

Assessment of Gender-Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme in India



The publication assesses gender-based partial free-fare bus schemes in Delhi and Hyderabad, examining their operational, financial, administrative, multimodal, and socio-economic impacts on operators and women users. It identifies key implementation challenges and provides practical guidelines for replicability in Indian Cities to ensure that such schemes advance inclusive mobility without compromising public transport quality or financial sustainability.



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Introduction

Gender equity in public transport is a critical dimension of sustainable urban mobility and social inclusion. Despite the growing global emphasis on equitable access to mobility, public transport systems continue to reflect and reproduce gender-based disparities in travel behaviour, safety, affordability, and representation in planning and governance. Empirical evidence reveals that women's mobility is often constrained by intersecting social, economic, and spatial factorsⁱ & ⁱⁱ.

India's first gender based partial free fare bus scheme was introduced by the Delhi Government in 2019. Although this initiative emerged during broader debates on free- fare public transport, its objectives and design differed significantly from full fare-free models. UITP's position paper on Free Fares, defines a Full Free-Fare Public Transport (FFPT) scheme as that which is applicable to most of the network, to provide benefits for most users across time and is relevant when the scheme is operational for at least 12 months¹. The UITP policy brief on "Keeping it fare: How to make public transport fares affordable"², emphasis on providing affordable fares and the



→ Buses at depot , ©UITP India

deployment of innovative fare products that cater to the needs of different – and, in some cases, vulnerable commuter groups. Thus, UITP's support for targeted social fares for vulnerable groups provides a relevant policy context for assessing gender- based partial free-fare bus schemes in India. Both approaches can support inclusion and access, which are key considerations for design of such schemes.

Indian schemes differ in their definition and design from western models. In India such schemes are primarily gender-targeted social welfare schemes aimed at reducing financial barriers and improving women's access to public transport. This approach also aligns with global equity principles under the UNFCCC and SDGs, which emphasize fair access to sustainable services. Fare affordability and social fares also sometimes support climate goals by encouraging a shift from private vehicles to low-emission public transit, thereby reducing urban congestion and greenhouse gas emissions.

Worldwide, concepts and approaches to social fares vary significantly. Countries in global north and global south adopt a range of approaches to social fares, yet the principle of social inclusion is reflected in both reduced fare and, in some cases, zero-fare products³, similarly to the Indian case. UITP also in its report estimates that such schemes generally benefit over 20% of the ridership base of a network. These initiatives are often targeted at specific user groups such as older persons, students, people with disabilities, or low-income households. The key difference in the various schemes is reflected through the funding mechanisms across different tiers, budgeting considerations and formulas embedded in each social fare mechanism, ensuring financial sustainability, high state capacity and institutional coordination⁴.

Although the previous paragraph highlighted UITP's varied definitions and observed that such schemes function primarily as social fare initiatives, this paper adopts the Indian terminology and will refer to the model as a gender-based partial free-fare bus scheme.

¹ UITP (Sept 2020) Full Free Fare Public Transport: Objective and alternatives, Policy Brief

² UITP (Jun 2025) Keeping it Fare: how to make public transport fares affordable, policy brief

³ UITP (Jun 2025) Keeping it Fare: how to make public transport fares affordable, policy brief

⁴ Fare affordability paper

1. Overview of the Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme for Women in India

A World Bank Report suggests that nearly 84% of women's trips are made by public transport, with buses serving as the primary mode for about three in every four women in cities. In contrast, Indian Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme particularly for women such as in Delhi, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu are primarily gender-targeted and framed as social welfare measures to enhance women's safety, labour force participation, and freedom of movement in male-dominated public spaces. While these schemes enhance social inclusion, they are often implemented in isolation from broader transport modernization efforts, prioritizing immediate empowerment over congestion relief or electrification.

Launched in Delhi for the first time in 2019, the Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme is an initiative for gender-equitable mobility. Following introduction of the scheme, about 1.4 million women travel in Delhi buses each day compared with pre-scheme period when women accounted for only about 20–25% of total ridership^{iv}. For low-income families, 90% of whom lack private transport—the scheme provides monthly savings of ₹500 (\$ 5.24 USD) to ₹2,300 (\$ 24.12 USD) accounting for nearly 8% of household income^v. By improving safety and independence, the initiative has expanded access to employment, education, and healthcare. Similar programmes have subsequently been introduced in other Indian states, including the Shakti (Karnataka), Mahalaxmi (Telangana) and Stree (Andhra Pradesh).



