

# Blue-Collar Workers of the Platform Economy in Bangladesh

## Policy Needs of the Precariat in South Asia

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**Blue-Collar Workers of the  
Platform Economy in Bangladesh:  
Policy Needs of the Precariat  
in South Asia**

May 2021

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# Foreword

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The pandemic is shaping lives across Asia, and it will change the social and economic conditions for the coming decade. To analyse the social, economic, political, geostrategic, cultural and societal implications of this unprecedented crisis and develop visions for the time after COVID-19, we invited scholars and practitioners to work on a paper series to envision aspects of a future of work in Asia that benefits workers.

In this series of papers, we explore subjects to support workers, trade unions and policy practitioners to formulate a just and inclusive vision for Asia's future. The rebuilding of supply chains, the digitalization across countries, the future of trade unions and workers as well as the implications of an incessantly proceeding automation will shape the future of the continent. Long-term and systematic analysis of visions for the future of work and the economy of tomorrow are the overall goal of this paper series.

The future of the digital economy and its workers play a tremendous role in the development of the countries in Asia. With Asia at the forefront of the digital transformation, we still have much to understand when it comes to the implications of digitalized economies. How is digitalization transforming companies and value chains? Who creates, generates, captures, controls and uses data? What are the implications of corporate and government policies for the growing number of gig workers? How can workers and trade unions gain more control over the future of work?

In this paper, Mohammad Tareq Hasan gives an in-depth analysis of Bangladesh's platform economy. By interviewing dozens of platform workers about their aspirations, problems and working conditions, this study provides a deeper and more detailed understanding of workers in platform economies that go beyond statistics and looks at the lived experiences of Bangladesh's gig workers. This study is an important starting point for further research that should look at crucial dimensions, like the gender-based and geographic differences for workers with digital platforms.

From this solid foundation, the paper analyses the impacts of the global pandemic and compares Bangladesh's regulatory framework with other laws and regulations for platform economies in South Asian countries. This bottom-up and top-down analysis finds its keystone in the final chapter: With 12 policy recommendations, including introducing risk and retirement benefits, guidelines for revenue-sharing or regulating driver registration to reduce potential threats, this paper gives thought-provoking answers to the problems of platform workers in Bangladesh.

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May 2021

# Background

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Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainties have loomed over the platform economy sector of the globalized economy. With the pandemic, many start-ups within the platform economy were forced to cease operation or at least lay off staff. Many of the Bangladeshi platform economy start-ups in sectors like finance, health, education, transportation, hospitality and deep technology experienced plummeting demand due to reduced consumer spending. At the same time, there were subsegments like online food delivery services that were often able to benefit from the crisis (Alam, 2020).

This paper focuses on blue-collar workers—a segment within the contemporary working class—who supply manual labour, skilled or unskilled. Blue-collar workers signify the existence of social divisions among wage earners—commercial and administrative employees in trade and industry, technicians, clerks, managers, forepersons, manual workers and civil servants (Goodwin, 2018; Kocka, 1985). They are mostly service providers who do not have the luxury of working from home. Due to the pandemic, the blue-collar platform economy workers are facing greater downturn.

Generally, the platform economy employs machine-learning data scientists and service providers (tradespeople or delivery drivers, for instance), who provide physical work or digital work or a mixture of the two. It engages both high-skilled and low-skilled workers in a variety of circumstances and contracts. The blue-collar workers of the platform economy include ride hailing, food delivery, repair services, home service and cleaning.

In Bangladesh, digital platforms such as Uber, Pathao, Foodpanda, Obhai and Sheba.xyz serve as a medium between consumers and those who are able and willing to work freelance. The pandemic-induced economic setback has made many of these workers indebted or jobless. Hence, they are joining what Standing (2018 and 2011) called the “precariat” class. Precariat workers form a unique grouping because they usually have higher educational qualifications than required by the job they can expect to obtain or be required to do. They engage in work for labour that is not typically counted in official statistics, that has low upward mobility and a distinctive wage income and no benefits; and they often live with unsustainable debt (Standing, 2018).

How do the workers evaluate their position in this work ecosystem? It is an important question to explore because workers are generally hired and treated as independent contractors but sometimes regulated as employees (in terms of obligation, not benefits). The emergence of the platform economy has blurred the “world of work”, and the current situations demand policy interventions.

Considering this context, the paper explores the pros and cons of the ride-hailing platforms in Bangladesh. Through the narrative-based research, the paper examines the policy or regulation deficits that have led to injustice and exploitation of the blue-collar workers in this new sector of the economy. After a comparative analysis of the policies regulating ride-hailing platforms in South Asian countries, the paper proposes policy recommendations for Bangladesh.

# Methodology and outline of the paper

This narrative-based policy study uses primary and secondary data. The narratives were collected from ride-hailing platform workers over a seven-day period in August 2020. The interviews were unstructured in nature but followed a thematic guideline. A total of 32 interviews were conducted (table 1). All the respondents had been working with a platform for at least three months. A few of the respondents used more than one platform—in such cases, the one they used for longer duration was considered. Some workers' comments also derive from newspaper reports.

A snowball method was followed in reaching the platform workers. To reduce potential biases, interviewees were located in four parts of Dhaka, including: Panthapoth/Dhanmondi, Rampura, Kawran Bazar and Jatrabari. Sometimes, bikers and auto-rickshaws were located at road crossings or traffic signals, and car drivers were found by scanning the applications. Hailing a ride and using personal contacts were also deployed to find ride-hailing platform drivers and bikers. Delivery personnel were approached by scouting popular restaurants in Gulshan, Dhanmondi and Jatrabari. Although the narratives were collected through direct discussion, for overall understanding of the workers' conditions, the study also relies on conversations with drivers and delivery persons while riding or after ordering food via the platforms over the past year.

Table 1: Categorized list of respondents

Platform or service types	Number of Respondents
Uber bike	5
Uber car	4
Pathao bike	5
Pathao car	4
Pathao delivery	5
Foodpanda delivery	5
Obhai auto-rickshaw	4

There are five main sections in this policy paper. The following section presents an overview of the platform

economy and its features. The next section overviews the impacts of COVID-19 on the platform economy sector (ride-hailing and delivery platforms). Worker's testimonies are offered to illustrate the dynamics of the platform economy in Bangladesh. Challenges for regulation of the platforms, such as the ride-hailing application, are then discussed for South Asian countries, with comparison with other Asian countries. Finally, policy recommendations are suggested, based on the narratives of the platform workers.

## The platform economy and its workers in Bangladesh: An overview

The platform economy, gig economy and sharing economy have become buzzwords in the contemporary world. Start-up enterprises using web-based platforms have laid the foundation of the sharing-based economy. Anyone can work on these digital platforms during a time of their preference and duration.

Companies like Uber and Airbnb have reached colossal scale globally. In Bangladesh, home-grown digital platforms, such as Pathao, Obhai and Sheba.xyz, have also gained popularity. In the platform economy, ride-hailing services are a booming sector and have had a revolutionary impact on the global transportation system.

## The market of ride-hailing platforms

The global ride-hailing market was valued at \$61 billion in 2018. Due to its increasing popularity, the market value is expected to grow to \$218 billion in 2025 and \$285 billion by 2030 (Adlittle, 2020).

"Popularity of the ride-hailing platforms can be gauged from the fact that, on average, 55 million people hailed a ride using the Uber app during every month of second quarter 2020" (Hasan, 2020a; Statista, 2020). Over the next three years, more than 100 million people are expected to use ride-hailing services on a monthly basis globally (Wang, 2017, cited in Tarek and Amit, 2019).

Reuters reported a couple years ago that the ride-hailing industry accounted for 23 per cent of the transportation sector in Dhaka, in a combined estimate of the average monthly income of different ridesharing service providers and the number of vehicles (Rahman, 2019). More than 7 million rides are recorded every month in the ride-hailing platforms that operate in the country. Policy Research Institute predicted that the value of this sector would reach \$1 billion within the next five to seven years, from its value of \$260 million in 2018 (Kamal and Ahsan, 2018).

Ride-hailing platforms in Bangladesh provide services with cars, motorbikes and auto-rickshaws. With the ride-hailing platforms, commuters are at ease with finding transport, doorstep pick-up and fare estimation. These platforms appear to provide a smart solution to the country's transportation problem. Food and parcel delivery have also developed.

