

GENDER-SENSITIVE STRATEGIES TO BRIDGE THE GENDER-GAP IN INDIA'S EMERGING JOB MARKET

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Abstract: Despite India's rapid economic growth, female labour force participation (FLFP) remains alarmingly low. The logistics and flexi-staffing sectors, both rapidly expanding since 2018, present a unique opportunity recruiting semi-skilled young and adult women. This study analyses women lived experiences alongside organizational gender-sensitive strategies to examine the horizontal (across industries) and vertical (within job hierarchies) dimensions of gender inclusion prospects by adopting a dual-perspective approach. Using in-depth interviews with 43 female workers and 8 employer representatives, this qualitative study explores a complex interplay between gender-sensitive workplace strategies implemented by employers and the persistent challenges faced by women employees - including restrictive social norms, and limited awareness and aspiration - while also highlighting successful interventions by introducing flexible work hours, incentives, safety measures and transportation facilities that have enabled greater inclusion and retention. The findings underscore the urgent need for scalable reforms, including flexible work arrangements, supervisory support, mentorship, and social engagement to build sustainable gender-inclusive interventions.

Keywords: *Female labour force participation, gender-sensitive strategies, logistics, flexi-staffing, qualitative research, India, SDG 5, SDG 8*

1. Introduction

As India's economy rises, its female labour force participation (FLFP) falls - a contradiction that has prompted extensive scholarly attention (such as Afridi *et al.* 2020; Sarkar *et al.* 2019; Afridi *et al.* 2017; Dubey *et al.* 2017; Siddiqui *et al.* 2017; Chatterjee *et al.* 2015; Das *et al.* 2015; Klasen and Pieters 2012; Neff *et al.* 2012). But mostly, these are predominantly on supply-side factors (or barriers) such as women's educational attainment, wage-gap, household responsibilities, cultural norms, safety concerns, and limited access to childcare and logistics etc. explaining low participation of women in the labour market (Deshpande, 2022; Mehrotra and Sinha, 2019; Hirway, 2017; Chopra, 2015; Kabeer *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, demand-side dynamics - particularly the role of employers and workplace landscape in shaping women's labour market engagement - remain underexplored. Globally, while many countries (e.g. Japan, Germany) have seen a steady rise or stabilization in FLFP over the past decade, India has witnessed a significant decline - from around 30.5 percent in 2005 to 19.2 percent in 2021 - placing it among the lowest in the world (ILO, 2023; World Bank, 2022). Since participation in the workforce depends not only supply-side factors but highly on the demand for their labour, a deeper and better insight is needed what explains women's historically low participation rates. Despite low FLFP, India holds immense potential: the McKinsey Global Institute (2018)¹ estimates that advancing gender equality could boost India's GDP by \$770 billion by 2025, even as the country ranks among the lowest for FLFP within the G20².

To address this opportunity, there is a pressing need for stakeholders such as - family, community members and employers to implement and expand gender-sensitive interventions to recruit and retain more women in the workforce (Jayachandran, 2020). Implementing such strategies helps in addressing systematic barriers or enablers (especially occurs from demand-side) and ensuring fair treatment and equal opportunities across all job roles. Such gender-sensitive strategies will not only promote equality and inclusivity but also leverage diverse perspectives that drive innovation and larger job ecosystem in favour of women. To boost women's work participation through gender-sensitive strategies, to the best of our knowledge, this study is one of the first to investigate the factors affecting FLFP and to review the gender-sensitive strategies developed and implemented by employers in selected companies in India. Some existing literatures present a rich and diverse analysis of women's labour experiences, work choices, and challenges within informal and formal sectors across India. The focus has been given on how women are constrained by limited access to affordable transport, shelter, women's resistance to gender norms, reproductive and household responsibilities, impacting their livelihood opportunities (Dadheech and Sharma; 2024; Deshpande and Kabeer, 2021; Carswell, 2017; Upadhyay, 2017; Lal, 2011; Mattila, 2011; Anand and Tiwari, 2006). Samantroy and Khurana (2017) stress the inadequacy of workplace care policies, whereas Dutta (2020) mentioned strength of emotional bonds and agency attaching workplace and Baruah (2017) showcases an empowering employment model through the women on wheels programme. But they are limited to sector or regional level and talk about supply-side constraints. While global literature highlights the importance of gender-sensitive employment strategies - such as flexible work arrangements, workplace safety, career progression, and incentive structures - as critical tools for improving women's workforce participation (OECD, 2021; ILO, 2017; Kabeer and Natali, 2013), India-specific evidence on how such strategies are designed and implemented at the industry level, particularly in non-traditional or semi-skilled sectors like logistics

