



POLICY BRIEF

Closing the Gig Gap

Why and How Should Policymakers Intervene to Boost Women's Participation in the Gig Economy?

Key Insights

- **Growth with exclusion:** Despite rapid expansion of India's gig economy, women remain underrepresented - accounting for about 28% of gig workers and under 1% in mobility and delivery roles. This makes the gig economy more gender-skewed than the overall labour market.
- **Structural, not supply-driven gaps:** Low female participation is driven mainly by platform design, safety risks, and regulatory blind spots rather than lack of willingness to work; existing gig structures disadvantage women in participation, hours, and earnings.
- **Market incentives reinforce male dominance:** Platforms have limited commercial incentives to address gender gaps, as algorithms, consumer expectations, and weak enforcement favour a predominantly male workforce and discourage investment in women's safety and inclusion.
- **Targeted regulation can unlock scale:** The proposed initiative combines gender inclusion targets, extension of PoSH protections, and incentive-linked platform certification. This can realign incentives, raise women's participation to around 35% by 2030, and reduce gender pay and safety gaps at scale.

India's gig economy has expanded rapidly over the past decade and is projected to grow further. The NITI Aayog estimates that the number of gig workers will rise from approximately 7.7 million in 2021 to 23.5 million by 2030, representing more than a triple increase in non-standard employment over a short period.¹ While this expansion has created new income-earning opportunities, there is growing concern that the benefits of this growth are being captured unevenly, particularly along gender lines.

The Gender Gap in Gig-Work

Women are substantially under-represented in gig work. Current estimates suggest that women account for around 28% of all gig workers², and less than 1% of app-based delivery drivers². This is notably lower than women's participation in India's overall labour force, which stands at approximately 40%³, indicating that the gig economy is more gender-skewed than the broader workforce. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

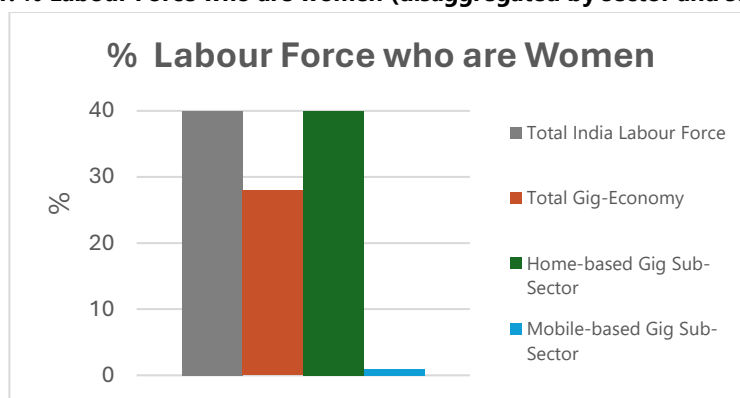
¹ International Labour Organization. *Expansion of the Gig and Platform Economy in India: Opportunities for Employer and Business Member Organizations*. Geneva: International Labour Organization, April 2024.

² NITI Aayog, Government of India. *India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy: Perspectives and Recommendations on the Future of Work*. New Delhi: NITI Aayog, 2022.

³ Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India. *Annual Report: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24*. New Delhi: MoSPI, 2024.

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women’s Participation in the Gig Economy

Figure 1: % Labour Force who are women (disaggregated by sector and sub-sector)



Source: PLFS 2025; LKYSPP Research 2025; ILO 2024 data

Even after accounting for regional and sectoral variation, women’s participation in gig work remains well below population and workforce parity. Gender participation varies sharply across gig sectors. Women are concentrated in care-oriented and home-based services such as domestic work, childcare, and beauty services. For instance, in 2020 the Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) reported Urban Company (leading app-platform in this sector) are 40% of its 20,000 home-service professionals are women⁴. In contrast, women are almost absent from mobility-based gig work such as ride-hailing and food delivery. Research from India’s Oxford Internet Institute finds that although gig platforms advertise flexibility, social norms and mobility constraints discourage women from entering driving and delivery jobs⁵. This pattern is consistent internationally, for example an survey conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) across 12 countries reported that only 9% of delivery riders and 5% of taxi-app drivers are women⁶.

