

Unmasking Digital Slavery: A Study of Labour Exploitation Occurring among Taxi Drivers in the Sri Lankan Gig Economy

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INTRODUCTION

Gig economy is a kind of a free market system in which temporary positions are common and organizations hire workers as independent contractors for short term commitments (Gillis, 2020). It facilitates matching between providers and customers on a short term and payment by task basis (Kaine & Josserand, 2019).

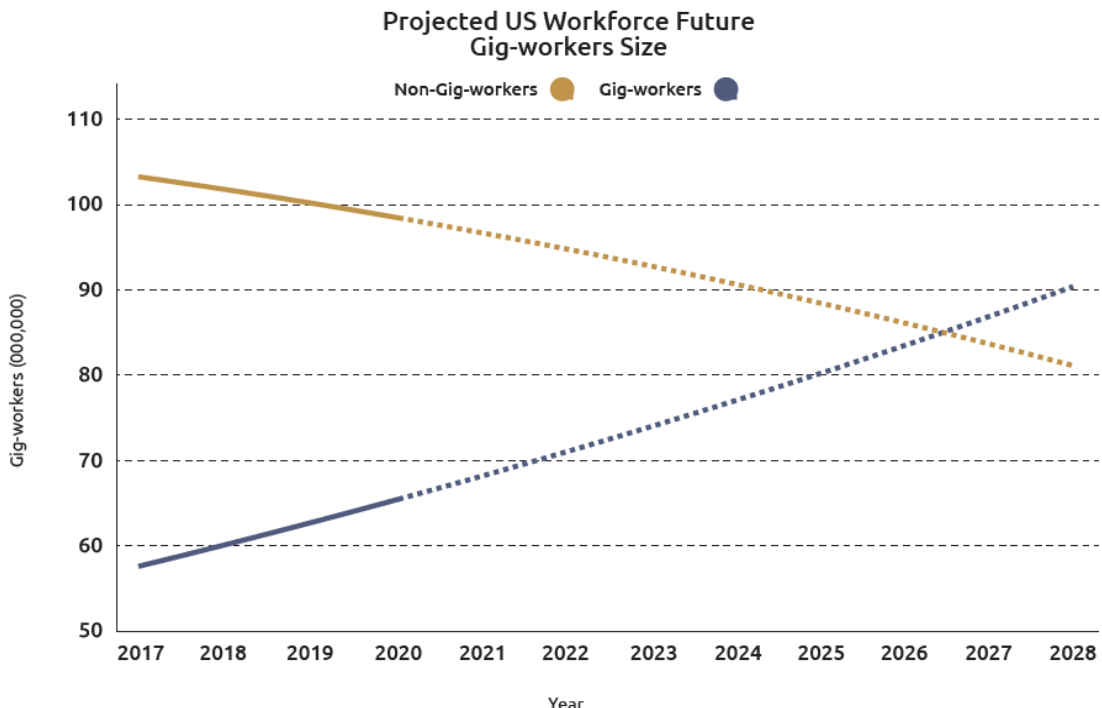
In financial crisis period of 2008,2009, task based labour has evolved and has become a significant factor in the overall economy. In that period, workers were laid off and as a result alternative solution of contingent workers emerged (Tigar, 2020). Mobilizing of underutilizing assets and the concept of creating an income from short term tasks has been begun in this recession period. With most of the population facing unemployment and underemployment, many workers started to pick up temporary engagements. So, this recession period has pushed people into the gig economy, with lack of choice and inability to work in traditional employment relationships (Frazer, 2019).This gig economy moves up a gear in the Digital era with the advancement of technology. Upwork like platforms and other remote job platforms and crowdsourcing marketplaces began to pop out by providing opportunities for the gig workers a place to find their work. Airbnb was launched in 2008 which enable anyone with a space room to generate additional income by letting it out. Gig economy was turned up another notch with the establishment of Uber in 2010 by recruiting contract drivers (Whitehead, 2019).

This gig economy is not a new thing to the world. However, gig economy has been growing dramatically in recent years. According to the statistics in the United States, approximately 57 million people (35% of workforce in the country) engage in gig economy. One trillion American dollars in income is contributed to the economy each year by freelancers (roughly 5% of GDP). And also, it has reported that thirty three percent (33%) of businesses are using gig services (startup anonymous.com).

Beyond the United States also these gig workers are found all over the world. In Australia, workers find gigs in more than 100 platforms, with the most popular being Air tasker, Uber, Freelancer, Uber eats and Deliveroo. Roughly 7% of working people in Australia use the gig economy to find jobs (startup anonymous.com). From 2016-2019, the United Kingdom’s gig economy doubled in size. Ninety seven percent (97%) of people in Mexico and India are open to gig work such as freelancers, temporary work and contract work (Darko, 2020). Thus, these statistics show that more people are choosing to work in the gig economy. Accordingly, we can expect that those numbers will continue to grow in upcoming years as well.

The rise of the gig economic platforms occurred during the last decade. Platform companies grasped this trend and moved into the digital world. This graph illustrates the rising trend of the both gig providers and the gig workers over past years and the upcoming years which based on US workforce (Appjobs institute, 2020).

Figure 1: Projected US Workforce Future (Gig-Workers Size)



Source: App jobs institute

Even though estimations are given by various people and institutions, the transformation that is taking place in these digital platforms and its scale cannot be fully explored due to the inability of conventional labour market statistics to measure the work happening via online platforms. Although

the exact size of the gig economy is unknown comparison to other industries, the estimations indicate an upward trend over the years to come (Appjobs institute, 2020).

The gig economy is a continuum that include micro work, global knowledge based freelance work, local manual labour, consumer led service work and include many other services. According to Healy, Nichol森, & Pekarek (2017), Works in gig economy can be anywhere in this continuum. When focusing on distribution of gig platforms by category of work, most common sector is the car gig sector within the gig economy. As many ridesharing companies have emerged worldwide in similar to Uber along with ridesharing, car gig sector become increasingly popular with delivery of all items from food to retail goods (Rao, 2019). So, exploring about this sector where taxi workers are working is a crucial area to be studied.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

The gigification of the labour market is an emerging trend in Sri Lanka. People in the 21st century are very busy with their social and work life. Due to this busy lifestyle, people tend to use services under gig economy, such as taxi services like Uber, Kangaroo, pick me and getting food from food delivery services like Uber eats, Pick me foods. Mainly consumer led service work, where direct customer and labour interaction take place is prominent in Sri Lankan gig economy (Galpaya, 2017). Accordingly, working as taxi drivers and food delivery workers can be seen as an emerging trend in Sri Lankan gig economy. An industry insider estimates that Pick me and Uber deliver around 25000 meals and ride hailing revenue tops Rs.100 million in Sri Lanka daily. Young urbanities used to order food whenever they fancy or renting tuk-tuks instead of owing cars are driving growth (Kulamannage, 2019).

