CHINA

Economic & Social Councils

Topic Guide

ILO

International Labour Organization

Yale Model United Nations China III

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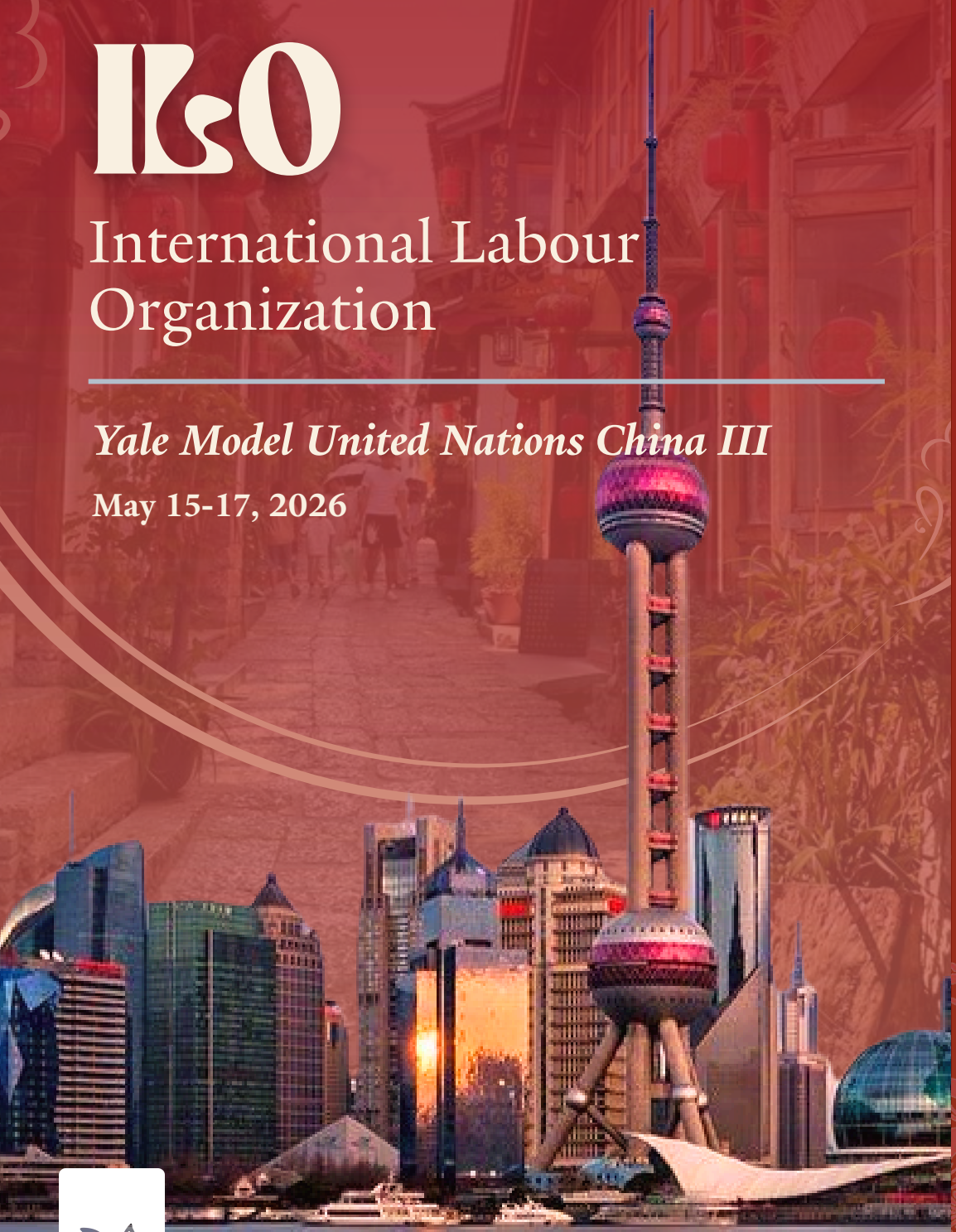

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Letter from the Dais

Dear Delegates,

My name is Lishore Kumar (马立胜), and I am a second-year student at Yale University majoring in Biomedical Engineering and Economics. This is my second year returning to YMUN China and my third time working with WeLand on an international MUN conference. In short, I relish the international MUN scene and have found YMUNC to be a cradle for discourse and personal development like no other.

A bit about me! I was born and raised in Houston, Texas; however, the majority of my family resides in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which I consider my home away from home. In 2023, I was selected by the U.S. Department of State as one of the inaugural Youth Ambassadors to the nation of Belize. This role involved over six months of service and diplomacy and marked the first time I truly realized how interconnected our world is—and, by the same token, how nations can serve as solutions for one another. It was this experience that sparked my interest in global affairs and Model United Nations.

At Yale, I stay involved in a wide range of activities, including studying Chinese (对不起同学们，我的中文不好), consulting for healthcare companies, building an AI health-tech startup with a professor and friends, and even performing in a rock cello group called Low Strung. In fact, I'll be in Beijing after the conference touring with my music group! After college, I plan to pursue a career in the financial industry, with a particular focus on healthcare and economic policy.

What inspired me to create a committee on this topic was its timely nature—this issue is rapidly evolving as we speak—and its intersection across countless fields: economics, labor policy, government intervention, and ethics, to name a few. The topics of fast fashion and the gig economy are ones that may seem simple on the surface, yet are so complex that governments worldwide are investing billions in international research efforts to decipher them.

I believe that true change is made through conversation, and as I mentioned at the start of this letter, YMUNC provides a unique platform for exactly that. So, as complex as this topic may be, let's figure it out together. Raise your placards, and let's get to work.

Sincerely,
Lishore Kumar

Committee History

Welcome to the International Labor Organization (ILO), a committee that is—truly—like no other. But what makes it so unique?

The uniqueness of the ILO goes back to its inception under the League of Nations. On June 28, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed by 33 global powers, including Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Japan, and more. On the same day, the League of Nations was born, with the goal of safeguarding international peace and creating a central order that remedied the wrongs so clearly exposed by World War I. More specifically, problems stemming from the Industrial Revolution made it clear that the only way to achieve true international peace was through social justice. With the necessity of the ILO apparent, it became the first organization established under the League of Nations.

In just a matter of years, the ILO became a symbol of international cooperative success, accomplishing milestone legislation such as limits on hours of work per day, minimum working ages, and maternity protection for women. When the United Nations was formed in 1946, the ILO was swiftly brought on as a specialized agency.

The uniqueness of the ILO continues today through its tripartite structure: each of its bodies includes government, employer, and worker representatives. As aforementioned, central to the ILO's belief is that in order to provide lasting international peace, social justice is necessary. That social justice, however, can only come from ensuring that every voice has a seat at the table. Since joining the UN, the ILO's successes have continued—from regional policies such as safe and healthy work initiatives for South Asian plantations, to drafting 128 conventions by 1969. These conventions were so successful in garnering international adoption that the ILO was awarded the 1969 Nobel Peace Prize.

With topics up for discussion such as fast fashion and the gig economy, every voice is needed more than ever. Accordingly, in our committee, delegates may be assigned to represent countries (United States, Malaysia, Lithuania, etc.), employer representatives (Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, Bahrain Chamber of Commerce, Mouvement des Entreprises de France, etc.), or worker representatives (Deputy Director, China Enterprise Confederation).

International Labour Organization

Topic Guide

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Topic One

Fast Fashion

Introduction

With 27 million people forced into exploitative, often fatal, labor conditions to support the self-expression of fashion, it is critical to break down the complex economic and labor issues at hand in order to uphold the ILO's commitment to advancing social justice.

