

Original Article

# Gig Economy: Opportunities and Challenges in Nepal

<sup>1</sup>Manisha Paudel

<sup>1</sup>MPhil Scholar, Central Department of Rural Development, Tribhuvan University.

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to examine the opportunities and challenges presented by the gig economy in Nepal. It is a review-based article that highlights the impact of digital technologies and online platforms on Nepali workers, providing new earning opportunities and potentially reducing reliance on traditional remittances. However, it also identifies key challenges such as job insecurity, regulatory obstacles, and power imbalances between gig workers and employers. The article emphasizes the importance of embracing digital advancements and creating supportive regulations tailored to Nepal's context to harness the benefits of the gig economy fully. The rise of the gig economy brings both advantages and drawbacks, notably impacting job security and worker autonomy. In Nepal, regulatory barriers hinder the gig economy's growth, underscoring the need for tailored policies to address worker rights and working conditions. Recommendations include improving digital literacy, enhancing access to technology, and ensuring fair treatment and compensation for gig workers. Additionally, addressing challenges such as regulatory barriers and income stability is crucial for fostering a thriving gig economy ecosystem in Nepal. The paper also acknowledges the limited literatures available in the case of Nepal. Despite the challenges, the gig economy holds promise for driving innovation, job creation, and economic growth in Nepal. Continued research and policy development are essential for navigating the evolving landscape of gig work and maximizing its potential benefits for Nepali workers and businesses.

**Keywords:** Gig economy, digital, platform, jobs, Nepal.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'gig economy' refers to jobs where people work independently through digital platforms. These platforms allow employers to hire workers whenever they are needed (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). The gig economy and gig platforms support two types of work: one that is physical and local and another that is virtual and global. The availability of the internet and smartphones is growing rapidly. This means that people can easily connect with each other online through various digital platforms. The rise of the internet and smartphone usage in the economy has brought about a new aspect called the gig economy. In the past, the gig economy mainly referred to short-term contracts and freelance work instead of permanent jobs. However, with the platform economy coming into play, the idea of the gig economy has changed. It is not just about short-term jobs anymore; it now includes various kinds of work facilitated by digital platforms (Healy et al., 2017).

The resurgence of gig work is attributed to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, during which numerous individuals confronted unemployment and sought avenues to augment diminished incomes and savings. In response to this demand, companies integrated gig work and part-time employment, facilitating a gradual transition from the conventional full-time workforce paradigm to a novel model characterized by temporary and on-demand flexible employment (Doshi & Tikyani, 2021). The shortage of permanent jobs pushes people to take on contract work as independent workers, often referred to as "gig workers" or "freelancers." In some developed nations, young individuals choose these contract jobs as a lifestyle preference to escape the strict rules of permanent employment. Meanwhile, in many countries, gig platforms serve as a transitional phase or "bridge employment" before individuals secure permanent positions. The gig economy has gained popularity among digital startups because it allows them to pay lower wages to contract workers and avoid legal issues with employees, especially during economic downturns (Roy & Shrivastava, 2020).

Digital platforms in the gig economy have led to millions of jobs being outsourced or automated. These platforms connect consumers directly to services, and workers get paid for each task (Doshi & Tikyani, 2021). This type of work includes various tasks like delivery, taxi driving, domestic and care work, micro work, and online freelancing. Popular platforms like Deliveroo, Amazon Mechanical Turk, and Uber facilitate this work. Gig workers can find their next job instantly using their smartphones and receive feedback from clients in real time (Bates et al., 2021). The future led by information and communication technology demands and fosters the gig economy worldwide. In Nepal, the gig economy is a fairly recent development and mostly exists in urban areas.

The meal delivery service Foodmandu, which started in 2010, is the oldest platform still in operation. Foodmandu set the stage for several other platforms to emerge. These include Khalti, iPay, and Esewa for online payment services,



Aayoexpress for on-demand delivery, Chamkilo for laundry services, and the two ride-sharing platforms: Tootle and Pathao (Hamal & Huijsmans, 2021). Several ICT companies and organizations are hiring 'gig' workers and making payments accordingly. Since the gig economy is fairly new in Nepal, there are no clear policies and strategies in terms of regulating the economy and safeguarding the gig workers. It poses unpredictable challenges while bringing the possibilities for economic growth.

The gig economy in Nepal lacks clear policies and strategies to regulate the economy and safeguard the rights of gig workers, posing unpredictable challenges while potentially bringing opportunities for economic growth. Therefore, the paper examines the current landscape of the gig economy in Nepal, including the types of digital platforms and services offered. It also explores the challenges faced by gig workers in Nepal, such as job insecurity, lack of social protections, and access to healthcare.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review synthesizes scholarly discourse on the gig economy, exploring its definition, global impact, technological underpinnings, and role classifications.

