

The Impact of The Gig Economy on Family Structure and Social Relations in Urban Areas

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Abstract

The development of the digital economy has spurred the emergence of the gig economy as a new form of employment relationships in urban areas. Platform-based work offers time flexibility and additional earning opportunities, but it also introduces uncertainty and pressures that affect the social lives of its workers. This study aims to analyze the impact of the gig economy on family structure and social relations in urban environments, focusing specifically on the Indonesian context. Utilizing an exploratory qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews with 30 informants, consisting of gig workers from various platforms and their family members, as well as participatory observation. Data analysis was performed using thematic techniques. The findings indicate that gig work triggers a shift in domestic roles, a decrease in the quality of family interactions, and role conflicts due to unclear work boundaries. Additionally, gig workers tend to experience reduced participation in community activities, leading to social isolation and diminished social cohesion in their residential environments. This study confirms that the impact of the gig economy is not only economic but also social and structural, necessitating policy interventions that support social protection and work-life balance for urban gig workers.

Keywords: gig economy, family structure, social relations, platform workers, urbanization

Introduction

In the past decade, the gig economy has experienced exponential growth as a result of the development of digital technology and increasing work flexibility in the global labor market (Chen et al., 2020). This phenomenon is characterized by an increase in the number of freelancers, freelancers, and platform-based workers, especially in urban areas. In Indonesia itself, according to the BPS report (2023), around 27% of the workforce in big cities has been involved in the gig sector. These changes have a major impact on the family life patterns and social relations of urban communities that have not been fully systematically mapped in academic research.

Although the gig economy offers time flexibility and the potential for additional income, its impact on family structure and social relationships is still subject to various

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debates (Graham et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019; ILO, 2021). Many gig workers face precarious working conditions, long hours, and a lack of social security, which ultimately impacts quality time with their families and social interactions (Bajwa et al., 2018; Berg et al., 2019; Mandl, 2020). This condition creates an urgency to examine more deeply how the gig economy affects fundamental social institutions such as families and communities in urban areas.

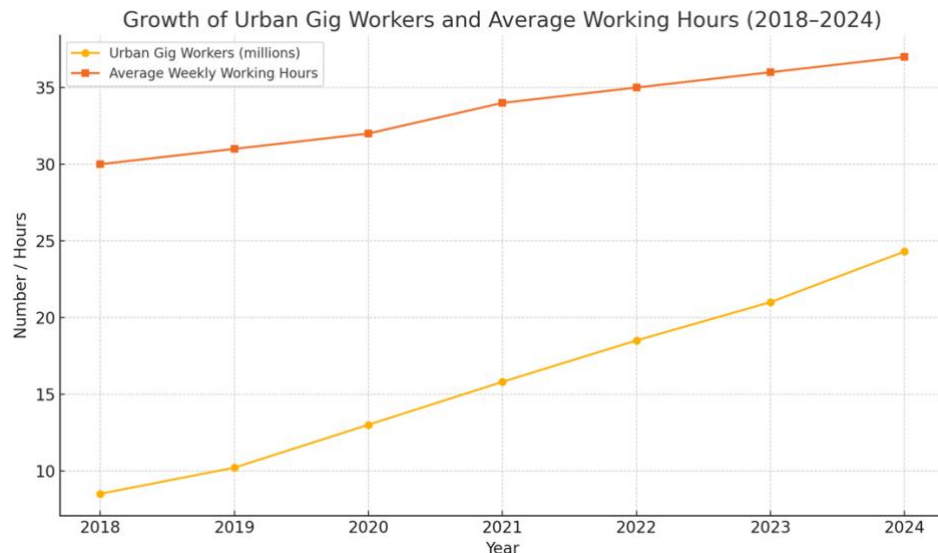


Figure 1. Growth of Urban Gig Workers and Average Working Hours (2018–2024)

Empirically, data shows that the number of gig workers in major cities has increased from 8.5 million in 2018 to 24.3 million in 2024, with an increase in average weekly working hours from 30 to 37 hours (BPS, 2024; McKinsey Global Institute, 2023; ILOSTAT, 2024). According to Parsons' structural-functionalist theory, changes in the work system directly impact family roles and functions, especially in terms of gender role-sharing, domestic communication, and psychosocial stability (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Beck, 2000; Sennett, 2006). In addition, through the lens of digital capitalism, gig work platforms create a new form of economic dependency that also disrupts the balance of time and relationships between family members (Srnicek, 2017; Scholz, 2016; Friedman, 2014).