→ Buses charging at depot facility, Delhi Transport Corporation, ©UITP India

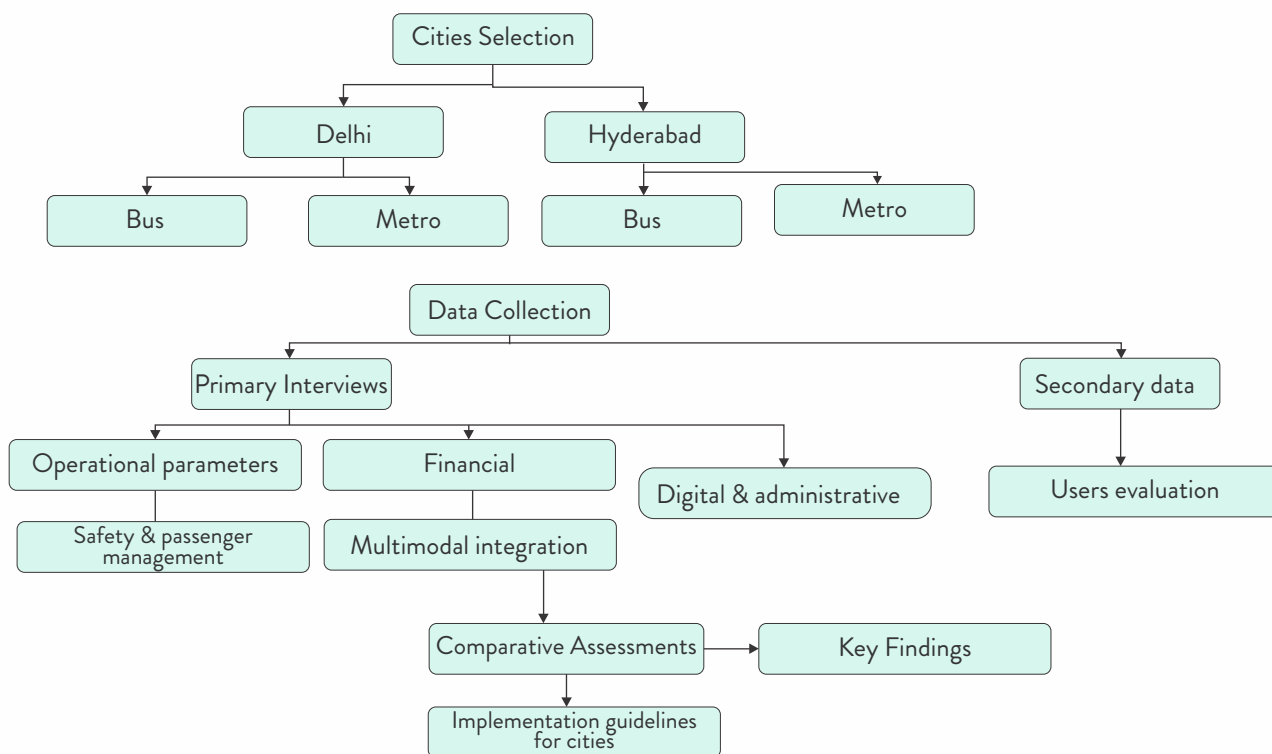
In India, existing research emphasizes social benefits to women—such as increased mobility and personal savings—while often paying less attention to the financial viability of such schemes. This paper assesses the operational, financial and user implications of gender-based partial free fare bus schemes through comparative case studies. It examines the operational and fiscal implications for governments and operators of Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme alongside the socio-economic implications for users.

Methodology

This study undertakes a comparative case study approach to rigorously assess Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme in urban bus and metro systems in two Indian metropolitan cities: Hyderabad (Mahalaxmi scheme) and Delhi (Pink Ticket scheme) and understand the impact of the scheme on the operators and users. The cities were strategically selected as major agglomerations with multimodal public transport ecosystems—integrating extensive bus networks with metro rail systems. The study draws on primary and secondary data sources, collected through interviews conducted by UITP team with the respective bus and metro operators in both cities

and secondary data obtained through a review of relevant reports and assessment of the scheme. To ensure analytical consistency, the scheme in both cities were evaluated using a common set of parameters including implementation timeline; operational metrics; financial indicators, digital infrastructure, administrative processes, safety protocols, multimodal synergies and user-centric outcomes. This multi-faceted approach helped in identifying challenges and opportunities relevant to the scheme, while suggesting pathways to sustain Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme as a viable tool for inclusive urban mobility. The study is limited to evaluating only the Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme in India and this evaluation does not include any low-income /marginalised groups.

The findings are based on two case studies and may not be directly generalisable to all Indian cities due to differences in institutional arrangements, funding mechanisms and public transport networks.



→ Figure 1 Methodology for study

City Case Studies

Hyderabad

Hyderabad, one of India's rapidly expanding metropolitan regions, relies heavily on bus-based public transport operated by the Telangana State Road Transport Corporation (TGSRTC), which maintains a fleet of approximately 9,000 buses serving urban, suburban, and rural routes. In December 2023, the Government of Telangana launched the Mahalakshmi scheme, providing free bus travel to women, girls, and transgender who are residents of Telangana State. Women must present an original, valid government-issued ID proof (such as an Aadhaar card or Voter ID) to the conductor to obtain a zero-fare ticket. The scheme is applicable to all TGSRTC services like Palle Velugu, Express, City Ordinary, and Metro Express buses. This is a subsidised initiative, and operators are reimbursed periodically based on the number of tickets issued and distance travelled by women passengers. This scheme has a substantial state budget allocation of around ₹3,000 crore⁵ (\$314.5 million USD⁶) annually. TGSRTC reported nearly 3 crore (30 million) free journeys in 2025 under the scheme.

