

# FAIR FARES: TOWARDS GENDER-INCLUSIVE PUBLIC TRANSPORT



**Author**

Sumana Narayanan

**Design and illustration**

Madhurya Balan

**Copyright**

First published in 2023

All content in this report is licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence.

**Acknowledgments**

The author thanks and acknowledges the contributions of the volunteers who collected and logged data from 6 cities across Tamil Nadu; the coordinators of the field work- Mr.Boopathy in Salem; Mr. Jayaraman in Coimbatore; Mr. Ramaperumal in Tiruvannamalai; Mr. Ramesh in Tiruvarur; and Mr. Ganapathy Subramanian in Tirunelveli; and colleagues at CAG, Divya Arvind, M. Mohan, and Sowmya Kannan, for help in data cleaning, analysis, and the filing of RTIs.

**Disclaimer:** The information in this document has been obtained in good faith from sources that are believed to be reliable, but any potential interpretation of this report as making an allegation against a specific company or companies named would be misleading and incorrect. The authors accept no liability whatsoever for any direct or consequential loss arising from the use of this document or its contents.



Citizen consumer and civic Action Group

No.103, First Floor,

Eldams Road, Teynampet,

Chennai - 600018.

Tamil Nadu,

India

+91-44-2435 4458

+91-44-2435 0387

helpdesk@cag.org.in

**About CAG**

Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG) is a 38-year-old non-profit, non-partisan and professional research organisation which strives to protect citizens' rights in consumer, civic and environmental issues while promoting good governance processes including transparency, accountability and participatory decision making.

# FAIR FARES: TOWARDS GENDER-INCLUSIVE PUBLIC TRANSPORT









# Contents

- Executive Summary ..... 02**
- Where are our cities headed? ..... 05**
- Objectives & Methodology ..... 10**
- Results & Discussion ..... 12**
- Recommendations ..... 30**
- Conclusion ..... 32**
- Bibliography ..... 34**
- City snapshots ..... 35**

# Executive Summary

1 In India, only 20% of women are a part of the labour workforce according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Chakrabarty 2023). Studies have shown that in addition to poor access to affordable and safe transport, women stepping out of the home are constrained by the disproportionate burden of domestic duties they shoulder; societal norms that impose restrictions on women's movement due to concerns of safety and prestige (what will people say?); and control over women's agency.



2

To ensure greater social inclusion, Delhi, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka have made public buses free for women. Two years after the scheme's introduction in Tamil Nadu, CAG surveyed 3000 women across 6 cities (Chennai, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruvarur, Tirunelveli, and Tiruvannamalai) to understand the impact of the scheme.



3 The scheme has resulted in substantial savings for the women with two-thirds reporting they saved over Rs 400 a month and 20% of the women saving between Rs 601 and 800. Considering that 90% of the women earned less than Rs 20,000 per month, the money saved is not inconsequential. The women shared that they mostly spent this money on household necessities other than food (2024 women), food for the family (1191), and education (879). Only 18 women said they spend on non-family expenses such as leisure or personal care. The public narrative around this scheme has been about women being subsidised by men who commute (pay tickets) and work outside the home. This argument does not take into account the unpaid work that women do (domestic chores) and the fact that the money saved due to the scheme is invested in the family's future and therefore the country's future. The money invested in better nutrition, for example, will contribute to reducing the family's use of public healthcare services which then means the limited resources of the State can be redirected elsewhere.





4

Studies globally show that women's travel patterns and therefore transport needs differ from men. Most men commute directly to work and back while women typically trip-chain, that is take multiple short trips in a series. For example, women drop children at school and then go to work from there. Currently fare structures penalise this kind of travel as shorter trips are more expensive per kilometre. This begs the question, who is subsidising whom?

5

Another popular narrative push back that has risen has been that thanks to the fare free scheme, women are stepping out of the house with no purpose and loitering. CAG's study found that nearly one-fourth of the women reported that they are now able to indulge in leisure activities such as visiting the temple, visiting friends and relatives, parks, and the beach. The women noted that they would not indulge in these activities earlier because transport was an additional burden on the family purse. However, mental peace, fresh air, and a break from routine chores is crucial for everyone, men and women. Women stepping out of the house in larger numbers also increases their visibility in public spaces, making it safer for women and encouraging more women to step out, creating a positive feedback loop.



6

The scheme has been successful in reducing the barriers to social inclusion of women. It can be improved by increasing fleet strength, making the scheme applicable to other bus types (Express and Deluxe) on par with student and senior citizen concessions to reduce concerns of crowding. It is also important that the state actively collects gender-segregated data to understand women's travel patterns which will then allow the government to optimise bus services.





Prioritising sustainable transport options is the only way forward if our cities are to be liveable.



## Where are our cities headed?

The urban population of India is one third that of its rural population as per the 2011 Census of India. However, the country is urbanising rapidly - especially in states like Tamil Nadu with nearly half the population in urban areas. Unfortunately, cities have not kept pace in terms of infrastructure and amenities. In the transport sector, for example, cities across the country are struggling with traffic congestion, vehicular air pollution, road crash deaths and injuries which are resulting in unsafe and stressful roads, thus reducing the quality of life for urban dwellers. The current state of the transport sector reduces the quality of life for urban dwellers.

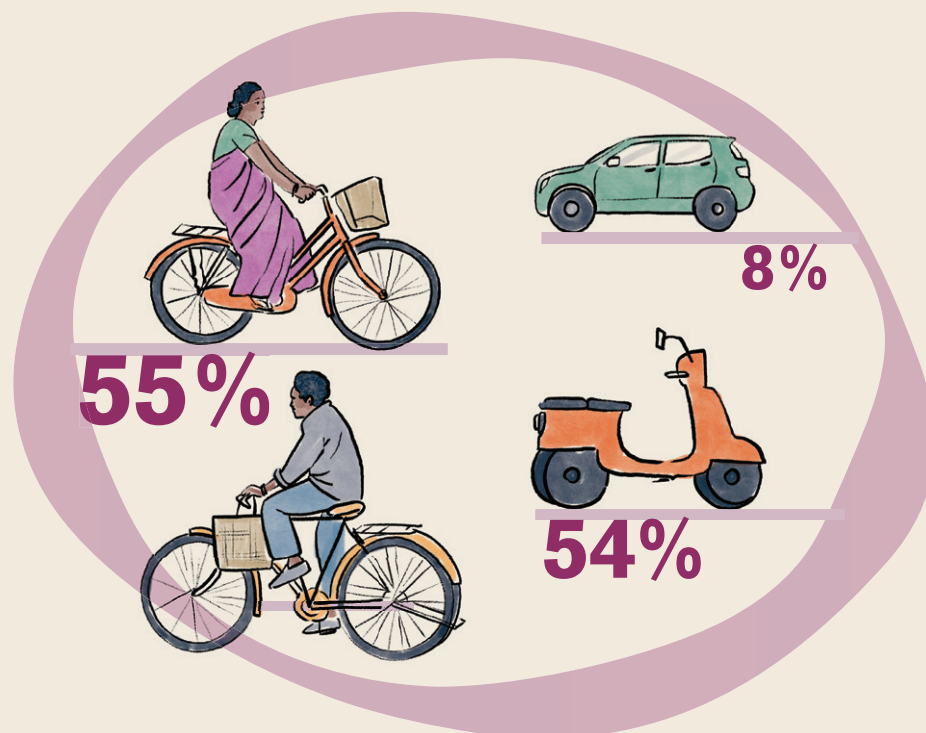


## Sustainable cities: a pipe dream?

There is growing recognition that walk/cycle/public transport is the only way forward if our cities are to be liveable. From being enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (see SDG 11) to national, state, and city level, plans and policies to promote sustainable mobility have mushroomed. Some projects/plans have also been realised although in often diluted forms. On the other hand, cities also continue to prioritise private transport by investing in flyovers, widening roads, multi-level parking; not clamping down on free/low cost on-street parking, not incentivising a switch to public transport, etc. This has meant that for every step forward on sustainable mobility, Indian cities are taking two steps backwards by investing in private transport. Cities across India are seeing an increase in private vehicles, especially two-wheelers.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's National Family Health Survey (2019-2021) notes that only 8% of Indian households own a car which works out to 1 in 12 families; 55% of Indian households have a cycle; and 54% of households own a two-wheeler.

### Percentage of families owning private transport



**Even with a low car penetration, Indian cities are struggling to handle traffic congestion.**



Thirty years ago (1992-93) when the first Survey was conducted less than 1% of households owned a car and about 8% two-wheelers). In comparison to high-income countries, India's car penetration is low. Yet even with this low number of cars (per 1000 citizens), Indian cities are struggling to handle traffic congestion, pollution, and road safety. The average speed of traffic has been slowing down in Indian cities leading to more time spent commuting, exposed to poor air and excessive noise. This affects productivity and health.

## **Access to mobility options across socio-economics and gender metrics**

In spite of an increase in private vehicles, the majority of trips in urban areas are made by walk/public transport (Soman, Kaur, and Ganesan, 2019). The socio-economic dynamic of who uses what mode of transport is also well documented. It is the poor who tend to walk/cycle/use public transit while the middle class has moved to two-wheelers and small cars. There is also an age and gender perspective.

Majority of students and early career professionals walk and use public transit. As their economic situation stabilises most employed people aspire to own two-wheelers and then a car. Along with owning a house, this is a marker of having arrived in their social circles.

Stigmas associated with women stepping out on their own especially at 'odd' hours, working outside the home, often valid concerns for safety and lack of financial independence, limit mobility options available to women.

Depending again on socio-economic and educational status, women have varied access to mobility. Social barriers to accessing transit (of any kind) abound for women. The general assumption that domestic/childcare/family healthcare duties must be the priority of women and that working outside the house can be allowed if these primary duties are not neglected. Even within the scope of domestic duties, women do need to access transit but the importance given to their (in) ability to access convenient, affordable transit is low. Due to some or all of these reasons, women tend to walk or use public transport for their mobility needs. This limits their participation in the labour workforce; curbs their independence, freedom; contributes to their time poverty, and can impact their state of well-being.

## Transport planning is (not) a one fit option

Public transport planning in India does not factor in the heterogeneity in users and their needs. It is well known that women's use and experience of public transport is quite different from that of men. Their travel patterns and needs are different. However planning tends to discount or not recognise these differences. For example, women tend to make multiple short trips, many of which are connected to household errands and childcare while men's use of public transport tends to be a single journey to and from work.

## Levelling the playing field

On International Women's Day 2021, the government of Tamil Nadu launched a fare free public transport scheme for women. The scheme has been running since July 2021 across the state. Tamil Nadu is the third state to attempt such a scheme, following in the footsteps of Delhi and Punjab. In 2023, the neighbouring state of Karnataka also implemented a similar scheme.

These fare free schemes for women have attracted approbation and criticism. This study seeks to understand the impact of this scheme in Tamil Nadu and how this scheme can be taken forward to promote a robust public transport system that is the preferred mode of transport for the majority of citizens.



**Women have varied access to mobility. Most people aspire to owning a two wheeler and then a car.**

## Fare free schemes

Fare free public transport schemes seek to reduce the barriers to accessing transport. Various forms of such schemes exist in India and elsewhere. The country of Luxembourg, for example, has free public transport for all. In many cities in India, including Chennai, fare concessions exist in different public transport systems. The bus system in Tamil Nadu has student concessions, concessions for senior citizens, and the differently abled and their caregivers.

The Government of Tamil Nadu's Transport Policy Note 2021-22 states that the fare free scheme for women seeks to ensure greater social inclusion of women by facilitating greater mobility. Tamil Nadu's scheme was extended to the transgender community and the physically disabled (with over 40% disability) and their escort. For the sake of convenience and since in the public domain the scheme is associated with women and the study itself focussed on women (we did seek to find transgender users), this report will continue to refer to the scheme as the fare free bus for women scheme, although other vulnerable groups have been added to the scheme's beneficiary list.

Public buses are categorised into ordinary, express, deluxe, and AC Volvo, though the last are uncommon. Ordinary buses halt at all stops and have the lowest fare starting at Rs 4; express fare are 1.5 times and deluxe fares are 2 times that of the ordinary service. The base fares for Chennai are slightly higher than that of other cities in Tamil Nadu. The fares were last revised vide G.O (Ms.) No. 48 of the Home Department, dated 28.01.18. To make it easy for users to identify the ordinary service buses, the front and rear of the buses have been painted pink - an effective, albeit aesthetically dubious way of communication.

