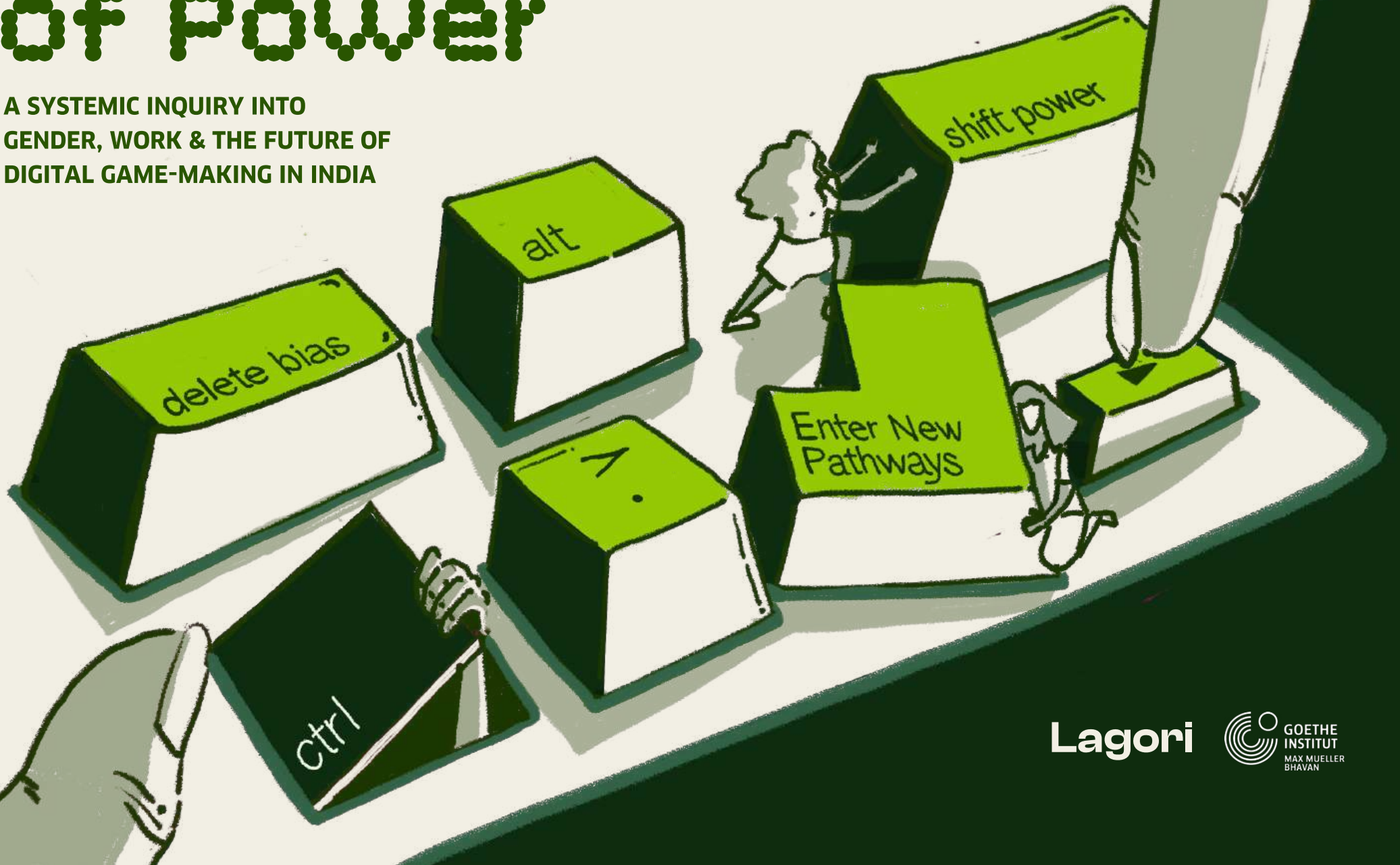


Playgrounds of Power

A SYSTEMIC INQUIRY INTO
GENDER, WORK & THE FUTURE OF
DIGITAL GAME-MAKING IN INDIA



Lagori



This report was produced by Lagori Collective, supported by Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi, as part of the Playgrounds of Power initiative.

Playgrounds of Power

Playgrounds of Power is a research and dialogue initiative by Lagori Collective, supported by Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi. The project maps the lived experiences of women and gender-diverse professionals in India's fast-growing digital gaming industry, examining how creative labour, workplace cultures, and systemic conditions shape who gets to participate in game-making today.

Lagori Collective

[Lagori Collective](#) is an interdisciplinary research and design lab based in India, working across South Asia. Grounded in participatory research and futures thinking, Lagori builds imagination infrastructure for the region by reshaping systems, strengthening collaborative capacity, and expanding the horizons of what becomes possible. Our work spans research, strategic foresight, and community-centered programming, with a focus on participatory methodologies for navigating complex and evolving global challenges. Lagori is also a member-run community space in Bengaluru and serves as an Index Node, part of a global network of non-extractive third spaces.

Research & Design Team

AUTHORS

Dhaval Kothari & Alifiya Mutaher
Co-founders, Lagori Collective

VISUAL DESIGN & LAYOUT

Riya Waykar

ILLUSTRATION

Vidit Jain

For Referencing, Citation and Circulation

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FOREWORD

by Poornima Seetharaman



Poornima has been part of the gaming industry for nearly 2 decades and essayed roles varying from Game Designer to Producer to Studio Head and Entrepreneur. She has been part of companies like Indiagames (Disney India), Jumpstart, GSN Games etc. Until June 2025, she was an Associate General Manager at Zynga (Take-Two) and is currently on a career break. She has worked on franchises like BioShock Mobile, How to Train your Dragons, Neopets, GSN Casino and FarmVille 2: Country Escape to name a few. She is a [TEDx Speaker](#), a Women in Games Ambassador at [WIGJ](#) and also a Hall of Fame Inductee at the Global WIG Awards 2020, making her the first Indian game developer to receive such an honour. She is also featured in [Rebel Girls: Level Up Edition](#). You can know more about her at [Drowlife](#).

I have been part of the Indian game industry for roughly two decades, and in that time I have seen the landscape change in many ways. But I have also seen how some patterns refuse to move. One of the strongest patterns is the invisible work that women end up doing in almost every studio. This work looks a lot like what many of us carry in our personal lives. We support people, fix gaps, mentor in ways that go beyond skillbuilding, listen to concerns, and hold the emotional load of a team. This labour is essential, yet it is rarely named, rewarded, or even seen. And this report shows that invisible labour is part of a much wider set of systemic gaps.

Across the industry, I have seen many of the patterns this report describes play out repeatedly.

Biased hiring pipelines that favour certain profiles. Uneven access to technical and management roles where credibility has to be proved again and again. The pressure to adapt your tone just to be taken seriously. The lack of real mentorship for women and gender-diverse professionals.

And of course, the slow growth, not because we lack ability, but because the system is not designed with our success in mind. These are not new problems, but they continue to shape careers in ways we do not talk about enough.

I have experienced both the good and the difficult sides of this industry. I have had a few managers who believed in me, who gave me space to grow, to fail, to learn, and to build trust in my own craft. That kind of support can change your entire career trajectory. It gives you permission to show up fully, to experiment, and to lead with confidence. But I have also experienced the opposite. To cite one such example, a former manager once told me that I was "the perfect fit" for a role that ended up being filled from outside. They simply assumed I would not want it. And yet, a male colleague who never expressed interest was already being considered.

But I want to speak not only of frustration. I want to speak of possibility. Because despite everything, I have seen what real change looks like in small pockets, and it is worth fighting for. This industry is changing, even if slowly. This report does not just describe the issues. It shows what becomes possible when people choose to take these challenges seriously.

I am grateful to everyone who put in the time, care, and effort to document these realities and offer pathways forward. I am especially thankful to Lagori Collective for leading this work with such care, and to the Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi for supporting research that our industry has needed for a long time. Every time a studio embraces transparency in salaries, in expectations, in career paths, something shifts. Every time a leader chooses action over empty words, something moves. Every time a developer is given the room to experiment, switch tracks, or learn something new, the ecosystem takes one small step forward.

In an industry that can change suddenly, the stability we build for people becomes even more important. Empathy is not a weakness; it is a core skill.

It allows teams to thrive even in uncertain times. We need workplaces that understand the value of safety, the importance of consistency, and the power of real accountability. We also need environments where creativity and business are treated as two forces that can strengthen each other when teams are trusted and supported.

To the next generation of developers, especially the women and gender-diverse creators, I want to say this: Success is not one doorway that only one person can walk through. There are many doors, many paths, and more room at the top than we are taught to believe. The path to leadership is often challenging, and stepping into those roles can feel overwhelming when you do not have people who walk beside you. And sometimes, even after you reach the top, it can feel strangely lonely because the more you grow, the more you are expected to carry. Heavy is the crown; but remember, it never has to be worn alone. Take people with you. Lift each other up. The industry becomes stronger when community is something we build together, not something defined for us by a few. We rise when more voices are welcomed, supported, and allowed to lead.

People are not just resources on a spreadsheet. They are the heart of every project and every studio. When we value people, we build teams that last. And when we build teams that last, we build an ecosystem that grows.

Empires may rise and fall, but ecosystems endure. And ecosystems only thrive when leaders choose empathy, patience, and care as part of their practice. Nurturing leadership is what allows people to take risks without fear, and it is the foundation of the future we want to build. So let us build the ecosystem we deserve, one where more of us can lead, create, imagine, and grow without holding back.

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WORKING VOCABULARY

This report uses certain terms deliberately. They reflect how practitioners described their own experiences, and how we interpret patterns surfaced during research. These are contextual definitions for the Indian game-making ecosystem for the purpose of this report and not universal standards.

CAPITAL LOGICS

The incentives and expectations that shape what kinds of games appear fundable, typically favouring high-velocity products, predictable funnels or RMG-adjacent templates over slower, experimental or culturally rooted IP.

CODED LANGUAGE

Terms in job descriptions or studio culture such as “culture fit”, “hustler” or “hardcore gamer” that quietly signal who belongs. These words shape self-selection long before hiring begins.

CREATIVE IP

Original worlds, systems, stories, mechanics or art styles created by developers. Used in contrast to outsourced execution, reskins or cloned templates.

GENDER-DIVERSE

Individuals who recognise gender expression as a spectrum and do not fit neatly into binary categories of “man” or “woman”, including trans, non-binary, gender-nonconforming and gender-fluid practitioners. Intention is to honour plurality and not collapse identities.

GLUE WORK

Relational and organisational labour mentoring, onboarding, documenting, smoothing conflicts, morale holding that stabilises teams. Essential but rarely visible in formal recognition or progression.

INFORMAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Community-led systems such as salary surveys, whisper networks, Discord channels, safe meetups and shared datasets that provide support where institutions remain thin.

INFORMAL NETWORKS

Discord servers, alumni circles, personal referrals and peer channels that influence hiring, visibility and opportunity. They provide pathways for some while excluding others.

MICROCULTURES

Intentional, usually volunteer-run pockets of practice such as women-led jams, mentorship circles or curated meetups that model more inclusive ways of working even when the wider ecosystem does not.

METRICS REGIMES

Platform and publisher algorithms and performance metrics (retention, daily active users, spend) that influence visibility and monetisation. Games built around reflection, care or slower engagement often struggle within these systems.

PRESTIGE WORK / PRESTIGE PROJECTS

Assignments considered high-impact or high-status engine development, systems design, multiplayer infrastructure, tools pipelines or monetisation systems. These roles carry disproportionate influence, visibility and career traction.

PRESENTEEISM

The practice of equating commitment with physical presence, late-night availability or participation in informal bonding rituals. A hidden gatekeeping mechanism that disadvantages those with mobility, safety or caregiving constraints.

RELATIONAL LABOUR

Emotional and interpersonal work that sustains both teams and community spaces. Overlaps with glue work but also includes broader culture-building, conflict mediation, peer support and invisible governance.

TECHNICAL AUTHORSHIP

The ability to shape core systems, tools, architecture or mechanics essentially, who decides how a game works. Distinct from executing tasks within established pipelines.

THE NAZARIYA/نظريہ GRID:

Nazariya means “perspective” or “way of seeing” in Urdu. The Nazariya Grid is a speculative design lens that helps teams pause and examine the perspectives shaping their decisions. It brings together five questions on player grounding, cultural patterning, system integrity, labour and safety and long-term value to surface consequences individual instincts often miss.

THE GULLY/गली ROUTES

Gully means a small lane or side-path in Hindi. The Gully Routes are a speculative counter-mapping tool that traces how careers in Indian game development actually move through detours, pauses, peer support, referrals and safety-based decisions rather than formal ladders.

UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

Communities historically excluded from creative, technical or leadership roles in Indian game-making, including women, gender-diverse practitioners, individuals from marginalised caste and class locations and those outside major metros.

WOMAN

Anyone who identifies as a woman, including cis and trans women.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India's digital gaming landscape is entering a period of redefinition. The domain is expanding, diversifying and adapting after several years of volatility. Yet the foundations required for equitable participation have not kept pace. One fact stands clear throughout this research: women and gender-diverse professionals contribute extensively to Indian game-making, but the structures around them have not evolved at the rate of their imagination or capability.

Across interviews, workshops and convenings, the same pattern appeared repeatedly. Gendered exclusions operate as a system. Early familiarity, hiring pathways, technical authorship, relational labour and working norms interact to create predictable frictions. These frictions accumulate. Over time they shape who enters, who stays and who is able to lead or shape the medium.

