

Women Safety in Public Transport Buses: An exploratory Study of Women in Hyderabad, India

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ABSTRACT

Women safety in metro cities has been the area of research interest across the globe. While extensive studies have been carried out in this area, women safety with respect to public transport systems have also gained significant interest among researchers. On the other hand, transport authorities of various metro cities across the world have also been paying attention and developed infrastructure and safety mechanisms to ensure the safety of women commuters. However, if the commuters perceive the existing infrastructure and practices safe enough is a question.

The purpose of this study is to gain insights on the perceived effectiveness of infrastructure by women commuters with respect to public transport buses infrastructure in the city of Hyderabad in India. This is an exploratory study that employed mixed approach. Primary data was collected through both quantitative and qualitative means utilizing survey, interviews and observation techniques. The researchers administered survey on 480 women commuters, interviewed 20 respondents, interviewed transport and police authorities and carried out field observations. The findings indicate women commuters are dissatisfied and do not feel safe with the existing infrastructure. Another significant finding is that most of the incidents are underreported. The study holds significance to the administrators in making strategies to create better awareness of safety mechanisms and reporting procedures for women commuters.

Keywords: Urban women safety, public transport, infrastructure, metro cities, bus transport

INTRODUCTION

Many women across India rely on public transport buses and Hyderabad is no exception, where lakhs of women commute by buses run by Road Transport Corporation (RTC) on a daily basis. While the free fare policy implemented through 'Mahalakshmi Scheme' significantly improved accessibility, it also unveiled persistent safety concerns that continue to limit women's full participation in public life.

Problem Statement

RTC buses are essential for women traveling to schools, workplaces, markets, and healthcare centres. However, increased female ridership as a result of free fare policy by the state government has also magnified issues such as overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent staff support, and poor awareness of safety measures. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how safe women feel in public transport buses, identify any potential gaps, and present actionable, data-driven recommendations that promote a safe, inclusive, and empowering transit experience for all women in Hyderabad.

To address this problem, the researchers have carried out an exploratory study to achieve the following objectives:

1. To gain insights on safety perceptions of women commuting by RTC buses in Hyderabad, India.
2. To assess the perceived effectiveness of RTC infrastructure with respect to women safety
3. To present actionable, data-driven recommendations that promote a safe, inclusive, and empowering transit experience for all women in Hyderabad.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Global Perspectives on Women's Safety in Public Transport

Women's safety in public transportation is a pressing global concern, with studies highlighting pervasive issues across various regions. A comprehensive study by Imperial College London, analysing data from 28 cities, found that women are 10% more likely than men to feel unsafe on public transport, underscoring a significant gender disparity in perceived safety (Brogan, 2020). In Mexico City, a staggering 64% of women reported experiencing physical harassment on public transport, prompting initiatives like the #NoEsDeHombres campaign aimed at raising awareness and combating such behaviour (The Guardian, 2019).

Similarly, in Nairobi, Kenya, women face daily threats of harassment in public transit, leading to calls for improved safety measures and support systems (UN Women Africa, 2021). Australia has considered implementing women-only train cars in response to reports that 64% of women in New South Wales feel unsafe on public transport after dark, reflecting a broader trend of gender-segregated solutions to enhance safety (Condé Nast Traveller, 2016). Furthermore, the World Bank emphasizes the need for holistic interventions, including community involvement, use of ICT for reporting harassment, and staff training, to prevent violence against women in transport systems (World Bank, 2016). These studies collectively highlight the global nature of the issue and the diverse strategies employed to address women's safety in public transportation.

2.2. Hyderabad Perspectives on Women's Safety in Public Transport

In Hyderabad, women's safety in public transport has garnered significant attention, leading to various initiatives and studies. The Telangana government's Mahalakshmi Scheme, offering free TSRTC bus travel for women, has improved accessibility but also led to challenges like overcrowding and continued harassment, indicating that financial incentives alone are insufficient for ensuring safety (Kumar & Sekhar, 2024). To address safety concerns, the Hyderabad Police have deployed 'SHE' teams in metro stations and trains, aiming to prevent harassment and provide heightened security for women commuters (The Hindu, 2024).