Women who board the ordinary buses are handed a zero value ticket and the service provider is reimbursed by the state government on a monthly basis at the rate of Rs 16 per ticket issued.



The fare free scheme is applicable only in the ordinary service.



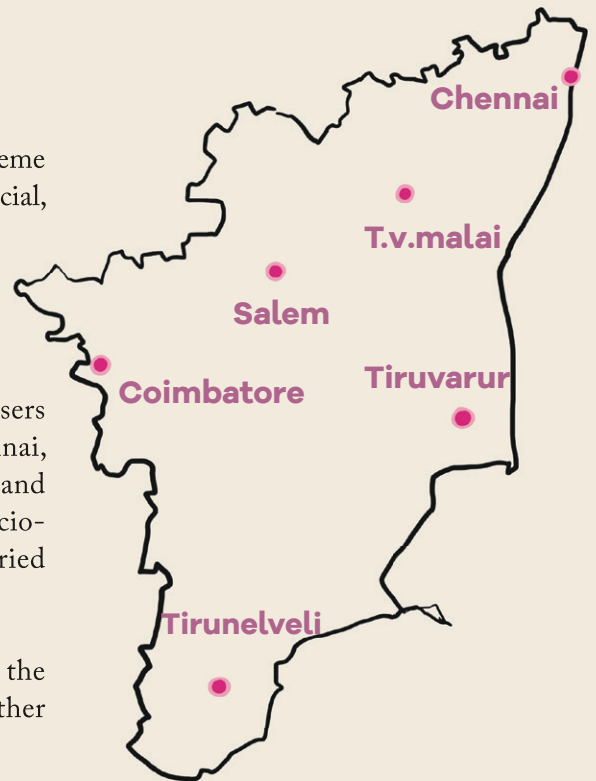
## Objectives

Assess the impact of the fare free bus for women scheme introduced in Tamil Nadu, on the women's financial, social, mental health/well-being.

## Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 500 women bus users each in 6 cities in Tamil Nadu - Chennai, Tiruvannamalai Coimbatore, Salem, Tirunelveli, and Tiruvarur. Representation across age groups and socio-economic background sought to ensure varied perspectives were captured.

The survey focussed on women who regularly used the bus system in their city (at least twice a week) whether it was private or public buses.



If the fare free scheme encourages well - heeled women to use public transport, it means less cars on the road.

Interviewees were from varied age and socio-economic backgrounds



**3000**  
respondents

- 1,015 No income
- 328 5,000 and below
- 898 5,001-1,000
- 476 10,001-20,000
- 176 20,000-40,000
- 62 40,001-60,000
- 30 60,000-1,00,000
- 6 1,00,000 +
- 9 Did not disclose

# Results & Discussion

## Demographics of women bus users

In all cities, women of varied age groups use the public bus system although the majority were between 20 and 60 years of age. Chennai had a higher number of senior citizens represented in the survey compared to other cities. Tier 3 cities – Tiruvannamalai and Tiruvarur, had considerably more senior citizens using the bus than in bigger cities like Coimbatore, Salem, and Tirunelveli.

## Education

Of the 3000 women interviewed, everyone had had some formal schooling and over half were post graduates. Graduates however were very few. There were also a small number of doctorate degree holders. In terms of employment, the respondents were divided into the following groups - those who did not work outside the house i.e homemakers or currently unemployed women; students; retirees; workers in informal sectors; and those employed in the formal sectors. Of the 759 homemakers/unemployed women, 354 were post graduates; 390 had some amount of schooling; and 15 were graduates. Just over half (1773) of the 3000 women are currently working.

## Income

To understand who uses public transport and the economic background of the women accessing the fare free scheme, we looked at income levels. As the data shows, there is a clear pattern with women who earn less than Rs 40,000 a month being the primary beneficiaries. One of the arguments in the public domain against the fare free scheme has been that this is enabling well-heeled women, who can afford the bus fare, to free-load. On social media this trope rears its head when a woman posts an image of herself with the zero value ticket. Recently with Karnataka launching the Shakti Scheme, this has popped up several times.

Typically public transport is not used by the well-heeled (men or women). Transport choice is an aspirational slope where personal/private transport is seen as a marker of social class. Most working people aspire to move 'up the ladder' by shifting to personal two-wheelers and then to personal cars at some point. Therefore, the number of economically upper class women (and men) using public transport is marginal. If the fare free scheme is encouraging more women from this group to use public transport, it is a win as it means less cars on the road. It will also mean that as more such women use public transport, the chances of the service quality improving are higher as these groups have a greater voice and ability to make their needs known to the government.





Women tend to make multiple short trips while men tend to commute directly to work.

## Reading the fine print of the scheme

In Karnataka and Punjab where similar schemes are running, the women have to show proof of domicile. In Karnataka, forms have to be filled and a Shatki card obtained. This actually penalises the target group for the scheme - poor women with little time or resources. Women from low income backgrounds, especially if they are transient labour, are less likely to have the documentation required to access the scheme and are also less likely to have the time and resources required to make trips to government offices and get the paperwork processed. If the process can be done online, these groups are also less likely to have access/ability to use such facilities. In fact, the well-educated, higher income group women based in the state are more likely to have the government identification required. These requirements also place a burden on the State in terms of resources - people to process the paperwork etc. Tamil Nadu's version of the scheme (similar to Delhi) keeps it simple and easy and accessible. Any perceived disadvantage of well-to-do women accessing the scheme is offset by the savings in government resources spent on processing paperwork.

While the fare free public transport for women has been garnering attention, there are several fare free schemes in the state for various groups that have been running for years. A Right to Information (RTI) application to Chennai's Metropolitan Transport Corporation (MTC) provided a list of concessions, eligibility criteria, and process to avail the concession. Excluding the fare free transport for women, there are 12 schemes in Tamil Nadu that offer varying levels of concessions.

**School and college students** (typically the institutes must be government-run or government-recognised) can obtain 100% fare free passes while other college students (private or self financed colleges) can avail of 50% concession passes. For persons with disabilities (physical and mental) who meet certain criteria (such as level of disability) fare free passes are given on a specific route of MTC. For freedom fighters and their widows and for Aged Tamil Scholars and their widows and Award Winners, fare free passes are given in all buses of the state transport corporations. This then would cover inter-city buses as well. The RTI reply does not specify winners of which awards are eligible for the concession, nor does it specify the criteria for receiving the title of Tamil Scholar.

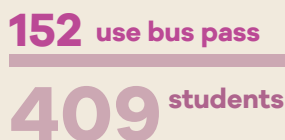
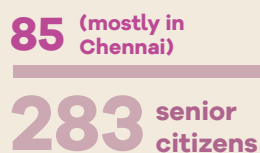
**Senior citizens** who are residents of Chennai are also eligible for free travel. Other than these, any individual can obtain a Travel as you Please Ticket which costs Rs 1000 per month but allows travel in any bus in the city with no limitations. For working people there is also a one-third concession though the details of the scheme are not clearly shared in the RTI reply.

The Tamil Nadu government's Transport Policy Notes for 2021-22 and 2022-23 give a sense of the budgetary outlay on concessions. The doubling of allocation for the fare free scheme for women could be partly explained by the fact that the scheme began only in July 2021 whereas for 2022-23, it would have applied for all 12

months. These concessions are valid in Ordinary, Express, and Deluxe Services. The fare free scheme for women, however, is valid only in the Ordinary Service.

| Allocation (in crores) | 2021-22 | 2022-23 |
|------------------------|---------|---------|
| Students               | 1300    | 928     |
| Women                  | 670     | 1520    |
| Senior citizens        | 52      | 52      |

### Are women using other bus concessions?



The poor uptake in other bus concessions (see illustration above) could be because women who were earlier obtaining concessions under the 12 schemes have switched to using the fare free scheme. The other schemes typically require documentation, application forms to be submitted and so on. And to the best of our knowledge, these processes are still offline and therefore require trips to various offices for validation. The fare free bus for women makes the concession access simple- a bus painted pink is free for women (the scheme has been extended to the physically disabled and transgenders). There is no paperwork at all.

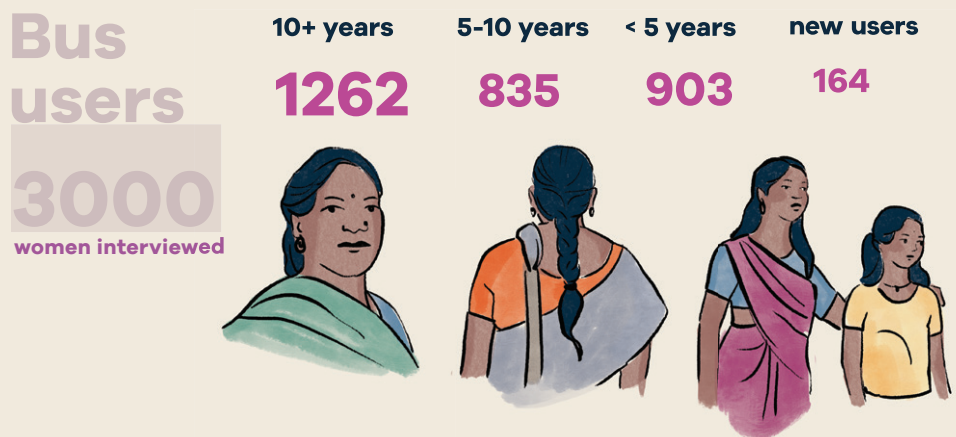
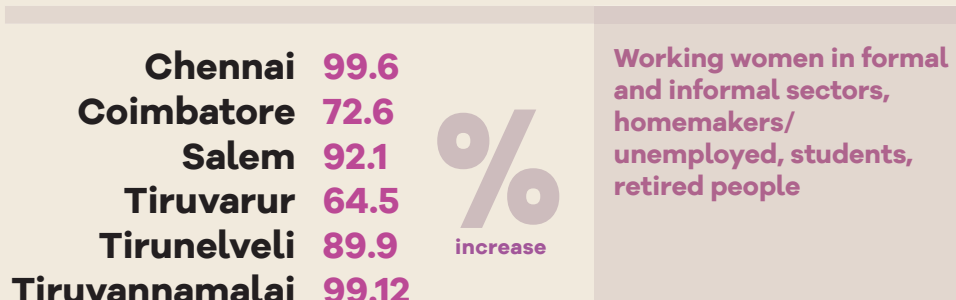
At the same time, through anecdotal evidence in Chennai (during multiple conversations with women in low income areas), we found that many were unaware of the concession schemes (the 12 listed earlier) or did not know how to access them. In fact, due to the lack of clear information in the public domain, we filed the RTI so as to be able to share the information with the women.



## Increased usage of public bus by women

Many women reported that their use of the bus service had increased after the fare free bus scheme was introduced. To understand if there has been a substantial increase in women using public transport because of the fare free bus scheme, we asked how long they have been using the bus and also surveyed their use of other modes of transport, particularly private transport.

### Since the fare free scheme, women make more trips by public transport

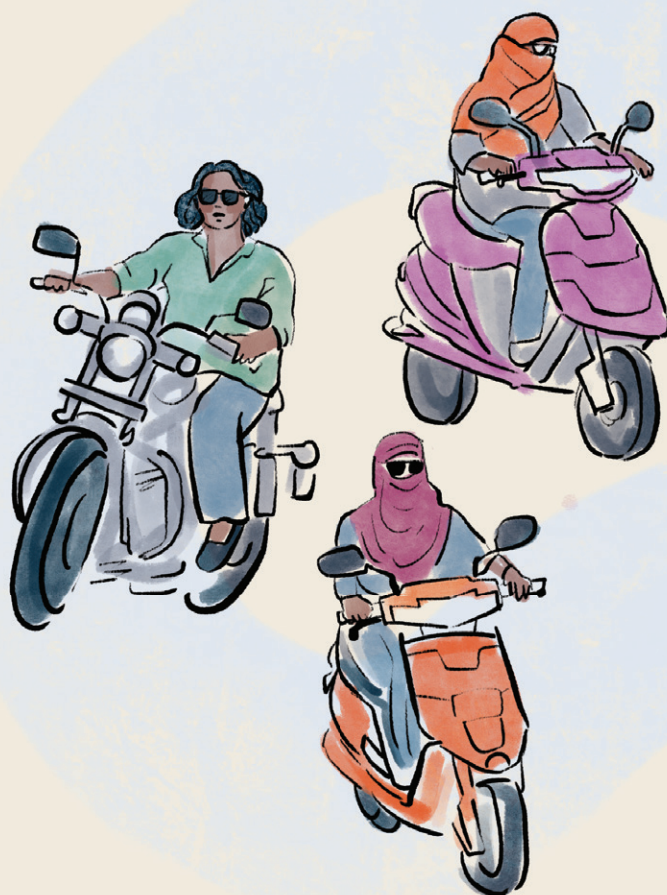


While there are a few (164) new users of public buses, the vast majority are seasoned travellers who perhaps had been using the more expensive services (like deluxe buses) or private bus services in the cities where public transit has been contracted to private entities. Another possibility is that the women, although regular users of the bus service, would also use Intermediate Para Transit or IPT services such as share autos and autos. Since the fare free scheme, they have reduced their use of private transport and IPT.

