

STATE OF WOMEN IN THE BLUE-GREY COLLAR WORKFORCE 2025



About

The Udaiti Foundation

The Udaiti Foundation is committed to driving India's vision of a Viksit Bharat and a \$30 trillion economy through two key objectives of increasing India's Female Labour Force Participation Rate to 50% and doubling the number of women-owned enterprises in the country. As a force multiplier in the Women's Economic Empowerment ecosystem, we actively provide data-backed evidence to the private sector organisations, state governments, and the start-up ecosystem and collaborate with them to drive change on the ground.

Close the Gender Gap Initiative

The private sector holds significant potential to enhance women's participation in the workforce. Close the Gender Gap (CGG) is an ambitious initiative to increase women's workforce participation in large enterprises in India from the current 18% to 30% by 2030. The initiative brings together India's leading companies to transform India's workforce by accelerating women's workforce participation in the private sector. CGG aims to catalyse commitments and action for gender parity at work.

About Quess Corp

Established in Bengaluru in 2007, Quess Corp Ltd. (Quess) is India's largest and a global leader in staffing and workforce solutions. With deep domain expertise and AI-driven digital platforms it helps businesses enhance productivity and build a future-ready workforce. It's comprehensive suite of technology-enabled staffing and managed outsourcing services spans key sectors including BFSI, Retail, Telecom, Manufacturing, IT, and GCCs. Today, Quess has a workforce of approximately 4,59,000 employees across 8 countries and serving over 3,000 clients. Quess Corp has been ranked 19 among India's Best Workplaces and certified a Great Place to Work for the sixth consecutive year in 2025. Staffing Industry Analysts (SIA) has recognised Quess Corp as India's No.1 staffing company in 2025 and 37th globally in 2024.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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About the Report



The State of Women in the Blue-Grey Collar Workforce Report - 2025 examines structural and everyday barriers that prevent women in blue-grey collar jobs from building sustainable careers. The findings draw on an extensive survey of 10,620 current women employees (also referred to as associates), 1,575 former women employees, and in-depth interviews with 19 current women employees at Quess, India's largest flexi-staffing company. All the women respondents covered in this survey (who are still with Quess) are formal employees with a written contract, entitled to minimum wages, and covered by social security benefits, including Provident Fund and medical insurance under ESIC.

The need for this report arises from the low and unstable participation of women in India's workforce, especially in the blue-grey collar segment. Demand and supply factors not only limit women's entry into the workforce, but also limit their ability to continue staying. This has direct consequences for household income and overall national productivity.

With the rising demand for workforce and persistent worker shortages, retaining and stabilising women workers in blue-grey collar space has become an urgent priority. Further, there is a lack of rigorous and gender-intentional research in this space to help stakeholders design strategies to effectively recognise and address gender-specific challenges. This report aims to develop an understanding of the barriers faced by women in blue-grey collar roles and enable key stakeholders to design effective policies to attract, support and retain more women in the workforce.

Key Characteristics of the Sample (Main Survey, 10,620 Women)



Average Age
28 years



Median Tenure
1 year



Marital Status
55% married



Mean CTC
INR 25,800



Sector (largest)
28% in Retail



Region (largest)
35% from South

Executive Summary

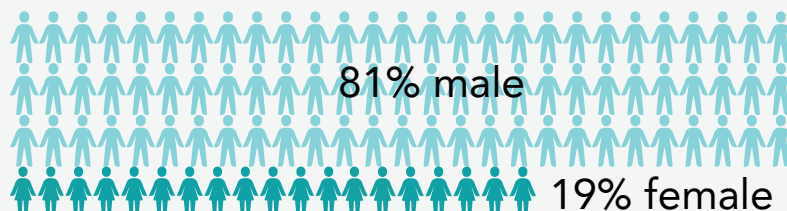
An increasing number of women in India are entering the blue and grey-collar workforce, a segment that forms the backbone of industries like manufacturing, logistics, retail, healthcare, and financial services. For many, these jobs offer a source of income and independence in the absence of formal education, skilling or access to white-collar opportunities. This workforce is critical for employers, as they drive the day-to-day operations of the organisations, enabling businesses to scale and serve customers effectively.

The staffing industry is one of the key sectors in India that is increasingly emerging as an enabler of women's workforce participation, particularly in the blue, grey, and entry-level white-collar segments. By offering structured job opportunities, minimum wages, and compliant work environments, staffing firms are providing women employees a pathway to transition into formal employment.

While women in these roles have gained greater access to employment opportunities, challenges around wages, career growth, and long-term security persist. This report explores why women leave these jobs, what might help them stay, and what could encourage them to return. Based on surveys and interviews with current and former women employees (also referred to as associates) at Quess, the findings will help decision makers build a more inclusive future and support women's retention in the workforce.

Key Findings of the Report

1. **Only 1 out of 5 blue-grey collar worker is a woman**

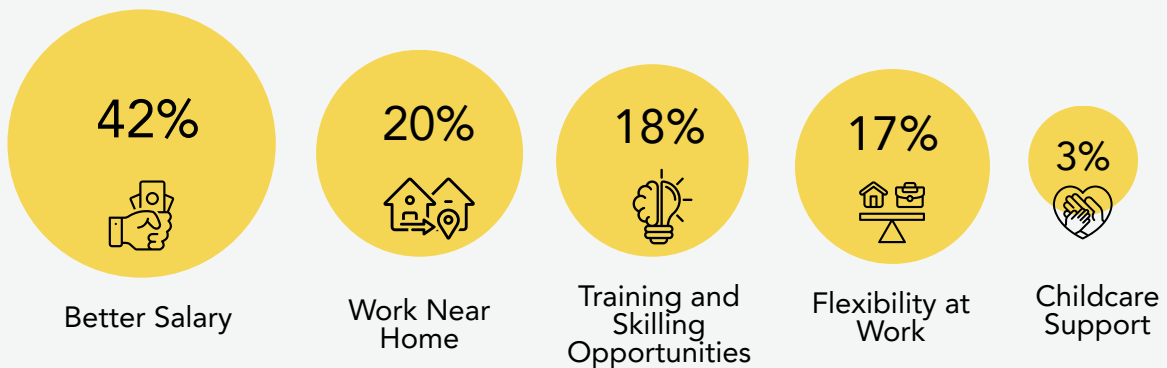


2. Among those who do join, many do not stay

High employee attrition is a significant challenge for organisations in this segment, with attrition rates ranging between 8% and 24%¹. From the sample, 52% of women with tenure less than a year reported that they plan to leave within the next 12 months. In contrast, women who have stayed beyond two years are significantly more stable, with only 3% considering leaving soon. However, the startling discovery came from 1,575 women associates who left Quess in the last six months. The survey found that only 33% of this pool of women are still working. Many women who left Quess remained out of the workforce, not because of a lack of willingness, but because of the absence of supportive job opportunities. Given the high opportunity cost of stepping out of home, women need jobs that provide fair living wages, easy commute, safety and clear pathways for growth.

Executive Summary

Primary Drivers That Will Bring Women Back To Work*

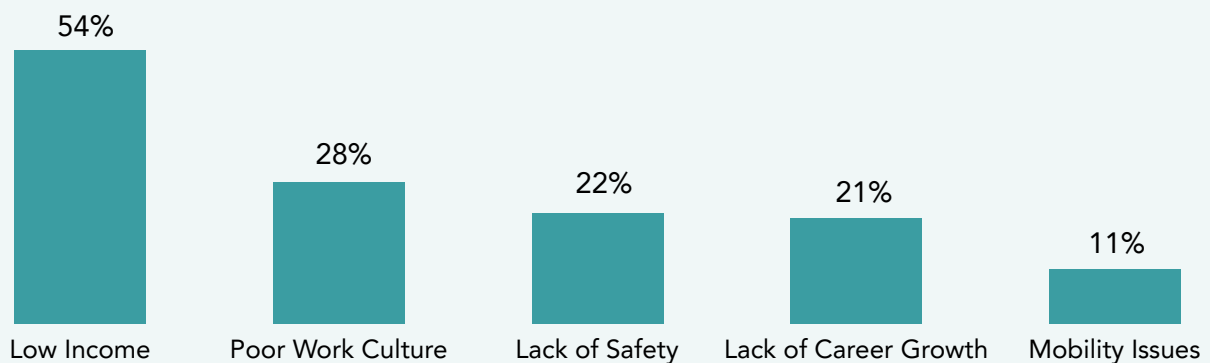


*Response from survey with 1575 ex-female associates of Ques

3. Why sustained participation is a challenge

Women in India's blue and grey-collar workforce face a set of tough, interconnected challenges, limiting their ability to sustain in jobs and build long-term careers. The report captures six critical barriers that shape women's workforce participation and retention in these roles. Recognising these challenges will play a significant role in making practical changes that help women thrive in their jobs and build a better future for themselves.

Key Challenges Faced by Women in the Workforce*



*Responses were collected in a multiple-choice format, hence the total exceeds 100%

Low Pay, High Opportunity Cost: Women in blue-grey collar roles earn only 70% of what their male counterparts do². Strikingly, 80% of the survey respondents from the pool of currently working employees save nothing or less than INR 2,000 a month, reflecting a gap between the living and minimum wage. Data reveals that higher earnings reduce the likelihood of attrition. Among women dissatisfied with income, those earning above INR 20,000 are 21% less likely to leave early than those earning less than INR 20,000. Additionally, among exited women employees who are currently out of the workforce, 42% said better pay would motivate them to return to work, signalling the opportunity cost women weigh when deciding to join or rejoin the workforce.

Executive Summary

Mobility Gaps Cost Women Jobs, Opportunity: With 61% of women respondents relying on public transport, commuting is more than a daily struggle, it is a barrier to career advancement. A total of 57% of women respondents reported facing mobility-related issues, with 11% of them citing serious concerns such as safety and lack of transport after dark. These challenges have real consequences: some women turn down promotions or quit jobs due to commuting stress. Interestingly, 1 in 5 women currently out of the workforce reported they would return to the workforce only if work were closer to home.

Safe, Affordable Housing Out of Reach for Many Women: Safe, affordable accommodation for single migrant women is scarce across India, especially in the Northeast, Central and North India. Only 15% of the survey respondents stay in hostels, falling to 8% outside South India, reflecting limited or sub-standard options. Even among women who stay in company-provided hostels, 1 in 5 of them reported facing mobility issues due to poor connectivity and unreliable transport, underscoring the need for the government and private sector to jointly develop good-quality working women's hostels closer to their work locations.

Skilling is Key for Career Growth: 21% of women respondents reported limited career growth and a desire for better roles, with dissatisfaction highest among graduates and postgraduates. Yet, only 11% are pursuing skill-based training to advance their career. The survey shows a clear link between upskilling and career growth, with 65% of women who left Qness and upskilled in functional training securing new jobs with salary hikes of over INR 4,000.

Workplace Safety, a Concern for Women: The presence of basic workplace infrastructure, such as CCTVs, good lighting, and sanitation, significantly affect women's sense of safety. One in three working women feels unsafe in the absence of these facilities. Women in manufacturing and field roles are especially affected, often lacking clean restrooms and safe break areas. Safety concerns are a key driver of attrition: among women who have completed a year of tenure, those feeling unsafe are 52% more likely to leave within a year.

Work Culture, Flexibility Drive Exits and Retention: 29% of women in blue and grey-collar roles report poor work culture as a reason their jobs feel dull, with lack of flexibility being the biggest issue. Additionally, 17% of women who have exited the workforce cite flexibility as a key factor they would consider for returning to workforce, a need that becomes more pronounced with age.

Executive Summary

4. Building the path ahead

Based on the report's findings, we recommend actionable plans across five key areas to improve women's participation and retention in the blue-grey collar workforce. However, achieving this will require a shared commitment from the government, the private sector, and civil society.



Income: Raise minimum wage, link pay to the cost of living and enable access to advance wages.



Mobility and accommodation: Provide safe worker housing, vehicle loans and subsidies.



Workplace facilities: Ensure gender-sensitive WASH infrastructure, childcare support, and safe public break areas.



Career growth: Offer transparent promotion pathways, skill training, and pathways to formal education.



Work culture: Promote flexible schedules, open communication, and regular safety audits of workplaces, especially factories.



Background: Blue-Grey Collar Work in India

India's labour market is fast-evolving, shaped by economic growth, technological progress, urbanisation, and a young, expanding population. Multiple sources suggest that India needs to add 7-10 million non-farm jobs a year to achieve the goal of becoming a developed nation or "Viksit Bharat" by 2047. A large share of these non-farm jobs are blue-grey collar roles, which form the backbone of India's economy.



About Blue-Grey Collar Work

Blue collar work refers to labour-intensive jobs that are typically paid on an hourly basis. They usually involve unskilled or semi-skilled workers, including construction, maintenance, catering, housekeeping, landscaping, mining, event support, and home or healthcare services.³

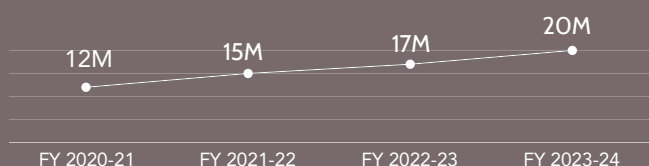
Grey collar work bridges the gap between blue and white collar jobs, combining manual or operational work, requiring some technical skills or training. This category of workers may operate machinery, supervise production lines, or work in sales and customer executive roles in sectors like retail, FMCG, healthcare, manufacturing or IT.⁴

The grey collar segment of the workforce is less formally researched and documented but plays a vital role in bridging manual and technical expertise.