¹<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Gender%20Equality/The%20power%20of%20parity%20Advancing%20womens%20equality%20in%20Asia%20Pacific/MGI-The-power-of-parity-Advancing-womens-equality-in-Asia-pacific-Executive-summary.pdf>

² An international forum of 19 countries and the European Union that brings together the world's major economies to discuss and coordinate global economic policy.

and flexi-staffing, remains scarce and under-explored (Deshpande, 2022; Afridi *et al.*, 2020; Mehrotra and Sinha, 2019).

In recognition of the opportunity to increase female labour force participation (FLFP) in specific industries, it would be interesting to know how gender-sensitive interventions can influence outcomes in these sectors if effectively implemented. This study draws on in-depth interviews with female employees and employers involved in a livelihood intervention led by a social impact organization aimed at enhancing employment opportunities for women in India. The program specifically targets women aged 15–59 years from low-income households, with the objective of increasing their participation in entry-level or blue-collar jobs. The program has included two highly growing industries - logistics³ which includes last mile delivery (LMD) and warehouse; and flexi-staffing⁴ (FS) by integrating gender equitable practices with partner companies. The partner companies are referred to as selected business houses who signed-up for the livelihood intervention and consequently piloted and scaled-up some of the recommended gender-equitable strategies. The aims have been to place over one million women in India by shifting the mindset of the employers and help them in recruiting and retaining female employees and bridge the gender gap in labour market. The program is being implemented with partner companies that have a pan-India presence, with a focus on urban geographies in three phases. This was a three-year intervention. In the first phase the organization conducted a scoping exercise to understand aspirations and challenges of various stakeholders in selected industries, which helped them in designing a set of gender-equitable best practices, tailored for partner companies across the two industries to employ women. During the second phase (the pilot phase) the best practices were pilot-tested with the signed-up partner companies based on their scoping study and evaluation findings. In the third phase (scale-up phase), the best practices are being scaled-up with partner companies and simultaneously the livelihood intervention is also documenting and disseminating these best practices to bring a shift in the industry norms.

To understand the complex realities shaping women's participation in India's logistics and flexi-staffing sectors, this study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Labour market segmentation theory explains women's concentration in low-paid, low-mobility roles deemed socially or physically 'appropriate', while excluding them from others (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). It helps interpret how gendered divisions shape job allocation and how recent shifts are opening new spaces for women. Feminist institutionalism reveals how workplace norms, routines, and hierarchies embed gendered power relations (Chappell and Waylen, 2013), showing how small structural changes - like female security staff or transport support - can enable meaningful inclusion. The capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) moves the analysis beyond job access rather question: Do these roles expand women's real choices, agency, and aspirations? Together, these theories help us understand how gender-sensitive strategies at the workplace are not just practical tools - they are part of a broader shift toward inclusion, equity, and empowerment.

³ The logistics sector includes both the warehouse industry and last-mile delivery (LMD) industry. The warehouse employment includes packing, handling, stocking and labelling of packages, loaders/unloaders, forklift drivers in warehouses (buildings where goods or products are stored before they are distributed or sold). The LMD indicates package delivery from the distribution center to individual residences or retail stores.

⁴ The flexi-staffing (FS) include employees hired from staffing consultancy companies or via agents on a contract basis. The job roles include salesperson, tele-caller, housekeeper or picker/packer/scanner at warehouses etc.

