



COVID-19  
RESPONSE



# COVID-19 and Ensuring Safe Transport with and for Women and Girls

Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

## INTRODUCTION

This brief highlights trends and impacts of COVID-19 on women's safety in transport. It includes examples of strategies put in place to provide safer transport modes for women and girls throughout the global pandemic with a focus on availability, accessibility and affordability, and makes recommendations on how different sectors can contribute to a comprehensive approach to improve women's mobility.

It draws upon the knowledge and experience of a wide range of experts (e.g. governments, grassroots women and women's rights organizations, the private sector, and other partners) including those from cities participating in the [UN Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Flagship Initiative](#).

The Global Initiative aims to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence that women and girls often fear and experience in and around public transport, and other public spaces.<sup>1</sup>

It is a living document which forms part of a series on [EVAW COVID-19 briefs](#) and will continue to be informed by the uptake of recommendations by multiple stakeholders in policy and programme action throughout different phases of the pandemic.



# COVID-19 AND WOMEN'S SAFETY IN TRANSPORT

## WOMEN AND GIRLS ACROSS THE WORLD REPORT FEELING UNSAFE WHEN COMMUTING

- In Kigali, Rwanda, 55% of women reported that they were concerned about traveling after dark.<sup>i</sup>
- In Auckland, New Zealand, women of color said they felt unsafe during the day and night at transit stops/stations.<sup>ii</sup>



- In Lima, Peru, women are more likely to make transport decisions based on safety, while men based on speed.<sup>iii</sup>
- In Los Angeles, a survey of riders showed that women feel less safe than men during all stages of their transit trips — especially at night.<sup>iv</sup>

## EMERGING DATA SHOWS THAT SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19, SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN TRANSPORT HAS INTENSIFIED

- In several cities in Latin America, women have expressed increased concerns about safety in public transport.
- Health workers, the majority of whom are women have experienced violence and discrimination in their commute.

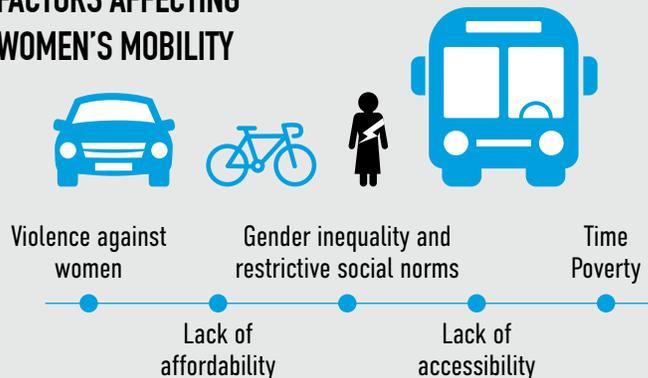


- LGBTIQ+ communities in Panama, Lima and Colombia have experienced a higher risk to violence while commuting.
- In Uganda, informal vendors have reported increased violence around transport.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN TRANSPORT MAY IMPACT

- Freedom of movement
- Access to transport infrastructure (including jobs and other services)
- Safe and sustainable transport

## FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S MOBILITY



## LOCAL LEADERS AND TRANSPORT AUTHORITIES RESPONDING TO COVID-19 CAN:

- Continue initiatives in place in transport to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls
- Ensure that mobility and transport measures developed during the pandemic are gender-responsive
- Create spaces for women and girls to meaningfully participate in transportation strategies including those that form part of COVID-19 recovery plans and budgets
- Incorporate a gender mainstreaming approach throughout mobility policies and transport infrastructure lifecycle

i UN Women (2013). Baseline Survey Report: Kigali Safe City for Women and Girls. [Accessed 23/09/20]

ii. 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

iii. Gomez, L.M. (2000). Gender Analysis of Two Components of the World Bank Transport Projects in Lima, Peru: Bikepaths and Busways. World Bank

iv. Metro (2019). Understanding how women travel. [Accessed 23/11/20]

# TRENDS AND ISSUES

In many cities, women and girls rely heavily on public transport and face a complex interaction of financial, physical, and socio-economic barriers in their mobility.<sup>2</sup> Before COVID-19, evidence showed that women and girls, and in particular those who experience multiple and simultaneous forms of discrimination and oppression (race, age, disability, etc.) fear and experience sexual violence and other forms of violence in public spaces, impacting their freedom of movement and right to the city.<sup>3</sup>

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.

