

Women Participation in Rail Transport in India: Relevance and Need in Present Scenario

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Abstract: *The article is written to address issue of women staff and passengers in Indian Railways. Despite being one of the largest transporter and employer in India, Railways have a poor share of women staff and women passengers. Article gives an overview of women share at present in Indian Railways and the need to increase this share. Poor share of women has resulted in poor planning of future projects from gender based perspective. The challenges faced by women employees are mentioned in the article and it gives two case studies of infrastructural deficiencies in the system. Situation in other countries is also mentioned for comparison and better understanding of India's place in this sector and it is projected how other countries are making efforts for increasing female share in Transport sector. Some suggestions are also given to make organization women friendly. This article is an effort for gender-equality in Rail Transportation in India-both for internal members and passengers.*

Keywords: Gender- equality, Share of women in Rail Transport, Poor infrastructure for females, Importance of female participation, suggestions to increase women participation in Rail transports

1. Introduction

According to International Labor Organization, transport is one of the several sectors that has traditionally been regarded as having 'no place for women'. Indian Railways is not an exception. Female participation is very limited in all the departments of Indian Railways. As per census 2011, India has 940 females per 1000 males; working population in India, however, tells a different story. As per the recent labor force survey conducted by NSSO using the usual status approach, the estimated female work population ratio (in percentage) in the country during 2009–10 and 2011–12 was 26.6% and 23.7%, respectively. As per NITI Ayog's report, only 27 females per 1000 work in comparison to 117 males per 1000 (in urban population) in transport, storage and communication (State Statistics/Labor Force Participation Rates).

This gap remains despite various government initiatives and steps to increase female participation rate, such as the enactment of the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, which provides for increase in paid maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks and makes a provision for mandatory crèche facility in establishments having 50 or more female employees, issue of an advisory to the states under Factories Act, 1948, to allow women workers in night shifts with adequate safety measures in place. But the irony is that though Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, which have existed for so long to ensure equal wages to male and female and equal remuneration to men and women for same work or work of similar nature without any discrimination, still could not increase female participation in workforce till date.

India Railways has been following all the initiatives and schemes introduced by the Government of India yet there are only 100,000 female employees in the total workforce of 1.3 million, i.e., only 7.71%. This ratio at the management level is 11.30% (2063 female officers in total 18263 officers) (40 - II Total Number and Annual Cost of Groups).

This clearly shows that female participation in workforce at

all level in Indian Railways is very poor.

2. Importance of Female Participation

'Companies that are diverse do better and this is also true for public transport' (McKinsey & Company).

Transport is like a fulcrum which connects people to their workplaces, education centers and social engagements. It is used by everyone. So, a diverse range of views is needed to shape and inform the transport sector at every stage so that the services it offers can be used by all without any complications.

Indian Railways is one of the largest transportation and logistics network in the world (Indian Railways: Lifeline of the Nation). With 8000 stations across India, Indian Railways carries 23 million passengers per day in 12,000 passenger trains and 3 million tons of freight per day in 7000 freight trains. Indian Railways carry around 36% of the total transportation in the transport sector (Morgan Stanley Research NOV 2015).

The usage by females of this huge transport network is comparatively low, which is an issue that needs to be addressed, and female participation as users of transport facility should be increased. There is less participation of women in the transport sector in general and in Indian Railways in particular, because the infrastructure is neither ready for female employees nor for female passengers. It is never planned with keeping in mind the needs of females. Few reserved coaches, very few separate toilet blocks at stations and some exclusive waiting rooms at bigger stations are the only things which are generally being planned for female passengers.

International Labor Organization in its Transport Policy Brief 2013 noted that "jobs in the transport sector are highly gendered and unequal, as is access to transport services. As a result, women's voices are all too often neglected when it comes to transport planning and the pursuit of decent work" (Verick 1).

Conditions of public transports have a different impact on male and female commuters. Women suffer more if the public transport is in poor condition. For example, if the public transport available to them is not reliable or affordable, women may turn down better career opportunities away from home and chose a low-paid local

job close to home. Hence a good transport system (which is both affordable and convenient) is important not only for women's practical needs such as going to school/college or market but it is essential for providing equal opportunities to women for their social and economic empowerment.



