Women-Oriented Transit: Meeting Female Travelers’ Needs in Settings of Fear and Harassment

By: Quinn Graham Wallace
Master of Planning
Sol Price School of Public Policy
University of Southern California
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qwallace@usc.edu
512-586-8125
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I. Hey, baby. How're you doing? – Introduction

Sexual harassment affects all women. As women break traditional gender roles and seek economic security, women and girls are frequent, and often dependent, riders of public buses and trains. Mobility is a critical component of women’s success and livelihoods, and harassment in transit environments—on transit, while waiting for transit, and walking to transit stations—ultimately restricts women’s movement in public space.

Because sexual harassment is intimately linked with fear, I explored the question of how women modify their behavior on transit to meet their safety needs and hypothesized that female choice riders in the United States would abandon transit when feeling unsafe and fearful. Though sexual harassment is present everywhere, it is only newly recognized as a policy issue in the Global North. Little information exists to illuminate how women modify their transit behavior in the U.S. because women’s needs are not understood and unmet in transit policies.

In this paper, I expand my research to the global scale to explore gender-specific policies and practices that U.S. cities’ transit operators could adopt. First, I examine women’s highly varied experiences on transit and their socio-cultural contexts. Next, I iterate why transit operators must address women’s needs and concerns to create a safe, inclusive transit environment. Before concluding my paper, I suggest women-oriented policies through which transit agencies can, and should, meet women’s transit safety needs.

II. Girl, I just wanna tell you you’re beautiful. – Women’s Varied Experiences on Transit

Women’s needs and experiences in public transportation vary widely; feelings of safety and fear differ according to a multitude of factors, including income status, ridership frequency, race, and age. Women’s fear in public space is a constructed social fear, rather than a natural fear, that is learned and perpetuated through the “social diffusion of fear” (Jeffries 2014, 253).
Fear is a common thread throughout women’s transit experiences, and everything from uncivil behavior to poor lighting can inspire fear (Vanier & de Jubainville 2017, 11-12). Nevertheless, physical design alone cannot eradicate women’s fear because these feelings are “exacerbated by a larger system of gender inequality” (Graglia 2016, 625). Safety is commonly known as a strong motive for fear and varies greatly between individuals, even within the same environment. In turn, fear and harassment are inseparably linked, as “harassment is understood to sit on a continuum of violence that increases fear of crime” (Gardner et al. 2017, 8).

In the U.S., sexual harassment is included as a form of discrimination in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Neupane & Chesney-Lind 2014, 24). In contrast, many developing countries lack clear legal definitions of sexual harassment, contributing to elusiveness in reporting and identifying perpetrators. Sexual harassment is best understood via examples within “two categories: non-confrontational (leering, the use of offensive and sexualised slurs, requests for someone’s name) and confrontational (following the victim, aggressive speech and sexual assault)” (Gardner et al. 2017, 9). Sexual harassment on transit is typically non-confrontational, “although it often may include forms of confrontational harassment in the form of subtle groping, touching or leaning” (ibid., 9). Sexual harassment falls within the United Nations’ definition of violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Neupane & Chesney-Lind 2014, 23).

Women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, and gender is the “strongest predictor of fear” (Gardner et al. 2017, 9). This remains true in transit environments, in which the “targets of harassment are generally females, [and] the harassers are generally males” (Neupane & Chesney-Lind 2014, 25). In developing countries, sexual harassment can be
a perceived “consequence” (Graglia 2016, 632) of women breaking away from traditional homemaking gender roles and working outside the home, requiring them to more regularly travel in public space. Nevertheless, women are asserting their right to the city in greater numbers than ever before and frequenting spaces in which “hegemonic masculinity is maintained” (ibid., 625), including public buses and trains.

Transportation is historically a male-dominated field with “gender-neutral” policies that effectively ignore women’s safety needs. In 1981, Douglas B. Gurin called for transit agencies to hire more women and hypothesized that “women [would] decrease their use of transit if transit operators [continue] to be unresponsive to women’s travel needs and preferences” (Gurin 1981, 73). Women are not a uniform group in their experiences, impressions, and opinions of transit, and when men—especially men who do not personally and regularly experience harassment—operate transit, women’s needs are overlooked (ibid., 82). Women’s travel is not ubiquitous but often reflects their homemaking, as they are more likely than men to travel in trip-chains, the linking of a traveler’s multiple destinations in the same trip (World Bank 2011, 18).

