

Women's Safety and Security in the Railways

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The International Union of Railway (UIC), the worldwide railway organisation, provides an initial response to help make progress in the area of the social, physical and psychological integrity of women in rail transport.

Violence in public spaces and specifically sexual harassment are a reality for women and girls in several countries all over the world. It happens on streets, in and around public transportation.

The railways are, as well as other mode of transport, a vulnerable space for women due to crowded situations or conversely to a shortage of people able to intervene and rescue in some cases. Sexual assault, molestation, and even rapes have been reported in trains and are even rising.

As expressed in the United Nations' 11th Sustainable Development Goals, "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", many cities in developing countries have a growing population of women. Yet, women's equal right to use the mobility services that cities offer is not fulfilled and impacts their freedom of movement.

In European countries women's situation in railway transports is not satisfactory. In France for instance, according to the latest survey on "victimisation and feeling of insecurity in Ile-de-France", published in 2017 by the Institute of Planning and Development (IAU), public transport always frightens women more than men. This study reveals that transit and train stations account for 39% of sexual assaults against women. The fear of being assaulted or robbed even goes as far as retaining from the use of public transport.

Violence against women and girls who use the rail system is real as well as violence against women and girls working within the railways.

UIC new study to highlight possible improvements to offer a sustainable and safe mobility to all

UIC is fully aware that this situation can be prejudicial to its members' aim to offer a sustainable and safe mobility solution to all.

In January 2018, UIC conducted a study among its members in order to assess:

- Whether the evolution of abuse and attacks against female passengers on railway premises (trains, stations, platforms, etc.) has decreased or increased within the last 5 years.
- Most affected areas (e.g. stations, platforms, trains), and when abuses occur (e.g. weekends, at night).
- Nature of the countermeasures and best practices that companies plan or have already conducted.
- Specific regulations and actions put in place for female security guards that have been implemented (e.g. team composition, operating times, self-protection).

It is worth taking the results of the study further. If the majority of the 18 responders - mainly European railways - answered that the number of abuse and attacks against female passengers on railway premises has remained stable for the past 5 years, and 22% of them identified an increase of violence.

Along the transport chain, abuses and attacks happen everywhere, no real patterns are identified. Although a variety of measures exists already, specific measures for women need to be taken.

Dedicated awareness and information campaigns in trains, on platforms or inside stations, aim to inform passengers that in case of sexual harassment they can call at a specific phone number or use some specific applications to ask for help. The goal is to raise the awareness of the public about this topic, increase the civil courage and “light up the dark field”. In a few countries railway companies propose in long-distance trains separate women’s coaches, which are close to the service coaches of the train staff. Surveys dedicated to inappropriate behaviour, with a focus on sexual intimidation, are conducted amongst the staff, followed by the organisation of focus groups also aiming to raise awareness.

These measures are a first step and 67% of the respondents to the UIC survey are willing to go further by conducting more investigations and sharing experience with their peers to fight against gender-based harassment.

Moreover, many ethical questions arise regarding:

- Consistency between national laws and internal policies about gender equality.
- Operational measures and care initiatives among railway staff in order to help victims.
- Solutions to prevent such behaviour (education, communication, control, etc.).

Due to the ethical importance of the topic, means to make progress have to be developed. The sharing of experiences and best practices, or, and difficulties (for example political or cultural aspects) are UIC’s first answer to make joint progress on the subject.