When focus on the gig economy and gig services, there is a dark side of gig workers that we all have to focus. As the gig workers join as independent workers, they work for daily payment. Platform companies maintain that workers perform task in their personal capacity as 'independent contractors'. Their payment is very low and it depends on the user-based rating system. Platform companies control workers through 'algorithmic management' enabled by platform-based rating and reputation systems. In that system, workers are rated by the clients according to the completion of the tasks and the workers with best scores receive more work through client preferences and also from the platform's algorithmic ranking of workers from that results. And also, this algorithmic management dismiss the workers with low ratings by deactivating their accounts (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2018). Workers are paid for every task completed rather than a fixed salary like employees (Kulamannage, 2019). Sometimes they did not get any payment due to rejection of service by the customer. These workers do not receive any additional incentives from the platform provider. No job

security for their work (no ETF/EPF received as traditional private sector workers) and their job existence is based on user-based rating system. The online platform is created in a way that all motions, waiting times of workers can be tracked by the company. So, these workers can be kicked off by the platform providers very easily due to various reasons. Also, these workers are socially alienated as they have no time to socialize with each other. Therefore, labour is being exploited in a higher extent where platform providing companies extract more benefits from workers rather than giving benefits and protections to the gig workers continuum (Healy, Nichol森, & Pekarek, 2017).

This research explores specific grievances of taxi workers that highlights labour exploitation. In Sri Lankan context, there is a tendency that younger generation tend to work in digital platforms specially as taxi and food delivery workers with the emergence of online platform companies such as Uber, Pick me etc. They have been expected to come along for working as a delivery worker in these platforms without much knowing about the long-term implications of some of the practices adopted by the platform companies.

With much has been written about the benefits of the sharing economy, this study is an initial effort to highlight the bad impact on gig workers specially taxi and food delivery workers. This study focuses on problems of taxi workers in the Sri Lankan gig economy regarding social security where lack of provision of annual pay, sick pay, health insurances, pension contributions and how their rights are ignoring such as right to communication between workers, right to organize and negotiate collective agreements etc. Accordingly, this study is much more focus on what is really happening in the Sri Lankan context.

Thus, the objective of this study was to,

Explore about how labour exploitation occurring among taxi drivers in the Sri Lankan gig economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gig Economy and Gig Workforce- Definitions

There is no any single definition to define the gig economy or gig workforce. Some studies use narrow definitions by focusing on internet based or platform jobs. Other studies define gig economy more broadly to include any type of work arrangement, short term job or source of supplemental income. This gig worker is identified by various names such as contingent worker, flexible worker, free agent, freelancer, on-call worker, temporary worker, platform worker, self-employed worker etc. This gig economy concept also called by names such as sharing economy, on demand economy, peer economy, platform economy etc. (Yildirmaz, Goldar, & Klein, 2020).

The gig economy is a collective term used to explain the economy of independent work, and the name derives from the short-term commitment provided by gig workers, which are often called gigs (Kobie, 2018). The work in the gig economy is usually characterized by multi party interactions, involving a seller, a buyer and a platform company. According to Karlsson and Wranne (2019), gig economy is a free market system in which temporary positions are common and organisations contract with independent workers for short term engagements.

When focus on the word 'gig', that word came from musical jargon and referred to a performance by a musical group. When applied to the working world, this concept refers to sporadic jobs of limited duration which highlights the person who hired to do the job is responsible for fulfilling a specific role within a project. This gig economy concept began in the United States more than a decade ago. This has happened along with economic crisis, and the job market underwent a revolution from which arose alternative hiring models, which contrasted with the prevalent traditional models of time (Otero, 2018).

In financial crisis period of 2008 and 2009, the task based labour has evolved and has become a significant factor in the overall economy. In that period, workers were laid off and as a result, alternative solution of contingent workers were emerged (Tigar, 2020). Mobilizing of underutilizing assets and the concept of creating an income from short term tasks has been begun in this recession period. Since most of the population had to face unemployment and underemployment, many workers started to pick up temporary engagements. So, this recession period has pushed people into the gig economy, with lack of choice and inability to work in traditional employment relationships (Fraser, 2019).

This gig economy expanded further thanks to improvements in digital platforms. With the technology over the last 30 years, workplace has evolved due to increase in usage of information technology and increasing fast paced working environments. Technology has played a crucial role in increasing number of people flocking to gig economy as well as for the establishment of platform companies such as Uber (Digital Holdings INC, 2020). This concept of 'gig economy' is popularly associated with online platforms such as Uber, Fiverr and Task Rabbit which make it easier for gig worker to find opportunities. These platforms connect individuals in need of personal services with those who will provide them (Yildirmaz, Goldar, & Klein, 2020).

Being largely hidden from public view, the size of the gig economy is rather a matter of guesswork. According to ADP research, from 2010 to 2019, the share of gig workforce in companies has increased from 14.2% to 16.4% and this may continue to grow by massive amount in near future. Accordingly, 6

million workers have moved into the gig economy since 2010, making a 15% rise in the last decade (Yildirmaz, Goldar, & Klein, 2020). And also rough estimates suggest this is a sector worth nearly us \$ 5 billion and involving around 60 mn workers in the global south. Beyond these approximations, there is a general agreement that online labour is growing fast as an economic phenomenon and that it will be an increasingly important model in the future of work and the future of economic development (Heeks, 2019).

Labour Exploitation in the Gig Economy

Gig work also raises the spectre of domination and exploitation. Specially in low skilled sector of the gig economy, where workers lack acceptable alternatives and thus bargaining power, which result in an exploitation.

Exploitation has a long history, however under the management discipline, exploitation was emphasized along with the emerged scientific management. A major criticism about the scientific management was, workers felt that they were exploited as they were not given a wage or salary compared to their increased productivity. This wage payment created uncertainty and insecurity for workers (Veneziani, 2007).

By far, most influential theory of exploitation ever set forth is that of Karl Marx, who held that workers in a capitalist society are exploited in so far as they are forced to sell their labour power to capitalists for less than full value of the commodities they produce with their labour. This theory stated that workers are not laboring entirely for their own benefit because capitalists use their privileged position to exploit workers (Veneziani, 2007)

Platform companies try to misclassify their workers as independent contractors and through this classification they try to achieve unseen outcomes which will be benefited for them (Doorn, 2017). According to Cherry (2016), on demand companies mobilize their terms of service (TOS) agreement to designate workers as independent contractors rather than employees. This arrangement prevents on-demand companies from having to pay employee benefits, compensation and insurances which can save up 30% in labour costs (Cherry, 2016). It states that this TOS agreement can be modified by platform owners at any time , and it detach the ability of workers to appeal particular regulations or decisions. Moreover, many TOS agreements also give right for platform owners to terminate worker's user accounts when they decide that these workers have somehow breached the agreement (Aloisi, 2015). This contract is viewed as a sham contract where platform companies try to categorized them as independent contractors in order to receive more benefits for them (Doorn, 2017).

Owners of platform companies try to reduce their business risk by demanding greater flexibility of their workers, thereby exposing them to increased personal risk. This is a kind of a risk shift that platform companies have made in these short-term contracts. As it difficult to terminate the contracts of permanent staff members, companies try to employ workers only temporarily and give low benefits for gig worker. By guarantee flexible number of working hours, they tend to transform business risk into personal risk and by that they try to extract more benefits from them by guarantee any number of working hours and workers are only called when needed (Doorn, 2017).