3. Present Scenario

Today, India's main concern in gender-related issues is that public places and public transports are not safe and secure for the female population. And, it is adversely affecting women's right to participate equally in public. There have been several studies in India in the recent past that have explored the nature and extent of sexual violence that women and girls face in Indian cities, specifically in public places, including public transports. A study conducted in Delhi in 2010 reported that over 90% of women had faced some form of sexual harassment in the past year. The same study mentions that 51% of women faced harassment inside public transport and another 42% while waiting for public transport (Women and Transport in Indian Cities 2017).

One non-profit women's organization and resource centre Akshara, which works for the empowerment of women and girls in Mumbai, conducted a survey of Mumbai suburban stations in 2015. The survey was aimed to take up issue of the sexual harassment of women on trains. Akshara and NSS students contacted 522 women commuters, held a focus group discussion with 15 regular women commuters and conducted safety walks with 150 students of both genders on 18 stations. Findings from this survey point to the fact that majority of women commuters face sexual harassment every day. This report also suggested various initiatives to ensure better safety and security for women commuters like free and clean toilets, security personnel manning help desks, reserved benches near ladies compartments, improved infrastructure in stations such working lights, signboards, lighted skywalks and reserved ticket windows for women. Every participant in the survey said that police patrolling is a must after 07:30 in the evening in public places including railway stations.

Similar surveys and studies have been carried out in recent past by some other NGOs, which work in this field, and all reports say that the infrastructure is not as it is required to ensure safe travels of women.

The question then arises as to why such a situation prevails in a city like Mumbai where from 7 million daily commuters, 1.6 million are females.

The situation for women employees of Indian Railways is not different. Women staff faces various challenges every day at their workplace. Very few stations have separate toilet blocks for female staff and if they are posted at level crossing gates, for instance, then chances are that there is no toilet block available in the vicinity. When the lower-level staff doesn't get basic amenities at workplace, very few would stick to the job or try to learn their work; most of them would prefer to opt for a desk job in a closed environment where challenges are fewer and conditions are better. It also results in less vertical up gradation of women employees to reach the decision making positions as fewer female chose to work in the field and also to less investment in the basic amenities.

Though the jobs of airplane pilots and airhostesses are very popular among young females, the number of female locomotive pilots and guards is much low in Indian Railways. And although there are quite a few female ticket checkers on job, none of them wants to work in long distance trains. This is because good rest rooms are not easily available and the hardships involved in long distance train operations and journeys make it difficult.

Two case studies given below give a clear picture of the present day scenario at the field level.

4. Case Study-I

In the Mumbai division of Western Railway, out of 1056 ticket checking staff, there are 96 females with job experience of 15–20 years. Ticket checking activity involves a variety of roles such as the deployment in long distance trains, in local squads, which work at suburban sections of Mumbai and in the stationary staff posted at various stations. Experience and seniority is a criterion to assign different types of roles as well as posting on various mail express trains or premium trains. Female staff prefers to work either at stations or on local squads because in these job profiles they can work for limited hours and take care of their families as well.

With an increasing number of female staff, one attempt was made by administration to deploy female employees in long distance trains in 2017. The train selected for this trial was the Intercity Express, which leaves Bandra terminus station in morning at 07:00 hrs and reaches Surat station at 11:30 hrs. The staff has to rest at the destination station from 11:30 hrs to 15:30 hrs and then take the return train from Surat, leaving at 16:00 hrs and reaching Bandra terminus by 20:30 hrs. Two senior female ticket checkers were deployed initially to do checking in upper class coaches. Though the journey was short, and staff could return home the same day, a lot of resistance and unrest took place among the female employees and they approached higher authorities and unions to stop this trial. The administration took a tough stand, mainly because the earning from ticket checking from Intercity Express had gone up by 300% in just 3 months and it became an example for male staff to follow to work hard and work sincerely. But the unresponsiveness among female staff was very determined and most of them kept on preferring stationary duties. The administration offered incentives like a full day off after a work day; also good restroom facilities were constructed and the female ticket checkers who continued on this job were suitably awarded.



This helped in changing the mind-set of some of the female employees. In March 2018, when a premium train Mumbai–Ahmadabad Shatabdi was started with the whole ticket checking staff consisted of females, many females felt proud to be a part of this initiative.

