

Gig Work, Big Gaps: Women in India's Gig Economy

Introduction

The gig economy has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven by a pandemic-induced demand for swift and convenient access to goods and services.¹ This economy is dominated by the provision of 'offline' assistance requested via digital platforms such as food delivery, repairs and care work (eg babysitting) provided by temporary workers termed 'independent contractors.'² This work is distinct from the more lucrative 'crowd work' which encompasses online tasks such as coding, programming and producing content for social media platforms.³ Despite its growing importance, the gig economy is characterised by variable hours, limited job security and minimal opportunities for career development.⁴

In India, the gig economy has expanded rapidly over the past decade, driven by factors such as growing rural-to-urban migration, low entry barriers for gig work, increasingly affordable mobile phones and data plans, and growing venture capital investment in digital platforms.⁵ According to the Indian government's policy arm, NITI Aayog, approximately 7.7 million individuals in the country were engaged in gig work in 2020. While sex disaggregated data on the gig labour force is scarce, some estimates note that women currently make up only 28% of platform economy workers – drawing a contrast to the rapidly growing male gig labour force.⁶ This is likely a conservative estimate impacted by frequent methodological changes in successive research looking at women's work in India. For instance, one of the frequent debates is on whether to place domestic work (as maids), dominated by women, as temporary work or more long-term employment.⁷

Over the past two decades, the country has witnessed a steady decline in the labour force participation rate among women, which fell from an already low 30% in the early 2000s to just 26% in 2018.⁸ In India, women's work has been on the backburner for several reasons: as families grow richer, they expect women to drop out of the labour force as their jobs are often seen as a supplementary source rather than the primary source of income.⁹ Additionally, more women are joining higher education in India causing longer periods outside the

¹ Rebecca Henderson, "How COVID-19 Has Transformed the Gig Economy," *Forbes*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccahenderson/2020/12/10/how-covid-19-has-transformed-the-gig-economy/>.

² Henderson, "How COVID-19 Has Transformed the Gig Economy."

³ Steven Vallas and Juliet B. Schor, "What Do Platforms Do? Understanding the Gig Economy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2020): 273–94, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857>.

⁴ Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham, *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction* (Polity Press, 2020), <https://www.abebooks.com/9781509536368/Gig-Economy-Critical-Introduction-Woodcock-1509536361/plp>.

⁵ Anwesha Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study," Institute of Social Studies Trust, May 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3944205>.

⁶ Anand Nandkumar and Ankita Sharma, "Women's Inclusion in the Gig Economy: An Unfulfilled Promise," Indian School of Business, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.isb.edu/faculty-and-research/srini-raju-centre-for-it-and-the-networked-economy/womens-inclusion-in-the-gig-economy-an-unfulfilled-promise>.

⁷ Steven Kapsos et al., "Why Is Female Labour Force Participation Declining so Sharply in India?," International Labour Organisation, August 2014, www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@inst/documents/publication/wcms_250977.pdf.

⁸ Ria Kasliwal, "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers," Observer Research Foundation, May 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230524165631.pdf>.

⁹ Lauren Frayer and Raksha Kumar, "It's a Mystery: Women in India Drop out of the Workforce Even as the Economy Grows," *NPR*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/01/04/1146953384/why-women-in-india-are-dropping-out-the-workforce-even-as-the-economy-grows>.

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workforce.¹⁰ Most critically, societal norms about what women can and cannot do outside the home remain largely unchanged, severely limiting their opportunities. Women are overwhelmingly expected to prioritise unpaid care work, a responsibility that persists as they transition through various roles, from daughters to wives to mothers.¹¹

Though the gig economy may seemingly promote an equal-opportunity workspace, entrenched structural barriers make it difficult for women to access quality work within this system. Gendered segmentation makes women over-represented in underpaid and undervalued jobs in beauty services and care work.¹² Women are not prioritised for certain works due to algorithmic bias, for instance as drivers or delivery food operators.¹³ Most gig workers work independently, and unionisation and collective bargaining efforts are few and far in between, and often led by men.¹⁴ Safety and security concerns restrict women from taking up 'risky' hours of work, despite the so-called flexibility offered by platforms.¹⁵ Challenges such as a lack of job security and uncertainty of company policy impact both men and women, but women are often rendered invisible by structural inequities, making it even more difficult for them to seek support.

