



GENDER DISPARITIES IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT EMPLOYMENT IN KERALA: OBSTACLES CONFRONTING FEMALE CONDUCTORS

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Abstract

Gender disparities in public transport employment remain a significant challenge in Kerala, particularly in the context of female bus conductors. Despite increasing societal changes and a growing focus on gender equality, women continue to face numerous obstacles when entering and progressing in the public transportation sector. This study examines the key challenges confronted by female conductors in Kerala, including entrenched gender biases, societal expectations, physical demands, safety concerns, and issues related to passenger behavior. By exploring these barriers, the research aims to shed light on the systemic inequalities faced by women in the transport workforce, with a particular focus on their experiences in Kerala. The study further explores the broader implications of these challenges on the recruitment, retention, and well-being of female employees in the sector, offering insights into how public transportation can become more inclusive and gender-sensitive.

Keywords: Commuters, misbehaviour, Transport.

INTRODUCTION

In Kerala, as in many other parts of the world, public transport plays a crucial role in the daily commute of millions of people. Buses, as a primary mode of transportation, provide essential services to urban and rural populations alike. However, the employment landscape within this sector has historically been dominated by men, with women facing significant barriers to entry and career advancement, especially in roles like bus conductors. The increasing participation of women in the workforce, driven by changing societal norms, has slowly begun to disrupt these traditional gender roles. However, female conductors in Kerala still encounter a range of challenges, from gender-based discrimination and societal stereotypes to physical demands and unsafe working conditions. These obstacles not only hinder their professional growth but also impact their overall well-being and job satisfaction. This study delves into these gender disparities, focusing on the specific hurdles faced by female bus conductors in Kerala, and emphasizes the need for a more inclusive, supportive work environment within the public transport sector.

OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the various occupational challenges faced by women bus conductors:
- To explore the musculoskeletal pain and physical discomfort experienced by women bus conductors

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study focuses on the central region of Kerala State Road Transport Corporation, encompassing depots in Alappuzha, Kottayam, Thrissur, and Ernakulam (central bus stations). Data were collected through a pre-structured questionnaire. A random sample of 100 female bus conductors was selected for the study, which was conducted between 2024 and 2025. The completed questionnaires were entered into the SPSS database and analyzed using various statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and weighted average mean scores. To assess the relationship between the experience of female bus conductors and musculoskeletal discomfort, the Chi-square test was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Occupational problems of women bus conductors at work place N=100

Sl. No	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Weighted Mean score
1	Difficulty in doing night shift because of perception of family members.	9 (9.00)	16 (16.00)	18 (18.00)	37 (37.00)	20 (20.00)	2.57
2	Difficulty in doing night shift because of unavailability of ladies' room and security.	11 (11.00)	35 (35.00)	13 (13.00)	29 (29.00)	12 (12.00)	3.04
3	Difficulty in doing long route because of extension of working hours.	9 (9.00)	37 (37.00)	27 (27.00)	23 (23.00)	4 (4.00)	3.24
4	Difficulty in doing ordinary/local route duties because of overload workload.	9 (9.00)	39 (39.00)	24 (24.00)	24 (24.00)	4 (4.00)	3.97
5	Working hours are fixed.	20 (20.00)	47 (47.00)	10 (10.00)	19 (19.00)	4 (4.00)	3.6
6	Because of fluctuating working hours it's difficult to face misunderstanding of family members.	7 (7.00)	20 (20.00)	19 (19.00)	35 (35.00)	19 (19.00)	2.61
7	Fluctuating working period is foremost reason to leave the job.	5 (5.00)	34 (34.00)	25 (25.00)	21 (21.00)	15 (15.00)	2.93
8	I am often think or worry about work(when you are not actually at work)	7 (7.00)	38 (38.00)	16 (16.00)	22 (22.00)	6 (6.00)	2.85
9	I am ever miss out any quality time with my family or my friends because of pressure of work.	27 (27.00)	39 (39.00)	16 (16.00)	12 (12.00)	6 (6.00)	3.69
10	I ever feel tired or depressed because of work.	11 (11.00)	46 (46.00)	20 (20.00)	11 (11.00)	12 (12.00)	3.33

11	Male domination at work place and companionship	6 (6.00)	23 (23.00)	14 (14.00)	26 (26.00)	31 (31.00)	2.47
12	The management is more concerned about the problems of women	4 (4.00)	31 (31.00)	26 (26.00)	30 (30.00)	9 (9.00)	2.91
13	Doing full justice to your family	33 (33.00)	46 (46.00)	12 (12.00)	5 (5.00)	4 (4.00)	3.99
14	Worry about family when at work	12 (12.00)	27 (27.00)	28 (28.00)	20 (20.00)	13 (13.00)	3.05
15	I am anxious while carrying cash at work place	2 (2.00)	24 (24.00)	14 (14.00)	23 (23.00)	37 (37.00)	2.31
16	It creates constant worry when there is no proper coordination with bus driver	13 (13.00)	40 (40.00)	10 (10.00)	25 (25.00)	12 (12.00)	2.77

Source: primary data

Table 1 illustrates that 47% of female bus conductors acknowledge experiencing occupational challenges related to fixed working hours. Additionally, 46% report difficulties due to depression and balancing family responsibilities. About 40% encounter issues performing local and long route duties, and express concerns about job security. Furthermore, 37% express dissatisfaction stemming from night shift work and anxiety associated with handling cash on the job.

