

# CLAIMING SPACES FOR WOMEN IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

ADVOCACY BRIEF

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*Driver Geeta presenting the Azad Calendar to Shri Kailash Gehlot, Minister of Transport*



*Geeta, Sakha commercial driver, HMV License holder*



*Delhi's First Woman DTC Driver Sarita at the Azad Alumni Meet urging more women to join DTC*



*Women with Heavy Vehicle License before going for their skill test in October 2021*



*Pinky, Sakha commercial driver, HMV license holder*

**STUDIES on gender-inclusive transportation** have largely focused on the safety of women as commuters and transport users, and there is not much information available about their roles as transport service providers. The ILO (2019) observed that women constituted less than 20% of the global transportation workforce in 2018, as they had limited options in transport-related occupations in all countries. There have been some sporadic, small-scale efforts in some countries, to engage women as public transport bus drivers, including by governments of Ghana, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, and so on. However, these efforts have not been sufficiently documented so as to provide deeper insights into structural factors that impede women's employment across different roles within this industry.

In order to fill the gap in evidence, about women's exclusion from being providers of transport, Azad Foundation undertook a rapid qualitative study to analyze critical factors that affect women's recruitment and retention in public transport as bus drivers. This report documents key findings and highlights critical recommendations to address gender based exclusion in this regard. It is due to Azad Foundation's relentless advocacy that women are seeking to be drivers in the transport sector. ( See: Box 1)

#### BOX 1

### Azad's advocacy for women's employment in Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) led to the first and only woman bus driver



In 2014, Azad's advocacy led to DTC inviting applications for women bus drivers, and 10 women applicants were from Azad. Under the leadership of then DTC Managing Director, Ms. Debashree Mukherjee, some criteria were relaxed around hiring practices - such as waiving off requirement for Heavy Motor Vehicle (HMV) licence and the need for three years of experience of driving a bus. Interested women drivers with commercial light vehicle license (LMV) were invited to apply.

Additionally, the criteria for age was also relaxed, capping it at 40 years for women drivers instead of the standard 35 years. The MD further announced that women would be trained by DTC for a period of six months, and the Department would assist in getting them their HMV licenses. However, the restrictions on the height criteria (160 cms.) stayed and were not relaxed, and this eliminated most women drivers even though they cleared the skill tests. V. Saritha was the only woman driver who met all the criteria and was finally hired by DTC.

The transport sector remains highly male-dominant in India, and barring efforts undertaken by the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC), very few state transport agencies have invested in creating a conducive workplace environment for women's entry and growth in public transport services.<sup>1</sup> The Delhi Transport Corporation has only 2.7% women employees on their rolls. Of these, 90% are bus conductors and there is only one woman bus driver thus far.

This advocacy brief focuses on short-term to long-term recommendations, for not only increasing women's employment in the transport sector, especially as bus drivers. We call upon the Government of NCT, Delhi and Delhi Transport Corporation to take affirmative actions for increasing women workers, drivers in transport. The brief is informed by an exploratory policy and evidence review (Refer Box 2).

## BOX 2

### An Exploratory Policy and Evidence Review towards advocating for Women's equal employment in public bus transport (Delhi Transport Corporation)

#### OBJECTIVE

- To analyze systemic barriers to women's entry as bus drivers within Delhi's public bus transportation system and how they can be addressed.
- To understand structural constraints to their retention and growth within the transport industry at all levels - labour, safety, and infrastructural.

#### METHODOLOGY

- Secondary review of transport policies in Indian states and other countries that currently have women in public transport including in heavy vehicle duty as drivers.

- Primary data collection that included -
  - » **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** - 10 women bus drivers across India, 4 women conductors/officers at DTC, 20 women cab drivers.
  - » **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** - Transport Commissioner, 8 DTC officers, and 1 development professional in transport in an International Development Agency.
  - » **Individual Interviews (IDIs)** - Woman bus driver in Delhi, and 2 private bus manufacturers, NMC & MSRTC officials.
  - » **Case Study** - 4 women with HMV license with an aspiration to become a bus driver.
  - » **Survey** - 143 commuters of DTC buses (109 female and 34 male).
  - » **Depot Audits** - of 5 DTC bus depots.