This case study explores the gendered challenges that women face in the gig economy in India. It highlights the policy-level, sociocultural-level and company-level challenges that hamper women's participation in the gig economy. It presents three policy options to address these concerns: maintain the status quo; improve legislation but keep limited company accountability and sociocultural barriers unchanged; and improve legislation that results in company accountability.

Challenges Faced by Women in the Gig Economy

Women in India's gig economy face multifaceted challenges. These barriers manifest at the policy-, sociocultural- and company-levels. Worker protection largely depends on national policies, which continue to grapple with defining the rights of gig workers and lags even further behind in addressing the specific needs of women gig workers.¹⁶ Meanwhile, sociocultural norms play a significant role in determining what women can and cannot do in both formal and informal work. These norms also influence women's access to technology, safety and security, forming the core of gendered challenges they face.¹⁷ Company regulations often unintentionally reinforce sociocultural expectations, for example, through algorithmic biases and limited opportunities for collective bargaining. These factors shape the type of work women can access and the options available to negotiate their position in the workforce.

Policy-level Challenges

This section summarises macro-level policy challenges faced by gig workers including limited legal recognition that bars them from accessing workplace benefits and protections. Women are made more vulnerable by these challenges, as this restricts their access to childcare services and redressal mechanisms, especially those addressing sexual harassment in the workplace.

¹⁰ Frayer and Kumar, "It's a Mystery: Women in India Drop out of the Workforce Even as the Economy Grows."

¹¹ Akshita Sharma, "Reviving Female Labour Force Participation in India: Need to Challenge Social Norms," Social and Political Research Foundation, March 2021, https://sprf.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/SPRF-2021_Female-Labour-Force.pdf.

¹² Ira Anjali Anwar et al., "Gig Platforms as Faux Infrastructure: A Case Study of Women Beauty Workers in India," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6, no. CSCW2 (2022): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555134>.

¹³ Ira Anjali Anwar et al., "Gig Platforms as Faux Infrastructure: A Case Study of Women Beauty Workers in India," 1–25.

¹⁴ Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

¹⁵ Ning F. Ma et al., "'Brush It Off': How Women Workers Manage and Cope with Bias and Harassment in Gender-Agnostic Gig Platforms," *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, no. 397 (2022): 1–13, doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3517524.

¹⁶ Vidhi Rane, "Platform-Based Gig Workers: A Blind Spot in the Indian Labour Laws," Jindal Global Law School (JGLS), October 31, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4821229>.

¹⁷ Kasliwal, "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers."

Exclusion of Gig Workers in Labour Laws

Most gig workers remain outside the purview of many labour laws, leaving women workers particularly vulnerable.¹⁸ For instance, the 1947 Industrial Dispute Act excludes independent contractors, leaving gig workers, especially women, vulnerable to exploitation without avenues for redress or protection.¹⁹ Gig workers are also excluded from the 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, leaving them without legal recourse in cases of sexual harassment.

In 2019, the Government of India introduced four labour codes to streamline 29 existing labour laws. These new policies include the following: 2019 Code on Wages; 2020 Industrial Relations Code; 2020 Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code; and 2020 Code on Social Security.²⁰ Among these, only the Code on Social Security explicitly mentions gig workers, defining them as individuals earning outside the traditional employer-employee relationship.²¹ While this definition provides gig workers with legal recognition, it does not grant them 'employee-like' status that would allow them to access company benefits. Gig workers are also ineligible to receive minimum wage allowances, as they are not covered by the Code on Wages.²²

With no legal precursors, companies continue to prioritise customer satisfaction over gig workers' concerns.²³ Echoing paternalism and moral policing, some companies have begun advising women to avoid male customers, limiting their earning potential.²⁴ Swiggy, a food delivery app in India, for instance, previously disallowed women from working after 6 PM to avoid safety issues, leading to significant income losses during peak dinner hours.²⁵ Without a robust legal framework, such "safety precautions" created additional barriers for female gig workers.

Missing Gender Focus in Social Security

Although the new Code on Social Security includes provisions for maternity benefits and childcare facilities, ambiguities and loopholes within these provisions leave female gig workers particularly vulnerable, further exacerbating existing gender disparities.²⁶ For one, the maternity benefits provision does not explicitly include aggregators or gig work platforms.²⁷ This exclusion creates ambiguity regarding maternity leave allowances and benefits for gig workers. In theory, companies should bear this responsibility. However, the multiple-employer nature of gig work, where workers are associated with several employers, allows companies to avoid these obligations.²⁸ This lack of clarity can discourage companies from hiring women in certain age groups, marginalising them further in the gig economy.

