



Mahalaxmi free bus scheme: A means of women empowerment in Telangana state

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Abstract: This research project investigates the “Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme,” launched by the Telangana State Government on December 9, 2023, as a transformative initiative aimed at empowering women. Recognizing that travel is essential for personal, educational, and economic development, the scheme seeks to overcome the historical constraints that have limited women’s mobility. Traditionally, women’s confinement to the home has restricted their access to education, employment, and decision-making, leading to a dependency that the government now aims to reverse. By offering zero-fare travel on selected TSRTC buses to all women. This initiative not only alleviates the financial burden of travel but also promotes gender equality by enhancing women’s independence and participation in societal development. This paper intends to assess the impact of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus service on the mobility and independence of women, to analyze the primary purposes for which women utilize the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme, to examine the role of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus service in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality and to assess the level of awareness among women about the Free Bus Scheme and its benefits. The analysis employed descriptive statistics to interpret the data collected. Key findings include: A significant majority of women use the service for work and the scheme provides noticeable financial relief, with many respondents saving monthly on travel expenses. These savings increase disposable income to fulfill other essential needs. There is evidence of Enhanced independence, as many respondents reported increased ability to travel alone, and similar proportions noted improvements in self-confidence and decision-making power. The study affirms that with implementation and adaptive management strategies, the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme can significantly empower women, encourage their participation in socio-economic activities and ultimately contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society in Telangana.

Key Words: Free bus travel, Empowerment, Equality, Mahalaxmi, Women

1. INTRODUCTION: Human survival is linked to travel. It is through travel that humans fulfill many of their life needs, enhance their intellectual development, and pave the way for social development. In this process of travel, women are almost confined to the home, while only men go out for work, which naturally has led to women lagging behind in decision-making power and empowerment compared to men. Due to this, women are lagging behind in the fields of education and employment, and due to the increasing dominance of men over women; a situation arises in developing societies where women live dependent on men.

To eliminate such social inequalities and abuses against women, since the country gained independence, many policies and measures have been taken by the central and state governments in terms of governance, constitutionally and legally, to establish equality between men and women. In this regard, the Telangana State Government has launched the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Service Scheme for women on 9th December 2023 as part of six guarantees to enable women to grow in the fields of their choice, to uncover their hidden skills and abilities and improve them. This scheme is gaining a lot of support from women day by day because every bus has been seemed filled with women. Regardless of the financial difficulties and challenges faced by the government in implementing this scheme, it is working hard to successfully implement this scheme and enhance the freedom and empowerment of women.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW: The Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme in Telangana is a significant social welfare initiative aimed at empowering women by providing free transportation services. To understand its impact, feasibility, and challenges, existing literature is reviewed. Pucher *et al.* (2005) and Tiwari *et al.* (2013) highlight that overcrowding, financial strain on government budgets and maintenance issues often reduce the long-term effectiveness of such schemes. Gutierrez, (2019) mentioned that Argentina's "Red SUBE" Program offered discounted fares for women and marginalized groups, leading to a 15% increase in workforce participation among women. Luxembourg's Free Public Transport Policy (2020) introduced free bus services for all citizens. Vasudevan & Gupta (2021) on Karnataka's "Shakti Scheme" for free women's bus travel highlighted that such policies increase economic savings for low-income women, improving their financial autonomy and household economic stability. Paul & Mishra (2022) emphasize the need for sustainable funding sources and public-private partnerships to ensure the longevity of free bus schemes. S. Kiruthika and Dr. G. Ravi (2022)'s study discovers that the facility was very useful to the students and employees, especially low wage workers and those who are financially dependent on their husbands and family. Dr. M. Kalimuthu and S. Preethika (2023) revealed in their study that the free buses facility was helpful for women passengers to save money and is used in household expenses of their family and also beneficial for the students and working women. Joel Premkumar (2023) studied the challenges women faced to benefit from the scheme. The study discovered that the scheme had a good effect on women by assisting them in meeting their practical needs and the study suggested the government to increase the access and availability of buses.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: Women often face mobility challenges due to financial constraints, safety concerns, and limited access to affordable public transportation. These barriers restrict their independence, employment opportunities, and social participation. To address this, the **Mahalaxmi Free Bus** service was introduced to enhance women's mobility and promote gender equality.

