

Precarious Work in Malaysia: Definition, Characteristics, Challenges, and Impacts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines about precarious work in Malaysia from 2018-2023, characterised by non-standard employment with volatility, insecurity, and reduced benefits. Analysis shows demographic variations across the precarious work types with millennials overrepresented. Most precarious workers fall within the B40 income bracket, indicating economic vulnerability. Challenges include limited access to employment rights, power imbalances in employer-employee relationships, and negative impacts on mental health. The findings emphasise the necessity for targeted interventions addressing both sector-specific challenges and demographic-specific needs within Malaysia's evolving labour market.

Keywords: Challenges, characteristics, impacts, labour market, Malaysia, precarious work

INTRODUCTION

Work and employment have transformed globally due to technology, economic restructuring, and COVID-19 (Rahman et al., 2021), leading to increased precarious work—characterised by uncertainty, instability, and limited social protection (Kalleberg & Hewinson, 2013). The ILO identifies eight forms: agency work, temporary work, contracting out, casual work, seasonal work, home-work, self-employment, and part-time work, typically

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lacking standard benefits and creating job insecurity (ILO, n.d.). The precarious work spans four dimensions: temporal, organisational, economic, and social protection (Koranyi et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2018; Matilla-Santander et al., 2019). Allan et al. (2021) found that social and economic marginalisation influences its prevalence, undermining job attitudes, behaviours, and mental health. EPRES measurements revealed associations between precariousness and job stress, with higher prevalence among workers aged 25-34 and minorities (Bhattacharya & Ray, 2022). While primarily associated with gig workers who face structural inequalities (Huang et al., 2020; Uchiyama et al., 2022), the precarious work exists across formal and informal sectors, particularly affecting women, workers of colour, and migrants (ILO, n.d.; Schneider, 2002). Non-traditional employment is not necessarily precarious if protected by the legislation or collective agreements (EMF, 2008), though Perri (2024) found significant mental health impacts on workers and families. Malaysian research has focussed mainly on migrants (Au et al., 2019; Nungsari et al., 2020; Sunam, 2023) with limited studies on Malaysians. Despite the Employment Act 1955 amendments, many workers remain unprotected due to independent contractor classifications. This review examines the precarious work definitions, characteristics, challenges and impacts in Malaysia, synthesising knowledge for policymakers while establishing foundations for future intervention research.

METHODS

This review employed qualitative literature analysis to examine the precarious work among Malaysian workers. Initial searches in Scopus yielded only two relevant articles, prompting additional searches in Google Scholar. No restrictions were placed on publication year or language to maximise inclusion of relevant studies. Despite this comprehensive approach using specified keywords, only five research papers focussing on precarious work among Malaysian workers in the Malaysian context were identified for review.

DISCUSSION

Definitions of Precarious Work

Izharuddin (2018) defines the precarious work as unstable, low-pay freelance jobs, using “academic precariat” to describe underclass academic workers with lower status, reduced benefits, limited security, and less institutional power than permanent faculty. Even full-time positions can be precarious when lacking health benefits, facing unrealistic performance metrics, or experiencing employment insecurity. Norashikin et al. (2018) used “precarious work behaviour” for conduct related to non-regular employment including part-time work, short-term contracts, and self-employment. Similarly, Jalil et al. (2023) define the precarious work as any non-standard employment marked by unpredictability and insecurity. Nor

(2022) characterises the precarious employment by income vulnerability, lack of contracts, and limited social protection. Siew et al. (2023) included gig workers (food delivery drivers, freelancers, e-hailing drivers) in this category, noting their increase due to internet platforms and job flexibility. In the Malaysian context, the precarious work is defined as non-standard employment characterised by instability, insecurity, and reduced benefits compared to traditional positions, classified by employment structure, economic factors, job security, and benefits/rights. Recent studies highlight digital platforms' influence in creating new precarious employment types.

Characteristics of Precarious Workers

The literature shows significant demographic diversity in the precarious work across Malaysia. Izharuddin (2018) identified various academic contingent workers (lecturers, assistants, tutors) facing minimal compensation and job insecurity. Quantifying these workers remains challenging due to inconsistent hiring practices. Research by Norashikin et al. (2018) revealed millennials as particularly vulnerable, with participants being predominantly female (70%), Malay (80%), and degree holders (61%). Unlike previous generations, millennials are more frequently engage in the precarious work arrangements. Other studies identified distinct demographic patterns: Nor (2022) found 60% of single mothers worked in the informal sector, Jalil et al. (2023) noted precarious workers were mainly women (66.4%), Chinese (54.9%), and unmarried (51.2%), with 79.6% in the B40 income bracket. Siew et al. (2023) revealed gig workers were typically young males (87%) working as food delivery drivers. These findings demonstrate gender segregation patterns across the precarious employment, millennial overrepresentation, and prevalent economic vulnerability, suggesting interventions should be tailored to specific demographic groups.

Challenges and Impacts of Precarious Work

The precarious workers in Malaysia face multifaceted challenges across various sectors. Izharuddin's (2018) research with freelance academics revealed unsustainable employment, unpredictable income, and fewer rights than permanent staff, causing anxiety and stress. These workers were ineligible for standard benefits and experienced marginalisation through unequal treatment. Norashikin et al. (2018) found limited access to basic employment rights—only 26.2% believed they could take annual leave and 5.4% sick leave. While 57.2% reported salaries covering basic needs, only 34.5% could manage unexpected expenses. Despite 63.2% not fearing to demand better conditions, 32.9% feared termination for refusing tasks. Nor (2022) identified education limitations and caregiving responsibilities restricting single mothers' employment prospects. Jalil et al. (2023) demonstrated job insecurity negatively affected psychological well-being, mediated by work-life balance. Siew et al. (2023) revealed B40 gig workers experienced poor psychological well-being,

with 40% citing low income as the primary factor, alongside inadequate social support and work-life balance. These studies consistently show rights deprivation, mental health impacts, and power disparities between precarious workers and employers, creating vulnerability despite theoretical rights to improved conditions.

CONCLUSION

A review of Malaysian precarious work literature reveals complex phenomena evolving with technology and labour market shifts. Precarious work now extends beyond temporary employment to various non-standard arrangements. Effects vary demographically, with millennials prominently represented in unstable employment and economic vulnerability concentrated in the B40 income group. Educational levels and family responsibilities significantly influence the precarious work engagement. Key challenges include lack of basic employment rights, power imbalances between workers and employers, mental health impacts, and poor work-life balance. The precarious work represents a multifaceted social phenomenon with significant consequences for individuals and Malaysian society, requiring targeted interventions as digital economies grow to ensure equitable development.

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