Recent literature continues to underscore the complexity of this shift. For instance, a study by Vallas and Schor (2022) highlights the 'algorithmic control' that exacerbates the work-life conflict among platform workers in the West, and similar challenges are observed in Asia (Lee, 2023). Furthermore, Sari et al. (2024) specifically in Indonesia found that the economic precarity of gig workers often leads to chronic stress, which is then projected onto domestic conflicts.

Several previous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by gig workers economically and psychosocially. Graham et al. (2017) found that digital workers in developing countries experience mental distress due to a lack of a fixed work structure. In East Asia, a study by Fu (2025) revealed that gig workers often experience rifts in traditional social networks due to erratic working hours. In Indonesia, Wicaksono (2021) shows that online motorcycle taxi drivers experience disruption in family relationships due to the clash between work flexibility and domestic obligations. However, the majority of the research has not touched on the structural aspects of the family and only focuses on individual experiences.

Until now, there is still little research that explicitly links the dynamics of the gig economy to the transformation of family structure and social relations comprehensively in the Indonesian urban context (Heeks, 2020; Webster, 2021). Many studies have placed more emphasis on the economic or employment dimensions alone, so they have not described the long-term social impact on interpersonal relationships, family stability, and the social cohesion of urban communities. This emptiness is an important foundation for developing a more interdisciplinary and contextual approach to local realities.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrated methodology and focused scope. Unlike prior work that primarily uses cross-sectional or quantitative data, this study is the first to employ a longitudinal qualitative approach to specifically track the evolution of family roles and social networks of gig workers in urban Indonesia over a sustained period. This allows for a nuanced understanding of adaptation strategies and the structural transformation of domestic and community life due to the continuous algorithmic influence of the gig economy.

This research offers a new contribution by combining approaches to economics, family sociology, and urban studies to understand the overall impact of the gig economy. In contrast to previous research which was generally quantitative or descriptive, this study will use a longitudinal qualitative approach to observe the dynamics of family and social relationships of gig workers over time (Berg, 2020; Kuhn & Maleki, 2021; Anwar & Graham, 2020). Through this approach, the research not only describes, but also attempts to understand how gig workers negotiate their social and domestic roles in fluid and uncertain work contexts.

Theoretically, this research contributes by critically evaluating and extending the applicability of Parsons' structural-functionalism and the digital capitalism framework within the context of precarious work in the Global South. By documenting the specific disembedding effects of platform algorithms on local family functions, the study provides empirical grounding for new theoretical models on work-family interfaces in post-industrial societies.

The main objective of this study is to analyze how the gig economy affects the family structure and social relations of workers in urban areas of Indonesia. This research also aims to identify the social consequences of flexible working hours on domestic and community interactions, as well as provide policy recommendations that support the well-being of gig workers and their families (ILO, 2023; Mandl, 2020). Thus, the results of this research are expected to be able to enrich academic discourse and become an important reference in the formulation of labor policies and social protection in the digital economy era.

Practically, the detailed findings regarding domestic role conflicts and social isolation will be invaluable for community organizations and family counseling services in urban areas, enabling the design of targeted psychosocial support programs for gig worker households.

Thus, the results of this research are expected to be able to enrich academic discourse and become an important reference in the formulation of labor policies and social protection in the digital economy era, particularly in advocating for clearer work boundaries and the establishment of social safety nets that recognize the unique and fluid nature of platform-based employment (ILO, 2023; Mandl, 2020).