At the same time, the research reveals strong countercurrents. Women and gender-diverse practitioners are expanding imaginative vocabularies, shifting design logics, introducing more grounded reference worlds and strengthening the social and organisational fabric of teams. Studios that experiment with inclusive leadership and clear internal structures demonstrate that alternative models are already in motion. These are not speculative possibilities. They exist today, although unevenly and often quietly.

The findings in this report draw from experiences across disciplines, career stages and geographies. Taken together, they show a field at an inflection point. The next phase of growth will not be determined only by market expansion or technical capacity. It will depend on whether studios and institutions can create environments where a broader range of people can direct work, influence decisions and take expressive risks.

If India is to realise its potential as a global and culturally rooted hub for game-making, equity cannot remain optional or dependent on individual leaders. It must become part of the operating architecture of studios, companies, educational systems and governance of the wider terrain.

The recommendations in this report focus on this shift. They call for moving from individual effort to durable infrastructures that support a wider field of imagination, technical authority and creative leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

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This report examines how gendered exclusions take shape within the Indian digital gaming sector.

While inequity in Indian workplaces is well documented, the specific dynamics within game-making remain understudied even as the domain grows rapidly. Some studios and community groups are building more inclusive practices, yet these efforts are dispersed and uneven. Creative industries depend on a mesh of conditions: policy environments, organisational norms, resource flows, behaviours and shared mental models. For long-term change to take hold, these conditions must shift collectively. Isolated interventions cannot alter structural patterns on their own.

The report moves through the internal and external systems that shape participation. It begins with the gateways that influence entry into game development: early contact, social validation, access to play, education, training and hiring practices. It then turns to the working patterns inside studios where authority is granted, withheld or negotiated through everyday interactions. From there, it examines the positions women occupy, the positions they are channelled into and the invisible labour that sustains teams while remaining unrecognised. The report highlights what becomes possible when women lead creative or technical functions and situates these experiences within the broader

forces that define the sector. It concludes with recommendations and future-oriented provocations that outline how the space might evolve.

Some of the issues surfaced through this work are not unique to the gaming field. They reflect broader patterns across India's cultural and technology domains. We include them because their specific expression within game-making shapes who participates, who advances and what kinds of stories and systems the sector is able to produce.

The intention of this report is twofold.

1. It seeks to document the experiences of women and gender-diverse practitioners in Indian game-making and to create a baseline of understanding at a moment when the domain is still defining itself.
2. It aims to offer studios, companies and actors across the wider environment a clearer view of the systemic patterns that shape their contexts.

By making these patterns visible, the report supports efforts to design work cultures, policies and infrastructures that enable broader participation. A resilient and creatively rich landscape depends on the diversity of the people who contribute to it. Expanding who gets to make games is therefore central to the kinds of stories, systems and worlds, the gaming industry in India will be able to create.

GATEWAYS & ENTRY: WHO GETS TO BECOME A GAME MAKER

Early contact, social validation, access to play, education, training and hiring practices.



INSIDE THE STUDIO: CREDIBILITY & WORKING CONDITIONS

Authority is granted, withheld or negotiated through everyday interactions.



ROLES WOMEN HOLD & INVISIBLE LABOUR

The positions they are channelled into and the invisible labour that sustains teams while remaining unrecognised,.



WHEN WOMEN LEAD CREATIVE OR TECHNICAL DIRECTION

What becomes possible and how this is experienced within the broader forces that define the sector.



STRUCTURAL FORCES SHAPING THE ECOSYSTEM

Market incentives, platform logics, policy frameworks, education markets and institutional gaps.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE-ORIENTED PROVOCATIONS

These outline how the space should evolve.

APPROACH

The research draws on multiple forms of engagement conducted over several months.

The project began with a systems-mapping workshop that brought together designers, developers, founders, educators and community organisers to chart the conditions influencing women's participation in Indian game-making. Insights from this session informed a series of qualitative interviews with practitioners across studio sizes, disciplines and career stages. These were complemented by a public convening where early provocations were shared for critique, and an open consultation form that allowed individuals to contribute anonymously. The approach is deliberately qualitative. It centres lived experience, organisational practice and structural patterns rather than quantitative measurement.

This report does not claim to represent every experience within India's gaming landscape. The findings reflect insights from a diverse but a limited group of practitioners. A comprehensive national picture would require a far larger and differently resourced effort, especially across regions, languages and studio types. No individual or studio is named in relation to specific experiences shared during this project. The aim is not to identify good actors or expose harmful ones, but to

surface systemic patterns that recur across teams, regions and functions.

While we sought to include a broad range of experiences, the project was not able to directly interview gender-diverse individuals. Insights related to gender-diverse individuals therefore draw on second-hand accounts shared by their colleagues. This is a limitation of the current study. Caste, class, language, and regional identity also shape access to the Indian gaming industry. These forces influence early access to devices, the ability to relocate safely, comfort with English-first workplaces, and whose cultural references are treated as credible. These dynamics form the wider social architecture within which gender operates. This report therefore centres gender as one analytical lens while recognising that deeper intersectional insight will require dedicated research, deeper community partnerships and resourced, long-term funding

Note: The stories included here are composite accounts drawn from multiple interviews and conversations. They distil recurring patterns observed across the research. To protect the anonymity of participants, names, locations, positions and some details have been deliberately altered. The stories communicate structural issues clearly while ensuring that no individual can be identified. Any resemblance to real persons or workplaces is coincidental.

BACKGROUND

India's gaming domain is expanding, but unevenly.

What began as a backend service economy of animators, asset creators, QA testers and live operations workers is now pulling in multiple directions. Outsourcing pipelines still dominate, indie studios are emerging, Real Money Gaming (RMG) rose rapidly and receded sharply, and teams are attempting original IP without the wider terrain required to sustain expressive risk.

For more than two decades, Indian studios executed contracts for global publishers. Most functions sat downstream of decision-making: building assets, testing bugs and maintaining live operations. These workflows trained workers to follow instructions rather than shape systems. Career paths formed around execution. Game design education emphasised tools rather than creative direction. This period built technical capacity at scale but also cemented gaming as a masculine, engineering-led domain. Many studios were founded by Indian entrepreneurs, while several international companies established production hubs in parallel. The legacy of this dual structure continues to shape who holds power, whose stories circulate and what kinds of games are considered viable. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trajectory. Lockdowns triggered a sharp rise in gaming demand.

First-time founders created studios at pace. Mobile-first teams grew quickly, often without stable HR systems or long-term plans. Remote work opened doors for some but intensified burnout for others. Women carried much of the invisible labour: emotional hosting, conflict resolution, onboarding and morale maintenance. This work was essential to studio functioning but rarely recognised as such.

RMG brought speed and capital. Between 2021 and 2024, behavioural design, data science and monetisation functions multiplied. High-velocity product cycles became common, and optimisation shaped daily workflows. As studios scaled rapidly, many shifted parts of their pipelines to Tier-2 cities such as Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Surat, Kochi and Puri. Lower operational costs and a growing pool of junior talent created short-term flexibility, although these expansions did little to address underlying precarity. Many entrants required significant training before contributing meaningfully to production, revealing how thin the wider environment remains outside major hubs. The model scaled rapidly but without buffers. When Parliament passed the [Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act of 2025](#) in August 2025, prohibiting all online money games, including skill-based formats, several major operators pre-emptively withdrew their real-money offerings, signalling the scale of disruption the law would trigger.

Studios wound down, teams disbanded, and entire product lines disappeared almost overnight. The crash exposed how deeply the ecosystem had been built on unstable foundations. Investors hesitated, not only due to regulatory upheaval but also because the wider industry was structurally brittle and unable to sustain long-term creative production.

Amid this churn, new forms of creative leadership began to take shape. Indie studios and solo developers are building narrative-driven games, myth-world experiments and culturally grounded work. Capital, however, continues to favour what is familiar: hypercasual mechanics, RMG-adjacent loops and aesthetics already validated elsewhere. Deviations are rarely funded and the infrastructure for experimentation remains limited. Even within these constraints, imaginative ambition is growing faster than the systems meant to support it.

The sector's legacy of outsourcing, RMG and high-velocity mobile production has shaped what kinds of games get made and who is trusted with creative authority. Even as more diverse work emerges, funding still gravitates toward the familiar. This context shapes the gendered patterns described in this report, influencing who moves into technical, systems and leadership roles.

India's online gaming industry continued its expansion, with [FICCI-EY's Shape the Future](#) report estimating the country's gamer base at approximately 488 million in 2023. Close to half are women.

In addition, as of May, 2025, [India had over 1,900 game development companies that employed around 66,000 professionals](#). Yet the development workforce remains overwhelmingly male: [86-88% of the total](#), with even fewer technical roles held by women, as of March, 2025. These numbers emerge from structural exclusions. Early access to play, family permission, relocation feasibility, peer circles, all of these shape who gets to imagine a future in games long before skills enter the picture.

Studios are concentrated in Bengaluru, Pune, Delhi NCR and Hyderabad. Developers outside these hubs must navigate housing risk, financial stress and safety concerns with little institutional support. Talent emerging from Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities often enters the field with uneven familiarity and limited training quality. Many require intensive employer-funded upskilling to meet production standards, which reproduces disparities in who transitions into stable, high-agency roles.

Working conditions within studios vary considerably. Some teams operate with care, fairness and collaborative governance. Others mirror extractive norms familiar from adjacent tech sectors. Crunch culture persists. Function clarity is inconsistent. Informal networks shape hiring and decision-making. HR practices range from robust to minimal. Without sector-wide standards for pay transparency, grievance redressal or progression pathways, inclusion becomes interpersonal. It depends on who leads, how power is held and what is considered credible.

For women and gender-diverse professionals, barriers accumulate over time. Many grow up with limited access to consoles or peer gaming communities. Confidence gaps form early. Formal education offers few correctives. Game development remains metro-centric, technically skewed and male-dominated within faculty. Tracks in design, narrative and world-building are underdeveloped. Placement pipelines reproduce existing hierarchies. Inside studios, women are often channelled into production, support or community functions. Technical leadership and narrative leadership remain closed circuits. Many hold teams together through relational labour often described as glue work. This labour sustains norms yet rarely receives recognition.

Not all studios follow these patterns. Some teams are building healthier practices: inclusive leadership, safer environments, clearer progression pathways and more experimental storytelling. These examples are not widespread, but they are not isolated either. They offer glimpses of a future in which Indian game-making deepens rather than only scales.

Institutional fragmentation continues to shape the space. Although the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) is the nodal ministry for online gaming and e-sports sits within the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting influences the terrain through the AVGC Promotion Task Force. Gaming therefore spans multiple policy domains.

This overlapping jurisdiction produces uneven support systems for regulation, skilling and sector development. It complicates long-term planning and reduces the likelihood of coordinated public investment.

Recent regulatory changes have introduced important protections for users. With the notification of the [Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025](#) in November 2025, organisations offering online games must implement age-verification mechanisms, verifiable parental-consent systems for children's data, and clear data-retention and deletion protocols. These measures strengthen privacy and child safety. Many studios, however, remain unevenly prepared. Smaller studios face disproportionately higher compliance costs and operational adjustments. Meanwhile, policy attention continues to prioritise revenue and legality.

Many practitioners noted that the field has not yet realised the creative identity imagined a decade ago. While some view the RMG correction as necessary and overdue, policy alone cannot transform creative industries. What is required is infrastructure that enables risk, systems that redistribute leadership and institutions that anchor equity.

If the field is to realise its potential as both a cultural force and a market, inclusion must be foundational. Women and gender-diverse practitioners contribute far more than relational labour. Many lead technical and imaginative functions. Many shape studio behaviours and community spaces.

Their numbers are rising but do not yet reflect the diversity of India's player base. Without sustained access to creative leadership, technical pathways and institutional support, their contributions remain constrained and the range of work they could create remains deferred.

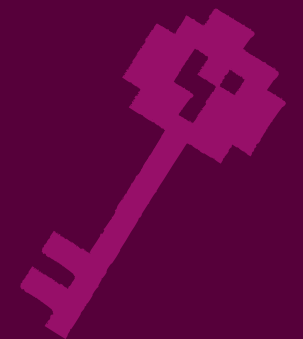
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GATEWAYS & ENTRY:
WHO GETS TO BECOME
A GAME MAKER?

The pathways into game development in India are far from linear. Although the sector presents itself as merit-driven and open to all, the actual routes of entry are shaped by social acceptance, class, gender, geography and institutional precarity. “Game development” is frequently conflated with coding, even though the field globally spans design, art, writing, production, testing, audio and community-facing roles. This narrow framing influences who is seen as a legitimate entrant, especially in a country where engineering-heavy domains remain male-dominated. Early exposure to play, family attitudes toward leisure, relocation feasibility, the cost of training and informal codes of belonging filter who gets to participate. This section examines these structural gates as interconnected conditions that determine which imaginations reach the field and which never get the chance.

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EARLY ACCESS & SOCIAL LEGITIMACY

Game development is still not seen as a serious or stable career, particularly for women and gender-diverse individuals.

In engineering colleges, it is treated as a niche. In families, it is often dismissed as a phase. Men who enter the field are described as ambitious; women are described as unserious. For many, the reputational risk is significant, especially without financial safety nets.

Access to gaming in India has long depended on class. Early exposure often hinged on whether a family could afford a PC, console or stable internet, and whether a child was permitted to spend time on it. Many interviewees described peers who entered the field because they grew up with gaming PCs or had parents working in IT. That early familiarity translated into confidence, literacy and a sense of belonging. These advantages accumulate over time. For most girls, and for anyone without economic cushioning, that door never opened.

Entry is shaped long before skill becomes visible. Who gets to play, who is allowed to explore and who receives devices determine who sees games as a viable future.

Girls face tighter restrictions on leisure. Gaming is monitored or prohibited. Even among interviewees who grew up playing, many described hiding it from parents or being discouraged as adolescence began.