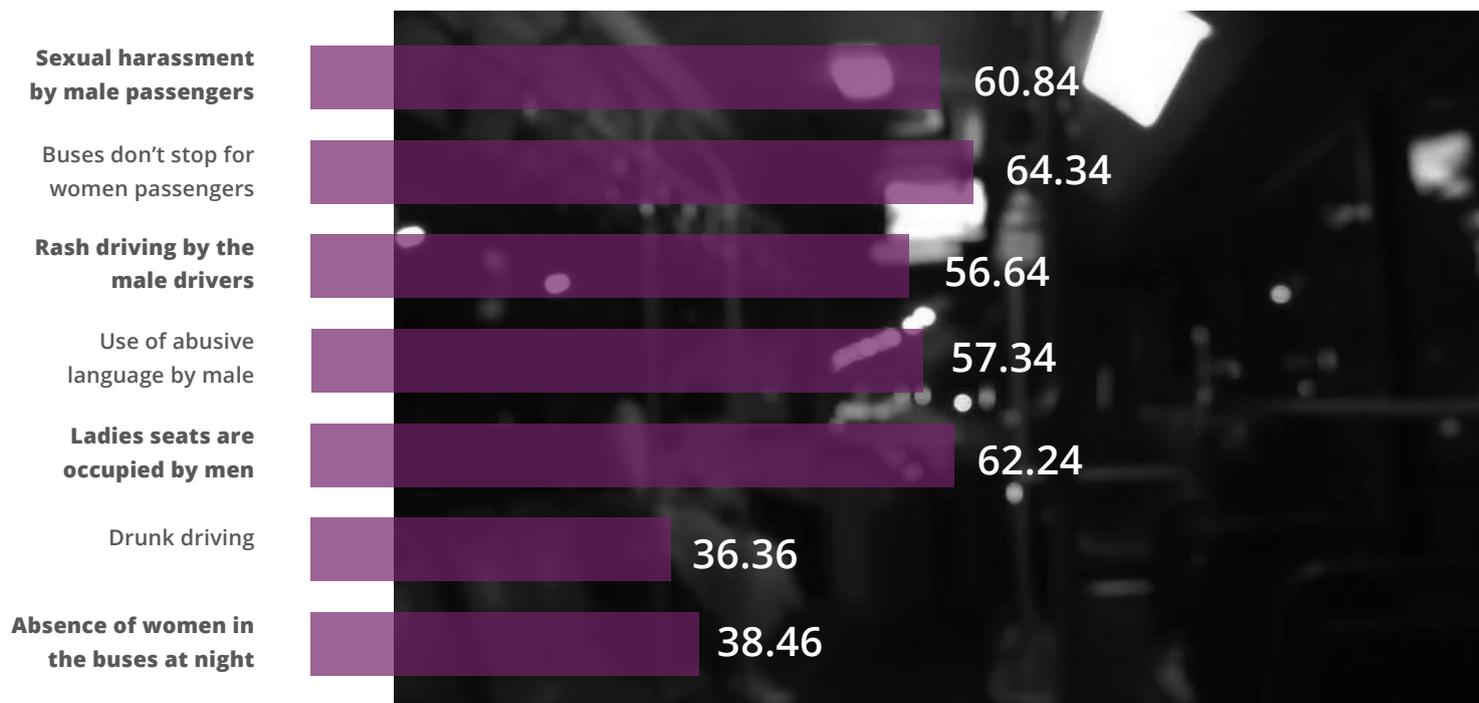
<sup>1</sup>There have been some efforts to hire women drivers in Indore, Ahmedabad, U.P., that was recorded in the study but these have not been accompanied by facilitative state policies for hiring and retention of women in transport.

