ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 1| January2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

THE KARNATAKA SHAKTI SCHEME: A STATE-WIDE INITIATIVE PROMOTING EMPOWERMENT AND MOBILITY FOR WOMEN ACROSS THE STATE

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ABSTRACT
The Karnataka Shakti Scheme, a state-wide initiative that promotes women's mobility and empowerment, has been lauded for its potential to catalyze social and economic transformation for women across the state. However, the scheme has faced some challenges and drawn criticism from certain sectors. This study aims to investigate the efficacy, implementation challenges, and societal impacts of the scheme, focusing on its objectives, eligibility criteria, impact on various transport operators, and the voices against it. The study provides valuable insights for policymakers to improve similar initiatives in the future. Moreover, the study contributes to discussions on gender equality, empowerment, and inclusive transportation access within the state, providing valuable insights into the intersectionality of gender, transportation, and socio-economic factors.
KEYWORDS: *Karnataka Shakti Scheme, Women's empowerment, Gender equality, Transportation accessibility, Socio-economic factors and Implementation challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

The 'Shakti' scheme, launched by the Congress government in Karnataka, aims to promote social equity and empowerment, particularly for women and transgender individuals. This initiative provides free travel on government-run buses across the state, with the issuance of smart cards to beneficiaries. The scheme, one of the government's poll guarantees, is expected to benefit over 41.8 lakh women passengers daily, albeit at an estimated annual cost of Rs. 4,051.56 crore to the state exchequer. The scheme, officially launched in June 11, 2023, extends its benefits to women of all ages and includes transgender individuals. Efforts to streamline travel through the development of smart cards are underway, with interim access provided through zero-sum tickets. Beyond providing free bus travel, the 'Shakti' scheme aims to enhance women's access to education, employment, healthcare, and other essential services. It signifies a crucial step forward in advancing women's empowerment and societal inclusion within Karnataka.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the Karnataka Shakti Scheme, focusing on its objectives, implementation, challenges, and societal impact. Here is a disintegration of the key points from each source:

1. **Uday et al. (5 June 2023)** discussed the implementation of the Shakti scheme by the Karnataka government, heralding free bus travel for women across state-run buses, effective June 11. Embracing inclusivity, the scheme extends to all women, including students and transgender individuals, on urban, general, and express routes. The government's directive mandates a 50% seat reservation for men, ensuring equitable access to transportation services. Application for the Shakti Smart Card is facilitated through the Seva Sindhu portal, emphasizing accessibility and ease of enrollment.
2. **Hindustan Times (7 June 2023)** analyzed the unveiling of the 'Shakti Yojane' scheme by the Karnataka government, marking a significant stride towards gender equality by offering free bus travel for women across the state. Launched at Bengaluru's Vidhana Soudha, the initiative fulfills one of Congress' electoral pledges and prioritizes enhancing women's convenience and accessibility to transportation services. Minister of Transport emphasis on augmenting bus services underscores the government's commitment to addressing transportation disparities. The introduction of Shakti smart cards and their impending necessity illustrate the government's strategy to streamline the scheme's implementation while ensuring eligibility and accountability.
3. **Arora, Sumit (9 June 2023**) highlighted the Karnataka government's advisory, encouraging women to seize the opportunity of free bus travel by acquiring Shakti smart cards, available from June 11 through the designated government portal. With specific guidelines in place, the scheme caters exclusively to ordinary state-run bus services within Karnataka, excluding certain premium categories. Reservation of 50% seats for men on designated buses underscores the government's commitment to inclusive transportation policies.
4. **The Financial Express (19 June 2023)** focused on the Karnataka government's Shakti scheme, designed to empower women and transgender individuals through free bus travel, which has elicited varied online responses. Despite concerns about fiscal implications and logistical challenges, the scheme has catalyzed a notable increase in female ridership, exemplifying its positive societal impact.

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The mandatory requirement of Shakti Smart Cards, coupled with a streamlined application process, reflects the government's commitment to ensuring equitable access to transportation services.

5. **B.P., Darshan Devaiah (11 August 2023)** analyzed the Shakti scheme's transition to issuing regular passes, following the Center for e-Governance's refusal to develop smart cards, highlighting operational adaptability amid challenges. Despite procedural adjustments, the scheme continues to resonate positively with female passengers, facilitating significant ridership and financial savings. Minister of Transport directive to utilize existing pass issuance systems underscores the government's responsiveness to implementation hurdles, ensuring continued service provision to beneficiaries.

