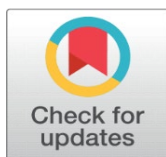
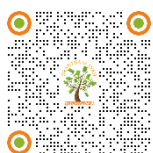


# FEMALE AUTO-DRIVERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL LIVELIHOOD IN THANE DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

This was an exploratory, descriptive, non-experimental study of women auto rickshaw drivers in Thane district. The study focuses on the reason women chose this profession and the problems they face in this job. Findings reveal that majority women entered this profession due to their family's financial instability and benefitted from the job in terms of financial self-reliance and fulfilling the family's basic needs. However, collective efforts like social awareness, government intervention, advocacy and research are required to make their work conditions and experiences better.

**Keywords:** Women Auto Rickshaw Drivers, Challenges, Advocacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In metropolitan areas, autos are a branch of the public transport system, and in smaller cities they are the main means of public transportation. Similarly, in rural and semi-urban areas, they are often the only means of public transportation that provides both personal and shared services. Auto-rickshaws provide flexible, low-cost mobility in most Indian cities with less waiting time and faster, door to door service at reasonable cost.

Auto rickshaws are an integral part of suburban commuting in Mumbai. And female auto drivers (FADs) are as much a novelty as their vehicle is ubiquitous. FADs

in Mumbai operate only in Thane district. The purpose of this study was to understand FADs' opportunities and challenges in this non-traditional livelihood.

The word auto driver is loosely translated in Hindi as 'auto wala'- masculine in gender. Shila Dawre was the first FAD in India in 1988. There is no exact number available for FADs.

However, most female auto drivers do not have their own vehicles and drive rental vehicles. This is mainly due to the lack of bank financing options and/or the high cost of self-financing. In addition, the lack of supervision has also led to the economic exploitation of drivers by middlemen.

However, the non-traditional livelihood of a FAD challenges patriarchal social norms and could empower both women and men.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to [Harding et al. \(2016\)](#), despite the important role they play in urban transportation in India, auto rickshaws and their drivers face a lot of criticism from the public (they overcharge, drive rashly at times), the media (their vehicles are unsafe and polluting and are the main cause of traffic congestion), and policy makers (not considering the viewpoints of drivers or public) ([Harding et al, 2016](#)).

[Anustruthy \(2016\)](#) in her study on a profile of auto-rickshaw drivers in Mumbai from the Human Development approach with a special focus on the issue of migration. The study revealed the impact of migration on their living conditions, work conditions, health, and sanitation and how remittances were sent back home. Also, how the community linkages determined the pattern of migration and employment, especially in the informal sector.

Most auto drivers belonged to another state and came to Mumbai for a job. Most stayed in chawls in poor living conditions and lacked basic health facilities. Political parties did not support them either. Most were from Uttar Pradesh. 94% worked in the day, 65% had means of recreation, 65% were middle aged, 68% were Hindu. Their chief concerns were income, health, education, recreation, and inclusion [Anustruthy \(2016\)](#).

[Shlaes and Mani \(2013\)](#) describe the Mumbai public transport as highly stressed. Auto-rickshaws thus supplement public transport, especially from users' homes to train stations. And this occupation is complicated and stressful. Their study reveals that problems are under three heads, namely passengers (rudeness and poor behaviour), drivers, and the government (unnecessary fines and other forms of harassment by police and traffic police, lack of parking, lack of permits). It must focus on driver training, enhanced infrastructure, and enforcement, permit and repair, and driver engagement. 80% respondents rented their auto and only 20% had their own auto. They spent almost 10 hours a day driving [Shlaes and Mani \(2013\)](#).

In his study on FADs in Ernakulam, Kerala, Jithu TV studied the reasons behind women selecting this job. He found that it was nearly impossible for women to operate heavy vehicles due to structural reasons like getting a license or ensuring their safety. Hence, they chose the easier option of driving an auto. Interestingly, they get paid the same as men. This is because this profession pays according to distance covered and duration of travel. However, the women reported getting less respect [Jithu \(2018\)](#).

It can thus be concluded that women's interests and needs are different and have been underrepresented in urban as well as rural transport and development policies.