Glossary

- **Fast Fashion:** The use of accelerated design, production, and distribution practices to create clothing that closely follows emerging trends. The model prioritizes speed and low cost, often at the expense of labor standards, environmental protection, and long-term product durability.
- **Ultra-Fast Fashion**: An intensified version of fast fashion characterized by extremely high production volumes and rapid product turnover. Companies operating under this model release new designs daily rather than seasonally, placing even greater pressure on supply chains and workers.
- **Outsourcing:** The practice of relocating manufacturing or production processes to other countries, typically where labor costs are lower and regulations are less strict. In fast fashion, outsourcing is used to reduce costs and increase production speed.
- **Subcontracting:** When a factory that has been contracted by a brand passes work to smaller workshops or informal producers. This creates additional layers in the supply chain, often reducing oversight and making labor abuses harder to trace.
- **Dupes**: Products designed to closely resemble copyrighted or branded items without being exact replicas. In the fast fashion industry, dupes allow companies to capitalize on popular designs while minimizing legal risk, contributing to rapid trend replication and overproduction.
- **Sweatshops**: Workplaces characterized by long hours, low wages, unsafe conditions, and limited labor protections. Historically linked to the rise of mass clothing production, sweatshops remain a central concern within fast fashion supply chains.
- **Livable Wage**: The minimum income necessary for a worker to meet basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare, and education. In many fast fashion manufacturing countries, workers earn only a small fraction of what is considered a livable wage.

Topic History

Fast fashion refers to the practice of using accelerated business practices to produce items that are based on trends. We see fast fashion everywhere, and though it may seem like a niche, obsolete phenomenon, more likely than not, you've engaged in it. In 2025, we saw a craze for bag charms such as Labubus, a plush monster praised for its cuteness and produced by the company PopMart, in addition to the coquette aesthetic of pink hair bows and lace revived by singer Sabrina Carpenter, and long denim jean shorts inspired by 80s skater culture. Regardless of how these trends originated or which company was the first to begin production, growing public demand leads to companies scrambling to be the first to market. This is so persistent that even if a company can't get licensing deals under the original brands name – such as PopMart's Labubu – then they'll produce similar versions as cheaply and quickly as possible.

The origin of fast fashion can be traced back to the first major developments of modern clothing production: the sewing machine, which could stitch clothing at roughly three times the manual rate. Though it's difficult to trace precisely when this evolved into fast fashion, one theory is that the increase in production capacity enabled by the sewing machine led markets and companies to grow accustomed to higher supply levels. When more complex designs or products needed to be made, manual human labor was expected to keep pace, leading to the birth of sweatshops – workplaces with deplorable working conditions, long hours, low wages, and highly unsafe environments due to chemicals and poor ventilation.

Though fashion has long been a form of expression, the advent of the internet and online shopping in the 1990s was a major catalyst for the fast fashion industry. Consumers could now participate in fashion trends from around the world, and while this led to the globalization of the fashion industry, it also accentuated the exploitative conditions characteristic of fast fashion. Today, brands like Zara, H&M, Forever 21, Uniqlo, Shein, Mango, and boohoo rely on cheap and fast labor. They recognize that trends come and go, but are all the same – desperate to claim their share of the $178.58 billion global industry. In fact, fashion giant Zara views the year as having 52 "micro-seasons," and its team of 300 designers produces roughly 12,000 new products annually.
As such, nimble production practices are key.

Leading Fast Fashion Producers in 2025
Description: Pie chart of the market share between the biggest fashion producers in the world

To reduce costs and increase output, manufacturers turn to countries where labor laws are less strict and minimum wages are pennies on the dollar compared to nations like the U.S., U.K., or Spain. Major countries that take on outsourced work include China, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Myanmar. The lower cost of hiring workers in these regions allows fast fashion companies to maintain profit margins roughly double those of their non–fast fashion counterparts.

Over the past decade, the issue of fast fashion has made headlines due to labor tragedies and the environmental impact of production, both of which this topic guide will address. Though this committee will focus on labor conditions and the creation of viable protections, all contributing factors should be considered in order to make this platform one for meaningful change.

Current Situation

Though it has been mentioned before, it should be made clear that this topic guide is not exhaustive. All information provided is intended to be bipartisan and analytical in nature, and a successful delegate or committee should use it as a stepping-off point to further develop their role's views rather than as a complete account.

This topic guide is organized by first discussing some of the economic and labor relationships that underpin fast fashion, before turning to key events or "case studies" that illustrate how fast fashion operates in practice and the ramifications that follow.

What is "Fast Fashion" and How Does it Occur?

As discussed in the topic history, fast fashion refers to the use of accelerated business practices to produce clothing based on emerging trends. Companies desperate to capitalize on these trends attempt to push designs through development and manufacturing as quickly as possible. Being first to market can mean the difference between earning the first $100 million in global sales and being left with unsold inventory. This pressure, combined with a broader business incentive to maximize profits, often leads to unsafe labor practices, which is why the issue largely falls under the purview of the ILO.

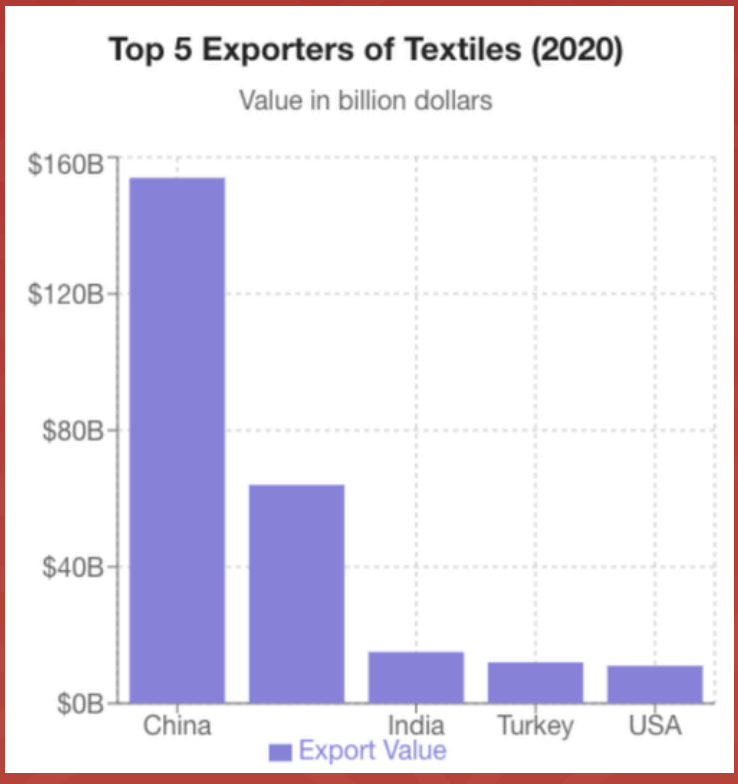
To understand how fast fashion reaches this point, it is helpful to look at how the process unfolds. When a fashion trend emerges—such as high-waisted jeans or merchandise tied to a trending artist—design and business teams at major fashion houses go on high alert to identify products with high sales potential. Fast fashion giant Zara, for example, has built in-house AI tools that constantly scrape the web and social media to detect, predict, and even help generate fashion trends (Michigan Journal of Economics). Once a trend is identified, design teams quickly determine what the product will look like. Even when designs are protected by copyright, such as luxury brand logos or merchandise from K-Pop girl groups, companies large and small often find ways to work around these protections. The production of near-

identical but inauthentic copies, commonly referred to as “dupes,” has become a major trend that has significantly accelerated fast fashion and increased clothing waste (Goldberg Segalla, 2022).

