



NARRATIVE REPORT

Strengthening Social Protection in the Platform Economy

Kaushiki Sanyal and Sabina Dewan

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This Narrative Report draws on the JustJobs Network's research on the platform economy, as well as insights from discussions with government officials, platform unions, platforms, labour experts and lawyers. These conversations took place at a closed-door roundtable organised by the JustJobs Network in collaboration with the Global Deal (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD) and the Government of Karnataka. We are grateful to all roundtable participants for their valuable contributions. We also thank Sristi Bhatt for designing the report and Kavita Iyer for her editorial support.

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Executive Summary

India's labour market is undergoing a transformation as it navigates the new opportunities and challenges presented by a rapidly growing platform economy. Digital platforms have created new opportunities for income generation in urban areas while introducing new forms of employment insecurity. With the gig workforce estimated at 12 million in 2024-25 and projected to reach 23.5 million by 2029-30, the scale of platform work makes extending social protection an urgent policy priority.¹ Platform work is emerging within a labour market where around 87% of workers are already in informal employment and outside the reach of many statutory protections.² Without effective safeguards, the expansion of platform work risks reproducing and deepening existing vulnerabilities.

Against this backdrop, JustJobs Network convened a stakeholder dialogue with government officials, worker representatives, platforms, civil society organisations and experts from India and the Asia-Pacific on March 27, 2026, to examine how social protection for platform workers can be strengthened and delivered effectively.

This report draws on that dialogue, India's evolving regulatory framework, and international experience to identify the principal challenges and policy choices facing India.

Below is a summary of the key findings and recommendations that emerged from this dialogue.

Key Findings

Informal by law: The Code on Social Security, 2020 created a distinct legal category of gig and platform workers defined as those who perform work “outside of traditional employer-employee relationship.” This enables platforms to classify them as self-employed/independent contractors, effectively placing them outside the purview of existing labour protections that are available to formal sector employees.

Unclear timelines, registration requirements and definitions:

- **Timelines:** The Code on Social Security, 2020, notified in November 2025, creates a framework for gig worker benefits—including insurance, health and old-age protection—but is yet to be fully implemented though Central Rules were notified in May 2026.
- **Registration requirements:** India's parallel registration systems - the central e-Shram portal and separate state welfare boards - create overlapping obligations with no interoperability, risking exclusion of the very workers the framework intends to protect.
- **Lack of uniformity in the definition of gig workers:** While central law distinguishes between gig and platform workers, state laws such as Karnataka's largely collapse this distinction,

creating definitional inconsistencies that could result in workers falling through the gaps between central and state protections.

Replication of the welfare-board model:

Occupation-based welfare boards offer a familiar institutional model for extending social protection to informal workers, but their effectiveness depends on adequate financing, accountable governance, transparent administration, and delivery capacity. Enabling access to entitlements for gig and platform workers through such a welfare-board system requires careful design and implementation to avoid pitfalls that have plagued their use in other sectors.

Need for universal social protection:

Social protection for gig and platform workers needs to be embedded within the broader welfare ecosystem. A piecemeal approach that responds reactively to each new category of worker as it emerges risks creating arbitrary distinctions between different forms of informal work.

Adverse working conditions:

Platform-based gig work is often marked by economic precarity alongside harsh physical conditions, including health hazards, lack of basic amenities, low safety standards and exposure to harassment.

Algorithmic control:

Platforms hold extensive data on workers that could improve the delivery of entitlements. Platforms also use algorithms to power their models, deepening the information asymmetry in their favour.

Need for law on gig work:

Legislation is more effective than policies and voluntary commitments in expanding access to social protection. However,

implementation remains the key challenge in translating intent into outcomes.

Promotion of social dialogue:

Social dialogue through structured, tripartite negotiations is essential to building durable systems of social protection. It can help amplify the collective voice of workers and address power asymmetries that otherwise leave gig workers marginalised.

Recommendations

For central and state governments:

Move from fragmented initiatives towards binding, portable and well-governed social protection frameworks. Registration systems should be interoperable across platforms and states, with clear eligibility rules and reliable financing mechanisms.

Welfare institutions should have tripartite oversight, independent audits and transparent reporting, while benefits should be designed to travel with workers across platforms and states. Public infrastructure, including safe waiting areas and rest facilities, should form part of the broader social-protection ecosystem.

For platforms and digital aggregators:

Treat social protection, safety and transparency as core responsibilities rather than compliance costs. Platforms should facilitate accurate worker registration and responsible data sharing, strengthen occupational safety and customer accountability, enable meaningful human review of consequential algorithmic decisions, and establish accessible grievance-redress mechanisms.

For worker organisations:

Extend representation to

less visible segments of the platform workforce and build stronger links across sectors of the informal economy. Cross-sector solidarity can strengthen workers' collective voice and help address the power asymmetries inherent in platform-mediated work.