The study assesses the organizational adaptations, scalability and impact of gender-sensitive strategies across two industries, namely logistics and the flexi-staffing. It adopts a dual-perspective approach, by capturing insights from both female employees and employers to explain the horizontal (across industries) and vertical (within job hierarchies) parameters across the industries.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study design

This study has adopted a mixed-methods design to unpack the nuanced factors affecting women's employment experiences both from employee and employer perspective.

To capture the employee's perspective, in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide to elicit rich narratives on recruitment and working conditions.

To explore the employer's perspective, key informant interviews were conducted to understand the effects on adaptability and sustainability of best practices/interventions from selected partner companies.

To examine and indicate the changes in recruitment of female employees, partner company aggregate data were collected from 12 partners from 2021 to 2024. The aggregate data shared by the partners included sex-disaggregated information on number of employees.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The study took place with employees working in partner companies based in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Haryana, Delhi and Odisha. The interviews with the employers were conducted from the same states. The participants were purposively selected for the study. The implementing partners connected the PCC research team with the employers from selected partner companies and the employers connected the research team with selected female employees who were willing to participate in the study.

The semi-structured interview guides were prepared in English language and translated into five languages Hindi, Marathi, Telegu and Oriya language. The female employee interviews were conducted by one female researchers in each location trained in conducting qualitative interviews. The PCC research team conducted a two day in-person training with the six researchers. The researchers recorded each interview after taking consent and ensuring confidentiality of information. The interviews were conducted in the local language and transcribed in English. The researchers also shared detailed notes in English. Whereas the employer interview guide was prepared in English language and were conducted by the PCC research team.

The qualitative interviews were translated in English language and analysed using the Nvivo software. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and contradictions. The data was manually coded to maintain contextual integrity and explore emerging themes. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts to identify recurring patterns and contradictions.

2.3 Study Profile

The female employees who were interviewed were recruited from four major companies - two warehouse organizations, one last-mile delivery (LMD) firm, and one flexi-staffing (FS) agency across two industries mentioned above (i.e. logistics and flexi-staffing). A semi-structured interviews were conducted with 43 female employees from logistics and flexi-staffing companies from four companies (2 Warehouse, 1 LMD and 1 FS) pan-India. The objective was to gain insights into their working conditions, employment aspirations, personal agency, and overall well-being.

About a half of the interviewed employees (55.8 percent) were from the warehouse industry and were designated as pickers, packers, sorters, security personnel and their work included packing, handling, stocking and labelling of packages, loaders/unloaders, forklift drivers in warehouses (buildings where goods or products are stored before they are distributed or sold) and warehouse management or reporting of data or dashboard tracking. All the LMD (23.2 percent out of all respondents) employees were delivery agents who were responsible for delivering e-tail parcels from the warehouse to client's homes. The interviewed female employees in the FS industry (rest 20.9 percent) were working in retail and warehouses as sewing machine operators and warehouse workers as picker, packer and scanners.

The mean age of the surveyed respondents was 26 years. Out of the total respondents, 58 percent were in the age group of 18 to 24 years. None of the respondents were illiterate, almost all female respondents had at least completed secondary schooling (97.6 percent). Most of the respondents from the warehouse and FS partners were unmarried (70.8 percent in warehouse and 66.7 percent in FS) and most of the respondents from LMD partners were married (90 percent). The average monthly household income of the employees was Rs 36,288. Most of the respondents are Hindus (76.7 percent) and are OBCs (41.8 percent), SC/STs (27.9 percent) or general castes (23.2 percent).

The study supplemented the employee narratives with partner company employer representative interviews. The employer interviews were conducted with 8 partner company employer representatives from 5 companies, who were representatives from HR heads and senior managers responsible for recruitment, training, and policy implementation in their respective companies and were exposed to the livelihood intervention strategies.

2.4 Ethics considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Population Council Consulting (PCC). Several strategies were adopted by PCC to insure privacy and confidentiality of the respondents. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. For minors under the age of 18, both parental or guardian permission and the minor's assent were secured, while participants aged 18 and above provided their own consent.