Companies of all sizes adopt different strategies to manage the legal risks associated with dupes (NYU Journal of Law). Smaller companies, which can afford to be more flexible in how they handle legal exposure, may ship products with separate logos that consumers attach themselves (Amazon v. Fitzpatrick). Larger companies, which typically lack the bandwidth for such tactics, instead rely on their vast financial reserves. These firms push designs as close as possible to the original before legal teams from the original brand can take action, aiming to generate as much revenue as they can before settling lawsuits out of court. This approach was notably used by the Australian brand MCoBeauty, which openly embraces dupe culture and treats it as a central part of its marketing strategy (ABC News, 2024).

Regardless of whether products are dupes or original designs, fast fashion companies are always operating on a tight clock. Even when brands streamline their design processes – sometimes to the point of predicting trends before they fully emerge – competitors are doing the same, and the real challenge lies in minimizing production time. This pressure has given rise to what is now referred to as ultra-fast fashion. Like fast fashion, ultra-fast fashion relies on rapid production, but at a scale that far exceeds earlier industry leaders such as Zara. While there is no strict threshold that separates fast fashion from ultra-fast fashion, the rise of the Chinese company Shein illustrates the distinction clearly. Zara produces roughly 12,000 to 20,000 designs per year, whereas Shein releases approximately 10,000 new designs per day (RawshotAI; Mckinsey & Co, 2025). Fast fashion companies should not be viewed as meaningfully “better” than ultra-fast fashion firms, but the difference in scale is significant, and responding dynamically to that reality is essential.

Whether considering Shein’s 10,000 new styles per day or Zara’s comparatively conservative 12,000 per year, the question remains: how is it possible to produce so many designs at such low cost? The answer lies in unethical labor practices. Regardless of company size, fast fashion producers seeking rapid and inexpensive production frequently turn to overseas manufacturing, where labor laws are weaker and average wages are significantly lower than those required for domestic production.



This bar graph shows the 5 biggest exporters of textiles in the world, led by China and tracked by the USA

Common destinations include China, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Myanmar (Chapman University, 2020). This process, known as outsourcing, allows companies to avoid paying adequate wages, and in major manufacturing countries, workers have earned as little as 2–6 percent of a livable wage (Silvery and Riley, 2025). Producers further exploit subcontracting systems, in which contracted factories outsource work to smaller workshops, creating layers of production that result in increasingly poor working conditions and make labor abuses harder to track (Silvery and Riley, 2025). Companies aren't blind to the issue and instead prefer to be left in the dark as to what subcontracting is occurring and the exact production chain that occurs. If they were to know of all their producers and acknowledge abhorrent worker conditions, that would open them up to legal risk. Courts could prompt the question, "If you knew these labor practices existed, why didn't you do anything?" (George Washington International Law and Policy Brief, 2021).

Important to know, however, is that although fast fashion production is most common in Southeast and South Asian nations, it is not isolated to those regions. Through subcontracting and a general lack of oversight driven by the desire for limitless, low-cost production, even countries such as the United States underpay garment workers. In a Department of Labor case study, it was found that 80 percent of garment contractors in Southern California were violating minimum wage laws, highlighting that labor abuses are not confined to the Global South (U.S. Department of Labor Blog, 2023).

The Impact of Fast Fashion

With the how and why of fast fashion established, it is important to examine some of its impacts.

Exploitative Labor Conditions

To meet constant demand, workers are frequently subjected to extreme conditions. These include working up to 16 hours per day, seven days a week, breathing in thousands of synthetic chemicals during production, and operating in unsafe facilities. In a general infrastructure assessment of 1,106 factories, inspectors identified more than 80,000 separate safety and compliance issues, underscoring both the scale and severity of these conditions (Silvery and Riley, 2025; George Washington International Law and Policy Brief, 2021)

Ready made garments workers seen at work in Narayanganj, Bangladesh on January 31, 2021

Child Labor
It is estimated that of the 75 million factory workers employed by the fast fashion industry, a substantial portion are children (U.S. Department of Labor Blog, 2023). This occurs for several reasons. First, clothing production is widely treated as low-skill work, requiring little formal education or training. What is needed are workers who can perform repetitive physical labor for long hours without burning out. Children are often targeted because of their smaller hands and perceived suitability for tasks that require precision and delicacy, such as cotton picking or sewing, which makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Humaniam, 2021).

Second, and more broadly across manufacturing sectors, children are subject to far fewer labor protections. For example, while a government may declare it "illegal for individuals under the age of 15" to be employed, it may not have additional legislation explicitly prohibiting those under 15 from working excessive hours, such as more than 16 hours per day. Policymakers may view such provisions as redundant, assuming that a ban on child employment is sufficient. However, in the eyes of a fast fashion producer operating in weakly enforced environments, permitting child labor may effectively mean violating only a single statute—particularly if enforcement mechanisms are limited or penalties are minimal.

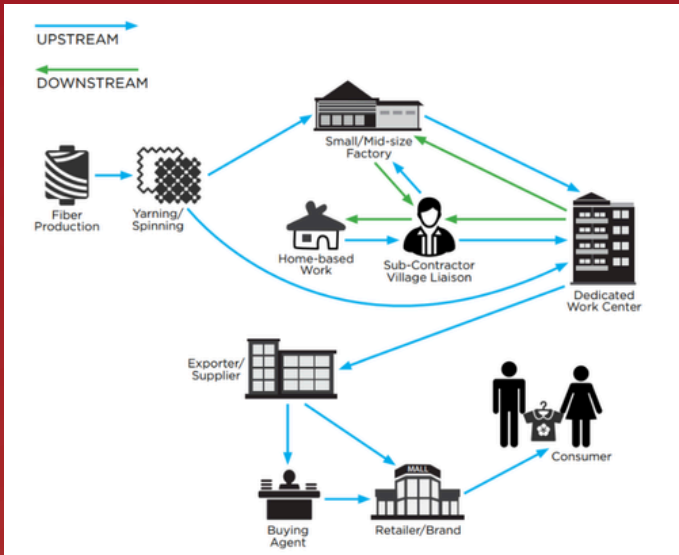
Children represent a "business opportunity" for contractors seeking low-skilled workers who can be paid well below minimum wage and more easily coerced due to their age and vulnerability. Because of weak enforcement mechanisms, the absence of strong labor unions, and the complexity of fast fashion supply chains, employers often evade accountability. As a result, both companies and consumers struggle to trace where and how garments are ultimately produced, allowing these practices to persist largely unchecked (Humaniam, 2021).

Economic Reliance
As obscure as it may seem, both companies and countries have become accustomed to the fast fashion system. Given how widespread the practice is, trade networks and broader economic structures have adapted to the prices and speed at which fast fashion operates. It is important to note that this reliance exists at the level of institutions and markets, not individual people.

Bangladesh offers a clear example of this dependence. While an Oxfam report found that 91 percent of Bangladeshi garment workers struggle to afford enough food for themselves and their families and that 25 percent face some form of abuse, the garment sector nonetheless accounts for 84 percent of the country's exports and 16 percent of its GDP. Dismantling this system is far from straightforward and, according to some researchers, could even produce deeper long-term economic consequences such as a dismantling of fashion's globalization, trade wars, and a steep rise in the cost of goods. This is not to argue that fast fashion should continue in its current form, but rather to highlight the paradox at the core of the issue and the complexity policymakers face when considering reform (Oxfam Canada, 2021). Proponents of fast fashion also claim that outsourcing production helps create more robust supply chains, fosters new business partnerships, and supports a more

globalized fashion industry. Removing access to these goods, particularly at low price points, could generate significant domestic political backlash. As a result, many governments are hesitant to act first, fearing pushback from constituents and economic disruptions that may be difficult to absorb (Modern Diplomacy, 2024).

