



BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP IN FLEXI- STAFFING

Learnings from Quess Corp

About

Through our Women in India Inc. project, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Center for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), we are spotlighting organisations that have demonstrated excellence in gender representation. This series of case studies focuses on selected private-sector organisations that have recently emerged as positive outliers in their respective sectors. The goal is to document gender-inclusive practices in the workplace by unpacking their gender-inclusive hiring, retention, and advancement practices and policies, inspiring others to adopt similar systematic approaches to bridge the gender gap.

The Udaiti Foundation

The Udaiti Foundation (TUF) is building data-backed evidence to accelerate Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in India. Udaiti focuses on improving the availability and accessibility of quality work for women, addressing barriers to women's work and entrepreneurship, and strengthening enablers that can create impact. We aim for every Indian woman to achieve her full economic potential as it will be a critical lever to help India become a \$10 trillion economy in the next decade.

Centre for Economic Data and Analysis

The Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA) has been set up by the Economics Department of Ashoka University with the primary objective of facilitating informed and data-driven discussion about key socio-economic developments in India. CEDA's in-house data portal hosts data from various administrative and official surveys covering fields including demography, employment, public finance, food prices and high frequency macroeconomic indicators. The data is supplemented with deep-dive analysis covering various dimensions of critical issues relating to the Indian economy. In addition to these, CEDA is currently working on an ambitious project to understand and find ways to overcome the demand-side barriers that are keeping women out of the workforce.

Women in India Inc.

'Women In India Inc.' (WIIn) is a collaboration between CEDA and TUF as a part of a larger CEDA project on women's economic empowerment. With the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CEDA has embarked on a wide-ranging project to understand and find ways to overcome the demand-side barriers that keep women out of the workforce. To achieve this, we at CEDA are taking a three-pronged approach – Inform, Investigate, Intervene – in order to enable women's entry, retention and progression in India's workforce. Visit <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/womens-economic-empowerment/> for more details.

Inside this Story

Introduction	_____	01
Methodology	_____	02
Flexi-Staffing in India: An Overview	_____	03
Flexi-Staffing and Women's Workforce Participation	_____	04
Quess: A Staffing Industry Leader	_____	05
Barriers to Women's Employment	_____	07
Gender Diversity Initiatives at Quess	_____	10
Beyond Quess: External Challenges	_____	20
Looking Ahead: Scaling for Greater Impact	_____	20

Bridging the gender gap in flexi-staffing:

Learnings from Quess Corp

“

“When families in my village see me working at a job, they are inspired. My father is a farmer. They reach out to him and me to learn more about where I work. This job makes me feel like a role model in my community, showing them that it is possible for a woman to be financially independent.”

- Seetha K. (25),¹ Assembly line operator at an electronics manufacturer in Tamil Nadu.

Seetha is one of 85,000+ women associates employed by Quess, India's largest flexi-staffing services organisation. For women like her, stepping out of their homes and into the workforce requires overcoming a number of barriers, something that would not be possible without active and sustained efforts from employers.

The good news is that more and more employers recognise the importance of diversity and inclusion, and have D&I policies in place. According to a survey² of 3100+ Indian employers by Manpower Group, 54% reported that their gender diversity initiatives were happening on schedule. However, flexi-staffing organisations, which hire on behalf of their clients, do not have the same incentives and face unique challenges to women's participation—such as temporary employment contracts and client-driven recruitment.

In this light, the steps taken by Quess to address the systemic barriers to women's workforce participation, are interesting. Their initiatives include recruitment practices that engage local communities and the families of women candidates, particularly in rural and remote regions, to communicate trust and safety. To support women associates who have to relocate for work, they provide accommodation arrangements and² assistance through implant officials and female liaison officers. To understand how associates are feeling during their employment and take timely action in case of issues, Quess does real-time sentiment checks via the SARA chatbot. In addition to standard employment benefits like leave and health insurance, they also offer easy, interest-free credit to women associates through DASH, their lending platform. These efforts collectively help them recruit and retain more women.

¹ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

² Manpower Group Diversity Outlook Survey.

As an employer that accounts for nearly 35%³ of India's flexi-staffing workforce, Quess's model has the potential to inspire other companies to drive meaningful change by investing in gender-sensitive policies and addressing industry-specific challenges. In this case study, we take a closer look at their gender diversity initiatives at different stages, from hiring to retention.

Methodology

The Udaiti Foundation has been working with Quess over the past year with the goal of gaining a comprehensive understanding of employee retention and turnover dynamics among Quess associates, with a particular focus on gender differences. We analysed retention trends across various sectors, regions, job roles, and age groups for the period from January 2020 to December 2023. This analysis sought to identify the factors influencing both male and female associates and to examine Quess's initiatives to improve retention and increase female representation within their General Staffing (non-IT) vertical. The study drew on multiple datasets including:

1

Payroll Data (January 2020 to December 2023)

This dataset provided detailed payroll information for Quess employees and associates. Key variables included employee demographics such as gender, age, and location, as well as job-related details including sector, role, tenure, and monthly salary.

2

SARA Chatbot Data (May 2023 to December 2023)

This dataset captured associate sentiment and reasons for employee exits across sectors and job roles, collected via Quess's employee feedback chatbot named SARA. The chatbot provided real-time insights into employee moods and the factors contributing to turnover.

