

All Aboard?

The recent introduction of a free public transportation scheme for women in the state of Karnataka saw multiple issues being raised. Arguments of economic feasibility, wastage of taxpayers' money and further alienation of women were raised during the introduction of similar schemes in Delhi and Punjab as well. In the following article, **Santoshi Harish**, Academic Associate at IIMA, argues for such schemes where women are incentivized to use public transportation. She presents a similar scheme that has been implemented in Tamil Nadu and brings to us narratives from the beneficiaries.



WOMEN'S FREE ACCESS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORT: A NECESSITY, AND NOT A PRIVILEGE.

In 2021, the Tamil Nadu state government announced the Zero-Ticket Bus Travel (ZTBT) scheme with an aim to increase women's mobility and their participation in the workforce. A significant allocation of Rs.1200 crores was granted to the state transport corporations as an annual subsidy. The scheme allows women to travel in the government-owned Metropolitan Transport Corporation (MTC) buses free of cost with no ceiling on the number of times the service can be availed. A similar scheme for school students and persons with disability has been in place for some time in the state. There are three categories of MTC buses— deluxe, express, and ordinary. Since the scheme applies only to the ordinary buses, it is painted pink to distinguish it from the rest of the fleet. Even though the stereotypical colour association might draw flak from some quarters, such a policy addressing gender concerns has been long overdue in the urban mobility sphere. This policy for women is bound to have positive effects as we will see later.

The State Planning Commission report on ZTBT Phase 1 and Phase 2 conducted in four districts—Chennai, Madurai, Nagapattinam, and Tirupur, evaluated the impact of the scheme over the last two years. The findings show that female ridership increased substantially from 40% to 61%. It also reveals that a major proportion of the beneficiaries belong to the unorganised sector such as the vegetables, fruit, and flower vendors, along with workers from construction sites, and factories. The report also found that the monthly savings of such passengers rose from 8% - 12% (Rs.756 to Rs.1,012 per month) to 11% for an average woman and 14% for individuals belonging to the economically weaker sections such as domestic workers and street vendors. This leaves a small surplus at their disposal which is mostly spent on groceries, children's educational expenses and/or to meet the sudden changes in the price of necessary commodities due to retail inflation. This is significant as more than 80% of the women who participated in the study earned a monthly income of less than Rs.12,000 (Vijayabaskar & Tresa, 2022a, b).

Rekha* is a 50-year-old caretaker of an elderly couple. She travels from Mudichur to Mylapore, a 30-kilometer distance that takes her around 1.5-to-2-hours. Though she cannot always rely on the free bus for her commute to work, she does benefit from it. While changing two buses for her long commute, on an average one of it is the free bus. She says, "We can also get down at any stop if the bus gets crowded and take the next bus from any of the subsequent stops without worrying about the fare." When asked if she has ever faced any issues while availing the scheme, she remarks, "During the peak hours, women sometimes face the heat from male co-passengers who think that women are at an undue advantage, crowding the bus because it is free."

Malar*, a 60-year-old flower vendor from Central Chennai and a patron of the ZTBT scheme mentions she has noticed a rise in footfall of homemakers in the Koyambedu market in the mornings and afternoons for purchasing vegetables and fruits after the introduction of the scheme. When asked how she was able to spot this distinctly, she said, “from the attire and at what time they come, we can recognise who is a student, who is an IT professional and who is a housewife.” Further, when asked how often she uses this facility, she adds, “Since I have to carry a lot of weight with me and because of my joint pain, I’m not a frequent user. But, yes, I have seen many housewives now come to the market.”

The above experiences reveal how the free public transport service can help increase the mobility of women who are otherwise dependent on family members for their transportation needs. The same is also evident from the State Planning Commission report, thus showing that the scheme encourages women’s public participation and empowers them to take decisions for themselves. For some, free mobility through public transportation has also been instrumental in breaking the barrier of distance, thus allowing them to take up better paying jobs (Kiruthika & Ravi, n.d.). This is corroborated by a study that shows travelling long distances can be a major issue hampering the labour force participation for women (Jain, 2021). The Informal Economy Monitoring Survey based in Ahmedabad shows that women are more likely to take up lesser paying jobs closer to their homes due to lack of affordable urban transport and safety (Mahadevia, Mishra, & Vyas, 2014). Thus, better mobility widens the pool of options available to resource-strapped women, thereby allowing them to explore better avenues of socio-economic upliftment.