However, it is essential to evaluate whether the scheme effectively reduces these challenges and empowers women. Key concerns include awareness, utilization, and its impact on their economic and social independence. Additionally, assessing its role in increasing women's participation in education, employment, and public life is crucial. This study aims to analyze the scheme's impact and effectiveness, providing insights for improving similar public transport initiatives for women.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY: The present study intends

- To assess the impact of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus service on the mobility and independence of women.
- To analyze the primary purposes for which women utilize the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme.
- To examine the role of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus service in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality.
- To assess the level of awareness among women about the Free Bus Scheme and its benefits.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN: This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to comprehensively assess the impact of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus for All Women initiative. The study is descriptive and exploratory, aiming to understand the effectiveness, accessibility, and socio-economic impact of the scheme.

a. Source of Data: The present study makes use of both Primary and Secondary source of data. The primary data has collected from the respondents by a pre-designed questionnaire through the Surveys and Interviews with women passengers at Hanumakonda Bus Stand and inside buses to assess passenger flow, service quality and accessibility concern. The Secondary data has also collected from Journals, Magazines, Government reports, previous research studies, Newspaper articles, Transport department statistics and various online websites on Mahalaxmi free bus scheme implementation and effect on women empowerment.

b. Sampling Design: A Purposive sample of 50 women passengers have been selected for the purpose of study. Of the 50 female passengers, 15 were taken under the age of below 21, another 20 were taken between the ages of 22 from 50, and the remaining 15 were taken above the age of above 50. And, out of 50 respondents, 40 are literates and 10 are illiterates selected for study to know their perception on the scheme.

c. Limitations of the Study: The present study covers only the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme for all women. It does not cover any other scheme. Data has been collected from only Hanumakonda Bus Stand only. The study covers only the scheme impact on women independence and empowerment through free bus traveling. It does not touch any social evils.



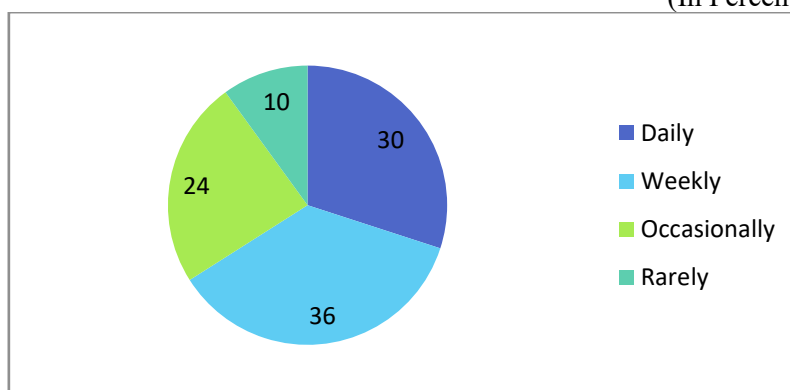
6. DATA ANALYSIS: The Telangana Government has been implemented Free Bus Service for all women including transgender in Telangana State to provide Zero fair services. It means women of the state don't need to pay any single rupee for the selected state-run buses of TSRTC (Telangana State Road Transport Corporation). The data has been analyzed using various statistical tools as under mentioned.

Table 1. Use the Free Bus Services

Sl. No.	Frequency of Use the Free Bus Service	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Daily	15	30
2	Weekly	18	36.
3	Occasionally	12	24
4	Rarely	05	10
	Total	50	100

Source: Primary data

Chart showing the Percentage frequency of usage of Free Bus services by women
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary data

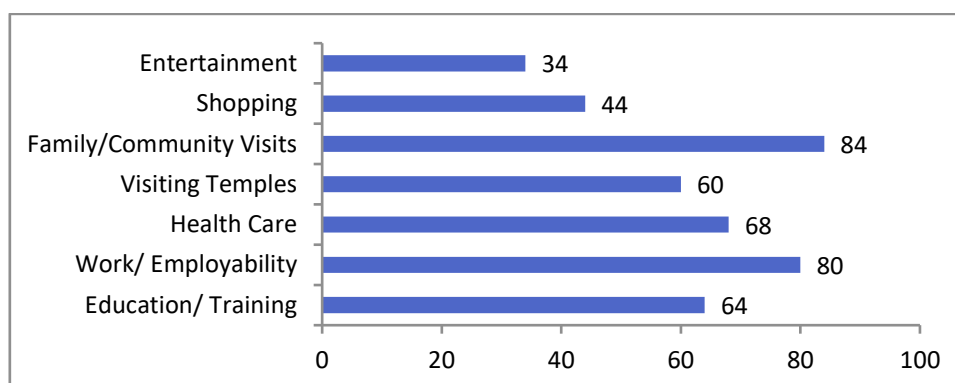
When we asked 50 selected women at Hanumakonda bus stand how many times women use the Mahalakshmi free bus service in a month, 15 of them said that they travel every day, 18 respondents said once a week, 12 respondents said that they use it depending on different occasions and the remaining 05 respondents said they travel occasionally. In the first 5-6 months of the introduction of Mahalakshmi Free Bus Scheme, many women enthusiastically used to travel for different types of work. Now it can be said that the crowd has reduced a little compared to the beginning as women travel only for necessary work.

