

## A BRIEF REVIEW OF PRECARIOUS WORK LITERATURE IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses the evolving nature, characteristics, and implications of precarious work in Malaysia through a review of studies between 2018 and 2023. Precarious work is defined by non-standard employment arrangements, which are characterized by volatility, insecurity, and reduced benefits compared to traditional employment. The analysis reveals significant demographic variations across various types of precarious work and a marked over-representation of millennials. Economic vulnerability is prevalent, with majority of precarious workers falling within the B40 income bracket. The review identifies several challenges encountered by precarious workers, such as restricted access to basic employment rights, power disparities in employer-employee relationships, and significant impacts on mental health and psychological well-being. This paper highlights the need for targeted interventions that address both sector-specific challenges and the distinctive needs of various demographic groups within Malaysia's changing labor market.*

**Keywords:** *Challenges, Characteristics, Impacts, Labour Market, Malaysia, Precarious Work*

## Introduction

The nature of work and employment relationships has undergone substantial changes globally as a result of technological advancement, economic restructuring, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Abdul Rahman et al., 2021). One of the predominant impacts of these changes is the emergence of precarious work, which is characterized by uncertainty, instability, and limited social protection. In fact, precarious work is becoming more common and is expanding as a result of global social, economic, and political changes (Kalleberg & Hewinson, 2013). The ILO presented eight forms of precarious work: agency work, temporary work, contracting out, casual or on-call work, seasonal work, home-work, self-employment, and part-time work. These forms of precarious work do not provide standard work benefits, such as health and life insurance, illness remunerations, or retirement benefits. As a result, workers engaged in precarious work face a lack of job security, are susceptible to employer replacement, and struggle to manage their lives due to unpredictable hours and schedules, often accompanied by minimal compensation and benefits (ILO, n.d.). Precarious work can be classified into four dimensions: the temporal dimension, the organizational dimension, the economic dimension, and the social protection dimension. Examples of temporal dimensions are uncertain employment continuity, short-term contracts, irregular working hours, and unpredictable schedules (Moore et al., 2018). Besides these dimensions, Matilla-Santander et al. (2019) identify several organizational characteristics that depict precarious employment, such as limited workplace rights and nonstandard employment relationships. Precarious employment is also characterized by economic vulnerabilities, which include low wages, income instability, limited benefits, and social protection (Moore et al., 2018). The social protection dimension focuses on the occupational health and safety implications, such as having limited access to social security, reduced occupational health and safety protection, limited collective representation, and vulnerable working conditions (Koranyi et al., 2018).

Allan et al. (2021) established a framework outlining the antecedents and consequences associated with precarious work. They emphasised that the prevalence of precarious work is influenced by social and economic marginalisation, and that precarious work encompasses various forms of work precarity, such as work itself, precarity at work, and precarity resulting from work. They also noted that certain moderators may influence the relationship between precarious work and various forms of work precarity, with these moderators being shaped by social and economic marginalisation as well as prevailing economic conditions. Various forms of work precarity can undermine job attitudes and behaviors, such as work engagement, job satisfaction, job performance, and the perception of meaningful work. Additionally, they may adversely affect general mental health, including conditions like depression and anxiety, and disrupt aspects of identity such as sense of self and self-esteem. In the United States, precarious work was measured for the first time by NIOSH using the Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES). The survey assessed precariousness based on four components: temporariness (job security, labor force status, salaried or wage earner, job tenure), disempowerment (decision-making, job schedule, union membership, employer and employee relations, help with equipment, must-work, developing opportunity), vulnerability (respect at the workplace, trust in management, productivity, age discrimination, race discrimination, safe team), and wages (financial situation, gross family income, family income satisfaction, fringe benefits, and chances of promotion) (Bhattacharya & Ray, 2022). The survey revealed an association between precarious work and job stress, unhealthy days, and days of reduced productive functioning. Precarious work was also found to be more common among workers in the age

group of 25–34, multi-racial workers, and Black and Hispanic workers. Bhattacharya & Ray, 2022).

