

WOMEN BEHIND THE WHEELS

Gendered Nature of Transport-Based
Gig Work in South Asia



WOMEN BEHIND THE WHEELS

GENDER IN ON-DEMAND TRANSPORT-BASED GIG WORK IN SOUTH ASIA

On behalf of



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Implemented by



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About Safetipin:

Safetipin is a technology-driven social impact organisation dedicated to making cities safer and more inclusive, especially for women. Since its inception in 2013, Safetipin has worked with urban stakeholders to integrate a gender lens in planning infrastructure and services. Safetipin has built various digital tools to facilitate a wider and more comprehensive database that enables urban stakeholders to make informed decisions that improve public spaces, infrastructure, and mobility.


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**To protect the identity of the women platform workers, all respondent names have been changed*

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Executive Summary



The gig economy, once a niche sector, has rapidly expanded, reshaping how work is structured and delivered across the globe. Despite its potential to offer flexible work opportunities, especially for women, the promise of the gig economy remains largely unrealised in South Asia, particularly in the transport sector. While gig work has surged globally, with the number of platforms multiplying tenfold between 2007 and 2020, women's involvement has been particularly low. In the transport sector, especially, women's engagement in work remains alarmingly low. While on-demand ride hailing and delivery sector comprise of 80% of the platform revenue generated in the Global South, this is a sector where women are notably underrepresented, with less than 1% of ride-hailing and delivery drivers in India being women. For countries across South Asia, the narrative is mirrored.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the barriers women face in entering and thriving in the on-demand transport-based gig economy across five South Asian countries—Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Through a detailed landscape analysis, data-driven insights, and interviews with key industry players, the report uncovers the structural challenges that persist and offers recommendations for overcoming them.

Gig workers, labelled as "independent contractors," often face risks and insecurity without the benefits of a "regular" job. Further the platforms they work for keep significant control of their day-to-day activities without taking on the usual duties of an employer. Women, in particular, face additional socio-cultural barriers that exacerbate these challenges. Historically, the transportation sector has been male-dominated. While women have made strides in entering this field, they still face numerous obstacles that hinder their participation and success.

One of the most significant challenges for women is threat to their physical safety with heightened risk of sexual harassment and violence. The perception of gig work as unsafe, especially when it involves driving or interacting with unfamiliar individuals, significantly deters women from participating. This fear is not unfounded, as reports from South Asia highlight the prevalence of harassment, with women gig workers frequently facing aggressive behaviour from customers and colleagues alike.

Beyond safety concerns, women in transport-based gig work grapple with economic disparities and time poverty. Societal expectations that women should prioritise caregiving over paid work add to the pressures they face, making it difficult for them to commit to the demanding hours that gig work often requires. Even when women do manage to participate, they are frequently paid less than their male counterparts, perpetuating the gender pay gap.

The financial barriers are equally daunting. High material investment costs, such as obtaining driving licenses and purchasing vehicles, present significant hurdles for women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The financial exclusion is stark as many women lack access to bank accounts, making it difficult to receive payments from gig platforms. This makes gig work and financial independence inaccessible for many women.

Additionally, the digital divide remains a critical issue, with a significant gender gap in smartphone ownership and digital literacy across the region. There's an average 34% gender gap in smartphone ownership across South Asia, with 375 million women not owning a smartphone in 2023. This gap severely limits women's ability to navigate and thrive in the gig economy.

Moreover, biased algorithms on gig platforms exacerbate the challenges women face. Designed primarily by men, these algorithms often fail to consider women's unique needs such as greater risk to their safety, distinct requirement of capital, among others., This failure to accommodate women's experiences and reality lead to poor ratings and high cancellation rates that affect women's earnings and job security.

The absence of safe and hygienic resting points adds another layer of difficulty. Women in gig work often have nowhere to take a break, manage their personal needs, or even find a safe place to rest between jobs. This lack of infrastructure not only affects their physical health but also exposes them to additional safety risks, making long-term participation in gig work untenable for many.

Additionally, the shortage of public electric vehicle (EV) charging stations in the region presents a significant barrier for hundreds of women who have adopted budget EVs like e-rickshaws for gig work.

The participation of women in on-demand transport-based gig work in South Asia requires a concerted effort from platforms to address safety, financial, structural, and societal barriers. By implementing these best practices, platforms can not only improve the working conditions for women but also unlock the full potential of the gig economy in the region.

Physical Safety

- **Gender-Segregated Rides:** Ride-hailing platforms across South Asia should adopt systems allowing women drivers to pick up only female passengers, especially for long or late-night trips. This approach, proven successful in Sri Lanka and Nepal, can significantly reduce safety concerns and make gig work more accessible to women.
- **Measures Against Unlawful Conduct:** Platforms should implement systems like Zomato's questionnaire and review process to identify and block unsafe locations. Periodic suspension of misbehaving customers, as practiced by Ola, Uber, and PickMe, should become standard practice across the region.
- **Enhanced Support Systems:** Establishing comprehensive support systems, including dedicated helplines, rapid response teams, and immediate human assistance during emergencies, is vital. Learning from Zomato's in-house ambulance service and Careem's dedicated safety helpline, platforms can ensure that women workers feel safe and supported.

Financial Support

- **Targeted Vehicle Financing:** Platforms should offer financial support to help women acquire vehicles, such as connecting them to rental vehicle providers (like Zomato in India) or providing lease-to-own models with low concessional EMIs. Reinstating and expanding subsidised loan programs, similar to Pathao's previous initiative in Bangladesh, can help women overcome material investment barriers.
- **Additional Financial Assistance:** Platforms should provide additional fiscal support to lower material investment for women. This can include initiatives like PickMe's free cell phones and tailored savings plans in Sri Lanka, as well as quick banking support similar to Zomato's 48-hour bank account setup, enabling women to start work instantly.
- **Gendered Policies and Incentives:** Platforms must implement gendered policies that consider women's unique experiences, such as Careem's waiver of cancellation charges for unsafe locations in Pakistan. Reducing commission rates or offering financial incentives, like bonuses for completing a certain number of rides, can create a more supportive environment for women drivers.

Foundational Support

- **Driving Licences:** Platforms should assist women in obtaining driving licences, similar to Namma Yatri's support in India. This includes providing guidance through the application process, transportation to and from licensing appointments, and preparatory classes for exams. This foundational support helps women gain the necessary credentials to start their careers in the transport gig economy.
- **Access to Sanitation Facilities:** Ensuring access to clean and safe sanitation facilities is crucial for women drivers. Platforms should follow initiatives like Swiggy's partnership with Shell in India and Zomato's collaboration with petrol pumps to provide restrooms and resting facilities for their workers. Replicating such efforts across South Asia can greatly enhance the working environment for women gig workers.

- **Health Incentives:** Providing health incentives is vital for retaining women in the gig workforce. Platforms should adopt policies similar to Zomato's in India, offering maternity insurance, and comprehensive medical coverage. Additional benefits, such as free online teleconsultation services and health insurance like PickMe's in Sri Lanka, can offer the security and support women need to thrive in their roles.

Training and Skill Development

- **Enhance Digital and Financial Literacy:** Provide comprehensive training on app navigation, GPS usage, and online transactions, along with financial management skills. Periodic refresher courses can boost confidence and efficiency. Emulate financial literacy programs to empower women in managing their finances effectively.
- **Collaborate for Comprehensive Skill Development:** Partner with local NGOs to offer holistic training programs that include both technical driving skills and essential soft skills like customer service and conflict resolution. Successful models include Careem and Bykea in Pakistan, BRAC Driving School's "Four Wheels to Freedom" in Bangladesh, and the Namma Yatri Mahila Shakti Program in Bangalore.

Enabling Measures

- **Prioritising Women Drivers:** Adjusting algorithms to favour women drivers in ride assignments close to their homes and areas can boost their earnings and job satisfaction, like PickMe in Sri Lanka, and Namma Yatri in India.
- **Expanding Safe Charging Infrastructure:** As electric vehicles become more common, platforms can collaborate with local businesses to expand the network of safe and accessible charging points, like Namma Yatri in India.
- **Collecting Gender-Disaggregated Data:** Regular collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data via establishment of dedicated monitoring and establishment team helps better understand challenges women face in gig work, and thereby establish actionable strategies to deal with them.
- **Promoting Success Stories:** Public awareness campaigns that highlight successful women drivers can help normalise their presence in the industry such as Pathao in Bangladesh, Uber and Ola in India, and Careem in Pakistan. This may also include participation for transwomen in gig work as Zomato has done in India.

While the road ahead may be challenging, a concerted effort to address these barriers can pave the way for greater gender equality in this growing sector, ultimately contributing to the broader economic empowerment of women across South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Short-term, task-based, and uncontracted work has a long-standing history, but the emergence of non-standard employment and technology-driven businesses in recent decades has spurred the expansion of the gig economy. The term "gig," originating from the jazz music industry, refers to one-off jobs paid per task or for a specified duration.¹ Gig work typically entails short-term contracts or non-contractual arrangements with payment based on the task rather than hourly rates. Platforms serve as intermediaries between gig workers (service providers) and those needing the work done (service users) through apps or websites. Consequently, gig workers are classified as independent contractors rather than employees of the platform. These platforms provide the infrastructure and rules for the work, governed by algorithms.²

Gig work can be categorized into two main types:

- **Physical Gig Work:** Tasks performed in physical locations, such as ride-hailing services, delivery, domestic care, and home services, facilitated by platforms like Uber and TaskRabbit.
- **Digital Gig Work:** Tasks completed and delivered online, further divided into:
 - Freelancing: Involves larger, longer-term projects requiring intermediate to high skills, such as software development, graphic design, and e-marketing.
 - Microwork: Consists of small, quickly completed tasks like image tagging, text transcription, and data entry, requiring basic numeracy and literacy skills.

