



# POLICY BRIEF



## Women on Wheels in New Delhi, India: Empowering Women Through an Innovative Training and Employment Program.

Much greater attention is currently being paid to reducing urban poverty than in previous decades, but large-scale job training and livelihood programs still tend to be skewed in favour of men. To help address this gap, Women on Wheels trains and employs poor urban women as chauffeurs and taxi drivers in New Delhi, India.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Women face tremendous social and cultural barriers in entering traditionally male-dominated fields unless there is specific access to placement services in place, as well as support for coping with broader social and economic constraints. The limited number of income-generation and skill development programs available to poor urban women in India tend to focus on stereotypically female occupations such as beautician training, tailoring and embroidery (Vadera 2013).

### KEY RESULTS

Since becoming involved with Women on Wheels, the drivers interviewed for this research report:

- Improved livelihoods and better access to economic opportunities.
- Increased ability to make important decisions about their lives and those of their children.
- Increased mobility, visibility and confidence, leading to an enhanced sense of belonging and entitlement to public services and benefits.
- Less restrictive familial and societal attitudes about women's employment and mobility alongside persistence of entrenched gender norms and attitudes about women's domestic responsibilities.

There are virtually no opportunities for disadvantaged urban women with limited education and socio-economic resources to acquire skills in more lucrative growing fields such as transportation, warehousing and skilled construction work (Chen 2008; Baruah 2010).

To help address this issue, an initiative called Women on Wheels (WOW) trains and employs poor urban women as chauffeurs and taxi drivers in New Delhi, India. Launched in 2008, WOW's work is made possible by two organizations: a non-profit called Azad Foundation that provides professional driving training and also organizes chauffeur placement services for women after they acquire their licenses; and a for-profit taxi company, Sakha Cabs, that employs drivers trained by its sister NGO.

It takes between 8 to 10 months for women to complete WOW's driving program and become skilled employable chauffeurs. Driving skills, customer service and English language training (a requirement for social mobility in India) is provided in-house by Azad Foundation. Gender equality, legal rights, assertiveness training and counselling services are provided by an NGO called Jagori; and self-defense skills are taught by the Women's Cell of the Delhi Police. The total cost of the training program varies between USD \$680 and \$850 per woman.

Since most women are very interested in becoming professional drivers but cannot afford to give up their daily wages to join the training, Azad Foundation seeks out subsidies or fee waivers for such trainees through private donors and corporations. Additionally, Azad can provide trainees with a one-time interest-free subsistence loan of up to USD \$200 that they can pay back upon completing the training and finding a placement.

In its first year of operation, Azad Foundation trained 9 women. Over the past three years more than 100 women have registered, 80 have completed training, and 35 have been employed as drivers with Sakha Cabs or placed as chauffeurs. Another 100 women are currently in various stages of the training.

Azad Foundation's work is currently supported by two UK-based charities, iPartner and Human Dignity Foundation. The WOW initiative also raises money through corporate social responsibility initiatives, individual donors, and crowdfunding. Other, often better resourced entities - including development organizations, government agencies and private sector firms - have been unwilling or hesitant to support WOW's work due to concerns over the high program costs and the small numbers of women Azad has trained so far. Getting potential funders to appreciate the value of making a large difference in the lives of a small number of women, while growing the program slowly to reach more women with all its depth and detail intact, has been a persistent challenge for Azad Foundation.

Although the long-term viability of the WOW initiative is difficult to predict, together Sakha Cabs and Azad Foundation make up an innovative hybrid institutional model of entities that are independent but also interdependent for impact and financial sustainability. There are plans to introduce the WOW initiative in three other cities in India (Gurgaon, Jaipur and Kolkata) using a similar model.

To study the opportunities and constraints of the WOW initiative, researcher Bipasha Baruah (University of Western Ontario) conducted empirical research with women drivers in New Delhi.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The research for this study included several components. First, in-depth interviews were conducted in New Delhi in 2012 and 2013 with all seven drivers employed at the time by Sakha Cabs, as well as interviews with the founder, the chief operating officer and two other staff members of the WOW initiative. Next, secondary sources were consulted, including mainstream media coverage of WOW from India, North America and Europe, and a publication called *Women with Wings: Stories about Women Drivers* (Dogra and Mehta 2012) about the lives of 50 women who trained as commercial taxi drivers and personal chauffeurs with Azad Foundation. Finally, there is an informal participant-observation component to this research, involving extended conversations with the women drivers and observations recorded while driving around New Delhi.

## KEY FINDINGS

By putting women in charge of a technology to which they had no previous access, WOW not only creates dependable livelihood opportunities that enable women to permanently escape lives of poverty and indignity, it also challenges deep-rooted gender and class stereotypes and barriers. Several challenges simultaneously exist that can prevent initiatives like WOW from being sustainable.

