

# Breaking Gender Barriers: Lived Experiences of Women Bus Conductors in Transportation Cooperatives in Pampanga, Philippines

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**Abstract**—This study explores the lived experiences of female bus conductors in transportation cooperatives in the Philippines, a traditionally male-dominated occupation. Using a qualitative descriptive design, in-depth interviews were conducted with five purposively selected participants to examine their motivations, daily work experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions from the public. Thematic analysis revealed that economic necessity and family responsibilities were the primary reasons for entering the profession. While some male colleagues and passengers were supportive, participants reported gender-based harassment, lack of gender-sensitive facilities, and the additional burden of balancing household responsibilities with long working hours. Public perception often emphasized women's politeness and empathy, creating extra emotional labor expectations. The absence of formal gender-responsive policies in cooperatives was identified as a significant gap. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions such as safe infrastructure, anti-harassment mechanisms, flexible work arrangements, and leadership development opportunities to promote equity and inclusivity in the transport sector.

**Keywords**— women bus conductors, transportation cooperatives, gender stereotypes, workplace challenges, Philippines, qualitative research.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In many parts of Pampanga and nearby provinces, public utility buses remain a common mode of transportation for workers, students, vendors, and commuters traveling daily between municipalities and cities. Within this environment, women bus conductors are gradually becoming more visible despite longstanding beliefs that transportation jobs are more suitable for men. Their presence reflects the changing role of women in society, where they are no longer confined to household responsibilities but are also active contributors to family income and community development.

Many female conductors shared that financial difficulties, children's education, household expenses, and the need to help their spouses pushed them to enter the transportation sector. Some were encouraged by relatives or acquaintances already working in transportation cooperatives, which is common in Pampanga where employment opportunities are often shared through family and community networks.

Despite proving that they can perform the same responsibilities as men, women conductors continue to face challenges in their daily work. These include verbal harassment from passengers, physical exhaustion from long routes, lack of proper restroom facilities at terminals, and the pressure of

balancing work and household duties. In busy terminals and highways similar to those in San Fernando, Angeles, or nearby towns, female conductors often work long hours under extreme heat while still expected to remain patient and courteous toward passengers.

## II. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive research approach was employed in this study, per Sandelowski (2000). This approach was used because it provides a thorough, straightforward description of the daily lives of women who work for transportation cooperatives as bus conductors.

### A. Sample

Five female bus conductors who are now working for various Philippine transportation cooperatives made up the study's participants. To make sure that participants were actively involved in the public transportation industry and could offer pertinent insights into the opportunities and challenges within their roles, a purposive sample technique was employed. Having at least a year of experience as a bus conductor and being willing to take part in the interviews were requirements for selection. The comparatively small sample size aligns with qualitative research methodologies, which prioritize understanding depth above generalizability.

### B. Instrument

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide to serve as the primary instrument for data gathering. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to openly share and elaborate on their lived experiences, perspectives, and personal insights as women bus conductors in transportation cooperatives. The guide covered topics such as personal background, motivations for entering the transportation industry, daily work routines, workplace interactions, gender-related challenges, coping mechanisms, and future aspirations.

To strengthen the quality and organization of the interview instrument, the researchers utilized AI-assisted tools, particularly ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026), in generating preliminary interview question formats, refining question flow, and improving the clarity and comprehensiveness of the guide. The AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed, revised, and contextualized by the researchers to ensure alignment with

the objectives of the study and the local transportation setting in the Philippines, particularly in Pampanga.

Furthermore, the interview guide underwent validation by experts in gender studies, sociology, and qualitative research to ensure its relevance, clarity, cultural appropriateness, and consistency with the study's research objectives. Their recommendations helped enhance the appropriateness and sensitivity of the questions, ensuring that participants could comfortably and meaningfully share their experiences.

### C. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted through face-to-face interactions with the participants, considering their availability and work schedules. Several interviews were specifically carried out within bus terminals and transportation cooperative stations to allow the researchers to observe the participants' actual working environment and daily experiences as bus conductors. Conducting the interviews in the terminal setting provided richer and more authentic insights into the realities, challenges, and interactions encountered by women in the transportation sector, particularly in busy routes and terminals similar to those in Pampanga, Philippines.

To foster a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere for sharing, the interviews were conducted conversationally, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes. Participants were encouraged to openly discuss their personal experiences, workplace interactions, gender-related challenges, coping mechanisms, and future aspirations. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and were later transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Throughout the entire data collection process, strict ethical considerations were observed, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, informed consent, and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

### D. Data Analysis

The study utilized Thematic Analysis following the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to systematically examine and interpret the participants' lived experiences as women bus conductors in transportation cooperatives. The analysis process began with repeated and careful reading of the interview transcripts to achieve data familiarization and gain a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives, emotions, and experiences within their actual work environments.