5. Case Study-II

In 2017, Central Railway started one station, Matunga, fully run and operated by female staff. A similar attempt was made by Western Railway in 2018 and they posted all-female staff in Matunga Road station in all categories. Initially, this exercise appeared to be a PR activity and there was a competition among zonal railways to show how soon and how much female participation can they show in their areas. But when Western Railway selected Matunga Road station for reasons like a residential area nearby and less workload when compared to other stations, the safety of the female staff became a primary concern for the officers. The station was not at all female friendly and secure from any side; hence it became a challenge to implement this initiative.

Booking office of the Matunga Road station was situated near the main road and a lot of anti-social elements used to roam around during night times. To address this issue, safety grills and iron doors were installed at the main doors and windows of the booking offices; one CCTV camera was installed to monitor the person approaching the booking window; an emergency bell was installed at the office, which can be heard at the station master office situated at PF for immediate reaction. Security personnel were increased for the patrolling of the station and, after initial hitch for a few days, things settled down for good and for the last one year Matunga Road station is being run successfully by 24 female employees.



Although these attempts have been successful, they show how deficient our setup is for female workforce. Hence it is very essential that the lessons learned should be used to proliferate the idea that not just one station but making every station a female friendly station. An inclusive approach rather than an exclusive one should be a part of our systems and designs. Women do not want separate facilities; rather, the design should be such that it includes the special requirements of females.

6. Situation in Other Countries

Women participation in other countries is also not very impressive. Labor force participation of female (aged 15 years and above) in the world is 48.7% as of 2018, which was 51.2% in 1990 (Unemployment, Total...).

However, public transport is a sector which is largely dominated by male working culture and the share of females varies from 10% to 30 % in big countries.

In Japan, JR-East is one of the 6 major passenger transport companies. It operates in area of 7527 km with 1666 stations. It runs 12,229 trains per day and carries 17.5 million passengers. For such a huge network and operation, JR-East has the employee strength of 57,580, out of which only 6500 are women. This ratio is so low despite the management's incentives to female employees like child care/nursing leave for 4 days/month and adjustment leave aligned with work hours per day for long shifts. This is more alarming because Japan's ranking in Gender Inequality Index is 22 with a value of 0.103 (lower value represents less disparities between females and males and less losses to human development) and the female participation in labor workforce is 50.42% (Table 5: Gender Inequality Index).

In United Kingdom, female participation in workforce is 57% (Turnball) but in transport sector it is only 20%. In the UK, only 6% pilots and 7% train drivers are female and only 12% are engineers. The situation is same in other European countries and as per one report of McKinsey, only 17.5% of public transport employees are women in EU. The same report revealed that in the United States, only 19% of women occupy top management position.

It is important to mention that these countries are making various efforts to increase female share in transport sector. In the UK, an all-party group Women in Transport is active in this field and they conduct regular meetings and dialogues to adopt methods for increasing female participation. For Europe too, a same kind of groups, UITP¹ and ETF,² are working with an aim to increase the share of female employees in transport companies from the existing 17.5% to at least 25% by the year 2020 and 40% in the year 2035.

This shows that the importance of female participation in the transport sector is being felt in all countries and attempts are being made to increase it at all levels.

7. What Could Be Done: Suggestions And Opinions

Recently, NASA administrator Jim Bridentine made a statement that 'the first person to land on Mars would be a woman'.

Such is the era in which we live. Women are reaching spaces and touching great heights. Then there is no reason why women cannot drive trains and guard the tracks. And there is no reason why the share of women participation in transport in general and in railways should not be increased.

Desired steps towards increasing the female share in workforce should be a mix of infrastructural as well as policy-level changes.

Addressing the issue of basic amenities

It is also important to address the needs of urban women, their daily requirements and other gender-related policies. Encouraging women in non-traditional occupations requires the institutions to create a favorable environment. For this to happen, the most important thing is infrastructure. Basic amenities like separate toilet blocks in all establishments

¹ UITP is the international organization of public transport. In EU, UITP represents the views of public transport undertakings of 28 countries.

² The European transport workers' federation (ETF) is a pan-European trade union organization, embracing 243 trade unions.

should be created on priority basis. Restroom facilities are the next hurdle which stops females from taking duties of driver/guard or ticket checking in long distance trains.

8. Monetary Encouragements

Why women should take the job of a loco pilot or a guard when they can work in an office environment and earn the same? Only monetary benefits can increase the charms of a physically demanding job. If extra allowances are offered to female employees, then chances are that more and more young women will opt for these jobs.

