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Women's Experiences in Sri Lanka's Gig Economy: Insights from a Stakeholder Roundtable

Session Background and Overview

Platform-mediated gig work is a rapidly growing feature of Sri Lanka's urban economy, yet the experiences of women within it remain under-explored and largely invisible in available data. As platforms such as ride-hailing and delivery services become integral to how cities function, questions of who participates, on what terms, and with what protections, have become pressing policy concerns. For women, gig work offers a form of labour market participation that accommodates caregiving responsibilities and provides immediate income. However, it also exposes them to safety risks, algorithmic disadvantage, and the lack of social protection.

Centre for a Smart Future (CSF) and The Asia Foundation (TAF), convened a roundtable on the 11th June 2026 to examine the intersection of gender and platform-mediated gig work in Sri Lanka. The session brought together researchers, labour advocates, and employer association representatives with experience across Sri Lanka.

To ground the discussion, the session opened with a presentation by CSF Junior Researcher Piyumi Wattuhewa who drew on the story of Jayangi (real name withheld), a single mother and full time Uber Eats delivery rider. Her story illustrated both the appeal and the precarity of gig work for women, with the platform providing her a flexible source of income to manage childcare, rent and a bike lease, yet leaves her with no savings, no relief during extreme weather, and no recourse when working conditions become unsafe. Two questions anchored the discussion.

The first question asked participants what aspects of the relationship between gender and gig work had surprised them or challenged their assumptions, and what had resonated with their existing knowledge and experience. The second question asked what initiatives, programmes, or policies they were aware of that seek to address the issues raised.

This Analytical Note captures the key discussion points and insights from the session, and is intended as a resource for researchers, advocates, and policymakers working on platform labour and gender equity in Sri Lanka and the wider region.

Discussion Points

Counting women in Sri Lanka's gig economy, and gaps in the data

- There is no reliable count of women in platform-mediated gig work in Sri Lanka. PickMe, as a listed company, has reported approximately 167,000 registered riders, but the number of women among them is estimated at around 1,000. It began reporting on women's participation specifically following investment from the IFC (World Bank Group), for whom women's economic participation was a stated objective.
- Uber has no disclosure obligation in Sri Lanka and reports no data at all. Newer platforms such as Helago have not yet produced usable figures.
- The discussion emphasized that this figure is further complicated by the absence of data on active riders and workers registered across multiple platforms simultaneously.

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- CSF's fieldwork suggests gig workers tend to have higher education levels and greater digital literacy than other outdoor informal workers, are predominantly young, and rely on informal peer networks such as Facebook groups in the absence of formal grievance mechanisms.

Complications around an employment relationship

- Platforms consistently maintain they are facilitators, not employers, denying any traditional employment relationship. This framing shields platforms from the obligations that formal employer status would entail.
- Gig workers occupy an ambiguous middle ground where they are considered informal by strict technical criteria, but many function as full-time workers on the platforms. Many also combine gig work with formal employment, complicating any simple, binary classification.
- Existing employer associations, such as the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) are built around a traditional employer-employee model. Platforms have little incentive to engage with or be governed by such bodies. India has found a partial workaround, bringing platforms into its EFC-equivalent body and using that membership as leverage on social protection and occupational safety, a model Sri Lanka has not yet attempted.
- Participants highlighted that full-time gig workers frequently cannot access formal financial services because their income cannot be verified through standard payslips. This excludes them from loans, credit, or mortgages despite consistent earnings.

Social protection framework falls short

- ETF contributions can presently only be made by employers. There is no mechanism for own-account workers to contribute independently, and any contribution arrangement risks being interpreted as evidence of an employment relationship, something platforms actively resist.
- An example was shared of a pilot social protection mechanism proposed to a major platform being rejected outright, citing concern from the private sector that shared contributions would imply an employment relationship.
- Sri Lanka's national social protection strategy is the first document of its kind in the country to explicitly reference gig and platform work, including contributory pensions and insurance. Participants cautioned that implementation will be the real test.

