

BUILDING GENDER INCLUSIVE SPACES IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT



A POLICY BRIEF ON THE STATUS
OF WOMEN DRIVERS IN DELHI
TRANSPORT CORPORATION

FOREWORD

Azad Foundation, established in 2008 in Delhi, is committed to expanding women's participation in non-traditional livelihoods (NTL) with dignity. Since its inception, the foundation has grown to operate in seven cities across India, directly impacting communities in Delhi, Jaipur, Kolkata, and Chennai, and partnering with organizations in Ahmedabad, Indore, and Bhubaneswar. Through our programs, we have empowered women from marginalized backgrounds with professional driving skills, while our strategic partner, Sakha, has supported their entry into the job market. To date, over 5,000 women have become employable with driving licenses and more than 3,500 are currently employed as four-wheelers, two-wheelers, and public bus drivers.

Azad Foundation has worked actively to challenge societal and industry norms, breaking barriers to support women's entry into diverse sectors within transportation. Our collaboration with the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) has enabled training and employment opportunities for women as bus drivers, leading to notable policy adjustments within DTC, including the reduction of height requirements, relaxed heavy vehicle experience prerequisites, and waived training fees for women drivers. Today, 93 women associated with Azad and beyond are either undergoing training or working as bus drivers within DTC in Delhi.

To better understand the workplace environment and support the needs of women bus drivers, Azad initiated a research focused on assessing DTC's facilities for women drivers. This research involved key informant interviews and qualitative case studies with drivers, revealing the need for more gender-inclusive infrastructure within depots. Expanding the research beyond its initial scope, our team conducted a comprehensive audit of DTC depots, developing a specialized assessment tool for this purpose. We extend our sincere gratitude to DTC authorities for their cooperation and support throughout this process.



We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Sanjukta Basu, our consultant-researcher, who conducted key informant interviews and qualitative case studies and provided an in-depth report on various aspects of women's experiences as bus drivers. We are equally thankful to Chandrayee Dey, who completed the depot audit and contributed a thorough, multi-faceted report. Special appreciation is extended to Manjima Bhattacharjya, a respected friend and noted feminist researcher and writer, for her work on developing the final report and summary brief, which contextualizes our findings and outlines recommendations for further engagement with DTC.

We also wish to thank Rubina Aziz, Specialist in Research, Policy Engagement, and Communications at Azad Foundation, for her coordination of the research and her valuable contributions throughout the process. Above all, we are profoundly grateful to the women bus drivers who have courageously chosen this unconventional path and enriched our study with their experiences.

We hope that this policy brief inspires DTC to take meaningful steps toward establishing a gender-inclusive workspace for all.

Warm Regards,

Dolon Ganguly and Shrinivas Rao

NATIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM

A STUDY TO INCREASE RETENTION OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In 2022, Azad Foundation published a policy brief titled ‘Claiming Spaces for Women in Public Transport,’ making the case for removing barriers to entry for women bus drivers in the public transport workforce in Delhi. The Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) has been a close ally and collaborator in enabling women to join the workforce as bus drivers in the city. In a pioneering act, DTC changed their policies to remove barriers to entry of women as bus drivers by relaxing height restrictions and experience required, and providing in-house training with stipends for women.

Since this milestone, it has been two years of having women working as bus drivers in DTC. Azad Foundation has carried out a research on the experiences of women bus drivers working in public transport since these policy changes, to identify challenges and systemic barriers faced by the women bus drivers pursuing their jobs. Azad also conducted key informant interviews and gender audits of eight bus depots where women bus drivers are placed.

The research found that while significant progress has been made towards integrating women into Delhi’s public transport workforce, ongoing efforts are necessary to ensure they can thrive without facing systemic barriers or discrimination. Beyond recruitment, further initiatives are vital to retain women in the workforce. By fostering an inclusive environment through targeted policies and infrastructural improvements, DTC can set a precedent for other cities aiming for gender equity in public transport systems.

Despite societal barriers, organizations like Azad Foundation have been pivotal in empowering women from underprivileged backgrounds to enter this field. The research offered insight into the inadequacies of bus depots, which are often unfriendly to women. It identified the need for gender-responsive mechanisms in depot design and operations, proposing a model for better facilities. It also highlighted the importance of gender-sensitive labour practices, tackling workplace harassment, and fostering open dialogue. By implementing inclusive policies, organizations like DTC can create supportive environments for women drivers.

1. INFRASTRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

The Problem of Women-Unfriendly Bus Depots

The training period in DTC lifted the confidence and self-belief of women bus drivers as they saw new possibilities ahead of them. As they adjusted to working in DTC, everyday challenges began to emerge. These ranged from physical difficulties to occupational health hazards, such as body ache and back pain due to hours of sitting and driving. Participants spoke of the difficulties of running old buses that often broke down or had broken first aid boxes, non-functional emergency buttons, delays in dealing with breakdowns that left drivers in buses in the heat without food or water for almost the entire day as they awaited support.

