NCAER

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Rapporteur Report

Building Inclusive Economies: Gender, Financial Inclusion, and the Platform Workforce

ILO – NCAER roundtable discussion
08 December 2025
NCAER Parisila Bhawan, New Delhi

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1. Background and Purpose

NCAER, in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), organised a one-day roundtable titled *Building Inclusive Economies: Gender, Financial Inclusion, and the Platform Workforce* on 08 December 2025 at the NCAER campus in New Delhi.

The event brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including senior government and RBI officials, representatives of the ILO and its social partners, NCAER researchers, and platform aggregators. Discussions focused on the linkages between gender, financial inclusion, and social protection in the platform economy, with the aim of moving beyond broad frameworks to identify specific, actionable gender-responsive policy recommendations at the intersection of labour regulation, fintech-led innovation, and social protection.

The programme began with context-setting remarks by Ms. Michiko Miyamoto, Country Director, ILO DWT SA-CO/India, followed by a keynote address by Dr. Arvind Virmani (Member, NITI Aayog) and a special address by Ms. Vandana Gurnani (Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India). This was followed by a joint research presentation by NCAER and the ILO, and thematic insights from Dr. Sonali Sen Gupta (Executive Director, Reserve Bank of India, virtual). The main roundtable discussion later was moderated by Dr. Ratna Sahay, Professor at NCAER and Director, Centre for Gender and the Macroeconomy, NCAER.

In her opening remarks, Ms. Miyamoto highlighted the rapid expansion of digital labour platforms globally and the growing role of platform work across both developed and developing economies. While noting that platforms have created new livelihood opportunities, she emphasised that regulatory systems have not kept pace with changing work arrangements. She also noted that ILO Member States are currently discussing the possibility of an international labour standard on digital labour platforms, potentially through a convention and recommendations. Referring to India's progress, including the Code on Social Security, she stressed the need for stronger coordination across labour and financial systems to support decent work and inclusion.

Drawing on her extensive experience in global policy and research, Dr. Ratna Sahay underscored the importance of moving from frameworks to implementation. She highlighted the role of financial literacy in educational institutions, and emphasised women's participation not only as users but also as providers of financial inclusion. As chair and moderator, she steered a rich and informed roundtable discussion, bringing together perspectives from the government, the central bank, researchers, and platform stakeholders. Her interventions helped connect evidence with policy priorities and ensured the discussion remained focused on practical, implementable recommendations.

2. Key Perspectives from Government and Policy

2.1. Dr. Arvind Virmani (Member, NITI Aayog)

In his keynote address, Dr. Arvind Virmani placed the discussion within the broader vision of *Viksit Bharat*, emphasising that India's growth story cannot be truly inclusive unless women participate in much larger numbers in the labour force. Referring to cross-country evidence, he noted a striking imbalance: while male labour force participation in India is relatively high for its income level, female participation remains far below potential. He stressed that going forward, most of India's labour force growth will depend on bringing more women into paid and productive work. At the same time, he pointed to recent data showing encouraging gains in female

employment over the past several years, and shared on-ground examples suggesting that these shifts are already beginning to take shape.

Dr. Virmani also drew attention to the sheer scale of self-employment in India, particularly among women, and argued that this reality is often not adequately reflected in skilling and employment strategies. He observed that many training programmes continue to assume a pathway into regular wage jobs, while a large share of women workers are self-employed and need a different set of capabilities. He suggested that skilling initiatives should place greater emphasis on entrepreneurship, basic financial management, and market-facing skills. Linking this to the wider reform and fintech ecosystem, he noted that formalisation, through reforms such as GST, labour codes, and digital payment systems can help generate the data and visibility needed to improve access to credit and financial services, especially for women running small businesses or working independently.

2.2. Ms. Vandana Gurnani (Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India)

In her special address, Ms. Vandana Gurnani described the roundtable as both timely and directly relevant for policy, noting that women remain largely absent from the platform economy. She pointed out that available estimates suggest women make up only about one in ten platform workers, and that those who do participate are often clustered in lower-paid roles, with limited access to higher-value services. She spoke candidly about the barriers women face, from limited access to devices and low digital and financial literacy, to weak credit histories, mobility and safety concerns, and the lack of adequate social protection.

Ms. Gurnani then walked participants through the key provisions of the Code on Social Security, 2020, including the formal recognition of gig and platform workers and the framework for a social security fund supported by aggregator contributions. She stressed that the main challenge now is implementation, and that this will require sustained engagement with stakeholders to design schemes that work in practice. She also referred to related government efforts such as e-Shram, the National Career Service portal, and women - focused credit and entrepreneurship schemes. Importantly, she urged the group to focus on granular, actionable recommendations, highlighting that even small changes, such as gender-neutral job descriptions, better-designed safety equipment, and practical workplace adjustments, can significantly improve women's participation.

