

"Exploring the Work Conditions, Safety, Compensation and Welfare of Food Delivery Workers in Bengaluru"

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Employee welfare is a fundamental aspect of Human Resource Management (HRM) that focuses on providing employees with a supportive and safe work environment to enhance their well-being and productivity. The concept encompasses a wide range of benefits and services the employer provides, aiming to improve employees' quality of life and foster a positive work atmosphere (Dessler, 2020). The gig economy, particularly in food delivery services, has emerged as a prominent feature of the modern labour market, offering flexible work opportunities driven by digital platforms. This sector has experienced rapid growth, fueled by urbanization and increasing consumer demand for convenience, especially in cities like Bengaluru. Research also emphasizes the challenging working conditions food delivery workers face, including long hours, algorithmic control, and high-pressure environments, which affect their overall job satisfaction and well-being (Anwar & Graham, 2021). The study follows a qualitative research approach suitable for exploring complex, multifaceted issues like working conditions and welfare within the gig economy. For this study, a qualitative approach was chosen to capture the subjective and varied experiences of food delivery workers in Bengaluru, enabling the researcher to delve into themes such as safety concerns, job satisfaction, and welfare needs. A semi-structured interview methodology was adopted to collect primary data from food delivery workers. Data was collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 28 food delivery workers. An interview guide was developed to maintain consistency across interviews, covering four major themes: (1) work conditions, (2) safety measures, (3) compensation structure, and (4) welfare support. The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The findings underscore the systemic issues embedded in the gig economy, from daily work conditions characterized by long hours and isolation to safety concerns arising from late-night deliveries and high-pressure deadlines. Personal narratives also revealed the aspirations and struggles of workers, painting a humanizing picture of their experiences and highlighting the need for platforms and policymakers to prioritize worker dignity and well-being. Ultimately, the study

emphasizes that a sustainable gig economy requires systemic changes prioritizing its workers' dignity, safety, and long-term aspirations.

Keywords: *Employee Welfare; Safety; Work Conditions; Gig Economy; Food Delivery Workers; Compensation.*

Introduction

HRM is a strategic and coherent approach to managing an organization's most valuable asset: its employees. The purpose of HRM is to recruit, hire, develop, and retain employees so that they can contribute effectively to the organization's goals (Dessler, 2020). Its core purpose is to ensure that organizations can succeed through people, as the field seeks to align workforce capabilities with the company's strategic objectives. HRM has evolved from an administrative function to a vital component of organization strategy, highlighting the importance of managing human capital in today's competitive environment (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Employee welfare is one of the essential elements of human resource management (HRM), which deals with creating a supportive and safe work environment for employees to improve their well-being and productivity. The term includes a wide range of benefits and services the employer provides, which aims to enhance employees' quality of life and promote a positive work environment (Dessler, 2020). Traditionally, employee welfare has encompassed health and safety, wellness programs, and other amenities that support better work-life balance. Organizations can reduce absenteeism, improve job satisfaction, and develop a more engaged workforce by investing in employee welfare (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Employee safety is critical to human resource management, ensuring work environments are safe, health-friendly, and productive. A component of HRM related to policies, programs, and practices that reduce possible dangers at the workplace by ensuring all employees are protected from hazardous injuries and health problems. Modern organizations realize that a safe working environment not only complies with all the regulatory requirements but also uplifts the morale of its employees and reduces operational risk (Dessler, 2020). A proactive approach to safety reflects a commitment to the well-being of the workforce and contributes to improved retention and productivity (Mathis & Jackson, 2019).

