

Ensuring Women and Girls' Safety on Streets, in Transport, and other Public Spaces

UN Women

Background

Evidence suggests that in many cities, women and girls rely heavily on walking and public transport and face a complex interaction of financial, physical, and socio-economic barriers in their mobility¹. Women and girls often bear a higher burden of morbidity and mortality from road traffic injuries from accidents as pedestrians². Across the world, women and girls often fear and experience sexual violence and other forms of violence on streets, and when waiting or using public transport.

For example, in Bogota, Colombia, a recent study reveals that sexual harassment of women in public transport and public space is widespread in the city, including a focus on stations, stops, vehicles, and walking routes.³ In Los Angeles, a survey of riders showed that women feel less safe than men during all stages of their transit trips — especially at night⁴. In Auckland, New Zealand, women of color said they felt unsafe during the day and night at transit stops/stations⁵. Moreover, infrastructure that aims to improve pedestrian and cyclist safety may often create unintended negative impacts on women and girls' safety, and **increased fear and experience of sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence** when transport and urban design does not take into account their specific needs.

This reality reduces women's and girls' freedom of movement denying them the same opportunity and rights to the city as men and boys enjoy. It reduces their ability to participate in school, in formal or informal employment, and in public life. It limits their access to essential services, and enjoyment of cultural and recreational opportunities. While women and girls of all social and economic strata experience and fear violence in public spaces, women and girls living in poverty, or belonging to socially excluded or stigmatized groups (Indigenous women, women of color, migrants, those living with disability or HIV/AIDS, etc.) bear the brunt of risks and dangers, especially because of experiences of discrimination and inequality, and limited access to information, services, resources and justice.

Women's perception of safety in various transport modes was already much lower than men's perceptions of safety pre-COVID-19, affecting their mobility choices and reinforcing patterns of gender inequality. A 2021 Rapid Gender Assessment on the impact of **COVID-19** on violence against women

¹ Sustainable Mobility for All SUB4all (2019). Global Roadmap of Action Toward Sustainable Mobility: Gender. Washington DC

² Sub4all (2019). *Ibid*

³ Quinones, L M (2020). Sexual harassment in public transport in Bogotá. In Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice. Vol 1(139), 54-69

⁴ Metro (2019). Understanding how women travel.

⁵ Chowdhury, S & van Wee, B. (2020). Examining women's perception of safety during waiting times at public transport terminals. Transport Policy Vol (94), 102-108

conducted in 13 countries reveals that more than half (58%) of women said they think that sexual harassment in public spaces has worsened amid the pandemic⁶.

The pandemic has revealed two main trends related to women and girls' mobility. With restricted public transport and lockdown regulations, the micro mobility at neighborhood level has gained increased attention, and many cities have put in place measures to support increased bike lanes, footpaths, and also in some cases the digitalization of transport modes⁷. Yet, in these initiatives it is not clear how women and girls' specific mobility needs, including concerns about their safety are addressed. The digitalization of these transport modalities also may fail to reach women and girls who are less likely to access or own and control information technology (for example smart phones) or have access to the internet given the digital divide⁸.

Solutions

-UN Women continues to support the **development and implementation of comprehensive initiatives spanning over 53 cities in 32 countries** to prevent and respond to sexual violence against women in public spaces, including a focus on streets and public transportation and safe mobility through the **Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Initiative**⁹, in partnership with local and national governments, women's rights organizations, UN agencies, and other partners. Some practices include:

- In Papua New Guinea, the Department of Transport, the Road Traffic Authority (RTA), the National Capital District Commission (NCDC) with technical support from UN Women developed a long-term city-wide mobility plan including women's specific mobility and safety needs.
- In Quito, Ecuador a comprehensive programme was implemented, including a protocol to address cases of sexual harassment on public transport, helping to increase bystander willingness to intervene in a sexual violence situation in public transport by 62%.
- In Canada, the Edmonton Transit Service and Safe City team launched the *Transit Safety and Security Project* which aims to create systemic change; increase the number of women in transit management; increase the number of female operators; and provide regular training to respond to sexual violence.
- In Torreon Mexico, a new amendment to the city's mobility regulation recognized sexual harassment as an administrative failure and made mandatory capacity building of drivers on gender-based violence and implemented a response protocol.

-UN Women launched a policy brief on COVID-19 and Ensuring Safe Transport with and for Women and Girls¹⁰, with a series of recommendations to prioritize safe mobility for women and girls during and beyond the pandemic.

⁶ UN Women (2021). Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during Covid-19. Available at: <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>

⁷ For example, in New York the number of women biking surged by 147 percent in July this year compared with the same month last year. In Buenos Aires, in less than a month the number of women cycling in main avenues increased from 8% to 19%. UN Women (2020). COVID-19 and ensuring safe transport for girls. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-covid-19-and-ensuring-safe-transport-with-and-for-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2419>

⁸ <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2020.pdf>

⁹ For more information, see UN women (2021). Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces. Global Results Report. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/07/safe-cities-and-safe-public-spaces-global-results-report-2017-2020>

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/12/brief-covid-19-and-ensuring-safe-transport-with-and-for-women-and-girls>

These include:

- Ensure that mobility and sustainable transport measures developed during the pandemic are gender-responsive (So that that the needs and concerns of women and men are taken account, including those groups who are most likely to experience violence because of multiple forms of discrimination and inequality)
- Consider women’s mobility needs and voices in different stages of transportation planning and in green recovery packages that form part of COVID-19 recovery plans and budgets
- Incorporate a gender mainstreaming approach throughout mobility policies and transport infrastructure lifecycle
- Continue initiatives in place in transport to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls

-UN Women’s Training Centre, UN Women’s Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Initiative, and the World Bank’s Transport Global Practice and Open Learning Campus prepared and launched a course in March 2021 on **Gender Equality in Transportation**¹¹. The course proposes practical solutions for enhancing inclusion and equality across the sector, balancing questions on ‘why’ a gender lens is important with operational questions on ‘how ’we can implement it and includes examples of concrete interventions designed to support the shift toward greater gender equality in transport.

¹¹ <https://portal.trainingcentre.unwomen.org/product/gender-equality-transportation/>