Additionally, the Telangana State Women's Commission has been proactive in safeguarding women's rights, handling gender-based issues, and recommending measures to the state government. Despite these efforts, studies indicate that women in Hyderabad continue to face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure at bus stops, lack of proper lighting, and insufficient enforcement of reserved seating, all contributing to a sense of insecurity during commutes. These findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach that combines policy interventions, infrastructure improvements, and community engagement to enhance women's safety in public transport within Hyderabad.

In order to understand better the safety perception of women commuters in Hyderabad, initiatives by the authorities like TSRTC and Telangana Police and identify any perceptual gaps, our team has carried out structured research, the findings of which along with strategic recommendations are presented in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed method approach was employed including both quantitative and qualitative techniques for primary data collection. Secondary data was collected from various research papers, official websites and newspapers. Primary data was collected in the following manner.

Surveys: Quantitative data from over 480 women commuters across major RTC routes in **Hyderabad**.

Interviews: Over 20 structured interviews with female passengers, conductors, and transport staff.

Expert Opinions: Interviews with authorities of TSRTC and Telangana Police Women Safety wing.

3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

4.1. Commuter Demographics:

The age distribution of RTC bus users reveals that the majority of respondents fall within the 18–25 age group, accounting for 36% of the sample. This indicates that young adults, likely college students or early-career professionals, form the primary commuter base. Additionally, 21% of respondents are under 18, suggesting that a substantial number of school-age or adolescent girls also depend on RTC services. The age groups 26–35 and 36–45 each represent 15% of the surveyed population, pointing to a notable segment of working professionals and homemakers.

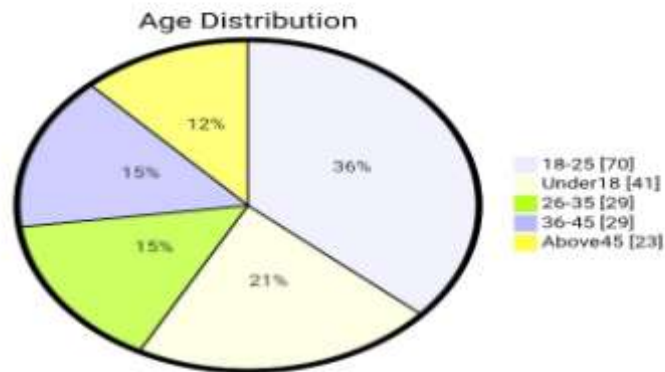


Fig 1: Commuter Age Distribution

4.2. Occupation of Respondents

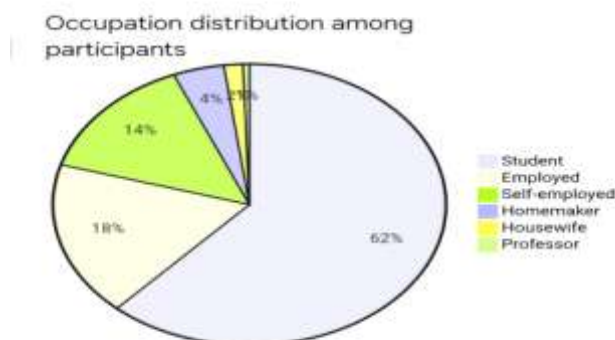


Fig 2: Occupation of Commuters

The occupational breakdown reveals that 62% of women using RTC buses are students, while 18% are employed. This suggests that the majority of RTC's female user base are young, mobile, and pursuing education or early careers. Ensuring their daily travel is safe, affordable, and reliable becomes a priority for sustaining their mobility and confidence in public systems.

4.3. RTC Bus Travel Frequency

The survey shows that 26% of women travel by RTC buses daily, while 22% use the service rarely, with others falling between occasional and weekly usage. This variation suggests that public transport plays a significant role in both routine and flexible travel needs for women. The daily commuters are likely students or professionals, while occasional users may rely on RTC only when absolutely necessary.

