Women in Transport: Safety and Personal Security

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Although transport sector projects may at first appear to benefit everyone equally in a community, men and women’s experiences with transport systems differ greatly, particularly when related to their safety and personal security. Research shows high levels of violence, sexual harassment and sexual abuse directed at women and girls in public transport and adjacent public spaces in many cities around the world. For example, in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt, as high as 99.3% of women surveyed reported having experienced sexual harassment, most commonly in the form of touching or groping. The study showed that streets and public transport are where women are most at risk. A study conducted in Mumbai, India, showed that 80% of women faced sexual harassment in transport. Almost twice as many women as men surveyed in London, UK said they do not feel safe using London public transport. However, only one in ten surveyed said they would report sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment in public transport can curtail women’s mobility and employability and can reduce their earning options. This issue becomes even more critical since more women than men tend to depend on public transport to meet their mobility needs. In many countries restricted mobility can translate into girls missing schools, women not looking for jobs far away from homes, giving up their jobs or being unable to access healthcare services. A recent study by the International Labor Organization showed that “limited access to and safety of transportation is estimated to be the greatest obstacle to women’s participation in the labour market in developing countries, reducing their participation probability by 16.5 percentage points.”

Promoting safe transport can benefit not only women but men, girls and boys, and society in general. In fact, applying a gender perspective to transport projects can positively benefit not only transport users but also service providers who can benefit in terms of revenue generation and operational efficiency when they provide a gender-sensitive service.

The World Bank Group is increasingly addressing issues of personal security through its transport projects. This approach is embedded in the Bank’s Gender Strategy (2016-23) and reflects the ambitions of the Bank’s Transport and Digital Development (TDD) Global Practice Action Plan to support the implementation of the Gender Strategy. For example, one of the Bank’s projects in Mexico, Hazme el Paro, was designed to improve women’s mobility by addressing sexual harassment in public transport through change of social norms, in a city where 65% of women have faced sexual harassment in public transport and related spaces: the project included a marketing campaign that defined actions for bystanders to follow so as to become interveners in a non-confrontational manner as well as a community and sector training (bus drivers, policemen) and IT components, such as, installing WiFi in buses and making a mobile application available for reporting different kinds of sexual harassment. The project resulted in changing behaviour of the public as reflected in their higher willingness to act against instances of harassment, mainly by men and young people. The perception of risk increased by 15% in the treatment group, which can be interpreted as a proxy for increase in awareness of the security situation. In response to the findings of the User Satisfaction Survey of City Bus Services covering 12 Indian cities, a project is putting in place measures to improve personal security and safety for all passengers and particularly, women and girls.

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9 Study on the Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt, UN Women, 2013.
10 Survey conducted by We the People Foundation, 2012.
11 https://yougov.co.uk/news/2012/05/25/sexual-harassment-capital/
12 World Employment Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2017; International Labor Organization
The Bank is also coordinating efforts to advance gender equality with other institutions. For the first time, gender was a focus of a major plenary session during the Bank’s annual Transforming Transportation global forum, and a partnership was signed by the World Bank and the International Association of Public Transport (UITP) to address gender issues in public transport globally. Under the Memorandum of Understanding, the World Bank and the UITP have committed, amongst others, to work together to address gender-based violence in public transport and to enhance female labour force participation in the transport sector. Recently, UITP - in partnership with the World Bank - launched Public Transport for Me #PT4ME campaign, which aims to advance the safety of women in public transport and increase awareness about the issue.

The Bank has also been one of the driving forces of the Sustainable Mobility for All (SuM4All) initiative - a global multi-stakeholder partnership created with an ambition of making mobility more sustainable. The partnership, which also includes the International Transport Forum (ITF), has produced the Global Mobility Report 2017, which is the first-ever attempt to examine performance of the transport sector globally and which features gender as a recognition that gender equality is an integral part of the sustainable mobility agenda.

The ITF can play a paramount role in promoting women’s safety and security in transport. With its convening power, the ITF provides a unique platform to advance global dialogue on gender issues in transport and to facilitate sharing knowledge among transport policy makers.

Useful links


SuM4All http://www.sum4all.org/