However, the most challenging concern echoed by all participants was the condition at the bus depots to which they were stationed. The depots were predominantly experienced as hostile spaces that excluded and discriminated against them.

1.1 HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

No Space for Women

The male-dominated atmosphere at bus depots creates feelings of exclusion and discrimination for women drivers. Statistics show that women comprise only 0.5% to 3% of the workforce at these depots, which fosters an unwelcoming environment.

The numbers in Table 1 show the skewed sex ratio at the bus depots (from 0.5% to a maximum of 3% of drivers in the depot being women) that creates the conditions for an extremely male-dominated space, in which the women bus drivers work.

TABLE 1: Sex ratio in 7 of the 8 audited bus depots of the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC)

NAME OF DEPOT*	WOMEN BUS DRIVERS	MALE BUS DRIVERS	WOMEN CONDUCTORS	MALE CONDUCTORS	WOMEN MARSHALS	MALE MARSHALS
Depot A	2	342	20	302	NA	NA
Depot B	10	500	NA	NA	NA	NA
Depot C	3	500	63	450	NA	NA
Depot D	3	432	77	345	17	97
Depot E	14	434	NA	NA	NA	NA
Depot F	11	404	60	294	3	130
Depot G	2	318	12	281	5	91

(Depot H did not provide information, *names of depots not used for confidentiality)

1.2 LACK OF FACILITIES

- **Toilets:** Women face inadequate access to clean and functional toilets, often with poor hygiene and lacking basic amenities. Many women's toilets are located inconveniently, often on upper floors, and do not provide essential items like sanitary napkins.
- **Drinking Water:** Some depots lack functional drinking water dispensers, forcing women to bring their own water.
- **Room to Rest:** There is a notable absence of designated rest areas for women, with existing facilities often being inadequate or shared with male staff, which contributes to discomfort and harassment.
- **Canteen and Eating Areas:** Women reported difficulties finding comfortable spaces to eat, often resorting to eating in unsuitable or crowded areas, which compromises their dignity and safety.

The Depot Audit found that the lacunae in available infrastructure had a strong role to play in contributing to women bus drivers' feeling of exclusion and hostility in the bus depots. Almost all participants found the infrastructure at their bus depots to be a challenge. Table 2 lists depot-wise status of available facilities and safety parameters that acutely contribute to women's experiences.

TABLE 2: Facilities and safety parameters in 8 DTC bus depots in Delhi

NAME OF DEPOT	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Accessibility	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female toilet	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Drinking water	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Women's rest room	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Canteen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Control room counter	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Medical care	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Internal Complaints Committee	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Security at gate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Openness & visibility	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Light & ventilation	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes

1.3 SAFETY CONCERNS

The lack of privacy and safety in shared spaces contributes to a sense of discomfort among women drivers, leading many to avoid certain areas altogether.

2. GENDER-RESPONSIVE MECHANISMS

While women are primarily assigned morning shifts, some have been accommodated for evening shifts upon request. The flexibility in shift scheduling has helped some women stay employed, but it often limits their access to necessary support services. To address these issues, we propose a vision for a gender-inclusive bus depot that includes:

- » **Clean, Functional Toilets:** Ensuring hygienic conditions and adequate amenities.
- » **Rest and Recreation Spaces:** Dedicated areas for women to rest, change, and eat, designed with privacy and comfort in mind.
- » **Women-Friendly Facilities:** Accessible infrastructure that meets the specific needs of female staff.
- » **Gender-Sensitive Complaints Mechanisms:** Clear and supportive processes for addressing grievances related to harassment or exclusion.

By implementing these changes, bus depots can transform into environments that not only support women drivers but also enhance overall workplace standards, leading to improved productivity and retention across the workforce.

3. BUILDING GENDER INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

The entry of diverse groups—including women, people with disabilities, and transgender individuals—into the workforce presents an opportunity to reshape workplaces. The findings from the Azad study and depot audits highlight critical areas needing urgent attention: labor practices, leave provisions, and complaints mechanisms related to workplace harassment.