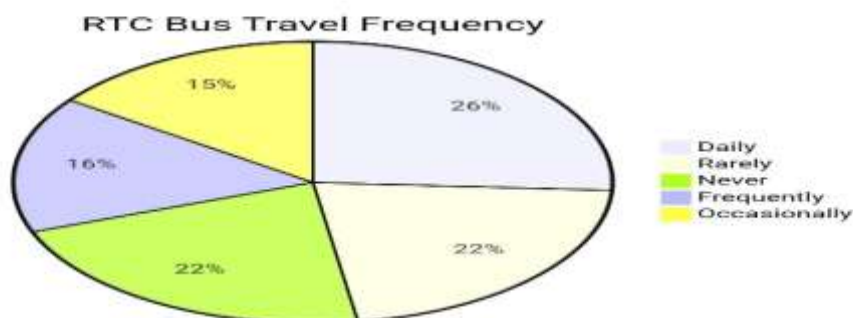


Fig 3: Travel Frequency

4.4. Experience of Inappropriate Behaviour

Alarming, 69% of the respondents reported having experienced or witnessed inappropriate behaviour while using RTC buses. This substantial majority points to a systemic issue of harassment in public transport spaces, especially for women. The result reinforces the need for enhanced surveillance, better staff accountability, and strong reporting mechanisms to ensure safer transit environments and rebuild commuter trust.

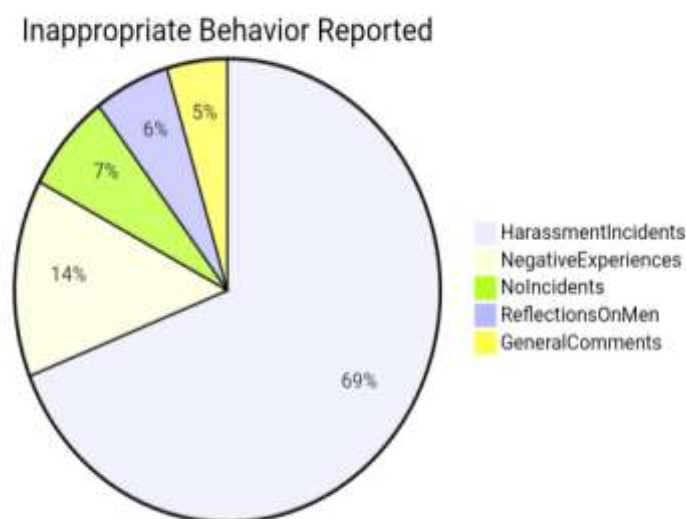


Fig 4: Rate of Harassment

4.5. Primary Concerns While Travelling:

Overcrowding was cited as the leading concern among female RTC commuters both by survey and interview respondents, followed closely by unhygienic conditions and unsafe waiting areas. This indicates that women not only fear harassment but also deal with infrastructural and environmental discomforts. The concerns suggest that improving the physical condition of buses and stations, particularly during rush hours, could directly contribute to women's sense of safety and dignity.

