Tip Sheet 1: Gender and safety on public transport

Conducting Gender Impact Assessments in the Transport Sector

The purpose of this tip sheet is to support you to identify key gender issues within the transport sector and ways to address these. This tip sheet focuses on safety and public transport.

Gender identity plays a significant role in the experience and perception of safety for public transport users.

For example, women,\* transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people frequently report feeling unsafe on public transport. People with disability and their carers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as some people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may experience compounding impacts.

It is important that the design of transport policies, programs and services considers the different safety needs, priorities, and experiences of commuters of all genders, particularly those that are more likely to report feeling unsafe.

\*Women/woman includes cisgender women, transgender women, non-binary people and gender diverse people who may be perceived as women, female or feminine (regardless of their expression or identity), and therefore may share common barriers and challenges in the workplace.



These resources include a focus on women who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTIQ+ and/ or as a person with a disability. This focus acknowledges that women across these groups face multiple, intersecting inequalities.

# How do safety and perceived safety impact the experience of transport for different gender identities?

## Sexual harassment is prevalent in public spaces, including on public transport

Research demonstrates that sexual harassment (both physical and verbal) is prevalent on our streets and on all forms of transport. More women than men experience sexual harassment. According to the [Australia Institute](https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/everyday-sexism/)[[1]](#endnote-1), 87% of women have experienced at least one form of verbal or physical street harassment.

In a national report on youth health in Australia, one fifth of participants have experienced verbal, physical or sexual harassment or abuse in public (including public transport) based on their gender identity or sexuality.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Whilst research into gender diverse and transgender experiences of public transport is sparse, anecdotal evidence describes transgender and gender diverse experiences of Melbourne public transport as sites of harassment and violence.[[3]](#endnote-3)

## Women, transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people change their travel behaviour

Unsafe public transport limits women, transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people’s freedom of movement as they avoid certain places, times, routes, and modes of transport, particularly at night.2 Some of these people decide it is safer not to go out at night at all. This cohort of commuters also report feeling unsafe in areas near public transport such as pedestrian subways and bridges, stations, and bike paths.3

## The onus is on women, transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people

Women, transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people are made to feel responsible for changing their behaviour or compromise identity to stay safe on public transport. For example, women are encouraged to sit with other passengers, plan their trip to avoid waiting times, use the carriage closest to the driver’s cabin, carry their phone and keep to well-lit busy areas. Global research reveals that transgender, non-binary, gender diverse people modify their appearance and travel with greater amounts of fear on public transport.

## Women’s experiences are not all the same

The risks associated with using public transport are a dominant concern for women across culture, class and ethnicity.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, women from CALD backgrounds, women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women who identify as part of the LGBTIQ+ community have particular experiences of harassment on public transport, given the intersections between gender, racism, ableism and homophobia, and the role these play in violence against women.

Data Snapshot

In Melbourne, 45% of female students report feeling ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ safe on public transport after dark, as compared to 11.3% of men.[[5]](#endnote-5)

[A nationwide survey](https://www.plan.org.au/media-centre/) launched in 2016 revealed 23% of young Australian women aged 15-19 believed it wasn’t safe to travel alone on public transport.

In 2018, 79.4% of female students surveyed in Melbourne, and an equivalent proportion of LGBTIQ+ students, said that they had been the victims of sexual harassment over the previous three years on public transport.[[6]](#endnote-6)

New YouGov research revealed that over half of women in London have been victim of some kind of unwanted sexual behaviour while travelling on public transport.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Research demonstrates that men are at risk of being ‘gay bashed’ in public spaces including on transport, when they do not look ‘straight’ near venues that are frequented by LGBTIQ+ community.[[8]](#endnote-8)

[A recent survey](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-07/women-safety-bystander-interventions-street-harassment-pandemic/100968388) found that one in five young women, transgender, gender diverse and non-binary people surveyed felt more unsafe in public now, than they did before the COVID-19 pandemic. For those with disabilities, 27% felt more unsafe.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Since the pandemic, women and people from Asian backgrounds have experienced greater levels of racism and public harassment.[[10]](#endnote-10)

As part of **Step 1 of your gender impact assessment** it is important to consider these experiences and perceptions of safety. How will the policy, program, or service you are assessing meet gendered safety needs and contribute towards the prevention of violence against women and gender diverse people on transport?

