

LABOUR RIGHTS PROTECTION FOR YOUNG WORKERS ON DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORMS: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Article history:

Submission date: 13 December 2023
Received in revised form: 28 November 2024
Acceptance date: 22 January 2025
Available online: 28 April 2025

Keywords:

Young workers, labour rights, gig economy, digital labour platforms, maqasid al-shariah

Funding:

The authors acknowledge the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) under Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) grant number FRGS/1/2023/SS112/UTM/02/2 for funding this research. The authors acknowledge the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, UTM FR, cost number QJ130000.3829.23H51 for funding of this research.

Competing interest:

The author(s) have declared that no competing interests exist.

Cite as:

Abd Razak, S. S., Abdul Wahab, H., Mohd Nor, R., & Yaacob, T. Z. (2025). Labour rights protection for young workers on digital labour platforms: An Islamic perspective. *Malaysian Journal of Syariah and Law*, 13(1), 100–109. <https://doi.org/10.33102/mjssl.vol13no1.665>



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ABSTRACT

The development of digital labour platform resulted from the growth of digital economy and has transformed the world of work. However, the progress of platforms has stagnated due to various issues arising in the employment relationship between platform providers and young workers. These issues include wages, compensation and benefits, working hours, rest days, leave and public holidays. Young workers often face unfair treatment by platform providers while performing their tasks. The research objectives of this study are twofold: firstly, to analyse the labour rights of workers from an Islamic perspective and secondly, to explore how the labour rights of young workers on digital labour platforms can be improved through Islamic principles. A qualitative method is employed to achieve these objectives. The content analysis method is used to analyse secondary sources relevant to this study. The main sources of this research are the *Qur'an*, *hadith* and journal articles. Additionally, the Employment Act 1955 (Act 265) and the Children and Young Persons Employment Act 1996 (Act 350) are also analysed to reach the objectives of this study. The findings of this study show that Islam promotes justice in the employment relationship between employer and employee. Consequently, existing legislation must be improved to ensure labour protection for young workers on digital labour platforms. This study contributes to the theoretical framework of labour rights by expanding the discussion to include digital labour platforms and young workers. Furthermore, it explores the Islamic perspective on labour rights for young workers on digital labour platforms.

Introduction

Global economic growth is being progressively driven by the digitalisation era (Atiyah et al., 2024; Muhammad et al., 2024; Farouk et al., 2024). The digital economy involves the use of digital technology in social and economic activities by individuals, businesses and governments (Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, 2021). Digital labour platforms developed, developed as a result of digital economy growth, have transformed the world of work. Digital labour platforms, also known as platform work, refer to online platforms that connect individuals ready to provide a service with those requesting the service, in exchange for payment (European Council, 2023). There are various types of platform work, but the most common types are web-based platforms and location-based platforms (Schmidt, 2017). A web-based platform is one where work is outsourced through an open call to the crowd, also known as crowd work. The work can be performed remotely without meeting the client, such as proofreading and design work (Hunt & Samman, 2019). A location-based platform is one where work is arranged through an online platform, but the service is performed locally or delivered to a specific location. An example is food delivery carried out by riders or drivers (Schmidt, 2017). Individuals who perform services through online platform arrangements by an organisation are known as platform workers (Blagoycheva, 2020). On digital labour platforms, the employment relationship established between platform workers and platform providers is in the form of an informal employment relationship (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018).

The main attraction of a digital labour platform lies in its flexible working arrangements, as platform workers are not required to adhere to fixed working hours like in traditional work (International Labour Organization, 2019). Additionally, tasks assigned by the platform provider can be performed remotely, and workers are paid according to the tasks they have completed (Hunt & Samman, 2019). Thus, in this context, the relationship between the platform provider and the platform worker is mediated through the digital platform. The rise of digital labour platforms has transformed the world of work and provided more employment opportunities for gig economy workers. A study shows that in Malaysia, more workers are expected to be involved in digital labour platforms in the coming years (Rahim et al., 2021).

However, the development of digital labour platforms has stagnated due to various issues arising in the employment relationship between platform providers and platform workers. Challenges accompanying digital labour platforms have become noticeable, especially concerning the labour rights of platform workers (International Labour Organization, 2019). Platform workers are not protected under the Employment Act 1955 (Act 265) (EA) as their relationship with platform providers is considered a contract for service, disqualifying them from being considered 'employees' under the Act (Razak, 2024). Consequently, platform workers are not eligible for minimum benefits such as public holidays, annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave and paternity leave. Additionally, there are also no regulations controlling the working hours of platform workers (Razak et al., 2024). Furthermore, platform providers are not obligated to contribute to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) which is government-mandated for employees under a contract of service (Berg et al., 2019).