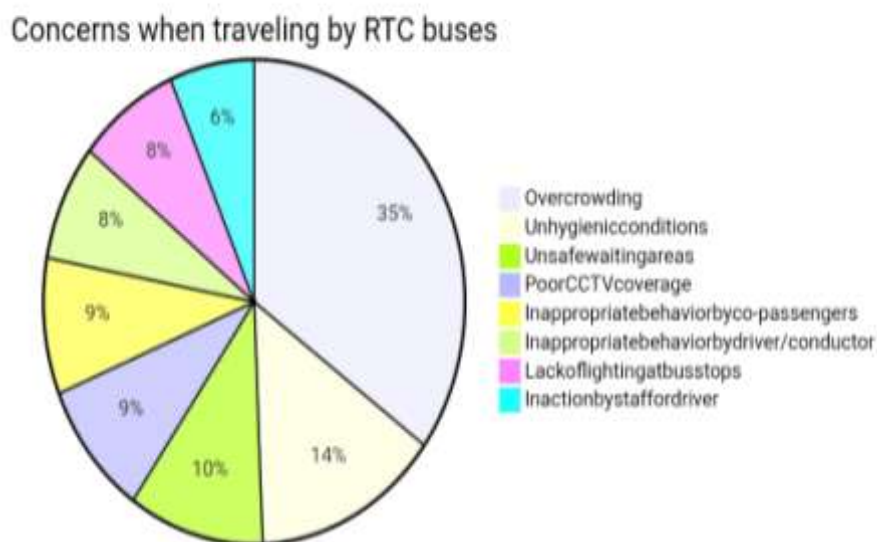


Fig 5: Commuter Concerns

4.5.1. Accessibility of Public Washrooms

More than half of the respondents reported that there are no clean and accessible public washrooms available near major RTC bus stops. Only a small portion acknowledged access at some places. This indicates a critical gap in gender-sensitive infrastructure, especially for women who spend longer durations commuting.

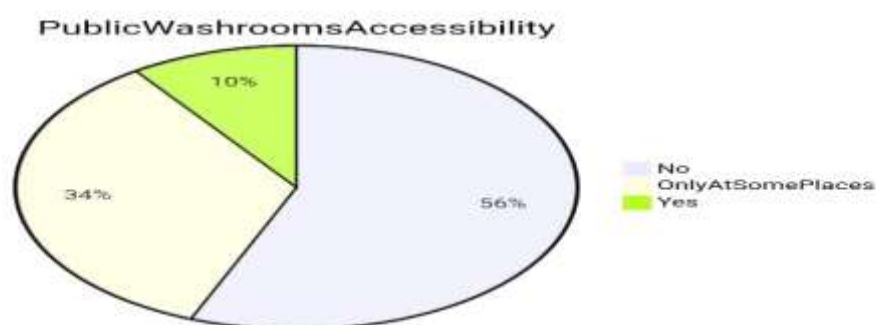


Fig 5: Accessibility to Public Washrooms

4.5.2. Safety in Public Washrooms

A significant portion of women strongly disagreed with feeling safe while using public washrooms near terminals or stops. This suggests that even when such facilities exist, they are poorly maintained, lack privacy, or are in isolated locations. Ensuring safe, well-lit, and hygienic washrooms is essential for protecting women's health and personal safety during travel.

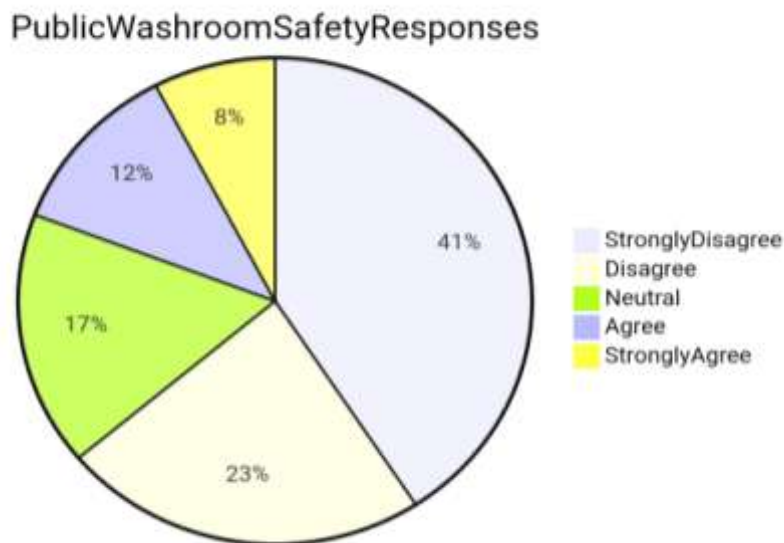


Fig 6: Safety Perception of Pubic Washrooms

4.6. Infrastructure Concerns

The survey reflects that a majority of women indicated that inadequate lighting at bus stops contributes to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, especially during early mornings or evenings. These results highlight the urgent need for infrastructure upgrades, such as installing proper lighting at all major and minor bus stops, to reduce fear and enable safer waiting conditions.