Women experience different forms of sexual violence in and around public transport ranging from unwelcome sexual remarks, looks and gestures

and touching, to attempted rape, rape and femicide. It happens on streets when walking and riding a bike, on buses,<sup>4</sup> trains,<sup>5</sup> and metros,<sup>6</sup> in taxis, when using rideshare<sup>7</sup> and in spaces around transport infrastructure.<sup>8</sup>

During COVID-19, measures such as social distancing and lockdown have led to a significant reduction in public-transit use. There has been a decline in ridership in cities around the world,<sup>9</sup> with as much as 80 to 90 per cent of some services.<sup>10</sup> Public transport users, the majority of whom are women<sup>11</sup> are particularly affected by these measures. For example, anecdotal evidence in Abuja, Nigeria suggests that women are more at risk to be cut off from transit service, and some have been left waiting on isolated roads as bus services have restricted their service capacity up to 60 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

The decreased number of people and bystander support in public transport has resulted in a heightened risk of violence against women.<sup>13</sup> Emerging data including from police, media and human rights organizations reveal that sexual violence against women and girls in and around transport continues to occur since the outbreak of COVID-19, and in some cases it has intensified.<sup>14</sup> For example, in Latin American cities, women have expressed increased concerns about safety in public transport and around empty streets.<sup>15</sup> LGBTIQ+ communities in Panama, Lima and Colombia have experienced a higher risk to violence while commuting and in public spaces following the introduction of sex-segregated measures on social distancing and mobility rules.<sup>16</sup>

Health workers, the majority of whom are women<sup>17</sup> have experienced violence and discrimination in their commute during the pandemic in several countries. The media and women's rights organizations have documented cases of violence



Photo: ILO/F. Latief

against women doctors and nurses including threats of sexual violence, physical violence, and intimidation,<sup>18</sup> on their way to and from work and when using public transport.<sup>19</sup>

The safety of women working in the informal economy has also been affected. In Uganda, women's rights groups have reported increased violence against informal vendors,<sup>20</sup> including those selling produce on roadsides, and have called for a gender responsive COVID-19 plan that considers the needs of women informal workers who represent 71% of informal workers.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to violence against women in public spaces, other barriers to women's mobility continue during the pandemic including time poverty, lack of accessibility, affordability of transport, and social norms that restrict women's mobility.

In Turkey, domestic workers the majority of whom are women tend to travel as long as 4 hours per day.<sup>22</sup> In the Netherlands, a COVID-19 and mobility

assessment reveals that first-generation women migrants with a non-Western background, less educated women, and single mothers are more likely to experience challenges with their mobility during the pandemic because they have few alternatives to urban public transport.<sup>23</sup>

Before COVID-19, evidence suggests that in households men often have priority for use of the family owned car or bicycle, even if women have a greater need for it due to the number of smaller trips made in the course of the day related to care and work responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> The pandemic has further amplified restrictive gender norms and expectations that unfairly distribute mobility resources.<sup>25</sup>

Even after the pandemic, transit agencies across the globe are expected to further cut services given drastically affected budgets as a result of costs associated with COVID-19 measures, and low ridership. This may further impact the safety and economic viability of public transport.<sup>26</sup>



Photo: Jennifer A. Patterson / ILO

# IMPACTS

Transport continues to be influenced by a set of gender inequalities,<sup>27</sup> as women's freedom of movement continues to be affected during the pandemic with fear and experience of violence and limited mobility, the high share of care work with additional risks and costs to women; and women and girls' lack of access to transport infrastructure, including jobs and services.