Gig work, a subset of the overarching economy, is distinguished by its emphasis on smaller work units purchasable by firms. This emphasis on smaller units, allowing for the acquisition of work in progressively smaller quantities, lies at the core of the gig economy concept (Bieber & Moggia, 2020). Heeks (2017) examines various terminologies used in this field and suggests different terms based on different perspectives for the gig economy. From a perspective focused on work and labor, the primary term would be online labor. When considering the viewpoint of clients, the preferred term would be online outsourcing. Lastly, when encompassing the entire domain, the overarching term would be "(digital) gig economy."

Globalization and computerization have resulted in the creation of prominent gig work-sourcing platforms such as Upwork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, Uber, TaskRabbit, among others, making the gig economy prevalent across the world (Aloisi, 2015). As per Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus (2024), the nature of labor in the gig economy points to a method of working where individuals, as opposed to working for an employer, have temporary jobs or complete distinct tasks that are paid individually. According to a recent research report, there are three key stakeholders in the gig economy: gig employees (freelancers or independent contractors), clients who make demands, and intermediate platform firms. (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019).

Digital platforms that serve as intermediaries play a vital role in linking gig workers with clients, facilitating project delivery and ensuring smooth payment processes despite the absence of formal employment contracts. Temporary staffing agencies, which have a long history predating the digital age, are another way for employers to subcontract labor and avoid responsibilities associated with permanent employment. This model takes advantage of the gray area between workers and end-users. In the past, similar arrangements were common in agriculture and industry, where workers were hired through independent subcontractors or "gangmasters" (Brass, 2004).

Platform work involves on-demand tasks with there is no assurance of continued involvement; compensation is based on piecework. Workers provide their equipment and operate within a triangular relationship between themselves, the end-user, and the intermediary organizing the work. Digital platforms facilitate task commissioning, supervision, delivery, and payment processes (Grantham, 1994). As capitalism began to take shape and grow, the most common types of paid work included casual, seasonal, and contract labor (E. M. Wood, 2002). Vallas & Schor (2020) outline five distinct categories of gig work, recognizing that there can be some overlap and differing distinctions within them.

The initial category pertains to platform architects and technologists, comprising individuals such as founders, highly skilled personnel, and independent contractors. Another category involves cloud-based consultants or freelancers who provide expert assistance but use platforms rather than creating them. The third category comprises gig workers who offer services via platforms, often offline, such as ride-hailing, food delivery, and care work. This sector encompasses a broad market, including delivery, day labor, and odd-job tasks, granting providers flexibility in work schedules and autonomy (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor, 2020).

A fourth type of platform work, known as micro-tasking, is carried out entirely online. This is demonstrated by workers on platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT). These jobs typically require less training and experience compared to cloud-based consultants and freelancers. Tasks involved in micro-tasking include describing or categorizing images, editing computer-generated text, or transcribing short audio clips (Wood et al., 2018). Another category of platform workers operates within the realm of social media. These individuals include content creators and influencers and are aspirational labor. This form of platform work often occurs without direct compensation, with individuals hoping to gain enough visibility in the attention economy (Marwick, 2014) to eventually establish a consistent source of income.

Recent research indicates that the gig economy comprises three key participants: gig workers (commonly referred to as freelancers or independent contractors), the requester (clients), and intermediary platform companies. The intermediary digital platform serves a vital function in connecting gig workers with clients and facilitating project delivery and payment processes despite the absence of formal employment contracts (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019).

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of the gig economy and its global implications, significant research gaps persist, particularly within the specific context of Nepal. Further exploration is required to address the scarcity of studies on the dynamics, challenges, and regulatory frameworks of gig work in Nepal, as well as its long-term socio-economic impacts. Closing these gaps will not only advance scholarly understanding but also inform policy interventions to ensure the equitable and sustainable development of the gig economy within Nepal's evolving economic landscape.

### III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The methodology of the paper involves reviewing journals, articles, books, and reports available in the public domain and on the internet. The publications available provide information on the emerging global trend of the gig economy. However, there is very limited literature available, particularly in the context of Nepal. Therefore, to contextualize Nepal, this collected information is rationalized and presented.

