

IMPACT OF FREE SCHEMES FOR WOMEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF KARNATAKA: EMPOWERING MOBILITY, ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION, AND GENDER EQUALITY

Banu Prakash M

Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce

University Constituent College, Lingarajapura, Bangalore, India

Abstract

In recent years, the Government of Karnataka has implemented several schemes aimed at fostering women's empowerment, notably by ensuring free public transit and financial support. The Shakti plan—free state-to-state transportation in non-deluxe buses to women, as well as transgender and students, and similar ones like the Grihalakshmi guarantee program—have provoked significant controversy amongst policymakers, academicians, and the people at large. This research has analyzed the socio-economic impacts of these programs as far as mobility among women, participation in the labour force, and general happiness are concerned. By comparing quantitative outcomes (such as rising ridership and number of daily trips) against qualitative factors (like enhanced safety perception and greater access to public space) through baseline study data analysis and media reports, we identify both the possible benefits, and the challenges of such initiatives, and inform future policy guidance for sustainable and inclusive urban transportation systems.

Keywords: *Free Schemes, Women's Empowerment, Shakti Scheme, Grihalakshmi, Guarantee Scheme, Public Transport, Gender Equality*

Introduction

The prevalence of gender disparities in access to public transport and economic opportunity has been a perennial challenge in developing urban policies that are inclusive in nature. With a view to mitigating this, the Government of Karnataka has initiated a series of specialized interventions with the explicit

aim of eradicating mobility barriers faced by women. The mid-2023-launched Shakti scheme provides women, including transgender persons and female students, with free intra-state movement, thereby raising engagement in the public space and the labor market. Complementary programs such as the Grihalakshmi guarantee scheme, which guarantees a cash allowance every

month, aim to further boost economic independence among women. The aim of this research paper is to analyze the diverse impacts of such schemes, providing answers to questions regarding their effectiveness, sustainability, and replicability.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Background on Transport and Gender Empowerment

Globally, public transport policies that remove financial or safety-based constraints are commonly linked with enhanced mobility, improved job opportunities, and increased socio-economic empowerment of women. Research in urban studies and gender economics indicates that as women gain more secure and accessible transport, their participation in education, market activities, and social life increases significantly. Karnataka's strategy exists in this larger discourse and recognizes access to public transport not as a matter of convenience but as an important aspect of gender justice and economic effectiveness.

Literature Review of Studies on Karnataka's Schemes

Existing studies are conflicting but penetrating. For instance, academic and policy reports have thoroughly evaluated the Shakti scheme through the lenses that

scrutinize mobility, reclaiming of public space, and labour market outcomes. Analysis like "Karnataka's Shakti Scheme: Women Reclaiming Public Spaces" emphasizes the shift in the form of urban space and reducing economic reliance among women. Additionally, baseline assessments from the Just Jobs Network indicate that enhancing the availability of affordable transport has direct benefits on labour force participation and perceived agency among women, even as critics note the limitations in isolating the direct causal benefits of such interventions.

Objectives

- Analyze the impact of free schemes of Karnataka on the mobility and availability of women in public space.
- Evaluate the impact of free transport on free mobility, safety, and availability in the city for women.
- Evaluate economic implications in the form of labour force participation and economic independence.
- Analyze how the schemes empower women to enter employment, save, and become autonomous.
- Analyze social and cultural transformations in gender roles and citizenship.

- Describe how enhanced mobility promotes inclusion, empowerment, and social engagement.
- Identify implementation challenges and suggest sustainable reform policy.
- Analyse fiscal interests, political interests, and suggest comprehensive long-term solutions.

Hypothesis

Introduction of free public transport (Shakti scheme) and direct cash transfer (Grihalakshmi scheme) by the Government of Karnataka promotes women's mobility, employment in the labour market, and socio-economic empowerment remarkably. The schemes are anticipated to reduce economic and psychological burdens to access the public sphere, thus enhancing women's presence in educational, occupational, and civic spaces. In addition, enhanced standards of safety and cost-effectiveness should allow for freedom and balance out gendered traditional ways of operating. These advantages can be managed, however, by the efficiency of scheme management, financial priorities, and individuals' attitudes toward women's growing visibility and mobility.

Theoretical Framework

The evaluation of Karnataka's free schemes for women can be understood in a multi-disciplinary framework that borrows from:

- **Feminist Economics:** Examining how reduced commuting costs and improved mobility challenge traditional economic dependencies.
- **Transport Accessibility Theory:** Investigating the way more access to cheap and secure public transport raises participation in economic and social activities.
- **Public Policy Assessment:** Analyzing the cost-effectiveness and final viability of maintaining "freebie" schemes as well as their longer-term social implications.

Methodology

Data Sources and Analysis

Mixed-methods approach is used for this research:

- **Qualitative Analysis:** Reading of newspaper articles, scholarly literature, as well as policy reports to judge public perception alongside qualitative findings of the schemes.
- **Quantitative Assessment:** Secondary analysis of government websites, baseline research, and reports such as those of the Fiscal Policy Institute and Economic Times. For instance, as per one Economic Times report, over 12

crore journeys had been enrolled under the Shakti scheme up to July 2023, reflecting high rates of adoption among women.

Analytical Approach

Evidence has been evaluated to gauge the impact of free schemes on women's day-to-day life, employment opportunities, and socio-economic independence. Obstacles such as operational difficulties, financial sustainability concerns, and potential political considerations (e.g., claims to be election pledges) are considered as well. Comparative examination against similar international initiatives provides context in assessing long-term effects.

