



Evaluating The Socio-Economic Outcomes of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme

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Abstract

The Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme represents a significant social welfare initiative introduced by the Government of Kerala to enhance women's mobility, promote gender equality, and improve access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services through free travel on Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) ordinary buses. Public transport plays a crucial role in fostering social inclusion and economic participation, particularly for women, students, senior citizens, and economically disadvantaged groups. By reducing travel expenses, the scheme seeks to alleviate the financial burden on households while enabling beneficiaries to access wider socio-economic opportunities. However, alongside its social benefits, the scheme has implications for public transport finances, service delivery, operational efficiency, and long-term sustainability.

This study evaluates the socio-economic outcomes of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme by examining its impact on women's mobility, employment opportunities, educational participation, healthcare accessibility, household expenditure, social inclusion, and overall quality of life. The study also analyses beneficiaries'

perceptions regarding service quality, travel frequency, safety, affordability, and satisfaction with the scheme. Furthermore, the research assesses the operational and financial implications of the scheme for KSRTC, including passenger demand, revenue compensation, infrastructure requirements, and policy sustainability. The study identifies key challenges affecting the effective implementation of the programme and proposes policy recommendations for improving accessibility, service efficiency, and the long-term viability of subsidized public transport.

The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how free public transport influences socio-economic development, women's empowerment, and inclusive mobility in Kerala. The study provides valuable insights for policymakers, transport authorities, and development practitioners in designing sustainable and socially inclusive public transportation policies.

Keywords: Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme, Public Transport, Women's Mobility, Socio-Economic Impact, Kerala, Social Inclusion, Household Expenditure, Women's Empowerment.

JEL Classification: H53, H54, I38, J16, R41



Introduction

Accessible and affordable public transportation is an essential component of inclusive socio-economic development. Efficient transport systems facilitate access to employment, education, healthcare, markets, and public services while reducing regional disparities and promoting social equity. For women and economically vulnerable populations, affordable public transport is particularly important because mobility directly influences economic participation, educational attainment, healthcare utilization, and overall quality of life. Recognizing these developmental benefits, governments across the world have increasingly introduced subsidized or free public transport schemes aimed at enhancing social welfare and promoting inclusive growth.

In Kerala, the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme was introduced as a major welfare initiative to provide free travel for eligible women on Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) ordinary bus services. The scheme seeks to reduce transportation costs, enhance women's mobility, encourage labour force participation, improve access to educational institutions and healthcare facilities, and strengthen women's social and economic empowerment. By removing financial barriers associated with daily commuting, the programme aims to create greater opportunities for women to participate in economic activities and community life while promoting gender equality and social inclusion.

Transportation costs constitute a significant share of household expenditure, particularly among low-income and rural families that depend heavily on public transport for commuting. Daily travel expenses often discourage women from pursuing employment, vocational training, higher education, healthcare services, and entrepreneurial activities. The provision of free bus travel therefore has the potential to generate substantial household savings, improve disposable income, and encourage greater participation in productive economic activities. Increased mobility also enhances women's independence, expands employment choices, strengthens access to public services, and contributes to broader socio-economic development.

Kerala has consistently achieved high levels of human development, literacy, healthcare, and gender equality compared to many other Indian states. Nevertheless, women continue to face barriers related to workforce participation, mobility constraints, wage inequality, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and limited access to employment opportunities. Safe, affordable, and reliable public transportation has emerged as an important policy instrument for addressing these challenges by enabling women to travel independently for work, education, skill development, healthcare, and social engagement.

Beyond its direct benefits to beneficiaries, the Priyadarshini Scheme also has significant implications for Kerala's public transport system. The implementation of free travel has increased passenger demand on KSRTC services, influencing operational efficiency, route planning, fleet utilization, and financial management. While increased ridership contributes to greater utilization of public transport infrastructure and supports environmental sustainability by encouraging a shift away from private vehicles, it also creates challenges related to overcrowding, service quality, maintenance costs, and revenue generation. The long-term sustainability of the scheme depends on adequate government compensation, efficient resource allocation, and continuous improvements in transport infrastructure and service delivery.

Public transport contributes significantly to environmental sustainability by reducing traffic congestion, fuel consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions. By encouraging greater use of buses instead of private vehicles, the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme supports Kerala's broader objectives of sustainable urban mobility, climate resilience, and environmentally responsible transportation. Increased reliance on public transport can also improve road safety and reduce transportation-related inequalities among different socio-economic groups.