For the ILO and international actors: Ensure the implementation of the ILO's Convention on Decent Work in the Platform Economy that lays down global baselines on social protection, portability, worker representation, algorithmic transparency and data rights, while allowing sufficient flexibility for

countries with large informal economies and diverse institutional arrangements.

India has passed laws to protect gig workers at the centre and state level but they fall short on coherence, enforcement and durable dialogue. How India resolves these questions will determine whether its vast workforce of platform workers gain meaningful, portable social protection and will offer lessons for other labour markets across the Global South navigating the transition towards digitally mediated work.

Context

Digital platforms have emerged as central marketplaces for the global and local exchange of goods, services and information, profoundly restructuring the world of work. Within the broader platform economy, labour platforms spanning ride hailing, delivery services, home-based services, and cloud-based professional work depend on human labour to meet consumer demand. What distinguishes these arrangements from existing business models is the digital interface, which intermediates and structures the relationship between service providers and consumers.³

Across the globe, a growing contingent of workers relies on these labour and e-commerce platforms for income. In India alone, the gig workforce has grown from 7.7 million in 2020-21 to 12 million in 2024-25⁴ and is projected to reach 23.5 million workers by 2029, making it one of the fastest growing platform labour markets in the world.⁵

On the face of it, this seems like a welcome development, especially in the Global South where job creation has lagged behind a growing youth population⁶ and a large share of workers remains in informal employment.⁷ It has also opened up new income-earning opportunities for women, people with disabilities and migrant workers.⁸ But a closer look reveals a more complex reality, characterised by irregularity of work, unstable incomes, poor working conditions, limited social protection, and restrictions on the right to collective bargaining.⁹

As these platforms generate "gig work" by breaking down what was once a single job into smaller task-based assignments distributed across more workers, an increase in gig work does not necessarily translate into an increase in stable jobs. Instead, precarity is built into the model: workers are classified as independent contractors, allowing platforms to bypass labour regulations and social protection obligations. At the

same time, the platforms retain considerable control over how work is assigned, priced and managed through algorithmic systems, which impinges on the workers' flexibility in terms of working hours, earnings and collective bargaining power.¹⁰

India's pre-existing social protection landscape compounds these vulnerabilities. About 87% of its workforce is in informal employment and consequently out of the purview of statutory social protections available to those in formal employment.¹¹ In order to bridge this gap, some states set up occupation-based welfare boards to provide targeted benefits to workers in occupations such as construction, sanitation and beedi-making.¹² In practice, however, these mechanisms have been limited in scope and effectiveness, constrained by low registration, weak enforcement, and administrative bottlenecks, leaving most informal workers without meaningful social security.¹³

The demand for extending social protections, which include economic security, insurance and pensions, occupational safety and data rights to gig

and platform workers, has been voiced by workers and unions, civil society organisations and labour experts. Policy makers have taken note and initiated legislative action at both the central and state levels.¹⁴ This presents a timely opportunity to explore ways to engage with the policy process, strengthen it through dialogue, and draw insights from the experiences of other jurisdictions within India and outside.

This report draws on the stakeholder dialogue that was convened by the JustJobs Network on March 27, 2026. The dialogue brought together a diverse set of stakeholders - government officials, union representatives, platform companies, civil society organisations, and experts from India and the Asia-Pacific - to examine how social protection for platform workers can be strengthened and effectively delivered at the central and state level. The discussion was situated in a moment of growing state-level legislative activity in India, alongside the ILO's Convention No. 193 on Decent Work in the Platform Economy, adopted at the International Labour Conference in June 2026.¹⁵

The Policy Landscape

India's Regulatory Architecture

Labour regulations in India operate within a federal structure. The Constitution divides legislative power between the Centre and the states through three lists: Union, State and Concurrent. Since labour is on the 'Concurrent List', the central and state governments can both legislate on labour.¹⁶

Until 2020, India's labour law framework was fragmented across central and state laws, largely organised around formal employer–employee relationships. The framework was organised around five thematic areas: wage regulation (*Minimum Wages Act, 1948; Payment of Wages Act, 1936*); industrial relations (*Industrial Disputes Act, 1947; Trade Unions Act, 1926*); occupational safety (*Factories Act, 1948;*

Mines Act, 1952); contributory social security (*EPF Act, 1952*; *ESI Act, 1948*; *Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972*); and sector-specific protections for construction, beedi, plantation, and migrant workers.¹⁷

Coverage was conditional throughout. Most statutes applied only above thresholds of establishment size or wage level, and anchored protection to formal, identifiable employer–employee relationships. This logic excluded the majority of India’s workforce - self-employed workers, domestic workers, agricultural labourers, home-based workers, casual labour, and workers in unregistered/informal establishments, who fell largely outside the statutory framework.¹⁸