The digital platforms empower consumers in a way, giving them opportunity to avail of services that were not otherwise accessible, while the ride-hailing platforms have created employment opportunities for thousands. For instance, more than five million users and more than 200,000 drivers registered to use Pathao in 2019. In 2020 in the Pathao ecosystem, there were more than 300,000 drivers and food-delivery and courier agents, more than 25,000 e-commerce merchants and more than 5,000 restaurants (Elius and Ahmed, 2020).

### **The business model**

The digital platforms serve as a medium of contract between consumers and those able and willing to work freelance. For instance, the ride-hailing platforms enable people with a car to “share” the ride with someone for a payment while travelling towards a destination. By sharing, all parties benefit.

Platform companies enable the continuous hiring of workers to perform tasks as “independent contractors”—with services requested on their digital platform. The availability of the platforms has reduced the need for full-time employees. Workers are paid for completing every

task rather than a fixed salary that employees on payrolls receive.

In theory, it works well for the drivers and passengers. In lieu of coming to work every weekday and following orders, drivers enjoy flexibility and predictable pay, and passengers can request rides without having to maintain a full-time driver or vehicle. As more workers (drivers) and customers sign up, the platforms become an efficient medium for exchange.

This business model allows companies to run without owning or leasing any vehicles. They do not even require employing any drivers. They connect customers with drivers through their platform. In other words, they are the intermediaries in a two-sided market of workers and jobs.

Workers on these platforms are legally treated as independent contractors rather than employees. Thus, the employment and labour laws do not apply to them (Collier, Dubal and Carter, 2017). Nonetheless, for Bangladesh, one may argue, the platform work is a first step out of informal work (or an oral contract-based work arrangement). However, situating themselves as contractors, the digital platforms are avoiding responsibilities for workers' employment benefits, such as overtime benefits, leave and rest times, social security provisions and opportunity for collective bargaining. This new type of working relationships raises a vital question: whether a platform worker will be legally treated as an independent entity who establishes a contract with a platform or as an employee having near-zero employment benefit rights from the de facto employer—the platform. Overall, the existing policies in Bangladesh fall short as the platforms, workers and customers function as independent entities in absence of any guidelines that could protect workers from contracts that exploit them and disproportionately benefit the platform providers.

### **Transferred burdens**

One unique ingenuity of the platform economy is that the “employees” (the drivers, for instance) hardly receive any on-the-job training and must invest in the tools (smart phone and Internet access) and equipment (vehicles).



Platform employers do not supply or protect any such investment.

For example, the product delivery and ride-hailing platforms require “riders” (employees) to own their vehicle. During the COVID-19 shutdown, these investments became liabilities for the employees. This is an important aspect because the investment risks have shifted to the individual from the organization.

Smaller investment in the infrastructure allows the platform companies to “on and off” their businesses abruptly, at will. Recently, UberEats announced cessation of operations in Bangladesh, jeopardizing many of its workers’ future income.

This breaks the myth of the platform economy, and the ride-hailing platforms in particular, that the efficiency-making of a service and the democratizing of the sector creates a new “world of work”. Rather, they operate in an alternate form of the traditional world of work in a way that puts workers at risk and strips them of their right to social protection as employees (Collier, Dubal and Carter, 2017). This extreme form of flexibilization of work is sometimes referred as the “fissured workplace” (Weil, 2014). This form shifts out the responsibility of workers’ protection and social costs. Within the platform economy, companies only have a distant relationship with workers.

### **Coercive nature of the platforms**

These platforms (ride-hailing and parcel or food delivery) do not limit the work hours of a driver. To gain popularity and edge over competing companies, platforms give incentives and persuade drivers and delivery personnel to work for longer hours.

With the provision of benefits for increased number of services provided within a time frame, the platforms coercively engage workers to drive for long hours. Thus, there is increasing risk of fatigue and accidents.

This tactic results in the absolute increase of surplus labour time for the ride-hailing platforms. The more a platform is used, the more profit is generated for the platform owners because they (now) earn a 25 per cent

share or commission of the total fare of any ride (this increased from 15 per cent gradually over the past two years) (Scholz, 2017).

The online platforms present a tripartite relationship: the platform, the workers (drivers) and the requester of the work or service (passengers, delivery recipients). There are many forms of control that the platform can have on its workers, but the most pervasive is the process of price or wage setting (Collier, Dubal and Carter, 2017). Here, in the form of several service-oriented targets, a platform controls the amount of time these workers and drivers must drive. However, the labour process stays less visible, compared to the market-based economy (Doorn, 2017).

### **The platforms get waiver from responsibilities**

Through their terms and conditions, the platforms achieve a legal waiver from any obligation to the transportation (or service) providers (drivers) or users. They set themselves only as intermediaries between the two parties—the workers and customers. The terms and conditions that the platforms require both drivers and users to agree to differentiate them from taxi services.

The drivers and passengers remain responsible for their own actions, and the mediator, which is the digital platform, is waived of any sort of responsibility. One of the reasons why platform-based sharing services adopt the contractor-based model is because it keeps the cost of business low. But from this modality of work, many risks appear for the drivers.

These workers are treated as if they are in a zero-hour employment contract. Eventually, they endure lack of fair pay, inflexibility, no fringe benefits, stress because of constant evaluation (including by the users) and occupational safety and health risks.

Even though the platform-based working paradigm thrives on the contractor model, it remains vulnerable in terms of harm to passengers by drivers or accidents or harm to the drivers (Tarek and Amit, 2019). This concern heightened as platforms ventured into food delivery and logistics.

### **Time–space compression**

Time–space compression is an essential feature of capitalism, as argued by David Harvey (1990) in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Capitalism as a process of production and distribution needs continuous expansion, he wrote. This requirement alters the qualities of and relationship between space and time—for recruiting more labour and setting up more markets.

Digital platforms, such as the ride-hailing platforms, are an epitome of capitalism’s time–space compression. The technological innovation has elided spatial and temporal distances. For instance, Uber, an American-based technology company registered in the Netherlands, operates around the world without the heavy infrastructural investment that other transportation companies have required. In its contemporary form, the digital platform exists not materially but digitally via programming. This signifies a global trend of financialization (see Kalb, 2013; Friedman and Friedman, 2008a and 2008b; Arrighi, 1994).

Innovative technology has allowed a capitalistic form that makes the entire world its market. Hence, the platform economy has overcome spatial barriers, opened up new markets, sped up production cycles and reduced turnover time of capital (Guyer, 2016; Harvey, 2007).

Structural inequalities ensued by a neoliberal capitalist approach to the economy appear normal in the business model of the platform economies (Choudary, 2018; Zott and Amit, 2010).

In the next section, the impacts of COVID-19 on the platform economy (ride-hailing platforms) are discussed in relation to blue-collar workers.

# Impacts of COVID-19 on the platform economy sector

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The Venture Capital and Private Equity Association of Bangladesh reported that around 300 start-ups are likely to incur revenue decline of approximately \$53 million in sales in Bangladesh (Rozario, 2020; see also Mahmud and others, 2020). Globally, to cope with the economic downturn, start-ups have stopped online advertising, cut salaries of employees, laid off full-time employees and stopped or slowed hiring. Business-to-consumer start-ups have seen a decline in revenues, which will gradually affect the business-to-business start-ups.

Freelancers and part-timers are likely to face a backlash in Bangladesh. There are about 500,000 active freelancers (Zaman, 2019). The number of part-timers is even higher. The World Bank reported that as much as 19 per cent of the total employed population in Bangladesh works part-time (World bank, 2020). Many freelancers and part-timers are likely to be unemployed in the post-pandemic situation. Thus, a threat of exponential increase in the rate of skill and educated unemployment is imminent.

Moreover, platform workers have had to invest more in remaining eligible for supplying services that the pandemic-induced social distancing and hygiene requirements are demanding. And they are facing increased occupational safety and health risks.

## Indebtedness

Due to the business model of the ride-hailing platforms, drivers fell into a debt trap during the shutdown due to the pandemic. Some drivers turned to the ride-hailing platform as a way out from economic crises. But the pandemic-induced shutdown, on the contrary, forced them into debt.