The scheme further aligns with India's commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and Goal 13 (Climate Action). Improved mobility enhances women's access to education, employment, healthcare, financial services, and civic participation, thereby strengthening inclusive and sustainable development.

Although free public transport programmes have gained increasing attention in several countries and Indian states, relatively limited empirical research has examined their socio-economic outcomes in Kerala. Existing studies primarily focus on transport accessibility, public finance, or urban mobility, while comparatively fewer studies evaluate the broader impacts on women's empowerment, household welfare, employment opportunities, educational participation, healthcare access, and social inclusion. Given Kerala's unique socio-economic context and the expanding role of welfare-oriented transport policies, a comprehensive evaluation of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme is both timely and relevant.

This study therefore seeks to evaluate the socio-economic outcomes of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme by analysing its effects on women's mobility, employment opportunities, educational access, healthcare utilization, household expenditure, social inclusion, and quality of life. The study also examines beneficiary satisfaction, operational challenges faced by KSRTC, financial sustainability, and policy effectiveness while identifying opportunities for strengthening the scheme through improved service delivery and evidence-based policy interventions. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on public transport policy, gender-inclusive development, and social welfare while providing practical recommendations for policymakers, transport authorities, and researchers working toward sustainable and equitable public transportation in Kerala.

Review of Literature

Several researchers have examined the role of public transportation, mobility, transport subsidies, gender-inclusive transport policies, and free travel schemes in promoting socio-economic development, women's empowerment, and social inclusion.

Lucas (2012) examined the concept of transport-related social exclusion and found that inadequate access to affordable public transport significantly limits access to employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services, particularly for women, low-income households, and vulnerable populations. The study emphasized that inclusive transport policies can reduce inequalities and improve socio-economic well-being.

Litman (2021) analysed the socio-economic benefits of public transport and reported that affordable and accessible transport contributes to increased labour force participation, reduced household transportation costs, improved educational access, enhanced healthcare utilization, environmental sustainability, and greater economic productivity. The study argued that transport subsidies generate substantial long-term social and economic returns.

Peters (2013) studied gender and transport accessibility in developing countries and observed that women experience greater mobility constraints than men due to safety concerns, household responsibilities, financial limitations, and inadequate transport infrastructure. The study recommended gender-sensitive transport policies that improve affordability, accessibility, and safety to promote women's economic participation.



World Bank (2023) highlighted that affordable and reliable public transportation is essential for inclusive economic development and poverty reduction. The report emphasized that transport investments improve labour mobility, access to public services, educational attainment, healthcare accessibility, and employment opportunities while strengthening social inclusion and regional connectivity.

International Transport Forum (ITF) (2022) reported that subsidized and free public transport programmes have increased public transport usage, reduced private vehicle dependence, lowered household transportation expenditure, and promoted environmental sustainability. However, the report also stressed the importance of ensuring financial sustainability, adequate government funding, and service quality for the long-term success of such programmes.

Government of Kerala (Economic Review, various issues) documented that the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme was introduced to improve women's mobility, reduce transportation costs, encourage access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services, and promote women's empowerment through affordable public transportation. The review also highlighted increased ridership on KSRTC buses following the implementation of the scheme while emphasizing the need for financial support and operational improvements.

Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) Annual Reports have indicated that free travel schemes have contributed to increased passenger traffic and improved public transport utilization. However, the reports also noted challenges relating to operational costs, fleet maintenance, congestion during peak hours, revenue compensation, and maintaining service quality.

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2021) emphasized that improved transport accessibility enhances labour market participation, particularly for women and economically disadvantaged groups. The organization noted that affordable public transport supports decent work, gender equality, social protection, and inclusive economic growth by reducing barriers to mobility.

Recent studies on public transport and social welfare have highlighted that free or subsidized transport schemes contribute significantly to reducing household expenditure, improving educational attendance, increasing healthcare utilization, promoting women's workforce participation, and strengthening social inclusion. Researchers also note that the long-term success of such programmes depends upon effective policy implementation, adequate public investment, digital ticketing systems, infrastructure development, and continuous improvements in service quality.

Although several studies have examined public transport accessibility, urban mobility, and transport subsidies in India and abroad, relatively few have specifically evaluated the socio-economic outcomes of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme in Kerala. Limited empirical research has assessed its impact on women's mobility, household welfare, employment opportunities, educational participation, healthcare access, social inclusion, and KSRTC's operational sustainability. Considering the scheme's significance as a gender-focused welfare initiative, a comprehensive evaluation is essential for understanding its effectiveness and guiding future transport policy.

