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The background of the cover features a blurred image of several hands raised, set against a light blue gradient. Overlaid on this are two large, concentric circular shapes: a smaller, dark blue circle in the foreground and a larger, teal-colored circle behind it.

Public Transport, Sexual Harassment, and Social Norms: Some Evidence from South Africa

Policy Brief 215

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Carolyn Chisadza, Matthew Clance, Nicky Nicholls,
Tendai Zawaira

1 Introduction

South Africa has been experiencing rapid urbanisation, with 8 in 10 people expected to be living in urban areas by 2050. This structural change necessitates improved coverage and frequency of transport systems in the country, especially since a significant proportion of the population relies on public transport. According to existing evidence, women and men have different experiences with the usage of public transport. For example, women tend to have non-linear travel patterns (“trip-chains”) between home, work, childcare and shopping, whereas men tend to have more linear travel patterns from home to work and back. This trip-chaining makes transport more costly for women. Women are also more likely to be travelling with babies and children, which means they require safety and easy accessibility on public transport.

However, despite existing frameworks such as the White Paper on National Transport Policy (1996, revised 2017) and the National Land Transport Act (2009), public transport remains largely gender-blind in its design and delivery. This is particularly problematic given that women in South Africa experience disproportionate levels of insecurity, violence, and harassment when commuting. These threats are not only underreported—they are also under-acknowledged in transport policy and planning.

Given the increasing demand for transport infrastructure and the existing gender knowledge gap in transport policies in South Africa, this policy brief summarises findings from an online survey on 996 individuals conducted by researchers at the University of Pretoria in 2024. The research focuses on the gender differences in experiences of public transport in South Africa, highlighting the current challenges faced by public transport users and offering recommendations to address the issues.

2 Key findings

Safety Risks and Harassment

- Women feel significantly less safe than men during early morning commutes (4–6 am), and are more likely to avoid public transport perceived as unsafe or accident-prone. This finding may be related to women having greater concerns about travel safety during the early morning hours. Additionally, it may also be connected to their non-linear travel patterns, where they combine activities like school runs and shopping on their way to and from destinations.
- A striking number of women reports witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment, particularly in taxis. Yet many choose not to report these incidents due to fear of retaliation, distrust in authorities, or perceived futility.
- Only 36% of women said they would feel safe reporting harassment to male security personnel; most prefer female staff.

Policy Implication: Harassment and violence in transport spaces deter women from accessing economic and social opportunities. Safety interventions must be gender-sensitive, visible, and accessible, going beyond general policing.

Recommendation: The presence of security personnel in public transport spaces, as well as CCTV cameras, may help reduce incidents of harassment. The Gautrain system demonstrates how well-maintained rail infrastructure, combined with visible policing and modern stations, can encourage commuter confidence, especially for women. Employ more women in the transport sector, including as drivers, guards, and station personnel. Representation can both improve service and reduce barriers for women passengers.

The Role of Social Norms

- Many respondents, both men and women, overestimate how much others tolerate sexual harassment in public transport. This misperception fuels a culture of silence and normalisation. This perception is based on several factors: a belief that perpetrators face no consequences, a lack of support for victims, fear of retaliation, the failure of authorities present to intervene during incidents, the normalisation of harassment, entrenched gender roles, cultural attitudes and societal silence on the issue that downplays the severity of the problem.

Policy Implication: Behavioural interventions (e.g. norm-correcting messaging campaigns) offer low-cost, scalable solutions to reshape commuter culture and challenge the permissibility of harassment.

Recommendation: The study's insights suggest a policy approach aligning with social norms theory: correcting mistaken beliefs about what others find acceptable can shift behaviour, reduce harassment, and support victims.¹² For example, deploy visual campaigns in stations, on vehicles, and on social media: "Most people here do not tolerate harassment."; use positive peer pressure to disincentivise harmful behaviour (e.g. showing high percentages of bystanders who intervene); or partner with transport unions and associations to ensure buy-in from operators.

Insufficient access

- Minibus taxis dominate daily commuting (83% of respondents), while trains account for only 3%, a reflection of the collapse of rail infrastructure and safety concerns.
- Both men and women (over 57%) mainly use public transport to commute for employment purposes, highlighting the importance of public transport access in fostering productivity and economic growth. Studies show a positive correlation between investment in safe public transport and employment, especially in poorer areas, with more recent evidence indicating a disproportionate benefit for women relative to men.³⁴⁵
- Women are more likely than men to avoid transport modes that are not close to their home or workplace, and many have declined job opportunities due to unsafe or inaccessible transport routes.

Policy Implication: Improved access and safety to different modes of public transport can reduce the opportunity cost of lost employment and productivity. Urban transport policies must explicitly account for women's travel needs. This includes designing flexible, safe, and integrated networks across modes (bus, rail, taxi).