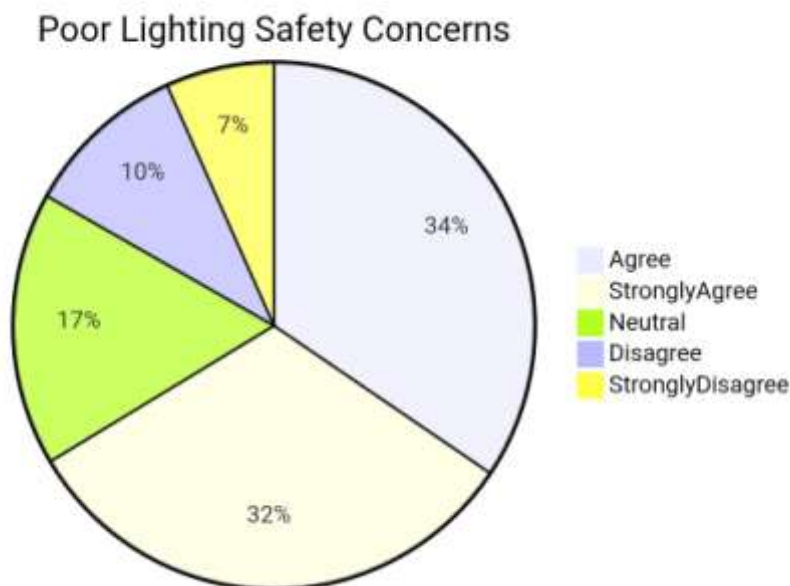


Fig 7: Perception of Lighting

4.7. Representation of Women Among RTC Staff

Only 36% of respondents agreed that RTC employs sufficient numbers of women conductors or safety staff. This low representation not only affects the visibility of female role models in the system but also impacts the sense of safety and comfort for women passengers. Increasing the number of trained female personnel could foster a more inclusive and secure transit experience.