### **3. RATIONALE**

There is little research done on FADs because of their small number and geographical limitations of driving within particular localities. The community of auto drivers is already seen as greedy, lazy, and unsafe in popular perception. Within this labelled community is a minority of women who face numerous challenges rooted in both public behaviour and policy making. FADs lack not just social but also financial and legal support simply because of their choices of livelihood. This research aims to highlight the problems faced by FADs, their perspectives, and their recommendations for addressing the same.

### **4. OBJECTIVES**

- To study the socio-economic background of FADs in Thane District.
- To identify the motivation, opportunities and challenges faced by these women.
- To understand societal perception of these women.

### **5. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study is quantitative, descriptive, and non-experimental. A quantitative design was selected because the study seeks to identify the experiences of FADs and their response. Also, little research has been done on this topic. Since the researcher is an outsider to the respondents' setting, the research also seeks confirmation for findings and reliability. The data was collected at the respondents' home/auto stand amidst their natural environment without any manipulation.

### **6. SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

There were two sources of information for this research: primary and secondary. The primary source was data collected from the respondents and the secondary sources were articles, research, journals, books and websites.

### **7. SAMPLING DESIGN**

The researcher approached FADs in Badlapur, Ambarnath, Ulhasnagar, Vitthalwadi, Kalyan and Dombivali. The contacts and respondents from these sources led to further respondents. Thus, the researcher has used non-probability and snowball sampling. This is because the number of FADs is rather small and strongly labelled and all are not registered in a data base. The researcher interviewed thirty respondents.

### **8. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS**

An interview schedule was prepared for the data collection according to the objectives of the study which included open and closed ended questions. The data collection tool was prepared in English, but the questions were asked to the respondents in the language spoken by them - Marathi. The schedule also included consent form for obtaining consent from the respondents.

## **9. SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study explores the socio-economic and geographical background of FADs in Thane District. It further explores the motivation, opportunities and challenges faced by these women. Lastly, this research discusses the societal perception of these women.

## **10. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This research has respondents of a similar socio-economic profile and all are from Thane district. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised to similar women in other cities.

Also, these respondents are a numerical minority for which there is no official data base. Hence, the size of the universe is uncertain and the sample small. There is also a lack of sufficient research studies on the subject.

Thirdly, in order to ensure that this research does not come across as a one-sided description of an entire community, the researcher wanted to organise a focus group discussion with the other stake holders such as male auto drivers. However, due to the pandemic this was not possible.

## **11. MAJOR FINDINGS**

### **11.1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS**

57 percent respondents were aged between 21 to 40 years and 43 between 41 to 60. 73 percent were married, 7 percent were unmarried, and 20 percent were widows. 63 percent had studied up to secondary level, 27 percent till higher secondary, 7 percent till graduation and only 1 respondent completed post-graduation. 90 percent respondents were Hindus, 7 percent respondents Muslims and 3 percent Christian. 40 percent respondent were from Scheduled Castes, 7 percent from Scheduled Tribes, 23 percent from OBCs, 10 percent from NT-DNT and 20 percent from open category. Only 1 respondent's monthly family income was above Rs. 30,000. 13 respondents had a monthly income between Rs. 10,000-15,000, 13 respondents between five to ten thousand Rupees and 2 below Rs. Five thousand a month. 67 percent respondents had their own house whereas 33 percent were living in a rented house. 50 percent respondents lived in apartments, 43 percent in semi constructed houses and 7 percent in "Pucca" houses. 66% respondents had 3-5 members in their family, 27% had 4 members and 7% had 1 other member. 53 percent respondents had 2 earning member in their family including themselves. 40 percent respondents were the only source of income for their family. Only 7 percent had 3 earning members in their family.

57 percent respondents joined this profession because of financial need, 20 percent to do something new, 13 percent because they love to drive, 3 percent were influenced by other female auto drivers and 7 percent because they had few job opportunities in their localities. 37 percent respondents had been working as an auto rickshaw driver for 2-3 years, 27 percent for 1-2 years, and 13 percent for 3-4 years. Only 10 percent respondents had spent 4-5 years in this job. 7 percent respondents had started a few months ago. Only 2 respondents had been driving an auto from last 5 to 7 years. 45 percent respondents learnt auto driving from their husbands, 22 percent from their relatives, and 20 percent from male auto drivers who were paid for it. Only 6.5 percent respondents had joined a training school.

Another 6.5 percent respondent learnt from experienced female auto drivers. All respondents stayed about 10-15 minutes from their place of work.

