

Women-only Transport: A “Solution” To What End?

By Sonal Shah

Sonal Shah is a New Delhi-based urban planner focusing on equitable and sustainable transportation in cities.

Sexual harassment restricts women’s movement and access to opportunities. According to the Asian Development Bank, a considerable proportion of women in South and Central Asia experience sexual harassment—53% in Karachi, Pakistan; 30% in Baku, Azerbaijan; and 21% in Tbilisi, Georgia—which affects their use of public transportation. Women in Karachi are more likely to wear “cover-up” clothing and reduce their use of transport at night. This limits their access to continuing education, flexible working arrangements, and social activities.¹



Sexual harassment of women in public spaces is pervasive, and governments are under pressure to act. Many governments have reflexively responded by creating or expanding sex-segregated transport services: ladies’ coaches, special trains, segregated buses, “pink” taxis, during peak hours or full time.

Segregated transit has low implementation costs, and can often be implemented immediately. While some advocates for women are demanding this step, others have argued that segregated transport reinforces gender inequality and the notion that women need protection from men. Sex-segregated transport often becomes a knee-jerk response without consideration of the drawbacks, such as how women will travel with male companions and how long they may have to wait for a transport service. Little thought has been given to transgender and non-binary people, who are often excluded from women-only spaces, despite being more vulnerable to assault or harassment than cisgender women.

Women-only carriages in subways and trains are common in Brazil, Bangladesh, Egypt, Japan, India, Iran, Indonesia, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, Taiwan, and the Philippines, among other countries. But do they work? No one really knows. There is some evidence from Japan that sex-segregated carriages reduce the rate of sexual harassment. In 2000, three rail operators introduced women-only carriages in Tokyo, and reports of lewd behavior dropped by about 3% per year. Yet Japanese women are ambivalent about the carriages. 35.9% of the women surveyed never used women-only carriages, 46.5% used them “sometimes,” 13.2% used them “usually,” and only 3.8% “always” used them.²

In many places, implementation has not been smooth or consistent. South Korea introduced women-only subway cars during peak hours in 1992, but discontinued them because men continued to use them. In 2006, Rio de Janeiro approved a law which mandated women-only carriages on commuter and metro trains. The system’s metro guards, often located at stations in affluent areas, are predominantly men. This has

¹ Asian Development Bank 2015.

² As cited in Mineta Transportation Institute 2009.



Opposite and above: Women-only carriages in trains are common in many cities around the world. But do they actually improve women's commute experiences? It depends.

Photos: ITDP India/ Wikimedia common

resulted in ineffective law enforcement and hostile reactions from men when women complain.³ A state-owned railway operator in Jakarta withdrew its female-only carriages after they were introduced in 2010. They argued that the dedicated cars were “largely empty,” while the mixed spaces were crowded.

Mexico City launched twelve women-only buses in 2008, which are popular, if very limited. In India, women-only buses do not achieve sufficient ridership. Women say that service is infrequent and they are unable to travel with male companions. The existing bus fleet is inadequate in most Indian cities. As of 2011, Delhi had 17 million people and only 5,000 buses. Yet more than double that number are required to serve the city adequately. Should gender-segregated services be a priority when a larger bus fleet would likely benefit everyone?

Some cities are getting the message that change is needed. In Quito, commuters can report sexual harassment by sending a text message. This alerts authorities and the driver, and triggers an anti-harassment announcement on the bus. The reporter will also receive a call from a psychologist for support. On average, the service receives at least eight calls per day between 6 a.m. and 9 p.m.⁴ Cities like Montreal, Toronto, Paris, and Bangalore have added request-a-stop service for buses after dark.

Gender-sensitive design is critical to safe and comfortable public transit. Cities can achieve this by expanding fleets (buses, rickshaws, metros, etc.) to reduce crowding; improving first-and-last mile transit connections; and adding crosswalks, well-lit paths, and request-a-stop services at night. Cities must have an effective complaint reporting and redressal system, a zero-tolerance sexual harassment policy, and bystanders should be encouraged to assist victims of harassment. Drivers and the police must receive training to prevent and address sexual harassment.

The goal of a public transport system should be to create an environment where women and girls can travel freely, without violence or worry about harassment. Sex segregation should not be the default response to harassment in public transport, as it does not foster behavioral change. Gender-equitable public transportation requires an integrated approach.

Creating safe cities for women and girls is not a one-time initiative, which can be solved by a magic wand, segregated service, or a technological device. It will require a sustained and coordinated effort to transform social behavior, and to make public transportation safe for women and girls. A safe city for women and girls is a safe city for all.

³ Yasmin Curzi, “Brazil: Women-only Carriages in Rio’s Subways: Safe Spaces for Women or Institutionalized Inequality?” Stop Street Harassment Blog, 2017, <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/2017/06/brazil-womenonlycarriages/>. “Nearly 2,000 Ecuador Buses to Have Mechanism to Report Sexual Harassment Instantaneously,” teleSUR, January, 21, 2018, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/> “Nearly 2,000 Ecuador Buses to Have Mechanism to Report Sexual Harassment Instantaneously,” teleSUR, January, 21, 2018, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Nearly-2000-Ecuador-Buses-to-Have-Mechanism-to-Report-Sexual-Harassment-Instantaneously-20180121-0011.html>.