The women interviewed are largely dependent on public transport. Many of them said that in addition to the bus, they walk (even to use the bus service, they would need to walk to and from bus stops), cycle, take share autos or autos.

## Women's access and use of private transport

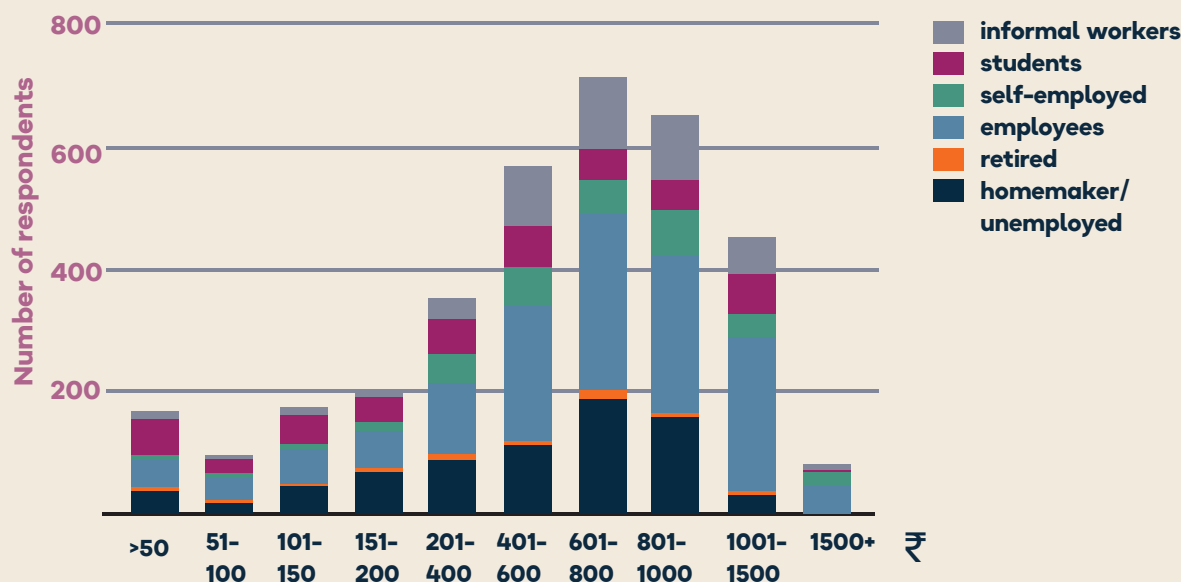
For the few women who used private transport, the two-wheeler was the go to option. While bicycles are private property and 129 women said they also used a bicycle, this was not counted as private transport in the context of this study as the lens is one of sustainable mobility. In Chennai, the number of women opting for/having access to private transport was low across different categories (homemakers, working professionals, retirees, students, etc). The highest use in the capital city was among informal sector workers (10%). Private transport use was highest in Coimbatore and Salem. In Coimbatore, nearly 25% of homemakers and unemployed women used two wheelers, followed by students at 13% and working professionals at 11%. Salem saw consistent use of two-wheelers across categories (16 to 40%). Working professionals reported the maximum use at 42%, followed by self-employed women (27%), retirees (25%), informal sector workers (20%), homemakers and unemployed women at 19%, and students at 16%.



**For the few women who used private transport, the two-wheeler was the go to option**

## Savings

Two-thirds of the women estimated that they saved over Rs 400 a month. 20% of the women said that they saved between Rs 601 and 800. Savings of Rs 801-1000 pm were reported by 18% of the women while nearly 16% said they saved between Rs 401 and 600. The number of women reporting savings more than Rs1000 was just under 16%. These findings are similar to the State Planning Commission's study that found an average saving of Rs 800 per month.



### Monthly saving from using the fare free scheme

The travel money saved is largely invested in the family, through spend on household needs, education, and healthcare. General household expenses led the list with 2024 women, followed by food (1191), education (879), and healthcare (712). Since the respondents could choose more than one option, the total responses exceed the sample size of 3000. Only 18 women said they spend on non-family expenses.

In the development sector, there is a broad understanding that investing in women reaps societal benefits that is more than a one is to one return (Jackson, 2009). This has been the underpinning for gender-focussed work globally in the past decade. Financial independence or at least control over finances empowers women to take decisions regarding their life, body and their families. Data has shown that when women are empowered, the spend on household needs, education, and healthcare increases, leading to better economic, social, health outcomes for the family and for society (Wei Wei et al, 2021).



# What do women spend the saved money on?

household **2024**

food **1191**

education **879**

non-family **18**

**3000**  
respondents

Women using the fare free scheme save, on average, Rs. 800 a month

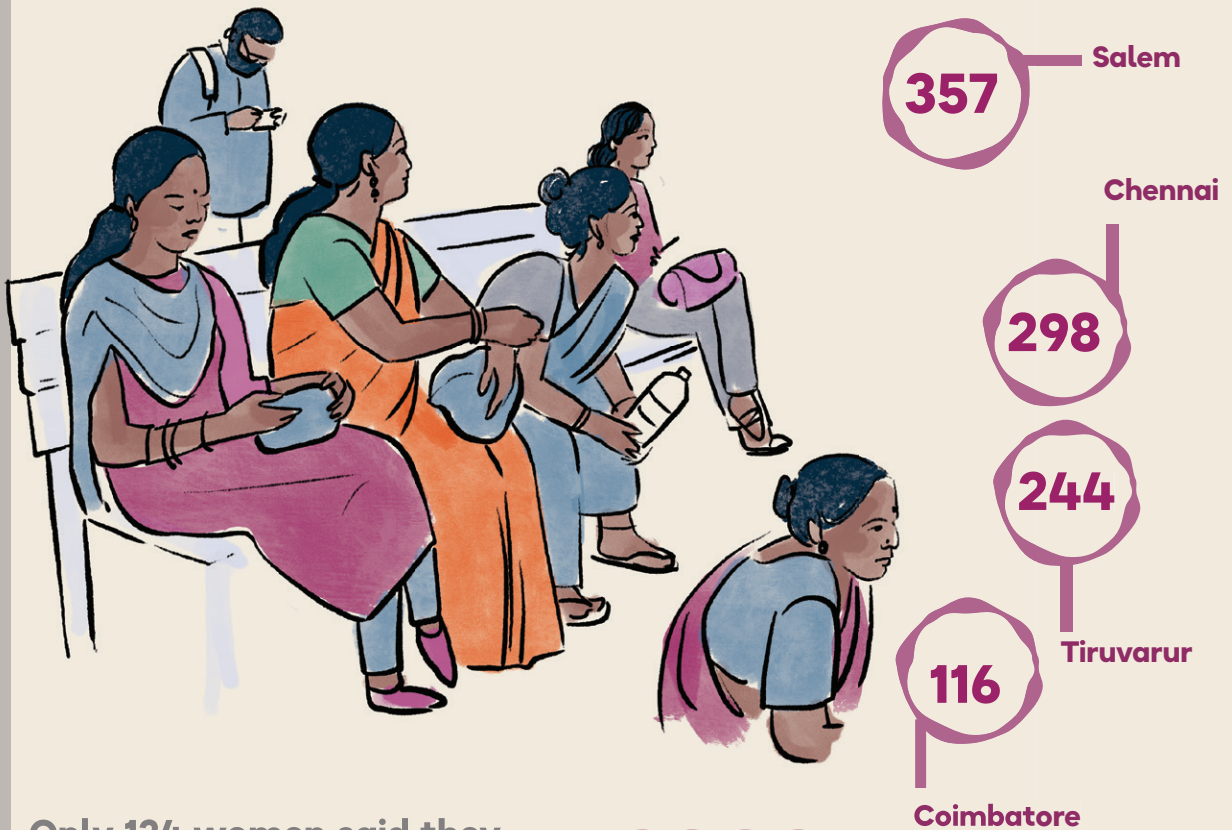


## Buses are worth waiting for

With media reports and anecdotal evidence showing increased crowding in Ordinary Services, we sought to gauge if women now preferred to wait for the Ordinary Service buses, foregoing Express/Deluxe Services that might arrive at the bus stop.

**1772 women will wait for a free bus**

**1104 women said they might wait for a fare free bus,**



**Only 124 women said they would board whichever bus arrives at the stop**

**3000**  
respondents

We had hypothesized that working women, i.e. those employed in offices which often have a fixed reporting time, would be more willing to board fare buses and not wait for fare free buses compared to others whose schedules may allow for more flexibility. However, the majority of women across professions said they would wait for the fare free bus.

Across all cities, women said that low frequency was not a consideration for them. That said, we did not ask them what they considered to be low frequency and since frequency and crowding are linked, it is likely to be an important factor in whether the women board a deluxe or express bus. In addition, there is no data in the public domain on fleet size per route and bus frequency per route in each city.

## How many buses are there?

For Chennai, we were able to obtain some information on the ordinary bus fleet size through Right to Information (RTI) petitions and the MTC website. MTC serves the Chennai Metropolitan Area (this encompasses Chennai city and some parts of neighbouring districts).

Nearly half the fleet of MTC consists of ordinary buses but with an overall utilization rate of less than 80%, it is not clear how many ordinary buses are actually running on a daily basis. The data does show that the fleet size has reduced over the past four years but the number of ordinary buses has increased since 2020. No doubt some express and deluxe buses have been converted to ordinary services. Combining data from RTI replies and the MTC website, we deduced that there are currently 1559 ordinary, 173 express, 1307 deluxe, 48 a/c, and 146 small buses. This fleet size is inadequate for the city and the surrounding areas that MTC serves. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) recommends at least 60 buses per 100,000 (one lakh) population. No city in Tamil Nadu is close to this metric.

## Too few and infrequent

There is a general perception that the ordinary buses are fewer in number and the service frequency is poor. The frequency of buses on any given route is dependent on a number of factors - number of buses, length of the route, and traffic. With the ordinary bus frequency, there is the added aspect that not all buses on a route are ordinary buses. According to a 2019 media report in The Hindu, MTC has over 750 bus routes. In the RTI data obtained from MTC, we found that the number of ordinary buses per route varied between 1 and 20. We do not know the basis for this allocation. What is clear though is that the overall number of ordinary

**The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) recommends at least**

**60** buses per  
**1 lakh** population



**No city in Tamil Nadu is close to this metric.**

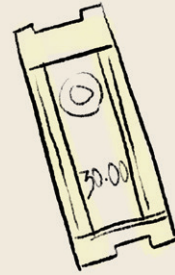
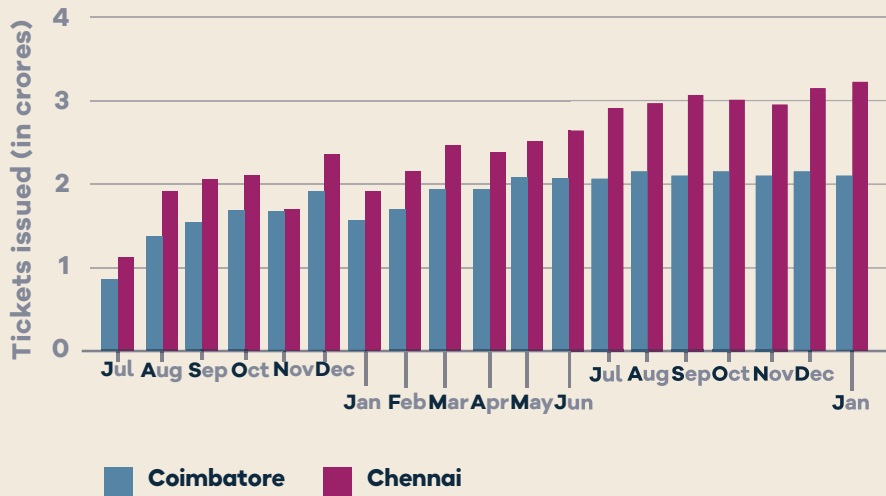


buses has increased somewhat since 2020 and therefore, one may assume frequency has improved. With the fare free scheme for women coming into play in 2021, and complaints of crowding coinciding with this, clearly more women are using the fare free buses. This is clear from the data collected by us and also from the growing number of zero value tickets being issued month on month at least in Chennai. We obtained the same data for Coimbatore as well, where there was some increase in the first few months of the scheme, after which the usage seems to have plateaued.