⁵ 1 crore=10 million

⁶ Conversion rate -1 USD = 95.418 INR as on 12.6.2026

Hyderabad also has a metro rail system of 67 km operated by L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd, which functions alongside the bus network. However, the scheme is limited to bus services only and does not extend to the metro system. As a result, the scheme has primarily influenced bus ridership patterns and increased the operational load on the bus network.^{vi}

While several studies indicate the initiative has led to a significant increase in female ridership and improved affordability and accessibility to bus transport, it has also created operational and financial challenges for the operator, alongside concerns regarding passenger comfort. These impacts are discussed in the following sections.

II. Comparative Assessment: Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme Impact

The comparative approach below provides a clearer understanding of how gender based partial free fare bus schemes influence the functioning of bus systems relative to metro networks in large urban transport systems.

A. Bus (TGSRTC) vs Metro (L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd)

1. Operational Impact

According to TGSRTC, demand increased significantly following implementation of the scheme, with daily ridership rising from 45.49 lakh (4.5 million) in 2023 to 60.47 lakh (6.04 million) in 2025 and bus occupancy increasing from 69% to 92%, pushing utilisation of buses to nearly 100% during peak hours of the same period. This prompted the operator to expand its fleet from 9,089 to 9,878 buses in 2025 and increased short-trip scheduling to improve vehicle turnover. Higher bus occupancy may place greater operational stress to overall bus system and may impact passenger comfort due to overcrowding.



→ Intermodal hub of metro and bus, © C J Mohamed Kowser

In contrast, L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd reported no operational restructuring in terms of fleet or schedule changes. This indicated that the gender based partial free fare bus scheme operational burden fell almost entirely on the bus system. According to L& T, share of female ridership on metro system subsequently declined from approximately 30% to 27% in 2025, with introduction of the scheme. However, subsequently it recovered to approximately 30%.

Parameter	Bus Operator (TGSRTC)
Total daily ridership	45.49 lakh (4.5 million) in 2023 → 60.47 lakh (6.04 million) in 2025
Female ridership	57%
Bus Occupancy	Increased 69% to 92%
Fleet size	Increased: 9,089 to 9,878 buses
Scheduling changes	Overall increase in short trips and frequency
Service coverage changes	Augmented 500 buses, planned 388 more

→ Source: TGSRTC

2. Financial Impact

TGSRTC reported that the daily revenue increased from ₹14.34 crore in 2023 (\$1.50 million USD) to ₹21.23 crore (\$2.21 million USD) in 2025. The increase may be attributable to increased ridership and Telangana government reimbursements calculated based on the distance travelled by women passengers. As per the operator, of the total daily revenue, approximately ₹11.67 crore (\$1.22 million USD) is reimbursed by the government under the scheme, while the remaining ₹9.5 crore (\$0.995 million USD) is generated from fare-paying passengers. Although the scheme intends to compensate the operator fully, the authors' assessment indicates that only about 80% of the scheme claims are reimbursed, as the amount to be received by the operator is fixed yearly by the Government. This results in a deficit of around ₹1,060 crore (\$111 million USD) annually, with a loss of Rs 0.86 crore (\$0.09 million USD)– 1.08 crore (\$0.11 million USD) per bus annually. Apart from this, TGSRTC reports delays in reimbursement resulting in cash-flow constraints affecting fuel procurement, spare parts, and vendor payments, creating financial vulnerabilities that may affect operations and fleet renewal over the longer term.

In comparison, the metro system operated by L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd reported minimal financial impact, with revenue collected from 30% female riders in 2025. Thus, it may be inferred again that the Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme mainly shifted female ridership toward buses without significantly affecting metro revenues.

Parameter	Bus Operator (TGSRTC)
Daily revenue	Increased: ₹14.34 Cr (\$1.50 million USD) in 2023 → ₹21.23 Cr (\$2.21 million USD) in 2025
Female Passenger Revenue	54.68%
Government reimbursement	Yes
Reimbursement timeliness	Delays
Cash flow impact	Stress on other procurements and other payments

→ Source: TGSRTC

3. Digital Systems & Ticketing Impact

Bus operators reported that ticketing systems remains hybrid unlike that of metro systems. In case of TGSRTC, paper tickets costing about 9 paise (\$0.00094 USD) per ticket, as well as digital tickets issued by Electronic Ticketing Machine (ETM) are issued to passengers. Thus, it implies that in case of paper tickets, lack of digital medium for ticket collection increases the possibility of revenue leakage. However, in case of metro, tickets all are digital and therefore negligible chances of revenue leakage.