Rise of Gig Work

Between 2016 and 2020, the number of gig economy platforms globally surged by 36% (figure 1)³, accompanied by a 220% increase in the number of gig workers from 2016 to 2023 (figure 2), with 120% rise in the value of platforms between 2018 and 2023, nearing \$312 billion in 2023.⁴

¹ Caza, B. B., et.al (2022)

² World Bank (2023)

³ ILO (2021)

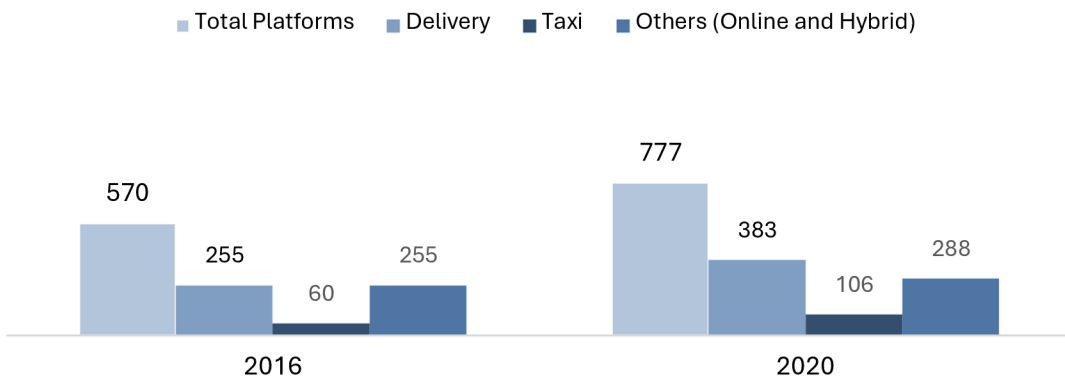
⁴ Fu, et al (2021)

Fig 1: Value of Global Platforms increased 120% in 5 years



Source: Caza, B. B., et.al (2022)

Fig 2: Number of Active Global Platforms



Source: ILO (2021)

Fig 3: Total number of gig workers increased by 221% in 7 years



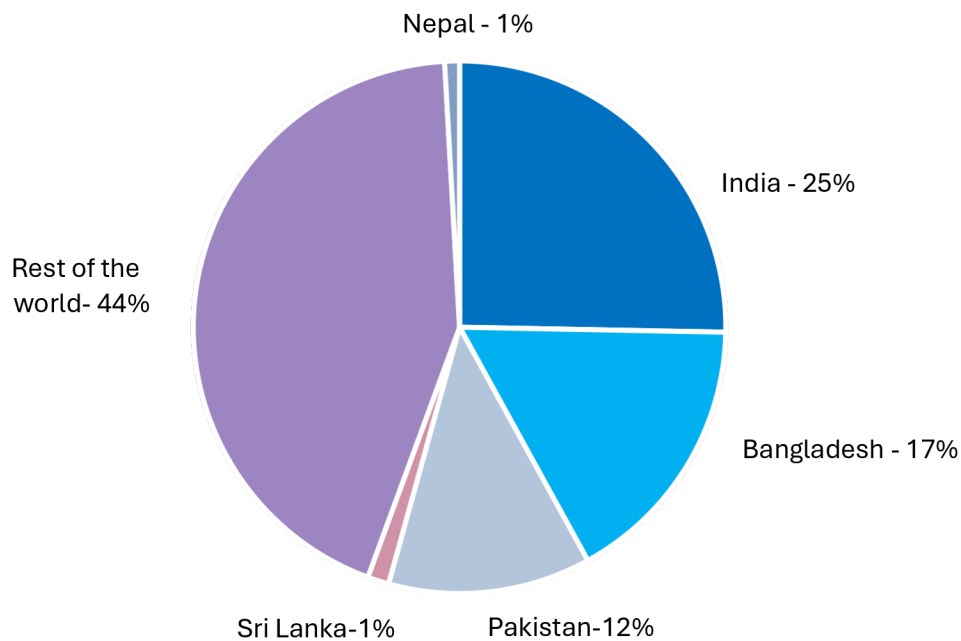
Source: World Bank (2023)⁵

⁵ This is a conservative estimate of the total number of gig workers.

The World Bank estimates the gig economy encompasses between 154 million and 435 million workers worldwide, representing 4.4% to 12.5% of the global labour force.⁶ This wide range is due to inconsistent classification of gig workers in various national legislations, resulting in a lack of standardized methodology for including gig workers in employment surveys.

Approximately 70% of the global supply of online labour originates from the Global South, with over 50% from three South Asian countries.⁷ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), India is the leading supplier of gig workers globally, with nearly 39 million workers (25%). Bangladesh follows with 17%, and Pakistan with 12%. Sri Lanka and Nepal each contribute 1% to the global supply of online labour. (Figure 4)^{8,9}

Fig 4: Global Supply Of Gig Workers in 2023



Source: ILO (2021)

Despite the potential of the gig economy to increase global work opportunities by offering flexible and accessible work arrangements, especially for women, it has not led to significant number of women entering gig work. Figure 5 indicates that the share of women in the online labour supply¹⁰ is highest in Sri Lanka (43%), followed by Bangladesh (29%), India (27%), Nepal (17%), and Pakistan (16%).¹¹

⁶ Datta, N. & Chen, R. (2023)

⁷ Tay, P., & Large, O. (2022)

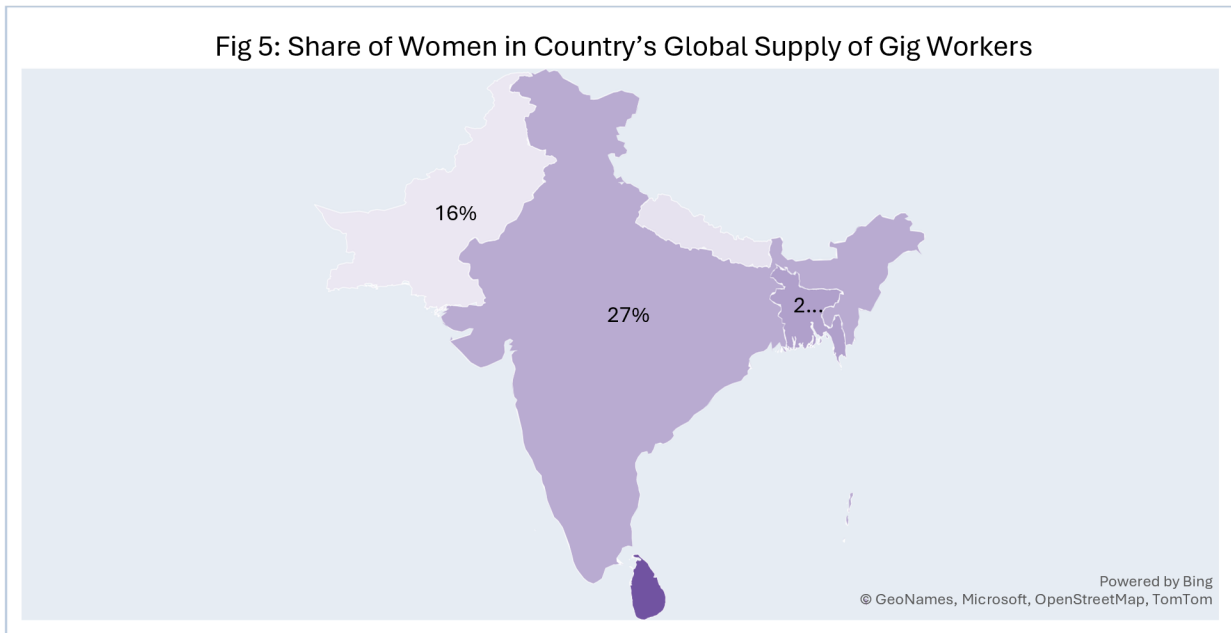
⁸ ILO (2021)

⁹ It must be noted that national estimates of each of the five countries are vastly different than the ILO estimates due to the different classifications of gig workers adopted in the ILO estimate and national estimates of these countries.

¹⁰ OLI's estimate of online labour supply includes freelancing, micro-tasks, etc.

¹¹ ILO (2021)

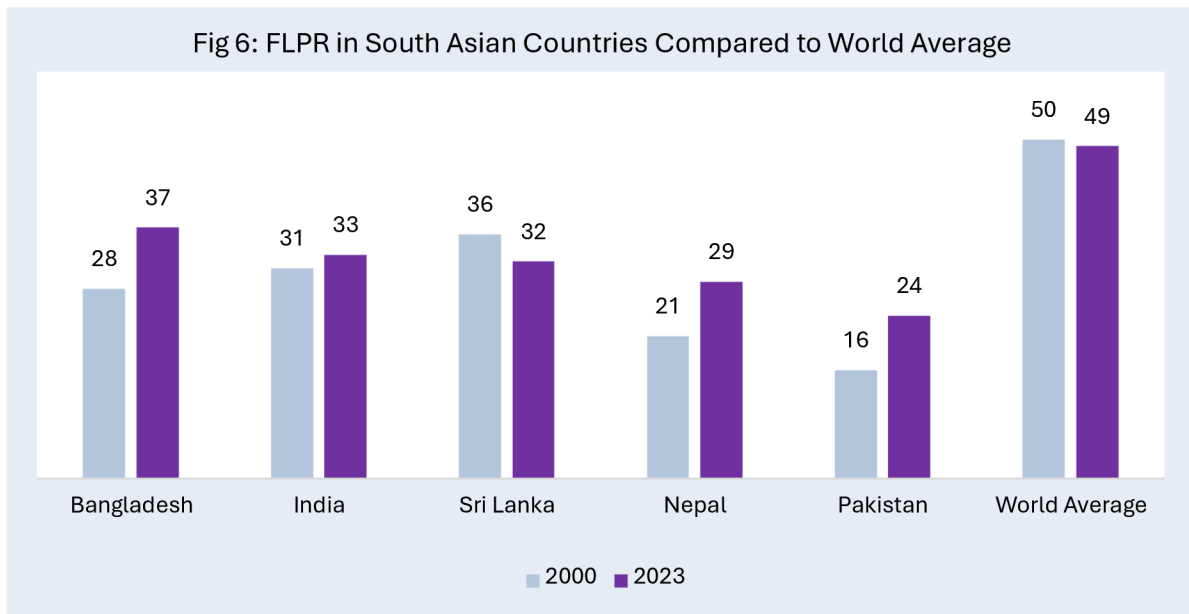
Fig 5: Share of Women in Country's Global Supply of Gig Workers



Source: ILO (2021)

Flexible work arrangements were expected to enhance women's participation in the labour market, particularly in regions like South Asia, which have historically struggled with low female labour force participation rates (FLPR). However, as shown in Figure 6, the FLPR in the five South Asian countries under consideration remains significantly below the world average, both in 2000 and 2023. ^{12 13} Indeed, even in comparison with 2000 figures as well, South Asian countries haven't been able to increase their own FLPR by much. While India, one of the biggest countries in South Asia, only having raised FLPR by 2 points, and Sri Lanka's FLPR declining by 4 points. ¹⁴

Fig 6: FLPR in South Asian Countries Compared to World Average



Source: ILOSTAT

¹² Bhattacharyya, R. (2018)

¹³ ILOSTAT

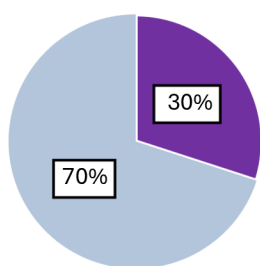
¹⁴ Please note: A large pull downwards in world average FLPR is due to pandemic induced recession in women dominated industries such as hospitality, with this phenomenon referred to as Shecession.