For informal workers, the government relied on welfare boards and government grants to provide benefits related to health, education and housing support.¹⁹ The Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996²⁰ created the welfare board and cess²¹ framework for construction workers, while the Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act, 2008²² enabled the creation of welfare schemes, social security boards and a registration mechanism for informal workers. However, both these arrangements suffered from weak institutional capacity, low registration, weak portability, unspent cess funds, and no justiciable entitlements.²³ Some states such as Kerala²⁴, Maharashtra²⁵ and Tamil Nadu²⁶ established multiple sector-specific boards covering workers such as head-load workers, transport workers, and handloom workers but their effectiveness was limited due to inefficiencies and mismanagement.²⁷ The result was a dual regime: formal sector workers with access to labour protections and contributory social insurance; informal workers dependent on fragmented and discretionary welfare.

In 2020, India consolidated 29 central labour laws into four Labour Codes²⁸, creating a new framework for governing work across sectors. The four Codes are as follows:

- [The Code on Wages, 2019](#): Consolidates laws relating to wages and bonus payments. It introduces a universal minimum wage framework and provisions on timely payment of wages, equal remuneration, and floor wages.
- [The Industrial Relations Code, 2020](#): Merges laws relating to trade unions, industrial disputes, and standing orders. It governs issues such as strikes, layoffs, retrenchment, dispute resolution, and recognition of trade unions.
- [The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020](#): Consolidates laws on workplace safety, health, and working conditions across sectors. It covers factories, mines, contract labour, migrant workers, working hours, welfare facilities, and occupational safety standards.
- [The Code on Social Security, 2020](#): Integrates laws relating to provident fund, employee state insurance, gratuity, maternity benefits, and social security schemes. It is also the first central labour legislation in India to formally recognise gig workers and platform workers.

The four Codes do not treat gig and platform workers uniformly. Among them, only the Code on Social Security, 2020 explicitly recognises and creates a framework for gig and platform workers (see Box 1). The remaining Codes largely continue to operate around conventional employer–employee relationships, limiting their direct applicability to platform work.

BOX 1

Key Provisions of the Code on Social Security, 2020

- Defines:
 - » **Gig worker:** a person engaged in work arrangements outside traditional employer–employee relationships.
 - » **Platform worker:** a person engaged in platform-based work through online platforms.
- Empowers the central and state governments to frame social security schemes for gig and platform workers.
- Envisages schemes relating to:
 - » life and disability cover,
 - » accident insurance,
 - » health and maternity benefits,
 - » old age protection,
 - » crèche and other welfare measures.
- Requires platforms to contribute 1–2% of annual turnover, capped at 5% of payments made to gig and platform workers for financing their social security benefits.
- Provides for registration of workers on a national portal linked to Aadhaar.
- Allows the central and state government to establish dedicated welfare or social security funds.
- Employment-linked protections such as Employee's Provident Fund, Employee's State Insurance, gratuity and maternity benefits do not apply to gig and platform workers.

Sources: Respective Acts (Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana, Jharkhand and Bihar); author's analysis.

Although the four Codes were enacted in 2019 and 2020, they were not notified until November 21, 2025²⁹ because their implementation required central and state rules³⁰, administrative preparedness, and political negotiation with states and trade unions.³¹ The central government finally notified the Central Rules for the Codes on Social Security, Wages and Occupational Safety on May 8, 2026, which made the respective central laws operational.³² However, states have to separately notify and operationalise their own Rules under the Codes, and not many states have done so yet.³³

Initiatives by States

While the Code on Social Security, 2020, created a new legal category of gig worker and platform worker and mandated the extension of certain social welfare measures, a few states went further and enacted laws that offer a more concrete framework to protect workers' rights.

So far, five states³⁴ - Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana, Bihar, and Jharkhand - have enacted laws to protect the rights of gig and platform workers. Rajasthan was the first, passing its law in 2023, but it is yet to be operationalised.³⁵ Karnataka, Bihar and Jharkhand passed their laws in 2025, and Telangana in 2026. Each is at a different stage of implementation. Karnataka appears to have made the most progress, having constituted a Welfare Board and held initial meetings.³⁶

In terms of process, the laws in Rajasthan, Karnataka and Telangana were developed through relatively broad-based consultations.³⁷ Jharkhand undertook a more limited consultation process,³⁸ while there is little publicly available evidence of any structured consultation in Bihar.

While the laws share several common features, they diverge in important respects. The table below provides a snapshot of their key similarities and distinctions.

