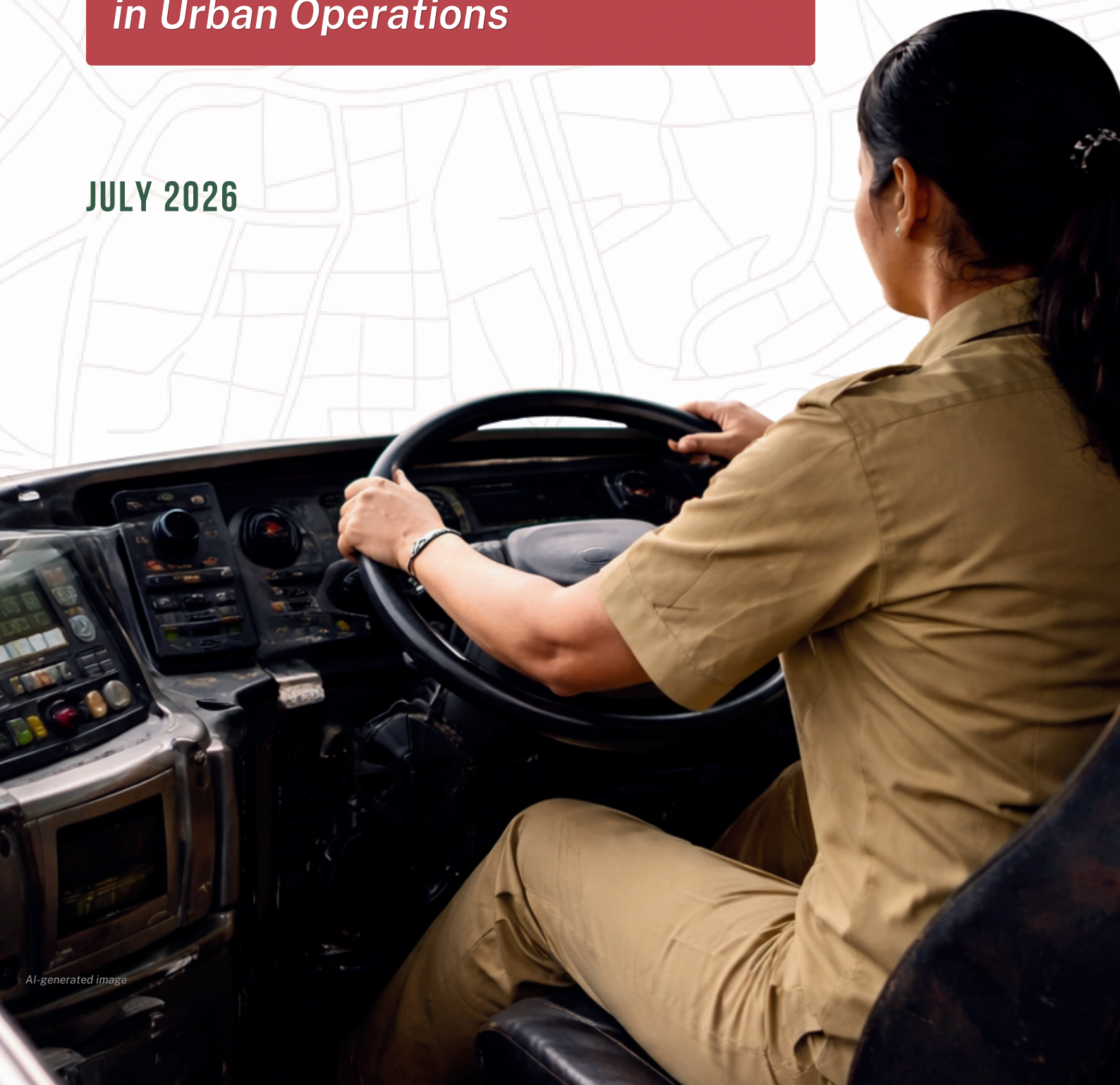


SHE DRIVES BHARAT

*Scaling Women's Employment
as e-Bus Drivers
in Urban Operations*

JULY 2026



AI-generated image



ABOUT THE PARTNERS



BOCI NAREE

BOCI NAREE (also referred to as the BOCI Nari Wing) is a landmark women-led initiative under the Bus and Car Operators Confederation of India (BOCI), aimed at strengthening the participation, leadership, and representation of women across India's passenger mobility and transport ecosystem.

BOCI is the apex, not-for-profit industry body representing India's passenger transport operators, constituted in 2016. Recognizing the acute under-representation of women in transport—particularly as entrepreneurs, drivers, and decision-makers—BOCI established BOCI NAREE as a dedicated national platform to address structural barriers and create sustained opportunities for women in mobility.

BOCI NAREE aligns with India's broader Nari Shakti vision by shifting from symbolic inclusion to action-oriented empowerment, focusing on access, safety, skill development, and leadership pathways for women within a traditionally male-dominated sector. Founded and headed by Smt. Sartaj Lamba, a mobility entrepreneur and sector leader, BOCI NAREE operates with the active guidance and support of the BOCI leadership, including its President Shri Prasanna Patwardhan and Chairman Shri Jagdev Singh Khalsa it was started in June 2025.