3

DASH Data (January 2023 to December 2023)

This dataset contained information about salary advances and loans taken by female associates through DASH, Quess's financial lending program. It was used to assess the financial challenges faced by female associates and the role of financial support in retention.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with employees and key representatives from Quess's HR, General Staffing, Sourcing, and DEI teams. These interviews provided qualitative

³ Quess's Annual Report 2023-24

insights into Quess's retention strategies, challenges, and efforts to promote gender diversity within the workforce. The team also conducted comprehensive secondary research to understand the third-party recruitment and staffing industry in India. Key sources included:

1**Industry reports**

Detailed reports from staffing industry associations, such as the Indian Staffing Federation (ISF) and Staffing Industry Analysts (SIA), were studied to understand market trends, regulatory frameworks, and growth patterns in third-party recruitment.

2**Academic journals and articles**

Published research on workforce management, labour market trends, and staffing models in India provided foundational knowledge of operational challenges and innovations in the sector.

3**Company reports and financial statements**

Quess's annual reports, quarterly missives, and press releases, were examined to understand its business model, services, policies around gender balance, and market position within the staffing ecosystem. We also examined reports from market research firms that offered insights into sector-specific challenges, such as talent shortages, skill gaps, and regulatory impacts.

Findings from all of the above have been used to develop this case study.

Flexi-Staffing in India: *An Overview*

Flexi-staffing refers to the practice of temporarily hiring employees for a specific period of time or until the completion of a project. These employees are often contracted through staffing consultancies or agents and work across a broad spectrum of roles, including blue-collar, grey-collar, and entry-level white-collar jobs. As one of the largest flexi-staffing markets in the world, India has a \$12 billion⁴ industry that provides recognized employment for temporary workers.

⁴ Quess Corp Ltd. Management Discussions

The industry has grown by 15.3% in FY2024, according to the 2024 annual report⁵ of the Indian Staffing Federation (ISF), the apex body of organised staffing companies. ISF has 121 member companies and through them, represents over 1.66 million contract workers employed in India's flexi-staffing industry. The same report notes that in 2023-24, these members added a net new employment of 202,000 formal roles, with the demand driven by sectors like FMCG, e-commerce, manufacturing, healthcare, retail, logistics, and BFSI.

One of the primary drivers behind this growth is the increasing need for flexibility in employment. With ever-changing business dynamics and economic uncertainties, temporary staffing allows companies to efficiently scale their workforce up or down as required. Flexi-staffing has also emerged as a solution for businesses aiming to enhance productivity by hiring specialised temporary workers for specific tasks, leading to greater efficiency and output. Organisations also outsource frontline jobs to staffing companies in order to focus on their core activities and reduce costs.

Flexi-Staffing and Women's Workforce Participation

The flexi-staffing industry has immense potential for increasing women's participation in India's workforce. The industry also serves as a gateway to formal employment for many women, especially fresh graduates or first-time job seekers. Flexi-staffing not only provides an entry point into the workforce but also offers key benefits like wage protection, social security, and fair work practices, such as guaranteed minimum wages and leave policies.

“

“Earning my own income and achieving financial independence fills me with an incredible sense of victory. The pride I feel when I pay for something as simple as my meal is unmatched. This job has given me a sense of identity and empowerment”

- Fatima S. (23), Qess associate - HR operations executive at a fashion e-commerce retailer, Madhya Pradesh

⁵ Indian Staffing Federation Annual Report 2024

Urban research findings⁶ from FSG's Growing Livelihood Opportunities for Women (GLOW) programme indicate that women prefer fixed salaries over daily wages, as they seek stability and predictability in their income. Flexi-staffing roles that offer consistent and reliable pay, even if part-time or shift-based, can cater to this need for stability.

An employer advisory⁷ created by the Ministry of Labour and Employment to promote women's workforce participation notes that when evaluating employment opportunities, women prioritise factors such as health benefits, workplace safety, and social security, in addition to wages. Organised and regulated flexi-staffing employers provide benefits that align with these priorities, including health coverage and government-mandated benefits.

For women looking to re-enter the workforce after a break, flexi-staffing provides an opportunity to upskill and gain valuable experience, potentially paving the way for full-time employment in the future. As they work across different industries and job functions, they can continually upskill and reskill, increasing their chances of securing permanent employment. They develop a broad set of skills, enhancing their adaptability and making them more versatile in the job market. Flexi-staffing is also a valuable networking platform, allowing women to build connections that could lead to continued employment and career advancement.

Quess: A Staffing Industry Leader

Quess, established in 2007 and headquartered in Bengaluru, is a technology-enabled staffing and managed outsourcing services provider. Their workforce is divided into two categories:

- Core employees, who are directly involved in Quess's business operations.
- Associates, who are employed by Quess but placed at client organisations across various sectors such as retail, e-commerce, BFSI, telecom, and manufacturing.

Associates make up 99% of Quess' total flexi-staffing workforce and, in absolute numbers, stand at 500,000+. As of March 2024, ~17% of these associates are women (85,000+ in absolute numbers), a diversity ratio that has remained steady since 2021. The industry average for women's participation in flexi-staffing is 25%⁸ according to ISF reports. At first glance, this may imply that Quess's women participation rate of 17% is below par. However, a closer look and additional context paints a different picture.

