

# EMBEDDING CHILDCARE WITHIN INDIA'S PLATFORM ECONOMY: A PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE GROWTH

*Author: Dr. Shipra (ISST) and Dr. Preeti Rani (Mobile Creches)*



*"I wake up at 4 a.m. to finish household chores and prepare my child's milk before leaving for the warehouse. A neighbour looks after my child while I spend the day packing orders, but my mind is always on whether she has been fed."*

India's gig and platform economy is expanding rapidly, creating new employment opportunities in warehouses and app-based platform services. These sectors increasingly attract young women migrating from rural and peri-urban areas to urban localities in search of income and financial independence. However, as more women enter these forms of work, an important question arises: how do women workers manage demanding jobs with the care of young children?

To better understand this intersection of work and care, this policy brief<sup>2</sup> draws on Navigating Work and Care: Gendered Experiences of Women in Warehouse and Platform Economies, a study conducted by Mobile Creches. Based on qualitative interviews with women workers<sup>3</sup>, union representatives, and sector experts, this brief aims to highlight how the design of platform and warehouse work shapes childcare arrangements and outcomes. It also identifies opportunities to strengthen working conditions and highlights the role of key stakeholders in advancing childcare-responsive labour systems within the vision of the Viksit Bharat.

## Why Care Concerns of App-based and Warehouse Workers Need Urgent Attention?

As labour markets continue to evolve, gig and platform-based work has become an increasingly important source of employment. Across sectors such as food delivery, beauty services, logistics, and warehouse operations, workers are employed through digitally managed systems.

While these sectors expand women's access to paid work, their design significantly constrains the ability to manage childcare. In platform-based roles, the promise of flexibility is undermined by algorithmic controls that dictate task allocation, incentives, and future earning opportunities. Workers must remain continuously available, accept tasks, and maintain high ratings to avoid penalties, with 'insta' service expectations further intensifying their time pressures. This often results in long and unpredictable working hours (70-80 hours per week), leaving little scope to plan for caregiving.

### THE REALITY OF GIG AND PLATFORM WORK

- Short-term, platform-mediated employment
- Work organised through digital systems and algorithmic management
- Irregular and unpredictable working hours
- Unstable and task-based incomes
- Poor working conditions
- Limited access to social protection and worker benefits

Warehouse work, though more structured with fixed shifts and defined roles, presents similar challenges. Physically intensive tasks performed under constant digital monitoring and strict productivity targets, combined with long shifts including nights limit workers' time and energy for care responsibilities. Across both sectors, employment arrangements whether as independent contractors or through third-party vendors remain fragmented and informalised, restricting access to social protections such as maternity benefits, paid leave, and childcare support. Even where provisions exist, workers frequently face barriers in accessing them due to the nature of employment and administrative gaps. Consequently, the responsibility of managing both livelihood risks and caregiving continues to fall disproportionately on women workers.

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All names used in this brief are fictitious to protect the identities of respondents and ensure adherence to research ethics.

1. Seema, a warehouse worker in Manesar.
2. This policy brief brings together evidence from the study "Navigating Work and Care: Gendered Experiences of Women in Warehouse and Platform Economies," complemented by a review of relevant literature and insights from the panel discussion held as part of the National Consultation on Childcare for Women Workers in India's Platform Economy, organised on 23 February 2026 at The Metropolitan, New Delhi. The event was convened by MC in partnership with ISST, and featured contributions from Prof. Ritu Dewan (Institute of Human Development), Dr. Aditi Surie (Indian Institute for Human Settlements), Alok Prasanna Kumar (Founder, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy), and Dr. Nitesh Das (Amazon India Workers Union).
3. Women workers employed in Manesar warehouse, Haryana and app-based work in Delhi NCR.

Income insecurity further deepens these care constraints. Platform workers face volatile (ratings, safety concerns, etc.), task-based earnings, while warehouse workers receive fixed but often low wages relative to the demands of the job. In addition, platform workers bear multiple work-related costs, including mobility, equipment, and penalties.

At the same time, limited pathways for advancement reinforce this precarity. In both sectors, workers remain largely in static roles despite experience, with minimal pathways for upward mobility. Further physically demanding environments, lack of rest spaces, constant mobility, and exposure to heat wave and risks such as fatigue and accidents all affect women's well-being and caregiving capacity.

