

Study exposes alarming risks to Scotland's food delivery couriers

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A new study highlighting the risks encountered by food delivery couriers reveals a majority feel 'unsafe' when at work with every woman surveyed having experienced sexual harassment or abuse.

The study, named, "Fair Gig Work: A review of Employment Practices in the Scottish Food Delivery Work 2024," involved co-investigators Dr. Anastasios Hadjisolomou from the University of Strathclyde and Dr. Nadia Kougiannou from Nottingham Trent University.

Led by Dr. Pedro Mendonca from the Center for Employment, Work and the Professions (CREWs) at Heriot-Watt University's Edinburgh Business School, the two-year project gathered feedback from 207 workers, including 33 women, employed in the [food delivery](#) industry in cities across Scotland.

It reveals more than 81% felt unsafe in their job yet continued due to financial necessity while 78% believed their employer focused more on the needs of customers rather than employees. Over 60% suffered racial or ethnic abuse with 55% physically abused, primarily due to road incidents and accidents.

Dr. Mendonca said, "Our findings shed light on the reality food delivery couriers have to confront on a daily basis.

"A significant number of the workforce are migrants who face multiple barriers as well as daily abuse and a lack of opportunities to find alternative employment in safer environments. It's imperative to understand the nuanced reality in this sector so that we can address challenges and ensure equal protection for all workers."

The food courier sector boomed post-COVID with an increasing number of restaurants, stores and food-delivery companies delivering direct to customers. An order is typically placed either by telephone, website or mobile app.

Employment in food delivery remains an important avenue for many people to enter the labor market, and a primary source of income for

48% of those surveyed, particularly among [migrant workers](#). But the sector is said to lack essential policies to protect employees, normalizing unfair practices.

Migrant workers, comprising a significant portion, face barriers such as qualification recognition, visa constraints, and language proficiency, limiting their opportunities to move into alternative careers.

Dr. Mendonca is calling on the Scottish Government to introduce safeguards to better protect workers' rights. He said, "The Scottish Government should advocate for the recognition of food delivery couriers as workers, ensuring access to full employment rights, such as [sick leave](#), paternal leave and holiday entitlement as well as the chance to join [trade unions](#)."

"Furthermore, I want to see food delivery companies, government and trade unions working together to improve employment conditions across the sector and to take action on the concerns voiced by workers."

The report documents first-hand accounts from food delivery couriers.

Among them is "Jordan," whose real name has not been published to protect his identity.

He spoke of his experience saying, "I'm constantly being threatened by people not only customers but on the road, it's like they see a guy with a delivery bag and they constantly giving me grief."

It was a similar story for "Jay" who added, "It's very dangerous work because there's more and more 'hit and run' specially for riders working at night and some colleagues really get hurt and then they can't work of course."

Roz Foyer is General Secretary of Scotland's trade union body, the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC). She supports calls for delivery couriers to be protected by employment rights.

"This report shines a light on the galling abuse suffered by food delivery couriers which cannot be allowed to go unchecked," she said.

"To read that all women surveyed had experienced [sexual harassment](#) or abuse, with 81% of couriers overall feeling fundamentally unsafe in their work, is inexcusable and requires urgent action from government.

"These workers need protection. If we are to become a Fair Work Nation by 2025, the exploitative, abusive practices this vital research from Dr. Mendonca highlights must be purged."

More information: Fair Gig Work: A review of Employment Practices in the Scottish Food Delivery Work 2024

Provided by Heriot-Watt University

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