

What does Mahalakshmi scheme reveal about women's mobility in Telangana?

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Abstract

The Mahalakshmi Scheme in Telangana provides fare-free bus travel to women, girls, and transgender persons, aiming to improve mobility and socioeconomic inclusion. Drawing on TGSRTC administrative data (December 2023-February 2026) and a primary survey of beneficiaries, this article evaluates the scheme's impact on ridership, affordability, healthcare access, employment, and women's empowerment. Findings indicate sustained growth in women's bus usage, substantial reductions in transport expenditure, and improved access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods. However, challenges including overcrowding, inadequate route coverage, and safety concerns persist. The article argues that operational improvements are essential to maximise the scheme's long-term social and economic benefits.

Keywords: Women's Mobility, Mahalakshmi Scheme, Public Transport, Gender and Development, Telangana

On the 9th of December 2023, something quietly shifted in how women in Telangana move. The state government launched the Mahalakshmi scheme, a programme offering free bus travel to all women, transgender persons, and girls who are domiciles of Telangana, on TGSRTC District Ordinary, District Express, City Ordinary, and City Metro Express services. No income ceiling, no cap on distance, no limit on trips. An Aadhaar card and address proof were enough.

Two years and some months later, administrative data from the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TGSRTC), obtained with institutional permission and covering December 2023 through February 2026, gives us one of the clearest

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pictures yet of what large-scale, gender-targeted transport subsidies actually do on the ground. Within two years of its launch, approximately 34.44 lakh women passengers were using free travel daily, and women had collectively saved an estimated Rs. 10,000 crore in travel costs (*Rasala, 2026*). The short answer: quite a lot, though not without complications.

1 The Indian Context: A Long-Overdue Policy Turn

India's gender transport gap is well-documented. Women in low- and middle-income settings are disproportionate users of public transport because they have lower access to private vehicles, face higher safety risks on informal modes, and bear the double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labour (*Uteng & Turner, 2019; Borker, 2024*). In Telangana, the 2024 Time Use Survey found that women spend an average of six hours and fifty-six minutes per day on unpaid caregiving and household work, compared to two hours and forty-two minutes for men. At the same time, men spend eight hours and twelve minutes on paid work, while women spend six hours and thirty-eight minutes (*Government of Telangana, 2024; Jha, 2025*). Despite one of the higher female labour force participation rates among comparable states at 34.8 percent, women's engagement in paid work continues to lag significantly behind.

Several Indian states have moved in this direction over the past few years. Delhi's Pink Ticket scheme (2019) pushed women's share of DTC bus ridership from 20 percent to 48 percent within four years (*Jamba, Kanuri, & Devaraj, 2025*). Karnataka's Shakti scheme (2023) produced a 151 percent increase in women's ridership on KSRTC (*Halder & Jayadev, 2025*). Tamil Nadu's programme increased female ridership from 40 percent to 61 percent within nine months of launch (*Observer Research Foundation, 2024*). Together, these schemes constitute one of the largest classes of gendered public transport interventions anywhere in the world (*Observer Research Foundation, 2024*). The evidence base is growing: reducing commuting costs alters women's time allocation and job search behaviour, though employment effects depend on household norms and skill levels (*Chen et al., 2024*).

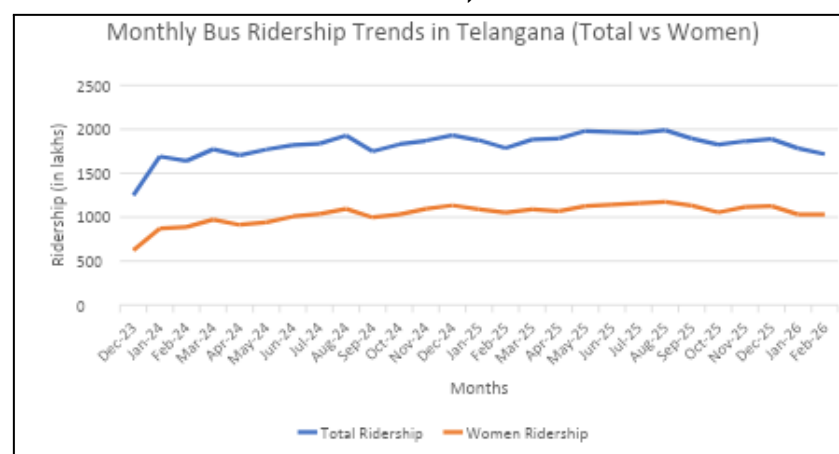
Fare-free public transport (FFPT) has been conceptualised not merely as a fare subsidy, but as a multidimensional sustainability intervention operating across

economic, environmental, and social domains (*Luvisetto & Ricci, 2025*). Even gender-neutral FFPT policies produce gendered effects because women are disproportionate users of public transport (*Maciejewska, 2024*). A well-functioning public transport system is crucial for vulnerable groups who depend on it for access and mobility (*Lucas et al., 2016; Allen & Farber, 2020*).