Economic reliance also extends to consumers. While wealthier consumers, typically in developed countries, may have the financial flexibility to avoid fast fashion and absorb higher clothing costs, this is not the case in low- and middle-income countries. In places such as Ethiopia and Uzbekistan, where per capita income is significantly lower than in developed economies, consumers are often compelled to purchase fast fashion or low-cost counterfeit clothing simply because higher-priced alternatives are unaffordable. This consumer-side dependence further entrenches fast fashion practices and limits the ability of markets alone to drive meaningful change (Khurana et al, 2021).



The Garment Supply Chain (Muslim Climate Watch, 2024)

Flowchart indicating how fast fashion production occurs from inception of design to manufacturing, before distribution

Environmental Harm

Perhaps the largest non-labor reason the issue of fast fashion has gained prominence is the growing body of research on the environmental impact of producing clothing at such speed and low cost. Compared to the year 2000, the fast fashion industry has doubled its output. This growth carries a number of sobering consequences. Most notably, the fast fashion industry is the second-largest consumer of water after agriculture. Poor infrastructure among unregulated producers, often driven by outsourcing, leads to inefficient and harmful processes, including the dumping of chemical wastewater into the environment. At the same time, the industry accounts for roughly 8–10 percent of global CO_2 emissions and contributes about 35 percent of microplastic pollution in the world's oceans (UNEP, 2019; UN Climate Change, 2018). If fast fashion accounts for 8–10% of global CO_2 emissions, that places it among the largest industrial contributors to climate change worldwide. This level of emissions accelerates global warming, intensifies extreme weather events, and increases climate-related instability. The effects are not abstract—they translate into droughts, flooding, food insecurity, and economic strain, particularly in low-income countries that are often the same places where garments are produced.

These statistics begin with overproduction and weak labor regulations and ultimately result in an environmental crisis in which consumers also play a role. In terms of overproduction, roughly 25 percent of fast fashion garments end up in landfills, and 87 percent of the total fiber input used for clothing is eventually incinerated or discarded (RawshotAI). The prevailing logic among fast fashion producers is that

underproducing risks losing market share and sales, so when there is uncertainty about demand, producing more is seen as the safer option. While basic supply-and-demand theory would suggest that scarcity can support higher prices, fast fashion operates within a narrow model that prioritizes speed and low cost above all else. Producing in larger quantities lowers the cost per unit, reinforcing incentives for mass output.

To keep production costs low, companies rely on cheap materials that carry significant environmental harm, particularly synthetic fibers such as polyester, nylon, and acrylic, which can take hundreds of years to biodegrade (Earth.org, 2026). The manufacturing of polyester and similar synthetic fabrics is highly energy-intensive, requiring large amounts of crude oil and releasing pollutants such as volatile organic compounds, particulate matter, and acid gases like hydrogen chloride, all of which can cause or worsen respiratory illnesses (Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry).

This environmental dimension is directly relevant to labor and to the mandate of the ILO because labor rights and environmental protections are deeply intertwined. The first people to bear the consequences of exposure to harmful chemicals or the pressures of overproduction are the workers producing these garments. In many ways, environmental damage is what brought renewed attention to fast fashion and calls for reform in the first place. As a result, while labor rights and social justice should remain the primary focus of this committee, understanding the environmental harms associated with fast fashion, along with potential solutions and how they intersect with the ILO's interests, is essential.

Case Study
One of the best ways to understand the concepts and complexity of these topics is to simply look at past cases of the fast fashion industry. Like any properly balanced understanding, it's crucial to understand the bad and the good. These cases will be entirely declaratory in nature and offer no analysis. While some lines may seem like personal thoughts of the Dias, rest assured that every statement is empirical in nature.

It is up to you to assess the situation and use it to inform your committee experience.

Case Study: The Rana Plaza Disaster
On April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Bangladesh, collapsed, resulting in 1,129 deaths and making it the deadliest accidental building collapse in modern history (Schwier).

The Rana Plaza Collapse (New York Times, 2013)
Groups of civilians gather hours after the Rana Plaza collapse while first responders search the rubble for survivors

The failure of the structure was the result of several compounding factors, including illegal construction, weak enforcement of building codes, and disregard for safety by building management. The building had originally been approved as a four-story commercial complex intended for retail use, but it was later illegally expanded and converted to house multiple garment factories. In the days before the collapse, large cracks appeared throughout the building, leading local officials to warn that the structure was unsafe for occupation. These warnings were ignored, and factory managers instructed workers to return to their jobs the following day to prioritize production deadlines. The building collapsed during the morning work shift, trapping thousands of garment workers inside.

Factories operating inside Rana Plaza produced clothing for major Western brands, including Benetton, Primark, and Walmart. The collapse, therefore, drew attention to the conditions under which a significant share of low-cost clothing consumed in wealthier countries is produced. In the months following the disaster, governments and fast fashion producers faced increased scrutiny over their role in global supply chains that prioritize low costs and rapid production over worker safety (The Conversation, 2023).

In response, two international initiatives were launched to address factory safety in Bangladesh: The European-led Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the American-led Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. The former established a legally binding framework requiring independent inspections, public disclosure of safety reports, and remediation financed by participating brands. The American-led Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, by contrast, operated as a voluntary initiative focused on inspections, training, and factory upgrades without enforceable legal commitments.

While both initiatives looked to reduce the risk of another structural collapse by improving factory infrastructure and safety standards, they focused on end-point conditions rather than the broader fast fashion production model that incentivizes speed and cost minimization (The Conversation, 2023).

Labor conditions following Rana Plaza also remained contentious. As workers protested low wages and the wage-setting process, brands failed to prevent or meaningfully respond to repression by factory owners and authorities. In several cases, demonstrations were met with crackdowns that resulted in four worker deaths and numerous injuries. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, major brands including H&M, Inditex (Zara), Next, and C&A have remained largely inactive while supplier factories continue to threaten workers and union organizers with arrest through the use of baseless criminal complaints filed against large numbers of unnamed individuals connected to labor protests (Clean Clothes, 2024).

Conclusion

With the complexity of the fast fashion industry now laid out, begin researching your role's stance on the situation. Leverage your views and resources to create a lasting solution to the fast fashion crisis.

Questions to consider:

1. How do the problems associated with fast fashion differ across countries (e.g., between low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries and developed countries, as well as between exporting and importing nations)?
2. What global policy solutions have previously been used to address labor concerns within fast fashion, and what were their respective strengths and shortcomings?
3. Is there a sustainable way to maintain elements of fast fashion given its economic benefits, or does meaningful reform require a fundamental change to the model itself?
4. How can countries prioritize domestic economic and political interests while still engaging in effective international cooperation on fast fashion–related labor issues?
5. What incentives might fashion producers have to comply with or support legislation proposed by this committee?
6. How can greater transparency and traceability be introduced into fast fashion supply chains without disproportionately harming workers or small manufacturers?
7. To what extent should responsibility for labor conditions fall on governments, brands, or consumers, and how should that responsibility be enforced?