¹⁸ Ministry of Commerce and Industry, "Overview of Labour Law Reforms," PRS Legislative Research, 2020, <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/overview-of-labour-law-reforms>.

¹⁹ Khushi Agarwal, "Rules and Regulations Governing Gig Workers in India," Juris Centre, September 10, 2024, <https://juriscentre.com/2024/09/10/rules-and-regulations-governing-gig-workers-in-india/>.

²⁰ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, "New Labour Code for New India: Biggest Labour Reforms in Independent India," 2019, https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/labour_code_eng.pdf.

²¹ Ministry of Labour and Employment (India), "The Code on Social Security 2020," September 28, 2020, https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/ss_code_gazette.pdf.

²² Ministry of Labour and Employment (India), "The Code on Wages 2019," July 19, 2019, https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/the_code_on_wages_as_introduced.pdf.

²³ Anjali Krishan et al., "Gender and Platform Work: Beyond Technosolutionism," *Fairwork*, 2023, <https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2023/07/Fairwork-Gender-Report-2023-FINAL-red.pdf>.

²⁴ Anjali Krishan et al., "Gender and Platform Work: Beyond Technosolutionism."

²⁵ Anjali Krishan et al., "Gender and Platform Work: Beyond Technosolutionism."

²⁶ Debjani Aich et al., "Closing the Gap: How Karnataka's New Bill and the Social Security Code Could Redefine Gig Worker Rights," *INDUSLAW*, December 6, 2024, <https://induslaw.com/publications/pdf/alerts-2024/gig-workers-article.pdf>.

²⁷ Ministry of Labour and Employment (India), "The Code on Social Security 2020," September 28, 2020, https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/ss_code_gazette.pdf.

²⁸ Anchita Dua, "Protecting Female Gig Workers in India: Bridging the Legal Void," *Niti Tantra*, March 23, 2023, <https://nititantra.com/female-gig-workers-in-india/>.

Sociocultural-level Challenges

This section summarises sociocultural challenges that female gig workers in India navigate on a regular basis – including safety and security concerns that platforms often overlook, and the gendered digital divide that hampers women's access to and participation in the gig economy.

Safety and Security

Gig platforms are supposedly gender-agnostic, suggesting that even though gig platforms and apps may not intentionally discriminate, they treat male workers' experiences as the norm, thereby forming platform designs that completely disregard female workers' lived experiences and realities. As a result, safety and security concerns in the work environment, which stand as critical issues for female gig workers in India, are often overlooked. Research on gig platforms in India shows that while measures like background and credit checks promote caution, female gig workers, especially those providing in-home services like beauty treatments, face significant safety risks.²⁹ Existing platforms often lack mechanisms to help them assess risks or ensure safe exits. Moreover, algorithm-driven systems often pressure workers to endure inappropriate client behaviour to avoid poor ratings, further compromising their safety.

Additionally, gig platforms also often fail to anticipate or have a mechanism to address female-specific safety needs and risks beyond the workplace.³⁰ A design study conducted on the Urban Company – an app providing home services like cleaning, repair, painting and salon services – revealed that female gig workers often request their male counterparts to accompany them in unknown locations, narrow alleys or wait outside until the service is completed. When emergencies arise, there are glaring gaps in calling their immediate manager or the help centre of the platform as they either take a long time to respond or become unresponsive.³¹ Urban Company is the largest employer of women in India's gig economy.³²

Digital Divide

The digital divide remains another critical barrier to female workers' participation in the country's gig economy, significantly impacting their access to and benefits from the platform work. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023 reports that only 18% of women in India use mobile internet compared to 30% of men, with adoption, cost and accessibility challenges as the top three concerns.³³ This gap stems from sociocultural constraints such as restrictions on owning a mobile phone – a direct barrier in accessing gig platforms.

