

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

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About Women Mobilize Women

Women Mobilize Women (WMW) is the leading global initiative on women in transport and seeks to actively transform the transport sector to become more diverse and inclusive. WMW works to empower everyone's right to the city through its strong networks and leverages upon Germany's Feminist Development Policy. WMW is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and is implemented by the Transformative Urban Mobility Initiative (TUMI).



About Safetipin

Safetipin is a social impact organisation that works toward building responsive, inclusive, safe and equitable urban systems. Since its inception in 2013, Safetipin has worked across 45 cities in Asia, Latin America and Africa. With a mission of shaping cities where every woman has a voice, Safetipin has collaborated with government and non-government stakeholders in using big data to improve infrastructure and services in cities.

BACKGROUND

The gig economy, once niche, has expanded rapidly, reshaping work structures. While it offers flexible opportunities, especially for women, its promise remains largely unrealized in South Asia's transport sector. While gig work platforms multiplied tenfold between 2007 and 2020, women's involvement remain low. In the on-demand ride hailing and delivery sector especially, women's engagement in work remains alarmingly low., especially in the Global South from where 80% of the revenue is generated. (Tay, P., & Large, O. ,2022)



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.

Safetipin, supported by GIZ, has undertaken a secondary research to identify barriers women face in entering and thriving in the transport-based gig economy across five South Asian countries—

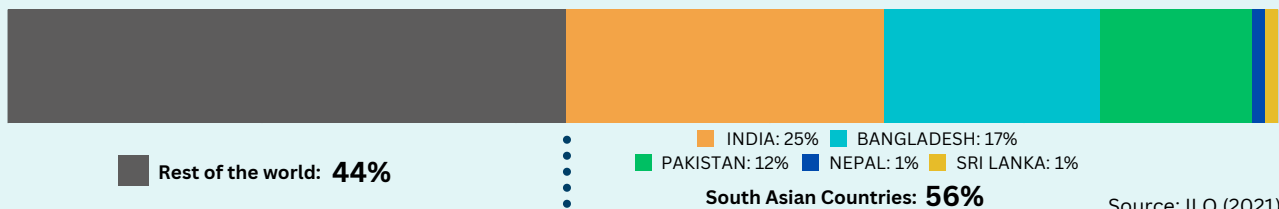
INDIA
BANGLADESH
PAKISTAN
NEPAL
SRI LANKA



REST OF THE WORLD

SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES

Global supply of gig workers in 2023



Source: ILO (2021)

As per ILO (2021), between 2016 and 2020, the number of gig economy platforms globally surged by 36%, accompanied by a 220% increase in the number of gig workers from 2016 to 2023. Approximately 70% of the global supply of online labour originates from the Global South, with over 50% from three South Asian countries. (Tay, P., & Large, O., 2022)

Gig workers, labelled as "independent contractors," often face risks and insecurity without the benefits of a "regular" job.

Gig Workers: Employees or Independent Contractors?



The risks and responsibilities of tasks are placed on gig workers



Performance evaluations based on customer ratings and speed of service heighten their vulnerability



Risk of suspension or termination without proper recourse



Non-negotiable standard contracts between gig workers and platforms with

Minimum task requirements

Restriction on the ability to reject tasks

A necessity that gig workers supply their own equipment.

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.

Freelancing: Involves larger, longer-term projects requiring intermediate to high skills. e.g. coding, graphic design etc.

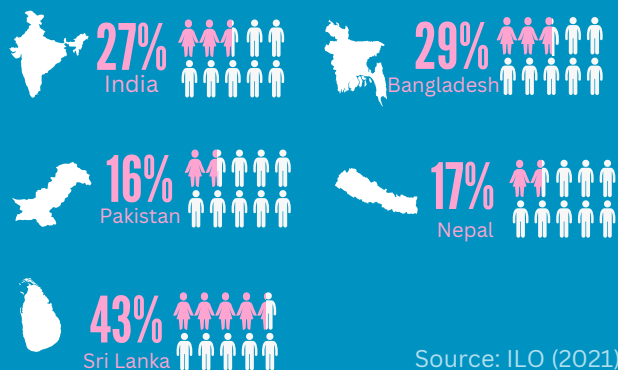
Microwork: Consists of small, quickly completed tasks requiring basic numeracy and literacy skills. e.g. data entry, image tagging etc.