The Blue-Grey Collar Workforce of India

The blue-grey collar workforce has undergone rapid expansion in recent years, influenced by technological advancements and changing industry needs. An estimated 450 million (formal+informal)⁵ workers are currently employed in the blue collar segment. Within the blue-grey collar segment, the formal workforce has grown steadily, rising to around 20 million workers in FY 2023-24.⁶ Cities such as New Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, and Pune have emerged as hubs driving this rising demand.⁷ Furthermore, according to Deloitte's "Blue-Collar Workforce Trends 2025" report, hiring intent in this segment has also risen by 10%.⁸

Formal blue-grey collar employment increased by **67%** between FY 2020-21 to FY 2023-24⁹



Quess Corp. alone employs over

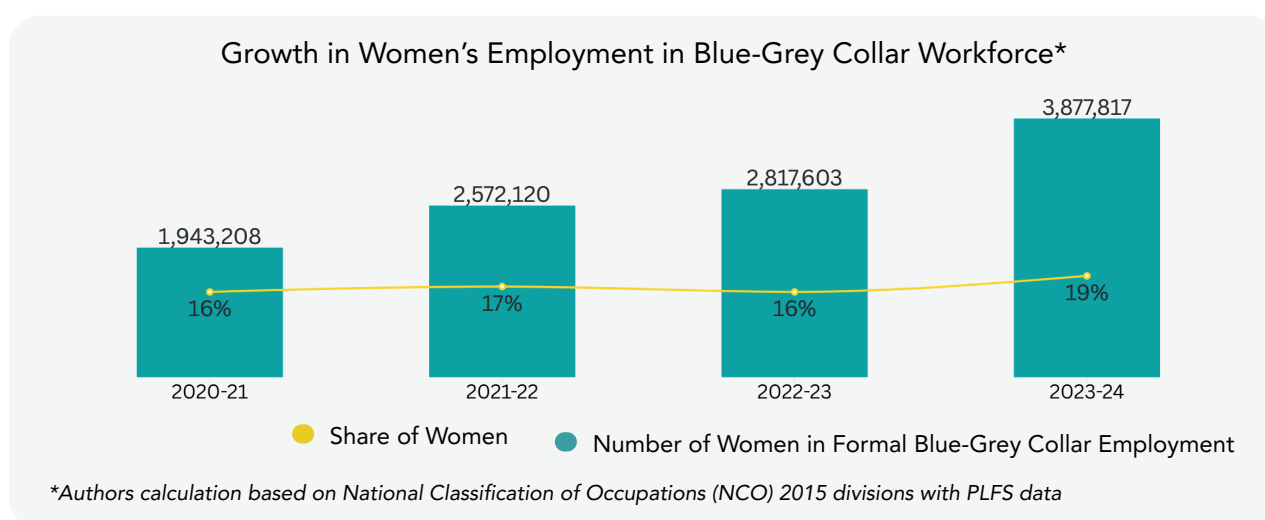
450,000

associates (blue, grey and entry level white collar)¹⁰

Women in Blue-Grey Collar Roles

With surging demand for blue-grey collar roles across sectors, women are increasingly entering these jobs traditionally dominated by men. The progress, however, cannot be measured solely by the number of women entering the workforce, but also by how industries, policy-makers and all other stakeholders take decisive action to break systemic barriers, offer fair wages, and create flexible, growth-oriented workplaces that enable women to stay and thrive.¹¹

Despite more women joining the blue-grey collar workforce, women still account for only about 1 in 5 workers in this segment.¹² On a positive note, sectors such as retail, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, construction, real estate, travel and hospitality have experienced increasing female representation in this segment of the workforce.¹³ While there is still a long way to go, this marks a significant shift from a time when gender inclusivity in many of these jobs was unheard of. According to PLFS, women's share in blue-grey collar roles has shown a steady albeit modest growth, increasing from 16% in 2020-21 to 19% in 2023-24.¹⁴



However, even with new job roles opening up and increasing hiring intent, women continue to face challenges ranging from limited upward career progression to lack of flexibility at work, which holds them back. According to a survey by Indeed, while 73% of the employers said they hired women for blue-collar roles in 2024, female participation remained stagnant at 20% across the country.¹⁵ This may be due to a high number of women exiting the workforce, offsetting the net additions. To add to the problem, persistent wage disparities are also acute in this segment, with the average wage for women being only 0.7 times that of their male counterparts.¹⁶

Women's participation in blue-grey collar jobs will grow, driven by demand in multiple sectors. With supportive policies and employer initiatives, with automation reducing physical barriers, more equitable opportunities will emerge.¹⁷

Retention in Blue-Grey Collar Work

Blue-grey collar jobs are often seen by workers as temporary in nature, as they are typically contractual and offer limited earning potential.¹⁸ Attrition levels in these segments are high, ranging from 8% to 24% across industries, with an annual turnover rate touching 55%.¹⁹ The attrition problem is exacerbated as historical retention strategies have focused predominantly on white-collar roles, leaving a significant gap in addressing the needs of this essential workforce.

Retaining women in blue-grey collar roles presents additional challenges due to the deep interconnection between their personal and professional lives. Life transitions such as marriage and childbirth disproportionately impact women,²⁰ adding high opportunity cost to continue in the workforce. These gender-specific barriers are often overlooked in traditional retention strategies in this segment.



Defining Blue-Grey Collar Jobs from our Sample

While it is difficult to clearly define and draw strict boundaries between different collared roles, our sample revealed some distinct patterns in the types of jobs women commonly occupy across sectors. Across industries, there is a strong concentration of women in client-facing roles, particularly in sales, customer service, and promoter or merchandiser positions. In fact, nearly half (47%) of the roles in our sample are in sales, 23% are in non-client or non-sales roles, and the rest fall into other varied categories. Women remain largely underrepresented in traditional, male-dominated domains such as core manufacturing, technical operations, and infrastructure roles, which have historically been outside the perceived scope of women's work. The average salary across these roles is around INR 26,000 per month, including performance-linked incentives, offering a steady income for many women, with potential for growth as they gain experience and build skills. It should also be noted that, unlike the blue-grey collar job in the informal workforce, workers in the staffing industry are formally employed and are entitled to a written contract, minimum wage and other social security benefits, including Provident Funds and medical insurance from ESIC.

The types of jobs held by women across predominant sectors employing blue and grey collared female workers can be classified as:

Retail

*Sales Consultant
Customer Care
Marketing Associate*




Manufacturing & Infrastructure

*Technician
Assembly Operator
Quality Analyst*



Information Tech & Education

*Data Entry Exec
Technician
Sales/Customer Care*



Telecommunication

*Customer Care Exec
Customer Relationship*



Fast Moving Consumer Goods

*Sales Consultant
In-store promoter*



Banking, Financial Services & Insurance

*Sales Exec
Back Office Officer
Field Ops Exec*



What Keeps Women in Blue-Grey Collar Jobs?

Qualitative interviews revealed that women's motivations to pursue and stay in blue-grey collar jobs vary by age, household structure, and financial situation. The average woman respondent is 28 years old with a median tenure of 1 year. Four key drivers emerge for women entering and staying in blue-grey collar jobs:



Family Responsibility

For women who are sole earners, such as single mothers or those supporting elderly parents, the primary motivation is sustaining their families. These women often prioritise job stability over career progression and seek consistent income to manage day-to-day expenses.

Steady Paycheck and Job Security

A regular paycheck is a major motivator. Many women expressed appreciation for employers who continued paying wages during COVID-19 and did not resort to layoffs. This reliability built a sense of trust and loyalty toward their workplaces.



Familiarity with Role

Among middle-aged women, prior experience in similar roles or sectors influences their decision to stay. Comfort with the nature of work and established routines helps reinforce job continuity.

Stepping Stone to Higher Paid Jobs

Younger women are primarily driven by opportunities to learn and grow. They view current roles as stepping stones toward better-paying jobs and are keen to absorb any training or upskilling the company offers.



Decoding Barriers to Women's Retention

Barriers were captured through the survey with 10,620 current Quess women associates, 1,575 former women associates and qualitative interviews with 19 current women associates.

INCOME

1

Low Wages, High Costs: Low wages make it difficult for women to sustain at work given high opportunity costs. **54%** of women respondents are unhappy with their pay, and nearly **80%** are unable to save even INR 2,000 a month, revealing a clear gap between minimum wage and living wage.

High Living Cost in Tier 1 cities: Costs are higher in Tier 1 cities, but **1 in 5 women earn below INR 20,000**, which is typically the stipulated minimum wage. Women in Tier 1 cities are **27%** more likely to leave early.

Better Pay Boosts Retention: Those earning above INR 20,000 are **21%** less likely to drop out in the near term, showing that better pay supports retention.

SAFE MOBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION

Unsafe Commutes, Limited Options: As many as **61%** women rely primarily on public transport, but **11%** face issues like safety and lack of transport.

Housing Gaps: While **30%** of single migrant women in South India use hostels, this drops to **8%** elsewhere. Even in company hostels, **20%** report mobility issues — highlighting the need to bundle safe housing with **reliable transport**.

Proximity and Safe Transport is Non-negotiable: **1 in 5** women currently out of the workforce said they would return only if work were closer to home.

2

CAREER GROWTH

3

Lack of Growth Drives Attrition: **1 in 5 women** cite stalled career growth as a challenge. Those with postgraduate degrees are 3 times more likely to quit if unhappy with job growth - unmet aspirations push even the most qualified out.

Challenge Varies by Age: Younger women face an aspiration mismatch — **70%** of those aged 18–26 changed their roles after leaving Quess. For more senior women, lack of career growth was one of the key drivers of exit.

Upskilling Pays Off: **65%** of women who undertook functional training saw salary hikes of INR 4,000 and above on switching, compared to **45%** women who did not upskill, highlighting the value of structured career growth.

Decoding Barriers to Women's Retention

SAFE AND CLEAN WORKPLACE

4

Safety Lapses Push Women Out of Work: 22% of women report feeling unsafe at work — a concern that rises by **13 percentage points** where basic safety measures like CCTV, lighting, or helplines are missing.

Certain Roles are More Vulnerable: Women working in **factories, warehouses and field roles** report higher safety concerns. These settings lack the structured protections of typical office spaces, making targeted safety investments in these sectors urgent.

Unsafe is Unsustainable: Women with a tenure of more than a year who are facing safety concerns are **52%** more likely to leave the job the following year.

WORK CULTURE

Poor Work Culture Comes at a Cost: 28% of women struggle with long hours and unsupportive work cultures, leading to dissatisfaction — nearly **1 in 3 of them report not enjoying their work.**

Inflexible Schedules is a Concern - But Few Avenues to Speak Up: Among women reporting poor work culture, **36%** cite lack of flexibility as the biggest issue. Yet, in the absence of an effective grievance redressal systems in place, many have no safe way to raise these concerns.

Promise of Flexibility Brings Women Back: 17% of women say flexible schedules are key to rejoining work — a requirement that increases with age, likely reflecting rising caregiving responsibilities.