Working conditions refer to the physical, social, and psychological environment in which employees work. Favourable working conditions become one of the primary objectives for HRM since they directly relate to the satisfaction, productivity, and well-being of the employee (Dessler, 2020). Working conditions include health and safety standards, ergonomics, and organizational culture within the physical workspace. HRM significantly improves working conditions by creating an environment that makes employees feel secure, supported, and motivated, thereby making the workforce more engaged (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

Employee compensation refers to the total rewards employees receive in exchange for their work, including direct payments, like salaries and wages, and indirect benefits, such as health insurance, retirement plans, and paid leave (Dessler, 2020). Compensation serves multiple purposes in an organization: it helps attract talent, retains employees, boosts morale, and motivates individuals to perform at high levels. From an HR perspective, designing an effective compensation strategy is essential for aligning employee goals with organizational objectives,

supporting a positive work environment, and ensuring legal compliance in pay practices (Noe et al., 2021).

Literature Review

The gig economy, especially regarding food delivery services, has emerged as one of the most crucial features of the modern labour market, offering flexible work opportunities motivated by digital platforms. This field has proliferated by urbanization and increasing consumer demands for convenience, especially in cities like Bengaluru. However, studies have highlighted the precarious nature of gig work because workers are classified more as independent contractors than employees. This classification often denies them social security benefits, job stability, and adequate earnings, leaving them vulnerable to financial and occupational risks (Kashyap & Bhatia, 2022). Other research focuses on the harsh working conditions food delivery workers face, including long hours, algorithmic control, and high-pressure environments, which impact their general job satisfaction and well-being (Anwar & Graham, 2021).

Safety issues and compensation packages are two of the most pressing concerns in the gig economy. The food delivery worker is at risk of road accidents, harassment, and theft. Access to safety measures and insurance cover is absent. The performance-based pay model, though flexible, often fails to generate sustainable earnings in light of fuel and vehicle maintenance costs (Srinivas, 2023). Studies in Bengaluru show a lack of regular earnings, welfare mechanisms, and crisis support systems for workers (Jha et al., 2022). The regulatory mechanism, better platform accountability, and social security measures are expected to improve gig workers' conditions and quality of life in the food delivery sector.

The gig economy, which features short-term, task-based work, is a defining feature of modern labor markets. Uber, Swiggy, and Zomato are examples of digital platforms that serve as intermediaries, linking workers to tasks while promoting flexibility and independence. In the food delivery sector, gig work offers an alternative to traditional employment, especially for those seeking quick income without long-term commitment (Kashyap & Bhatia, 2022). This model has flourished in urban areas, growing consumer dependence on convenience and on-demand services significantly expanding the market for food delivery platforms.

Despite its growth, the gig economy has raised concerns about the exploitative nature of its working arrangements. Unlike traditional employment, workers in the gig economy are categorized as independent contractors, depriving them of benefits like paid leave, retirement funds, or health insurance. This classification shifts operational risks from employers to workers, leading to precarious working conditions (Ravenelle, 2019). In addition, the competitive environment of digital platforms creates an imbalance, where workers must constantly meet high-performance demands to maintain their income.

The food delivery sector has emerged as one of the fastest-growing gig work segments in the Indian context. Platforms such as Swiggy and Zomato have expanded aggressively in cities like Bengaluru, driven by the growing disposable incomes of urban consumers and changing dining habits. However, this rapid expansion has exposed gaps in worker protections, making the role of policy and regulation increasingly critical in ensuring sustainable growth for both the industry and its workforce (Jha et al., 2022).

Working conditions for gig workers, especially for those doing food delivery work, often revolve around uncertainty and a lack of security. Delivery work takes workers through congested city streets with

little slack for time delays, risking penalty or loss of payment when late. Such working conditions drive up stress and fatigue in workers, pitting them against their targets as their earnings goals vie against job demands (Anwar & Graham, 2021). In addition, the physical strain of hours spent on the road worsens their susceptibility to health problems.

Safety is a major concern for food delivery workers, whose work is inherently risky. Delivering orders in high-traffic urban areas exposes workers to road accidents, particularly as they face pressure to meet strict delivery timelines. Studies have shown that many food delivery workers resort to unsafe driving practices, such as speeding or disregarding traffic signals, to avoid penalties or cancellations, increasing the likelihood of accidents (Srinivas, 2023).