Parameter	Bus Operator (TGSRTC)	Metro Operator (L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd)
Ticket type	Paper + digital (ETM machines)	Digital
Paper ticket cost	9 paise (\$0.00094 USD) per ticket	NA
Digital verification	Yes (only in case of digital tickets)	Yes

→ Source: TGSRTC & L&T

4. Administrative Impact

TGSRTC reports that because ticketing has not been fully digitised, it completely relies on its crew/conductor staff for issuance of tickets. Thus, crew counselling is often done to avoid verification risks and possibility of revenue leakage. Crew members are also fined for violations. Also, there is no periodic mechanism for monitoring the scheme or systematically collecting passenger feedback to inform scheme evaluation.

In contrast, L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd reported that no comparable staff training or penalty mechanisms are required because fare collection is automated at entry gates.

Parameter	Bus Operator (TGSRTC)
Monitoring mechanism	Manual monitoring
Staff training	Crew counselling conducted
Penalties for violation	Yes
Scheme monitoring & feedback	No

→ Source: TGSRTC

5. Safety and Passenger Management Impact

The bus operator reported no safety complaints or changes to safety procedures or passenger management, though it may be indirectly inferred that increased bus occupancy indicates overcrowding and lower customer satisfactions levels when compared to metro.

The metro operator reported no significant passenger safety issues, and existing metro safety standards remains in place.

Parameter	Bus Operator (TGSRTC)	Metro Operator (L&T Metro Rail Hyderabad Ltd)
Safety complaints	None reported	No major issues reported
Gender safety measures	Standard enforcement	Existing metro safety maintained
Crowding impact	Increased crowding	No significant change

→ Source: TGSRTC & L&T

6. Multimodal Integration and System-Level Impact

As stated earlier, the Scheme has led to increase in female ridership toward buses by about 57% and only a temporary decline in metro female ridership from 30% to 27% in 2025, which later stabilised. However, the Scheme does not apply to metro feeder buses, and no integrated ticketing, fare coordination, or joint operational planning exists between TGSRTC and Hyderabad Metro. This lack of multimodal integration may increase the operational burden on bus operators as it was evident from previous sections on operational impact and may indirectly affect the passengers.

Key Takeaway

Following introduction of the scheme, female ridership on TGSRTC services increased considerably. TGSRTC responded by expanding the fleet and revenue increase by about 48 %. Yet due to partial reimbursement to the bus operator by State government, TGSRTC reports a substantial financial shortfall, which may be attributed to constrain in maintenance and fleet renewal. Thus, overall, it may be said that the scheme, improved women's access to bus services but may also have increased pressure on city's bus network due to lack of joint planning and integration between two modes.

Delhi

Delhi hosts India's most extensive multimodal public transport network, with the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) and Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System (DIMTS) operating around 7,000 buses across 400+ routes connecting urban and nearby satellite cities and the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC)'s 390-km network. The Pink Ticket scheme, pioneered in October 2019 by the Government of Delhi, provides women residents of Delhi free travel on all AC and Non-Ac buses. Women must present an original, valid government-issued ID proof (such as an Aadhaar card or Voter ID) to the conductor and then obtain a zero-fare ticket. The Transport department of Delhi compensates operators through a fixed reimbursement of Rs 10 (\$ 0.10 USD) per issued ticket regardless of trip distance or service type. Several studies indicate the implementation of the scheme has significantly increased women's participation in bus travel.



→ Delhi Transport Corporation Cluster Bus, © Amrita Chakroborty

The city also has an extensive metro network operated by the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) carrying over 63 lakh (6.3 million) passenger journeys daily, highlighting the integrated nature of the multimodal transport system.^{vii}

Although the scheme is intended to enhance women's mobility and equity but it presents several challenges from operators' perspective. The impact of the scheme is further illustrated in the subsequent paragraphs.

B. Operator perspective: Bus (DIMTS & DTC) vs Metro (Delhi Metro Rail Corporation Ltd)

1. Operational Impact

Data reported by DIMTS and DTC indicate operational impacts, including increased female ridership of more than 50%. Though the total passenger ridership reported is higher for DTC compared to DIMTS. This is attributed to higher number of buses owned by DTC compared to DIMTS. Higher bus occupancy is reported by DTC, 81% in 2016-2017 to 88% in 2024-2025, and above 70% female ridership in selected routes was reported by DIMTS. Boarding patterns reported by bus operators indicate women make a substantial share of trips to employment and institutional destinations.

DMRC reported stable ridership of 235.8 crore (2358 million) overall, with only a temporary decline in female ridership from 30% - 27% initially with introduction of scheme. The data therefore suggests that the bus systems absorbed most of the additional female ridership with the introduction of the scheme when compared to metro. Despite female ridership reaching approximately 50% overall and exceeding 70% on some routes, the passenger load on the buses has increased by approximately 8%. However, neither the bus nor the metro operator did not report any changes to its existing scheduling or service coverage.