THE GENDER DIVIDE

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. **The participation of women is even lower in the transportation gig work.**



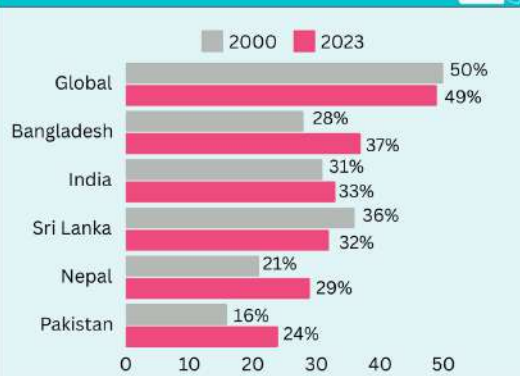
Share of Women in Country's Global Supply of Online Gig Workers



The ILO found that women comprise less than 10% of the app-based ride-hailing and delivery workforce in the world.

FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

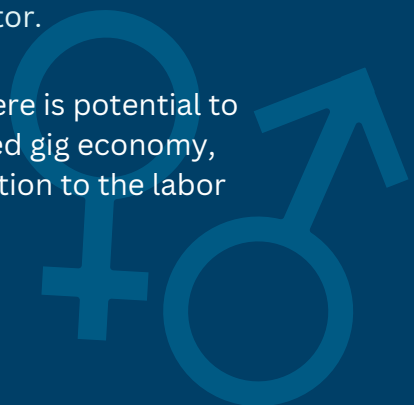
Source: ILOSTAT



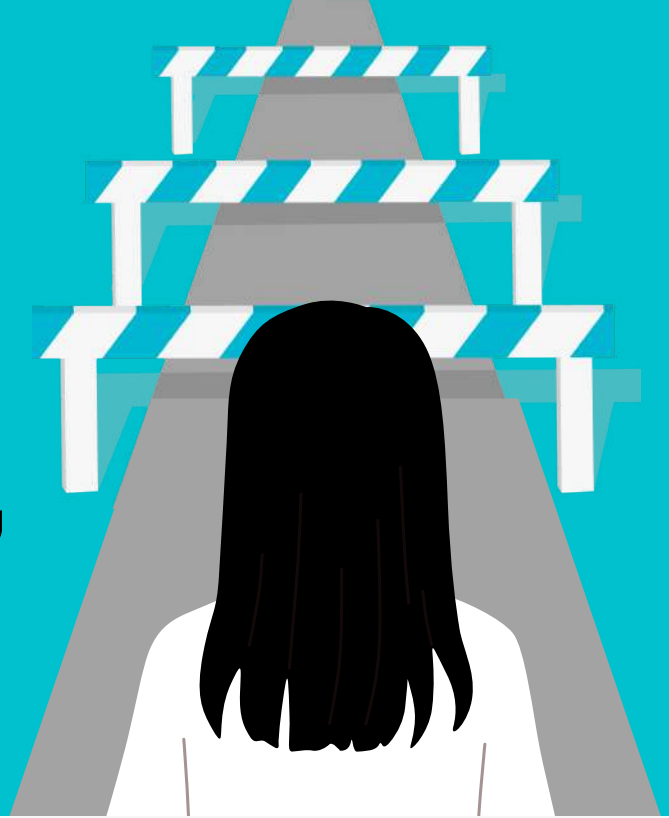
Regions like South Asia, have historically struggled with low female labor force participation rates (FLPR). However the FLPR in the five South Asian countries under consideration remains significantly below the world average, both in 2000 and 2023, as per ILOSTAT 2023. **This indicates the platform economy has not led to an evident increase in FLPR.**

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 labor market.