Additionally, 30% of them expressed disagreement, citing challenges such as male dominance in the workplace, lack of camaraderie, and management's insufficient attention to women's issues. According to Pooja and Reshma (2013), female bus conductors face difficulties with night shifts due to inadequate facilities and safety concerns. They often experience stress and anxiety related to work responsibilities, find long route duties challenging due to extended hours and family expectations, and struggle to maintain quality time with friends and family due to job pressures.

Table 1 reveals that female bus conductors face challenges in their roles on local and long routes due to heavy workloads, extended hours, and inadequate facilities such as a ladies' restroom and workplace security. The demands of work, coupled with male dominance, leave them with little time to spend with their families and friends. Performing duties during late hours poses additional difficulties for them.

Table 2 shows that musculoskeletal pain experiences by women bus conductors. The most common musculoskeletal pains observed among the women bus conductors in different parts of the body are as follows.

Body part	Very severe F (%)	Severe F (%)	Moderate F (%)	Mild F (%)	Very mild F (%)	Weighted Mean score
Neck	13 (13.00)	6 (6.00)	23 (23.00)	16 (16.00)	42 (42.00)	2.32
Shoulder	17 (17.00)	12 (12.00)	17 (17.00)	20 (20.00)	34 (34.00)	2.58
Upper back	17 (17.00)	18 (18.00)	19 (19.00)	20 (20.00)	21 (21.00)	2.75
Upper arms	14 (14.00)	8 (8.00)	18 (18.00)	12 (12.00)	48 (48.00)	2.28
Elbows	6 (6.00)	11 (11.00)	19 (19.00)	14 (14.00)	50 (50.00)	2.09
Lower back	23 (23.00)	15 (15.00)	31 (31.00)	10 (10.00)	21 (21.00)	3.09
Lower arms	12 (12.00)	11 (11.00)	22 (22.00)	6 (6.00)	49 (49.00)	2.31
Wrist	15 (15.00)	12 (12.00)	22 (22.00)	7 (7.00)	44 (44.00)	2.47

Palm/fingers	21 (21.00)	11 (11.00)	16 (16.00)	11 (11.00)	41 (41.00)	2.76
Thighs	36 (36.00)	17 (17.00)	14 (14.00)	7 (7.00)	26 (26.00)	3.3
Knees	42 (42.00)	18 (18.00)	12 (12.00)	10 (10.00)	18 (18.00)	3.56
Legs	52 (52.00)	14 (14.00)	13 (13.00)	8 (8.00)	13 (13.00)	3.84
Ankle /feet	49 (49.00)	17 (17.00)	10 (10.00)	8 (8.00)	16 (16.00)	3.75

Source: primary data

Neck: 13% have very severe pain in their neck due to this job.

Shoulder: The women bus conductors have very mild pain in the shoulder that is (34%) followed by 20 per cent of them have mild pain, 17 per cent of them have moderate and very severe pain and 12 per cent of them have severe pain experiences.

Upper back: Female bus conductors commonly experience musculoskeletal pain in the upper back area, with 21% reporting very mild pain, followed by 20% experiencing mild pain, 19% moderate pain, 18% severe pain, and 17% very severe pain.

Upper arms: Furthermore, among women bus conductors, 48% experience very mild pain, 18% report moderate pain, 14% note very severe pain, and the least, 8%, experience severe pain in their elbows. Notably, the majority, 50%, report very mild pain in this area.

Lower back: Women bus conductors experience nearly equal levels of pain in their lower back region, with percentages ranging from 23% to 21%.

Lower arms: Female bus conductors commonly report very mild pain in their lower arms, accounting for 49% of respondents. Following this, 22% experience moderate pain, while 12% report very severe pain, 11% severe pain, and 6% mild pain in this area.

Wrist: Female bus conductors frequently experience wrist pain during their duties. Specifically, 44% report very mild pain, followed by 22% experiencing moderate pain, 15% noting very severe pain, 12% reporting severe pain, and 7% indicating mild pain.

Palm/Fingers: Female bus conductors also face muscular pain while performing their duties. Specifically, 41% report very mild pain, followed by 21% experiencing very severe pain, 16% moderate pain, and 11% each reporting mild and severe pain.

Thighs: The majority of women bus conductors (36%) are experiencing very severe pain in their thighs, while a small percentage (7%) report mild pain.

Knees: Regarding knee pain experiences, the majority (42%) of women bus conductors report very severe pain, with only a small percentage (10%) experiencing mild pain.

Ankle feet: The majority of women bus conductors (49%) experience very severe pain in their ankles, while a small minority (8%) report mild pain.