⁶ GLOW urban research findings

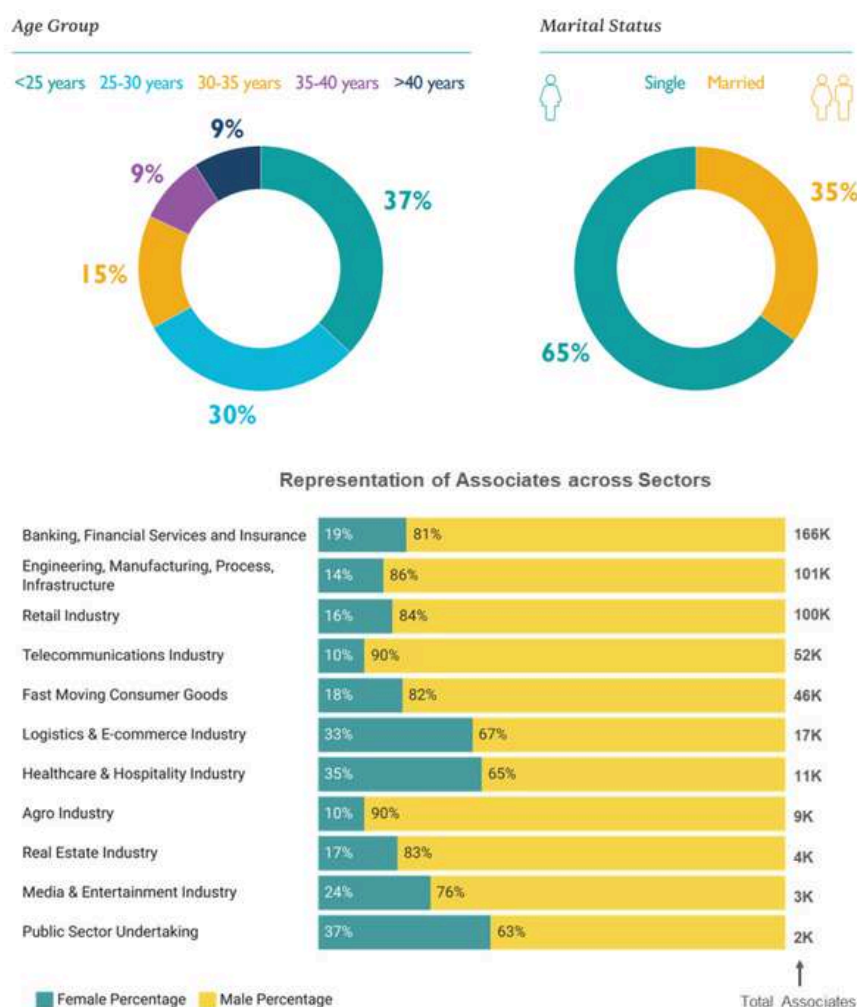
⁷ Advisory for Employers to Promote Women's Workforce Participation

⁸ ISF Flexi Employment Social Impact Report 2023

First, the two data points are not directly comparable. The number reported by ISF includes staffing across sectors, including IT. Historically, the IT sector has had higher female participation, which currently stands at 37%.⁹ According to data we've gathered under the aegis of the Close the Gender Gap program, this is far higher than in other sectors—for instance, women's participation is only 15% in manufacturing and 18% in financial services¹⁰ as of FY2023-24.

Thus, including IT staffing data skews the overall average and the reported industry average of 25% does not reflect the reality in non-IT sectors where gender representation is very much a work in progress. Qess's reported diversity of 17% is for general staffing, which comprises all non-IT sectors such as BFSI, healthcare, retail, manufacturing, etc.

Second, there is a difference in the data sources for the two numbers. The industry average released by the ISF is calculated based on self-reported data by its member organisations. However, Qess's data has been drawn from their actual payroll and cross-verified, offering a more reliable and grounded perspective on gender representation within the industry.



A snapshot of Associate data from Qess

⁹ Indian Staffing Federation Annual Report 2024

¹⁰ Close the Gender Gap Data

Among Qess's core employees, gender diversity is higher. Women make up 37% of the core workforce, with a stronger presence at the leadership level—35% of women hold mid-management roles, and 20% are in senior leadership positions. While these figures demonstrate the progress they have made in increasing women's participation, the challenge remains to extend this success to the associate level.

“Providing equal opportunities is fundamentally the right thing to do, and there is a huge untapped female talent pool that can contribute significantly to the economy,” says Guruprasad Srinivasan, CEO of Qess. “As India aims for a GDP growth rate of 8% by 2030, women, who make up half of the population, must be actively involved in the workforce to achieve this goal. We believe that when women feel safe, valued, and supported, they are more likely to thrive and pursue career opportunities.”

Qess has set itself a target to increase women's participation at the associate level to 25% by 2027. Key stakeholders at Qess note that this aligns with a growing client demand for women in specific roles, such as in manufacturing (assembly lines), packaging, and retail shop floors. Srinivasan says, “To achieve this, we have implemented a number of initiatives aimed at hiring, skilling, retaining, and supporting our female associates. We remain committed to launching new programmes to further increase female representation. It is going to be a gradual and continuous process.” says Srinivasan.

Achieving this goal will be critical, not only for the company's internal diversity objectives but also for its broader impact on the industry. As India's largest flexi-staffing employer, Qess has the opportunity to influence gender dynamics through their gender-positive initiatives. This makes Qess's gender balance initiatives of particular importance as they have the potential to pave the way for an industry-level change.