53 percent respondents had tried other jobs before driving autos, ranging from domestic worker, job at a company, graphic designer, staff at health clinic, security guard, caretaker, shop keeper etc, before driving autos. 13 percent had had their own business-like tuition teacher, running a snack shop, estate agent and tailoring etc. The remaining 34 percent were home makers.

**"I worked as a graphic designer for two years in Mumbai, but my salary did not match my work. Later I search for a job in many places but despite my education I did not get the job I wanted".**

**Respondent, age 36**

70 percent respondents had taken a loan for purchasing their auto and were repaying the loan and only 30 percent respondents had their own auto.

30 percent respondents had paid their vehicle loan. 3 percent paid up to 1000 rupees per month, 10 percent from 3001 to 4000 rupees, 14 percent up to 5000 rupees, 20 percent up to 6000 per month, and 23 percent up to 7000 rupees per month.

All 30 respondent (100 percent) had vehicle insurance.

33.3 percent respondent earned 401 to 500 rupees per day. 26.7 earned 201 to 300 per day. 20 percent earned 301 to 400 rupees. 6.7 percent respondents earned 501 to 600 rupees. 1 respondent earned 101 to 200 rupees, 1 601 to 700 rupees, 1 801 to 900 rupees and 1 respondent earned rupees 901 to 1000 per day.

60 percent respondents worked 6 to 10 hours a day. 23 percent worked up to 5 hours in a day and 17 percent around 11 to 15 hours a day.

100 percent said they don't have a fixed time for auto driving - they chose this occupation because it is flexible.

Half the respondents don't take a regular holiday, they take one only in case of an emergency or their illness. 27 percent respondents took a holiday on every Sunday. 10 percent respondents took holiday on every Saturday and Sunday. 3 percent respondent took holiday only on Fridays and remaining 10 percent took holiday only on festivals.

14 respondents felt the biggest advantage of auto driving was becoming self-employed. According to 12 respondents, another great advantage was financial support to their family. 10 respondents appreciated the flexibility of the job, given their household responsibilities. 2 respondents said they were appreciated by their family and society whereas 2 respondents didn't see any advantage in this profession.

10 respondents said one big disadvantage of this profession was misbehavior and disrespect by male auto drivers and male passengers. 8 respondent felt high risk of road accidents was another big disadvantage. 11 respondents saw no major disadvantage of this occupation. 2 respondents said that no separate auto stand for women was a disadvantage. 9 respondents said that there was no fixed income.

## **11.2. IMPACT OF AUTO RICKSHAW DRIVING ON WOMEN'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH**

67 percent respondents faced physical problems during driving such as back pain, joint pain etc. 17 percent respondent faced mental stress, especially society's

perception of them. 8 percent respondents mentioned safety issues, passengers paying less etc. 8 percent respondents had not faced any kind of problem.

87 percent respondents did not drive an auto in the night because of safety issues. 13 percent respondents drove at night only in an emergency.

12 respondents received disrespect and discouragement from the society when driving an auto for the first time. 4 respondents didn't get approval from the family in the beginning. 16 respondents got encouragement from society as their first reaction whereas 3 respondents received reaction of surprise and shock.

80 percent respondents got appreciation and respect from passengers but 20 percent faced misbehaviour and disrespect from passengers, especially male passengers.

53 percent respondents didn't get support from male auto drivers (MADs) who also misbehaved with them. 40 percent respondents said male auto drivers are very supportive. 7 percent respondents believed that MADs reciprocated FADs' behavior.

93 percent respondents got support from traffic police whereas only 7 percent respondents did not.

25 respondents found themselves independent and confident after choosing this profession. 5 respondents were happy because they were the income earner in the family. 3 respondents were able to take their own decisions.

77 percent respondents were satisfied with this profession whereas 7 percent respondents were not.

### **11.3. RESPONDENTS' MOTIVATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

According to 29 respondent, anyone who wanted to get into auto rickshaw driving needs to have basic primary education. But according to 1 respondent, now no educational qualification is needed to apply for the permit.

16 respondents felt that whenever a woman enters this profession, she must be strong and confident. 11 respondents said that women should not tolerate misbehaviour by anyone. 5 respondents feel women must have persistence and patience in this job. 3 respondents felt women required humility and control over anger after entering this job. 4 respondents said women should keep their reputation clean. 3 respondents said women must learn to ignore comments by society and MADs. 2 respondents felt that women must take care of their health. 2 respondents felt women should wear their uniform. 1 respondent felt women need to be aware of their surroundings and good knowledge about roads.