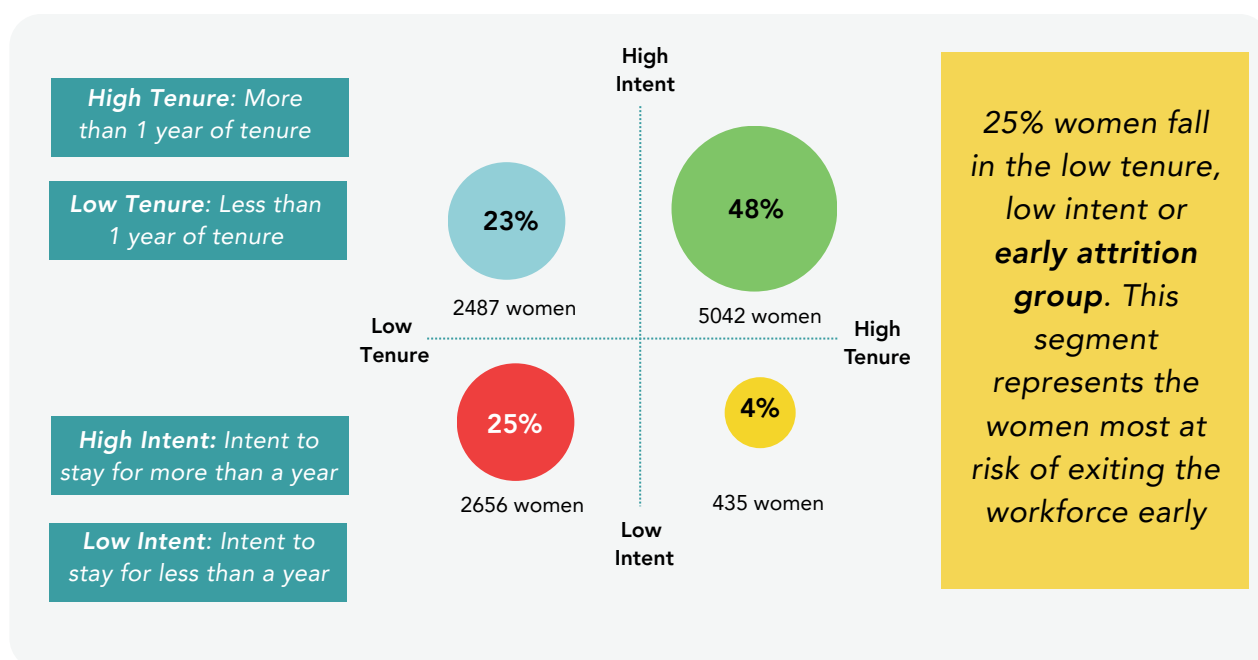
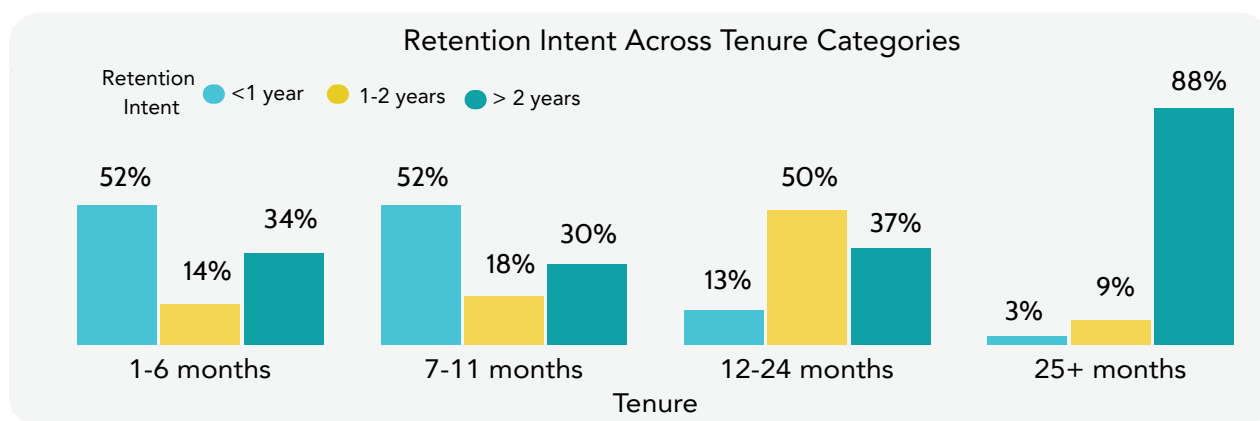
5



Understanding Early Exit Drivers

When we asked 10,620 women respondents, "How long will you continue in your current role at Qess?" the data revealed a striking pattern: 29% planned to exit within a year. But the real story emerged when we cross-referenced exit intent with actual tenure. The findings were stark: **52% of women with under one year of service intended to leave within the next 12 months.** Compare this to women who survived beyond two years—only 3% planned near-term exits.

The verdict is clear: New women associates face catastrophic attrition risk. The first year is not just challenging—it is make-or-break.



A closer look reveals the typical attributes of the early attrition group. These women are more likely to be unmarried, work in the retail sector, earn less than INR 20,000 per month and have relatively less family responsibilities. However, to move beyond the surface-level observations, the following sections examine the barriers faced by women in blue and grey collar roles in-depth. These findings are drawn from a combination of descriptive and inferential survey data analysis, in-depth interviews and secondary research.

INCOME

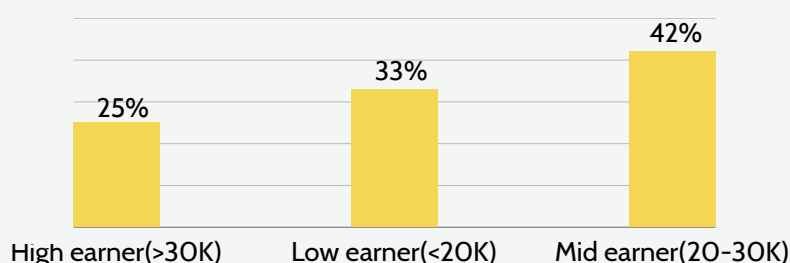
More than half (54%) of the women are unhappy with their income, indicating that low income is a significant factor driving potential turnover among the respondents. The jobs being entry-level, workers are mostly paid state-specific minimum wages.

This was reinforced in qualitative interviews, especially among respondents from **Tier-1 cities**, where the **cost of living has surged post-COVID**. Tier-1 cities have a 10%–35% higher cost of living compared to Tier-2 cities.²¹ Yet, **20%** of women in Tier-1 cities earn below INR 20,000 a month, and nearly **50%** them have dependent children - signaling a glaring gap between minimum wage and living wage.

Low Income and Savings

Income is limited in the blue-grey collar sector and savings are out of reach for most women workers

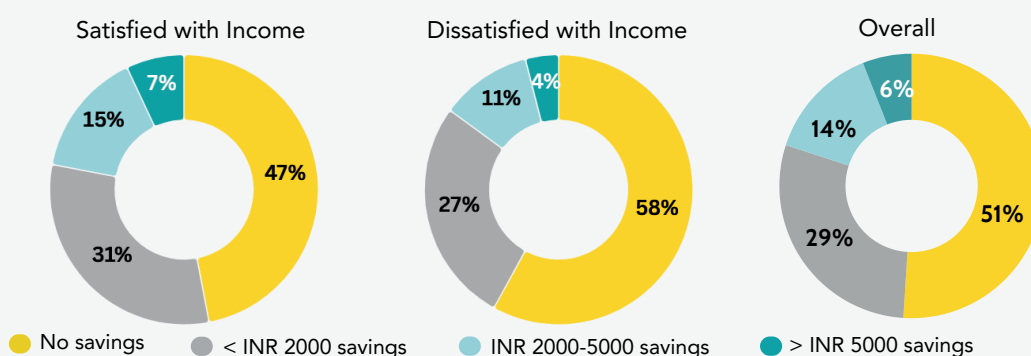
Income Distribution for Female Blue-Grey Collar Workers



From the attrition perspective, among women with similar levels of income dissatisfaction, those earning above INR 20,000 were **21% less likely to fall in the early attrition group** compared to those earning less than INR 20,000 monthly. It indicates that **higher absolute earnings significantly reduce early-attrition risk**.

Among women who are unhappy with their income, 58% report no monthly savings at all. This financial strain is also worsened by the gendered spending patterns studied in literature. Women, particularly those in female-headed households, tend to allocate a larger portion of their income to basic household needs such as food items and daily survival, leaving them with less income for the purposes of savings and leisure.²²

Comparing Savings Patterns for Different Income Satisfaction Levels



Regardless of income satisfaction,

80%

women save nothing or under INR 2,000 a month

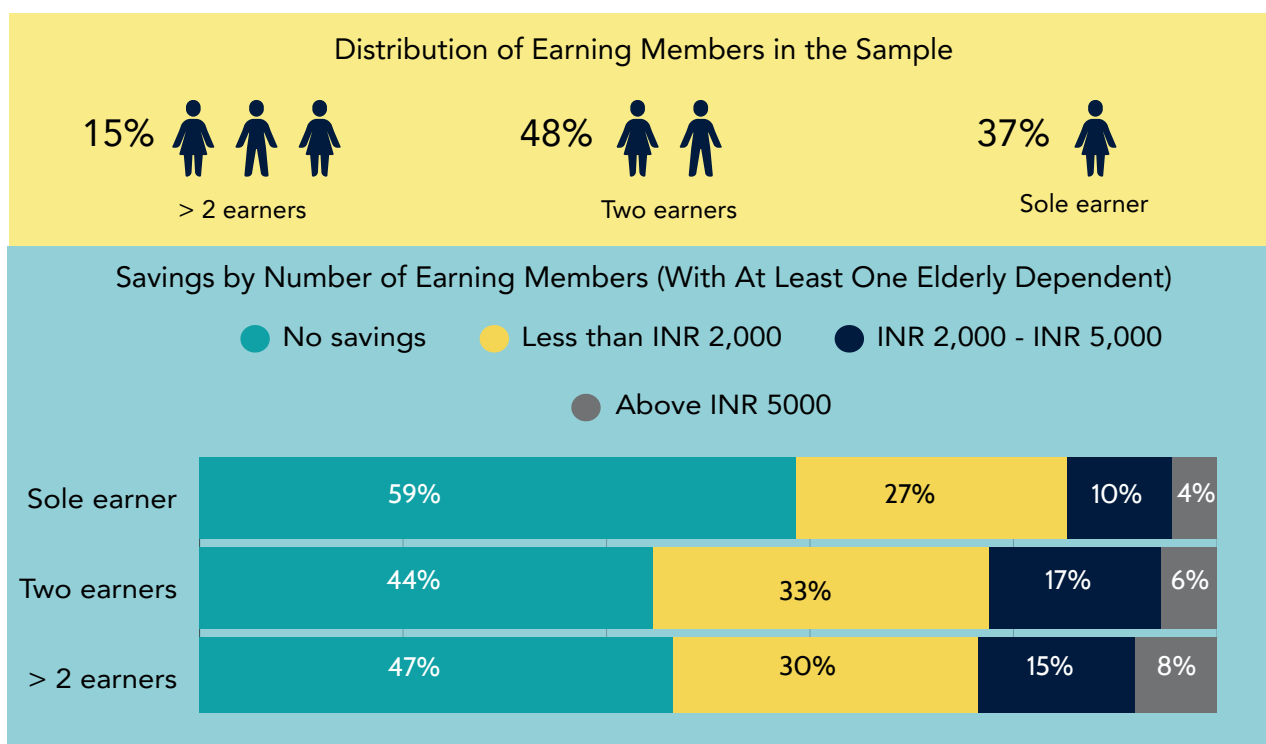
Challenges around Increments

The qualitative findings of this study highlight an opportunity to improve **clarity and transparency** in increment systems, which can significantly support women's income growth. Many women expressed confidence in their performance but were unsure about the **specific criteria used for performance evaluations** and salary increases. Establishing clear, well-communicated **processes for increments** can help build trust, boost morale, and enable women to better plan their career and financial goals.

Household Constraints Impact Income Satisfaction and Retention

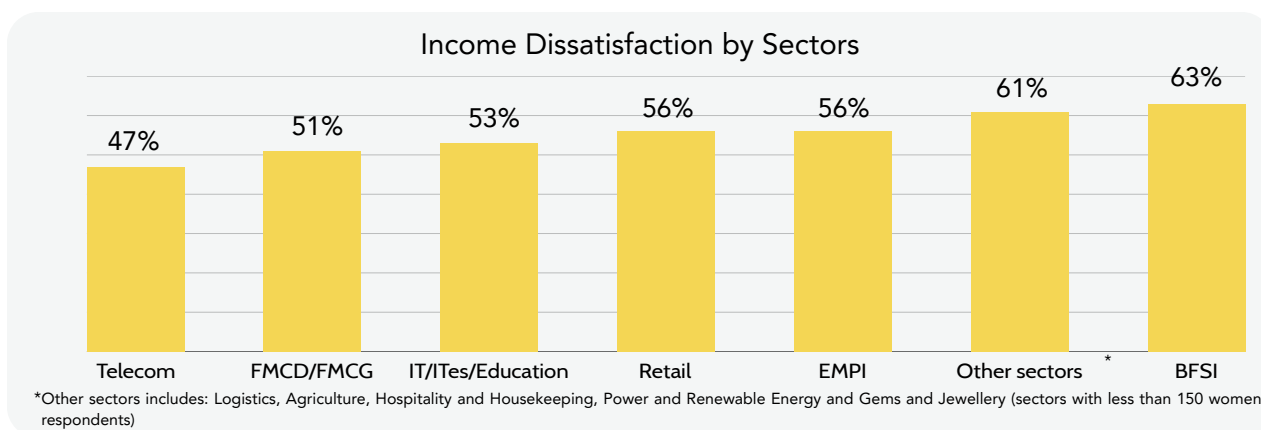
Financial stress hits hardest where the responsibility is heaviest - among **solo or primary earners**, especially those supporting dependents.