The most vulnerable group affected by this issue is young workers (Rahim et al., 2021). In the context of this study, young workers are defined according to the International Labour Organisation as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 (International Labour Organization, 2022). A study shows that the digital labour platforms attract youth compared to traditional work due to their informal employment status (Lin et al., 2018). Young workers are exposed to unfair treatment by employers while working on digital platforms, particularly in terms of wage levels, working conditions and compensation. The issue of labour rights for young workers is further aggravated as the existing law, specifically the Children and Young Persons (Employment) Act 1996 (Act 350) (CYPE), which only protects young workers between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. Thus, young workers aged 19 to 24 are not protected under the Act (Razak et al., 2024).

Apart from that, young workers on digital platforms also face challenges in participating in trade union activities. According to the Trade Unions Act 1959 (Act 262), young workers aged 15 years old are not eligible to join a trade union. Additionally, in voting matters, trade union members who have not reached the age of 18 are not allowed to vote in a strike action (Razak, 2024). These barriers to freedom of association for young workers are demotivating youths from working as digital labourers. As a result, there has been a high unemployment rate among young workers in the past 5 years (Ministry of Human

Resources, 2024). This issue is also pushing young workers to work abroad instead of locally, further contributing to the brain drain issue. Thus, based on the issues presented in this study, the research questions are as follows: first, what is the position of young persons in terms of work from the Islamic perspective; second, how does Shariah view labour rights; and third, how the labour rights of young workers on digital labour platforms be improved through Islamic principles.

A qualitative method is undertaken to achieve the objectives of this study. Specifically, the study applies a content analysis method to analyse secondary sources relevant to this study. The main sources of this research are the *Qur'an* and *hadith*. Keywords such as young, work and labour are used to find relevant material. The sources of *hadith* are clearly mentioned to ensure the authenticity of the referenced *hadith*. This study also refers to the statutory provisions under the EA and the CYPE. The first part of this article analyses labour rights from an Islamic perspective. Next, the article discusses on the protection of young workers on digital labour platforms. The final part of this paper concludes the discussion and makes recommendations to improve the labour rights of young workers on digital labour platforms so that they align with the principles of *maqasid-al-shariah*.

Labour Rights in Islam

According to Kamali (2011), the concept of work is related to the principle of '*amal*' in Islam. '*Amal*' is defined as 'physical or mental exertion by a human being that is made for generating economic gain, or for enhancing and developing an existing value'. According to Qaradawi, '*amal*' means 'self-exertion by a human being either individually or in collaboration with others in order to produce goods or render a particular service' (Al-Qaradawi, 1997). Work is considered '*amal*', as the performance of work involves activity that can generate economic gains. In work performance, the relationship between employer and employee is described in the form of an employment contract, which consists of terms and conditions that outline the rights of the employee and employer during employment. The main role of an employee is to perform a skill or service that they promise to deliver to the employer, and the main role of an employer is to pay the salary due to the employee.

The principle of work in Islam is different from the Western concept of work as it extends the dimensions of work to include religious and spiritual aspects (Asutay et al., 2022). One of the Islamic principles regarding work is that all individuals with physical and mental ability must work to improve their lives.

According to the *Qur'an*:

Translation: "Those who have faith and do good works (*amilu al-salihah*) shall have blessings and great rewards".

(Surah Al-Fathir, 35:7)

This is again supported in another verse:

Translation: "And say (you must) work, soon will God see your work, and so will His Messenger and the believers".

(Surah At-Tawbah, 9:105)

Maqasid-al-shariah promotes public welfare by avoiding activities harmful to individuals and society. The intent, objective, and purpose of *maqasid-al-shariah* are to achieve social and economic justice while also improving the community's welfare. Thus, employment relationships must be based on justice (Yasmeen, 2022). The relationship between employer and employee must be fair and just to maintain industrial harmony. This can be supported by the following provision:

Translation: "Allah both commands you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between people, that ye judge with justice".

(Surah An-nisa, 4: 58)

According to Naqvi (2013), social justice is the most important element that must exist in every employment relationship:

“The Islamic perception of (the) socio-economic process is dynamic, and its insistence of social justice is uncompromising. This is because injustice disrupts social harmony and, for that very reason, is unethical. To produce the best social structure, according to this view, man’s economic endeavours should be motivated by a meaningful moral philosophy” (emphasis added).

