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Systematic Evaluation of Platform Work Against Decent Work Standards: *Development of a New Framework and Application in the Global South*

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2020

Abstract

Platform work, also known as gig work, is a fast-growing trend, estimated to involve up to 40 million workers in the global South. Celebrated in some quarters, growth of the gig economy has also been a cause for concern about the nature of jobs being created. Yet, while it is the focus for a growing body of research, there has been a lack of systematic frameworks to evaluate this type of labour against decent work standards.

This paper reports on the development of such a framework, based on five principles of fair pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation. Following its development, the framework was applied via worker interviews to 11 digital labour platforms in South Africa covering ride-hailing, delivery, domestic and digital work. It finds positive evidence around pay, safety interventions, communication and worker interaction for some workers and platforms. But the framework also exposes workers paid less than minimum wage and working very long hours, incorrect employment classification, and absence of collective representation.

Alongside its analytical value for understanding emergence of the gig economy, the framework can also be used in practice to inform platform eco-system stakeholders as a basis for improvements in worker pay and conditions.

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A. Introduction

Digital technologies are central – indeed, all-consuming – to debates about the future of work (Aroles *et al.*, 2019; ILO, 2019a; World Bank, 2019). While much of the discussion has focussed on digital's impact on the quantum of work, there has also been debate – especially in relation to platform-based labour – about the quality of emerging work (Norton, 2017; Spencer, 2018). Our paper speaks to this latter debate: evaluating the quality of platform-based work. We focus particularly on the context of the global South given that is where by far the majority of the world's work is located and yet, in relative terms, less research has been undertaken.

Platform work – work organised and mediated by digital labour platforms such as Uber and Upwork – is growing fast. For example, in the global South, overall numbers are uncertain but one set of estimates puts the figure at between 30-40 million workers with growth rates up to 30% per year (Heeks, 2017; Heeks, 2019). This expansion has been matched by a growing research literature. This literature identifies a number of benefits of digital labour platforms. The platforms themselves can help to address information failures and inefficiencies in traditional labour markets (Drouillard, 2017). Clients benefit from lower costs and higher service standards (Accenture, 2017; Dreyer *et al.*, 2017). Alongside this, though, has been a more negative counter-narrative. This has involved platforms (for example, avoiding tax payments: Olbert and Spengel, 2017) and clients (for example, being cheated by workers: Kaganer *et al.*, 2013).

The literature presents a similarly mixed view in the debate on quality of platform work. Gains are reported for workers such as higher incomes than previously earned, greater flexibility of working hours or location, and more objective management processes, among others (Surie and Koduganti, 2016; Heeks, 2017). Yet other research findings point to over-long work hours, lack of social protection payments, and an atomisation of the workforce that prevents collective voice (Hunt and Machingura, 2016; Kashyap and Bhatia, 2018; Wood *et al.*, 2018).

This debate echoes and in some cases directly refers to decent work standards, such as those promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 1999). Yet, to date, there has been a lack of primary research that systematically evaluates platform work against such standards. It is this gap which the current paper seeks to fill; developing a new decent work framework of specific relevance to platform work, and then using that as the basis for primary data-gathering on the experiences of platform workers in order to provide a systematic understanding of the nature of such work.

The next section reviews in more detail the evidence on platform work, looking particularly at the global South, and then explains the framework of decent work principles that was developed for the current research. Following an explanation of fieldwork methods, the findings from this fieldwork are presented. The paper ends with a discussion of those findings and conclusions about the framework, about

practical interventions to improve platform work standards, and about the future research agenda.

B. Platform Work in the Global South

During the past few years, there has been growing interest in the future of work; understood particularly in terms of the impact on employment of the rising presence of digital technologies (ILO, 2019a; World Bank, 2019). One element of this has been discussion about the impact of robotics and other forms of industrial automation on numbers employed in manufacturing, given the importance of the industrial sector particularly in the global South.

Another element – the focus here – is the growth in digital labour platforms; defined as a set of digital resources including services and content that manage value-creating interactions between consumers and individual service-providing workers (adapted from Constantinides *et al.*, 2018). We divide the work undertaken via such platforms into two types. Physical gig work involves location-bound physical activity such as taxi driving, food delivery and house cleaning via platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo, Rappi and GoJek. Digital gig work involves location-independent digitally-centred activity such as data entry, translation and web development via platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork and Freelancer.¹

Looking just at the global South then, as noted above, such work already employs up to 40 million gig workers – some 1.5% of the workforce – and growth rates are rapid (Heeks, 2019). Hence, the growing interest in this new form of employment; an interest reflected in an emergent research literature which has looked at the spread of digital gig work to the global South (e.g. Mill, 2011) and more latterly at the spread of physical gig work (e.g. Surie and Koduganti, 2016).