2.3. Ms. Sonali Sengupta (Executive Director, Reserve Bank of India)

In her thematic address (virtually), Ms. Sonali Sengupta shared the Reserve Bank of India's perspective on women's financial inclusion, noting that India has made major strides in expanding access to formal banking. She pointed out that bank account ownership is now close to universal, with a very small gender gap, and that women hold a majority of basic savings accounts. Importantly, she noted that account usage is also relatively strong, reflecting a shift from access alone to more meaningful participation in the formal financial system.

At the same time, she acknowledged that access to credit continues to be a major constraint, particularly for women-owned MSMEs. She outlined several RBI initiatives aimed at addressing this, including the National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (2025–2030), the Unified Lending Interface to enable cash-flow-based lending using alternative data, and priority sector lending provisions for women. She also spoke about innovative pilots such as programmable CBDC and digital receivables systems. Throughout her remarks, she emphasised the need for better gender-disaggregated data, more inclusive product design, and safeguards to prevent over-indebtedness, underscoring that fintech can support women's economic empowerment but only if it is deployed responsibly.

3. Research Evidence Presented by ILO–NCAER

3.1. Dr. Radhicka Kapoor (ILO)

Initiating the research presentations, Dr. Radhicka Kapoor (ILO) set the stage by reminding participants that the platform economy is not a single, uniform space. She drew a clear distinction between web-based platforms and location-based platforms, such as delivery, ride-hailing and home services. Referring to both global and Indian evidence, she noted that women remain underrepresented in platform work and are often concentrated in lower-paid activities, reflecting patterns of occupational segregation seen in traditional labour markets. She also highlighted that women face *triple barriers* in the platform economy, not only in entering platform work, but also in sustaining their participation and advancing within it. She emphasised that closing gender gaps in financial access and usage is key to enabling women to survive and thrive in this rapidly growing sector.

3.2. Dr. Bornali Bhandari (NCAER)

Dr. Bornali Bhandari (NCAER) shared insights from NCAER's research on food delivery platform workers, describing platform work as being shaped largely by apps and algorithms, where tasks, incentives, and earnings are mediated digitally. She noted that many workers are drawn to platforms because they offer regular digital payments, flexibility, and a sense of independence. She also observed that this flexibility can make platform work particularly appealing for women, especially in terms of choosing work hours, days, and locations, and balancing multiple responsibilities.

She emphasised that women face much higher barriers to entering and sustaining work on delivery platforms. She pointed to practical constraints such as access to smartphones, bank accounts, two-wheelers, and upfront entry fees requirements that can be difficult to meet without credit or family support. She highlighted that women often struggle more than men to access credit for these initial costs, and noted that gaps in social security coverage remain a major concern. Overall, her presentation reinforced that financial inclusion is not just an enabling factor, but a necessary condition for women to enter, remain, and progress in platform work.

3.3. Ms. Mehak Jain (NCAER)

Ms. Mehak Jain (NCAER) presented research findings on women's financial inclusion and fintech, drawing on cross-country evidence as well as India-specific trends. She noted that while India has made strong progress in expanding access to formal finance, particularly in bank account ownership and narrowing gender gaps in traditional indicators, yet significant gaps persist in digital usage, including mobile money, digital payments, and fintech-based services. She emphasised that account ownership does not automatically translate into meaningful financial participation, and highlighted the broader economic relevance of closing these gaps by referring to key findings from various research papers authored by Dr. Ratna Sahay (during her long career at the International Monetary Fund), which provide a compelling case for reducing gender gaps in financial inclusion, including credit, as it leads to higher growth and lower inequality in the economy.

3.4. Ms. Mariko Ouchi (ILO)

Ms. Mariko Ouchi (ILO), spoke about why extending social security to platform workers remains so challenging in practice. She reminded participants that social protection is not only an economic investment, but also a human rights issue and highly relevant for ILO's standard-setting framework. She explained that platform work often falls into grey areas - employment relationships are unclear, work is fragmented across platforms and tasks, and monitoring working conditions is difficult. Drawing on international experience, she noted that many countries have started by extending employment injury coverage, particularly for high-risk, location-based services. She also cautioned that voluntary schemes rarely achieve meaningful coverage, and emphasised that durable solutions will require mandatory approaches.

4. Roundtable Discussion: Key Themes and Inputs

The roundtable discussion brought together perspectives from fintech, platforms, researchers, worker organisations, and employers, and highlighted that women's low participation in the platform economy is shaped by a combination of financial, social,

and operational constraints. Several participants noted that while fintech has played a major role in expanding financial inclusion, women's needs have rarely been an explicit design objective. Products are often framed as gender-neutral but tend to be gender-blind in practice, reinforcing the need for more deliberate product design and stronger consumer protection. A recurring theme was the challenge of credit access for women, particularly because women's economic lives often involve informal and relational cash flows that remain invisible to formal underwriting systems. Participants suggested that selectively digitising such transactions and linking them with enterprise cash flows could help women overcome onboarding barriers and improve access to credit.

