Free Metro Rides for Women

What is the issue?

Women may soon get to travel for free in buses and metro trains in Delhi as announced by the government. This has divided people into factions.

What are the differences in opinion?

- This is a **gender-based** public transport fare subsidy programme which hasn't been tested anywhere in India in the past.
- **Proponents** – The policy will protect and liberate women.
- **Critics** – The policy is financially unviable and unfair.
- As polarised debates over the intent and impact of the policy continue, it is useful to assess whether this idea has any merit.

What is the situation in India?

- **Less common** – Urban transport fare discounts are
- **More common** – The concessions for seniors, students, and other socio-economic groups in government-operated flights and railway services.

Why is the scheme needed?

- **Article 13** in the UN' Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises **freedom of movement as a basic human right**.
- **A Study in Delhi** – College girls, compared to boys, chose lower ranked colleges with safe and reliable transport access.
- **2011 Census** – 60% of women workers in India choose to work from home or at a place which is less than a km from home.
- **World Bank Study** conducted in Delhi – The remaining working women tend to rely excessively on public transport.
- **RTI application** in 2013 – Only 13% of Delhi driving licences were issued to women.
- **Wage discrimination** and **gender segregation** in employment, and household labour divisions.
- The **lopsided rationing** of household transport budgets results in women taking **slower commute options** to save on expenses.

- **Compromises on education and jobs** for travel purposes.

What are its benefits?

- Women may take up **jobs for which they're better suited** but are further away from home.
- Women can **engage in a range of activities** that promote their well being.
- **Brings more women to public spaces** and consequently, make those spaces safer for women.
- **Makes public transport truly public** as some people are at a relative disadvantage in urban transportation markets.
- Revenues from appropriately charging personal transport can make public transport cheap.

What are the examples in other countries?

- Singapore – Offers a discount to rail commuters who are willing to travel before the morning rush-hour.
- Estonia – Public transport is free for residents.
- Luxembourg –Public transport free for people under the age of 20.
- Hong Kong – Public transport fare concession for people aged 65 years or more.
- Berlin – Offered women a 21% ticket discount for one day in March this year to highlight the gender wage gap.

What are the questions which are unanswered?

- Who will pay for the subsidies aimed at the transportation-disadvantaged?
- Will such subsidies make it difficult for public transport to achieve its other major goal — reducing car use and cleaning up the air?

How can these questions addressed?

- The **personal motorised vehicle** travel is highly **subsidised** globally, including in India which makes driving cheaper.
- So, Indian cities must consider **pricing interventions** such as congestion charges, mileage-based road use charges, etc so that private driving costs better reflect full social costs.
- To **discourage driving** can help governments generate funds for improving and operating cleaner transportation alternatives.
- Women who feel this policy treats them as lesser citizens should have the **choice to opt out**.

Source: The Hindu

