



## SCOOTER LADIES: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S MOBILITY IN THE CITY OF COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

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### **Abstract**

Sri Lankan men and women are negotiating their attitudes, actions, and traditions in order to best survive within a changing economic structure. The country which had been a traditional agricultural society continuously has been linked to a global economic structure by various governments following the colonial economic model even in the post-independent period. In this context women happened to leave home and workplace viz a viz daily while attending to various traditional responsibilities held by women with regard to child rearing and maintenance of the homes etc. The male dominant mode of transport has been a challenge for them as they are often subjected to various forms of harassments and women started negotiating this and started slowly to get control of their own transportation. Most of the women started riding scooters in male dominant roads, i.e., male drivers and conductors more on the road. Most of the girls in the Asian region in general ride scooters mainly to travel to their workplaces whilst several girls used to ride light motorcycles in eastern countries. The vulnerability of the rider meeting with an accident is less for scooter users compared with the standard motorbike riders as it is easier for the rider to place their legs on the ground faster which creates a high level of confidence. Some ride scooters to go to their offices and working places, take children to and from the schools or tuition classes, and do daily shopping at the market etc. This is an area not adequately explained by researchers with special reference to the survival strategies of women or their adaptability with the changing socio-economic and competitive environment. Against this backdrop a qualitative research was conducted by the authors with the scooter riding women mainly in the city of Colombo which reveals that the introduction of scooters to the Sri Lankan motorcycle market has very much benefitted the women in Sri Lanka. The women were able to take their children to school, tuition classes, and also to go to office without becoming vulnerable to sexual harassments in the male dominant transport system in Sri Lanka. Moreover, those who started to ride scooters found it easier to get benefits from the changing Sri Lankan economy while fulfilling at the same time their traditional roles as daughters, and wives in a safer and more convenient manner.

**Keywords:** Scooter riders, women in Sri Lanka, male dominance, transport, sexual harassment, Sri Lanka

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lankan men and women are negotiating their attitudes, actions, and traditions in order to best survive within a changing economic structure. The country which had been a traditional agricultural society continuously has been linked to a global economic structure by various governments following the colonial economic model even in the post-independent period. In this context women happened to leave home and workplace viz a viz daily while attending to various traditional responsibilities held by them with regard to child rearing and maintenance of the homes etc. The male dominant mode of transport was a challenge to them and women started negotiating this and started slowly getting control of their own transportation. Most of the women started riding scooters in male dominant roads. Most of the girls in the Asia region in general, ride scooters mainly to travel to their workplaces, whilst several girls ride light motorcycles in the eastern countries. The normal scooter's ground clearance is far better than the motorbikes, which make it easier for the rider to place their legs on the ground faster and with a high level of confidence. The vulnerability of the rider meeting with an accident is less for scooter users when compared with the standard motorbike riders. Scooters are ridden by some to go to their offices and workplaces; take children to and from their schools or tuition classes; and do daily shopping at the market etc. There has been little, or no attention paid by the researchers to this aspect in Sri Lanka. In this backdrop a qualitative research was conducted by the authors, among scooter riding women mainly in the city of Colombo which reveals that the introduction of scooters to the Sri Lankan motorcycle market has been very much beneficial to the women in Sri Lanka. Not only were they able to take their children to school or tuition classes, but also to go to office without becoming vulnerable to sexual harassments in the male dominant transport system in Sri Lanka. Moreover, those who started to ride scooters found it easier to get benefits from the changing Sri Lankan economy while at the same time fulfilling their traditional roles as daughters and wives in a safer and more convenient and safer manner.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Against the above background a research was conducted by authors to identify the world of scooter using women in the city of Colombo. In addition to the main research problem, a few sub questions were studied in order to understand the socio-economic and cultural background of the motor bike using women. Namely, the advantages and disadvantages of women bike users and also the prospects and challenges of the scooter riding ladies. This research was conducted as a qualitative study considering the explorative nature of this research. In-depth interviews were conducted with scooter riders selected via a snowball sampling technique. The detailed narratives were analysed in order to identify the trends in the lives of scooter riding ladies.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The narratives when collected via the research and analysed revealed that the scooter mode of transport introduced to the Sri Lankan market made the lives of women much easier compared to their previous situation. In general, the Sri Lankan society is considered as male dominant with the women playing a more backward role in its economic, social, cultural, and political spheres (Unaiza & Sehar 2006). The economic changes of the country compelled women to re-negotiate their traditional roles and engage in more and more economically productive activities while continuing to perform conventional roles expected from women as a daughter, mother and a grandmother. The women who came out of the houses in order to engage in more economically important activities as the families were over-burdened by the failed Sri Lankan economy due to corruption, lack of visionary economic policies etc., used the



existing transport in order to fulfil their transport needs. However, the public transport is considered as a space where the women were harassed by the operators, the male passengers etc., and the women were scared to make complaints against the perpetrators due to the social stigma and shame which impacted the women victims rather than the male perpetrators. In this context, the women's usage of cars, vans, and jeeps were very limited and restricted to one class of wealthy community due to the fact that there was unfair distribution of the wealth of the country. It is a fact that females driving lorries, trucks, buses, trains, etc., are very low due to the cultural factors connected to the social construction of females' bodies and their capacities. Therefore, in this context, the introduction of scooters, mainly the Indian made low-cost scooters, made a certain percentage of women of this country to fulfil their transport needs.

