

## Women As Gig Worker: Barriers for Breaking Stereotypes

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### Abstract

*Based on primary data from India, this paper tries to explore the role of women in India's gig economy, highlighting the barriers they face in breaking stereotypes and achieving equitable participation. Gig workers, as defined by NITI Aayog, engage in non-traditional employment arrangements, with the sector witnessing significant growth—projected to reach 23.5 million workers by 2030. Despite the promise of flexibility and independence, women's participation remains hindered by persistent gender biases, safety concerns, and structural inequalities.*

*The paper throws light on the fact that while the gig economy has created opportunities, women still contend with lower wages, limited job security, and societal norms that dictate their roles. Empirical data suggests that women are often relegated to lower-skilled tasks and experience discrimination in earnings and treatment. Additionally, the lack of supportive infrastructure—such as access to safe working conditions and comprehensive welfare policies—exacerbates these challenges.*

*This study underscores the urgent need for policy reforms aimed at enhancing women's inclusion in the gig economy, focusing on redefining employment relationships, improving safety measures, and fostering an environment conducive to gender equality. By addressing these systemic issues, the potential for the gig economy to empower women and contribute to India's economic growth can be realized more fully.*

### Who are gig workers?

As per NITI Aayog, Gig workers are those engaged in livelihoods outside the traditional employer-employee arrangement.

It classifies gig workers into platform and non-platform-based workers.

1. **Platform Gig workers:** those whose work is based on online software apps or digital platforms.
2. **Non-platform gig workers:** generally casual wage workers in the conventional sectors, working part-time or full time.

### Present status of gig economy and gig workers in India:

Gig workers include ridesharing drivers, food delivery couriers, parcel delivery etc.

As of now, India has around 7-8 million gig workers, and this number is rapidly growing. NITI Aayog estimates that the numbers of gig workers could expand to 23.5 million by 2029–30.

The gig economy is expected to expand at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 12%, reaching 23-25 million workers by 2030. This would mean that gig workers would make up 4.1% of India's total workforce by that time.

A report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) suggests that the gig economy could potentially create 90 million non-farm jobs.

The gig economy could create 90 million non-farm jobs and contribute an additional 1.25% to India's GDP, reflecting its potential as a significant economic driver.

### What are factors behind rapid growth of gig economy in India?

1. **The COVID-19 Pandemic:** During the lockdowns, many traditional jobs were disrupted, pushing people to seek alternative employment opportunities. With companies moving toward remote work and freelancers offering essential services like food delivery, healthcare support, and logistics, the gig economy became a viable option for many.
2. **Digital Revolution:** India's rapid digitalization has been a game changer. The increased access to smart-phones, affordable internet, and the rise of platforms like Zomato, Uber, Swiggy, and Ola have provided gig workers with more opportunities.
3. **Changing Workforce Preferences:** Today's workforce, particularly younger generations, prefers flexible work arrangements over traditional full-time employment. The gig economy offers workers autonomy, allowing them to manage their own schedules and choose tasks or projects based on their interests or needs.
4. **Additional income:** Due to increasing cost of living and inflations, many people, especially those in lower-income groups, are turning to gig work to supplement their earnings.
5. **Business Demand for Cost-Effective Solutions:** Companies, particularly startups and small businesses, are

leveraging gig workers to reduce costs. Instead of hiring full-time employees, businesses can hire gig workers for specific projects or tasks.

### Gig Economy for Women -A New World of Opportunity and Gender Equality

#### Impact of the gig economy on women

A recent report by Harvard University states that during the last decade the number of women working in the gig-economy has outgrown that of their male counterparts. The gig economy enables men and women to benefit from more flexible ways of working and greater freedom in their working patterns. In fact, this could be why the number of mothers working as freelancers has increased by 79% between 2008 and 2016. People working in the gig economy can to some extent choose the hours they work, often when and even where they work and this empowers them to achieve a work/life balance to suit their lifestyle. This is especially advantageous for those who have to care for loved ones (young and the old) – they can fit both work and care-giving into their schedules.

The rise of the gig economy has been hugely beneficial particularly to professional women – 93% of women say it is hard to combine a successful career with caring responsibilities. Being a gig worker has allowed them to continue to advance their careers or at least keep.