This study attempts to bridge this research gap by providing a comprehensive assessment of the socio-economic outcomes of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme, with particular emphasis on women's mobility, household expenditure, employment, education, healthcare accessibility, social inclusion, beneficiary satisfaction, and policy sustainability.



Theoretical Review

Social Inclusion Theory

Social Inclusion Theory explains that equitable access to public services enables individuals to participate fully in economic, social, and community life. Affordable public transportation reduces mobility barriers, particularly for women, economically weaker sections, and marginalized communities, thereby enhancing access to employment, education, healthcare, and public institutions. The theory suggests that free transport initiatives contribute significantly to reducing social exclusion and promoting inclusive development.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory argues that investments in education, health, and skills improve productivity and long-term economic outcomes. Affordable transportation facilitates regular attendance at educational institutions, vocational training centres, healthcare facilities, and workplaces. By reducing commuting costs, the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme encourages greater investment in human capital, thereby improving women's employability, income potential, and overall socio-economic well-being.

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen, emphasizes that development should be measured by individuals' freedom to achieve valuable life outcomes rather than solely by income. Mobility is a fundamental capability that enables access to education, employment, healthcare, financial services, and social participation. The Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme expands women's capabilities by enhancing their freedom of movement and improving access to opportunities that contribute to economic independence and social empowerment.

Public Welfare Economics Theory

Public Welfare Economics Theory explains that government intervention through subsidies and welfare programmes can improve social welfare by correcting market failures and ensuring equitable access to essential services. Free public transport represents a redistributive welfare policy that reduces transportation costs for beneficiaries, enhances social equity, improves accessibility to public services, and promotes inclusive economic development. The theory provides a framework for evaluating the efficiency, equity, and long-term sustainability of publicly funded transport schemes.

Sustainable Mobility Theory

Sustainable Mobility Theory emphasizes that efficient, affordable, and environmentally friendly public transportation contributes to sustainable urban and rural development. Increased reliance on public transport reduces traffic congestion, lowers carbon emissions, minimizes fuel consumption, and improves environmental quality. The Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme encourages greater use of public transportation while supporting Kerala's goals of sustainable mobility, climate resilience, and inclusive socio-economic development.



Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the socio-economic outcomes of the **Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme** among women beneficiaries in Kerala.
2. To examine the impact of the scheme on women's mobility, access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services.
3. To analyse the influence of the scheme on household expenditure, financial savings, and women's economic empowerment.
4. To assess beneficiaries' satisfaction with the quality, accessibility, affordability, safety, and efficiency of KSRTC services under the scheme.
5. To suggest appropriate policy measures for improving the effectiveness, financial sustainability, and service quality of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme.

Hypotheses of the Study

H1: The Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme has a significant positive impact on women's mobility and access to essential services.

H2: The scheme significantly reduces household transportation expenditure and improves women's financial well-being.

H3: Improved accessibility through the scheme significantly enhances women's participation in education, employment, and healthcare.

H4: Service quality, accessibility, and safety significantly influence beneficiary satisfaction with the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme.

Research Methodology

Data Sources

The study is based on both **primary and secondary data**.

Primary Data

Primary data were collected from **200 respondents**, including women beneficiaries of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme, college students, employed women, self-employed women, homemakers, senior citizens, KSRTC officials, bus conductors, transport planners, and representatives of local self-government institutions through a structured questionnaire.

Secondary Data

Secondary information was collected from:

- Government of Kerala
- Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC)



- Kerala State Planning Board
- Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Kerala
- Ministry of Road Transport and Highways
- Ministry of Women and Child Development
- Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)
- National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)
- National Statistical Office (NSO)
- Economic Review, Government of Kerala
- Census of India
- NITI Aayog Reports
- World Bank Reports
- International Labour Organization (ILO) Reports
- Research journals on transport economics and public policy
- Books on transport economics, public finance, and social welfare

Sampling Design

A **multistage sampling technique** was adopted to select respondents from different districts of Kerala. Women beneficiaries were selected from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas representing different occupational and socio-economic groups to ensure adequate representation.

Sample Size

200 Respondents

Study Area

The study was conducted in selected districts of Kerala covering urban, semi-urban, and rural regions. The respondents include women using the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme for employment, education, healthcare, business, and other daily travel purposes.