Barriers to Women's Employment

The challenges faced by women in Qess' core employee base differ significantly from those faced by their associates. These differences are largely driven by the socioeconomic backgrounds of the women in each category, necessitating a differentiated approach to fostering gender diversity.

For women in core roles, who typically come from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds and occupy white-collar positions, the focus is on supporting career advancement. Quess has tailored initiatives such as targeted mentorship programs, leadership development, and support during maternity leave to help these women progress in their careers. However, the barriers faced by women associates—who are deployed at client locations and come from lower-income backgrounds—are far more fundamental and begin with the challenge of entering the workforce itself.

Nature of the Flexi-Staffing Industry

Flexi-staffing associates are hired on behalf of client companies and they typically work on contract-based assignments. Client companies have a vested interest in promoting gender diversity and inclusive hiring practices for their full-time employees because it directly impacts their reputation and corporate culture. However, this incentive often doesn't extend to contract employees hired through flexi-staffing agencies.

Since these workers are temporary, client companies may not view them as integral to their long-term workforce strategy. Because contract employees typically operate outside of the company's internal policies and culture, clients may see little benefit in enforcing D&I standards for short-term or part-time staff. As a result, gender diversity often receives less attention in flexi-staffing.

Client companies, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sectors like engineering, manufacturing, process, and infrastructure (EMPI), often have little incentive to implement D&I agendas for temporary roles. The focus tends to be on meeting operational demands quickly, with gender diversity taking a backseat. This limits the opportunities for women, as hiring managers might favour male candidates for certain roles, consciously or unconsciously, especially for jobs seen as physically demanding or requiring long hours.

Many of these roles are located in remote or industrial areas, presenting logistical and safety challenges that require the organisations to invest additional resources to solve. This serves as a further deterrent to them hiring women.

Recruitment Challenges

In the India Development Review (IDR), Vikram Jain, Managing Director for initiatives at FSG writes¹¹ about how recruiters in warehousing tend to search for candidates at tea stalls, which are almost exclusive gathering places for men. They also share these jobs on WhatsApp groups,

¹¹ [Do recruiters want to hire women?](#)

from which women are missing because they aren't part of such social networks. The problem could be even more fundamental—according to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024,¹² the gender gap in the use of mobile internet in India is at 31%, with safety/security concerns and affordability being two reasons why fewer women are online on their phones. Thus, women often miss out on finding out about work opportunities because of current recruiting practices.

FSG's GLOW studies¹³ observe that recruiters work predominantly with male candidates and are not particularly trained to take a gender-sensitive view of hiring. For instance, the kind of generic job advertisements recruiters post often fail to provide crucial details about the job that are especially important to women candidates such as the exact working location, hours, shift timings, and benefits available. These gaps in communication hinder women from applying, even when they are aware of or interested in the roles.

Societal Norms and Gender Biases

According to the GLOW report,¹⁴ which surveyed 6,600 women and 550 decision-makers across urban low-income households in India, women show a clear willingness to work. One in two women are either working in a job or seeking one; 64% strongly agree that for a woman to be self-reliant it is important to work; 70% are comfortable interacting with strangers in the workplace, including men—societal norms create significant barriers.

The same report discovered that 84% of women need to secure permission from family members before deciding to work. For one in three women who are neither working nor seeking a job, this lack of permission or precedent is the primary reason for their non-participation in the workforce. Additionally, three in four family decision-makers prefer that women work from home or start their own business, allowing them to simultaneously manage domestic responsibilities.

Safety Concerns

Safety remains a major concern, particularly for migrant women and their families. The fear of unsafe work environments, especially in new or unfamiliar cities, often deters women from entering the workforce. Families, especially of younger women, prefer that their loved ones work close to home, and in many cases, family members physically accompany women to their workplaces to ensure their safety. For migrant workers, this isn't always financially feasible, further exacerbating concerns about safety and well-being. Addressing these safety concerns is key to attracting and retaining female associates.

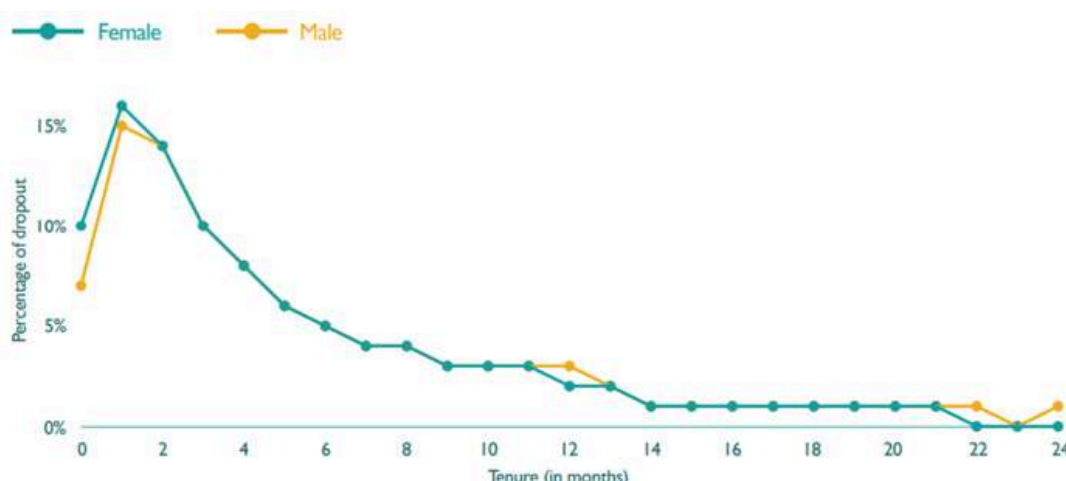
¹² [The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024](#)