Parameter	Bus Operator (DIMTS)	Bus Operator (DTC)
Total ridership	39.24 crore (392.4 million) in 2017-18 - 22.80 crore (228 million) in 2021-22	115.1652 crores (1151.652 million) in 2016-17 - 93.34 crore (933.49 million) in 2024-25
Female ridership	Up to 70% on some routes, avg ~40-49%	50%
Bus occupancy	Increased on several feeder routes and few other routes	Increased: 81.36% in 2016-17 → 88.77% in 2024-25
Fleet size	3,239	3,819
Scheduling changes	No	No change
Service coverage changes	No	No change

→ Source: DIMTS, DTC

2. Financial Impact

DIMTS has reported an increase in revenue by 15% overall, however DTC has not reported the same. Both DIMTS and DTC depend on ₹ 10 (\$ 0.10 USD) reimbursement per ticket from the Delhi Government irrespective of the service used by passengers. The reimbursement, however, does not fully cover the AC services, as the average ticket price for AC buses is Rs 15 (\$ 0.16 USD). This leads to a financial gap of about Rs 105 crores (\$1.09 million USD) annually. In this case the financial gap is smaller when compared to Hyderabad case as the deficit primarily arises from the AC bus services and not the whole bus system. Reimbursement delays are also reported by bus operators leading to overall cash-flow constraints affecting routine maintenance activities.

DMRC reported no measurable financial impact, attributable to the scheme.

Parameter	Bus Operator (DIMTS)	Bus Operator (DTC)
Daily revenue	Increased: DIMTS Rs 361 Cr (\$37.88 million USD) in 2017-18 → 414 Cr (\$43.4 million USD)) in 2021-22	Not reported
Female Passenger Revenue	Nearly 50%	
Government reimbursement	Yes	Yes
Reimbursement timeliness	Delays	Delays
Cash flow impact	Stress on other procurements	Stress on daily activities

→ Source: DIMTS, DTC

3. Digital Systems & Ticketing Impact

Both DIMTS and DTC rely primarily on paper tickets with no digital integration for the scheme. This creates potential verification gaps and revenue risks during reimbursements. Bus and metro operators reported that smart-card rollout and fare integration are planned at a later stage.

At present, DMRC operates independently with no ticketing integration with the Bus Scheme. However, very recently the Government of Delhi has introduced the Pink Card Scheme, where the card would be applicable to metro users and bus users and can be recharged by individuals at their own cost

Parameter	Bus Operator (DIMTS)	Bus Operator (DTC)	Metro Operator (DMRC)
Ticket type	paper pink tickets, smart card integration planned	Paper tickets, smart card integration started with metro	Digital
Paper ticket cost	8 paise (\$0.00085 USD) per paper ticket	Not reported	NA
Digital verification for scheme	No	No	No

→ Source: DIMTS, DTC & DMRC

4. Administrative Impact

As reported by DIMTS and DTC, the pink tickets are tracked through conductors and depot managers manually. For DIMTS lastly the total number of pink tickets issued is subsequently entered into Bus Management System (BMS). Training is provided to conductors by both DIMTS and DTC, but on ground enforcement and disciplinary actions depend largely on conductor or depot manager. This might again imply leading to chances of revenue leakage.

DMRC reports no direct involvement for ticket collection as tickets are validated through automated gates at entry. Also, it is reported that no periodic scheme monitoring or system of collection of customer feedback is undertaken to understand the actual impact of scheme on bus users and operators.

Parameter	Bus Operator (DIMTS)	Bus Operator (DTC)
Monitoring mechanism	Depot-level serial tracking	Monthly pink ticket reporting
Staff training	Staff Counselling	Staff Counselling
Penalties for violation	Random checking and warning issued	Challans to conductors and drivers
Scheme monitoring & feedback	No	No

→ Source: DIMTS, DTC

5. Safety and Passenger Management Impact

All three operators report established safety systems including CCTV, marshals, reserved seating, and security personnel. DMRC operates the most formalised safety structure. No major safety incidents were reported by women passengers.

Parameter	Bus Operator (DIMTS)	Bus Operator (DTC)	Metro Operator (DMRC)
Safety complaints	CCTV, panic buttons	CCTV, panic buttons	CCTV, female CISF, reserved coaches
Gender safety measures	Complaint-based response	Marshal enforcement	Dedicated security staff
Crowding impact	Yes	No change reported	No change reported

→ Source: DIMTS, DTC & DMRC

6. Multimodal Integration and System-Level Impact

The Scheme increased female ridership above 50% towards buses. Pink tickets are issued in metro feeder buses also in Delhi. Operators reported higher bus occupancy particularly on routes connecting employment and institutional hubs. The metro experienced only a temporary decline in female ridership, during the initial implementation period of the scheme. However, there is currently no integrated planning or fare coordination between both the modes. But due to the strong presence of metro network around the city, the scheme appears to have had limited impact on service provision

Key Takeaway

The scheme is applicable to the urban areas and is based on flat reimbursements from Delhi Government to the operator. The scheme has led to a moderate increase in passenger load. Although bus operators' revenues increased, the flat rates of ticket reimbursement undervalue AC fares, resulting in annual deficits for operators. It may be inferred that the scheme overall may contribute to women's mobility and inclusion and greater access to work opportunities. The scheme places some financial pressure on operators and creates longer-term funding risks. No major service disruptions were reported, the presence of an extensive metro network may have helped moderate system-wide operational pressures. However, manual ticketing may reduce operational efficiency and affect the passenger experience.