“Women have much fewer examples or stories showing how they enter gaming. With men, it is an ‘easy accident’: engineering, access to computers, experimenting with devices, tinkering. They have more permission culturally. So they already enter with exposure”

– Ecosystem Enabler

Family approval becomes its own gate. Several women described parents discouraging them from accepting gaming roles, not because of lack of ability but because the field was considered unstable, low paying or too new to trust. One candidate turned down an offer from a respected indie studio because her parents insisted she take a “safer” tech job. Aspiration itself becomes gendered.



Women have much fewer examples or stories showing how they enter gaming.

With men, it is an 'easy accident': engineering, access to computers, experimenting with devices, tinkering. They have more permission culturally. So they already enter with exposure.

– ECOSYSTEM ENABLER

NEETI

In a Delhi apartment in the late 1990s, Neeti learned games by standing next to the family PC her father brought home from work.

It was understood without anyone saying it that the machine was for her brother. She wasn't discouraged, but she wasn't invited either. That line shaped how she saw herself: interested, but not the kind of person who "really plays."

Years later in college, the same unsaid rule followed her. She walked past the gaming club often, hearing the loud debates inside, and something in her repeated an old message: this space is not meant for you. It was the internalised norm that gaming belonged to boys who had grown up being allowed to take up that space.

When she finally stepped in, she realised she understood the mechanics without effort. What she had absorbed in silence had built real skill. She recognised how close she'd come to talking herself out of even showing up. Her story is about how early, unspoken norms decide who sees themselves as belonging, long before choice or skill ever enter the picture.



EDUCATION PATHWAYS & SKILL FORMATION

The gap extends into education. Game design courses are few, expensive and metro-centric.

Curricula lean toward tools such as Unity and Blender, pipelines and production techniques, with far less emphasis on systems thinking or critical design. Studios rarely visit campuses outside major cities. Internships are limited and often unpaid.

Women enter the field through multiple routes. Some arrive through formal programmes or early exposure. Many others rely on alternate pathways such as online tutorials, peer networks and self-teaching because structured avenues remain unevenly accessible. These routes demand additional emotional and cognitive effort. Their growing presence is encouraging, although the landscape is far from equitable.

The talent pool feeding gaming is already gendered long before hiring begins. Computer science programmes, engineering colleges and advanced programming tracks remain predominantly male. Similar patterns appear in many art, animation and UI/UX programmes that supply game-art roles. Studios inherit these imbalances. They are not selecting from a neutral population but from an educational system in which women and gender-diverse learners have already been filtered out at earlier stages.

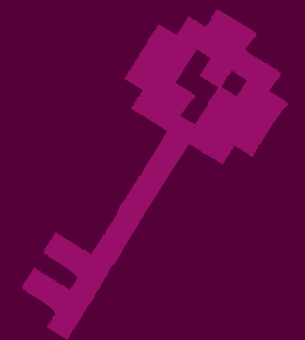
Even where formal education exists, curricula lean heavily toward tools rather than systems thinking, player experience or critical design. Students are trained as implementers of someone else's brief rather than originators of their own ideas. For women and gender-diverse learners who already face questions of legitimacy, being channelled into tool-centred training without creative authority narrows their pathway to high-agency roles.

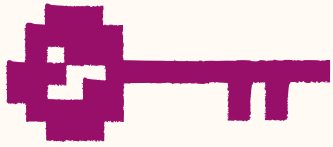
A different model is possible. A sensitive and holistic design education would pair technical training with systems thinking, worldbuilding and player psychology. Students would learn to critique power, design for diverse play styles and work across disciplines. Even modest shifts such as co-taught courses across art and engineering, or assignments that reward reflection alongside mechanics, could open far more equitable pathways into the field.

“The problem that I'm seeing with a lot of the game design programs is many of them are making technically focused art skills, programming skills. If it's a technical school then programming focus; if it's an art school then art focus. And even in some design schools, the programs are very heavily technical... it's like how do you make video, how do you make 3D art...what are the different styles, qualities, materials, processes, techniques and tools that you need to learn to make a pretty model or pretty animation...or how do you combine UI with games.”

– Independent Practitioner and Educator

Even where formal education exists, curricula lean heavily toward tools rather than systems thinking, player experience or critical design.





HIRING PIPELINES & STRUCTURAL GATEKEEPING

Hiring in India's gaming world is shaped less by formal processes and more by informal networks.

Many entry-level roles are filled through referrals, Discord groups and closed college circles before job posts go public. For those already inside these communities, the space can function as a supportive environment, offering alternate routes into the field outside traditional university pipelines. The same reliance on tight-knit networks creates uneven access. Many women and gender-diverse candidates remain outside these circles and therefore never enter the hiring pool.

Studios also depend heavily on subjective notions of “fit”: who appears confident in interviews, who speaks the right gaming vocabulary, who feels familiar. These cues favour those already embedded in male-dominated gaming cultures. Several interviewees described being assessed on whether they “felt like a gamer” rather than on their craft. Technical tests often reinforce this bias. Exercises frequently draw from genres associated with male players, while experience in narrative, casual or community-centred work is discounted. Strong portfolios were dismissed as “not technical enough.”

Hiring becomes a sorting mechanism long before skill is meaningfully evaluated. The barrier is a recruitment architecture that reproduces the profiles the field has historically centred.

Hiring becomes a sorting mechanism long before skill is meaningfully evaluated. The barrier is a recruitment architecture that reproduces the profiles the field has historically centred.

SANVI

Sanvi spots a junior game designer role at a major Bangalore studio, the kind of place people describe as a launchpad. Everyone reminds her that the application portal rarely works on its own. Without a referral, most CVs never surface.

While checking LinkedIn, she notices a name she recognises. She remembers him from a long-running Discord server where they'd once exchanged comments on a design thread. She messages him, unsure if he'll even remember her. He replies that evening, says he's happy to refer her, and adds that this was how he got in too. The first gate opens through someone already inside. During the hiring process, the studio asks Sanvi for an additional task: a detailed explanation of her contribution to one of the games in her portfolio. The message is framed politely, but the implication is clear: they want proof she actually worked on it. She completes the breakdown, assuming this is just how junior roles are evaluated. Interviews follow. An offer comes through.

Months later, while grabbing coffee with a colleague hired in the same batch, she mentions the task. He looks surprised. He had a game project in his portfolio too, but was never asked to prove his contribution. For him, the credit was taken at face value. For her, validation was a requirement. A reminder that even at the point of entry, the gate doesn't look the same for everyone even when they walk through the same door.



MOBILITY, CULTURE & RETENTION BARRIERS

Mobility is another gate. Studios are concentrated in Bengaluru, Pune, Delhi NCR and Hyderabad. Entry-level salaries are low and rent is high. Many women described turning down offers because relocation was not feasible due to safety concerns, family opposition or finances. Although cloud-based systems allow more people to participate in game development remotely, the field continues to reward geographic flexibility while providing little structural support for it. Even where access exists, language excludes.

Job posts emphasise qualities such as “hustle”, “culture fit” and “hardcore gamer”, signalling who belongs. Many candidates do not identify with these labels yet are entirely equipped to meet the demands of the position. Those who do not resonate with this vocabulary can appear misaligned even when they possess the required skills.

Studio norms often mirror these cues. Late-night meetings, Slack threads and Friday social gatherings reinforce masculine expectations. Participation becomes performance, and opting out can mean losing visibility.

“And then policies like menstrual leave – well-intentioned but with repercussions. Patriarchal society turns it into another reason not to hire women. ‘Now they’ll have periods off AND maternity leave.’ The real problem is that we never told men they’re also supposed to do domestic labour. So women end up doing both, work and home. And then period pain becomes a ‘negative factor.’”

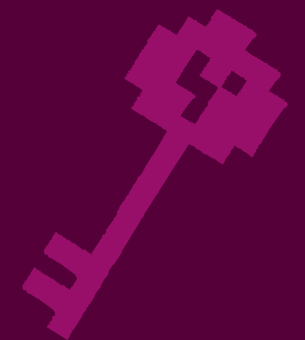
– Senior Management Personnel

Structural life-course events are interpreted as individual weakness. Maternity leave, health breaks or caregiving responsibilities are seen as liabilities. Career progression assumes uninterrupted continuity. Interviewees described being penalised for pausing or being assumed to pause even when they had not.

Role models are scarce. Many women and gender-diverse developers encountered very few senior figures who looked like them. Faculty in design schools are mostly male, and gender-diverse leaders are rare across conferences, creative leadership and studio management. Without structured mentorship or clear pathways upward, many exit early. The issue comes down to the limited traction available in early roles and the narrow framing of what ambition and career growth can look like.

Language adds another layer. While tools and documentation are in English, many teams default to regional languages in meetings or social conversations. For those who relocate to unfamiliar cities, this creates an added barrier to belonging.

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look like.



SARV

A mid-size studio in Delhi opens applications for an entry-level game developer. Leadership has been tracking shifts in their player base seeing more women players engaging with their titles and they want the team to reflect that change. Over sixty people apply. Among them, Sarv, a young developer from Kolkata, the only gender-diverse applicant in the pool stands out based on their resume. Their fundamentals are strong, they've taught themselves Unity through late-night practice, and their demo builds show clear technical judgment. Across interviews, they consistently emerge as one of the best fits for the role.

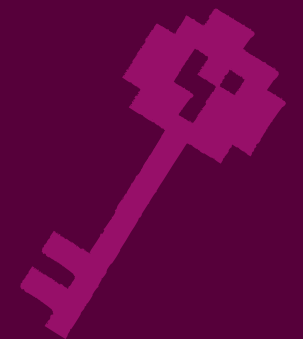
The studio extends an offer. A week later, the candidate writes back to withdraw. Relocating alone to Delhi feels unsafe, and there is no support system in the city. Their family is worried and so are they. The reassurances the studio provides regarding safe transport, flexible timing and a supportive team do not change the realities outside the office. Inside the hiring team, the outcome settles without any conversation. Skill and opportunity finally aligned, yet mobility, safety, and social acceptance closed the door.

A reminder that the barrier was never capability rather it was everything surrounding the role before the candidate even reached it.



Not all studios follow the same patterns. Across interviews, more intentional practices surfaced: clearer HR processes, safer working environments, mentorship structures and team cultures that encourage collaboration instead of competition. These examples show that different ways of working are possible. They signal a slowly changing landscape, even if such practices remain exceptions rather than norms. Beyond these pockets of progress, entry into gaming in India continues to be a maze shaped by fragmented courses, inconsistent internships and unclear job roles. Pathways remain uneven, often dependent on personal networks, city access and prior exposure to digital tools. For women and gender-diverse individuals, each step contains added friction. Barriers appear in who gets visibility, who feels permitted to apply and who can safely relocate or participate in after-hours culture.

Entry into gaming in India continues to be a maze shaped by fragmented courses, inconsistent internships and unclear job roles.



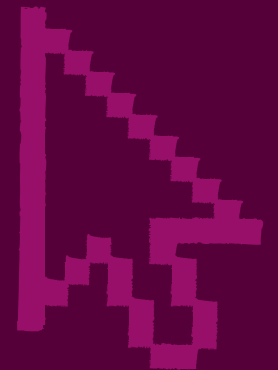
playgrounds
of power



INSIDE THE STUDIO:
VOICE, CREDIBILITY,
AND DAILY WORKING
CONDITIONS

The experience of working inside a studio is shaped by many of the same forces that govern entry into the industry. Gender, geography, informal networks and institutional gaps continue to influence how work is distributed, whose judgement is trusted and which contributions are treated as central to the product. For many women and gender-diverse professionals, the studio environment is not overtly hostile, yet it is structured in ways that make participation uneven. The barriers are rarely dramatic. They accumulate through daily rhythms, unspoken norms and interpersonal habits that shape visibility, credibility and progression over time.

For many women and gender-diverse professionals, the studio environment is not overtly hostile, yet it is structured in ways that make participation uneven.



ISOLATION, VISIBILITY, AND THE WEIGHT OF BEING THE ONLY ONE

Across engineering, design, production and leadership tracks, women and gender-diverse professionals often find themselves as “the only one”. The only woman in a systems team. The only woman in a founder meeting. This isolation carries a dual burden: hyper-visibility, where every action feels observed and interpreted as representative with little room for error; and under-recognition, where expertise is questioned, sidelined or treated as optional.

“When I drive, I try to drive carefully so that people do not say ‘Oh, she drove badly because she is a woman.’ Similarly, I am careful of the quality of my work because I do not want to be an example reinforcing those statements.”

– Software Engineer

In leadership settings, the rarity of women can unintentionally create competition instead of solidarity due to the limited visibility of pathways upward. Being the sole woman in an organisation’s leadership team can also

create a pressure to advocate for more inclusive workspaces, often alone.

“Even in my team, I was the only female engineer. In each project, there would be just one female engineer, or sometimes not even one.”

– Software Engineer

Many spoke about the absence of peers with similar lived experience. Without others to compare notes with, sense-checking challenges or navigating bias becomes an individual exercise. This lack of peer reference points intensifies the emotional load of already being the only one. Several described this professional loneliness as one of the most enduring features of studio life.

“Women have always been told there is ‘one seat at the table,’ so we subconsciously fight each other for that one chair.”

– Senior Management Personnel



“Women have always been told there is ‘one seat at the table,’ so we subconsciously fight each other for that one chair.”