Quantitative comparisons highlight these gaps. Women’s earnings on gig platforms lag men’s by roughly 8–10%⁷. This difference has been attributed to various factors including working fewer hours (due to care duties and risk aversion) and avoiding surge-time shifts⁸. For example, one study of app-based delivery in Mumbai noted women earned ~7% less per hour than men, primarily because they logged in during off-peak hours⁶. Access barriers further compound these outcomes: only 21% of women use mobile internet, compared to 41% of men⁴, limiting women’s ability to register for and navigate digital platforms.

For those women able to participate in gig-work, safety and social protection concerns are widespread. Women gig workers report incidents of harassment, sexual advances, assault, and theft, particularly in home-based service roles. An exploratory study of women gig workers in India documents verbal harassment, unwanted physical contact, and intimidation by clients inside private homes⁹. However, it has been studied through investigations across major Indian cities find that women gig workers frequently avoid filing formal complaints due to fear of retaliation, customer backlash, or de-activation by platforms. Additionally, platform grievance mechanisms are often cited to be unclear, slow, or ineffective.¹⁰ In addition

⁴ Chaudhary, Reetika. *India’s Emerging Gig Economy: The future of work for women workers*. The Asia Foundation, June 2020.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ International Labour Organization. *Expansion of the Gig and Platform Economy in India: Opportunities for Employer and Business Member Organizations*. Geneva: International Labour Organization, April 2024.

⁷ Rafie, Arwa, and Shadman Shaidai. "Empowerment or Entrapment: The Question of Women in the Gig Economy." *Countercurrents*, January 16, 2026.

⁸ IDInsight. *Economic Lives of Digital Platform Gig Workers: Case of Delivery Drivers in India*. Digital Economy Research Impact Initiative. New Delhi: IDInsight, 2024.

⁹ Verma, Manish K., and Shivani. "Gender and Work: Women in India’s Gig Economy." *International Journal on Science and Technology* 16, no. 4 (October–December 2025).

¹⁰ Sharma, Sukant. "Women in India’s Gig Economy: A Conceptual and Review-Based Study of Challenges and Opportunities." *Anusandhan International Journal of Research Associates* II, no. 1.

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

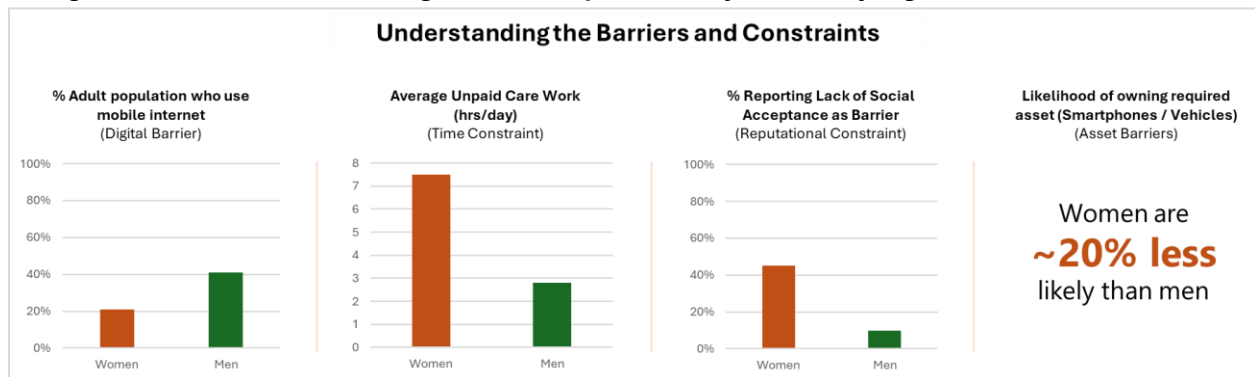
to harassment, women in mobility-based gig work face elevated risks of theft and physical harm, particularly when working alone or during off-peak hours. Fear of robbery, assault, and unsafe public spaces discourages participation and limits working hours¹¹.

Overall, the evidence suggests that despite rapid growth, India's gig economy is reproducing and in some cases deepening existing gender inequalities.