Overall Comparative Assessment of Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme: Bus Operator Perspective for both cities

Parameter	TGSRTC – Hyderabad	DTC/DIMTS – Delhi
Scheme Introduction date	Mahalakshmi Scheme (2023)	Pink Ticket Scheme (2019)
Reimbursement / payment of subsidy	✓	✓
Female Ridership Increased	✓	✓
Occupancy Levels increased	✓	✓
Fleet Size expansion	✓	X
Operational Modifications	✓	X
Financial Risk	✓	✓
Digital ticketing	✓	X
Intermodal integration	X	X

→ Source: Authors

III. Insights from the impact of the scheme on bus operators of Hyderabad and Delhi

Although both Hyderabad and Delhi implemented gender-based partial free fare bus schemes with the common objective of improving women's mobility, the two cities experienced markedly different operational outcomes because of differences in scheme design, transport network characteristics and reimbursement mechanisms.

- Scheme Introduction and application** - The Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme in Delhi was first introduced in the country in 2019, with the objective of improving women's access to education, employment and other opportunities. However, this scheme was introduced much later in 2023 by the Telangana Government, with the same intentions. The Hyderabad scheme applies to all both urban and rural bus services. In Delhi the scheme only applies to urban areas as DTC is intracity bus operator.
- Female Ridership and Demand Generation** - Both cities achieved their primary objective of increasing women's access to public transport. Hyderabad recorded a sharper increase, with women accounting for nearly 57% of total ridership, while Delhi reported approximately 50% female ridership overall, with more than 70% on selected routes. The comparison suggests that although both schemes successfully enhanced women's mobility, the demand generated in Hyderabad was considerably greater, placing higher pressure on the bus network when compared to Delhi.
- Occupancy Levels and Operational Response**- The increase in female ridership translated into different operational outcomes across the two cities. Hyderabad experienced a substantial rise in bus occupancy from 69% to 92%, requiring fleet expansion and increased short-trip scheduling. In comparison, Delhi reported a more moderate increase in occupancy of approximately 8%, while operators largely accommodated additional passengers within existing service levels. This indicates that Hyderabad required active operational restructuring, whereas

Delhi's existing network capacity was able to absorb additional demand with minimal operational modifications. In Hyderabad, higher system utilisation is also likely to increase procurement, service-supply and operating costs.

- **Financial Sustainability and Operator Risk** -The reimbursement mechanism also explains the differing financial outcomes. Hyderabad follows a distance-based reimbursement model, which better reflects travel demand but is constrained by fixed annual budget allocations. As a result, TGSRTC receives only around 80% of eligible reimbursements, creating a much larger annual financial deficit and cash-flow constraints that may which hamper maintenance and fleet renewal. Delhi, on the other hand, provides a flat reimbursement of ₹10 (\$0.10 USD) per ticket regardless of trip length or service type. While this undercompensates operators on AC services, the financial shortfall is comparatively more predictable and primarily concentrated in specific service categories rather than across the entire network.
- **Digital Ticketing and Administrative Efficiency**- Neither city has fully digitised scheme administration, although Hyderabad has made relatively greater progress by combining Electronic Ticketing Machines (ETMs) with paper tickets. Delhi continues to rely predominantly on paper Pink Tickets, with smart-card integration only recently initiated. Consequently, both cities continue to depend on manual verification, conductor-based ticket issuance and administrative reconciliation, increasing the potential for revenue leakage and slowing reimbursement processes. The comparison suggests that digitalisation remains a common area requiring improvement. Also, neither city has a systematic monitoring framework for assessing the scheme's impacts on operators and users.
- **Multimodal Integration and System Performance**- Both Hyderabad and Delhi lack fully integrated fare systems between buses and metro services. However, the impact of this limitation differs between the two cities. Hyderabad's scheme is restricted to buses and lacks coordinated feeder services or integrated ticketing, concentrating additional passenger demand almost entirely on the bus network. In contrast, Delhi's extensive metro network continued to absorb longer-distance travel demand despite the introduction of free bus travel, reducing pressure on bus operations. This comparison indicates that stronger multimodal networks can improve the resilience of fare concession schemes by distributing travel demand more efficiently.

Overall, the comparison suggests that the operational impacts of gender-based partial free fare bus schemes are shaped not only by the policy itself but also by the characteristics of the urban transport ecosystem in which it is implemented. Cities with strong multimodal integration, balanced demand distribution, and predictable funding arrangements are better positioned to absorb increased ridership. The two case studies suggest that where bus systems function as the dominant mode without integrated network support, operators are likely to experience greater capacity constraints, operational stress, and financial vulnerability despite achieving significant social and mobility benefits.

