Ending the Harassment ‘Nightmare’

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Mass transit is important for achieving the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals to reduce poverty and protect the planet and contributes to the quality of life of urban citizens. Indeed, public transport is the only way to efficiently move large numbers of people around cities; between their homes and places of work, study, shops, public services or leisure. However, the stark headline in the New York Post from October 2017, “Public transportation is a nightmare for women everywhere”, brings into focus the scale of changes needed to embed sustainable, low carbon mass transit as a safe and attractive option for everyone in cities. The conclusion, based on evidence from around the world, shows that the status quo cannot continue - there needs to be a fundamental culture change to design transport systems with women in mind.

Women are majority users of public transport, and depend heavily on these systems for their mobility needs as they frequently do not own or have access to private vehicles. However, there is a growing body of evidence that many women simply do not feel safe while using public transport. For women and girls, sexual harassment and other gender-related forms of violence are important concerns, which can be multiplied further by their role as care-givers as they may travel accompanying children or other adults.

Harassment covers a wide range of behaviours of a threatening or offensive nature, which extend from unwanted attention to physical or sexual assault. This is a global issue, repeated in cities all around the world – from New York to Lima; Cape Town to Delhi. In Latin America alone, six in ten women say they have been physically harassed while using public transport. Addressing women’s concerns about personal security on and around public transport are at the heart of achieving sustainable mobility.

The FIA Foundation in partnership with CAF (Latin American Development Bank) has been supporting a research programme on this issue, working with teams in South Africa and Latin America. The first stage of the study, the *Safe and Sound* report included a global literature review of women’s safety and personal security on and around urban public transport systems and developed a case study methodology in conjunction with the University of Cape Town. The second phase, *Ella se mueve segura* (She Moves Safely) applied this approach to investigate personal security and the emotional impact of (sexual) harassment in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santiago, Chile; and Quito, Ecuador.

The research teams found similar results in the cities investigated – and typically 70% of women in the *Ella se mueve segura* study reported feeling unsafe while using public transport. This is unacceptable. Women report feeling particularly insecure while getting to and from public transport as well as having to travel in overcrowded carriages, travelling alone, or at night when few people travel. As a result, many may change their travel patterns, choosing not to travel alone, or taking more expensive forms of transport such as taxis or simply not to travel outside their neighbourhoods. In Buenos Aires seven out of ten women reported harassment has affected their travel behaviour, compared with just two out of ten men. In Santiago, 95% of those interviewed said that they had observed harassment, and 85% had directly experienced it themselves on public transport.

One major issue is lack of action and effective reporting mechanisms. Despite these events recurring frequently, they are largely ignored by transport authorities, operators and society at large. One woman in Ecuador told a focus group ‘It’s hard for anyone to help you, normally no-one does”. Few victims file complaints due to a lack of trust in the system and fear of reprisal. Low levels of reporting are reinforced by this lack of action against allegations.
The *Ella se mueve segura* report identifies a number of actions that cities can take, starting with developing inclusive transport policies that focus on making public spaces safe and secure. This can include infrastructure and operational improvements, public awareness campaigns, better security with CCTV and trained staff and improved lighting combined with a zero tolerance approach to harassment. It also suggests collecting and analysing gender disaggregated data for the design of the public transport system, promoting women’s participation and leadership in the transport sector, and including local communities in service design.

Of course, men have a role to play too. The study shows that men also share many of the same concerns about safety, comfort, affordability, convenience and fear of theft or violent robbery. In the focus groups, men showed an awareness that these incidents occur to women, but fewer will change their travel behaviour as a result of an incident compared with men. Public transport systems that are safer for women will be safer for everyone. Cultural change involves everyone, but can be supported by clear protocols, education and protective measures which make it clear that incidents are not acceptable and will be dealt with.

By using the important role women play at a community and family level, women can become catalysts in achieving sustainable urban mobility. Public transport systems enable everyone to participate in vibrant, flourishing and inclusive cities. Changing the way that transport is planned to better include the needs of women will be transformational both for women and for urban transport. It will also unlock economic development – CAF estimate that improving women’s participation in the workplace could add 34% to the region’s GDP. This includes women working in the transport sector and taking leadership roles.

The #MeToo movement has shown that women are willing to step out and take a stand against harassment and violence. The ITF, together with other transport partners, need to do the same and actively support governments and transport authorities around the world to design systems with the needs of women in mind, so all women can travel safely without fear of harassment.

**Useful links**