Across Rajasthan, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand and Telangana, gig worker laws broadly follow a common welfare board model. They provide for mandatory registration of platform-based gig workers and aggregators (digital intermediary for buying and

Table 1:
Key Provisions of States’ Gig Worker Laws

Provisions	Rajasthan (2023)	Karnataka (2025)	Telangana (2026)	Jharkhand (2025)	Bihar (2025)
Mandatory Registration of Gig Workers & Platforms	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Establishment of Welfare Board for Gig Workers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Creation of Welfare Fund	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rights of Gig Workers	Representation on welfare board, get social security schemes based on contributions, right to grievance redressal mechanism	Same as Rajasthan Act + right to refuse work	Same as Rajasthan Act + right to refuse work Govt may prescribe standard rates of remuneration	Same as Rajasthan Act + right to fair remuneration (minimum remuneration)	Same as Rajasthan Act + right to timely payments (max 7-day gap)
Algorithmic Transparency	Not mentioned	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (limited)
Data Sharing Obligation	Limited	Required	Required	Limited	Required
Grievance Mechanism	Yes. Single-tier (state officer)	Yes. Two-tier (internal + Board)	Yes. Multi-tier, (with Internal Dispute Resolution Committee for platforms with 100+ workers)	Yes (internal dispute resolution committee)	Yes (grievance redressal officer & appellate authority + internal dispute resolution committee for large platforms)
Penalties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Sources: Respective Acts (Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana, Jharkhand and Bihar); author’s analysis.

selling goods and services), creation of a state welfare board, issuance of worker IDs, establishment of a welfare or social security fund, and aggregator contributions through a transaction-linked fee or cess. They also envisage welfare schemes covering health, accident and life insurance, and other social security benefits. Each includes grievance redressal mechanisms and penalties for non-compliance.³⁹ In addition, the states have favoured transaction-based levies to finance the social protections: Rajasthan, Bihar, Karnataka and Jharkhand impose welfare fees or cess on aggregators, while Telangana's 2026 law levies 1–2 per cent on each payout to gig workers. These funds may also draw government grants and, in some states, worker contributions.

Protections on fair contracts, algorithmic transparency and worker voice vary across the five state laws. Rajasthan focuses mainly on registration, welfare funding and grievance redressal. Karnataka, Telangana, Bihar and Jharkhand go further by requiring clearer terms of engagement, prior notice for adverse changes, and mechanisms to contest deactivation or penalties imposed by the platform.⁴⁰ Several provisions require platforms to share worker and transaction data with welfare boards, creating a basis for algorithmic accountability. Worker voice is addressed through representation on welfare boards, grievance mechanisms, and consultation-oriented institutional structures, though collective bargaining rights remain weak.⁴¹

ILO Convention on the Platform Economy

On June 12, 2026, ILO adopted the Convention No. 193 on Decent Work in the Platform Economy. It was a historic milestone, establishing for the first time legally binding international minimum labour standards for gig and platform workers. Like all ILO Conventions, however, its provisions become legally binding only for member states that ratify them.

Although India abstained from voting, the Convention sets a global benchmark for regulating work in the digital economy. Currently, India's legal

framework remains partially aligned with the ILO Convention with only limited or no provisions for algorithmic transparency, data protection and collective bargaining.

The ILO Convention provides a comprehensive framework for promoting fair working conditions and ensuring social protection, algorithmic transparency, occupational safety, collective rights, and effective access to justice in the digital economy.

Key Provisions of ILO Convention No. 193

SCOPE

- **Coverage:** It covers all persons working through digital labour platforms, whether classified as employees or self-employed, and whether the work is performed online or through location-based services.
- **Status-neutral:** It does not require ratifying states to reclassify workers as employees to extend protections.

CLASSIFICATION

- **Primacy of facts:** A worker's status must be determined by the reality of how work is performed and directed, not by the label used in a platform's contract.

REMUNERATION

- **Payment standards:** It requires payment in full and on time, adherence to applicable minimum wage standards, and reimbursement of work-related expenses.

ALGORITHMIC MANAGEMENT

- **Disclosure:** Platforms must disclose to workers and their representatives the function of automated systems used to monitor, evaluate, or make decisions about work.
- **Safeguards:** Algorithms cannot be used in ways that undermine freedom of association or safe working conditions.
- **Human review:** Decisions affecting pay, suspension, deactivation or termination require a documented explanation and meaningful human review.
- **Data rights:** Worker data collected through these systems is subject to purpose limitation and rights of access, correction and erasure.

SAFETY, SOCIAL PROTECTION & RIGHT TO REFUSE WORK

- **OSH & social security:** Occupational safety and health duties and social-security entitlements extend to platform workers regardless of formal status.
- **Protection against unlawful deactivation:** Workers are protected against discriminatory or unlawful account suspension, closely related to the right to refuse work without penalty.