Understanding the Root Causes behind the Gap

Low female participation in gig work reflects a combination of supply-side constraints affecting women workers and demand-side and institutional barriers embedded in platform design and regulation. Women's participation is low, earnings are lower, exposure to safety risks is higher, and institutional protections are weak – ultimately underscoring the need for a targeted policy intervention. Key barriers and constraints are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Structural Barriers to Gig-Work Participation Are Systematically Higher for Women Than Men



Source: LKYSPP Research 2025; Oxford Internet Institute Survey 2024; ISB Centre for IT and the Networked Economy (2025)

Supply-side constraints

Safety and social norms remain a central deterrent. Patriarchal norms restrict women's mobility, working hours, and ability to travel alone, limiting access to many gig opportunities. Nearly half of women surveyed cite lack of family or societal acceptance as a reason for not undertaking platform work¹². Working late hours, commuting over long distances, or entering unfamiliar neighborhoods increases exposure to harassment and violence, discouraging women from applying for or continuing gig work¹³.

Unpaid care responsibilities further constrain participation. On average, Indian women spend over seven hours per day on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to about 2.8 hours for men¹⁴. Although platforms advertise flexibility, peak demand often coincides with times when women are required at home, reducing the practical usability of flexible scheduling.

⁹ India. *The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*. Act No. 14 of 2013. Gazette of India, April 23, 2013.

¹² Dinsight. *Economic Lives of Digital Platform Gig Workers: Case of Delivery Drivers in India*. Digital Economy Research Impact Initiative. New Delhi: IDInsight, 2024.

¹³ Sridharan, Vasudevan. "India's Female Gig Workers Facing Harassment and Unsafe Conditions, Seek Change and Justice." *South China Morning Post*, November 22, 2024.

¹⁴ NITI Aayog, Government of India. *India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy: Perspectives and Recommendations on the Future of Work*. New Delhi: NITI Aayog, 2022.

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

Digital, asset, and financial access gaps raise entry barriers. Only 21% of women use mobile internet, and women are around 20% less likely than men to own smartphones or vehicles¹⁵. Many high-paying gig roles, such as delivery or ride-hailing, require personal vehicle ownership, creating capital constraints. Securing loans for vehicles is particularly difficult for women due to lower asset ownership, limited collateral, and restricted access to formal finance.

Demand-side and ecosystem barriers

Platform design and incentive structures are poorly aligned with women's needs. Algorithms reward behaviors, such as night shifts, long distances, and continuous availability, that are less accessible to women. In some cases, platforms restrict women from opting into late-evening or long-distance deliveries, effectively capping their earnings potential¹⁶. Rating systems may also penalize women who decline jobs due to safety concerns.

Absence of female role models and networks reinforces under-representation. With few women visible in gig roles, informal peer learning, mentorship, and recruitment channels remain male-dominated, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion.

Regulatory Blind Spots

Regulatory blind spots exacerbate these issues. Gig workers' classification as independent contractors has left platforms largely outside labour regulation. Gender-specific protections are rarely mandated or monitored. For example, the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act has not been meaningfully enforced for gig platforms¹⁷, and most state labour departments lack guidelines for gender equity in gig work. Existing government schemes related to skills, credit, or employment have not been adapted to gig-specific contexts.

Collectively, these factors indicate that India's gig economy has been designed around male participation, leaving structural barriers that systematically exclude women.

Misaligned incentives

Platforms face limited incentives to address gender disparities. Employing predominantly male workers reduces perceived safety costs and aligns with consumer expectations for rapid, round-the-clock service. Customers' demand for ultra-fast delivery reinforces a model dependent on full-time availability, which disadvantages women. Worker representation structures provide little counterbalance: the largest gig-worker unions in India are composed almost entirely of men, and while NGOs have documented safety and fairness gaps, they lack enforcement authority.

The evidence illustrates that the gig ecosystem is structurally male-biased and the market incentives currently discourage platforms from correcting gender imbalances

¹⁵ Kasliwal, Ria. "Gender and the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of Gig Platforms for Women Workers." ORF Issue Brief No. 359. Observer Research Foundation, May 2020.