TIP: Download tools to support your understanding of violence prevention including

[Change the Story](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story/) and [Changing the landscape](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-landscape-a-national-resource/). The [TramLab Toolkits](https://www.monash.edu/mada/research/project/tram-lab) specifically focus on responding to women’s safety on Victorian public transport.

# Key questions: Gendered safety and perceptions of safety

## How, where and when do women and gender diverse people feel unsafe travelling at night?

If we understand how, where and when women, transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people feel unsafe, we can build solutions that better meet those needs. Collecting evidence to understand diverse women’s lived experience is crucial (see box below).

## How might your policy, program or service promote safety, including cultural safety?

Approaches such as lighting, careful messaging and staff training can all promote safety on and around transport. Visible signage that acknowledges country and translates messages in multiple languages can contribute to feeling included and culturally safe.

## Does your policy, program or service put the onus on women, transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people to change their behaviour to stay safe?

This approach fails to emphasise the behaviour change and the gender responsive planning and design which is needed to create a transport system that also works for women, transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people.

## How can your policy, program or service work to influence behaviour change?

Communication campaigns which aim to increase reporting, promote gender equality, place the onus for safety on the offender, and encourage bystanders to act can contribute to behaviours that create a safer environment for all commuters.

Responses need to move beyond a quick fix

Gender segregated (‘women-only’) carriages have been introduced in many countries, including Mexico, Japan and India, where they can be found in various forms on buses, trains and taxis. The assumption is that this will protect women, however evidence suggests that while this approach may make women feel safer, it is only a short term solution. Gender segregation does not address the underlying cause of sexual harassment or highlight that this behaviour is unacceptable. Instead, the expectation is placed on women to change their behaviour and limit their freedom of movement in public space.[[11]](#endnote-11) Gender segregation on the basis of being a woman also marginalises individuals from the LGBTIQ+ community and those who have fluid or non-conforming gender identities. For this reason, this approach is not generally recommended in Australia.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Do you have enough information to answer these questions? **As part of Step 2 of your gender impact assessment** you may need to collect further evidence to understand your specific context. Here’s some ideas for how:

* Consider any internal data, customer feedback information or existing reports which may provide the information you need.
* Geolocative data on the experiences of women, girls and gender diverse people in cities, including experiences of sexual harassment and feelings of safety on transport, is being collected by a number of innovative platforms. In Melbourne, these include [She’s A Crowd](https://shesacrowd.com/) and [YourGround](https://www.yourground.org/).[[13]](#endnote-13) These can provide valuable insights to inform policy and planning decisions.
* Women’s safety audits are a participatory process to better understand how different women experience and perceive public spaces AND to effectively respond to their needs and concerns. See this [Women’s Safety Audit toolki](https://tfl.gov.uk/travel-information/safety/report-it-to-stop-it)t and this [Women’s Safety Audit Guidance](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/1404462831wpdm_Women%27s%20Safety%20Audit.pdf).

**The gender safety audit process[[14]](#endnote-14)**

1. Identify places in the area which are unsafe or feel unsafe to women and gender diverse people.
2. A group of local women from diverse backgrounds, who are regular users of the space, walk through it with a checklist, observing and identifying factors which make them feel unsafe.
3. An audit report is produced and presented to key decision makers to inform planning and policies.

See the TramLab toolkit on Gender Sensitive Data and pages 22-28 of the GIA toolkit for further ideas on collecting evidence and meaningful consultation.

## What works?

When you are considering the range of options for your policy, program or service as part of **Step 3 of your gender impact assessment**, here are some innovative solutions being implemented around the world.

## Behaviour change campaigns

A communication campaign which puts the onus for safety on the offender not to offend and on institutions to respond appropriately, is important for changing attitudes towards safety for all genders. This should include training for all staff and should be developed in collaboration with women’s and LGBTIQ+ organisations and networks. Campaigns can also educate bystanders about the action they can take if they witness sexual harassment on public transport, including speaking up, documenting the incident (if safe to do so) and alerting authorities.