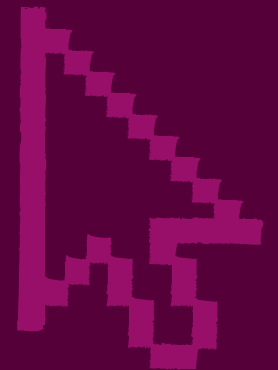
– SENIOR MANAGEMENT PERSONNEL

CREDIBILITY, TONE, AND UNEVEN RECOGNITION

Inside teams, credibility often follows gender rather than competence. Ideas offered by women gain traction only after being repeated by men.

This epistemic imbalance shapes who is heard, whose instincts are trusted and whose input influences direction. Tone and communication are interpreted unevenly: assertiveness from men is read as strength; the same clarity from women is labelled “abrasive”. Many described adjusting vocal pitch, body language or emotional tone simply to be taken seriously. This constant calibration becomes second nature, although it carries a cumulative psychological cost.

Many described adjusting vocal pitch, body language or emotional tone simply to be taken seriously. [This] carries a cumulative psychological cost.



CHAVVI

Chavvi steps into the production manager role after her previous manager moves to another project. For months she had watched her former lead, one of the few women in leadership, modulate her tone in meetings: steady, low, precise. On the morning of her first team meeting, Chavvi practises lowering her own voice, knowing how differently people respond when she does.

The team gathers to plan a new combat mechanic. When the floor opens, she offers a simple direction: to explore a swap system that rewards consecutive hits so players can switch abilities without breaking flow. Before she finishes, a colleague talks over her and shifts the discussion. Minutes later, another teammate frames the same idea in slightly different words. This time, the room engages debating timings, trigger rules, edge cases.

Chavvi doesn't interrupt. She notes the dynamic immediately. The idea landed only after someone else voiced it in a pitch and tone the room instinctively trusted.

It's the recurring pattern she has learned to work around: calibrate tone, over-prepare, speak carefully, and still watch her credibility alter the moment it leaves her mouth.



TECHNICAL VISIBILITY, GLUE WORK, AND UNEVEN ACCESS TO IMPACT

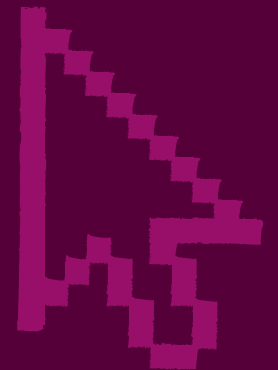
Technical authority is not distributed evenly across teams.

High-prestige work such as engine optimisation, systems architecture and multiplayer infrastructure tends to circulate within male-majority groups. Women in technical roles often receive fewer inbound questions, fewer opportunities to debug alongside peers and fewer moments where problem-solving is visible. These interactions shape who is considered a technical anchor. Genre hierarchies reinforce this pattern. Strategy, systems-heavy and competitive titles are assumed to be the “core” of game-making. Narrative, cosy or culturally rooted games are viewed as niche even when they demand significant technical craft.

Alongside this, relational work gravitates toward women and gender-diverse professionals. Mentorship, documentation, planning, morale and community-building form the glue that keeps teams functional. This labour is strategic. It stabilises projects, maintains continuity and protects teams during high-pressure cycles. Yet it remains undervalued because it is not always captured in performance reviews or credited in progression pathways. The work is essential but rarely treated as a route to authority.

VOICE, CREDIBILITY, AND DAILY WORKING CONDITIONS

Narrative, cosy or culturally rooted games are viewed as niche even when they demand significant technical craft.

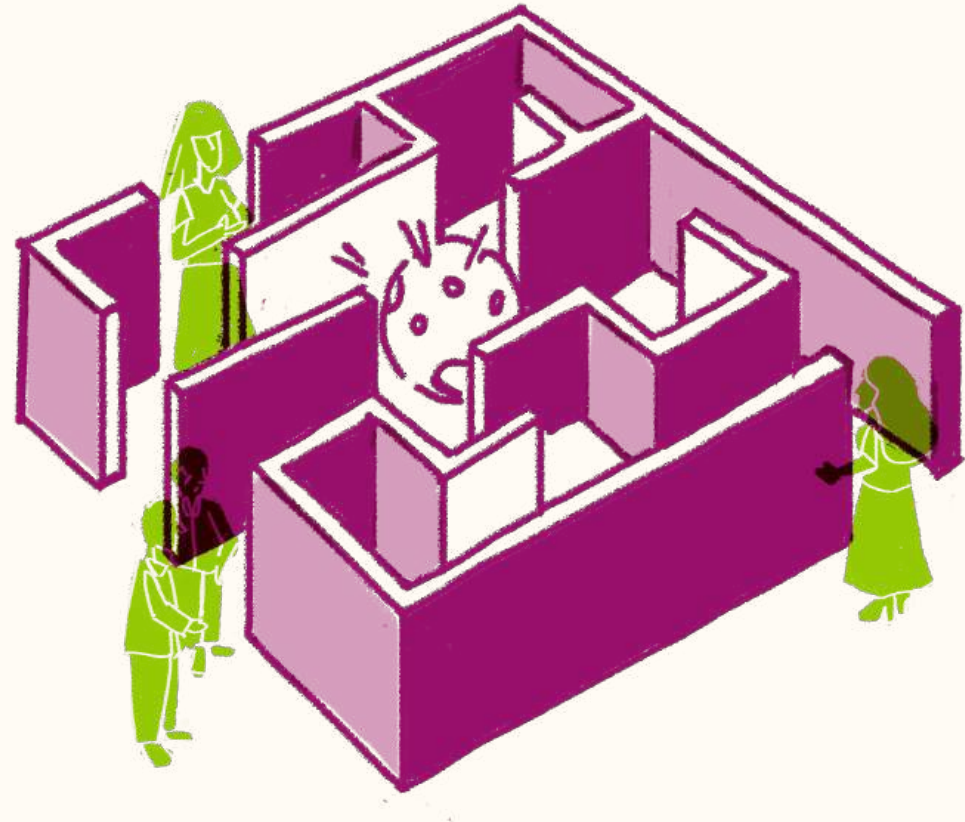


SANA

Sana is the only female engineer on the floor. The team is polishing a branching-quest RPG (role-playing game), and that afternoon a teammate hits a blocking bug in the combat sequence. An enemy AI keeps freezing mid-attack, breaking the flow of a boss fight they've been tuning for weeks. He walks past her desk and heads straight to two male colleagues.

From her corner, she hears them cycle through theories, adjust behaviour-tree values, reload the same broken scene. Between attempts, the conversation drifts to a new café nearby and weekend plans. The bug stays where it is. Only later does someone remember that Sana built a similar AI loop during a previous project. They bring the file over. She scrolls once, spots the issue immediately, and points to a timing conflict in the state machine.

The fix takes minutes. Work continues. But the path they took to reach her leaves a small, steady reminder: technical trust often flows along social lines she is rarely included in and by the time her expertise is recognised, the impact of her work has already been made smaller than it is.



Daily working conditions often reflect unspoken assumptions about who can stay late, who can join after-hours bonding and who can move through the city without concern.

STUDIO RHYTHMS, SAFETY, AND UNEVEN ACCOUNTABILITY

Daily working conditions often reflect unspoken assumptions about who can stay late, who can join after-hours bonding and who can move through the city without concern. Crunch periods, evening meetings and late-night rituals privilege those with unconstrained mobility. Women and gender-diverse employees described safety concerns, family restrictions and domestic responsibilities that shape their ability to participate in these rhythms. These constraints are not about commitment or capability. They reflect how studios organise time, workflow and culture, and how proximity to informal spaces often shapes proximity to decision-making.

Larger companies have begun formalising HR systems and grievance channels. Many established studios have strengthened accountability mechanisms, including POSH committees, disciplinary panels and zero-tolerance policies that have led to senior leaders being removed when necessary. Smaller studios often rely on informal judgement where accountability depends heavily on founder temperament. Trust in these systems varies. Some interviewees described environments where concerns could be raised without fear, while others relied on avoidance strategies or private networks to stay safe. Emotional safety often depended more on leadership behaviour than on written policy.

Cultural cues also shape inclusion before any formal process does. Global debates around feminism, diversity and so-called culture wars have filtered into online spaces used by Indian developers. Dismissive remarks about women protagonists, diversity hires or inclusive storytelling appear in group chats and forums, sending early signals about who is welcome to speak freely. Even when comments are not overtly hostile, they create an atmosphere where some feel naturally aligned with the culture and others must continually negotiate their place within it.

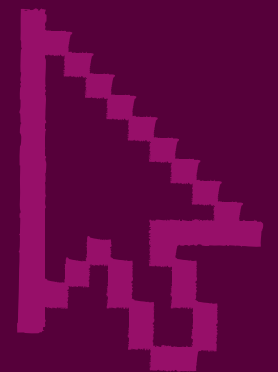
“There was someone who showed me a meme saying female managers are the worst and no one likes working under a female manager.’ She was laughing. I told her, “You are also a female,” and she said, “But I will be different.”...these kinds of messages that spread. When I see such things, I become more cautious, because I do not want to fall into that stereotype.”

– Software Engineer

Daily working conditions are tied to structural inequity. They shape who is heard, who is mentored, who receives complex assignments and who feels protected enough to take creative risks. These dynamics influence careers long before promotions are formalised. Women and gender-diverse professionals contribute across design, engineering, writing, production and culture-building. Yet their influence and authority remain uneven because the system rewards those who can participate fully in its informal structures.

Recognising these conditions is essential for understanding how power circulates inside studios. It also signals what is required for the industry to hold a wider range of imaginations and leadership. When working environments are safer, more consistent and more structurally supportive, the creative possibilities of the sector widen for everyone.

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playgrounds
of power

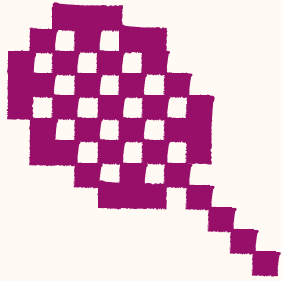


THE ROLES WOMEN HOLD
AND THE ROLES THEY'RE
BLOCKED FROM

If daily studio life shapes who is heard, trusted and protected, the distribution of roles inside studios shows how those dynamics settle into patterns of power. Interviews reveal how some forms of work become central to decision-making and visibility, while others are treated as peripheral or interchangeable. These tendencies influence who gains authority, who steers creative direction and whose expertise defines what is considered core to game-making.

Some forms of work become central to decision-making and visibility, while others are treated as peripheral or interchangeable.





HOW WORK IS VALUED: THE FEMINISATION OF CERTAIN ROLES

Across many studios, women and gender-diverse professionals tend to occupy roles associated with coordination, aesthetics and relational work.

Production, narrative design, UI and UX, art, community management and QA appear regularly as entry points. These roles involve deep technical and systems awareness. Art teams work within rendering limits and animation pipelines. Narrative designers balance quest structures, pacing and mechanical constraints. Producers manage dependencies across engineering, art, audio and design.

Despite this, these disciplines are often positioned at the edges of technical legitimacy. Their contributions are essential, yet less frequently treated as central to architectural or strategic decision-making. How these roles are framed influences how credibility is assigned and shapes which forms of expertise are seen as foundational to the craft.

WHO HOLDS TECHNICAL POWER AND WHY IT MATTERS

Tracks such as programming, systems design, engine work and technical art continue to be dominated by men.

These tracks carry larger budgets, deeper ownership of core systems and greater influence over the boundaries within which other disciplines operate. As a result, technical authority often becomes the anchor of decision-making.

Prestige projects tend to orbit these roles. Engineering-heavy challenges, multiplayer infrastructure, monetisation systems and experimental toolchains are frequently taken up by existing male-majority teams. Women seeking to enter these domains often encounter fewer high-impact assignments and limited opportunities to demonstrate capability across large systems. Genre expectations compound this sorting.

Women are often associated with narrative, cosy or hypercasual games, while strategy, action or competitive genres are assumed to be better aligned with men.

Since genre is tied to budgets, pipelines and team structures, this sorting mechanism influences who accumulates the experience that leads to leadership positions.

Credibility follows these patterns. Technical competence is granted more readily in some groups and must be demonstrated repeatedly in others. This shapes how ideas are evaluated, who is invited into architectural discussions and who is viewed as influencing the direction of a project.

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BARRIERS TO LEADERSHIP AND THE MID-CAREER DROP-OFF

Leadership pathways remain narrow. Many women described reaching mid-career roles where responsibility increased but authority did not. Trust gaps, limited sponsorship and uneven access to mentorship contribute to stagnation. Several noted how recognition arrived slowly despite substantial contributions.

“When men step into leadership from creative or non technical tracks, it rarely raises eyebrows. But when a woman makes that transition, it becomes a debate. And if she earns recognition, it often gets framed as luck, bias, token diversity quota or the idea that she must have had fewer responsibilities at home. The assumption is always that women need an excuse for their success...”

– Senior Management Personnel

Mentorship is particularly fragile. With few senior women in technical or creative leadership, guidance flows unevenly. Cross-gender mentorship is complicated by social norms, limiting the support mid-level women

receive at crucial points in their careers. Life-course events create further friction.

Studio cultures are often designed around uninterrupted availability, rapid turnarounds and flexible hours that stretch into the evening. These rhythms sit uneasily with caregiving responsibilities or periods of pause. Women returning from maternity breaks described having to rebuild credibility or being seen as less suitable for ownership-heavy roles, irrespective of capability.

Meeting dynamics reflect the same hierarchies. Women described being interrupted more often, being asked to take notes or being included for input rather than direction. Assertiveness, tone and communication style were interpreted unevenly depending on who expressed them.

Over time, these dynamics create a landscape where many women carry responsibility without corresponding influence. Some larger studios have implemented clearer systems to counter this, yet such practices remain uneven across the industry. This is less a reflection of individual ambition and more a reflection of how leadership pathways are structured and rewarded.