Research on food delivery workers in Bengaluru has brought much insight into the conditions, problems, and aspirations of such workers. Kashyap and Bhatia (2022) found that the hours were often long, and the earnings were insufficient. They had to balance work with personal life. Platform incentives also play a significant role in the behavior of the workers, which leads to burnout and dissatisfaction very frequently.

Srinivas's 2023 report dealt with safety issues in Bengaluru's delivery workforce, which emphasized concerns over heavy traffic, bad roads, and aggressive driving patterns. The study concluded that workers are aware of their job's dangers but said that the pressure to finish deliveries within time is quite often more important than safe delivery. Moreover, there is a lack of safety education and protective gear in the sector according to Srinivas.

Jha et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study on the workers' perspective of gig work and revealed mixed feelings towards the flexibility and challenges faced by them. While many valued their ability to choose when they work, they found that support during emergencies and predictable earnings were lacking. Together, these studies highlight an immediate need for targeted interventions aimed at improving the working conditions and well-being of food delivery workers in Bengaluru.

Research Methodology

A semi-structured interview methodology was adopted to collect primary data from food delivery workers. Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible yet structured approach, allowing the researcher to explore key themes while also adapting questions based on the interviewee's responses. This method was deemed appropriate because it provides structure through predefined questions, allowing participants to discuss their experiences in depth. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, as this method fosters rapport and facilitates a more personal and open exchange, especially when discussing sensitive topics like safety and compensation. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences, capturing perspectives from workers of varying age groups, levels of experience, and regions within Bengaluru. The purposive sampling method helps ensure that the sample reflects a broad spectrum of the workforce in this sector, highlighting both commonalities and differences in experiences.

Data was collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 28 food delivery workers. These interviews took place conveniently for participants, often in public spaces where workers gather between deliveries, such as food hubs, popular restaurants, and waiting areas. Each interview session was carefully organised to ensure that participants felt comfortable and could share openly about their work experiences. An interview guide was developed to maintain consistency across interviews, covering four major themes: (1) work conditions, (2) safety measures, (3) compensation structure, and

(4) welfare support. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, during which participants were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences, concerns, and opinions. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. This step was crucial for capturing nuanced responses and avoiding the limitations associated with only taking written notes.

The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility and its ability to reveal both explicit and implicit themes in participants' narratives. The analysis followed a step-by-step process starting with transcription, where the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure that each participant's words and expressions were preserved accurately. The transcriptions were then reviewed and coded, with initial codes representing key phrases, ideas, or recurring patterns observed across multiple interviews. These codes were then grouped into broader categories related to the main research themes: work conditions, safety, compensation, and welfare. After categorization, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This methodical process of coding and categorization helped to illuminate recurring patterns and unique insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by food delivery workers in Bengaluru.

Findings

Themes Identified

Workers' Experiences of Daily Work Conditions

Food delivery workers face gruelling work conditions with long hours and high physical and mental demands. Many participants in the study described their jobs as relentless, with unpredictable schedules and limited control over their workday. Workers reported that the pressure to meet delivery deadlines often led to skipping meals and breaks. One worker remarked, *“You can't rest if you want to earn enough. The app keeps sending orders, and your earnings drop if you reject too many.”* This creates a cycle where workers are forced to overwork to meet their financial needs, affecting their physical health and well-being.

The absence of fixed working hours contributes to a lack of work-life balance. Workers highlighted that they often work 10 to 12 hours a day to achieve a sustainable income. This strain is exacerbated during peak hours, especially during bad weather or festive seasons, when demand surges and traffic congestion increases. Workers noted that they had little to no recourse when dealing with such challenges, making their work environment even more taxing. A participant shared, *“Festivals are supposed to be a happy time, but for us, it means more work and stress.”*

The lack of interaction with co-workers or supervisors further compounds the challenges. Workers are largely isolated, with minimal opportunities to build social connections or seek guidance. Many stated that communication with management is limited to app notifications or email, leaving them unsupported. One participant explained, *“We work alone and don't even meet others doing the same job. It's a lonely experience.”* This sense of isolation adds to the emotional toll of the job, underscoring the need for a more inclusive work culture in gig platforms.