Although some female workers may overcome these access barriers, the reality of low digital literacy is a persistent challenge. Particularly for those migrating from rural areas, most of the female gig workers are unfamiliar with the digital tools and systems that gig platforms require such as Global Positioning System navigation, online payments and managing work through smartphone apps. This lack of 'digital legibility' along with digital literacy places female workers at a disadvantage from the start.³⁴

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many platforms introduced remote health and safety training for service providers, covering important topics like minimising touch, maintaining social distancing, proper sanitation

²⁹ Ning F. Ma et al., "'Brush It Off': How Women Workers Manage and Cope in Gender-Agnostic Gig Platforms," 1-13.

³⁰ Shruti Gupta, "Gendered Gigs: Understanding the Gig Economy in New Delhi from a Gendered Perspective," *Proceedings of the 2020 International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development*, no. 7 (2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3392561.3394635>.

³¹ Divyansha Sehgal and Yatharth, "Designing Domestic and Care Work Platforms: A Case Study of Urban Company," Center for Internet & Society, August 2022, <https://studylib.net/doc/27342258/apc-designing-domestic-and-carework-platforms--1->.

³² Sonia Faleiro, "A Startup Ushered Thousands of Indian Women into Gig Work, for Better and Worse," *Rest of World*, May 2, 2023, <https://restofworld.org/2023/urban-company-gig-work-women-india/>.

³³ Nadia Jeffrie, "Gender Gap 2023 - Mobile for Development," GSMA, 2023, <https://www.gsma.com/r/gender-gap-2023/>.

³⁴ Govind Kelkar, "Patriarchal Discrimination and Capitalist Relations: The Gender Question in the Gig Economy," Institute for Human Development, 2022, <https://www.ihdindia.org/working-papers-wp/IHD-CGS-Working-Paper-03.pdf>.

and usage of Personal Protective Equipment kits.³⁵ While helpful in theory, these trainings came with barriers. They were not multilingual and depended on understanding the English language, which Indian women are much less likely to be able to be familiar with.³⁶ Besides, they also required fast and reliable internet access. Since these resources and digital skills are not well available to female workers, navigating these platforms became a process of trial and error, often resulting in missed opportunities and thereby lost income. When faced with digital challenges, female gig workers reported seeking help from their families and friends – indicating additional efforts that female workers needed to exert to adapt to a digital environment.

Company-level Challenges

This section summarises challenges that women face once having joined the gig-force, including gendered expectations that push women into lower paying jobs reinforced by an 'algorithmic bias' that prioritises men for certain jobs, and the dual burden of unpaid care and employment that most women navigate daily.

Gender Segmentation and Algorithmic Bias

Gender segmentation is a defining characteristic of gig work, where women are seen concentrated in jobs related to beauty work, caregiving or domestic services, which are often both undervalued and underpaid. Female workers are treated as replaceable commodities and are funnelled into precarious work arrangements that ultimately reflect age-old hierarchies of gender, caste and class.³⁷ Such gender segmentation is perpetuated by platform design and algorithmic biases. Algorithmic bias refers to the systematic skewing of outcomes generated by algorithms, which may inadvertently reinforce existing social inequalities or create new forms of discrimination.³⁸ In the context of India's platform economy, algorithmic bias manifests in the way gig platforms allocate work through automated systems, evaluate worker performance and determine rewards or penalties.

While platform algorithms set prices and task timings, it fails to recognise the additional burden pushed onto women in the beauty industry.³⁹ If a lower rating is provided due to a perceived lack-of-professionalism, this translates into fewer bookings, trapping women into a cycle of invisibility, mismatch in job allocation and lower earnings. The same expectation is usually not set on delivery workers who are mostly men. This bias is particularly burdensome for female gig workers at the margins of caste and class in India. Such workers are often asked to perform their work as beauty service providers from bathrooms or balconies, adding to the emotional and cognitive workload.⁴⁰ When algorithms are programmed and curated by coders without considering gender equity and female participation, the resulting effect is replication and amplification of pre-existing biases.⁴¹ For instance, a female worker in the goods delivery or a ride-hailing service platform may find fewer job matches because platforms assume these jobs are better suited to be performed by men.⁴²

Demands of Gig Work Amidst Unpaid Care Work

For most women in India, gig work does not replace unpaid care work at home. Despite the flexibility often associated with gig work, companies impose minimum hour requirements on the job that make unpaid care work like childcare even more burdensome for women. For example, Urban Company requires beauticians to

³⁵ Ira Anjali Anwar et al., "Gig Platforms as Faux Infrastructure: A Case Study of Women Beauty Workers in India," 1-25.