For instance, R. Ahmed, who is a third-year student at a public college in Dhaka, had worked as a driver for a ride-hailing platform for two years. For the first six months, he drove a rented car, but then he took a loan from a private bank to buy a motorbike. Using the ride-hailing platform, he earned around 50,000 taka per month. He used to drive from 8 a.m. till 6 p.m. every day. From that income,

he made loan payments of 10,000 taka each month. The rest of the money abled him to take care of his family in the village, including two younger brothers.

Then the COVID-19 shutdown came. "I am now without any work, and my savings are almost all gone. I am living a woeful life right now. I am depressed thinking about the instalment payment of the bike and other things," he told a journalist (Tipu, 2020).

## Adaptation through diversification

The people working in the product delivery ecosystem are facing a different crisis in this pandemic. Once the shutdown in the country started, many delivery personnel returned to their home village, which created a void in the product-delivery system. As the chairperson of the e-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (e-CAB) noted in an interview with a newspaper journalist, "Approximately 80 per cent of our delivery people are now off-duty. This has happened because most of them left Dhaka following the recent government holidays forced by the coronavirus outbreak" (Tithila, 2020).

The government-imposed shutdown made it difficult for delivery personnel to travel from the outskirts of the city. However, during the shutdown period, the volume of online product delivery spiked, and there was a shortage of delivery personnel. "Since mid-March, we have seen a 112 per cent growth in our online orders from Shwapno [a retail superstore chain]," the head of e-commerce innovation of ACI Logistics told a journalist (Tithila, 2020).

During the shutdown period, the ride-hailing platforms diversified their services. For example, Pathao launched "new services to meet our consumers' needs and to provide earnings opportunities for some of our delivery men" (Elius and Ahmed, 2020). Pathao launched Tong, an on-demand essentials and grocery delivery service and started delivery of pharmaceutical products (non-prescription drugs and medical supplies). It also began providing logistical support to many social initiatives during the pandemic, such as Obhizatrik Foundation,

Bidyandondo Foundation's One Taka Meal Program and Sheba.xyz, The Daily Star and Daily Samakal's Mission Save Bangladesh, to deliver food to "underprivileged members of our community" (Elius and Ahmed, 2020).

### **Uncertainty and the post-pandemic threats**

Bangladesh is uniquely positioned to face severe post-pandemic threats. During the past 30 years, the country has experienced extensive economic growth. In facilitating that unprecedented economic growth, people involved in the booming sectors like labour migration, start-ups, freelancing and the garment industry have acquired new lifestyles.

The condition of the blue-collar workers amid the global economic growth indicates socioeconomic uncertainties have become persistent for a huge group of people whom Guy Standing (2011) referred to as the "precariat". In short, the precariat is a group of people whose "labour is insecure and unstable, so that it is associated with casualization, informalization, agency labour, part-time labour, phoney self-employment and the new mass phenomenon of crowd-labour" (Standing, 2015). They have been habituated with instability in income and living standards. They rely entirely on wages despite income insecurity. Therefore, the precariat is not the same as the proletariat.

The income-insecure waged labourers are resultant of a neoliberal economic model that aims to achieve profit through market competitiveness and flexible labour. Market competitiveness has transferred production bases to the countries with cheap labour and enabled a massive increase in labour migration, part-time work, freelancing, etc. Labour market flexibility has transferred the responsibilities of coping with economic risks and insecurity from employers to workers.

Regrettably, most of these platform workers and/or newly unemployed people—the precariat, so to speak—will not directly fit into the safety checks of the government's rehabilitation programmes. The precariat is a class in the making in the current juncture of neoliberal predicaments. Hence, the platform workers are the precariat, as this paper argues.

In the post-pandemic "new normal" condition, many workers will fall into economic hardship and lose their socio-professional identity. The long cherished middle-class stability towards which people were drugged by the instantaneous consumerism will appear unattainable. Grave despair will replace aspirations. Consequently, this may disrupt social cohesion at large.

The increased imbalance in the post-pandemic time may generate deep frustration as well as anger about the impossibility of having a sense of a secured life. A progressive agenda for restoration must reach out to them sooner than later. Otherwise, the frustration could lead them to far-right political affiliation or be captured by the revolt of the elites, leading to a quick fix rather than a genuine change of the "order of things", as Arjun Appadurai (2020) recently argued.

Bangladesh must consider the possibility of rising social disruption, especially as the country seeks to embrace digitalization for development and establish IT parks in every district. It is imperative that we take the voices of blue-collar workers in the platform economy into consideration. Effective policy regulations must be installed to ensure the protection of workers' rights and to thus halt the creation of precariat workers.

The next section describes the dynamics of the ride-hailing platforms in Bangladesh through workers' testimonies.

# Workers' testimonies: Dynamics of the platform economy

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## What attracts the drivers?

### ***Perceived flexibility: "No figure of a boss"***

The flexibility of work hours and "no figure of a boss", such as a less hierarchical structure of the platforms, are major pull factors. Abul Bashar, for example, worked as a house driver for two years before joining a ride-hailing platform. There were various problems in his previous jobs, he explained: He had to work long hours, did not get any break and sometimes could not eat or say prayers on time because his employer needed to go somewhere. "Uber has given me the opportunity of being my own boss. Even if I have to drive the whole day, no one will ask me to rush over or demand anything," he said.

Islam Shaheen, an Uber biker, agreed: "In any other job, there is no end to a workday till one achieves the day's target, but here I am on my own. There is no pressure here. I can choose my work hours as per my wish."

A Pathao delivery person added, "There is no pressure in our job. We come to work, take the parcel, and as soon as we finish, we can go back after submitting the cash to the office."

### ***Quick return from investments***

A quick return from a small investment is also a lure to the job, an Uber bike rider pointed out: "In other businesses, you have to invest much more for a smaller profit. Here, by small investment, you can start getting profit in no time at all" (Zwick and Spicer, 2019).

The platforms' rapid link to passengers provides that quickness. Rafiqul Islam, an auto-rickshaw driver, started using the Obhai platform two years ago. Now he drives with "contact" arrangements as well as using the platform. For him, the benefit of using the platform is the convenience of finding a passenger. "Sometimes after dropping off a passenger, we cannot wait there due to lack of parking space, but with the app we get a request for a ride as soon as we finish one," he explained.

### ***Ease in operation and "inclusiveness"***

The shutdown induced by the pandemic forced some

people to take up platform work. For instance, Ridoy Mahmud started working for Foodpanda after the shutdown forced him to close his business. From a social media platform, he came to know about this opportunity. To start the work, he needed to have an android phone and a bicycle or motorcycle. He already owned a phone, thus initially he bought a bicycle for 4,000 taka and later invested 25,000 taka to buy a motorcycle. "Joining Foodpanda has rescued me from unemployment," he said. The digital platforms created opportunities for people in economic distress, provided they had the needed tools or could access funds to acquire them.

## Forms of contracts

### ***Ride-hailing contracts***

Drivers who own their vehicles can directly work using a ride-hailing platform. But in some cases, drivers are recruited by someone else who has invested in a car for ride-hailing services. In such situations, the drivers may work for a fixed salary or work as a shared beneficiary with the investor.

### ***Parcel delivery contracts***

For parcel delivery, many workers previously worked on a monthly salary. Then the platform model introduced the commission system. Now, the workers get a 5,000 taka fixed rate, 500 taka (or €49 and additionally €4.90 as bonus) as an attendance bonus, and the rest of their earnings depends on how many deliveries they make. If a person delivers 15 parcels, they will earn 15 taka per parcel. The rate increases with 15–30 deliveries, yielding 16 taka per parcel. The highest they can earn is 18 taka per parcel if they deliver more than 30 parcels a day. Working every day, they could earn 20,000–25,000 taka monthly.

### ***Food delivery contracts***

Food delivery workers work on commission. Foodpanda does not require its delivery persons to pay for food orders to a restaurant. They pick up the food using a code. And they earn 28–40 taka per delivery. With Pathao, a delivery person must pay for the food order

with their own money, but they receive 70–80 taka per delivery (during the shutdown, the rate doubled from 40 taka). The workers must bear all the costs for the mobile telephone bill, Internet fee and vehicle maintenance. They must go to the restaurant, collect the food and then deliver the order to the customer. And they must submit the payments to the platform company to receive the commission on a weekly basis. Workers mentioned that they receive tips sometimes, ranging from 10 taka to more than 100 taka. On a monthly basis, they receive around 2,000–3,000 taka as tips.