¹³ [Job Advertisement Development Training for Recruiters](#)

¹⁴ [GLOW urban research findings](#)

High Attrition

Apart from fewer women candidates applying for roles and joining the workforce, there is also the problem of helping them stay in the jobs for long periods of time. In our year-long study of Quess's internal data, we observed that in the first three months of employment, they see high attrition among its associates, with more women leaving (50%) than men (46%). However, Quess's employee data also indicates that women who remain in their roles beyond the first 90 days are more likely to stay long-term, with many continuing in their positions for more than a year. This highlights the importance of targeted interventions during the critical first three months of employment, which could significantly improve retention rates and reduce early attrition among female associates.



Insight from Udaiti's study of Quess's data: Nearly one out of every two associates who quit, do so within the crucial initial 90-day period, with the proportion of female dropouts slightly outpacing their male counterparts. If these associates manage to stay beyond the crucial 3-4 month period, they tend to remain employed for an additional 9-10 months.

Gender Diversity Initiatives at Quess

Quess has incorporated multiple interventions to address the challenges women associates face in entering and staying in the workforce. These can be broadly classified into three sections that map different stages of an employee's workplace lifetime.

Recruitment & Hiring

Apart from fewer women candidates applying for roles and joining the workforce, there is also the problem of helping them stay in the jobs for long periods of time. In our year-long study of Quess's internal data, we observed that in the first three months of employment, they see high attrition among its associates, with more women leaving (50%) than men (46%). However, Quess's employee data also indicates that women who remain in their roles beyond the first 90 days are more likely to stay long-term, with many continuing in their positions for more than a year. This highlights the importance of targeted interventions during the critical first three months of employment, which could significantly improve retention rates and reduce early attrition among female associates.

1

Inclusive Recruitment Measures

Apart from the essentials of inclusive hiring—job descriptions that are gender-neutral, the presence of at least one female recruiter in every interview panel—Quess has taken some additional steps to make their recruitment more women-friendly. Based on client demand, they organise massive hiring drives focused on women candidates.

To maximise outreach and engagement for their hiring events, Quess uses a multi-faceted approach to communicate with communities. They work with local leaders such as sarpanches, block officers, and heads of educational institutions to raise awareness about upcoming job fairs/melas and distribute pamphlets through local networks.

For open roles, Quess makes concerted efforts to offer their clients a balanced mix of male and female candidates from their talent pool. They also look at past data and try to place women in sectors and roles where they have historically succeeded, increasing the likelihood of successful placements and long-term retention.

2

Community and Family Engagement

The best way to address societal and cultural barriers to women's employment is to address it at the grassroots level, by engaging directly with community members and the families of women candidates. This is a significant aspect of Quess's recruitment strategy, particularly in rural and backward regions where fewer women have historically left their regions for formal employment.

Quess's recruiters, both internal and external, travel to districts, talukas, and villages to organise job melas, working closely with local community leaders to build trust within the community. During these events, they not only explain the job roles but also



address concerns related to safety, transportation, accommodation, and language barriers. They work to convince parents and family members about the job roles, safety protocols, and the benefits of sending their daughters to work, even if it involves relocation to a different city. This personalised approach is crucial in overcoming cultural and societal barriers that often prevent women from pursuing employment.

To mitigate the families' concerns about safety, Quess also provides travel tickets for both the female associate and her family members, an uncommon practice within the industry. This reassures families and lets them visit the workplace and accommodation, and verify the safety of the environment firsthand.

To further support these efforts, Quess partners with NGOs to provide guidance and advocacy, helping to address cultural and societal barriers to women's employment. This collaborative approach ensures that concerns are heard and addressed throughout the recruitment process, creating a supportive environment for female candidates.

3

Digitising Job Discovery

While India continues to face a digital gender divide, the rise of digital platforms and increased internet access has also positively influenced female labour force participation. Among women with digital access, job discovery has become easier than before. Between 2015 and 2022, the expansion of digital tools helped reverse the

the steady decline in the female labour force participation (FLFP) seen up until 2013.¹⁵

A research paper by IWWAGE¹⁶ found that in rural regions, women's workforce participation saw a significant rise of 9.8 percentage points, jumping from 8.1% in 2017-18 to 17.9% in 2020-21. Urban areas experienced a more modest increase, with the rise from 11% to 13.3% over the same period. This shift, largely driven by the accessibility of digital platforms, has provided women—particularly in underserved and rural areas—new avenues to explore job opportunities and enter the workforce.

Qess has digitised job discovery by developing its own platforms such as QJobs and Taskmo, aimed at blue-collar and gig workers respectively. These are not just job boards but also have features for resume writing, video resumes, interview prep support, etc. to assist job seekers including women. Additionally, these apps are available across devices and in multiple Indian languages, further enabling job seekers of all backgrounds to apply. Promisingly, Qess's data shows that the maximum number of talent for both genders come through their internal database, which is primarily fed through QJobs and supported by their recruiter network.