## LIMITED MOBILITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Fear and experience of sexual harassment and other forms of crime and gender based violence in public transport reduces women's and girls' freedom of movement, their access to school, work, essential services, their ability to participate in public life and enjoy recreation opportunities, etc.<sup>28</sup>

In some cities, migrant women in particular have experienced a higher risk of violence during the pandemic due to lack of mobility.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, these safety concerns have also in some cases translated into higher costs of transport for women. Before COVID-19, the "pink tax" of transport - a term used to describe the extra amount women pay for safety reasons, has been documented.<sup>30</sup> During and beyond the pandemic this cost may further increase for women as they seek alternative and safer modes of transport.

## RETHINKING MOBILITY AND CARE WORK

As a result of the health pandemic, cities are reconsidering growth and land-use, particularly around density and travel distance. While women were already taking on most of the care work prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging research suggests that the crisis and its subsequent lockdown have resulted in a dramatic



Photo: Cory Hancock

increase in this burden.<sup>31</sup> During the lockdown, with limited transport options and an increase of fear of being exposed to the virus, the burden of travel related to care such as running household errands and travel with children and elders to receive care and services,<sup>32</sup> continues to be carried by women, and may increase further.

The city of Paris has shown, with its adopted '15 minute city' approach that there could be a shift towards a new local model, where services and employment are local, and journeys are shorter which may help to contribute to sustainable development.<sup>33</sup>

This model may offer a unique opportunity to redistribute care work and mobility as more people will be able to work closer to their homes or remotely and have access to more public spaces. In the development of such approaches, it is also important to ensure safe access routes for women who need to travel longer distances and who often make multiple trips to access jobs and services.

## LACK OF ACCESS TO TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE, INCLUDING JOBS AND SERVICES

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) forecast, women's employment,

in particular in developing countries is likely to be greatly affected during the pandemic. Women are overrepresented in many of the industries hardest hit by COVID-19. For example, 40 per cent of all employed women – 510 million women globally – work in hard-hit sectors including food service, retail and entertainment.<sup>34</sup> Women who are in precarious jobs may be more likely to be affected by transport service cuts.

The transport sector that is traditionally male dominated, with only 17% women employees on average across a sample of 46 countries<sup>35</sup> has also been affected with job losses. A recent study conducted in Kenya suggests that during the pandemic the already limited number of women employees in transport will further decrease. The study estimates that 52% of women in the sector lost their job, and in some cases, women stated that men bosses took advantage of the situation and asked for sexual favors in return for employment.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, as part of efforts to build back better, the transport sector has also seen this as an opportunity to employ more women as part of a comprehensive approach to ensure gender responsive transport. In Latin America, transport investments are specifically engaging women across the transport value chain as part of the economic recovery,<sup>37</sup> as women are greatly underrepresented across the transport sector globally.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of access to essential services for women survivors, lack of transport has also been identified as a key challenge. In Papua New Guinea, UN Women conducted a rapid needs assessment of over 200 service providers across the country, which provide support to women experiencing GBV during the pandemic. The main barriers that service providers reported to services remaining open included: lack of food for clients, lack of transport, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), among others.<sup>39</sup>

## CLOSING THE GENDER GAP IN SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, national and local governments are prioritizing sustainable transport and recovery plans through multi-sectoral partnerships.<sup>40</sup> However, currently it remains unclear the extent to which these plans are effectively addressing gender inequalities.

Women are key champions in sustainable transport and in climate change. In India, the 2011 census reported that 84 per cent of women use low-carbon transport modes to travel to their workplace in urban areas,<sup>41</sup> while in many cities women walk more.<sup>42</sup> In the context of COVID-19, there is an opportunity to close the gender gap in sustainable transport and achieve climate change targets.