Platform representatives reinforced that entry into location-based services is shaped by very practical constraints, especially asset ownership and mobility skills such as

two-wheeler riding. Retention was highlighted as an equally important challenge, with participants drawing attention to basic workplace needs, such as access to toilets, rest spaces, and appropriate work attire as well as the continuity challenges created by women's caregiving responsibilities at home. Multiple speakers also emphasised that family and community acceptance is often the biggest barrier, with platform work still widely perceived as male-dominated. Platforms shared efforts to address this through community engagement, peer storytelling, safety features, and partnerships to improve on-ground support infrastructure. Some speakers also noted that women borrowers often demonstrate stronger repayment discipline than men, reinforcing the case for more targeted and accessible credit products.

The discussion also expanded the definition of platform-linked work, with worker organisations highlighting women's participation in activities such as cloud kitchens, packing units, and home-based production, which are often excluded from mainstream definitions of the platform economy. Concerns were raised about repayment pressure under certain credit schemes, widening pay gaps in feminised segments, and the risks of algorithmic surveillance in home-based workplaces. The role of algorithms was raised as a cross-cutting concern, particularly the way penalties for rejecting gigs can disproportionately affect women due to care responsibilities and safety concerns, contributing to income volatility. Participants called for more gender-responsive platform design to reduce such penalties and make earnings more stable and predictable.

Several contributions focused on mobility and workplace culture. Operational evidence from a women-led logistics model suggested that workstations with women workers may experience lower losses and improved workplace culture, but also underscored the need to address design barriers in vehicles and create supportive ecosystems, such as dedicated mobility centres. From the

employer perspective, it was noted that MSMEs often face higher perceived costs in hiring women due to maternity and compliance requirements, and that women's participation tends to be higher in online and remote platform work compared to location-based services because of safety and social constraints.

Finally, the roundtable highlighted that addressing women's participation in the platform economy requires enabling infrastructure beyond the workplace. Speakers stressed the importance of care systems, with examples of community-based solutions such as converting panchayat centres into creches and digital literacy hubs. Research evidence also pointed to the potential of formal part-time work and a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work to significantly raise women's labour force participation. Participants noted that while the platform economy can offer flexibility, it can only translate into real opportunities for women if care burdens, safety concerns, and enabling support systems are addressed alongside financial inclusion and social protection.

The roundtable discussion benefited from inputs shared by a wide range of stakeholders. A few representatives and experts who offered comments are listed below:

S. No.	Organisation	Name
1	All India Organisation of Employers	Mr. Mayank Dias
2	Centre for Catalysing Change	Ms. Kaniz Fatima
3	Dvara Research Foundation	Dr. Indradeep Ghosh
4	Eternal (Zomato & Blinkit)	Dr. Jaskiran Bedi
5	Even Cargo	Mr. Yogesh Kumar
6	FACE	Ms. Sugandh Saxena
7	Haqdarshak	Mr. Aniket Doegar
8	IWWAGE	Dr. Bidisha Mondal
9	NCAER	Dr. Aakash Dev
10	SEWA	Ms. Sonia George
11	Swiggy	Ms. Neha Singhvi

5. Key Takeaways and policy recommendations

Drawing on the roundtable deliberations, the following policy recommendations were identified as priority areas for enabling women's entry into platform work and improving their access to decent work outcomes:

i. **Adopt a gender-responsive approach to platform economy policy**
Policies and regulatory frameworks should explicitly account for the constraints faced by women workers, rather than assuming gender-neutral design.

ii. **Improve women's access to credit and financial products linked to platform work**
Financial institutions and platforms should expand access to low-cost, suitable credit for work-related assets (e.g., smartphones, two-wheelers, fuel/maintenance support), supported by safeguards against over-indebtedness.

iii. **Strengthen social protection coverage for platform workers**
A priority is to develop implementable mechanisms for health insurance, accident coverage, maternity benefits, and income support, using simple enrolment and contribution systems.

iv. **Enable safe mobility and access to work-related assets**
Interventions should focus on improving women's mobility through safer transport options, affordable asset financing, and workplace safety measures (including grievance redressal).

v. **Build community acceptance and support systems**
Programmes should work with local institutions, worker groups, and communities to address social norms that limit women's participation in location-based platform work.

vi. **Improve transparency and fairness in platform work arrangements**
Policymakers should encourage clearer rules around onboarding, pay structures, ratings, penalties, and termination, along with accessible dispute resolution systems.

vii. **Strengthen coordination across ministries, regulators, and industry**
Implementation requires coordination among labour, finance, transport, urban development, and digital governance stakeholders, along with platforms and worker representatives.

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