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BHAIRAVI

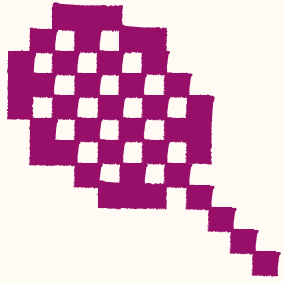
Bhairavi has just been promoted to manager of a development team at an established studio in Hyderabad.

A week into the role, she hears in a passing comment that a junior developer is unwilling to report to her. There is no discussion with her, no attempt to understand the issue. He goes directly to leadership. By the next morning, he has been reassigned to another project on a different floor. The move is described as a resourcing shift. No one checks in with her. The discrete handling of it leaves a small space where doubt can slip in.

Through the studio's mentorship program, she is paired with an engineer from another team. Their technical domains do not overlap much, and she initially wonders what she is meant to offer. In their first conversation, he tells her something she has not heard said aloud: having a woman in a technical leadership role changes how the studio feels. It softens unspoken hierarchies. It makes day-to-day interactions, the ones that are rarely named, less fraught.

She keeps that with her. It becomes the steady point she returns to while building her team: a reminder that her presence is not only about delivering features or managing timelines, but about shaping a space where the barriers she faced do not replicate themselves for the next person.





EARLY SHIFTS AND EMERGING POSSIBILITIES

Across the sector, small but meaningful shifts are visible. Some studios are strengthening HR structures, developing mentorship ladders, creating flexible roles for parents or rewriting job descriptions to broaden access.

Platforms are beginning to highlight women creators through curated features, recognition programmes and fellowships. These efforts remain early and uneven, yet they signal that alternative models are taking shape.

Interviewees pointed to teams where leadership is more distributed, where emotional safety is intentional and where ownership is shared more equitably. These examples show that equity and creative depth reinforce each other rather than exist in tension.

Women and gender-diverse professionals already shape India's games across design, writing, art, production and community life inside studios. As pathways into technical authority and leadership expand, the industry gains access to a wider range of imaginations and approaches. This shift strengthens not only representation but the creative foundations of the sector itself.

As pathways into
technical authority
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playgrounds
of power



INVISIBLE LABOUR
& INFORMAL
INFRASTRUCTURE

Alongside code, art and design lies another layer of labour that is often gendered. This labour sustains teams, communities and the wider environment, yet it rarely appears in job descriptions, performance reviews or institutional memory. Women and gender-diverse professionals contribute significantly to this informal infrastructure. Their efforts stabilise environments that are otherwise precarious, but the work remains largely unrecognised within formal structures.

This labour sustains teams, communities and the wider environment, yet it rarely appears in job descriptions, performance reviews or institutional memory.



RELATIONAL LABOUR AS AN UNSPOKEN EXPECTATION

Across studios, women are often the first to notice when tensions rise, when a colleague is struggling or when morale needs attention. They mentor, mediate and de-escalate. These actions are interpreted as personal qualities rather than as essential organisational work that requires skill, energy and time. In fast-moving or under-resourced settings, these interventions hold teams together.

“A lot of it is managing egos. Seniors have told me: ‘You should talk to this person; they’re more likely to listen to you because they don’t see you as a threat.’ Because I’m a woman.”

– Senior Management Personnel

These actions are interpreted as

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COMMUNITY WORK THAT SUSTAINS THE INDUSTRY

Outside formal employment, women and gender-diverse professionals often maintain the community spaces that support others like them.

They organise meetups, run jams, host Discord channels, mentor newcomers and share resources after hours, typically without institutional support. These are not the dominant community groups, which remain largely male-led. They are parallel networks built to provide safer entry points, peer support and practical guidance for those who may not find such support elsewhere.

This labour strengthens the broader ecosystem by building networks, cultivating learning environments and reducing barriers for underrepresented groups. Studios benefit from these collective efforts through stronger talent flows and more cohesive cultures, even though the work is rarely resourced.

“Women naturally end up mentoring juniors, supporting colleagues, creating safe spaces, leading ERGs, arranging learning resources, bringing people together. They build communities, spread awareness, create opportunities...all on top of their regular work. This leadership is not imposed; they do it because they care. But it is still unpaid labor”

– Game Producer

Studios benefit from these collective efforts through stronger talent flows and more cohesive cultures, even though the work is rarely resourced.



INFORMAL GOVERNANCE AND COLLECTIVE PROTECTION

When formal protections are limited, informal systems take shape. Whisper networks share information about unsafe teams or events through word of mouth, Discord, X or WhatsApp groups.

Salary spreadsheets circulate to create transparency where none exists. Community-led initiatives such as open pay datasets and harassment reporting forms become shared safeguards.

At times these networks mobilise collaboratively. When a group of women creators were excluded from a prominent industry recognition list, they publicly posted their work on LinkedIn. The coordinated response shifted attention, challenged the validity of the list and sparked wider conversations about representation.

These moments demonstrate how communities can act as rapid checks on exclusion when institutional pathways fall short.

STUDIOS BENEFIT WITHOUT RECOGNISING THE WORK

Employers gain from the cultural infrastructure and goodwill generated by this labour.

Networks reduce hiring friction, strengthen team cohesion and maintain a baseline of community health. Yet few studios provide time, recognition or compensation for it. It rarely appears in appraisal systems or promotion criteria. When individuals step back from this work, the ecosystem loses mentorship, continuity and valuable institutional knowledge.

This disconnect reveals a gap between what the sector claims to value and what it actually supports. The system relies on labour it does not name.

The system relies
on labour it does
not name.



MICROCULTURES THAT MODEL ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Despite limited support, new microcultures are emerging.

Women-led jams, curated meetups at conferences, peer-led mentorship circles and small online communities create safer and more intentional environments. Special award categories and showcases for women-led games contribute to this landscape by providing legitimacy and visibility that counterbalance historical exclusion. These spaces normalise women and gender-diverse professionals as designers, programmers and creative leads. They provide reference points and role models where studios often do not.

Most of these initiatives are volunteer-led and lightly documented, yet they remain among the most generative and experimental spaces in Indian game-making. They build cultures grounded in reciprocity, transparency and shared authorship, and they demonstrate that different ways of working are already possible.

“I felt like I was doing it (advocacy) because I was almost too close to the issues, and I knew no one else was going to do it. At some point I realised there’s no one else, so I’ll have to step up and do it.”

– Senior Management Personnel



**“At some point I realised
there’s no one else, so I’ll
have to step up and do it.”**

– SENIOR MANAGEMENT PERSONNEL

playgrounds
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WHAT CHANGES WHEN
WOMEN LEAD CREATIVE
& TECHNICAL DIRECTION

When women and gender-diverse professionals lead creative or technical work, the texture of game-making shifts in visible and subtle ways. These shifts are not about individual personality. They arise from different reference points, lived experience and leadership orientations. Across interviews, practitioners described how these approaches broaden what Indian games can be, deepen how systems are imagined and create more intentional working environments.

The texture of
game-making shifts
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ways.



CREATIVE WORLDS BECOME BROADER, MORE GROUNDED, AND LESS GENERIC

Women and gender-diverse creators draw from a wider and more varied set of cultural references.

Folklore, regional memories, domestic rituals, small-town textures and non-dominant mythologies shape the worlds they imagine. Characters move away from tropes and hypersexualised framings. Clothing, body types and interpersonal relationships gain depth. Protagonists are designed with interiority rather than spectacle, and side characters are given narrative weight. These choices emerge from different lived experiences.

Developers spoke about drawing from childhood games, everyday care rituals, regional languages and neighbourhood stories that rarely enter mainstream pipelines.

As a result, the creative palette of Indian games expands. The work feels culturally rooted rather than globally interchangeable, and the horizon of what counts as an Indian game widens.

“When women design or lead games, the results can be different...Female artists create characters that are not overly sexualized, more natural. Women developers sometimes don't want to label characters strictly as male or female; they bring queerness or fluidity more naturally.”

Co-founder, Game Studio

The work feels culturally rooted rather than globally interchangeable, and the horizon of what counts as an Indian game widens.



→ RAJI: An Ancient Epic by Nodding Head Games

All game artwork © lie with their respective creators. Referenced for research purposes.

EXTRACTIVE NORMS ARE QUESTIONED AND CLONED TEMPLATES LOSE THEIR HOLD

Across interviews, teams led by women or gender-diverse professionals described resisting derivative production models. Clone culture, reskins and templates like “X but cheaper” carry less appeal. There is visible discomfort with hyper-extractive monetisation practices, particularly those associated with RMG-adjacent design.

Creative integrity and long-term trust are prioritised over short-term spikes in revenue, even when this slows commercial momentum.

These positions arise from a belief that games should hold emotional or cultural weight and that players deserve respect rather than manipulation. Developers noted that such teams question psychological hooks, dark patterns and aggressive funnels. They prefer sustainable engagement architectures built on trust rather than churn. This challenges dominant business logics and opens space for experimentation.

“I started seeing everyone was just copying content and we are very happy with copying content. Once I saw a clone of a (well known game) at one event I was judging and it was so well polished. It played even better than the original. When we have all this talent to pull off something that a big company has made, why are you not trying to innovate? The response is that this makes money. I don't blame them if that's the aim but at the same time, we make this the norm.”

– Senior Management Personnel

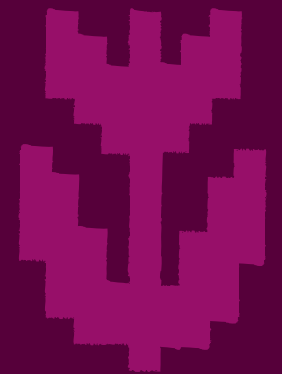
DESIGN LOGICS SHIFT TOWARD REFLECTION, CARE, AND SOCIAL NUANCE

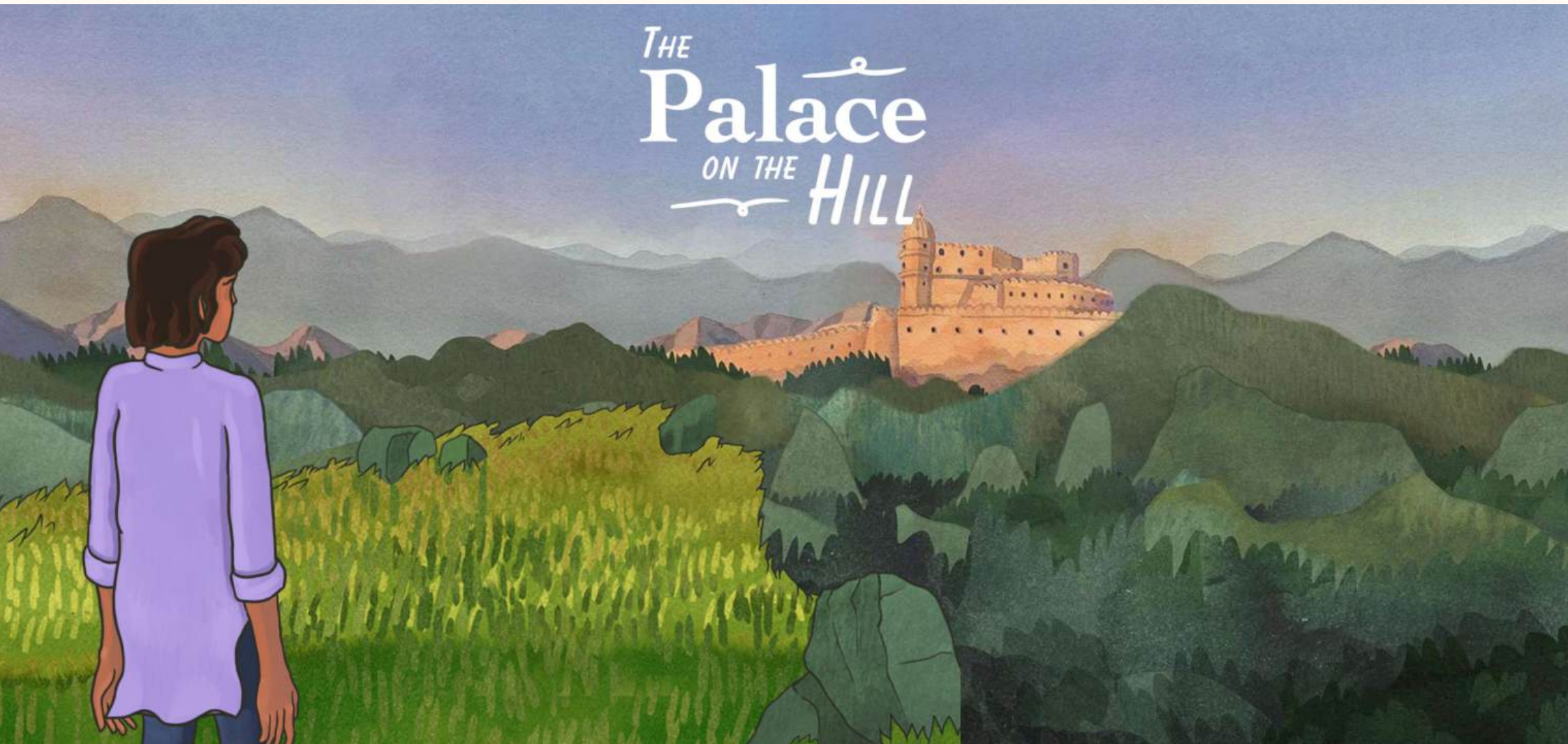
When more women and gender-diverse professionals shape mechanics or systems, the underlying logic of play often changes.

Their presence broadens the spectrum of design orientations that enter the sector. Many described pacing that allows pause rather than pressure, exploration rather than extraction and emotion rather than conquest. These shifts speak to different forms of engagement. Care, interdependence, vulnerability and complexity begin to shape the mechanical vocabulary.