And also, they do not have any insurance coverage and platform companies avoid that cost by classifying them as independent contractors. Thus, it is argued that as labour markets are weakly regulated, firms may exploit workers from this risk transformation mechanisms that identified in this study. So, their work is said to be precarious which affected due to flexibilization of the labour market by giving lower earnings with low power by exposing workers to a greater personal risk (Bieber & Moggia, 2020).

Inability of many low skilled workers to turn down work offers creates a high level of dependency and this contributes to power imbalance. Absent regulations, enable firms to exercise power without external constraints. And also, firms succeed in turning business risk into workers personal risk without proper compensation, in turn they extract a benefit in the form of an increase in expected profits which ultimately lead to an exploitation (Bieber & Moggia, 2020).

Another critique of the gig economy relates to its 'potential for accelerating 'fragmentation of jobs' where breaking down once whole jobs into discrete elements, each of which is then auctioned to the lowest bidder (Healy et. al ,2017). Unions New South Wales (2016) argued that Air tasker business model engage workers as independent contractors and they are governed by commercial law rather than employment law and by that they try to bypass requirements for minimum payments and employee safety nets.

So, this will be led to the people who do microwork know only to perform a small task and they don't know the whole work process. Ultimately, they limited to certain task and arenas will be not opening to them in future.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an exploratory type study as it tries to explore what is happening in the Sri Lankan gig economy. This exploratory study explores how the platform companies exploit gig workers, in order to seek new insights and to assess the phenomena in a new light. In this study, researcher explored

labour exploitation that occur among taxi workers and identify this as a problem that has not thoroughly investigated, especially in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, a qualitative and interpretive approach was applied with the aim of having an in-depth understanding of how the labour exploitation occurs among taxi drivers in the Sri Lankan gig economy.

A series of interviews were conducted as the strategy for generating data, with the aim of exploring the research question. It has selected as it provides access to rich information, where researcher will be able to gain knowledge on their thoughts and opinions. These interviews are semi structured in nature by allowing more open-ended questions to make a discussion with the interviewee rather than strictly following a formalized list of questions. Furthermore, social media posts and comments were also used to generate the data. This strategy is called as ‘Netnography’ which is said to be the branch of ethnography that analyses the free behavior of individuals on the internet that uses online marketing research technique to provide useful insights. Therefore, this research used ‘interview method’ and “Facebook posts and comments of drivers’ groups” to study the phenomenon of labour exploitation in the gig economy, where comprehensive understandings are essential from individual participants as well as from those posts and comments.

The purposive sampling method was used as the sampling techniques as it enables researcher to squeeze a lot of information out of the data that they have collected. Individuals who works as taxi drivers within the Colombo district were selected for the study. Colombo district was selected because most of the gig economy workers, specially these taxi and food delivery workers are popular as well as available in the Colombo district. Taxi drivers who works as full-time workers as well as some part time workers were selected as it useful in achieving research objectives as well as purpose of the research.

Table 1: Details of the Participants

Name of the participant	Full time/part time	Age	Area of working
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1.Kamal	Part time	40 years	Piliyandala
2.Namal	Full time	35 years	Colombo
3.Sapumal	Full time	58 years	Colombo
4.Vimal	Full time	44 years	Kaduwela
5.Rukmal	Full time	27 years	Kotikawaththa
6.Wanamal	Full time	48 years	Colombo
7.Muthumal	Full time	28 years	Colombo

Source: Author compiled

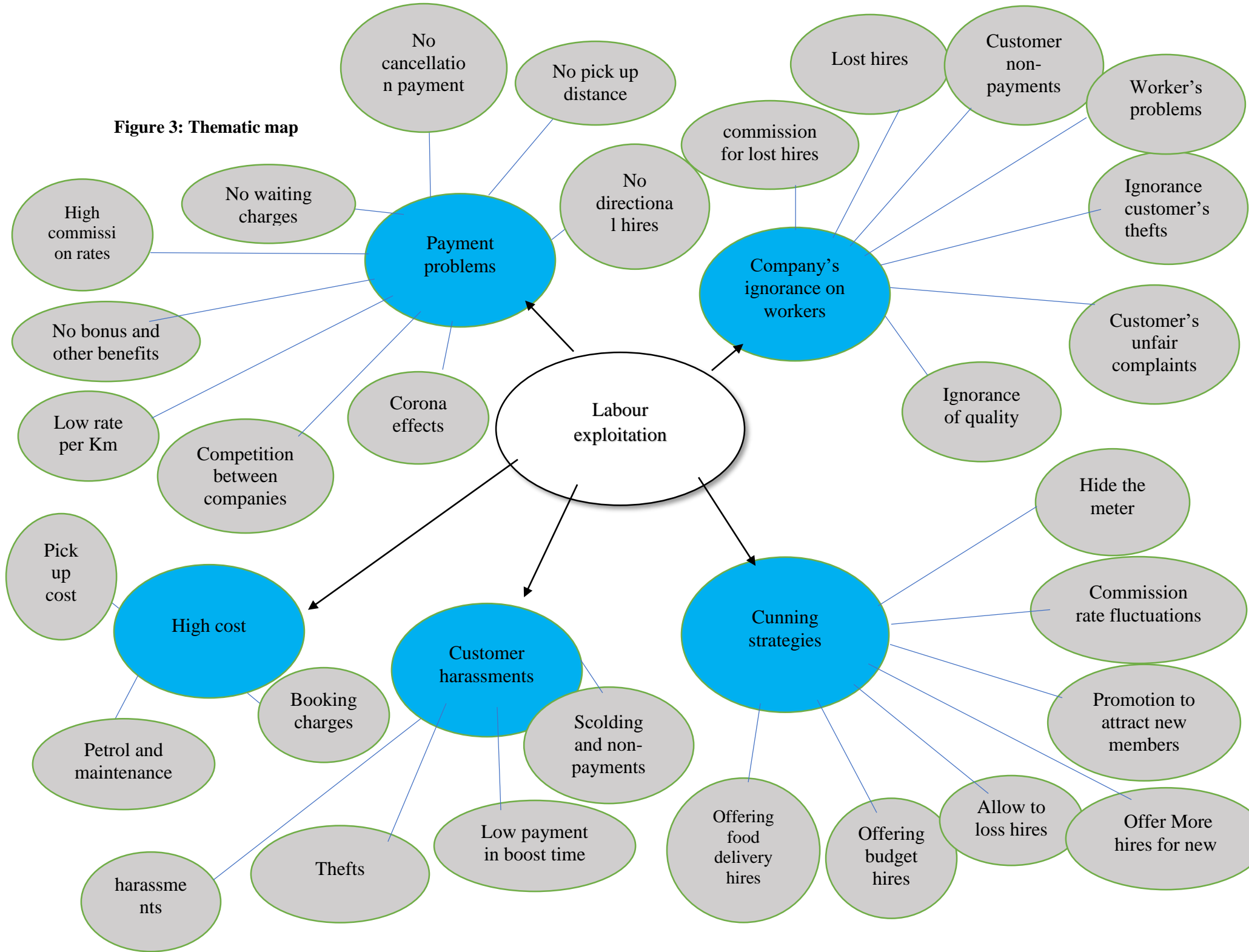
In this study, researcher used Thematic analysis which is applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts.