Recently, a new payment system was introduced in Foodpanda whereby the workers receive a fixed 24 taka per delivery and an additional 2 taka for each kilometre travelled. Although they are now paid for the distanced travelled, their earnings have reduced, especially if a restaurant is near to the customer. On average, they earn around 25,000 taka monthly.

## **Registration for the platforms, needs and priorities**

### ***Registration for ride-hailing and workers' concerns***

To begin in this line of work, the drivers register with a platform. They do this at registration points where they are briefed on the application and required or suggested forms of engagement with customers. For registration, they submit a driver's licence, vehicle registration and their national identity card.

They are also briefed on the requirements of hygiene of the vehicle and passenger safety. However, many workers reflected that when they started, they did not know the city roads well and were not comfortable with the map navigation of a map, which resulted in long navigation time to reach the point of pick-up and the destination. "For the inexperienced drivers, navigation training is an absolute necessity," insisted Abul Bashar, an Uber driver.

Added Md. Shumon, an Uber biker, "Many of us do not completely understand all the features of the app. We just receive a request and go to the pick-up point. We are not very comfortable about using the application for other services." This indicates a need for greater orientation training for platform workers.

The major dissatisfaction with the platform system among workers seems to be their share of the profit. "After accepting a request, we have to call the passenger several times, and have to use our data package [to do so]. The platform does not share any cost of such. On top of this, [the platform takes] a huge share [at 25 per cent] of the actual fare of a ride," said Md. Abdullah, an Uber biker.

"The minimum cost of a ride could be as low as 20 taka," explained another Uber biker. "After investing 200,000 taka, if we must ride a trip for 20 taka and have to face rude behaviour of the passengers, it does not make any sense." Md. Abdullah further stressed, "The minimum cost of a ride should be 100 taka." Hence, there is a need for a guideline for revenue-sharing.

Additionally, as Md. Mostafa, a Pathao car driver, insisted, "Refresher training for workers should be required every six months or a year. There should be a minimum educational requirement, and the platform should [conduct] a practical test of driving as there are many inexperienced drivers."

Several drivers also cited problems with parking on the roads.

### ***Registration for parcel and food delivery***

For the food and parcel delivery registration, delivery personnel are required to have an android phone and a bicycle and to submit their national identity card and a photograph. Once a person registers on the online platform, they get an appointment to submit the documents. Before they start working, they are briefed about the procedure of food and parcel collection, delivery and payments.

## **Understanding of the platform ecosystem**

Because many drivers work on a monthly contract with a vehicle owner, they are not interested in the sharing of the revenue earned. Many did not understand the system of bonus given for completing a certain number of trips in each time period. "I registered on the app expecting a lot of profit. But once I started, I am experiencing that they are taking away 20–25 per cent of the income. Though

I have to invest money and bear all the running costs," said Md. Abdullah, the Uber bike rider.

Another Uber bike rider described the bonus system: "If during the working days of the week a rider can complete 13 trips during 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., he will get 700 taka as a bonus. Afterwards, if the rider can complete another 15 trips within 12 p.m. to 9 p.m., he will get an additional 600 taka every four days or three days of a week. These targets vary depending on the peak and off hours."

Some ride-hailing workers are sceptical about the digital payments, and on many occasions, they ask the passengers about their payment method. If a passenger wants to pay digitally, some workers cancel or decline the trip. One driver explicitly mentioned that he prefers cash payment over payment via bKash (mobile banking) or bank cards (debit or credit). One reason for such preference is that a digital payment enables the direct deduction of the platform's commission after a trip. During the early days, workers received a "bonus" as incentive from their platform and they did not pay anything to the platform because their share was adjusted with bonus. Drivers are now cynical about the direct commission deduction by the platforms. If they receive cash, they do not have to wait for their payment from the platforms.

Delivery personnel can work around the clock, which is divided into three shifts. They can choose as per their preference and are paid depending on the number of deliveries they complete. They can earn up to 40 taka per delivery. However, the company keeps 3,000 taka as deposit money from each worker when they begin working. Every week the company deducts 750 taka (this is done only during the first four weeks), which is paid back to the worker once they leave the platform. They do not receive any form of festival bonus, like what employees on a payroll are paid.

During the training for delivery service, the riders learn the basic payment system: When a person starts, they belong to the fourth tier, thus, they earn 28 taka for an order. There is no other basic salary. They receive a bonus if they accept all the requests and make prompt deliveries. Their monthly earning depends on which level they are in the delivery ecosystem. There are four levels, and the rate of bonus increases if they perform better

and rise up the ladder of performance. There is also a "bonus-hour" payment for riders who deliver during 1 p.m. to 2 p.m.

## Experience of unexpected incidents

### *Experience of ride-hailing workers*

Oftentimes, drivers or bikers face tough times from passengers. As Uber bike rider Md. Abdullah recalled, "Fare calculation is done by the platform, but many passengers do not want to pay if the fare rises from the estimated cost shown on the app. In case of a low fare, compared to the estimated fare, we cannot do anything. But passengers usually do not want to pay the increased fare. Sometimes, passengers request a ride but do not show up or receive our calls after we reach the pick-up location. The company does not do anything in such cases."

Passengers sometimes make the drivers wait at the pick-up point or request the drivers to make an extra stop during the ride to buy something. Or they set a pick-up location or destination somewhere having no accessible road. In such cases, drivers lose working time. If the drivers refuse to wait, passengers behave rudely, and sometimes the drivers face legal action for wrongful parking. As Md. Abu Taleb pointed out, "When we complain about such issues [rude behaviour or delays], platforms do not consider it, and sometimes even say they have made a solution, which for [the passenger] does not have any implications."

Drivers must take responsibility for any item left behind in their vehicle. One driver recalled a time when a passenger left a mobile phone in his vehicle, which he only noticed once the next passenger was on board. After completing the ongoing trip, he realized he had several missed calls from the owner of the phone, who suddenly called again. The phone owner explained that because there had been no reply earlier, he had reported it stolen to the police, with the driver's details. The driver's calls to the Help Centre went unanswered, and he had no recourse but to take the unpaid time to return to the pick-up point to return the phone to the owner. This incident illustrates how drivers are responsible without any support from the ride-hailing company.

### ***Experience of parcel and food delivery workers***

Food delivery persons face different sorts of unexpected incidents. Sometimes after bringing food from a restaurant, for example, they find that the ordering phone number is switched off. In such a situation, they must submit the undelivered food to the area office. Thus, they receive no payment for the time or distance travelled to pick up the food order and then deliver it to the area office. The Pathao workers are only reimbursed for what they paid for the food order. Sometimes, they may get half of the food that was undelivered.

Ridoy Mahmud, a delivery rider for Foodpanda, explained that if the customer does not accept the food delivery, they must pay the demurrage (if by mistake they press confirm on the application that the food was delivered). "Every week, they cut 200–250 taka from our payment," he said. Otherwise, they must take the food to the office; although, in such cases, they do not receive the payment they would have earned for the food delivery service. "If a person places an order and then does not accept it, we call the service centre and they cancel the order. In such a case, we do not get the payment for our work," Ridoy Mahmud added. Pathao workers, who buy food with their own money, lose what they had paid.

After a day's work, delivery riders have a few thousand taka on them, which is sometimes snatched by robbers. They sometimes lose their mobile phone or motorcycle. The platform company does not take any responsibility for such losses, and most workers in this study did not have their own insurance coverage. Nor were they sure if they had insurance coverage through the platform. However, in the event of severe injury, the expense for damaged delivery goods or food is sometimes overlooked.

Parcel delivery personnel face unique problems. Usually, they cannot check the product that they are delivering. If the seller sends the wrong product, the delivery person endures the consequence once they deliver the wrong product to a customer. These product deliveries tend to be payment upon receipt, so the customer typically opens the package before handing over cash. If the order is not correct, the customer's frustration (anger) is directed to the delivery person.