3. Findings

This section drives into the findings by uncovering all collected narratives and actionable insights collected during in-depth interviews. This segment will review the interventions implemented by partner companies by each industry followed by insights and impact seen through the intervention. The analysis is focusing to spark a shift in employer attitudes, if any and how that played role in terms

of enhancing women employment along with a transformation at the workplace cultures' by integrating gender-equitable practices. Therefore, it is just not reviewing the available opportunities but set to assess recruitment and retention practices, making them more conducive towards women stepped into roles long considered non-traditional.

3.1 Impact of the intervention strategies across industries

3.1.1 Logistics: Warehouse Industry

To promote gender-inclusive employment and improve the recruitment and retention of women employees, the warehouse partner companies implemented multifaceted strategies tailored to women's needs and aspirations. Therefore, there was a conscious effort made by the warehouse organization in prioritizing job roles from DAs to pickers, packers, sorters, and scanners in warehouses and dark stores. An employer representative mentioned that *"we started with the low hanging fruit that is, the processing center wherein the female workers were just scanning and putting it on the scanner for it to move to the respective sector so that further they can be routed to their destination, but now we've started with the inbound and outbound also wherein we are exploring the females for loading and unloading also keeping in mind the weight and everything. Another option that is being explored is to use the electric Battery Operated peddle Delivery (BOPD) riders"* [KII, Partner representative, Warehouse].

To ensure a safe and secure work environment, substantial investments were made in enhancing infrastructure, including robust safety and security mechanisms. Like they said, *"So having a female security guard is anyways a requirement as per as per the shops and establishment act. You are mandated to have a same gender security guard and a separate washroom facility"*. Another mentioned, *"We will start the warehouse manager sensitization training in which we will talk to managers about how to effectively deal with different kinds of situations, what situation should you immediately escalate and situations in which you do not have the authority to take a call or action, unfortunately right now are all male"* [KII, Partner representative, Warehouse].

The introduction of incentives fostered employee motivation and morale through a monthly reward and recognition program and offered financial incentives like retention bonuses to encourage long-term association. During interview, female employee narrated that *"I was told about the referral bonus (2000rs is given for referring a person, at the time when that person receives the first salary), retention bonus (for staying here for long time), there are different retention bonus of six months, one year. We also get scratch card monthly on the smart staff app, if we scratch the card, whatever in that card, they give us"*. *"At the time of the interview, they explained about picking, packaging and other work. They were asked to read the English at the time of interview. They explain about application by which daily work is assigned. There will be Rs. 12000/- salary for 26 days. If 26 days are completed in a month then a 1000/- bonus will be added to salary i.e. Rs. 13000/- salary for 26 days with 4 days off. For one day leave in a month except 4 days off, Rs. 1500/- will be deducted (Rs. 500/- salary and Rs. 1000/- bonus) from salary"*. [IDI, Female employee, Warehouse].

Beyond immediate roles, the organization promotes upward mobility by offering clear career pathways, including the opportunity to transition from off-roll⁵ to on-roll⁶ positions and advancement to higher responsibilities. Employees also noted a rise in job roles suitable for women, such as desk-based positions, reflecting a conscious effort to diversify tasks and create a more accommodating workplace.

Insights shared by female employees working in warehouses reveal several positive developments that have contributed to a more inclusive and supportive work environment. One notable change has been the increase in shift options, including the introduction of night shifts, which has expanded employment opportunities for women seeking flexible work hours. They pointed out, *“Earlier there was only one shift now there are 3 shifts, and in each shift, women are working plus there are more women in night shift. When I joined only 40-45 women were working in the warehouse, but now there are 3 shifts, so more women are getting hired now”* [IDI, Female employee, Warehouse].

Along with flexible shifts, infrastructure changes are also impactful. Like, *“As women are not allowed to carry anything inside the warehouse, we are also making sure that we install sanitary napkin vending machines everywhere providing them sufficient washrooms”* [IDI, Female employee, Warehouse].