Systems become more socially attuned. Rather than linear power accumulation, designers introduce consequences, trade-offs and softer forms of challenge. This is particularly visible in narrative and systems design, where everyday life, conflict resolution and interpersonal dynamics influence mission structure, progression and feedback loops. Games become less about domination and more about navigating complexity.

Games become less
about domination
and more about
navigating
complexity.





→ *The Palace on the Hill Prologue* by Niku Games

All game artwork © lie with their respective creators. Referenced for research purposes.

THE HORIZON OF WHAT IS CONSIDERED WORTH MAKING EXPANDS

When women and gender-diverse professionals lead creative direction, the range of viable projects widens. Ideas rooted in everyday life, memory, care, longing, ecosystems or local humour become possible. These projects do not always fit familiar genre slots or monetisation patterns, making them harder to justify to investors. Yet they carry a different creative ambition that values grounded experience.

Teams become more attentive to lived experience as design material. Memories of neighbourhood games, questions of safety or belonging, domestic rhythms and regional idioms influence how characters move, how quests are structured and how worlds are built. The palette of Indian games grows broader. Failure is treated differently as well.

Experimentation is encouraged, and mistakes are seen as part of the process rather than a threat to authority. This flexibility is essential for creative innovation in a risk-averse industry.

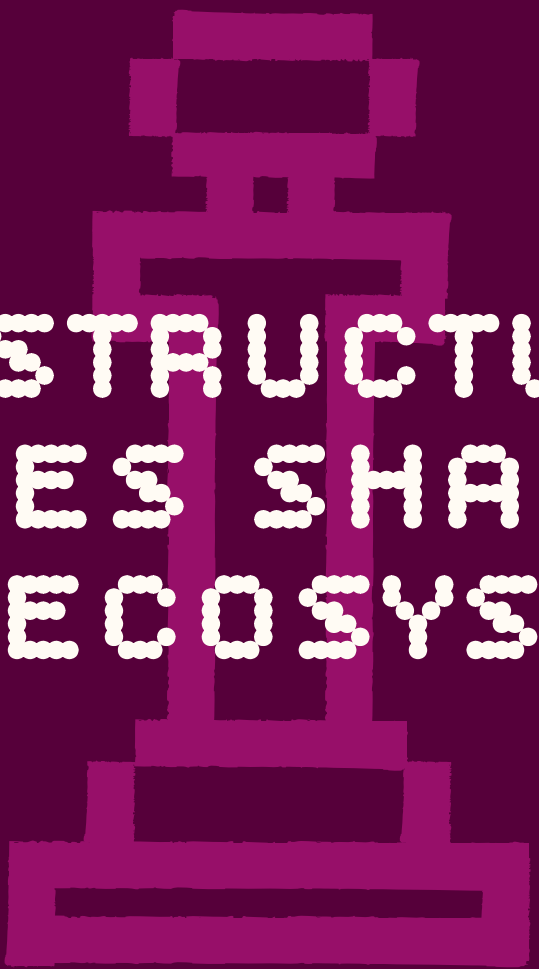
Some interviewees noted that such shifts occasionally meet resistance.

Men who are accustomed to narrow definitions of core games sometimes view gender-neutral or feminist creative choices as diluting tradition or undermining familiar power fantasies.

This backlash mirrors global patterns, but its presence in India highlights how cultural norms and gaming preferences remain closely intertwined.

**Teams become more attentive
to lived experience as design
material.**

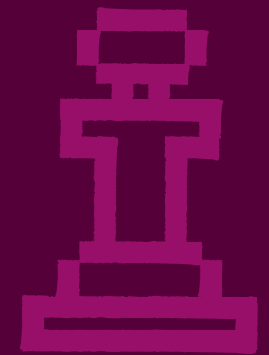
playgrounds
of power



THE STRUCTURAL
FORCES SHAPING
THE ECOSYSTEM

The conditions described so far do not originate inside individual studios. They are produced by wider systems that determine how capital moves, how creative risk is defined, what labour is recognised and which futures appear viable. Market incentives, platform logics, policy frameworks, education markets and institutional gaps all interact to shape who can participate and on what terms. There are signs of improvement across these domains, yet these shifts remain uneven, early and fragile.

**Market incentives,
platform logics,
policy frameworks,
education markets
and institutional gaps
all interact to shape
who can participate
and on what terms.**



CAPITAL ARCHITECTURES AND THE SLOW BROADENING OF WHAT COUNTS AS VIABLE

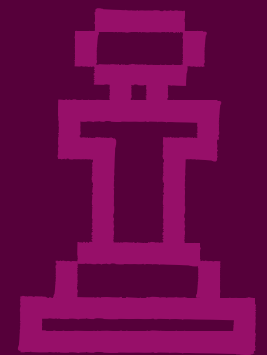
Capital in Indian gaming continues to cluster around familiar models: high-velocity production, predictable funnels and genres that map cleanly onto investor language. This narrows which kinds of games appear investable and whose creative ambitions feel legitimate.

The landscape is shifting slowly. A growing number of funds, incubators and grantmakers are beginning to recognise creative IP, narrative originality and cultural specificity as meaningful forms of value. Early-stage support for experimental projects is becoming more visible. In parallel, a small number of early-stage gaming and interactive media funds led by women have begun reshaping evaluative lenses within venture and publishing contexts. Their presence expands how creative risk, founder potential and cultural contribution are interpreted, allowing projects centred on narrative experimentation, care-driven mechanics or culturally grounded worlds to be taken seriously.

These changes coexist with structural inertia. Experimental work competes with models that promise faster returns. Founder networks remain uneven. Publishing support, multi-project funding and sustained mentorship remain thin. Progress is real but partial. Many women-led and gender-diverse teams continue to operate at the margins of investability.

THE STRUCTURAL FORCES SHAPING THE ECOSYSTEM

Capital in Indian gaming continues to cluster around familiar models: high-velocity production, predictable funnels and genres that map cleanly onto investor language.



PLATFORM POWER, METRICS AND THE PARTIAL OPENING OF DISCOVERY

Distribution remains governed by a handful of global platforms whose algorithms privilege scale, retention and spend.

Games designed for slower engagement, narrative depth or non-mainstream audiences often struggle to surface within these logics. At the same time, platform teams in India are beginning to recognise the value of underrepresented creators. Curated featuring, regional collections and targeted support programmes have begun to appear. These initiatives do not transform discovery systems, but they open temporary windows through which more diverse work becomes visible. The fundamental asymmetry remains.

Feminist, gender-diverse or culturally specific games must work harder to align with a metrics regime not built for them. Gains are meaningful, but structural constraints continue to dominate.

POLICY ARCHITECTURES AND EMERGING ATTENTION TO THE SECTOR

Historically, gaming entered policy primarily through taxation, online harms and digital regulation. Labour conditions, authorship diversity and workplace equity rarely appeared in official agendas.

This is beginning to shift. Multiple ministries now recognise gaming as a legitimate cultural and economic sector. State governments are drafting AVGC policies with language on inclusion, skilling diversity and regional access. Some nodal agencies have begun asking questions about representation and mentorship gaps.

These developments signal institutional attention but not yet institutional transformation. Without sector-specific labour protections, pay transparency guidelines or policy incentives for inclusive studios, progress remains symbolic rather than structural.

**Without sector-specific labour
protections, pay transparency
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inclusive studios, progress remains
symbolic rather than structural.**

URBAN SYSTEMS, SAFETY AND UNEQUAL PRESENCE – WITH LOCAL IMPROVEMENTS

Game development in India is anchored in specific urban geographies: Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi NCR.

Participation is shaped by housing markets, commuting safety and after-hours mobility.

These urban conditions silently filter who can relocate, stay late or attend community events.

Some improvements are emerging. Safer coworking spaces, women-only hostels and better late-night transport have appeared in parts of major cities. Hybrid work models are reducing relocation pressures. Conferences and meetups are expanding beyond traditional hubs.

Yet these improvements are uneven. Urban safety and affordability continue to determine presence and participation. Structural constraints endure even as local conditions improve.

EDUCATION MARKETS AND THE SLOW DIVERSIFICATION OF PATHWAYS

The education system feeding Indian gaming remains stratified and metro-centric, with expensive private institutes, limited curricular diversity and pipelines still oriented around outsourcing legacies rather than creative leadership.

The landscape is shifting. More universities are introducing game design tracks. Some institutes are updating curricula to include narrative design, systems thinking and worldbuilding. Scholarships and fee waivers for women are becoming more common. Peer-learning communities and self-organised mentorship spaces are expanding, reducing reliance on elite credentials.

These developments widen possibility but do not erase barriers around mobility, affordability and legitimacy. The system is improving, but its hierarchy remains intact.

INSTITUTIONS, COLLECTIVES AND THE GRADUAL BUILDING OF SHARED NORMS

India's gaming ecosystem remains institutionally fragmented. No single body sets binding standards on pay, progression, safety or representation.

As a result, good practices stay local and harmful practices persist without coordinated accountability.

Yet this is also where the most hopeful energy resides. Developer associations are building inclusion-oriented initiatives. Communities are creating salary datasets, mentorship circles and safer event practices. Conferences are adopting codes of conduct and hosting women-focused showcases. Studios experimenting with transparent HR and distributed leadership are slowly influencing peers.

These efforts do not yet form a unified institutional framework. Still, they mark the emergence of shared norms built through distributed effort. The wider ecosystem's collective infrastructure is beginning to take shape, even if not yet at the scale needed for structural change.

POSSIBILITY OF A DIFFERENT FUTURE

The Indian gaming ecosystem is not static. Across capital, platforms, policy, education and community life, improvement is visible: more support, more awareness, more distributed leadership and more deliberate experimentation. Yet these shifts are uneven and easily reversed.

Deeper structures continue to determine who can enter, stay and lead. Investment incentives, algorithmic discovery regimes, urban constraints, credential hierarchies and weak institutional governance still define the boundaries of possibility. Women and gender-diverse professionals continue to push the industry forward, often carrying the burden of improvement themselves. Their successes demonstrate what is possible, but they do not yet rewrite the architecture that makes their presence exceptional.

A resilient ecosystem will require widening these openings into durable structures: funding instruments that recognise creative risk, policy frameworks that centre labour and representation, urban infrastructures that enable presence and participation and institutions capable of holding shared standards. The improvements underway show that change is already beginning. The work ahead is to make it structural rather than situational.

playgrounds
of power



RECOMMENDATIONS

The conditions shaping the participation of women and gender-diverse professionals in Indian game-making cannot be shifted through isolated fixes. Exclusion is produced by an interlocking system: capital incentives, platform logics, educational pathways, urban constraints, workplace norms and cultures all reinforce each other.

Lasting change requires redesigning the structures that determine how work is valued, how authority circulates and who is able to take creative risks. The recommendations below focus on building durable, ecosystem-level conditions rather than one-off initiatives. They are grounded in patterns surfaced through interviews, convenings and public consultation.

**Lasting change
requires redesigning
the structures that
determine how work
is valued, how
authority circulates
and who is able to
take creative risks.**



FOR STUDIOS & COMPANIES

Make role allocation, pay, and progression transparent

Publish role ladders, expected competencies and salary bands. Make criteria for project allocation explicit so women and gender-diverse employees are not routinely channelled into coordination-heavy or glue-work roles while men accumulate prestige projects and technical visibility. Transparency interrupts subtle gatekeeping.

Build leadership pathways that assume non-linear careers

Design managerial and technical tracks that incorporate breaks, caregiving responsibilities, and hybrid schedules as normal. Formal re-entry pathways and part-time leadership roles prevent mid-career stagnation. Promotion criteria must value long-term contribution, not just uninterrupted availability.

Enforce POSH as organisational infrastructure

Safety cannot rely on founder goodwill. Establish trusted Internal Committees, include external members, communicate processes clearly, and track anti-retaliation and case resolution as leadership KPIs. Studios cannot retain women and gender-diverse professionals without structural safety that is seen, tested, and believed.

Recognise and compensate invisible organisational labour

Mentorship, onboarding, morale-holding, conflict mediation, and employee resource group work are stabilising functions. Incorporate this labour into performance reviews with explicit time allocations, budgets, and promotion credit. This work keeps teams functional and must be formally valued rather than treated as personality or passion.

Create structured access to technical authority

Offer short-term rotations and apprenticeships within systems design, engine teams, tools development, and monetisation pipelines. Publish skill matrices and learning pathways so credibility is not determined by bias or insider networks. Access to complex systems should be designed deliberately and intentionally.

Decouple visibility from presenteeism

Redesign assessment frameworks around clarity of contribution, ownership of systems, and design or technical impact rather than late-night availability, bonding rituals, or participation in gendered social spaces. Studios must stop rewarding visibility that is only possible for a subset of employees.

Build accountability for culture into leadership KPIs

Evaluate leads on safety norms, meeting hygiene, respectful collaboration, work allocation fairness, documentation quality, and mentoring practices. Culture cannot be outsourced to those doing unpaid emotional labour. It must sit inside how leadership is measured, rewarded, and renewed.

FOR INDUSTRY BODIES & ECOSYSTEM ORGANISATIONS

Fund women and gender-diverse individual led creative risk

Establish small-grant programmes, residencies, and incubators for narrative, experimental, and feminist-aligned games. Prioritise risk-tolerant, low-administration funding that backs creators, not just prototypes.

Build cross-studio mentorship networks

Coordinate national mentorship programmes that connect mid-career women and gender-diverse professionals with senior leaders, including international mentors. Keep these spaces insulated from hiring pipelines.