³⁶ Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

³⁷ Ira Anjali Anwar et al., "Gig Platforms as Faux Infrastructure: A Case Study of Women Beauty Workers in India," 1-25.

³⁸ Zhisheng Chen, "Ethics and Discrimination in Artificial Intelligence-Enabled Recruitment Practices," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 1 (September 13, 2023): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02079-x>.

³⁹ Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

⁴⁰ Isha Bhallamudi, "It's Always Been Women's Work': Tracing Gender, Technology, and Work in India through an Account of AI-Mediated Beauty Work," (PhD diss., University of California Irvine, 2024), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6k42w860>.

⁴¹ Kasliwal, "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers."

⁴² Kasliwal, "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers."

complete at least 30 jobs per month to remain active on the platform, leaving women with little time to balance professional and caregiving responsibilities.⁴³

A study conducted by the National Sample Survey Office in 2022 highlighted that women in the working-age group of 15 to 60 years spend an average of 7.2 hours daily on unpaid domestic work compared to only 2.8 hours spent by men.⁴⁴ Even among urban areas, 87% of women participate in unpaid domestic work compared to only 25% of men, further underscoring the time poverty that women face.⁴⁵

As a result, female workers have limited flexibility and availability to meet the rigid and often unpredictable demands of gig work, such as punctuality and task completion metrics. It also makes it harder for female workers to meet the platforms' Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven rating systems, which are insensitive to their unpaid labour burdens, leading to lower ratings and fewer job opportunities. This dynamic perpetuates and deepens the gender disparities in the gig economy.⁴⁶

Box 1: The Double Work Burden and AI-ratings on BeautiCare⁴⁷

Sheetal, a dedicated beautician on the BeautiCare platform, was blindsided after 1.5 years of employment when her app access was suddenly blocked. The platform's algorithm had adjusted its rating threshold and workers scoring below 4.5 were laid off. Despite multiple warnings on the platform, there was little time for Sheetal to meet the elevated expectations of the AI-mediated rating decisions as she struggled to juggle her domestic responsibilities of cooking, cleaning and caregiving at home. She could not regain access to the app, even though she re-applied as a masseuse (a different service category), created a new profile and completed the required job interviews. The platform's opaque and unaccountable rating system failed to recognise her compounded challenges and put her in a state of emotional and financial turmoil.

Unionisation and Advocacy Challenges

Platforms make it challenging for workers to organise or bargain collectively. Workers are often pitted against each other, and those seen as threats can be fired without recourse. Since platforms position themselves as intermediaries rather than employers, workers struggle to identify whom to approach for grievances like non-payment of earnings or poor working conditions.⁴⁸

The gig economy is fraught with the gendered nature of worker collectivisation.⁴⁹ The gender gap in the platform economy is reflected in women's low membership in male-dominated trade unions like the United Food Delivery Partners' Union and the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers. This disparity stems from several factors: the low number of women in delivery and driving sectors, insufficient gender sensitivity in workplaces, and poor working conditions combined with unpaid labour, leading to higher attrition among women.⁵⁰

In women-dominated sectors like domestic and beauty work, platform workers lack unions representing their specific needs. While organisations like the Self-Employed Women's Association have championed women's

⁴³ Sonia Faleiro, "A Startup Ushered Thousands of Indian Women into Gig Work"; Aashima Sinha et al., "Well-Being Costs of Unpaid Care: Gendered Evidence from a Contextualized Time-Use Survey in India," *World Development* 173 (2024): 106419, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106419>.

⁴⁴ The Economic Times, "Women Spend 7.2 Hours on Unpaid Domestic Work Compared to 2.8 Hours Spent by Men: IIMA Prof's Research," February 12, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/women-spend-7-2-hours-on-unpaid-domestic-work-compared-to-2-8-hours-spent-by-men-iima-profs-research/articleshow/97837422.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴⁵ Ellina Samantroy, "Women's Paid and Unpaid Work: Insights from the Time Use Survey and Methodological Issues," *NLI Research Studies Series*, no. 154 (2022), vgnli.gov.in/sites/default/files/NLI%20Research%20Studies%20Series%20No.%20154-2022.pdf.

⁴⁶ Bhallamudi, "It's Always Been Women's Work."

⁴⁷ Bhallamudi, "It's Always Been Women's Work."