After listening to the audio recordings, the interview data that gathered were transcribed into detailed texts. Then special codes for the words and phrases were identified. Codes helped this research to track common themes and phenomenon that is available among the collected data. Labour exploitation- high commission rate, low payment rates, corona effects, company actions, no waiting charges, high commission rates, no pickup distance are some of the codes identified. Then, researcher put similar codes together to build comprehensive themes that focused on a particular concept or set of ideas. Each theme was defined and given a name, and the researcher gone through codes and themes again and again in order to ensure all the interesting themes have identified in the research. After that, themes are described with the evidences such as quotes which said by participants, Facebook posts and Facebook comments of platform drivers. Thematic analysis method was used due to the flexibility and freedom it provides. It was useful in identifying even the minor details of the transcripts and hence I was able to read between the lines and come up with clearer themes and analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the study was to explore how labour exploitation occurring among taxi drivers in the Sri Lankan gig economy. A thematic map was developed based on the data gathered from the participants. The findings of this study represent a thematically – organized synthesis of the perceptions of 7 participants on labour exploitation of gig workers.

Figure 3: Thematic map



Source: Author Compilation

Note: The size and the distance between bubbles do not indicate any thematic relationship

Research Objective: To explore how does labour exploitation occur among taxi drivers in the Sri Lankan gig economy

According to the gathered data from taxi drivers in the study, Labour exploitation is identified as a main theme of the study. Under the main theme of labour exploitation, sub themes have identified as payment problems, company's ignorance on workers, high cost, customer's harassments, Cunning strategies of companies and Digital Taylorism. They are identified as main ways in which labour exploitation occurring in the Sri Lankan gig economy.

Payment Problems

This study revealed the payment problem as the main way that workers are getting exploited in the gig economy in Sri Lanka. The main ways in which payment problem is occurring is identified under the codes such as no directional hires, no pick up distance, no payment for cancellation, no waiting charge, high commission rate, no bonuses and other benefits, low rates per Km, competition between companies and corona effects on payments.

It was found that the gig workers do not receive any fair payment for their effort and it can be identified as a main criticism where drivers are getting exploited by giving a low payment for their work. In the study, it has identified different ways that drivers face difficulties in payment aspect. For most of the hires, drivers have to go for a long distance to pick up the customers. But they are not paid with any amount for the pick-up distance that travelled. They have to spend the petrol cost for that distance. But they have been paid only when the customer has arrived. In one hand, drivers lost the payment for pick up distance. On the other hand, they said that they have to cancel some of the hires as sometimes they have to travel more distance than the distance that to be travelled for the particular trip.

This is what said by Rukmal.

“To pick up customers have to go nearly 2-3 Km and no any payment for the pick-up distance. sometimes I have got only 120 rupees for all 4-5 Km travelled and this job is doing as I have no any other option.”

According to him it is proved that they had to face the same problem again and again when they got hires. They don't remain any amount in hand when they have paid off the commission from that 120 rupees. Rather than that, they have to bear the petrol cost and ultimately, it's a loss that drivers get from this situation.

Waiting charge is a charge that given for the taxi drivers for the waiting time that they are waiting until customers stop at different locations within the trip. Even though previously they have given with a payment for that waiting, now it is completely stopped by the platform companies. They have to face petrol cost for that waiting. And also, drivers faced the difficulty when there are two customers in the vehicle and one stopped for at a shop or somewhere. In that case, drivers had to put A/C on as other customer is in the vehicle. According to the interviews that conducted with the drivers, most of them emphasized the problem of waiting time.

Kamal said.

“Some customers asked to stop near supermarkets and wait until they went on shopping. No any payment is given for us for that waiting. Our engine /ac is working and no any payment for that and it’s a huge loss for us.”

Kamal is a part time worker works as a taxi driver in this platform. He is an accountant in profession. Even though he has a permanent job, there is no difference between him and a full-time worker as Kamal also had to face all the difficulties as same as in a full-time taxi driver in this gig platform. Here Kamal revealed that he does not get a payment for the time he was waiting. So, he had to incur the loss of a/c wastage, fuel wastage and time wastage in that circumstance. Previously, platform companies paid for the waiting time for the drivers when they are waiting in peak times which is high traffic time. But the situation has changed now and no any fair payment is given now for them.

Commission rate problem is a main problem that taxi drivers have to face when been in the platform. As said by most of them, this commission rate has increased more than doubled of the previous rate. Platform companies increased the rate for three wheelers as well as for the cars. As said by three-wheel drivers, the rate has changed from 5% to 12% while for cars 10% to nearly 23%.

This is what Kamal and Vimal who were car taxi drivers expressed their ideas about the commission rate increment.

“Commission rate for cars previously (before corona pandemic) is 10% and now it was increased 20%. And they take additional 5 rupees for every hire.”

This proved that COVID 19 situation led workers into a more difficult situation than previous. The commission rate was drastically increased up to 20% for the cars which was in 10%. It is very unfair to increase the rate by such a huge amount in this pandemic situation because it is a period where whole country’s economy got corrupted and people faced with difficulties in finding living expenses. Rather than giving a support for their lives, implementing such a huge commission rate is very sad to hear.

Not only high commission rate, low rate per Km is another payment issue that faced by the taxi workers. The problem is whether this payment enough for them when compared with the expenses that have to be incurred by them. From the payment that they have gained per Km, they have to pay commission and fixed amount of payment. Not only that the petrol and maintenance cost, tire wastage also have to be paid off with that payment. How much they could remain in their hands is a problem we all should concerned with. But the platform companies couldn't understand this issue of need of a fair payment for the workers.

According to Wanamal,

“Platform companies have enough number of drivers now. Now they want more and more customers to attract. Due to this competition, the rate for a km is also reduced as companies compete with each other to give a low cost to the customer. Ultimately our payment rate goes down.”

Wanamal clearly clarify what is happening in this platform. Competition led companies to attract more and more customers to the company. For that, they try to reduce what customer have to pay for a hire. Ultimately, it has affected for a low payment for the drivers.

In Salve & Paliath (2019), it revealed that app-based service providers in India spent long hours on the job to earn incentives in order to send savings to their home. And also, it is stated that they have little or no employment benefits such as insurance and they complained that their incomes were declining.

Corona pandemic is a situation which all over the world affected with. Sri Lanka is also a country who faced with economic crisis with this pandemic.

In this pandemic situation, rather giving any reliefs and benefits for the workers, what platform companies did was revealed by Muthumal.

“After corona pandemic, they have further reduced the payment rates for a km. So, I had to go for my previous job again because the unfair rates given.”

Even people came by paying attention for the surface benefits, by the time passed they understood the bitter truth. That's may be the reason for the Muthumal to go again for his previous job rather staying in the platform.

According to what is said by Sapumal, this is the situation that three-wheel taxi drivers have faced after the COVID 19 pandemic.

“For a 1 Km-Rs.60 after 1 Km for every other Km-Rs. 35, waiting charge-Rs.3.the payment after 10pm-5am is Rs.70 and every other Km Rs.42. After corona Demand

rate -only rs.35, Non- Demand time rate – rs.28, No waiting charges and no previously given Rs.7 extra amount.”