¹⁵ [The impact of education and digitalization on FLFP](#)

¹⁶ [Digitization and its effects on FLFP](#)

Onboarding & Workplace Support

Implant Officers for Onboarding

The onboarding process at Qess is designed to ease the transition of new recruits into the workforce, especially for those relocating to new cities or industries. A key component of this support is the deployment of implants, who are operations personnel responsible for managing the onboarding process and assisting new associates.

Allocated at a shift and shop floor level, the implants play an important role during the initial 90 days of employment, a period when many female associates face challenges. Implants assist with documentation, accommodation arrangements, and helping associates with queries related to the work environment. They also coordinate with hostels and ensure that female associates have safe, secure living accommodations. They also help with everyday essential information about meal timings, weekly working hours, and job expectations.

Implants also help with day-to-day operations such as attendance marking, payroll, and salary deductions using Qess' WorQ app. This level of personalised assistance not only ensures a smooth onboarding process but also helps new female associates feel more comfortable and confident in their roles right from the early days.

Accommodation Assistance

During conversations with aspiring women workers and their families, Qess's recruiting team identified that infrastructure and living conditions are a key concern, especially in sectors like Engineering, Manufacturing, Process and Infra (EMPI). To address this, Qess has partnered with local PGs and hostels to provide accommodation for all migrant associates, with implant officers assisting them in the process.

In 2023, they piloted the Sampoorna Rozgar Yojana program, aimed at female associates who need to relocate from their native place for work, at an automobile manufacturing unit in Uttarakhand. This program provides dormitory-style accommodation near or within the factory premises for female associates, as well as meals, relieving women of the burden of cooking

while adjusting to a new work environment. According to internal surveys conducted by Qess, associates have responded positively to this program.

Such efforts mitigate the safety and security concerns of young female associates as well as their families and plays a key role in simplifying their entry into the workforce. From Qess' perspective, the initiative reduces early attrition, as women feel more secure and supported in their roles.

Presence of Female Liaison Officers

Female Liaison Officers are stationed at every manufacturing unit where Qess associates are placed. These officers are responsible for overseeing the welfare of female employees, addressing any grievances, and ensuring that women feel safe and included in the workplace. They act as a dedicated communication channel, helping female associates raise concerns about safety, working conditions, or any other issues they may face. Qess also has Male Liaison Officers at each unit, the number specified by the ratio of male to female associates working there. The presence of Liaison Officers plays a vital role in supporting women, preventing workplace harassment, and fostering an inclusive atmosphere.



Benefits & Retention Strategies

Financial Assistance Programme

In India, despite women typically having better repayment rates and credit profiles, they still struggle to access credit. According to the annual retail credit insights 2023 published by TransUnion CIBIL, only 28%¹⁷ of borrowers are women. Qess's DASH financial platform helps bridge this gap by offering a straightforward way for female associates to obtain financial support in the form of loans or salary advances. The amount they can borrow is determined by financial partners based on key factors like credit score, monthly salary, and how long the associate has been employed. For salary advances, the borrowed amount is deducted from their next paycheck in full, while loans are repaid in instalments directly from their salary, making the repayment process hassle-free.






Based on our examination of DASH data, the program has had a clear positive impact on employee retention. The average turnover rate is lower among female associates who have utilised the program compared to those who have not. The program has been especially popular with younger women, particularly those in the services sector—over half of DASH users work in industries like finance and consumer services. Additionally, two-thirds of DASH users are in the 25-35 age range, with many earning less than INR 15,000 per month, highlighting the program's importance for lower-income associates.

Notably, the data shows that most female associates who used DASH but eventually left Qess had a tenure of more than one year. This suggests that access to financial support through DASH plays a role in offering financial security to women, reducing the likelihood of early attrition.

Unified Health Portal

Qess associates are entitled to benefits under the Employee State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) and Provident Fund (PF). Our study of employee data revealed that access to such benefits positively impacts retention, particularly among married women associates.

¹⁷ [TransUnion CIBIL Insights](#)

 Employee A the one who is receiving the benefit		Likelihood of retaining in the specific job			
		Single men	Single women	Married men	Married women
Benefits	 Provident Fund	99%	61%	2 times	3 times
	 Employees State Insurance Scheme	7%	48%	Not statistically significant	Not statistically significant
	 Performance Incentive	66%	3 times	2 times	54%
	 Quarterly Incentive	6 times	4 times	6 times	7 times

The table shows how likelihood of retention varies when benefits are provided, considering the factors gender and marital status. How to read: The reference is a hypothetical employee B who has not received the respective employee benefit. For e.g., compared to an unmarried male employee B who has not received performance incentive, unmarried male employee A, who has received performance incentive benefit is 66% more likely to retain in the specific job.

The challenge is that associates who have entered the workforce for the first time or transitioned from unorganised or informal sectors, are often not aware of the benefits they're eligible for and how to avail them. To help them, Qess has introduced video clips that explain these benefits and insurance provisions in simple, easy-to-understand terms. These videos are shared with all associates along with their offer letters. In addition, there is also a Unified Health Portal in the form of a toll-free helpline. Associates can contact this to get answers to their specific queries.