⁴⁸ Woodcock and Graham, *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*.

⁴⁹ Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

⁵⁰ Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

rights, platform-specific challenges remain overlooked. Female delivery workers from platforms like Zomato and Swiggy reported exclusion from union WhatsApp groups due to their gender, receiving updates informally through male colleagues.⁵¹ Trade unions are often perceived as male-dominated spaces, requiring time and resources that many women, burdened by paid and domestic responsibilities, cannot spare. As a result, union activities are seen as additional tasks that could harm women's livelihoods.⁵² However, the lack of union membership leaves women vulnerable in the face of unfair treatment.

Policy Options

The challenges outlined – spanning policy clarity, safety, digital divide, algorithmic biases and structural inequities – reveal a deeply entrenched cycle of gendered barriers within the gig economy of India. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multi-faceted response that considers the intersection of policy, company responsibility and sociocultural transformation. There are three policy options to address these concerns: maintain the status quo; improve legislation but keep limited company accountability and sociocultural barriers unchanged; and improve legislation that results in company accountability.

Maintain the Status Quo

The first policy response is to 'do nothing'. Maintaining the status quo may be beneficial for two key reasons. First, the low labour force participation among women in India may be a temporary phenomenon and could be expected to improve as the country transitions from being a low-middle-income economy to a high-income one.⁵³ A white paper titled "Shaping the Future of Work: Empowering India's Gig Economy" highlights the potential for significant growth, projecting the addition of 90 million jobs enabled by large multinational corporations, which would provide increased opportunities for women.⁵⁴ This growth is expected to contribute 1.25% to India's GDP by 2030.⁵⁵ In such a scenario, overburdening employers with excessive welfare measures through legal provisions could hinder this momentum.

Improve Legislation but Keep Limited Company Accountability and Sociocultural Barriers Unchanged

In this policy option, national legislation is revised to enhance labour rights, with state governments tasked to implement social welfare schemes for women gig workers in their respective jurisdictions. Gig workers will be defined using parameters such as working hours, service provision and loyalty to one or more platforms, rather than through the restrictive definition of being "outside an employee-employer relationship."

Adopting a more inclusive framework like the UK legislation⁵⁶ could offer greater flexibility for women gig workers by categorising them into three groups: self-employed, workers and employees, based on their level of contribution. Under this system, the self-employed, who contribute minimally, would still be entitled to certain basic benefits. Workers would receive minimum wages, welfare schemes, maternity benefits, pensions and similar provisions, while employees would gain full employment status.⁵⁷ This definition would apply to all labour laws, including the 2019 Code on Wages; 2020 Industrial Relations Code; 2020 Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code; and 2020 Code on Social Security. It would enhance workers' bargaining power and strengthen their rights based on their contributions and be able to provide women workers with assured minimum benefits that could help them continue employment.

⁵¹ Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

⁵² Anweshaa Ghosh et al., "Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study."

⁵³ Henry Tam, "U-Shaped Female Labor Participation with Economic Development: Some Panel Data Evidence," *Economics Letters* 110, no. 2 (February 2011): 140–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2010.11.003>.

⁵⁴ India Brand Equity Foundation, "India's Gig Economy Could Add 90 Mn Jobs Enabled by Large Multinationals," November 29, 2024, <https://www.ibef.org/news/india-s-gig-economy-could-add-90-mn-jobs-enabled-by-large-multinationals>.

⁵⁵ India Brand Equity Foundation, "India's Gig Economy Could Add 90 Mn Jobs Enabled by Large Multinationals."

⁵⁶ Kasliwal, "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers."

⁵⁷ Kasliwal, "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers."

Companies would need to shift their focus from daily minimum jobs for gig worker performance to these newly defined parameters. Amending the definitions based on the new indicators will particularly benefit women gig workers by offering flexibility and the ability to choose their work capacity for platform companies. This shift would support women gig workers by ensuring more inclusive and adaptable work arrangements, providing bargaining power under the new categorisation, and encouraging greater labour force participation. Aligning work opportunities with personal preferences and legally mandated social security benefits, such as maternity leave and pension schemes, would further enhance their financial stability.