The concept of "platformization"¹⁵ has thus not led to an evident increase in FLPR.¹⁶ However, while the proportion of women in online labour is low, it is even lower in the transportation sector.

On-demand ride-hailing and delivery platforms constitute 80% of all platform revenue generated in the Global South.¹⁷ Figures 7 to 9 illustrate that more than a quarter of gig work in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan is in the transportation sector, highlighting these sectors as major employers in the gig economy in South Asia.^{18 19}

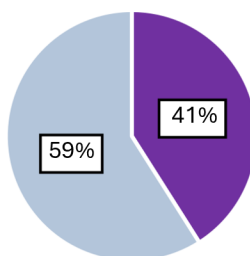
- Share of Gig Workers in Transportation in Total Gig Workforce
- Share of Other Gig Workers in Total Gig Workforce

Fig 7: Bangladesh



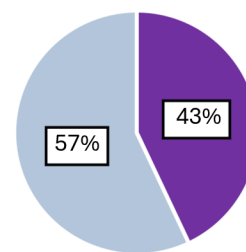
Source: Fairwork Bangladesh (2023)

Fig 8: Pakistan



Source: Fairwork Pakistan (2023)

Fig 9: India



Source: Fairwork India (2023)

However, women are significantly underrepresented in the transportation gig work.²⁰ The ILO found women comprise less than 10% of the app-based ride-hailing and delivery workforce in the world.²¹ In India²², women comprise less than 1% of ride-hailing and delivery drivers.²³ Given its role as a significant employer and enabler of women’s economic empowerment in South Asia, it is crucial to understand the barriers preventing women from entering gig work in the transportation sector. By addressing these barriers and implementing targeted strategies, there is potential to significantly increase women's participation in the transportation-based gig economy, thereby enhancing their economic empowerment and overall contribution to the labour market.

¹⁵ Poell, et, al., defines Platformization as the “penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in diTeren economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms.”

¹⁶ Poell, T. et, al (2019)

¹⁷ Tay, P., & Large, O. (2022)

¹⁸ Fairwork Bangladesh (2023), Fairwork Pakistan (2023), Fairwork India (2023)

¹⁹ Data is only available for these countries as fairwork which collects said data has a presence in only India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh

²⁰ Ng, W. and A. Acker (2020)

²¹ ILO (2021b)

²² This is the only south Asian country for which this data has been included

²³ IFC (2018)

APPROACH

This report concentrates on the on-demand ride-hailing and delivery sector within five South Asian countries, namely, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The report includes any platform that involves passenger interaction and operates on an on-demand basis, regardless of the type of vehicle used, within the transportation sector in these countries. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, a multifaceted approach has been employed:

Landscape Analysis: A thorough analysis of country-specific policies pertaining to the gig economy, with a particular focus on on-demand ride-hailing and delivery, has been conducted. A thorough analysis of country-specific policies pertaining to the gig economy, with a particular focus on on-demand ride-hailing and delivery, has been conducted. This includes examining existing regulations, and guidelines, that govern the operation of ride-hailing and delivery platforms, as well as worker rights. Specific attention has also been paid to emerging and existing e-mobility in the on-demand transportation-based gig work. Additionally, a country-wise mapping of all the major on-demand ride-hailing and delivery platforms have been conducted, with focus on the biggest platforms.

Data Analysis: Given the lack of gender-disaggregated data in the on-demand transportation sector, the report relies on previous survey-based reports produced by national think tanks, platforms, and international agencies. While the data is still lacking, these available sources provide valuable insights into the challenges, and opportunities within the sector across different South Asian countries.

Interviews: The Safetipin team conducted interviews with representatives from key companies such as Namma Yatri, Zomato, and other logistics/e-commerce player in India. The insights gained from these interviews have substantially contributed to the depth and accuracy of this report

Company Reports: Analysing company reports of large platforms, especially those conducted with international agencies, has allowed for the identification of well-established best practices that have been effective in hiring and retaining women workers across the five countries studied. These practices serve as benchmarks for other platforms aiming to enhance gender diversity and inclusion.

Best Practices and Recommendations: The report synthesises best practices from various sources and offers actionable recommendations that are primarily platform focused. These recommendations are designed to be practical and implementable by on-demand transportation platforms, with an emphasis on improving women's participation and retention in the gig economy. While public policy considerations are noted, the primary focus remains on strategies that can be directly adopted by platforms.

GIG ECONOMY IN SOUTH ASIA

Gig workers, often labelled as ‘independent contractors,’ shoulder the risks and responsibilities of their tasks without the platforms assuming any obligations. This ambiguous status of work creates challenges for gig workers. The standard-form contracts between gig workers and platforms are typically non-negotiable, offering gig workers a "take it or leave it" choice. These contracts often impose minimum task requirements, restrict the ability to reject tasks, and necessitate that gig workers supply their own equipment.²⁴ Thus, the power dynamics created in gig work often closely resemble traditional employer-employee relationships, with platforms holding significant control. Additionally, performance evaluations based on customer ratings and speed of service heighten their vulnerability, with the risk of suspension or termination looming without proper recourse.²⁵

These broader issues are even more pronounced for women gig workers, especially in male-dominated sectors such as transportation. Socio-cultural norms disadvantage women in the gig economy, making it particularly challenging for them to sustain themselves in the transportation sector. Consequently, women working as drivers in on-demand platforms remain a rarity worldwide. A study based in the UK revealed that globally only about 5% to 6% of drivers on platforms like Uber are women.²⁶

The following section delves into the macro landscape of gig work in South Asia, exploring the on-demand ride-hailing and delivery sector, especially from a gendered lens. The section also dives into initiatives across e-mobility in the countries in South Asia.

²⁴ Often creating provisions where this equipment can only be bought by the platforms they serve.

²⁵ De Stefano (2016)

²⁶ Balaram et al. (2017)

India

In 2021, Niti Aayog²⁷ estimated that India had 7.7 million gig workers, making up 1.5% of the nation's total workforce.²⁸ This number is projected to increase to 23.5 million by 2030, representing 4% of the workforce.²⁹ The six largest transport and delivery platforms engage approximately 3.3 million workers, surpassing the 1.3 million employees of Indian Railways, the country's largest employer.³⁰ Despite this significant employment, gender-disaggregated data remains unavailable.

Ola and Uber dominate the ride-hailing market in India, while Zomato and Swiggy dominate the on-demand delivery market. These platforms operate in most major cities and employ a number of women gig workers. However, given the unavailability of gender-disaggregated data, specific figures are not available. Namma Yatri, another ride-hailing platform operating in India, in an interview reported to be currently engaging 74 female auto drivers with plans to increase it to 1500 under their Mahila Shakti program. As per estimates by Shadowfax Technologies,³¹ major on-demand delivery platforms had around 6,600 female delivery partners out of its total delivery workforce of 100,000 in 2022.³²

Government Regulations for Gig Workers in India

In 2020, the Government of India introduced the Code on Social Security, which for the first-time recognised platform workers as a distinct category entitled to pensions, accident insurance, and maternity benefits. This legal framework allows state governments to establish such programs as needed. States such as Rajasthan and Karnataka have already established their version of the code. For instance, Rajasthan has mandated that Indian platform companies or those registered in India contribute 1-2% of their revenue to finance these benefits.

Further, given the rise of transportation platforms, India implemented Motor Vehicle Aggregators Guidelines 2020 guidelines to safeguard the welfare of gig workers in the transportation sector. Guidelines included regulating working hours, capping platform commissions, mandating 24/7 gig worker support systems. These guidelines also required companies to track vehicles and implement panic buttons to ensure worker safety, which is extremely important for women gig workers in gig work within the transportation sector.

Source: The Code on Social Security (2020), Motor Vehicle Aggregators Guidelines (2020)

²⁷ India's official government think tank.

²⁸ Niti Aayog (2022)

²⁹ Niti Aayog (2022)

³⁰ Ministry of Railways (2020)

³¹ They work with online marketplaces such as Flipkart Quick, Zepto, BigBasket and Swiggy Instamart.

³² Bhattacharya, R. (2022)

Women-Focused E-Mobility Initiatives in India

India has seen several e-mobility initiatives specifically aimed at empowering women workers in gig work. These efforts are being spearheaded by both private platforms and government bodies, aiming to create sustainable and inclusive opportunities for women in the transportation sector.

Platform Initiatives

1. inDrive and Evera Cabs Partnership:

- Initiative: Introduction of an electric vehicle fleet operated by women drivers.
- In collaboration with Evera Cabs, inDrive is promoting an all-electric taxi service driven by women.