6. **Blog.Jagokisan.Com (24 October 2023)** showcased the integration of the Seva Sindhu portal, enabling seamless application for Shakti smart cards, further enhancing accessibility and enrollment. Provisions for seat reservations and forthcoming reimbursement mechanisms reflect the government's proactive approach to addressing gender disparities in transportation. The convergence of state road transport corporations in implementing the scheme underscores a unified effort to promote women's mobility and empowerment.

7. **Outlook India (18 January 2024)** discussed the multifaceted challenges presented by the rollout of the Shakti Scheme in Karnataka since its inception on June 11, 2023. The surge in passengers availing free travel has strained bus operators and conductors, leading to operational difficulties and overcrowding. Particularly in Bengaluru, students face commuting woes amidst the burgeoning ridership. Overcrowding exacerbates concerns of harassment and discomfort for women passengers, underscoring the need for sustainable solutions to ensure the scheme's efficacy in promoting gender equality.

8. **Pavan Agrawal (29 February 2024)** explained the Karnataka Shakti Scheme, spearheaded by author, aiming to provide women in the state with free bus transportation to foster gender equality. The innovative Shakti Smart Card facilitates various transportation options, alleviating the financial burden on women and promoting their mobility. The scheme's details elucidate the process for women to obtain the Shakti Smart Card and capitalize on this progressive initiative.

9. **Shahrukh (2024)** discussed the Karnataka Shakti Scheme, the flagship initiative of the Government of Karnataka, aiming to bolster women's financial empowerment through complimentary bus services. Mandating the use of Smart Cards underscores the scheme's operational efficiency and accountability, aligning with its core objective of fostering women's economic autonomy.

10. **Arvind (4 April 2024)** analyzed the formal launch of the Karnataka Shakti Scheme, underscoring the government's commitment to advancing women's financial empowerment through complimentary bus services. While limitations on eligible buses and travel boundaries exist, the scheme's simplicity and accessibility through the Seva Sindhu portal signify a concerted effort to facilitate widespread participation. Notably, the scheme's projected beneficiaries and anticipated benefits underscore its potential to catalyze social and economic transformation for women across Karnataka.

Overall, the literature review provides a nuanced understanding of the Karnataka Shakti Scheme, including its objectives, challenges, and efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through accessible transportation services.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The research study on the Karnataka Shakti Scheme is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it evaluates the effectiveness of a government initiative aimed at promoting social equity and empowerment, particularly for women and transgender individuals. By assessing its impact on various aspects such as access to education, healthcare, and employment, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers to improve similar initiatives in the future. Secondly, the study examines the scheme's financial sustainability, helping policymakers make informed decisions regarding resource allocation and budget management. Furthermore, it analyzes the scheme's impact on different transport operators, highlighting broader implications for the transportation ecosystem and offering insights into potential challenges faced by stakeholders. Moreover, the study contributes to discussions on gender equality and empowerment, providing valuable insights into the intersectionality of gender, transportation, and socio-economic factors. Ultimately, the research aims to inform policy recommendations that enhance the effectiveness of the Shakti Scheme and ensure its continued success in promoting social equity, empowerment, and gender equality within Karnataka.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Karnataka Shakti Scheme, initiated by the Congress government in Karnataka, aims to empower women and transgender individuals by providing free bus travel on government-run buses across the state. While the scheme holds promises of social equity and empowerment, there exist various challenges and dissenting perspectives that necessitate a comprehensive inquiry. This research seeks to investigate the efficacy, implementation challenges, and societal impacts of the Karnataka Shakti Scheme, focusing on its objectives, eligibility criteria, impact on various transport operators, and the voices against it. By examining these aspects, the study aims to provide insights into the scheme's effectiveness in promoting women's empowerment, addressing transportation disparities, and fostering gender equality within Karnataka.

In view of this, the present study, titled “The Karnataka Shakti Scheme: A State-Wide Initiative Promoting Empowerment and Mobility for Women across the State” was undertaken with the following objectives.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the goals, benefits, and purpose of the Karnataka Shakti Scheme.
2. To differentiate between permitted and prohibited bus types under the Karnataka Shakti Scheme and determine eligibility criteria.
3. To identify required documentation and analyze the application process for the Shakti Smart Card.
4. To assess the scheme's impact on various transport operators and understand challenges and dissenting perspectives.
5. To suggest suitable measures to improve the scheme.

