

The Pink City Rickshaw Company Driving Change for Women's Empowerment in Jaipur

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1. Context

India has a population of 1.3 billion, of which 48.5 percent is female population.¹ India is a fast growing economy, which has made progress in terms of education, health and other human development indicators. And although the Indian economy has grown at about 6-7 percent per year, women's labor force participation rate (LFPR) has fallen considerably. In fact, India has one of the lowest rates of female workforce participation in the world, and it is on the decline.² Estimates show a fall from 36 percent in 2005-2006 to 24 percent in 2015-2016.³

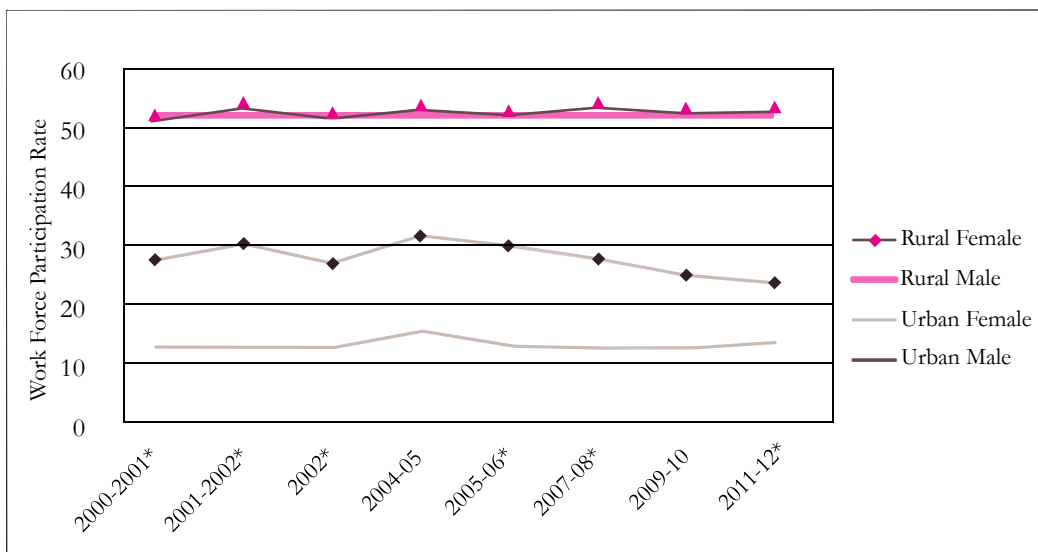


Figure 1. Trend in Workforce Participation

Source: National Sample Survey Office

This worrying trend can largely be attributed to conservative social norms, which place restrictions on women's mobility, agency and time, all of which contribute to keeping women in unpaid work at home. Those that are in paid work are largely low-skilled informal workers, engaged in low productivity, low-paying work.

Additionally, the common factor across the society within varying education levels and income groups remains that Indian women still are the primary caregiver and manager of a household.

1. Census of India, 2011

2. ILO, India Labour Market Update, July 2017

3. Economic Survey of India, 2017-2018.

Managing household responsibilities in most of the cases takes precedence over jobs thus keeping women out of paid jobs.

Encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit and leadership in women provides a unique opportunity to dismantle some of the barriers they face in advancing their economic and social empowerment. With an income of their own, women can have increased status, can provide for their families, and become empowered in other parts of their lives as well, such as making decisions about education, housing, food choices and medical care.

2. The Initiative

The Pink City Rickshaw Company is a unique, innovative and inspiring social enterprise, set up by ACCESS Development Services in Jaipur, to empower and provide aspirational incomes to 200 women from low income households. It was launched in 2016, with funding from HSBC's 'Skills for Life' programme.

Jaipur was picked up for grounding the initiative, as it is a tourist hotspot frequented by both Indian and foreign tourists. The city has congested streets and alleys and suffers from increasingly high pollution levels. The hope was that the concept of PCRC would be a trend setting initiative and would appeal to tourists visiting the Pink City, as well as local residents.

PCRC aimed at creating opportunities for underprivileged women in Jaipur while finding answers to the following dilemma:

- Can opportunities be created for women with low or no education?
- Can women be empowered to let go of regressive societal norms?
- Can women be persuaded to give up years of conditioning and exercise agency in matters relating to their employment options?
- Can a sense of community be built among these women with more awareness and opportunities?

