Women’s personal safety in public transport

Surveys made to more than 2,700 transport users in Buenos Aires, Quito and Santiago de Chile show the differences in how men and women perceive security in public transport and provide relevant information for the definition of transport policies that ensure equal access of women and girls to cities while maximizing the benefits of improved mobility for all.

In general, women make more trips than men but travel shorter distances and have more limited access to motorized transport, making them more dependent on public transport.

More than 60% of respondents feel unsafe while using public transport

The feeling of insecurity comes from observing, hearing or experiencing a sexual harassment incident.

If we consider women users of public transport, the number rises to 70%.

Women feel more insecure while using public transport under the following conditions:

- Overcrowded transit vehicles
- Traveling alone
- Traveling with children or the elderly
- Traveling without daylight

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Women disproportionately carry the responsibility for meeting children’s travel needs, and, among those users who are mothers, 8 out of 10 feel unsafe while using public transport.

The sustainability of transport is at risk as women often shape the travel patterns and attitudes of their children.

Out of the total of users surveyed...

- Buenos Aires: 71% observed situations of harassment, 27% experienced situations of harassment
- Quito: 35% observed situations of harassment, 11% experienced situations of harassment
- Santiago: 95% observed situations of harassment, 85% experienced situations of harassment

Even as women experience harassment in a greater dimension than men, these recurring events are still largely ignored by transport authorities, operators, and society at large.
Few victims of sexual harassment in public transport file complaints due to lack of trust in the system and fear of reprisal.

“I am not going to go out unless I am accompanied with someone that I know I can come home with”
Woman in Focal Group Discussion, Center of Santiago de Chile

“All of my sister’s friends have had these type [harrassment] of experiences... I have heard of some situations, but I thought it was something that does not happen normally”
Man in Focal Group Discussion, Quito

“It’s hard for someone to help you, usually nobody does”
Woman in Focal Group Discussion, Quito

3 out of 5 women changed their travel behavior after seeing or having experienced a sexual harrassment incident.

This stressful setting causes many women to feel compelled to change their travel patterns and transportation modes.

3 out of 5 women users of public transport affirm they will prefer to change transport modes, versus 1 out of 2 men.

Fear of harassment in public transport and the public space can turn women into using private cars and taxis if and when they have the chance, compromising efforts to increase the share of public transport in Latin American cities.

In order to promote equality and inclusion in the transport system, cities can...

- Promote transport and public space policy that considers the concept of mobility as a capability for all types of individuals to access the city and its opportunities.
- Collect, analyze and use sex-disaggregated data and gender sensitive data for the planning, design and operation of safe transport systems.
- Promote labor participation of women in the transport sector, particularly in areas of leadership.
- Include local communities in the process of designing new services and implementing accessibility interventions through the systematic use of participatory methods.
- Facilitate the empowerment of women so that they take action against any type of gender-based violence in public space or transport through effective regulation.
- Promote collective responsibility among private transport operators, government agencies, the academic sector, as well as civil society to promote lasting change.

Women can become catalysts in achieving sustainable urban mobility.