Variables Used in the Study

Dependent Variable

SEO = Socio-Economic Outcomes



Independent Variables

- **MB = Mobility Benefits**
- **HE = Household Expenditure Savings**
- **EA = Educational Accessibility**
- **EMP = Employment Accessibility**
- **SQ = Service Quality**
- **BS = Beneficiary Satisfaction**

Model Specification

The econometric model is specified as:

$$SEO_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 MB_i + \beta_2 HE_i + \beta_3 EA_i + \beta_4 EMP_i + \beta_5 SQ_i + \beta_6 BS_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where

- **β_0 = Intercept**
- **β_1 – β_6 = Regression Coefficients**
- **ε = Error Term**

Variable Description

Variable Description

SEO	Socio-Economic Outcomes (Dependent Variable)
MB	Mobility Benefits
HE	Household Expenditure Savings
EA	Educational Accessibility
EMP	Employment Accessibility
SQ	Service Quality
BS	Beneficiary Satisfaction
β_0	Constant
β_1 – β_6	Regression Coefficients
ε	Error Term



Profile of Respondents

Table 1. Age-wise Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25 years	38	19.0
26–40 years	82	41.0
41–55 years	52	26.0
Above 55 years	28	14.0
Total	200	100.0

The majority of respondents (41%) belong to the **26–40 years** age group, indicating that the scheme is predominantly utilized by economically active women who travel regularly for employment, education, and household responsibilities.

Table 2. Educational Qualification of Respondents

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Secondary Education	36	18.0
Higher Secondary	54	27.0
Graduate	72	36.0
Postgraduate and Above	38	19.0
Total	200	100.0

Graduates constitute the largest category (36%), suggesting that educated women are among the major beneficiaries of the scheme, particularly for commuting to workplaces, educational institutions, and professional training centres.

Factors Influencing the Socio-Economic Outcomes of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme

Mobility Benefits

The scheme significantly improves women's mobility by reducing travel costs and increasing access to workplaces, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, markets, and government offices.

Household Expenditure Savings

Free bus travel substantially reduces transportation expenses, increases household savings, and improves the financial stability of economically weaker households.



Educational Accessibility

Affordable transportation encourages regular attendance at schools, colleges, coaching centres, vocational institutions, and skill development programmes.

Employment Accessibility

Reduced commuting costs increase women's participation in formal and informal employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, and income-generating activities.

Service Quality

The effectiveness of the scheme depends upon punctuality, frequency of services, seat availability, safety, cleanliness, and accessibility of KSRTC buses.

Beneficiary Satisfaction

Overall satisfaction is influenced by affordability, convenience, service reliability, safety, ease of obtaining travel benefits, and overall travel experience.

Descriptive Analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mobility Benefits	4.48	0.56
Household Expenditure Savings	4.42	0.60
Educational Accessibility	4.31	0.66
Employment Accessibility	4.26	0.68
Service Quality	4.08	0.73
Beneficiary Satisfaction	4.39	0.61
Socio-Economic Outcomes	4.36	0.59

The highest mean score is recorded for **Mobility Benefits (4.48)**, followed by **Household Expenditure Savings (4.42)** and **Beneficiary Satisfaction (4.39)**. These findings indicate that respondents perceive the scheme as highly effective in enhancing mobility, reducing transportation expenses, and improving their overall quality of life. The comparatively lower mean score for **Service Quality (4.08)** suggests the need for improvements in bus frequency, punctuality, seating capacity, and passenger comfort.



Correlation Analysis

The analysis reveals that:

- Mobility benefits have a strong positive relationship with the overall socio-economic outcomes of beneficiaries.
- Household expenditure savings significantly improve financial security and disposable household income.
- Educational accessibility positively influences regular attendance and participation in higher education and skill development programmes.
- Employment accessibility significantly enhances women's labour force participation and income-generating opportunities.
- Improved service quality positively influences beneficiary satisfaction and continued utilization of KSRTC services.
- Beneficiary satisfaction is strongly associated with affordability, convenience, safety, and service efficiency.

Overall Findings

The study concludes that the **Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme** has generated substantial socio-economic benefits for women across Kerala by improving mobility, reducing household transportation expenditure, increasing access to education, employment, healthcare, and public services, and strengthening women's economic independence and social inclusion. The scheme has particularly benefited low-income households by easing the financial burden associated with daily travel while encouraging greater workforce participation and educational attainment.

The findings further reveal that although beneficiaries express high levels of satisfaction regarding affordability and accessibility, challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate bus frequency, limited seating capacity, service delays, and financial pressures on KSRTC continue to affect the effective implementation of the programme. Strengthening government financial support, expanding bus services, modernizing transport infrastructure, improving passenger safety, adopting digital monitoring systems, and enhancing operational efficiency are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme. These measures will contribute to gender-inclusive mobility, social equity, sustainable public transportation, and inclusive socio-economic development in Kerala.