Table 2. Primary Purpose of Travelling

Sl. No.	Travelling Purpose	Total Respondents	No. of Respondents	Percentage
01	Education/ Training	50	32	64
02	Work/ Employability	50	40	80
03	Health Care	50	34	68
04	Visiting Temples	50	30	60
05	Family/Community Visits	50	42	84
06	Shopping	50	22	44
07	Entertainment	50	17	34

Source: Primary Data

Graph 2. Showing the Primary Purpose of Travelling
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary Data

When we asked 50 selected women through a pre-designed questionnaire about the purpose and occasions for which women availing the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme, 42 respondents (84 Percenta) are utilizing this scheme to visit family and community visits. 64 percent respondents responded that they were traveling for education and training, 40 out of 50 respondents (80 Percent) endorsed that they were traveling for employment and various tasks, 68 percentage respondents replied that they were traveling for better medical treatment, 60 percent respondents said that they were visiting temples or shrines, and 22 out of 50 women respondents said they go shopping, only 17 out of 50 respondents said they travel for various types of entertainment.

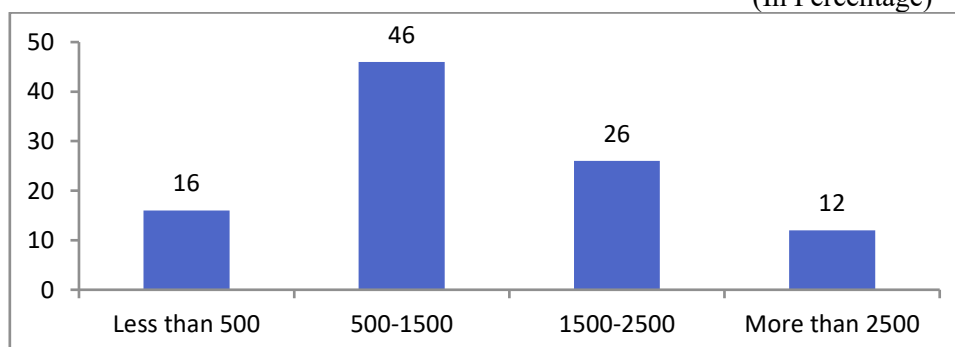
Due to the introduction of the Mahalakshmi Free Bus Scheme by the Telangana government, a large number of women are rushing to and from their relatives' houses for every auspicious and inauspicious event in buses, ignoring crowding. This increases the love and affection between relatives and family members and makes them closer mentally. There is no doubt that women use the free bus to further their education, to find employment and various types of work, to get the training they need, to visit various hospitals for health care, to visit various temples and shrines for spiritual and mental happiness.

Table 3. Money saving on Transportation for each Month

Sl. No.	Money saving (in Rs.)	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Less than 500	08	16
2	500-1500	23	46
3	1500-2500	13	26
4	More than 2500	06	12
	Total	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Graph 3 showing Money saving on Transportation for each Month
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary Data

When 50 female respondents were asked for how much they were saving in a month's travel expenses by using the Mahalaxmi free bus, 8 of them (16 Percent) responded that they were saving less than Rs. 500 per month, 23 respondents