This proved how much they have reduced from them in demand and non-demand times. Platforms have cut off all the extra payments that previously given which drivers fell into a worst situation in the pandemic situation.

Bonuses are a good way to reward and motivate gig workers. So, there is no reason that a company cannot offer bonuses to the workers. Even platform companies started to give bonuses for the workers for a particular number of rides completed and also for the hires in busy hours in specific areas, now they don't offer that to the drivers. All bonuses are cut off with the time.

According to this study, most of the workers revealed that they have received performance bonuses previously at the beginning stage that they entered into the gig economic sector. But all the bonuses are cut off without any reason by the platform company.

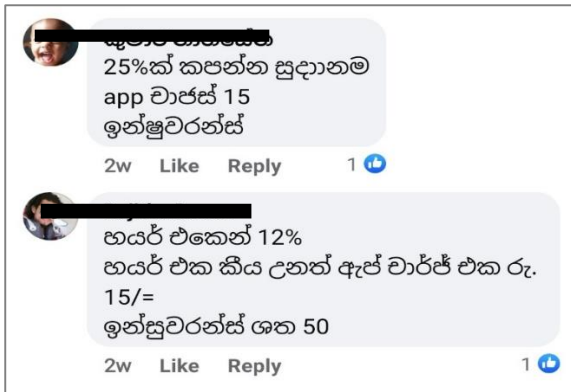
Those targets and extra payments are not available now as platform companies use those strategies only to trap the drivers to the platform.

According to Namal,

“Previously we have given bonus for hires when we achieve targets. But now no anything like that. Even though they said they have given it no one know whether it is given or not.”

So, the previously given benefits are stopped by the companies. This bonus may be a motive for them to work even in a situation where companies take high commission rates and put them in trouble. It's very bad to hear that the given benefits are no more given for the workers.

Workers might work very courageously when they receive bonuses. The above things that said by workers proved how much they fed up from the company's bad decisions. Rather than cut the bonuses, it may be fair for the workers if company could give them a little amount of payment as a benefit for their hard work.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

This is what three-wheel drivers posted on a taxi drivers' group in Face Book. They have posted about their high commission rate, booking charge and insurance cost that they have to bear due to been in the platform and company's actions. And also, some of the drivers said that company may ready to incur a more hire commission which is 25% from them in future.

Company's Ignorance in Workers Problems

Company's ignorance in workers' problems is a main area to be concerned in this gig economic sector. Here, in every instance the platform companies have taken the customer's side or else completely ignore the worker's problems in worker's issues.

Most of the drivers said that they fed up with this work due to this ignorance. One instance is getting a commission by the platform companies even for the hires that lost for them. Most of the times taxi drivers said customers don't pay for the hires or they pay in less for the hires.

This is what Vimal said.

“No any solution given for us even we called for company's hotline. When we complain them with the customer payment problems, what they said is you are responsible to get the payment. We cannot do anything. And even though customer not paid for hire, we have to pay the 20% commission for them.”

Getting a commission even for a lost hire is a huge cost for the taxi drivers. They have lost the payment, petrol cost, tire wastage. Additionally, they should pay that commission which they ultimately got nothing from that. Due to this behavior of the companies, most of the drivers said that they have left the job and also fed up with the job. This proves that company ignorance and this bad behavior ultimately affected for the job dissatisfaction of the taxi drivers.

This is what a platform driver posted in the social media.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

This post implied that platform providers are not listening for the driver's problems. Even though they called the hotline for their problems, the platform providers do not give solutions rather make off from those by saying nonsense.

In this study, it has found some of the features of digital Taylorism where workers are being exploited in technology means. Here also the platform companies try to extract more benefits from the workers rather giving benefits for them.

This is what Vimal said.

“Previously I worked more hours without a rest as a taxi driver in this platform and I got a disease even in my back as I worked for long hours till morning to mid night.”

Vimal is a car taxi driver in this platform. As he worked more and more hours continuously by being in the seat, he got a fungus like disease in his back. He said that he worked very hard till morning to night without any rest and got that disease. This proved that the huge effort these workers had to put in order to earn in this platform. Drivers caught with these kinds of diseases due to the sleepless, restless nights that they have spent in order to earn an income in the platform.

Karl Marx's theory of exploitation held that workers in a capitalist society are exploited as they forced to sell their labour power to capitalists for less than the full value of the commodities they produce with their labour. In the current study it has proved that in the gig economy which is more rely on labour than capital can earn huge profit as they are involved in exploitation of labour. And also, these platform providers can get a huge profit as they can get a higher surplus value as they don't want to give even a minimum wage for the gig economy workers.

Passing Unnecessary Cost for Drivers: Unfair Rules

Another problematic situation is drivers have to bear the cost of petrol for the pick-up distance. They said that they cannot reject hires. Even they accept some of the hires they have to travel a long distance to pick up the customer than the distance of the whole trip. So, what about the pick-up distance cost? They do not pay any amount for that. In the side of the taxi drivers, it is a cost as well as a loss for them.

This situation proved by the statement that said by Kamal.

“We cannot reject hires. They said us to take all of the hires. But actually, we cannot accept and take all of the hires. Because drivers have to go for 2/3 Km to take the customer and we have not received any payment for that pick up distance. Our reject rate should below 20% and otherwise our rates are going down.”

In one side, they cannot reject hires as their rates going down. On the other hand, they have to bear a huge loss if they accept the above type of hires where they have to travel a long distance to pick up rather than the distance of the trip. Companies do not look at these crucial situations while ignoring them too much when compared to a traditional type of a worker.

Due to non-availability of a transparent meter, most of the drivers faced with difficulties. Even the app shows a distance, it is not the correct distance that they travelled. Even companies can easily adjust the true distance by using technology, they do not try to adjust and give a fair treatment for the taxi drivers.

According to Muthumal,

“Sometimes I have driven 30 Km. but the app shows it as 27 Km. No any solution given for that by the company. They can easily adjust it to the right distance by getting details through the google map.”

This proved that workers faced difficulties due to the company’s ignorance in these kinds of problems.

Another ignorance is that company always give the priority for the customers in conflict situations with the driver.

According to Namal,

“At one instance, customer didn’t pay money and complain to the company. So even the bad thing happened to me, company only listen to the customer’s complaint and ignore whatever the thing happened to us.”

What is happening here is, customers do not pay and they complain the company by saying that taxi drivers are the ones who have done the wrong thing. In that case, platform companies always take the

customer's side even for their bad behavior. Companies classify the workers as independent contractors and ignore to give the facilities, payments, incentives for the workers. This is one of the major critiques which has towards the gig economy called 'sham contracting'.

Drivers felt upset of choosing this sector to work. Even they entered to this gig economic sector, they have understood the real situation after being in this sector and now worried about their decision.