As noted in the Introduction, this research has evidenced many benefits of platform work. On digital gig work, there is evidence that globalisation of online tasks has brought new jobs to the global South (Codagnone *et al.*, 2016). Most evidence, though, relates to quality not quantity of work. There is evidence that pay rates for platform workers are higher than prevailing norms; for example, GoJek motorcycle taxi riders in Indonesia earning two-three times more than previously (Ford and Honan, 2017). There is evidence that workers find greater flexibility and autonomy in platform work: for example, Upwork workers in India, “appreciated being able to operate from home and avoid difficult commutes as well as escaping from the micro-politics, supervisory controls and interpersonal issues that accompanied organisational life [and] enjoyed the flexibility of setting their own daily schedule and pace” (D’Cruz and Noronha, 2016:50).

At the same time, though, there is evidence of problems with platform work. Uber/Ola drivers in India were found to endure “fatigue, stress, hunger and sleep deprivation” in order to earn enough to pay off loans taken out on the assumption of a certain level of income from platform work (Kashyap and Bhatia, 2018). Few if any platform workers report social protection provision by the platform: for example,

large-scale surveys of digital gig workers report no platforms paying for sick leave, health/life insurance or pension contributions (Berg, 2016; Berg *et al.*, 2018). Set within a broader frame, platform work is therefore seen as a trade-off: providing work opportunity and flexibility for developing country workers but at the cost of chronic precarity and inequality (Heeks, 2017).

While there is a growing body of evidence of both pros and cons to platform work, as yet, there has been very little research that has used a systematic framework to analyse platform work. Perhaps because of the relative novelty of this type of work, some of the literature is based on secondary research (e.g. Ford and Honan, 2017; Schmidt, 2017). Where primary evidence-based, the research has been inductive in its approach, drawing out themes bottom-up from primary data (e.g. D’Cruz and Noronha, 2016; Surie and Koduganti, 2016; Graham *et al.*, 2017a; Pongratz, 2018); or it has asked questions about a set of issues but without a clear and structured derivation (e.g. Berg *et al.*, 2018, Ilavarasan *et al.*, 2018). There are thus research agenda calls for more systematic work: “We will need frameworks for understanding the impacts of the transformations described here” (Norton, 2017:28-29) including structured frameworks that would allow comparisons across countries and across time (O’Farrell and Montagnier, 2019).

Alongside this, there are action agenda calls for decent work standards to be extended to apply to digital labour platforms (ILO, 2019a). There has certainly been engagement with the idea of decent work in the research literature on platform work (Hunt and Machingura, 2016; D’Cruz, 2017; Noronha and D’Cruz, 2017; Berg *et al.*, 2018). This research is based on primary evidence-gathering, and has given a sense of both pros and cons in relation to the idea of decent work. However, as for the more general body of research on platform work in the global South, this has not yet applied any systematic framework of decent work standards – decent work is seen as a general agenda rather than a specific structure for analysis. In the next section, we therefore set out such a structure.

C. A Framework for Decent Work Standards

The origins of decent work standards lie in the work of the International Labour Organization during the 20th century but crystallise with their 1999 launch of the concept of “decent work” (ILO, 1999) which was later defined as “work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men” (ILO, 2019b). Over succeeding years, this idea of decent work was formalised into a series of indicators which then came to be understood as benchmarks or standards (ILO, 2013; see also Anker *et al.*, 2003; Ghai, 2003):

- Employment opportunities
- Adequate earnings and productive work
- Decent working time

- Combining work, family and personal life
- Work that should be abolished
- Stability and security of work
- Equal opportunity and treatment in employment
- Safe work environment
- Social security
- Social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation
- Economic and social context for decent work

In order to create the decent work standards against which platform work could be assessed, our starting point was these eleven ILO standards but we wanted to modify them because of two concerns. The ILO standards are broad in their coverage and sometimes seen as rather complex and difficult to implement (Korner *et al.*, 2009, Burchell *et al.*, 2014). We therefore drew from two global-leading frameworks which have operationalised the ILO standards into a rather simpler set: the Ethical Trading Initiative Base Code (ETI, 2014) which is an internationally recognised code of labour practice; and the labour components of the widely-used SA8000 certification scheme, developed by Social Accountability International (SAI, 2014).

The ILO standards are also traditional in their coverage, having been developed before digital technologies played a significant role in shaping the nature of work. We reviewed the literature on platform work in the global South described in the previous section and broader sources on platforms and work (particularly De Stefano, 2015; Cherry and Poster, 2016; Lehdonvirta, 2016; Graham *et al.*, 2017; Huws, 2017; Schmidt, 2017). From this, we found issues being raised – around algorithm- rather than human-led management, around use of data, around employment status – which did not readily fit into the eleven ILO standards. In order to ensure that these platform-specific issues were recognised, we also reviewed four platform-specific standards:

- the “Frankfurt Declaration on Platform-Based Work” (FairCrowdWork, 2016) signed by North American and European trade unions;
- a related development of this Declaration, applying its ideas to undertake a survey and rating of digital gig platforms (FairCrowdWork, 2017);
- a voluntary code of conduct for crowdwork set by the German crowdsourcing platform Testbirds (2017) and supported by Deutscher Crowdsourcing Verband e.V (German Crowdsourcing Association); and
- Richard Heeks’ (2017) “Decent Work and the Digital Gig Economy” synthesis of contemporary literature on standards for platform-based digital gig work.