¹⁶ Nandkumar, Anand, and Ankita Sharma, with contributions from Gayatri Nair, Vinoj Abraham, Sakshi Khurana, and Janani Rao. "Women's Inclusion in the Gig Economy: An Unfulfilled Promise." SRITNE Newsletter, Vol. 1. Hyderabad: Indian School of Business, May 2024.

¹⁷ International Labour Organization. *Expansion of the Gig and Platform Economy in India: Opportunities for Employer and Business Member Organizations*. Geneva: International Labour Organization, April 2024.

Push and Pull Policy Responses to Close the Gap

In order to address this challenge, two broad policy responses emerge.

1. Improve the Gig Ecosystem to Attract Women (Enhance “Pull” factors).

The aim of this intervention would be to make gig work more appealing and viable for women by requiring a change to platforms' practices and benefits. This includes introducing short-term legal mandates (e.g., extension of the PoSH Act to gig-workers, introduction of gender quotas/targets) which would require platforms to enhance their platform design and business operations to meet legal requirements (e.g. add safety features and establish internal redressal routes) and encourage them to redesign their worker interface (e.g. lowering minimum service durations, and offering flexible scheduling mechanisms for caregivers). Longer-term innovations such as women-to-women matching services for workers and customers, and introduction of family-friendly services could further improve safety and security concerns for women.

2. Remove Barriers to Access (Enhance “Push” factors).

The aim of this intervention would be to decrease the physical and information barriers for women to join the gig-economy. This includes introducing positive interventions that addresses women's ability to join gigs by providing awareness, training, and financing for digital and physical assets required in gigs (i.e., digital assets including smart phone and internet, and physical assets required to complete a gig such as vehicles). Measures here would include digital literacy programs, small loans or subsidies for vehicles purchase or rent, and mobile/internet access. This may also include active community outreach and media campaigns to increase awareness and encourage women to consider gig jobs as a career.

Whilst both *pull* and *push* factors must be enhanced in tandem, it is the pull factors that present the critical and principal bottleneck for the increased participation of women in the gig-economy. This is because if platforms remain male-biased without active considerations for the unique circumstances or safety requirements of women, even those women who are able to acquire the information and physical assets may be dissuaded from participating in the gig-sector. As such this policy paper will focus on the introduction of a '*Gig Women Safety & Inclusion Initiative*' that focuses on improving the current gig ecosystem to attract more female workforce participation.

Introducing the Gig Women Safety and Inclusion Initiative Gap



This policy brief recommends the introduction of the **Gig Women Safety and Inclusion Initiative**, which aims to align legal accountability with practical support, tackling both design flaws and access barriers faced by women which has led to their low participation in the gig-economy. This initiative aims to combine regulatory mandates requiring platforms to actively consider women in their design and business operations, resulting in a more inclusive gig economy.

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

The policy intervention is designed with 3 interacting elements, all designed to re-enforce each other and create a systematic evolution of the gig ecosystem.

Element 1: Introduce explicit Gender Inclusion Targets for all gig-platforms.

By introducing this requirement, it is expected that these targets will be translated into additional internal key performance indicators for gig-platforms, requiring them to transform their business strategy and operations practices. Using global benchmarks and India's current women workforce participation generally and within the gig-economy, a legal scheme to be introduced whereby each platform sets annual targets (in accordance with central growth standards?) for the percentage of women gig-workers 'active' on the platform for the reporting year (e.g. 20% of all driver/drone/operator workers must be female). Non-achievement of these targets may result in an incremental levy based on deviation from the agreed target, and the development of a Gender Action Plan that outlines the initiatives the firm will take in the following measurement cycle to meet the next agreed target. Any penalty payments will be added to a Gender fund (which compliant companies can draw down-upon for gender-focused training or insurance). This creates a direct incentive for platforms to be compliant with the targets for engagement of women.

Element 2: Extend the PoSH Act to include gig-workers.

