

# 19

## Women as Auto Rickshaw Drivers: Reclaiming the Road and Redefining Gendered Mobility

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### Abstract

Women's participation in non-traditional occupations is transforming the social and cultural landscape of India. Among these, the emergence of women as auto rickshaw drivers is both a symbol and a substance of change challenging the entrenched gendered division of labour and redefining the meaning of public mobility. This study explores how women drivers in India's informal transport sector embody resilience, independence, and agency in a field historically dominated by men. It situates their experiences within the theoretical frameworks of feminist geography and urban sociology, highlighting the intersection of gender, work, and spatial justice. Drawing upon secondary data, policy reports, and case studies from cities such as Delhi, Jaipur, and Kochi, the chapter analyses the socio-economic motivations that lead women into this profession and the structural barriers they continue to face. Findings reveal that women auto rickshaw drivers often belong to economically marginalized backgrounds, seeking livelihood security and social respect. Despite challenges including social stigma, safety concerns, and limited institutional support, they are redefining perceptions of women's visibility, safety, and authority in public spaces. Beyond earning income, these women act as catalysts of social transformation. Their presence contributes to safer urban commuting networks, inspires community confidence, and reconfigures the narrative of gendered urban mobility. The study concludes that the road serves as both a physical and metaphorical site of empowerment where women assert control, claim their right to the city, and shape inclusive cultural identities. The chapter underscores that gender-responsive mobility policies and grassroots support systems are essential to sustain this emerging movement of women who are, quite literally, driving change across India's cities.

**Keywords:** Gendered Mobility, Feminist Ideology, Informal Transport, Women Empowerment, Cultural Change.

### Introduction

The participation of women in non-traditional occupations in India has steadily increased over the last decade, symbolizing a broader societal transition toward gender inclusivity and empowerment. One of the most compelling examples of this

transformation is the emergence of women auto rickshaw drivers a visible assertion of agency in a field historically dominated by men. Their entry into the informal transport sector not only provides livelihood opportunities but also challenges entrenched gender norms surrounding mobility, safety, and work in public spaces. According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), as of March 2020, women accounted for only about 12% of all driving licenses issued in India, illustrating the vast gender gap in driving and transport-related professions (MoRTH, 2020). In certain states, the disparity is even greater; for instance, data from The Softcopy (2023) revealed that women comprised barely 6% of professional drivers in Karnataka, underscoring the persistent barriers women face in accessing these spaces. Yet, these figures also hint at the potential for change, particularly as state and local governments begin to recognize women's mobility as both a right and an economic opportunity. Several government initiatives have been launched to address these disparities. Under Uttar Pradesh's Mission Shakti programme, the state trained over 56,200 women in the first phase to drive e-auto rickshaws, followed by an additional 18,750 women in the second phase (The Statesman, 2023). Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, the government distributed auto-rickshaws to 148 women drivers and two transgender persons under a state subsidy scheme in 2023 (DT Next, 2023). These initiatives indicate a policy-level shift toward gender-responsive mobility and recognition of women's contribution to sustainable urban transport. From a socio-cultural standpoint, women's entry into the driving profession carries profound implications. Driving an auto rickshaw in Indian cities represents not just economic independence but also symbolic freedom the ability to navigate, occupy, and command public space. Feminist geographers have long emphasized how access to mobility defines access to opportunity. In this sense, the road becomes a metaphorical and literal space of empowerment, where women assert visibility and challenge patriarchal restrictions that have historically confined them to private domains. Furthermore, women drivers often report enhanced self-esteem and respect within their families and communities, even as they navigate stigma and scepticism. Commuters frequently perceive them as more courteous, reliable, and safety-conscious, which, in turn, fosters a more inclusive and secure transport environment particularly for women passengers. Thus, women auto rickshaw drivers play a dual role: as economic actors and as catalysts of cultural change, shaping perceptions of gender and mobility in contemporary India. In this context, this chapter seeks to explore how women auto rickshaw drivers are reclaiming mobility as a form of social capital, asserting their right to the city, and redefining community norms. By situating their experiences within the frameworks of feminist geography and urban sociology, the chapter highlights how grassroots livelihood practices can drive cultural transformation, reimagining public transport as a domain of inclusion, safety, and empowerment.

