

Shakti Yojane in Karnataka: Empowering Women through Free Bus Travel – A Field-Based Assessment

Saraswati H Bammanal

Assistant Professor, RTES Degree College, Ranebennur, Karnataka, India

DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v15i03.007

¹ Received: 14/06/2025; Accepted: 28/08/2025 Published: 09/09/2025

Abstract

This study assesses the impact of the *Shakti Yojane*, Karnataka's free bus travel scheme for women, on enhancing mobility, economic savings, and social empowerment. Drawing from field surveys conducted across districts such as Dharwad and Haveri, the report analyzes usage patterns, satisfaction levels, and operational challenges from the perspectives of women commuters, transport staff, and officials. Key findings reveal significant monthly savings, improved access to education and employment, and enhanced feelings of safety and dignity in public transport. However, issues such as overcrowding, limited bus frequency, and lack of awareness among marginalized groups persist. The study concludes with recommendations to strengthen the scheme's implementation and offers broader policy insights for gender-inclusive transport planning in India.

1. Introduction

In June 2023, the Government of Karnataka launched the **Shakti Yojane**, a flagship welfare scheme aimed at promoting gender equity in public transportation. Under this scheme, women domiciled in Karnataka are allowed to travel free of cost on non-luxury state-run buses across the state. Operated by four Road Transport Corporations—KSRTC, BMTC, NWRKTC, and KKRTC—the scheme is a key component of the state's broader strategy to address socio-economic and mobility barriers faced by women, particularly those from rural and low-income backgrounds. The primary objective is to enhance women's access to education, employment, health services, and social networks by removing the cost barrier associated with daily commuting.

The **Shakti Yojane** was conceived in the context of long-standing gender disparities in mobility patterns, where women often restrict travel due to affordability concerns, safety issues, and lack of supportive infrastructure. By making public transport free for women, the scheme seeks to democratize mobility and improve women's participation in the public sphere. Beyond the immediate benefit of cost savings, it aims to enable greater independence, self-determination, and social visibility for women across both urban and rural Karnataka. The scheme also attempts to address spatial inequities, where rural and remote areas have historically faced challenges in connectivity and transportation access.

This initiative marks an important shift towards **gender-responsive mobility policies**, which are essential for inclusive and equitable development. Traditional transport policies have often overlooked the distinct needs and constraints faced by women commuters—such as trip chaining, caregiving responsibilities, and reliance on non-motorized or public modes of travel. By centering women's mobility, Shakti Yojane sets a precedent in recognising

¹ How to cite the article: Bammanal S.H.; (September, 2025); Shakti Yojane in Karnataka: Empowering Women through Free Bus Travel – A Field-Based Assessment; *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*; Vol 15, Issue 3; 83-93, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v15i03.007>

mobility not merely as a logistical challenge but as a key instrument of social justice. As this article will show, field-level evidence suggests that such policies have the potential to transform the everyday lives of women, while also raising important questions about sustainability, infrastructure capacity, and long-term impact.

2. Brief Review of Literature:

Existing literature on gender and mobility highlights the systemic barriers women face in accessing safe, affordable, and reliable public transportation. Studies by the **UN Women (2017)** and the **World Bank (2020)** underscore that women's mobility is shaped by income constraints, time poverty, safety concerns, and socio-cultural norms. These factors often result in reduced access to education, employment, and public services, especially for women in low-income and rural households.

In the Indian context, research by **Agarwal and Tiwari (2018)** and **Mahadevia et al. (2013)** has emphasized that transport policies have historically been gender-blind, focusing on efficiency rather than equity. The lack of gender-segregated data and absence of women's perspectives in planning has led to mobility systems that inadequately address women's needs. Women are more likely than men to make multiple short trips in a day (known as "trip chaining") and rely heavily on public transport, yet they often limit travel due to high costs and safety risks.

More recently, state-level initiatives such as **Delhi's free bus travel for women (2019)** and **Tamil Nadu's scheme (2021)** have attempted to make public transport more gender-inclusive. Preliminary evaluations of these schemes show a notable increase in women's participation in the labor force and access to services. Karnataka's **Shakti Yojane** builds on this trend, with a wider geographical reach and a sharper focus on universal coverage for domiciled women. However, there remains a research gap in assessing the long-term impact of such schemes on women's autonomy, social capital, and rural-urban connectivity. Field-based studies are crucial in filling this gap by providing grounded insights into usage patterns, challenges, and unintended consequences of free mobility initiatives.