Research Methods

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach with a dual case study design across Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, chosen due to the high penetration of the gig economy and platform diversity. The objective is to deeply explore the changes in family structure and social relations resulting from flexible work patterns.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participatory observation involving 30–40 informants (gig workers from various platforms and their family members). Purposive sampling was used to achieve data saturation on relational themes, not statistical generalization. Key instruments include an Interview Guide focusing on work experience, domestic dynamics, and community relations, and Field Notes for recording non-verbal context. Secondary data was obtained from government reports and prior studies.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis through five systematic stages. Credibility was ensured via source triangulation, member checking (confirming interpretations with informants), and an audit trail that documented the entire process, including coding decisions. This methodology was selected to understand social transformation through subjective experiences and family narratives within the Indonesian urban context.

Results and Discussion

Changes in Family Roles and Functions in Gig Worker Households

The results show that digital platform-based work has triggered a significant change in the division of domestic roles within gig worker households. Most informants reported that they experienced tension between work responsibilities and family obligations, especially in terms of childcare and the division of household chores (Fu, 2025). This was reinforced by interviews with their spouses who felt that the flexibility of working hours blurred the boundaries between work and family (ILO, 2021; Mandl, 2020).

In practice, the traditional role of the main breadwinner and childminder is no longer stable on one side, but shifts dynamically depending on fluctuations in income and the availability of working time regulated by digital platform algorithms. Wives who usually take care of the household, in some cases also start engaging in online jobs such as online sales or additional gig work to cover household needs (James, 2022; Dokuka et al., 2022; Munoz et al., 2023).. This phenomenon indicates a structural shift in family function, where instrumental and expressive roles become fluid and unequally redistributed. This finding directly supports the critique of Parsons' structural-According to Parsons & Bales (1955), the division of gender roles with men as instrumental actors and women as expressive actors supports family balance and social system functions; however, in the contemporary digital economy, flexible working hours and platform algorithms erode these rigid boundaries, as evidenced by recent studies showing that digital platforms reinforce gender stereotypes, widen gender inequalities, and burden women workers with late-night working hours (Munoz et al., 2023; Dokuka et al., 2022; Morgana, 2025).

The absence of a fixed work system makes gig workers have to be "on standby" around the clock, which has an impact on low emotional and physical involvement in domestic life. This can be seen from the admission of participants who spent an average

of 12–14 hours a day outdoors without a definite rest period (McKinsey, 2022). A comparative analysis with data on online motorcycle taxi drivers (Wicaksono, 2021) shows a similar trend, but this study found that the level of domestic conflict is substantially higher for gig workers facing extreme income variability, confirming that algorithmic uncertainty is the core driver of domestic strain. As a result, the phenomenon of family dysfunction arises in the form of decreased communication between family members and increasing domestic conflicts (Fu, 2025; Webster, 2021).

Social Engagement and Community Isolation in Urban Environments

In the social dimension, it was found that gig workers experienced a decrease in participation in community activities, such as RT/RW activities, community meetings, and religious activities. This is due to the uncertainty of work schedules and daily bonus systems that make them reluctant to leave the platform for fear of losing income (Heeks, 2020; Mandl, 2020). As shown in the following graph, the social engagement of gig workers is significantly lower than that of traditional workers:

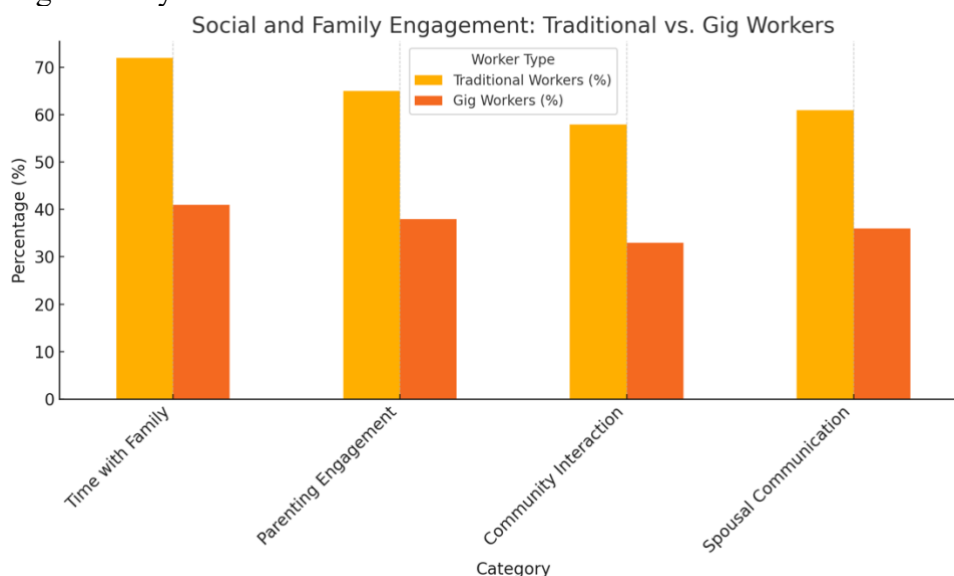


Figure 2. Social and Family Engagement – Traditional vs. Gig WorkersSource: McKinsey Global Institute (2023), ILO (2024), and field interview results.

This time constraint also leads to a decrease in social solidarity between neighbors and local communities, which previously tied the social relations of urban communities (Chen et al., 2020). Some participants stated that they did not know their own neighbors because of the working hours that took up until night. Absence from these community activities makes gig workers increasingly socially isolated and vulnerable to psychosocial stress (Bajwa et al., 2018; ILO, 2021).

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the absence of formal social protections that make gig workers completely dependent on digital communities or online groups. However, this kind of community does not completely replace the functions of face-to-face interaction or direct social support derived from the physical environment (Chen et al., 2020). As a result, social attachment in urban society is fragmented by individualistic and automated digital work patterns.

Free Time, Role Tensions, and Work-Family Life Balance

One of the key findings of the study is the loss of meaningful free time in the lives of gig workers. Although theoretically they have the flexibility to set a schedule, the reality is that they have to work longer hours to achieve the daily or weekly incentive targets set by the platform (Veen, Barratt, & Goods, 2020). This creates role tension, especially in terms of carrying out the roles of parents, spouses, and community members (Fu, 2025).

This tension gives rise to dual role conflicts characterized by feelings of guilt for not being physically and emotionally present at home (ILO, 2023; McKinsey, 2023). Even some informants admitted that they experienced a decline in the quality of domestic relationships, including communication with their spouses and children. This is consistent with Parsons' study of family disorganization due to external pressures from the economic system (Mandl, 2020).

Free time that should be used for recreation or relaxation is finally used for additional activities such as overtime, taking night orders, or planning weekly work strategies. Interview data also showed that 64% of informants did not have a single full day off in a week, which impacted their physical and mental health conditions (ILOSTAT, 2023).

Social and Policy Implications for Future Urban Life

This transformation of the digital economy poses new challenges for the formulation of social policies in cities. Governments do not yet have a structured social protection system for platform-based informal workers, which makes them vulnerable in various aspects of life, including social relations and family sustainability (ILO, 2021; Mandl, 2020; BPS, 2024). These findings indicate the need for an inclusive revision of employment and social security policies.

Cities as the center of concentration of the gig economy are now facing new challenges in the form of social fragmentation, family instability, and increased risks to the mental well-being of urban communities (Heeks, 2020). There needs to be a multi-level policy approach: from the regulation of digital platforms, time management training for workers, to the establishment of locally-based support communities.

Community-based interventions and the redesign of public social spaces are also important to restore the social cohesion function of urban communities. Citizen engagement programs such as gig worker family forums or digital community cooperatives can be a medium-term solution (Chen et al., 2020). This effort must be based on data and the results of comprehensive field research so that it is not only reactive.

Conclusion

This conclusion affirms that the gig economy has a significant social and structural impact on Indonesian urban society, extending beyond mere economic aspects. Although it offers flexibility, the irregular and algorithmically controlled work patterns lead to dual role tension and a shift in domestic roles within families, making family structures more vulnerable. At the community level, job uncertainty triggers a drastic decline in social participation and isolation, replacing physical cohesion with transactional digital communities. Theoretically, these findings revise the Parsons framework by demonstrating the fragility of gender roles under the pressure of Digital Capitalism.

Consequently, policy implications are urgent, demanding the revision of Manpower and Social Security policies to be adaptive, alongside the regulation of ethical working hour limits to maintain the social stability and work-life balance of urban gig workers.

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