The provision of pick and drop services from home to the warehouse has significantly improved safety and convenience, particularly for those working late hours. It was mentioned, *“Comfortable environment at workplace, supportive work culture, closer to the place of residence, services provided by the company including pick and drop, and night guard accompanies female staff during night shift are factors that help us to pursue employment”* [IDI, Female employee, Warehouse].

3.1.2 Logistics: Last Mile Delivery Industry

Recognizing the untapped potential of specific demographic groups, the LMD organisation has focused on recruiting single women above the age of 35 and social media platforms are being actively leveraged to advertise DA job roles. One of the representatives mentioned *“We spent nearly one year on researching and finding how do we recruit women for such job roles. We are also telling our female drivers that when you go out to deliver a parcel, if someone asks about your job, make sure that they get inspired & motivated by you to join the industry”* [KII, Partner representative, Last mile delivery].

Once recruited, female employees undergo comprehensive onboarding that includes technical and operational training in driving, navigation, and safety. New recruits are also paired with experienced rider buddies to ease their transition into the role and offer peer support. It was revealed during interview that *“Once we on board we teach them navigation skills and driver training. A woman driver a rider buddy follows the new driver for three days later like a shadow just to see how she's doing so that when she joins it becomes easier. For me to send my supervisor would cost Rs 15,000 per person, but if a rider buddy accompanies it will cost Rs 500 because she is not a supervisor and is doing her work in the same area. Moreover, it is an extra income for the rider*

⁵ Off-roll employees are hired and paid by a third-party agency and may not receive employee benefits.

⁶ On-roll employees are direct hires of the company and are covered under company's HR policies.

buddy and that also helps in creating that bond between the women who are at each Hub” [KII, Partner representative, Last mile delivery].

To address work-life balance challenges, particularly for women managing family responsibilities, the LMD organisation provides flexible scheduling and part-time work opportunities. It was recorded that *“We provide them with flexible working hours, so there are some ladies who are working with us, they go to their home, they take care of their kids for one to two hours and then they came to do their job” [KII, Partner representative, Last mile delivery].*

Moreover, performance-based monetary incentives are offered to DAs who exceed their targets, along with referral bonuses - both for current employees who bring in new hires and for new recruits who remain with the company for over three months. Even to scale up retention, several efforts are being made, like conversion of the contract into permanent employment, providing access to yojana card etc. For example, quotations are made, *“We are also seeing if the employees who have at least completed two years are converted into become permanent employees instead of contract employees. So that they get into the ESI or you know those kinds of things. So that is something we want to see because as an industry we are not innately a Gig economy”. “Hakdarshak is a social enterprise - they get two benefits that are already mapped, depending on what background they come from or which state they are coming from and then automatically they get listed for other schemes that they may be eligible for. For example, now- If Telangana announces there is a free bus service- Hakdarshak will send you a notification that you know that there is a new scheme under which you're getting a loan of 10,00,000 or 5,00,000” [KII, Partner representative, Last mile delivery].*

Transportation facilities were provided as a cost-effective and sustainable option for employees. They mentioned, *“So, for commute, we want them to use electric vehicle only and even for delivery see because as a business when we are encouraging women, might as well encourage them to be future ready”. “We will be introducing picking and drop facility as inevitability many live near some metro area. The DA's will get jacket and stand there and whoever wants will come and approach them. They will notify the availability on the application” [KII, Partner representative, Last mile delivery].*

Additionally, the reduced weight of e-tail parcels has made delivery tasks more physically accessible, removing a common barrier that previously deterred female candidates. It was mentioned, *“Earlier last mile delivery parcels were heavy now with the new vendor, the couriers are small and easy to carry. Earlier cash on delivery was there now it is completely online” [IDI, Female employee, Last mile delivery].*

These insights underscore how operational adjustments and targeted communication strategies can effectively create a more inclusive and supportive environment for female delivery agents.

3.1.2 Flexi-Staffing Industry

A key initiative has been adopted by the flexi-staffing organisation on hiring of female recruiters. These included training recruiters on how to effectively pitch to female candidates and identify relevant talent pools. An increase in the number of female in-house recruiters was also reported. *“In my team is itself of the number of women employees have gone up for recruiters so earlier had no women recruiters now have three women recruiters another thing which I realized also after that was that I need to hire women recruiters is very important for us to also. I decided to consciously hire women recruiter”.* [IDI, Employer representative, Flexi-staffing].