Moreover, workers reported that technical glitches and system errors in the app created additional stress. Errors in assigning delivery addresses or delays in payment processing frequently disrupted their workflow, leading to frustration and reduced efficiency. Despite

these issues, platforms often penalised workers for late deliveries or rejected orders without considering the challenges. This rigid algorithmic management system prioritises efficiency over worker well-being, perpetuating dissatisfaction, and discontent.

Safety Concerns and Incidents Reported by Workers

Safety remains a paramount concern for food delivery workers, with many reporting incidents that highlighted the inherent risks of their job. Participants frequently cited road accidents as a recurring problem, especially during high-speed deliveries or in adverse weather conditions. A worker shared, *“The pressure to deliver on time is so high that we sometimes take risks on the road. It’s not safe, but we have no choice.”* These accidents often result in injuries that workers must bear without adequate support from the platforms.

Late-night deliveries were identified as particularly hazardous, especially in poorly lit or remote areas. Many workers shared stories of harassment, theft, and even physical assault. One participant recounted, *“I was delivering food at night when two people stopped me and took my phone and money. The company didn’t offer any help.”* Such incidents leave workers feeling vulnerable and unsupported, as platforms rarely have mechanisms to ensure their safety during such assignments.

The lack of safety training and protective measures further exacerbates the issue. Workers noted that while platforms provided helmets or reflective jackets, these were often insufficient in addressing the broader safety challenges they faced. One participant remarked, *“They give us a helmet and think it’s enough. But what about insurance or support when something happens?”* This reflects a gap in the platforms’ commitment to ensuring worker safety, despite the high-risk nature of the job.

Additionally, workers expressed frustration at the limited insurance coverage provided by platforms. While some companies offer accident insurance, the coverage is often inadequate and does not compensate for lost wages during recovery periods. One worker shared, *“The insurance only covers medical expenses, not the income I lose when I can’t work.”* This lack of comprehensive support leaves workers financially and emotionally burdened, calling for more robust safety and welfare measures.

Perspectives on Compensation and Earning Uncertainty

Workers frequently voiced concerns about the instability of their income, describing the compensation structure as both opaque and unsustainable. Earnings are often dependent on a combination of base pay, incentives, and customer tips, but these are highly variable. A participant explained, *“There’s no fixed salary. Some days you earn well, and other days, it’s not even enough to cover fuel.”* This unpredictability forces workers to work long hours to meet their financial needs, leading to burnout.

Incentives, which are supposed to motivate workers, were often criticized for being inconsistent and difficult to achieve. Several participants noted that platforms frequently change the incentive criteria without prior notice. One worker shared, *“Earlier, I could earn a good bonus for completing 10 deliveries. Now, they’ve raised it to 15, and it’s almost impossible.”* This constant shift in earning potential creates a sense of insecurity and distrust among workers toward the platforms.

Additional costs, such as fuel, vehicle maintenance, and platform commissions, further eat into workers’ earnings. Many participants pointed out that these expenses were not accounted for in their compensation, leaving them with minimal net income. One worker said, *“After paying for fuel and*

repairs, there's not much left to take home. It feels like we're working just to keep the bike running.” These hidden costs make it difficult for workers to achieve financial stability despite working long hours.

The lack of financial support during emergencies was another common grievance. Workers needed better income protection mechanisms, such as minimum wage guarantees or emergency funds. A participant stated, *“If I fall sick or the bike breaks down, I earn nothing. The company doesn't help in such situations.”* This highlights the precarious nature of gig work and the urgent need for reforms to provide workers with a more secure and predictable income.

Access to Welfare Programs and Institutional Support

Access to welfare programs and institutional support was reported as minimal by most workers, leaving them to navigate challenges on their own. While some platforms offer basic accident insurance, workers noted that the coverage was often inadequate and excluded critical aspects such as income replacement during recovery periods. One participant recounted, *“I had an accident, and while my hospital bills were covered, I lost two weeks of earnings. There was no help for that.”* This gap in support exacerbates the financial and emotional burden on workers during crises.

