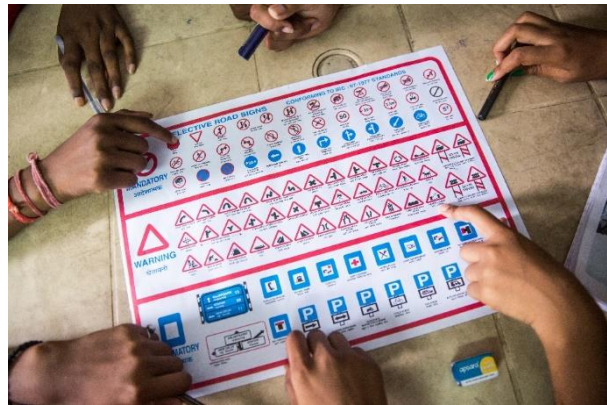


## Changing Mind-sets and opening opportunities!!

The challenges that most Indian women living in poverty with their families in resource-poor communities face, are harsh and tough. The numbers paint a bleak picture: In India, only 1 in 3 women is employed professionally - women's workforce participation has dropped from 35% in 2005 to 26% (World Economic Forum Report, 2018), reflecting not just women's conditional access to resources and opportunities, but also the deep-seated gender inequalities like restrictions on mobility, early marriage, high incidence of violence at home and public spaces. India ranks 142 out of a total of 149 countries in the economic opportunity and participation sub-index, with the gender pay gap at a massive 39% (World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2018).

Beyond the lack of access to professional education or any type of vocational training for women outside of traditional low paying jobs or unpaid – such as homemaking, agriculture, sewing, babysitting, domestic work, etc. there is also the added challenges of repressive social stigmas of women working outside the home. There is a great need to provide women with adequate skills and equips them with the means to, make informed choices and negotiate financial decisions thus making them independent and overall equal contributors.

**Azad Foundation** challenges the long-standing gender norms that limit women's economic choices through its idea of non-traditional remunerative livelihoods. Azad's "**Women on Wheels**" program especially challenges professional driving, that's considered a man's domain, as a means of livelihood for resource-poor women. Azad began with 9 women in 2008, and has been able to empower **over 2000 women** to earn livelihoods with dignity by gaining employment as professional chauffeurs.



**Opening new markets for employment:** - Azad along with its employment partner, Sakha, launched the Sakha cab services in yet another city, Indore to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the trained women chauffeurs. We are also glad to share another significant development with the signing of the MoU with National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation, which will help in increasing the Sakha fleet across cities and will boost the employment opportunities of the Azad trained women professional drivers while extending support to the differently abled.

**Zeenath's story**, is testimony to the importance of Azad's holistic approach and the transformational training that goes beyond just the technical training to help women take control of their lives. The training components of self-development and empowerment are essential for imparting women the voice, confidence and tools to overcome the multiple barriers they face within - their family, the community they live in, and the society at large.

22-year old Zeenath lives with her father and 6 siblings. The family survived on the meagre earnings of her father, a construction worker and 2 brothers, a factory worker, and a driver. She had to drop out of college due to financial strain.



Zeenath and her mother learnt about **Azad's Women on Wheels** when they met Azad's mobilizers. It was her mother, who was then battling Kidney disease and cancer, who insisted that she consider the opportunity despite resistance from her father and brothers, who wanted Zeenath to work as a seamstress or a beautician - jobs, that they considered 'suitable' for a woman.

With her mother's strong backing, Zeenath completed her training - from turning on the ignition for the first time to self-defence to eye-opening sessions on gender disparity and patriarchy, Zeenath learnt and enjoyed every training module at Azad. Her mother was pleased to witness Zeenath transform into a confident and independent woman.

Just as Zeenath progressed to becoming a Sakha commercial cab driver, her mother passed away. She believes her mother fought to stay alive to see Zeenath live a life of dignity and earn a decent living; pushing Zeenath to live up to her expectations.

Today, Zeenath not just enjoys driving the car but also takes her pride in her financial independence that allows her to contribute towards the repayment of her brother's business loan and partially support his education. She has also started saving wisely and hopes to buy a house for herself and her family someday soon.

### **An Attitudinal Shift in Family and Community...**

There was a time when Zeenath's father and brothers would not accept the fact that she had the freedom to express her thoughts or an opportunity to be independent. Today, they are supportive of her career choice as a professional driver and respect her independence.

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**"Neighbour's would often ridicule the efforts of girls training at Azad to become drivers. But the very choice of girls doing so has also initiated discussion on the topic of women working in a non-traditional job, and is slowly breaking stereotypes around women's employment."**

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Social structures are gradually changing and people & families are slowly beginning to understand and support the idea that women – their daughters, sisters, and wives – also need to get out and participate in public life and experience things on their own, all they need is a little help.

**Thank you for helping us enable women like Zeenath, the chance to ascertain themselves and help change mind-sets. You can read more in the [Annual Report](#).**

It is with your help that the lives of resource-poor women in India are being transformed every day. We look forward to your continuous support to reach out to more women who can join this pool of skilled women professional drivers.... **Together, we can do a great deal more, so help us do more!**