
The Dynamics of Daily Project Workers: Between Flexibility, Social Vulnerability, and Sustainable Livelihoods

Fikri Noviar
Independent Researcher

*Correspondence: fikrinoviar99@gmail.com

Abstract

The phenomenon of daily project workers in the construction industry, particularly in steel fabrication and erection, reflects characteristics of the gig economy. Workers earn income based on the number of days they work and their involvement in specific projects, making household economic stability highly dependent on the availability of jobs. From a social and sustainability perspective, this situation presents a dilemma: on the one hand, it offers flexibility, allowing workers to easily move between sites; on the other hand, it creates long-term uncertainty once projects are completed. Workers often face periods of unemployment, during which previous earnings are quickly depleted, while the next source of income remains uncertain. Field experiences also highlight significant vulnerabilities regarding social protection. Enrollment in employment insurance such as BPJS Ketenagakerjaan is inconsistent, varying across projects and management policies. This inconsistency reduces workers' sense of security, both in terms of health and future protection. In some cases, management even suppresses costs by neglecting safety regulations, such as proper personal protective equipment or standard procedures, to accelerate project milestones, thereby increasing risks for workers. Economically, while large-scale projects, often run by multinational corporations, contribute to national development, the benefits are not always evenly distributed to contractual workers at the ground level. From a socio-cultural perspective, daily workers build strong solidarity, for example by sharing job information once a project ends. However, this practice simultaneously normalizes precarious working conditions. From a legal standpoint, workers' status often remains ambiguous: sometimes treated as daily laborers, sometimes as piece-rate contractors, or occasionally as permanent staff, frequently based only on verbal agreements. This study underscores the urgency of consistent social protection mechanisms and adaptive legal frameworks, so that the flexibility of gig-like work in construction projects can still ensure sustainable livelihoods for workers and their families.

Keywords: Gig economy, daily project workers, social protection, sustainability, labor law

1. Introduction

The transformation of labor structures in the 21st century has brought significant changes to how employment is defined and practiced. The emergence of the gig economy—characterized by short-term, flexible, and project-based work—has reshaped the meaning of stability and productivity across sectors. While this phenomenon is most visible in digital platforms such as ride-hailing and freelance

marketplaces, similar employment dynamics have quietly taken root in the construction industry, particularly among daily project workers engaged in steel fabrication and erection.

These workers represent a hybrid form of labor: they combine the flexibility of gig workers with the physical and contractual precarity of traditional manual labor. Their livelihoods depend heavily on the number of active projects and the continuity of job opportunities, creating a persistent tension between freedom and fragility. Field observations reveal that many workers migrate between projects without formal agreements, relying solely on word-of-mouth recruitment and personal connections to secure employment.

From a socio-economic perspective, this pattern fosters both adaptability and vulnerability. On one hand, workers can quickly move from one employer to another, seizing opportunities as they arise. On the other hand, once a project concludes, they face income instability and limited access to social protection. The inconsistent application of employment benefits such as BPJS Ketenagakerjaan further intensifies this insecurity, leaving workers exposed to occupational risks without adequate safety nets.

Previous studies on gig work in Indonesia have largely focused on digital freelancers and platform-based labor, often overlooking the construction sector as a significant non-digital extension of the gig economy. This research fills that gap by highlighting the lived realities of daily project workers, showing how flexibility, social protection, and sustainability intersect in a physically demanding and legally ambiguous environment.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the socio-economic and legal dynamics that shape the sustainability of daily project workers' livelihoods in the context of Indonesia's evolving gig economy. It seeks to answer a central question: how can flexibility in project-based work coexist with sustainable welfare and security for workers and their families?

2. Research Method

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach by combining field experience and literature analysis to understand the working dynamics of daily project workers in steel fabrication and erection projects in Indonesia. This approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of the social and economic realities experienced by workers, particularly in relation to flexibility, social protection, and livelihood sustainability.

2.1. Data Sources

The primary data were obtained from field experiences gained through direct involvement and interaction with daily project workers in several steel construction sites. Field observations focused on working patterns, recruitment systems, payment mechanisms, and the implementation of occupational safety and social security programs. Secondary data were collected from academic literature, labor regulations, and reports related to the gig economy and social protection within the construction sector.

2.2. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through two main techniques:

1. Direct observation, to identify working practices and social conditions in the field.
2. Literature review, to examine theoretical frameworks and policy discussions relevant to daily project workers, including Indonesian labor law and social security systems.