Limitations

While rich qualitative and quantitative data are present, disentangling the distinct impacts of these schemes from other socio-economic influences is problematic. Long-term longitudinal data covering a number of years following the introduction might be employed in subsequent research to more precisely establish causal links.

Findings

Enhanced Mobility and Access to Public Space

One of the most immediate impacts of the Shakti scheme has been the greater mobility

of women. By providing free travel, the scheme has not only encouraged greater use of public transport but also enabled women to reclaim urban spaces that were otherwise inaccessible or daunting. Women have reported feeling safer and having more freedom to move for work, education, or leisure. Their re-definition as active women's transit points and bus stop locales is an extremely evident sign of this transition.

Economic Impacts and Contribution to the Labour Force

It has major economic impacts. More access to transport means that:

- **Labour Market Participation:** Numerous women are now accessing previously logistically or financially beyond-them work options. Easy and safe movement is directly associated, as research findings in baseline studies have demonstrated, with better labour market participation as well as the quality of available jobs.
- **Cost Savings and Time:** All those women who earlier had to shell out heavy transport charges now have financial ease to use their capital for development activities like vocation training or education. Table presenting some relevant comparative figures below:

Indicator	Before Scheme	After Scheme
Daily Total Bus Travelers	Approximately 80 lakhs (generalized figure)	Approximately 1.10 crore travellers overall*[Estimate]*
Women's Share	Data not comprehensively recorded	Over 55% of bus travellers are women
Cumulative Female Journeys	–	Over 12 crore journeys recorded as of early evaluation

Such increased mobility has favorable downstream consequences on women's economic empowerment by saving time and money.

Social and Cultural Aspects

Aside from economic and mobility gains, free schemes for women have triggered wider social transformation:

- **Security and Safety:** The guarantee of free and safe movement decreases the risk of harassment women would otherwise face in informal or less regulated public transport.
- **Community Participation:** Greater access to the public space increases the chances of women participating in social networks, local government, and communal activities, building an inclusive city.

These systems not only enable empowerment of the individual but enable changing societal norms for public presence by women.

Criticisms and Debates

There have been advances, but there remain serious criticisms:

- **Fiscal Sustainability:** The critics say that subsidizing free transport for women might be an enormous taxpayer cost. Some economic analyses are such that although the short-run gains in empowerment and security are clear, longer-term fiscal sustainability calls for complementary policy.
- **Politicization of Welfare:** These programs are feared to be politicized during election seasons, thereby undermining their legitimacy as effective policy interventions when political agendas change.

These are some of the issues that suggest the need for an equilibrated policy intervention that couples free transport with complementary initiatives such as enhanced job creation, childcare centers, and enhance health infrastructure to supplement the overall empowerment of women.

Discussion

Crossroads of Mobility and Empowerment

Mass deployment of the Shakti scheme is a pioneering case study in demonstrating how mobility can be a keystone for large-scale societal change. The nexus between affordable transport and economic autonomy is ineluctably established, and Karnataka's actions add empirical support to this relationship. Greater mobility means positive gains in women's education, health, and employment and thus as an agent for better socio-economic outcomes.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Considering the impacts that are being seen so far, policymakers have these recommendations to weigh:

- **Integrated Support System:** Low-cost child care, training initiatives, and robust anti-harassment policies need to be combined with free transportation programs to help maximize their benefits.
- **Regular Impact Evaluations:** Conducting regular, solid evaluations will allow the causal impacts to be unraveled from the effects and indicate areas of improvement. A longitudinal survey over a three-year period, for instance, can reveal more precise details

regarding long-term versus short-term political gains.

- **Enduring Funding Mechanisms:** Innovation in public-private partnerships or astute budget reallocations could make the programs financially viable while persisting in economically and socially empowering women.

Wider Implications for Leadership and HR

To business leaders and HR managers, far-reaching implications of these initiatives reach far and wide. Increased mobility for women is most immediately associated with increased workforce participation, employee ease of work, and more diversity in hiring and promotion policy. Along with these policies, companies can promote sustainable HR practice and ethical leadership, paving the way towards gender equality in both the public and private sectors.

Further Reflections and Future Directions

Beyond the obvious gains, researching the interaction of free transit with full women empowerment raises further issues. How would such initiatives induce other bordering states or other emerging economies to follow suit and implement similar policy initiatives? How can data analysis be integrated with participatory research to uncover fine-grained difficulties

faced by different subgroups in the beneficiary community? Organizations, policymakers, and researchers can draw a lesson from Karnataka by evaluating interventions that address mobility solutions by combining them with community development and, thereby, creating the base for more resilient, inclusive cities of the future.

Conclusion

The Government of Karnataka's new free programs for women, especially the Shakti and Grihalakshmi programs, are a significant step towards reducing long-standing mobility and economic constraints for women. The rising rates of use, enhanced public safety, and increased economic participation signal the general gains such policies can generate. Nevertheless, difficulties—ranging from fiscal sustainability to political forces—need to be overcome if these programs are to deliver long-term benefits to society. Future studies need to distinguish between the long-term effects, whereas policymakers need to

be flexible in incorporating transport projects with overall socio-economic support mechanisms. This combination of mobility, empowerment, and strategic planning can be a model for other parts of the world that seek to improve gender equality and sustainable development.

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