The review categorised the contents of these other standards into eight themes, drawing out a series of potential sub-elements that could be used to evaluate platform work; as shown in Table 1.

In workshops held in Geneva (co-hosted by the ILO and UNCTAD), Bangalore and Johannesburg during 2018, we asked stakeholders representing workers, platforms, government and civil society to discuss and prioritise the themes and sub-elements.

From this emerged five “Fairwork principles”²: a simple framework of decent work standards that could be readily operationalised for evaluation of platform work. These were necessarily not as comprehensive as the initially-identified themes, let alone the original ILO decent work standards. But they did represent a tripartite perspective on what was most important in applying the concept of decent work to digital platforms. As shown in Table 2, each of the five principles was broken into two measurable elements: a “basic” level representing a minimum level of decency, and an “advanced” level that builds beyond this.

Platform Work Theme	ETI	SA8000	Frankfurt Declaration	FairCrowdWork Review	Crowdsourcing Code of Conduct	Heeks	Sub-Elements
Pay	Living wage	Living wage	Minimum wage	Pay and non-payment	Fair payment	Adequate earnings	Minimum wage; Living wage; Pay terms; Regulation of non-payment
Conditions	Employment freely chosen; Working hours are not excessive; Working conditions are safe and hygienic; Regular employment is provided	No child, forced, or compulsory labour; Limits on working hours/days; Safe and healthy working environment		Experiences with technology; Quality and availability of tasks	Motivating and good work; Clear tasks and reasonable timing; Freedom and flexibility	Employment opportunities; Career development; Work processes; Working hours; Health and safety	Information about work process; Health and safety; Regularity of employment
Contracts			Comply with laws; Clarify employment status; Social protection	Changes to terms and conditions; Warranty of work	Tasks in conformance with the law; Clarification on legal status	Social protections; Other legislation and rights; Stability of work; Employment status	Employment status; Compliance with law; Contract terms; Liability and insurance; Social protection
Communication				Contact with employers; Contact with workers	Constructive feedback and open communication		Lines and quality of communication
Management	No discrimination is practised; No harsh or inhuman treatment is allowed	No discrimination; No abusive disciplinary practices	Dispute resolution	Reviews, ratings, and evaluations	Respectful interaction; Regulated approval process and rework	Discrimination; Respect, privacy and dispute resolution	Discrimination and equality; Management guidelines; Ratings and reviews; Dispute resolution; Account deactivation
Governance	Code through supply chain; Reporting	SA8000 management system	Transparency			Platform governance; Accountability	Transparency; Accountability
Use of Data					Data protection and privacy		Data collection, use, access, protection and privacy
Representation	Freedom of association and right to collective bargaining	Freedom of association and right to collective bargaining	Collective bargaining			Freedom of association; Social dialogue/collective bargaining	Worker voice; Freedom of association; Collective representation and bargaining

Table 1: Summary of Decent Work Themes for Platform Work

Fairwork Principle	“Basic” Indicator	“Advanced” Indicator
Fair Pay	Pays the minimum wage	Pays the minimum wage including costs
Fair Conditions	Meets comparative health and safety regulations	Actively protects health and safety (e.g. positive identification of customers)
Fair Contracts	Clear terms and conditions	Offers contracts that reflect the true nature of the employment relationship
Fair Management	Provides a clear channel of communication to workers involving the ability to appeal disciplinary procedures or deactivation	Can evidence equality in the management process and/or any collection of data must be justified with a clear purpose and only with explicit informed consent
Fair Representation	Includes freedom of association and worker voice mechanisms	Recognises collective body that can undertake collective representation and bargaining

Table 2: Summary of Fairwork Principles and Indicators

D. Research Methods

We then set out to operationalise these principles; using them as the basis to evaluate platform work in South Africa. Fieldwork was undertaken from November 2018 to May 2019 focusing on all of the main South Africa-based platforms that the team could identify. Ultimately, eleven platforms were covered, with number of worker interviews indicated in brackets:

- Delivery platforms: Bottles (6), Mr D Food (Mr Delivery) (4), OrderIn (6), UberEats (11), Wumdrop (3)
- Domestic work platforms: Domestly (4), SweepSouth (7)
- Ride-hailing platforms: Bolt (Taxify) (8), Uber (11)
- Digital work platforms: NomadNow (5), Upwork (5)

We set a target of interviewing six workers from each platform, selected randomly by hiring the services of a worker and then undertaking an interview with them; providing a compensation payment to cover their time. For some platforms, it was difficult to reach workers due to limited numbers being available within the locations in Cape Town and Johannesburg where interviews took place. For other platforms, contact with platform workers was a by-product of research team everyday activity, and more than six were interviewed. Thus, in total, 70 workers were interviewed across 11 platforms; roughly 40% in Johannesburg, 60% in Cape Town.