IV. Users' perspective

From the users' perspectives, several studies and reports indicated that over 70% of women continue to rely on buses even without gender-based partial free fare bus schemes^{viii}, because buses offer the most practical solution across different city locations. Studies identify several ways in which bus services benefit users, as summarised below:

- **Lower travel costs:** Reduced transport expenditure enables women, particularly from low-income households, to redirect savings towards essential needs such as food, healthcare, and education.
- **Improved access to opportunities:** Affordable bus travel increases access to employment, education, healthcare, and other essential services, with the greatest benefits observed in cities offering reliable and frequent bus services.
- **Greater mobility and social inclusion:** The schemes have enhanced women's independence by enabling more discretionary, caregiving, and social trips, thereby supporting greater participation in economic and social life.

These findings are consistent with UITP, 'Access Creates Value'⁷ report. Thus, the above findings from secondary sources also complement the operator assessment by demonstrating that while gender-based partial free fare bus schemes impose operational and financial pressures on bus operators, they have been associated with social and equity benefits for women users.

V. Guidelines

While gender-based partial free fare bus schemes have been associated with improved affordability and access to employment, education, and essential services for women, they also present operational and financial challenges for bus operators.

Drawing from these challenges, the following guidelines, offer a pathway to sustainable implementation of such Gender Based Partial Free Fare Bus Scheme.

Guidelines for Government:

The guidelines presented below are further grouped into high and medium priority areas.

High-priority areas

- Drawing on the experience of both case studies, governments may establish clear and predictable funding or contractual arrangements, preferably supported by multi-year budget commitments, between State Government and operators to ensure operators are adequately compensated for the services delivered.
- Given the continued dependence on conductors or depot staff for ticket collection, institutional policy reforms including automated audits and digital ticketing and regular scheme monitoring are important to enhance transparency and help in support effective scheme implementation and potential expansion.
- Before introducing such schemes, State governments should undertake joint planning with bus and metro operators to assess network impacts, feeder service requirements, and fare integration opportunities.

Medium Priority areas

- Design reimbursement mechanisms that reflect actual service costs. Distance-based reimbursement, where appropriate, can improve financial predictability. This could help reduce Cash-flow constraints and support essential activities such as maintenance and fleet renewal.
- Where fare concession schemes result in sustained occupancy levels above an established benchmark for example 80–90%, State governments should consider providing dedicated funding to operators for additional fleet deployment and service expansion to prevent overcrowding and deterioration in service quality for passengers.
- Institute regular monitoring and evaluation committees within Government to refine scheme execution and address emerging gaps proactively.

Guidelines for operators

High-Priority Areas

- Operators should deploy robust digital ticketing, automated verification, and integrated platforms in bus operations to minimize verification risk and the possibility of leakage of revenue and expedite reimbursement claims.

⁷ https://www.uitp.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2026/04/20260408_Access-Creates-Value_WEB.pdf.

- Operators should coordinate multimodal planning to accommodate increased passenger demand under such schemes.
- Provide for additional services and fleet deployment when such schemes are introduced to prevent overcrowding and deterioration in service quality for passengers.

Medium Priority Areas

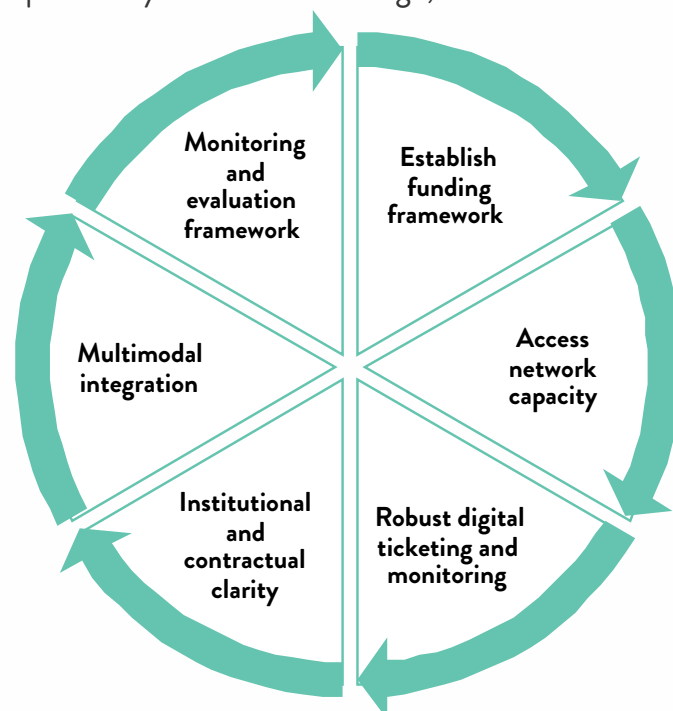
- Use innovative technologies such as mobile apps and CCTV surveillance— to strengthen passenger safety and improve operator responsiveness.
- Conduct periodic programme monitoring and passenger feedback surveys to assess scheme impacts and inform operational and financial planning.