Some may argue why is it so important that women should be encouraged by giving monetary benefits? It is seen that monetary benefits sometime work as encouraging factor to take challenging jobs. A local train driver of western railway Priti kumari once told that she filled up many jobs forms as her husband was not keeping well and she has to go out and work. And when she finally got selected for driver job in local train she accepted it despite the challenges involve in it because she needed it at that time ("Meet Western Railway's Only Motor woman"). So if a well paid job of railways is available for qualified females they will be encouraged to take it over low paid jobs.

Reservation for women in management posts

Simultaneously, women's presence at different levels in public transport authorities has the potential of mainstreaming gender within the organization by bringing women's issues to the fore in its services and infrastructure. Hence it is very important that more and more female officers join railway services and stick to it when the journey starts. This can be achieved by giving reservations in top managerial posts. At present, there are 16 zones in the Indian Railways, and all have male officers as general managers. Among 7 general managers of production units, only one is female. In the Indian Railways, main field unit is a division which is headed by divisional railway managers (DRM). Today, out of 68 divisions only 7 have female officers as DRM. Appointments of general manager and DRM are made after they fulfill certain criteria based on good career record as well as a good age profile. Due to various responsibilities they have at various stages in their personal life, female officers tend to skip important postings which can be useful in their career. A policy can be defined or a guideline can be created to make this criterion a bit relaxed for female officers and keep a part of total posts reserved for women so that top posts are not dominated by males. This, in turn, defines the policies and important tasks on field units.

Publicity and glamorization

Youngsters mostly follow the path which they find within their reach or which has a certain glamour attached to it, like jobs of airhostesses or airplane pilots. Jobs in Indian Railways are though well paid and popular in young students, the actual job-related challenges and the perks attached to it are not well known. Hence it is required that the service is widely publicized and female students are made aware of the challenges it offers but also of the perks attached to it. The range of job profile must be publicized and glamorized with role models reaching out to training

institutions.

9. Institutions of Women Committees

Recently, Indian railway board issued instructions that deficiencies related to separate toilet blocks and changing rooms be addressed on a priority basis in all zones and a target be fixed to complete all such works. The Railway board has also provided assurance in the employee charter to take care of women employees' issues. Now, though instructions from the Railway Board are issued, implementation of these instructions needs to be continuously monitored as it is not a priority item for field units. That is why there is a need of forming a high-power committee at all zones with members from the concerned departments who will coordinate and ensure the availability of basic facilities for female employees of the Indian Railways.

These committees then can be used for installing the necessary facilities in different cities by interaction with various women groups to tackle gender issues in public transports.

Lastly, there is a need of an 'organisational will' to include gender sensitivity in the vision of Indian Railways and make it a part of all training programs. While the female staff need not be treated as a special case, it is certainly necessary that they get equal attention in meeting their personal requirements and necessary provision should be made to implement this in all the units.

10. Conclusions

Indian Railways has been defined as 'a vehicle of inclusive development and national integration' in Vision 2020 ("Indian Railways: Vision 2020"). In the Citizen Charter published in March 2018, Indian Railways committed that provision of passenger amenities and convenience in travel is one of the most important objectives of Indian Railways, in terms of both business ethics as well as social obligations. In this charter, first mission statement is 'safe and dependable services' and the last is 'requisite amenities to females, senior citizens and disabled persons for facilitating their convenience'.

Indian Railways' commitment towards female passengers is worded in the Citizen Charter and now there is a need to implement female-friendly transportation. And the first, and probably the most important, step towards accomplishing this mission could be employing more female staff at different stations and in trains. A lady travelling alone will feel safer with a lady ticket checker and a lady station master. It generates confidence among the female aspirants to see that ladies are working in the night shifts in Indian Railways.

If Indian Railways aims for inclusive development, then it is quite essential that females are included in all services and future planning related to it. Whether it is station development projects or new lines for high speed trains, a female perspective will enrich the development socially and strategically.

It is important to mention here that with its employee strength of 14 lakh if Indian Railways takes steps to improve female participation at all levels, it will set an example for other sectors of our economy. Indian Railways is a career of economic and social changes. This role should be widened by opening doors for females and giving wings to female employees to reach the top and to be able to offer qualitative services to customers.



‘We don’t want separate queues and places; we want respect wherever we stand’.

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