Recognise community organisers as ecosystem infrastructure

Support organisers who run meetups, salary datasets, Discord communities, and safe-learning spaces through stipends, fellowships, or annual awards. Their labour sustains the cultural fabric of the sector.

Develop shared hiring standards

Publish inclusive job-description templates, interview rubrics, and evaluation frameworks that avoid coded language like “culture fit”, “hustler”, or “hardcore gamer”. Distributed tools reduce subjective, gendered gatekeeping.

FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS & TRAINING PROVIDERS

Expand exposure within women-heavy streams

Introduce modules on game design, narrative, worldbuilding, and interactive media within arts, humanities, design, commerce, and non-CS engineering programmes. Treat game-making as a legitimate creative-technical pathway.

Train faculty and placement cells in real industry pathways

Train institutions to speak accurately about career pathways, salaries, skill requirements, and safety concerns. Faculty attitudes shape which students feel authorised to enter the field.

Update curricula beyond tools

Shift from Unity/Blender-centric training to systems design, creative direction, player psychology, prototyping, and critical design. Tool-first curricula reinforce outsourcing legacies and limit access to creative authority.

FOR FUNDERS, PUBLISHERS & PLATFORMS

Support narrative, feminist, and culturally rooted IP

Create dedicated tracks for original intellectual property (IP) that may not fit hyper-casual templates. Evaluate success through cultural impact, craft, and ecosystem contribution.

Offer multi-year, patient funding

Extend longer runways and flexible milestones for studios, especially women or gender-diverse individual led ones, building original worlds and systems. Sustained funding counters the industry's structural pressure toward clones and derivative templates.

Expand curated visibility for underrepresented creators

Use platform featuring, store collections, and editorial curation to surface games by women and gender-diverse professionals without relegating them to separate “diversity” sections.

FOR COMMUNITIES & COLLECTIVE SPACES

Resource existing community groups rather than creating new ones

Provide venues, tech support, stipends, and accessibility resources to groups already doing the work. Avoid duplicating initiatives that fragment visibility and effort.

Strengthen regional ecosystems

Subsidise travel, venue costs, and event infrastructure in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. Participation should not depend on relocation to Bengaluru, Pune, or Delhi.

Support community-led transparency initiatives

Fund salary surveys, harassment mapping, and open datasets. These collectively held tools anchor accountability across the ecosystem.

Mainstream women and gender-diverse individual expertise in technical masterclasses

Ensure that sessions on systems design, engine optimisation, monetisation, and leadership at conferences are led by women and gender-diverse professionals, not siloed as special-interest panels. Visibility in core knowledge areas shifts mental models of who is a “technical expert”.

FOR POLICYMAKERS & GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Establish equity-centred governance for gaming

Gaming policy is still fragmented across MeitY, MYAS, MIB, and state departments, leaving representation and labour equity unaddressed. Create a coordinated governance mechanism that explicitly includes workforce inclusion, safety, and representation as policy priorities. This will lead to a governance architecture where equity is treated as a core driver of industry growth.

Introduce gender-disaggregated workforce reporting and pay-equity standards

Current Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, Comics, and Extended Reality policies do not require studios to report gender data, pay bands, or leadership representation. Mandate annual gender-disaggregated workforce reports, pay transparency guidelines, and anti-retaliation norms. This will lead to transparency that makes inequity visible, measurable, and correctable through policy and institutional action.

Create funding incentives for women- and gender-diverse-led creative work

Most public incentives reward outsourcing or production volume. Introduce grants, residencies, and tax support specifically for studios or creators led by women and gender-diverse professionals. This will lead to wider participation from women and gender-diverse creators who are otherwise excluded.

The industry is already changing, yet the burden of that change has fallen disproportionately on women and gender-diverse professionals who hold teams together, build informal networks and imagine alternative ways of working. The next phase requires shifting their labour from the margins into the architecture of the ecosystem: funding instruments, governance norms, safety systems and creative infrastructures that outlast any single studio or leader.

A gaming ecosystem where more people can author, lead and take creative risks becomes more inventive, resilient and culturally rooted. The recommendations above offer a foundation for building that future.

A gaming ecosystem
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playgrounds
of power



IMAGINING OTHERWISE:
FUTURES OF INDIAN
GAME-MAKING

This section offers a different kind of analysis. The earlier parts of the report describe the industry as it stands today and the structural gaps that shape it. Here, we explore a related question: if these conditions shifted, even slightly, what futures could become possible?

This section is for studio leads, developers, educators, funders and community organisers who shape the gaming ecosystem each day. Its purpose is to make visible the futures implied within the findings and to show how small structural changes could alter the texture of work and creative possibility. The provocations that follow are tools for thinking. Each one translates a pattern from the research into a future scene or shift. Some are practical, near-term possibilities that could emerge through policy or organisational design. Others work at a cultural level, offering new ways to understand legitimacy, labour, care and technical authority.

Together, these sketches widen the field of possibility. They help the industry see not only what needs attention but what could grow if women and gender-diverse practitioners were able to build and lead with less friction and stronger structural support. They are invitations to imagine what Indian game-making might look like if the knowledge already present at its margins shaped its centre.

NEAR-FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

These possibilities stay close to the present. Each one is a small but meaningful shift that could take root if the insights from this report are acted upon. They are intended to be recognisable, practical and easy to imagine within today's constraints.

A Shared Way of Making First Offers

A young developer in Indore receives her first offer from a Pune studio. Instead of a dense PDF, she is guided to a shared first-offer page maintained by a cluster of studios across cities. It lists salary ranges, progression pathways, safety policies, hybrid-work expectations and clear criteria for technical authorship. Her parents read it easily and are surprised to see something so straightforward in a creative field. Within months, candidates across the country begin asking whether studios follow the shared page. Gradually, more studios align with it. Transparency becomes a cultural practice rather than a distinctive feature of a few early adopters.

Naming the Work That Holds Teams Together

A designer in Hyderabad begins noting the behind-the-scenes work she does each week: teaching a new hire how the build pipeline functions, rewriting unclear documentation, smoothing tensions, checking in on a stressed programmer. She shares her list with two friends in different cities and they recognise the same pattern in their own routines. The notes circulate through Slack groups and Discord communities, eventually evolving into a simple team support checklist that a few studios begin to adopt. Over time, relational labour moves from being the unspoken glue of Indian game-making to something deliberately acknowledged and resourced.

New Ways of Understanding What Makes a Game “Good”

A gender-diverse solo developer in Kolkata releases a small narrative game about navigating public spaces that feel welcoming one day and unsafe the next. Traditional metrics show minimal retention. A new set of slow play indicators reveal how often players linger, revisit scenes and share their experiences. A platform features the game in a curated collection celebrating reflective play. The developer's lived experience becomes legible as design knowledge rather than an exception within a metrics regime that rarely captures emotional resonance.

SYSTEM-LEVEL SHIFTS AND FUTURE ORIENTATIONS

These provocations imagine what the industry could become if the structural conditions identified in this report shifted at scale.

They move beyond discrete interventions to explore emerging cultural norms, governance architectures and collective orientations that could shape Indian game-making in the years ahead. Each sketch is a thought experiment designed to widen the horizon of what this sector could hold. None of them stands alone. They are intentionally overlapping, incomplete and in conversation with one another.

They rest on two assumptions. First, creativity grows through infrastructure as much as through individual talent. Second, gender diversity is a shift in how knowledge enters systems, and legitimacy is culturally produced and open to renewal.

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THE NAZARIYA/نظريه GRID

The Nazariya Grid begins as a response to something developers across India recognise. Most major creative choices in studios still flow through a narrow set of instincts. These instincts are usually senior, homogenous, and often shaped by imported templates rather than the lived realities of Indian players. Teams know the consequences of this pattern. Characters flatten. Worlds feel generic. Creative coherence begins to fray long before a game reaches players.

A mid-sized studio in Mysore chooses to name the issue rather than work around it. They introduce a simple practice called the Nazariya Grid:

A shared decision lens that asks every team to pause before locking a mechanic, story arc, monetisation choice or art direction. Five questions held together in one frame.

Player Grounding

Does this decision reflect the lives of the players we are designing for? Who will recognise themselves in this story, mechanic, or world? Who is left out, misrepresented, or made invisible?

Cultural Patterning

What patterns does this choice repeat? Does it rely on stereotypes, familiar male-centred tropes, imported humour, or old formulas? Or does it help us show gender, class, region, and identity in more grounded ways?

Systems Integrity

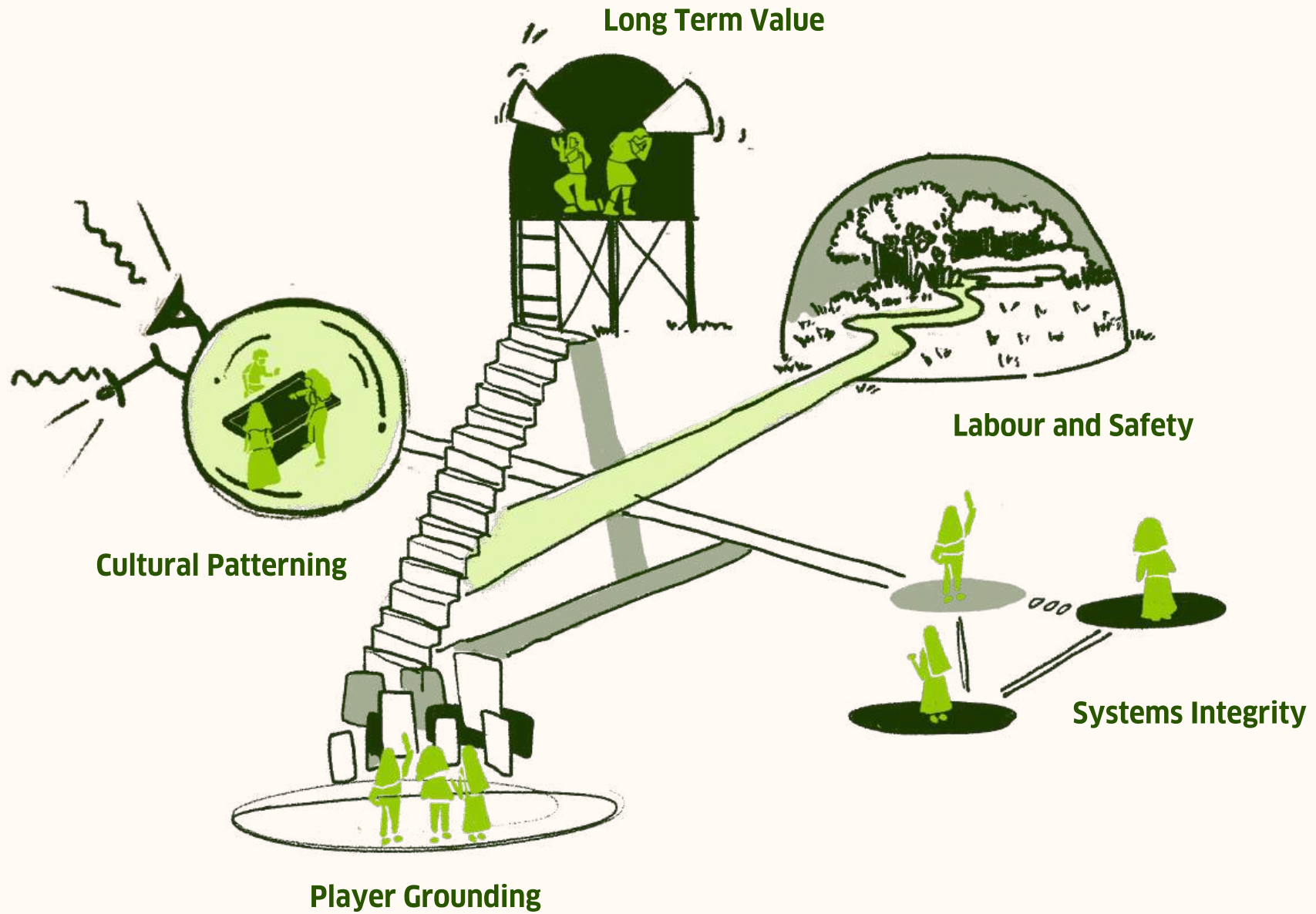
Do the mechanics, rewards, and progression actually support the experience we want to create? Are we rewarding behaviour that contradicts the story or emotional tone? Does the system push the game toward something we didn't intend?

Labour and Safety

What does this choice do to the team? Does it increase crunch risk, emotional pressure, or technical fragility? Does it put some roles, especially women, gender-diverse individuals, juniors, under more stress or exposure?

Long-Term Value

What future does this decision make possible? Does it only give us short-term numbers, or does it build trust, replayability, and the foundation for future work? Will we be proud of this choice a year from now?



The first time the studio uses the Nazariya Grid, the conversation spills far beyond the mechanic under review.

The team realises the loop assumes late-night uninterrupted sessions, which excludes many women and gender-diverse players. The proposed art direction doubles workload without meaningfully improving experience. The monetisation cue breaks the emotional narrative flow. No single person had seen these consequences alone. The Grid makes them visible at once.

The practice spreads steadily. A Hyderabad studio adapts the Grid for multiplayer systems. A Chennai design school incorporates it into capstone courses. A Pune indie team uses it to review whether a story arc unintentionally repeats caste-coded patterns. Within two years, some platforms and publishers begin asking for “Nazariya Notes” in pitch decks. These notes summarise how the five lenses shaped a game’s core decisions and who took part in the review. They become subtle indicators of design maturity, team health and long-term coherence.

When a large studio attempts to bypass the Grid in the interest of speed, junior developers push back. They argue that skipping reflection always returns later as rework and as crunch. Their stance resonates across the studio. What began as a modest internal exercise starts to function as a shared expectation in the wider ecosystem.