By extending the PoSH Act, additional compliance requirements are placed upon gig-platforms, requiring them to further transform their operations practices and gig-worker interfaces. As per the PoSH Act:

- i. Development of an internal PoSH policy and/or protocol. This document will outline the organisation's approach to remaining compliant with the PoSH Act 2013. This document should articulate the organisation's mechanisms to report Sexual Harassment and describe the disciplinary measures for violations. This would need to be agreed by the organisations' senior governance mechanism (i.e., Board of Directors) and communicated to all employees. The policy should be periodically reviewed and updated to remain compliant with the PoSH Act.
- ii. Formation of Internal Complaints Committee (ICC). As per Section 4 of the PoSH Act, every organisation (with 10 or more employees) must have an Internal Complaints Committee. It is through the ICC, that organisations will receive and resolve inquiries and complaints resolving Sexual Harassment. This committee should include a senior female employee as the Presiding Officer, two internal members, and one external expert with experience in handling workplace sexual harassment cases. Any additional members should not alter the balance in gender equity.
- iii. Complaint Handling Process. Organisations must establish a complaint-redressal procedure (to be operated by the ICC). The PoSH Act articulates specific steps for complaint handling which must be adhered to by the ICC to ensure expediency and equity.
- iv. Employee Awareness and Training Programs. Organisations must introduce awareness and education programmes regarding sensitisation of sexual harassment, prevention and rights under the PoSH Act. Under Section 19(c) of the Act, the training program should run regularly.
- v. Record-Keeping and Documentation. Organisations must document all PoSH-related activities, and these records must be stored and accessible to show during any compliance audits.
- vi. Internal Audits and Reviews. Organisations must conduct regular internal audits to assess their compliance with the PoSH Act.
- vii. Non-compliance with the POSH Act may attract penalties of up to ₹50,000 for employers, along with the cancellation of business licenses or refusal to renew operational permissions. In cases of repeated violations, penalties may be doubled. Additionally, failure to report statutory compliance can result in enhanced fines, including personal liability for officers responsible for the default.

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

Element 3: Introduce a 'Women-Inclusive Gig Platform' Certification for gig-platforms

The 'Women-Inclusive Gig Platform' Certification would be administered by the government (potentially with the support of an independent body), with a focus on gig-platform compliance with Element 1 and Element 2. Gig-platforms can apply for certification, which they will be eligible for after one-year of compliance as supported by data. Periodic audits would verify continued compliance and support annual certification renewal processes (these will also draw from public published data on compliance – for example through Annual Reports).

This element will also include an incentive-linked scheme, specifically tax credits will be provided for firms who have maintained certification for two consecutive tax years. By doing so, an incentive will be introduced for firms to absorb the additional costs that arise from compliance with the two legislative requirements outlined above (namely, introduction of Gender-Targets and PoSH Act extension). This certification

This structured approach maximizes women's interest in gig work and minimizes hurdles, paving the way for sustained gender integration in India's future of work

Implementation strategy

Lead Institutions and Coordination

Implementation will be anchored by an Inter-Ministerial Task Force (IMTF) on Gender-Inclusive Platform Work, convened by NITI Aayog and co-chaired by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) and the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD). Given that the gig economy intersects multiple regulatory domains, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) will provide technical inputs on platform compliance and algorithmic reporting, the Department of Revenue (Ministry of Finance) will administer the certification-linked tax credit, and the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship will integrate gig-relevant modules into existing skilling programmes. State Governments, gig platforms (represented through the Internet and Mobile Association of India, IAMAI), worker collectives such as the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers, women's collectives including SEWA, and accredited civil society organisations will be permanent invitees, ensuring tripartite engagement consistent with ILO conventions. The IMTF will issue model rules, harmonise state-level adoption, and publish an annual implementation review.