After familiarization, the researchers conducted systematic coding by identifying significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful segments related to the participants' motivations, workplace experiences, gender-related challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions from passengers and coworkers. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories and patterns, which later evolved into major themes that represented the central realities and lived experiences of the participants in the transportation sector.

To ensure a more organized and efficient analysis process, manual coding was supplemented with the use of NVivo software for data management, categorization, and theme organization. In addition, AI-assisted tools such as ChatGPT

(OpenAI, 2026) were utilized to support the preliminary organization of thematic patterns, improve coding consistency, and assist in refining thematic descriptions. However, all interpretations, theme generation, and final analyses remained researcher-driven to preserve the authenticity, contextual relevance, and credibility of the participants' voices and experiences.

The trustworthiness and credibility of the findings were further strengthened through peer debriefing, reflective discussions among the researchers, and consultation with qualitative research experts. These validation processes helped ensure that the generated themes accurately represented the participants' perspectives and were aligned with the objectives and context of the study, particularly within the transportation setting in the Philippines.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. Results

The findings revealed that women entered the transportation sector primarily because of financial necessity and family responsibilities. In many cases, participants became bus conductors to help support household expenses, children's education, daily living costs, and medical needs. For example, one participant from a transportation cooperative in Pampanga shared that after her husband lost his job during the pandemic, she accepted work as a bus conductor to help sustain their family's income. Another participant explained that she became interested in the job after observing a female relative successfully working in the same cooperative, demonstrating how personal referrals and informal community networks often influence employment opportunities in local transportation settings.

Workplace experiences varied among the participants. Some male drivers and conductors were supportive and treated female coworkers with respect. One participant recalled how an experienced driver patiently guided her during her first weeks on the job, teaching her how to manage passengers, handle fare collections, and respond calmly during stressful situations. However, not all experiences were positive. Another participant shared that some coworkers doubted women's abilities to handle physically demanding routes and occasionally made discouraging or inappropriate remarks about women working in transportation.

The absence of gender-sensitive facilities further increased the physical and emotional strain of the job. Several participants described situations in crowded bus terminals where they had difficulty finding clean and private restrooms, especially during long provincial routes. One participant mentioned having to wait for extended periods before locating a secure restroom during trips between Pampanga and nearby provinces, causing discomfort and exhaustion during working hours.

Most participants observed that passengers generally viewed female conductors positively. Many commuters described them as more patient, polite, approachable, and attentive compared to some male conductors. For instance, one participant shared that elderly passengers and students often preferred interacting with her because she communicated calmly and respectfully. However, these positive perceptions

also created additional emotional expectations. Participants felt pressured to remain composed and accommodating even when dealing with rude passengers, stressful traffic situations, or personal fatigue.

The study also identified several workplace difficulties, including verbal harassment from passengers, occasional disrespect from coworkers, long working hours, and the challenge of balancing employment with domestic responsibilities. One participant shared that after completing an exhausting day shift, she still needed to prepare meals, assist her children with schoolwork, and manage household chores upon returning home. Another participant recalled experiencing inappropriate comments from intoxicated passengers during evening trips, making her feel uncomfortable and unsafe while working.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and determination through various coping strategies. Many relied on family encouragement, prayer, self-motivation, and friendships with supportive coworkers to continue working in the industry. Some participants expressed pride in becoming role models for younger women interested in entering non-traditional occupations. One participant stated that seeing more women confidently working in transportation inspired her to encourage other young women in Pampanga to pursue jobs traditionally dominated by men.

However, despite their perseverance and dedication, participants emphasized that transportation cooperatives still lack formal gender-responsive policies that ensure women's safety, equal opportunities, and professional growth. The absence of clear anti-harassment mechanisms, designated rest facilities, flexible schedules, and leadership opportunities reflects a significant institutional gap that continues to limit women's full participation and advancement within the transportation sector in the Philippines.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that female bus conductors are gradually breaking long-standing gender stereotypes within the traditionally male-dominated transportation sector. In many transportation cooperatives in the Philippines, particularly in provincial settings such as Pampanga, women are increasingly taking on roles previously associated only with men. Most participants entered the profession primarily because of financial responsibilities, the need to support their children's education, rising household expenses, and their desire to become financially independent. For instance, one participant shared that she decided to work as a bus conductor after her family struggled financially following the loss of her spouse's income. Another participant explained that the job gave her a sense of pride because she was able to contribute equally to her family's needs while proving that women are capable of handling demanding transportation work.