3. The Road to Success

3.1 A Question Faced by Many Design Professionals – Does Design Matter?

Through the Pink City Rickshaw Company, a design venture, tried to demonstrate what design could do for women's empowerment. A well designed, economical rickshaw, supported by intensive training and marketing, made this project unique and showcased the possibilities that design thinking opens up for the social sector.

The Pink City Rickshaw Company opened up a ground-breaking new income opportunity for housewives and young women from slum areas by training them to drive customized electric rickshaws on specially designed tours of the city. The women, who received comprehensive training in soft-skills and e-rickshaw driving, were also equity holders in company which they owned and

managed. Not only did this initiative contribute to women’s social and economic empowerment but also addresses environmental concerns by investing in pollution-friendly electric rickshaws.

3.2 The Rickshaw Design

Design is one of the key aspects of the project, as the rickshaw had to be visually distinctive and address the needs of the tourists as well as the women drivers. With this in mind, ACCESS commissioned Ayush Kasliwal, a designer from Jaipur to customize the e-rickshaw. The initial idea was to redesign the rickshaw from scratch, but it was soon realised that the cost of this would be prohibitive. In order to keep the costs low, existing platforms of e-rickshaw and the facilities of existing vendors were used. The result was distinctive and comfortable. The company provided pro-bono design services.

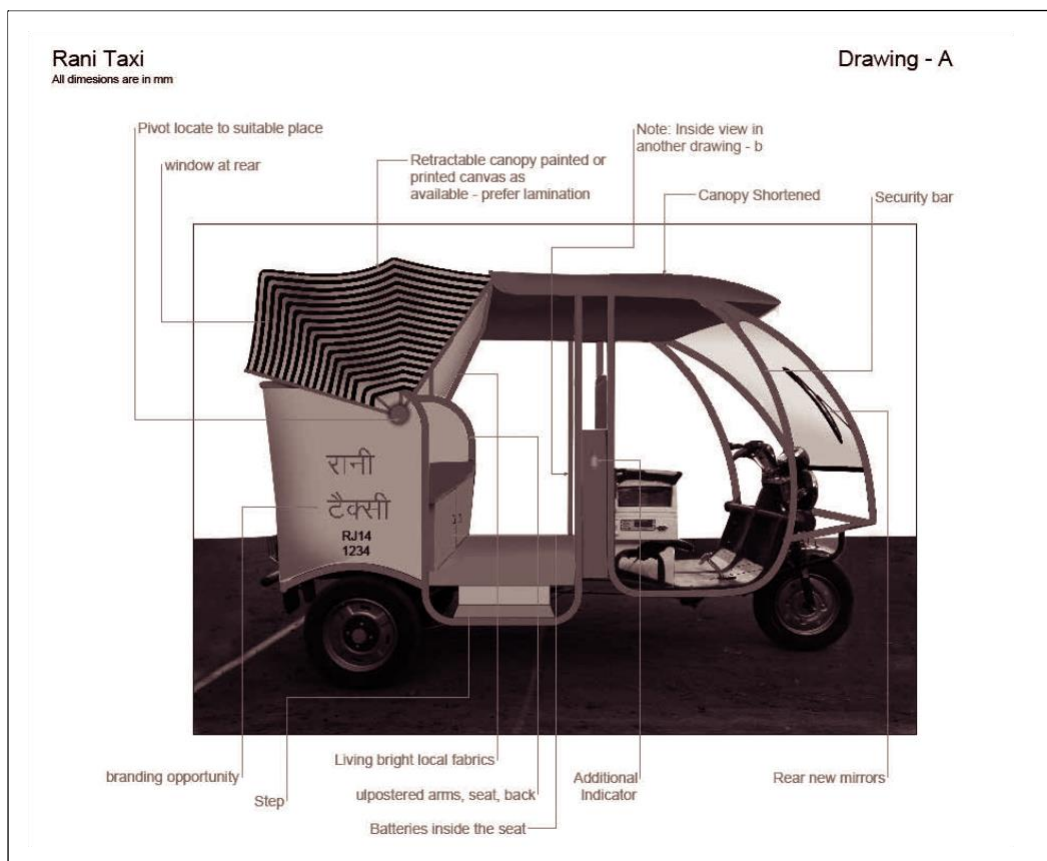


Figure 2: A Drawing Indicating the Modified Elements in an Existing e-rickshaw

The e-rickshaws was given a bright pink body and a collapsible canopy, designed to look like a stage carriage. The passenger seat was ergonomically designed with a mobile phone charging point, small dustbin, newspaper and bottle holders, and lockers for both passengers and drivers. An IVRS-based app for mobile phones has been developed to facilitate and enhance client’s experience. With a maximum speed of 30-35 kmph, the e-rickshaws can travel upto 60 kms. when charged for eight hours.