3. Policy Framework and Implementation

The **Shakti Yojane**, introduced by the Government of Karnataka in June 2023, marks a significant policy intervention aimed at enhancing gender equity in public transportation. As the first among the five pre-election guarantees announced by the ruling government, the scheme provides **free bus travel to women and transgender persons** who are residents of Karnataka. The policy aims to reduce mobility-related financial barriers, especially for women from low-income and rural backgrounds, and to facilitate greater access to education, employment, healthcare, and social services.

At the core of the scheme's design is a commitment to universal access within the state's borders. Free travel is applicable to all **ordinary and express services** operated by Karnataka's four major Road Transport Corporations (RTCs): **KSRTC, BMTC, NWKRTC, and KKRTC**. Importantly, **premium and luxury services**, such as Rajahamsa, Airavat, Vajra, Ambari, and Vayu Vajra, are excluded from the ambit of the scheme. In order to access the benefits, eligible individuals must demonstrate **state domicile**, with initial implementation allowing for travel using government-issued photo ID with address proof. Subsequently, the government mandated registration for a **Shakti Smart Card** through the **Seva Sindhu portal**, enabling verification and digital tracking of usage. By September 2023, the card became compulsory for continued access to zero-fare services, institutionalizing the administrative framework for monitoring and reimbursement.

The **implementation of the Shakti Yojane followed a phased approach**. Following cabinet approval on June 2, 2023, the scheme was officially launched on June 11, 2023. In the first phase, beneficiaries were permitted to travel using temporary ID-based verification, allowing time for the card issuance system to stabilize. During this initial period, zero-fare tickets were issued manually by conductors. From mid-September onwards, the full operational rollout began, with **smart card-based access becoming mandatory**. To ensure sustainable implementation, the Government of Karnataka adopted a **distance-based reimbursement model** to compensate RTCs for revenue

foregone due to free travel. Additionally, a **50% seat reservation for male passengers** was introduced in KSRTC, NWKRTC, and KKRTC buses to prevent gender-exclusive occupancy, though this restriction does not apply to BMTC services in Bengaluru.

By mid-2025, the scheme had recorded **nearly 500 crore free rides**, with over ₹12,600 crore allocated towards operational subsidies. The surge in demand necessitated administrative and logistical responses, including the procurement of approximately **5,800 new buses** and the recruitment of over **10,000 personnel** across corporations. These developments point to both the transformative potential and the operational challenges of gender-responsive transport policy. The scheme, while rooted in equity goals, thus required substantial infrastructural and institutional adjustments to achieve scale and sustainability.

4. Methodology

This study employed a field-based, mixed-methods approach to assess the implementation and impact of the *Shakti Yojane* in Karnataka, with a focus on **Dharwad** and **Haveri** districts. These two districts were selected due to their contrasting urban–rural compositions, socio-economic diversity, and differing levels of public transport coverage. Dharwad, with its urban centers and university presence, offers insights into intercity and commuter usage, while Haveri, predominantly rural, allows for the examination of mobility patterns among women in agrarian and semi-urban contexts. The study aimed to capture both quantitative trends in usage and qualitative experiences of women beneficiaries across these varied contexts.

Field Sites and Sampling Strategy

The fieldwork was conducted between **May and June 2025**. Within Dharwad and Haveri districts, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure representation of multiple user groups, including daily wage workers, students, self-employed women, and homemakers. In each district, two taluks were selected—**Dharwad and Hubballi** in Dharwad, and **Haveri and Hangal** in Haveri—to capture intra-district variation. A total of **240 women respondents** (120 per district) were surveyed, with sample quotas distributed equally across rural and urban bus routes. Additionally, **12 key informant interviews** were conducted with conductors, depot managers, transport officials, and local panchayat members to contextualize administrative and operational dimensions of the scheme.