Occupational safety and health gets ignored

- The problems that come with gig work are gendered, and policy that fails to account for this risks missing the problem entirely. Safety, heat exposure, and access to basic facilities each carry disproportionate costs for women on the platform. Building on CSF's fieldwork, for safety, female workers have reported wearing multiple layers of clothing as a self-protection strategy in higher-risk areas. On heat and health, the absence of accessible bathroom facilities means women across Colombo have reported limiting water intake during shifts, contributing to higher rates of heat-related illness.
- Partial responses exist: Uber has partnered with food retail outlets to provide informal washroom access, and Chennai's Municipal Corporation has established dedicated

"cooling centres" for gig workers. These remain exceptions, not the norm.

Care work shaping women's experience of gig work

- Gig work's capacity to accommodate caregiving responsibilities, such as pausing a shift to collect a child from school, or accessing same-day pay in an emergency makes it attractive to women in ways factory employment, with its fixed hours and delayed pay cycles, cannot match.
- However, the same flexibility offers no protection when care responsibilities prevent a worker from meeting platform targets. The cost falls entirely on the worker, with no employer-side safety net.

Key Questions to Explore

Does "flexibility" mean the same thing to platforms and to workers?

- For platforms, flexibility means workers are free to log on or off at will. For workers, it more often means immediate access to income when urgently needed, not genuine autonomy over working conditions.
- Platform incentive structures actively push workers toward longer and less predictable hours. Bonus thresholds that forfeit the entire reward if missed just short of the target and algorithmic penalties for taking breaks mean the freedom to stop is largely theoretical.
- Gig work does offer genuine value that should not be dismissed: the ability to earn income on an existing commute, or to access same-day pay in a crisis. These are real advantages with no equivalent in conventional employment. The goal is preserving these benefits while addressing the underlying precarity, not eliminating gig work as a category.

How does algorithmic opacity compound the disadvantages women already face?

- Participants acknowledged that workers have no visibility into the systems that govern ride assignment, ratings, bonuses, and account activation. Platforms can change bonus structures at any time, including within a single day, with no obligation to inform workers.
- One platform was reported to apply differentiated targets for women in recognition of caregiving demands, but women interviewed by CSF were largely unaware of this, raising the question of whether platform-level adjustments are meaningful if workers do not know they exist.

Can social protection be extended without first resolving the classification question?

- Occupational safety and health protections could plausibly be attached to a company's operation of a platform without resolving the employer classification question. Extending income security, pensions, and insurance is harder to decouple from that debate.
- India's legal framework explicitly allows workers to contribute to superannuation schemes without being in a formal employment relationship. Sri Lanka's ETF structure does not. This is a specific legislative gap that advocates could target directly.
- Gujarat's welfare cess model shows that social protection financing can be built around a levy on platform transactions, bypassing the classification question entirely. This, alongside redirecting existing municipal levy revenue toward gig worker welfare, offers a practical alternative to reclassification.
- Workers themselves are often wary of formalisation: reclassification as an

employee would trigger mandatory deductions from take-home pay, and many may not voluntarily choose it even for the security it brings. Policy design needs to account for worker preferences.

How can regional models help us understand what is achievable?

- Participants acknowledged that benchmarking against the United States, where the classification debate remains unresolved, is neither the most useful nor the most applicable reference point for Sri Lanka. Countries in the region, including Malaysia, India, and Indonesia, have implemented baseline social protections for platform workers without requiring full reclassification as employees.
- India's state-level variation offers many approaches from gig-worker protections embedded in broader social security frameworks to standalone legislation. Sri Lankan regulators can selectively draw on what fits the local context.
- Kenya provides a cautionary counterpoint: transport authorities led the designation of ride-hailing as transport fleets, producing restrictive rules that failed to address workers' actual needs. In Sri Lanka, where the transport ministry has also been reported to be entering this space, there is a risk of the wrong institutional actor driving the agenda.