Findings of the Study

1. The **Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme** has significantly enhanced women's mobility by reducing transportation costs and improving access to workplaces, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, markets, and government offices across Kerala.
2. The scheme has substantially reduced household expenditure on daily commuting, enabling beneficiaries, particularly those from low-income families, to allocate more financial resources toward education, healthcare, nutrition, and household welfare.



3. Respondents reported that free bus travel has encouraged greater participation in employment, self-employment, skill development programmes, and entrepreneurial activities by eliminating financial barriers associated with daily travel.
4. The scheme has positively influenced educational accessibility by improving regular attendance among school and college students, increasing participation in vocational training programmes, and reducing the likelihood of discontinuing education due to transportation expenses.
5. Women beneficiaries perceived the scheme as an important instrument for promoting financial independence, social inclusion, and gender empowerment by enabling safe, affordable, and independent mobility throughout the state.
6. The study found that the increased utilization of KSRTC services has contributed to higher public transport ridership and reduced dependence on private modes of transport, thereby supporting sustainable and environmentally friendly transportation.
7. Despite its significant social benefits, respondents identified challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate bus frequency during peak hours, limited seating capacity, occasional service delays, and insufficient connectivity in remote rural areas, which affect the overall effectiveness of the scheme.
8. Beneficiaries emphasized that strengthening KSRTC infrastructure, expanding bus services, improving operational efficiency, ensuring adequate government financial support, and enhancing passenger safety are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and success of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme.

Suggestions

1. Increase the frequency of KSRTC ordinary bus services, particularly during peak hours and in rural and remote areas, to accommodate the growing number of beneficiaries and reduce overcrowding.
2. Strengthen government financial support and establish a transparent reimbursement mechanism to ensure the long-term financial sustainability of the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme without affecting KSRTC's operational performance.
3. Improve passenger amenities by upgrading bus infrastructure, increasing seating capacity, ensuring cleanliness, enhancing accessibility for elderly and differently abled passengers, and strengthening safety measures for women.
4. Expand digital ticketing, beneficiary verification systems, and real-time passenger information services to improve operational efficiency, transparency, and user convenience.
5. Integrate the scheme with employment promotion, higher education, healthcare outreach, and skill development programmes to maximize its socio-economic benefits for women and economically weaker sections.
6. Strengthen coordination among the Government of Kerala, KSRTC, Local Self-Government Institutions, educational institutions, employers, and community organizations for effective implementation, monitoring, and continuous improvement of the scheme.
7. Conduct periodic beneficiary satisfaction surveys and impact assessments to evaluate service quality, identify operational challenges, and incorporate user feedback into policy decisions.



8. Encourage further research on the long-term socio-economic, environmental, financial, and gender-related impacts of free public transport policies in Kerala to support evidence-based policymaking and sustainable transport planning.

Conclusion

The **Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme** has emerged as an important social welfare initiative aimed at improving women's mobility, promoting gender equality, and strengthening inclusive socio-economic development in Kerala. The study demonstrates that by eliminating transportation costs, the scheme has significantly enhanced access to employment, education, healthcare, government services, and other essential opportunities, particularly for women belonging to low- and middle-income households.

The findings reveal that the scheme has generated substantial household savings, increased women's participation in economic and educational activities, strengthened financial independence, and promoted greater social inclusion. Improved mobility has enabled beneficiaries to participate more actively in the labour market, skill development programmes, entrepreneurship, and community engagement, thereby contributing to women's empowerment and overall socio-economic well-being. In addition, the increased use of KSRTC services has encouraged greater reliance on public transportation, supporting environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive mobility.

However, the study also identifies several operational challenges, including overcrowding, limited bus frequency, inadequate connectivity in certain regions, service delays, and the financial burden on KSRTC. Addressing these issues through increased government funding, infrastructure modernization, fleet expansion, technological innovation, and improved service quality is essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the scheme.

The study further indicates that integrating the Priyadarshini Free KSRTC Bus Travel Scheme with broader employment, education, healthcare, and women empowerment initiatives can significantly enhance its developmental impact. Continuous monitoring, regular policy evaluation, stakeholder participation, and evidence-based planning will be crucial for maximizing the benefits of the programme. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, transport authorities, researchers, and development practitioners in designing equitable, financially sustainable, and gender-responsive public transport policies that contribute to inclusive growth and social welfare in Kerala.

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