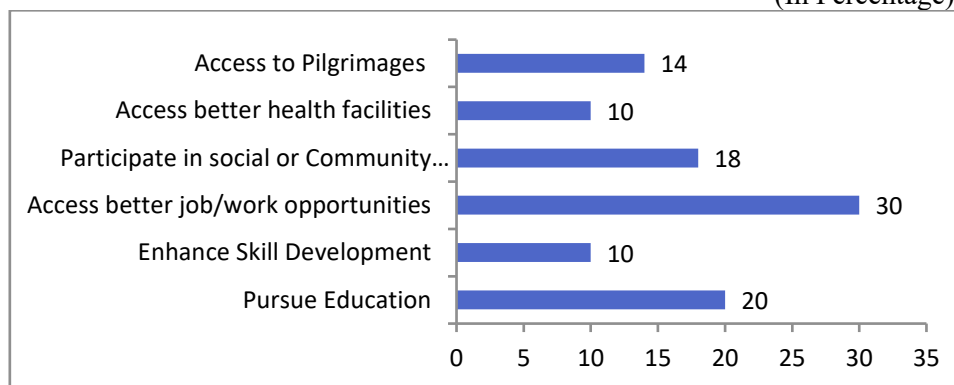
(46 Percent) said between Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,500, 13 respondents (26 Percent) replied between Rs. 1,500 and Rs. 2,500, and the remaining 6 respondents (12 Percent) said they were saving more than Rs. 2,500 per month. With the above table we can conclude that Women travelers have spent more money on travel expenses, which increases their purchasing power and allows them to spend it on things to fulfill their desires.

Table 4. Details of Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme enable to use

Sl. No.	Enable to use free bus	No. of Respondents	Percentage
01	Pursue Education	10	20
02	Enhance Skill Development	05	10
03	Access better job/work opportunities	15	30
04	Participate in social or Community activities	09	18
05	Access better health facilities	05	10
06	Access to Pilgrimages	07	14
	Total	50	100

Source: Primary Data

Graph 4 showing details of Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme enable to use
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary Data

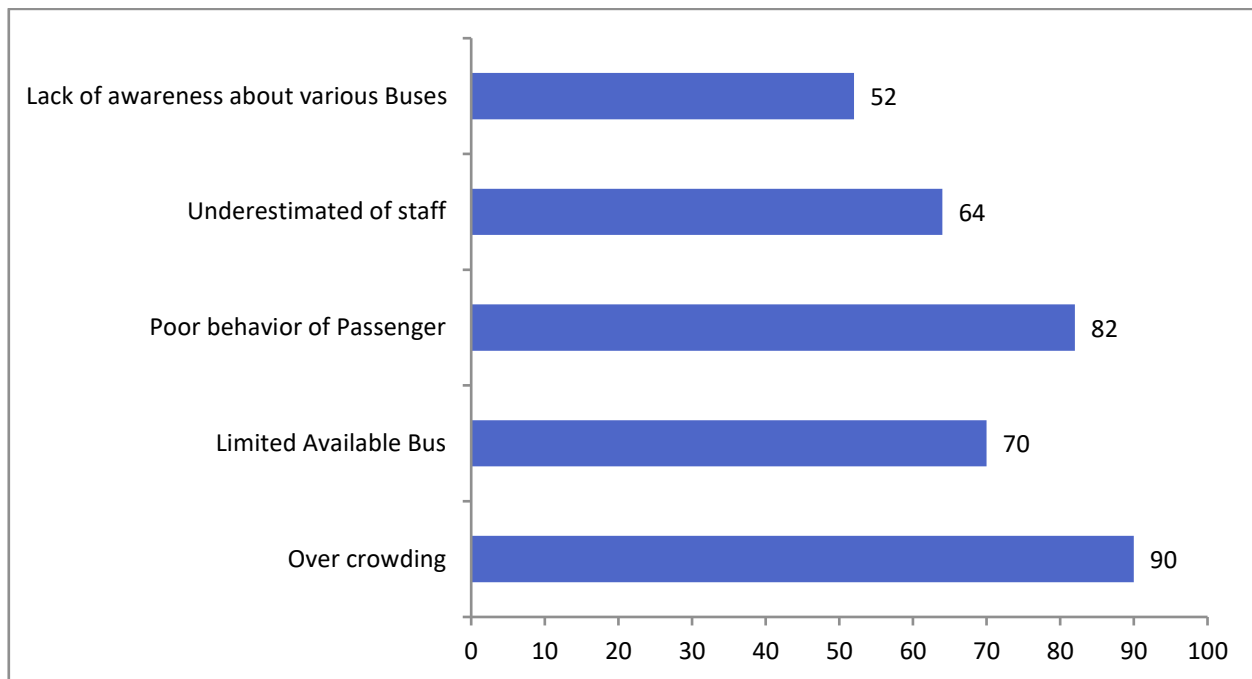
When 50 female passengers respondents were asked, what needs the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme would enable women to fulfill, 10 of them (20 Percent) said it was for education, 05 of them (10 Percent) said it was for skill development, 15 respondents consist 30 percentage of total respondents said it was for better employment opportunities, 18 percent respondents said it was for social programs, 10 percentage respondents said it was for better medical and health facilities, and the remaining 07 respondents (14 Percent) said they were traveling to visit pilgrimage sites. It can be concluded, due to the free bus scheme, many women passengers are travelling to multi-specialty hospitals for better medical facilities and famous pilgrimage sites for mental and spiritual happiness, for further studies, to enhance their skills through better training for self-employment and to find job opportunities of their choice.