VI. Way Forward

Evidence suggests that gender-based partial free fare bus schemes in India can support broader social objectives such as access to employment, education, healthcare, and essential services. At the same time, the comparative assessment of Hyderabad and Delhi shows that the operational and financial impacts on bus operators vary considerably depending on the design of the reimbursement mechanism, the availability of funding, network capacity, and the degree of multimodal integration.

For cities considering the introduction of gender-based partial free fare bus schemes, several favourable enabling conditions should be established before implementation. These include:

- **Establish funding framework:** Establish a dedicated and predictable funding mechanism with contractual multi-year budget commitments and clearly defined reimbursement arrangements to ensure operators are fully compensated in timely manner.
- **Assess network capacity:** Conduct assessments of expected ridership growth, financial implications, and operational impacts to estimate funding requirements and identify necessary service enhancements.
- **Robust digital ticketing and monitoring:** Deploy electronic ticketing, automated passenger validation, and digital reimbursement systems to improve transparency, minimise increase verification risk and possibility of revenue leakage, and streamline claims processing.



➔ Figure 2 Suggested enabling conditions for city led for implementation of gender based partial free fare bus schemes

- **Institutional and contractual clarity:** Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of governments and operators, including reimbursement procedures, performance monitoring, and dispute resolution mechanisms.
- **Multimodal integration:** Align the scheme with the broader public transport network through integrated ticketing, coordinated feeder services, and joint planning between bus and rail operators to avoid unintended shifts in demand and optimise network performance.
- **Monitoring and evaluation framework:** Establish performance indicators and periodic reviews covering ridership, financial performance, service quality, customer satisfaction, and equity outcomes, enabling evidence-based adjustments after implementation.

Overall, the findings from the paper suggest that the success of gender-based partial free fare bus schemes depend not only on the policy itself but also on the institutional, financial, and operational environment within which it is implemented. However, such type of schemes is considered majorly a welfare scheme and therefore the burden should not fall on the operator, instead considered as social- service obligations. Embedding these schemes within a broader framework of sustainable public transport planning can help cities advance inclusive mobility while maintaining resilient and financially viable public transport systems.

About UITP Transport Economics & Finance Committee (TEFC)

UITP, as the International Association of Public Transport and a passionate champion of sustainable urban mobility, brings together (as per 2026) more than 2,000 public transport authorities, operators, industry suppliers, academics and policy makers from around the world, and together with its members, UITP advances public transport through advocacy, knowledge and networking.

Since 1885, UITP has shared insights and experiences, inspiring innovation, shaping the future of urban mobility.

The UITP Transport Economics & Finance committee is a transversal committee within UITP forums. It falls within the scope of the UITP Service Excellence Unit aims to strengthen the attractiveness of public transport and sustainable urban mobility. Its primary goal is to contribute to passengers' high-quality journeys, ensure a secure framework for operations, staff well-being and diversity, identify adequate financial resources, promote customer-centric design principles and communication tools.

Each of its transversal committees' exchanges experiences, collects best practices and constructs data-led content with its members. It acts as a direct line of communication between stakeholders, including authorities and industry, serving as a link between operational matters and political issues. Thus, advancing our industry and association by identifying needs, trends and practical approaches.

TE&FC is the main forum for UITP members experts or with a keen interest in economic, financial matters and related risks. Accounting with over 50 international members, it aims to promote sustainable business models related to urban mobility, including environmental, social, governance and innovation issues, as well as their impact on the evolution of the sector.

The topics of interest for the TE&FC aims to target:

- **Public Transport and Sustainable Mobility:** Public Administrations budgets are constrained, whereas sustainable mobility requires long and short-term funding commitment from public administrations and stakeholders.

- **Funding and Financing Public Transport:** Available tools and models ought to provide a more balanced public contribution through financing and funding mechanisms.
- **Improving the effectiveness and quality of Public Transport:** Ensuring public transport systems may depend on a resilient and comprehensive revenue and cost strategy integrating both social and commercial objectives.

The TE&FC is structured by bringing members, experts and guests through three Working Groups:

- **UITP Global Economic Outlook 2026:** Exploring key trends from how the sector perceived the FY year to come based on a survey participated by 106 networks. The results can be found on My Library.
- **UITP Sustainable Finance:** this group aims to explore how companies have deployed and created sustainable finance framework and how it has impacted the company and how they operate internally to ensure the compliance with new processes and ESG-related requirements.
- **UITP Innovative Funding:** this group is conducting a world-wide interview to understand the context and landscape of funding operational expenses. This group is the continuation of UITP recent publication 'Access Creates Value: the Case for Funding Public Transport' (available on uitp.org)

These groups bring together specialists to develop knowledge and produce reports, which are made available to all UITP members via My Library.

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