METHODOLOGY

The required data information has been collected from secondary sources such as daily newspapers, magazines and various websites.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Scheme is a commendable effort by the state government to empower women through financial and social means. By providing free bus travel within Karnataka, the scheme aims to alleviate financial burdens and enhance mobility for women, ultimately promoting their participation in various aspects of life.

Objective of the Scheme

The objective of the Scheme is to empower women in the state through two main goals:

- **Financial Empowerment:** The scheme directly tackles the financial burden of transportation for women by providing free rides on government buses within Karnataka. This frees up money they can use for essential needs like education, healthcare, or household expenses.
- **Increased Mobility:** Free bus travel removes a significant barrier to women's ability to move around freely. This increased mobility allows them to travel more easily for work, education, healthcare, and even social activities. Easier access to transportation can encourage women to pursue opportunities farther from home, leading to greater participation in the workforce and educational programs.

In essence, the Karnataka Shakti Scheme aims to achieve a double benefit for women in Karnataka: financial empowerment by reducing transportation costs and social empowerment by enhancing their mobility and access to various opportunities.

Benefits of the Scheme

The Scheme heralds a transformative era for women in the state, offering a multitude of benefits that span across various dimensions of their lives:

Financial Liberation: Through the provision of free bus rides, the scheme significantly alleviates the financial burden on women by reducing their transportation expenses. This surplus financial resource can now be channeled towards essential needs such as education, healthcare, and household expenditures, thereby fostering economic independence.

Enhanced Mobility: The scheme facilitates greater freedom of movement for women, enabling them to access diverse opportunities and services more easily. Whether it's commuting to work, attending educational institutions, seeking medical care, or engaging in recreational activities, free bus travel empowers women to navigate their surroundings with increased autonomy and efficiency.

Socioeconomic Empowerment: By breaking down barriers to mobility, the Karnataka Shakti Scheme opens up avenues for women to pursue education and employment opportunities beyond the confines of their immediate vicinity. This, in turn, can lead to a more skilled and financially empowered female workforce, thereby contributing to broader socioeconomic development.

Promotion of Gender Equality: The scheme plays a pivotal role in promoting gender equality by addressing the systemic disparities that hinder women's access to transportation. By providing equitable access to free bus travel, regardless of gender, the Karnataka Shakti Scheme fosters an environment where women can participate more actively in social, economic, and political spheres.

Enhanced Well-being: Beyond its economic and social implications, the Karnataka Shakti Scheme enhances the overall well-being of women by affording them greater independence and agency in navigating their daily lives. This newfound sense of empowerment not only improves individual quality of life but also contributes to the collective advancement of women in society.

In essence, the Scheme represents a concerted effort by the state government to uplift and empower women by addressing systemic barriers to mobility and financial independence, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Allowed and Not Allowed Buses for Travel under Scheme

The Scheme provides free travel for eligible women on government-run buses within Karnataka. This applies to most, but not all, categories of buses operated by the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC). Here is a breakdown of the allowed buses under the scheme:

Included Buses

- **City Buses:** These are buses that operate within city limits, typically connecting major points and localities.
- **Ordinary Buses:** These are standard intercity buses that provide connectivity between towns and cities across Karnataka. They offer basic amenities and make designated stops along the route.
- **Express Buses:** These are faster intercity buses with fewer stops compared to ordinary buses. They often connect major cities and may offer slightly better amenities.

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Excluded Buses

The Scheme excludes travel on premium buses operated by the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC). These buses typically offer a more luxurious travel experience with features like air-conditioning, comfortable seating, and sometimes even entertainment systems. Here is a more specific list of buses you likely cannot use the scheme on:

- **Non-AC Sleeper:** These buses offer reclining seats that convert into beds for overnight travel, but lack air-conditioning.
- **AC Sleeper:** Sleeper buses with air-conditioning for a more comfortable overnight journey.
- **Rajahamsa:** These buses are comfortable and affordable options for intercity travel. They have standard amenities such as comfortable seating and air conditioning.
- **Vajra, Vayu Vajra:** KSRTC's brand names for high-speed luxury buses offering a premium travel experience.
- **Airavat:** Another brand name for KSRTC's premium category buses with AC and potentially more amenities. This includes subcategories like:
  - Airavat Club Class
  - Airavat Gold Class
- **Ambari:** Yet another brand for KSRTC's premium bus category, often with AC and additional features. This includes subcategories like:
  - Ambari Dream Class
  - Ambari Utsav Fly Bus
- **EV Power Plus:** While electric, this bus falls under the premium category due to its potential for additional features and amenities.