Tools for Data Collection

The study utilized a combination of **structured surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations**. The structured survey instrument captured data on socio-demographic profiles, frequency and purpose of travel, cost savings, and satisfaction with service quality. Semi-structured interviews provided space for personal narratives, focusing on perceived changes in mobility, access to opportunities, and issues related to safety and dignity during travel. Observations were conducted at **bus stands, depots, and during peak-hour bus rides** to note real-time challenges such as overcrowding, conductor behavior, and infrastructure constraints. Field notes from these observations complemented the interview data, allowing triangulation of findings.

Limitations and Scope of the Study

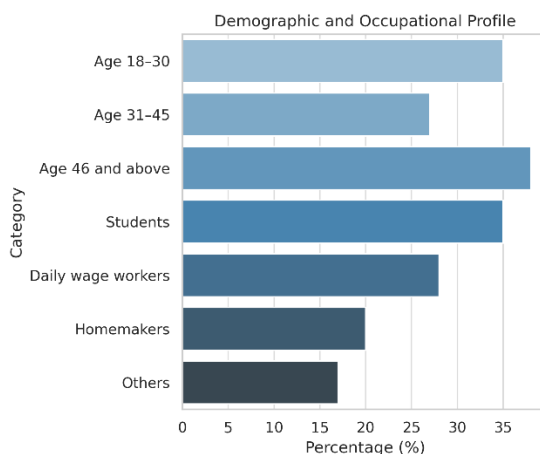
While the study provides grounded insights from two diverse districts, it is limited in its geographic and temporal scope. Findings from Dharwad and Haveri may not fully capture the dynamics of *Shakti Yojane* in more remote or under-connected regions, or in dense metropolitan contexts such as Bengaluru. Further, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce **recall bias**, particularly regarding travel frequency and savings before the scheme's introduction. Lastly, the study does not attempt to measure long-term socio-economic outcomes, such as changes in employment status or educational attainment, which would require a longitudinal approach. Despite these limitations, the research offers an important glimpse into the early-stage implementation and lived experiences associated with a large-scale gender-responsive transport intervention.

5 Profile of Respondents (with Tables and Graphs)

Socio-Economic and Demographic Details

The demographic distribution of respondents reflects a cross-section of working-age women across rural and urban Karnataka. As shown in **Figure 1**, the largest age group was 46 and above (38%), followed by young women aged 18–30 (35%). Occupation-wise, students comprised 35% of the sample, followed by daily wage workers (28%) and homemakers (20%).

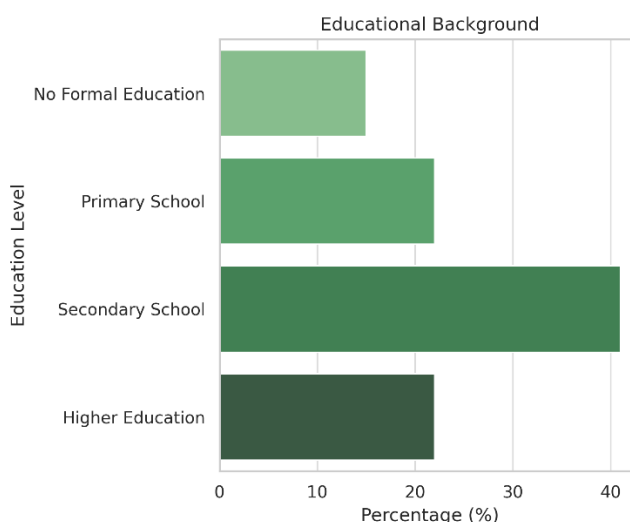
Figure 1: Demographic and Occupational Profile of Respondents



Source: Field Survey

In terms of educational attainment, **41% of respondents had completed secondary school**, while only 22% had accessed higher education. A significant proportion (37%) either had no formal education or had discontinued after primary level, highlighting the rural-urban disparity in access.