## **Thematic Literature Review**

- **Gender and Urban Mobility**

Scholars have highlighted the deep-rooted gender bias in urban mobility. Women's access to transportation is shaped not just by infrastructure but by social attitudes toward female movement and safety (Anand & Tiwari, 2006). Feminist geographers argue that urban spaces are gendered constructed and experienced differently by men and women (Massey, 1994). The mobility of women is often constrained by social surveillance, harassment, and domestic responsibilities (Phadke, 2013). Hence, when women enter transport work, they do more than drive; they assert spatial agency and challenge traditional divisions of mobility.

- **Women in Informal Economies**

The informal sector remains a vital source of employment for Indian women, yet it is marked by instability, low income, and lack of social security (Chen, 2012). Driving autos, though part of this informal system, offers relative flexibility and independence. Women drivers often belong to marginalized socio-economic groups, seeking sustainable livelihoods amid economic pressures (ILO, 2018). Their work also contributes to gender mainstreaming in urban economies (Khosla, 2020).

- **Feminist Geography and the "Right to the City"**

Feminist geography emphasizes that mobility is not merely a physical act but a negotiation of social power. The "right to the city," a term popularized by Lefebvre (1996) and revisited through feminist lenses (Kern, 2020), involves the right to move, participate, and shape urban life. Women auto rickshaw drivers embody this right by transforming the symbolic and physical meaning of the road from exclusion to inclusion. They claim the right to visibility, independence, and respect in spaces historically reserved for men.

- **Women's Agency and Mobility as Empowerment**

Empowerment through mobility has been studied as a key dimension of women's social progress (Peters, 2013). Driving autos provides economic autonomy and enhances self-esteem, as women become visible participants in city life. Case studies from Kerala and Delhi indicate that women drivers feel safer and more respected, particularly when serving female passengers (UN Women, 2020). Thus, transport becomes a medium for empowerment and community trust-building.

## **Objectives of the Study**

- To explore the socio-economic motivations, lived experiences, and empowerment trajectories of women working as auto rickshaw drivers in India's urban informal transport sector.

- To analyze how women's participation in this non-traditional occupation challenges prevailing gender norms, reshapes public perceptions of mobility, and contributes to inclusive urban cultural transformation.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative exploratory design**, integrating secondary data with illustrative case studies. The approach emphasizes lived experiences, socio-cultural perceptions, and narratives of empowerment, using feminist research principles that prioritize voice, context, and intersectionality.

### Data Sources

- **Secondary Data:** Government and NGO reports (UN Women, 2020; NITI Aayog, 2021), journal articles, and newspaper features on women drivers in Jaipur, Delhi, and Kochi.
- **Case Studies:** Review of initiatives such as *Sakha Consulting Wings* (Delhi), *Pink Auto Scheme* (Rajasthan and Chandigarh), and *Kudumbashree's Women Taxi Program* (Kerala).

### Sampling and Data Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select cases that highlight different socio-cultural contexts—North India (Delhi and Jaipur) and South India (Kochi). These locations represent varied models of women's inclusion in the transport workforce.

### Analytical Framework

The analysis was conducted through **thematic coding**, identifying recurring patterns such as:

- Economic motivation and livelihood security
- Gendered challenges in public space
- Social perception and cultural impact
- Institutional and policy support

### Results and Discussion

#### Socio-economic Motivations and Empowerment Trajectories

One of the primary objectives of this study was *“to explore the socio-economic motivations, lived experiences, and empowerment trajectories of women working as auto rickshaw drivers.”* The findings across the case studies of North India (Delhi & Jaipur) and South India (Kochi) show recurring patterns of economic necessity, the search for dignity, and gradual empowerment.

In the Jaipur “pink auto” initiative, for example, a project described by Access & PCRC noted that over 200 women were trained, and about 45 were actively driving,

with more than 15 owning their own e-autos and running independent businesses. In [Reasons to be Cheerful](#) blog states, many women cited family financial stress (widowhood, divorce, unemployment of male breadwinner) as the trigger for opting into auto-driving. A study of Chennai found that among women auto-drivers, 84% had only middle-school education or less, and 93% carried outstanding loans (mean loan ~ ₹1,41,954) for vehicle purchase or running costs. These figures underscore the economic vulnerability underlying the decision to take up this profession.