The labor market literature has mainly associated precarious jobs with gig workers or informal sector workers. In the ILO as well as in Malaysia, gig workers are considered a vulnerable group in the labor market due to their precariousness and structural inequalities caused by the nature of the gig economy (Uchiyama et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2020; Heeks, 2017). Unlike traditional employees, gig workers refer to employees working in the gig economy or informal sector characterised by flexible and on-demand work arrangements rather than permanent, full-time employment (Ipsos, 2024). Organizations consider gig workers as independent contractors due to the nature of their work. The characteristics of the gig economy labor market enable corporations to optimize the exploitation of revenues by transferring essential risks to employees and augmenting the disparities and susceptibilities they encounter (Uchiyama et al., 2022). However, according to Schneider (2002), precarious work can be observed in both the informal and formal sectors of economies in developed and developing countries. Women, workers of color, and migrant workers are also more vulnerable to precarious work than other populations (ILO, d.). Precarious work is often linked to, but should not be regarded as the same as, the following forms of employment: “part-time employment, self-employment, fixed-term work, temporary work, on-call work, home working, and telecommuting.” All of these forms of employment are interconnected as they diverge from the traditional employment relationship (full-time, continuous work with a single employer). However, they should not always be deemed precarious, as effective legislation and/or strong collective agreements can provide security for these types of contracts (EMF, 2008). Despite the increasing prevalence of precarious employment, Perri (2024) notes that the impact of these working conditions on employees and their families has not been thoroughly studied. In their study involving 451 respondents, they discovered that precarious work has a significant impact on the mental health of workers and their families, leading to intense pressure, trauma, anxiety, and depression.

Prior studies concerning precarious work in the Malaysian context have concentrated on migrants, including Rohingya refugees (Nungsari et al., 2020), Nepalis (Sunam, 2023), domestic workers (Au et al., 2019), and other foreign workers (Kumar et al., 2014; Michael, 2024). Nevertheless, there has been a paucity of research about precarious work among Malaysians (Abdul Jalil et al., 2023; Norashikin et al., 2018). In Malaysia, the Employment Act 1955 outlines the minimum benefits for workers, such as annual leave, sick leave, public holidays, termination benefits, and maternity allowance. The employer is expected to ensure that the employment contract with the worker meets the minimum requirement as provided under the Employment Act 1955. The latest amendment of the Employment Act 1955, which came into force in January 2023, has expanded the scope of protection for workers. All private workers, regardless of their wage amount, are under a contract of service. Despite the amendment, many workers are not protected under the Employment Act 1955. This is because their employment contracts categorize them as independent contractors under a contract for service. This has resulted in their ineligibility to be protected under the Employment Act 1955, and the workers are further exposed to issues such as unstable income, lack of job security, and being disqualified for compensation and benefits.

Therefore, this review aims to provide insights into the discussion of precarious work in Malaysia, including gig workers, by focusing on the definition, characteristics, and impacts of

precarious work. This study is significant as it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by synthesising and clarifying the various definitions and characteristics of precarious work within the Malaysian context. In addition, this study offers valuable insights to policymakers, enabling them to develop and refine labour policies that effectively safeguard vulnerable workers. This study also benefits organizations and employers, as it highlights the impacts of precarious work on both workers and organizations. This knowledge allows organizations to review their human resource practices and workplace policies. Finally, the findings from this study can serve as a foundation for future research into specific groups of vulnerable workers and specific aspects of precarious work in Malaysia, particularly in developing intervention strategies and policy recommendations.

## Methods

This review paper uses a qualitative approach through a literature analysis to examine the prevalence of precarious work among Malaysian workers. We initially conducted our search on the Scopus database; however, it produced only two relevant articles. Consequently, we continued our search on Google Scholar. We did not restrict our search by year of publication or limit it to only English-language papers, as such limitations could lead to the exclusion of relevant studies. Instead, we conducted our search using the specified keywords without any exclusion. Despite this strategy, we only managed to find a few articles that focused on precarious work among Malaysian workers in the Malaysian context. Based on this methodology, our review is confined to only five research papers.

## Discussion

### Definitions of Precarious Work

Izharuddin (2018) defines precarious work as freelance jobs that are unstable and with low pay. He uses the term academic precariat to represent the “underclass” academic worker who has a lower status, reduced benefits, limited job security, and less institutional power compared to permanent, full-time academic faculty. According to Izharuddin (2018), a full-time appointment may also be conceived as precarious when the worker is denied certain rights that are normally given to permanent, full-time academic faculty, for instance, lack of health benefits, demanding performance metrics (extremely high publication requirements within unrealistic timeframes), and employment insecurity (abrupt termination).

On the other hand, Norashikin et al. (2018) used the term "precarious work behavior" to denote any work conduct associated with non-regular and non-standard employment, including part-time work, short-term contracts, and self-employment. This definition corroborates with Abdul Jalil et al. (2023), who define precarious work as any non-standard employment, including part-time, contract-based, freelancing, self-employment, or assigned roles, all of which are marked by unpredictability, instability, and insecurity. In a different study, Md Nor (2022) defines precarious employment as a type of employment in the informal sector, including part-time jobs or self-employment. Among the characteristics of precarious employment are the vulnerability of income, absence of an employment contract, and limited access to social protection compared to those working in formal sectors. Precarious employment may also involve gig workers (Siew et al., 2023). Siew et al. (2023) defined gig workers as individuals working as independents or freelancers. According to Siew et al. (2023), gig workers are increasing in Malaysia because the gig economy offers a wide variety of job opportunities, the

expansion of internet platforms, and provides flexibility. Examples of gig workers are food delivery drivers, freelancers, and e-hailing drivers.