Eligibility Criteria for the Scheme

The eligibility criteria for the Scheme are as follows:

Residence: Applicants must be residents of Karnataka state. This ensures that the benefits of the scheme are targeted towards individuals domiciled within Karnataka.

Age: There is no specified minimum or maximum age limit. Women of all ages residing in Karnataka are eligible to apply for the scheme.

Employment: Employees of the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) are not eligible for the scheme. This exclusion is to prevent duplication of benefits as KSRTC employees may already have access to subsidized travel benefits through their employment.

Gender Identity: The scheme is open to all women and transgender individuals who consider Karnataka their home state. This inclusive approach ensures that individuals of various gender identities residing in Karnataka can benefit from the scheme.

It's important to note that eligible applicants must apply for a Shakti Smart Card to access the free bus rides provided by the scheme. However, since the smart card system is still under development, interim measures such as zero-fare tickets are available for eligible individuals to enjoy free bus travel within Karnataka until the smart cards are issued.

Documents Required for Scheme

The documents required for applying to the Karnataka Shakti Scheme are as follows:

Proof of Identity: Any government-issued ID card with a photograph and name, such as:

Aadhaar card
Voter ID card
Driving License
Passport
Pan card

Proof of Residence: A document verifying the applicant's address in Karnataka, which can be:

Aadhaar card (if it contains the address)
Voter ID card
Ration card
Passport
Any other government-issued document showing the Karnataka address

Recent Passport-sized Photograph: A digital copy of the applicant's recent passport-sized photograph is likely required for the online application process.

Procedure to Apply for the Shakti Smart Card

The application process for the Karnataka Shakti Smart Card involves online registration and application submission on the Seva Sindhu portal, the government's service portal. Here is a breakdown of the steps:

1. **Registration:** Head to the Seva Sindhu portal. (https://sevasindhu.karnataka.gov.in/Sevasindhu/English). If you are a new user, you will need to register first.
2. **Login:** Once registered, log in to the portal using your credentials.
3. **Apply for Smart Card:** Look for the option to "Apply for Shakti Smart Card" or similar wording. This might be under a dedicated "Shakti Scheme" section.
4. **Application Form:** The portal will provide an online application form. Fill out the form carefully with your personal details.
5. **Documents:** During the application process, you will typically need to provide proof of identity (such as Aadhaar card, Voter ID, etc.), proof of residence (like Aadhaar card with address, ration card, etc.), and a recent passport-sized photograph. These documents may need to be scanned and uploaded as part of the application process, including address proof and photo identification.
6. **Submission:** After completing the form and uploading documents, submit the application electronically.
7. **Verification and Issuance:** The authorities will verify your application. Once approved, you will receive your Shakti Smart Card.

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Karnataka Shakti Scheme Helpline Number: **1902**

The Scheme Effects on Auto Rickshaw, Cab, Car and Private Buses Operators:

The Karnataka Shakti Scheme has primarily impacted private bus operators, but it could also have indirect effects on auto rickshaws, cabs, and car operators:

Impact on Private Bus Operators:

- **Negative Impact:** This has been the most significant effect. Free bus travel for women has led to a decrease in ridership on private buses, resulting in:
  - **Loss of Revenue:** News reports suggest drops in business by as much as 60%.
  - **Financial Strain:** This can affect the financial health of private bus companies and potentially lead to job losses for drivers and staff.
  - **Protests:** Private operators have demanded compensation from the government and threatened strikes to address their concerns.

Indirect Impact on Auto, Cab and Car Operators:

- **Potential Increase in Demand:** While not as significant as the impact on private buses, there could be a slight increase in demand for autos, cabs, and ride-sharing services like Uber or Ola. This is because:
  - **Limited Applicability:** The free bus travel scheme is only valid on government buses, not including AC or luxury options.
  - **Overcrowding:** If government buses become overcrowded due to increased ridership, some women might choose alternative modes of transport for comfort or convenience.
  - **Last-Mile Connectivity:** Public buses might not cover all areas, and autos or cabs could be needed for last-mile connectivity.

Overall:

- The impact on auto, cab, and car operators is likely to be much smaller compared to private bus operators.
- The increase in demand might not be enough to offset the losses faced by private bus companies.

Additional Considerations:

- **Shifting Preferences:** Women who previously relied on autos or cabs for short trips might switch to government buses for cost savings, impacting auto and cab businesses.
- **Long-Term Trends:** The long-term impact on auto, cab, and car operators will depend on factors like the scheme's overall success, ridership patterns, and women's evolving travel preferences.