3.3 Key Design Interventions

a. Visual and Structural

- Cutting off the roof and convert it into a retractable canopy
- Material and color of shelter canopy, to make it distinct and noticeable
- A distinctive colour for the rickshaw to make it look more approachable
- Company logo placement, prominently located for brand recognition
- Carving steps out of floor board and removing the driver's hand rest, to ease the entry and exit of the passengers
- Number Plates installed ABOVE the vehicle, making it easier for it to be identified from a distance
- Re-welding the dolphin bars to improve the safety of the vehicle, also making it a handle to use during entry and exit in the rickshaw
- Change the seat covers to a brighter colour, and make it easier to clean
- Addition of floor mats to keep a cleaner vehicle
- Changing the passenger seating from a 4 seater to a 2 seater for a more spacious seating
- Redesigning the locker box allowing the guests to lock their possessions when they step out of the vehicle

b. Safety

- Raising the driver's back panel for better privacy for the driver
- Indicators, lights, tail lights and rear view mirrors installed
- Panel for installation of interactive devices (for a possible integration of tabs to allow translation and enhanced city experience via geo location)
- Wobbling issues addressed by the relocation of the batteries towards the rear

c. Additions

- Placement of a dustbin to dispose off wrappers and other waste
- Installation of a tip box, to allow discrete contributions
- Phone chargers, which allows the travelers to charge their devices while on the move
- Cushions/Bolsters, adding to the comfort of the vehicle
- Bottle holders, to carry water bottles, a service that can provide additional revenue to the driver
- Shelf to put accessories like hand bags etc, while travelling
- Install spare tyre and its cover

d. Tour design

Bespoke tours were designed that included key tourist attractions in Jaipur, as well as offering an ‘out- of-the-box’ experience by incorporating aspects of Jaipur’s rich heritage and culture, including textiles, handicrafts and food. PCRC currently offers five main tours and individually customized tours.

- Heritage Tour
- Wake up with Jaipur Tour
- Shopping Tour
- Food Trail tour
- Culture Gully Tour

4. Training

Batches of women were trained in:

- E-rickshaw driving and maintenance, and
- Soft-skills (motivation and confidence building, communication skills and personal hygiene)

Two ACCESS community mobilizers were recruited, who were well-known and respected in the communities concerned and by the women themselves, to act as trainers for the rickshaw driving component, for the first batch of women. The example of the first few women helped convince other women to sign up. For the second batch, some of the first batch ladies were brought in to act as driving instructors.

In 2016, a partnership was forged with an e-rickshaw manufacturer and training institute, which through their company’s foundation offer free courses in e-rickshaw driving to people from socially disadvantaged communities. This partnership proved win-win for both parties. PCRC recruits now received training in e-rickshaw driving from a professional and well-equipped institute, while the institute who hadn’t trained women drivers before, now advocate courses for women drivers and have even hired one of the women members as a full-time trainer.

5. Marketing

It was critical to market these tours to a niche clientele, so that there would be higher revenue and shorter work hours for the women, allowing them the flexibility to combine this work with their household responsibilities. To carve an entry into Jaipur’s tight-knit and highly competitive tourist industry was no easy task. The e-rickshaw is not synonymous with luxury transport, so ensuring that high-end tourists would accept it, meant developing an eye-catching and comfortable rickshaw that would appeal to the target clientele.

It was also crucial to get the right partners on-board, as early on as possible, who would feel confident in promoting the tours to their high-end clients. Local tour operators were initially skeptical of the concept, so international agents were approached, who were more receptive to new ideas. As soon as business started coming in, local tour operators too began to take note. ACCESS sent a one-minute promotional video on PCRC to travel companies - a strategy which proved highly successful.

“We first heard about PCRC after a promotional video of theirs went viral on social media. We are always looking for new experiences for our clients, and immediately saw the potential of PCRC.”

A prominent tour operator in Jaipur

The use of social media platforms became instrumental in raising the profile of PCRC and marketing the tours to both individual customers and travel agents. This necessarily required fine-tuning the service by paying meticulous detail to every customer review (on trip advisor and other platforms) and incorporating their feedback.