Since becoming involved with WOW, the drivers interviewed for this research report:

### **Improved livelihoods and better access to economic opportunities.**

The women drivers who work with Sakha Cabs earn a starting monthly salary of USD \$100 with guaranteed 10 percent annual raises and a package of other benefits such as health care and contributions towards a national pension plan. The average monthly starting salary earned by a chauffeur almost immediately makes her a co-breadwinner, if not the primary breadwinner in the family.

### **Increased ability to make important decisions about their lives and those of their children.**

The higher incomes, job security and social status derived from commercial driving have enabled women to make empowering decisions in their personal lives including leaving abusive marriages, reporting abuse to police, filing for separation or divorce, assuming primary financial responsibility for children, enrolling or re-enrolling children and younger siblings in school, providing financial support to aging parents, building new homes and upgrading old ones.

### **Increased mobility, visibility and confidence, leading to an enhanced sense of belonging and entitlement to public services and benefits.**

Prior to getting their licenses, none of the women would have been able to offer any proof of identity even though such documents are a prerequisite for accessing various rights and entitlements. For people who have never possessed any proof of identity, a driver's license can represent a form of government-approved recognition of personhood that can then open other doors. Even women who, for various reasons, ended up not working as commercial drivers after getting their licenses indicated that they regularly used their licenses as proof of identity for purposes such as opening bank accounts and accessing utilities and services such as water connections and mobile phones.

### **Less restrictive familial and societal attitudes about women's employment and mobility alongside persistence of entrenched gender norms and attitudes about women's domestic responsibilities.**

Although they continued to shoulder much of the responsibility for childcare and household maintenance, the women also emphasized that other family members had become more willing to share responsibility for domestic chores once the women started earning higher incomes from commercial driving. Women who train as commercial drivers simultaneously face challenges on many fronts: scepticism or ridicule from family and friends, deep-rooted social prejudices against women drivers, balancing long working hours with family responsibilities, and lack of a sense of community beyond their peers in the program. Importantly, none of the women interviewed for this research perceived these challenges as insurmountable or permanent; they were all very optimistic that social attitudes toward female drivers would change over time as more of them got behind the wheel.

## **POLICY INSIGHTS**

Several policy lessons emerge from this research and may be useful for decision-makers and funding organizations.

### **For initiatives like WOW to be successful, it is important to think beyond replicating and "scaling up" to consider the depth of the influence ("scaling deep") in people's lives.**

The high program costs and the small numbers of women Azad has trained so far are easily invoked as impediments for scaling up the program, and as reasons not to provide financial support. But the fact that WOW is designed to work with small numbers of women in each training cycle should be perceived as a strength and not a weakness of the program since it is precisely the focus on detail and depth of impact that makes the transformative differences in the lives of women and their families. Moreover, from a purely economic standpoint, the total cost of the training (USD \$850) is easily recovered by the trainees within a year of working as a chauffeur or taxi driver. There are very few existing livelihood programs that can make this claim.

An obsession with "cost effectiveness" and "scale" can delegitimize the valuable work of organizations like WOW. The depth of the impact an intervention has in people's lives must also be considered a critical factor in promoting gender equality and social change. Delivering quick, measurable results in large numbers is very different from delivering long-lasting development impact.

### **Funding organizations must question the practice of working only with big institutions.**

It is easier and much cheaper to provide large amounts of money to a few institutions than providing smaller amounts to a larger number of institutions. However, the practice of privileging logistical convenience over effectiveness often results in smaller institutions working on new and innovative initiatives being denied the opportunity to create very meaningful differences in people's lives. There will always be a need for large-scale programs in development but instead of always spending millions of dollars in one place, going forward we must figure out how to spend 100K in ten different places.

### **The benefits women derive from initiatives like WOW can only find optimal traction within the context of a wider and more comprehensive social security infrastructure.**

It is important to emphasize that the increased access to income, familial support and social networks enjoyed by women who work as commercial drivers does not in any way minimize the need for the state to create adequate



social security floors to protect against vagaries in the job market, illness, maternity, old age, job losses and other risks to people's well-being.

### **Individual empowerment and collective empowerment are actually quite compatible.**

The purpose of this research was certainly not to argue that initiatives like WOW, which adopt features typical of neoliberal development projects - such as corporate social responsibility contributions and a for-profit component, and that seek to empower smaller numbers of women individually as workers and entrepreneurs - are "better" in any way than organizations like the Self-Employed Women's Association and Working Women's Forum that focus on unionization, establishment of cooperatives and other grassroots mobilizing strategies in order to empower much larger groups of women. An important lesson that emerges from this research seems to be that similar social and economic outcomes can be accomplished using individual and collective strategies. The two may not be as different and diametrically opposed as they are often made out to be in the development literature, and they certainly do not have to be mutually exclusive.

*This brief was authored by B. Baruah and designed by K. Grantham. It draws on key findings of their working paper, "Women on Wheels in New Delhi, India: empowering women through an innovative training and employment program."*

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