Recommendation: Given the lack of access and safe transportation options in certain areas, conducting detailed gender-disaggregated data to inform decisions on routes, schedules, and infrastructure design could help identify where demand for transport exists in under-served regions. Understanding the size of this market will assist in determining the appropriate investments for transportation. For instance, while trains

¹ Zhang, D., Baig, F., Mao, S.-K., Xu, H.-F., Jin, H., & Li, L. (2021). Social Norms Matter: University Students' Misbehaviors in the Metro Carriage. *Journal of Advanced Transportation*, 2021 (1), 1749298.

² Bursztyn, L., González, A. L., & Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2020). Misperceived social norms: Women working outside the home in Saudi Arabia. *American Economic Review*, 110 (10), 2997–3029

³ Boisjoly, G., Moreno-Monroy, A. I., & El-Geneidy, A. (2017). Informality and accessibility to jobs by public transit: Evidence from the São Paulo Metropolitan Region. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 64, 89–96

⁴ Martinez, D., Mitnik, O., Salgado, E., Scholl, L., & Yañez-Pagans, P. (2020, 03). Connecting to Economic Opportunity: The Role of Public Transport in Promoting Women's Employment in Lima. *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy*, 3 (1), 1-23. doi:10.1007/s41996-019-00039-9

⁵ Seki, M., & Yamada, E. (2020, March). *Heterogeneous Effects of Urban Public Transportation on Employment by Gender: Evidence from the Delhi Metro* (Working Papers No. 207). JICA Research Institute. Retrieved from <https://ideas.repec.org/p/jic/wpaper/207.html> doi: 10.18884/00001026

have a larger capacity, they require significant investment in infrastructure, especially in areas where tracks are not yet available.

3 Conclusion

Findings from this study highlight some weaknesses/gaps in public transport spaces. Recommendations include increasing security presence (including more female officers) at stations and on public transport, creating a secure and non-hostile environment for individuals reporting incidents of sexual violence, whether against themselves or others. It would also be beneficial to ensure that public transport systems and stations are equipped with easily accessible toll-free numbers, allowing commuters to report incidents anonymously. Information about lower tolerance for sexual harassment could be leveraged to communicate positive social norms about inappropriateness of sexual harassment through advertisements on public transport and at stations, as well as through traditional media channels. Finally, further investigating under-serviced transport routes could present opportunities to broaden access to cost-effective transport, enabling better access to economic opportunities.

This research not only informs the broader academic community but also offers valuable insights for policymakers and advocates working towards safer and more inclusive public transport systems and cities in South Africa.

Examples from global interventions that South Africa could consider:

1. Vienna, Austria adopted a “gender mainstreaming” approach in urban transport planning in the early 2000s. After research revealed women made more multi-stop trips (e.g., work, daycare, grocery), the city redesigned footpaths, added seating, and improved lighting—making transit safer and more accessible for women. The City of Cape Town’s TOD (Transit-Oriented Development) Strategic Framework identifies spatial inequalities but still lacks gendered implementation criteria. Applying a gender-responsive framework could enhance TOD impact.
2. In Tokyo, Japan, the city introduced women-only carriages during peak hours to address harassment⁶⁷. Though not universally accepted, it raised public awareness and provided short-term relief for victims.
3. Mexico City’s “Viajemos Seguras” (Let’s Travel Safely) campaign included women-only buses, an SMS reporting line, and female police patrols, resulting in increased reporting and reduced fear. A local opportunity in South Africa is the MyCiTi Bus system in Cape Town, with controlled entry/exit and card-based boarding, offers a safer model than informal transport modes and could integrate gender-responsive safety features more deliberately.
4. In the UK, Transport for London’s “[Report it to Stop it](#)” campaign used posters and social media to highlight that sexual harassment is a crime and not tolerated. It led to a 36% increase in reporting of incidents in its first year. Studies in Saudi Arabia showed that correcting male beliefs about peer support for women working outside the home increased spousal approval.⁸ Similar nudges could reduce permissiveness toward harassment in South African transit.
5. In India, the [SafetiPin app](#) crowdsources safety ratings of streets and transport areas based on lighting, crowd presence, and user experiences. These insights are used by city planners and

⁶ <https://www.kcpinternational.com/2025/04/women-only-train-carriages-in-japan/>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-women-in-tokyo-strongly-back-single-sex-transport-amid-security-fears-idUSKCN1NK054/>

⁸ Bursztyn, L., González, A. L., & Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2020). Misperceived social norms: Women working outside the home in Saudi Arabia. *American Economic Review*, 110 (10), 2997–3029

transport providers to improve infrastructure. Platforms like [Namola](#) (used for emergency response) or [GoMetro](#) (for mobility planning) can be extended or partnered with to create gender-sensitive commuter feedback and alert systems.