BOCI NAREE represents a shift from isolated women-centric programmes to a structured, industry-led platform that combines advocacy, research, capacity building, and on-ground action. It functions simultaneously as a support network for women transport professionals, a policy voice within BOCI and before government stakeholders, and a catalyst for cultural change within transport enterprises. By strengthening women's participation across the mobility value chain, BOCI NAREE contributes to safer and more inclusive public transport systems, increased workforce participation, and the development of sustainable, people-centric mobility solutions across India.

BOCI NAREE stands as a pioneering example of women-led transformation within Indian transport, bridging industry, policy, and social change. As India advances toward inclusive growth and sustainable mobility, BOCI NAREE is poised to play a critical role in ensuring that women are not just passengers in this journey—but drivers of change themselves.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS



CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE CITIES

THE URBAN CATALYSTS

C-SEC is a sister organization of The Urban Catalysts, which works towards climate resilient, gender equitable cities, transport, public spaces and jobs and businesses of the future. Over the past 7.5 years, it has worked across 10 Indian states, South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa, applying gender-responsive, data-driven, and participatory approaches to urban mobility and development.

Its portfolio spans multiple verticals, including gender mainstreaming in city planning and public spaces, safe and secure public transport, inclusive e-mobility transitions, gender sensitization programs, urban policy analysis, and leveraging technology to strengthen transport planning and operations, enabling just transitions in the jobs for the future.

TUC has led projects supported by UK FCDO, ADB, World Bank, UN Habitat, GIZ, WRI India. It has supported the preparation of gender-inclusive urban plans for Mysuru, Jaipur, Bhopal, and Visakhapatnam, created gender-inclusive indicators for Tbilisi, and designed climate-adaptive, gender-inclusive public spaces in small towns in Bangladesh. In India, its work has influenced \$9 billion in rail investments and is expected to benefit 4.5 million women and girls by 2027. It has also supported NITI Aayog in developing national advisories for a gender-responsive transition to electric mobility in India.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India is working to replace 800,000 diesel buses with electric buses by 2030, including those used in public, private, and institutional fleet. At least 50,000 e-buses are expected to be on the road for urban public transport operations by then, requiring an estimated 1.15–1.25 lakh skilled e-bus drivers. However, women currently account for only 0.1% of public bus drivers. The shift in technology to electric buses, which makes driving easier in an otherwise demanding job, along with the Government of India's vision for Viksit Bharat, provides a timely opportunity to scale women's participation in intra-city urban bus operations. However, efforts to do so have been constrained in the past by a weak pipeline of licenced, employment-ready women candidates, reflected in women's 1.4% share of public service vehicle (PSV) driving licences

Achieving 30–50% women's representation in the urban public e-bus driver workforce could create employment opportunities for an estimated 37,500–62,500 women e-bus drivers.

The scale of this demand, with a meagre retention rate of 4–5% underscores the need to identify and address the key barriers affecting women's entry into and retention in the driver workforce. The current estimated number of women commercial drivers represents a large potential workforce that can be supported through structured HPMV training and certification pathways to help meet the growing demand for e-bus drivers.

2024–25
(Estimated)

4.6–4.9 lakhs

2029–30
(Projected)

6.2–7.6 lakhs

Women commercial drivers in India

This research is situated within the current contractual framework¹ for intra-city e-bus operations, while recognizing that 93% of the country's bus fleet is operated by the private sector. The recommendations aim to create an enabling environment that increases demand and builds a reliable supply of women e-bus drivers.

[1] With e-buses operated by the private sector, through gross cost contracts (GCC).

Public procurement tenders for intra-city e-bus operations should explicitly classify bus drivers as skilled workers and include graded quotas for women to create a steady demand for women e-bus drivers. The current tendering system, which aggregates demand from different cities, creates incentives for operators to minimise controllable operating costs, particularly labour and maintenance expenditures. As a result, operators may reduce labour costs, leading to inconsistent minimum wages. Explicitly classifying bus drivers as essential skilled workers in tender documents would better reflect the technical skills and safety responsibilities required to operate high-capacity public transport vehicles. Introducing graded quotas for women e-bus drivers, along with programmes to increase the number of qualified women e-bus drivers, would give operators enough time to pilot, learn from implementation, and build a strong pipeline of qualified women e-bus drivers.

Gender lens investing (GLI) can create direct financial incentives for operators to improve gender diversity in the workforce. GLI encourages investment in companies that demonstrate a positive gender impact, including women-owned or women-led enterprises, organisations that promote gender equality in the workplace, and businesses whose products or services significantly improve the lives of women and girls. This approach helps address bias and the perceived costs of compliance that discourage private operators from investing in the recruitment and retention of women by making gender inclusion financially beneficial rather than an operational burden. The 2X Criteria and the 2X Challenge are examples of initiatives that support this approach.