57 percent respondents wanted to revert to home making if they could not drive any longer. 20 percent respondents preferred a job in that scenario and 23 percent entrepreneurship.

97 percent respondents said they would love to refer other women to take up rickshaw driving and only 3% said they would not.

70 percent respondents wanted a separate stand for women auto drivers and 15 percent a women's toilet near every auto stand. 3 percent respondents wanted banks to reduce their loan EMI. 12 percent respondent expected the same amount of respect as male auto drivers.

#### **11.4. SOCIETY'S PERCEPTION OF FADS**

The five major reasons behind women driving autos are financial instability at home, need for self-sufficiency, hobby, motivation by other FAD, and less job opportunities.

17 respondents worked because their husbands were unemployed. Some were widows and were responsible for the whole family. 6 respondents wanted to be self-employed. 4 Respondents had driving as a hobby. 2 respondents felt there were few job opportunities.

All FADs had to complete their household chores like cleaning and cooking before they left for work. They continued with these chores even after returning from work. One respondent even runs a snack shop in addition to rickshaw driving.

**"Women are better at multi-tasking than men."**

**Respondent, age 34**

Rickshaw driving is a daily wages job and hence does not provide a regular income. Also, it was one of the worst hit during the lockdown. It is also non-traditional. All the above factors reduce family support for women taking it up. Another major issue is safety.

**"Before Covid, I earned 600 -800 rupees daily, during Covid it decreased to 100- 200 rupees per day."**

**Respondent, age 32**

**"Because most auto drivers are men, a woman driver is allowed to take passengers only after 10-15 men drivers have taken theirs. This means a waiting time of about 30 minutes. If I need to use a washroom, I have to walk 10-15 minutes one-way to my home and then stand in line again."**

**Respondent, age 37**

**"Initially MADs caused a lot of trouble they abused us and even punctured the tires of our autos."**

**Respondent, age 38**

A FAD was complimented by a passenger – You drive very safely and nicely. Many passenger clicks selfies with FADs. Sometimes people give extra money with appreciation. Female passengers feel safer with FADs.

**"MADs bad mouth us and our work because people think only men can drive."**

**Respondent, age 31**

**"I faced many problems but was consistent - and today I can't believe I have my own house and that too in a building!"**

**Respondent, age 44**

One FAD said she did not want a separate rickshaw stand because MADs respected and helped her in times of need. They don't misbehave unless provoked by FADs.

#### **12. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings prove that a majority of the respondents are unaware of government schemes, which has allowed MADs to dominate them. The respondents suggested that the discrimination first has to be acknowledged and discussed for which the women and the MADs and community need to come together. Many felt

that acceptance for such non-traditionally employed women is overdue, including women industrial workers. In conclusion however, most respondents felt that FADs should not give in and should fight for their rights.

- 1) Awareness generation among FADs about government welfare schemes and financial aid, especially loan subsidy.
- 2) Gender sensitization among male auto drivers and family members of FADs.
- 3) FGDs among male and female youth on work and gender
- 4) Advocacy for separate rickshaw stands for FADs with separate restrooms.
- 5) Outfitting women driven autos with GPS for their safety.
- 6) Communication and conflict resolution skills for FADs.
- 7) Community outreach and more training institutes to train more women.
- 8) Research on concerns of husbands and children of FADs.
- 9) Forming associations of FADs and advocacy for their demands like separate stands with women's toilets.

### **13. CONCLUSION**

According to the findings, it is clear that FAD received trainings from majority of Men. Women getting support and help from men them to come forward and break gender stereotypes.

War is often understood as being played across a geo-political landscape but like most social conflict, it's based on resources and access to them. Interestingly, there were men secure enough in their masculinity that they would not just teach but also support MADs. On the other spectrum were FADs who said that before driving they did 'nothing' at home. This conflict of the sexes based on gendering of work is a fundamental inequality that gives rise to conflict over resources and that too in the basic unit of society. It perpetuates itself from family to the mezzo level where women's education and their job profiles and their salaries are mismatched. These are the smaller wars taking place on our turfs – they are less visible but no less impactful.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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