### **Nature of support by the platforms in day-to-day operations**

Platform workers reflected that in their experience, ride-hailing companies are basically customer oriented. All the support goes towards the persons using the platform to hail a ride or receive food or order parcels and not to the drivers or delivery personnel giving the service.

Sometimes, ride-hailing drivers experience problems when intoxicated people request rides late in the night and mistakenly insert the wrong address in the application but want to get off in a different location. In such cases, drivers do not get much help from the platform's local office, as one Uber driver stressed. "Even if we complain about a rider being rude or hitting the driver, the office people just say that they will look into the matter but never come back to us with any remedy," another platform driver commented. "Sometimes, passengers flee without paying. In such cases, platforms do not help the driver. Rather, they go on deducting their share based on the fare calculation by the app."

Drivers must deal with situations beyond their control. "During the traffic hours, the passengers become impatient and, in many cases, after starting a trip they want to change the destination by requesting us."

But the platform will defer to the passenger, as another Uber driver explained: "If there is a dispute between the driver and the passenger, [whoever complains gets] priority from the platform. Nonetheless, passengers always get assistance from the platform."

The process of seeking aid from the platform is not convenient for the drivers and riders. "For any assistance, we need to go to [the platform] office, but I do not want to go there because going there will cost me more," said Anwar Hossain, a Pathao bike driver. This was echoed by another driver: "For any need, if we call the contact centre, we do not get to talk immediately, sometimes 10 taka is lost before we can even start talking. So, many times, we ignore many problems about pick-up, waiting time or fare disputes."

Because the drivers' complaint hotline has been replaced by a feature on the app, drivers face extra problems. For



instance, a rider explained, "Platforms have established a system of complaint registration through the app, replacing the hotline number, which is cumbersome for many drivers and bikers. Thus, many do not lodge complaints."

The overall system is discouraging for workers to seek help from the platform. "In case of accidents in the roads, Uber might provide some benefits, but the procedure is too cumbersome to follow and get any support," explained Islam Shaheen, an Uber bike driver.

As well, a Foodpanda delivery person recalled, "Once, I encountered an accident. I informed my area manager but did not get any support. Sometimes, area managers behave very rudely. We know that, as Foodpanda delivery persons, we have insurance coverage. But the area manager did not care much as it was only a cycle."

### **Surviving the COVID-19 shutdown**

During the three-month shutdown period in Dhaka that started on 26 March 2020, the platform drivers were helpless. In Bangladesh, many people work with the ride-hailing platform not just as a means of extra support to another income source. Rather, it has become their only source of income. In the first few weeks of the pandemic, the platform services only allowed parcel or food deliveries, which precluded many people from working. Additionally, many did not work due to fears of the health risks. The drivers had to borrow money from relatives to marginally survive the shutdown days. "I found no ways to earn a living during the three months of shutdown. I had to borrow around 60,000 taka," one driver said.

Many platform workers continued working as drivers but using their own contact arrangement with customers (working independently). These platform workers did not receive any support from the platform they worked for nor from the government in that time. The companies in the platform economy have not been eligible for government support, and the companies do not recognize the drivers as their employees. Hence, they are not legally required to support the drivers. Many of the platform workers reverted back to the contact driving.

"Bikers used to ride on contact when the app platform was closed down. We could not pay house rent, had to eat less, but the company did not even care to know about our condition," explained an Uber biker.

"During the shutdown period, we did not get any support from the platforms. We had to take out a loan to survive these three months. Now after the service is resumed, the platforms take 25 per cent of the income. They continuously ask us to deposit the dues. If we do not clear the dues, there is a possibility of suspending our accounts. On top of this, we must spend more money for maintenance of health guidelines," an Uber driver reported.

According to another bike driver, "They just forwarded a message containing health guidelines, but we have to arrange everything on our own."

Workers have not been adequately supported for adhering to the required safety measures to operate safely while COVID-19 cases continue to spread. They have had to personally buy their safety equipment, disinfecting sprays and so on. To finance the safety measures, the workers must invest the money they had borrowed during shutdown, as one driver noted.

Although the food delivery platforms were operational during the shutdown period, many workers did not work during the initial few weeks. They only resumed once they felt confident with the social distancing procedures and hygiene requirements. "During the [shutdown] time, we delivered medicine and essentials. They just gave us a mask and a training on how to deal with the customers maintaining social distance. But our day-to-day safety depends on us," said a Foodpanda worker.

### **The future orientation**

The drivers and food delivery workers do not see themselves driving long term for the platform. In a few years' time, they aim to have saved enough money to start a small business. It is largely because of their experience in the platform that they do not want to continue this work.

For bikers especially, the long duration of riding is unhealthy. "It is difficult to continue for long if one drives a bike the entire day. It takes a toll on the body," one bike rider reflected.

### **Flexibility in work**

The pandemic and shutdown have revealed shortcomings of the platform economy. The replacement of independent contractors for regular employees in the platform economy has had a plethora of impact for the workers. The flexibility that initially appeared as a benefit has made them vulnerable to any form of disruption (Berg and Johnston, 2019; Bailey, 2016).

"Everyone [not in platform jobs] received salary and other benefits during the shutdown period," complained an Uber platform rider. "However, we did not get any support from anyone. And if we ride in contact [own arrangement] now, we are penalized [fined by the police for making their own arrangement with customers and/or for violating the COVID-19 guideline to avoid passengers on a motorcycle]. Government should make a guideline, specifying duration of work, parking facilities, training of new riders and securing contact passengers."

Said another driver, "If anyone works for a company, government or non-government, during changing jobs or during retirement, they get some benefit. But in the platform economy, even though we will work for many years, there is no provision of retirement benefits."

These responses are remindful that every work arrangement has possibilities of "derangements" and "rearrangements" within its own functioning (Povinelli, 2014). The platform economy became popular with the possibility of flexible working conditions. Online platforms allow workers to choose when and for how long they will work. But such arrangement of work has led to the elimination of pensions and service benefits. Hence, it can be argued, the "democratization of work" has stripped workers of their many rights.

### **An illusion of freedom?**

The flexibility in work or apparent freedom of choice generates increased vulnerability for workers to a large extent. It appears that the platforms have created more precarious employment and an illusion of freedom (Zwick and Spicer, 2019; Zwick, 2017).

A comparison between the features of platform and non-platform jobs (ride-hailing versus traditional jobs as drivers for private employers) is presented in table 2 to depict that even though the work process is transformed by the ride-hailing platforms, an overall structure of inequality persists.

On the positive side, online platforms have reduced unemployment among the youth. It has enabled many young people who were otherwise unemployed to improve their living conditions. It has mostly attracted jobseekers who would otherwise work primarily in the informal sector. Moreover, ride-hailing platforms have increased the efficiency of the transportation system, and thus, people's commuting times have decreased (Tarek and Amit, 2019; Kamal and Ahsan, 2018).

But the system is organized in a way that pushes workers to work more and more without negative coercive pressure. More working hours means more income and bonuses for the workers, thus they continue working. This can lead to fatigue and fatal accidents. Workers' options are restricted by the app they are working through. They cannot go to their choice of destination at their will because "the apps sometimes detour us with three trips before we get a trip to our desired destination", one driver lamented. This frustration is quite common in the ride-hailing services (Nastiti, 2017).

Gradually, the platforms have introduced more flexibilization while burdening the workers with all the responsibility for maintaining the services (Bajwa and others, 2018). For instance, when the Pathao courier was launched, it provided loans of up to 5,500 taka to their delivery personnel to buy a motorcycle. It has since stopped providing the loans, according to Md. Miraz Hossain, a Pathao delivery person. And it has shifted from a payroll system to a commission system.

Table 2: Features of platform and non-platform jobs

	<b>Platform jobs (ride-hailing)</b>	<b>Non-platform jobs (as drivers)</b>
Requisite for getting a job	The platform application	Social capital and network
Work hours	12 hours ++--	12 hours +-
Flexibility of work hours	Somewhat flexible	Low
Break during workday	Low possibility because more work means more money	Moderate possibility
Weekend leave	Depends, because more work means more money	1 day
Control over the destination	There is some control, but it takes around three trips before a trip request of desired destination is received.	None, but predictable
Stress over providing service	High, because preferences are different for different customers	Less, due to predictability of preferences of the owner
Performance rating	Formalized	Informal
Stakeholders to be engaged with	The platform, every customer and sometimes vehicle owners (if not own vehicle)	Mostly the owner or employer
Possibility of disputes	High	Low
Investment needed	Must manage everything	None
Income	Depends on the work done	Fixed
Possibility of monetary loss	Extremely high	None
Possibility of social support	None	Moderate to high

“If the company supplied vehicles for the delivery personnel, it would have been much more beneficial. Even if they could provide us some loan,” noted a Foodpanda rider.

