Free Bus Travel and Women's Mobility: What the Time Use Surveys Show

News reference: 28 October 2026 | Prelims: NSO Time Use Survey and state free-bus schemes | Mains: GS-1 Women and Society; GS-2 Policy Evaluation



Original symbolic image: pcsmantra.com

Why in the News

Shravani Venkataraju's data analysis in The Hindu, dated 28 October 2026, compares NSO's all-India Time Use Surveys of 2019 and 2024. It identifies four states that made ordinary government buses free for women between 2021 and 2024: Punjab and Tamil Nadu in 2021, Karnataka in June 2023 and Telangana in December 2023. Each survey asked about 4.5 lakh people what they did in every half-hour of a day.

Main Figures in the Analysis

The following figures are reported by The Hindu.

Measure	Reported figure
Women aged 15-59 making at least one survey-day trip in four free-bus states	38.7% in 2019 to 45.3% in 2024; up 6.6 percentage points
Men in those states	Up 3.7 percentage points

Measure	Reported figure
12 other large states	Women: +4.4 points; men: +7.6 points
Women in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh	Telangana: 43.7% to 54.6%; Andhra Pradesh: 40.8% to 41.6%
Care-related trips in free-bus states	Approximately threefold
Travel for paid work	+2.3 points in free-bus states; +1.2 points elsewhere
Women undertaking paid work	30.5% to 34.4% in free-bus states; 18.4% to 22.9% elsewhere

Comparing Telangana and Andhra Pradesh

The comparison is useful because the states were united until 2014. Telangana began Mahalakshmi in December 2023; Andhra Pradesh introduced Stree Shakti in August 2025, after the 2024 survey. Women's survey-day travel rose from 43.7% to 54.6% in Telangana between 2019 and 2024, but changed little in Andhra Pradesh, from 40.8% to 41.6%.

Travel Purposes and Employment

Women's paid-work travel rose 2.3 points in free-bus states against 1.2 elsewhere. Care-related trips, such as taking children to school or relatives to hospital, almost tripled in free-bus states. Social, religious and leisure travel also increased.

Employment presents a different picture. Among women aged 15-59 who did paid work on the survey day, the share rose from 30.5% to 34.4% in free-bus states, compared with 18.4% to 22.9% elsewhere, a slightly larger increase. The analysis concludes that free buses ease leaving home, but jobs also depend on nearby work, childcare and safe travel.

Key Examination Points

- Time Use Surveys measure how people spend time; this analysis uses them to compare travel.
- The relationship between free buses and increased travel is analytical evidence, not final proof of causation.
- More mobility and more employment are different outcomes; employment did not show the same rapid growth.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Consider the following statements about The Hindu's analysis:

Statement 1: Punjab and Tamil Nadu made ordinary government buses free for women in 2021.

Statement 2: Women's travel rose more than men's in 12 other large states.

Statement 3: The share of women doing paid work increased more in free-bus states than elsewhere.

Which statements are correct?

(a) 1 only
(b) 1 and 2 only
(c) 2 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (a). Statement 1 matches the analysis. Elsewhere, women's travel rose 4.4 points and men's 7.6 points. Paid-work participation rose from 30.5% to 34.4% in free-bus states and from 18.4% to 22.9% elsewhere, a slightly larger rise outside them.

2. Consider the following statements:

Statement 1: NSO conducted both surveys.

Statement 2: Andhra Pradesh introduced Stree Shakti after the 2024 survey, making its comparison with Telangana useful.

Statement 3: The figures prove that free buses caused faster employment growth for women than elsewhere.

Which statements are correct?

(a) 1 only
(b) 1 and 2 only
(c) 2 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (b). Statements 1 and 2 match the analysis. Employment did not show the claimed pattern; work also depends on nearby opportunities, care and safety.

Mains Practice Question

"Free bus-travel schemes increase women's mobility but do not automatically increase employment." Examine this statement using the Time Use Survey figures. (150 words)

Sources and Factual Limits

The Hindu, "Free bus travel has given women more mobility", Shravani Venkataraju, 28 October 2026, is the main source. The author is an MA student at TISS Hyderabad; this is a data-analysis/opinion article.

All figures come from that article. The original NSO survey tables were not opened for the source article. Its conclusion is analysis, not final causal proof.

- The Hindu: Free bus travel has given women more mobility
- Original article PDF