Table 5. Difficulties while using Free Bus Service

Sl. No.	Difficulties/Challenges	Total Respondents	No. of Respondents	Percentage
01	Over crowding	50	45	90
02	Limited Available Bus	50	35	70
03	Poor behavior of Passenger	50	41	82
04	Underestimated of staff	50	32	64
05	Lack of awareness about various Buses	50	26	52

Source: Primary Data

Graph 5. Difficulties while using Free Bus Service
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary Data

The respondents were asked about the various difficulties and challenges faced by women passengers while using the free bus scheme, 90 percent of respondents said that the buses were very crowded and there was no space to stand. 35 out of 50 said that the buses were not operated according to the number of passengers. 41 out of 50 (82 percent) respondents said that many passengers behave badly and should not be treated with dignity. 32 out of 50 said that RTC staff and male passengers are rude towards women. 26 out of 50 respondents (52 percentage) said that women were not properly informed about the various bus facilities and tickets.

The study observed that the percentage of female passengers increases due to free bus service. Due to the increasing percentage of passengers, due to the unavailability of buses and their non-arrival on time, the crowd naturally increases in the buses. This leads to a clash between the two as women compete with male passengers to get seats to board the bus. Both lose patience, lose their dignity, behave disrespectfully, look at women in a disrespectful manner, and drivers and conductors do not pacify the disputes between passengers but rather view them as entertainment. Women are facing many challenges. To prevent this, continuous publicity should be given at the bus stands to create complete awareness about the Mahalaxmi scheme and its objectives at the RTC stops and the public. Similarly, the number of buses should be increased or decreased according to the congestion.

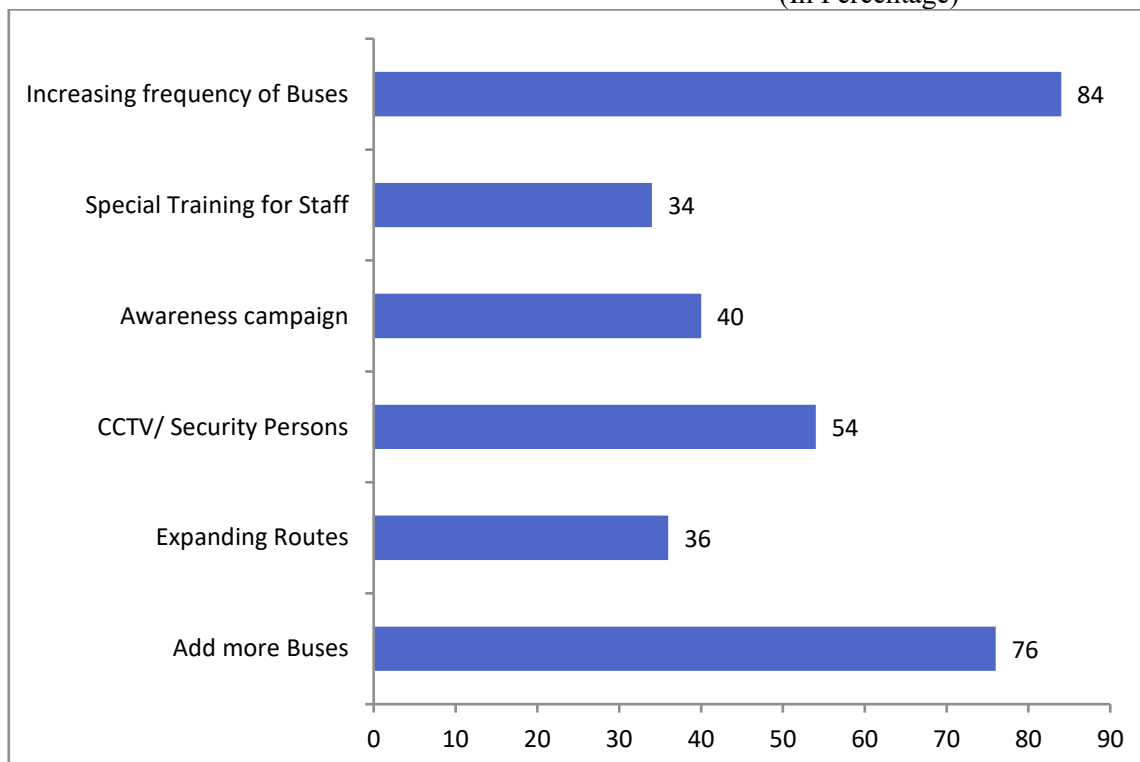
Table 6. Measures to improve the Mahalaxmi Scheme