2. Snap-E Cabs:

- Initiative: Training and engaging women as EV drivers.
- Snap-E Cabs, an on-demand app-based fleet of 100% electric vehicles, has partnered with the West Bengal government to train women for their EV fleet.

3. Rapido:

- Initiative: Distribution of electric vehicles to women drivers.
- Rapido, a bike-taxi platform, has introduced electric vehicles exclusively for women drivers and provided free EVs to women already working for the platform.

4. Uber:

- Initiative: Launch of an 'EV-only Uber' operation.
- Uber is planning to introduce a fleet of electric vehicles with a focus on employing women cab drivers.

5. Swiggy:

- Initiative: Partnership with E-vehicles manufacturers.
- Facilitate electric cycles and bikes (sub-25 kmph) on rent for women workers

Government Initiatives

1. Delhi Government:

- Initiative: Subsidizing E-rickshaws for women drivers.
- The Delhi government offers subsidies to women drivers to encourage the adoption of electric rickshaws.

2. Maharashtra Government:

- Initiative: Subsidizing electric rickshaws for unemployed women.
- The Maharashtra government plans to subsidize 20% of the cost of electric rickshaws for unemployed women applicants.

3. Bengaluru Airport Authorities:

- Initiative: Women-driven SUV EVs at the airport.
- Bengaluru Airport has introduced electric SUVs driven by women for passenger travel within the airport.

Source: References provided in Appendix A

Bangladesh

The gig economy in Bangladesh has experienced significant growth, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding by 27% between 2020 and 2022. By 2021, the gig workforce in Bangladesh had reached approximately 1 million workers, including 300,000 physical gig workers. The Centre for Policy Dialogue reported that the ride-hailing sector alone is valued at \$60 million, generating 6 million rides per month.³³ In 2023, the daily online food delivery orders hovered around 60,000 in the country.³⁴

Pathao and Uber are the leading ride-hailing platforms, while FoodPanda, and Pathao Food are the biggest delivery platforms in the country. Pathao, has one of the largest fleets of gig workers, with over 300,000 drivers registered in 2020 alone, however, the platform employs fewer than 1,000 women drivers.³⁵ ³⁶ The participation of women in Bangladesh's gig economy remains minimal. An initiative called LilyRide, which aimed to provide women-only taxi services, was introduced but discontinued shortly after its launch because of insufficient sign-ups by women workers.³⁷

Even though women form a small proportion of the male-dominated on demand transportation sector in Bangladesh, the rise in the acceptability of women as drivers has led to a report from Oxford Economics suggesting that transportation gig economy has the potential to employ up to 300,000 women in the near future.³⁸

Government Regulations for Gig Workers in Bangladesh

Despite the rapid growth, the legal framework governing gig work in Bangladesh remains inadequate. A recent amendment to the Labour Act of 2006 broadened the definition of workers to include apprentices and seasonal workers but failed to explicitly recognize gig workers. Additionally, the government issued the Ridesharing Guideline in 2017 to regulate ridesharing companies and workers. However, this guideline is legally non-binding and lacks clear protections for gig workers, leaving them vulnerable .

Source: Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, Government of Bangladesh (2017)

³³ Fairwork Bangladesh (2023)

³⁴ Pieal, J. N. (2023)

³⁵ Elius and Ahmed (2020).

³⁶ Gender-disaggregated data is unavailable for other platforms, and for Pathao since 2020.

³⁷ Business Standard (2024)

³⁸ Oxford Economics (2023)

Pakistan

The gig economy in Pakistan is a growing sector, employing nearly 2% of the country's labour force, which translates to approximately 1.7 million workers engaged in both digital and physical gig work. According to the Centre for Labour Research, around 700,000 individuals were employed in Pakistan's physical gig economy in 2023, with the majority involved in ride-hailing and delivery services.³⁹

Careem and FoodPanda are the biggest on-demand transportation platforms in Pakistan. According to an independent research report, Careem has approximately 800,000 registered captains (drivers) in Pakistan. Of these, nearly 1,586 are female drivers, who have collectively completed over 570,000 rides.⁴⁰ FoodPanda holds a 99% market share of food delivery in the country in 2022. Its fleet includes over 20,000 gig workers, but no gender-disaggregated data is available.⁴¹

Roshni Rides, founded in 2016, was a pioneering solar-powered rickshaw service designed to offer women affordable, safe, and sustainable transportation. However, the platform was discontinued during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴²

Government Initiatives in E-Mobility

The Sindh government has taken significant steps to promote e-mobility and support women in the transportation sector. One notable initiative is the launch of electric taxi services in Karachi. This service includes pink-coloured taxis driven by women, exclusively for female passengers, ensuring a safer travel environment. The pink taxis are equipped with cameras and a monitoring system to enhance the safety and security of both passengers and drivers. The project will roll out in two phases, starting with pink taxis dedicated to women passengers, and followed by blue taxis, which are electric taxis for the general public.

³⁹ Centre for Labour Research (2023)

⁴⁰ Amber, H., et. al. (2023)

⁴¹ Siddiqui, Z. (2022)

⁴² The Tribune (2022)

Nepal

The gig economy in Nepal has experienced significant growth over the past five years, expanding by about 67%, as per the Online Labour Index.⁴³ Most of this growth is concentrated in the ride-hailing and delivery sectors.

Tootle and Pathao are the two largest ride-hailing platforms in Nepal (the latter also being the largest delivery platform). As of mid-2019, Tootle had 31,813 registered drivers, with less than 4% (1,115) being women. Pathao is one of the biggest delivery platforms in Nepal, and has a pool of 25,000 drivers, with only 150 women.⁴⁴ Gender-disaggregated data is unavailable for most transportation platforms, and the larger gig economy in Nepal. Despite the low numbers, driving as a profession for women is less stigmatized in Nepal compared to other South Asian countries, largely due to the prevalence of women tempo drivers (explored in the box below).

There is no legal definition of a gig worker in Nepal, making it difficult to determine their employment status. In absence of any legal regulation or policies, the workers also are barred access from the laws to safeguard worker rights and face uncertainty about their employment status.

E-Mobility and Women Drivers: A History

Electric tempos, small vehicles carrying up to 10 passengers, are common in Kathmandu and have historically seen high participation from women drivers, who now dominate the e-tempo sector. This shift began in the 1990s with support from international NGOs, which provided large subsidies, financial support and driver training programs specifically targeting women as part of empowerment initiatives. These tempos are typically rented, making it easier for women to enter the profession.

Source: Grossman-Thompson, B. (2020)

⁴³ ILO (2021)

⁴⁴ Hamal, P., & Huijsmans, R. (2022).

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's gig economy has seen substantial growth, with ride-hailing and delivery services dominating the market. Industry insiders estimate that combined daily revenues from PickMe and Uber (both being the largest ride hailing and delivery platforms in the country) reach over Rs.100 million.⁴⁵ In 2019, the latest year for which data is available, only 17,368 Sri Lankan women worked in the transportation sector, compared to 497,102 men.⁴⁶

Women are significantly underrepresented among gig workers on these platforms. PickMe data indicates a small but growing number of female workers,⁴⁷ primarily operating motorcycles for deliveries and tuk-tuks. These vehicles have lower fixed costs, making them more financially viable for women.⁴⁸ In 2017, PickMe introduced a feature called Lady First, allowing riders to request female drivers for an additional charge.

This surcharge went directly to the drivers. Although the feature was paused, PickMe plans to reintroduce it once they reach enough women drivers.⁴⁹

Empowerment through E-Mobility

The Rosie May Foundation's Think Pink initiative in Sri Lanka and Nepal exemplifies empowerment through e-mobility. This program provides single mothers with the opportunity to train as drivers of electric tuk-tuks (electric four-wheeler rickshaw), specifically catering to female passengers. The initiative aims to lift women out of poverty by providing them with a sustainable income source. The charity rents out the tuk-tuk to the women, and ensures the vehicles are insured and maintained for maximum safety. Additionally, women drivers receive English language training to better serve tourists.

Source: Rosie May Foundation

⁴⁵ Ruvishani, M., & Kariyapperuma, S. (2021).

⁴⁶ Rathnayake, Z. (2021)

⁴⁷ Actual numbers are unavailable

⁴⁸ Ruvishani, M., & Kariyapperuma, S. (2021).

⁴⁹ IFC (2020)

CHALLENGES

Platforms in the ride-hailing and delivery sectors have historically been dominated by men. Traditionally, the transportation sector has been perceived as masculine work, involving mobility outside one's home, interacting with strangers, and exploring new territories, all of which may pose physical safety risks. In a conventional South Asian household, a woman's role was strictly confined to the home. However, over time, women have started entering transportation, challenging long-standing socio-cultural barriers.⁵⁰

Despite these efforts, gender inequalities persist in gig work. One of the primary challenges women face in transport-based gig roles is the heightened risk of sexual harassment and violence.⁵¹ The perception of location-based work as unsafe significantly impacts women's participation. Both women and their families often view driving and interacting with unfamiliar individuals in potentially unsafe areas as too risky, overshadowing the economic benefits these jobs might offer.⁵²

In addition to safety issues, women face many other challenges. They often experience lower earnings, have fewer financial resources, and face limited chances for career growth. These problems are exacerbated by 'time poverty'— which is the lack of free time owing to caregiving duties and social expectations that reduce women's flexibility and mobility for work.⁵³

Research from various countries supports these observations. Studies conducted in the UK, for example, show that women are more likely to exit the gig economy than men.⁵⁴ This higher turnover rate is attributed to the lack of job security, inadequate income, and safety concerns.⁵⁵ These issues are not unique to Europe and North America; they resonate deeply in South Asia, where similar barriers limit women's ability to enter and sustain themselves in transportation gig work.

This section delves into the common challenges faced by women in South Asia's gig economy, exploring how safety, economic disparities, and societal expectations continue to hinder their progress and participation in the on-demand transportation sector. By understanding these issues, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the gig economy.

⁵⁰ Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2021).