### IV. RESULTS

#### A) *Global Trends in the Gig Economy*

Digital platforms that engage customers in services in the gig economy have facilitated the outsourcing or automation of millions of jobs (Srnicsek, 2016). With the rise in popularity of gig work outsourcing platforms such as Upwork, Guru, and Freelancer.com, there has been a noticeable increase in the global disparity between demand and supply for gig work. Notably, the supply predominantly originates from low-income countries such as India and the Philippines (Graham et al., 2017). In the USA, most freelancers (about 75%) work with clients from their local area. On the other hand, freelancers in countries like India, Pakistan, and the Philippines mainly get their work (about 90%) from clients overseas.

This difference means that freelancers in the USA usually earn more per hour than those in other countries because they work with local clients who often pay higher rates. However, freelancers in low-income countries can increase their earnings by learning new skills in IT and programming. For example, they can raise their hourly rates from as low as USD 4/hr. To as high as USD 20/hr. However, even though freelancers in low-income countries can charge higher rates, employers from wealthier countries can still hire them through online platforms (Beerepoot & Lambregts, 2014). In the past twenty years, Europe has experienced a decline in labor productivity.

Factors contributing to this decline include a decrease in birth rates, an aging population, and strict anti-immigration policies. Increasing productivity becomes challenging under these circumstances, but technological innovation and higher labor force participation offer potential solutions. The rise of gig-type work aims to boost productivity by increasing labor force participation and leveraging technological innovations, particularly through digital platforms. Additionally, in Europe, the ratio of working-age individuals to older persons is projected to decline. The major online marketplace players include Freelancer.com, Upwork.com, and Fiverr.com. These platforms have significant user bases, with Freelancer.com having 31 million registered users, Upwork.com with 17 million, and Fiverr.com with 7 million (Warner, 2023). The adoption of technology disrupts the gig economy significantly, enabling clients to access talent from both developed and developing nations. Digital platforms similarly provide millions of freelancers from developing countries with opportunities to apply for jobs posted on these websites. Establishing a personal brand on a gig economy platform is challenging, requiring individuals to position themselves as competent and reliable amidst a crowded marketplace. Additionally, they must showcase their creativity and cost-effectiveness compared to traditional employees in the same field (Petriglieri et al., 2018).

decrease from 3.5 today to 2.2 by 2040 (Atkinson, 2018). The gig economy is fueled by the significant increase in the number of tech-savvy, middle-class consumers (Hunt & Samman, 2019).

#### B) *Gig Economy in Nepal*

The gig economy is becoming increasingly popular worldwide due to its accessibility to jobs, fair earnings, and flexible schedules. While Nepal's gig economy is still in its infancy, it has experienced rapid growth since 2016. Specifically, 43 percent of online freelance employment in Nepal is attributed to those working in software and technology development (Pradhan, 2016). Tootle, a ride-sharing platform operating within the Kathmandu Valley, along with Pathao, a ride-hailing service provider in Kathmandu, are among the well-known enterprises in Nepal's gig economy. Additionally, Fiverr, an online marketplace for freelance services, and Upwork, an online platform linking businesses with skilled freelance professionals, are also prominent in Nepal. The gig economy proved especially valuable during the pandemic, assisting workers in managing job losses and salary reductions (Ghosh et al., 2023).

Online web-based platforms enable businesses to delegate their processes and access global talent remotely, thereby boosting their trade gains through improved matching of employers and employees (Agrawal et al., 2015). While the precise figure remains uncertain, estimates from 2020 suggest that there were between 30 to 40 million workers involved in platform-mediated work in the Global South, experiencing a growth rate of approximately 30% annually (Heeks et al., 2020). In 2017/2018, among the six countries studied, the level of familiarity with online platforms in Nepal was only 20%, and they were aware of the potential of platforms for buying and selling goods and services in at least one of the seven areas mentioned in the survey (Galpaya et al., 2023).

### ***C) Opportunities for the Gig Economy in Nepal***

The global shift towards digital technologies and the gig economy is impacting Nepal. This presents new earning opportunities for Nepali workers through online platforms and remote work, possibly reducing reliance on traditional remittances. Nepal should embrace digital advancements and create supportive regulations for the gig economy. This includes improving digital literacy, providing better access to technology, and ensuring fair treatment and pay for workers (Ghosh et al., 2023). Digital labor platforms offer earning opportunities to individuals facing disadvantages in their local job markets (Graham et al., 2017).

Nepal is a developing country, and the demand for gig work within the corporate sector is on the rise. As organizations demand skilled professionals amidst intense competition, they often prioritize profit maximization. This dynamic presents an opportunity for freelance professionals who opt to depart from traditional corporate roles to pursue work they are passionate about and gain autonomy. Companies in Nepal are increasingly recognizing the value of this freelance workforce, as it provides them with immediate access to flexible talent, reduces operational costs, and fosters rapid innovation.