Among solo earners with elderly dependents, **nearly 60% women are unable to save**. Qualitative insights also reinforce this finding that salary is a more acute concern for women with significant household responsibilities, such as eldest daughters supporting low-income families or single mothers. **Despite low income satisfaction, many remain in their jobs due to limited career guidance and a higher risk aversion, driven by family obligations.**

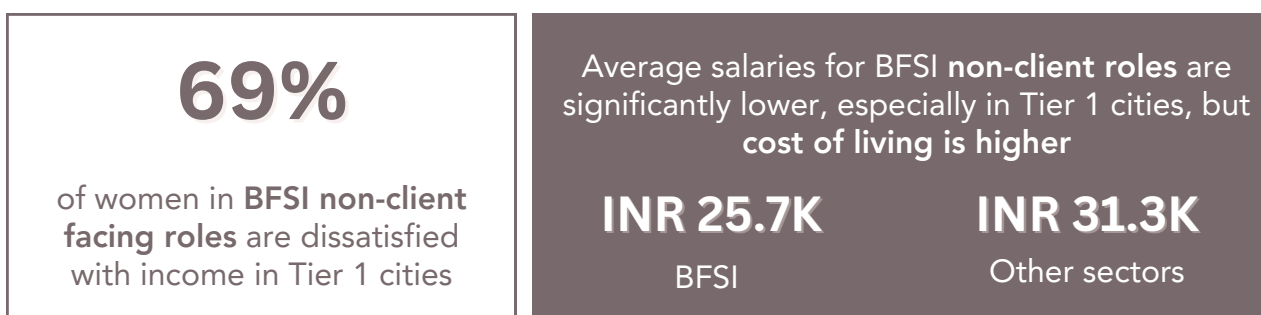


Sectoral Trends

Disparities exist in income satisfaction levels across sectors and roles. **Income dissatisfaction is highest among women working in BFSI, followed by retail and Engineering Manufacturing Process and Infrastructure sector (EMPI).**

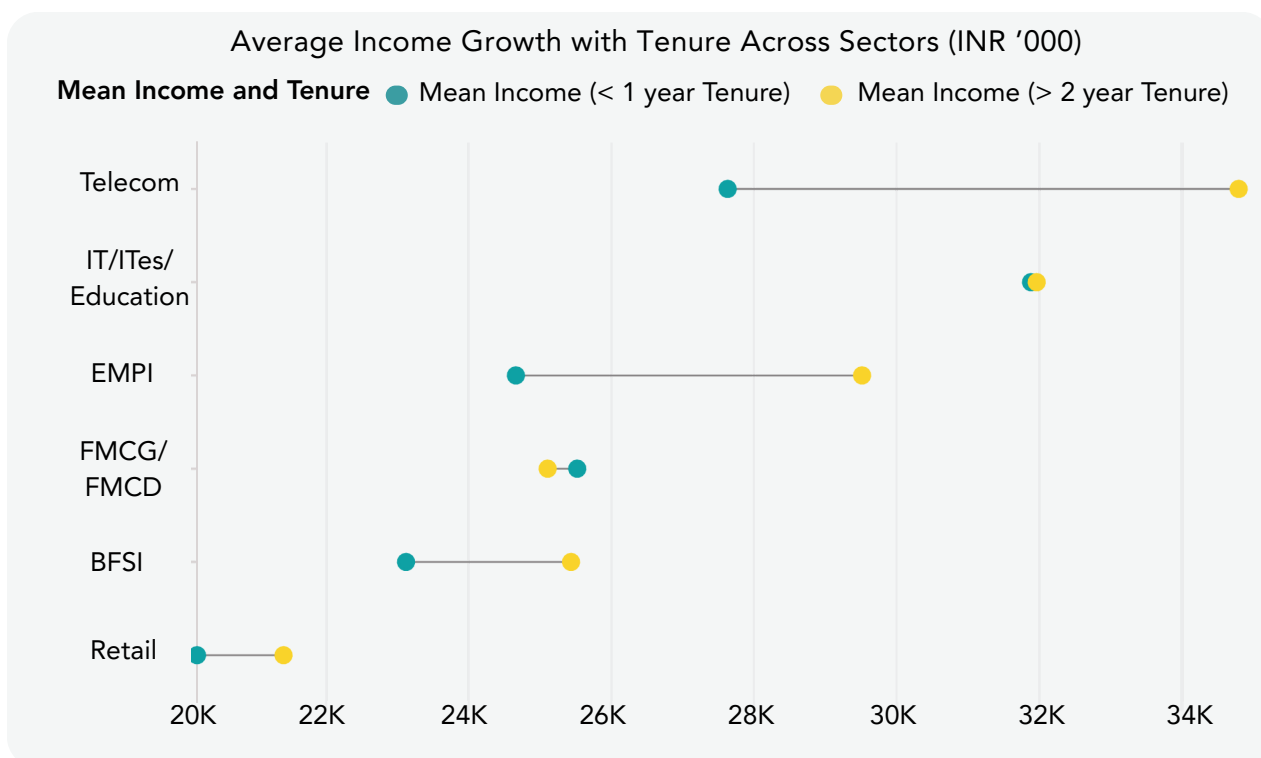


Low Pay, Higher Dissatisfaction in BFSI's Non-Client Facing Roles



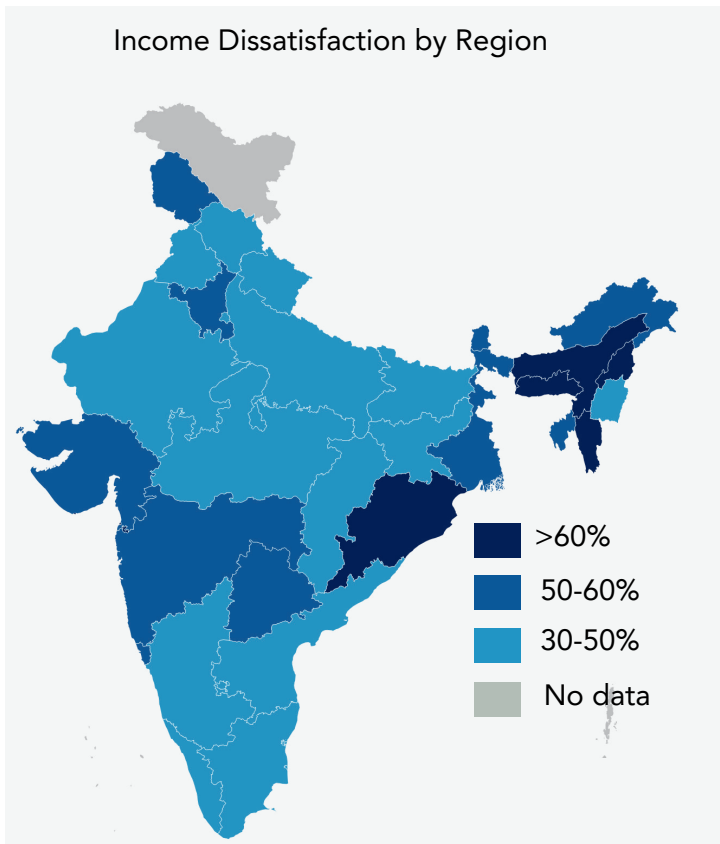
Low and Stagnant Salaries in Retail

Salary growth may be slow across the board - but in retail, it is particularly constrained. Women in the sector earn an **average of just INR 21,000**, with barely any difference based on age or experience - underscoring the need for salary growth and upward mobility.



Region and City Tier Wise Trends

Across regions, women working in Tier 1 cities are **27% more likely to fall in the early attrition group** compared to those living in Tier 2/3 cities.

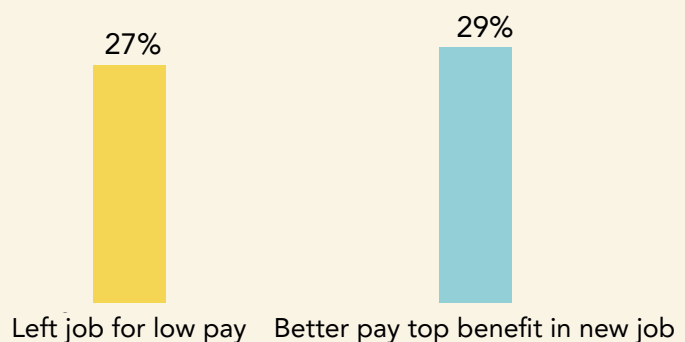


Income dissatisfaction is highest in the Northeast and lowest in the South. In the Northeast, **retail dominates employment**, with 58% of women working in the sector.

Insights from Survey with Ex-Women Associates

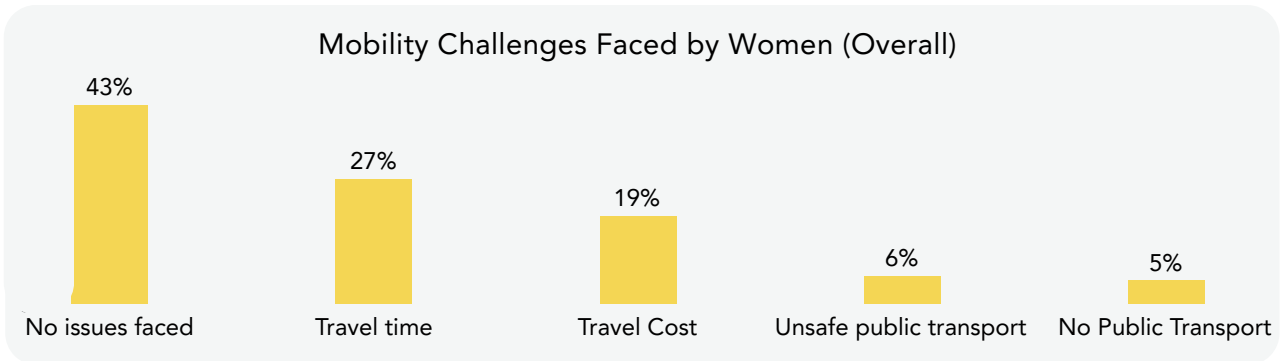
Only 1 in 3 ex-women associates are currently employed. Common reasons for not working included health concerns and difficulty finding roles that matched their aspirations. However, income emerged as a key factor influencing their willingness to return to work - **42% said that a better salary would motivate them to re-enter the workforce**, with this trend being especially prominent among single women and those from the **Northeast, East, and Central** regions.

Among the 33% of women currently working, **income remains a key factor in employment decisions**, highlighting that competitive pay is essential for attracting and retaining women in the workforce.



SAFE MOBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION

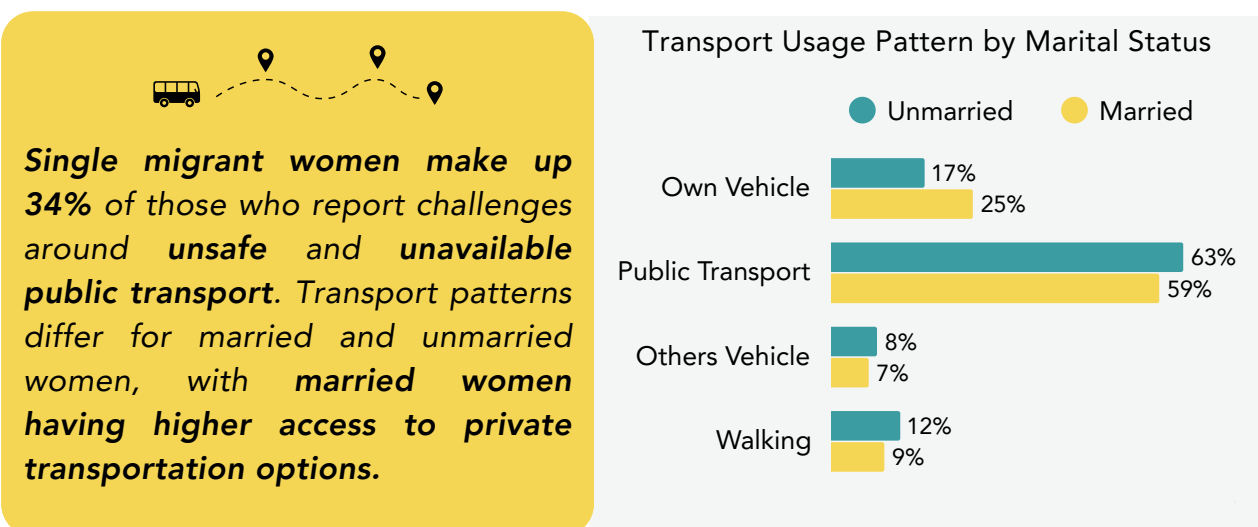
Fifty seven percent of the 10,620 surveyed women respondents reported facing mobility-related challenges. **11%** reported **serious mobility issues**, due to unsafe or unavailable transport after work, while **46%** reported **other mobility issues**, such as cost and time taken to travel.



Safety and Unavailability of Public Transport

Mobility is not just about getting to work - it is about safety, access, and affordability. And for many women, especially those working late shifts or commuting long distances, public transport is falling short on all three. Of the 10,620 respondents, over **600 women (6%) reported feeling unsafe while travelling to work in public transport**, while **5% reported unavailability of transport**. This is especially concerning as **61%** women respondents rely on public transport to get to work. Many women are forced to depend on expensive alternatives like private cabs because of limited night-time services.