Additional Resources:

- https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-fast-fashion
- https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2025/04/04/ai-powered-fashion-how-tech-is-reshaping-the-future-of-zaras-fashion-empire/#:~:text=AI%20technologies%20work%20to%20gather,Epifano%20&%20Nikolopoulos%2C%202023).
- https://www.goldbergsegalla.com/blog/environmental-law-monitor/emerging-issues-elm/fast-fashion-post-holiday-autopsy-how-the-industrys-dupes-and-fast-fashion-apparel-boom-is-fostering-environmental-disaster/#:~:text=The%20recent%20explosive%20growth%20in,Fashionistas%2C%20Do%20Not%20Despair!
- https://jipel.law.nyu.edu/dupes/#easy-footnote-36-9939
- https://rawshot.ai/statistic/zara-fast-fashion
- https://blogs.chapman.edu/sustainability/2020/02/26/fast-fashion-and-outsourcing/#:~:text=Some%20countries%20where%20fast%20fashion%20companies%20outsource,with%20student%20organizations%20that%20promote%20sustainable%20fashion

- https://silverandriley.com/blogs/insightstudio/the-true-cost-of-fast-fashion-what-low-cost-apparel-really-means-for-workers-and-the-planet?srsltid=AfmBOoqIfVIN0rI7fRkrKYBPW_RxHrLpmV4o8PiNupduxcSwhgWbJRkW
- https://blog.dol.gov/2023/03/21/the-exploitation-of-garment-workers-threading-the-needle-on-fast-fashion
- https://fashionunited.com/statistics/global-fashion-industry-statistics
- https://www.humanium.org/en/the-detrimental-effects-of-fast-fashion-on-childrens-rights/
- https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/01/26/the-economic-implications-of-fast-fashion-for-the-developed-and-developing-world/
ttps://www.researchgate.net/publication/352304623_Are_low-_and_middle-income_countries_profiting_from_fast_fashion
- https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/un-alliance-sustainable-fashion-addresses-damage-fast-fashion
- https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/
- https://www.engr.psu.edu/ae/thesis/failures/MKP/failures/failures.wikispaces.com/Rana_Plaza_Building_Collapse.html
- https://theconversation.com/fast-fashion-still-comes-with-deadly-risks-10-years-after-the-rana-plaza-disaster-the-industrys-many-moving-pieces-make-it-easy-to-cut-corners-201538

International Labour Organization

Topic Guide

2

Topic Two

Gig Economy

Introduction

The traditional 9 AM–5 PM office job is no longer the only model of employment. As more people turn to short-term "gigs" to make ends meet, it is important to examine how this shift is reshaping the labor force and what protections workers may need.

Glossary

- **Gig**: A single short-term, task-based job completed for payment, typically arranged through a platform or informal contract, with no guarantee of continued work afterward.
- **Gig Economy:** A labor market built around short-term contracts, on-demand tasks, and piece-rate work where workers are typically classified as independent contractors and must continually secure new assignments to maintain income.
- **Salary Problem:** A term used to describe the instability and variability of gig earnings, where workers compete for tasks in a platform-controlled marketplace and pay may fluctuate based on demand, algorithms, tipping, and unpaid waiting time.
- **Engaged Time**: The period during which a worker is actively completing a paid task (for example, transporting a passenger or delivering an order), excluding unpaid waiting or idle time between jobs.
- **Supplemental Income:** Earnings from gig work used to complement a primary job or other income source, rather than serving as a worker's sole means of financial support.
- **Digital Labor Platform**: An app or website that connects workers with customers, processes payments, and often determines pricing, work assignments, and performance ratings.
- **Platform-Mediated Work:** Work arranged through a digital intermediary that creates a three-party relationship between worker, customer, and platform, rather than a traditional employer-employee relationship.
- **Location-Based Platform**: A type of digital labor platform where services are performed in a physical location, such as ride-hailing, grocery delivery, or home repair.
- **Algorithmic Management**: The use of automated systems—such as rating systems, dynamic pricing, and task allocation software—to monitor, evaluate, and control worker behavior instead of traditional human supervisors.

- **Worker Classification**: The legal determination of whether a worker is considered an employee, independent contractor, or intermediary category, which determines eligibility for labor protections such as minimum wage, overtime pay, unemployment insurance, and benefits.

Topic History

Put simply, "gigs" are short-term jobs. Gigs can take multiple forms, including a busker—a musician playing at a wedding, a Meituan driver delivering food, a TaskRabbit worker hired to assemble furniture or change light bulbs, and many others.

Gigs have existed for decades, and the idea of working individuals taking on short-term jobs to make a living certainly isn't new. In earlier periods, dockworkers were hired by the day, farm laborers were paid per harvest, and tradespeople moved from town to town offering services as needed. What is new, however, is the catalytic role that technology has played in forming what we now call the gig economy: the exchange of labor for money between individuals or companies through digital platforms that actively match providers and customers on a short-term, payment-by-task basis (World Economic Forum, 2017). Taxi drivers have transformed into Uber, Lyft, and Didi drivers; personal shoppers into TaskRabbits and TaskRunners; and other gigs, such as childcare and tutoring, have become more common largely because of the rise of smartphones, app-based platforms, and the ability to advertise services individually and at scale.

The rise of the gig economy was driven primarily by technological innovation, but it was also accentuated by the Great Recession beginning in 2007 (Regional Economic Development Institute, 2017). During that period, around 30 million people worldwide lost their jobs (World Bank Blogs, 2013), making the growth of gig work particularly pronounced, as nonemployer establishments dramatically outpaced traditional employer-based firms. Many workers turned to freelance and contract work out of necessity. This growth has persisted, reinforced by later developments such as the Great Resignation in 2021, when 47 million Americans quit their jobs, citing low pay, limited opportunities for advancement, and feelings of disrespect at work (Pew Research Center 2022; CNBC 2022). For some, joining the gig economy addressed these frustrations by allowing individuals to "be their own boss," choose their working hours, and decide how many jobs to accept. Taken together, these shifts have contributed to a global gig economy that now accounts for up to 12 percent of the labor market (World Bank 2023).

These benefits do not come without drawbacks. Most gig economy jobs, by nature of being freelance or independent work, are not subject to employee benefits such as healthcare, retirement plans, or paid leave (Western Governors University 2025). In countries where healthcare costs are especially high, including the United States, and in nations with strained pension systems such as Japan, Austria, Hungary, and Greece, this creates additional pressure on individuals to secure care independently

(Harvard Kennedy School 2015; Nippon 2025). When governments are unable to provide sufficient support, increasing numbers of gig workers may rely on financial safety nets that have limited capacity.

A question of ethics, labor, and justice that has recently surfaced in public debate is whether gig workers should receive health benefits. If someone commits sixty hours a week to freelance work, should that not qualify them for the same protections as someone who works sixty hours in a traditional office job? As the global labor market increasingly shifts toward gig-based employment, what protections should be guaranteed to workers? And how can governments require platforms and companies to enact these protections without destabilizing their financial models or encouraging further exploitation? These are the issues that must be considered in order to fully understand the historical development and present challenges of the gig economy.