2 What the TGSRTC Data Shows

At the scheme’s launch in December 2023, women already constituted roughly 50 percent of total TGSRTC ridership. As Figure 1 shows, women’s ridership grew steadily in absolute terms alongside total ridership over the study period (*TGSRTC Administrative Data, 2026*). This growth proved sustained rather than temporary.

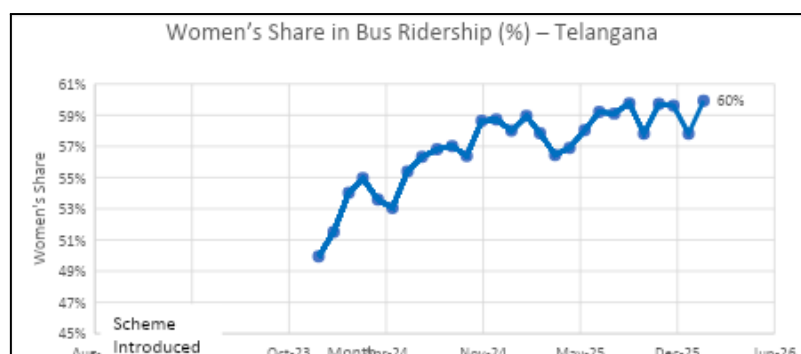
Figure 1: Monthly Bus Ridership Trends in Telangana – Total vs Women (in lakhs)



Source: Author’s calculations based on TGSRTC Administrative Data (2026)

Figure 2 captures the compositional shift more precisely. Women’s share climbed from approximately 50 percent at launch to nearly 60 percent by early 2026, stabilising within a consistent band across multiple months. This pattern points to a structural behavioural change, not a novelty effect, consistent with what was observed following the Karnataka Shakti scheme, where ridership stabilised rather than declined after an initial surge.

Figure 2: Women’s Share in Total TGSRTC Ridership (%), December 2023 – February 2026

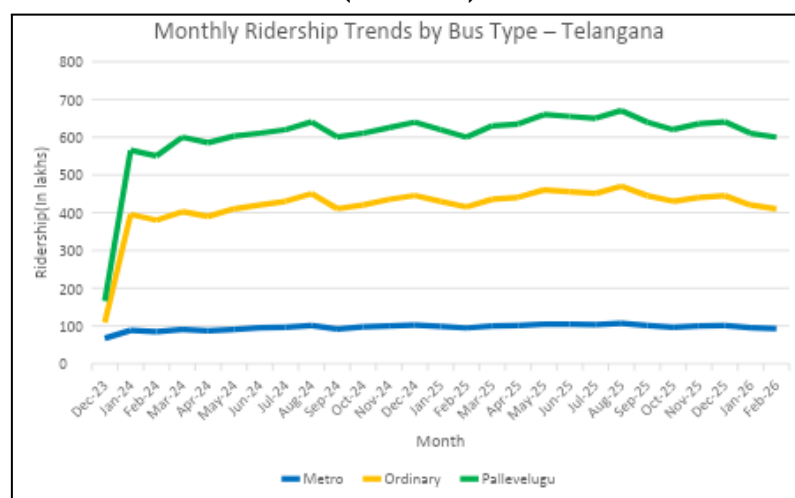


Source: Author’s calculations based on TGSRTC Administrative Data (2026)

Average daily ridership rose from 45.49 lakh passengers before the scheme to approximately 60.40 lakh after implementation. Bus occupancy jumped from 69 percent to 98 percent, effectively full capacity. At this utilisation level, the fleet operates at its cost-effective peak: fixed operating costs are spread across the maximum number of passengers, bringing the per-passenger cost of service delivery to its lowest point. The number of buses operating daily increased from 7,292 to 10,081, a 38 percent expansion, and the scheme covers 2,241 routes across both urban and rural services (*TGSRTC Administrative Data, 2026; Government of Telangana, 2025*).