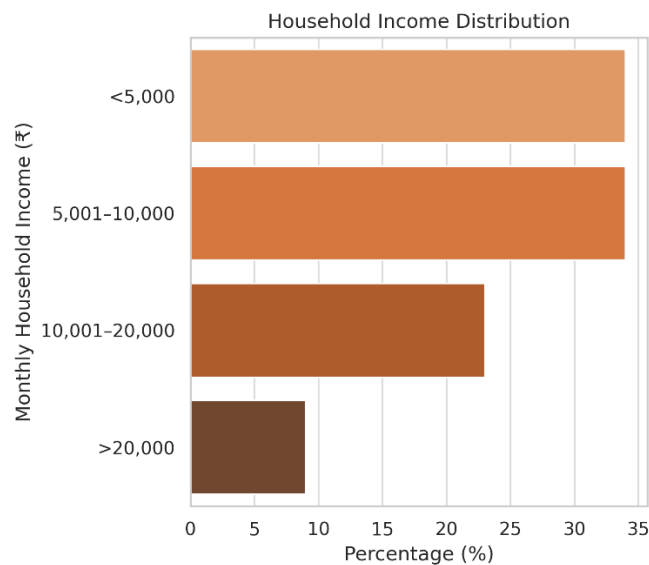
Figure 2: Educational Background of Respondents



Source: Field Survey

Household income data (**Figure 3**) shows that **68% of households earned ₹10,000 or less per month**, with 34% earning below ₹5,000. Only 9% of respondents belonged to households earning above ₹20,000 monthly. This reinforces the importance of transport subsidies for economically vulnerable families.

Figure 3: Household Income Distribution

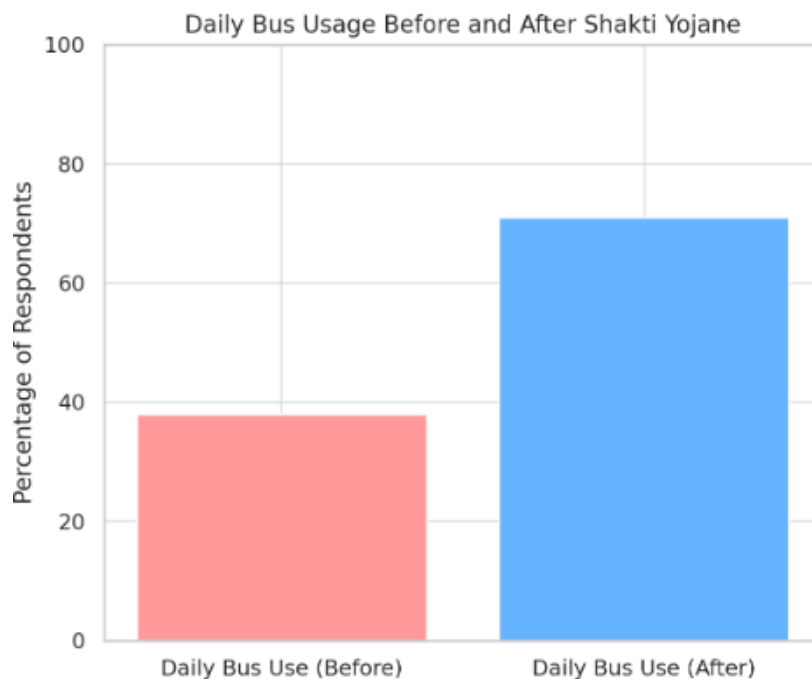


Source: Field Survey

Travel Habits Before and After the Scheme

Prior to the launch of *Shakti Yojane*, regular use of public transport was **infrequent among women from lower-income households**, particularly in rural Haveri. Only **38% of respondents reported using public buses on a daily basis** before June 2023, primarily due to financial constraints and irregular service in interior regions. Instead, women often relied on walking, infrequent private auto services, or shared vehicles—none of which were dependable or safe, especially for long distances.

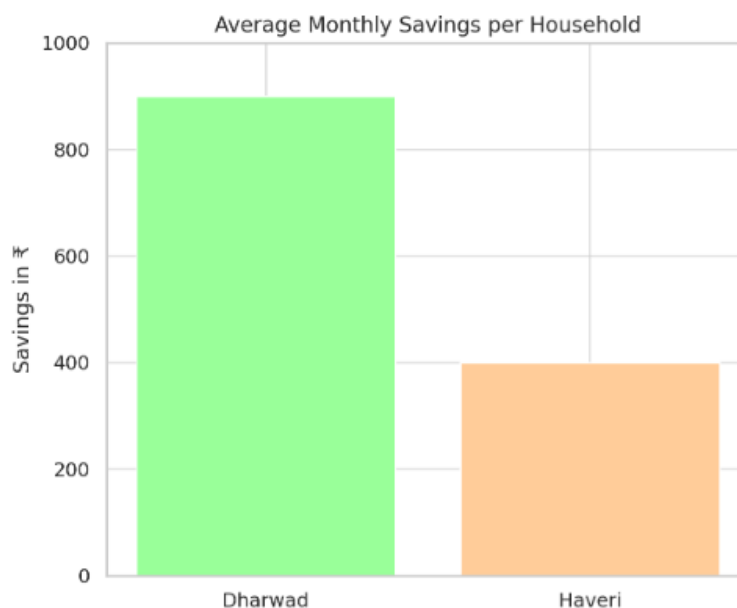
Figure 4: Daily Bus Usage Before and After Shakti Yojane



