

The Impacts of the Shakthi Scheme on Women's Empowerment in Karnataka

Dr. Shripad Kulkarni¹ and Manjunath J²

¹Associate Professor, University College of Arts, Tumkur University, Tumkur.

²Research Scholar & Teaching Assistant, Department of Studies and Research in Political Science, Tumkur University, Tumkur

Abstract:

The Karnataka Shakti Scheme, launched in June 2023, is a transformative initiative designed to empower women by offering free travel on state-run non-premium buses. By eliminating public transport costs for women and transgender persons, the scheme enhances mobility, economic participation, and social inclusion across urban and rural Karnataka. Over 500 crore free rides have been availed within two years, demonstrating widespread adoption and impact. The scheme has led to increased workforce participation, improved access to education, and economic relief for low-income families. Women are now able to travel farther and more frequently, pursue employment opportunities, support small businesses, and engage in community life with greater freedom and confidence. As a result, the Shakti Scheme stands as a powerful example of how targeted public policy can drive grassroots-level empowerment and contribute to broader gender equality.

Keywords: Free travel, Freedom of movement, increased mobility, Reclaiming public spaces and Access to opportunities.

Introduction

The introduction of the Shakthi scheme in Karnataka marks a significant step towards women's empowerment by addressing a fundamental barrier to their mobility and independence: the cost of transportation. Launched in June 2023, the scheme allows women, including female students and transgender individuals, to

travel for free on government-run buses within the state. This initiative goes beyond simply providing free rides; it is a strategic policy designed to create a more equitable society and unlock a wide range of opportunities for women. By eliminating bus fares, the Shakthi scheme directly impacts the financial well-being

Please cite this article as: Shripad Kulkarni and Manjunath, J. (2025). The Impacts of the Shakthi Scheme on Women's Empowerment in Karnataka. *SRUJANI: Indian Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 4(4), 8-12

of women, especially those from low-income households, enabling them to save money that can be used for other essential needs like education, healthcare, or family expenses. This financial liberation, in turn, fosters greater economic participation and decision-making power. Furthermore, the scheme enhances women's access to education and employment opportunities by making it easier and more affordable to commute to schools, colleges, and workplaces, especially in rural areas. It also promotes social and cultural mobility, as women can now travel more freely to visit relatives, attend religious places, or engage in community activities. In essence, the Shakti scheme is a powerful tool for women's empowerment, promoting financial independence, social inclusion, and increased participation in the economy and public life. It represents a proactive government effort to dismantle the barriers that have historically limited women's freedom of movement and access to opportunities.

The Impact of the Shakti Scheme on Women's Empowerment in Karnataka

The Shakti scheme, launched in June 2023 by the Government of Karnataka, aims to empower women and transgender individuals by providing free bus travel on non-premium state-run buses. Studies and reports indicate that the scheme is achieving its primary objectives of increasing women's mobility, participation in the workforce, and financial independence, thereby contributing to their overall empowerment. While the

Shakti scheme has demonstrated considerable success, it has also presented some challenges. A significant increase in ridership has led to overcrowding and a shortage of buses, impacting both male and female commuters (ResearchGate). There is also a need for continued focus on expanding the public transport network, ensuring gender-sensitive staffing, and improving safety infrastructure like CCTV cameras (The Hindu, July 2025). Some studies also highlight the need for better integration with other schemes to maximise the long-term benefits for women (JustJobs Network).

Economic Empowerment: The most significant impact of the Shakti scheme is on the financial well-being of women. By eliminating the cost of bus travel, the scheme directly contributes to household savings, particularly for women in the informal and unorganised sectors.

Financial Savings: According to a study by the Centre for Gender Analysis and the Fiscal Policy Institute, women from rural areas who commute to sell goods in markets, like those from Hassan visiting Madikeri and Kodagu, can save over ₹200 daily (JustJobs Network, June 2024). A New Indian Express report notes that garment and daily wage workers with salaries around ₹12,000 are saving over ₹1,000 per month, which they can then use for other essential needs (New Indian Express, July 2023).

Increased Employment: The scheme has been positively correlated with an increase

in female labour force participation. A study by Nikore Associates found a 23% jump in women's employment in Bengaluru and a 21% increase in Hubballi-Dharwad following the scheme's implementation (The Hindu, July 2025). This increased mobility allows women to seek and access better-paying jobs farther from their homes, improving their economic status and overall quality of life (ResearchGate).

