



Violence against Women Riding Public Transport is a Global Issue - Especially in Developing Countries

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When a 23-year-old physiotherapy student was brutally raped and beaten after she got on a public bus in India, the world reacted with appropriate horror. Yet we should not imagine that assaults directed against women using public transportation are unusual or isolated to one nation. In fact, a severe attack similar to the assault in India took place in May 2012 in the hilly region of Nepal, where a 21-year-old Buddhist nun was gang raped on a public bus by five men, including the driver and his staff.

Less horrendous sexual harassment of women taking public transport is part of everyday life in Nepal – and two-thirds of Indian women also say they have experienced such incidents, most of which are not officially reported. Nearly half of Japanese women say they have had at least one such experience, and the problem has also been reported in Hong Kong and Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Persistence of Violence against Women

What are we to make of sexual violence and harassment on buses and other forms of public transit? Such violations may seem surprising in the twenty-first century, but in truth the world has a long history of countenancing violence against women. Historically, violent acts against women within the home were framed as “family matters” into which the police were reluctant to intervene. Even assaults in public directed against women by strangers could be minimized if, somehow, the woman could be presented as out of place – dressing the wrong way or outside at an inappropriate time or place. She could then be defined as bringing the assault upon herself.

In the most economically advanced democracies, considerable progress has been made in changing such practices and understandings hostile to women – although we often see evidence that progress is not as complete as it should be. But in today’s developing nations, the worst tendencies are, if anything, on the rise. Especially in fast-growing developing economies like India, educational and occupational opportunities are expanding. Yet to take advantage of these opportunities, women must leave spaces defined as “private” – spaces controlled by family members or familiar neighbors – and move around in the public domain. In public areas they can seem “out of place” and fair game. They become vulnerable to threatening attacks or harassment. Women in developing nations certainly enjoy greater mobility, but their freedom to move and claim new opportunities comes at a cost, since they become much more vulnerable to unpleasant social, psychological, and physical experiences.

Common types of assaults in public range from annoying behavior – leering looks, winking, and gestures – to offensive acts such as unnecessary touching, unnecessary leaning or pressing against the woman, unexpected touching of the breast, brushing of thighs and bottoms, pinching of the bottoms, and pinching of the hips. Often described as “micro inequalities,” women are more susceptible to such unpleasant experiences as they
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become spatially mobile.

“All the Time” – But Still Deeply Disturbing

Research I conducted with Gita Neupane in Kathmandu, Nepal, found that sexual harassment in public transport is a common experience for women, with clearly deleterious consequences. According to a survey of university students, 97% of those using public transportation had experienced some form of sexual harassment. The average young woman said she had been harassed over thirty times in a year, and half said it happens “all the time.” But the social and psychological impact is not routine. Nearly two thirds of the women said harassment made them feel sad for a long time and also caused mood changes and affected relations with other people.

Harassers on public transportation often target particular areas of women’s bodies in ways that would meet in the legal definition of sexual assault in my own state of Hawaii. A college-going law student reported that “once a guy in a crowded bus held my breast tight and tried to squeeze it. I felt so bad; I could not go to the college for a week. I keep asking myself why I could not take revenge.” Another young woman said “sometimes I feel like I wish I can leave all my female private parts at home while traveling in a bus.”

The impact can be very long lasting, as one student eloquently explained. “Once while riding a micro-bus, a man put his hand on my belly inside my jacket. I will never forget this in my whole life.” Transit employees can also be part of the problem, rather than a trusted source of help. “The bus conductor stared at my breasts in a strange way,” one student said. “I felt very embarrassed. I covered my breasts with my bag. When I looked toward him after some time, he was still gazing. I felt more embarrassed.”

What Can be Done?

Despite intense reactions, most women do not take action in response to harassment. Except with a few very close friends, they do not even talk with others about what happened. Women worry that publicly disclosing harassment will lead to stigma for them and their families.

Yet proper public labeling of what happens is important – and international organizations and women’s movements are pushing on that front. Along with other kinds of violence directed against women, harassing acts of the sort routinely experienced on public transport are now properly understood to be violations of international law. The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines such violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”

Beyond international action, the citizen outrage that spread in India after the rape and murder of the physiotherapy student suggests that, at long last, public views – at least in the world’s largest democracy – may be shifting away from blaming the female victims. Hopefully, public concern will grow, spread, and yield results in India and other countries. The ability of millions of women to freely enter and move about in the public sphere is very much at stake.

Read more in Gita Neupane and Meda Chesney-Lind, “Violence against Women on Public Transport in Nepal: Sexual Harassment and the Spatial Expression of Male Privilege.” *Journal of Comparative and*

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