To further encourage inclusive hiring, monthly performance evaluations and incentive-based systems were implemented for in-house employees. Recruiters received lead generation training and were supported in sourcing female candidates through social media outreach, partnerships with NGOs, placement agencies, colleges, and skilling centers. For example, *“Placement partners, going to colleges, skilling centers, NGOs. And how often should you be engaged with and communicating with them so that your leads are available and can always convert”*. *“The trainings help in highlighting when you are sharing about the job details, how you want to approach a person, how you should approach a person over a text to maintain the professionalism”* [IDI, Female employee, Flexi-staffing].

To further strengthen gender-sensitive recruitment, recruiters are sensitized to use a gender-equitable pitch, ensuring that job roles are communicated in a manner that appeals to and encourages women applicants. Additionally, performance-based incentives and bonuses are provided to recruiters who successfully onboard female candidates, creating a strong incentive structure that aligns organizational goals with inclusive hiring practices.

These strategies have contributed to creating a more accommodating and inclusive workplace, thereby improving both recruitment outcomes and employee satisfaction.

3.2 Increase in female recruitment

The analysis of partner aggregate data shows that there was a sizable increase in recruitment and retention of female employees. The logistics partners added 4,504 females (primarily warehousing roles) and FS partners added 7,249 females between 2021 and 2024. These numbers highlight not only the scalability of the intervention but also signal a cultural shift in employer readiness and workplace environments that are becoming more gender inclusive.

This was also substantiated by interviews with employer representatives, *“In my team is itself of the number of women employees have gone up for recruiters so earlier had no women recruiters now have three women recruiters another thing which I realized also after that was that I need to hire women recruiters is very important for us to also. I decided to consciously hire women recruiter”*. [IDI, Employer representative, Flexi-staffing].

“From the last year, young females are also joining. About 10-12 young females have joined as delivery agents” [KII, Employer representative, Last mile delivery].

Some of the employees mentioned that *“Earlier there were 10 people. When I joined that was hiring of 15 people. They increased the workers in picking and frozen section in the warehouse in last one year”*. [IDI, Female employee, Warehouse]

3.3 Improve in female employee's living standards

Using the semi-structured interview guides, the study collected information on monthly average earnings of female employees. On average, the earnings of warehouse workers were Rs 16,913. The earnings, however, vary based on job role and tenure at the company. For example, the earnings of warehouse workers ranged between Rs 9,500 and Rs 24,000, whereas supervisory role earned Rs 54,000. The earnings of the delivery partners were more uniform varying from Rs 12,000 to Rs 18,000 and received an average earning of Rs 14,800. The earnings of flexi-staff placed as warehouse workers ranged between Rs 11,500 to Rs 15,000.

There is an extensive literature that suggests financial independence of women contributing to better household consumption (Thomas, 1993), improved educational and health spending (Duflo, 2003) as well as enhance women's agency (Luke and Munshi, 2011). The spending pattern reported by the female employees indicate similar findings, i.e., an improvement in living standards of their household in terms of consumption basket, health and increased investment on education, particularly of children of married females and younger siblings of unmarried females.

"I spend Rs. 3000 per month on rent, Rs. 2000 per month on ration, Rs. 1000 electricity bill per month, Rs. 1300 on gas (LPG) that is bought quarterly. Also, some spending on my brother's education. If I do some work instead of sitting at home, I will be earning some money. Now I don't have to ask for money from my family like I used to do earlier" [IDI, Female employee, Flexi-staffing].

"I have bought a new phone and paying instalments for the phone. I give the rest of the money to my parents. They spend on brother's education and household expenses like ration. The job has helped my family as earlier, my mother used to work as a domestic cook. Now that I am earning, she can take some rest and her health is improving" [IDI, Female employee, Warehouse].