Taken together, these factors create conditions of time poverty, income insecurity, and limited autonomy that shape how childcare is organised within households, underscoring that childcare challenges are not merely individual choices but systemic outcomes of how work is structured in the digital economy.

## Caregiving Concerns and Implications for Young Children

Within these constraints, women's childcare arrangements are shaped more by compulsion than choice. In Manesar, where most warehouses are located, there are no private daycare facilities within accessible distance, and the single Anganwadi centre in a four-kilometre radius enrolls none of the workers' children. As a supervisor noted, migrant children are frequently excluded due to mobility-related registration gaps. In Delhi NCR, while private daycare exists, costs remain prohibitive for most workers, and concerns about Anganwadi quality further limit uptake. In the absence of reliable formal options, women rely predominantly on informal arrangements-neighbours, older siblings, or extended family-or, in the case of migrants, leave children behind entirely.

These arrangements are not driven by preference, but by the absence of anything better. While they enable continued participation in paid work, they often result in fragmented and inconsistent care during critical early childhood years.

### KEY CHILDCARE CHALLENGES

- The absence of reliable childcare places a significant emotional and non-economic burden on women workers, including stress, guilt, exhaustion, and prolonged separation from children.
- Long working hours and unstable work conditions are affecting children's nutrition, care, learning, and safety.

Physical and prolonged separation places a considerable emotional burden on mothers and undermines responsive caregiving — a core component of nurturing care. Beyond financial strain, the absence of accessible childcare creates deep feelings of guilt, emotional distress, and mental exhaustion for mothers who are forced to live away from their children for work. Komal, a warehouse worker living alone after separation from her husband, sees her daughter once every six months: *"I keep wondering what I have done to deserve being away from my daughter."* Nisha, a platform-based beauty worker, observed that her child had begun calling her grandmother *"mummy"* — reflecting a measurable shift in attachment. Such conditions reduce opportunities for daily affection, consistent routines, and meaningful interaction, ultimately affecting both maternal well-being and children's emotional security.

These constraints also translate into multiple interconnected risks for young children. **Nutrition** is often compromised, as irregular schedules limit timely feeding and the preparation of age-appropriate meals. As Nisha explained, *"When I am out for work, my children mostly have milk. When I come at night, I cook and make them eat."* With limited time available, feeding practices are often reduced to quick and accessible options such as milk or packaged foods rather than diverse, home-prepared diets, contributing to risks for children's growth.

**Early stimulation is similarly affected;** long and irregular working hours leave mothers with limited time or energy for play and interaction upon return, with screen-based engagement frequently substituting for more developmentally generative activities.

Children's **safety** is also at risk. Children are left in informal arrangements with limited oversight — sometimes in the care of older siblings or neighbours who lack the capacity to supervise adequately.

These challenges are compounded for migrant and single mothers, whose limited support networks mean that even minor disruptions to care arrangements can simultaneously affect income and children's well-being.

Taken together, the structural features of warehouse and platform-based work—long hours, irregular scheduling, and limited social protection—do not merely constrain women's caregiving capacity. They systematically shape the conditions of early childhood care, producing gaps across nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning, and safety.

### **Integrating childcare within platform economy**

Given that childcare challenges are structurally embedded in the design of platform and warehouse work, addressing them requires coordinated, system-level responses. Ensuring childcare-responsive labour systems calls for multi-level action across the state, market, and society, with clearly defined and complementary roles that enable convergence between labour regulation, social protection, and early childhood development systems.