According to the Transport Policy Notes (2021-22, 2022-23) of the Tamil Nadu government, the number of women who travelled in ordinary buses between 12.07.2021 (when the scheme was launched) and 26.08.21 (roughly the first month of the scheme) was 1463.15 lakh which was about 60% of the total passengers in ordinary buses. As of 30.04.22, the number of women who had used ordinary buses (since the launch of the scheme), was 106.34 crore accounting for 61.78% of passengers on ordinary buses.

## Number of zero value tickets issued



## Modal shift?

Unfortunately, we cannot say how many women are existing users of public buses and how many began using buses as a result of the fare free scheme. This is because the government of Tamil Nadu does not collect gender-segregated data on the usage of their services. The zero value tickets issued is possibly the first piece of gender-segregated data that the government has collected on bus services. Even now there is no data on how many women use other services (deluxe, express, etc). However, from primary data, it is clear that the majority of women prefer to wait for the fare free bus and more than frequency, crowding is likely to discourage use of the fare free bus.

It is also hard to say whether more women are now mobile (due to the fare free scheme) due to the lack of gender-segregated data on commuters. This study indicates that most of the women were already using the bus and within the bus services, they are tending to use the ordinary service to a greater extent. The study suggests that women have begun to use the bus more, eschewing less sustainable transport (autos and two-wheelers); or are saving on time and effort by taking the bus instead of walking for a few kilometres. Anecdotally, we met a few women who did say that now they go to work or have been able to counter familial arguments of transport being an issue when it comes to their mobility ie parents/ husbands/ inlaws use poor transport options and cost as an argument to stop them from travelling when they wish.



## Crowding in buses

One of the grouses of male passengers, reported in the media and from anecdotal records, is that the fare free buses are now very crowded due to the plethora of women travelling in them. The women agree that these buses have become more crowded since the scheme's introduction.

Crowding is, of course, linked to frequency and number of buses plying on the route. It could be that most of these women regularly use routes where the number of ordinary buses is very low, and/or the route is a long one which would mean that the time taken for the bus (especially since ordinary buses stop at all stops on the route) to complete the journey is higher, and more so during peak traffic. It must be noted that the fare free scheme for women applies only to the ordinary buses whereas other concessions (for students, persons with disabilities) such as monthly passes are also applicable to express and deluxe buses. If the fare free scheme for women was not limited to ordinary buses, this might take care of any crowding issues.

What is clear though is that there is a general public perception that the fare free buses are crowded. Some women also felt that frequency had reduced. The male passengers and media reports seem to suggest that the crowding is a result of more women out and about. The opinion is that women are roaming around without purpose and implied here is that this is not a good state of affairs. To understand whether this charge of pointless, unnecessary travel by women was true, we asked the women how they used the fare free buses, i.e for what purpose.







Chennai 387  
Coimbatore 387  
Salem 478  
Tiruvannamalai 484  
Tirunelveli 448  
Tiruvapur 462

## Crowding in buses

Coimbatore 166  
Chennai 104  
Tiruvapur 135

Women complained  
of crowding since  
the scheme began.

**3000**  
respondents

Women are  
discouraged  
from waiting  
for a free bus.

## Providing greater mobility

Students interviewed in this study noted that the fare free bus scheme made travel to their educational institute easier/less expensive. Some pointed out that in addition to their school/college, this scheme made travel to tuition easier on the pocket as student concession fares only cover the route between home and the educational institute.

This was echoed by other beneficiaries. As one woman explained to us, earlier she would walk to the shops so as to save money. Now she takes the fare free bus even if it is for just a couple of stops as it saves time and effort. The fare free bus is used for diverse purposes by women including ferrying their children to school and to visit the hospital for regular checkups.

The survey only found a few women who specifically said that access to transport was a barrier in working outside the home and that the fare free scheme removed the barrier. However, transport is not the only barrier women face in obtaining a paid job outside the house. Women are disproportionately burdened with domestic duties, childcare, eldercare, their transport needs not prioritised by other family members, making it difficult for them to obtain and retain demanding external jobs. Added to which there is the glass ceiling and the inherent bias against women (such as in assuming they will put family first, or will want a long maternity leave) in the marketplace and home, ensuring the deck is stacked against women joining the workforce.

### Who are the main beneficiaries?

**3000**  
respondents

|                                   |             |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| accessing workplaces              | <b>2901</b> |
| household errands and duties      | <b>1342</b> |
| ferry children to school and back | <b>1172</b> |
| healthcare check-up               | <b>11</b>   |

## Subsidised by men

The women we spoke to mentioned that they often have male passengers comment that they are freeloaders, that the men are subsidising the women's wanderlust, as it were. Sometimes the conductor refuses to halt the bus to pick them up.

In reality, the transport corporation, MTC, gets paid Rs 16 for every zero value ticket issued so it's the government who is paying. One may argue as a taxpayer, it is our money that goes into the exchequer which is the source of this reimbursement. Technically that is true, but in this case, women using the bus are doing so largely for paid or unpaid work. Many do both. In short the women's contribution to GDP must be factored in as should the point made earlier that women, rather than men, tend to invest their savings back in their family. The Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission echoed this in its report on the fare free scheme conducted in 2022, a year after the scheme began.



Women face hostile reactions from male passengers for traveling 'free'.





## Visibility in public spaces

Nearly one-fourth (734) women said the fare free bus had opened up opportunities for them to indulge in leisure activities such as visiting the temple, visiting friends and relatives, accessing recreation facilities (malls, the beach, etc). This perhaps corroborates the point made by men - that women are heading out of the home “for no reason”. We argue that this is poorly phrased.

Women are using the fare free bus service for more leisure activities which they had denied themselves as transport was an additional burden on the family purse. Mental peace, fresh air, and a break from routine chores is crucial for everyone, men and women. As studies have shown, parks, temples, beaches, and other public spaces are important for this purpose. A study on the role of parks in South and South East Asia (Sahakian et al, 2020) found that in addition to being a space for exercise, public parks are for women, especially from low income families, a free, easy to access, and safe space to centre themselves, catch a breath, and temporarily forget their troubles. This not only improves the mental health of the women but can positively impact familial relationships. Leisure, therefore, is not a frivolous activity.

As social movements like Pinjra Tod and books like Why Loiter? show women’s access to public spaces is very limited and constrained by patriarchy but couched in terms of their safety. If more women use public transport, be it for leisure, employment, or unpaid household chores, it will lead to more women in the public sphere and therefore greater visibility of half the population.

The government of Tamil Nadu in its transport policy note for 2021-22 states that the purpose of the fare free scheme is to bring greater social inclusion of women. Women’s visibility in public spaces is relatively lower in India. Men standing on roadside, seemingly without purpose, is considered normal, while women doing the same invariably draws stares and comments (on why they need to loiter, on their safety, and so on).



Women's access to public spaces is very limited and constrained by patriarchy.

# Recommendations

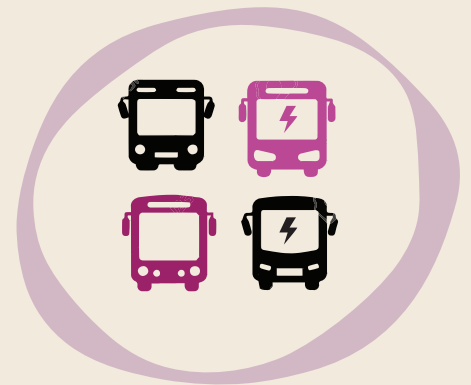
## 1. Increase fleet strength:

The overall fleet strength of public buses is inadequate in India. In Chennai, for example, the MTC's fleet strength lies at 3000 odd buses which serve a population of around 7,00,000 people in the metropolitan area. The average age of these buses is about 7 years. So with an ageing small fleet, the government struggles to provide quality service and this shows in the frequency of buses, the cleanliness, the safety and more. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has set a benchmark of 60 buses per 100,000 population. Tamil Nadu's city buses are woefully short of this target.



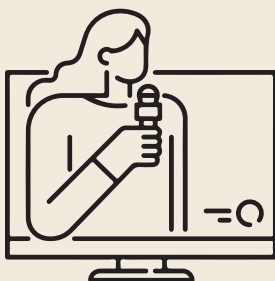
## 2. Extend scheme to other kinds of buses:

With regards to the fare free scheme for women, the problems of crowding would ease if the scheme was extended to deluxe and express buses. Considering that other concession schemes apply to these buses as well, there is no reason why the fare free scheme for women should not also be extended.



## 3. Strong narrative -building:

The fare free scheme has received its share of brickbats as discussed above. A substantial part of this could have been countered and planned for by sharing data, discussing in public for the purpose of such a scheme, and highlighting the benefits and the costs.





#### 4. Collect gender-segregated data:

Thanks to the zero value tickets, the state government now has a small piece of gender-segregated data. With the Government of India mooting a common mobility card (which is much needed), the state must seize the opportunity to gather more granular data on public transport usage. It is well-known that women tend to make numerous small trips (trip-chaining) while men tend to make a single commute to work and back. Yet public transport services in India are planned and designed for just the latter. For example, in terms of fare, short trips are more expensive (per kilometre) than longer ones, in effect penalising women for using public transport. Public transport services work on a peak and off peak logic where during 'off-peak' hours, service frequency reduces considerably. Again this penalises those who do not have the default working male routine of heading to work in the morning and returning at night.

With the introduction of a common mobility card, the government can seize the opportunity to get better data on who uses their public transport and how. This will allow for improved service delivery.



# Conclusions

1 In India, as in many middle and low income countries, **women's travel tends to have barriers quite different from men.** A World Bank study in Mumbai found that women were more likely to walk or take public transport than men to commute to work, while men were more likely to take private transport although both groups spent the same time on commute. Women were also more likely to take auto rickshaws than two-wheelers or cars. This indicates a limited access to personal transport for women and lower priority given to the women's commute in households.

2 In addition, women shoulder the majority of child rearing, domestic, family welfare/healthcare duties which are added barriers in joining the labour workforce. The same World Bank study found that in 2019 only one fifth of women were employed. So **while 80% of men's trips were work related, it was just 17% of women's; 50% of women's trips were domestic/childcare related.**

3 Women's time is undervalued, they are more dependent on the vagaries of public transport as their transport costs are not necessarily budgeted for. Women tend to look for the cheapest mode of travel (walk, ordinary buses). This then becomes an added reason why women are discouraged to look for work especially if it's further away from home and requires multiple changeovers of transport. **Transport costs also are another reason why women may curtail their socialising/leisure activities.**



4 While fare free transit does not dissolve all of these barriers, it eases one barrier i.e cost of travel. It also **visibilises women in the public space**. More women stepping out for whatever reason (to work or for leisure) rejuvenates the public space, brings greater equity in use of public spaces and makes these spaces safer.

5 For the most part, women have welcomed the scheme and find it useful. It gives women much-needed access to mobility options. Women have said that it significantly reduces the time taken for domestic errands and allows them to save a considerable sum of money every month. This scheme seeks to give a **leg up to vulnerable sections of the population**.

6 Finally, this scheme contributes to India's efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG Target 11.2 which calls for all citizens to have access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems by 2030 by expanding public transport. Promoting the use of sustainable transport also contributes to India's Net Zero targets by **reducing carbon emissions, improving air quality in cities, and reducing road crashes**.





