

Indonesia: The “LadyGrab” program was meant to protect women drivers. It backfired

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Quick-fix policies have accidentally left female drivers open to harassment and affected their earnings.

- Super-app Grab introduced policies to make things safer for women drivers. But it’s causing unforeseen problems.
- One program unintentionally cuts off women from making money from passenger rides. Another allows female drivers to cancel on men — but they can’t tell who might be a threat just by looking at a profile. “We accept the ride and face the situation,” a female driver told *Rest of World*.

When Jakarta-based motorbike driver Ostin first joined the LadyGrab program in 2019, she thought it was the “perfect solution” to male passengers groping her waist and thighs. Launched by Singaporean super-app Grab, the LadyGrab program — its questionable name aside — allows female drivers like Ostin to only take on food and package delivery gigs.

For a while, the program delivered, and Ostin used it to make a decent living. Along the way, she also garnered [nearly 18,000](#) followers by sharing videos of her life as a woman driver. (Ostin requested to be identified by her first name only, due to her large online following.)

Now, however, Ostin’s earnings have dropped to around a third of when she first joined, and she struggles to hit the app’s bonus target of 20 jobs a day. Some days, all she gets are two gigs. She is not sure what happened, but suspects people are ordering less often, or there has been a change in LadyGrab’s algorithm. To make ends meet, she’s started taking extra gigs through ride-hailing app Gojek — which has less flexible policies for driver safety and opens her up to harassment yet again.

Globally, women participate less in the app-based gig economy, due in part to security concerns. To make the experience safer in Southeast Asia, Grab has introduced various measures, including the LadyGrab program in Indonesia, women-only rides in Thailand, and an in-app emergency button across the region. These gestures are intended as welcome changes for drivers — but in practice, can end up being ill-conceived fixes that still leave women open to harassment, while hurting their earnings.

“Beyond its unfortunate name, [LadyGrab] failed to account for the significant income-earning opportunities that are lost through inaccessibility of ride-hailing work,” concluded a [study by Fairwork](#) under the Oxford Internet Institute. “These are only short-term solutions, because a women-only option has way less passengers,” Kavita Dattani, a researcher who ran the study, told *Rest of World*. Grab declined to comment on questions from *Rest of World*.

Based on interviews with female drivers across 38 countries, the Fairwork study found that they consistently battle sexual harassment. In Southeast Asia, motorcycles and scooters are the main modes of transport; female gig workers share their personal space with passengers and risk being

inappropriately touched and propositioned.

In Thailand, Grab allows female drivers to cancel a ride without penalties if their prospective passenger is a man. This sounds fine in theory, but isn't useful in practice, according to 30-year-old GrabBike driver Muk Praditphol. She can't tell if a man is going to harass her simply by the appearance of his profile page. "We accept the ride and face the situation," she told *Rest of World*.

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Meanwhile, the women-only rides offered by Grab in major Thai cities really only benefit customers, who have the option to choose the gender of their driver, Praditphol said. She pointed out that there is nothing stopping a male passenger from booking a female driver.

Across Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, Grab offers AudioProtect, which records the audio of the entire ride, as long as both the driver and rider consent. It could work as a deterrent, but also makes it harder to complain about harassment without hard proof. "I see how if there was a camera in a car or a recording device, somebody might think twice about any kind of harassment," said Dattani from Fairwork. "But if a worker was to report discrimination without having a recording device in the car or other vehicle, does that mean platforms wouldn't believe them?"

Ostin is not the only LadyGrab rider who has seen her earnings drop lately. In a [recent TikTok video](#), she humorized her tight finances. "How many orders [are you getting]? 30? 40?" a female driver in a Grab uniform asks in the video. She, Ostin, and another woman colleague reply in unison, with a tinge of sarcasm: "Still zero! Yes, we are lazy drivers." They refer to their impending loan repayments: "Got a lot of installments? Same here!"

Yet, Ostin said she feels "protected, honored, prioritized" by LadyGrab because she sees no better alternative. This year, the company began sponsoring her to make one or two videos a month. She still prefers LadyGrab to Gojek: During peak hours, Gojek doesn't allow drivers to choose between taking passengers or deliveries, meaning Ostin has to shut off the app to avoid male passengers. She misses out on the most lucrative time of the day.

"Gojek is committed to give equal chance to everyone without looking at their gender, race, and religious background," Rubi W Purnomo, senior vice president for corporate affairs at Gojek, told *Rest of World*.

Such gender blindness, however, doesn't necessarily work either, said Dattani, because "these platforms are built with workers in mind who are men," and have the freedom to move about the city at all hours of the day and night.

Disappointed by platforms' solutions, some women drivers across Southeast Asia have taken matters into their own hands to stay safe. Praditphol in Bangkok — who runs a support group with thousands of drivers, men included — has organized self-defense lessons. Supapon Panpasit, also a GrabBike driver, runs another peer group which advises its members to carry small weapons like a knife or a taser.

"We practice staying calm, to think how to get out of a situation; we practice negotiation," Panpasit told *Rest of World*. She said she hadn't received any such training from Grab, even though both she and Praditphol have experienced harassment from customers trying to touch their bodies on the bikes. Praditphol jams the brakes when that happens, to physically shake off the harasser.

Other women who doubt the platforms' ability to protect them have formed their own ride-hailing services. [Ladies Only Riders and Drivers](#) is a Malaysian cooperative that takes bookings via

Facebook Messenger, as does Riding Pink — Malaysia's [first all-women ride app](#) that only accepts women and children as passengers. Shejek in Bandung, Indonesia, caters to urban Muslim women.

But the market is small, and the economics are difficult. "It's a constant struggle, and I do not dare say that we have overcome it," Denise Tan, the founder of Riding Pink, told *Rest of World*. "However, we have managed to get by."

These alternative services will continue to exist if platforms value their customers over their drivers, experts told *Rest of World*. "As long as there's no real redressal mechanism [for harassment], there's no real intention to listen to workers," Kriangsak Teerakowitkajorn, managing director of the Bangkok-based nonprofit Just Economy and Labor Institute, told *Rest of World*. "The platforms focus so much on one-sided reviews, reviews of customers ... The power imbalance is still there."

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