Secondly, regardless of their category, all women gig workers would be protected against sexual harassment through amendments to the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act. The definition of the workplace would be expanded to include continuously moving areas, providing legal recourse to ensure that women gig workers in all categories, including self-employed and workers, can seek redress against workplace sexual harassment, which is a fundamental right.⁵⁸

Lastly, the implementation of welfare schemes for women would be led by state governments. States like Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Karnataka have already enacted bills to combat gig worker exploitation.⁵⁹ Such state legislation can take the lead in providing maternity benefits, childcare facilities and POSH-related grievance redressal mechanisms for female gig workers by incorporating these into programmatic schemes. States can address these gaps by enacting legislation based on the RAISE approach outlined by NITI Aayog.⁶⁰ RAISE is a five-pronged strategy to operationalise the 2020 Code on Social Security for gig workers.⁶¹ It stands for:

R: Recognise the varied nature of platform work to design equitable schemes.

A: Allow augmentation of social security through innovative financing mechanisms.

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

S: Support workers in subscribing to government schemes and welfare programmes through widespread awareness campaigns.

E: Ensure benefits are readily accessible to workers.⁶²

Following this framework, state governments may adopt a gender-sensitive approach to include programmatic schemes within gig work laws. These schemes could provide maternity benefits, childcare facilities, skills development programmes and other welfare measures funded through tax collections specifically allocated for women. Additionally, state governments may include POSH-related grievance redressal mechanisms under state laws to ensure a safer and more equitable work environment for female gig workers. Incorporating this approach into state legislation will reinforce the existing Code on Social Security by introducing targeted implementation strategies to empower women gig workers.

Improve Legislation that Results in Company Accountability

In the third policy option, gig workers could be solely categorised under the 'worker' category of the improved legislation introduced in the second policy option. This is possible and has already been accomplished through landmark verdicts, for instance with the UK Supreme Court's ruling in 2021 that Uber drivers should be

⁵⁸ Apurva Singhi, "Female Workers in the Indian Platform Mediated Gig Economy – Highlighting a Need for a Comprehensive Policy for Protection from Sexual Harassment," *Law School Policy Review*, March 3, 2023, <https://lawschoolpolicyreview.com/2023/03/03/female-workers-in-the-indian-platform-mediated-gig-economy-highlighting-a-need-for-a-comprehensive-policy-for-protection-from-sexual-harassment/>.

⁵⁹ Ashrita Prasad Kotha and Madhulika T, "Bill for Gig Workers Misses the Mark," *Deccan Herald*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/bill-for-gig-workers-misses-the-mark-3179034>.

⁶⁰ NITI Aayog, "Perspectives and Recommendations on the Future of Work India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy," June 2022, https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/25th_June_Final_Report_27062022.pdf.

⁶¹ Ola Mobility Institute, "Reimagining Social Protection in the 21st Century: Operationalising the Code on Social Security 2020," February 2021, https://olawebcdn.com/ola-institute/reimagining_social_protection.pdf.

⁶² NITI Aayog, "Perspectives and Recommendations on the Future of Work India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy."

classified as workers rather than as self-employed, entitling them to benefits like minimum wage and holiday pay. The Court emphasised that Uber exercises significant control over drivers, including setting fares and imposing contractual terms, which undermines the drivers' independence.⁶³

The allocation of such a worker status combined with certain innovative protections by some companies could become exemplar and widely adopted. Despite Swiggy's previously paternalistic leanings such as disallowing women to work after 6 pm, they have also successively taken some steps to prioritise workers' safety. This includes introducing an SOS button on the app to provide instant connections to ambulances, police stations or a helpline. It also provides the option to decline deliveries in unsafe neighbourhoods without intently creating any disincentives. Additionally, it has crafted a Swiggy-specific Sexual Harassment Redressal Policy in 2022 aligned in spirit with the prevailing POSH law, which as of yet, does not cover gig workers.⁶⁴ Although these measures have been recently introduced and may be fragmented in implementation, they signal important company-led innovation to tackle systemic challenges.

Some companies have also begun to integrate measures such as introducing insurance coverage for all its gig workers, including female workers. This includes the Urban Company which began covering COVID-related hospitalisations and income protection for its 30,000 active service providers in the platform.⁶⁵ The company introduced certain improvements in 2023 after numerous protests were staged by workers at their offices demanding improved working and safety considerations.⁶⁶ Urban Company now offers substantial insurance coverage for its workers and has also initiated 'Project Nidar,' which allows legal and emergency aid to workers suffering from gender-based violence.⁶⁷

This indicates that such mechanisms are possible to be taken from a company level, and transparency should be key in maintaining trust in the platform ecosystem. For instance, Singapore's Platform Workers Act mandates platform operators to contribute to the Central Provident Fund of their workers. The Act also provides platform workers with the same scope and level of work injury compensation as traditional employees.⁶⁸ Such standard practices can be applicable in India.