Interviews were designed in relation to the five Fairwork principles and ten indicators plus some background questions about demographics and prior work, and more general questions about key problems they faced or changes to work they would like to see. Although not reported in detail here, we also contacted platforms seeking evidence in relation to the principles and indicators; evidence that was used to corroborate worker interview data.³

E. Findings

E1. Background

In terms of basic demographics, 20% of the interviewees were female, representing around half of digital gig workers and almost all domestic workers, but with other segments very heavily male dominated: we came across no female taxi drivers even when travelling without interviewing; and only one of the 30 delivery workers was female. There was therefore a strong gender skew in all but digital gig work.

The average age of interviewees was 32 years old, with taxi drivers tending to be older than average, and the three other types of worker being somewhat younger than average. Only three of the interviewees identified as “coloured”⁴; the remainder were black Africans⁵. Of those who provided details about their nationality, roughly one-third were South African, one-third were Zimbabwean, and one-third were other African nationalities, particularly Congolese. A mix of South African and non-South-African nationalities was seen across all four types of platform.

On average, workers had worked for their platform for just over one year, with the longest period being 4.5 years and the shortest two months. Three-quarters only worked for the one platform. Of those working for multiple platforms, three-quarters were delivery drivers and they represented half of the delivery drivers.

In terms of previous work, for only two interviewees – both non-South-African students – was platform work their first job; though one-quarter – including most domestic workers – had been without a job and looking for one just prior to joining the platform. Just under a half – including all but four of the South African interviewees – had worked in the same type of work prior to joining the platform: this was particularly found for digital and domestic work and, indeed, a number of these interviewees were still mixing platform and non-platform work in parallel. One-fifth – all in delivery work – had previously worked in the same type of work for a different platform. Just under one-third – taxi drivers and non-South Africans especially – had worked in a different field: seven as security guards; five in manual trades such as mechanics or electricians.

It was the attraction of higher income that was the main rationale given for joining the platform: half of interviewees mentioned this⁶. Just over one quarter of interviewees cited greater flexibility of hours; for example, to allow time to be with their families. Half of those from outside South Africa mentioned the difficulty of getting any sort of work, at least formal work, because of their status, and hence the difficulty of finding alternatives to their platform-based labour. All of these motivations were reflected in a Malawian interviewee who had shifted to working during the day and evening as a delivery rider which he regarded as significantly better than his previous job, working night shifts as a security guard and being paid R150 (c.US\$10) a day in cash because he had no formal work permit as compared to the R260 (c.US\$18) paid to South Africans in the same job.

E2. Fair Pay

At first sight, pay levels for platform workers appear reasonable, averaging R14,300 (c.US\$1,000) per month⁷. This is around one-third lower than the average formal business sector salary of R21,190 recorded at the same time (Wasserman, 2019) but twice as large as gross national income per capita of just under US\$500 (World Bank, 2019). Average pay levels were R54 (c.US\$4) per hour; significantly above the R20 (c.US\$1.5) per hour minimum wage⁸. However, these dropped to R34 (c.US\$2.5) per hour net income once work-related costs were taken into account. A couple of taxi drivers and one domestic worker were earning below minimum wage after costs, but this was true of half of the delivery drivers, a few of whom were losing money on longer delivery drops as costs exceeded payment. In total, roughly one quarter of interviewees were earning less than minimum wage in net terms.

There were significant differences between types of work. The data in Table 3 can be summarised as follows: digital work is well paid with low costs but workers found it hard to make a full-time living; taxi driving is fairly well paid but has high costs and very long working hours; delivery work is not very well paid and has low costs but very long working hours; domestic work is not very well paid and has low costs and work available via the platform is somewhat limited. These sectoral characterisations were also borne out by interviewee responses when asked if they were getting enough work via the platform. All or most of the workers on five platforms said they were not; reflecting the failure of the platform to generate enough customers to enable workers to earn a living from that platform alone. This affected one-third of domestic workers, half of deliverers, and 80% of digital workers.⁹

Platform Type	Working Hours Per Week (mean)	Gross Weekly Income (mean)	Work-Related Weekly Costs (mean)	Gross Income Per Hour (mean)	Net Income Per Hour After Costs (mean)
<i>Delivery</i>	72 hours	R2,228	R633	R32	R22
<i>Domestic Work</i>	27 hours	R801	R220	R30	R20
<i>Ride-Hailing</i> ¹⁰	73 hours	R5,855	R3,414	R86	R43
<i>Digital Work</i>	5 hours	R765	R217	R106	R91