The research sample consisted of only females between the ages of 24- 45 living in the suburbs of Colombo central city. Moreover, 30% of them were never married, and 70% of respondents were married, having children 1-3 in the age category of 4-16 years. Education level of the respondents was an A/L pass to a university degree. There were few employment categories, including government officers (primarily teachers and clerical staff) and self-employees (having their own business, etc.). They have been using scooters for 2-7 years. Considering the demographic background of the sample, it was notable that the experience of using a scooter has been connected with their marital status, nature of work, and number of children they have (only for those who have children). Therefore, it is evident how those have connected with socially constructed gender patterns. Most of the scooters were in orange, red, blue, and white; it is not that they selected those colours specifically but those are the colours available in the market. It is important here to see those structurally designed thinking of gendered colours. A majority of 85% claimed that they received very positive responses from their families, communities, and peers about using a scooter as a transport method.

*"I am getting different feedback from my associates of diverse age groups regarding my using a scooter. For example, people like my grandmother are not giving much better feedback; they are telling, "Are these things which women do? Do women have that much travel needs? Are they that much busy? etc., My peer groups are very interested in this; they tell me, "Wow! Can you take me on a scooter ride around the city? My parents have mixed feelings. They maintain a little worried about my safety in the context of careless male buss and lorry drivers. They always want me not to ride the scooter fast (33 year old an office lady, Colombo, 2023).*

The very decision to buy and use a scooter was connected with their gender roles; 70% of respondents claimed that the reason for using a scooter was,

- It makes their day-to-day lives easy, especially transporting their children to schools and tuition classes.
- Becoming more independent and be less dependent on their husbands.
- It is an economical mode of transport, especially in a period of severe economic pressure.
- It facilitates responding to urgent situations quicker, i.e., the family members can be taken to hospital quicker without waiting for a taxi or a three-wheeler.

Overall, the roads in the city give priority to buses, cars and vans. There are priority lanes for buses and cars. Three-wheelers, motorbikes and scooters have no lanes, and they often ride in between the lanes allocated for buses, vans and lorries. The scooter riders travel on the lines; in between two lanes making their lives very vulnerable. The research findings suggest that the females have to struggle a lot to survive in the city roads and traffic plans created honouring the male perspective. Even the city traffic operators and police officers are always predominantly males, and they monitor the movement of the traffic from male viewpoints. The results suggested that the ladies who used scooters always travelled shorter distances compared to men. Their places of work/ offices located in the local areas indicated that the care work they did was very important such as looking after their kids and elderly parents or in-laws, being responsible in sending kids to school and tuition classes, etc. Moreover, the women were frequently insecure in public spaces and in public transport and by using the scooter, they were able to increase their safety on the roads and outside their homes. They addressed the factors which made them vulnerable when moving, such as dependability, reducing the opportunity to mix up with males,



increasing the possibility of avoiding risks by using short-cuts, and getting more control over their own mobility. The female scooter riders reported that they were relatively less charged or fined by the police officers as they were a disciplined group of drivers. However, the disciplined nature of riding a scooter, i.e., respect for colour lights, rule of following the correct lane etc., made them vulnerable to accidents due to the fact that most of the male drivers did not care for such. Mostly the women scooter riders are considered as an object of creating traffic on the roads by the male drivers. Almost all the scooter riders included in the study belonged to Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups but not Muslims. The usage of scooter or motorcycle by the Muslim women is restricted by social norms.

The female scooter riders' experiences can be discussed in relation to many aspects out of which a few key areas are the economic, social, and cultural dimensions discussed below. Most of the women who are employed said that they decided to buy a scooter as it makes their travel to the office easier and affordable.

*"There is a long way to my office, where I work. I must travel by two or three buses to reach my office. The main reason for buying this scooter was to travel workplace quickly"* (30 year old an office lady, Colombo, 2023).

Since these scooters run over 40k.m. per litre of petrol, they could travel comfortably in a cost-effective manner. In general, the women are looking after the cooking, arranging breakfasts and lunches in boxes for the spouses and children to have in the workplaces and schools. They engage in both paid and unpaid work in the complex everyday life. There is a demand for punctuality and reliability in both the private and government sectors in Sri Lanka especially when recruiting a female employee. For example, they could not afford to send children late to school while at the same time meeting strict deadlines for various tasks and appointments at the office are also vital. In such a context the completion of household chores and reaching offices in time has been a challenge for women. In this context the ladies who used scooters were able to meet these challenges. Some office going ladies beginning to use scooters have motivated many other female staff members of the respective offices too.