⁵¹ Roscoe, A. (2020)

⁵² Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2021).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kasliwal, R. (2020)

⁵⁵ Dewan, S., & Sanyal, K. (Eds.). (2023)

Traditional Barriers

Family pressure and societal norms play a significant role in discouraging women's participation in paid work. For instance, a survey on women and work in Sri Lanka revealed that 76% of full-time homemakers felt their husbands preferred them to stay at home.⁵⁶ This expectation to manage the household instead of seeking paid opportunities makes women financially dependent on their families and husbands. The societal norm of maintaining control over women makes it difficult for them to enter the paid workforce.

When considering paid work as a driver, further challenges emerge. The perception of **driving as a "masculine" job and the associated risks** create significant internal and external barriers for women contemplating transport-based gig work. Family support is crucial in determining whether women can sustain their roles as drivers. A study by ActionAid revealed that 11% of women drivers in Bangladesh faced disapproval from family or friends about their decision to join gig work in the ride-hailing and delivery sector.⁵⁷ A 2019 study conducted in Sri Lanka on women and work found that 28% of respondents said families don't allow women to drive; 21% thought being a driver wasn't a suitable job for women; and 69% believed it was unsafe for women to drive.⁵⁸ Concerns include security risks for women and doubts about the appropriateness of driving as a job for them. Indeed, a survey by the IFC in Sri Lanka on women drivers in PickMe reported that one-fifth of all drivers currently engaged with PickMe still think that driving is not a suitable occupation for women, and that it is economic desperation that led to them joining driving.⁵⁹

Even when women enter the workforce, their ability to sustain themselves is often dependent on the care requirements of their children. High attrition rates among women in South Asia's workforce are frequently due to the dual burden of unpaid domestic work and paid professional work, especially after starting families.⁶⁰ Women often have to leave their jobs when starting families and can only re-enter the workforce if they can arrange alternative care for their children or when their children's care needs decrease. The survey from Sri Lanka on women and work reported that 77% of women were worried about neglecting their children if they worked.⁶¹

This interconnected web of family pressure, societal norms, and practical challenges creates a formidable barrier to women's entry and sustainability in transportation gig work.

Structural Barriers

Physical safety is a critical concern for women in the gig economy. Interviews with women drivers across South Asia reveal that despite taking additional precautions—such as sending their location to friends, using familiar routes, and working mostly during peak hours—they face daily safety challenges.⁶²

⁵⁶ Zainudeen, A., & Samaratunga, I. (2023).

⁵⁷ ActionAid UK (2024)

⁵⁸ Rathnayake, Z. (2021)

⁵⁹ Roscoe, A. (2020).

⁶⁰ Kasliwal, R. (2020)

⁶¹ Zainudeen, A., & Samaratunga, I. (2023).

⁶² Oxford Economics (2023)

Women drivers in ride-hailing report facing aggressive or rude behaviour, mainly from clients, and traditional taxi drivers. On the other hand, women delivery workers mention instances of discrimination from customers, and at the order-pick up points.⁶³ Some platforms offer self-defence training and emergency SOS buttons on apps or vehicles to help women feel safe. To begin with, in South Asia, the harm attached to a woman's reputation on being harassed by a stranger, deters women from reporting harassment. Adding to this, is platforms being unwilling to report incidents of harassment, and make it difficult via a lengthy and opaque reporting process.

However, besides the cumbersome reporting process, since, platform policies are mostly oriented towards customers, women gig workers fear disproportionate retaliation if they report harassment.⁶⁴ All of these factors contribute to not only data not being collected, but also when collected not being representative of the true picture. Even if it were available, it would likely be underreported for reasons stated above.⁶⁵ A survey conducted by Rest of World in Pakistan and Bangladesh found that a third of female workers said they had faced some sort of harassment while on the job.⁶⁶

The issue of physical safety is notably more severe for women gig workers in ride-hailing compared to delivery. Many platforms do not allow women workers to know the customer's gender. The inability to select a particular gender, especially on long trips in ride-hailing, creates insecurity over their safety. Women are reluctant to cancel trips, as doing so might lead to platform penalties and missed earnings, especially since long trips usually yield higher income.⁶⁷ However, being stuck on a long trip with a man who might make them uncomfortable is far from ideal. While SOS buttons are available, many prefer to avoid getting into risky situations in the first place. The delivery sector involves less proximity and interaction with strangers, making it a preferable option for some women, although the threat to safety remains.⁶⁸

Moreover, in most South Asian countries (except Pakistan), gig workers are not included under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Acts, as the act only includes employees of firms. Gig workers, being individual contractors, are thus not protected, often driving them to exit the workforce.⁶⁹

High material investment and financial exclusion are significant barriers for women entering transportation gig work in South Asia. Platforms typically require workers to incur the costs of obtaining driving licenses, owning or renting vehicles, maintaining those vehicles, and owning a digital device.⁷⁰ The material investment required to enter transportation-based gig work imposes a significant financial burden on women. As of December 2019, only 4,052 women had motorcycle driving licenses in Pakistan's Sindh province, compared with 2.3 million men.⁷¹ Similarly, in Bangladesh, a media report stated that less than 1% of all driving licence holders are women.⁷² Surveys conducted in Pakistan and Nepal found that women often struggle to secure the financial resources needed to purchase vehicles, necessary for gig work.^{73 74} Even initiatives like Namma Yatri's Mahila Shakti Program (explored in detail later) in India face challenges such as loan

⁶³ ILO (2021)

⁶⁴ Fairwork (2023)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Siddiqui, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2021)

⁶⁷ Rathnayake, Z. (2021)

⁶⁸ IFC (2018)

⁶⁹ Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2021)

⁷⁰ IFC (2018)

⁷¹ Siddiqui, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2021)

⁷² Mostafa, M. (2018).

⁷³ IGC (2023)

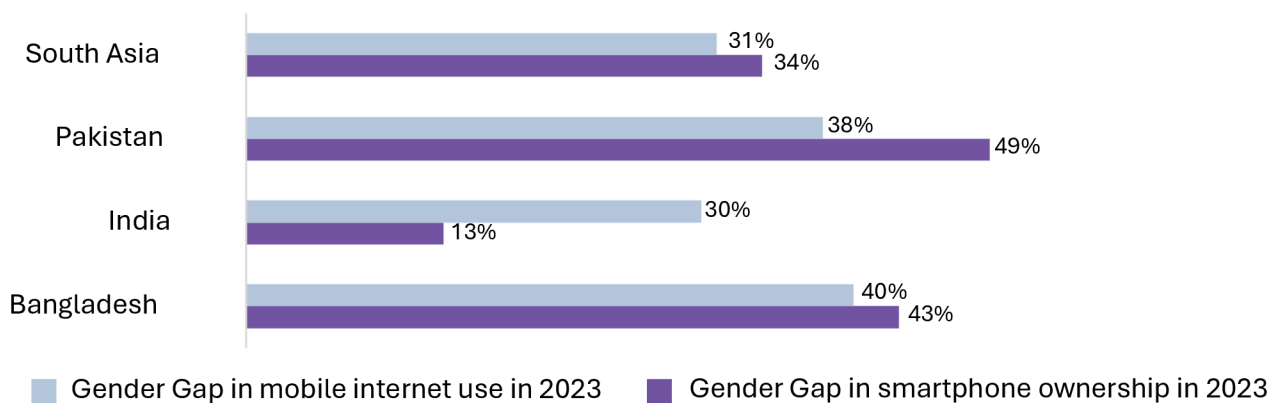
⁷⁴ Hamal, P., & Huijsmans, R. (2022)

sanctions requiring a male guarantor.⁷⁵ These barriers further make it difficult for women to enter gig-work, and actually makes them more dependent on men. Further, women in South Asia (besides India) often don't even own a bank account, which is another exclusionary factor preventing them from engaging in gig work.⁷⁶ Even when women want to work for platforms, opening a bank account may be an uphill struggle — banks ask for proof-of-income statements and employment letters, which gig workers and contract-based freelance workers are often unable to provide.⁷⁷ In a survey conducted by Rest of World,⁷⁸ a woman gig worker in Pakistan explained:

“As a woman, it’s pretty daunting to walk in and demand a bank account... no one is talking about the millions of unbanked women in this country.”

Access to mobile phones and the internet is crucial for participating in the gig economy, yet a substantial gender gap in digital access exists.⁷⁹ There’s an average 34% gender gap in smartphone ownership across South Asia, with 375 million women not owning a smartphone in 2023.⁸⁰ In India, only 35% of women have access to smartphones compared to 51% of men leading to a gender gap of 13%. Gender gaps in smartphone ownership stand at 49% in Pakistan and 43% in Bangladesh. Further, there is a 31% gap in mobile internet adoption in South Asia, with 285 million women not having access to mobile internet.⁸¹ In India, gender gap in internet penetration is 30% while it is 38% in Pakistan and 40% in Bangladesh.⁸²

Fig 10: Gender Digital Divide



Source: GSMA (2024)

⁷⁵ Interview with Namma Yatri

⁷⁶ Owing to the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, women’s status as bank owners has improved in India. - Women’s World Banking (2021)

⁷⁷ Siddiqui, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2021).

⁷⁸ Siddiqui, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2021).