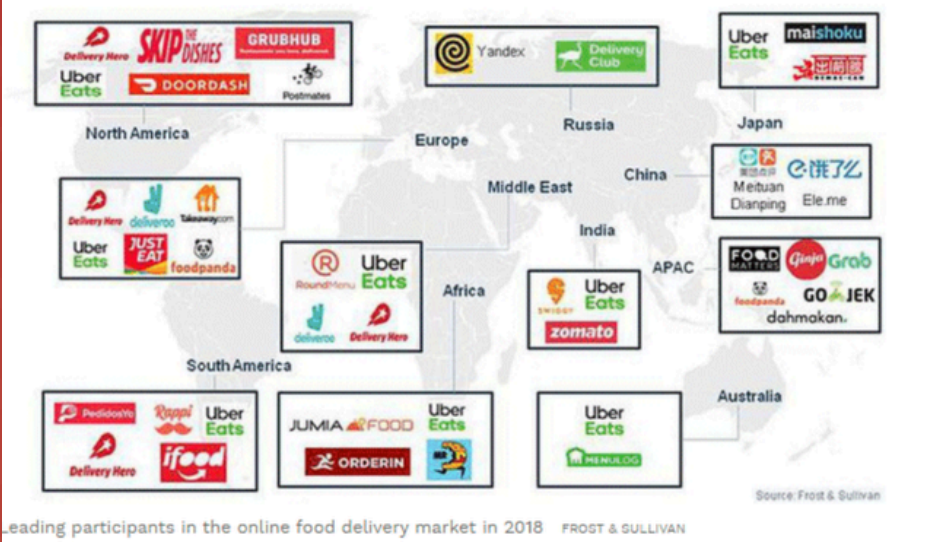
Current Situation

What is a Gig Economy

The gig economy refers to work organized around short-term contracts or piece-rate jobs where future work is not guaranteed, and the worker must repeatedly seek and accept new "gigs" to keep earning. Statistical agencies increasingly define gig work by a few criteria, including:

These criteria are used to determine if a job is a "gig" or not (Statistics Canada, 2024). In the context of this topic, the "gig economy" refers to platform-mediated, on-demand work where an app or website matches the worker to a customer and strongly shapes the pay. The ILO describes digital labor platforms as a major component of the platform economy and makes a basic distinction between location-based platforms—where work is performed in a specific place, like ride-hailing or delivery—and online platforms, which involve remote work delivered digitally (ILO, 2024).

It's also important to separate gig work as a concept from occupations that have long existed. Taxi driving, day labor, domestic work, and one-off contracting did not begin with smartphones. What changed is scale and structure: platforms reduce search costs, standardize customer acquisition, and use data systems (including ratings and algorithmic dispatch) to manage work at high volume. Research on



Major Global Food Delivery Apps (Frost and Sullivan, 2018)

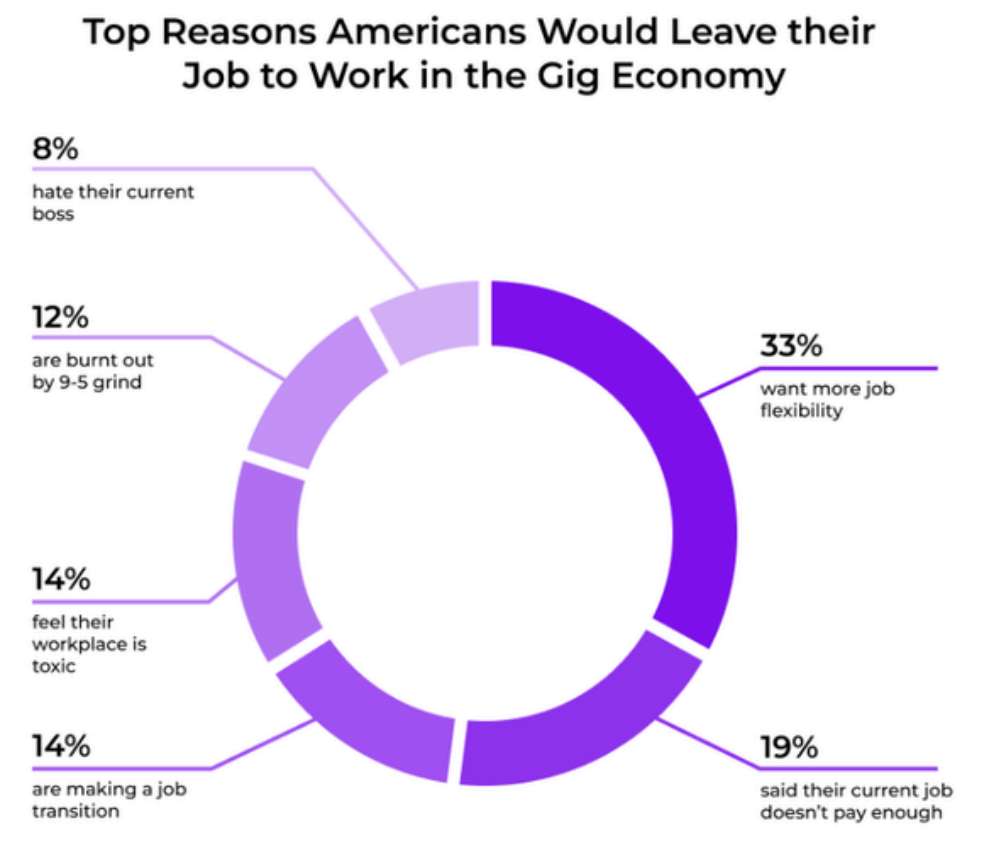
Description: The biggest food delivery apps per major world regions

"digital platform employment" points to the growth of app-mediated, three-party relationships (worker–customer–platform) as a defining feature of the modern gig economy debate (NBER, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2021).

The Role that Labor Plays

It may be difficult to see how labor plays a role in the gig economy, but rest assured, it plays a significant one. The model of a gig economy is built around labor being flexible and on-demand, and workers being treated as non-employees. The latter helps explain why people join and why political conflict around gig work often centers on worker classification, pay standards, and overall worker rights.

A major share of gig participation is driven by income supplementation and flexibility. In August 2024, over 60% of gig workers said that they participate in the gig economy to supplement income and take part in the flexibility of the job—i.e., choosing your own hours, being your own boss, etc. These two reasons were the leading drivers for gig workers taking part in the associated economy, but the survey also reflects gig work becoming a primary income source for a substantial minority (TransUnion, 2024).



FATbit Technologies, 2022
Pie chart highlighting the top 6 reasons why Americans would leave their job to join the gig economy

At the same time, participation is uneven across demographics and income groups, which matters for labor conditions. The Pew Research Center found (in its 2021 nationally representative survey) that 16% of adults in the United States had ever earned money via an online gig platform, with higher participation among younger adults, Hispanic adults, and lower-income Americans. That same survey found that among current or recent gig platform workers, 31% said platform work had been their main job over the prior year, rising to 42% among lower-income platform workers (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Growth on the demand side also pulls labor in. In 2021, Pew estimated large shares of U.S. consumers used apps for delivery, groceries, and ride-hailing, especially younger adults—one reason the market for on-demand labor expanded quickly (Pew Research Center, 2021).

A practical way to explain the recent surge in the gig economy's size is to look at platform proliferation and the ability of platforms to coordinate large workforces. A measurement-focused chapter published through the National Bureau of Economic Research summarized the ILO's estimates that the number of digital labor platforms rose from 142 in 2010 to over 777 by 2020, with the number of online labor platforms reaching 283 in 2020 (NBER, 2020). Furthermore, growth has not been limited to wealthy countries. A 2023 World Bank press release describes in its report, "Working Without Borders," that the "gig economy" could account for up to 12% of the global labor market and emphasized rapid growth in online gig work demand (World Bank, 2023).

The Salary Problem

Chief amongst complaints regarding the gig economy are issues with compensation. Though gig workers could, in theory, set their own wages and consumers can decide whether or not to pay them, workers are essentially competing against each other in the marketplace to have lower prices. For example, if someone would like to hire a DiDi driver from Shenzhen Bao'an International Airport to the Shenzhen Foreign Language School, the app will prefer showing the cheapest options, knowing that the average consumer wants the lowest price. Drivers then inherently compete against each other to see who can provide that lower price; therein lies the so-called "salary problem."