#### Women's Inclusion in Gig Economy

The gig economy promises flexibility and opportunity for women, but gender biases and structural barriers limit their participation and success. To unlock the potential, platforms and policy need to change with an emphasis on safety, gender-inclusive design, and worker support.

The platform-driven gig economy has become a significant source of employment in India. The NITI Aayog estimates that about 7.7 million, or about 1.5 percent of India's workforce, were engaged in the gig economy in 2020–21. Just as important is that the platform-based gig economy in India holds significant potential to empower women in ways traditional sectors have thus far failed to do. The platform driven gig economy facilitates their entry into the workforce and allows them to work flexible hours that accommodate their household responsibilities.

However, the reality of the gig economy for women in India is a bit more nuanced. Due to economic restrictions that stem from men still being the key decision makers for household purchases, two factors determining women's participation in the gig economy – access to the internet and smart-phones – continue to favour men.

Moreover, women gig workers often face challenges such as low wages, lack of security, limited bargaining power, and algorithmic discrimination.

### **Problems of women in the platform-based gig economy.**

During the process of interaction, some of the women Gig Employees share their experience as below:

- As a part-time Gig Employee part-time, the income is low,
- Have many of safety concerns.
- It's both physically and mentally draining.
- Even with a safety app and pepper spray, challenges were a constant.
- It's particularly tough for women in the field.

- The risk of accidents notwithstanding, given how unpredictable the traffic can be
- The fear of harassment or feeling unsafe during deliveries are hard to deal with.
- Safety tools help, but they don't entirely ease the worry of being vulnerable."

Some of these occupational hazards that are characteristic to women in gig work also show up in their rather low participation as well.

Taskmo, a task fulfilment platform that hires gig workers for various companies, reports that women's participation in the gig economy is only about 28%. Even in Metropolitan cities, where platform-based gig companies primarily operate, the average female employment rate in 2021 was about 6.9% lower than in 2020. This decline is indicative of the fact that the gig model has failed in one of its promises to provide more opportunities for women.

### **Reasons for low women's participation in the platform-based gig economy.**

More quantitative data is required to understand the reasons underlying low women's participation in the platform-based gig economy.

However, from initial surveys, it appears that the gig economy absorbs more women each year, who also drop out more rapidly.

Occupational segregation and structural barriers remain a considerable challenge. In the so-called "low to mid-skilled" work, men take up jobs in food delivery and ride-hailing, while women again tend to take on work considered "appropriate" Male autocratic, such as beauty, care, domestic help, and cleaning.

## Literature Survey

### 1. Professor Vinoj Abraham, The Centre for Development Studies,

“Traditionally, driving and delivery jobs were male-dominated. There are social norms attached to where women can and can’t be seen in public places, making it hard for women to enter these jobs. Technology has helped search for jobs more efficiently, but norms are not changing.”

Not surprisingly, empirical research also highlights that the commonly attributed reasons for the low participation of women in the labour force, in general, are structural barriers and the lack of gainful employment on account of conservative social norms.

These differences persist in the platform-driven gig economy, too. For instance, many gig platforms, fearing women’s security, do not allow women to deliver food after 06:00 PM., restricting the promised “flexibility.” Gig platforms also experience maximum demand during that time, which male delivery partners lapped up, ultimately contributing to earning disparities between men and women.

### 2. Dr. Gayatri Nair, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi,

while agreeing that social norms and domestic responsibilities heavily influence women’s ability to engage in the gig economy, further points out that these problems are compounded by the gig economy’s reliance on workers to provide their assets, such as vehicles or tools, which can be a significant barrier for women due to their lower access to credit and resources to begin with.

Dr Nair also points out that algorithmic management in the gig model, which replaces

traditional human oversight with automated systems that monitor and control worker performance, adds to the problem. Algorithmic management introduces new forms of authority and control, making it difficult for workers to negotiate their working conditions or address grievances.

For instance, irrespective of the delivery partner’s gender, algorithms mandate targets that are, for the most part, very stiff for women given their relatively limited working hours, failing which algorithms are programmed to provide fewer opportunities for such partners. Perhaps, due to these reasons, a survey by TeamLease showed an 8-10% wage difference between male and female delivery executives.