Many cities have opted to develop alternative and active transportation infrastructure, such as creating temporary and long-term bike lanes. The provision of infrastructure such as well delineated cycleways, separated bike lanes<sup>43</sup> and quality end-of-trip facilities have successfully increased women's uptake of cycling by bolstering safety and convenience.<sup>44</sup> 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%.<sup>45</sup> As cities cater to more demand for active transport options, they must also look at how to improve women's safety in and around transport and road safety.

If transport-oriented development adopts a gender approach that sensitizes and mobilizes men in transport towards gender equality, includes women's participation in transportation and takes account of their needs during the pandemic, there is an opportunity to build back stronger across cities and countries and accelerate the progress towards targets related to sustainable transportation, gender equality, and other SDGs.

# EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES FROM GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

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Gender blind urban and transport planning reproduces gender inequalities in the built environment. Women and men have different mobility patterns, needs and experiences due to prescribed gender roles.<sup>46</sup> Poor transport planning can contribute to women and girls feeling unsafe, it can affect their use and enjoyment of public spaces, and can reproduce stereotypes related to gender, class, and unpaid labour.<sup>47</sup> Evidence reveals the value of bringing a gender perspective to urban and transport planning, management, and governance.<sup>48</sup> Failure to include women's needs and voices in transportation is a missed opportunity to build back in a stronger way during and after the health crisis, and accelerate action on gender equality and across the SDGs. Below are some examples of gender-responsive transport initiatives put in place by multi-sectoral partners attentive to the current context.

## COVID 19 AND GENDER RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT PLANNING

- As part of their COVID-19 response, several cities are offering free and safe transport services to health workers such as New York, **USA**<sup>49</sup>; Cordoba, **Argentina**, La Paz, **Bolivia**, Kazan, **Russia** and Taipei, **Taiwan**.<sup>50</sup>
- In Edmonton, **Canada**, an open and inclusive public consultation portal has been developed to inform the Safe Mobility Strategy post-COVID-19.<sup>51</sup>
- In **Japan**, there are provision of rooms for transport employees to bring their children to work while schools remain closed.<sup>52</sup>
- In Bogota, **Colombia**, a wide range of services related to active transportation infrastructure have been implemented to ensure cyclists' safety, including 344 police units and 150 mobility units. The city is providing access to psychosocial and legal support to women who are subject to violence in their commute, including bike riders.<sup>53</sup> As a participating city in the UN Safe Cities Global Initiative, Bogota has also developed Manzanas del Cuidado "Care Blocks" to reduce time poverty, commute time and increase women's access to care services within short distances including equal opportunity services, playgrounds, community centers and services for persons with disabilities.<sup>54</sup>

## WOMEN'S HEALTH, SAFETY AND TRANSPORT

- In **Brazil**, a transport service is offering survivors of violence rides to police stations to get immediate assistance during the pandemic.<sup>55</sup>
- In Port Moresby, **Papua New Guinea** free and safe transport services are provided to women survivors during lockdown as part of the Port Moresby Safe City for Women and Girls Initiative.
- In **Madagascar**, free and safe transport for pregnant women is available 24 hours a day and is expected to serve around 5,000 women during lockdown.<sup>56</sup>
- In Tilburg, the **Netherlands** public transport packages and subsidies through local health initiatives are distributed to women, and several vulnerable groups.<sup>57</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

As the transport sector has been severely hit by the pandemic, innovative partnerships across different sectors (public health, transportation, employment, safety, etc.) and across different levels of government have emerged to address the emergency.<sup>58</sup> Multi-sectoral partnerships with international and national civil society organizations and UN agencies have the potential to ensure safe and sustainable transport with and for women and girls.

The policy and programme recommendations included below on women's safety in transport take account of the different stages of COVID-19. They include short, medium- and long-term action with a focus on the needs and concerns of women who face multiple forms of discrimination and violence.



