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Overcoming Barriers to Women's Mobility Improving Women's Access to Public Transport in Pakistan

About the project

Funded by: International Growth Center (IGC)

Key Counterpart: Punjab Commission for the Status of Women (PCSW)

Impact: The research was taken up by the PCSW to highlight women's issues and advocate for better policies and for designing better interventions for Women in transport.

This policy brief is based on the report "Public Transport and Urban Labour Market Integration: A Randomized Controlled Trial" and has been written by Fizzah Sajjad (CERP), Kate Vyborny (Duke University), Ghulam Abbas Anjum (UET) and Erica Field (Duke University).

In brief

- Although women travel less, as a proportion of non-walking trips, women are much more dependent on public transport than men are.
- Feasible transport interventions can improve women's ability to travel safely.
- Existing women's-only services benefit their users substantially, but serve a small number of women, restricting women's lives substantially.

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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 labor 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.

Barriers to mobility

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 (Figure 1). These are families who would accept their female family members traveling if they have access to a safe women's-only space. Although separate women's compartments in buses have facilitated women's travel, many women lack access to such bus services, discouraging them from traveling. Existing women-only services (three Pink Bus routes in Lahore) benefit their users substantially but serve a tiny fraction of women due to very limited geographic coverage, restricted timings and lack of publicity.

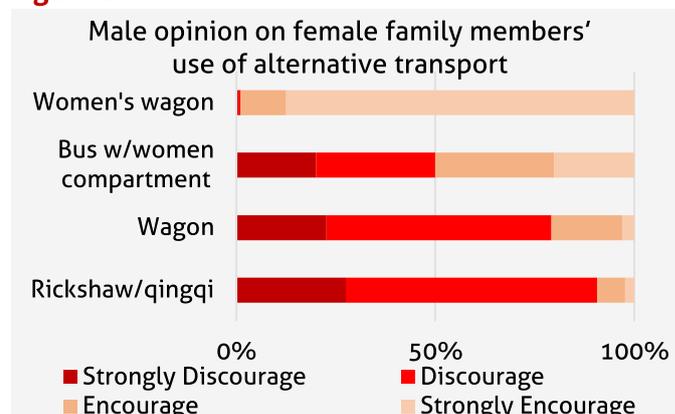
Women also face distinct challenges from men when accessing public transport. They experience threats to their safety while walking to public transport, waiting at stops and while traveling on vehicles. A CERP pilot survey in Lahore showed that nearly 30% of respondents also found it "unsafe" for women to walk in their neighborhood.

What can be done?

Continue the expansion of public transport networks. Emphasise high quality services with lower crowding.

Fix and publicise a schedule for all services and work with operators to maintain consistent schedules. In addition to improving the convenience and value of the system for all passengers, this will reduce waiting times, when women often feel unsafe and are subject to harassment.

Figure 1



Work with existing informal operators in peri-urban areas to provide reliable, low frequency transport on a well-publicised timetable. These areas have limited public transport coverage, but informal operators provide some services for local residents.

If women's-only services are used, increase value for money by improving service design. Use small vehicles that fill up quickly and are able to cover their costs. Run them on routes where there is crowding in vehicles and no large bus with a separate section, as these are areas where women face the biggest challenges.

Train drivers and conductors on sexual harassment. The training should include the standards expected of them, as well as how to deal with passenger-on-passenger harassment. The government and operators must monitor staff and hold them accountable for meeting these expectations.

Build sidewalks, improve street lighting, and provide police attention close to public transport routes and stops. Public transport alone is not enough. Women need to feel and be safe in public spaces, and getting to and from stops.

This is a summary of the policy brief "Overcoming barriers to women's mobility," based on the first stage of the Women's Mobility project at CERP. The full brief is available on CDPR's website. CERP appreciates the support of PCSW, LTC and P&D, and funding from IGC, DFID-IZA, PEDL, NSF, Gates-J-PAL, ADB and 3IE for the Women's Mobility Project.