Based on these definitions, precarious work has been defined in the Malaysian context as non-standard employment arrangements characterized by instability, insecurity, and reduced benefits compared to traditional full-time permanent positions. Precarious work can be classified into four components, which are employment structure, economic factors, job security, and benefits and rights. The literature presents a coherent perspective on precarious work from 2018 to 2023, with recent studies (Abdul Jalil et al., 2023; Siew et al., 2023) notably highlighting the influence of digital platforms and the gig economy in the emergence of new types of precarious employment.

### Characteristics of Precarious Workers

The literature highlights significant variation in demographic profiles across different types of precarious work. This indicates that the impact of precarity is not uniform across different populations. For example, Izharuddin (2018) highlighted four types of contingent academic workers, namely sessional lecturers, teaching assistants, tutors, and research assistants. He also categorizes adjuncts, part-time lecturers, facilitators, factional staff, and graduate teaching assistants as members of the academic precariat. Their employment is contingent on the institution's budget and enrollment. Besides that, they receive minimal compensation for a range of teaching responsibilities, including delivering lectures and creating assessment materials. However, it is challenging to quantify or define contingent academic workers in Malaysia due to ad hoc hiring practices, zero contact hours, variable or seasonal employment, multiple institutional affiliations, and inconsistent recordkeeping across institutions.

Meanwhile, the research conducted by Norashikin et al. (2018) concentrated on Generation Y, commonly referred to as Millennials. The majority of the respondents who participated in the study by Norashikin et al. (2018) are female (70%), of Malay race (80%), married (67%), aged between 26 and 35 years (60%), and possess a bachelor's degree (61%). According to Norashikin et al. (2018), the millennials are more likely to engage in precarious employment than the older generation. The Millennials generation, which was born in or after the 1980s and entered the labor market in the 2000s, is characterized as a generation with high levels of self-confidence, self-reliance, independence, individualism, social engagement, and a preference for collaborative work. Moreover, they purportedly prioritize work-life balance and make job choices that favor lifestyle and leisure activities (Shih & Allen, 2007). Millennials, in contrast to previous generations, are more susceptible to fluctuating labor markets and often engage in precarious work arrangements, including temporary, part-time positions and several occupations (Lyons et al., 2015).

Research conducted by Md Nor (2022) focused on single mothers in Peninsular Malaysia, either widowers or divorcees, and between 18 and 16 years of age. Out of 96 respondents, 24% of them were engaged in the formal sector, 60% were in the informal sector either doing part-time jobs or being self-employed, and 16% were unemployed. More recent studies by Abdul Jalil et al. (2023) reveal an interesting pattern of demographic characteristics of precarious workers in Malaysia. The study included 442 Malaysians who identified as precarious workers. The majority of the respondents were women (66.4%), Chinese (54.9%), and unmarried (51.2%). 42.7% were engaged in contract-based employment, part-time employment (32.2%),



self-employment (14%), dispatched employees (9.2%), and agent workers (1.7%). A significant portion of the respondents indicated household income below 40% (B40, 79.6%), followed by middle 40% (M40, 17.8%), and top 20% (T20, 2.6%). Meanwhile, Siew et al. (2023) conducted a study on 30 individuals who identified themselves as B40 gig workers in Malaysia. The majority of the gig workers were male (87%), aged between 20 and 30 years (87%), unmarried (83%), and 80% of them worked as food delivery drivers.

These studies indicate a distinct pattern of gender segregation across various forms of precarious employment, with specific sectors exhibiting a predominance of either male or female workers. Young adults, especially millennials, exhibit a significant over-representation in various types of precarious employment. Furthermore, economic vulnerability is a prevalent issue, as a significant number of precarious workers are classified within the B40 group, regardless of the sector in which they operate. Drawing on these findings, the characteristics of precarious work differed markedly among various demographic groups, indicating that interventions should be customized to address the needs of specific population segments.