Sometimes, there are not enough requests for rides on the application so drivers and riders are forced to make an arrangement outside of the platform service, which is risky for both the driver and the passenger due to the lack of traceability. After the COVID-19 shutdown, the platforms for hailing bike rides operated initially only for transporting parcels. But in many instances, the bikers found that people requesting parcel delivery needed to travel somewhere. Due to the shortage of requests, the bikers accepted such trips.

It appears that workers using the platforms as a form of cushioning with their primary income-generating activity are comparatively safe from the different shortcomings of

the platform. For example, Md. Abu Taleb used to drive his vehicle for a traditional car-driving service. Now he works with Pathao due to the reduced demand through his previous employer.

In comparison with non-platform jobs involving driving for a private employer, it is likely that platform workers remain more stressed about their service because they must respond to customers' varied preferences with every new trip. Moreover, passengers rate the service after every trip, and the rating system turns into a technology of control that governs the workers. Due to the diverse needs and preferences of the customers, the possibility for disputes is likely to be high. We learned from the drivers' testimonies that passengers make them wait before and during a trip, ask them to change route or the pick-up and/or drop-off points and direct them into inaccessible or narrow roads. For non-platform jobs, the possibility of stress and disputes is comparatively less because drivers

must meet more predictable demands of their employers. Waiting and other requests actually do not translate to a driver's monetary loss. Additionally, vehicle maintenance, parking facilities, fines for illegal parking fines, etc. are the responsibilities of the owner or employer.

Platform workers sometimes invest in buying vehicles whereas, traditional jobs did not require them to own vehicles they drove. Even after investing, the return or income from platform work varies significantly while traditionally drivers earn a fixed income. Furthermore, the possibility of investment loss is high in platform work. We have witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, many drivers became unsustainably indebted as they could not return their vehicle loans. Additionally, they sometimes had to take out more loans to survive without supports from the platform companies. The pandemic also revealed that for platform workers, the possibility to access social support is minimal. Because they are not legally classified as employees, they cannot expect support from their company or the government during any shutdown period. Although many traditional drivers also have lost income and/or job during the pandemic, they have not faced the same risk of indebtedness as the platform workers because many of them received support from their employers. For traditional drivers, the employers or the owners of vehicles usually provide support during a crisis like the pandemic or a personal matter.

The illusion of freedom that the platform ecosystem has generated seems best illustrated in a comment from a delivery worker: "Food delivery option has given an opportunity to survive, but it is not very beneficial.

There are many problems in this sector. First, the area manager behaves badly. Besides, there is no support or insurance coverage for the delivery persons. If we make any mistake, then we are penalized. Sometimes technical errors show us active while we are not working. Hence, during that time, not delivering any product decreases our rating, and we are deprived of the bonus."

These situations reveal the contradictions of the "sharing" platform economy within the confines of capitalism (Mason, 2015), whereby the exploitive and coercive labour process is not as directly visible as it is with industrial workers (Doorn, 2017; Booth, 2015). Ranking and rating in this system have become a powerful social device of coercion (Appadurai, 2011; Guyer, 2010).

The workers' testimonies indicate diverse issues that need policy attention. The next section covers a brief comparison of policies in South Asian countries, reflecting some of the policy changes this new form of economy has required.

# Regulations of platform economy in South Asian countries: Comparative analysis

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Why have ride-hailing platforms, like Uber, Pathao, Ola, Careem and PickMe, been successful in capturing the transportation market of South Asia?

In a nutshell, these platforms provided customers with a service that traditional taxi services did not provide. The platforms have ensured the convenience of planning a trip for point-to-point travelling. They also provide a cost estimation prior to the ride, thus reducing the need to haggle with drivers or uncertainty of a higher charge after a trip is completed.

However, in using the platforms, both drivers and passengers are positioned at the losing end, with the platforms claiming to be only mediators between the service providers and the customers without taking any responsibility. The absence of an easily accessible “authority” has contributed to the growing frustration and fatalistic attitude among drivers, who came into this industry attracted by the high incentives.

The platforms, through their terms and conditions, are legally waived of any obligation to the transportation providers or users. They set themselves only as an intermediary between the two parties and assume no role in such agreement (Tarek and Amit, 2019; Collier, Dubal and Carter, 2017). Nonetheless, in recent years, governments across the United States and Europe have introduced regulations that hold the platforms responsible, similar to what is imposed on “traditional” employers (Spicer, 2019). Following these trends, South Asian countries are formulating policies and regulations for platform economies.

The existing terms and conditions that the platforms require customers to agree to differentiate between hailing apps and taxi services. Taxi services are transportation services, while the hailing apps are intermediaries between clients and transport providers. This form of liability waiver is a common clause that platform economy users are asked to comply with.

With the advances in mobile technology and the advent of the sharing economy, the world is struggling to

regulate the Internet and cloud-based platforms. The major contention between the regulators and these platform-based companies emerges from the dilemma over treating these companies as traditional companies, such as a taxi company or as an information technology company that acts as an intermediary. Companies that supply a platform to individuals to share resources in return for a payment do not own or lease any vehicles. They do not even employ any driver. The ride-hailing platforms only connect customers with drivers.

The traditional regulatory and policy frameworks are not compatible with the transforming world of work and with the business model of emerging economic platforms (Goitom, 2016). This has forced a modification of existing regulations or led to new regulations.

Much of the new regulations are formulated as responses to the demands of platform workers and users. In the absence of the “official” right to unionize, the ride-hailing workers have started to form associations, and they are continuously protesting against the new labour conditions in platform economies. In India, Ola and Uber drivers’ protests trace back to 2013. The initial protests were sporadic but gradually turned into large-scale strikes. With support from local taxi and auto rickshaw unions, the Sarvodaya Drivers’ Association of Delhi, one of the largest drivers’ collective in Delhi, forced the state government and Ola management to revise fare structures in 2017. In March 2018, coordinated protests across several big cities, like Mumbai, New Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai, highlighted workers’ demands for a justified benefit-sharing scheme (Ray, 2019).

Similarly in Bangladesh, Uber drivers in 2019, under the banner of the Dhaka Ridesharing Drivers Union, observed a 24-hour work abstention to demand an increase in fares, reduction in the platform’s commission and removal of a cap on working hours for drivers and riders (Daily Star, 2019). In December 2020, Foodpanda workers demonstrated at Baily Road and Gulshan in Dhaka. They protested a decrease in workers’ commission per delivery or task and demanded an increase of benefits (Hasan, 2020b).

The following sections look specifically at the South Asian countries where new concerns are raised and policy regulations are being implemented. These new policies reveal the diversity of issues that ride-hailing platforms are generating. This brief review of the new policies is offered with the aim of finding relevant lessons for Bangladesh. Ultimately, the framing of appropriate policy recommendations requires a combination of bottom-up analysis of the situation—that takes perspectives of the people, in this case the platform workers, into consideration—and top-down analysis—the legislative lessons learned from other countries’ experiences (Llambi and Lindemann, 2013).

The country-specific policy analyses reveal certain important aspects of regulations for ride-hailing platforms that Bangladesh (and other countries) can use to formulate more effective and inclusive policy guidelines for the benefit of the workers.

## India

India is a “key growth market” for ride-hailing companies, and approximately 11 per cent of Uber’s rides each year are registered in India (PYMNTS, 2019). However, the country’s central and state governments have struggled to regulate this new mode of transport.

The main obstacle for India in formulating a policy for ride-hailing platforms is its differential approaches across states. For example, Karnataka State does not allow motorcycle taxis, while Haryana State does. Additionally, because the transportation sector is regulated by the state transport department, every state has different guidelines for pricing and for the permissible number of passengers. The absence of any specific rules has led to the recognition of the ride-hailing platforms as fleet taxi operators. To overcome the regulatory dilemmas, the government now considers Uber and other mobile-based hailing services as aggregating companies.