## THE CASE FOR WOMEN BUS DRIVERS IN DTC

The pre-pandemic female labour force participation rate in Delhi was 11%, among one of the lowest in the country. Women lack access to formal and remunerative occupations and generally refrain from traveling longer distances for work due to safety and time concerns. Investing in opportunities for women in transport in the short-run, can cause a ripple effect in their economic participation in the long-run, as it can facilitate their mobility and access to skills, education and remunerative jobs. The study reported that 61% women faced difficult situations in public transport (refer graph 1). Unsafe transport can thus be a deterrent for women's access to education, skill building and work.

GRAPH 1

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN COMMUTERS IN DTC BUSES



Source: Survey with 143 commuters in DTC

**The female labour force participation rate in India post-covid is 9.4% with urban participation rate at 7.2% (CMIE, 2021)**

The study also highlighted that 95% women and 76% men would want to travel in buses driven by women. Women said they would feel safer as women drivers would empathize with them in cases of sexual harassment and enable immediate support as also ensure them a greater degree of safety while traveling at night. That women drivers would not be rash while driving, and also not use abusive language as some male drivers did were other factors.

# REASONS FOR WOMEN'S LOW PARTICIPATION IN TRANSPORT SECTOR



*“My brother was never interested in driving, but my father insisted that he learn to do so. I, on the other hand, always wanted to drive, but was told that girls don't drive. My father said that he let me and my sister study, so that we become better wives and mothers. He never let us work outside the home. When I joined a professional driving course a few years after my marriage, my husband felt frustrated. He also refused to help me with domestic chores whenever I got a duty call at odd times, and blamed me for leaving my earlier well-timed school job for such a difficult and unstable profession.”*

*TULSIJEET, Sakha commercial driver, HMV license holder*

A

## FACTORS IMPEDING WOMEN'S ENTRY IN TRANSPORT

Gender-segregated labour norms - that do not account for the lived realities of women. From a young age, gendered social norms and normalized violence against girls/women in private and public spaces prevent them from building their aspirations, and accessing skills especially those that are defined as 'typically male' like driving a vehicle. Women drivers have thus to navigate barriers such as gender-segregated labour norms that, 'driving is not a woman's job' and bars them from accessing required skills.

Many state transport corporations have shown the will to hire women bus drivers but advertised their jobs with pre-induction criteria of 3-year Heavy Motor Vehicle license, one-year driving experience, and height requirement for above 160 cms (average height of women in India is around 152 cms). Therefore, cities like Nagpur have witnessed a default hiring of male drivers, even when the initial advertisements were made for women drivers, as they could not find any women. Thus lack of access to skills, lack of timely information about non-traditional jobs, and skewed gender-norms create a vicious loop that structurally exclude women from accessing and qualifying for such recruitment processes. Here, MRSTC has taken positive steps and now the government of Delhi has also announced a reduction in height to 153 cm and given a relaxation in duration of HMV license to promote entry of women as bus drivers in DTC.

### MSRTC is leading the way in reducing entry barriers for women bus drivers

In 2017, MSRTC introduced a 30% quota for women in their driver recruitment process, but did not manage to hire any, as the women drivers did not qualify to meet the minimum height criterion nor did they have the requisite three-year heavy motor vehicle (HMV) driving experience. In a renewed effort in 2019, MSRTC became the first and only state to revise the recruitment criterion - reducing height requirements to 153 cms from 160 cms, and only one-year LMV (light motor vehicle) experience for women applicants. Thus in 2020, 163 women began their training for HMV with MSRTC.