Along with the internet, Below the Line (BTL) marketing techniques were implemented, including distribution of pamphlets and brochures to top hotels and guest houses in Jaipur, such as The Rambagh Palace, Samode Haveli, Rajvilas and 28 Kothi. Promotional material were distributed to cafes, shops and restaurants, who were known to be supportive of social enterprises, such as Anokhi and Café Palladio.

6. Rickshaw Parking and Maintenance

Initially, the idea of buying e-rickshaws was explored, to be given on loan to the women, who would progressively pay off the loan with their earnings. However, it was soon realised that parking the vehicles at their homes would be problematic, as they could get vandalised

Box 1: The PCRC Uniform-Creating A Professional Image

Comprising of a blue salwar-kurta with a pink block-printed *bandi* (waistcoat) and a light pink stole, the PCRC uniform was chosen for its comfort, practicality (for driving a rickshaw) and to suit the PCRC brand, aimed at a high-end niche market, 90 percent of whom are foreign tourists.

The women were initially reluctant to wear the uniform because salwar-kurta is not the traditional dress-code of married women in Rajasthan. They feared social stigma if they were seen in public wearing a salwar kurta. Similarly, for the Muslim trainees, the idea of going out in public without wearing a *burka* was unthinkable.

As part of the soft-skills training, the ACCESS team enlisted the help of trainers from the Oberoi hotel group to help train the women in the importance of wearing a uniform in helping to create a professional image. This proved highly successful, with the result that now the women are proud to wear their smart uniforms and have the option of whether or not to cover their head.

or stolen and the erratic electricity supply would make charging the e-rickshaws difficult. Instead the rickshaws were bought outright with the grant received from HSBC and storage facility was hired, where the rickshaws were kept overnight, charged and repaired.

7. What Have the Women Gained?

Jaipur is a well-known tourist destination and it remains strongly traditional with strict social norms governing most aspects of women's lives. Thus the concept initially received mixed reactions. Convincing women, mostly from conservative communities, was no easy task. Tougher still was getting them to consider rickshaw driving, an overwhelmingly male dominated domain, as a viable job option. The women doubted their ability to negotiate any type of vehicle by themselves, in the traffic congested streets of the old city, where the tours were concentrated. Many of them could not even ride a bicycle, let alone drive a rickshaw. They also felt apprehensive about interacting with foreign tourists, because of the language barrier and socio-cultural gulf between them. Furthermore, they had to contend with the opposition of many of their family members, and also face taunts and stares from male rickshaw drivers.

These challenges were progressively overcome by the determination of the team working on the program, as well as the women themselves. After repeated interactions and reassurances with the families and communities concerned, seventeen women were brave enough to enroll on the program, as the first batch of trainees, held in April 2017.

The next hurdles were more logistical in nature, such as finding trainers whom the women (and their families) would trust; encouraging them to overcome their shyness; strengthening their communication skills; instilling in them an entrepreneurial attitude and getting them market ready. Again, these all proved challenging, because they tried to bring about a change in the deeply conservative socio-cultural norms, which restrict women's agency and mobility outside the home. Even something simple, such as wearing a uniform was initially met with a lot of resistance and required multiple rounds of sensitizing workshops before the women felt comfortable with it.

8. Reach and Impact

- Till date, 117 women have received training in e-rickshaw driving and maintenance and soft skills
- PCRC now owns 29 e-rickshaws, which have collectively completed more than
- 700 tours till date.
- PCRC has a 5 star rating on Trip Advisor, a 4.9/5 star rating on Facebook and an Instagram following of over 500.
- PCRC has been written about extensively in national and international press, including in 13 print newspapers and on 36 online sites.
- PCRC has been endorsed by 11 national and international travel companies

- Operations have been extended to Udaipur, under the aegis of the Lake City Rickshaw Company and there are plans to set up similar operations in Agra and Varanasi in the future.
- Two PCRC women have since purchased their own e-rickshaws for commercial use (with a 15percent subsidy provided by the project), in between PCRC tours.
- 47 women have bought shares in PCRC.

The impact of this initiative has been seen most strongly by the confidence and enthusiasm of the women themselves. Driving an e-rickshaw provided the women with a level of autonomy, that most of them had never experienced before. The initiative has also greatly enhanced social capital among the women who, as a community, feel empowered and motivated by each other. They communicate daily on a very active whatsapp group and continue to inspire each other.