Administrative Mechanism

At the Centre, MoLE's Directorate General of Labour Welfare will function as the nodal authority for the Gender Inclusion Targets and the PoSH Act extension. Compliance reporting will be integrated into the existing e-Shram portal, which already registers over 30 crore unorganised workers. Aggregator platforms with more than ten gig workers will be required to file annual gender-disaggregated returns covering participation, earnings, working hours, and complaints registered and resolved. The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), in coordination with empaneled audit agencies, will administer the 'Women-Inclusive Gig Platform' Certification, drawing on the institutional model used for ISO 9001 and BRSR (Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting) audits already mandated for listed companies. At the state level, State Labour Commissioners will operationalise PoSH compliance audits and act as the first point of contact for grievances escalated beyond platform ICCs. Rajasthan's Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023 and Karnataka's Platform-Based Gig Workers Bill, 2024 provide useful templates for state-level integration without requiring fresh state legislation in most cases. Notification under the Code on Social Security, 2020 will provide the legal basis for federal-level enforcement, avoiding the need for fresh primary legislation by Parliament.

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

Financing

A dedicated Gig Workers' Gender Fund will be established under the Code on Social Security framework, modelled on the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Cess, which has demonstrated that levy-based welfare financing can scale within Indian fiscal federalism. The Fund will be capitalised through three streams: (i) penalty levies collected from platforms missing their Gender Inclusion Targets; (ii) a small platform contribution of 0.5-1 per cent of annual gig-worker payouts, well within the Code's 1-2 per cent cess provision; and (iii) seed funding from the Union Budget under the Mission Shakti umbrella. The Fund will finance ICC member certification, safety equipment subsidies (panic devices, vehicle telematics), digital and skilling outreach, and grant-based support for women-led platform cooperatives. The ILO, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank will be approached to co-finance independent impact evaluation of the pilot phase, leveraging their existing engagement on gender, social protection, and the future of work in India.

Phased Timeline

The Initiative will follow a three-phase rollout to allow administrative learning and political consensus-building before national scale-up.

Phase I (Year 1: Foundation): notification of rules under the Code on Social Security and the PoSH Act amendments; constitution of the IMTF; design and launch of the e-Shram gender-disaggregated reporting module; and capacity-building of State Labour Departments through MoLE-funded workshops co-delivered with the ILO.

Phase II (Year 2: Pilot): pilot implementation across six cities (Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, and Kolkata) covering the largest aggregator platforms, with concurrent independent evaluation by an empaneled research institution and quarterly course-correction reviews by the IMTF.

Phase III (Years 3-5: National Rollout): phased extension to all Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities, with simplified compliance norms for platforms below a defined revenue threshold to avoid disproportionate burden on smaller actors. Annual public reporting to Parliament, alongside disclosure of platform-level compliance data, will ensure ongoing legislative oversight and accountability.

Figure 3: Phased 3-year timeline



Key Determinants of Success

Political Feasibility

The Initiative is positioned to succeed within India's current policy landscape. The Government of India has framed 'women-led development' (Nari Shakti) as a flagship priority, reflected in the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration (2023) and the Mission Shakti scheme. Female labour force participation is a stated economic priority, with the Economic Survey 2023-24 explicitly identifying it as a key driver of growth. The PoSH Act extension is an incremental rather than disruptive reform, building on a 2013 statute that enjoys cross-party support. Opposition parties, several of which advocate for stronger gig-worker protections, are likely to support strengthened safety standards. Resistance from organised platform interests, channelled through IAMAI and NASSCOM, is anticipated, but will be mitigated through structured industry consultations and

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

the certification-linked tax credit, which provides a tangible commercial benefit for early adopters. Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan have already moved toward gig-worker welfare legislation, signalling strong state-level political appetite.

Administrative Capacity

The Initiative deliberately leverages existing institutional infrastructure rather than creating parallel systems. The PoSH Act 2013 has over a decade of jurisprudence, mature ICC formation procedures, and an established training ecosystem. The e-Shram portal already maintains a digital registry of unorganised workers, and the Code on Social Security 2020 provides the statutory hook for platform-based reporting. Compliance audits will draw on the BRSR and ISO audit ecosystem already operating in India. Where capacity is thinner, particularly within State Labour Departments, many of which remain understaffed, the Initiative provides ringfenced training funds and engages NGO partners (SEWA, Aajeevika, ILO-empanelled bodies) under a co-governance model, consistent with the National Rural Livelihoods Mission's hybrid implementation experience. The phased rollout, beginning with six metros, allows administrative learning before national scale-up.