Women’s identities profoundly inform how often they feel (un)safe on transit. For example, “women with higher income and education levels are more likely to feel safe than women in low income groups” (Vanier & de Jubainville 2017, 2-3), which can be assumed as true on transit. Women’s feelings of fear also differ based on the regularity of their ridership; in a study of Paris’ transit system, Camille Vanier and Hugo d’Arbois de Jubainville found that women who ride transit the least often report feeling safe the most often when compared with casual and frequent riders. These inactive users likely ride within a group and may not have experienced harassment in transit environments, while casual riders feel comparatively the most unsafe, likely due to the increased anxiety of navigating unfamiliar surroundings alone (ibid., 8).

Many researchers do not define whom they classified as women in their studies, and it is
critical to acknowledge that transgender women and gender-queer/non-conforming individuals share similar harassment experiences with cis-gender women (females who are assigned as females at birth and remain females). However, in this paper I choose to focus on the (assumed) cis-gender women of my sources because LGBT women and persons experience other challenges in transit beyond sexual harassment that merit their own foci in studies and research.

III. Where you goin’, doll?– The Importance of Women’s Safety on Public Transportation

Sexual harassment inhibits women’s mobility because in order to make themselves safe, women must modify their travel behavior. To avoid a harasser, women report exiting transit vehicles and waiting for the next bus or train (Graglia 2016, 634). In doing so, women sacrifice timeliness in reaching their destinations and miss opportunities to report harassment incidents. Ultimately, these travel modifications have significant social and economic costs, in which “women’s avoidance of urban places limits their access to resources…but also jeopardizes women’s ability to develop an identity as leaders and public figures” (ibid., 628).

In these instances, women act out of necessity to avoid shame (Neupane & Chesney-Lind 2014, 25) and sexual violence. Transit environments are conducive to women modifying their travel behavior in harassment incidents but rarely focus on targeting harassers. Perpetrators simply step off the bus or train to “put on the cloak of anonymity and take advantage of the public space” (ibid., 31). In the social dimension, women’s mobility modifications perpetuate the “urban culture of fear” (Jeffries 2013, 252) because victims are forced to act in self-preservation. Given many women’s use of transit, the sector could play a significant role in actualizing women’s “right to the city without fear” (ibid., 257).

In the U.S., transportation officials and researchers often separate local transit riders into two categories: captive riders (riders who depend on transit as a primary mode of transportation)
and choice riders (riders who choose to take transit despite their access to other travel modes). Transit authorities’ potential ridership is contingent upon the authorities’ ability to appeal to potential choice riders while continuing to engage and satisfy current riders. In interviews with female Taiwanese and American transit riders, Hsin-Ping Hsu found that rather than abandoning transit altogether, female choice riders tend to modify their travel behavior for short periods and ultimately continue to take transit (Hsu 2011).

However, in the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (L.A. Metro) survey with former transit riders in 2015, about 1/3 of women surveyed reported feeling unsafe when taking transit, likely fueling their avoidance of L.A. Metro services (“L.A. Metro launches hotline”, “Transportation is a Women’s Issue”). If women knew that their local transit systems worked to include their safety needs, then more potential riders would consider taking transit. By instead implementing gender-neutral, and consequently female-blind, policies, transit authorities do not fully engage with women and lose potential ridership.

By identifying gender-specific safety needs, transit operators can create policy that makes transit environments safer for more riders. In their study of women’s fear and transit operations in Penang, Malaysia, Rohana Sham, Nurazlina Samusdin, and Khairunnisa Rahman assert that, “when women perceive that the public transport is safe, so will the rest of society” (Sham et al. 2013, 343). The broader social and systemic impacts of improving women’s transit safety are important to note. However, this argument undermines the sanctity of women’s safety by qualifying that their accommodations will benefit everyone—rather than improving transit for the sake of meeting women’s needs. Nevertheless, this is a common argument for justifying investments in women, especially in developing countries (World Bank 2011, 8). U.S. transportation planners may find this argument appeals to voters and is an effective means of including women and increasing transit funding. Regardless, I urge transportation planners and
policymakers to understand that using women’s needs solely as a means of bettering transit systems reinforces gender-blind policies and undermines the validity of women on transit.

