



Photo: Devin Smith

Street and Transit Harassment

Discussions of transportation safety topics typically include the following issues: mechanical features, sight distance, roadside hazard minimization, planning tools, and even inclement weather considerations. The topic of personal security and safety, however, typically focuses on terror prevention or national security threats; gender rarely is a consideration. Only recently has some attention to gender concerns begun to circulate in the design process: where should transportation safety begin—when a person is walking to the public transit or when they are waiting at the designated station? What efforts can be made to ensure a greater sense of safety to users as they navigate various public spaces?

According to the World Bank 2017 Global Mobility Report, “women’s mobility is of concern in rural and urban areas,” especially in those with limited access to public transportation, and “although no database on public transit-related crimes is available, evidence points to

security issues that constrain women’s mobility” (1). These security issues limit where and how far women can travel, the times of day women can safely use transit systems, and women’s access to financial stability and independence. A lack of personal security, either real or perceived, or the inability to use transportation without the fear of being victimized—whether riding public transportation, walking to or from a facility or stop, or waiting for transit—can substantially decrease the attractiveness and use of public transit (1).

Studies have shown that women experience more street harassment than men (2–3). Typical street harassment includes, but is not limited to, leering, honking, whistling, sexist comments, vulgar gestures, sexually explicit comments, kissing noises, unwelcomed following, blocking of pathways, and even assault. Street and transit harassment include unwanted and annoying actions of one party or group to another, threats, and demands, whether systematic or continued or both.

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Photo: KeioLine, Wikimedia

Single-sex train carriages in Japan were instituted to reduce incidents of harassment.

Fear of crime and violence has been documented consistently as more pronounced among women than men. Women tend to consciously monitor the public spaces they navigate for environmental cues of danger and to change their behavior in response to feelings of unsafety, such as avoiding particular areas, traveling with company, keeping a friend updated on one's whereabouts, and carrying pepper spray or other personal safety devices (3-4).

Victims may not report incidences of harassment out of fear, shame, or guilt. Society often has placed the onus of harassment prevention on the victim rather than on the abuser; for instance, victims often are told that their attire and public interactions with strangers could invite harassment. In an effort to reduce public transit harassment and invasion of women's personal spaces, some countries such as Mexico, India, Japan, and Brazil have implemented women-only cabins (3). Such arrangements seem like a viable, pragmatic solution, but they may send the message that women who do not want to be harassed should separate themselves and that women who choose

to travel in the regular cabins should expect some harassment.

In 2000, nearly 70% of women in Tokyo backed the women-only cabins that were introduced to reduce incidents of harassment and increase safety and comfort for female passengers (5). But as Telegraph writer Claire Cohen argues, single-gender arrangements may normalize sexual assault; rather than remove women from the equation, the answer is to tackle the problem of sex offenders (3).

Although issues of street and transit harassment seem to have more to do with human behavior, addressing them demands equal participation by the technical community. Engineers, architects, planners, and policy makers must collaborate to create implementable practical solutions. It is imperative to understand the human element of engineering, and design accordingly to best suit the end users. Safety features such as well-lit walking paths and transit waiting areas protected from the elements, spacious travel cabins, stricter background checks, easier-to-use incident reporting

systems, and security features such as recording devices can make transit systems users feel safer and more secure.

Ridesharing

Infrastructure alone cannot solve the issue at hand. Rideshare services such as Uber, Lyft, Moovel, ARRO, and Bolt, as well as traditional taxis, also may help tackle harassment and safety concerns. Rideshare services can provide an increased sense of safety, allowing passengers access to vehicle and driver information before pick-up as well as shareable trip status updates once the ride begins. Although most harassment in general goes unreported, data collected from transit-related reported incidents do influence company culture and policies and aid in implementing proactive solutions to minimize and eliminate future occurrences (6).

Following a recent media spotlight on harassment and assault cases related to the use of rideshare apps, Uber has made strides toward greater transparency by partnering with the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) and the Urban Institute to

create a new taxonomy to categorize reported incidents of sexual misconduct and sexual assault (7). The listed categories include, but are not limited to: staring or leering, comments or gestures, attempted touching or kissing, nonconsensual touching or kissing, and soliciting sexual acts. Mainstream media outlets have brought these conversations on rider safety and awareness to the forefront as well as the emergency features currently available in these apps as more victims share unwelcomed experiences.

Some rideshare apps such as Safr, DriveHER, and Ride Austin operate with the premise of providing increased safety features especially for female passengers: stricter vetting procedures, bystander awareness training, and around-the-clock, real-time monitoring. According to one study, “when it comes to the person behind the wheel, women riders want women drivers. Nearly 45 percent prefer female drivers. Only nine percent want male drivers and 46 percent have no preference” (8).

Major competitors such as Uber and Lyft also have taken measures to bridge the gender-related safety gap by implementing stricter screening technology and policies; working with law enforcement and transportation leaders to minimize future incidents; implementing a dedicated critical response line for emergency assistance; eliminating forced arbitration for individual claims of sexual assault and harassment; committing to release transparency reports; and creating a taxonomy to better classify sexual assault and misconduct claims.

Transportation-related and street harassment is a significant issue, especially for the many women who require public transit to navigate their daily commutes to and from work, home, doctors’ appointments, and more. It is imperative that all involved in the policy, planning, design, and implementation process to consider gender-related safety concerns more seriously to facilitate a safer transit experience for all commuters—especially women and other vulnerable demographics.

The positions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or positions of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

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Photo: Dakota Grizzle, Pexels

In ridesharing, women generally prefer women drivers.