By providing these benefits-related resources digitally, Qess is breaking down barriers that often prevent associates from understanding and accessing the support they're entitled to. For associates, many of whom come from low-income backgrounds, having access to such vital support fosters a sense of security and trust in their work environment.

Skilling and Upskilling

Qess provides skilling and upskilling opportunities for associates through its in-house edutech platform, QDemy. This platform offers professional skill development training to blue-collar and grey-collar workers at a nominal cost. QDemy also offers certified online courses in areas such as communication and English speaking.

Access to such affordable training programs plays a crucial role in helping associates build skills that extend beyond their current roles at Qess and improve their long-term employability.

“

“As an introvert, I never imagined I would be training around 1,000 to 2,000 associates, something I am incredibly proud of. The rigorous training and support from Quess have been instrumental in building my confidence and allowing me to step out of my comfort zone.”

- Krithiga (27), Quess associate & HR Executive
at a cement manufacturer

Monitoring Sentiment via the SARA Chatbot

Understanding how employees are feeling is key to designing programs that benefit them and in turn, improving retention. Quess does this through the use of a feedback chatbot named SARA. The chatbot interacts with employees from two days before their join date, continuing through their exit interview. It uses sentiment analysis to gauge associates' moods at various touchpoints. For example, when associates are asked questions like “Are you enjoying your work?” or “Do you get a conveyance to reach your work location?”, SARA captures their responses using emojis, ranging from happy 😊, indicating satisfaction, to sad 😞, reflecting dissatisfaction or issues that need to be addressed.

Interaction Journey through SARA

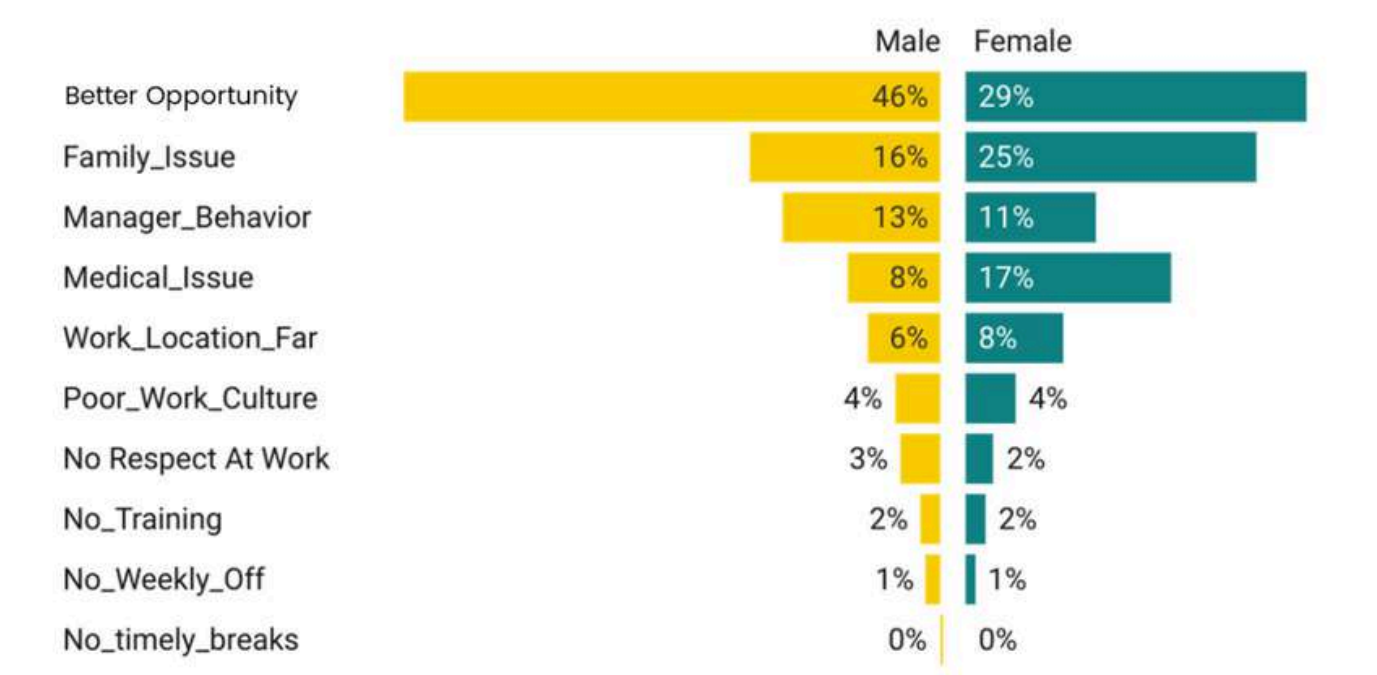


By capturing responses to key questions related to everyday work and overall satisfaction, SARA helps identify employees at risk of leaving, particularly during the critical first 90 days of employment. An analysis that the Udaiti team conducted of SARA data found that female associates who interacted with the chatbot were less likely to quit, with retention particularly improving among those facing challenges related to commute, work hours, or other logistical concerns.

By capturing employee feedback and exit reasons, the chatbot enables the organisation to identify patterns in why employees leave and, more importantly, intervene in a timely manner

to prevent these exits. Our analysis found that overall, SARA’s proactive engagement has contributed to a 1% reduction in the overall turnover rate at Qess.