Free travel schemes for women have been met with many unfair criticisms that do not take into account the following facts. Women experience ‘trip-chaining’ owing to the fact that they run several errands through multiple short trips. These errands are a combination of economic activities and care-taking responsibilities. Due to this, they end up paying more for daily travel, which has been termed as the ‘pink-tax’ (Nikore & Ollivier, 2022). Such criticisms also discount the significant impact women’s mobility and labour force participation can have on the household and the economy as a whole. A survey conducted in Delhi shows that on an average, even though women cover around 38% shorter trips than men, they pay around 54% more than men (Acharya & Gupta, n.d.). Similar patterns have also been observed in Argentina and Colombia (Steinmayr, 2022).

According to the National Sample Survey Organisation data, a public bus is the primary mode of transportation for more than 60% of both rural and urban households. A good public transport system directly incentivises women’s mobility (Bandagi, 2021). Tamil Nadu’s robust public transport system caters to one-fourth of its total labour force (Doe, n.d.). Out of an estimated 1.6 crore daily bus passengers, women comprise 40% of the travellers (Durai, 2021). It is laudable that the state has acknowledged the need for gender perspective in designing its public infrastructure policy and has promptly decided to further increase the subsidy allocation from Rs.1,200 crores to Rs.1,600 crores in its 2022-23 budget. Apart from Tamil Nadu, the Delhi and Punjab governments have already implemented similar cost-free transit facilities for women. Recently, Karnataka too implemented such a scheme. These states provide successful cases for other governments to adopt a similar policy. Access to safe and reliable transportation system, especially for women, boosts their mobility and consequently increase their participation in the labour force. As the proportion of women availing free public transport increases, communities become safer with more women stepping out of homes and participating in not just the labour market but also in social events (Archana, 2022). Mobility, thus, is the fulcrum to social and economic inclusivity, women’s agency, and their reclamation of public spaces. While economic concerns might prove to be a sore point in the short run, the benefits far outweigh the cost.

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IIMA TALKS

While research has shown that such schemes have a positive impact on the participation of women, there are concerns as well. Therese Abraham, former Research Assistant with the CMGI, spoke to a few community members on how they viewed such measures taken by the state.



Treesa* (Research Assistant): Public transportation needs to be free for all, not just women. The schemes which allow for it are definitely moving in the right direction. In the current times, we can see that women are at a disadvantage when it comes to ownership of vehicles or access to modes of transportation. Schemes such as this will definitely bring about a change in that and correct the skew of visibility of women out and about.

Madhur* (Research Assistant): I don't understand why the scheme must cover all women on account of them being from a particular gender. This in fact pushes back the movement towards equality. Why should a woman who earns in lakhs per year and a woman who is barely able to fend for her family be clubbed together? It should have more qualifiers attached to it rather than being a blanket policy addressing women as a homogenous group.



Atul* (Student): It is a good initiative by the Karnataka government. This scheme will encourage the participation of more women in the labour force. This will be especially beneficial to women who work in the informal sector and earn meagre amounts. It has the potential to help women to save and leads to an improvement in nutrition and health status and level of children's education.



Naren* (Academic Associate): Free public transportation ride schemes for women have potential to address mobility challenges and safety concerns. By removing financial barriers, these initiatives aim to empower women to access education, employment, and social opportunities more easily. However, successful implementation requires careful planning, including addressing potential overcrowding, ensuring adequate funding, and preventing misuse. Evaluating the impact on gender equality, public infrastructure, and overall societal benefits is crucial. Collaborative efforts between the government, transportation authorities, and civil society can maximize the positive outcomes of such schemes while addressing any potential drawbacks.

Arundathi* (Research Assistant): Ensuring women access more opportunities does not singularly depend on accessing free public transportation. Creating safe spaces that are conducive need to go hand in hand with such policies. Schemes such as this need to be coupled with adequate infrastructural support and governance mechanism to ensure that the changes are sustained. Else, this just drains the exchequer with no tangible change in society with no lasting impact on the state of lives of the common woman. Essentially, the scheme cannot exist in a silo and needs to be backed up by policy changes in related areas as well.



Suresh* (Student): While the intention of 'empowering' women is commendable, I somewhere feel that all of this is just political appeasement trying to influence election outcomes. Most of these women-centric policies are just that— tokenism. Such policies will only create artificial distinctions between men and women.

**Names have been anonymised*

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