BARRIERS FACED BY WOMEN GIG WORKERS



Threats to physical safety: Risk of sexual harassment and violence deter women gig workers. Reports reveal frequent harassment and aggressive behavior from customers and colleagues in South Asia.

Time poverty: Dual burden of professional and care work restricts women from committing to the demanding hours of gig work.

Financial barriers: High material costs for gig work, pose significant hurdles. Many women, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, lack bank accounts, limiting their financial independence. They are also often paid less than men, perpetuating the gender pay gap.

Digital divide: A 34% gender gap in smartphone ownership across South Asia (GSMA, 2024) and low digital literacy hinder women's ability to participate and succeed in the gig economy.

“

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.

- Female Driver, Bykea, Pakistan

Biased algorithms: Algorithms designed without considering women's needs increase challenges like poor ratings and high cancellation rates, directly impacting their earnings and job security.

Lack of resting infrastructure: The absence of safe, hygienic resting points affects women's physical health and safety, making long-term participation in gig work unsustainable.

Family pressure and societal norms: Expectations to prioritize household duties, perceptions of driving as a “masculine” job, and safety concerns often discourage women. Additionally, societal control and lack of family support create barriers.

Lack of gender-disaggregated data: It hinders analysis of workforce disparities, limits understanding of women's participation, and prevents platforms from addressing gender gaps and promoting equitable job opportunities.



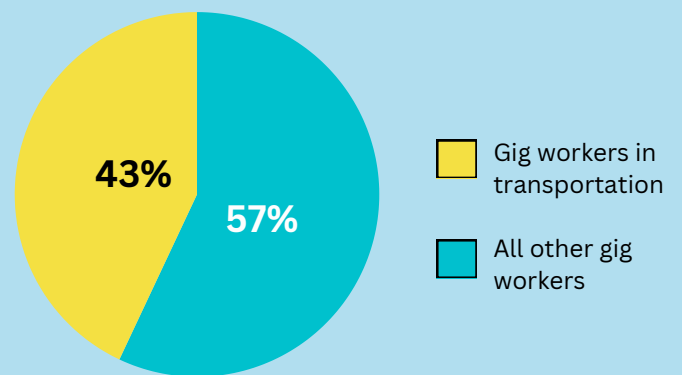


INDIA

In 2021, Niti Aayog (India's official government think tank) estimated that India had 7.7 million gig workers, making up to 1.5% of the nation's total workforce.

The major transport and delivery platforms engage approximately 3.3 million workers. Ola and Uber dominate the ride-hailing market in India, while Zomato and Swiggy dominate the on-demand delivery market.

Despite this significant employment, gender-disaggregated data remains unavailable.



Share of transport workers in total gig workforce

Source: Fairwork India (2023)

In India, women comprise less than 1% of app-based ride-hailing and delivery drivers (IFC, 2018). Globally this number is around 10%. (ILO, 2021b)

POLICY-LEVEL INITIATIVES

- In 2020, the Code on Social Security recognized platform workers as a distinct category entitled to pensions, accident insurance, and maternity benefits. Rajasthan and Karnataka have established their version of it.
- India also 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.
- Some other notable initiatives include subsidized e-rickshaws for unemployed women by Maharashtra and Delhi governments, women-driven SUV EVs at the airport by Bengaluru Airport Authorities, training programs for women electric taxi drivers by West Bengal Government.



Source: Hindustan Times

INITIATIVES BY THE PLATFORMS

Zomato's Rest Points – A Pioneer in Driver Support

In 2023, Zomato strategically planned unisex shelters in high demand areas for its drivers. Their shelters 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 but Zomato has plans to expand the network across all cities in the near future.

These shelters are managed independently by Zomato but are open for delivery persons from other companies. This initiative sets a great example of prioritising worker welfare in the gig work.



Source: Zomato



Source: Prajavani

Mahila Shakti by Namma Yatri

Namma Yatri, a ride-hailing platform, is reported to be currently engaging 74 female auto drivers with plans to increase it to 1500 under their Mahila Shakti program. The program also offers training and upskilling program for women drivers along with supporting them in getting access to financial resources.

inDrive and Evera Cabs Partnership:

Launched an all-electric taxi service operated by women drivers.