*"I became very much independent after purchasing the scooter. Otherwise, I always have to travel with my father or another family member on a bike or by public buses. It wastes a lot of my precious time. Since I have a scooter now, I can easily attend to my daily routine independently"* (28 year old office lady, unmarried, Colombo, 2023).

When it comes to social dimensions, a lot of responsibilities fall on housewives connected to child rearing, taking them to schools and tuition classes, consulting doctors when children are sick, shopping, maintaining social relationships such as attending weddings and funerals as well as other social functions, etc. Having a scooter at home always eased the stress of women in finding a vehicle to attend their social responsibilities and important and urgent demands of the family members.

*"I'm living in my sister's home, not with my parents, my sister's husband does not come home daily, and my sister has two babies. If they are sick, we needed to wait until my father come from far away or else ask for help from my neighbors, especially in night times. In that sense, it is really useful to have a scooter"* (25 year old unmarried woman, employee in a private sector, 2023).

*"I can travel any urgent matter very quickly. It is the same if my children ask me to come to school in an emergency. It saves money and time; it consumes only a small amount of petrol compared with a three-wheelers. I can save endless waiting time for three wheelers to come. I must travel approximately 1 km to get a bus, compared to that, it is easy to use a scooter. No need to wait long hours for buses"* (32 year married lady, private sector employee, Colombo 2023).

These ladies often travel in a chain rather than simply commuting home directly. They make several stops on their way back home. Some ladies who took part in the study picked up children from the schools and tuition classes, did shopping and visited the doctors on their return home from the offices or places of work.

*"I received 100% positive feedback. Especially my Montessori for bringing the child on time. I*



*am so happy about that. Family members were happy since I did not have to spend much money on there-wheelers; I spent a lot on three-wheelers. My little kids were so happy since they could go to tuition classes with me on scooter. The best example is that both got high marks in their grade 5 scholarship examination and entered Colombo schools; all because of my bike” (35-year-old married lady, a housewife, Colombo, 2023).*

The scooters helped women to maintain their social image as a “good” woman. In general, the South Asian societies married women are expected to be very much physically closer to the legally married person only, which could not be maintained in the public transport services due to the high demand. The passengers are overcrowded and most of them travel even on footboards, which is banned even in the traffic laws. When women travel in the public buses they are exposed to various harassments by the male passengers. Most of the ladies exposed to such situations never complain, as such complaints will become a stigma for women rather than creating a safer environment for them to live in. In most of the situations, even the husbands have started suspecting their wives unnecessarily when such issues are reported more often. The office ladies who used scooters were able to maintain their clean character, free of undue remarks and gossips by other women compared to those who travel by staff service providing vans or buses or public buses.

*“My husband is living abroad. Therefore, having this bike is a great strength for me to meet my daily routine. This bike is the one which I am using for everything in my home; I’m even conducting tuition classes. I did not think I could ride a bike before I bought this. I did not even have a foot bicycle before... This bike is the highest strength for my professional and family life” (35 year old married woman, a tuition class teacher, Colombo 2023).*

However, the women who used scooters happened to successfully negotiate their softness, culturally defined docile and secondary statuses compared with men in order to be a better rider on the roads. Mostly the roads in Sri Lanka have become places for competitions to get the road cleared to move faster. In this competition, the motorcyclists or scooter riders are a disadvantaged group. To survive within this competitive environment women, have to be tough.

## CONCLUSIONS

In general, women who live in the South Asian patriarchal society inherits a second-class status compared with men. A woman’s work and financial status, self-image and self-esteem, value and recognition and social identity is based on the male members. In such context mobility, both the physical and social mobility, is also determined by the patriarchal value system. This study focused on their physical mobility which cannot be considered as a gender-neutral concept. The gender stereotypes and roles that members learn via their gender socialization during childhood has an impact on shaping the transport choices of the young and older ages. In Sri Lanka, an insignificant percentage of women engage in the transport industry related careers such as bus drivers and conductors, train drivers, taxi drivers etc. Therefore, a technical and a stereotypical male point of view dominates the mobility planning of citizens in Sri Lanka. The study reveals how a group of women, mostly office ladies, have started re-negotiating the male dominant mobility culture in Sri Lanka in a manner that does not disturb their social image as women. The study reveals that the introduction of affordable technology such as scooters enables women to be successful in deciding their own mode of mobility and to be a successful woman in their work and family life. The research further reveals the need of making the transport system in Sri Lanka more sustainable and inclusive and emphasize the want of an inclusive perspective on the mobility of citizens.

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