### Extra Burden: Women in Gig Economy

The gig economy accounts for over 1.4 million jobs in India, including delivery staff, drivers, beauticians and maintenance workers, as per Better Place, a platform for blue-collar workers. Led by companies like Uber, Ola, Swiggy and Zomato, gig work provides the option of short-term contracts or freelancing to its drivers and delivery personnel.

#### 1. Wage Discrimination

With more women joining the gig workforce, they continue to be paid less than their male counterparts for the same jobs. According to TeamLease, there is an eight to 10 per cent salary disparity between male and female delivery executives, ranging between Rs 15,000 and Rs 30,000 per month. As much as 60% of the jobs are in food tech, 30% in e-commerce and courier services and 10% in hyperlocal delivery, it said.

## 2. Disobedient customers

Other than pay disparity, despite women's increasing participation in the gig economy, gender-based discrimination, disobedient customers, and abrupt change in company policies, job insecurity and safety issues remain a growing and unresolved concern for women.

In a recent news report 30-year-old Tinku Das, working for a food delivery apps shared that a man asked her to come up to his home and passed lewd comments when she was delivering food there on Holi. "I quickly called the app support and they took the matter up with him," she was quoted saying.

## 3. Routine, Unremarkable of domestic chores before and after a day at work

Though gig opportunities offer the promise of flexible hours, in most cases, women workers, burdened with domestic expectations have to deal with the quotidian of domestic chores before and after a day at work.

## 4. Disparity in Pay structure

The inadequate pay offered in most gig roles leaves women with little money to afford help after paying for basic needs such as rent, food and transit. Pay structure has been another cause of distress for female gig workers, especially the recent changes in payout structures, which have led to the imposition of pay cuts in the employing companies, especially for delivery workers.

Instances of harassment and prejudice have also been common for female gig workers. "My work at the salon would fetch me better pay. The delivery job, which earlier used to fetch me Rs 30 per

3 km, earns me only Rs 15 now. I used to love the work, but it has become difficult to sustain now," mother of five, 29-year-old Ayesha Khatun was quoted saying in a media report. Khatun works as a food delivery executive for Zomato.

## 5. Gender stereotypes

While women workers struggle with gender inequality within the sector, they also simultaneously are dealing with sexism and gender stereotypes in the outside world with customers and clients. Female cab drivers succumb to these disadvantages the most due to the long-believed and popular misconception that women are bad drivers. Women cab drivers have reported that customers cancel on them shortly after they see a woman cab driver's name.

Rides are also often cancelled after booking and customers pick up fights with a female cab driver. "A man called me 'jhadu-poche wali' and told me I shouldn't drive... I can't count the rides that have been cancelled for no fault of mine," 42-year-old Neelam Sharma, who's been working with cab aggregator service Uber for the last four years as a driver told Indian Express.

Even though drunk men behave inappropriately with female drivers, the drivers don't cancel the ride or raise a complaint out of fear of losing any income. It is important to note here that a driver's ID gets temporarily blocked if their rides are cancelled often. Furthermore, complaints regarding customers' behaviour have been cited to go mostly unheard.

## 6. Lack of access to toilets

Besides assault, harassment and misogyny, women gig workers also struggle with the issue of lack of access to toilets. There are no provisions for toilets for women gig workers, delivery partners or cab drivers. The market of the gig economy deprives workers of the same rights as an employee, thus increasing accessibility issues multifold for women in the sector. Crèches, period leaves, protection from sexual harassment at the workplace, toilets, etc are not on the agenda of gig companies for their workers.

A researcher at the Centre for Internet and Society, was quoted saying that since women make up only 0.5 and 1% of the workforce in the food delivery and cab-hailing industry sectors, the standardized policies for workers end up being gendered. “Algorithm incentivizes longer hours of work, late shifts, peak hours and consecutive rides, which prove to be discriminating against women.”

### What are the lacunas in present initiatives of government?

#### 1. Absence of traditional employee status:

The Karnataka Bill and Rajasthan Act, like the Code on Social Security 2020, avoids defining employment relations in gig work by using “aggregator” instead of “employer.”. It places them outside traditional employer-employee relationships, which limits their access to full labor rights and protections. This prevents the application of protective labor laws to gig workers.

#### 2. Minimum wages:

Institutional protection such as minimum wage protection are missing for gig workers. Occupational safety and health regulations do not apply for gig workers.