Sources: International Labour Organization, Convention concerning decent work in the platform economy, 2026 (No. 193), June 12, 2026

Key Issues and Policy Debates

Digital platforms in India prioritise scale, efficiency, rapid market expansion, and cost minimisation, relying on algorithmic management to allocate work, monitor performance, and control labour costs. In order to succeed, platforms need to attract a large pool of service providers and consumers. Often, their strategy is to initially attract workers through generous joining incentives and performance-linked bonuses, but gradually reduce them once the platform achieves scale, market penetration, and a stable labour supply.⁴²

That is not to say that digital platforms do not add value. Digital platforms provide income-generation opportunities along with the option of flexible work hours, which can be especially attractive for those with care responsibilities.⁴³ But workers also face several challenges, including income volatility and incentive structures that reward those who work longer hours. Working conditions may be unsafe, there is no social security, and systems of ratings and deactivation are opaque.⁴⁴ In addition, flexible working hours do not benefit those who depend on platform work as their primary livelihood.⁴⁵ Since they have to bear the costs of fuel, vehicles, insurance, health risks, and social security themselves, such workers take on more tasks to achieve an appropriate level of earnings. Many platforms also incentivise longer engagement with the platform. Moreover, prolonged working hours reflect not only the time spent on each task but also the waiting time between tasks. For instance, in delivery or ride-share work, workers spend significant amounts of time waiting between jobs.

This wait time may not be taken into account when payments are based solely on the performance and completion of tasks.⁴⁶

This divergence creates a structural imbalance where platform incentives favour operational efficiency, while workers seek stability, transparency, dignity, and protection from precarity. This section discusses the key issues and policy debates related to the welfare of gig workers that were highlighted during the peer-learning workshop.

Employment Status & Access to Social Protection

The employment status of workers on digital platforms is one of the most contested issues across geographies. Despite significant differences in labour market contexts, platform workers across the Global North and Global South have fought for recognition as employees, for employee status brings them within the scope of existing labour protections.⁴⁷ Most countries have taken one of two approaches: (a) classify platform workers as employees, primarily based on the amount of control exercised by the platform; or (b) treat them as independent contractors, based on the degree of their autonomy and flexibility.⁴⁸

India has adopted a middle path. Platform workers have not been granted employee status, but certain statutory social security and welfare protections have been extended to them through separate legal frameworks.⁴⁹ The Code on Social Security, 2020, explicitly defines platform work as “a work

arrangement outside of a traditional employer–employee relationship”, and provides for the extension of social security entitlements to platform workers. By creating this separate category, the Code enables platforms to classify workers as self-employed or independent contractors, effectively bypassing labour protections available to formal sector employees such as minimum wage, social security benefits, occupational safety and health, and the right to collective bargaining.⁵⁰

Platforms argue that they function merely as digital intermediaries connecting workers with clients, while workers operate as independent contractors because they retain the flexibility to choose when, how and whom to work for. Yet, many labour platforms act as more than just a digital intermediary. They exercise management control over gig workers by setting the rates, managing quality through customer ratings, using algorithms to determine when and how work is available, and deactivating workers who fall short of platform-defined standards.⁵¹

Although the Code on Wages, 2019 allows the government to fix minimum wages for employees based on working hours or the number of pieces produced (piece rate work),⁵² platform workers are not eligible even though they are mostly paid a piece rate (i.e. per task).⁵³ None of the state-level platform-based gig work laws mandate a minimum wage.

India has chosen to not give gig and platform workers employee status. This could be for multiple reasons, including the need to provide some employment to its large, mostly semi-skilled labour force, preserving the flexibility model of digital platforms, and the lack of state capacity to implement labour laws.⁵⁴ Nonetheless,

it could consider the experiences of jurisdictions that have opted for presumption of employment, and tailor an approach suited to India's needs:

European Union: The European Union's Platform Work Directive (2024) introduced a rebuttable presumption of employment, shifting the burden of proof on digital platforms to demonstrate that workers are genuinely self-employed.⁵⁵

Spain: Spain's Riders' Law, enacted in 2021, introduced a presumption of employment for delivery riders working through digital platforms, entitling them to labour protections such as minimum wages, paid leave, social security and collective bargaining rights.⁵⁶

California, U.S.: In 2020, California passed the AB5 law creating the ABC test to determine independent contractor status. It presumes that all workers who provide labour in exchange for remuneration are employees, unless proven otherwise. To classify someone as an independent contractor, the hiring entity must prove three conditions: (i) the worker is free from the entity's control, (ii) the work is outside the entity's usual business, and (iii) the worker is engaged in an independent trade or business of the same nature.⁵⁷

UK: The UK Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that Uber drivers are workers, and not self-employed contractors, as Uber tightly controls the transportation service.⁵⁸

In contrast, people working at Deliveroo (food delivery company) were not deemed to be workers because they had an unlimited right of substitution.⁵⁹

The right of substitution provides for any person to delegate their work to a substitute, an important right in determining employment status.