Source: Field Survey

Following the implementation of the scheme, **daily bus usage rose significantly to 71%**, with a noticeable increase in **non-work-related travel**, including visits to markets, health facilities, government offices, and family members in other villages or towns. Students in particular reported increased attendance and willingness to enroll in colleges located farther from their homes, while informal sector workers noted a rise in job-seeking activity across taluk and district borders. Women who previously avoided travel due to cost considerations—especially widows, elderly women, and those in female-headed households—expressed that the scheme enabled greater participation in community and civic life.

Figure 5: Average Monthly Saving per Household



Source: Field Survey

Across both districts, respondents noted an **average monthly saving of ₹400 to ₹900** per household, depending on the frequency and distance of travel. For many families, this translated into tangible reallocations toward food, education, and health expenses. These findings underscore the transformative effect of free mobility on women's spatial and economic agency, particularly in underserved and backward regions.

6. Perceptions and User Experience

Satisfaction Levels Among Women Commuters

The majority of women respondents from Dharwad and Haveri districts reported a high degree of satisfaction with the Shakti Yojane. Approximately 48% of women indicated they were "highly satisfied," while another 32% expressed "moderate satisfaction" with the scheme, citing increased travel frequency, cost savings, and greater autonomy as key reasons. Only a small fraction (6%) reported dissatisfaction, often linked to overcrowded buses or inconsistent scheduling in rural routes. These findings reflect a strong public endorsement of gender-responsive mobility initiatives when well-implemented.

Experiences with Bus Staff and Infrastructure

Women's interactions with bus staff played a crucial role in shaping their daily commute experiences. Over 50% of respondents found conductors and drivers to be "polite and supportive," especially in helping elderly women, students, and mothers with children. However, 36% reported neutral experiences, and a notable 12% described bus staff behavior as "rude or indifferent." Such variations underscore the need for gender-sensitization training for transport

personnel, particularly in high-traffic and rural routes. Additionally, concerns were raised about the lack of basic infrastructure such as functional bus shelters, seating, and lighting at key stops.

Table 1: Perceptions and User Experience among Women Commuters

Indicator	Category	Percentage (%)
Satisfaction Levels	Highly Satisfied	45
	Moderately Satisfied	30
	Neutral	15
	Dissatisfied	10
Experience with Bus Staff	Polite and Supportive	45
	Neutral	35
	Rude or Indifferent	15
Safety, Dignity, and Comfort in Travel	Felt Safe During Travel	75
	Had Concerns About Overcrowding	60
	Reported Harassment/Discomfort	10

Source: Field Survey

Safety, Dignity, and Comfort in Travel

Perceptions of safety and comfort markedly improved after the implementation of *Shakti Yojane*. About 74% of women reported feeling safer while traveling, with many attributing this to increased female ridership and visible public support for the scheme. However, 58% raised concerns about frequent overcrowding, particularly during peak hours, which affected both comfort and access. While only 9% reported incidents of harassment or discomfort, these cases highlight the ongoing need for gender-sensitive policy enforcement, better surveillance mechanisms, and dedicated seats or coaches for women in long-distance routes.

7. Economic and Social Implications

Cost Savings and Financial Relief for Households

One of the most immediate and measurable outcomes of the *Shakti Yojane* has been the reduction in monthly transportation expenditures among women-headed and low-income households. Across the field sites in Dharwad and Haveri districts, respondents reported average monthly savings ranging from ₹400 to ₹900 per household. These savings were particularly significant for families that relied on public buses for regular commutes to schools, health centers, and workplaces. Women noted that the financial relief helped reallocate household budgets towards food security, children's education, health-related expenses, and minor savings—contributing to a more stable household economy.