## GOVERNMENTS AND UN AGENCIES

- Ensure that mobility and transport measures developed during the pandemic are gender-responsive and are included in COVID-19 recovery plans and budgets.
- Identify and remove barriers to women's and girls' access to transport modes during different stages of the pandemic, and as part of mobility assessments.
- Provide mobile health and education services to avoid women having to walk long distances or using unsafe transport modes.
- Consider women's mobility needs and voices in different stages of transportation planning<sup>59</sup> and in green recovery packages, including active transportation measures such as walking and cycling.
- Engage equal participation and leadership of women in transportation, and create spaces for the active participation of women's organizations, including those that engage women and girls who face multiple and simultaneous forms of oppression and discrimination in policy dialogues and decision-making related to sustainable mobility during the pandemic and beyond.
- Ensure that progress in gender-responsive mobility, including under safe city and safe public spaces initiatives and other women and mobility initiatives are not undermined by budget cuts and austerity measures
- Conduct systematic assessments of the environmental and gender impacts of sustainable mobility and undertake gender analysis to understand the motivations, expectations, and perceptions of different modes of transport and technologies.
- Incorporate a gender mainstreaming approach throughout mobility policies and transport infrastructure lifecycle, critically during the investment and design stages.
- Review traffic light timing to prioritize pedestrians and cyclists, and traffic light systems to promote cycling.
- Continue and begin initiatives that prioritize integrated transport and land-use planning so that essential living needs are taken into account, and care related activities are made accessible.
- Support the development and implementation of global communities of practice which promote north-south and south-south exchanges on gender responsive transport planning in rural and urban settings throughout different phases of the pandemic.
- Identify and implement measures that address intersecting forms of sexual violence against women in and around transport with other factors such as race, age, disability, etc.



## GOVERNMENTS, TRANSPORT OPERATORS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

- Monitor the uptake of different modes of transport with sex-disaggregated data and address accessibility barriers.
- Set high-level and clear commitments to upholding inclusive and sustainable mobility.
- Strengthen the capacity of employees at different levels in transport on gender and mobility.
- Continue to invest and collaborate with transport experts, women rights organizations, feminist tech companies in the development of sustainable and inclusive mobility solutions.
- Scale up investment in mobility infrastructure that is affordable and gender responsive. These include protected bike infrastructure, safe mobility options and mobility that address care needs.
- Continue to engage women in transport sector investments during the recovery period.
- Promote gender, age, race, ethnicity, and ability diversity in transport marketing strategies.
- Support community groups who provide access to women and girls who want to start cycling but who cannot afford a bicycle.
- Consider the digital gender gap and mitigations while setting up contactless technology for ticketing, entry/exit turnstiles and other actions.
- Provide financial and other incentives to promote an even distribution of passenger numbers across the whole day to reduce peak-time crowding and sexual harassment (e.g. through differentiated tariffs).



## WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS

- Engage the media, private sector, and schools to raise the visibility of women safety in public spaces, including transport, demonstrating how the risk factors of sexual violence against women are exacerbated in the context of COVID-19.
- Raise awareness on women's mobility needs in different community contexts, targeting different groups (e.g. community, transport planners, private and public operators of transit).
- Conduct women's safety audits which can help make the case for sustainable mobility investments and identify the safety needs of women and girls in and around transport.
- Share knowledge and expertise on women's safety in transportation, including practical strategies which take account of the specific needs of women and girls who face multiple forms of discrimination and are more likely to fear and experience sexual violence when commuting. Use simple and easy to use formats, and include in different languages.
- Advocate for data collection on sustainable mobility, disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and race where possible in existing surveys and rapid assessments.
- Provide input to sustainable mobility education programs for women and girls including a focus on intersectionality (age, disabilities, Indigenous ethnicity, race), which go beyond increasing understanding about environmental aspects of sustainable mobility to include a focus on gender equality and links with ending violence against women.
- Strengthen and enhance partnerships at local, national and international levels to promote women and girls' safety in transportation including through community mobilization, advocacy about women and girls' experiences of violence in and around transportation, information on how and where to report and seek assistance. Advocate for the inclusion of a gender responsive approach to transportation infrastructure as part of COVID-19 recovery plans.

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