### **Challenges and Impacts of Precarious Work**

Our review suggests that workers in precarious work situations encounter a range of interconnected challenges that encompass financial, social, and psychological aspects. For instance, Izharuddin (2018) conducted interviews with seven individuals who are currently and formerly freelance academics in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The informants emphasized that their employment is not sustainable, their income is unpredictable, and they have fewer rights compared to permanent staff. For instance, the informants were not eligible for paid leave, medical claims, salary, bonuses, or delayed payments. They were also unable to participate in departmental meetings or exercise authority over their tasks. The interview uncovered instances of permanent staff marginalization, characterized by unequal treatment, administrative control, susceptibility to arbitrary decisions, dismissive attitudes, normalization of unfair treatment, and social acceptance of discrimination. Consequently, the informants experienced constant anxiety and stress.

In related research, Norashikin et al. (2018) measured precarious work behaviors using the Employment Precariousness Scale (EPRES). The respondents were asked about their rights as employees engaged in precarious work. The study found that only 26.2% of respondents believed they had the right to take weekly annual leave, while 10.3% took long leave, 9.8% went to the doctor, 8.5% requested a day off for personal family matters, and 5.4% took sick leave. This result suggests that individuals have limited access to basic rights and may be experiencing precarious employment conditions. The respondents were also asked about their opinion of the wages they received for doing precarious work. 57.2% of respondents agreed that their salary allows them to cover their basic needs. However, only 34.5% of respondents agreed that their salary allows them to cover unexpected expenses. In terms of bargaining under their precarious employment conditions, the majority of the respondents (63.2%) do not feel afraid to demand better working conditions. However, 32.9% agreed that they would be fired for not doing the task given, and 49.2% agreed that they are able to demand better working conditions without being exposed to punishment. This suggests that while workers theoretically feel they can speak up, their practical power to do so is limited by fear of punishment or job loss. The relatively high standard deviations (0.83–1.00) also suggest a considerable variation in individual experiences or perceptions.

In another study, Md Nor (2022) elucidates the challenges faced by single-mother households in Peninsular Malaysia, contingent upon their job status. Insufficient educational attainment appears to restrict the respondents' work options. When combined with caregiving obligations, the prospects for employment appear to be diminishing. Despite some respondents being employed, their income is insufficient. The ongoing concern for their family's sustenance impacts the emotional and physical health of both the mother and the children. Similarly, the study by Abdul Jalil et al. (2023) illustrated the significance of work-life balance and job security in safeguarding the mental health and psychological well-being of precarious workers. Their study revealed that job insecurity is adversely correlated with work-life balance and psychological well-being; conversely, work-life balance is positively associated with psychological well-being. Furthermore, work-life balance serves as a mediator in the relationship between job insecurity and psychological well-being.

Another investigation revealed that gig workers are more likely to experience mental health issues due to the nature of their work (Siew et al., 2023). Their study found that B40 gig workers had a low level of psychological well-being. 17% of the respondents felt they were not good people and did not live a good life, while 15% of the respondents indicated a lack of sense of purpose and meaning in life. In addition, 13% of the respondents expressed pessimism about their future, and 10% reported having unsupportive and unrewarding social relationships. The majority (40%) of the respondents stated low income as a contributor to low psychological well-being. Siew et al. (2023) identified four predictors that may impact the psychological well-being of gig workers: social support, work-life balance, time pressure, and workload.

Based on these studies, there is a distinct trend of rights deprivation across various sectors, characterized by significantly limited access to fundamental employment benefits. Furthermore, the impact of mental health is significant and strongly linked to both employment conditions and economic instability. These findings reveal that the power disparity between precarious workers and employers results in a state of vulnerability, even in the presence of theoretical rights aimed at promoting improved conditions.

## Conclusion

A review of precarious work literature in the Malaysian context, albeit limited, uncovers complex and multifaceted phenomena that have evolved due to technological advancements and shifting labor market dynamics. This analysis yields several critical insights. The notion of precarious work in Malaysia has evolved from its conventional definitions to temporary or part-time employment to include a wider range of non-standard work arrangements. Besides that, the effects of precarious work vary among different demographic groups, highlighting specific patterns of vulnerability. Young adults, especially millennials, exhibit a significant presence in unstable employment situations. The prevalence of economic vulnerability is also notable, particularly within the B40 income category. Our review also suggests that the nature and extent of precarious work engagement are significantly influenced by educational attainment and family responsibilities. Ultimately, these studies reveal underlying problems of precarious working conditions, including a lack of basic employment rights and benefits, disparities in power dynamics between employees and employers, significant effects on mental health and psychological well-being, and a strong relationship between job insecurity and a reduced work-life balance. In conclusion, this review highlights that precarious work extends beyond a simple employment classification; it represents a multifaceted social phenomenon with significant

consequences for individuals, families, and Malaysian society at large. As the nature of work evolves, especially with the growth of the digital economy, it is essential to address these challenges to ensure sustainable and equitable economic development.

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