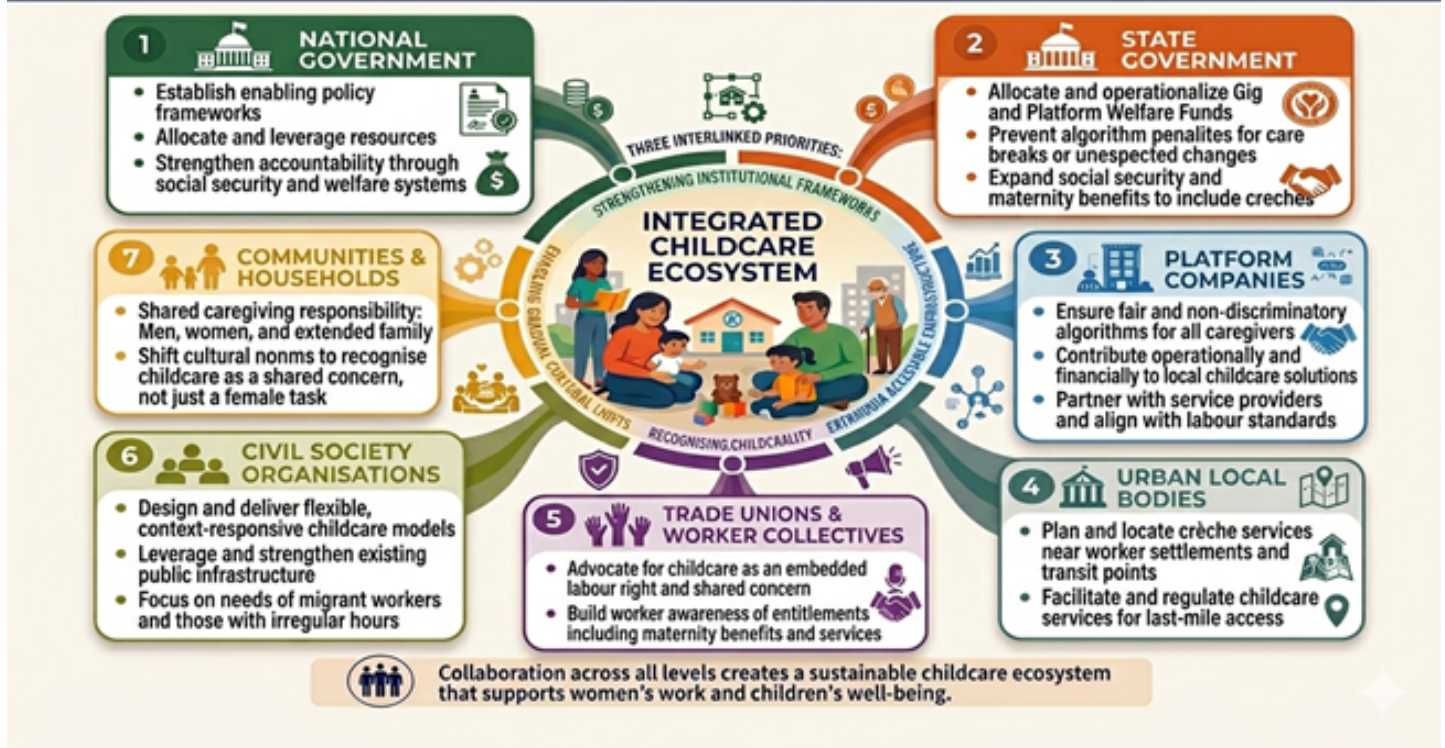
National and state governments play a central role in establishing enabling policy frameworks, allocating resources, and strengthening accountability through social security systems and welfare boards. Platform companies, which significantly shape working conditions, can contribute both financially and operationally to childcare solutions, particularly through partnerships with service providers and alignment with labour standards. Urban Local Bodies can further translate policy into practice by planning and facilitating childcare services near worker settlements and transit points, improving last-mile access.

At the implementation level, civil society organizations and service providers are well positioned to design and deliver flexible, context-responsive childcare services, especially for migrant workers and those with irregular hours. Trade unions and worker collectives can help sustain demand and accountability by integrating childcare into labour discourse and collective bargaining. Communities and households, including greater participation from men, remain critical in enabling more equitable caregiving practices.

Taken together, these efforts converge around three interlinked priorities: **strengthening institutional frameworks, expanding accessible childcare infrastructure, and enabling gradual cultural shifts that recognise childcare as a shared labour concern.** A coordinated approach across these dimensions can move childcare beyond an individual burden toward a more inclusive and sustainable support system for workers and their families.