Table 3: Pay Level by Type of Platform/Work

One can also identify two temporal issues. Hourly earnings were often relatively low because of the very long hours being worked. Excluding those working part-time (e.g. due to being students) or unable to find sufficient work due to lack of sufficient clients on the platform, the mean number of hours worked per week was 67 (this includes time waiting for tasks but excludes travel-to-work time). One-fifth were working more than 90 hours per week. There is also a longer-term dynamic with, for example, a number of delivery workers complaining that their income had been dropping as platforms changed their fee and payment structures and/or as additional workers were hired onto the platforms and thus demand-supply ratios began to fall.

E3. Fair Conditions

Fair conditions particularly concerned platforms' actions to mitigate work risks. Digital work is insulated from South Africa's context and, for digital workers, the main risk of their work was non-payment by clients. This hardly figured for the other workers who were more concerned with physical risks. By far the major one was crime; specifically robbery. This was reported as a key risk by two-thirds of respondents, including at least four who had already been robbed while working. Accidents were seen as a key risk by half of the workers; including 80% of delivery workers, four of whom had already had accidents. Problems with customers ranked third, followed by a few reporting job-specific risks: the weather for delivery riders; dangerous pets and allergies for domestic workers; police fines for taxi drivers.

The response of platforms to these risks was mixed. The poorest performers – including four of the five delivery platforms – did have a facility where workers could contact the platform in case of a problem but they did not take measures to ensure a safe working environment. Six of the platforms did seek to provide this: simple health and safety training, provision of equipment and, in the case of Upwork, holding client payments in escrow to reduce the chances of non-payment. Three platforms – SweepSouth, Uber and UberEats – went beyond the basics to actively improve working conditions. Uber, for example, had multiple documented policies on working conditions, and drivers themselves corroborated this: basic albeit very brief safety training, limits on working hours, a “panic button” on the app that could be used in an emergency¹¹, insurance in case of accidents, provision of security at sites of conflict with meter taxi drivers, and covering the costs of both passengers who ran off without paying and police fines if vehicles are impounded for not having a taxi license. None of the platforms provided sick pay or holiday pay or pensions.

E4. Fair Contracts

Under this principle, we looked at the contractual terms and conditions under which a worker is employed, given these represent the core foundation for work. Yet workers on six of the eleven platforms reported that they neither knew nor possessed the terms and conditions of their work. One driver explained that their terms and conditions were regularly updated and they were then presented with these when they logged on to the app in order to start work:

“I didn't read it because it's too long and it's so fine because you have to zoom in on your phone that it's difficult to read ... I had a choice of reading 22 pages or working and because you have to earn money for your family, you accept it, so I don't know what was in there”.

Like other workers, he was unable to access a copy of his terms and conditions in order to check them. Even for the other five platforms, one quarter of workers were not clear about the nature or whereabouts of their terms and conditions.

All of the workers were identified as independent contractors rather than employees. However, Section 200A of South Africa's Labour Relations Act (DoL, 2002:115) states that a

worker “is presumed, regardless of the form of the contract, to be an employee, if any one or more of the following factors are present:

- a) the manner in which the person works is subject to the control or direction of [*the platform*];
- b) the person’s hours of work are subject to the control or direction of [*the platform*];
- c) in the case of a person who works for [*a platform*], the person forms part of that [*platform*];
- d) the person has worked for that [*platform*] for an average of at least 40 hours per month over the last three months;
- e) the person is economically dependent on the [*platform*] for whom he or she works or renders services;
- f) the person is provided with tools of trade or work equipment by the [*platform*]; or
- g) the person only works for or renders services to one [*platform*].”¹²

Setting aside digital work (given no interviewees were finding enough work to create a living/dependency), 43 of the remaining 60 only worked for one platform and were economically dependent on it; the remaining 17 (mostly delivery drivers) also worked for one of the other platforms. One could make an argument that the workers were part of the platform; certainly that is how they are universally perceived by clients and other external stakeholders – as an “Uber driver”, as an “OrderIn deliverer”¹³. Even more clearly, all but one of the interviewed workers was working more than 40 hours per month for their platform, and it was readily arguable that they worked on the basis of control or direction of the platform app, and that the app represented “tools of the trade”. For those engaged in physical gig work, then, the status allotted to them by the platform – independent contractor – did not match their status through interpretation of the law: employee.

For digital workers, as noted, extent of work, hours, economic dependency and working for only one platform were not present in those interviewed. However, one could still argue that the way in which they worked was directed and even controlled to a significant degree by the platform, and that the platform formed an essential “tool of trade”. So even for these workers, they can be seen as mis-classified by the platform.