(Naqvi, 2015, p. 80)

Vulnerable groups, especially young workers are frequently exposed to the discriminatory acts by employers. Workers should not be treated unfairly or less favourably because of their gender, skin colour, age, race, or other characteristics. In the *Qur’an*, it is stated that the only measure of superiority between human being is righteousness (*taqwa*), not race, nationality, or social status:

Translation: “O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted”.

(Surah Al-Hujurat, 49:13)

According to Qureshi (2012), Islamic teachings place a strong emphasis on equitable pay, forbid labour exploitation, and suggest a system for determining compensation that takes into account factors such as productivity, cost of living, and profitability. An employer must pay wages according to the agreed amount in the employment contract. The wages given must be commensurate with the service provided, and it is prohibited to underpay workers. This obligation is stated in the *Qur’an*:

Translation: “Give full measure and weight with justice and do not deprive people of their due and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption”.

(Surah Al-A’raf, 7:85)

Additionally, Islam emphasises the obligation of employers to make timely payments to workers (Qureshi, 2012). Wages should be paid immediately after the work is completed. A *hadith* from Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) states:

Translation: “Give the worker his wages before his sweat dries”.

(Sunan Ibn Majah, n.d., Hadith 2443)

This practice aligns with one of the elements under *maqasid-al-shariah*, which is to protect wealth. Workers have the right to fair compensation, timely payment, and protection from wage theft or unfair dismissal. Islam encourages justice in wealth distribution through fair wages and prohibits exploitation, ensuring economic stability for both employers and employees (Ishak & Osman, 2016). Another unique aspect of the Islamic concept of work is found in the element of *ehsan* whereby both the employer and the employee are expected to be good and generous to each other (Jawad & Abbas, 2010). It is the duty of employer and employee to work and perform their obligations in the best possible manner, as promoted by Islam. Injustice in an employment relationship will only cause losses for both employer and employee.

In Malaysia, the EA is the main piece of legislation that regulates the relationship between employer and employee. The EA does not cover every single worker in Malaysia. It only covers persons who are under a contract of service, irrespective of the number of wages earned. However, persons whose wages exceed four thousand ringgit a month are not qualified to claim for overtime payment, payment for working during a rest day, payment for working during public holidays, termination, lay-offs and retirement benefits (Ministry of Human Resources, 2024). The EA only protects workers hired under a contract of service. A contract of service is any agreement, whether in writing or verbal, expressed or implied, whereby one person agrees to employ another as an employee, and the other person agrees to serve the employer as an employee (Employment Act 1955). Workers under contract for service are not protected

under the EA. This is because the relationship between the parties in a contract for service is between employer and independent contractors (Ismail et al., 2019). In determining the type of contract governing the parties, the court will apply the control test, that is, whether the employer can control the worker in performing their duties. The Industrial Court in the case of *Henry Eliathamby v. Tootpay Sdn Bhd* (2018) 4 ILR 22 at page 27 held that:

“The law defines an employee as someone who is engaged under a contract of service, while an independent contractor is one who is engaged under a contract for services. To determine whether a contract is one of service or for services, the degree of control which the company exercises over the individual is an important factor”.

The court in the said case explained that a high degree of control by the employer indicates that the worker is under a contract of service. On a digital labour platform, platform workers are under a contract for service as the platform workers have the flexibility to choose when they want to perform the work. This is supported by a recent case involving an e-hailing driver in Malaysia who claimed unfair dismissal from the platform provider. In the case of *Loh Guet Ching v. Menteri Sumber Manusia and Ors* (2022) MLJU 2503, the High Court held that there is no legal provision in Malaysia that acknowledges an e-hailing driver as a ‘workman’. The low degree of control over the platform workers categorises them as under a contract for service. As a result, platform workers do not qualify for protection under the EA. Their labour rights are determined through the terms of contract agreed with the platform provider. This situation has caused unfairness towards the platform workers, as most of the contract terms set by the platform provider do not favour with the platform worker (Razak et al., 2024). Platform workers such as e-hailing drivers and p-hailing riders are exposed to injuries and accidents while performing their jobs and are left without proper compensation (PERKESO, 2021). Furthermore, platform workers are not entitled to minimum labour rights such as minimum wages, termination and retirement benefits that can be enjoyed by workers under contract of service (Uchiyama, 2022). This practice is clearly against the principle of labour rights in Islam, as the situation has caused unjust treatment to platform workers.