"Most of my earnings are spent on my children's education. Monthly I spend Rs. 6000/- on fees of 2 children and Rs. 4000/- on transport facility. Children are studying in CBSE school. Some amount is spent on medical as I have thyroid. For my own commute I spend Rs. 1000 to Rs. 1500/-" [IDI, Female employee, Married, Warehouse].

3.4 Increase in agency of female employees

There was significant increase in agency of the female employees, which was measured by three indicators: decision making, self-efficiency and exposure to media. It has been revealed that agency related to decision making has been increase, even in terms of migration for work. They have received better financial access including owning bank account of their name. Also, there is media exposure by having social media account, mobile phones, and some reported using job portals as well to access employment-related information.

"I have bought a new phone and am paying for it in instalments" [IDI, Female employee, Unmarried, Warehouse].

"I want to start own business. I have started to save money to start my business" [IDI, Female employee, Flexi-staffing].

4. Discussion

Using grounded theory approach to test the existing labour market segmentation theory along with feminist institutionalism, and the capability approach, a key finding is that the restructuring of job roles, safety, flexible working hours, incentives play a crucial role. Women were shifted from high-risk delivery positions to roles such as pickers, packers, and sorters, reducing physical exposure and entry barriers. While this horizontal occupational segregation reinforces traditional gender divisions (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007), it also creates a viable entry point into formal employment. Participation remains concentrated in warehouse roles, with infrastructural adaptations, namely

gender-segregated sanitation, female security staff, and subsidized accommodation to name a few reflecting efforts to institutionalize safety and respectability standards. Customised shifts in last-mile delivery, culturally responsive leave policies, and local food access in flexi-staffing allowed women to balance paid work with caregiving responsibilities. These measures resonate with the capability approach (Sen, 1999), enabling women to choose work aligned with their household responsibilities. These interventions align with feminist institutionalism (Chappell and Waylen, 2013) indicating a transform towards global gender norms into workplace policies.

Moreover, change in the recruitment strategies targeting single women over 35 and young women, including college students and mothers, particularly in warehouse and delivery roles; promoting welfare entitlements like Hakdarshak expanded real agency (Sen, 1999) and enabling informed employment decisions (Mackay *et al.*, 2010); referral bonuses further reinforced the correlation between compensation and job satisfaction. Supportive work culture, like having approachable supervisors and empathetic leadership played a crucial role to continue their work retention reflecting feminist institutionalist insights (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Mackay *et al.*, 2010).

While many women experienced greater financial independence and reported using earnings for healthcare, education, and household expenses, persistent barriers - such as community stigma, limited role models, and rigid career structures - continue to constrain long-term mobility. True inclusion demands not only access but also institutional arrangements that expand capabilities and transform aspiration into agency (Nussbaum, 2000).

5. Strengths and Limitations

The inclusion of high-potential industries with a clear demand for semi-skilled young and adult women is a unique strength of this study. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has systematically accessed and analysed gender-responsive practices across these sectors - particularly with regard to their implementation, the challenges faced, and the outcomes achieved. Addressing the current gap of no availability of publicly available data, this study has collected information on key indicators - such as service type, impact on women employees, implementation barriers (if any) - is essential for generating deeper insights into gender dynamics across industries. A key strength of this study lies in its dual-perspective approach, capturing insights from both employers and employees which allows for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the recruitment and retention dynamics influencing women's participation in these industries.

Despite these unique contributions to the literature, the study is limited to certain conditions and future exercises can try to address those. Firstly, the lack of consistent time frame has been undertaken due to partly COVID-19 periods. Future research should aim to use standardized time-aligned aggregate data from partner industries to enable accurate trend analysis of employment trends. This will also allow for more effective pair-wise matching of companies and strengthen the evidence base for program design and policy learning. Secondly, as a qualitative investigation based on a purposive sample, the findings are not statistically generalizable. Therefore, future research could also benefit from developing quantifiable metrics. Thirdly, the geographic concentration of participants in select urban and peri-urban locations may underrepresent rural perspectives. Fourthly, there is also a risk of selection bias, as the study primarily includes women already in, potentially excluding the voices of those unable to access these job markets. Addressing these omissions could offer richer, more comprehensive insights to assess the scale of observed trends on women employment.