In terms of actual numbers, there is no single average gig salary that carries across countries and platforms, largely because gig work ranges from occasional side income to full-time work. Moreover, pay can be measured in different ways (engaged time, total in-app time, net revenue vs. gross revenue, etc.). Not to mention, people engage in the gig economy for different reasons, such as supplementing their income versus making it their full-time job (Statistics Canada, 2024; NBER, 2025).

Even so, several credible data points do exist and can anchor what typical earnings look like. In the United States, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in July

2023, 4.3% of workers (6.9 million people) held contingent jobs on their sole or main job, and 7.4% (11.9 million people) were independent contractors on their sole or main job. The same report shows that contingent full-time workers had median weekly earnings of $838 versus $1,137 for noncontingent full-time workers, and that contingent workers were far less likely to have employer-provided health insurance (19.9% vs 51.2%). (BLS, 2024). The aforementioned TransUnion report showed that two-thirds of gig workers in its August 2024 survey said they earned under $2,500 per month from gig work, while some younger cohorts reported earning more than $5,000 per month. (TransUnion, 2024).

Platform-published pay estimates—while not neutral—provide one lens into how large companies frame earnings. Lyft said that in the second half of 2023, the median U.S. driver's gross earnings were $30.68 per hour of "engaged time" (including tips and bonuses) and estimated median net earnings of $23.46 per engaged hour after marginal expenses. Lyft also states that most drivers are part-time by its measures (94% driving fewer than 20 hours per week). (Lyft, 2024).

Independent analyses sometimes reach different conclusions depending on methodology. A 2025 benchmarking study by HR&A Advisors reports average net hourly income for Uber drivers in Chicago of $23.01 after estimated hourly expenses (and provides separate figures for full- and part-time drivers). (HR&A Advisors, 2025). Academic and labor-policy research using more expansive time measures—like full shift or all in-app time—often finds lower effective hourly pay. A 2024 report from the UC Berkeley Labor Center analyzing driver earnings across five U.S. metro areas (January 2022 data) reports that passenger drivers' median net hourly earnings after expenses (excluding tips) were $7.12 in California and $10.64 in metros outside California; it reports delivery workers' median net hourly earnings (excluding tips) of $5.93 in California and $0.48 in the other metros, with tips raising medians to $13.62 in California and $9.87 elsewhere. (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2024).

Sustainability depends on whether gig work is truly supplemental or whether it becomes the worker's primary livelihood. Several sources indicate that a meaningful minority of workers rely on gig income for basic needs, which raises the stakes when pay is volatile, expenses are high, and benefits are missing. (Pew Research Center, 2021; TransUnion, 2024). One recurring issue is that gig pay often looks higher when measured as "engaged time" and lower when measured as a full working "shift," including waiting time and unpaid time between jobs. That gap is one reason governments have experimented with minimum pay standards that explicitly try to stabilize earnings for time spent working, not just completing tasks. (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2024; NYC Mayor's Office, 2025).

Case Studies

Study 1: Uber and the UK

To really get why the gig economy is such a legal mess, you have to look at the specific court cases that have set the precedents. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a 2021 UK Supreme Court ruling fundamentally changed the game for Uber. The court had to decide if drivers were actually "workers" or just independent contractors. Ultimately, the justices sided with the drivers, arguing that "working time" isn't just when a passenger is in the car—it's whenever a driver has the app open in an authorized area and is ready to take a fare. This was a massive blow to Uber's argument that they were just a platform for independent partners, as the court focused on the specific rights drivers were losing out on, like the minimum wage and holiday pay (UK Supreme Court, 2021; House of Commons Library, 2021).

What makes this UK case so important is that it hits on the "control" issue. Companies love the word "partner," but regulators are looking at who actually holds the power. The House of Commons Library pointed out that because Uber controls the fees, tells drivers which routes to take, and manages the passengers, the "independent contractor" label just didn't hold water (House of Commons Library, 2021). Interestingly, the UK has a middle-ground worker status that isn't quite a full employee. While this gave drivers the National Minimum Wage and paid leave, it still leaves them in a bit of a gray area without the full parental leave or protection rights that standard employees get (UK Government, 2026; Acas, 2025). Following the loss, Uber pivoted, announcing it would offer pensions and holiday pay while trying to maintain the "flexibility" narrative (Uber SEC Filing, 2021; AP, 2021).

City	Chicago	Philadelphia	Portland
Average Monthly Unique Uber Drivers in City in 2024[4]	55,248	28,842	4,325
2024 Uber Driver Gross Hourly Earnings	$29.35	$27.83	$29.08
2024 Uber Driver Costs per Mile	$0.330	$0.349	$0.337
2024 Uber Driver Costs per Hour	($6.34)	($6.54)	($7.26)
2024 Uber Driver Net Hourly Earnings[5]	**$23.01**	**$21.29**	**$21.82**
2024 Local Minimum Wage	$16.20[6]	$7.25[7]	$15.95[8]

Summary of Uber Driver Size, Net Earnings, and Comparison Wages (HR&A Advisors, 2025)
Description: Summary statistics of Uber Drivers wages for the areas of Chicago, Philadelphia, and Portland

Case 2: Proposition 22 and California
Across the Atlantic, California offers a completely different case study. Instead of a court ruling for worker status, the state saw the passage of Proposition 22. This was essentially a legal carve-out that let app-based companies keep drivers as independent contractors as long as they met certain criteria. Even though it was challenged, the

California Supreme Court upheld the core of Prop 22 in July 2024 (Castellanos v. State of California), basically closing the door on the constitutional argument against it (Justia/California Supreme Court, 2024; Reuters, 2024). This "third way" approach tries to have it both ways: keeping the contractor status but offering some limited benefits. However, researchers at the UC Berkeley Labor Center have been skeptical, arguing that these pay guarantees often don't actually match a real minimum wage once you factor in expenses and "downtime" between pings (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2024).