It is the duty of an employer to ensure fair dealings with employees throughout the employment relationship, especially when it comes to vulnerable groups such as youths, women, and disabled persons. Nowadays, individuals as young as 10 years old are working due to their families’ economic hardships, and they are forced to help earn an income. Thus, the question arises of whether young persons are qualified to work according to Islam. The position of young person working in Malaysia is established under Section 1A of the CYPE. A child is defined as a person under the age of 15 years, while young person is defined as a person who is 15 years old but under the age of 18 years old.

Protecting Young Workers’ Labour Rights in the Digital Labour Platform

Islamic law promotes treatment of young persons with kindness. This can be supported by the verse of the *Qur’an*, which encourages everyone to help each other in kindness and piety (Surah Al-Ma’idah, 5:2). Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) also states that:

Translation: “He who helped in alleviating suffering of a believer from the distress of the world, Allah would relief him from distress of the day of Resurrection. He who makes things easy for one who is hard pressed, Allah will make things easy for him in both in this world and the hereafter, and he covers (the failing of) a Muslim, Allah would provide him covering in this world and in the hereafter. Allah would come to help of a servant as the servant had been coming to help his brother...”.

(Sahih Muslim, n.d., Hadith 233)

Empowering young workers in the employment landscape is important as they play a role in social change and are a part of national development. As the employment landscape has been digitally transformed and the relationships between employer and employee have blurred, labour protections for young workers must be revisited to ensure that their rights at work are preserved. In the context of this study, it is vital to treat young workers with kindness by providing justice in the workplace. Islam regards justice as an important element in governing every relationship. Thus, it is the responsibility of every human being to maintain justice, and each person is answerable for their own actions. This is supported by a verse in the *Qur’an*, which states:

Translation: “O ye who believe, stand our firmly for Allah as witnesses to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just that is next to piety and fear Allah for Allah is well acquainted with all that you do”.

(Surah Al-Maidah, 5:8)

The action of providing labour rights protection to young workers is aligned with a *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) which promotes showing mercy to young persons which states:

Translation: “Whoever does not show mercy to our young ones or acknowledge the rights of our elders, is not one of us”.

(Sahih Muslim, n.d., Hadith 4943)

According to Abdullah bin Umar, the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) was reported saying:

Translation: “Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock. The Imam who is over the people is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock; a man is a shepherd in charge of the inhabitants of his household and he is responsible for his flock; a woman is a shepherd in charge of her husband’ house and children and she is responsible for them; a man’s slave is a shepherd in charge of his master’s property and he is responsible for it. So, each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock”.

(Sahih Muslim, n.d., Hadith 2928)

Young workers who have reached puberty still lack experience and knowledge; they are vulnerable to various forms of discrimination by employers. Thus, the law must be adequate to protect the young workers from being victims at the workplace, which would directly stunt their career path (Razak et al., 2024). It can be observed that the action of ensuring labour protection for young workers is aligned with protecting the wealth and property of human beings, which is one of the principles of *maqasid al-shariah* (Abou El Farag & Rashed, 2023; Alias et al., 2024).

Social justice in Islam can be achieved by entrusting and giving wealth or property to those who rightly deserve them (Qutb, 2013). Therefore, justice can be served to young workers if they are compensated. Due to the nature of digital labour platforms, which limits interactions between employers and employees, young workers are often denied their right to fair compensation, as the platform providers sometimes simply change the terms and conditions of the contract without the platform workers’ consent. Currently, platform workers are prone to being victimised by the system algorithm that is set by the platform provider (Rani et al., 2021).

It is also equally important to allow young workers to form and participate in trade union activities. The *Qur’an* clearly validates help for the victims of oppression and even encourages them to leave a place where they are being oppressed and migrate rather than tolerate injustice. Al-Subki wrote:

“The construction workers should ascertain that the site which they build is clear of living creatures. Building works should not be rushed such that it entraps animals underneath or that unclean substances are mixed and used in construction materials. Textile workers and tailors should not make pure silk garments for men nor should they draw inappropriate pictures and designs on their cloths. Dyers and tannery workers must also avoid using unclean substances in their line of work. The use of blood in dying is one such example, which is unlawful. Transport workers and those who rent out animals from transport should refrain from being a party to a procurement of sin- such as taking people to gambling circles. Prison and governors and guards must allow Muslim prisoners to perform their Friday congregational prayers unless the judge has ordered against it. The judge is authorised to disallow it on ground of public interest. They must also help prisoners whom they know to be innocent to seek their release. Weavers must ensure not to include pig hair in the cloth which Muslims may use as prayer mat or wear during the performance of prayer. Water carriers must ensure that drinking water is clean of impure

substances. It is a part of their Islamic duties to be watchful in this regard. Then it is added that if any of these classes of workers are misled or pressurised by the corrupt and powerful elements of society to violate their professional ethics, they must resist the pressure in order to preserve their purity of character and piety”.