# Bibliography

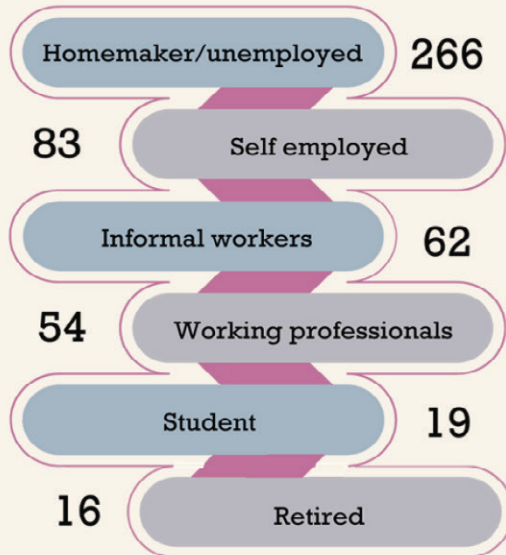
1. Chakrabarty, Roshni. 2023. "Female labour participation declining in India: Why are women not working?" India Today, June 9, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3FXQSGq>
2. Ghoshal, Somak. 2021. "Are women free to loiter on the streets of India in 2021?" The Mint Lounge, January 28, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3QAsuQ8>
3. Government of Tamil Nadu. Home Department. G.O (Ms.) No.48. Dated 28.01.2018 <https://bit.ly/46obkvf>
4. Government of Tamil Nadu, Transport Department. Policy Note 2021-22 Demand No. 48. 2021. <https://bit.ly/3MEq9Tk>
5. Government of Tamil Nadu, Transport Department. Policy Note 2022-23 Demand No. 48. 2022. <https://bit.ly/3FQsJwO>
6. Government of Tamil Nadu, State Planning Commission. A report on the Zero-Ticket Bus Travel Scheme for Women -I. June 2022. <https://bit.ly/3FPgPbr>
7. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2021. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: India: Volume I. Mumbai: IIPS. <https://bit.ly/3MBIrpq>
8. Jackson, Leah Witcher. 2009. "Educate the Women and You Change the World: Investing in the Education of Women is the Best Investment in a Country's Growth and Development." Forum on Public Policy Vol 2009 no. 2: <https://bit.ly/3QQh5gz>
9. Phadke, Shilpa., Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan. 2009. "Why loiter? Radical possibilities for gendered dissent." In *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities*, edited by Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham, 185-203. New York: Routledge. <https://bit.ly/476Sj1o>
10. Ramakrishnan, Malavika. 2019. "On board Chennai's longest bus route." The Hindu, June 25, 2019. <https://bit.ly/47sMxXv>
11. Sahakian, M., Anantharaman, M., Di Giulio, A., Saloma, C., Zhang, D., Khanna, R., Narasimalu, S., Favis, A. M., Alfiler, C. A., Narayanan, S., Gao, X. and Li, C. 2020. "Green public spaces in the cities of South and Southeast Asia: Protecting needs towards sustainable well-being", *The Journal of Public Space*, 5(2), pp. 89–110. doi: <https://bit.ly/3ufsuXo>
12. Soman, Abhinav, Harsimran Kaur, and Karthik Ganesan. 2019. *How Urban India Moves: Sustainable Mobility and Citizen Preferences*. New Delhi: Council on Energy, Environment and Water <https://bit.ly/3QU0h8y>
13. Wei. Wei et al. 2021. "The Influence of Women's Empowerment on Poverty Reduction in the Rural Areas of Bangladesh: Focus on Health, Education and Living Standard." *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, 18(13), 6909; <https://bit.ly/3QwACBo>

# City snapshots

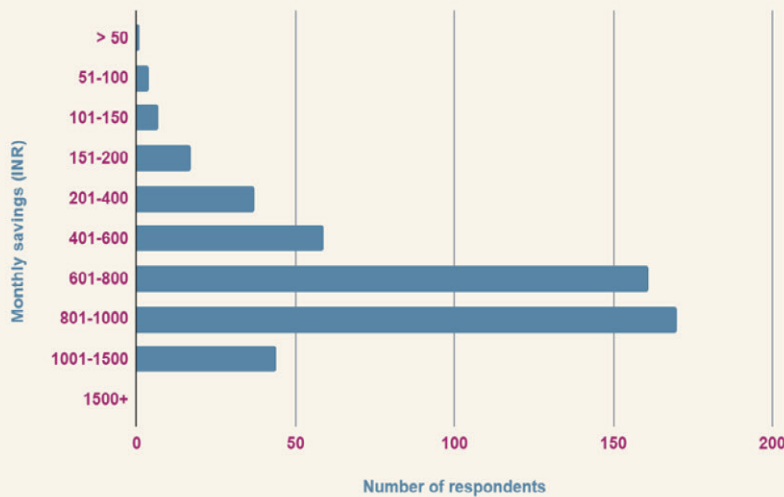
# CHENNAI

Total number of women surveyed: 500

## Demographics



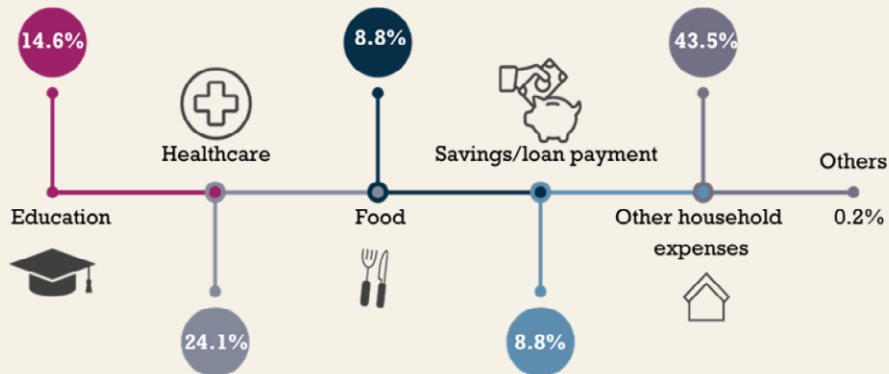
## Monthly savings from use of fare free scheme





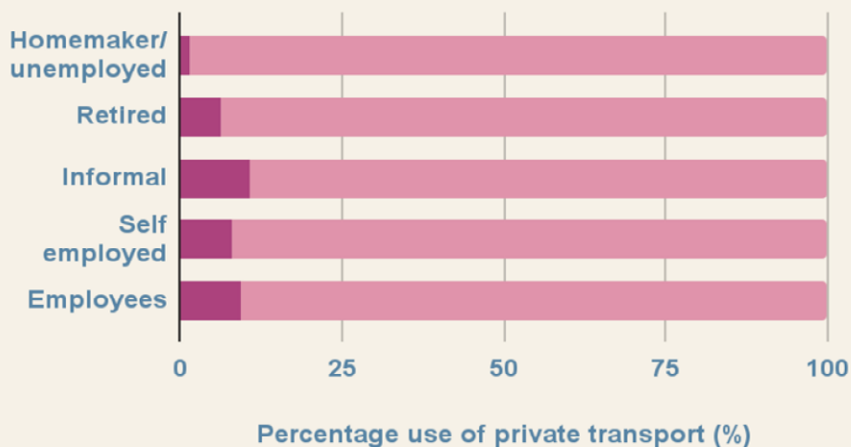
## What do women spend the saved money on?

The travel money saved is largely invested in the family, through spend on household needs, education, and healthcare.

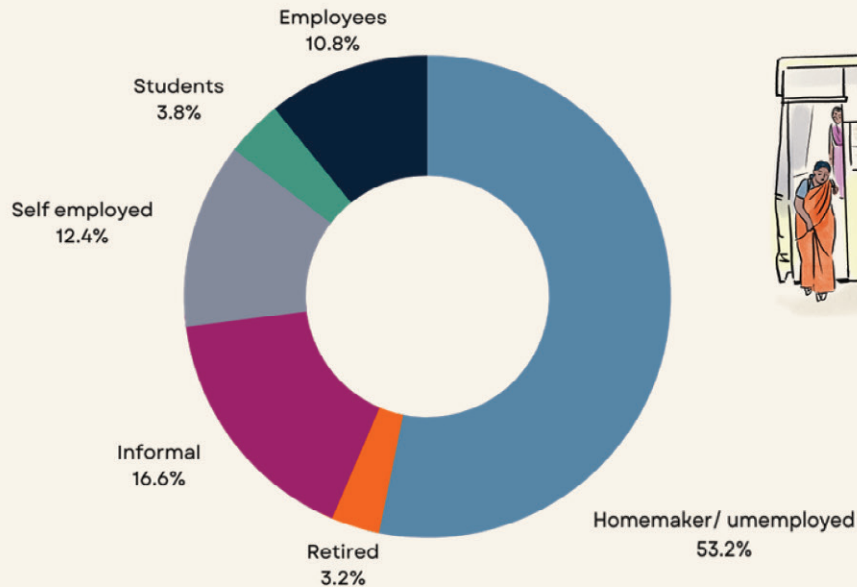


## Percentage use of private transport

In Chennai, the number of women opting for/having access to private transport was low across different categories.



## Increased use of public bus by women



Many women reported that their use of the bus service had increased after the fare free bus scheme was introduced.

## Opinions on the fare free bus scheme

320

Increase the frequency and number of whiteboard buses

82

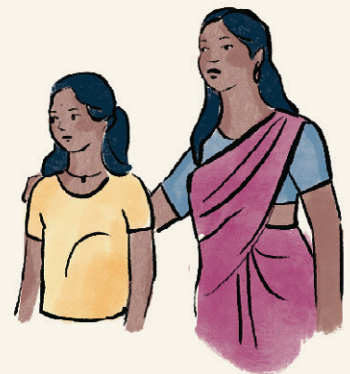
Buses needs to be maintained properly

52

The scheme is very useful

17

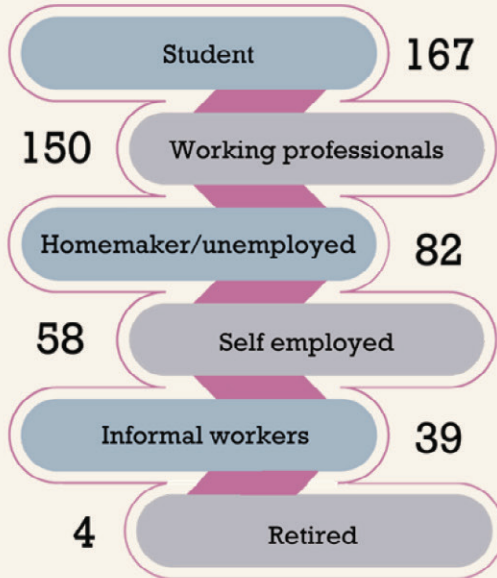
Need low floor / disable friendly buses



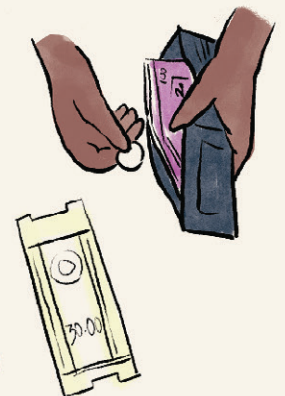
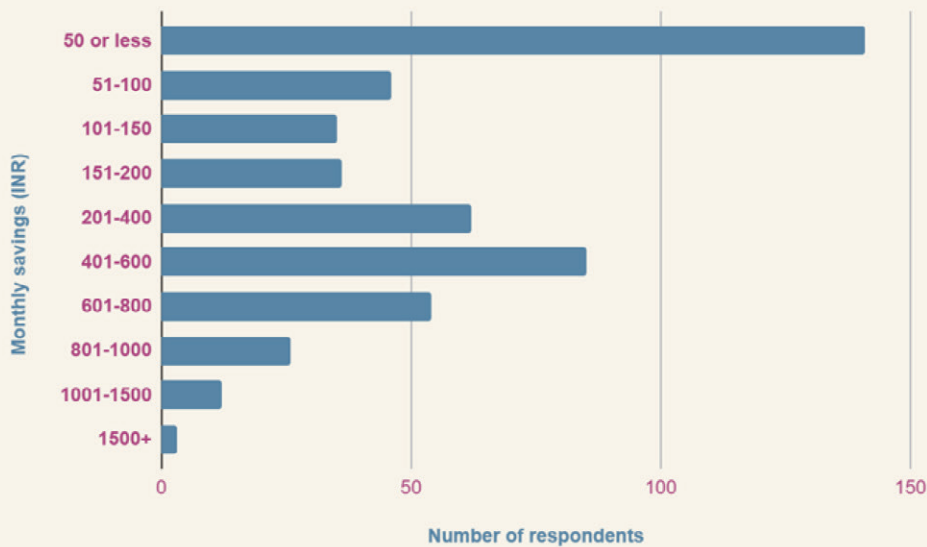
# COIMBATORE

