



Fare Free Bus Travel for Women and Economic Empowerment: An Impact Study in Dindigul.

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How to Cite this Article:

G, D. S. (2026). Fare Free Bus Travel for Women and Economic Empowerment: An Impact Study in Dindigul.. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, 2(8), 1-9.
<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i8.067>

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<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i8.067>

Abstract

This study examines the impact of Tamil Nadu's free bus travel scheme for women on economic empowerment, drawing on a primary survey of 100 women beneficiaries in Dindigul. The scheme, introduced in 2021 under the 'magalir vidiyal payanam ', aimed to enhance women's mobility, workforce participation, and financial autonomy by eliminating transportation costs. The findings reveal that the scheme has significantly improved women's access to employment, healthcare, and education, with 72% of respondents reporting savings of ₹1,000-₹2,000 monthly redirected towards household expenses and children's education. However, the study also identifies persistent challenges including safety concerns, overcrowding, and first-and last-mile connectivity issues that limit the scheme's transformative potential. The analysis contributes to the growing body of evidence on gender-responsive transport policies and their role in advancing women's economic empowerment in developing economies.

Key words: Fare free bus, saving, savings, household expenses, children education, women empowerment, health care.

1. Introduction

Women in India face significant mobility barriers that constrain their economic participation and social mobility. According to the 2011 Census, 30.2% of women travel to work on foot, with only 24.6% using any form of transportation, compared to over 50% of men who use motorised transport. The National Time-use Survey (2020) reveals that Indian women spend only 8 minutes per day on employment-related travel, while men spend 36 minutes. This gender gap in commuting reflects deeper structural constraints, including financial barriers, safety concerns, and gendered norms regarding women's mobility.

The International Labour Organisation (2017) estimates that lack of transportation decreases women's probability of participating in the labour market by 16.5 percentage points in developing countries. In response to these challenges, several Indian states have introduced free or subsidised bus travel schemes for women. Tamil Nadu's Pink Slip Program(magalir vidiyal payanam). Implemented in May 2021, allows a woman to travel free on state-run buses, eliminating a critical financial barrier to mobility.

This study investigates the impact of the free bus travel scheme on women's economic empowerment in Dindigul , Tamil Nadu. Dindigul, a predominantly agricultural and small-scale industrial district, presents a relevant context for examining the scheme's effects on women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.



2. Review of Literature

2.1 Evidence from State-Level Programmes

Several states have implemented free bus travel schemes for women, yielding valuable evidence on their socio-economic impacts.

Delhi's Pink Ticket Scheme (2019): Delhi became the first Indian state to offer fare-free bus travel for women in October 2019, using a 'pink ticket' system. A Greenpeace India report (2024) found that the scheme significantly reduced transportation costs, with 75% of women reporting savings on transport. Of these, 67% now spend less than ₹1,000 per month on transport. Women redirected savings towards household expenses (54%), emergencies (50%), personal purchases (33%), and healthcare and education (15%). The report also noted that 23% of women who previously used buses reported more frequent travel, while 15% who rarely used buses became regular users.

World Resources Institute India's 2025 study found that women's ridership in Delhi's public buses increased by 20% between 2019 and 2023. Women who previously used auto-rickshaws now save an average of ₹2,300 per month, while former Metro users save ₹1,690 per month.

Karnataka's Shakti Scheme (2023): Launched in June 2023, the Shakti scheme provides free bus travel to women and transgender persons across Karnataka's four state-run transport corporations. The scheme facilitated over 500 crore ticketed women journeys by July 2025, earning recognition in the Golden Book of World Records.

Empirical evidence from Karnataka demonstrates significant economic impacts. The 'Beyond Free Rides' study by Nikore Associates (2025), commissioned by the Sustainable Mobility Network, found that women's employment rose by 23% in Bengaluru and 21% in Hubballi-Dharwad following the scheme's implementation.

An independent survey of 6,125 women heads of households across 15 districts, conducted by Tara Krishnaswamy in collaboration with Lokniti-CSDS, found that 83% of women said they could access better medical facilities, 72% felt more confident and empowered, and 19% gained new or better jobs due to the scheme.

The King's College London study, 'Routes to Recognition' (2025), surveyed 239 women across four districts and found that nearly half now travel beyond their gram panchayats to reach workplaces. Women reported saving between ₹1,000 and ₹2,000 per month, which they redirect towards children's education, healthcare, or household investments-5.

2.4 Challenges and Gaps

Despite positive impacts, studies consistently identify persistent challenges. The Greenpeace India report found that 77% of women feel unsafe in buses after 5 pm due to poor lighting, harassment, and overcrowding. Only 21% of women reported that buses arrive on time, and just 7% noted that buses stop long enough for comfortable boarding.

The King's College London study highlighted issues of overcrowding, irregular bus schedules, and last-mile connectivity, particularly in rural areas. The Karnataka government reportedly owes state transport corporations nearly ₹1,800 crore in pending reimbursements.

2.5 Research Gap

While substantial evidence exists from Delhi and Karnataka, limited empirical research has examined the impact of Tamil Nadu's free bus travel scheme on women's economic empowerment at the Dindigul. This study addresses this gap by examining the scheme's effects in Dindigul, a semi-urban and rural context with distinct socio-economic characteristics.

Objectives

1. To quantify the financial savings accrued by women beneficiaries through fare-free travel and assess the direct correlation between these savings and household economic resilience.