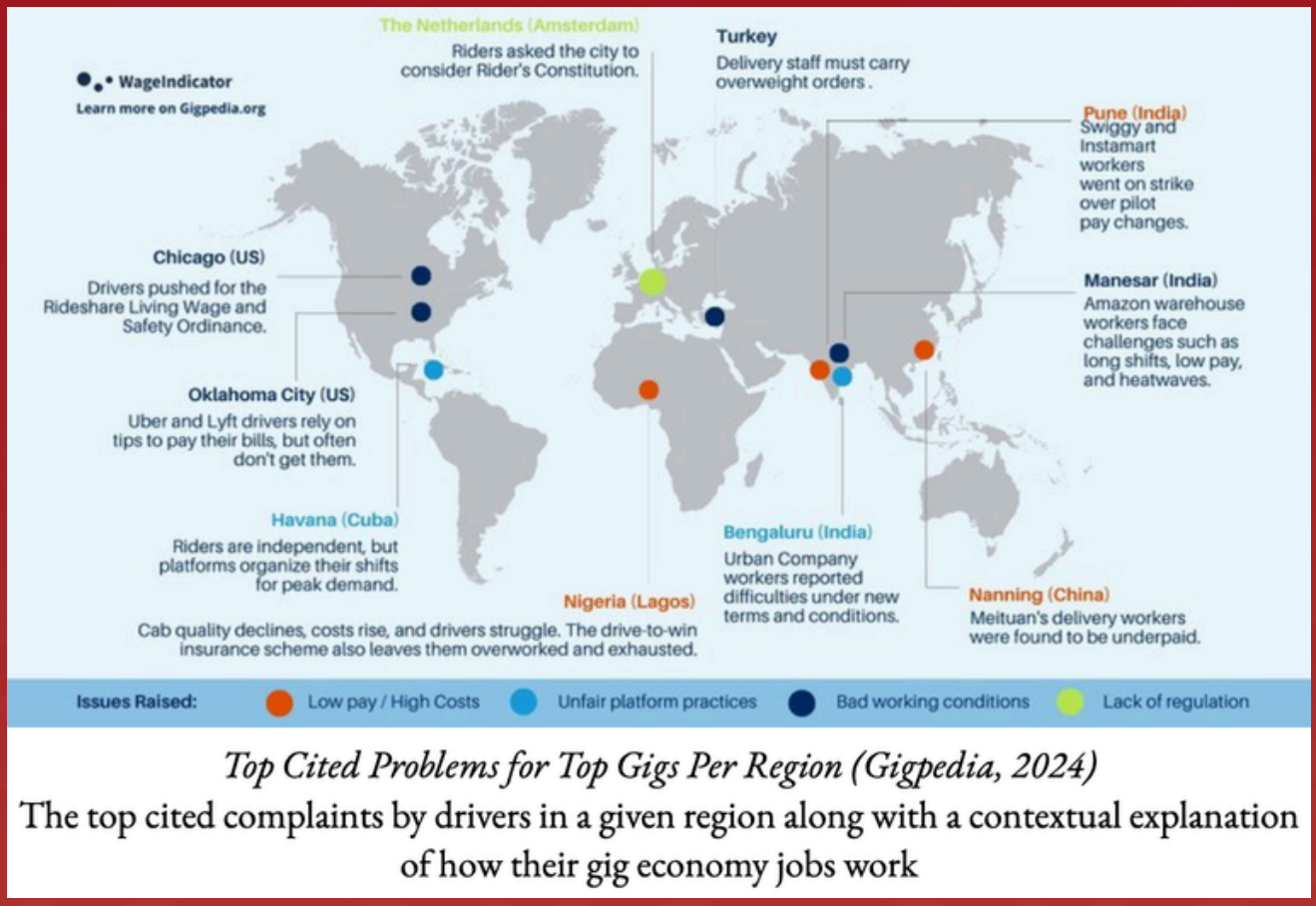
Case 3: Delivery Workers and NYC
Finally, we're seeing a rise in city-level intervention, with New York City leading the charge. The NYC Department of Consumer and Worker Protection didn't wait for a state-wide shift and instead just set a minimum pay floor. By April 2025, the rate for delivery workers hit $21.44 an hour before tips, specifically because the city recognized these workers were footing the bill for their own costs and benefits (NYC Mayor's Office, 2025). They've since doubled down on this; as of early 2026, grocery and food delivery apps alike have had to match that $21.44 rate, and it's already scheduled to climb to $22.13 in April 2026 to keep up with inflation (NYC DCWP, 2026).

Incentives
Despite the systemic issues, the gig economy wouldn't be nearly as massive—or the subject of this committee—if it didn't offer genuine benefits. The most cited draw is undoubtedly schedule control. According to Pew Research Center data, nearly half (49%) of U.S. adults who did gig work in the past year listed schedule flexibility as a primary motivator. Public opinion generally mirrors this; many see these platforms as a viable way to drum up extra cash on their own terms, even if they don't necessarily view it as a stable, long-term career path (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Another major draw is the low barrier to entry. Unlike traditional employment, which often involves grueling hiring pipelines, platforms allow people to start earning almost immediately. The ability to scale one's participation up or down based on immediate financial need makes the model incredibly attractive, even when workers recognize they are trading away income predictability and traditional benefits (TransUnion, 2024; HR&A Advisors, 2025).

However, the third incentive—the identity of being "your own boss"—is where the most significant friction occurs. While the idea of independence is a genuine perk for those using the apps for side income, it creates a major legal fault line. In practice, many workers are classified as independent contractors but experience the same level of discipline and control over their pay and job access that an employee would. This leads to a massive gap in protections. With the exception of a few proactive U.S. states, most regions do not require platforms to provide health coverage, social security contributions, or paid time off. This shifting of responsibility from the employer to the individual means that the long-term burden often falls on the public welfare system, raising serious concerns about the future sustainability of social security (Milken Institute, 2025).

Challenges



Top Cited Problems for Top Gigs Per Region (Gigpedia, 2024)
The top cited complaints by drivers in a given region along with a contextual explanation of how their gig economy jobs work

The first major challenge and the principal complaint is volatile and opaque pay. Human Rights Watch argues that major U.S. platforms often unilaterally set pay rates and use opaque, changing algorithms that leave workers without meaningful wage negotiation—while classifying them as independent contractors who lack access to many wage-and-hour protections. (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Pay structure also differs across gig sectors, with tipping playing a much bigger role in delivery than in ride-hailing. Gridwise reports (using its tracked data focused on the U.S.) that tips accounted for 53.4% of total compensation on food delivery platforms, with only 44.3% from base pay—creating high income variability tied to customer behavior. (Gridwise, 2025).

A second challenge is the benefits gap and legal exclusion. In the U.S., independent contractor status generally means fewer protections than employee status under many federal and state labor laws; investigations and policy debates often focus on how this legal structure shifts costs and risks (injury, unemployment spells, insurance, and payroll taxes) onto workers. (Human Rights Watch, 2025; U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

A third challenge is safety and accountability when management is automated. The Fairwork US 2025 report argues that automated management systems can reduce transparency and accountability and that, among the platforms it assessed, it found

limited evidence that platforms met basic minimum standards of fair work—particularly in areas like fair pay (after expenses) and fair conditions. (Fairwork, 2025).

A fourth challenge is algorithmic control that can look like employment control even when a worker is called a contractor. For example, a 2025 study released through the University of Oxford describes how Uber's dynamic pricing system (introduced in 2023, per the study) shifted the relationship between what passengers pay and what drivers receive, with drivers spending more unpaid time waiting and seeing lower inflation-adjusted hourly income before operating costs. (University of Oxford, 2025).

With all these challenges laid out, find your team, and get to work.

Questions to consider:

1. How do the challenges of gig workers differ across different countries? How are they similar?
2. What policy models have already been used to better regulate gig work?
3. Should gig workers be guaranteed a minimum wage and workers' benefits?
4. How can governments balance innovation and labor protection without discouraging platform investment?
5. Would stronger labor protections lead to a decrease in consumer demand?
6. Who should bear the responsibility for workplace safety?
7. How can gig workers meaningfully challenge deactivation or algorithmic decisions?
8. If global standards are to be created, how can they account for regional differences in the standard of worker care offered?

Additional Resources:

https://www.studyingeconomics.ac.uk/blog/the-rise-of-the-gig-economy-a-case-study-of-uber/
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-004-m/75-004-m2024001-eng.htm
https://www.milkenreview.org/articles/job-benefits-for-gig-workers?IssueID=56
https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/05/12/the-gig-trap/algorithmic-wage-and-labor-exploitation-in-platform-work-in-the-us
https://www.hraadvisors.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/HRA_Uber-Earnings-Benchmarking-Report_FINAL_ALT.pdf
https://www.indwes.edu/articles/2025/05/navigating-the-gig-economy
https://yalelawjournal.org/forum/gig-economy-myths-and-missteps

ILO

International Labour Organization

Yale Model United Nations China III

May 15-17, 2026