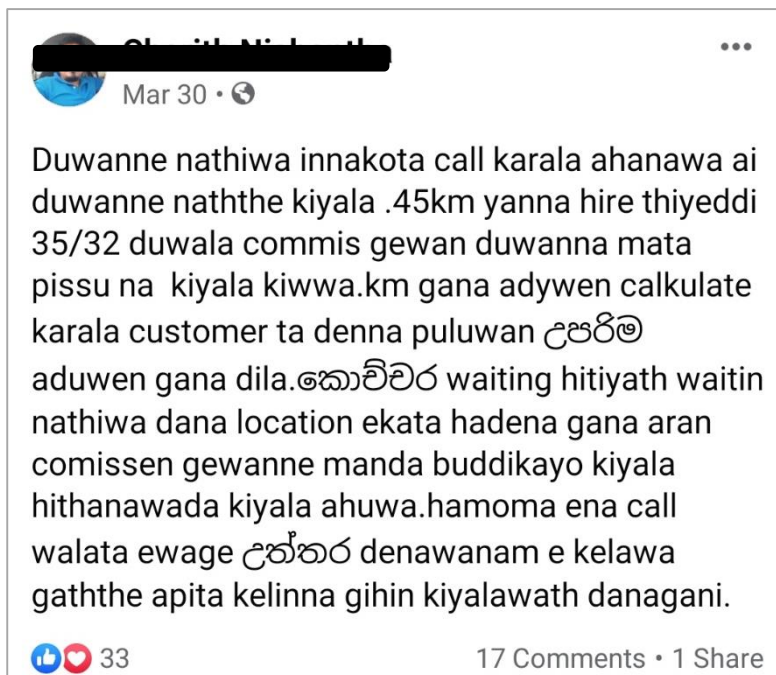
Wrong estimations are also another ignorance that do by the platform companies. Sometimes the estimated payment is not the real payment for the distance. So, they do not consider them by taking them as their issues.

This is a situation that said by Rukmal which was a situation that faced by his friend.

“My friend said me that he went on a hire which costs 732. Customer went on more and more locations during the trip. However, my friend called to the company because he assumed that, that hire cost should be much more. The company said that the hire should costs 1132 rupees and the estimation is wrong. But the customer didn't give that amount as app showed 732. Simply company said that friend to go to the police and no any solution given to him.”

When considering this situation, it is clear that company is ignoring workers. They are the ones who should be responsible for the wrong estimation. But they ignore the things even they should give solutions. They simply give up their responsibilities by putting workers into a more difficult situation.

This is a post which posted in Fb.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

He emphasized the fact that how far this platform put drivers into a difficult situation. He stated the problems of giving budget hires, high commission rates, no payment for waiting like problems that drivers had to face when working in the platform.

Unfair Customer Harassments and thefts

Sometimes not only the customer's non-payments, they have to face with customer's thefts.

According to Namal,

“When my phone was theft by a customer, even though I complaint it to the platform company, they just say “ah anyway your phone is found and don't worry.”

In every situation company's focus is on customer. So, they don't worry about employee's complaints. But if a customer complains for the company, they will more focus on it. The platform providers concern customers as their valuable asset but not the employees who work to generate the income.

In this study, it is found main three ways that Customer's unfair complaints are coming from. They do not put right location, go various places rather the end location during the trip and do not like to go in a short cut for the trip. In all these instances taxi driver is the party who badly affected. Even though customer do the wrong, the company put the blame on drivers.

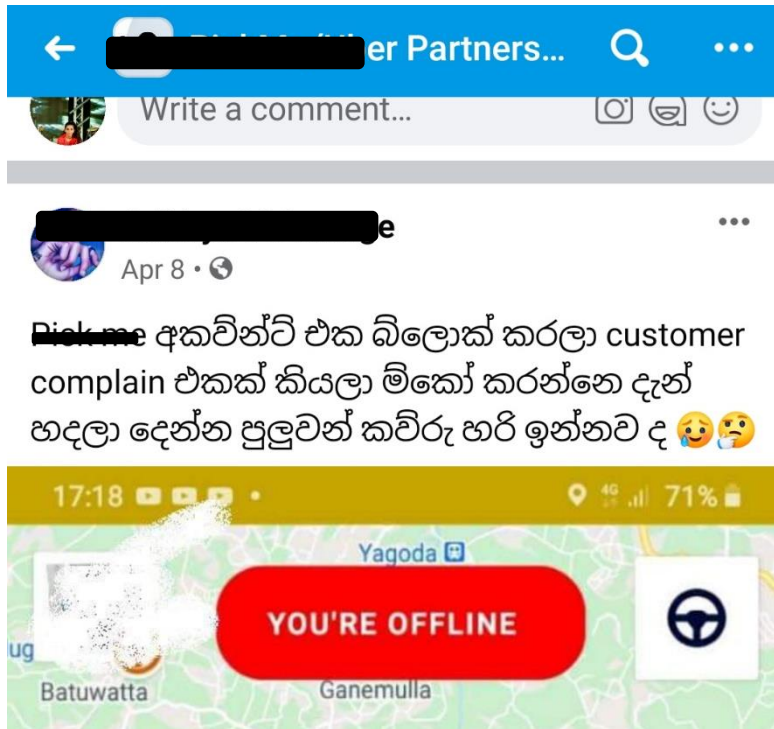
This is what Namal said regarding customer's unfair complaints.

“When customer complained, they don't try to ask what happened from the driver. When customer try to go for various locations in the trip, arguments coming from customer which will lead to a conflict. And also, sometimes conflicts occur when customer not put the right end location. When customer complain, our rates are going down and company block our app”.

It is unfair to block the driver without any inquiry. Thinking about their customers is not enough to run the business. But the situation that actually happened is platform company do the fair for the customers. Drivers are the ones who bear all the situations and work under the pressure of customer and it is not understand by the platform providers.

It is said that workers who supported themselves through the gig economy struggled financially far more than the average person. And also companies try to extract more percent from the drivers earnings which led them in a difficult situation where they couldn't earn at least the living wage of the day (Campbell, 2019).

In the social media, there are taxi drivers' groups available. Most of the drivers have posted on difficulties they have to face when the companies block the app of the drivers due to the customer's complaints and without an inquiry.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

In this post, taxi driver said that he has been blocked by the company. In this post, he was trying to unblock the app by requesting help from other drivers. It proved that drivers are fear about whether they are deactivated from the app every time they log into the app. They sadly speak that they live with fear day by day that these platform companies lay off from their employment due to the unfair customer complaints.

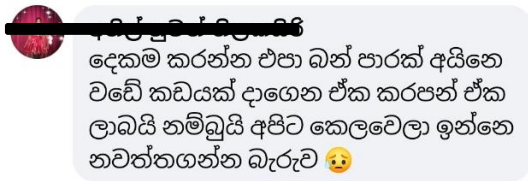
This is what Vimal said.

“One day I got a hire at 11pm from Kelaniya to Athurugiriya. After I pick off the customer in Athurugiriya, that customer called me saying that he left the phone in the car. He said that to me while I am on another hire and it cannot be cancelled at that time. After ended the hire I went again to Athurugiriya to give that phone to the customer. Unfortunately, He hit me badly after I reached that customer in a road in Athurugiriya. I had to be in the hospital because my head was damaged and I got a hearing problem also.”

