

Dear OWRAC Members,

I write to the committee today as an industrial relations and labour researcher, advocate, and worker in Ontario. For the last few years, my work has been around understanding how immigrants are affected in the Canadian labour force, especially with a focus on app-based digital labour platforms, as well as examining how non-standard, precarious work is impacting young and educated workers. All three pillars of this consultation are essential, but I will focus my submission today on the necessity of supporting workers.

In one of my interviews with platform workers during the pandemic (i.e., those who exchange services or goods through a digital labour intermediary such as Uber, DoorDash, etc.), I was slightly taken aback when one participant refused my attempt to offer them a small token of appreciation for their time – he told me he just wanted to be heard, he wanted his story to be known. He was a recent immigrant from Egypt who was trained as a pharmacist and currently working for Uber and Amazon Flex. He shares a similar frustration to what other immigrants I have interviewed expressed – the inability to gain credentials and licensing in his field of training pushed him (and many others like himself) into platform work as survival jobs. He lamented of the seasonal income fluctuations, the unpredictable income offered him no security, but he had few options – he wanted to transition but his options were limited. [I have written](#) about the need to provide tools for those seeking to transition in non-standard and precarious labour, which includes expanding skills/tasks-based recognition, as well as providing essential support in such working conditions with health and social services. As illustrated in the testimony above, there is the desire to transition – but what are the necessary policy tools that can empower workers to find a job that can offer *true* flexibility, control and security? I argue that these qualities for work are not mutually exclusive; they should not be expressed in “either/or” terms – you should be able to have work that offers control and security, and also flexible. While my [findings on the decision making process of immigrants in platform work](#) align with barriers and challenges that many immigrants and newcomers face, what made this interview striking was knowing that many workers have never been asked about how their experience – their complaints dissipate into the ether, the technology platforms they participate on portray a façade of care when many workers’ needs are met with indifference. **The need to have a voice, especially collectively, for platform workers is paramount. The process to achieve said voice is also critical.**

It is also *how* we hear the stories of workers. There is a difference between simply using a superficial method of asking for workers’ feedback when companies look at dichotomous responses about workers’ attitudes and behaviors, yet the nuances and intricacies can only be captured when you dig deep, when you question, and create a comfortable space for workers to share and confide. When gig companies ask workers for their input, there must also be a question of the ways in which answers are solicited. Even within open-ended interviews, my work and the work of other researchers have shown that it is open not a straight-forward response – we need to listen to what the deeper context might entail – it is not that workers are deliberately hiding the truth but when we hear and make sense of what is said between the lines and reach deeper into expressed thoughts, we might be able to find more significant value and meaning. Those are the moments when we are not just hearing the words but begin to move into understanding that can then launch us into palpable actions.

I have wondered if we, as researchers and academics, might often ask redundant questions, or make workers feel drained from speaking with us and answering our questions. I have been honored to center my work around the voices of workers, but I find workers so eager to share their stories – for too long have they feel unheard, silenced, or simply an aside when commentaries about them are made. That is why when the design of this committee did not have voices of workers represented, it was once again an enforcement of the reality that many workers have expressed to me that they have never been asked or consulted about their work – was a fact of life and a reality. In 1988, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak wrote on the concept of “epistemic violence”, which describes a concept in which a person of marginalized status is not able to speak and denied the ability to speak for themselves. In her reflection of Spivak’s work, Dotson (2011) writes that “to communicate we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us”. By not even giving workers the opportunity to voice their experiences, the audience is putting on full display of their unwillingness and incapability of listening to the struggles and barriers that workers face. And as we know from administrative data in Canada, those who are most involved and visible in gig employment are migrants, racialized individuals, and women. By not allowing them to speak for themselves and sharing their experience as precarious gig workers, our government is contributing to the continuation of violence against those who can most benefit from protection.

The workforce recovery process in Ontario might not be a linear process, not all viewpoints might align. But there is a need to center our policies around supporting workers, protecting those who might be most vulnerable to exploitation and unfair labour practices. I would be happy to provide any additional information as necessary and you can reach me through the contact information below.

In solidarity with workers,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laura Lam', written in a cursive style.

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