Lived experiences show a trajectory from marginalization to relative stability. Women recount how prior to driving autos they were engaged in informal labour, domestic work, or depended on male relatives. The move into driving provided a measure of income independence—monthly household income in the Chennai sample averaged ~ ₹33,000 as stated in [LEAD at Krea University](#) | For many, this economic change translated into enhanced self-confidence, improved decision-making at home (for example regarding children's education), and greater recognition in their community. In the Jaipur case, one driver commented: "For me, the fact that ACCESS was able to train these ladies, and empower them to start their own businesses, is our biggest impact." [Reasons to be Cheerful](#)

However, the empowerment trajectory is not linear. Interviews indicated persistent financial burden, such as loan repayments, vehicle maintenance costs, and fluctuating daily earnings (especially during crises like the COVID-19 lockdowns). For example, in Chennai two drivers reported their earnings dropped precipitously post-lockdown one being unable to afford rent for five months. [Matters India](#) Thus, we observe a duality: the profession offers empowerment but also piles on new risks and burdens. The results support the view that while auto driving opens a pathway for livelihood and agency, it remains constrained by structural vulnerabilities.

- **Challenging Gender Norms and Reshaping Mobility Culture**

The second major objective aimed *"to analyze how women's participation in this non-traditional occupation challenges prevailing gender norms, reshapes public perceptions of mobility, and contributes to inclusive urban cultural transformation."* Findings show compelling evidence of these transformations, though with varying depth across contexts.

- **Visibility and Mobility**

Women entering the auto-driving profession disrupt the masculine monopoly over mobility and public space. For example, the Mumbai region's rollout (approx. 467 women granted permits) in 2016 emphasised women "gain in confidence and earn a living." [Gulf Times](#), In Pune, female drivers note they must adopt a "masculine attitude" to survive using assertiveness traditionally associated with male drivers. This points to a gender paradox: women are driving, but often in male-coded ways. [The Indian Express](#)

Public perception research (via commuter questionnaires and focus groups) indicate that many female passengers feel safer taking rides from women drivers, especially at night. In the Ranchi “pink auto” case it was noted that women passengers felt an added sense of security if the driver was female. [Sampratyaya](#) Thus, women drivers aren’t only agents of their own empowerment they actively reshape the mobility ecosystem by enhancing trust, especially for women travellers.

- **Social and Cultural Impact**

At the community level, the entry of women into this profession influences broader cultural attitudes. In the Jaipur case, the formation of a driver cohort reportedly fostered a “strong sense of sisterhood,” mutual support, and collective identity. [Reasons to be Cheerful](#) In local neighbourhoods, families came to regard the women as legitimate earners rather than dependent non-working members. This contributes to shifting gender ideologies around work and public presence.

However, the process is uneven. Drivers in Pune reported social stigma: “A woman is often questioned on her character just because she steps out of her home.” [The Indian Express](#) This reveals that while women challenge norms by driving, they simultaneously negotiate new moral economies wherein their mobility is scrutinised. The interplay of empowerment and social disapproval suggests cultural change is partial and contested.

- **Institutional and Policy Factors**

The study’s analytical framework flagged institutional/policy support as a key theme. The Tamil Nadu subsidy scheme handing over autos to 148 women (plus 2 Tran’s persons) is a salient example of state intervention enabling access. [dtnext](#) Similarly, the Thane exploratory study noted that beyond economic motivation, “collective efforts like social awareness, government intervention, advocacy and research are required to make their working conditions and experiences better.” [Granthaalayah Publication](#)

These initiatives create enabling spaces; yet, the results show that policy support alone cannot remove all barriers. Drivers still face infrastructural deficits (e.g., dedicated stands, safe parking, night-time lighting), vehicle financing constraints, and harassment (male drivers, passengers). For example, in Pune the auto union distributed pepper sprays to women drivers after harassment incidents. [The Indian Express](#) This indicates that safety and institutional culture remain weak links despite policy frameworks.

- **Synthesis and Implications**

Bringing together the two core objectives, the results underline several key points:

- **Empowerment via mobility:** Women auto drivers gain income, visibility and agency, but their empowerment is mediated by economic burdens and gendered risks.
- **Change in mobility culture:** Women's presence in public transport introduces new norms around safety, trust and gender roles. They act as cultural change-agents in urban mobility.
- **Structural constraints:** Even as women challenge norms, institutional and infrastructural barriers persist, limiting the full potential of transformation.
- **Interconnectedness of livelihood and gender transformation:** The case studies affirm that economic participation (livelihood) and cultural change (gender norms) are interwoven; one cannot be isolated from the other.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that initiatives should move beyond mere access (licenses, subsidies) to include continuous support: financial literacy, vehicle maintenance, childcare support, women-friendly infrastructure (parking, toilets), peer-networks, and safety mechanisms. Community awareness campaigns can help reduce stigma, while male-driver associations might be sensitised to reduce harassment and discrimination.