This instance also proved the riskier situation that the taxi drivers had to face in this platform. For this driver he had to hit by the customer and to be hospitalized due to the customer's bad behavior. As a

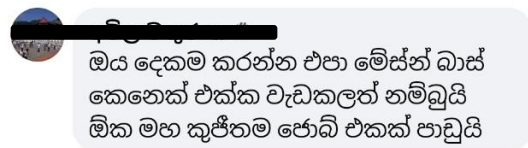
company they should concern about these bad situations and have to implement solutions rather than putting these workers into a trouble.

This is what two taxi drivers have commented on a post in FB. These words proved that how badly workers are treated in the platform.



දෙකම කරන්න එපා බන් පාරක් අයිනෙ වඩේ කඩයක් දාගෙන ඒක කරපන් ඒක ලාබයි නම්බුයි අපිට කෙලවෙලා ඉන්නෙ නවත්තගන්න බැරුව 😞

3h Like Reply



මය දෙකම කරන්න එපා මේස්න් බාස් කෙනෙක් එක්ක වැඩකලත් නම්බුයි ඕක මහ කුජිතම හේබි එකක් පාඩුයි

1h Like Reply

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

Most of the workers said that they have worked with dedication in the initial stage of working in the platform. They have worked with devotion. After companies started to badly treated, they also started to give up their work. They posted that this job is such kind of a bad work in the current situation and they had to face loses in the job.

Labour process theory is an important Marxist approach in the study of relation of production in industrial capitalism. In the study of Gandini (2018), labour process theory discusses in terms of ‘point of production’, ‘emotional labour’ and ‘control in the gig economy’. From the interview process, researcher has identified practical scenario regarding this labour process theory in the Sri Lankan gig economy.

In this study, the practical scenario of performing the emotional labour is identified through the things that they have said in the interview.

According to Sapumal,

“Sometimes, when customer is blaming, we do not tell anything and drive as an animal (gona wage ahagena yanawa). Because otherwise our rates may be down.”

He said that even though the customer is blaming for them, they are not telling anything due to these ratings. Customer ratings which rate the driver force drivers to control their own emotions. Otherwise it affected for the driver’s ratings and they may lose their jobs even.

High cost

High cost that have to be incurred by workers is also a crucial area to be concerned in this gig economy. Many reasons that led drivers to have a high cost are identified in this study. In that case, high cost for the petrol and maintenance is emphasized by many workers as the main reason for their high cost.

This is what is said by Kamal.

“People not feel with the cost in the initial year of vehicle bought because tires and all things are in a new condition. After that when tires getting depreciated and so on, drivers started to feel the huge cost of maintenance. In last month I had to incur 80000 rupees of maintenance cost.”

Even though Kamal works as a part time worker, he has a serious tone in the way that platform companies implement unfair practices towards the innocent workers. According to Kamal, drivers started to feel that they have to bear a high cost for the vehicle not in initial years, but when the years passing. Even though they drive cars in the gig economy, due to this high cost they are also like a normal three – wheel driver. Due to the high cost, the low rate payment that they are getting is not enough for them to live. Further, it can be concluded that these actions by the platform providers has a same bad result on both kind of workers. It proved by the things said by Kamal as a part time worker. It is no doubt that even Kamal felt this badly, how about the full-time worker feel these unfair practices? Actually the bad result may be doubled on them as full time workers are engaging in the platform in full time and they do not get any protection from permeant salary or incentives from any other method.

This is what I extracted from a FB post which is posted in a taxi drivers’ group who works in the gig economic sector.

“Our vehicle tires get wasted, have to do repairs, have to pay for the finance of the vehicle etc. But companies never think about it and get a high commission from us. Sometimes the payment that given for a hire for a car is lower than a three-wheeler due to the high cost. They have already made their customer base. So, they don’t care about us. We are the ones who bear all the loses and earn income for the companies (api thama athin kyte karan unta hamba karala denne).”



Nov 26, 2020

මවං මං මෙහෙම කිව්වා කියලා තරසා වෙන්න එසා.

හැමදාම මේකෙ අද මට මෙව්වරයි හම්බ උනේ, මෙව්වර Commission එක කපනවා කිය කිය Facebook එකේ ඇඩුවට වැඩක් නෑ. උන් කොහොමත් අපිව හුරන් කනවා. අපිත් නැති බැරි කමට දවසේ වේලා හොයාගන්න බැන බැන හරි උන් කියන මගුලක් අහගෙන හයර් යනවා.

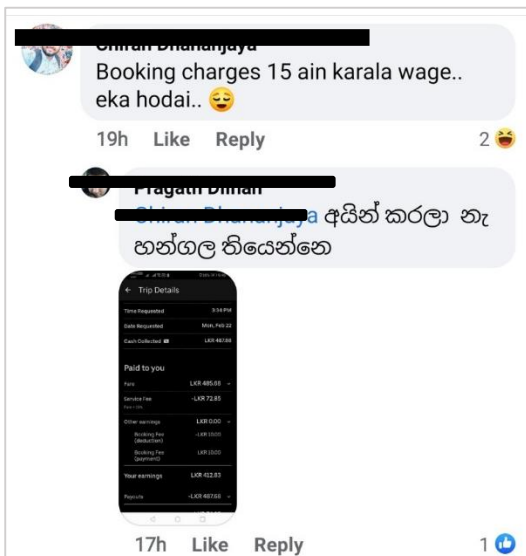
වාහන වල ටයර් ගෙවෙනවා, Service එනවා, Finance තියෙනවා කියන ඒවා company වලට අදාල නෑ. සමහර වෙලාවට එකම තැනට යන්න Threewheel එකේ ගානටත් වඩා අඩුයි car එකේ හයර් එක. උන් දැන් Customer base එක හදාගෙන ඉවරයි. හරියට බැලුවොත් අපි අතින් කයිටි කරන් උන්ට හම්බ කරලා දෙන්නේ.

මේකෙ අපි නිකන් කියව කියව හිටියා කියලා උන්ට දැනෙන්නෙවත් නෑ. අපි උන්ට දැනෙන දෙයක් කරන්න ඕනෙ. එහෙම උනොත් තමයි උන් උන් ගැන හිතලා අපි වෙනුවෙන් දෙයක් කරන්නේ. එහෙම නැතුව උන් කවදාවත් අපි ගැන හිතලා අපිට දෙයක් දෙන්නේ නෑ.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

This post which is posted by a taxi driver also emphasized the high cost that they have to incur in this gig economy. The ignorance of companies regarding the workers led them to bear a high amount of cost with lower benefits which is ultimately results in loses for them.

This is extracted from a FB post regarding the booking charge. Some drivers think that they have no booking charges. But the reality is this booking charge is still prevailing. But it is hidden.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

In the above image, one of the taxi drivers proved with evidence how the platform provider hides the booking charge from the drivers. Platform providers hide those charges tactically which bring disadvantage for the driver.

Cunning Strategies of Companies

Companies cunning activities which is done to get their own benefit is considered as cunning strategies in this study. Accordingly, there are various ways which the company do cunning activities in this platform and they are discovered in detail in this study.