Snap-E Cabs:

Partnered with the West Bengal government to train women as EV drivers for its 100% electric vehicle fleet.

Rapido:

Distributed free electric vehicles exclusively for women drivers on its bike-taxi platform.

Uber:

Plans to launch an EV-only fleet with a focus on employing women cab drivers.

Swiggy:

Partnered with e-vehicle manufacturers to provide electric cycles and bikes on rent for women workers.



Source: inDrive

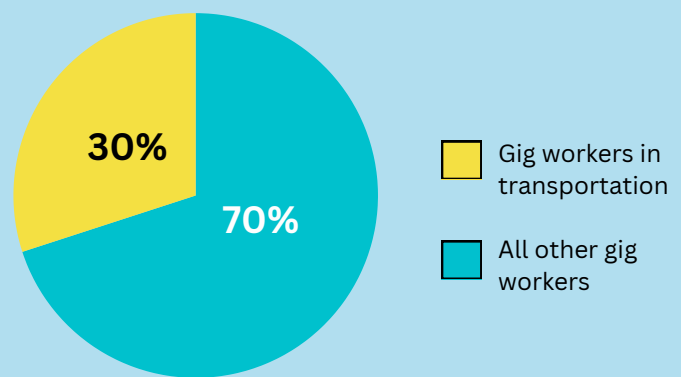


Source: Rapido



BANGLADESH

By 2021, the gig workforce in Bangladesh had reached approximately 1 million workers, including 300,000 physical gig workers (Fairwork Bangladesh, 2023). It was reported that the ride-hailing sector alone is valued at \$60 million, generating 6 million rides per month (Pieal, J. N., 2023).



Share of transport workers in total gig workforce
Source: Fairwork Bangladesh (2023)

Pathao, Uber, FoodPanda, and Pathao Food are the biggest gig work 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. (Elius and Ahmed, 2020)

The participation of women in Bangladesh's gig economy remains minimal. However, there has been a rise in the acceptance of women as drivers. The transportation gig economy has the potential to employ up to 300,000 women in the near future. (Oxford Economics, 2023)

POLICY-LEVEL INITIATIVES

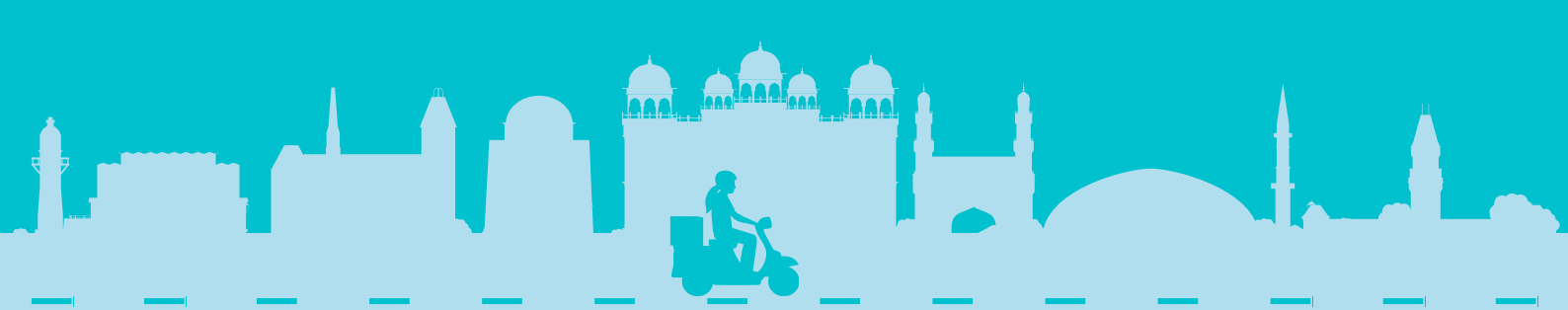
A recent amendment to the Labour Act of 2006 broadened the definition of workers to include apprentices and seasonal workers but failed to explicitly recognize gig workers. The government also issued the Ridesharing Guideline in 2017 to regulate ridesharing companies and workers. However, this guideline is legally non-binding and lacks clear protections for gig workers, leaving them vulnerable.