The data is backed by research: there is a positive correlation between improved public transport and higher female workforce participation,²³ yet persistent issues like harassment, poor connectivity, and unreliability continue to disproportionately impact women,²⁴ who are more dependent on these systems.²⁵



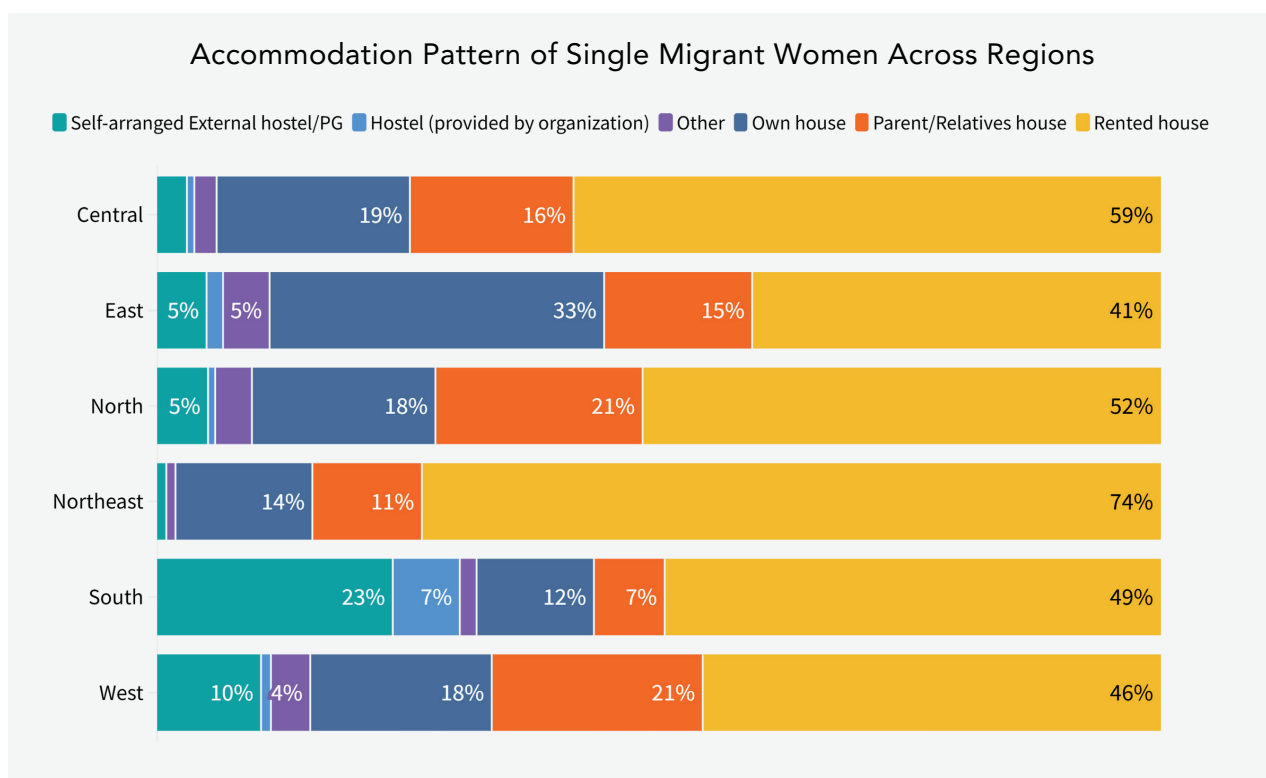
Long and Costly Commute

Commute-related challenges negatively affect women's job satisfaction and career decisions. Qualitative insights revealed deep impacts: some women said they have declined job changes to avoid longer commutes, and some noted that their colleagues, especially in lower-paid roles, had **left jobs due to the burden of commuting**.

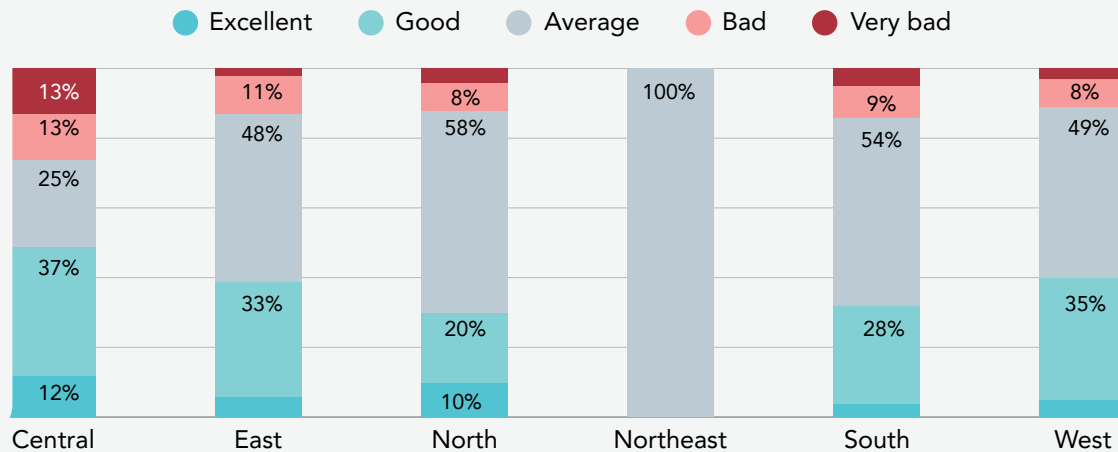
Accommodation Barriers for Migrants

For single migrant women, safe and affordable housing remains a major gap, especially outside South India. **Only 15%** of 3,455 single migrant **women stay in hostels** – whether external or company-provided – across regions, which drops to **8% outside South India**, reflecting limited or poor-quality housing options.

Additionally, usage of hostels provided by the company is the highest in South India at 7% compared to rest of India, likely due to a dense network of factories and industrial parks, along with more women willing to migrate for work. In the **EMPI and manufacturing sectors**, hostel use peaks at **23% for single migrant women**, largely because many factories are located on city outskirts and offer worker accommodation. Yet, even among those living in company-provided hostels, **1 in 5 women report** serious mobility challenges, with poor connectivity and unreliable transport leaving them isolated on the margins.

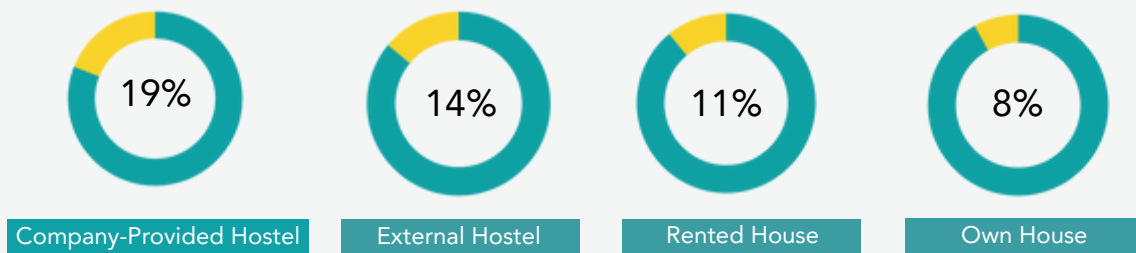


Perception of Hostel Living Conditions Across Regions



While fewer working women use hostels in Central and Western India compared to the South, a higher share of users in these regions rate the quality as **excellent or good**. This suggests that while access is limited, **hostel quality may be better**. However, these ratings are subjective and influenced by various factors.

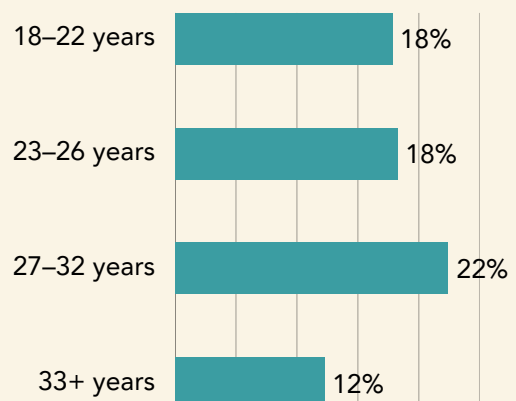
Percentage of Women Facing Mobility Issues by Type of Accommodation



Insights from Survey with Ex-Women Associates

1 in 5 women who left Qess and are currently out of the workforce cited having a **workplace closer to home as the key factor that could enable their return**. This preference is particularly strong among **women aged 27 to 32**, a group highly affected by life transitions like marriage and childbirth. **12% of the women who left Qess and joined other jobs said a shorter commute was the most beneficial feature of their new job.**

Workplace Proximity as Top Re-Entry Condition by Age Group

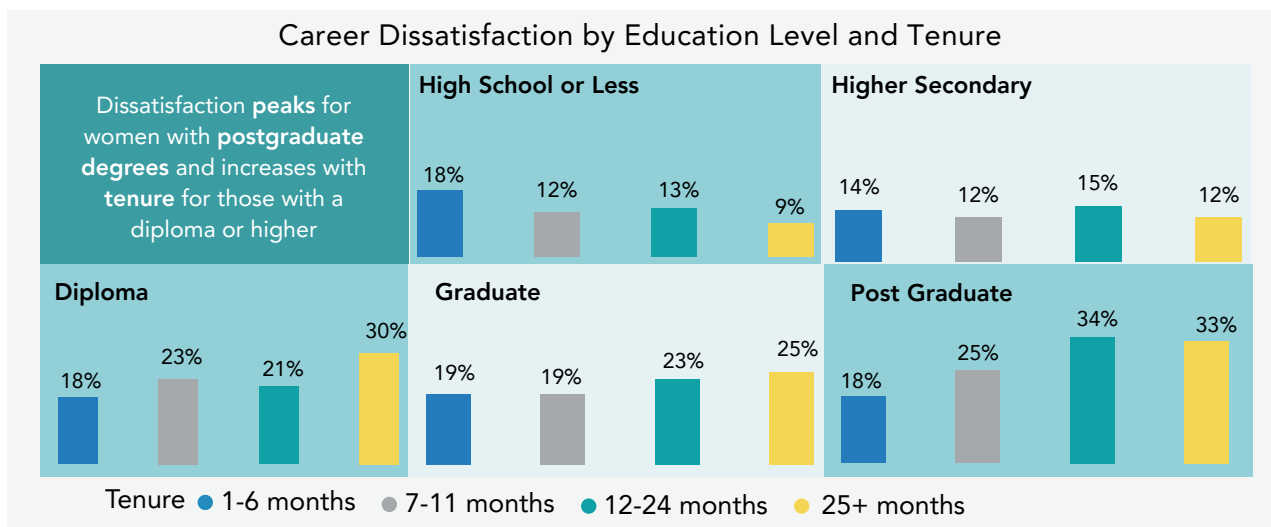


CAREER GROWTH

Many women in blue-grey collar roles are eager to grow and advance in their careers. In fact, **21%** of women respondents expressed a clear aspiration to move into more advanced positions. Qualitative interviews highlighted that while the **drive to progress** is strong, **promotion pathways** are not always visible or well-communicated. This offers a valuable opportunity for organisations to strengthen skilling or upskilling programmes, career progression frameworks, provide greater clarity, and actively support women in achieving their professional goals. The lack of clear pathways for career growth may **lower the morale of women workers**, while increasing the likelihood of them stepping away from the work.

Role of Education and Tenure

Women with **higher education and longer tenure** report **greater dissatisfaction**, signaling unmet expectations for career growth. Interviews reveal that women without formal education also aspire to advance, but face barriers due to qualification gaps. This underscores the need for **performance-based** progression, ensuring growth opportunities are accessible to all regardless of formal education.

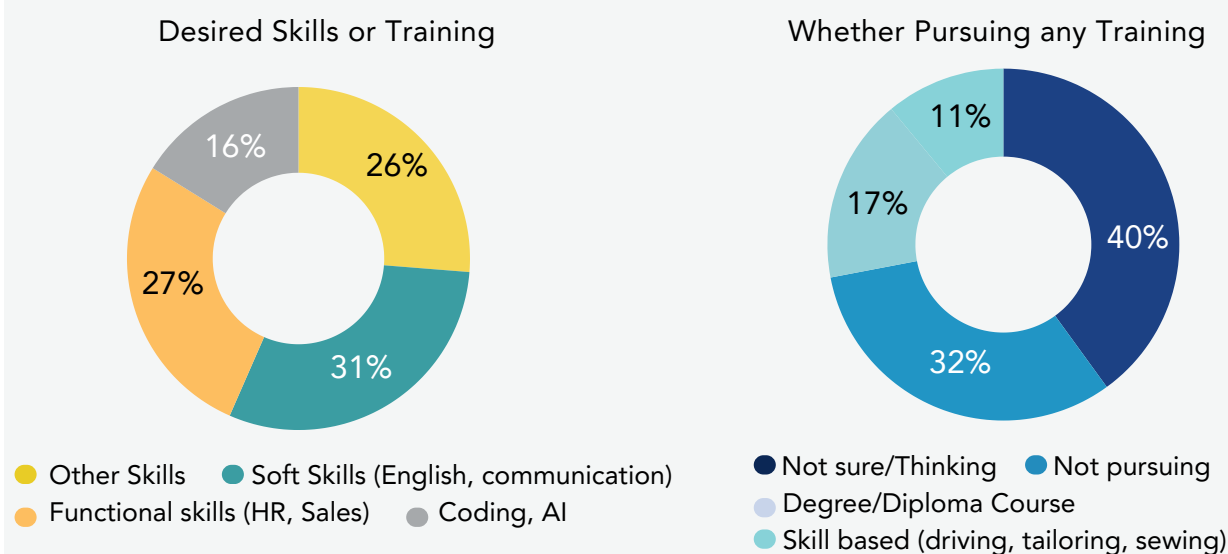


Women with over a year's tenure, holding a postgraduate degree and dissatisfied with their career growth are **nearly three times more likely to quit in a year** than those with high school education or less.