⁷⁹ The gender gap in mobile ownership, smartphone ownership and mobile internet use refers to how much less likely a woman is to own a mobile (or a smartphone or to use mobile internet) than a man. Mobile internet users do not have to personally own a mobile phone

⁸⁰ GSMA (2024)

⁸¹ GSMA (2024)

⁸² IGC (2023)

Even with internet access, technical proficiency and digital literacy are low. In Sri Lanka, 42% of women online lack the skills to install apps or complete online transactions.⁸³ Similarly, the digital inclusiveness gap⁸⁴ in Nepal stood at 35% in 2022,⁸⁵ with only 3% women having used internet for online transactions.⁸⁶ Given that technological proficiency and literacy are essential for navigating the gig economy, the lack of these skills restricts women's ability to enter and thrive in the gig economy, resulting in lost economic opportunities. The digital divide leads to women facing everyday struggles with using on-demand platform apps. For instance, in Bangladesh, ride-hailing drivers are briefed on app usage and customer interaction at designated physical points, but many struggle with app features and navigation.⁸⁷ In Sri Lanka, women drivers face difficulties with GPS and commuting routes.⁸⁸ In India, an interview with Namma Yatri company personnel revealed that since many women were unfamiliar with city areas, the inability to further navigate through GPS left women drivers struggling to understand destinations and routes.⁸⁹

The gender pay gap remains a persistent issue in the gig economy, particularly affecting women in the app-based taxi (76%) and delivery sectors (86%) who rely on gig work as their primary source of income.⁹⁰ While the data on gender gap in ride-hailing in South Asia is unavailable, studies in the UK and US have shown that female Uber drivers earn significantly less than their male counterparts.⁹¹ Similarly, in India, a study by TeamLease Services found that women delivery workers earn around 10% less than men.⁹² In Bangladesh, to boost women to take up delivery and ride-hailing gig work, platforms such as Pathao reduced the commissions they charged from women workers from 30% to as low as 7%.⁹³ However, women workers still earned far below a living wage.⁹⁴ This disparity is rooted in the variable income model of gig platforms, which requires workers to log long hours to achieve a sustainable income.⁹⁵ Women face additional challenges, such as limited resources and the burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities, which restrict their ability to work extended hours. Furthermore, concerns about discrimination, harassment, and violence make them less likely to work during night hours, exacerbating the pay gap.⁹⁶ A gig worker in Bykea, Pakistan,⁹⁷ aptly highlighted the issue.

Thus, physical safety, high material investment, digital access gaps, and the persistent gender pay gap create formidable structural barriers to women's entry and sustainability in transportation gig work.

⁸³ Oxford Economics (2023)

⁸⁴ This indicates the level of inclusion attained by women in Nepal in the digital economy, and includes factors such as mobile ownership, internet penetration, digital literacy, digital safety, amongst others

⁸⁵ Inclusive Digital Economy (2022)

⁸⁶ World Bank (2022)

⁸⁷ Hasan, T.M. (2021)

⁸⁸ IFC (2020)

⁸⁹ Interview with Namma Yatri

⁹⁰ IFC (2018)

⁹¹ Kasliwal, R. (2020)

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Indeed, gig workers at large in Pakistan and Bangladesh are facing platform debt and negative income, wherein, the cost of operation as a platform driver is more than the revenue earned.

⁹⁴ Oxford Economics (2024)

⁹⁵ Which means that income earned from every gig varies.

⁹⁶ ILO (2021)

⁹⁷ Siddiqui, Z. (2023)

Enabling Barriers

Biased algorithms on gig platforms add significant challenges for women. A UK-based study on algorithmic management revealed that these platforms are typically designed by and for men, reflecting male perspectives and work patterns, which can inadvertently disadvantage women.⁹⁸ Stereotypes about women drivers further compound these issues. For instance, an IFC study on the ride-hailing industry found that up to 15% of women app-based drivers in India believed passengers had cancelled rides due to their gender.⁹⁹ This sentiment is echoed in Sri Lanka, where an IFC survey revealed that only 45% of men believed women were as good drivers as men, and just 39% felt safe being driven by a woman.¹⁰⁰ These stereotypes lead to poor ratings and high cancellation rates for women drivers, impacting their overall ratings and, consequently, their earnings and job security.¹⁰¹ The lack of transparency in rating systems exacerbates this issue.

Algorithms that do not account for the unique needs of women, such as the necessity to work closer to home or in safer areas, further hinder their success. A female driver in Bykea, a ride-hailing and delivery app in Pakistan,¹⁰² shared her story:

“I would have liked to opt for package deliveries over customer pickups because men would cancel rides with me when they saw I was a woman, but the algorithm didn’t allow me to do that.”

The absence of safe, secure, and hygienic resting points is another major hurdle for women in transportation gig work. According to Fairwork, women often struggle to find safe and hygienic facilities for simple needs like bathroom breaks.¹⁰³ This issue is severe as women often get stressed every time they drink water, in the worry that they would need to find a toilet. In Mexico and Uganda, the lack of bathroom facilities has been linked to higher rates of urinary tract infections among women workers.¹⁰⁴ This prevents women from sustaining long-term gig work.

The lack of public bathrooms or facilities to manage menstruation adds a significant burden. For instance, several female Uber drivers have reported difficulties finding places to change sanitary pads during work hours.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, women gig workers are doubly disadvantaged: not only does public infrastructure not support women gig workers’ needs, but the lack of safe resting point also leads to threat to physical safety. In a survey conducted by Rest of World on women gig workers in transport sector, one in every six female gig workers reported facing harassment while resting between jobs in Pakistan and Bangladesh.¹⁰⁶ Platforms often resist setting up rest centres due to the financial investment required and because they are not legally obliged to do so, considering gig

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ IFC (2018)

¹⁰⁰ IFC (2020)

¹⁰¹ Wood, J. A., et. al. (2019)

¹⁰² Siddiqui, Z. (2023)

¹⁰³ Fairwork (2022)

¹⁰⁴ Siddiqui, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2021).

¹⁰⁵ IFC (2020)

¹⁰⁶ Siddiqui, Z. and Zhou, Y. (2021).

workers as independent contractors. Even when platforms like FoodPanda attempted to create resting points in Karachi, local authorities removed them, citing a lack of construction permits.¹⁰⁷

While women in South Asia have increasingly adopted budget electric vehicles like tuk-tuks, a study by Harvard Business School highlighted a critical **shortage of public EV charging stations**.¹⁰⁸ In India, there are roughly 2.4 million e-rickshaws but only 12,146 public charging stations. Pakistan has just 21 public charging stations,¹¹⁰ and Bangladesh only 14.¹¹¹ Nepal, despite its history with e-rickshaws, has just 51 charging stations, mostly built in 2023.¹¹² For many women, the lack of accessible public charging infrastructure translates to significant additional costs and risks. The cost of installing a personal charging unit at home is prohibitive, especially for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus, the lack of EV charging infrastructure severely limits the ability of women to participate in gig work. Additionally, since women drivers often rely on public chargers for their daily needs, it increases their electric vehicle miles travelled and exposes them to safety risks if the charging stations are far from home.¹¹³ Hence, the need to travel long distances to find a charger can be a deterrent, making gig work less feasible and sustainable for them.

Thus, algorithmic biases, lack of resting points, and EV charging infrastructure, as well as absence of gender segregated data creates enabling barriers to women entering transport-based gig work.

Data Collection and Gender Disaggregation in Platform Economies

Gender-disaggregated data is not typically prioritised by most gig economy firms. While platform operators generally have a sense of their workforce's gender composition through team interactions, systematic tracking is rare. This absence complicates efforts to analyse gender disparities and understand the platforms' impact on job creation and exacerbation of existing gender gaps. Some platforms, primarily focused on scaling operations, neglect to monitor gender trends among their workers, reflecting a broader gap in collecting gender-disaggregated statistics. During interviews with platform operators in India, operators had low awareness of the gender distribution and, responses often relied on anecdotal evidence or limited interactions with workers, lacking robust numerical backing. A significant challenge identified was the inability to accurately assess the total number of women workers engaged by these companies. This limitation impedes meaningful analysis of gender-specific breakdowns within the workforce and hinders efforts to address gender disparities effectively.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ HBS (2024)

¹⁰⁹ Shivji, S (2022)

¹¹⁰ Khan, A.S. (2022)

¹¹¹ Bhuiyan, A.H. (2021)

¹¹² Dahal, A. (2023)

¹¹³ HBS (2024)

BEST PRACTICES

To effectively address the issues faced by women in the gig economy, ride-hailing platforms must recognise the differentiated needs of women in gig work, considering the broader context of gender relations within households, communities, and society. Thus, it is essential to undertake policies that are not gender-agnostic. Retaining women drivers and overcoming the barriers they face requires a multi-faceted approach.¹¹⁴

Safety Measures and Support Systems

Despite the implementation of real-time monitoring and panic buttons on driver apps, these measures alone are insufficient to tackle the pervasive fear and reality of harassment that women drivers face. However, there are best practices from various countries in the region that, if widely adopted, could significantly improve the situation for women gig workers.

Gender Segregated Rides:

Allowing women drivers to choose to pick up only female passengers can significantly alleviate safety concerns, especially in ride-hailing platforms. For instance, a survey in Sri Lanka revealed that 90% of female riders preferred women drivers, especially for nighttime trips.¹¹⁵ In Nepal, Tootle's digital interface already indicates to women workers whether customers are male or female, allowing women drivers to make informed decisions.¹¹⁶ Although many women-only cab services exist in India and Bangladesh, this feature is not available on all platforms. By enabling women drivers to select women riders, particularly for late-night or long-distance rides, platforms can create a safer and more appealing work environment for women driving across South Asia.

Unlawful Conduct:

Platforms like Zomato in India have taken proactive steps by having women workers fill out specific questionnaires about safety and security at both order pick-up and customer locations. If multiple women delivery partners mark a location as unsafe, it is reviewed and potentially blocked by the platform.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Ola and Uber in India and Bangladesh periodically suspend customers who misbehave with female workers.¹¹⁸ PickMe in Sri Lanka also takes action against any unlawful conduct by customers.¹¹⁹ These measures not only enhance safety but also build

¹¹⁴ Mukhopadhyay, P., Galpaya, H., & Chattaraj, S. (2022)

¹¹⁵ IFC (2020)

¹¹⁶ Hamal, P., & Huijsmans, R. (2022).

¹¹⁷ Interview with Zomato

¹¹⁸ Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2021).

¹¹⁹ IFC (2020)

confidence among women workers, encouraging them to enter and remain in the gig economy. Additionally, the fact that platforms listen to them, makes women more confident about speaking up when they face unsafe situations. By creating strict policy actions, such as Zomato in India, by blocking customers, and locations, platforms across South Asia can ensure safety for women in the workplace.

