

Sexual Harassment on Public Transit

While preparing for my NPC18 session, “Planning for the Other Half,” which addressed gender-specific needs and safety on public transportation, I was reminded of my college days in New Delhi. Being stared at, even groped, by men on city buses was routine. It was upsetting, but there was nothing I could do; if the guy got violent, no one was going to help me. I just had to put up with it and wait for my stop.

The banality of that harassment shocks many people, but I am not alone in my experience. Sexual harassment on transit is a global problem. It’s so commonplace it has become part of the urban scenery. Combatting that reality is a challenge transportation planners and agencies must tackle together.

Public awareness campaigns are one strategy we can use. After a 2014 passenger survey, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority found that 22 percent of passengers—the majority of which were women—experience unwanted sexual contact during rides. However, that same year, only 99 official reports were made. To address the disparity, LA Metro and partners launched the “It’s Off-Limits” anti-sexual harassment campaign, encouraging victims and witnesses to inform police of incidents. Reports can be submitted via LA Metro’s smartphone app, which allows riders to snap photographs of suspects without activating the phone’s flash. Last year, a telephone hotline with counselors was added.

Since the campaign was launched, harassment reports have decreased to 15 percent, which is significantly lower than rates in other big cities around the world. A 2007 survey of New York City subway riders found that 63 percent experienced some form of harassment, and recent polling by the Thomson Reuters Foundation indicates rates are higher still in other countries.

We need to find more ways to keep women safe on public transportation. Cities in Japan, Mexico, and India have established women-only train cars, but the problem persists across their transit systems. New York City, a leader in the legislative fight

against sexual harassment on subways, is working on a new law that could upgrade harassment from a misdemeanor to a felony and turn “sexually motivated touching” into a sex crime with jail time. I applaud these efforts, but until we identify and address the root of the problem, we are simply spinning our wheels.

Earlier this year, under the leadership of Deputy CEO Stephanie Wiggins, LA Metro established a Women & Girls Governing Council to look specifically at how we meet the transportation needs of female riders. Is there bias in the way the transit system is studied and evaluated? Does transit design accommodate the needs and security concerns of women? How can harassment and other kinds of violence be prevented and responded to?

To answer these questions, we must continue to educate the public—victims, bystanders, police officers, and transit workers. Some critics have argued that the growing gap between LA Metro’s data and harassment rates in other cities could indicate that our riders do not understand what sexual harassment looks like, or that they have become accustomed to it. Indeed, research suggests most women who have experienced harassment do not take action in response. We must engage with riders to help them understand that no incident is too trivial, and that everyone is responsible for speaking out and making public transit safer. We can also encourage the adoption of programs that train police officers to treat these cases with respect and dignity.

Sexual harassment on transit is a planning issue. It’s time we work with transportation agencies to protect the people who use this necessary, publicly funded service.



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