Workers also expressed frustration with the lack of mental health resources or counseling services, despite the high levels of stress and anxiety associated with their job. Many participants highlighted the need for platforms to address the mental health challenges of gig work. One worker said, *“The stress of deadlines and dealing with rude customers takes a toll on you. We need someone to talk to, but there's no support.”* This reflects the need for a more holistic approach to worker welfare that goes beyond physical safety.

Emergency helplines provided by some platforms were viewed as inadequate by workers. Many stated that these helplines were primarily designed to address logistical issues rather than provide real support during emergencies. A participant explained, *“If I call the helpline after an accident, they just tell me to report it in the app. There's no real help.”* This lack of responsive support systems leaves workers feeling abandoned and undervalued.

Moreover, workers reported a lack of awareness or access to government welfare programs. Many stated that they were unsure if they were eligible for schemes such as health insurance or pension plans. One worker shared, *“We don't know what benefits are available or how to apply for them. Nobody guides us.”* This highlights the need for platforms and policymakers to collaborate in raising awareness and ensuring that gig workers can access welfare benefits that improve their quality of life.

Personal Narratives and Case Studies of Delivery Workers

Personal narratives provided a humanizing lens to understand the realities of food delivery workers. These stories revealed the diverse reasons individuals joined the gig economy and the challenges they faced in adapting to the work environment. One participant, a middle-aged father of two, shared how he turned to food delivery after losing his job during the pandemic. *“This job was a lifeline for my family during tough times, but it's not easy. The stress of earning enough every day is constant,”* he explained. This narrative highlights how gig work often serves as a stopgap solution for many during economic downturns.

Another participant, a young college graduate, shared his experience of working as a delivery worker to support his education and family. *“I needed a job to pay for my college fees, and this was flexible. But sometimes, I feel stuck because it's hard to study after a long day of work,”* he said.

His story underscores the dual burden faced by those trying to balance gig work with personal aspirations. For many, food delivery offers a sense of financial independence, but it also limits opportunities for self-improvement due to the demanding nature of the work.

Case studies also revealed instances of workers overcoming systemic challenges through resilience and resourcefulness. For example, one participant described how he organized a group of fellow delivery workers to share tips on safety and efficient route planning. *“We have a WhatsApp group where we warn each other about unsafe areas or bad customers,”* he said. Such informal networks provide much-needed support in an otherwise isolating profession, demonstrating the importance of worker solidarity.

Despite these efforts, many narratives reflected a deep sense of insecurity and frustration with the lack of long-term opportunities. One worker expressed concerns about the sustainability of the profession: *“I can’t do this forever. There’s no growth here. But finding a better job feels impossible without time to search or train.”* These stories highlight the urgent need for reforms that not only address immediate challenges but also provide pathways for career progression and economic mobility for gig workers.

Emergent Themes from Worker Interviews

In addition to the predefined themes, several emergent themes arose from worker interviews, providing deeper insights into their lived experiences. One recurring theme was the psychological toll of gig work. Workers frequently spoke about feelings of low self-worth and alienation stemming from the perception that their work was undervalued by society. *“People treat us like we’re invisible. They don’t realize how hard we work to make a living,”* one participant lamented. This sense of social exclusion negatively impacted workers’ mental health and morale.

Another emergent theme was the lack of recognition and appreciation for their efforts. Many workers expressed a desire for acknowledgement, not only from customers but also from the platforms they worked for. A participant shared, *“Even a small thank-you from the company or customer would make a big difference. Right now, we are just numbers in the system.”* This indicates a critical gap in fostering worker engagement and satisfaction in the gig economy.