The motor vehicle law empowers the central government to frame guidelines for these companies and to reduce variance in regulations across states. Taxi aggregators now acquire a licence from the state governments.

Section 36 of the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 created a new category of “aggregators”, whereas the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 did not recognize the platforms as separate entities. Aggregator means a “digital intermediary or marketplace for a passenger to connect with a driver for the purpose of transportation” (Nandi, 2019). The Motor Vehicle Aggregators Guidelines 2020 aims to address some of the pressing issues, including: (a) the types of permissible vehicles, (b) surge pricing and (c) passengers’ safety.

The Motor Vehicle Aggregators Guidelines 2020 include capping the commission of aggregators to 20 per cent of the full fare. The existing rate of commission is about 25–30 per cent of the fare charged. To enhance road safety, the government has capped duration of work for the ride-hailing drivers to a maximum of 12 hours per day.

To ensure a seamless operation and that drivers receive support if and when required, the government requires that aggregators set up control centres operating 24 hours every day of the week. A valid telephone number and an email address must be displayed on the website for grievance management. To further promote safety, the aggregator guideline calls on companies to track vehicles and issue a panic button connected to the control room.

In addition, companies must offer insurance coverage for drivers and passengers. Aggregators must provide health insurance coverage of 500,000 Indian rupees for each driver and ridesharer. Additionally, aggregators must ensure term insurance coverage of 1 million rupees for each driver on their platform.

## Nepal

There was a strong dispute between the traditional taxi companies and ride-hailing platforms in Nepal in March 2020. Traditional taxi companies had protested that ride-hailing platforms were violating an existent government regulation of the Motor Vehicles and Transportation Management Act, 1993, against the use of private vehicles being used for public transportation or for income-generation.

The ride-hailing platforms' operational model violated section 8 of that law, which prohibits use of private motor vehicles as public transport services. Similarly, section 12 of the law was violated because motor vehicles registered for private use were being used for other (commercial) purposes.

The dispute was fuelled by the fact that vehicles registered solely for public transport must pay taxes, get route permits and follow a government-approved fare chart. However, the private vehicles used for ridesharing did not have to follow such rules and could charge higher prices.

In 2019, police arrested a few ride-hailing drivers of Tootle and Pathao for violating the public transportation law. Later, the government allowed these platforms to operate, and all the parties agreed to formulate a regulatory framework to govern ride-hailing services (myRepublica, 2020).

## **Pakistan**

Uber and Careem are the popular ride-hailing services in Pakistan. Their popularity increased because they are cheaper than traditional taxi services and more dependable. Due to a shift in the customer demand from the taxi services to the ride-hailing platforms, traditional taxi drivers have been protesting against the platforms.

In their protests, the taxi operators pointed to the fact that even though both services provide a form of public transportation, regulatory requirements are tougher for regular taxis. To run a taxi service, an operator must acquire permits from the transport authority. They must also pay local terminals for their use as an operational hub. The ride-hailing platforms, however, need not have any registration and can charge higher fares (Omer, 2020).

After repeated protests by the taxi operators, the Islamabad Transport Authority suggested that cars working for ride-hailing platforms must display a sticker to distinguish them. A driver operating through a ride-hailing platform must have a fitness certificate and a route permit for the vehicle, issued by the motor vehicle

examiner. They must also convert the registration of the vehicles from private to commercial. The government will set a tariff chart for ride-hailing services, which the platforms must adhere to (Anjum, 2017; Hakim, 2017). As of 2020, it had not yet been done.

## **Sri Lanka**

Ride-hailing platforms gained popularity providing taxi and food delivery services. The major digital platforms are Uber and PickMe, which earn around 100 million Sri Lankan rupees in revenue per day (Kulamannage, 2020). The advent of ride-hailing platforms has revealed tax and tech policy challenges.

The Sri Lankan ride-hailing platform PickMe alleges that global platforms, such as Uber, do not need to follow Sri Lankan tax law and thus have an unfair advantage. Having to absorb sales tax, PickMe's profit margins are slimmer than its competitors' margins. This concern reveals that the global gig economy encourages companies to register in low-tax countries to reduce their taxation.

As a measure to level the operational field, the government introduced a 3.5 per cent tax on all foreign transactions on credit cards. However, a draft e-commerce law in India proposes "significant economic presence" as the basis for deciding permanent establishment of a company for the purpose of allocating profits and taxation.

## **Bangladesh**

Along with the growing demands for app-based transport services in Bangladesh, the new ventures faced backlash from traditional taxi services. In November 2017, the CNG Autorickshaw Workers Union Council called for strikes, referring to the ride-hailing platforms as illegal operators of taxi services. They demanded the banning of the digital platforms (Khaled, 2017). After the fast expansion of the app-based transport services in the country, the government drafted the Ridesharing Service Guideline, 2017.

The existing laws did not allow commercial use of private vehicles, but the new policy lifts that prohibition. Under the new regulation, vehicle owners need to obtain a certificate from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) before they can use their private vehicle for commercial purposes. However, they can use a vehicle for ride-hailing services only after it has been registered for one year.

The new policy proposes that app-based service providers must run as a public or private limited company and will be liable to pay taxes. At the operational level, these

platform companies must get a Ridesharing Services Company Enlistment Certificate. Individual vehicles must obtain a Ridesharing Motor Vehicle Enlistment Certificate to be eligible for ridesharing.

As per the policy, the BRTA is aiming to fix the coverage area of the ride-hailing services by considering passenger need, road capacity, registered vehicles on the platforms and technological efficiency of the app. The BRTA will fix the fare of ridesharing services in coherence with the existing Taxicab Service Guidelines (Mogumder, 2018; Uddin, 2018).

Table 3: Issues and concerns centring ride-hailing platforms across South Asia

	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Bangladesh
New guideline in place or draft	Yes	No draft	Some initiatives taken	No draft	Yes
Ride-hailing as fleet taxi operation	Yes	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered
Requirement of route permit or special permit	Yes	Not yet considered	Considered but not yet finalized	Not yet considered	Yes
Policy for using private vehicle for commercial use	Yes	Private vehicles are strictly not allowed to be used for commercial purposes	Considered but not yet finalized	Not yet considered	Yes
Capping for income distribution	Yes	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered
Regulation of surge pricing	Yes	Not yet considered	Considered but not yet finalized	Not yet considered	Considered but not yet finalized
Capping of work hour	Yes	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered
Shared responsibility in case of accident or crime	Yes	Accidents are covered by insurance (decided in January 2021)	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered
Insurance of drivers and passengers	Yes	Yes	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Not yet considered
Zoning system for operation	Not yet considered	Considered but not yet finalized	Not yet considered	Not yet considered	Considered but not yet finalized
Public identifiable label	Not yet considered	Yes	Suggested	Not yet considered	Not yet considered



### **Issues and concerns about ride-hailing platforms across South Asia**

The policy concerns are varied, and countries in South Asia are trying to come to terms with the platform economy differently. Some countries have come up with regulatory frameworks while others have yet to finalize regulations. Table 3 presents a comparative summary of issues and concerns, considered or not yet considered, regarding the regulation of ride-hailing platforms in South Asia.

### **Experiences elsewhere in Asia**

#### ***Regulatory issues***

The regulatory issues around ride-hailing platforms are varied and complex. Conflict of interests between traditional taxi operators and ride-hailing platforms is not unique to the South Asian countries. Taxi drivers' protesting against ride-hailing companies for offering low-priced services caught Indonesia's Ministry of Transport by surprise in March 2016 (BBC, 2016). Platform companies have a competitive edge in offering cheaper prices and thus attained larger market share within a short time. Because the taxi services operate under regulations guiding public transportation, their overhead costs are higher. Following these tensions, Go-Jek and Grab had to register as transport companies in March 2018 (Silviana and Potkin, 2019; Silviana, 2018). Such conflict of interest is common across various countries. In Thailand, conventional taxi drivers protested against the use of personal vehicles for ride-hailing services (Tanakasempipat and Thepgumpant, 2017).