Lack of Clarity on Timelines, Registration Requirements & Definitions

Timelines

The Code on Social Security creates an architecture for extending benefits to gig and platform workers but it is yet to be implemented due to delay in notification (it was notified on November 21, 2025 and Central Rules were notified on May 8, 2026).^{60,61} It requires the central government to frame schemes covering life and disability cover, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, and crèche facilities, funded through a combination of central government, state government and aggregator contributions. Workers must register on a national Aadhaar-linked portal. However, they remain excluded from formal employee entitlements such as provident fund, ESI, gratuity, and maternity benefit.

Registration Requirements

India's dual registration framework for gig workers may create confusion and lead to exclusions. At the central level, the Code on Social Security requires registration on the e-Shram portal. Simultaneously, every state law passed so far - Rajasthan, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Telangana - independently mandates registration with a separate state-level welfare board. With no interoperability between these systems, a worker operating across state lines faces registration obligations in multiple jurisdictions, while benefits remain non-portable across boards. Rather than simplifying access to social protection, this multiplying architecture risks recreating the very exclusion it intends to remedy.

Lack of Uniformity in Definition of Gig Workers

India's central law draws a distinction between gig workers—defined as those earning outside a traditional employer-employee relationship—and platform workers, a subset who specifically access work through digital intermediaries. This two-tier definition recognises that not all gig work is platform-mediated. State laws, however, have largely collapsed this distinction. Karnataka, for instance, defines a gig worker as someone who engages in contractual, piece-rate work specifically through a platform, effectively treating gig and platform work as synonymous. This definitional inconsistency creates regulatory confusion: workers covered under the central framework may fall outside state protections, or vice versa, undermining the coherence of an already fragmented social security architecture.⁶²

Replication of the Welfare Board Model

Occupation-based welfare boards have been the principal vehicle to deliver welfare to the country's large informal workforce. As this workforce mostly falls outside the conventional employer-employee relationship, the boards are a practical mechanism for sector-specific welfare. They also institutionalise tripartite negotiation between the state, employers, and worker representatives, enabling occupation-specific welfare measures and dispute resolution through collective participation.

However, their effectiveness depends on adequate financing, accountable governance, transparent administration, and delivery capacity. The Building

and Other Construction Workers' (BOCW) Welfare Boards—the closest analogue to proposed gig worker boards - offer a cautionary precedent. The Comptroller and Auditor General's performance audits across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi between 2024 and 2025 have documented persistent failures: in Tamil Nadu, 19.13 lakh registrations were found to be inactive or duplicate; in Karnataka, 6.06 crore in collected cess was retained without remittance, while about 12 crore, stated to have been remitted through DD/Cheques could not be traced to the bank account of the board.⁶³

Enabling access to entitlements for gig and platform workers through such a welfare board system requires careful design and implementation to avoid pitfalls that have plagued their use in other sectors.

Need for Universal Social Protection

Social protection for gig and platform workers must be situated within a broader and more universal welfare ecosystem rather than treated as an isolated policy challenge. A fragmented, piecemeal approach that creates separate protections for each newly emerging category of worker risks producing arbitrary hierarchies within the informal economy, where gig workers may receive attention while equally precarious groups such as domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, or agricultural labourers remain excluded. Such distinctions are difficult to justify in labour markets where workers frequently move across occupations, combine multiple forms of informal work, and experience similar forms of insecurity. Moreover, technological change and digitalisation will continue to generate

new and hybrid forms of labour that existing legal categories may struggle to capture. Building worker protections through narrowly defined occupational silos is therefore unlikely to remain sustainable. Instead, the long-term challenge is to develop universal, portable, and adaptable social protection systems capable of covering all workers irrespective of employment classification.⁶⁴

India already possesses much of the digital infrastructure necessary to enable portable social protection for gig and platform workers. Systems such as Aadhaar, the e-Shram portal, and emerging models of cross-platform data sharing provide a foundation through which workers could carry benefits and welfare entitlements across platforms, occupations, and state boundaries. Many large platforms that operate nationally also have practical incentives to support portability, particularly as workers frequently move between regions and combine work across multiple applications. However, translating this technological capacity into meaningful worker protection requires deliberate policy design, legal coordination, and enforceable data-sharing obligations.