What this becomes as infrastructure:

1. A shared reasoning framework that broadens who shapes creative direction giving women and gender-diverse practitioners formal space to influence high-impact decisions.
2. A cultural coherence layer that reduces bias and imported templates at the point of design.
3. A distributed decision memory that strengthens safety, trust, and long-term craft across the ecosystem.

THE GULLY/गली ROUTES

Gully Routes begin as a response to something almost everyone in the industry knows yet rarely names. Career growth in Indian game development is unpredictable, opaque, and shaped by networks that many women and gender-diverse practitioners simply do not have. Official ladders appear stable on paper, but real movement happens through back-channel referrals, chance visibility, and silent detours around unsafe teams or biased leaders.

Gully Routes emerge as a collectively created system for tracing how careers actually move through the Indian gaming ecosystem.

They document real journeys including promotions, exits, pauses, sideways shifts, setbacks, lost opportunities, and the workarounds people invent when formal ladders fail. These lived pathways become shared “route cards” that reveal the real corridors women and gender-diverse developers use to grow in the industry. They describe the shortcuts that build momentum, the red flags to avoid, the supportive pockets that enable risk-taking, and the invisible labour that unlocks leadership.

Instead of the idealised hierarchies shown in HR charts, Gully Routes turn personal career paths into navigational tools. They centre the craft, survival strategies and creative lineage of practitioners historically pushed to the margins. They make visible knowledge that the industry has long relied on yet never formally recognised.

A small collective of mid-career, women and gender-diverse, developers in Mumbai begins the first mapping. They meet in a borrowed office in Andheri on Sunday afternoons. Whiteboards fill with trajectories: where people were promoted, which teams grow juniors well, where harassment pushes staff out, which studios value narrative craft, where burnout stalls growth and which indie collectives open doors when formal studios do not. One participant refers to it as a “gully map,” the side paths people follow to survive and advance when the main road is blocked.

Over time, patterns surface. Certain studios consistently nurture strong producers yet fail to grow women engineers. Some cities offer better re-entry after a break, while others provide momentum only if one is willing to shift specialisation. A handful of senior women appear repeatedly as anchor points in the ecosystem. These are the individuals who recommend, protect and open doors through informal networks that official systems never acknowledge.



The collective begins translating these journeys into “route cards”:

Entered gaming through QA and kept building small systems prototypes at night because formal transitions into design or engineering were blocked. A senior tools engineer eventually recognised the quality of her scripting tests and advocated for a transfer. Moving into gameplay programming felt like stepping into the career she had been building alone for years. Left a studio after months of a hostile lead who continually undermined their confidence. They did not file a complaint. They quietly stepped away. Re-entering the industry through small narrative contracts found via a gender-diverse Discord channel reminded them they had not lost their craft.

Spent years doing invisible balancing work that senior leads took credit for. A cross-studio jam finally revealed the elegance of her mechanics to a wider audience. Another studio saw the work, and hired her as a lead systems designer, recognising the role she had already been performing.

A narrative designer with a computing background persistently requested technical responsibilities. After months of pushing, they were trusted with AI dialogue integration. Delivering a working prototype shifted how the studio saw them, recasting them as a hybrid designer with technical grounding rather than just a “story person”.

The cards circulate across Discord servers, alumni groups and networks. They resonate because they speak plainly. They describe how the industry truly functions and how women and gender-diverse practitioners make it work.

Design schools begin using Gully Routes to guide students. For the first time, women and gender-diverse aspirants from tier 2 and tier 3 cities see career paths that include pauses, pivots, safety-based decisions and creative reinvention. Industry attention follows.

A few studios begin attaching “Route Commitments” to job postings. These commitments outline mentorship expectations, safety protocols and growth opportunities that respond directly to patterns highlighted in the maps. Platforms commission Route Profiles as part of showcases for emerging creators.

What this becomes as infrastructure:

1. A shared reasoning framework that broadens who shapes creative direction giving women and gender-diverse practitioners formal space to influence high-impact decisions.
2. A cultural coherence layer that reduces bias and imported templates at the point of design.
3. A distributed decision memory that strengthens safety, trust, and long-term craft across the ecosystem.

INTERLINE STUDIO

India has thousands of small teams building prototypes, story fragments, experimental mechanics and low-budget worlds. Very few of these ever reach players. The existing publishing landscape rewards finished products, velocity or proven formulas. It leaves little room for early-stage work or for collectives whose ideas fall outside dominant production logic.

Interline Studio comes as a response to this gap. A few mid-career developers realise that what India lacks is a shared space where small teams can publish playable ideas without going through the demands of a full production pipeline. They design Interline as a cooperative publishing layer for experiments, fragments and limited editions.

Interline operates through a simple set of working rules that shape how each informal collective releases work on its platform.

The rules are:

Cluster-Based Ownership

All releases must be produced by a small, self-organised cluster. Credit is listed collectively. Ownership is shared among cluster members.

Edition-Based Publishing

Releases must be scoped to the smallest playable form that expresses the core idea. Interline publishes in limited editions of mechanics studies, systems fragments or narrative prototypes.

Transparent Labour Documentation

Each release must include a labour note that specifies: a) contributors; b) time invested; c) constraints and conditions under which the work was produced. This information is recorded for transparency and accountability.

Release Criteria

A release is eligible for publication when the cluster confirms that the core experience, mechanic or idea functions coherently. High production polish is not a requirement.

Lineage Acknowledgement

Each release must document the ideas, references or prior works that informed its development. Acknowledgement is required to maintain continuity across the cooperative.



Revenue Split Protocol

All revenue generated from an Interline edition must be automatically divided among cluster members according to a pre-agreed split recorded at project initiation. No cluster may proceed to release without documenting the split. Interline holds no ownership stake and retains only operating fees where applicable.

Financial Transparency Standard

Interline publishes a quarterly financial summary for all cooperative releases. This summary must include: a) total revenue per edition; b) distribution amounts per cluster; c) operating costs deducted; d) any platform or processing fees. Financial data is shared with all cooperative members and archived for auditability.

Public Reasoning Requirement

Each edition must include an Interline Note summarising the purpose of the release, the design question it explores and key decisions taken during development. These notes form a shared knowledge base for the cooperative.

A two-person team in Kochi shares a movement prototype they had been iterating on after work. A small group working between Hyderabad and Guwahati posts a non-linear progression test that had never fit into their day jobs. Each edition is small, but together they open a view into the kinds of early ideas and technical explorations that rarely make it past internal channels.

As Interline grows, different groups begin to use it for different reasons. Independent developers publish experiments that would never receive formal funding. A number of clusters start releasing work without navigating biased hiring loops. People outside the major hubs use Interline to show capability without relocating.

Over time, Interline starts to change how early-stage work is valued. For many teams, Interline becomes a way to build momentum through regular, public releases rather than waiting for a full game to be approved or funded.

What this becomes as infrastructure:

1. A cooperative publishing layer that gives early-stage work visibility.
2. A shared memory system that records how ideas develop across clusters.
3. A pathway for women, gender-diverse and off-centre practitioners to enter authorship on their own terms.
4. A way for Indian game-making to grow through continuous, public experimentation.

playgrounds
of power



CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

What this report makes visible is simple. The industry is not short of imagination. What is missing are the systems that allow imagination to circulate.

Women and gender-diverse practitioners are already shaping new ways of working through community-led support, teaching, safer microcultures and experimental forms of creative direction. This work strengthens the ecosystem every day, yet it sits inside a sector that has not yet learned how to hold, recognise or sustain it.

The exclusions documented here are features of a system shaped by uneven access to education, narrow definitions of technical legitimacy, volatile funding cycles and organisational cultures built without the full diversity of creators in mind. These conditions produce predictable outcomes. They create constrained creative direction, uneven access and a development workforce that does not reflect the people who play games in India. They can shift, but only through deliberate and collective effort.

Moving beyond execution toward real creative authorship will require infrastructures that honour care, distribute risk and recognise the full spectrum of labour that makes games possible.

Technical labour, creative labour, relational labour and organisational labour together form the foundation of a healthy game-making ecosystem. Equitable participation is the basis for a more inventive, culturally grounded and resilient sector.

The early signals already exist. Teams working collaboratively. Communities organising differently. Leaders experimenting with new forms of responsibility. What remains is the slower, harder work. Turning these signals into durable conditions. Futures are not imagined once and then implemented. They are rehearsed, iterated and held in common across teams, institutions and generations. The next phase of Indian game-making will depend on how seriously the industry takes this work and how deeply it invests in a system where more people can author, lead and take creative risks.

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WHAT'S NEXT

This report is a starting point. The landscape it describes is still shifting, and many of the issues surfaced here require deeper inquiry than any single initiative can hold.

The real texture of the industry lies in the lived experiences of women and gender-diverse practitioners, experiences that deserve sustained, qualitative attention. Much more remains to be understood. We invite studios, community groups, educators, funders and policy actors to treat these insights as working material. Test what resonates. Challenge what does not. Adapt the recommendations to your contexts. Extend the imaginaries in ways that reflect India's varied and layered realities.

In 2026, Playgrounds of Power will continue through public conversations and community-led experiments that build on this work. Alongside this, we will begin creating an open repository of active Discord communities, peer support networks, and groups that women and gender-diverse creators can join for guidance, solidarity, and shared learning. We hope this report serves as a reference for internal reflection, a prompt for negotiating better norms and a foundation for collaborations that recognise women and gender-diverse practitioners as authors of the industry's future.

This field is still taking form. The next steps need collaborators and resourcing that can hold work beyond the scope of a single report.

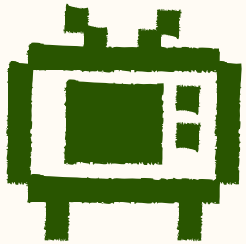
We are seeking support for:

- Deeper qualitative inquiry into the structural and lived realities shaping participation.
- Collaborative workshops that allow studios and communities to prototype new ways of working.
- Storytelling efforts that widen visibility for women and gender-diverse practitioners.
- Sector-wide dialogues that help articulate shared futures.

If you're interested in collaborating or supporting this work including funding future inquiry, workshops, or documentation, we'd welcome the conversation.

You can reach us at dhaval@lagorcollective.com and alifiya@lagorcollective.com.

If you would like to offer feedback or share additions to strengthen this report, you can send your thoughts through [this form](#).



SOURCES

There is no established body of literature that fully captures the gendered, cultural and organisational conditions of game-making in India.

Much of what is known lives in practice: in lived experience, in conversations shared in trust, and in emerging scholarship scattered across disciplines. The sources listed here reflect the small set of materials that informed this report including interviews, convenings, conversations and community knowledge. This report draws on materials that do not fit neatly within conventional academic citation systems: industry reports, policy documents, media writing, community-generated datasets and practitioner-led publications.

We have chosen not to force these diverse sources into a single Western academic standard. Instead, each citation preserves the context, format and authorship of the original material.

Importantly, these sources have not been treated as literal inputs to be extracted or reproduced verbatim. Rather, they have served as contextual signals, helping situate interview insights, highlight structural patterns and deepen our understanding of the wider ecosystem. The report draws from them interpretively and relationally, acknowledging their value in shaping the analytical frame.

Primary Knowledge

Playgrounds of Power - Practitioner Convening/Workshop, New Delhi (September 2025). Hosted by Lagori Collective and Goethe-Institut New Delhi. Contributions from Aamir Khan, Damini Pawha, Dedipyaman Shukla, Deepanjali Sarna, Kinshuk Sinha, Lalima Singh, Mala Sen, Prof. Nidhi Gupta, Shagufta Khan and Vikram Khazanchi.

Glitching the Game - Public Event, New Delhi (September 2025). Hosted by Lagori Collective and Goethe-Institut New Delhi. Contributions from Deepanjali Sarna, Mala Sen, Shagufta Khan, and audience participants who shared questions and reflections.

Qualitative Interviews and Open Community Survey - Practitioner Interviews & Community Responses. (August - November, 2025). Contributions from Dedipyaman Shukla, Kanan Rai, Megha Gupta, Narosenla L., Namala Kajol, Poornima Seetharaman, Srushti Paranjpe, Vikram Khazanchi and many others who preferred anonymity.

Community-Generated Knowledge

[State of Salaries in the Indian Games Industry in 2021](#). Crowdsourced Salary Survey / Community Platform. Gamedev.in (GameDev India Substack). July 29, 2022.

Industry Knowledge

[India's Gaming Inflection: Non-RMG at Scale](#): Industry Report. Lightbox India Advisors Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai.

[A Studio Called India: Content and Media Services for the World](#). Industry Report. EY India. May 2025

[Survey of Domestic Game Developers](#). Workforce Survey / Industry Body. Rehan Hassan. All India Game Developers' Forum (AIGDF). March 2025.

[Beyond the Screen: Women in Games Report - An Analysis of Women in India's Gaming Workforce](#). Workforce Analysis: Gender & Roles. All India Game Developers' Forum, Coral, and M League. February 2025.

[Female Gamers in Asia](#). Industry Research: Regional Trends. Niko Partners. Version prepared for the Women in Games Asia Panel at Gamescom Asia 2022. October 2022.

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[India's Booming Online Gaming Industry: A Potential Powerhouse](#). Policy Analysis. EGROW Foundation and Primus Partners India. 2024.

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Media & Journalism

[How Women Are Carving Their Path in India's Gaming Industry](#). Feature Journalism. Author: Jaya Chahar. ET Edge Insights (Media & Entertainment). March 31, 2025.

[The Representation of Female Characters in Indian Video Games: Moving Beyond Stereotypes](#). Arts & Culture Journalism. Author: Uzair Jan. The Kashmir Walla. January 27, 2025.

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