Methodologically, the case-study approach (Delhi/Jaipur/Kochi) and thematic coding proved effective in capturing nuanced, context-specific experiences. The inclusion of secondary data and illustrative initiatives enriched the richness of findings. However, the qualitative design limits statistical generalisation; future research might incorporate larger mixed-methods surveys for triangulation.

#### • Case Study Spotlight

- **Jaipur – “Pink Auto” Initiative:** Training over 200 women, 45 active drivers, 15 owning their own autos. Drivers reported income stability, mutual support, and increased self-esteem. [Reasons to be Cheerful](#)
- **Chennai (IFMR Lead Report):** Sample of 220 women drivers; average income ~ ₹33,000, 84% low education, 93% with outstanding loans. Illustrates financial pressures and stability. [LEAD at Krea University |](#)
- **Pune – Women Driver Union:** Female drivers described needing male-coded behaviour to survive, and union distributed pepper spray following incidents of harassment. [The Indian Express](#)

These case studies reflect varied regional and contextual dynamics metropolitan vs. tier-ii cities; states with proactive vs. less supportive environments; and where drivers own vehicles vs. lease.

In line with the objectives, this study demonstrates that women auto rickshaw drivers in India are not just passive participants in the informal transport sector they

are active agents of socio-economic and cultural transformation. By navigating mobility, livelihood and public space, they challenge gendered norms, reshape community perceptions, and highlight pathways to inclusive urban culture. Nonetheless, the journey remains constrained by structural vulnerabilities and institutional gaps. For realising the full potential of this transformation, a holistic ecosystem of support economic, infrastructural, social, and policy must accompany the entry of women into this domain.

### **Policy and Pragmatic Interventions**

The experiences of women auto rickshaw drivers in India underscore the urgent need for integrated policy frameworks that address both *gender equity* and *livelihood sustainability* in the urban informal transport sector. Women's participation in this non-traditional domain reveals both the potential and the systemic gaps that must be bridged through targeted interventions.

- **Strengthening Institutional and Policy Support**

Government policies must evolve beyond one-time subsidies or pilot initiatives to develop **sustained institutional mechanisms** for women's inclusion in public transport.

- **Formal Recognition and Licensing:** State Transport Departments can create *gender-inclusive licensing windows* that streamline application processes, provide literacy support for form-filling, and remove hidden bureaucratic biases that discourage women applicants.
- **Dedicated Financial Schemes:** Integration of women drivers into credit networks through partnerships between banks, microfinance institutions, and self-help groups (SHGs) is critical. Low-interest loans or credit guarantees similar to the *PM e-Vehicle Scheme* should specifically reserve quotas for women in informal transport.
- **Policy Convergence:** Existing initiatives such as *NULM (National Urban Livelihood Mission)* and *Skill India* can be converted to provide training, digital literacy, and financial planning modules designed for female mobility workers.

- **Infrastructure and Safety Measures**

Empowerment in mobility cannot be sustained without *safe and enabling infrastructure*. Many women drivers, as shown in Jaipur and Pune, reported inadequate night-time safety, lack of public toilets, and absence of resting zones.

- **Women-Friendly Auto Stands:** Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) should designate "Pink Auto Stands" with proper lighting, sanitation, and CCTV coverage in high-demand areas.

- **Safety Monitoring Systems:** Integration of GPS tracking and SOS emergency buttons in women-driven autos can be mandated under state transport rules, ensuring both driver and passenger safety.
- **Rest and Childcare Facilities:** Establishing common rest areas and linking driving cooperatives with crèche facilities would reduce the double burden of caregiving that limits many women's working hours.
- **Training, Capacity Building, and Social Awareness**

Skill development remains a critical enabler for occupational sustainability.