Sl. No.	Measures to success	Total Respondents	No. of Respondents	Percentage
01	Add more Buses	50	38	76
02	Expanding Routes	50	18	36
03	CCTV/ Security Persons	50	27	54
04	Awareness campaign	50	20	40
05	Special Training for Staff	50	17	34
06	Increasing frequency of Buses	50	42	84

Source: Primary Data



Graph 6. Measures to improve the Mahalaxmi Scheme (Women)
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary Data

According to the above table, when the 50 selected people were asked about the steps to be taken to improve and successfully continue the Mahalaxmi scheme, 42 of them (84 percent respondents) said that more buses should be added, 18 out of 50 respondents said that bus routes should be increased, 27 out of 50 respondents (54 percentage) said that CCTV and security personnel should be provided at bus stands and CCTVs should be replaced in buses as well, 20 out of 50 (40 percent respondents) said that widespread awareness should be created about the scheme, 17 out of 50 respondents said that special training should be provided to RTC staff about the scheme, and finally, 42 out of 50 (84 percent respondents) said that the frequency of buses should be increased.

Free bus facility should be provided by the state government for the sake of women welfare. Through bus facility, women can freely take steps on an equal footing with men in the fields of their choice. The main objective is to empower them to reduce the gap between men and women socially, economically, culturally and spiritually. In order to achieve this goal, first of all, the number of buses should be increased so that women do not feel uncomfortable in buses, expand bus facility even in rural areas, strict adherence to bus timings should be ensured. The government should ensure that CCTV and security personnel are provided at the bus stand or in the buses, which will increase self-confidence among women. Complaint boxes should be set up widely at the bus stand.

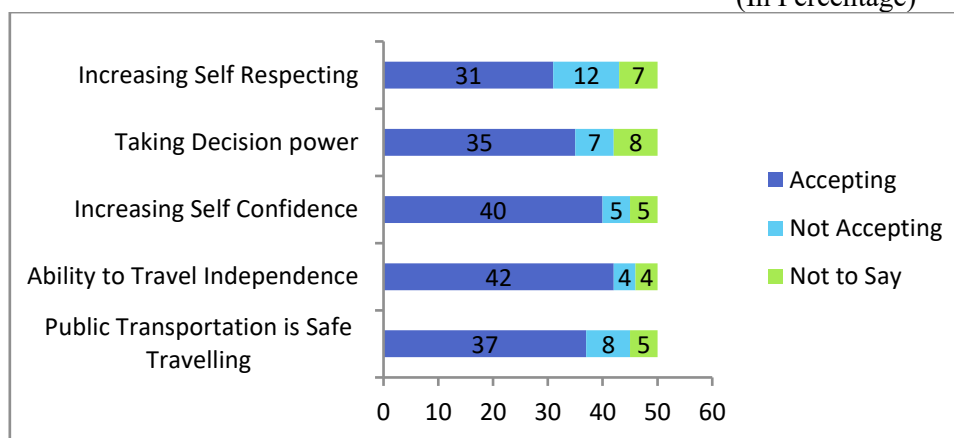
Table 7. Mahalaxmi Free Bus effect on Women Independence and Empowerment

Sl. No.	Women Independence & Empowerment	Total Respondents	Accepting	Not Accepting	Not to Say
01	Public Transportation is Safe Travelling	50	37	08	05
02	Ability to Travel Independence	50	42	04	04
03	Increasing Self Confidence	50	40	05	05
04	Taking Decision power	50	35	07	08
05	Increasing Self Respecting	50	31	12	07

Source: Primary Data



Graph 7. Mahalaxmi Free Bus effect on Women Independence and Empowerment
(In Percentage)