Total number of women surveyed: 500

## Demographics



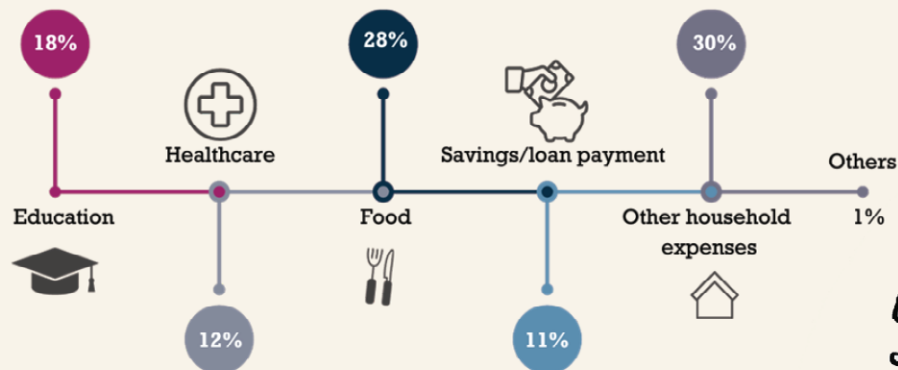
## Monthly savings from use of fare free scheme



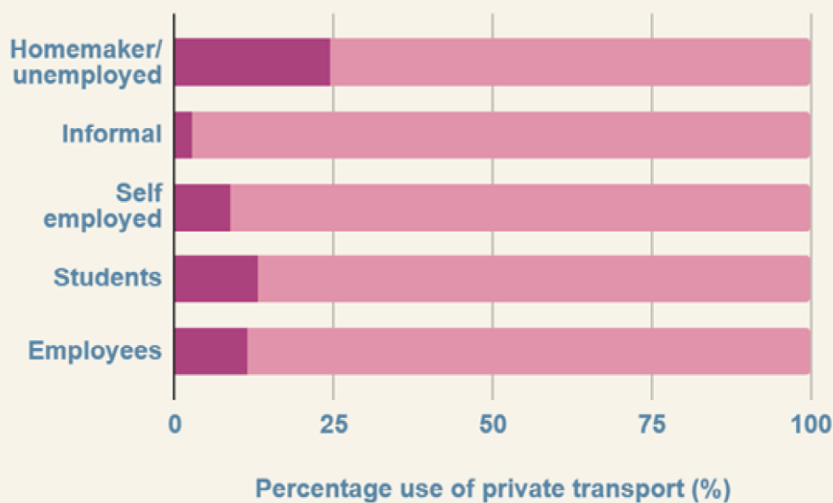


## What do women spend the saved money on?

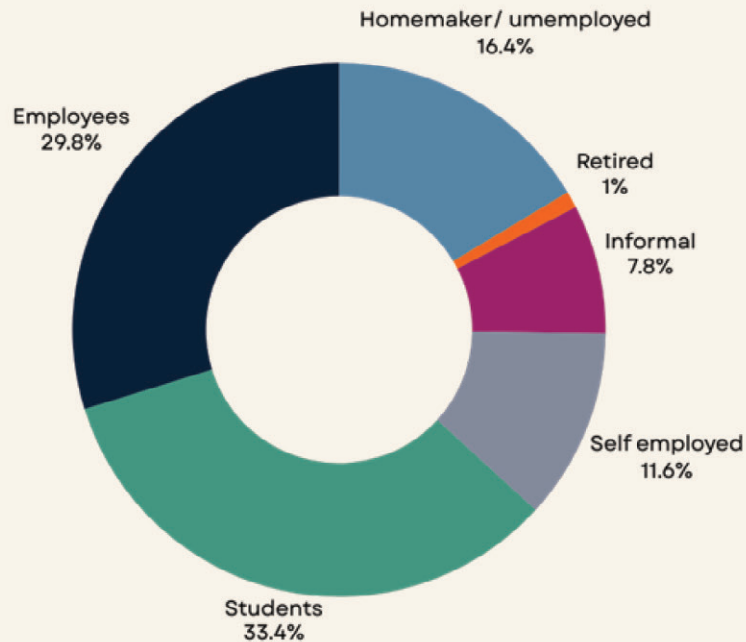
The majority of travel money saved is spent on household expenses and food.



## Percentage use of private transport



## Increased use of public bus by women



Working professionals and students were the sub groups that reported the highest percentage of free bus use.

## Opinions on the fare free bus scheme

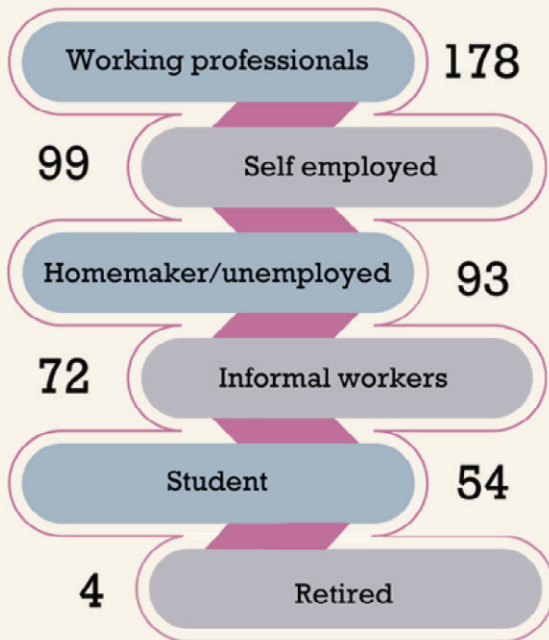
|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 197 | Increase the frequency and number of buses          |
| 150 | Good scheme but number of buses should be increased |
| 387 | Buses are crowded                                   |
| 63  | This scheme helps save money                        |



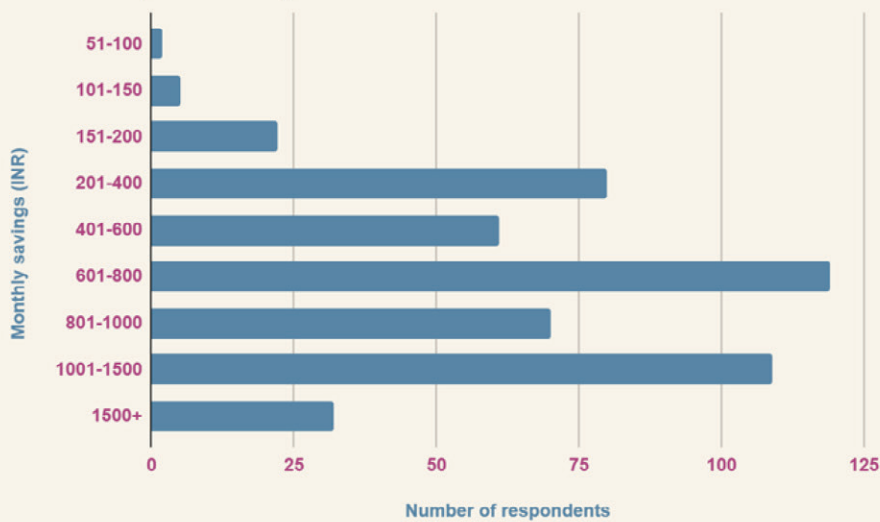
# SALEM

Total number of women surveyed: 500

## Demographics

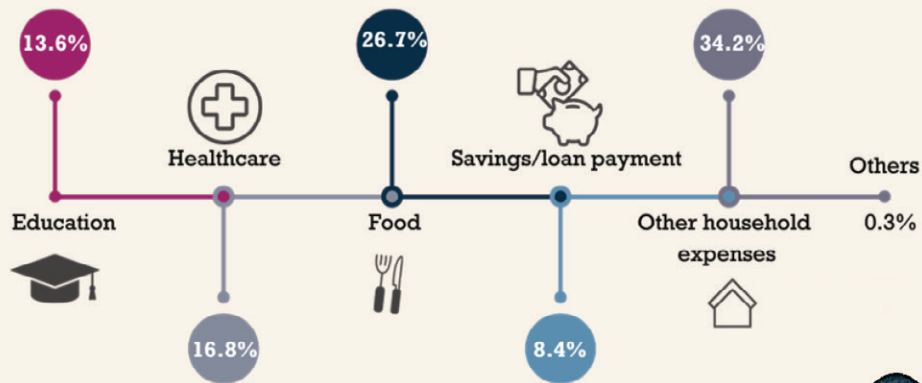


## Monthly savings from use of fare free scheme



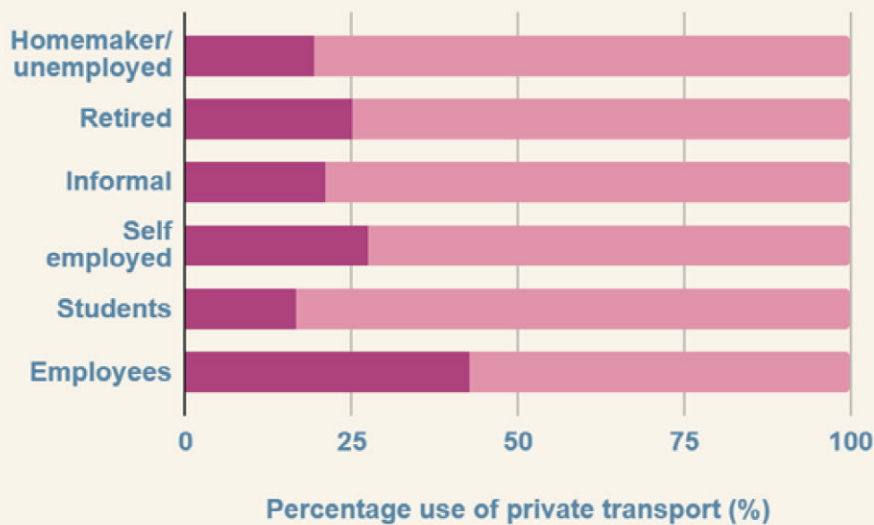


## What do women spend the saved money on?

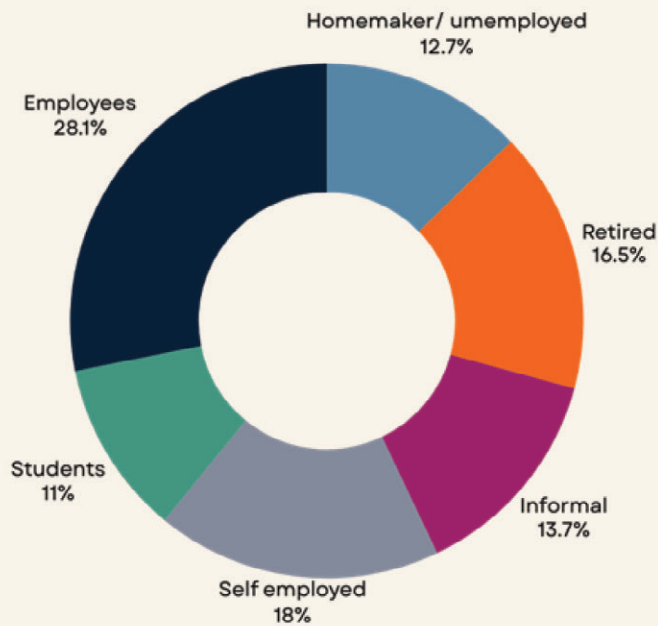


## Percentage use of private transport

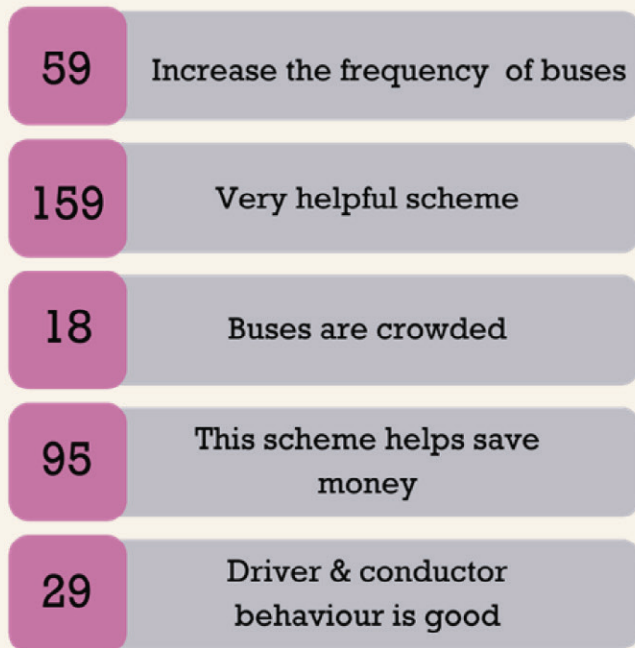
Working professionals reported the maximum use of private transport.



