practice. Recommendation: regulators in both countries should prohibit tying core worker benefits — injury compensation, insurance access — to performance ratings or hours worked.
6. Evidence: This paper's comparative analysis (Section 7, Section 9) finds that India has no equivalent mechanism to Singapore's formal worker representation framework, while Singapore's mechanism itself remains empirically untested. Gap: no independent, cross-platform infrastructure currently exists to complement Singapore's formal mechanism or substitute for India's absence of one. Recommendation: policymakers should give a platform such as UNHU the opportunity to pilot alongside other independent, worker-centred platforms, to determine empirically whether cross-platform infrastructure can complement Singapore's Platform Work Associations and fill the representation gap that persists in India.

10.2 Limitations

1. Reliance on secondary sources: this paper draws on platform accountability reports, government publications, and press coverage rather than primary interviews or survey data with gig workers themselves, a limitation given the paper's own emphasis on the neglect of worker voice.
2. Recent regulation: both India's labour codes and Singapore's Platform Workers Act took effect in 2025, meaning this paper can assess their stated provisions but not yet their demonstrated real-world outcomes; a meaningful outcomes-based evaluation of either framework will require a longer post-implementation window
3. Two-country scope: The comparative analysis is conducted across the two countries of India and Singapore; these countries were chosen for their distinct regulatory trajectory, as described in Section 4.1, but the pattern discussed here has not been tested against other South and Southeast Asian gig economies, and may not generalise.
4. The absence of gig worker voice generally: no one in the gig worker community was interviewed for this paper. The account of worker experience in this paper is necessarily mediated, since it is based on the existing work of other academics, platform ratings reports, or news reports; it is very likely that the qualitative interview methodology used in related migrant-worker research (e.g., this paper's companion study) will be much better suited to close this gap.

10.3 Future Recommendations

1. The secondary sources used here suggest structural gaps between gig workers and employees in both countries, which should be tested in future research through primary, qualitative interviews, with a semi-structured interview design similar to that employed in interviews with adjacent migrant-worker populations.
2. Future research should test empirically the feasibility of closing the worker-voice gap identified in this paper by piloting UNHU - or a worker-population platform partner-agnostic, minimum-viable version of its three pillars - with a specific worker-population and a platform partner.

3. As both regulatory regimes examined in this paper are only recently in place, a reassessment is warranted in the future to determine whether the legal recognition has led to any measurable improvements in worker outcomes, after two or three years have passed, when implementation data is available.
4. Future comparative studies should expand upon the four pillars framework used in this paper to include other gig economies from South and Southeast Asia, to see if the social-dialogue gap found here for India and Singapore is a regional pattern or just a feature of these two regulatory contexts.

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