# Integrating Childcare Within the Platform Economy Labour Market

## Complementary Roles of Key Stakeholders



## Recommendations and way forward

Expanding access to accessible and reliable childcare is not only a social investment but also an economic imperative. Global evidence, including a Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study, shows that employer-supported childcare can generate returns of up to 425% through improved retention, reduced absenteeism, and higher productivity<sup>4</sup>. This indicates that investments in childcare support can substantially reduce costs linked to employee turnover, absenteeism, recruitment, training, and productivity losses. The study estimates return on investment (ROI) by comparing the cost of childcare benefits with savings generated through improved employee retention, attendance, and work performance. Notably, retaining even 1% of eligible employees can offset the annual cost of providing childcare benefits in some companies. International experience further demonstrates that companies can adopt partnership-based models such as subsidies and collaborations with third-party providers to deliver flexible childcare without directly building infrastructure<sup>5</sup>. **Recognising childcare as core labour infrastructure can therefore simultaneously strengthen women's workforce participation and improve employer performance outcomes.**

The following recommendations outline key priority areas for action:

**1. Institutionalizing Childcare within Labour and Platform Regulation:** Existing policy frameworks, including the Code on Social Security, 2020<sup>6</sup> and the Draft Social Security Code Rules, 2025<sup>7</sup>, provide a foundation for extending social protection to gig and platform workers. However, stronger integration of childcare and creche provisions within state-level legislation is needed. Strengthening these frameworks

4. Kos, E., Clark, K., De Santis, N., & Joseph, T. (2024). Childcare Benefits More Than Pay for Themselves at US Companies. Retrieved from <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/childcare-benefits-pay-for-themselves-at-us-companies>

5. Somji, A. (2020). Child's Play The case for developing childcare services to boost women's economic empowerment. ILO The Lab Market Systems Development For Decent Work. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_emp/@emp\\_ent/@ifp\\_seed/documents/publication/wcms\\_752814.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@emp_ent/@ifp_seed/documents/publication/wcms_752814.pdf)

6. The code has mandated to establish a Social Security Fund and Facilitation Centres to address worker grievances.

7. The Draft Social Security Code (Central) Rules, published on December 30, 2025, propose that workers engaged for at least 90 days with one aggregator, or 120 days cumulatively across multiple aggregators, shall be eligible for Sickness, Disablement, Dependents', Medical, and Maternity benefits, as well as Funeral Expenses.

through welfare boards and dedicated Social Security and Welfare Funds can help embed childcare within labour protections, alongside encouraging platform contributions through regulatory and fiscal incentives.

Building on this, existing policy levers can be more effectively utilised to integrate childcare within the gig and warehouse labour ecosystem. Worker registration systems and welfare boards can help identify demand and channel resources for childcare, while portability provisions can enable migrant women workers to access services across locations. Platform contributions to social security funds can be leveraged to support childcare financing and strengthened MIS systems can improve targeting and delivery. Together, these mechanisms can position childcare as an integral part of labour market infrastructure, enabling sustained participation of women workers.

**2. Multi-Stakeholder Infrastructure & Local Implementation:** Bridging the gap between policy and access may require a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to childcare infrastructure. Platform companies could explore partnerships with service providers to support flexible and cluster-based childcare models. Governments may consider adapting existing schemes such as Palna and ICDS to improve portability and inclusion for migrant worker families. Urban Local Bodies could play a stronger role in planning and enabling services near worker settlements and transit hubs, while civil society organizations may continue to pilot community-based, context-responsive childcare solutions.

**3. Collective Action and Cultural Shifts:** Advancing childcare as a labour concern may benefit from greater integration into public and institutional discourse. Trade unions and worker collectives could consider incorporating childcare into collective bargaining and advocacy efforts. At the same time, workers, communities, and civil society organizations may contribute to shifting social norms by encouraging shared caregiving responsibilities and supporting awareness-building initiatives. Such efforts can help sustain demand and strengthen the recognition of childcare as a shared responsibility.

The design of platform and warehouse work creates conditions of time poverty, income insecurity, and constrained caregiving, limiting women's sustained participation in the workforce. Positioning childcare as core labour and social infrastructure offers a clear pathway to address these constraints. Integrating childcare within labour and social protection systems can therefore serve as a foundational enabler, supporting work continuity, improving productivity, and strengthening women's economic autonomy.

**By shifting childcare from an individual responsibility to a shared, system-level investment across state, market, and society, India can unlock women's workforce potential while advancing more inclusive, equitable, and resilient growth, central to the vision of a Viksit Bharat.**