Some workers also highlighted the importance of community and informal networks. Despite the isolating nature of their work, many had built connections with fellow delivery workers through online groups or shared experiences at common pickup locations. These networks served as a source of advice, emotional support, and advocacy. One worker explained, *“When something goes wrong, we help each other. It’s the only support we have.”* These grassroots efforts illustrate the potential for collective action to address shared challenges.

Finally, the interviews shed light on workers’ aspirations and long-term goals, which often contrasted starkly with the realities of their current jobs. While many viewed food deliveries as a temporary solution, they expressed concerns about being trapped in a cycle of low-paying gig work due to a lack of time, resources, or opportunities for skill development. A participant remarked, *“I want to move on to something better, but I don’t know how to start.”* These emergent themes underscore the need for platforms, policymakers, and civil society to collaborate in creating systems that address workers’ immediate needs and support their long-term well-being and growth.

Conclusion and Discussion

This research illuminates the multifaceted challenges faced by food delivery workers in Bengaluru, focusing attention on the precarious nature of gig work and what it portends for workers' well-being. The results dramatically underscore systemic issues deeply embedded in the gig economy—from daily work conditions marked by long hours and isolation to safety concerns occasioned by late-night delivery, not to mention high-pressure deadlines. Although gig work has the potential to be a source of flexible and supplementary income for many, there are serious concerns that it may not be sustainable as a full-time livelihood.

Safety emerged as a particularly critical issue, with workers facing risks of road accidents, harassment, and theft. The lack of adequate safety training, protective measures, and responsive support systems from platforms leaves workers vulnerable and unsupported in high-risk situations. Similarly, the study highlighted how unpredictable earnings and hidden costs like fuel and vehicle maintenance create financial instability for workers. The lack of effective programs or safety nets for welfare and emergency support makes it worse, as workers are definitely without a net during crises.

Despite these challenges, workers have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness, forming informal networks to share knowledge and provide mutual support. These grassroots efforts underlie the potential for collective action that can improve conditions in the gig economy. Personal narratives also revealed aspirations and struggles of workers, providing a humanising picture of experiences and the need for both platforms and policymakers to promote worker dignity and well-being.

In conclusion, while food delivery work may be an accessible source of income for many, its inherent challenges point to an urgent need for systemic reforms. For instance, safety concerns can lead to a more equitable gig economy, fair compensation, and opportunities for career advancement. All these require collaboration between platforms, workers, and policymakers toward the building of an ecosystem that values the contributions of gig workers while safeguarding their rights and well-being.

The findings of this study are in line with existing literature on the gig economy, which reinforces the notion that gig work, while providing flexibility, often comes at the cost of worker security and well-being. The daily work conditions, characterized by long hours and isolation, underscore the exploitative nature of algorithmic management systems that focus on efficiency over worker welfare. These conditions symbolize a broader situation in the gig economy, where they treat workers as independent contractors without adequate support and protections despite their integral role in the operations of platforms.

The emphasis on safety concerns further contributes to the discourse on gig worker vulnerabilities. The lack of proactive safety measures and inadequate insurance coverage exposes a critical gap in the responsibility assumed by platforms. This aligns with global research indicating that gig platforms often externalise risks to workers while reaping the benefits of their labour. Addressing these issues requires platforms to adopt a more worker-centric approach, including providing comprehensive safety training and robust emergency response mechanisms.

Earning instability and the obscure nature of compensation structures have emerged as another critical concern, echoing earlier research on the financial precarity of gig work. The results require the rethinking of payment models to ensure fairness and predictability, with the possibility of minimum wage guarantees. Policymakers also have a role in regulating the gig economy to protect workers from exploitative practices and ensure equitable access to social security benefits.

The personal narratives and emergent themes from worker interviews underscore the importance of considering the human element in discussions about gig work. While platforms often emphasize efficiency and scalability, these findings highlight the need to balance business objectives with worker welfare. By incorporating worker feedback and fostering a culture of collaboration, platforms can create a more inclusive and supportive work environment. On balance, the study concludes, this sustainable gig economy will come from systemic changes that prioritize dignity and safety for its workers' long-term aspirations.

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