Clients and customers benefit from the flexibility of the gig economy, enabling quick delivery of food, hiring web developers, and getting on-demand taxi services effortlessly. It is worth noting that the gig economy became prevalent during the financial crisis when people sought alternative work due to unemployment or underemployment. Now, the gig economy spans two major segments: knowledge-based gigs like machine learning data scientists and independent management consultants and service-based gigs such as tradespeople and delivery drivers. Additionally, the gig economy provides millions of job opportunities to workers in lower-income countries through online outsourcing and remote work (World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends, 2015).

This paper adds to our understanding of how the gig economy is changing Nepal's economy. It shows how digital technologies and gig work are offering new ways for Nepali workers to earn money online, which could reduce their reliance on traditional remittances from abroad. In Nepal gig economy benefits customers by providing quick and easy access to services like food delivery and transportation. Furthermore, gig work is creating job opportunities for people in lower-income countries through online outsourcing and remote work, contributing to broader discussions about economic development and digital inclusion.

### ***D) Challenges of the Gig Economy in Nepal***

The emergence of the gig economy marks a shift away from conventional employment structures, providing workers and businesses with increased flexibility while also introducing novel challenges (Manyika et al., 2016). The advantages of the gig economy follow some disadvantages for both the employer and employee. Gig workers face certain risks compared to traditional employees. They often have less job security and fewer protections. Also, they have to adjust their schedules according to customer demand, which can limit their independence (Ravenelle, 2019; Schor, 2020).

The current policy framework in Nepal poses obstacles to the growth of the gig economy. Regulations regarding foreign transactions make it challenging for gig workers to receive payments efficiently. Additionally, various challenges faced by the physical gig economy in Nepal have impacted the predictability and stability of income for workers. The gig economy's success in the country centers on the government's portrayal of laws that promote job creation, encourage innovation and adapt to changing business dynamics. These laws should address worker classification, employment benefits, and the establishment of safe and conducive working environments, among other factors.

Furthermore, competition policy, taxation, and labor market regulations should be tailored to accommodate the needs and concerns of the gig economy (Ghosh et al., 2023). The rise of the gig economy and online talent platforms has redefined what we consider as "jobs", involving employees and employers who do not fit neatly into existing labor laws. This presents a significant challenge, calling for the development of new labor models. Another challenge is posed by the confidentiality of the employees, where one employee could be working in numerous other opposing organizations at the same time.

Moreover, gig jobs transfer risk onto workers who may lack the resources to mitigate it. In the gig economy, the finer details of work contracts give companies more control over employment conditions, creating a power imbalance. As firms can

purchase work in smaller increments, this increased granularity can potentially lead some gig companies to exploit their workers (Bieber & Moggia, 2020). Additionally, unlike traditional employment, which offers opportunities for developing career competencies, gig work typically lacks such avenues for gig workers. This is primarily due to the mediated nature of gig work (Kost et al., 2019).

Despite extensive research into the various facets of the gig economy and its relationship with the traditional job market, there remains a scarcity of comprehensive studies providing synthesized snapshots of the gig-based economy (Batmunkh et al., 2022). The rise of the gig economy brings both advantages and drawbacks, notably impacting job security and worker autonomy. In Nepal, regulatory barriers hinder the gig economy's growth, underscoring the need for tailored policies to address worker rights and working conditions. There are research gaps in the context of Nepal despite exploration done at the global level, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies offering insights into gig-based economic dynamics in Nepal.

## V. CONCLUSION

The gig economy presents both opportunities and challenges for Nepal as it navigates the complexities of a rapidly evolving digital landscape. The adoption of digital technologies and the emergence of gig work offer new avenues for Nepali workers to access income streams through online platforms and remote employment, potentially reducing reliance on traditional remittances. However, alongside these opportunities come significant challenges, including job insecurity, lack of regulatory frameworks, and power imbalances between workers and employers. To fully capitalize on the benefits of the gig economy, Nepal must embrace digital advancements and develop supportive regulations tailored to its unique context.

This entails improving digital literacy, expanding access to technology, and ensuring fair treatment and compensation for gig workers. Moreover, addressing challenges such as regulatory barriers and income stability will be crucial for fostering a thriving gig economy ecosystem in Nepal. Despite the challenges, the gig economy holds promise for driving innovation, job creation, and economic growth in Nepal. By addressing these challenges head-on and leveraging the opportunities presented by the gig economy, Nepal can position itself for sustainable development and prosperity in the digital age. Continued research and policy development will be essential for navigating the evolving landscape of gig work and maximizing its potential benefits for Nepali workers and businesses alike.

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