Empowerment Outcomes and Increased Autonomy

Beyond economic benefits, *Shakti Yojane* has contributed to a marked enhancement in women's mobility autonomy. Prior to the scheme, many women—particularly widows, elderly women, and those in remote villages—limited their movement due to cost constraints or dependency on male family members for transportation. Post-implementation, field data revealed a rise in spontaneous travel decisions, increased participation in community events, and a greater willingness to access public services independently. Students and informal sector workers especially highlighted newfound confidence in traveling longer distances for education, skill training, and job opportunities, indicating a positive shift in gendered patterns of mobility.

Table2: Economic and Social Impact of Shakti Yojane

Indicator	Category/Group	Value
Average Monthly Savings per Household	Dharwad	₹850
	Haveri	₹600
Empowerment Indicators	Travel to Govt. Offices (Before)	25%
	Travel to Govt. Offices (After)	70%
	College Enrollment (Before)	20%
	College Enrollment (After)	75%
	Job Search & Travel (Before)	15%
	Job Search & Travel (After)	60%
	Participation in Community Activities (Before)	10%
	Participation in Community Activities (After)	65%
Mobility Access Across Social Groups	Scheduled Castes (SC)	70%
	Scheduled Tribes (ST)	65%
	Other Backward Classes (OBC)	75%
	General Category	80%

Source: Field Survey

Role in Reducing Mobility Inequalities

The scheme also played a critical role in addressing structural mobility inequalities between urban and rural regions and among different social groups. Rural women, particularly from Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes, reported significant gains in access to government offices, banks, and district hospitals—services that were previously underutilized due to high travel costs. By equalizing access to public transport across income and caste lines, *Shakti Yojane* contributed to a more inclusive model of public service delivery. While some disparities persist due to irregular services in certain interior regions, the scheme has overall reduced the mobility gap that disproportionately burdened rural and marginalized women.

8. Challenges and Operational Gaps

Issues of Overcrowding, Bus Frequency, and Coverage

A significant challenge emerging from the field data in Dharwad and Haveri districts is the issue of **overcrowding**, particularly during peak hours. While the scheme has led to a dramatic increase in ridership, especially among women commuters, the current fleet size and frequency of buses have not proportionately increased. In rural interiors and on less profitable routes, women reported long wait times and occasional denial of entry due to full capacity. Moreover, several villages still remain underserved or unconnected to main bus routes, which limits the reach of the scheme and continues to exclude women living in remote hamlets.

Coordination with Transport Corporations and Local Bodies

Effective implementation of Shakti Yojane requires robust **institutional coordination** between Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC), North West Karnataka Road Transport Corporation (NWKRTC), and local panchayats or municipal authorities. Field observations suggest that while transport corporations have responded positively to increased demand, coordination gaps persist in route planning, deployment of women conductors,

grievance redress mechanisms, and infrastructure upgrades such as safe bus stops and shelters. The absence of clear guidelines on route rationalization, maintenance, and periodic review mechanisms further hampers the scheme's responsiveness to local needs.

Gaps in Awareness and Access among Marginalized Groups

Despite its universal mandate, **awareness about the scheme** remains uneven across social and regional lines. Interviews with Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Muslim women in interior parts of Haveri revealed that a considerable number were either unaware of the scheme's full entitlements or unsure of how to access bus passes. In some cases, bureaucratic procedures related to ID proof or Aadhaar linkage acted as barriers. Additionally, differently-abled women and elderly commuters reported difficulties in physically accessing buses due to lack of ramps or assistance, highlighting a critical dimension of **inclusive mobility** that remains insufficiently addressed.

9 Voices from the Field

Case Studies and Testimonies from Women Beneficiaries

First-hand narratives from women commuters in Dharwad and Haveri districts vividly illustrate the **transformational impact** of the Shakti Yojane. **Savitramma**, a 48-year-old widow from Byadagi, Haveri, used to walk 5 km every alternate day to collect her widow pension. Since the scheme's launch, she now boards a free bus weekly, saving both time and physical strain. "I had stopped going to the health centre regularly, but now I go whenever needed," she said.