KEY ISSUES

- a. **Labor Practices:** Since 2010, DTC has primarily hired contractual staff, leaving no permanent positions for women drivers, creating disparities within the workforce. Currently, among 9567 of DTC employees, 5000 are contractual, and all women drivers fall under the contractual category which marginalizes and excludes them from essential social safety nets.
- b. **Salary and Incentives:** Pay structures are based on daily attendance, with incentives tied to completing 22 days of “OK duty.” This system creates financial instability, as any missed duty—often due to bus breakdowns—can jeopardize earnings.
- c. **Leave Provisions:** Both male and female staff have the same leave policies; however, as all women drivers are contractual staff, they are not entitled to requisite leave similar to regular employees. Also, women often bear greater caregiving responsibilities, making existing provisions inadequate which led them to express the need for more leave for their domestic work.
- d. **Sexual Harassment at the Workplace:** The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (POSH) mandates that all employers establish an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC). However, none of the research participants were aware of any such committee at their depots. Instances of harassment often went unreported due to lack of mechanisms or fear of job loss. Participants emphasized the need for formal channels to address harassment, ideally with female representation in the grievance process to make them feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences. ICCs need to be instituted in all depots, with public signage and information made available publicly on the POSH act and the procedure for complaints.
- e. **The Need for Dialogue on Gender Equality:** Participants frequently reported facing hostility from male colleagues, underscoring the importance of ongoing gender training across the organization to foster a more inclusive workplace. The study revealed that many women spend considerable time on domestic work, often leading to “double duty”—balancing professional and home responsibilities. Dialogue on this aspect would also be crucial in increasing empathy for one another and encouraging sharing of domestic workloads.

By addressing these key areas, DTC can foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment that not only empowers women but also enhances overall workplace productivity and morale. Engaging in open dialogue and creating systemic changes will be essential as the organization navigates its transition to modernized public transport solutions.

4. WHAT COULD A MODEL BUS DEPOT LOOK LIKE?

Bus depots (like buses in the past) have been designed with an implicit gender bias, keeping only a male workforce in mind. With the electrification of public buses in cities, urban experts are seeing this as an opportunity to create bus depots and other infrastructure that responds to the needs of the time and includes a diverse workforce. A gender-inclusive model bus depot should include various key elements: clean, functional toilets; rest and recreation spaces; women-friendly facilities; and gender-sensitive complaints and redressal mechanisms.



CLEAN & FUNCTIONAL TOILETS

- For women staff only
- Private
- Maintained and cleaned regularly
- Running water
- Sanitary napkins
- Dustbins
- Mirrors & Basins/sinks
- Well-lit



COMPLAINTS & REDRESSAL MECHANISMS

- Internal Complaints Committee is functional
- Information on sexual harassment at the workplace made public
- Signage on how to register complaints
- Clear guidance on redressal mechanisms



REST & RECREATION SPACES

- Safe drinking water
- Inverter to address power cuts
- Fan, coolers or ACs that work
- Lockable doors for changing in
- Comfortable seating
- Clean and hygienic resting arrangements
- Place to charge mobile phones
- Reading or recreational material



WOMEN-FRIENDLY FACILITIES

- Canteen with reserved tables for ladies
- Medical room or system for medical assistance/emergency
- Separate lines/counters for women for duty allocation
- Lockers for staff
- Drinking water stalls
- Activities organized regularly to increase empathy for women colleagues
- Feeding room for new mothers or space to express milk and store.
- Creche/ emergency child care

5. CONCLUSION

The journey for women bus drivers at DTC has been transformative, with significant strides made over the past two years. Despite their accomplishments, concerns about the future persist. While barriers to entry are gradually being removed, efforts to improve the work experience for women in public transport are ongoing. Collaborative partnerships are essential to create gender-inclusive workplaces with supportive policies and infrastructure. Azad Foundation proposes the following recommendations to DTC with faith in the collaborative spirit in which such progress has been made.



CALL TO ACTION



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



RECRUITMENT INITIATIVES

DTC and private companies should enhance efforts to recruit women drivers, providing support like stipends during training and addressing gender biases.



GENDER-INCLUSIVE BUS DEPOTS

Improve depot conditions to be comfortable and accommodating for women, including establishing 'model bus depots'.



COMPLAINT MECHANISMS

Ensure all depots have functional Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) and clear signage regarding complaint procedures.



LABOUR PRACTICES REVIEW

Assess and enhance contracting, job security, and leave policies to ensure gender parity.



CONSULTATIONS FOR TRANSITION

Facilitate discussions on integrating gender-inclusive practices during the shift to private vehicles.



FIVE-YEAR GENDER PLAN

Develop and implement a gender-inclusive plan with clear indicators and benchmarks.



GENDER SENSITIZATION PROGRAMS

Conduct training for all staff, including follow-up sessions for lasting impact.



GENDER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Form a committee with gender and public transport experts to guide the design of inclusive infrastructure.



WIDER CONVERSATIONS ON GENDER BIAS

Promote discussions about gender equality and the benefits of a gender-equal society, women's skill-building and participation in non-traditional workforce.

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