Creating Gendered Mobility Plans to Enable Safe and Secure Transport: Challenges and Way Forward for India and Brazil

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Sexual harassment and violence is a barrier to women’s mobility. While mainstream narratives focus on gruesome incidents such as rape, gender violence also includes visual, verbal and physical abuse such as groping, molestation, staring, stalking, stealing and cat calling. Yet, our mobility plans remain gender blind as they do not measure women’s trip chaining patterns, use of slower and inexpensive modes of transport, constrained mobility, the level and extent of sexual harassment and violence, and limited employment in the transport sector. This is a lost opportunity as around US$28 trillion could be added to the global economy by 2025, if women were to play an identical role to men in markets (MGI 2015).

Women constitute 50% of the urban population with walking and public transport being their most important means of travel, particularly for lower income women. In São Paulo, Brazil, the gender and class analysis of the Origin and Destination Survey of 2012 reveals that 74% of women’s daily trips are made by public transport or on foot. Among the poorest women, 50% of the trips were made by walking and 28% by bus (City Hall of Sao Paulo 2012).

The Census of India, for the first time in 2011, released data on the ‘Mode of Travel to Work’ for those not involved in agriculture and household industry. ITDP India and Safetipin’s policy brief on Women and Transport in Indian Cities found that while 73% of urban work trips were by sustainable modes of transport, women and girls’ share was only 14%. This could be due to urban women’s low workforce participation and home-based work. Around 30% walked, only 3% cycled and 22% used buses, trains and paratransit for work trips. Of the total work trips made by urban women, around four out of five (84%) were by public, intermediate public and non-motorized modes of transport.

However, it is disturbing that streets and public transport are also perceived as being most vulnerable for women and girls, with significant underreporting of sexual harassment and violence.

According to the research "Linha de Base", 86% of Brazilian women were harassed in public spaces and 44% in public transport. The situation was more alarming in the country’s biggest cities where 100% of interviewed women in São Paulo and 66% in Rio suffered harassment in public transport (Actionaid 2014). This, within a context where less than 5% of women reported cases of harassment, and according to the Brazilian Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), only 10% of women reported cases of rape in 2013 (IPEA 2013). ITDP Brazil’s study Women and Children's Access to the City, conducted focus group discussions with low income and black women in the outskirts of Recife's Metropolitan Area and found that harassment was perceived an inevitable occurrence in women’s daily life. Women felt more vulnerable, especially in streets and public spaces with lesser number of people. They rated waiting at the bus stop as the worst experience of the journey as the bus service was unreliable and infrequent, located in single land use zones, especially in the outskirts, which made them deserted.

Similarly, in India, while the National Crime Records Bureau reported that crimes against women had increased from 8.8% (2007) to 11% (2014), research across multiple cities revealed significantly higher instances of sexual harassment. In Delhi, a study with over 5000 men and women in 2010 showed that over 95% of the women had experienced harassment in the past year. Public transport, buses and streets were identified as the most vulnerable spaces. While women of all ages faced some form of violence or
sexual harassment, school and college girl students in the 15-19 age-groups were the most vulnerable (Jagori 2010). In Mumbai too, 95% of the women respondents reported sexual harassment and 69% reported facing harassment inside buses and waiting at bus stops (Akshara 2016). ITDP India, Safetipin and Janki Devi Memorial College’s upcoming publication on access to bus terminals in Delhi has rated pedestrian infrastructure (availability of footpaths, surface quality, road safety and encroachment), street lighting and gender diversity lowest in terms of their safety scores. Further, women’s access to a basic public facility such as public toilets is restricted as these are locked, used as male toilets, for storage or located close to garbage collection centres.

What can be done?

In India and Brazil, gender is not a core competence in local and metropolitan governments.

To address this gap, the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) has conducted research to understand women and girls’ access and experience of streets and public transport. ITDP is sensitizing public authorities in collecting gender disaggregated mobility data, adopting gender responsive goals and indicators in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies and involving women’s groups in this process. Some indicators include (i) gender (and income) disaggregated data on people living within walking distance of rapid transit and frequent city bus services in the city and metropolitan region; (ii) gender (and income) disaggregated travel mode shares in the city and metropolitan region; (iii) gender (and income) disaggregated data of users who rely on bus timetables; (iv) percentage of major urban roads with a dedicated right-of-way for bus based public transport; and (vi) state and city allocations and expenditure on improving women and girls’ safety and security. These must be disaggregated by race, religion and caste depending on the context.

ITDP, in alignment with the New Urban Agenda, supports solutions to enable women and girls’ right to mobility and access to social and economic opportunities. We recommend (i) coordinated planning between mobility, land use and employment with mixed uses and affordable housing; (ii) promotion and expansion of sustainable transport that considers women and girls’ practical needs and strategic interests; (iii) adoption of street design that promotes road safety, facilitates universal accessibility and equitably distributes road space among all users; (iv) development and implementation of security policies to reduce sexual harassment and gender-based violence; and (v) reallocation of resources towards sustainable and equitable cities.

Useful links


The power of parity: How advancing women’s equality can add $12 trillion to global growth: https://www.mckinsey.com


ITDP Brasil, O Acesso de Mulheres a Crianças à Cidade, ITDP Brasil : http://itdpbrasil.org.br/mulheres/