*Source: Newspaper Articles*

- **Lack of Information** about where jobs are advertised and procedures for filling up the forms. Besides the recruitment process is very lengthy and cumbersome as reported by the officials in Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) which though necessary can become an inhibiting factor for women.
- **Financial Constraints** is another barrier for most women applicants, as they usually come from resource poor backgrounds. They are unable to bear the high costs of training fees and license costs for heavy motor vehicle (HMV), approx. INR 15,000-20,000, as reported by trainees in Delhi.
- **Lack of sustained Institutional Mechanisms that provide support** to not only building women's aspirations for being a driver, but also accessing skill trainings, counseling their families, and preparing them for the recruitment process. A handful of women bus drivers in various states of India, while aware of job vacancies in the sector, were confident in applying for it only when they were associated with organisations that worked in the transport domain.



*“I didn't know that women could exercise the option of becoming a driver, till I came across Azad's outreach programme in a community area where I worked as a tailor in a small boutique. I didn't apply immediately as I was scared of telling my family my aspiration. When I finally joined Azad after three years, I took the training in secret for 6 months prior to that.*

*GEETA, Sakha commercial driver and HMV license holder*

## Azad Foundation's experience of building women's aspirations in driving

When Azad Foundation began its work in 2008, there were no professionally trained women drivers in North India. The **Women With Wheels (WWW)** Programme led them to educate clients (individuals, corporates, industry, government) that women can be reliable drivers. An Azad study (2019) noted that for every 100 women they engage with, only 7 actually enroll in the programme.

Azad works in communities to train women and men to ensure resource-poor women have the right to access (to be aware, informed, be able to negotiate within families, be able to have documents of eligibility, etc.) skill programmes. Of all the women enrolled by Azad, more than 80% would not have been able to access the training had they not been reached out to by Azad's community leaders. Almost 50% would not have been able to access the training even if they knew about it, because they did not have the required documents.

Having negotiated with their families and having braved all other hurdles, once women are able to access a skill education opportunity, Azad delivers a learning pedagogy that is empowering and transformative. Azad's WWW training curriculum and pedagogy build learning opportunities including skills, understanding on women's rights, social inequalities and how to protect themselves from any backlash. It provides women trainees with legal literacy

tools, English speaking skills, self-defense, counseling and work preparedness. Azad enables women to empower themselves such that not only is she employable, but also aware about the choices she has to make to lead a more equal and violence-free life.

For trained women, the right to decent work, to dignity, to remunerative livelihoods are secured in partnership with Sakha. This critical pillar of supporting employment addresses the huge inequalities and barriers that exist in the market for women's employment. Potential customers and consumers (retail as in individuals, as well as corporates, industry and state) need to be educated about women being good and reliable drivers. Delhi State Transport Corporation employed its first woman bus driver from Sakha/Azad, as did other operators (Uber, Ola) and agencies (UNICEF, US Embassy, Australian Embassy, Delhi State Commission of Women) in hiring women chauffeurs. Overall 1500+ women chauffeurs have been in active employment and generated cumulative earnings of INR 2.4 million+, providing over 1.5 million safe rides to women users alone. In addition, 100% of them have regained their right to mobility, become key wage earners in their families and made positive transformations in their personal and professional lives.

B

**FACTORS THAT AFFECT WOMEN'S RETENTION IN TRANSPORT**

ILO (2013) observed that women experience weak pull and strong push factors that affect their sustenance in the transport sector. These structural disadvantages work towards keeping the glass ceiling intact (see Figure 1 below).

Some of the key findings that emerged from interviews with cab, bus drivers and conductors indicate the following factors.