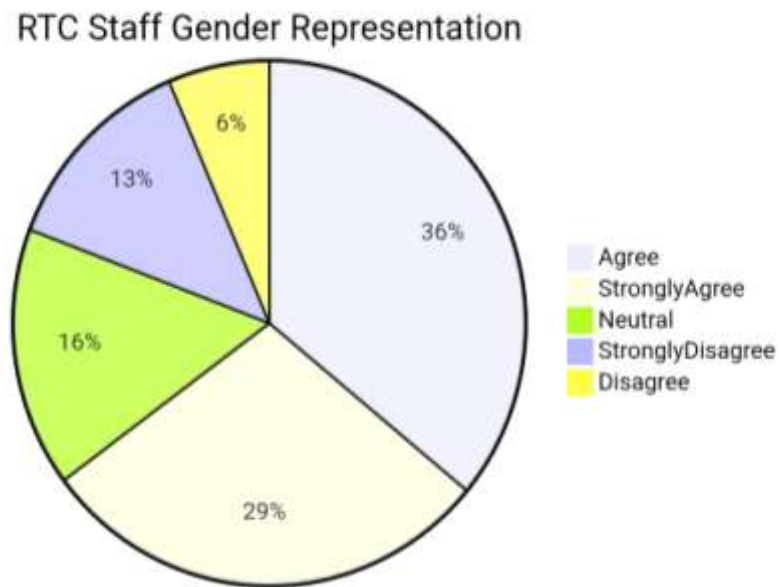


Fig 8: Perception of Women Staff Representation

4.8. Opinion on Women-Only Buses

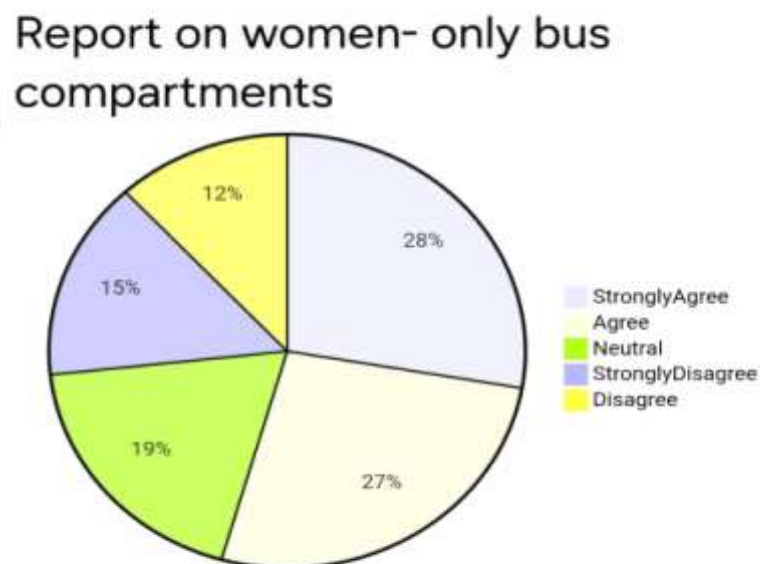


Fig 9: Preference of Women-Only Buses

The data shows that 55% of respondents either strongly agree or agree with having women-only compartments in RTC buses, reflecting a clear demand for dedicated safe spaces. Meanwhile, 27% remained neutral, and a smaller portion disagreed, suggesting that while many support the idea, some either doubt its impact or feel it is unnecessary. This highlights the growing sentiment for gender-sensitive transit solutions in response to safety concerns.

4.9. Designated Seats for Elderly Women and Women with Children

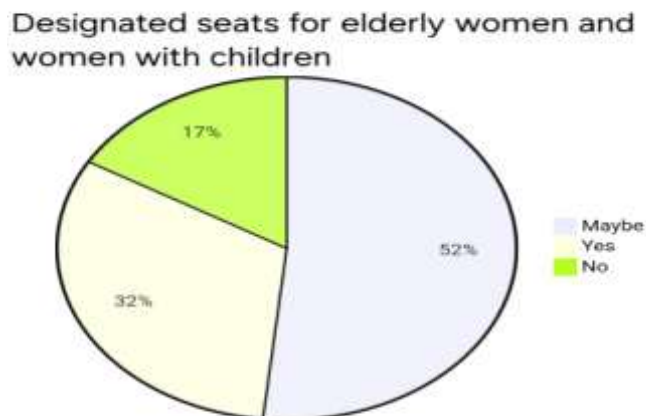


Fig 10: Perception of Designated Seats for Women and Children

Only 32% of respondents confirmed the presence of designated seating for elderly women and mothers with children. A larger percentage (52%) responded with "Maybe," indicating a lack of clarity or consistent enforcement of this provision. This suggests that while the policy may exist, awareness and proper marking of such seats need reinforcement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Few Women commuters on RTC buses in Hyderabad report incidents of harassment, including inappropriate touching and verbal abuse. These incidents are particularly prevalent during peak hours and on isolated routes. Unfortunately, reporting remains minimal due to fear, public apathy, or a lack of accessible channels. Many women choose silence over confrontation or formal complaints, often because they do not trust the process or do not know how to report such experiences effectively.

Infrastructure shortcomings further compound these issues. Numerous bus stops lack basic safety features such as proper lighting, seating arrangements, and surveillance cameras. Facilities for differently-abled individuals and elderly women are often inadequate or absent altogether. At night, poorly lit and unsafe waiting areas leave women feeling vulnerable and exposed to potential threats.

While concerns were raised regarding the unhygienic and unsafe conditions of waiting areas, it is understood from the authorities of TGSRTC was clarified that most bus shelters were constructed by the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) 10–15 years ago. Therefore, regular maintenance and upgrading is necessary.

RTC Buses in Telangana State cover approximately 4 lakh kilometres per day in Hyderabad with around 14 lakh passengers being transported every day. The large number of commuters leads to a significant overcrowding concern. The authorities are aware of this issue and agree increased number of buses are needed. However, limited resources are a constraint. Moreover, there is no accurate data on specific accurate data such as specific peak hours and stations with this concern. During peak hours, many women are forced to stand for long durations, increasing discomfort and the risk of harassment. On inner-city or low-frequency routes, limited bus availability leads to longer wait times and further crowds. These conditions degrade the overall commuting experience, especially for women traveling alone.