“When the women first started driving the rickshaws, they used to hide under their ghunghat (veil) so people couldn’t see their faces, now they wear sunglasses and take selfies with the guests”

Vishal Lalwani, PCRC Business Head

Box 2: What our Women Drivers Say

“I never went out alone earlier and was completely dependent on others, even to go to the nearby market. Now I have the confidence to take up anything on my own. Being a part of PCRC has given me a chance to gain new experiences and meet people from across the world.”

“PCRC has given me a chance to prove to myself that I can learn a skill at my age and be part of the tourism industry. I never thought I was capable of something like this, as I had no professional training or qualifications.”

“We overcame our own fears and managed to stand on our own two feet. When I drive, I feel that I am finally in control of my own destiny”

9. The Road to Sustainability

Since its inception two years ago, The Pink City Rickshaw Company has already proven itself as a successful business model which is helping in empowering disadvantaged women in Jaipur. However, there is still more work to be done to help the women strengthen the company and make it fully sustainable. Now that the women have been trained and the tours are fully operational, the focus increasingly needs to be on business management and development, including selecting and grooming a board of directors. Although 40 women have purchased shares in the company, many women still don’t feel comfortable with parting with ₹ 500 (the cost of 5 PCRC shares) as they see no immediate benefit in this and

are yet to understand the longer-term implications. Several women have emerged as natural leaders, who have the potential to take a more proactive role in the management of PCRC. With the grant from HSBC coming to an end, it is expected that PCRC will be able to meet the salaries of the director and key facilitators from company profits. This represents a significant step towards sustainability of the enterprise.

English language and computer/digital training was a skills development area that many of the women are keen to explore. This would enable them to communicate better with their customers and also be able to operate the newly developed PCRC mobile app. Discussions are under way to secure another grant for these activities.

10. Strategies for Success

10.1 On-ground Learning

It is important to be open to on-ground learning and adapt your strategies accordingly. Initially women from the 18-25 years age group were targeted, but it was soon realized that this age group was hesitant to sign up as they didn't view rickshaw driving as an aspirational job. Over half the women who signed up on the first batch were over 25 and unskilled, which worked in favour of the project, as they became mentors to the younger women and had more clout in the community to allay fears and apprehensions about the initiative.

As PCRC's visibility and reputation grew, the composition of PCRC trainees changed from older, less educated women, to younger, better educated women, many with post-graduate degrees, who increasingly saw working with PCRC as an attractive job option

10.2 Create Job Opportunities with Flexible Working Hours

Women are more likely to consider job options that do not interfere with their domestic responsibilities. The way PCRC works is that once a booking is made, women are able to choose whether they want to take the tour or not. In case they are unavailable, the tour is offered to another driver. This means the women are totally in control of how much and when they work. The team also tries to match clients with particular women, depending on the tour they choose. The 'Wake Up to Jaipur' tour is a favorite with the women as it happens early in the morning, leaving the rest of the day free for other work or household duties.

Put simply, many women do not take on paid work outside the home because they do not have the time.

10.3 Provide Comprehensive Support

Disadvantaged women are not going to be able to confidently run their own social enterprise over-night. One needs to make sure there is enough time for their confidence to grow and for the seeds of entrepreneurship to take root.

10.4 Creating Social Capital

Bringing women together into a collective enterprise is likely to be more successful because it provides mutual reinforcement and inspiration.

10.5 Think Outside the Box

Women feel proud and are motivated to get involved if an idea is new and inventive, rather than being part of a traditional income generation programme.

10.6 Don't Compromise on Professionalism

Professionalism and providing quality service is essential for the long-term sustainability of any entrepreneurial social enterprise.

10.7 Be Media Savvy

Commitment and dedication to maintain a social media presence is essential for the success of any tourist-based initiative.

11. Conclusion

Two years on, the experience of The Pink City Rickshaw Company has been overwhelmingly positive, with the company enjoying a five-star rating on Trip Advisor and numerous accolades in national and international press. Today, PCRC boasts 29 custom-designed e-rickshaws and has successfully trained 117 women as e-rickshaw drivers, catering to tourists, corporate, cultural events, literary festivals and even big-budget weddings and have made 700 tours over this time period. On an average, the women drivers supplement their incomes by an average of ₹ 8,000-10,000 per month.

The PCRC model has worked successfully and the women inducted in the programme have benefitted in more ways than one. Along with a steady income, the programme has enhanced mental, physical, economic, social and psychological development of women. It has built their confidence, determination and self-dependency by decreasing financial dependency on male partner. It has provided them with status and recognition among the society, leading to gender equality. Also, women e-rickshaw symbolise the strength and potential of women creating a sense of security and importance of female in other women. This has changed the image of women and slum-dwellers in India to foreigners. Foreigner women tourists feel safer in rickshaws and Jaipur. Women drivers seem more reliable and trustworthy to them.