Despite their growing participation, workplace conditions often remain inadequate in addressing women's safety, health, and overall well-being. Similar to findings from studies conducted in India, Nigeria, and Colombia, female workers in Philippine transportation cooperatives continue to face structural barriers such as insufficient terminal facilities, lack of

private restrooms, absence of secure resting spaces, and limited access to formal grievance or harassment reporting mechanisms. One participant recalled experiencing discomfort during long provincial trips because terminals lacked clean and safe restrooms for women employees. Another participant shared that although some male coworkers were respectful and supportive, others still questioned women's capabilities in handling physically demanding routes and crowded commuter situations.

Participants also emphasized that female conductors are often expected to display greater patience, politeness, and emotional control when dealing with passengers. In many cases, commuters viewed women conductors more positively because they were perceived as approachable and courteous. For example, one participant noted that elderly passengers and students frequently preferred interacting with her because she communicated calmly and respectfully. However, these positive perceptions also created additional emotional pressure, as women were expected to remain composed even during stressful situations such as heavy traffic, overcrowded buses, fare disputes, or encounters with rude passengers. Unlike their male counterparts, female conductors often felt obligated to manage passengers gently and avoid showing frustration, adding another layer of emotional labor to their daily responsibilities.

The study further revealed that the lack of gender-responsive policies within transportation cooperatives reflects a significant gap between symbolic inclusion and actual workplace equality. Although women are now more visible in transportation work, institutional support remains limited. Participants highlighted the absence of clear anti-harassment policies, flexible work arrangements, wellness programs, and leadership opportunities for women within cooperatives. One participant explained that despite years of service, women were still rarely considered for supervisory or leadership roles in the organization.

These findings suggest that achieving true inclusivity in the transportation sector requires more than simply allowing women to enter the profession. Transportation cooperatives must actively establish gender-responsive policies that address women's physical safety, emotional well-being, career advancement, and equal treatment in the workplace. Strengthening institutional support systems, improving facilities, and promoting respectful workplace culture are essential steps toward creating a safer, more equitable, and empowering environment for women employees in the Philippine transportation industry.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

##### *Conclusions*

The findings demonstrate that, despite being driven primarily by financial need and familial obligations, female bus conductors are shattering gender preconceptions in a historically male-dominated industry. However, their safety, health, and well-being are frequently not sufficiently supported by their working environment. Women in Philippine transport cooperatives encounter structural obstacles such as poor infrastructure, no channels for reporting harassment, and few

leadership chances, which are comparable to findings in India, Nigeria, and Colombia. Passengers may value female conductors for their sensitivity and civility, but these demands place an extra emotional burden on them that is not placed on their male colleagues. Since women's employment in transportation does not always equate to equal treatment or opportunity, this emphasizes the disconnect between symbolic inclusion and true equality. Transportation cooperatives must actively adopt gender-responsive policies that address both professional development and physical safety in order to attain inclusion.

#### *Recommendation*

To promote a safer and more inclusive working environment for female bus conductors, transportation cooperatives in the Philippines should implement practical and realistic gender-responsive programs that address the actual conditions experienced by women in the field. Since many conductors spend long hours in terminals and on provincial routes, cooperatives should coordinate with terminal operators and local government units to provide clean, well-lit, and secure restrooms as well as designated resting areas for female employees. In busy transport terminals similar to those in Pampanga, access to safe facilities can significantly improve women's comfort, health, and overall work performance.

Transportation cooperatives should also establish clear and enforceable anti-harassment policies to protect female conductors from inappropriate behavior by passengers, drivers, and coworkers. Simple but accessible reporting systems, such as designated officers, hotline numbers, or written complaint procedures, should be introduced so employees can safely report incidents without fear of retaliation. Installing CCTV cameras in terminals and inside buses, especially during evening routes, may also help improve employee security and accountability.

Considering that many women conductors balance work responsibilities with childcare and household duties, cooperatives may adopt more flexible and humane scheduling arrangements whenever operationally possible. For example, rotating shifts, adjusted schedules for mothers with young children, or limiting consecutive long-distance trips can help reduce physical exhaustion and work-family conflict.

Regular gender-sensitivity seminars and workplace orientation programs should also be conducted for drivers, dispatchers, cooperative officers, and other employees to promote professionalism, respect, and awareness of gender-

related concerns in the transportation industry. These activities can help lessen discriminatory attitudes and create a more supportive workplace culture for women employees.

In addition, transportation cooperatives should encourage women's professional growth by creating mentorship and leadership development opportunities. Experienced female conductors may serve as mentors to newly hired women employees, helping them adjust to the demands of the job and build confidence in the workplace. Cooperatives may also encourage qualified women employees to participate in leadership training, safety management seminars, or supervisory development programs to increase women's representation in decision-making roles within the organization.

Through these practical and achievable initiatives, transportation cooperatives can move beyond symbolic inclusion and create a safer, healthier, and more equitable working environment that genuinely supports and empowers female bus conductors in the Philippines.

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