## Increased use of public bus by women



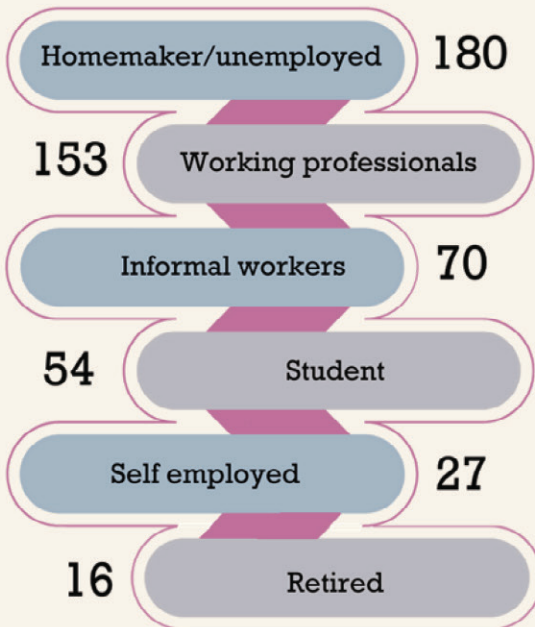
## Opinions on the fare free bus scheme



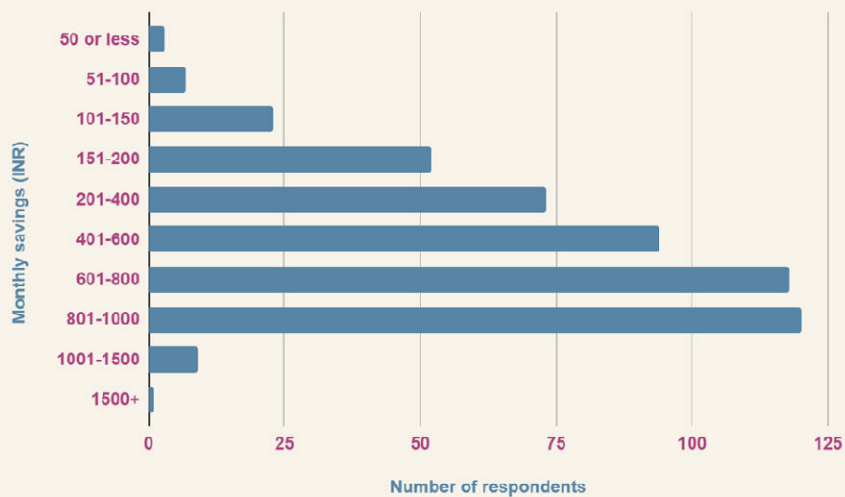
# TIRUVANNAMALAI

Total number of women surveyed: 500

## Demographics

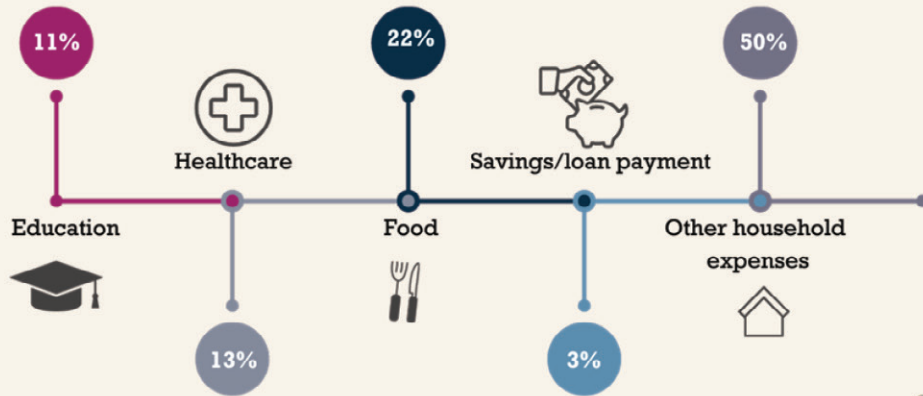


## Monthly savings from use of fare free scheme



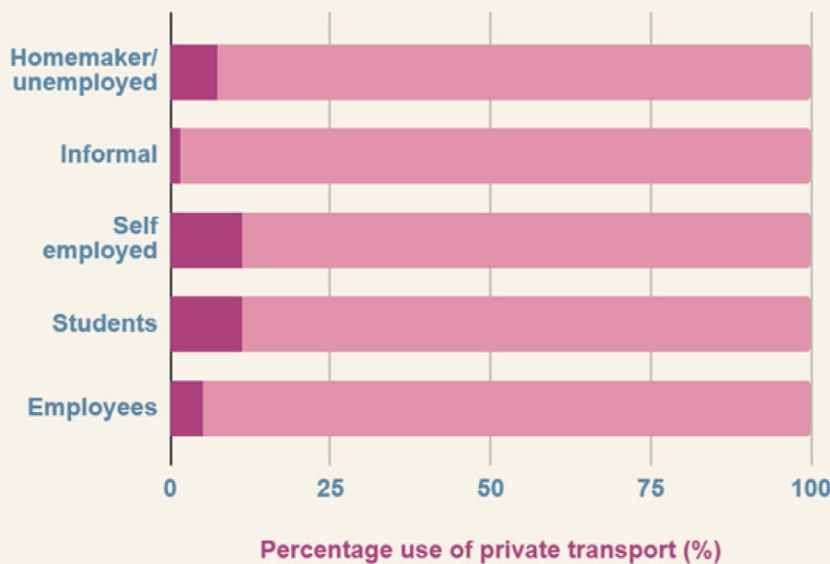


## What do women spend the saved money on?

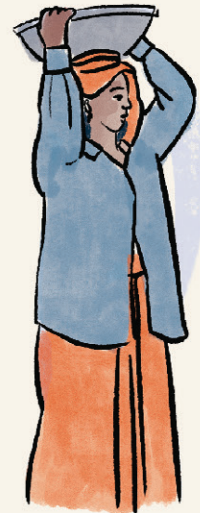
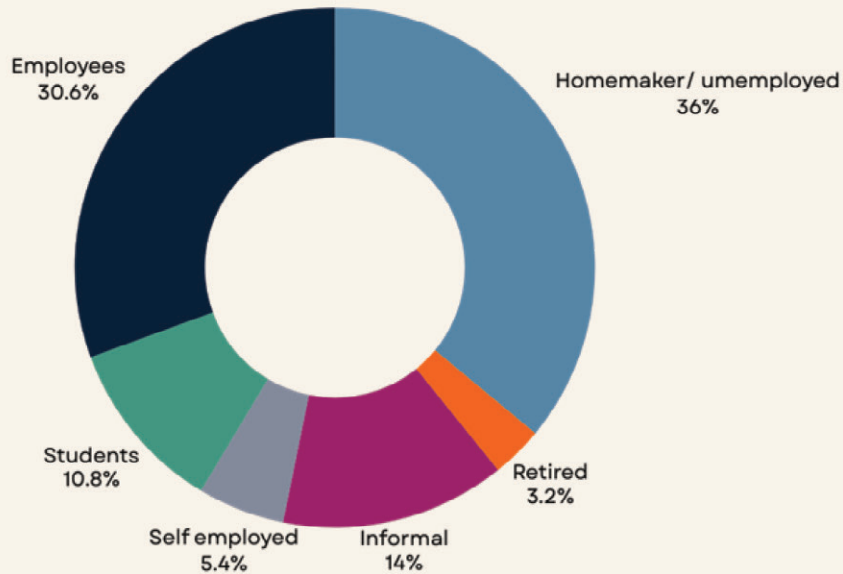


## Percentage use of private transport

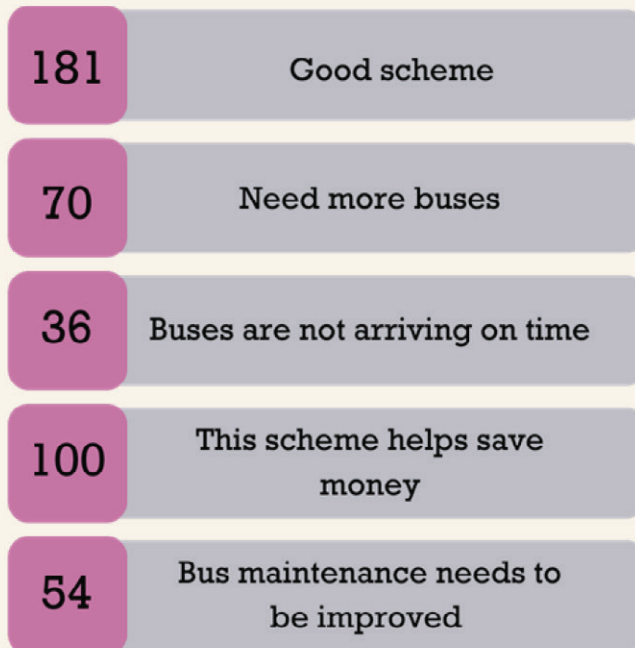
Self employed category and students reported the maximum use of private transport.



## Increased use of public bus by women



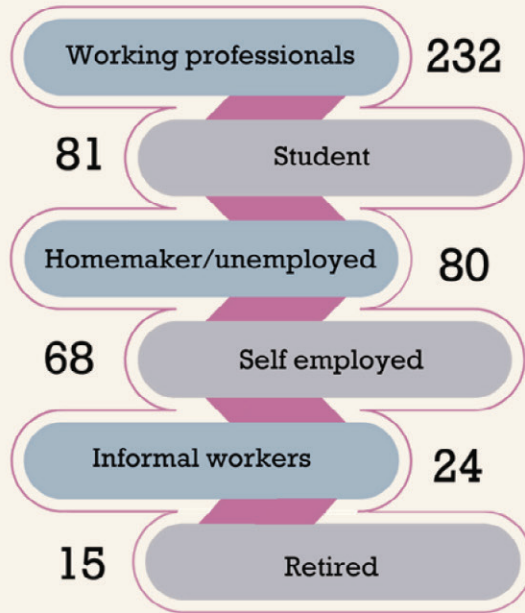
## Opinions on the fare free bus scheme



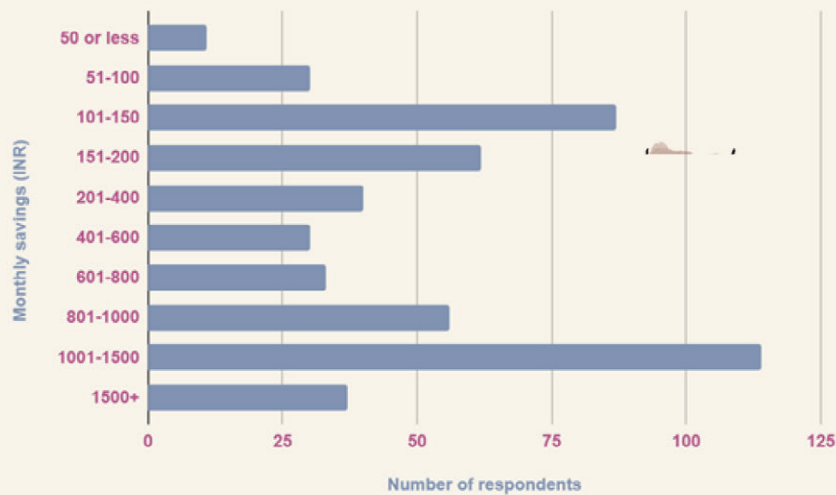
# TIRUNELVELI

Total number of women surveyed: 500

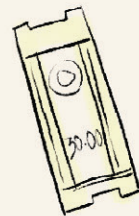
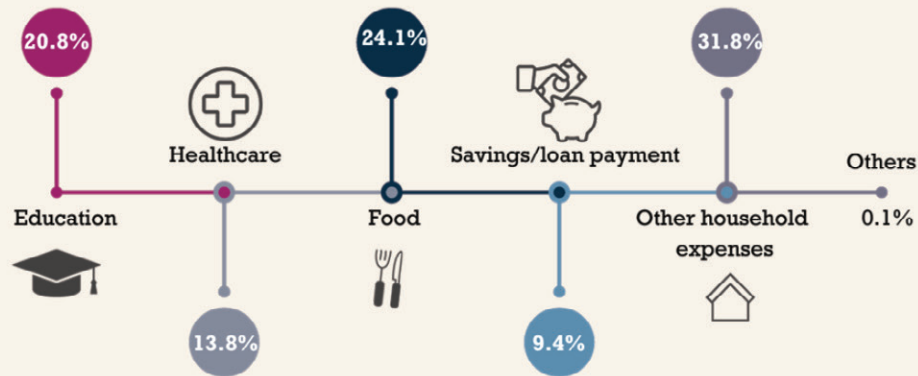
## Demographics