Not all departments and bus stations have CCTV cameras, posing a challenge for safety and monitoring. The lack of CCTV coverage affects the ability to ensure security effectively.

TSRTC employs approximately 48,000 people, with 30,000 to 35,000 being running staff. Hyderabad alone has about 8,000 RTC employees. Running staff receives training once a year or every six months. They receive behavioural training to ensure professional conduct. A training college, located at a specific site, runs the POWER program to improve staff behaviour and service quality. The complaints received regarding staff misconduct are minimal by authorities. However, the commuter survey gives mixed feedback on staff behaviour. While some conductors were praised for being supportive and intervening during incidents, others remained indifferent or passive. This inconsistency largely stems from a lack of gender-sensitization training and unclear accountability structures. Furthermore, the enforcement of women's reserved seating policies varies greatly from one route to another.

Several systemic challenges remain unresolved. Underreporting of incidents, lack of awareness of reporting channels, insufficient infrastructural facilities, poor visibility of support security staff support are found to be the major safety challenges.

While there are many initiatives taken by TSRTC and Telangana Police, awareness programs are not actively conducted, leading to reduced public engagement and safety education. Most of the commuters are not aware of that SHE Teams are available and respond promptly to incidents. Most incidents occur at bus stations, highlighting the need for enhanced safety measures in these areas. But there is a clear gap between the safety initiatives and helplines and awareness of them among the commuters.

6. Recommendations

Upgrading infrastructure is critical. All major RTC bus stops should be equipped with proper lighting, shelters, and CCTV surveillance to deter misconduct and promote visibility. Sanitation facilities must be made available, especially at terminals and on longer routes, to ensure dignity and hygiene. Moreover, barrier-free access is essential to support elderly passengers and women with disabilities, promoting universal accessibility.

Technology integration can offer transformative solutions. A dedicated mobile application should be developed for logging women's safety complaints, sharing location data, and accessing immediate support. QR codes can be placed inside buses to connect passengers with emergency helplines in a single scan. In the long term, an AI-based alert system using surveillance footage could help identify and respond to real-time incidents.

Training and inclusion of RTC staff must be prioritized. Gender-sensitization workshops should be held regularly for drivers and conductors to foster empathy and proactive behavior. The recruitment of more female staff into visible operational and safety roles would not only improve gender representation but also increase comfort levels among women passengers. Conductors who actively intervene in harassment cases could be incentivized through recognition programs or financial rewards.

Policy enforcement and governance need strengthening. Grievance redressal cells should be empowered and made easily accessible to all commuters. Incidents must be handled with transparency and swiftness to build trust in the system. Collaborative initiatives with local police could enhance patrolling near known high-risk terminals. Moreover, adjusting bus frequencies based on real-time demand patterns could help reduce overcrowding and waiting times.

Finally, community engagement is essential to fostering a culture of safety. City-wide awareness campaigns should promote respectful commuting, encourage bystander support, and simplify the process of reporting incidents. Partnerships with NGOs and educational institutions can facilitate periodic safety audits and bring diverse perspectives to the table. Citizen feedback forums should also be institutionalized to ensure that the voices of women commuters continue to guide RTC's policy and operational reforms.

CONCLUSION

RTC Hyderabad is in a transformative phase where accessibility must be matched by safety. A safe commute not only empowers women economically and socially but also builds trust in public institutions. This paper urges all stakeholders—transport officials, city planners, police, and civil society—to adopt a holistic approach in making RTC buses truly secure and inclusive for every woman. To address these challenges, the report recommends a multi-pronged approach this means upgrading infrastructure (lighting, sanitation, CCTV), integrating safety tech (mobile apps, QR-based helplines, AI alert systems), expanding gender-sensitive staff training, and launching community-driven awareness campaigns. Strengthening policy enforcement, enhancing women's representation in RTC roles, and involving stakeholders—NGOs, police, and local bodies—are essential to creating a safer, more inclusive transit system. Ultimately, ensuring a secure public transportation environment is not only a matter of mobility but also of dignity, empowerment, and equity for the women of Hyderabad.

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