Gap in Efforts for Career Growth and Skilling

Despite women perceiving a plateau in their professional development, **only 11% are pursuing skill-based training to advance their careers**. Many women in blue-grey collar roles believe that long tenure and good performance should naturally lead to career growth. This disconnect points to a critical gap in how women approach career progression and how employers view it.

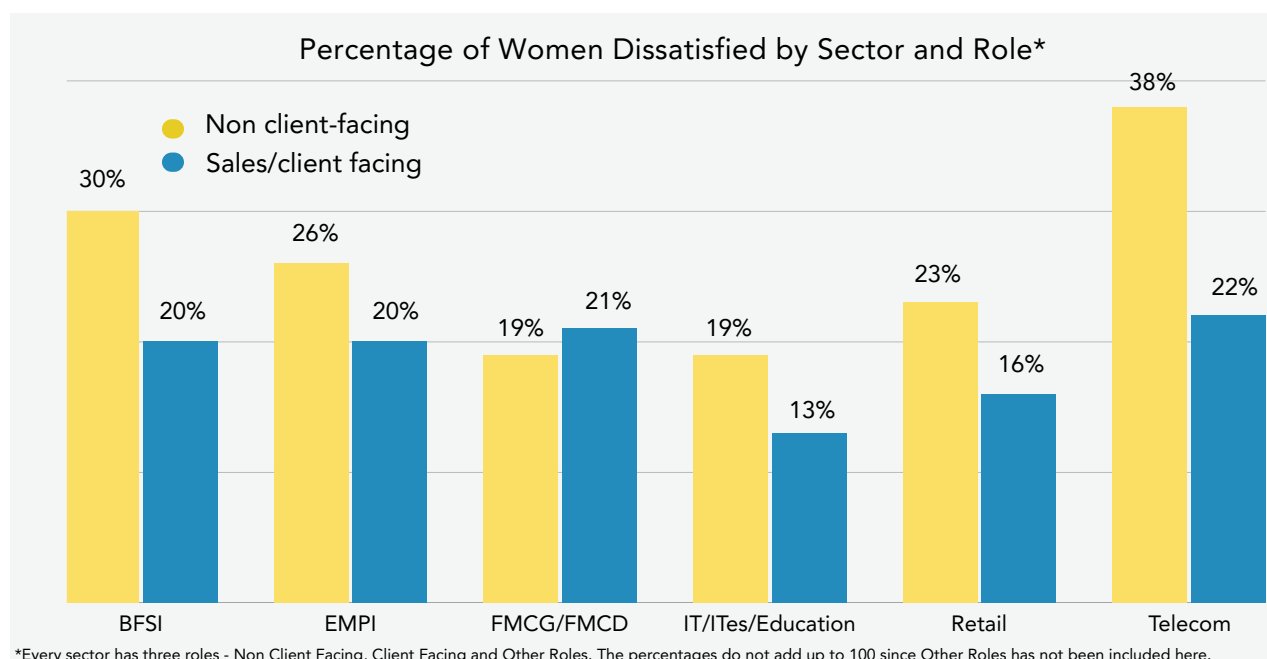
Gap in Desire and Actual Training Pursued by Women Reporting Lack of Career Growth



Sectoral Trends

Career growth dissatisfaction is most pronounced in **BFSI (25%)** and **telecommunication sectors (24%)**, where 94% and 83% of women, respectively, hold graduate or higher degrees.

However, interviews reveal that education is alone is not translating into career advancement. Survey finds that women in the telecom sector often face stagnation in their roles despite relatively long tenures and high educational qualifications. Respondents cited barriers such as **unclear pathways or age-related constraints**. Additionally, survey findings reveal that **women in non-client facing roles, such as backend engineers in the telecommunication sector, report higher dissatisfaction**.

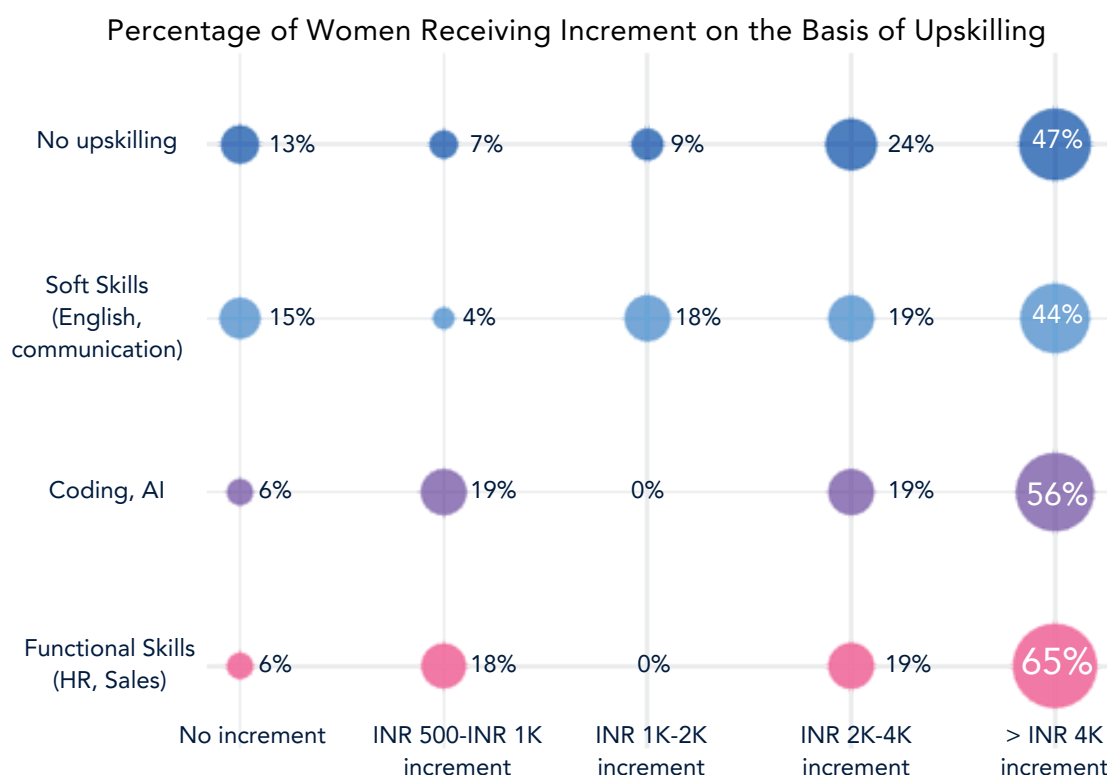
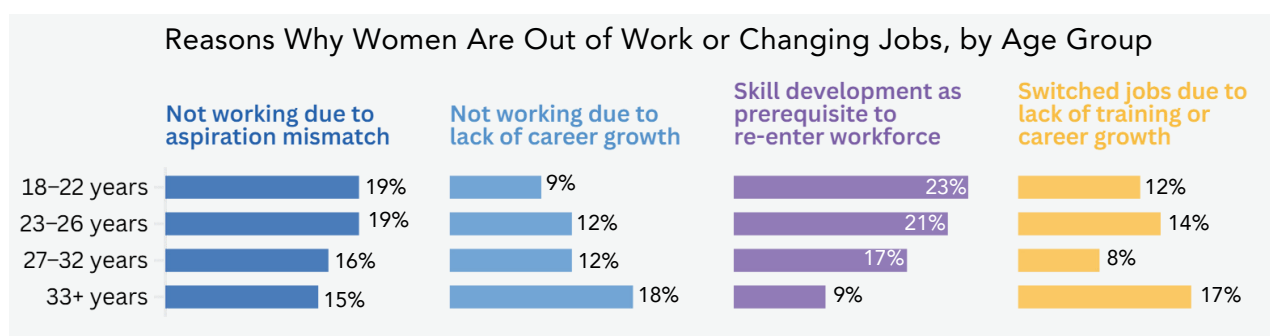


Insights from Survey with Ex-Women Associates

Among women who exited Quesst and are currently not working, reasons for leaving the workforce vary by age. **Younger women**, especially those who were previously employed in the BFSI sector, often face an **aspiration mismatch** and seek roles that align with their skills. In contrast, **women aged 33 and above**, particularly in telecom sector, **cite a lack of career growth as one of the main drivers for exit**.

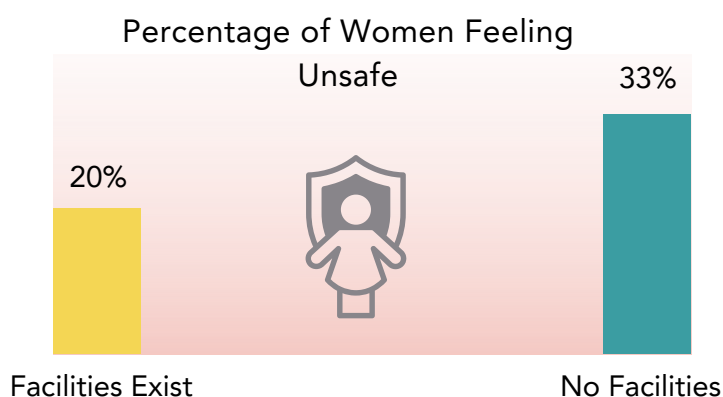
The numbers back it up: **71% of younger women** (18-26 years) who are currently employed (after exiting Quesst) have **already switched roles**, reflecting early misalignment between areas of interest or expectations and reality. It is worth noting that their initial work experience at Quesst provided them with an exposure to the formal workforce, serving as a platform to transition into better roles.

On the upside, there is **merit in upskilling**. Women who invested in functional training saw the highest salary increments on switching jobs: 65% of those who availed functional skills received an increment of INR 4,000 and more.



SAFE AND CLEAN WORKPLACE

Safety is foundational to women's workforce participation, yet **22% women report feeling unsafe at work**. This perception of unsafe conditions was **13 percentage points higher among women whose workplaces lacked basic safety measures** like CCTV, helplines, and proper lighting.



Workplace Safety Concerns

Some women reported feeling unsafe due to the behavior of supervisors, customers, or distributors, or knew colleagues who faced such issues. However, these concerns were often dismissed as “personal problems”, leading to reluctance in reporting them. A few women also said they would quit if safety became a concern.

Safety Concerns based on Age and Tenure

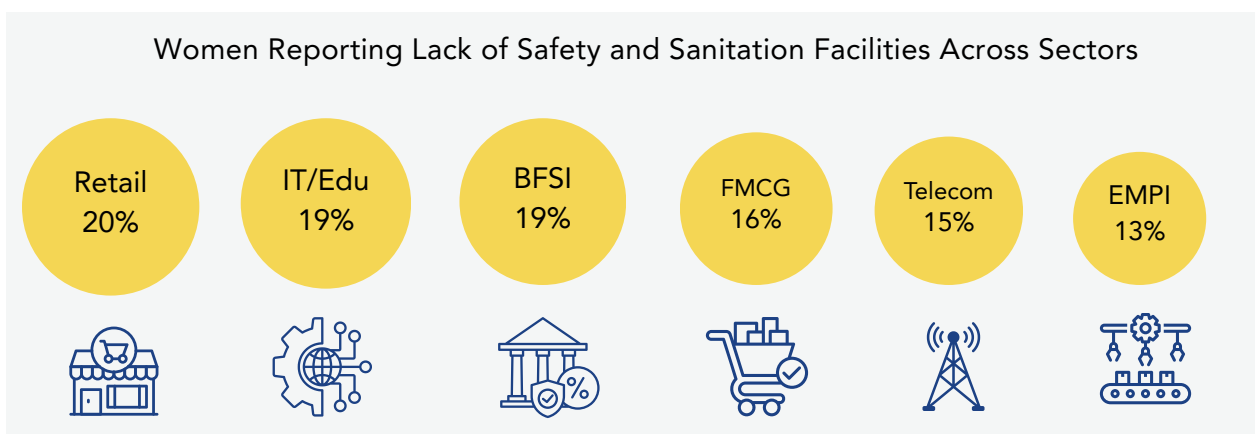
Women aged 33 and above are **40% less likely to fall in the early attrition group** if they encounter unsafe working conditions compared to younger women aged 18–22. This indicates that younger women are more sensitive to safety concerns at the workplace.

The long-term impact is universal. Once women cross the one-year mark at work, those who face safety issues, regardless of age, are **52% more likely to exit** within the next year. The signal is clear: safety is not optional, but rather non-negotiable for retention.