Financial Implications

The Initiative is fiscally light by design. The principal compliance costs, ICC formation, training, and gender-disaggregated reporting, are borne by platforms, consistent with the polluter-pays logic of the Code on Social Security cess. The Gender Fund's levy-and-contribution structure makes it largely self-financing. Direct fiscal exposure is limited to (i) the certification-linked tax credit and (ii) seed funding for the IMTF and pilot evaluation, estimated at ₹250-400 crore annually during Phases I and II. This is modest relative to the Mission Shakti allocation (₹3,145 crore in FY 2024-25). The tax credit's revenue cost will be substantially offset by formal-sector tax gains arising from higher female labour force participation. McKinsey Global Institute estimates that closing India's gender gap could add up to USD 770 billion to GDP by 2025, providing significant fiscal capacity over the medium term. Multilateral co-financing for evaluation (the ILO and World Bank already operate active gender and platform-work portfolios in India) further reduces Union Budget exposure. Overall, the Initiative occupies a 'low-cost, high-legitimacy' feasibility quadrant: politically aligned with prevailing development narratives, administratively grafted onto existing institutions, and fiscally manageable through cross-subsidisation and multilateral support.

Balancing Actors, Incentives, and Consequences for Effective Implementation

Tokenism and Compliance Theatre

The most significant risk is that platforms meet numerical targets without producing meaningful inclusion. Platforms could hire women into low-stakes roles such as single-day gigs, customer support, or beauty services to satisfy headline targets while continuing to exclude women from higher-paying delivery and ride-hailing work. ICCs may exist on paper without functional grievance redress, replicating the well-documented compliance gap in formal-sector PoSH implementation, where audits have found that nearly 30 per cent of mandated organisations lack functional ICCs. Mitigation requires that the certification standard demand sector-segmented reporting (e.g., women's share within ride-hailing specifically) and that audits include worker-level surveys, not only documentary review.

Cost Pass-Through and Protective Discrimination

Platforms operating on thin margins may absorb compliance costs by reducing payouts to all gig workers, including women, eroding the very welfare gains the policy seeks to produce. Continuous monitoring of payout structures using the gender-disaggregated earnings data the Initiative itself mandates will be

Closing The Gig Gap: Increasing Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

essential. A related risk is protective discrimination: faced with safety liability under an extended PoSH framework, platforms may simply restrict women from 'risky' assignments such as late-night shifts, distant locations, certain neighbourhoods, limiting their earnings in a paternalistic manner that contradicts the Initiative's intent. Urban Company's earlier restrictions on women beauticians' working hours illustrate how protective measures can become exclusionary. The Gender Inclusion Targets create countervailing pressure for genuine integration.

Industry and Political Opposition

Platform aggregators, represented by IAMAI, are likely to lobby aggressively, framing the regulation as a threat to startup competitiveness, India's digital ecosystem, and consumer prices. Counter-arguments invoking parallels to the European Union's Platform Work Directive (2024) will be necessary. State-level resistance is possible where political alignment differs from the Centre, particularly in states pursuing distinct gig-worker frameworks. Male-dominated worker unions may also resist quota-style targets, perceiving them as threats to existing members' earnings (Tamil Nadu's 2024 cab-driver protests offer a cautionary precedent.)

Federal Friction and Market Consolidation

The Code on Social Security operationalises through state-level rules, and differential adoption (already visible in Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Kerala) risks producing a fragmented compliance landscape where platforms face conflicting obligations. The IMTF must function as an active coordinating forum to harmonise state rules and circulate model templates. Compliance costs are also inherently regressive: large platforms (Uber, Swiggy, Urban Company) can absorb them; smaller and emerging regional players may not. Without graduated obligations, the Initiative could inadvertently entrench incumbents, reducing competition and ultimately hurting workers. The Initiative's tiered compliance design via simplified obligations for platforms below a defined revenue or worker-count threshold, is intended to mitigate this, but the threshold must be calibrated carefully.