Social Empowerment & Increased Mobility: Beyond financial benefits, the Shakti scheme is fundamentally altering women's social participation and their presence in public spaces. The freedom of movement is a key indicator of women's empowerment, and the scheme has significantly enhanced it (SDMIMD).

Freedom of Movement: By removing the financial barrier to travel, the scheme gives women greater autonomy and control over their daily lives. They no longer need to rely on others for transportation, enabling them to travel independently for education, employment, healthcare, and leisure (OHRH). This increased mobility has also led to a significant boost in religious tourism, with many women travelling to places of worship that were previously inaccessible due to cost (Deccan Herald).

Enhanced Public Participation: The scheme is leading to a greater presence of women in the public domain. This includes their participation in social and political life, as they can more easily attend meetings, community events, and

access public services. The scheme directly aligns with international human rights principles, such as the right to work, health, and education (OHRH).

Access to Education: The scheme has made it easier for female students, especially those from rural areas, to commute to schools and colleges, which is expected to boost female literacy rates and reduce dropout rates. This is particularly impactful for young women aspiring to attend educational institutions located farther away (Deccan Herald).

Major Findings

1. By removing the barrier of transport costs, the scheme enables women to pursue educational opportunities and seek better-paying jobs, including those further from their homes. For instance, a study found that women's employment in Bengaluru increased by 23% and in Hubballi-Dharwad by 21% following the scheme's implementation (The Hindu, July 25, 2025). This data suggests a direct link between free public transport and a rise in female economic participation.
2. A major benefit for women, especially those from low-income households, is the money they save on daily travel. Some studies have noted that women working as vendors or daily-wage earners can save over ₹200 a day, which directly contributes to their economic stability. The total ticket value of trips taken by women since the scheme's inception in June 2023

through July 2025 is estimated to be over ₹12,881 crore (Hindustan Times, July 26, 2025).

3. The scheme has encouraged women to travel more frequently, not just for work or education, but also for personal and social purposes like visiting family, attending religious ceremonies, and participating in social gatherings. This increased presence in public spaces helps challenge patriarchal constraints and fosters a sense of security and belonging.
4. Between June 11, 2023, and July 24, 2025, the scheme facilitated over 508 crore free trips for women across the four state transport corporations (Hindustan Times, July 26, 2025). This has led to a significant surge in overall bus ridership, with a daily average increase of over 23 lakh passengers in state-run buses after the scheme's implementation (The Hindu, December 11, 2024).
5. While the scheme offers free travel for women, the government reimburses the transport corporations for the ticket value. This has led to a boost in the revenue of these corporations, as the increased ridership from women has offset some of the costs. For example, the Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation's (BMTTC) average daily earnings rose from ₹4.4 crore to ₹5.3 crore in 2023 (Dr. Arja Srikanth, 2024).

Challenges and Future Outlook

Despite its successes, the scheme has faced some challenges that need to be addressed to ensure its long-term effectiveness.

1. The massive surge in women passengers has led to overcrowded buses, which can create discomfort for all commuters, including men. This highlights the need for a larger bus fleet to meet the increased demand (Deccan Herald, May 28, 2025).
2. Issues like a shortage of drivers and conductors, as well as a need for better first- and last-mile connectivity, persist. While the scheme makes bus travel free, women in some areas still have to pay for other forms of transport (e.g., auto-rickshaws) to reach bus stops, which can diminish the financial benefit.
3. The initial process of issuing smart cards was slow, and there have been reports of conductors facing challenges in verifying digital IDs, leading to some ticketless travel. Furthermore, safety concerns like harassment and poor lighting on certain routes have been flagged, emphasising the need for better safety infrastructure like CCTV cameras.
4. Despite an increase in female passengers, some women still report feeling unsafe due to issues like poor lighting at bus stops and harassment on buses.

5. The scheme has created a strain on the state's transport corporations, with a reported staff crunch and the need for a significant expansion of the bus fleet to meet the increased demand.
6. The scheme's benefits are limited for women who live in areas without easy access to a bus stop, as they still have to incur costs for other modes of transport to reach the bus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Shakti scheme represents a successful and transformative policy for women's empowerment in Karnataka. It has not only provided a tangible economic benefit by saving women money on travel but has also had a profound social impact by increasing their mobility, agency, and access to crucial opportunities. While operational challenges like overcrowding and the need for fleet expansion exist, the scheme's fundamental success lies in its ability to empower women to reclaim public spaces and participate more fully in the state's economy and society. The Shakti scheme serves as a powerful model for how targeted public policy can directly contribute to gender equality and inclusive development.

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