Source: Primary Data

Women commuters were asked about the impact of Mahalaxmi free bus services on women's empowerment. As part of this, 50 women respondents were asked about the increase in self-respecting, 31 out of 50 agreed, 12 disagreed, and the remaining 07 were neutral. When respondents were asked about the increase in taking decision making power, 35 out of 50 agreed that it would increase, 07 disagreed, and the remaining 08 were neutral. When asked about self-confidence, 40 out of 50 said it would increase, 05 opposed it, and the remaining 05 were neutral. When asked about the ability to travel independently, 42 out of 50 agreed that they had the ability, 04 disagreed, and the remaining 04 said they could not say anything. When respondents were asked about safe travel by public transport, 37 said it was safe, 08 said it was not safe, and the remaining 05 said they could not say anything.

Mahalaxmi free bus facility will help women travel more on an equal footing with men for their own needs and family needs. This will help women to become more aware of the behaviour of fellow passengers, their customs and the culture and traditions of different places. This will help women to keep up with the times, adapt to the culture and traditions, and become modern women, equal to men in every way. They will be able to do their own work, travel independently for their work, no matter how far they go, and develop self-confidence and self-esteem. This scheme will be useful for them to live with self-respect.

6. FINDINGS: The following are the major findings of the study.

1. Women are ready to travel any distance without fear and for their desired jobs or work and for studies.
2. Due to the introduction of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme by the Telangana government, a large number of women are rushing to and from their relatives' houses for every auspicious and inauspicious event in buses, ignoring crowding and that they were travelling for education and training.
3. Majority respondents said that their saving was between Rs. 500 and Rs. 1,500 per month.
4. Majority respondents said that they were able to use Mahalaxmi free Bus scheme for better employment or work opportunities.
5. Most of the respondents said that the buses were very crowded and there was no space to stand and various difficulties and challenges faced by women passengers while using the free bus scheme.
6. Most of the respondents suggested that more buses should be added and the frequency of buses should be increased to improve and successfully continue the Mahalaxmi scheme.
7. About the ability to travel independently, majority respondents said that increased ability to travel alone, self-confidence would be increasing and decision making power would be increasing. Before the scheme, when women travelled from rural areas to towns or cities for various tasks, they would feel inferior because of the behaviour of the people in the cities, their culture, their dress, and their way of speaking. Today, due to free bus travel, women have become economically, culturally, and linguistically conscious and their confidence have increased. Consequently, the cultural distance between rural and urban areas has decreased. They are ready to go wherever there is demand for their work or jobs, and at the same time, they have become confident that they will sell their products wherever there is demand.



8. Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme will help women to become more aware of the behaviour of fellow passengers, their customs and the culture and traditions of different places. This will help women to keep up with the times, adapt to the culture and traditions, and become modern women, equal to men in every way.

9. We have found that women are visiting their relatives' houses or families more than ever before for any auspicious or inauspicious events. This reduces the emotional distance between relatives and increases the love, affection, and intimacy between them.

10. Through this scheme, all the women travelling in buses forget their differences of caste, financial position and region and instead establish good relationships, stay together and have respect for each other.

7. CONCLUSION: The Telangana State Government's Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme represents a transformative step toward women's empowerment, providing them with the freedom to be self-reliant and financially independent. By eliminating travel costs across the state, the initiative enables women to access education, secure employment and participate fully in social and family decision-making processes. This initiative has had a profound impact on both urban and rural women. Urban and Rural women benefit by reaching workplaces, educational institutions, and professional opportunities that match their skills and aspirations, thereby earning higher wages. In rural areas also, the scheme has opened avenues for women to transport their agricultural products like vegetables and seasonal fruits to markets where they can obtain better prices, contributing to improved household incomes. Moreover, the increased mobility has led to greater participation in cultural and social events, reinforcing community ties and enhancing overall self-esteem. Economic freedom through improved mobility translates into enhanced decision-making power for women. As they navigate their personal and professional lives with greater confidence, women are more likely to challenge traditional gender roles and contribute actively to societal progress. The positive outcomes of the scheme underscore the need for its responsible use by beneficiaries to ensure its continued success and widespread benefits. The success of the Mahalaxmi Free Bus Scheme hinges on sustained commitment from both the government and RTC, along with responsible utilization by the beneficiaries. When executed effectively, the scheme not only provides a practical solution to mobility challenges but also serves as a catalyst for increased gender equality and socio-economic development in Telangana.

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