Challenges of Gig Work

Occupational Safety and Public Infrastructure

Platform-based gig work is frequently characterised by deep economic insecurity alongside demanding and often unsafe working conditions. Workers face unstable and unpredictable incomes, long working hours, and constant pressure from algorithmic performance monitoring systems. These conditions are compounded by significant occupational risks,

particularly for delivery and ride-hailing workers who spend extended hours on roads, without adequate accident insurance, rest facilities, sanitation, or protection from extreme weather. Workers also routinely report exposure to harassment, abuse, and arbitrary penalties with limited avenues for redress. Despite being central to urban service economies, most gig workers continue to operate without adequate labour protections, workplace safety standards, or meaningful social security coverage.^{65,66}

Women platform workers face additional barriers. In location-based platform work, they may face harassment from customers, unsafe travel routes, lack of secure waiting spaces, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to grievance redressal. Care responsibilities, family restrictions on mobility, lack of vehicle ownership, limited access to bank accounts, and lower digital literacy can further restrict their participation. These constraints may push women into lower-paying or lower-demand forms of platform work, reproducing offline labour market inequalities in digital form.

Despite persistent worker demand, platforms have resisted instituting “Know Your Customer” processes to verify customer identity.⁶⁷ This basic measure can significantly improve customer accountability and enhance worker safety.

Flexibility Trap

Digital labour platforms market gig work as offering flexibility and autonomy, yet their incentive structures frequently reward long and uninterrupted working hours through surge pricing, performance ratings, and algorithmic allocation of tasks. This disadvantages workers who cannot remain constantly available,

particularly women, persons with disabilities, older workers, and others with caregiving or mobility constraints. Women workers face an additional layer of structural disadvantage due to unpaid care responsibilities, limiting their ability to compete within systems designed around continuous availability.

Algorithmic Management & Personal Data Collection

Platform work is governed through algorithmic management systems that assign tasks, monitor performance, determine pay, impose penalties, and shape workers’ access to future work, with minimal transparency or accountability. Workers are disciplined through ratings, automated deactivations, and opaque incentive structures that leave little room for contestation. At the same time, platforms collect highly granular data on workers, including earnings, working hours, locations, productivity, and behavioural patterns. Such data could significantly improve the design and delivery of welfare entitlements, social security, and targeted support for gig workers. However, platforms rarely share this information with governments or workers themselves, making statutory data-sharing and algorithmic transparency obligations increasingly necessary.⁶⁸

Need for Comprehensive Gig Work Law

India requires a comprehensive central law governing the gig economy to create a coherent and consistent regulatory framework across states. While states such as Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana, Bihar and Jharkhand have initiated important legislative efforts, fragmented regulation risks creating inconsistencies,

regulatory arbitrage, and rent-seeking. A national framework is also necessary to clarify how gig work regulation intersects with other laws, including data protection and privacy legislation. International experiences demonstrate that effective gig economy regulation must address a wide range of issues, including worker classification, algorithmic management, remuneration, working time, occupational safety, social security, dispute resolution, data governance, and collective representation. These experiences offer important lessons for India's evolving regulatory approach.⁶⁹

Promotion of Social Dialogue

Sustained social dialogue between governments, platforms, workers, and their representative organisations is needed to ensure a robust social protection architecture for platform-based gig workers. Bringing platforms meaningfully to the negotiating table is essential not only to secure commitments on data sharing and interoperable systems, but also to build consensus around fair and enforceable standards for worker protection. Such dialogue must ensure that technological efficiency

BOX 3

Furthering the Collective Voice: Why Social Dialogue Matters

Platform work creates structural conditions that make worker organisation and collective bargaining difficult: workers are geographically dispersed, and significant power asymmetries persist between them and platforms. Legal frameworks that recognise collective action, alongside practical infrastructure that supports organising, such as accessible help desks and legal aid, can help create the environment needed to lift up worker voices and strengthen representation in social dialogue.

In the past few years, gig and platform worker unions have begun to organise in India, with app-based transport and delivery unions being among the most active. Their presence in Karnataka's legislative consultations and multi-stakeholder workshops in states like Uttar Pradesh have resulted in better-grounded legislation. Karnataka's tripartite welfare board institutionalises this, creating a permanent structure for ongoing dialogue rather than a one-off consultation process. Equally, other states too have recognised the distinct interests that drive platforms and worker organisations and unions, and have created conditions for dialogue to facilitate better outcomes.

Structuring dialogue to account for divergent views and power asymmetries is a prerequisite to ensuring fair outcomes. Social dialogue is not a mere formality or a procedural add-on to social protection; it is what makes protection durable.

The evidence from the states that have passed gig worker laws also points consistently in the same direction: representation built into governance structures from the start produces better outcomes.

and business interests do not overshadow worker welfare, and that gig workers themselves have a voice in shaping the systems that govern their livelihoods and access to social protection. Social

dialogue is, ultimately, a prerequisite for enabling robust legislation that can drive social protection, since it embeds participation, legitimacy, and shared responsibility into policy design.