Support Systems:

Immediate access to assistance during emergencies is crucial for women workers. This can include dedicated helplines, rapid response teams, and nearby peers for timely help.¹²⁰

For example, Namma Yatri in India provides women drivers with help from male drivers and on-ground support teams during vehicle breakdowns.¹²¹ Platforms should avoid using bots for SOS responses and instead provide real human support. Zomato offers an instant connection to an ambulance, police, or their 24-hour SOS team, aiming to reach the delivery agent's location within 12 minutes of a call request.¹²² Similarly, Careem in Pakistan has a dedicated safety helpline for women and a WhatsApp group to address their issues.¹²³ While in Sri Lanka, PickMe's Lady Fleet support team prioritizes requests from women drivers, more can be done by platform across South Asia to provide better support systems for women workers. Evidence of support was particularly missing in case of Bangladesh and Nepal, but other platforms in Sri Lanka, and Pakistan also fell short.¹²⁴

Public Policy for Safety: Pakistan

In January 2022, an amendment to the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act of 2010 expanded the act's scope to include all workers in both formal and informal sectors, including gig workers. The 2022 Amendment Act redefined "employee" to encompass contractual, piece rate, gig, temporary, and part-time workers and broadened the definition of "workplace" to include any location where professional services are rendered. The legislation requires platforms to establish inquiry committees to address complaints from and about their workers, with an option for workers to file complaints directly with the Ombudsperson instead of through the inquiry committee.

Source: Iqbal, S. (2023)

Financial Support

In South Asia, women often face significant financial barriers to entering the gig economy, particularly in transportation. Providing targeted financial support is crucial to facilitate their entry and retention. By adopting best practices from various countries in the region, platforms create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women workers.

¹²⁰ Mukhopadhyay, P., Galpaya, H., & Chattaraj, S. (2022).

¹²¹ Interview with Namma Yatri

¹²² Interview with Zomato

¹²³ Siddiqui, Z. (2023)

¹²⁴ IFC (2020)

Fiscal Support for Vehicles:

One major barrier for women entering transportation gig work is the lack of material investment needed to acquire vehicles. Platforms can offer targeted financial support to help women overcome this obstacle. For example, Zomato in India connects women to rental vehicle providers, eliminating the need for initial capital as the rental amount is directly deducted from their earnings. Zomato also has special partnerships with vehicle providers to offer a lease-to-own model, where women can pay low concessional Equated Monthly Instalments (EMI) after an initial down payment. This enables women with some capital to work towards owning their vehicles.¹²⁵ Similarly, Uber in India and Bangladesh provides vehicles on lease under exclusivity agreements.^{126, 127} Although Pathao in Bangladesh discontinued its subsidised loan program for motorcycles, reinstating and expanding such fiscal support to more vehicles could greatly benefit women.¹²⁸ Evidence suggests that women value financial support more than men, making such initiatives particularly effective in encouraging their participation in the gig economy in South Asia.

Other Fiscal Support:

Beyond vehicular support, other forms of fiscal assistance can significantly lower the material investment required from women. PickMe in Sri Lanka offers free cell phones and tailored savings plans to women entering the sector, addressing access issues and encouraging more women to join.¹²⁹ Providing free cell phones is a practical step that platforms across South Asia could adopt. Banking support is another critical area. Zomato helps women open bank accounts within 48 hours, removing a significant barrier to entry and enabling women to start work instantly.¹³⁰ Such instant banking support ensures that financial hurdles do not prevent women from entering and succeeding in the gig economy.

Gendered Policies:

Implementing gendered policies that consider women's unique experiences is crucial. Careem in Pakistan has specific policies for women drivers, such as waiving cancellation charges if a pickup or drop-off location is deemed unsafe. This policy, which is not extended to male drivers, could be implemented across delivery and ride-hailing platforms in South Asia.¹³¹ Tootle in Nepal has also shown support by stopping commissions from women drivers since October 2019, creating a more financially supportive environment.¹³² Other platforms could adopt similar measures, offering reduced commission rates for women drivers or financial incentives, such as bonuses for completing a certain number of rides.

¹²⁵ Interview with Zomato

¹²⁶ Mukhopadhyay, P., Galpaya, H., & Chattaraj, S. (2022).

¹²⁷ An exclusivity agreement implies workers can only work with that particular platform. However, that makes some workers wary of signing on lease agreements as the idea of flexibility also entails flexibility in

¹²⁸ Kamal, S.M., & Ahsan, N.A. (2018)

¹²⁹ IFC (2020)

¹³⁰ Interview with Zomato

¹³¹ IGC (2023)

¹³² Hamal, P., & Huijsmans, R. (2022).

Foundational Support

To effectively integrate and support women in transport-based gig economy, platforms across South Asia need to adopt targeted initiatives and resources proven successful in various countries. This foundational support can significantly improve women's participation and retention in the gig workforce.

Driving Licenses:

Obtaining a driving licence is a fundamental step for women entering the transport gig economy. In India, Namma Yatri assists women drivers in obtaining learner's licences for six months through an agency and supports them in acquiring permanent licences.¹³³ Platforms across South Asia could adopt similar practices to help women gain the necessary credentials to start their careers in transport. Providing guidance through the application process, transportation to and from licensing appointments, and preparatory classes for written and practical exams can make this process smoother.¹³⁴

Access to Sanitation Facilities:

Ensuring access to clean and safe sanitation facilities is crucial for the well-being and job satisfaction of women drivers. Public restrooms for gig workers that include sanitation, drinking water, and resting facilities can greatly enhance their working environment. Swiggy in India has partnered with Shell to provide its delivery partners with access to restrooms across petrol stations.¹³⁵ Similarly, Zomato has partnered with various petrol pumps and public washrooms, marking these places as rest areas on the map accessed by delivery partners. Additionally, Zomato has introduced Zomato-owned and maintained resting areas in 2023.¹³⁶ FoodPanda in Pakistan is also creating shelters for its workers.¹³⁷ Such initiatives should be replicated across South Asia to provide essential amenities for women workers.

Zomato's Resting Areas – A Pioneer in Driver Support

In 2023, Zomato embarked on an innovative initiative to create resting areas for its delivery partners across India. These shelters, strategically placed in high-demand areas, offer a small room equipped with essential amenities such as air conditioning, charging points, hot and cold water, and first aid facilities. Currently, the number of these shelters is limited and far from optimal, but Zomato has plans to expand the network across all cities in the near future. These common shelters are unisex and provide open access not only for Zomato's delivery partners but also for those from other companies and anyone in need of a resting area. Importantly, Zomato maintains all these shelters independently, with no partnerships involved, and entry is unrestricted, ensuring a welcoming environment for all. This initiative highlights sets a great example of prioritising worker welfare in the gig work.

¹³³ Interview with Namma Yatri

¹³⁴ Mukhopadhyay, P., Galpaya, H., & Chattaraj, S. (2022).

¹³⁵ Bhattacharya, R. (2022)

¹³⁶ Interview with Zomato

¹³⁷ Siddiqui, Z. (2023)

Health incentives: Health incentives are vital for retaining women in the gig workforce. Zomato in India has pioneered several beneficial policies, such as paid period leave, maternity insurance covering up to Rs. 40,000/- for delivery and prenatal care, and comprehensive accidental and medical insurance. They also offer a free online teleconsultation service, allowing women to consult with various doctors and get discounts on medication.¹³⁸

In Sri Lanka, PickMe provides health insurance policies worth \$21,600 to its workers.¹³⁹ Namma Yatri plans to introduce a maternity support policy allowing women auto drivers to rent out their vehicles during maternity leave, ensuring continuous income through this system. They also provide health insurance and other benefits to their top 500 drivers.¹⁴⁰ These health incentives can significantly impact women gig workers, offering them the security and support needed to thrive in their roles. Zomato's period leave policy, for example, has proven extremely successful in retaining women and transgender employees. Extending a similar policy for gig workers might also prove successful.

Success Story – Zomato

Zomato's health policies, including maternity insurance covering up to Rs. 40,000 for delivery and prenatal care, played a crucial role in Amrita's (name changed) journey. These benefits alleviated the financial burden of pregnancy-related expenses, allowing her to focus on her work and health, till the eighth month of pregnancy. Working at Zomato also brought a significant positive shift in Amrita's personal life. Her role and dedication earned her recognition and respect from her family, who began to see her as a competent and capable individual. The job provided her with a sense of independence and a clear objective, boosting her confidence and happiness. Amrita's story is a testament to how supportive workplace policies can transform lives, offering women the opportunity to thrive both professionally and personally. Source: Interview with Zomato

Source: Interview with Zomato

Training and Skill Development

To effectively integrate women into the transport-based gig workforce, comprehensive training programs focusing on app navigation, digital literacy, driving skills, and soft skills are essential.

Digital and Financial Literacy:

A significant challenge for many women in South Asia is digital literacy. Platforms can address this by providing in-depth training on app navigation, GPS usage, and managing online transactions. These skills are crucial for ensuring that women feel confident and competent in their roles. While most platforms offer some form of digital literacy training during onboarding, periodic refresher courses can enhance their confidence and efficiency over time. Additionally, financial literacy is another area where women often face difficulties. Financial literacy programs for platform workers serve as an excellent model that ride-hailing and delivery platforms can emulate. By helping women understand financial management, budgeting, and savings, platforms can empower them to take control of their finances and improve their economic stability.

¹³⁸ Interview with Zomato

¹³⁹ IFC (2020)

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Namma Yatri

Skill Development:

Platforms should partner with local NGOs to offer targeted training programs. In Pakistan, for example, Careem and Bykea have successfully collaborated with NGOs to train women drivers, overcoming initial resistance and scepticism.¹⁴¹ In Bangladesh, the "Four Wheels to Freedom" initiative by BRAC Driving School has been training women to drive since 2012, helping them enter the male-dominated driving profession.¹⁴² Similarly, the Namma Yatri Mahila Shakti Program in Bangalore focuses on skill development and financial management, enabling women to overcome barriers in the driving sector.¹⁴³ However, these partnerships should not only provide technical driving skills but also include soft skills such as customer service, conflict resolution, and negotiation. Platforms like Uber, Ola, Zomato, and Swiggy in India have collaborated with NGOs to offer holistic training programs that encompass both technical and soft skills, ensuring that women drivers are well-prepared to handle various challenges they may encounter.¹⁴⁴ For instance, Uber and Ola have foundations that partner with NGOs provide a supportive network for women drivers, offering mentorship and ongoing support. Zomato and Swiggy's partnership programs include women's safety modules, ensuring that women feel secure and confident while working.¹⁴⁵

Women on Wheels, India

Azad Foundation's Women on Wheels program targets young women from urban poor households, offering training in driving, self-defence, and empowerment. Many women drivers for Uber and Ola have graduated from this program. They are later absorbed into the labour force through Sakha Consulting Wings Pvt Ltd, a for-profit organization. Women drivers engage in both regular routes (e.g., school drops) and platform work with Uber and Ola.