Supply-side recommendations address barriers across the pipeline for women e-bus driver, from occupational aspiration and licensing through to hiring and retention, guided by an employment cycle framework.

State transport departments should revise eligibility criteria— height requirements, upper age limits, and prior Heavy Passenger Motor Vehicle (HPMV) driving experience- to expand the pool of eligible women drivers for public e-bus driving. India is estimated to have 4.57-4.86 lakh women commercial drivers with holding an Light Motor Vehicle (LMV) licence as of March 2025. This represents a significant untapped workforce that could be supported in obtaining an HPMV licence and moving into public e-bus driver roles. If 10% of this cohort were to make the transition, it could create a pipeline of at least 45,000 women e-bus drivers.

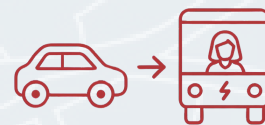
Minimum height requirements of 159–160 cm across public bus authorities exclude most Indian women, whose average height is about 152 cm. These requirements should therefore be recalibrated using state-level anthropometric data from National Family Health Survey (NFHS) to set women-specific thresholds without compromising operational safety. Upper age limits of around 35 years can disproportionately affect women seeking to re-enter the workforce after childcare

responsibilities, as NFHS-5 data show that most women complete childbearing between the ages of 20 and 30 (median age at last birth: about 28 years).

Key informant interviews indicate that the 2–3 years of prior HPMV driving experience requirement is not always strictly followed by PBAs when filling bus driver vacancies. This could be addressed with training and competency-based tests². Newly recruited women drivers could initially be assigned to lower-traffic, less complex, or women-only routes before progressing to high-intensity operations. This would improve road safety while reducing the risk of early dropout. In Maharashtra and Delhi, relaxing height and prior HPMV driving experience requirements, alongside targeted training interventions, has enabled more women to enter the profession. As a result, Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation reported to have 122 women bus drivers in 2024, while Delhi Transport Corporation reported 74 women bus drivers as of 2025.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs or State Transport Department should introduce a Women E-Bus Driver Programme to create a structured pathway for women holding an LMV licence to become professionally trained e-bus drivers.

The cost of training and licensing a candidate as a skilled e-bus driver is estimated at INR 22,000–37,000, depending on state-specific costs. Expanding the women e-bus driver workforce is a shared responsibility between the government and the private sector. Under the She Drives Bharat skilling programme, government could partially finance the cost of HPMV driver training and licensing costs. Private operators could become eligible for reimbursement after employing women e-bus drivers for 3 months. Skilling 45,000 women e-bus drivers would require a direct investment of approximately INR 99–166.5 crores.



Even if **10%** of the latent pipeline of 4.57-4.86 lakh women commercial drivers with an LMV license transition to HPMV driving, it could create a new pool of at least

45,000

women e-bus drivers

Private operators should implement gender-responsive mobilisation strategies, referral incentives and targeted communication campaigns to attract women into bus driving roles. Conventional recruitment channels (newspaper ads, generic digital outreach) have limited effectiveness due to occupational stereotypes, limited awareness of bus driving as viable careers, and women's exclusion from informal recruitment networks. Operators can initially focus on women-headed households, who maybe more amenable to undertake non-traditional higher wage jobs. This initial pool of women e-bus drivers must be supported to serve as champions, role models and attract a larger workforce.

Simultaneously, operators should adopt proactive mobilisation strategies through organizations working on women's skilling and livelihoods, community institutions, women's collectives, and self-help groups. Mobilisation efforts should also engage households through clear communication that reframes bus driving as an essential profession while highlighting wages, benefits, safety, and job security to build trust. Open days at bus depots and women-focused job fairs can provide candidates and their families with direct exposure to the work environment. Operators can also offer higher referral incentives linked to the training completion, certification, and retention of women e-bus drivers—a strategy already used by some of the women fleet operators interviewed as part of their recruitment efforts.

Electric bus depots must build, upgrade, and maintain gender-sensitive infrastructure, operations, and safe workplace environments. This includes clean and well-maintained gender-segregated toilets at all bus depots and terminals, as well as locker rooms and rest areas. Desk-based jobs may be considered for women during menstruation or pregnancy, where appropriate. Split shifts may also be considered to help women e-bus drivers to balance household and caregiving responsibilities, while encouraging men to share caregiving responsibilities.

Structured post-placement support through referral and buddy systems, along with designated focal persons, should be provided, as the risk of attrition is highest during the first 6 months after deployment. Workplace safety must institutionalise a zero-tolerance approach to sexual and workplace harassment, including functional Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) at the zonal or regional levels, regular compliance assessments under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and regular gender sensitization trainings across all depots.

Operators may consider implementing integrated welfare schemes, structured recognition mechanisms, to improve job satisfaction, strengthen retention, and enhance the long-term attractiveness of bus driving as a career.

Way Forward. Expanding women's participation in e-bus driving requires an ecosystem-level approach that builds enabling conditions for entry, retention, and career progression across the sector. School transport services, employee shuttle fleets, and institutional transport operations provide controlled environments with fixed routes and regular schedules making them suitable entry pathways for women drivers.