Legs: It's evident that 52% of women bus conductors experience leg pain during their duties. This pain is predominantly very severe, exacerbated by prolonged standing and the challenging conditions inside buses, where they struggle to maintain a comfortable posture due to the bus's movement. Somnath et al. (2012) similarly found that a significant majority of bus conductors reported discomfort, particularly in their legs, with 93.3% experiencing more pain in their left leg due to prolonged standing and increased pressure.

Ankle/Feet: Female bus conductors frequently experience very severe pain in their ankles and feet, exacerbated by prolonged standing without breaks or opportunities to sit. The strain of bearing weight all day often causes a burning sensation in their feet. Ajit et al. (2015) noted that the only relief these conductors get is when they stand with their feet apart to maintain balance or lean against the seat backs for support.

Knees: More than 42% of female bus conductors experience very severe pain in their knees, often due to bending forward to issue tickets to passengers. They sometimes rely on the bus pole or seats for support, which contributes to knee strain. Ajit et al. (2015) similarly found that knee pain arises from prolonged standing hours in buses, where conductors assume an incorrect posture and experience uneven weight distribution due to the bus's movement. Prolonged standing can fatigue muscles, leading to discomfort and eventually pain.

Thighs: It has been observed that 36.00% of female bus conductors experience thigh pain due to continuous standing and the rocking motion of the bus during their duties. Regarding palm and fingers, 41.00% of them report moderate pain from the repetitive handling of ticket machines and pressing buttons to issue tickets. This repetitive action causes finger pain, exacerbated by holding money in their palms.

Wrist: It has been observed that 44.00% of female bus conductors experience very mild pain in their wrists due to the repetitive motion of handling ticket machines and bending their wrists towards passengers. Similar findings by Somanath (2012) indicated that 70.00% of conductors reported wrist pain due to the same activity of handling ticket machines.

Lower arms: It has been observed that 49.00% of female bus conductors experience very mild pain in their lower arms due to the repetitive handling of ticket machines and money bags.

Lower back: It can be observed that 23.00% of female bus conductors experience very severe pain in their lower back due to the constant vibration and swaying of the bus, exacerbated by bouncing over potholes. They face additional strain as they handle tickets and accept money, placing pressure on their lower back without adequate support from their hands. The only relief they find is when they stand with their feet apart for balance or lean against the seat backs. Ajit et al. (2015) similarly noted that conductors often rely on these methods for support due to the challenging conditions inside buses.

Elbows: Female bus conductors experience very mild pain in their elbows due to minimal stress on this area. Similarly, they also report very mild pain in their upper arms, as there are no specific reasons causing discomfort in this region.

Shoulder and neck: Female bus conductors are constantly required to wear a ticket box and money pouch, which places pressure on their shoulders. The elevated position of their shoulders, necessary to prevent the

pouch and ticket box from slipping, leads to muscle pain over time. Additionally, neck pain results from bearing the load on neck and shoulder muscles due to repetitive movements. Ajit et al. (2015) found similar results, highlighting that the neck remains in a flexed position during ticket issuance and movement around the bus, increasing the likelihood of pain and discomfort in the neck due to the demanding workload.

Table 3 demonstrates a highly significant association between experience and musculoskeletal pain among women bus conductors, evidenced at the 0.01 level of significance. Shift hours also show a significant association with musculoskeletal pain, as indicated in Table 3. The pain experiences reported by female bus conductors in their legs, ankles/feet, knees, thighs, palms/fingers, and other body parts are attributed to heavy workloads, discomfort, and factors related to aging. These findings underscore the close relationship between work experience, shift hours, and the prevalence of musculoskeletal pain among these workers.

Table 3: Association between experience and musculoskeletal pain experience of women bus conductors N=100

Experience (years)	Musculoskeletal pain range			Total	χ^2
	Low <76	Medium 76-79	High >79		
<4	12 (27.3)	28 (63.6)	4 (9.1)	44 (44)	8.072**
4-8	21 (80.7)	3 (11.6)	2 (7.7)	26	
>8	4 (13.4)	19 (63.3)	7 (23.3)	30	
Total	37	50	13	100	

**significant at 0.01 % level

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of the study reveal that female bus conductors face significant dissatisfaction in their roles, primarily due to the high workload and long working hours they endure. The demanding nature of their tasks, which includes managing large crowds, adhering to strict bus schedules, and handling administrative duties, contributes to their overall dissatisfaction. Moreover, the physical strain associated with their jobs is substantial, with many conductors reporting musculoskeletal pain in various parts of their bodies, such as the legs, ankles, feet, knees, thighs, palms, fingers, and wrists. The pain is mainly attributed to prolonged standing during shifts, as well as the repetitive physical movements involved in their work. These physical challenges not only affect their daily comfort but also pose long-term health risks. Despite these difficulties, the female conductors continue to carry out their duties, often without adequate support or resources to alleviate the physical strain. The lack of ergonomic interventions further exacerbates the situation, making it harder for them to maintain their health while fulfilling their professional responsibilities. This underscores the urgent need for improved working conditions and occupational health measures for female bus conductors, ensuring they are provided with the support necessary to perform their roles effectively and sustainably.

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