INITIATIVES BY PLATFORMS

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.



- **Pathao** reduced the commission they charge from women workers from 30% to as low as 7%.
- **BRAC** launched a driving training program called Four Wheels to Freedom to empower women as drivers.



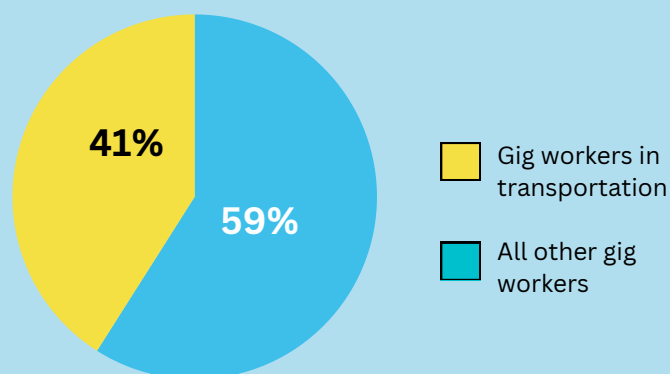
PAKISTAN

The gig economy in Pakistan employs nearly 2% of the country's labour force in both digital and physical gig work. (Centre for Labour Research, 2023)

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.** (Amber, H., et. al., 2023)

The fleet of Pakistan's biggest food delivery platform employs 20,000 workers, but no gender-disaggregated data is available. (Siddiqui, Z. , 2022)



Share of transport workers in total gig workforce
Source: Fairwork Bangladesh (2023)

POLICY-LEVEL INITIATIVES

The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act of 2010 was amended in 2022 to include all workers in both formal and informal sectors, including gig workers. It also broadened the definition of "workplace" to include any location where professional services are rendered.

INITIATIVES BY THE PLATFORMS

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 (Rest of World, 2021).





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 (ILO, 2021). 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. As of mid-2019, Tootle had 31,813 registered drivers, with less than 4% (1,115) being women. Pathao has a pool of 25,000 drivers, with only 150 women (Hamal, P., & Huijsmans, R., 2022).

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.

LACK OF POLICY INTERVENTIONS

There is no legal definition of a gig worker in Nepal, making it difficult to determine their employment status. In the 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 (Grossman-Thompson, B., 2020).



Source: UNEP



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.

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. (Rathnayake, Z. , 2021)**

PickMe data indicates a small but growing number of female workers, primarily operating motorcycles for deliveries and tuk-tuks (Ruvishani, M., & Kariyapperuma, S. , 2021).

INITIATIVES BY THE PLATFORMS

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.

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.



Source: NDTV Profit

BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN IN GIG ECONOMY



SAFETY PRACTICES

Gender-Segregated Rides:

Tootle in Nepal allows women drivers to identify the gender of customers, enabling informed decisions.

In Sri Lanka, 90% of surveyed female riders preferred women drivers for night-time rides, suggesting a need for women-only cab services in South Asia.



Addressing Unlawful Conduct:

Zomato in India blocks unsafe locations flagged by multiple women and suspends misbehaving customers. PickMe in Sri Lanka and Uber in Bangladesh enforce similar actions, empowering women to report incidents confidently.

Dedicated Support Systems:

Namma Yatri in India offers real-time help from peers and on-ground teams, while Zomato's 12-minute SOS response system includes ambulances and police. Careem in Pakistan maintains safety helplines and WhatsApp groups for women workers.

Women on Wheels, India

Azad Foundation's Women on Wheels program targets young women from urban poor households, offering training in driving, self-defense, 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.



FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Fiscal Support for Vehicles:

Platforms like Zomato offer rental and lease-to-own vehicle programs, deducting costs directly from earnings. Uber provides leasing options in India and Bangladesh, while similar schemes could benefit women in Nepal and Bangladesh.



Banking and Resource Assistance:

PickMe in Sri Lanka provides free phones to women drivers. Zomato helps women open bank accounts within 48 hours, ensuring faster onboarding. Careem's waiver of cancellation fees at unsafe locations exemplifies gendered financial policies.



FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT

Driving License:

Namma Yatri in India supports women in acquiring learner's permits and permanent licenses. Offering such programs across South Asia can simplify entry into transport-based gig work.

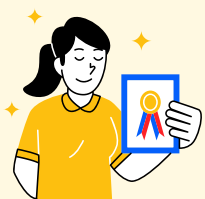


Sanitation and rest areas:

Swiggy in India collaborates with Shell to provide restroom access, while Zomato partners with petrol stations for rest areas. This is needed in other South Asian countries.

Health incentives:

Zomato's paid period leave and maternity insurance set a high standard. PickMe's \$21,600 health insurance for workers offers security, while Namma Yatri plans to offer maternity support by allowing women drivers to rent out their vehicles during maternity leave.



Platforms like Uber and Ola in India share success stories of women drivers, normalizing their presence in the workforce and inspiring others.

Trainer Tabusam, once a delivery partner, joined Namma Yatri's driving program due to irregular payments and limited growth. Earning ₹1,800 daily, she was soon hired as a trainer. Over nine months, she reclaimed her mortgaged belongings, improved her living standards, and plans to send her son back to school. Her training has helped women boost their daily earnings from ₹200 to ₹800-900.

TRAINING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Digital and Financial Literacy:

Platforms should provide ongoing app navigation and financial management training, ensuring women adapt to evolving digital platforms. Namma Yatri's Mahila Shakti program focuses on skill development and financial management, enabling women to overcome barriers in the driving sector.



Skill Partnerships:

Azad Foundation's Women on Wheels program targets young women from urban poor households, offering training in driving, self-defence, and empowerment. Careem in Pakistan and BRAC in Bangladesh collaborate with NGOs for targeted training, combining technical driving skills with soft skills like customer service and conflict resolution.

ENABLING MEASURES

Prioritizing Women Drivers:

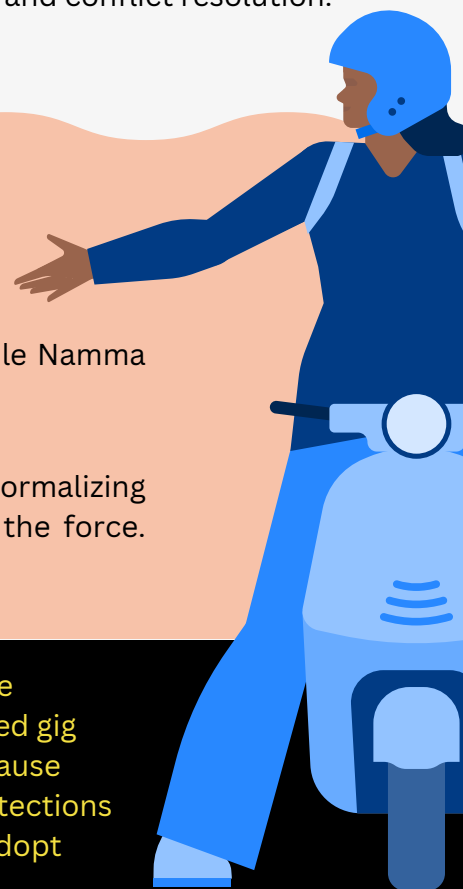
PickMe in Sri Lanka prioritizes female drivers in ride assignments, while Namma Yatri trains women to maximize earnings in high-demand areas.

Public Awareness Campaigns:

Platforms like Uber and Ola in India share stories of women drivers, normalizing their presence in the workforce and are encouraging others to join the force. Transgender inclusion, as seen with Zomato, broadens representation.

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 adopt measures to safeguard women in gig work.

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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