E5. Fair Management

Fair management was understood firstly in terms of channels and processes for workers to communicate with management, including appealing decisions: that these should be not just documented but also working in practice. This was the case at a basic level for all but one of the platforms; that workers felt they could readily communicate with platform staff via chat/messaging (WhatsApp or similar) or phone call or email, with the majority also able to visit a physical office in case of problems that needed to be discussed.

This positive view of communication channels eroded somewhat when asking workers about their specific experiences of using them – on four of the platforms it appeared that central offices were understaffed, so responses were slow. For five workers, this was particularly problematic because they had been robbed or involved in an accident and did not get help from the platform. It would also be reasonable to say that even the good communication was more “fair administration” than “fair management”: where workers

had tried to use these channels to raise concerns about pay or conditions, they did not find them responsive.

A management issue raised in literature on platform work is the unfair deactivation of workers (Codagnone *et al.*, 2016; Silberman, 2017). In practice, only nine of the 70 workers had had some form of warning or suspension or deactivation, and they seemed to regard the process for resolution as reasonable. Our sampling approach would not catch those who had been permanently excluded from the platform but we asked workers about examples of this. Twelve gave such examples but their narrative was always that this was the worker's fault: persistent lateness, cancellation of orders or rudeness to customers, letting someone else use their profile, working in parallel for another platform when this was explicitly forbidden.

As noted in Table 2, fair management also involved assessment of whether platforms had active measures to protect workers' data and to prevent discrimination. Only two of the platforms did. In relation to data, only four (c.6%) of the workers felt they understood and had given informed consent to use of their data. In relation to discrimination, just over 80% of workers had had no experience that they regarded as discriminatory; for example, in terms of their nationality or race. Of the twelve who had, most related to abuse of non-South African delivery drivers from drunk customers or from taxi drivers shouting at them about their riding. None of this was reported to their platform. More intrinsic issues were found in domestic work which has been the habitual site for racialised treatment of black South African workers (Hunt and Machingura, 2016): more than half of them reported such experiences but most had not reported this to the platform for fear of negative repercussions.

E6. Fair Representation

The fair representation principle covers the ability of workers to collectively organise and be heard. None of the digital workers met up with others or was in a chat group with other workers, and only two were in touch with other workers in any way (one in a Facebook group, one with friends who did the same type of work). This is consistent with the relative isolation of digital gig workers reported elsewhere (Graham *et al.*, 2017b). For other workers, one-fifth were not in contact with other workers but the remaining majority were in chat (e.g. WhatsApp) groups or face-to-face contact or both. Delivery and taxi drivers often had known waiting areas where they would congregate, and most were also in a platform-specific chat group which was also nationality-specific in the case of larger platforms. Domestic workers rarely if ever had an opportunity to physically meet as a group, and they were further constrained because their WhatsApp groups were run by the platform.

Setting aside non-work chat, the majority of discussions were about everyday aspects of work, largely outside the control of the platform: tips on good areas or times to get more business, handling difficult customers, warnings about traffic or police problems, help with repairing cars or bikes, letting others know about an accident, etc. Only a minority related more directly to the work conditions set by the platforms; with levels of payment dominating well above all other topics. This was also reflected when we asked what

changes workers would like to see: pay (including payment systems and income more generally as reflected in level of demand) was by far the main concern, followed by safety and then interface design.¹⁴

Despite these groupings of workers and their ability to collectively discuss work-related topics, official collective representation to platforms was almost non-existent. On only one platform were workers aware that there was an officially-sanctioned mechanism for workers to contact managers about issues. There were documented mechanisms, in theory, on three other platforms but none of their workers were aware of, or had used that mechanism.

None of the platforms recognised a union or any other collective body for representing workers – though one claimed to support the development of such a body. The only organisation that resembled a collective entity was the South African e-Hailing Association but only three of the 20 taxi drivers had heard of it and none of them was minded to join the Association. This reflected a more general view on unions: only three of the 70 interviewees – all of whom were experiencing problems with their platform – expressed an interest in joining a union.

F. Discussion and Conclusions

We saw earlier that prior research on platform labour in the global South, even if more inductive than deductively systematic, has portrayed a mix of positives and negatives in relation to this type of work. Our application of the five Fairwork principles and ten thresholds provides further, and systematic, evidence for this mix, summarised in Figure 1.