Actionable Recommendations

For State Governments and Policy Makers

- State governments should move beyond voluntary commitments and create binding legal obligations for platform worker protection. Legislation should clearly define covered workers and platforms, require registration of workers and aggregators, establish contribution mechanisms, and create enforceable obligations on data sharing, grievance redressal, and benefit delivery.
- Welfare boards should be designed with safeguards from the outset. This includes tripartite representation, transparent fund management, clear timelines for benefit delivery, independent audits, public reporting, and mechanisms for workers to raise complaints about non-payment, exclusion, or delayed benefits. Worker representatives should reflect the diversity of the platform workforce, and should include women, migrants, and workers from less organised sectors.
- States should design benefits for portability. Worker IDs, registration systems, and contribution records should be interoperable across platforms and, where possible, across states. State systems should be aligned with national databases such as e-Shram while ensuring privacy, consent, and correction rights. Social protection mechanisms should provide access to healthcare, accident coverage, and insurance facilities that respond to the occupational risks faced by gig workers, including road accidents, long-term health conditions, and workplace harassment.
- Policymakers should move beyond rigid worker classifications and reimagine social protection more holistically, building integrated systems capable of covering workers across diverse forms of informal, self-employed, and platform-mediated work.
- Policy design should integrate social protection with public infrastructure. Governments should work with urban local bodies, transport departments, health departments, and platforms to create rest shelters, toilets, drinking water points, charging facilities where relevant, road safety measures, and emergency support systems for workers. These facilities should be designed with the needs of women workers in mind, including secure, well-lit waiting areas, safer transit points, and childcare facilities to support their continued participation in platform work.

- Governments should require platform policies and contracts to be available in relevant Indian languages, written in plain and accessible terms. Workers should receive clear information about pay calculation, incentives, penalties, grievance procedures, and deactivation rules.
- States should institutionalise social dialogue.

Consultation should begin before laws are drafted and continue during rule-making, implementation, and evaluation. Separate consultations with worker organisations and platforms may be necessary before joint deliberations, especially where power asymmetries are significant.

For Platforms and Digital Aggregators

- Platforms should treat social protection as part of a sustainable business model rather than as a compliance burden alone. High attrition, distrust, and unsafe working conditions increase costs and undermine service quality. Contributing to welfare funds, sharing required data, and supporting grievance redressal can improve stability in the platform workforce.
- Platforms should provide workers with access to their own data, including earnings histories, task records, ratings, penalties, incentive calculations, and reasons for deactivation or account restrictions. This information should be available in usable formats and relevant languages.
- Consequential decisions should not be left solely to automated systems. Platforms should introduce human review for deactivations,

penalties, blocked accounts, and complaints involving harassment or safety risks. Workers should have access to time-bound appeal mechanisms.

- Platforms should improve worker safety and customer accountability. This includes customer verification where appropriate, emergency support, safe cancellation options, protection from retaliatory ratings, and clear protocols for responding to harassment or violence.
- Platforms should participate constructively in tripartite boards and consultations. This requires sharing operational concerns transparently while accepting that workers' rights and social protection cannot depend only on voluntary initiatives.

For Worker Organisations

- Worker organisations should continue expanding representation across sectors, cities, and worker groups that are currently less visible. This includes women platform workers,

migrant workers, home-service workers, cloud workers, and workers outside ride-hailing and delivery services.

- Unions and worker collectives should invest in worker resource centres, legal support, help desks, and digital literacy initiatives that help workers understand contracts, document grievances, access benefits, and participate in consultations. These forms of support are especially important where workers interact with platforms mainly through apps.
- Worker organisations should build alliances across gig, informal, contract, and self-employed workers. Many of the challenges faced by platform workers—income volatility, weak

bargaining power, lack of social security, and fragmented welfare access—are shared across the wider informal economy. Cross-sector solidarity can strengthen demands for a universal and portable social protection floor.

- Worker representatives should actively engage with welfare boards and state consultations, while also monitoring implementation. Their role should extend beyond advocacy for new laws to ensuring that registration, contributions, benefits, and grievance mechanisms function in practice.

For the ILO Process

- The ILO's newly adopted Convention No. 193 on decent work in the platform economy is the first legally binding treaty that sets minimum standards for gig work while recognising the diversity of national labour markets.⁷⁰ Although India abstained from the voting process⁷¹, the Convention does provide a blueprint for crafting its gig laws. For those countries that supported the treaty, they are required to bring their domestic laws in line with it on matters related

to employment classification, portability, worker representation, algorithmic management, occupational safety, and data rights.

- India's experience, alongside that of other countries navigating similar terrain, offers lessons that are directly relevant for the process of standard-setting and can help establish a meaningful and replicable floor for platform worker protection globally.

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JustJobs convenes a global network of diverse stakeholders—including policy shapers, academics, and grassroots leaders—to deepen the practical implications of our research and amplify its impact. Through the combination of cutting-edge research and global knowledge sharing, we aim to forge a fresh, dynamic channel for policy dialogue on employment and skill development at national, regional and international levels.