  - **Comprehensive Training Programs:** Beyond driving proficiency, training should include *soft skills, vehicle maintenance, digital navigation tools (Google Maps, ride-hailing apps), and customer service*. Initiatives like *Sakha Consulting Wings* and *Kudumbashree Women Taxi Scheme* demonstrate that holistic training significantly increases retention and earnings.
  - **Gender Sensitisation Campaigns:** Public awareness drives and male-driver sensitisation workshops supported by transport unions can reduce stigma, harassment, and hostility toward women drivers.
  - **Peer Network and Cooperative Models:** Encouraging women drivers to form registered cooperatives can enhance bargaining power, facilitate shared maintenance infrastructure, and enable group insurance coverage.
- **Economic and Digital Empowerment**

Economic resilience is at the core of sustainable empowerment.

  - **Vehicle Ownership Support:** Women should be given preferential access to electric auto permits and subsidies to encourage sustainable and independent ownership rather than lease-based dependency.
  - **Digital Integration:** State-backed mobility apps (such as Kerala's "She-Taxi" or Jaipur's "Pink Ride") can be replicated nationally to help women drivers' access passengers safely, receive digital payments, and maintain transparent earnings.
  - **Social Security Inclusion:** Linking women drivers to *PM Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, E-Shram Portal, and Atal Pension Yojana* would provide essential safety nets for health, retirement, and accident coverage.
- **Creating an Enabling Ecosystem**

True transformation requires shifting public perception. Therefore, interventions must integrate social, cultural, and media strategies to normalise women's presence in this occupation.

- **Community Engagement:** Local ward committees, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), and educational institutions should be mobilised to recognise women drivers as essential service providers.
  - **Visibility in Media:** Positive representation in local and national media through documentaries, campaigns, and government awareness drives can inspire wider participation.
  - **Monitoring and Evaluation:** A gender audit system for urban transport departments can assess women's participation rates, income growth, and workplace safety metrics annually to inform policy refinement.
- **Pragmatic Implementation Strategy**

The pragmatic success of such interventions depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration:

- **Government:** Develop national-level guidelines under the *Ministry of Road Transport and Highways* that recognise women in informal transport as a distinct policy group.
- **Civil Society and NGOs:** Organisations like UN Women, SEWA, and Sakha can continue to mediate between women drivers and government schemes, ensuring inclusivity.
- **Private Sector and CSR:** Ride-hailing companies, automobile manufacturers, and corporate CSR wings can provide sponsorship for vehicle purchase, safety kits, and training modules.
- **Academia and Research Institutions:** Universities can conduct longitudinal studies tracking empowerment indices, safety improvements, and socio-cultural changes linked to women's participation.

Policy and pragmatic interventions must therefore move **from symbolic inclusion to systemic empowerment**. While women auto rickshaw drivers represent a visible change in India's urban landscape, sustained transformation requires a **gender-responsive policy ecosystem** that integrates safety, finance, infrastructure, and social legitimacy. Only through an intersectional approach linking livelihood, dignity, and gender justice can urban mobility truly become inclusive and equitable.

### **Conclusion and Way Forward**

The study reveals that women's participation as auto rickshaw drivers in India signifies a profound transformation in gendered mobility and urban livelihoods. Moving beyond traditional roles, these women navigate public spaces that were historically male-dominated, asserting agency through mobility and work. Their presence challenges deep-rooted stereotypes while promoting a more inclusive image of the city. Case studies such as *Sakha Consulting Wings* in Delhi, the *Pink Auto Scheme* in Rajasthan, and *Kudumbashree's Women Taxi Program* in Kerala highlight how

institutional support and targeted interventions can enable economic independence, dignity, and empowerment. Despite these successes, multiple barriers persist including limited access to finance, inadequate safety infrastructure, and lingering social stigma. For women to sustain themselves in this sector, empowerment must extend beyond employment to systemic support, policy inclusion, and public recognition. A coordinated strategy that integrates government policy, private partnerships, and community engagement is essential for lasting change. The way forward lies in developing a national framework for women in informal transport, promoting gender-responsive urban design, and expanding skill development and digital inclusion under missions such as *NULM* and *Skill India*. Financial schemes offering vehicle ownership, insurance, and pension coverage must be made accessible. Simultaneously, awareness campaigns and gender sensitisation programs can normalise women's presence on city roads. Ultimately, women auto rickshaw drivers embody resilience and transformation. Their journeys illustrate how economic participation can evolve into social empowerment, redefining both livelihood and identity. By creating equitable policy ecosystems and inclusive urban spaces, India can ensure that mobility becomes not only a right but a pathway to empowerment for every woman.

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