Apart from this, SARA also shines a light on areas of improvement for Qess. Examining the data, we found that 17% of female associates who left the company cited medical reasons as their reason for quitting. This included pregnancy and related complications (22%), fever and infections (18%), and chronic conditions or surgeries (15%).



Findings from our study of Qess’s employee exit data

However, the data also showed that 73% of these employees had access to ESIC benefits, which include sickness and maternity leave provisions, where employees are entitled to 70-100% of their wages for up to 91 days during illness or up to 12 weeks during maternity leave. This analysis revealed that, while Qess provides these essential benefits, more needs to be done to raise awareness about them among associates.



Beyond Quess: External Challenges

Given the nature of the staffing industry, the full potential of increasing women's participation in the workforce can only be realised through a collaborative approach. While Quess can push for more female placements, success also requires a pull from its clients in terms of demand for more women employees.

Even with Quess making concerted efforts to place more women in associate roles, ultimate success also depends on the willingness of client organisations. If clients are reluctant to hire women, or unwilling to invest in essential workplace infrastructure, cultural interventions, or enforce Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) policies, women associates may still feel unsafe or unsupported. These factors, which are outside of Quess' direct control, can result in women leaving the workforce. For meaningful change to occur, client companies need to actively participate in creating inclusive, supportive environments that encourage women to stay and thrive in their roles.

Additionally, Quess faces limitations when it comes to governmental policies that may restrict the hiring of women. For instance, certain labour laws and state regulations may limit the ability of companies to hire women for night shifts or roles that require relocation. While Quess can advocate for change, the company has little direct influence over these policies. These external constraints highlight the broader, systemic challenges that impact the staffing industry's ability to enhance gender diversity.

Looking Ahead: Scaling for Greater Impact

"We receive positive feedback from our clients on having women employees. Women employees are known for their diligence and contribute significantly to a positive work environment. We have especially noticed that the workplaces with a balanced gender mix tend to have lower turnover rates," says Srinivasan. "In the manufacturing sector, there is a growing demand for women, particularly for tasks requiring precision and dexterity. Women's strong

hand-eye coordination makes them well-suited for assembling small components. Overall, there has been a noticeable increase in demand for female workers compared to five years ago.”

Nitin Dave, CEO - General Staffing at Quess, concurs. “Our clients have been reporting some really positive outcomes after hiring more women, especially in non-traditional sectors like manufacturing. They’ve noticed reduced absenteeism, a significant boost in productivity, and consistently good feedback from their own teams. Some clients are even specifically asking for women candidates now, especially in industries where this wasn’t common before.”

This is an encouraging sign for the industry as a whole and has positive implications for Quess. Currently, 10% of their overall female workforce is engaged in the manufacturing sector across 400 industrial and manufacturing units. With a growing preference¹⁸ for women workers in new-age manufacturing companies, particularly in electronics manufacturing services (EMS) and automotive, companies are choosing to employ a 60-80% women workforce on the shop floor.¹⁹ This means that focused interventions could help accelerate progress towards achieving broader gender goals in these sectors.

Towards its goal of increasing women’s participation at the associate level to 25% by 2027, Quess intends to build upon the successes of its existing initiatives.

1

Proactive diversity goals

Not all of Quess’s clients prioritise gender diversity when hiring associates for contractual roles. In such cases, Quess plans to take the initiative to set internal diversity targets for the recruitment process, ensuring that they maintain adequate gender diversity across client assignments.

2

Scaling up feedback loops

Seeing the value of data captured through the SARA chatbot, Quess plans to further leverage it by introducing additional touchpoints, monitor responses, respond better to associate

3

Driving awareness initiatives

Also on the cards are measures to improve awareness of employee benefits so that all associates—particularly women in lower-income brackets—fully understand and utilise the support available to them. The data from SARA has already revealed a gap between the availability of these benefits and employees’ awareness of them. By closing this, Quess can provide a stronger

¹⁸ Fortune India: Women on Shop Floor

¹⁹ Economic Times: Floored by women

4

Scaling women-friendly programs

Quess plans to bring the Sampoorna Rozgar Yojana initiative to new locations, particularly in sectors like manufacturing. Amplifying this initiative will help Quess tap into the potential of an even larger female workforce and create a supportive work environment for women.

These initiatives reflect Quess's commitment to fostering greater gender parity across its workforce. The company understands that the path to achieving meaningful change requires sustained effort and a willingness to scale up successful programs.

Quess's approach serves as a potential model for other staffing companies interested in narrowing the gender gap, specifically its emphasis on community engagement in recruitment, associate wellbeing at every level, and data-driven insights for retention. As the company looks to the future, its efforts in enhancing gender diversity could pave the way for broader change across the flexi-staffing industry, helping more women enter and remain in the workforce.

Acknowledgements

This report has been co-authored by The Udaiti Foundation and the Center for Economic and Data Analysis, Ashoka University.

Names of team members who have worked on this research report include:

The Udaiti Foundation

1. Khushi Boken
2. Gayatri Misra
3. Karthick Morchan
4. Annu T Poulouse

Centre for Economic and Data Analysis

1. Dr. Ashwini Deshpande
2. Akshi Chawla
3. Dr. Kanika Mahajan
4. Dr. Anisha Sharma

The authors would like to thank Khushi Boken for designing the report.