Algorithmic Opacity



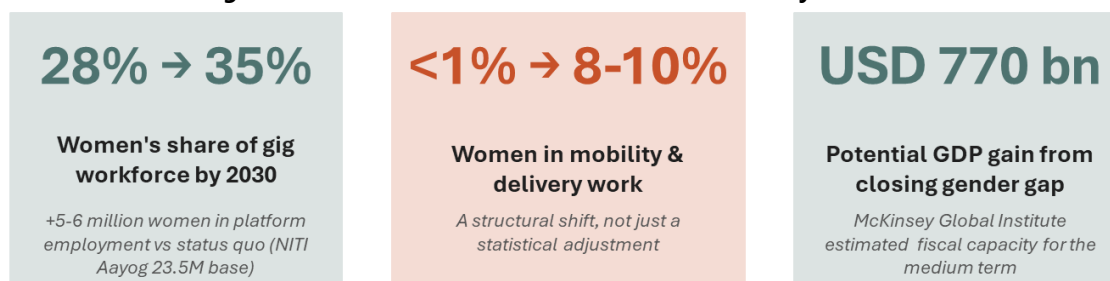
Source: India's female gig workers facing harassment and unsafe conditions, seek change and justice | South China Morning Post

Platforms may comply formally with audit requirements while continuing to operate algorithms that disadvantage women in shift allocation, ratings, or surge timing. Without algorithmic disclosure or third-party algorithmic audits, bias may persist beneath the regulatory surface. The Initiative anticipates this by mandating outcome-based reporting (gender-disaggregated earnings, hours, and complaints), which surfaces discrimination irrespective of the algorithmic mechanism producing it.

Closing the Gap and Realising the Opportunity

If implemented as designed, the Initiative is expected to deliver measurable outcomes across three dimensions over a five-to-seven-year horizon, as illustrated in Figure 4 below

Figure 4: Measurable outcomes over a five-to-seven-year horizon



First, participation: raising women's share of the gig workforce from approximately 28 per cent to 35 per cent by 2030 would translate, on NITI Aayog's projected 23.5 million gig workforce, into an additional 5-6 million women in platform employment relative to a status-quo trajectory. More significantly, an increase from below 1 per cent to 8-10 per cent in mobility and delivery work would represent a structural shift, not merely a statistical adjustment.

Second, earnings and conditions: the combination of pay equity audits embedded within compliance reviews and the removal of design biases is expected to narrow the existing 8-10 per cent gender pay gap among gig workers. Improved safety infrastructure is expected to reduce harassment incidents and increase complaint reporting (a leading indicator of trust, not deterioration).

Third, spillover effects: visible women workers in mobility and delivery roles can shift social norms, reducing the family-acceptance barrier that currently constrains nearly half of potential women entrants. Over time, this builds a feedback loop that strengthens demand-side change.

Macroeconomic and Developmental Significance

The Initiative's significance extends well beyond the gig sector. India's female labour force participation rate stands at approximately 33 per cent, far below comparator economies. The McKinsey Global Institute has estimated that closing the gender gap in workforce participation could add up to USD 770 billion to India's GDP by 2025. The gig economy, projected to triple by 2030, is one of the few sectors where this gap can plausibly be closed at scale within a policy-relevant horizon. The Initiative therefore directly advances Sustainable Development Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and operationalises India's G20 commitment to gender-equitable digital economies.

Why This Is the Best Policy Choice

Three features make this Initiative superior to alternative responses. First, targeted leverage: by focusing on the small number of large aggregator platforms that account for the majority of India's gig workforce, the Initiative achieves systemic impact without dispersed enforcement effort. Second, institutional efficiency: it grafts onto existing legal architecture minimising the need for new institutions or fresh primary legislation. Third, incentive alignment: the combination of mandates (Gender Targets, PoSH extension), penalties (deviation-based levies), and rewards (certification-linked tax credit) creates a self-reinforcing structure in which compliance becomes commercially rational rather than purely regulatory.

The under-representation of women in India's gig economy is not an accidental feature of platform design. Rather, it is a systemic outcome of misaligned incentives, weak legal coverage, and structural exclusion. The Gig Women Safety & Inclusion Initiative offers a calibrated, fiscally manageable, and politically viable response. It positions women not as marginal beneficiaries but as central participants in India's platform-led future of work, anchoring economic dynamism in equity rather than exclusion.