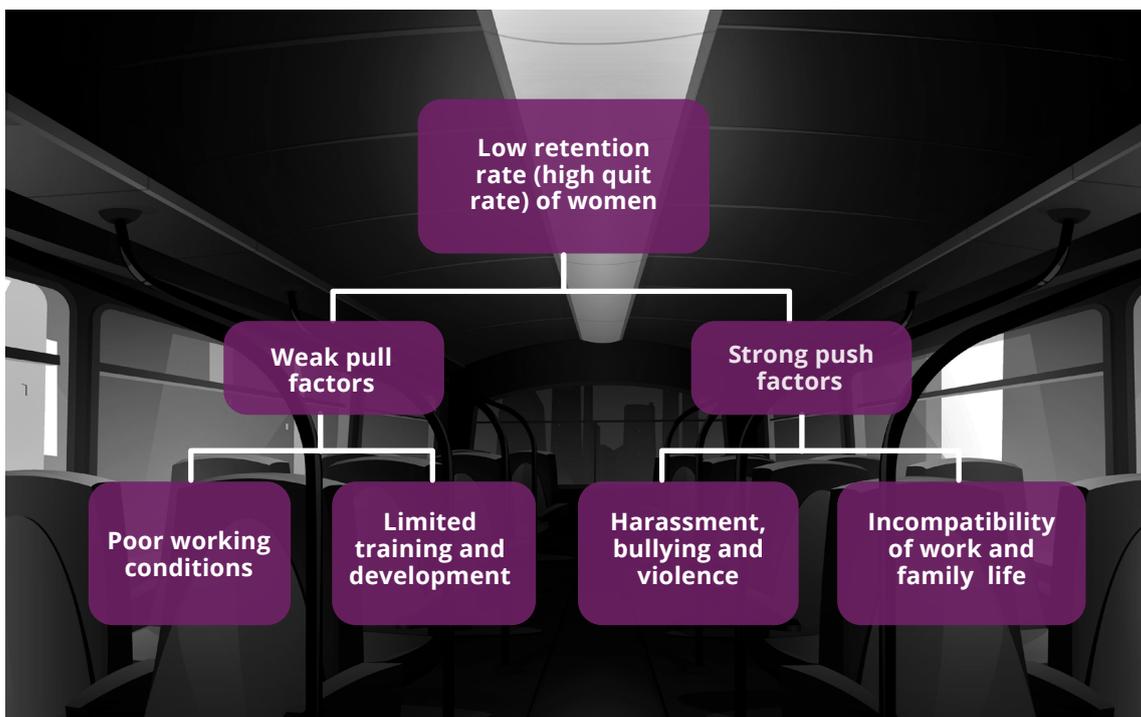
- **Unfavourable labour conditions** as drivers and conductors in DTC are mostly hired as contractual workers and paid on a per kilometer basis. This impacts women disproportionately as they carry a higher burden of domestic and care work and are unable to put in the extra hours/days to earn at par with men. The prevalent mindset among male colleagues and supervisors – that women take more leave, or do not keep timings, also impacts women's work, especially with regard to their applications for leave or for re-allocation of duties or other incentives.



*“Women face issues with regard to conveyance mostly, ...and have early shifts. They usually request for shift change, and I have always cooperated. However, in most cases, women misuse the rights that are given to them; like they make allegations when they're put under pressure for work, especially when something comes up immediately. There are many women who just come to finish the job and run back home, which shows disinterest in work.”*

*MALE RESPONDENT working at a DTC Depot*

FIGURE 1  
CAUSE-EFFECT RELATIONSHIP OF POOR RETENTION OF WOMEN IN THE TRANSPORT SECTOR



**Women spend 7.2 hours as compared to 2.8 hours spent by men on unpaid care work.**

Time Use Survey, 2019

**The biggest barrier for women in paid work is the struggle to balance it with family responsibilities.**

ILO

The depot audits conducted by the researchers revealed that:

- » There are no separate restrooms (aaramghar) or changing rooms for women at the bus depots, and the canteens are largely occupied by men - both physically and conversationally. These workspaces become extremely unwelcoming of women workers.
  - » Washrooms for women where available, were badly-maintained, dirty and practically unusable. The women employees reported that they refrained from using these washrooms at the depot.
- **Lack of information on sexual harassment and grievance redressal systems** within the organisation, lack of training and sensitisation programmes with the staff, and no support systems for women act as strong push factors for women. Information regarding the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) is inadequately advertised at all DTC depots and terminals. Though respondents are aware that there is some process of grievance redressal, no one could tell us about the process or whom they had to approach in cases of sexual harassment.