The distribution of ridership across bus categories reveals the scheme’s geographic breadth. As Figure 3 shows, Pallevelugu services designed for rural and semi-urban areas consistently carry the largest ridership, well ahead of ordinary and metro services.

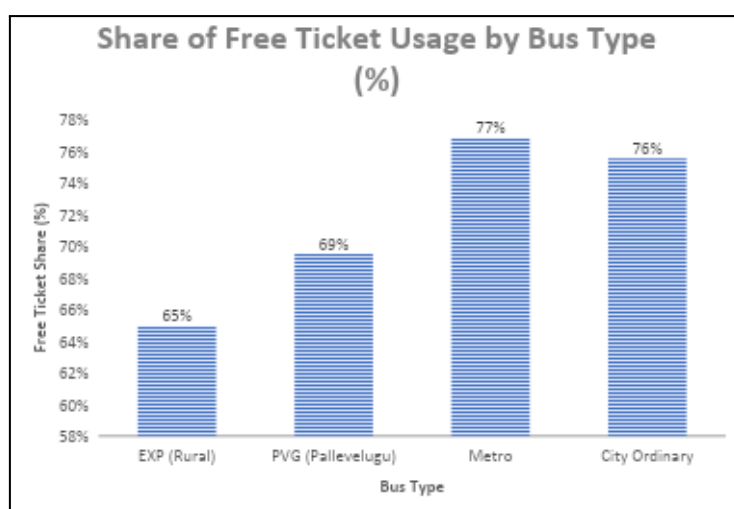
Figure 3: Monthly Ridership Trends by Bus Type – Metro, Ordinary, Pallevelugu (in lakhs)



Source: Author’s calculations based on TGSRTC Administrative Data (2026)

Figure 4 shows the proportion of each service's passengers travelling free. Roughly 69 percent of Pallevelugu passengers travel free, and around 65 percent of express rural service passengers do too. In metro and city ordinary services, the free ridership share rises to 75 to 77 percent. The scheme is not a Hyderabad story alone; its reach into rural Telangana is substantial.

Figure 4: Share of Free Ticket Usage by Bus Type (%)



Source: Author's calculations based on TGSRTC Administrative Data (2026)

3 What Women travellers reveal: Primary Survey Evidence

Aggregate ridership data tells us that women are travelling more. It does not tell us what that means to them. A primary survey was conducted among sixty female beneficiaries across urban, peri-urban, and rural locations in Hyderabad and surrounding areas, spanning domestic workers, students, health workers, retail employees, and homemakers.

The most immediate finding is financial. Before the scheme, respondents spent a mean of Rs. 1,295 per month on transport. After adoption, that fell to Rs. 228, a mean saving of Rs. 1,068, or an 82 percent reduction. This result is statistically highly significant ($p < 0.001$), confirmed by both paired t-tests and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests. For a household earning between Rs. 5,000 and Rs. 10,000 per month, the modal income bracket in the survey, this saving represents 10 to 14 percent of household income. This is, functionally, an in-kind income transfer.

The numbers tell one story. What respondents said during the survey brought it to life in a different way. Across occupational groups and income levels, a few themes came through repeatedly.

“Earlier I used to skip the hospital if it was not urgent. The bus fare plus the time would eat up half a day's wages. Now I go whenever I need to.” –

Daily-wage worker, Hyderabad

Healthcare access was among the most consistently reported improvements. Among applicable respondents, 58.3 percent reported that the scheme had reduced delays in accessing medical care: 33.3 percent significantly and 25.0 percent somewhat. This finding aligns with the broader literature showing that transport costs and unreliability are key determinants of healthcare-seeking behaviour for low-income women, with consequences for maternal health, chronic disease management, and preventive care (*Syed, Gerber, & Sharp, 2013; Balarajan, Selvaraj, & Subramanian, 2011*). Inequities in healthcare access in India are strongly mediated by socioeconomic and geographic barriers, including transport costs (*Balarajan et al., 2011*). No existing study on an Indian free bus scheme had examined this dimension prior to this study.

“I found a stitching job in Kukatpally. I would never have taken it before because the travel cost was too high. Now I go every day and save most of what I earn.” – Homemaker turned part-time tailor, peri-urban Hyderabad

Employment-related access improved for 66.7 percent of respondents, and 33.3 percent reported that the scheme had enabled entirely new opportunities, employment or educational engagements they would not have been able to pursue otherwise. These findings are broadly consistent with *Ajay Kumar and Sekhar (2024)*, who found increased awareness and immediate uptake under the Mahalakshmi scheme, and with *Ramana and Shravan (2025)*, who reported a perceived sense of freedom for women to travel, alongside concerns about overcrowding.