Source: Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2021)

Driver Partnerships

Trainer Tabusam, a former delivery partner with a positive attitude, transitioned to Namma Yatri's driving program due to irregular payments and lack of career growth in her previous job. She quickly began earning Rs.1800 per day, and her success led Namma Yatri to hire her as a trainer. Over nine months, she retrieved her mortgaged belongings, improved her standard of living, and plans to send her son back to school. Her training has helped other women increase their daily earnings from Rs.200 to Rs.800-900.

Source: Interview with Namma Yatri

¹⁴¹ IGC (2023)

¹⁴² Naher, K. (2024)

¹⁴³ Interview with Namma Yatri

¹⁴⁴ Ghosh, A., Ramachandran, R., & Zaidi, M. (2021).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Case Study: Mahila Shakti Program – Namma Yatri

1. Community Outreach: Partner with NGOs to source women, especially those in need of financial support.
2. Data Collection: Conduct interviews to gather information on women's financial conditions, family income, house location, driving experience, and willingness to drive.
3. On-Ground Training: Provide 30-40 days of on-ground driving sessions, 45 minutes per driver, 5 days a week.
4. Classroom Sessions: Offer classroom training on essential apps, map usage, and other driver tools every Saturday.
5. Optional Courses: Provide advanced training for drivers who have graduated from the learner stage, including basic English and planned self-defence courses.
6. Post-Training Support: After completing the mandatory course, offer two options:
 - a. Connect women to NBFCs/banks for vehicle loans if they have a down payment ready.
 - b. Provide autos on rent for 3 months through Namma Foundation, with additional mentorship programs on savings and financial literacy

Source: Interview with Namma Yatri

Enabling Measures

By promoting public awareness, platforms can create a more inclusive environment that encourages and supports women drivers, ultimately leading to greater gender equality in the industry.

Prioritising Women Drivers:

One of the most effective strategies is to adjust algorithms to prioritise ride assignments for women drivers. By doing so, platforms can help increase women's earnings and job satisfaction, making the gig economy more appealing and sustainable for them. For instance, PickMe in Sri Lanka has tailored its algorithm to prioritise women drivers for ride and delivery assignments. When both a male and female driver are equidistant from a delivery location, the platform assigns the order to the female driver.¹⁴⁶ This approach not only boosts women's income but also enhances their retention on the platform. Similarly, Namma Yatri in India trains women drivers to identify high-demand areas and leverage data to maximise their earnings, particularly during peak hours.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ IFC (2020)

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Namma Yatri

Expansion of Charging Infrastructure:

With the rise of electric vehicles (EVs) in the ride-hailing sector, ensuring that women drivers have easy access to charging stations is essential. Platforms should focus on increasing the number of EV charging points in areas frequently visited by women drivers, ensuring these locations are safe and accessible. Although this area is still developing, and the expansion of public charging infrastructure is a public policy issue, platforms can help fill the gaps. For example, Namma Yatri drivers in Bangalore often choose to operate in the city centre, such as Koramangala, where charging stations are readily available.¹⁴⁸ Besides this, platforms can collaborate with local businesses, shopping centres, and public spaces to expand this network further. Providing real-time updates on the availability of charging stations through the driver app can reduce downtime and help drivers plan their charging stops more efficiently.¹⁴⁹

Collect Gender Segregated Data:

Collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated data is crucial to refine these strategies and address the specific needs of women drivers effectively. While PickMe in Sri Lanka, Uber in India, and Bangladesh have generated reports with IFC, and World Bank respectively focused on women gig workers, taking into account the number of hires, and specific challenges they face, this practise could be adopted at large, by collecting gender-segregated data regularly. Establishing a dedicated Monitoring and Evaluation team to interpret this data can help identify localised issues and tailor solutions accordingly. Without this data, it is challenging to reach women drivers effectively and implement changes that truly benefit them.

Promote Success Stories:

Public awareness campaigns that highlight the success stories of women drivers can play a significant role in normalising the idea of women in this profession. Platforms like Pathao in Bangladesh, and Uber and Ola in India, have successfully used visual representations in their advertisements to depict women as capable and professional drivers.^{150, 151} These campaigns, often featuring interviews with platform founders or directors, demonstrate that women can excel in this field while balancing their traditional gender roles. Such initiatives have also been seen with Careem in Pakistan.¹⁵² Namma Yatri has taken a similar approach by including women auto drivers in their driver communication videos on their app, further normalising the presence of women in transportation roles.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Namma Yatri

¹⁴⁹ Mukhopadhyay, P., Galpaya, H., & Chattaraj, S. (2022).

¹⁵⁰ Oxford Economics (2023)

¹⁵¹ Mukhopadhyay, P., Galpaya, H., & Chattaraj, S. (2022).

¹⁵² IGC (2023)

¹⁵³ Interview with Namma Yatri

Success Story – Namma Yatri

Pallavi Jain was the 15th woman driver who purchased an auto through the Namma Yatri Mahila Shakti program. Previously, Jain, worked as a cashier at a restaurant, and was trying to save money for her son's medical expenses. She got inducted into the program and learnt to drive very well. Not only was she able to pay for her auto's rent but saved INR 50,000 for the downpayment of a new auto in just 4 months. Additionally, she was able to save money for her son's medical expenses and is waiting for an appointment at the hospital for treatment.

Source: Interview with Namma Yatri

Zomato has also been hiring transwomen in its delivery fleet. This inclusion can help motivate more transwomen in gig work as per an interview with Zomato.¹⁵⁴

Source: Interview with Zomato

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Zomato

WAY FORWARD

The gig economy, with its promise of flexible work arrangements, has long been heralded as a pathway to expanded employment opportunities globally. However, in South Asia, this promise remains largely unfulfilled for women, especially in the transport sector. Despite the growing demand for ride-hailing services across the region, women remain significantly underrepresented, making up less than 1% of ride-hailing drivers in India. This stark gender disparity underscores the persistence of traditional, structural, and enabling barriers that hinder women's full participation in the gig economy, even as eAorts to promote gender equality gain momentum.

The transportation sector, one of South Asia's largest employers, presents unique challenges for women in gig work. Entrenched socio-cultural norms, safety concerns, and limited access to resources continue to deter women from entering and thriving in this space. Recognising these barriers, it is essential for platforms in the transport-based gig economy to address the specific needs of women workers, taking into account the broader context of gender dynamics within households, communities, and society.

This report aimed to map and study the platforms operating in the on-demand ride-hailing and delivery sectors across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. By understanding the challenges faced by women gig workers and examining the initiatives undertaken by these platforms to address them, we can chart a way forward. The recommendations outlined below draw from best practices observed in individual countries and provide a framework for improving safety, financial support, and overall working conditions for women in transport-based gig work across South Asia.

Physical Safety: Ensuring the physical safety of women gig workers is paramount. Platforms should implement gender-segregated rides, allowing women drivers to exclusively pick up female passengers, particularly during long or late-night trips. Measures to prevent unlawful conduct, such as suspending misbehaving customers and blocking unsafe locations, are crucial. Additionally, establishing robust support systems—including dedicated helplines, rapid response teams, and immediate human assistance during emergencies—can provide women with the security they need to pursue gig work with confidence.

Financial Support: Access to financial resources remains a significant barrier for many women. Targeted vehicle financing options, such as lease-to-own models with low concessional EMIs or subsidised loans, can help women acquire vehicles and reduce their material investment needs. Platforms should also offer additional financial assistance, such as free mobile phones, tailored savings plans, and quick banking support to improve financial inclusion. Gender-sensitive policies, such as waiving cancellation charges for unsafe locations and reducing commission rates to close the gender pay gap, are also vital.

Foundational Support: To empower more women to join the gig economy, foundational support is essential. Platforms should assist women in obtaining driving licences by providing guidance

through the application process and offering preparatory classes. Access to safe and hygienic sanitation facilities is another critical need; platforms can collaborate with petrol pumps to provide these amenities if they cannot establish their own resting points. Health incentives, including paid period leave, maternity insurance, and comprehensive medical coverage, would further support women's retention in transport-based gig work.

Training and Skill Development: Enhancing women's digital and financial literacy is key to their success in the gig economy. Platforms should provide comprehensive training on app navigation, GPS usage, and online transactions, as well as financial management skills. Collaboration with local NGOs to offer holistic training programmes that cover both technical driving skills and essential soft skills can also help women sustain themselves in this field.

Enabling Measures: To further support women in gig work, platforms should prioritise women drivers in ride assignments close to their homes and areas, which can boost their earnings and job satisfaction. As electric vehicles become more common, expanding the network of safe and accessible charging points is necessary. Regular collection and analysis of gender-segregated data, along with the promotion of successful women drivers through public awareness campaigns, can also play a vital role in normalising women's presence in the industry.

By implementing these recommendations, platforms can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in the transport-based gig economy. However, women's safety remains a significant concern because most countries, except Pakistan, do not extend sexual harassment protections to women gig workers. It is crucial for other South Asian countries to follow Pakistan's lead by implementing laws that protect women workers, regardless of whether they are classified as employees or independent contractors.

While the road ahead may be challenging, a concerted effort to address these barriers can pave the way for greater gender equality in this growing sector, ultimately contributing to the broader economic empowerment of women across South Asia.

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Appendix A

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