Similar for the city of Jaipur, this programme has opened up avenues to explore a similar model in Indian cities, tailored to their need. Hopefully the programme will expand and will employ and empower more women across the country in the coming years.

12. Stories of Driving Partners

Box 3: Basanta Devi, 38 years

Basanta's story is one of the most compelling of our women drivers and shows how, with the right support, disadvantaged women can provide a better future for themselves and their families.

The odds were stacked against Basanta from childhood – she had no formal schooling in her native Bangalore, was married off at the age of 11 to a Jaipur-based man and had her first child when she was only 13. Four children later, she supported her family by working on a construction site for over ten years, earning ₹ 350 a day, until a back injury rendered her unable to work. She never knew how much her husband earned as a cycle rickshaw driver, as he spent all the money on alcohol and was frequently violent with both her and the children. Five years ago, she gathered enough courage to leave him.

Completely uneducated, with four children to support and unable to do *beldari* (labour work) anymore, Basanta tried her hand at various jobs. She worked as a security guard at the City Palace for a year, until the security agency ended her contract. She then worked part-time as a domestic help, where her employer suggested she admit two of her children to an NGO-run residential school, where they have been studying since the last seven years.

She also opened a little shop selling trinkets near the Govind Devji temple in the old city. It was here that she first saw Komal Mahawar, our youngest PCRC driver going for her duty at the City Palace to drive the PCRC rickshaw within the complex and wondered what her uniform was. One day she saw her driving the rickshaw and was amazed that a woman was doing this. The next day, curiosity got the better of her and she mustered up the courage to go speak to Komal. Komal told her about the training and encouraged her to get in touch and apply. Basanta assumed that she would not be eligible because she was illiterate, so she never called, but still kept the number.

One day, the PCRC Team got a call from a lady who enquired in impeccable English, about PCRC, the training provided, financial implications and our marketing efforts to ensure constant bookings. Upon probing, she revealed she was Basanta's employer, where she worked as a domestic help. Basanta was invited to join PCRC.

Basanta turned out to be a great driver and inspiring role model for other women. Un-phased by anything, she says that this is her best job till date. 2 months after completing the PCRC training, she took a loan and bought her own e-rickshaw, which she drives daily, in between taking customers on PCRC tours. When she first bought her own e-rickshaw, the male rickshaw drivers were quite hostile to her, telling her she could not drive in their areas. She simply ignored them and has chosen to ply on the roads around the City Palace, which she knows well. She charges all her passengers the same rate and makes no distinction between Indian and foreign tourists.

Box 4: Najma Bano, age 46 years

Najma Bano, a mother of four, is from a Muslim community living in Shivaji Nagar basti in Jaipur.

Despite being over 40 years of age and a grandmother herself, Najma Bano approached us, wanting to join the Pink City Rickshaw Company. Apart from making lac bangles at home, to support the meagre income her husband made from his cycle repair shop, she had never worked before. Najma was an unlikely candidate – she had little formal education, was above the target age and was not used to travelling alone.

But there was a strong and silent determination in her that stood out and made the PCRC team reconsider. Her children supported her and strengthened her resolve, despite strong reservations from her community.

Najma is now one of the trainers and is highly respected by the other women drivers. She continues to be instrumental in helping to convince future recruits, many of whom are hesitant about trying this unusual occupation, that being independent is a state of mind. She also convinced her daughter Ruksar Bano, to sign up for training. In December 2018, Najma was one of the speakers at the ‘Woman Up Summit,’ held in Jaipur and organized by Siyahi. Najma received a standing ovation after narrating her recent experience of being one of the first female e-rickshaw drivers in Jaipur.

Box 5: What the Customers say about PCRC

“I would highly recommend taking a tour with the Pink City Rickshaw Company, not just because of the amazing female empowerment project...but also because the ladies really give you a great tourist- friendly (no commission shopping or harassment) experience.”

“We had a great Food Trail Tour. We tasted food and went to small shops, which we would not normally have gone to. Very interesting. Great lady drivers.”

“I loved that the tour, while visiting major attractions, felt more authentic by giving an insider’s look into every-day life in Jaipur.”

“Such a unique way to see the city.”