## Monthly savings from use of fare free scheme

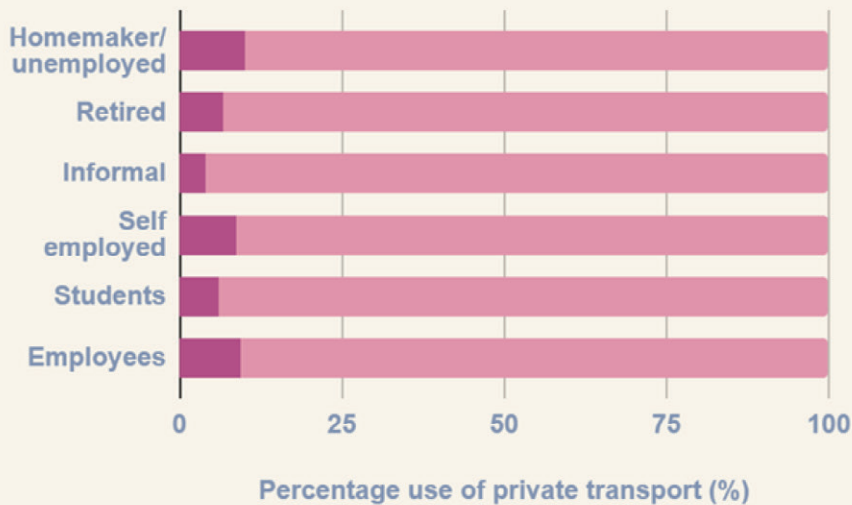


## What do women spend the saved money on?



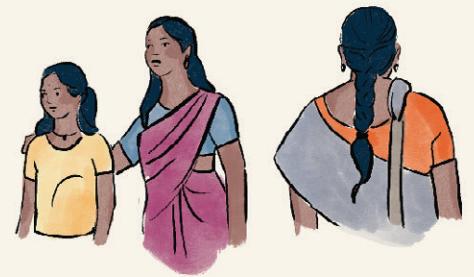
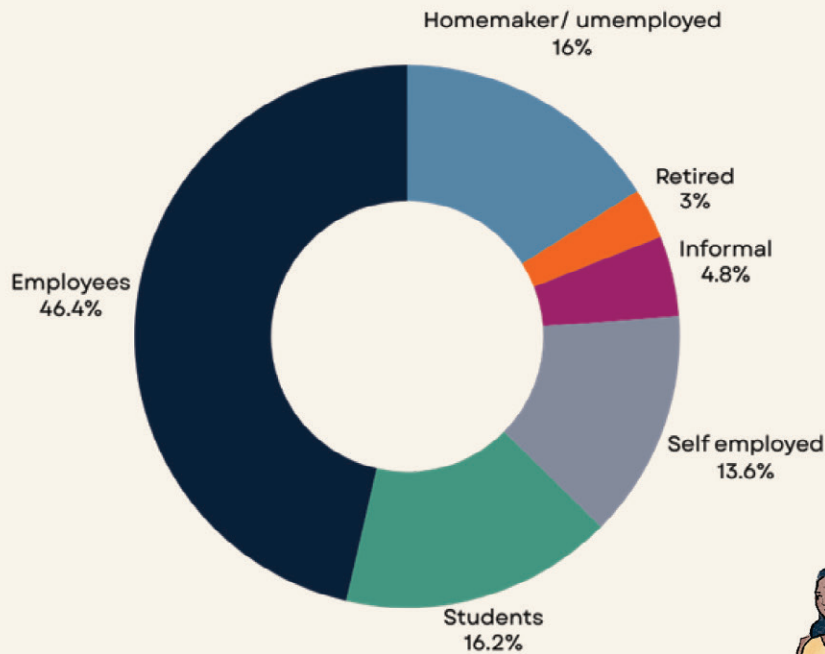
## Percentage use of private transport

Homemakers/unemployed and working professionals reported the maximum use of private transport.





## Increased use of public bus by women



## Opinions on the fare free bus scheme

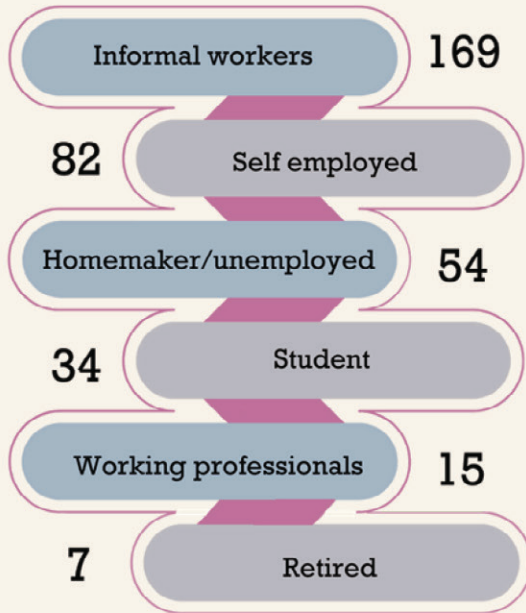
- 105 Increase frequency and number of buses
- 129 Good scheme
- 20 Quality of buses must be improved
- 53 This scheme helps save money
- 29 Driver & conductor behaviour is bad



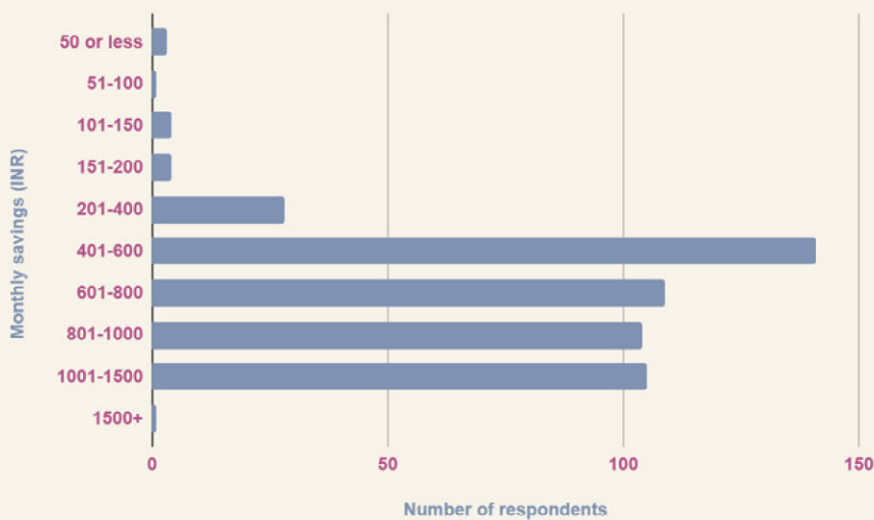
# TIRUVARUR

Total number of women surveyed: 500

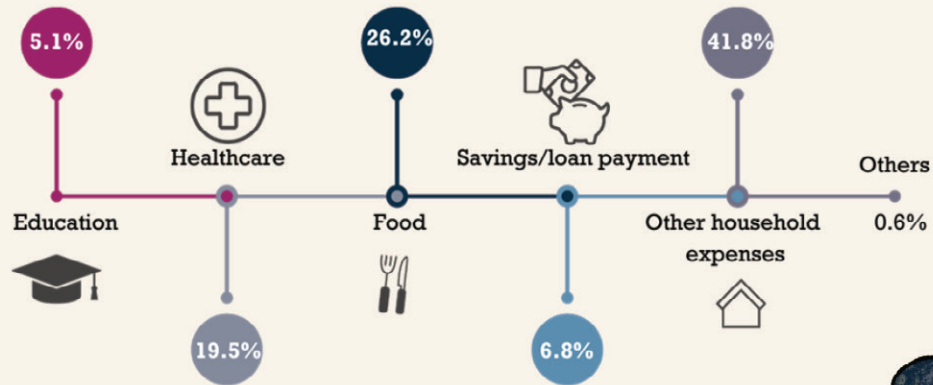
## Demographics



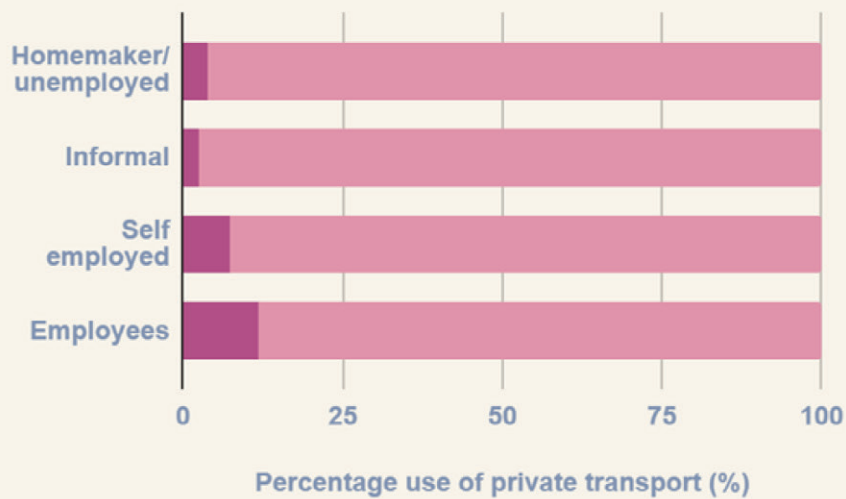
## Monthly savings from use of fare free scheme



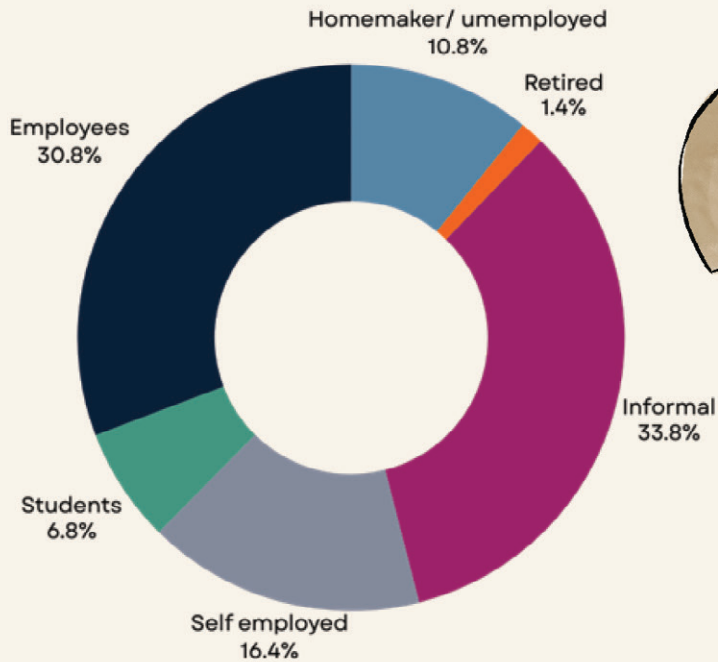
## What do women spend the saved money on?



## Percentage use of private transport



## Increased use of public bus by women



## Opinions on the fare free bus scheme

- 98 Increase frequency of buses
- 167 Good scheme
- 24 Buses should also be made free for senior citizens
- 29 There is crowding in the buses







**CAG**

Citizen consumer and civic Action Group

**No.103 (First Floor), Eldams Road, Teynampet,  
Chennai 600 018**

**T: +91(44) 2435 4458 | 2435 0387**

[www.cag.org.in](http://www.cag.org.in)



@CAGChennai