Poor Access to Workplace Sanitation Facilities

Poor sanitation infrastructure significantly affects blue-grey collar women workers. **One in five women in retail lack access to basic facilities** like separate washrooms and often rely on nearby establishments. This reflects ILO findings that only **21%** of Indian factories have separate toilets for men and women.²⁶ The consequences go beyond the workplace, with 87% of women without adequate toilets at work

reporting frequent genitourinary issues, underscoring serious health risks.²⁷

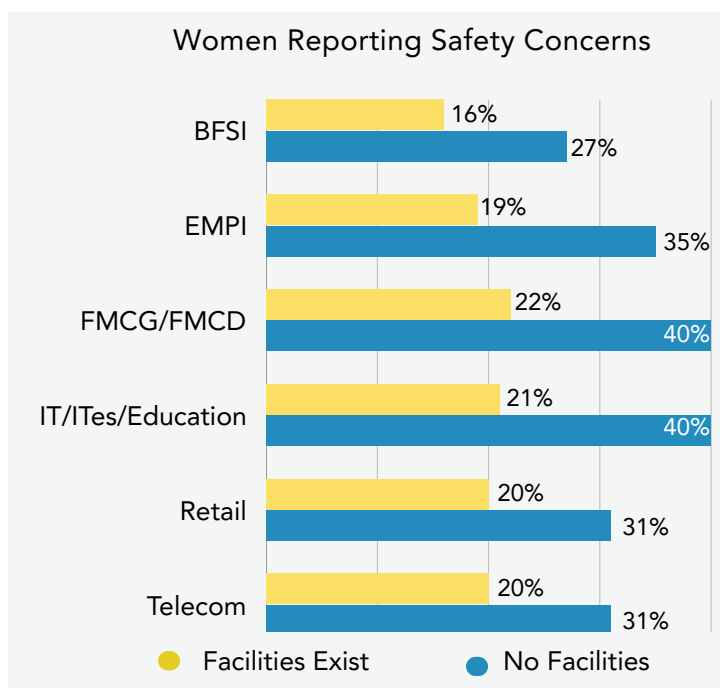


Inadequate Infrastructure for Women in Field Roles

Women in field roles face added difficulties from inadequate workplace infrastructure. They report a **lack of sanitation, safe spaces to eat, and areas to rest**. With no nearby break rooms, many are forced to eat on the roadside, exposing them to judgment, harassment, and heat. This often leads to illness, affecting women's ability to perform at their best.

Safety Concerns Across Sectors

Women in **FMCG/FMCD, IT/ITeS/Education, and EMPI** sectors report the highest safety concerns where workplace safety provisions are lacking. Since many roles in these sectors involve labs, warehouses, field sales or off-site environments, unlike typical office settings, stronger safety measures are essential.



Regional and Tier-Wise Trends

Women in Central India report the highest safety concerns overall, and among those without adequate workplace facilities, at 46%. In contrast, women in the Northeast and West report the lowest levels of concern. The sharpest contrast across city tiers is reported in East India, where **27% of women in Tier 1 cities like Kolkata report feeling unsafe, increasing to 35% in Tier 2/3 cities**.

WORK CULTURE

Work-life balance is a key driver of job satisfaction for blue-grey collar women, yet for many, it remains elusive. Nearly 1 in 3 (**28%**) respondents report difficult hours and demanding work environments. The message is clear: without more supportive and flexible workplaces, attracting and retaining women in this segment will remain an uphill battle.

Poor Work Culture and Work-Life Balance

Data shows that **28% of women surveyed struggle with work culture and inflexible hours**, and among them, **29% report lack of enjoyment in their work**.

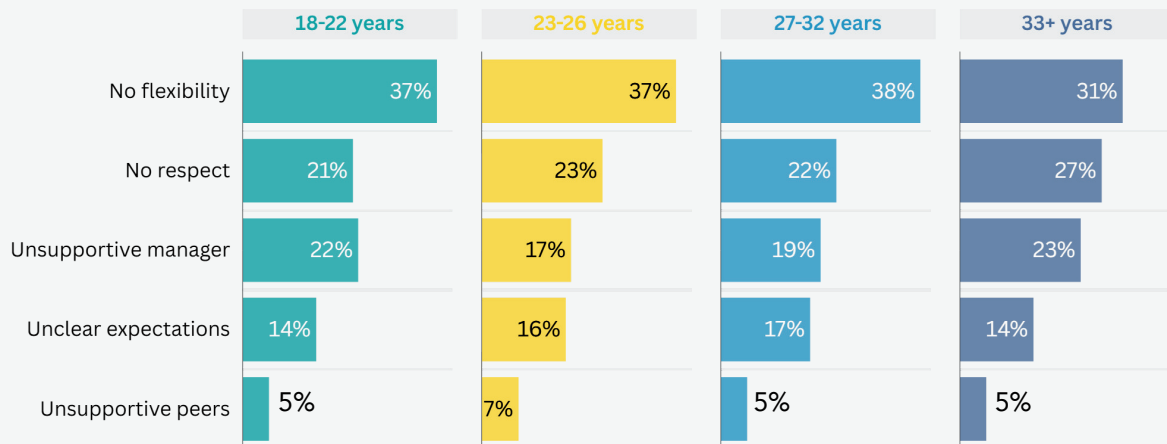
Dissatisfaction caused by culture and work hours also **spills over to the personal lives of women**. Qualitative insights also highlight that long working hours and lack of rest days restrict women from spending time with their families and lead to job dissatisfaction. Additionally, **22% of the women who are dissatisfied with the work culture work all seven days a week**.



Rigid Workplaces and Lack of Respect

Among the women who find work culture to be poor, **lack of flexibility at work and respect are the most common concerns**. While rigid workplaces is a challenge across age groups, **lack of respect is more acutely felt by women aged 33 and above**.

Challenges Within Work Culture Faced by Women of Different Age Groups

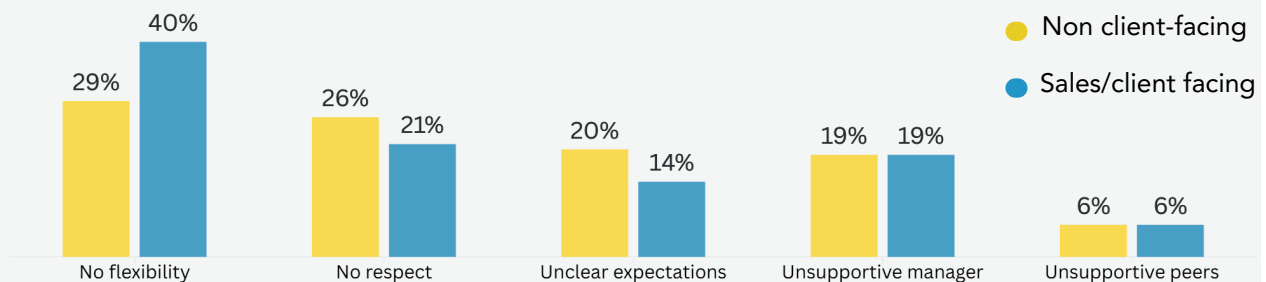


Many women interviewed shared that they **hesitate to voice concerns** around work hours, location, or safety, and when they do, these are not always addressed effectively. This highlights an important opportunity for organisations to **strengthen grievance redressal systems** which are open, responsive, and inclusive - one where women feel empowered to speak up without hesitation.

Sectoral and Role-Wise Trends

Women in the telecom sector reported highest dissatisfaction with work culture (34%). Additionally, lack of flexibility at work is a key challenge for those engaged in sales and client-facing roles.

Perception of Work Culture by Role*



*There are three roles in total - Non Client Facing, Client Facing and Other Roles. The percentages do not add up to 100 since Other Roles has not been included here.

Requirement of Flexibility to Return to Work



Insights from Survey with Ex-Women Associates

17% women require workplace **flexibility** to return to work. Moreover, **24%** women switched jobs due to poor manager behaviour and **lack of respect**.

Archetypes

10,620
current
women
associates

57%



26%



17%



	Progress Hunter	Constrained Struggler	Resilient Climber
Average Age	27	28	35
Average CTC	INR 27,000	INR 19,000	INR 34,500
Marital Status	26% married	61% married	84% married
Sector	Telecom (37%) Retail (19%)	Retail (58%) FMCG/FMCD (17%)	FMCG/FMCD(37%), EMPI (18%)
Education	67% Graduates 20% Postgraduates	25% Graduates 13% Postgraduates 52% Higher Secondary	52% Graduates 25% Postgraduates 12% Higher Secondary
Challenges Reported			
Income Dissatisfaction	53%	54%	52%
Work Culture Dissatisfaction	29%	25%	26%
Career Growth Dissatisfaction	24%	15%	22%
Lack of Facilities at Work	16%	21%	13%
Lack of Safety at Work	20%	27%	18%
Problems with Mobility	11%	11%	8%
Retention Categories			
High Tenure High Intent	51%	33%	65%
Low Tenure Low Intent	22%	38%	14%

Progress Hunter

Savita (name changed) is a 27 years old graduate. She lives in Ahmedabad with her family, all of whom are employed.



Savita works in back-office operations at a multinational telecom company and brings 5 years of experience to her role. She is a graduate and wants to grow professionally through upskilling in IT to boost productivity and advance her career. However, long working hours and limited access to training have made it difficult for her to pursue this goal. She also wishes for greater flexibility at work to manage personal emergencies.

Recommended Actions for Companies to Undertake:

- Provide upskilling opportunities for career growth
- Offer structured guidance for career growth and flexibility at work.

Constrained Struggler

Ramshi (name changed) is a 30 years old graduate. She lives in Pune with her family who she financial supports.



Ramshi works as a sales associate at a consumer electronics store since the last 9 years. Despite her work experience and the high expenses of Pune city, her salary is stagnant at INR 25,000. This leaves her with low savings and high financial stress. She works 7 days a week and her workplace lacks proper facilities and a system to register and address complaints.

Recommended Actions for Companies to Undertake:

- Clear pathways for increments and salary increase
- Access to essential facilities and proper grievance process for safety and growth.

Resilient Climber

Suman (name changed) is a 44 years old. She is a single mother living in Bangalore. She is a graduate.



Suman is a product consultant at an FMCG company. As a single mother, she often juggles work with caregiving duties for her daughter. She really appreciates the stability her job provides her. Despite this and a strong desire to advance in her career, she is unable to do so as she does not have proper qualifications or skills and is seen as too old for a promotion.

Recommended Actions for Companies to Undertake:

- Eliminating age and gender bias in promotion decisions
- Recognition of on-the-job experience for promotions.

Recommendations



Increased
Income



Mobility &
Accommodation



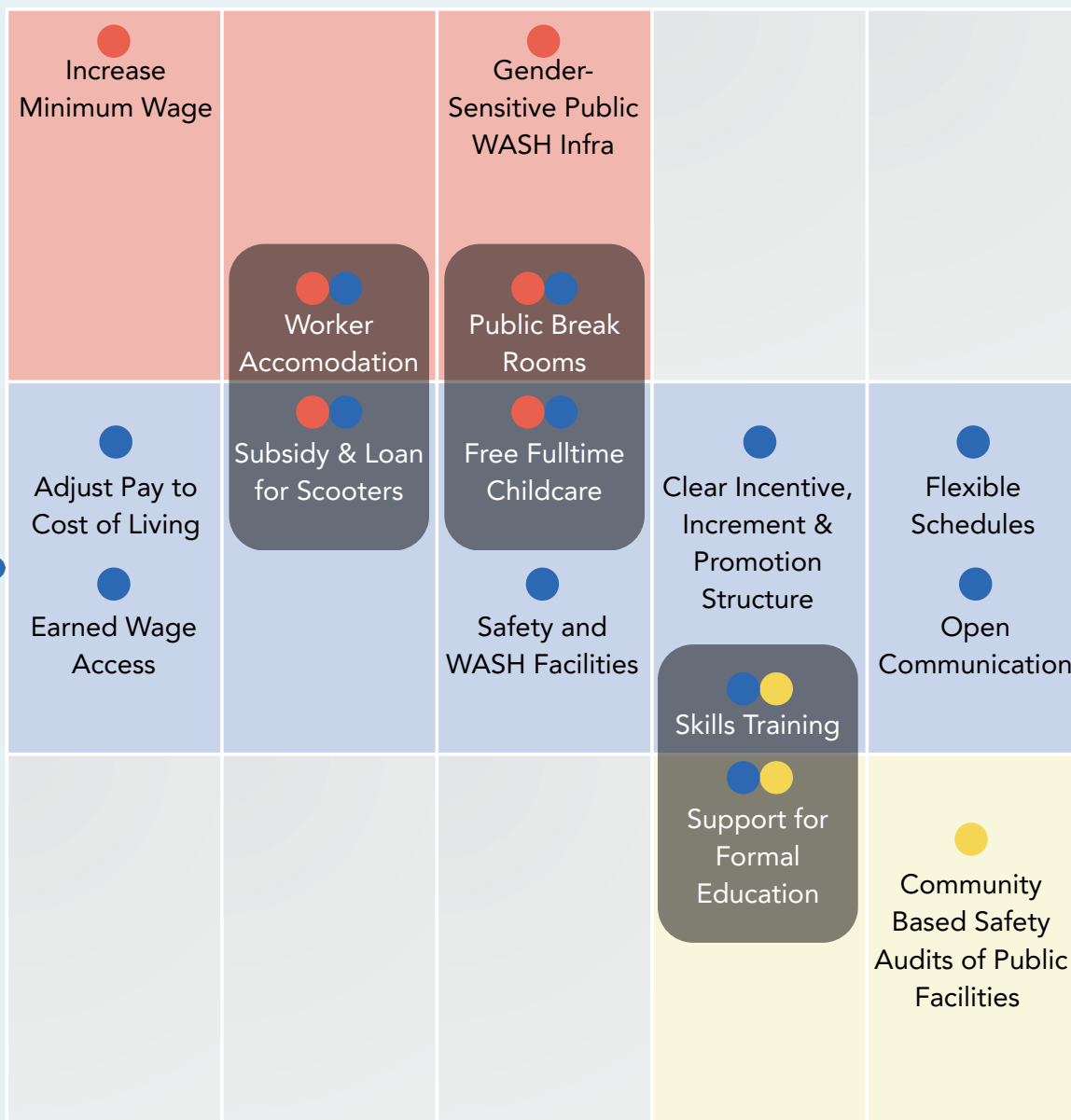
Public & Work
Facilities



Career
Growth



Work
Culture



Gender Disaggregated Data Collection

Community Wide Gender Sensitisation

Government
Recommendations

Company
Recommendations

Civil Society Org
Recommendations

Government

Income is a make-or-break factor driving women's exit from the blue-grey collar workforce.