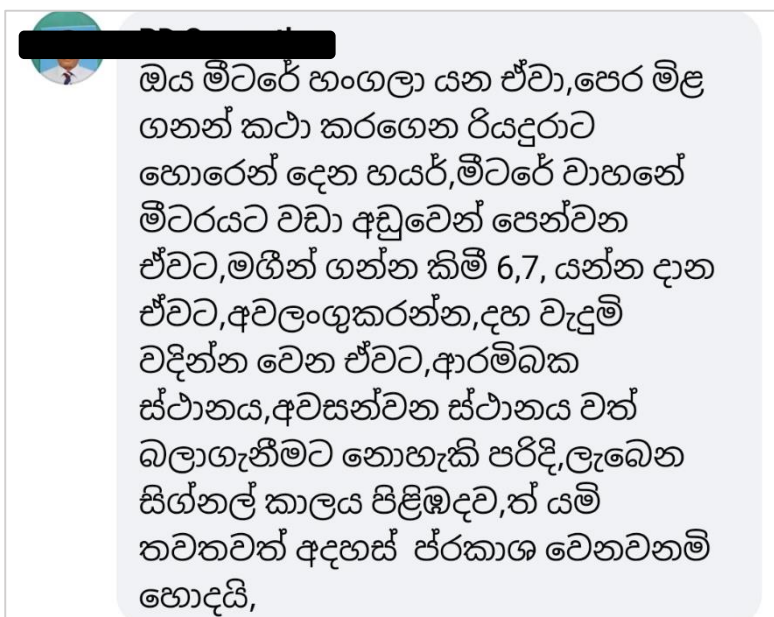
Transparent meter is a must to have for the taxi drivers in this platform. without a transparent meter driver couldn't have a chance to verify the actual distance travelled as well as the payment for that distance. But unfortunately, most of the drivers emphasized that the meter is not transparent and they even don't know about the actual distance travelled.

According to Sapumal,

“We have not shown the meter. For the customers, meter shows the shortest distance for the destination. But customer go various places before reach the destination. For that, we haven't given any charge for the whole distance travelled.”

Here the non-availability of a transparent meter is a bad thing for the workers. Platform companies try to give the benefit for the customer. Customer is shown the shortest distance for the destination. So, the payment has made for that shortest distance. But in practically customers don't want to go the shortest distance and they are going various places before ending the trip. Companies couldn't consider this which will affect the income of the workers badly.

This is what taxi drivers posted in the FB regarding the cunning activities of the platform providers.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/643366022742306/?ref=share>

In this post, the taxi driver has emphasized number of cunning activities such as hide the meter, fraudulent hires, fraudulent distance to attract customers, not giving chance to cancel the hires, do not show the start and end location of the trip etc.

If we focus on three-wheel drivers, this commission rate increment is applied for them also.

Rukmal said.

“previously we have 5% commission rate. Now they take 12% for all the hires. And recently rs.15 fixed amount is also taken by them.”

For the three-wheel drivers also they did the same thing. Increasing rate from 5% to 12% is a 7% increment which is a huge increment for them. And also, they said that fixed amount of 15 rupees also now added recently. The platform companies do not only increase the rate. Rather they incur additional charges which put the drivers into a more difficult situation.

In these all ways, workers are getting exploited by the companies through extracting more benefits by them. When focus on the main point where they are getting exploited can be identified as follows.

High commission → low payment for a Km

Through a high commission rate and on the other hand through a low payment for a Km they have extracted the labour in this gig economy.

So, in this study it is proved that the labour exploitation of taxi drivers in the gig economy occurs not only through payment problem or commission rate problem. Rather than that, it includes various ways in which drivers get harassed in this gig economic sector. Mainly drivers are faced with difficulties due to payment problem issue. Not only giving a low payment for the workers affects for them. Rather it is proved in this study the issues such as non-giving of payment for the pick-up distance and no payment for waiting led drivers into a difficult situation. On the other hand, incurring a high commission rate from the driver is very unfair. And also, drivers emphasized that competition between platform providers resulted reduction of payment further and also companies have taken steps to reduce the payments in corona pandemic which results in unjust for the taxi drivers.

Drivers emphasized the fact that they are being ignored by the platform companies in their issues. Sometimes drivers had to pay commission for lost hires and companies do not consider whether hire was lost to the driver or not. Sometimes due to customer's non payments, not arriving at the right place like reasons affected them to lose that hire. And also, customer's unfair complaints regarding the driver led them to reduce the ratings as well as huge losses in hires.

High cost is also emphasized by the drivers as a main problem in the Sri Lankan gig economy. They had to bear pick up cost and no any payment given for that distance.

Most of the drivers revealed that they had to experience harassments from the customers. Some of the customers did thefts which resulted huge losses for the drivers. Some customers get off by non-paying for the drivers. Even though drivers had to face those problems, companies do not take any step as a justice for them.

Cunning strategies of companies is also another area to be concerned where drivers faced with riskier situation of their work life in the gig economy. Offering more hires to attract new taxi drivers to the platform and giving more benefits for them is also a cunning strategy that implemented by the platform companies. Changing commission rates time to time and hide a transparent meter is also some tricks used by companies to get their own benefit.

So, this study proved that how actually the taxi drivers are getting exploited in the Sri Lankan gig economy.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored different ways which taxi drivers are getting exploited in the Sri Lankan gig economy. The study discovered that Company actions such as payment problems, high cost, cunning strategies, ignorance in worker's problems and also through the customer's actions such as s harassments, non-payments, thefts, led the taxi driver into a more difficult situation in the gig economic sector.

This research addresses the gap in the existing literature as it is less studies on Labour exploitation in the gig economy, specially regard with taxi drivers in the gig economy. In the Sri Lankan context, there is only few researches that focused on the future of the gig economy workers. But in this study, it has explored how these taxi drivers' future will become uncertain due to the exploitation that happened to them. The tendency of young workers moved into the gig economy and how they trapped by the gig economy platform has revealed in the study. And also, the need of a government intervention to have a justice for the workers also revealed in the study.

When focus on the labour exploitation in the gig economy, the study proved variety of ways that drivers are getting exploited rather than low payment and the high commission rates. How company is ignoring worker's problems and most of the cunning strategies of the platform companies are revealed through the study with the help of interview data as well as through the posts and comments of social media. And also, the customer's harassments, thefts, non-payments are also revealed in the study which there is no any research paper that focused attention on these things. A good understanding about the difficulty of living with this job is also emphasized in the study in relation to taxi drivers in the Sri Lankan gig economy.

In Sri Lankan context, there is a tendency that younger generation tend to work in digital platforms specially as taxi and food delivery workers with the emergence of online platform companies. And also, there is an emerging trend of establishing more and more platform companies in the Sri Lanka by promoting them as the best. Thus, management of the newly established platform providers could get a better understanding of how the workers should be treated well to retain them with the platform in long run. They should focus on their workers, as they are the main source which provides wealth for the platform companies.

They should have a safety net from the law of the country as well from the government. Most of the countries have identified the labour exploitation and the challenges faced by the drivers and introduced labour laws which protect them. Many legal cases which emphasized about the wrongful actions of the platform providers are also reported from worldwide and in most of the cases court held that the platforms should act in wrongfully. As no labour law or statutory protection for the taxi drivers in the Sri Lanka, it is the responsibility of the government to provide a safety net for them in terms of law as well as by the government.

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