2.3. Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis used a thematic approach, categorizing findings into key themes such as flexibility, social vulnerability, labor protection, and livelihood sustainability. Field findings were interpreted in relation to existing theories to understand how flexibility affects workers' welfare. A reflective approach was also employed, integrating empirical field insights with theoretical perspectives to produce a holistic understanding of daily project workers' position within Indonesia's evolving gig economy.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Flexibility as a Double-Edged Sword

The working system of daily project workers offers flexibility that allows them to move easily between construction sites and companies. This flexibility, however, functions as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it provides freedom and autonomy—workers can seek new opportunities and negotiate their daily rates depending on project budgets. On the other hand, this system exposes them to uncertainty once a project ends.

Field experiences in steel fabrication projects show that workers often experience “project gaps,” where they must wait for weeks or months before the next job begins. During these periods, household income quickly diminishes, highlighting the fragile nature of gig-like employment in the construction sector.

3.2. Social Vulnerability and Protection Gaps

Despite being physically demanding and high-risk, daily project work often lacks consistent access to social protection. Participation in BPJS Ketenagakerjaan (the Indonesian Employment Social Security program) varies depending on project management and cost-saving decisions. Some employers register workers only for the project duration, while others omit registration entirely.

This inconsistency weakens workers' sense of safety and long-term welfare. Field observations also reveal that safety procedures are often compromised—helmets, gloves, and harnesses are sometimes neglected to accelerate project milestones. As a result, occupational hazards increase while formal accountability remains vague.

3.3. Solidarity and the Normalization of Precarity

In response to these vulnerabilities, workers develop strong networks of solidarity. They often share job information, tools, and even daily expenses with one another. This solidarity fosters mutual dependence that helps them survive between projects.

However, this same social mechanism also contributes to the normalization of precarity—workers begin to accept unstable conditions as “the way things are.” This cultural acceptance of risk and instability perpetuates systemic inequality, where survival replaces security as the main logic of work.

3.4. Legal Ambiguity and Worker Status

The legal status of daily project workers remains ambiguous. They are alternately treated as daily laborers, contract workers, or even temporary staff—often without formal written agreements. Employment relationships are commonly established through verbal negotiations, creating uncertainty in terms of rights, wages, and responsibilities.

From a legal perspective, this ambiguity complicates the enforcement of labor law. The Indonesian Labor Law (Law No. 13/2003) and the Job Creation Law theoretically protect all workers, but in practice, daily project workers fall through the cracks of implementation. They exist in a gray zone between formal and informal labor.

3.5. Sustainability Implications

The instability of employment directly affects the sustainability of workers’ livelihoods. Economic sustainability is threatened by irregular income and limited savings capacity, while social sustainability declines due to a lack of long-term welfare support.

To achieve a balance between flexibility and security, adaptive labor policies are needed—ones that recognize the hybrid nature of gig-like work in construction. Such policies should strengthen social protection coverage and encourage fairer project management practices that prioritize workers’ well-being alongside productivity goals.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

This study reveals the paradox faced by daily project workers in the steel fabrication and erection sector, who operate within a system that combines freedom with fragility. Flexibility allows them to move between projects and adapt to fluctuating job demands, yet it simultaneously generates long-term uncertainty—economically, socially, and legally.

The inconsistent application of employment protection mechanisms such as BPJS Ketenagakerjaan, along with the weak enforcement of occupational safety standards, places workers in a precarious position. Solidarity among workers serves as a vital survival mechanism; however, it also inadvertently normalizes instability, embedding precarity into the culture of work itself.

Moreover, the legal ambiguity of worker status exacerbates their vulnerability, as most rely on verbal agreements without formal contracts. Consequently, the sustainability of their livelihoods depends largely on informal networks and the availability of future projects, rather than institutional protection.

4.2. Recommendations

1. **Consistent Social Protection**
The government should ensure comprehensive implementation of employment social security (BPJS Ketenagakerjaan) for all project-based workers, including daily laborers. Oversight mechanisms must be strengthened to align social protection with the flexible nature of project employment.
2. **Enforcement of Occupational Safety and Health Standards (OSH)**
Stronger supervision and sanctions are necessary for companies that fail to provide adequate protective equipment or safety procedures. Compliance with OSH regulations should be integrated into project evaluation criteria.
3. **Adaptive Labor Policy Frameworks**
Labor policies need to recognize the hybrid nature of daily project work—neither fully formal nor informal—and provide appropriate legal coverage to guarantee fair treatment and security.
4. **Worker Empowerment and Capacity Building**
Training and certification programs should be developed to enhance the skills and competitiveness of daily project workers, creating pathways toward more stable and sustainable employment opportunities.
5. **Further Research**
Future studies should expand the discussion to other construction sectors with similar working patterns or examine the long-term impacts of flexibility on workers' families and community resilience.

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