## C

### **GENDERED PERCEPTIONS ABOUT DRIVING AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN**

Transportation remains a heavily male-dominant sector, and bus-driving is especially considered a masculine job that requires physical strength and a strong head for handling difficult situations. These inherent gender norms discourage women drivers by doubting their technical capacities to drive, maintain heavy vehicles, be accident-proof, and further doubt their abilities to work late hours in public spaces. As a result of these gendered biases, women are set up for more difficult driving tests, and experience additional pressure of outperforming their male colleagues in order to prove their capabilities.

Even within the system, like in many other sectors, the onus of safety and occupational mobility lies squarely on women's shoulders - rather than re-designing the ecosystem to ensure inclusion and safety for all. Women employ several coping mechanisms to navigate their way through the difficult system and sustain themselves - they have reportedly changed their looks to appear masculine to avoid harassment, negotiated desk jobs during pregnancies, carried wooden sticks for self-protection, and avoided interactions with male colleagues in the workplace.



*“Public washrooms are either locked, unclean, or inaccessible due to lack of parking space. There are no dustbins and wrappers for disposal of sanitary napkins.”*

*WOMAN TAXI DRIVER,  
Delhi*



*‘The only female driver in Delhi changed her personality to look like a man in the public space - she maintains short hair and wears pants and shirt. This is because she faced harassment during her stint as an auto-driver when she dressed as a conventional woman.’*



*“Driving a car is about two people, but a bus is about fifty people, and we have to be very sure if they are ready. It is our honour at stake, because if there is one accident, then people will ask why we hired women.”*

*OFFICIAL  
Transport Department,  
Delhi*

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of NCT of Delhi has taken proactive measures for the advancement of substantive equality for women in Delhi's public transport system. The pink ticket scheme for women's free travel in buses and the deployment of 13,000 marshals for women's safety have been instrumental in shaping an inclusive and gender-sensitive transportation system. As we write this report, the transport department under the leadership of Honorable Minister Shri Kailash Gehlot has initiated processes to facilitate entry of more women as bus drivers (See Box 4).

### BOX 4

#### Azad's policy Intervention with Ministry of Transport

The Hon' Transport Minister Shri Kailash Gehlot met representatives of Azad Foundation on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2021 and initiated processes to revise criteria to enable entry to more women bus drivers in DTC. On August 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, DTC set up a Consultative Committee to review the height criteria and further to that under guidance from Transport Commissioner, Shri Ashish Kundra, 12 women drivers trained by Azad with an HMV license

appeared for a skill test on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2021 at DTC Nand Nagari depot. This led to a consultative meeting between DTC and Transport Department on 7<sup>th</sup> Dec 2021 where it was decided that a joint effort would be taken to ease norms. On February 11<sup>th</sup> 2022, the Ministry of Transport has announced reduction in height for women drivers to 153 cms and waive the HMV duration criterion to facilitate entry of women.

The following policy recommendations provide a framework that can be used to further these efforts by strengthening institutional processes to advance women's participation as bus drivers. The state is already in the process of transforming its public transportation system under the Electric Vehicle Policy 2020 and plans to procure 3500 e-buses in the coming year under the FAME-II scheme. This will create a demand of around 8000 additional drivers and provides a perfect opportunity to employ women in sustainable transportation in huge numbers from within Delhi. Gender-sensitive planning of Delhi's sustainable transport initiative will lie at the intersection of three Sustainable Development Goals - SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Access to Decent Work and Economic Opportunities), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities).



## WE CALL THE TRANSPORT DEPARTMENT AND DTC TO

- **Inform women about the opportunities** in the transport sector through public campaigns by forging strategic partnerships with civil society and media. Transport Department's public campaigns on electric vehicles present a great opportunity for inclusion of a gender aspect that promotes a sustainable and equitable public transportation system.
- **Revise the standards for recruitment** (as mentioned below).