#### 3. Welfare Boards shortcomings:

Historically, welfare board models have been poorly implemented, as shown by the Construction Workers Welfare Act of 1996 and the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, where available funds were underutilized.

#### 4. Exclusion:

Gig workers are not included under the Industrial Relations Code 2020 and are not covered under the dispute resolution mechanism.

#### 5. Misuse of Power balance by employers:

As per the ILO study, asymmetric relations of power and control between workers and platform companies lead to many issues. Not only are workers are working without legal status and safety nets, there has also been a gradual pullback of the incentive structure and income levels of workers which had motivated them to join the platform economy in the first place.

#### 6. e-Shram portal:

Like informal workers, gig workers are required to register themselves under the e-Shram portal through self-declaration.

#### 7. Formal companies with informal workers:

Many gig employers, as in some of the well-known companies, operate as formal entities within the formal sector. Therefore, exclusion of gig workers from the traditional employment framework is not justified.

## 8. Social Security Gap:

The Social Security Code 2020 sets to provide gig workers with only certain social security schemes but not institutional social security, which is provided to formal employees. For example, under institutional social security coverage, formal workers get 26 weeks of paid leave along with job security for the entire period of maternity under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961. Whereas, under social security schemes, for maternity benefits, there is a cash benefit such as ₹5,000-₹10,000 for registered informal workers.

## 9. Low Compensation and platform related issues:

Despite being easy to enter, many gig jobs offer inadequate compensation and lack the benefits typical of traditional employment. Platforms have multiple other issues like (a) Frequent and random changes to the commission structure, (b) Delays in payments, (c) Deliberate miscommunication of earnings potential to attract gig workers

## 10. Gender Disparities:

Women in the gig economy face challenges such as limited career advancement, lack of bargaining power, and lower pay due to gender-based discrimination.

## 11. Bad treatment:

Due to non-recognition of workers, food delivery workers are often treated badly by the restaurants and order placing stores and even by security guards of housing societies.

## What should be done?

### Defining Employment Relations:

The article argues that the key to securing gig workers' rights lies in clearly defining the employment relationship between aggregators and gig workers. U.K. Supreme Court ruled in the Uber case, where Uber drivers were classified as workers and Uber was considered an employer. A similar approach in India could formalize gig work and provide workers with necessary protections.

### NITI Aayog's recommendations for welfare of gig workers in India

#### 1. Financial Inclusion:

Access to institutional credit may be enhanced through financial products specifically designed for platform workers and those interested to set-up their own platforms.

#### 2. Skill development:

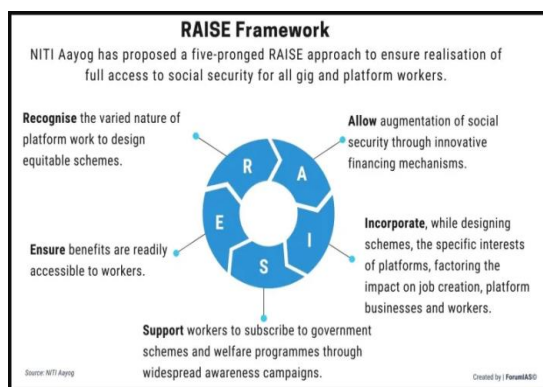
Platform-led models of skilling and job creation need to be promoted for the gig and platform sector. This will create avenues for horizontal and vertical mobility for workers to take up jobs in the gig and platform sector.

#### 3. Enhancing Social Inclusion:

Gender Sensitisation and Accessibility Awareness Programmes for workers and their families should be undertaken. Platform businesses can undertake partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to enable different sections of workers such as women workers and PwDs.

### NITI Aayog's RAISE Framework

NITI Aayog has proposed a five-pronged RAISE approach to ensure realization of full access to social security for all gig and platform workers



- **Recognize:**

Recognize the varied nature of platform work to design equitable schemes,

- **Allow**

Allow augmentation of social security through innovative financing mechanisms

- **Incorporate**

Incorporate, while designing schemes, the specific interests of platforms, factoring the impact on job creation, platform businesses and workers.

- **Support**

Support workers to subscribe to government schemes and welfare programmes through widespread awareness campaigns.

- **Ensure:**

Ensure benefits are readily accessible to workers

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