

Overcoming Barriers to Women’s Mobility

Improving Women’s Access to Public Transport in Pakistan

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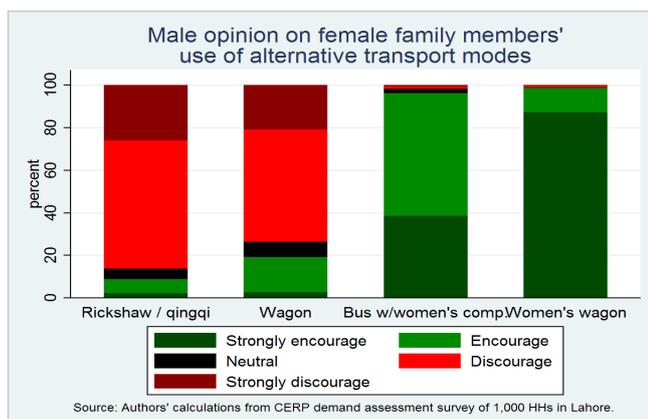


Many Pakistani women aren’t allowed or don’t feel safe to travel alone - but improved transport can help!

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Topic at a Glance

Women’s mobility outside the home in Pakistan is restricted by social norms and safety concerns. In particular, social norms against women coming into close contact with unrelated men, and the discomfort, social stigma, and fear of harassment when they do so limits women’s movement and their use of public transport. This constrains their choices to participate in the labour force, continue their education, or engage in other independent activities. The government has attempted to address women’s concerns through transport policy by introducing separate sections in buses and running women-only buses. However, challenges still remain for women’s safety and comfort on public transport. There are major areas for improvement in transport policy that can significantly increase women’s mobility.



Caption: Most men in Lahore restrict their female family members’ mobility -yet they would be happy for their wives and daughters to travel independently if they could ride in a women’s-only compartment or van.

New Insights

There are striking differences between men and women’s access to and experience of public transport in Pakistan. When traveling beyond walking distance, women in Lahore are almost 30% more likely than men to use public transport such as buses or wagons. This is in part because of other options, such as riding independently on a motorbike or bicycle (common transport modes for men), are taboo for women.

But travel on public transport presents significant challenges for women because of concerns about safety, harassment and social stigma. In a survey conducted by the Center for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP) of 1,000 households across Lahore, 70% of male respondents said they would discourage female family members from taking public wagon services. Although separate women’s compartments in buses have facilitated women’s travel, many women lack access to such services, discouraging them from traveling. In a CERP survey of 50,000 households in Lahore, almost 40% of respondents said that it was unsafe or very unsafe for women to walk in their neighborhood.

Many women avoid using public transport, particularly on crowded modes such as wagons. Women either switch to higher cost modes, adjust their travel timings and route or simply do not travel without a male family member.

These challenges restrict women’s lives substantially. They affect whether they work and the kind of jobs they take, where they can study and when they can visit their families. Women may have to give up better job opportunities that do not provide transport – or they may not find a job at all. Twenty-five percent of female respondents in the CERP survey in Lahore said that whether transport is provided would increase their chances of taking up a job opportunity.

If improved public transport addresses these challenges, it has the potential to make a significant impact on women’s mobility and the opportunities available them.

Transport interventions designed with attention to these issues can improve women’s ability to travel safely. Notably, many men who restrict their wives and daughters from travelling alone would be comfortable

with them traveling independently on a women's-only service – they do not oppose their mobility overall, but specifically because of the fear of harassment on existing transport services (Figure 1).

In recent years, various transport interventions in Pakistan have attempted to facilitate women's mobility by creating women's-only spaces on public transport, or changing norms around women's presence in public spaces – through encouraging women to ride motorbikes, or drive rickshaws or for ride-hailing services. Yet the social and economic impact of such interventions has not been rigorously evaluated.

Existing women's-only services (in Lahore, three Pink Bus routes) appear to benefit their active users substantially, but serve a very small number of women due to their limited geographic coverage, restricted timings and lack of publicity. The resources for these services could be used more efficiently. On the other hand, many women in Lahore lack access to buses with women's-only compartments – which most respondents would find acceptable.

Policy Recommendations

1. Continue the Expansion of the Public Transport Network.

The absence and shortage of public transport affects women differently than men. The Government of Punjab has expanded public transport extensively over the last five years; this should be continued. Emphasize high quality services with lower crowding and/or with separate women's sections.

2. Use Pink Bus Resources to Achieve Greater Value for Money.

Women's-only vehicles that run partly empty may benefit a small number of riders substantially, but their cost makes them unsustainable to scale up to cover large areas of the city. Instead, if women's-only vehicles are used, the program should use small vehicles that can fill up and cover their costs. Run them on routes where there is crowding on vehicles and where there is not already a large bus (high Occupancy Vehicle) with a separate section, as these are the areas where women face the biggest challenges.

3. Announce and Follow a Schedule for Bus Services; this is possible with more layover time.

This will reduce waiting time on the street for women, and improve the convenience and value of the system for all passengers. CERP's urban and peri-urban pilot services, conducted with the collaboration of the Lahore Transport Company, demonstrated this is feasible even in Lahore's uncertain traffic conditions.

4. Peri urban areas have limited public transport coverage, but informal operators provide some services. The government should work with these operators to provide a reliable, low frequency transport service in peri-urban areas on a well-publicised timetable. CERP's peri-urban pilot with the Lahore Transport Company in the Halloki area demonstrated that peri-urban passengers will plan around the announced schedule and make use of such a service.

5. Train Public Transport Staff (particularly drivers and conductors) on Sexual Harassment.

They should be trained on the standards expected of them, as well as how to deal with passenger-on-passenger harassment. There is currently no training in place for these staff. Staff must also be monitored and held accountable to these requirements. CERP's pilot service in collaboration with Women in Struggle for Empowerment (WISE) used such training and enforcement with high success. Aurat Foundation has expressed interest in working with the Government of Punjab on a larger-scale pilot of this program in Lahore.

6. Public transport alone is not enough: women need to feel and be safe getting to and waiting at stops. Sidewalks, street lighting, and police attention to stops and general street safety are critical.

7. Incorporate Gender in Transport Planning.

Decisions on gender issues in transport (such as whether to have a divider between male and female sections on the Metrobus) are often made ad hoc, based on the judgment of a particular implementing agency. The government should start a process to assess women's needs in designing new policies, and use data to help inform transport planning.

8. Conduct evaluations of Women's Safety and Mobility Initiatives.

Multiple initiatives on women's-only transport, such as the Pink Bus, as well as programs to change social norms such as Women on Wheels, have been implemented in recent years. There is critical need for better monitoring and rigorous impact evaluation of such programs, to determine how to adapt them and whether to scale them up.

Limitations

These findings are based on survey data, which do not always fully reflect how people will respond to new situations in practice. For example, a respondent may say in a survey that she would take up a job if offered safe transport, but might not follow through and take up the job in reality. Importantly, these survey data also do not allow us to quantify how much women lose in terms of opportunities.

To address these questions, the CERP project is carrying out a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) of transport services in Lahore – offering transport to work to men and women, to test how this affects the job opportunities they can access and their earnings. The study will also test whether the option of women's-only transport makes a greater impact on female participants, and conduct a cost-benefit analysis of alternative transport options.

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