The challenge: **Wage-living cost misalignment** especially in peri-urban zones—where living expenses soar but wages lag behind urban standards.

The solution: A survey in these zones to **quantify the real wage to cost of living gap**. Compensation could be adjusted accordingly.

Why this matters: Women already face **steep opportunity costs** to join the workforce. Inadequate wages that ignore local realities simply drive them out.

Increase Minimum Wage



Improve Public Transport



Ease of commute has a significant role to play in women's decision to partake in paid work.

The challenge: Public transport often fails to meet women's mobility needs, especially during non-peak hours and late nights, making safe travel difficult.

The solution: Enhance **gender-responsive transport** by increasing off-peak services, enabling safe drop-offs, and improving secure last-mile connectivity.

Why this matters: Women primarily rely on public transport for workplace commute. Lack of safe transport is linked to a 15.5% drop in women's labour force participation in developing countries.²⁸

Strengthening sanitation infrastructure is critical for women's economic development.

The challenge: Inadequate sanitation facilities put women at **risk of harassment and assault** and act as a major barrier to their participation in field-based work.

The solution: Develop safe, hygienic, gender-sensitive **public toilets in blue-grey collar work hubs**. Mandate clean, accessible sanitation facilities at workplaces and enforce regulations through regular inspections.

Why this matters: Clean and functional sanitation facilities are increasingly associated with better mental health and improved well-being among women, enabling them to perform to their full potential.

Invest in Gender Sensitive Sanitation Facilities



Collaborative Actions for the Government and Companies

Safe, affordable and quality housing is a critical lever to enable single migrant women to move out of their hometown for work.

The challenge: Women in blue-grey collar roles are often migrants, facing challenges in **accessing safe housing** closer to workplaces. Most often, worker housing lacks gender sensitive space planning.

The solution: Expand the **number** of quality worker housing and invest in **gender-responsive accommodation**, including provisions like crèches, kitchens, and recreational spaces, and be well-connected to public transit.

Why this matters: About 84% of women need family permission to take up work.²⁹ Bundling jobs with safe, accessible housing and transport can help more women join the workforce — and sustain.

Gender Responsive Worker Housing



Break Rooms for Field Workers



Lack of basic facilities makes field work harder and less dignified for women.

The challenge: Women in mobile blue-grey collar roles often **lack access to safe spaces to rest, eat, or refresh** during the workday. Public infrastructure does not account for the needs of women in field-based jobs, leaving them without basic facilities during long hours when on the move.

The solution: Invest in **gender-responsive public infrastructure** — including safe, accessible rest areas where women can take breaks and eat meals with dignity.

Why this matters: Women in field roles face daily hardships with no place to rest, eat, or refresh. Without basic support, staying in the workforce becomes more difficult.

Without childcare support, many working mothers are forced to quit — making it a key barrier to retention.

The challenge: Despite legal mandates, most women, especially those in contract roles - still **lack access to workplace childcare facilities**.

The solution: Provide **full-time, free childcare** for all women workers - including contract staff, and ensure strict enforcement of employer compliance.

Why this matters: 73% of Indian women leave their jobs after childbirth.³⁰ The motherhood penalty hits hard - and it is even more severe for low-paid, contract-based women in blue-grey collar roles, where support systems are weakest.

Full Time Free Childcare



Subsidy and Loans for Two-Wheeler Ownership



Unsafe and strenuous commutes are a significant challenge for women in blue-grey collar roles.

The challenge: More than half the sample of women reported **issues with public transport**, including safety, availability, and other challenges.

The solution: Introduce financial **subsidy programmes** that help women in blue-grey collar jobs purchase two-wheelers, in order to improve women's comfort with their commute. Private sector companies can also collaborate with financial institutions to offer **affordable financing options** to women.

Why this matters: The data reveals that over 60% of women rely on public transport as the primary mode of commute. The ownership of motorised vehicles among women is much lower than that of men.³¹ This gap is largely driven by the high cost of vehicle ownership and women's limited access to formal credit and financing options.



Earned Wage Access



Low-income workers, especially women, tend to be disproportionately affected by financial stress.

The challenge: Almost 80% women in the sample are unable to save anything or less than INR 2,000 per month. They struggle to make their salaries last through the month, leading to **financial stress and instability**.

The solution: Allow access to **earned wages before payday** (advance salary), interest-free. This practice can be institutionalised with clear eligibility criteria, like minimum tenure, to ensure responsible use.

Why this matters: Advance wage access has been shown to improve morale, reduce attrition, and boost productivity — for women workers.³²

Career stagnation affects 1 in 5 women — and those with higher education are three times more likely to leave their jobs than their less-educated peers.

The challenge: **Unclear decision-making processes** prevent women from understanding or accessing growth opportunities — limiting their career progression.

The solution: Establish **transparent systems for promotions, incentives, and pay increases** by clearly defining eligibility criteria, documenting decision-making processes, and sharing these policies with all employees.

Why this matters: Women are equally ambitious as men - when they know how to grow, they are more likely to stay and succeed.

Structured Incentives, Increment and Promotions



Flexible & Predictable Shift Schedules



Rigid and unpredictable shifts are a top concern for women in blue-grey collar roles — especially in telecom.

The challenge: Unpredictable and inflexible work schedules make it difficult for women to **manage caregiving duties or arrange safe commutes**, particularly during late hours.

The solution: Implement periodically defined work schedules that offer **flexibility and structure** and are communicated in advance. Offer flexible shift options to accommodate caregiving needs and enable safer commute planning.

Why this matters: Survey reveals that 17% women require flexibility to return to the workforce, with this need increasing with age. Such policies can help the company and women worker better manage their safety requirements along with personal and professional responsibilities.

Safety issues go unspoken. The silence points to a deeper problem: the absence of safe spaces and responsive systems for women to voice their experiences.

The challenge: The **lack of open communication and structured feedback mechanisms** leads to women being discouraged from speaking openly and their concerns being overlooked.

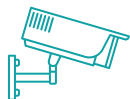
The solution: Establish **open communication channels and structured feedback systems** — including regular, documented manager check-ins, tools like **Net Promoter Score** to track morale, consistent **exit interviews**, and more women in supervisory roles to foster trust.

Why this matters: Among women completing a year of tenure, those facing safety concerns are 52% more likely to leave. Creating open and judgment-free channels to voice concerns can stem attrition.

Open Communication and Feedback Mechanism



Facilities for Safety and Sanitation



Lack of clean and accessible WASH facilities affects 1 in 6 women — making the workplace feel unsafe and unsupportive.

The challenge: Infrastructure often ignores women's needs — with **poor sanitation, dimly lit spaces, and no systems like CCTV or emergency helplines** in place.

The solution: Upgrade workplace infrastructure to be gender-sensitive by ensuring **separate washrooms** for men and women, **clean sanitation, secure and well-lit spaces, daycare access, emergency helplines, and CCTV monitoring**.

Why this matters: A safe and supportive workplace builds trust, improves comfort, and directly impacts women's ability to stay and grow in their jobs.

High attrition among women in blue-grey collar roles often goes unaddressed due to a lack of gender-specific workforce data and insights.

The challenge: Only a **few large companies track key gender indicators**, such as attrition rates, return after maternity leave, or how long women stay post-return. The lack of such data makes it hard to design targeted interventions.

The solution: **Regularly collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data** on workforce trends. Share findings internally and externally to improve transparency, and set time-bound targets to reduce attrition with periodic progress reviews.

Why this matters: Clear data drives better decisions. Tracking and acting on gendered workforce patterns is essential to prevent preventable attrition.

Gender Disaggregated Data Collection



Collaborative Actions for Companies and CSOs

With 44% looking to upskill, women in blue-grey collar roles are eager to grow — but **lack the avenues** to do so.

The challenge: Lack of **structured training, mentorship, and personalised career support** leaves women **stuck in entry-level** roles, with no clear pathway upward.

The solution: Invest in **robust skill development programmes** — combining on-the-job training (like mentorship and job shadowing) with regular workshops on communication, leadership, and problem-solving. Private companies should partner with civil society organisations for delivery and ensure managers co-create personalised career plans with employees.

Why this matters: Most women in the survey reported hitting a wall in their careers — held back by age, limited education, or simply the absence of clear direction and support. Without targeted investment in their growth, stagnation will remain the norm, not the exception.

Skills Based Training



Support for Pursuing Education



Although most women in the sample are graduates, 26% **lack a college degree** — and without the resources, guidance, or support, they struggle to pursue further education or training needed to advance in their careers.

The challenge: Without **access to flexible learning options or structured support**, women are barred from career growth.

The solution: Companies can **build educational support into personalised career plans**. By identifying women who need higher qualifications, employers can connect them to civil society organisations or platforms offering flexible options like open universities or online courses like Hamara Academy or Coursera.

Why this matters: Career growth should not be reserved for the few. It must start at every level, including for contractual workers, so that women can move into more secure, permanent roles. Supporting women to pursue training unlocks their potential, expands the leadership pipeline, and strengthens long-term retention.

Civil Society Organisations

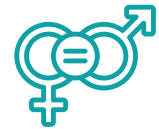
Deep-rooted gender bias persists — most women still need permission from male members of the family to work, and are allowed only if the job is seen as respectable.

The challenge: A **lack of awareness, weak community support, and outdated gender stereotypes** continue to shape women's agency and economic empowerment.

The solution: Civil society organisations can drive change by leading community awareness programs that **challenge gender norms, building workplace support networks, and advocating for inclusive policies** that enable women to join, continue and thrive in blue-grey collar roles.

Why this matters: When mindsets shift, so do opportunities. CSO-led initiatives not only promote respect and dignity at work but also help more women enter and stay in the workforce with confidence.

Gender Sensitisation



Community Based Safety Audits



22% women feel unsafe at work - increasing to 33% women when faced with a lack of basic safety infrastructure like CCTV, helplines, etc.

The challenge: Lack of regular **gender-focused assessments** means critical safety gaps in infrastructure, workplace design, and housing go unnoticed and unaddressed.

The solution: CSOs can lead targeted safety audits across public spaces, workplaces, and worker housing. In **public areas**, they can assess lighting, transit access, and police presence, emulating models like the Gender and Policy Lab in Chennai.³³ In **workplaces**, especially factories and warehouses, they can check for gender-responsive features like private washrooms, ergonomic stations, and safe equipment. In **housing clusters**, CSOs can partner with the government to gather women's feedback on safety, hygiene, and living conditions. These audits help uncover risks and drive improvements where women need them most.

Why this matters: Targeted safety audits, assessments and surveys give women a voice in shaping the environments they live and work in — turning blind spots into actionable change.

Annexure

Methodology

To understand the key drivers of attrition among women in the blue-grey collar workforce and develop effective retention strategies, we employed a multi-pronged approach. This included:

Survey

A comprehensive survey consisting of two parts: a longer survey with 33 questions for women currently employed in blue-collar roles, and a shorter survey with 7 questions targeting women who had quit their jobs within the past year. The longer survey provided in-depth insights into factors affecting retention, including income, mobility, work culture, career growth, and work-life balance. Meanwhile, the shorter survey helped us understand the actual reasons behind attrition.

Survey Sampling

The survey was conducted among 10,620 current and 1,575 former women associates of Qess Corp, based on voluntary participation, through the Qess official HR app. This approach relied on convenience sampling, engaging respondents who were available and willing to participate.

Qualitative Interviews

To complement the survey data, 19 in-depth interviews were conducted with current women associates of Qess. These telephonic interviews were conducted across diverse industries and age groups to capture a range of perspectives.

Secondary Research

Analysis of a range of reports, industry publications, and academic studies to gather insights into the challenges and trends affecting women in blue-grey collar jobs. This helped establish a broad understanding of the context and identify key areas for further exploration.

Analysis Methods

Analysis of survey results using descriptive statistics to spot key trends and logistic regression for deeper insights. Two models were used: one for women with under a year of tenure, and another for those with over a year, looking to leave within a year. The second model specifically highlighted how perceived lack of career growth relates to higher attrition risk among longer-tenured women.

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