### Proposed revisions<sup>2</sup> in current standards of recruitment

1. Reduction in minimum height criterion to 153 cms for women.
2. Reduction in years of experience with HMV to 3 years non-commercial LMV experience for women candidates. (This can be done for a limited time as it can be a pull factor for interested women to apply for HMV licenses as well). It must be accompanied with adequate training programmes designed to induct drivers and help them acquire HMV license and on-road driving skills.
3. Design separate training and mentoring processes for women drivers. These should be a part of a paid training programme with stipends made available through linkages to the Delhi government's existing skill training programmes, under the Delhi Skill and Entrepreneurship University.

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge the announcement by Govt of Delhi to implement proposed revision 1 and 2, as of 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2022

- **Ensure investments in the training and recruitment** of a batch of women drivers. This pool of champions will pave the path for changing gender norms, providing peer support to each other and getting a buy-in from within the system.
- **Include compulsory sessions on gender and work**, sexual harassment at the workplace in the annual refresher courses. Since all the refresher courses are being moved online, relevant sessions can be designed in partnership with NGOs and be included in the curriculum.

2



**CALL TO ACTION  
FOR MEDIUM-TERM  
INTERVENTIONS**

WE CALL UPON DTC TO \_\_\_\_\_

**Create a positive environment that promotes women in transport**

- **Reserve 25% jobs in public transport for women drivers** to create a positive push for more women to take their HMTV license and apply. These can be extended to women bus drivers in cluster and DTC and even women car and bus drivers in government offices.
- **Provide waivers of fees for HMTV license and training** for women as drivers by mainstreaming it as a skill training under the Delhi Skill and Entrepreneurship University.

WE CALL UPON WOMEN AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT TO \_\_\_\_\_

**Help facilitate creation of gender-sensitive infrastructure and fair work policies that can sustain women in employment within the transport sector. For this -**

- **Review workplace policies** with regard to regularizing contractual work of women; ensure fair and minimum wages; fair conditions of work; and compliance with labour standards. As well as ensure that social security, medical insurance and other entitlements are provided to every worker - as it is known that social security benefits act as a huge facilitator for women's retention in the industry.
- **Regularize training on workplace safety** - As buses have panic buttons and bus drivers and conductors need to be trained on what is the response system when the alarm systems are triggered by passengers. They also need to be directly connected to the local police station and helplines for immediate response.
- **Ensure gender-sensitive infrastructure** - at depots. DTC is currently in the process of remodeling the depots<sup>3</sup> through a contractual agreement with NBCC. This might be an opportunity to re-format and retro-fit its project with a gender lens.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/delhi-govt-to-build-multi-level-bus-parking-sites-in-vasant-vihar-hari-nagar-101631212195838.html>



## Gender-sensitive Infrastructure

- Well-placed, separate washrooms for cis-women and trans-women with
  - » Regular cleaning staff
  - » Fittings for disabled people
  - » Proper supply of water and soap
  - » Light in the toilets and the common area
  - » Dustbin for disposal of menstrual waste
- Separate lockers and changing rooms for women, ensuring privacy.
- Well placed, separate resting rooms for women with proper lighting and ventilation.
- Inclusive eating areas with presence of female canteen staff at all depots.
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Policy and names of the committee members should be clearly advertised at multiple places at every depot and bus terminal.

3



CALL TO ACTION  
FOR LONG-TERM  
INTERVENTIONS

WE CALL ON AN INTER-MINISTERIAL PANEL  
LED BY HON. MINISTER OF TRANSPORT TO

- **Organize a platform for a tripartite partnership** with the state transport agencies/regulatory bodies, NGOs, and private sector automobile industry to include looking at ways by which future buses can be re-designed to be inclusive of women's physical standards.

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