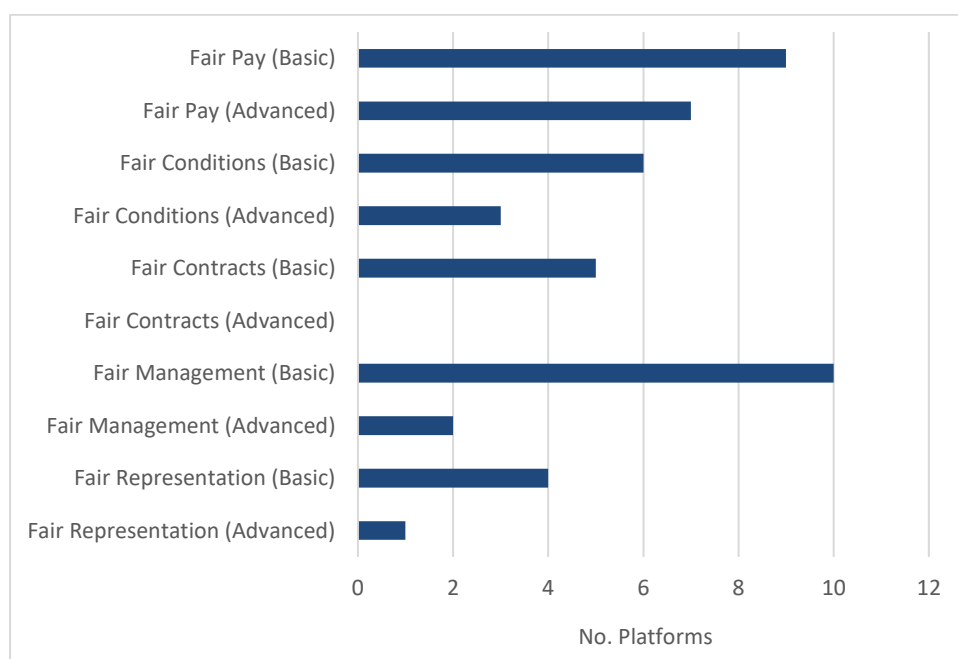


Figure 1: Number of the Eleven Platforms Achieving Fairwork Principles

On the positive side, these digital labour platforms are providing some workers, particularly immigrants to South Africa, with work they might otherwise struggle to obtain. Pay for most, even after deducting work-related costs, is above the minimum wage. A (small) majority of the platforms was taking at least some measures to ensure a safe working environment. The great majority of workers were happy to be seen as independent contractors. They were readily able to make contact with staff at the platform, and felt that the way platforms dealt with deactivation was reasonable. More than 70% were in some form of worker grouping that provided a forum to discuss work-related issues.

On the negative side, work in the platform economy is heavily gender-skewed towards men and both gender- and racially-skewed within sectors. One quarter of our sample take home less than minimum wage, with a number saying that income was dropping over time, and with 40% not obtaining sufficient work through their platform. Yet many were working very long hours: the average is roughly 50% longer than the maximum 45-hour working week specified by South Africa's Basic Conditions of Employment Act (RSA, 1997). Only three of the eleven platforms were taking active measures to improve working conditions, and even on these workers still faced contextual risks of crime, accidents and problems with customers. The majority of workers were unclear about their terms and conditions of employment and unable to access written details of their employment. Every one of the workers appeared to be incorrectly – quite possibly illegally – classified as an independent contractor when they were a de facto employee of the platform. Yet they received none of the benefits of employee status, including no sick pay, holiday pay, pension contributions, etc. They did not feel that platforms were responsive to more serious issues they faced – racial discrimination, robbery, accidents – and only a tiny number had given properly informed consent to the platform's use of their data. On ten of the eleven platforms, there was no effective mechanism for these and other work-related issues to be collectively raised with managers.

This therefore evidences the broader patterns of platform work (Heeks, 2017; Anwar and Graham, forthcoming). Platforms are providing workers with work opportunities and flexibility: jobs that are new and often better-paid or more formalised than prior employment; with some level of autonomy of working hours. But the work is chronically precarious: uncertain and insecure because of the lack of employment rights and the lack of fair management and representation. And the work is embedded in a structurally unequal system. Value accrues most to platforms, then clients, and least to workers in relative terms. The very real physical risks of working in South Africa are largely borne by workers, not platforms. Information about workers and work processes is held by the platform and inaccessible to workers. Platforms control “the institutions and organisation of work including legal oversight, terms of service, and work context and management design ... They also control the technical systems into which work and work organisation are embedded.” (Heeks, 2017:18). Workers control none of this, and their ability to influence it is limited by the absence of fair representation.

F1. Conclusions

Despite the global and rapid growth of platform work, there has been a lack of systematic schemata for the evaluation of such work. The research reported here is original in

developing a new framework for such evaluation, based on decent work standards. Applying this in a global South context, it provides a structured evidence set that exposes both the positive and negative aspects of platform work in developing countries. The framework has simplified and specified decent work standards in order to make them straightforward to operationalise. At the same time, the content is relatively comprehensive given the foundation on prior frameworks plus the tripartite inputs provided by the framework development workshops¹⁵. The framework therefore provides a basis for evaluation throughout the gig economy that other researchers, government agencies, worker associations and, indeed, platforms themselves can use. Given the clarity and structure of the framework, it will enable comparisons to be made over time and between different contexts and platforms.

