

Breaking the Silence on Gender-Blind Transport

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The achievement of women's fundamental right to freedom of movement begins with the fight against male-induced harassment on public transport. Credit: Danilo Valladares/IPS

ROME, Aug 22 2016 (IPS) - In today's "Post-Feminist" world, it is time to pose a fundamental question. If we are really reaping the liberating outcomes of a "gender-just" 21st century, why do the vast majority of young girls and women, the world over, continuously refuse to speak out in the face of verbal, sexual and physical harassment on public transport?

If, as an international community of women, we turn a blind eye to men's salivating glares and inappropriate touching, do we do nothing more than fuel the "meat market" and succumb to the sexual objectification of women on a global scale?

Does female reluctance to acknowledge the fear pervasive males trigger within them permit the perpetrator of the "cat-call" to possess an undefeatable power?

By dismissing harassment do women do nothing more than strengthen the repressive chain of male patriarchy by neither questioning nor reprimanding it?

In light of the upcoming of the [UN Habitat III](#) conference and the subsequent definition of the new "Urban Agenda", it is time to step up in the face of sexual harassment and threat on public transport and fight for women's quintessential right to freedom of movement in their own urban environment.

Whilst many may consider cat-calls and "light groping" to be harmless, the setbacks implicated from the threat of men on public transport is critical.

Few stop to consider that each threatening remark and lustful gaze can lead to the hindrance of women's educational and social freedom and development.

According to a recent discussion led by [Wikigender](#), issues surrounding accessibility and safety can deter women from assessing public spaces, seeking education, availing of economic opportunities and receiving healthcare.

By placing a strong focus on female-inclusive public transportation in the new UN-Habitat “Urban Agenda”, our world will be one step closer to achieving not only SDG 5 for female empowerment and Gender Equality, but also, SDG 11 which aims to make cities and settlements inclusive, safe, and sustainable.

The need to eradicate gender-blind systems of transport is particularly vital at this juncture as for the first time in history, there are more people living in cities than in rural areas.

There is no other time to implement gender inclusive transport initiatives than the present.

Each month, over five million people are added to the cities of the developing world.

In addition, it is estimated that by 2030, approximately 1.5 million girls susceptible to gender-based harassment and violence on public transport will live in urban areas.

A report issued by [Plan International](#) indicated the fear of violence felt by adolescent girls is prevalent particularly in the developing cities of Kampala, Delhi, and Lima where the research was primarily conducted.

The findings spoke volumes of the feelings of terror and discomfort gender-blind transport inflicted on girls as young as 12.

In Delhi, only 3.3 % of reported always feeling safe while using public transport. Meanwhile, in Lima, only 2.2 % claimed to feel secure when walking in public spaces. In Kampala, over 80 % of young women stated that they do not feel safe whilst in urban transition in general.

Although the study was conducted in distinct parts of the world, the underlying issue of silence remained common.

Female hesitation to voice their plight permits the vicious cycle of victimisation, harassment, and threat on public transport to continue.

Those interviewed emphasised the fact that their opinions were not valued when it came to urban planning, an overwhelming sense of exclusion was felt from all interviewees when it came to key decision-making processes in their individual cities.

Ironically enough, many young girls “weathered-down” or excused the actions of the perpetrators of gender-based violence and harassment.

During the interview process of the [Plan International Report](#), words like “assault” and “harassment” were replaced by “eve-teasing” in Delhi and “inappropriate touches” in Cairo. This evidence suggests that the female victims of harassment and violence reluctance to condemn their attackers stems from an intrinsic feeling of shame instilled within them.

In what can be considered a process of “re-victimisation”, (a deep societal fear of having brought the harassment onto themselves) the subsequent consequence of being ridiculed, scorned, and even punished acts as a core element of the silence surrounding gender-based harassment on public transport.

Ultimately, the recurrent denial of women’s fundamental right to mobility in the city is nothing short of an outrage.

Female discomfort and insecurity can no longer be considered a “societal norm” or consequently associated and attached to the status of being a woman.

The lack of apathy from witnesses of harassment stems from the undercurrent fear to speak up.

If nobody chooses to voice their condemnation, the hindrance to women’s freedom of movement will cease to discontinue.

It is crucial to comprehend that this is no small-scale women’s issue, it’s a global epidemic triggered by self-entitled male chauvinism.

In fact, Research by [Hollaback and Cornell University](#) based on 16,000 interviews in 22 countries found that 80-90 % of women had been harassed in public.

The evidence further indicated the shocking extent of public harassment with 66 % of German women reported to have been groped or fondled and 47 % of Indian women to have witnessed male exposure in public.

In New York, it is estimated that 96 % of sexual harassment and 86 % of sexual assault goes unreported on the subway.

In Bogota, Colombia [recently ranked as the most dangerous city for a woman to take public transport in the world](#), six in every ten women report physical harassment while travelling.

These figures indicate that the continuance of male-induced harassment is overwhelmingly threatening and detrimental to the future of gender equality.

This is why it is vital that UN Habitat's new "Urban Agenda" implements initiatives with a strong emphasis on the safe mobility of women and girls in urban environments.

By granting women access to safe and secure transport, establishing support networks and recognising the fundamental significance of the female voice in urban decision-making processes, the path to freedom will be paved for women in urban mobility.

In this way, the next woman or young girl to feel under threat by a pervasive stare or demeaning remark will not shy in fear of the implications of female blame, rather, she will report the perpetrator of harassment and help put an end to women's insecurity and victimisation on public transport.