[The Respect Women: ‘Call It Out’ (Public Transport) campaign](https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/campaigns/respect-women-call-it-out-public-transport) is designed to bring all Victorians into the conversation around sexual harassment on public transport by providing the tools to call out inappropriate behaviours. Safety in public spaces is everyone’s business and every commuter has the right to make it home safely. Tools and resources are available on the campaign website.

[Project Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/jul/22/sexual-harassment-london-transport) was a campaign launched on London’s Transport Network. This involved all 2,000 officers who policed the city’s public transport network being trained to deal with sexual harassment and sexual assault. The campaign worked closely with women’s organisations to develop guidelines and training and also used social media to raise awareness of the campaign.

## Encourage reporting of sexual harassment on public transport

Alongside a communication campaign, coordinated action can encourage better reporting of sexually related crimes and sexual harassment, including establishing a dedicated hotline and creating communications materials to encourage reporting by victims and witnesses. This should include public education on the consequences of offences which put the onus on institutions to respond properly to offences.

Transport for London introduced a “[Report it to Stop it](https://www.fiafoundation.org/resources/safe-and-sound)” campaign in 2018. This campaign was built on a series of videos encouraging women to come forward in reporting sexual harassment and assault on public transport. These videos highlighted a 24 hour reporting hotline and emphasised that action would be taken in response to calls. In the first year of the campaign, [reports of harassment on public transport increased by 36%, with a 40% increase in criminal charges](https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/inside-tfl-campaign-tackle-unwanted-sexual-behaviour-public-transport/1450533). 84% of women respondents agreed that the campaign “made me feel more confident to take action against unwanted sexual behaviour if it occurred.”

## Develop a shared understanding of preventing gender-based violence on transport

Protocols or charters can be a useful tool to create awareness and identify shared actions to address sexual harassment on public transport and gender-based violence for public transport workers. Developing these tools with other institutions, organisations and women, transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people can give rise to meaningful partnerships and strategies which respond to lived experiences. It is important to remember that people’s experiences are not all the same. Many people face multiple forms of dis-crimination when gender identity intersects with ethnicity, disability and other intersecting factors. Space should be created for all genders with diverse lived experiences and identities to meaningfully participate in transportation strategies including those that form part of COVID-19 recovery plans and budgets.[[15]](#endnote-15)

[The Greater Sydney Women’s Safety Charter](https://greatercities.au/thought-leadership/womens-safety-charter) was launched in March 2020 and aims to bring together businesses, government agencies, peak groups and not-for-profit organisations to take collective action that improves the safety of diverse women and girls in Greater Sydney. It was developed collaboratively with the input of more than 80 organisations across Sydney. The Charter contains key principles and example actions.

## Use careful lighting design to increase safety

Good lighting is critical after dark to increase visibility, feelings of safety and to enable exercise and active transport (such as walking and cycling). Light infrastructure must be maintained and activated after dark (i.e., not only used for special events, such as sport). Research demonstrates that women’s safety is increased not necessarily by more or brighter light, but by careful lighting design that enhances the areas to ensure appropriate visibility, including in carparks and outdoor waiting areas.[[16]](#endnote-16)

## Reliable Transport

Infrequent transport makes women feel unsafe.[[17]](#endnote-17) Evidence shows that accessible real-time information and transport updates makes women feel safer. On demand public transport services may also provide a safer solution to meet the journey needs of women.[[18]](#endnote-18) Various technological solutions are also being trialled to make travelling in the city safer for women at night (see below).

Transport NSW launched a [safety after dark campaign](https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/data-and-research/digital-accelerator/transport-digital-accelerator/safety-after-dark) in 2020. This campaign included an innovation challenge calling for solutions which use data and insights to inform decisions and put in place actions to make travelling in the city safer for women at night. Winning entries include [artificial intelligence software](https://www.uow.edu.au/media/2020/ai-research-to-aid-womens-safety-on-public-transport.php) developed by the University of Wollongong to aid women’s safety on public transport. Their solution enabled a camera to detect an occurrence and then notify a human operator, via a signal or alert, in order for them to assess and respond.

## Footnote

Women/woman includes cisgender women, transgender women, non-binary people and gender diverse people who may be perceived as women, female or feminine (regardless of their expression or identity), and therefore may share common barriers and challenges.

# Notes

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