The framework is not only an analytical device but can also have practical application. For example, through its identification of the way in which platform work in South Africa falls significantly short of decent work standards, use of the framework creates an imperative for intervention. Three main forms of intervention can be identified: structural, regulatory and informational.

The first two lie outside the ambit of the framework application. Structural interventions could include support for formation of worker associations or even gig economy unions, through to creation of platform cooperatives, as has occurred in some cities of the global North (Borowiak and Ji, 2019). Regulatory interventions would involve action by the state to fill the institutional voids that enable some of the decent work shortfalls to occur. This would look particularly at ways in which substantive legal provisions can be made applicable to platform workers, through law, collective bargaining, policy and voluntary codes.

Informational interventions would seek to provide information to labour market stakeholders – clients, workers, competing platforms, government, etc. – on the nature of working conditions on individual platforms. The Fairwork framework shown in Table 2 and Figure 1 readily lends itself to this because each element can be awarded one point, providing a decent work score out of ten for each platform. Though not reported here, this has been undertaken based on the fieldwork described above including evidence-gathering from platforms plus also desk research (see Fairwork, 2019). The information within the rating score for each platform is intended to influence altered behaviour among stakeholders.

Our paper reports the first application of this new decent platform work schema. A first step for further research will therefore be application of the schema in other countries; both global South and North. As noted above, this will allow ready comparison across platforms and countries; for example, to help understand the influence of national context on the nature of platform work. Application of the framework over time will allow longitudinal insights: whether, for example, growing regulation of platform work is improving standards or growing competition is driving down standards. These broader applications will also allow the principles to be revisited: to understand whether they are universally applicable or whether they require modification; for example, when applied to different types of platforms and/or as platforms themselves change over time.

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¹ Acknowledging that all gig work involves some physical activity and also the creation of digital data with a potential value.

² So-called because the workshops and development of the framework were undertaken as part of the Fairwork programme (<http://fair.work>), which seeks to improve working conditions for digital platform workers.

³ As noted in the Conclusions, both worker and platform evidence-gathering was undertaken as part of a longer-term action research project that rates gig work platforms against decent work standards. For further details, see Fairwork (2019).

⁴ Within South Africa, this term does not have the negative connotations found in some other parts of the world. “Coloured” was a self-identification of the interviewees, referring to “a multiracial ethnic group native to Southern Africa who have ancestry from more than one of the various populations inhabiting the region” (WP 2020).

⁵ For ride-hailing, delivery and domestic work platforms, this reflects the racial make-up of the workforce, with a significant racial skew against white workers (white people make up around 15% of the combined populations of Cape Town and Johannesburg) and coloured workers (coloured people make up around 6% of Johannesburg’s population and 42% of Cape Town’s population) (SSA, 2019). For digital work platforms, we deliberately sought non-white interviewees in order to provide a racial consistency of responses, focusing on those who are the majority of job seekers in South Africa. A review of worker profiles suggested digital work to be dominated by white workers: for example, representing two-thirds of a sample of Upwork profiles.

⁶ We did not systematically gather “before-and-after” data on pay but, for those that brought it up, it appeared that delivery riders were earning more than previously, even taking costs into account. For domestic workers and taxi drivers this was less clear: we only had six responses but four of these were earning less than they had previously done.

⁷ Excluding part-time workers, defined as those working less than 18 hours per week on a platform.

⁸ R15 per hour for domestic workers.

⁹ While there are likely to be platform-specific features – e.g. poor marketing or poor customer offer – at play, these findings will also reflect sectoral features such as excess of labour supply over demand. As noted above, deliverers often made up for low demand on one platform by simultaneously working for a second platform.

¹⁰ As an example of the value split, for a driver driving a taxi owned by someone else, the fare paid by the passenger ended up: 20% to the platform; 27% to the owner (including costs for car insurance and maintenance); 18% paid for fuel and data; and 35% was the driver’s net income.

¹¹ Though drivers noted this might be of limited value since the first thing stolen in a robbery was their phone.

¹² Substituting the word ‘other person’ in the Act for ‘platform’ – except in criterion (c), where the substitution is for the original word ‘organisation’ – in order to assess whether the worker was an employee of the platform.

¹³ The workers themselves were more equivocal. Some saw themselves as working for their platform, others as working via their platform, others still that the platform worked for them: “I employ Uber, Uber don’t employ me”. They had certainly imbibed the rhetoric of the platform economy: of the 47 who responded, 42 (89%) preferred to be seen as independent contractors rather than employees.

¹⁴ There was some differentiation by platform: deliverers were most concerned about pay; taxi drivers more about safety.

¹⁵ Fieldwork also asked open questions of workers and they did not identify work-related issues that lay outside the five principles.