Company accountability must also extend to combating biases that are inherent in algorithmic management. Studies conducted around gig economy have highlighted that platforms are employers as well, and it is crucial for platforms to practice greater self-regulation as the gig economy in India matures.⁶⁹ Including a review and appeal mechanism in formal grievances of app ratings that negatively affect female workers can be a fundamental step. This shift is critical to transform India's growing gig economy into a space that truly delivers on its promise of a more modern, equitable and flexible work environment for all.

Women-centred platforms in India have been exemplary in their approach to gender, considering they work with and directly serve women. In platforms such as TaxShe, Sakha and Koala, gig workers rely on WhatsApp groups or informal meetings to share demands, address concerns, negotiate wages and offer social support.⁷⁰

⁶³ Mary-Ann Russon, "Uber Drivers Are Workers Not Self-Employed, Supreme Court Rules," *BBC News*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56123668>.

⁶⁴ Swiggy Diaries, "Building a Safer Delivery Universe for Swiggy's Women Executives," November 16, 2022, <https://blog.swiggy.com/news/building-a-safer-delivery-universe-for-swiggys-women-executives/>.

⁶⁵ Urban Company, "Urban Company Provides COVID-19 Health Insurance & Income Protection Cover to All Its Service Professionals," October 11, 2023, <https://www.urbancompany.com/blog/urban-company-provides-covid-19-health-insurance-income-protection-cover-to-all-its-service-professionals>.

⁶⁶ Faleiro, "A Startup Ushered Thousands of Indian Women into Gig Work, for Better and Worse."

⁶⁷ Urban Company, "Urban Company — Service Partner Enablement," *Medium*, June 28, 2024, <https://medium.com/urban-company/urban-company-service-partner-enablement-45448efe5967>.

⁶⁸ Matthew Matthews, "Singapore's Platform Workers Act Strikes Crucial Balance for Future of Gig Economy," *The Straits Times*, September 18, 2024, [straitstimes.com/opinion/singapore-s-platform-workers-act-strikes-crucial-balance-for-future-of-gig-economy](https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/singapore-s-platform-workers-act-strikes-crucial-balance-for-future-of-gig-economy).

⁶⁹ Gupta, "Gendered Gigs: Understanding the Gig Economy in New Delhi from a Gendered Perspective," 1–10.

⁷⁰ Anweshaa Ghosh and Risha Ramachandran, "Engendering the Gig Economy in India - Policy Brief," Institute of Social Studies Trust, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4551740>.

Worker protection also extends to being allowed to engage in collective bargaining through unions. However, the disparate nature of gig workers does not readily allow them to unionise, and this becomes even more difficult for women. Companies therefore may not be keen on allowing workers to unionise. Nonetheless, existing unions – such as the All-India Gig Workers Union – may engage more women workers and create more space for women in top leadership. This would allow women workers to openly voice their concerns and create a safer gig economy.

Conclusion

The gig economy holds great promise for India's growing urban population as a relatively easy market to enter. For women, however, the space is fraught with structural challenges made difficult by ambiguous legislation, prevailing sociocultural norms and weak company accountability that limit the kind of work they can do and how long they can continue to do it. Though reshaping sociocultural barriers is often difficult, addressing policy-level and company-level issues may allow women to better flourish in the gig economy and help India experience a thriving labour force. In fact, the increased participation of women in the economy directly challenges and weakens restrictive gender norms that question their role. Creating more spaces for women to actively contribute to the workforce – alongside ensuring better education and equal opportunities – may significantly loosen the grip of outdated social norms that limit female economic participation. Empowering women in this way is not only fair, but also essential for societal and economic progress.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the gig economy help in improving labour force participation among women in India?
2. How do national legislations, sociocultural norms and company policies impact women in India's gig economy?
3. Who are the different stakeholders and how do their roles change across different policy options presented in the case study?
4. Do you agree/disagree that state governments in India need to cater to women gig workers? Explain your stance using possible trade-offs between the different policy options