

Beyond the Women-Only Train Car: Gender and Sustainable Transport

By Sonal Shah, ITDP India

In December 2012, a woman was gang raped on a bus in Delhi while traveling with a male companion. She later died of her injuries, prompting national outcry and widespread protests in India. The attack against the woman lifted a curtain on the fraught relationship between gender and public transport. What was once an issue for feminists and the LGBT movement – both of whom have long lamented discrimination and personal threats during the simple act of traveling around the city – went mainstream, galvanizing civil society action and compelling different levels of government to create safer public transportation systems.

India's story is hardly unique. Over the last decade, women's safety on public transport all over the world has drawn a great deal of attention, particularly in developing nations. Transit agencies, in turn, are struggling to comply. As many transport professionals are beginning to understand, however, this is not simply a matter of protecting women from violent men, but requires a more fundamental approach to issues of women's equality, poverty, and visibility in the transport sector overall.

Ultimately, transportation is the fulcrum that allows women to participate in the workforce, a societal shift that can transform the entire world

economy. If women were to play an equal role in labor markets, as much as US\$28 trillion could be added to the global economy by 2025 according to the McKinsey Global Institute. But first they have to get to work. One of the most essential keys to economic and social opportunities for women, especially poor women, is safe, accessible, and affordable transportation options.

It is now widely acknowledged that our cities and transportation systems are not gender-neutral. Women have inferior access to public modes (buses, trains, informal transit options) and private modes (two-wheelers, cars, cabs), while assuming a higher share of the household's travel burden and caretaking responsibilities.

While media continue to focus on violent crimes in public transport and public spaces, the defining characteristics of violence against women are more mundane and harder to stamp out. Groping and catcalls are such



Images: Meena Kadri

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Access to and from the Public Transport stop

Waiting at the bus shelter, interchange terminal

Boarding and alighting the vehicle

Experience in the vehicle

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constant occurrences that they have become ordinary, under the radar of law enforcement, while controlling women's everyday lives through a constant sense of insecurity.

In New York City, it is estimated that 96 percent of sexual harassment and 86 percent of sexual assaults in the subway system are unreported. In Baku, Azerbaijan, none of the 162 out of 200 women who reported having been sexually harassed on the metro to an NGO survey, reported it to the appropriate authority. Of 1,010 women surveyed in Egypt, 83 percent of female citizens and 98 percent of foreign women living or travelling in the country had experienced sexual harassment in a public place. In turn, only 2.4 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively, had reported the incident.¹ This underreporting is consistent throughout the developed and developing worlds, resulting in a vicious cycle. Daily harassment goes unpunished, which means that it continues to flourish. Because it continues, it's treated as normal – something to endure rather than speak out about – and thus continues to go unreported.

In response, transport authorities across the world have provided segregated rail and bus services, reserved seats, women-only taxi or auto-rickshaw services. While such services have provided some comfort to women commuters, they may not always achieve the desired objectives. For example, women-only buses in India have been critiqued for poor frequency and the inability to travel with men.

What's more, focusing on women-only services scratches the service of the issue without digging deeper into the gender biases in transportation planning. Planners rarely acknowledge mobility of care, or the travel needs associated with care and home-related tasks, which are predominantly done by women. Instead, transit systems are designed largely for the

Adequate transport planning for women should take into account the entire transport experience, not simply the ride, to address all areas where women are vulnerable.

solo and able-bodied, traveling only at peak hours, making it difficult if not impossible to travel with children, the elderly, or disabled, as many women do. Integrating care concerns into transport planning is not just important for women, but will become more significant for everyone as the participation of men in these tasks increases.

Transportation planning that fails to create a safe environment to travel at night is another example of gender bias. Inadequate public lighting, closed-off passageways between stations, or a lack security at transit stations are a few examples. Part of the problem is that there is a lack of female representation in the transport sector overall.

While many efforts to address gender bias in transportation planning focus on riders, there is another possible role for women as transport operators. In addition to offering employment opportunities, women in official roles – as bus drivers, subway conductors, and ticket takers – normalizes the presence of women in transit systems, making them less vulnerable.

In an increasingly urbanizing and motorizing world, and in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda, there is an urgent need to mainstream gender in sustainable transport - such that walking, cycling and public transport are preferred, safe, and accessible modes of transport for women. It is not only an issue of inclusion or rights but an imperative for sustainable and equitable urban growth.

¹ Allen and Vanderschuren 2016