In the Philippines, despite initial support for a cheap and convenient transport solution, people started accusing the ride-hailing platforms of increasing traffic congestion. The increasing number of cars and bikes

on the roads led the Land Transport and Franchising Regulatory Board to set a limit to the number of drivers allowed to operate as rideshare providers. The cap was set at 45,700 drivers in January 2018, but the Regulatory Board increased the threshold to 66,750 in February (The Economist, 2018).

Governments in Malaysia, Singapore and Viet Nam became concerned about the monopolistic market after Grab bought the South-East Asian operations of Uber in 2018 (The Economist, 2018). Nonetheless, ride-hailing platforms have been criticized for undermining working conditions and bypassing national regulations.

#### **Issues of safety and workers' benefits**

Ride-hailing platforms, in their approach as an intermediary, have not established an easy and direct way for passengers or drivers to contact them. A relatively easy drivers' registration process with ride-hailing platforms poses many safety concerns. In 2019, for instance, 14,000 rides through Uber were completed by unregistered drivers in London (Spicer, 2019). The app allowed people to upload their photos to other worker's account and it led to many instances where the trips were operated by unlicensed drivers jeopardizing overall road safety. The European Court of Justice ruled that Uber is not a tech firm but a "transportation services" company. Therefore, Uber must follow the rules that apply to other taxi companies. Consequently, drivers of the ride-hailing platforms must be recognized as employees and not only as independent contractors, ensuring workers' rights to benefits, such as sick pay and paid holidays (Spicer, 2019).

# Policy recommendations

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The rapid development of information and communication technology has revolutionized the global business models creating the pathways for the platform economy. The latest changes have overhauled the system of regulations and governance. Among many issues, three themes need urgent attention for establishing a collaborative governance system of the platform economy: protection of rights and interests, reasonable safety for all and fair competition. The policy recommendations presented here cover workers' rights, potential threats and the business environment for the future.

## Addressing workers' rights

### ***Orientation training for drivers***

Many drivers who start with the ride-hailing platforms are not completely comfortable with navigation systems. Training on navigating a map to reach pick-up points would help reduce the frustration of workers and increase the satisfaction of customers. This would give added benefit of the direct link between drivers and the platform. It also would make the workers feel more comfortable using all the features of a platform's digital application.

### ***Limiting workers' fatigue***

The number of hours the workers are coerced to work to avail of a bonus leaves them too fatigued to drive safely. This is especially important in the case of those who drive using ride-hailing apps to supplement other income. Capping the work hour is important because drowsiness is one of the determinant factors in accidents. The applications should monitor how many hours of driving are completed by a particular driver in a given day and limit them from driving beyond the permissible hours.

### ***Efficient grievance management system***

Workers in the platform many times feel they are on their own and that the platform officials are on the side of the customer. This has developed due to the problems they face in contacting the office and finding a visible result in their favour after a dispute. This affects the overall functionality of the platforms and diminishes workers' rights. Therefore, an easy and comprehensible grievance management system is required. Many workers prefer a

hotline number instead of the app feature for lodging a complaint.

### ***Different message delivery options and refresher training***

Many drivers are not comfortable with information received as text messages from their platforms regarding work issues and guidelines. During the COVID-19 shutdown, workers received health guidelines through such messaging, but they preferred different mediums of communication, like a person-to-person discussion. This need indicates a need for refresher training of all the workers of a platform.

### ***Introducing risk and retirement benefits and shared allocation of risks***

There are some risk benefits for workers in the platforms, but the process of getting them must be made easier so that they can claim the benefit. People working full-time on these platforms must be treated as employees with retirement benefits. If ensured, it will eliminate insecurity of the workers and form a gateway to social protection.

Though platform work has improved labour market participation and visibility of the so-called informal workers, policymakers must find and formulate ways for reducing the imbalance of power between the platforms and the workers by monitoring and reviewing existing contractual arrangements.

Recognizing the changing world of work, the government must seek out equilibrium between platforms' responsibilities and the protection offered by state agencies in terms of insurance, training and skilling.

### ***Guideline for revenue-sharing***

Ride-hailing platforms in Bangladesh currently take 25 per cent of the total fare of a ride while not carrying responsibility for any operating cost of the trip, including vehicle maintenance, fuel cost, necessary paperwork and communication costs. This is an issue of dissatisfaction for the platform workers because the share of the platform has continuously increased over the past two years, from 15 per cent to 25 per cent. Therefore, policymakers should consider a guideline for revenue-sharing.

## **Reducing threats and ensuring safety for all**

### ***Regulating driver registration to reduce potential threats***

The drivers offering rides on the platforms are not permanent employees of the company. They are their own bosses and set their own hours of work. They earn a reasonable income—all in the comfort of their own vehicle. This sounds rosy but may threaten the transportation sector. For instance, Uber, as a major company offering ride-hailing service, posts the following requirements for the registration process: “You must meet the minimum age to drive in your city, have an eligible mode of transportation and submit required documents, including a valid driver’s license” (Uber, 2021)

In the details of requirement, they have specified the following documents: driving license, national identity card, vehicle registration, vehicle tax token, vehicle insurance and vehicle certificate of fitness. This leaves many loopholes for eminent danger. Platforms should oversee a physical driving test as well as determine a minimum level of knowledge among potential drivers about vehicle maintenance and routes of the city to reduce safety concerns.

### ***An integrated online database as “background check”***

In most of the developed countries, taxi drivers need to submit a comprehensive criminal background check that may involve a higher level of scrutiny than those carried out by the web-based service providers. But these platform service providers argue that stricter controls may keep occasional drivers, who work part-time only, from signing up. To reduce burdens on potential drivers, the platforms could create a database of drivers requesting registration and share it with the police stations at each driver’s permanent and current address.

### ***Introducing interactive vehicle safety monitoring***

Vehicle safety inspection is essential for ensuring public safety. Because private vehicles are being integrated increasingly into public transportation through the ride-hailing platform, safety of vehicles has become a paramount concern. Even though a vehicle fitness certificate is documented for the registered vehicle, an interactive option should be added to the application and

prompted after every ride to ask the passenger about the vehicle’s condition. This will provide a real-time review of a vehicle’s condition.

## **Adjusting skewed business environment**

### ***Ensuring a level playing field for different service providers***

One of the points of contention over ride-hailing services is that they provide transportation service without following all the regulations that conventional transportation companies follow. Moreover, there is disparity between the legal requirements for local and international platforms. Comprehensive policy planning by the government must ensure a level playing field for all the transportation service providers.

### ***Maintaining a ratio of drivers and commuters***

Recent reports indicate that “disintermediation” is causing revenue loss for ridesharing platforms. When commuters and drivers agree to transact verbally rather than through the app, greater vulnerabilities emerge because they are sidestepping any form of traceability. The ride-hailing platforms should work to ensure a balanced ratio of drivers and passengers to keep a reasonable business environment. Policymakers and platforms must work together to limit vehicles in a particular time and place while considering the demand of vehicles.

The BRTA could launch an application for “walk-in passengers” that could limit the threats of disintermediation.

### ***Labour relations and future outlook***

Anecdotal reports from drivers show that ride-hailing apps generate labour issues. The ride-hailing service providers pursue market share over revenue and subsidize rides for both the drivers and passengers. However, these bonuses have become less generous as regulations have started to be put in place. This could result in a significant decline in those employed by these services and trigger drivers’ disbelief in a positive future with their platform. The platforms’ “driver under partner” provision enables the exploitation of workers because they could be working under perilous conditions, of which the ride-hailing companies remain ignorant and seek to avoid any

responsibility for workers' sufferings.

For an effective sharing economy, risks and benefits of any venture must be equally shared. The existing model exploits workers, thus stocking a precariat class.

An important aspect that this paper does not cover is the gender dimension of platform work. Although the digital platforms do not pose formal gender-based barriers to work, research should be extended to examine the gender-based differences for workers on digital platforms, especially considering the gender-based

division of labour in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries. Additionally, research should also seek out the experiences of users or customers availing of the services offered through the digital platforms and also look at the constraints of platform providers in different countries.

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#### Imprint

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This publication is part of the research paper series Shaping the Future of Workers in Asia, as regional project coordinated by the FES Office for Regional Cooperation in Asia.