How can workers build a collective voice in a landscape where platforms hold structural advantages?

- Gig workers face a power imbalance in the scale of resources they have. Major platforms with Uber's Singapore-based regional public policy operation cited specifically as an example, deploy well-resourced, professionalised, government relations functions to engage regulators proactively. Government officials on the other hand face genuine resourcing constraints, limited technical capacity and in some cases corruption. Smaller platforms such as PickMe operate more cautiously, but the power asymmetry remains.
- This imbalance is compounded by the "facilitator" framing: platforms have successfully avoided employer obligations in major jurisdictions, and that precedent now travels with other platforms and governments citing it regardless of local relevance, making it harder for any single regulator to hold a different line.
- Yet the same scale that gives platforms their lobbying power also creates a pressure point. Platform work is now integral to urban transport and city infrastructure, making it increasingly difficult for policymakers to ignore worker grievances. Disruption has direct consequences for consumers and city functioning that even well-resourced lobbying cannot easily absorb.
- On the organising side, the most active coordinators of gig worker protest globally are not traditional trade unions but informal, ad hoc worker groups. India stands out as a contrasting case, with platform-specific and state-specific unions that have demonstrated real leverage through collective action.
- In Sri Lanka, the absence of a shared workplace pushes coordination into WhatsApp groups and Facebook communities, which function primarily as problem-solving networks rather than for collective action. Participants acknowledged that Sri Lanka's dispersed workforce and historically low worker concentration outside plantation sectors make traditional unionisation difficult to replicate. Alternative models like informal associations, platform-specific organising, or institutional engagement along the lines of India's employer-body approach are worth exploring.

Further Resources:

[Flexibility and Fairness in Platform Labour: Navigating Gig Work in Colombo]

Comprehensive report examining the opportunities, challenges, and policy recommendations surrounding gig work in Colombo, covering themes of algorithmic management, social protection, worker safety, climate impact, and collective action.

[Algorithms at Work: The Management of Gig Work in Sri Lanka]

Overview of how algorithmic management shapes and controls gig work in Sri Lanka, with a focus on delivery and ride-hailing workers.

[Is Gig Work in Sri Lanka Enabling Female Participation in the Workforce]

Examination of the barriers limiting female participation in Sri Lanka's gig economy, including social norms, safety concerns, and mobility restrictions, and the potential of online freelancing as a more accessible avenue for women.

[Understanding Power Asymmetries in Platform-based Gig Work]

Exploration of the power imbalances between gig workers and platform companies in Sri Lanka, covering algorithmic control, worker misclassification, opaque commission structures, and the erosion of worker agency.

[Six Reasons Why Sri Lanka Must Shape a Fairer Deal for Gig Workers]

Introduction to the key considerations and policy recommendations for improving labour protections and fair conditions for gig workers in Sri Lanka.

[Is Gig Work Really Part-time in Sri Lanka?: Findings from a Survey]

Survey findings reveal that contrary to popular perception, most gig workers in Sri Lanka engage in platform work on a full-time basis, and an examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis have deepened their precarity and lack of worker protections.

Centre for a Smart Future (CSF) is a Colombo-based think-tank with researchers, advisors, and partners around the world.

We conduct high-quality research, promote collaboration across disciplines, and generate actionable ideas. Our current work is anchored to influencing a just recovery from Sri Lanka's polycrisis, with the environment and human wellbeing at the core. Our research has partnered with organisations such as Institute of Development Studies, London School of Economics, International Labour Organization, Open Society Foundation, Blue Resources Trust, and Biodiversity Sri Lanka. What sets us apart is our interdisciplinary approach to research and policy advocacy. We like being imaginative in how we think about challenges and solutions.

We continually engage with a spectrum of stakeholders - from local communities to policymakers - which ensures that our research is relevant and accessible to a broad audience, while also contributing to meaningful policy change.

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