IV. Woman, what’s your name? – Meeting Women’s Transit Safety Needs

Transit authorities cannot “solve” sexual harassment independently of a socio-cultural shift; however, they can contribute to this shift through gender-specific policies. For transit authorities, “recognizing that women and girls have different needs is the first step towards…developing an institutionalized response that sets targets…and measures impact” (World Bank 2011, 28) of gender-specific policies. Policymakers rarely highlight fear or sexual harassment in transit policy discussions in the U.S., where the “dominant North American notion of the bus [is] a space of endurance, poverty, solitary boredom, and fear” (Jeffries 2013, 261). It cannot be emphasized enough that, “women are not a uniform group of passengers” (Vanier & de Jubainville 2017, 13). Thus, U.S. transit operators must implement multiple women-oriented policies. Taking a “one size fits all” approach to meet women’s needs would work contrary to transit authorities’ goals to increase ridership, meet women’s needs, and create safe transit environments. As there are few gender-specific policies in U.S. transit systems, I studied the following policies from developing countries to explore viable options for U.S. transit operators: women-only transit vehicles, increased surveillance, women-oriented design, greater female employment in transit authorities, and published data on sexual harassment.

Women-only transit vehicles

Women-only carriages operate in several countries, including Malaysia, Brazil, Mexico, and Japan (“Transportation is a Women’s Issue”). In 2010, one of Kuala Lumpur’s rail transit operators, KTM Komuter, introduced Women-Only Coaches (WOCs) in response to women’s harassment on KTM. Though needing some improvements in enforcement and visual indicators,
WOCs have proven as overall effective in making women feel safe and are in high demand during peak hours (Bachok et al. 2014). In Mexico City, INMUJERES, an organization legitimizing women’s concerns in Mexican government, used the bright pink buses as a “symbolic place for a women’s [political] movement” (Graglia 2016, 627). Women-only buses were already a logical practice because many women regularly modified their travel behavior in light of extremely frequent harassment. Women-only transportation without policy reforms increases the notion that women must be protected; what has made Mexico City’s pink bus fleet so successful is their accompanying pro-women policies (ibid., 637).

In the U.S., Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris has found that women-only transit vehicles are unpopular with American women who fear that women-only transportation could further discrimination (“Transportation is a Women’s Issue”). These cars segregate women and do not inherently solve the greater social issue of harassment. They focus on modifying women’s behavior—already a common transit practice—instead of addressing perpetrators’ behavior (Gardner et al. 2017, 11-12). Regardless, no women-only transit vehicles currently operate in the U.S., and coupled with policy, women-only transit vehicles present an opportunity for planners to experiment with how to best meet women’s needs. As women are not ubiquitous, women-only vehicles would receive mixed reviews. As ride-sharing companies offer the option to request female drivers (“Transportation is a Women’s Issue”) middle- and high-income women will have more options on how to travel safely, but women-only transit vehicles would give low-income women access to safer options and attract female choice riders with safety concerns.

**Increased in-person surveillance**

In-person surveillance has proven more effective at making women feel safe in transit environments than CCTV (Loukaitou-Sideris 2014, 246). Transit authorities can make women safer by locating more bus stops near “natural surveillance opportunities” (Loukaitou-Sideris
2014, 247), like shopping centers and business districts, because women fear isolation and depend on others in victimization incidents (Vanier & de Jubainville 2017, 2-3). Many migrant women have concerns about reporting to the police (“Transportation is a Women’s Issue”) and feel less safe on public transportation with increased in-person surveillance. Thus, increased policing could easily re-appropriate the city of fear. Transit operators should be extremely careful when considering increasing in-person surveillance, especially in the U.S. where police brutality and immigration policing are prevalent concerns.

