Creating Gender-Sensitive Public Transport for Women

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Safety in public transport is soon going to become a prerequisite rather than a unique selling point. If advancing women’s equality can add $12 trillion to global growth and we want to improve GDP by 2025, then we must acknowledge that getting women to work safely will be one of fundamentals to close gender gaps in work and society.

To understand the importance of safety in public transport and the indifference towards gender issues we should take a step back and look at the macro trends in mobility. Safety will play a key role in attractiveness and the economy of public transport. Shortly after Singapore announced a freeze of vehicle count in 2018, Roland Berger published the much quoted study on “Urban Mobility 2030”. It revealed that public transport will be under huge pressure from autonomous driving vehicles (low cost taxis in particular), and that an upsurge of single unit transport and hence road combustion is almost inevitable. Why would women share an unsafe transport unit if cost and skill are no longer a prerequisite to using a car?

Urban environments are not gender-neutral. As much as we would like to think that first world cities have put assault behind them, we are far from being as technologically advanced as countries where public transport is safe, actions are traceable, let alone proven or penalised. It is due to the scale and transitory nature of trams, trains, buses, taxis and ride-sharing services that perpetrators have a close and anonymous proximity to their targets. This circumstance can change for single service units when autonomous driving becomes conventional. For shared services however, harassment claims have only been proven to decrease, when a combination of awareness campaigns and technical solutions were chosen.

Nicole Kalms, Director of XYX Lab and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Architecture at Monash University, argues that communications and awareness alone are not enough to tackle challenges related to safety and security of women in transport. Results of her studies indicate that women are internalising the message that safety and security are solely their responsibility. By advising passengers to sit with other passengers, use the carriage closest to the driver’s cabin, or avoid extended waiting times, transport operators fail to acknowledge the role of gender in public transport safety.

Results of our own - LAT - installations show that the provision of CCTV cameras and alarm buttons is important and can have an immediate effect. Numbers show that after the installation of video surveillance fewer assaults are being reported. The technology is not a magic bullet. This is also partly due to local regulations, such as time that data is stored and the extent to which people are recognised. If recorded data is deleted within 72 hours of the incident, it is of no help if an assault is reported weeks later.

From a technical point of view, I believe we need to address the fact safety measures are still generalised and “gender-blind”. There is still a lack of research into how these environments contribute to sexual harassment, a gap we should close by using material from surveillance systems. But technology cannot solve it all; it might be crucial to work with what the drivers have to say on the matter. Whilst I believe safe transport is something all humans are entitled to, we know that women are, by their role and nature,
more likely to move between multiple destinations throughout their daily commute. It is hence crucial to create gender-sensitive, safe and accessible public transport systems.

**Useful links**

The Power Of Parity: How Advancing Women’s Equality Can Add $12 Trillion To Global Growth  

Roland Berger, Article: Urban Mobility 2030  

The Conversation, Article: Gender makes a world of difference for safety on public transport  

Smartcity, 2nd International Urban Mobility Dialogue, Program  
http://www.smartcity-dialogues.com/program/