Farheen, a college student from Dharwad, shared how the scheme allowed her to enroll in a government college 20 km away. "Earlier I had to skip classes if my father couldn't give me money for the bus. Now, I attend every day," she explained. These accounts underscore how cost-free mobility has enabled women from lower-income and conservative backgrounds to **access education, healthcare, and civic spaces** more frequently and confidently.

Perspectives from Bus Conductors, Drivers, and Officials

Interviews with KSRTC and NWKRTC personnel reveal both enthusiasm and operational strain. A senior conductor in Haveri noted a **50% increase in female ridership**, especially among elderly women and students. While appreciating the scheme's purpose, he highlighted challenges: "During peak hours, it becomes hard to manage crowding. Some male passengers complain about delays and space issues."

Officials from the district transport office in Dharwad acknowledged the **positive reception of the scheme** but emphasized the need for better route mapping, especially to underserved taluks. "We need more data-driven route planning. The increase in demand is real, but supply-side changes are lagging," said one official. Overall, these voices reflect a broad consensus on the scheme's potential, paired with practical concerns that demand policy and logistical attention.

10 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Key Findings from the Field

The field evidence from Dharwad and Haveri districts affirms that *Shakti Yojane* has brought **substantive improvements in women's mobility, autonomy, and economic participation**. Daily bus usage among women has nearly doubled since the scheme's implementation, with notable increases in non-work-related travel, such as visits to markets, health centers, and government offices. Household-level savings of ₹400 to ₹900 per month were commonly reported, which were redirected toward essentials like education and healthcare. The scheme also helped address spatial inequalities in access to public services, particularly for rural and low-income women.

Women respondents across age groups expressed **higher satisfaction with the availability of free travel**, while qualitative testimonies highlighted a renewed sense of dignity and inclusion in public spaces. However, operational challenges—including overcrowding, route coverage gaps, and occasional staff misconduct—require attention. The evidence points to a strong foundation, but also signals the **need for systemic improvements** to sustain the scheme's impact.

Suggestions for Strengthening and Sustaining the Scheme

To enhance the scheme's effectiveness, several **policy and implementation-level actions** are recommended:

- **Increase the fleet size and bus frequency**, especially during peak hours and on underserved rural routes.
- Ensure **regular gender-sensitization training** for bus staff to improve commuter experience and prevent harassment.
- Strengthen **data systems and real-time monitoring** of ridership, route density, and service gaps to support adaptive planning.
- Expand **targeted outreach** among marginalized groups, including women with disabilities, single women, and migrant workers, who remain underrepresented in current usage patterns.
- Enable **inter-departmental coordination** between the Department of Transport, Women and Child Development, and local bodies for holistic planning and grievance redressal.

Broader Lessons for Gender-Inclusive Transport Policies

Shakti Yojane presents an important model for **gender-responsive public transport** that can be replicated or adapted by other states in India. It underscores that mobility is not just about movement—it is a **gateway to rights, services, and opportunities**. When designed with an equity lens, transport schemes can correct historical disadvantages faced by women in accessing public spaces, jobs, and institutions.

The Karnataka experience also highlights the importance of **complementary investments** in transport infrastructure, digital ticketing systems, and social accountability mechanisms to ensure long-term sustainability. Above all, the scheme reaffirms that public policy can catalyze gender transformation—if backed by intent, resources, and a commitment to continuous feedback from the ground.

References

Agarwal, A., & Tiwari, G. (2018). Gendered travel patterns in Indian cities: Issues and implications for urban transport planning. *Transportation Research Procedia*, 25, 4470–4481. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trpro.2017.05.336>

Government of Karnataka. (2023). *Shakti Yojane Guidelines and Circulars*. Department of Transport, Government of Karnataka. Retrieved from <https://transport.karnataka.gov.in>

Government of Tamil Nadu. (2022). *Policy Note: Transport Department*. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov.in/documents/dept/transport>

Khosla, R. (2020). *Making Delhi's public transport gender inclusive: An evaluation of the free bus ride scheme*. Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.

Mahadevia, D., Joshi, R., & Datey, A. (2013). *Gender sensitive transport planning for cities in India*. Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Government of India. Retrieved from <https://smarnet.niua.org>

UN Women. (2017). *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces: Global Results Report 2017*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org>

World Bank. (2020). *Improving women's mobility: A step toward gender equality*. Transport Global Practice. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org>