Technology may be able to replace some of the need for in-person surveillance, as apps and hotlines allow callers to report incidents and direct police to transit stops to handle perpetrators (“L.A. Metro launches hotline”, “Ecuador has created an app”). Emergency communication boxes on trains supposedly allow passengers to communicate with the conductor, but the boxes are often difficult to find, sometimes do not work (Hidden 2007, 19), do not ensure that the perpetrator will be caught, and require women to publicize incidents. To enable apps and other smart phone-based technology, transit operators should work to increase cell phone service coverage while maintaining emergency communication boxes for those without cell phones.

**Women-oriented environmental design**

Transit authorities can implement a wide variety of design innovations to better include women; this is an area in which transportation planners should continue to think creatively and include women in designing transit features. For example, women notice lighting, or lack thereof, in regards to their safety. Bus stops need improved lighting—but not so bright and isolated that those waiting at the bus stop are targeted (Vanier & de Jubainville 2017, 14). Already in Portland, real-time information for buses significantly minimizes women’s stress and fear during wait times (“Transportation is a Women’s Issue”). While some transit authorities encourage riders to use apps to access real-time transit information, some low-income or older
women do not have smart phones and, thus, access to this stress-relieving information.

**Increased women employment in transit authorities**

Perhaps the most effective, long-term “solution” that transit authorities can employ to meet female transit riders’ needs is recruiting and hiring more female employees. With more women involved in every capacity of transit, transit gains greater women-oriented focus, as women will make policy decisions and enforce practices that women helped to create. If not in place already, U.S. transit authorities can and should implement this strategy immediately.

As women continue to work and move outside the home in developing countries, more women have jobs in transportation, like Mumbai’s female commandos who police transit (World Bank 2011, 37). Women-only reporting systems (“Ecuador has created an app”) indicate that U.S. transit authorities may see increased harassment reporting with women-only systems. In a World Bank study that focused on poor women in Mumbai, researchers found that women were more comfortable reporting incidents to female commandos. They also asked women surveyed if working as train or bus conductors appealed to them and received overwhelmingly positive responses, including statements celebrating female empowerment (World Bank 2011, 35).

**Published data on sexual harassment in transit environments**

In the public, the most challenging aspect of understanding sexual harassment in transit systems is the lack of accessible data. Though fear and safety are difficult to measure, understanding how, when, and where women feel (un)safe in transit environments facilitates the creation of, or significantly improves, transit authorities’ women-oriented policies and practices. No national statistics on women’s fear and transit are publicly available (Hsu 2011, 88). Only recently have some major U.S. transit agencies (*Hidden* 2007, 5; “L.A. Metro launches hotline”; L.A. Metro 2015) begun publishing data on sexual harassment and safety. When results do not differentiate between genders (L.A. Metro 2015), transit authorities reinforce gender-neutral
(women-blind) transit policies. If data remains unpublished, no public check exists to ensure transit authorities are tracking harassment data or working to address women’s needs and fears.

Current quantitative data collection is insufficient to understand women’s safety needs and fears on transit. Hsu asserts that surveys can skew results by simplifying harassment, failing to recognize fear, and failing to differentiate between choice and captive transit riders. Thus, transit authorities should adopt a qualitative, narrative-producing approach to study sexual harassment and craft policy (Hsu 2011, 88). Additionally, it is challenging to quantitatively measure women’s travel modifications in response to harassers. In utilizing qualitative methods to track this data, transit authorities will be yet better informed in how to address women’s safety needs while calling public attention to the immobilizing effects of sexual harassment.

V. Can I get a smile, pretty girl? – Conclusion

Overcoming fear and feeling safe in transit environments persists as a major challenge for women throughout the world. Sexual harassment remains a significant contributor to women’s fear and remains common in transit environments. While transit operators alone cannot stop sexual harassment in public space, there are actions they can take to make women safer, target perpetrators, and facilitate women’s enhanced mobility. My suggestions for U.S. transit operators are by no means exhaustive, and I encourage researchers, transportation planners, and policymakers to continue to engage female riders and work to create women-oriented transit policy. As transit operators seek to increase their ridership and maintain safe transit systems, they must shift away from gender-neutral policies and instead consider gender-specific policies in order to understand and meet women’s needs. Moreover, transit authorities have a tremendous opportunity to better include women in their systems and alleviate the detrimental long-term effects of sexual harassment; I look forward to the women-oriented transit practices of the future.
Sources


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