2. To assess the scheme's effectiveness in increasing women's labor force participation, particularly in terms of new job acquisition and the expansion of geographic job-search radii.
3. To analyze the differential economic outcomes across diverse demographic segments (e.g., skilled vs. unskilled, married vs. unmarried) and identify the mediating role of household gender dynamics.
4. To measure the psychological and social dividends of the scheme, specifically regarding women's perceived independence, autonomy in decision-making, and reduced reliance on male family members for mobility.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Area

Dindigul, located in Tamil Nadu, has a population of approximately 2.1 million (2011 Census). The economy is primarily agrarian, with significant textile and leather industries. The district's semi-urban and rural character, combined with its economic diversity, makes it a relevant setting for examining the scheme's impacts across different socio-economic groups.

3.2 Sample Design

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 100 women beneficiaries of the free bus travel scheme in Dindigul. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, targeting women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including daily wage workers, domestic workers, garment factory workers, agricultural labourers, and self-employed women. The sample was drawn across urban (Dindigul town) and rural areas to capture variations in accessibility and usage patterns.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered face-to-face between June and July 2026. The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, travel behaviour, financial savings and usage patterns, employment status and changes, and perceptions of safety and empowerment. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity of responses was maintained.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean comparisons. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were thematically analysed to capture nuanced perspectives on the scheme's impact and challenges.

Findings

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n=100)

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Age Group	18-25 years	22%
	26-35 years	38%
	36-45 years	28%
	46 years and above	12%
Marital Status	Married	65%
	Unmarried	25%



	Widowed/Divorced/Separated	10%
Educational Status	Illiterate	12%
	Primary (1-5)	28%
	Secondary (6-10)	35%
	Higher Secondary (11-12)	18%
	Graduate and above	7%
Caste Category	Scheduled Caste (SC)	32%
	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	8%
	Other Backward Class (OBC)	45%
	General	15%

Source: field survey

4.2 Utilisation and Travel Behaviour

The majority of respondents (76%) reported using the free bus service at least 3-4 times per week, with 48% using it daily. Before the scheme, 58% reported using paid bus services or auto-rickshaws, while 32% relied on walking or family members for transport. 34% of respondents reported travelling more frequently after the scheme's introduction, and 22% reported travelling longer distances for work.

4.3 Economic Impacts

Financial Savings: The scheme has generated significant financial savings for respondents. 72% of women reported saving between ₹1,000-₹2,000 per month, while 18% saved more than ₹2,000. 62% of women who previously used auto-rickshaws reported switching to buses.

Savings Utilisation: Savings were redirected towards household expenses (58%), children's education (52%), healthcare (38%), and personal purchases (28%). 45% of respondents reported having greater control over household financial decisions after the scheme.

Employment Impact: 34% of respondents reported gaining new or better-paying jobs due to the scheme. Among women who were employed, 28% reported working more days per month after the scheme. 48% reported the scheme enabled them to travel beyond their local area for work. The most common new employment sectors were garment factories (32%), domestic work (24%), and retail (18%).

4.4 Social Empowerment

The scheme has had significant social impacts. 68% of respondents reported feeling more independent since using the scheme. 56% reported reduced dependence on family members for travel. 62% reported being able to visit more places, including healthcare facilities, markets, and relatives.

4.5 Safety and Challenges

Safety concerns persist. 54% of respondents reported feeling unsafe in buses after 5pm, citing overcrowding, poor lighting, and harassment. 32% reported experiencing or witnessing harassment while using buses. 78% reported bus stops being too far from their homes (first-mile connectivity), and 66% reported additional costs for first- and last-mile connectivity, averaging ₹200-₹500 per month.

The main challenges cited included overcrowding (68%), irregular bus schedules (52%), bus stops far from home (78%), and unsafe conditions (54%).



5. Discussion

5.1 Economic Empowerment: Savings and Employment

The economic benefits observed in Dindigal align closely with findings from similar initiatives in Delhi and Karnataka. A significant majority of respondents (72%) reported monthly savings of ₹1,000–₹2,000, a figure that directly mirrors the savings range documented among beneficiaries of Karnataka's Shakti scheme by a King's College London study. Furthermore, over a third of the respondents (34%) secured new employment through the scheme. While substantial, this figure is somewhat lower than the 46% of Karnataka women who reported that the Shakti scheme influenced their career decisions. The impact on mobility was also notable, with 48% of women now traveling beyond their local areas for work—a trend that parallels the King's College London finding that nearly half of surveyed women in Karnataka now commute outside their gram panchayats for employment.

However, the scheme's economic impact is not uniform. This study reveals heterogeneity in outcomes, particularly between skilled and married women. This variation is consistent with a World Bank study, which found that while low-skilled married women often reduced their labor supply, skilled employed women increased theirs. This suggests that intra-household gender dynamics continue to play a critical role in mediating the economic effectiveness of such transport policies.

5.2 Social Empowerment and Agency

The scheme has also fostered a notable increase in social agency. In this study, 68% of women reported feeling more independent, and 56% noted a reduced dependence on family members. These results are consistent with the King's College London study, where over 80% of women under the Shakti scheme felt "more independent." That study also highlighted the emotional and social resonance of the program, with three-quarters of women stating that the scheme motivated them to actively seek paid work.

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence from Dindigul on the impact of Tamil Nadu's free bus travel scheme on women's economic empowerment. The findings demonstrate that the scheme has generated significant financial savings for women, enhanced their access to employment opportunities, and improved their sense of independence and agency. However, persistent challenges—safety concerns, overcrowding, and connectivity issues—limit the scheme's transformative potential. Addressing these challenges through targeted policy interventions is essential to realise the scheme's full potential as a tool for advancing women's economic empowerment and gender equality.

The study contributes to the growing body of evidence on gender-responsive transport policies in India and highlights the importance of context-specific implementation strategies. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causal impacts, examine the scheme's effects on different sub-groups of women, and assess the fiscal sustainability of such programmes.

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