Challenges and Voices against Karnataka Shakti Scheme

The Karnataka Shakti Scheme, while lauded for its aim of women's empowerment, has faced some challenges and drawn criticism from certain sectors. Here is a breakdown of the key points:

Challenges

- **Financial Sustainability:** The long-term financial burden on the government is a concern. With a large ridership, the scheme might require budget adjustments or additional resources to maintain smooth operation.
- **Overcrowding:** The increased ridership on government buses due to free travel can lead to overcrowding, making commutes uncomfortable and potentially unsafe, especially for women.
- **Impact on Private Operators:** Private bus operators have seen a significant decrease in revenue due to women shifting to free government buses. This can lead to financial hardship and job losses in the private transport sector.

Voices Against:

- **Private Bus Operators:** They have been the most vocal critics, demanding compensation for lost revenue and expressing concerns about unfair competition. They have threatened strikes and protests if the situation does not improve.
- **Digital Divide:** The online registration process for the Shakti Smart Card might exclude women in rural areas with limited internet access or digital literacy.

Additional Considerations:

- **Implementation Issues:** There might be teething problems in the initial stages, such as delays in issuing smart cards or difficulties with verification processes.
- **Environmental Impact:** If the scheme leads to a significant drop in private bus ridership, it could have unintended consequences, like increased use of private vehicles, potentially impacting the environment.

It's important to note that the Karnataka Shakti Scheme is a new initiative, and its long-term effects are still being evaluated. The government might need to address the challenges and consider adjustments to ensure the program's sustainability and minimize negative impacts.

Suggestions for the Study

To enhance the effectiveness of the scheme, consider the following suggestions

1. **Financial Sustainability Assessment**: Conduct a thorough evaluation of the scheme's long-term financial sustainability to ensure that the budgetary allocations remain adequate to support the initiative without compromising other essential services. This assessment can help identify potential sources of funding or cost-saving measures.
2. **Capacity Building and Infrastructure Development**: Invest in upgrading public transportation infrastructure, including increasing the fleet size, improving bus frequency, and enhancing last-mile connectivity. Additionally, provide training programs for bus drivers and conductors to ensure safe and efficient service delivery.
3. **Address Overcrowding Concerns**: Implement measures to manage overcrowding on buses, such as optimizing bus schedules, deploying additional buses during peak hours, and promoting staggered work and school hours to distribute passenger flow more evenly throughout the day.

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4. **Engagement with Private Operators**: Engage with private bus operators to address their concerns and explore collaborative solutions, such as revenue-sharing models, route optimization, or providing subsidies to offset losses. This partnership can help maintain a balance between public and private transportation services.
5. **Digital Inclusion Initiatives**: Implement strategies to address the digital divide and ensure equitable access to the Shakti Smart Card registration process. This may involve setting up offline registration centers in rural areas, conducting awareness campaigns, and providing training on digital literacy skills.
6. **Enhanced Monitoring and Evaluation**: Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the scheme's progress, measure its impact on women's empowerment and mobility, and identify areas for improvement. Regular feedback from beneficiaries and stakeholders can inform policy adjustments and program enhancements.
7. **Accessibility and Inclusivity**: Ensure that the scheme's benefits reach marginalized communities, including rural women, persons with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged groups. Implement targeted outreach programs and accessibility features on buses to accommodate diverse needs.
8. **Continuous Stakeholder Engagement**: Foster ongoing dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders, including government agencies, transport operators, civil society organizations, and women's groups. This participatory approach can help build consensus, address concerns, and ensure the scheme's relevance and sustainability over time.

By implementing these measures, policymakers can strengthen the Karnataka Shakti Scheme and maximize its impact on women's empowerment, gender equality, and inclusive transportation access within the state.

CONCLUSION

The Karnataka Shakti Scheme stands as a commendable initiative by the state government aimed at empowering women and transgender individuals through accessible transportation. Through providing free bus travel, the scheme addresses financial barriers and enhances mobility, thereby fostering greater participation in various aspects of life. Despite its positive intentions, challenges such as financial sustainability, overcrowding, and impacts on private operators necessitate ongoing evaluation and refinement. By implementing suggested measures and fostering stakeholder collaboration, the scheme can continue to advance women's empowerment, gender equality, and inclusive transportation access within Karnataka, serving as a beacon for similar initiatives nationwide.

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