6. Conclusion

The logistics and flexi-staffing industries in India saw significant growth since 2018, compared to the previous year in job opportunities. The growth of these sectors will be truly beneficial only if the gender gap in labour force participation is actively addressed. Integrating women into these non-traditional, high-growth sectors demands more than recruitment; it requires systematic transformation of work environments, norms, and institutional structures. This study, among the first of its kind, explores both the lived experiences of female employees and the institutional strategies adopted by employers to make frontline roles more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to gendered needs. Through qualitative analysis of industry practices and narratives, this research surfaces a wide range of organizational interventions - from infrastructural adaptations and transport support to gender-targeted outreach, retention incentives, and flexible work arrangements. These efforts reflect a growing acknowledgment that sustainable inclusion is rooted not in one-off initiatives but in embedded, systemic reform.

From the lens of labour market segmentation theory, the data confirms women pick up jobs such as pickers, packers, and sorters are low in pay and less mobile. Yet, even within these capacities the entry of women into formal jobs - particularly in logistics is a meaningful step toward economic empowerment. These roles offer greater regularity and security compared to informal alternatives and, when accompanied by targeted incentives and support mechanisms, can challenge the rigidity of gendered labour divisions. It has been observed that prioritizing job roles in warehouse and dark stores by enhancing infrastructure (like separate washrooms), ensuring transportation facility (pick-up and drop-off), food facility (lunch and tea/snacks), grievance redressal mechanisms (POSH committee) and flexible shifts, providing retention bonus or a career path by making them a full-time worker act as enabler factors for women employment. Drawing on feminist institutionalism, the study highlights how gender is enacted and resisted within organizational spaces when advertising for single women, above 35 years old using social media platforms, providing training on navigation, safety, and driving during onboarding and assigning a rider buddy, providing monetary incentives to delivery agents in LMD labourers. Flexi-staffing employers adopted several best practices such as training recruiters to pitch to women, offering hiring incentives, conducting monthly reviews, using social media for outreach, and partnering with NGOs, colleges, and skilling centres to source of women candidates. The capability approach provides the moral and developmental lens to interpret women's employment not merely as income generation but as a pathway to expanding their real freedoms and functioning. This has been reflected with their reflection on their spending, taking household responsibilities and a widening of their life choices and personal agency. The intervention resulted in tangible improvements in workforce participation and well-being for over 11,000 women across India, demonstrating that when employers are equipped with context-sensitive, gender-inclusive tools, women not only enter the labour market but thrive within it.

The study has highlighted several challenges, such as lack of information, role models (e.g. inspirations), and unsupportive family environments (e.g. social norms). More elaborately stated, many female employees lacked role models and had limited career aspirations, with few pursuing further educations. Employers are also faced several implementation challenges while adopting gender-sensitive strategies – such as separate sanitation facilities, female security staff, and transportation services - which required additional investment and operational reconfiguration. Moreover, recruiting women for roles like delivery agents proved difficult due to safety concerns, night shifts, and prevailing

gender norms. In the flexi-staffing sector, a lack of female recruiters initially limited outreach, necessitating targeted hiring and training efforts. Internal resistance also emerged with managers needing sensitization to support women's inclusion effectively. These identifies that gender-sensitive strategies are impactful, cannot succeed in isolation. Their success relies not only on organizational commitment but also on broader societal change. For example, focuses on building interventions to facilitates consistent implementation, cross-sector collaboration, and societal transformation. For instance, building mechanisms to support school-to-work transitions, enabling visibility of successful female figures, and engaging families in dialogue are necessary to shift the social ecology around women's employment. Organizations must create pathways not just for entry, but also there is a collaborative push requires from all stakeholders, where industries, employers, and aspiring women labourers join hands to overcome this situation. Strategic co-investment from all the stakeholders - individual, family, community members, industry (i.e. employers) - can transform these associations into catalysts for systemic change which further amplifying impact, driving sustainable ecosystem for women employment, and advancing inclusive growth in India.

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