(Kamali, 2011, p. 157)

The *Qur'an* also permits any individual or group who feels that they have been oppressed to peacefully protest the unjust acts of the employer. This protest can be done through the participation of young workers in a trade union. This is supported by a verse:

Translation: “But indeed, if any do help and defend themselves after a wrong (done) to them, against such there is no cause of blame”.

(Surah Ash-Shuraa, 26:41)

A *hadith* also enjoins anyone who sees an evil to fight against it by any means available to him, whether by oral admonishment, taking physical action, or through silent denunciation. The provision of labour protection for young workers on digital labour platforms is therefore compatible with the goal and objective of Islam, as it aims for justice. The Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) once said:

Translation: “Support one another as if you were the component parts of a building”.

(Sahih Muslim, n.d., Hadith 1928)

Under Section 1A of the CYPE, it provides labour rights protection for young workers between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. It limits the types of employment that young workers can perform. According to Section 2 of the CYPE, young workers are prohibited from working in hazardous environments (Shukri et al., 2012). Additionally, restrictions on the working hours of young workers are provided to ensure they have sufficient rest and prioritise their education (Shukri et al., 2012). However, the definition of young workers under Section 1A of the CYPE is not aligned with the standard set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This is because the ILO defines young workers as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (International Labour Organisation, 2022). This inconsistent definition of young workers is harmful towards the unprotected young workers (19 to 24 years old) as their working hours are longer and they can even be instructed to work during holidays and leave. They are also exposed to injuries and accidents as the law does not preclude them from working in hazardous environments (Razak, 2024). Worsening the situation, unprotected young workers who work on a digital labour platform are not even protected under the EA, Sabah Labour Ordinance 1950 (Sabah Cap. 67) and Sarawak Labour Ordinance 1952 (Cap. 76 (1958 Ed.) as platform workers are regarded as working under a contract for service and thus not categorised as ‘employees’ who qualify for labour protection in Malaysia (Zainal et al., 2024).

The ILO has developed principles to address the working conditions, rights, and responsibilities associated with digital labour platforms. According to the ILO, digital labour platforms should ensure fair pay, reasonable working hours, and safe working conditions for all platform workers. Platform workers should also have access to social protection such as healthcare, insurance, and retirement benefits (International Labour Organisation, 2022). Therefore, it is important to provide clarity in employment relationships between platform providers and platform workers so that the workers are not denied their labour rights and protections. Lessons can be learned from other countries such as New Zealand where the New Zealand Court of Appeal in the case of *Rasier Operations BV and Ors v. E Tu Incorporated and Anor* (2024) NZCA 403 has decided that Uber drivers are considered as employees and thus eligible to claim for labour rights. While in India, the definition of platform workers is included in Section 1 of the Code of Social Security 2020 (No. 36 of 2020). The inclusion of the term’s platform work and platform worker under Section 1 of the Code confers power upon the government to provide labour rights for platform workers (Srivastava & Gupta, 2020).

Therefore, as young workers play an important role in the nation’s economy, improving the protection for labour rights of young workers on the digital labour platforms is a stepping stone to transform the world of work (Turner et al., 2024). The government must take steps to improve the employment laws to protect young workers’ labour rights in the workplace. This can be done through recognising platform workers

as employees who qualify for protection under the EA. It is equally important to revise the definition of young person under the CYPE and expand the scope of young persons aged 19 to 24 years old to align with the standard set by the ILO (Razak et al., 2024). Additionally, to prevent the exploitation of young workers on digital labour platforms, platform providers must clearly state the age limitation to for platform workers in their contracts. Platform providers may impose a requirement that platform workers must be at least 18 years old. This would allow contracts to be legally binding, as individuals under 18 years old are considered minors under the law of contract (Razak et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The flexibility and convenience of digital labour platforms have attracted young workers to participate in the digital economy. However, due to loopholes in current legislation, young workers are facing various labour rights issues that demotivate them from working. Youths are the assets of a nation, and thus they must be empowered through respecting their rights in the workplace and providing them with protection while working. This effort aligns with the concept of shariah, that is to be just and fair to everyone. The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical framework of labour rights by expanding the discussion to digital labour platforms and young workers. Additionally, it explores the Islamic perspective on labour rights for young workers on digital platforms. This study also provides practical contributions to the government in its effort to improve the gig economy ecosystem. The employers and employees also benefit from this study as it highlights the duties of platform providers to treat young workers fairly, even on a digital platform, from the perspective of shariah.

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