“My college is far but the bus is free. My parents were worried about the cost before. Now they are okay with me going.” – Undergraduate student, outer Hyderabad

Students, who made up 23.3 percent of the sample, were among the groups most visibly affected. Women's travel patterns are structurally distinct from men's: they are multipurpose, care-oriented, time-constrained, and income-sensitive (*Uteng & Turner, 2019*). Women in India additionally face a persistent gender wage gap that makes paid access to transportation disproportionately burdensome (*Deshpande, Goel, & Khanna, 2018*). For young women from lower-income households, the removal of transport expenditure appears to have reduced a practical barrier to sustained attendance.

To examine the scheme's micro-level impact more systematically, a Women's Mobility Empowerment Index (WMEI) was constructed from nine theoretically grounded survey dimensions drawn from *Kabeer's (1999)* three-dimensional framework of resources, agency, and achievements. The index yields a mean score of 3.55 out of 5, indicating moderate-to-high empowerment gains. Regression analysis finds that education level and commute time reduction are the strongest and statistically significant predictors of empowerment, consistent with *Sen's (1999)* concept of conversion factors: more educated women are better positioned to convert the transport resource into actual capability expansions, such as accessing more skilled employment or navigating healthcare systems more effectively. Income is statistically insignificant, confirming the scheme's universality.

One finding cuts against this optimism. Over 51 percent of respondents disagreed that bus routes adequately served their travel needs, and 56.7 percent expressed dissatisfaction with bus quality. Safety perception scored a mean of 3.05 on the Likert scale, with the majority giving a neutral response. Perceived safety is a documented determinant of women's willingness to use public transport independently (*Borker, 2024; Tripathi, Borrion, & Belur, 2017*). A scheme that is financially free but perceived as unsafe will be used below its potential.

“The scheme is good but the bus does not come to our area. I still have to walk 20 minutes to reach the main road where I can board.” – Security guard, semi-urban Hyderabad

4 The Gaps That Data Cannot Hide

The financial relief is real and the ridership transformation is measurable. But a few structural questions linger. First, the absence of pre-scheme gender-disaggregated ridership data from TGSRTC means we cannot construct a clean before-and-after counterfactual for women's ridership at the aggregate level. The upward trajectory is clear, but full attribution to the scheme requires caution.

Second, the geography of benefit is uneven. Women in India face additional sociocultural and economic factors that constrain their mobility patterns (*Tripathi et al., 2017; Srinivasan & Rogers, 2005*). Peri-urban and rural women with longer commutes and fewer transport alternatives arguably need the scheme most, yet route coverage gaps are most acute in precisely these areas. International experience from Morocco, where operator training and female-friendly infrastructure were integrated into BRT design (*Kurshitashvili et al., 2022*), offers a useful reference for how to close such gaps.

Third, near-full occupancy creates real overcrowding. A bus at 98 percent capacity is not equally accessible to all women, particularly those with physical disabilities, those travelling with children, or those boarding from intermediate stops. Overcrowding also raises safety concerns that must be actively addressed if the scheme is to be genuinely inclusive.

5 What This Means for Policy

India's wave of gender-targeted transport subsidies is beginning to accumulate a real evidence base. The patterns emerging from Delhi (*Jamba et al., 2025*), Karnataka (*Halder & Jayadev, 2025*), Tamil Nadu (*Observer Research Foundation, 2024*), and now Telangana are consistent: free transport for women increases ridership in sustained ways, functions as an effective income transfer for lower-income households, and has measurable positive effects on healthcare and employment access. These findings add to the growing international literature on gendered fare-free transport (*Maciejewska, 2024; Luvisetto & Ricci, 2025; Štraub & Hess, 2025*) by providing India-specific micro-level evidence largely absent from that literature.

The Mahalakshmi scheme has generated approximately Rs. 10,000 crore in cumulative travel savings for women across Telangana in roughly two years, according to TGSRTC data as reported in April 2026 (*Rasala, 2026*). The policy challenge now is to extend route coverage to the areas that most need it, improve fleet quality, and address capacity constraints alongside ensuring safety and comfort for women travelling on these buses.

The Mahalakshmi scheme appears to be doing what it set out to do. With improvements on the operational side, the scheme could set a new pathway for women in Telangana and reshape how we think about gender-targeted public investment in this country.

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