

WOMEN'S EVERYDAY MOBILITY: FEAR & SAFETY IN TRAVEL FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Gender considerations are often overlooked in transportation planning, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, where public transport systems are rarely designed with women's safety and needs in mind. In urban areas such as Lahore, women face a multitude of barriers when navigating public transit, ranging from verbal harassment and physical intimidation to inadequate infrastructure and cultural constraints that limit their freedom of movement. These gendered challenges are further compounded by the absence of inclusive policies and gender-sensitive urban planning. This study investigates the barriers of mobility and safety concerns of female commuters through a mixed-methods approach, combining a large-scale perception survey of 903 women and focused group discussions with diverse stakeholders. The data reveal that a majority of women experience harassment at bus stops and during travel, with Speedo feeder routes perceived as especially unsafe due to poor lighting, overcrowding, and lack of female-specific facilities. Participants reported feeling vulnerable and unsupported, and many avoid public transport altogether, which limits their access to education, employment, and civic life. The findings point to a critical need for structural reforms, including the expansion of women-only spaces, better surveillance, and community-based interventions.

To make transportation systems equitable and safe, it is essential to incorporate women's perceptions into planning, policy-making, and service delivery at all levels.

Keywords: *gender-sensitive transport, public transport safety, women's mobility, urban planning, harassment, Pakistan, inclusive policy, Lahore, female commuters*

INTRODUCTION

According to Maslow's hierarchy of requirements, security and safety rank among the basic needs (Maslow, 1943). Fear of crime and personal security are two more essential elements of sustainability frameworks (Gamman & Armitage, 2009). This means that ensuring safe spaces for people to walk around freely and fearlessly is another aspect of designing public spaces. The sense of security-related risk may make it more difficult for people to plan autonomous travel or modify their own travel habits. For instance, restricted travel behaviour might take the form of avoiding certain journeys and/or travel modes, as well as changing of different locations and routes (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2010; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014).

The time of day, or more precisely the amount of daylight and light, can affect these behavioural adaptations. "Arming" is another coping mechanism for fear, in addition to putting oneself in a physical and temporal distance from possible perpetrators (passive measures). In this particular context, the term "arming" must be used broadly to include things like using a cell phone while going alone at night or putting a dog on a leash as deterrents for self-defence. Enrolling in self-defence classes is an additional illustration of proactive steps. These proactive steps can lessen anxiety and raise feelings of perceived security. Moreover, extensive literature reviews and empirical research show that sexual offences, particularly harassment

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of women, are on the rise, partly as a result of growing cultural acceptance and a sense of "normalisation." (Ceccato et al., 2022; Östergren et al., 2022). As shown by earlier empirical experiences, this trend may continue to pick more steam in the wake of the projected rise in public transport usage that will come from continuing attempts to make cities more sustainable in the years to come (Rayment-McHugh, 2023; Spicer & Song, 2017; Useche et al., 2024). Furthermore, an important and noteworthy issue is the increasing number and share of female workers in economies that were formerly dominated by men (Alfaro et al., 2024). Gender considerations have frequently been overlooked in transportation planning and design, creating systemic challenges in countries such as Pakistan.

Traditional customs and societal norms contribute to pronounced gender disparities, particularly concerning women's mobility. Limited access to safe and reliable public transportation hinders women's ability to pursue education, employment, and personal opportunities in many communities. Safety concerns, including harassment and assault, further deter women from using various modes of transport for their daily commutes, particularly in rural areas with few transportation options. While the government has made efforts to address women's concerns by providing segregated sections on buses and operating women-only services, issues persist regarding safety and comfort. Recognizing the differing travel needs and perceptions of space between men and women is essential for closing the gender mobility gap and promoting gender inclusion in transportation (Zahid, 2023).

The constitution of Pakistan envisions a society free from discrimination, where both women and men enjoy equal treatment under the law and have the opportunity to fully contribute to the broader community.

To actualize this vision, successive governments in Pakistan have enacted laws addressing various issues concerning women, including different forms of violence against them. Notably, sexual harassment is recognized as a distinct criminal offense under the PPC of 1860, introduced by the “Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2010”. However, despite these legal provisions, there is a lack of systematic and structural mechanisms to enforce these laws and hold perpetrators accountable. This failure to implement laws against sexual harassment has resulted in women experiencing violence in both public and private spheres without effective means for recourse. Consequently, the silence of women survivors and the absence of accountability for offenders have contributed to a rise in incidents of violence against women and girls.

Moreover, transgender individuals in Pakistan face even fewer protections. The ground reasons of violence faced by women and girls are often disregarded in policies, as well as in administrative, planning, and managerial processes. The foundational structures frequently fail to address these underlying issues. For instance, one common basic cause of little school enrolment and rate of employment is the lack of adequate mobility, particularly for women. Mobility is inherently gendered and could not be treated as an unbiased concept. The women and girls’ mobility in Pakistan is significantly restricted by norms prevailing in society and culture. They are often burdened with preserving family "honor," which necessitates close protection and limits their access to places deemed safe and suitable for women. Consequently, women and their families prioritize transportation options that are effortlessly accessible, comfortable, and safer, offering as much confidentiality and security as possible, but they still feel unsafe during travel and access to public places.

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The fear of crime and being victimised is very common among women. According to research on crime fear, women are more afraid of crime than men are. Women frequently fear rape, but feminist scholars also contend that women are victims of other forms of violence, such as intimidation, groping, sexual remarks, harassment, and threats. Fear limits one's range of motion. Women's fear of transport facilities, including parking structures, buses, train cars and bus stops, affects how they travel and may prevent them from exercising a fundamental right to the city: the freedom to move freely from point of origin to point of destination without fearing that a "wrong choice" of mode, transit setting, or time of travel might have an adverse effect on their safety (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014).

Women who are afraid tend to use preventative tactics and methods, which alters their travel habits. These can include adopting particular coping strategies when out in public, selecting particular routes, means of transportation, and locations, or avoiding certain situations and activities altogether (such walking and bicycling) that are thought to be riskier. Furthermore, scholars contend that if fear of personal safety keeps women or members of other social groups from using public areas and/or transit services, this might lead to their social marginalisation (Lucas, 2012; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). Low-income, minority women who reside in high-crime neighbourhoods with few mobility choices are particularly affected by this circumstance.

Rationale

The study highlights the pressing issue of violence against women in transit spaces. It also seeks to identify gaps in services related to the safety and security of women using public transport. The methodology, which includes perception surveys and focus group discussions with

diverse stakeholders, facilitates community engagement. This approach ensures that the voices of women from various backgrounds are heard, leading to more informed and effective solutions.

Objectives of the Study

Present study aims to discover:

1. Identify mobility barriers and safety concerns experienced by women using public transportation in district Lahore.
2. Examine gaps in public transport services that affect the security and well-being of women, with the goal of guiding authorities to strengthen infrastructure and establish effective responses to incidents of violence.
3. Highlight the need for safe, accessible, and gender-sensitive transportation spaces to enhance women's freedom of movement.

Significance

The significance of the study on women's everyday mobility, fear, and safety in travel from a women's perspective in Pakistan is multifaceted. The study sheds light on the gendered nature of mobility, highlighting how cultural and societal norms in Pakistan restrict women's movement. By focusing on women's security and safety while consuming public transportation, the study highlights the urgent need to address violence against women in transit spaces. The study aims to identify gaps in services related to the security and safety of women who use public transport in Lahore. The study advocates for creating environments that enable women to move freely and independently, by emphasizing on the importance of safer and protected public transport for women. The study's methodology, which includes perception surveys and focus

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group discussions with diverse stakeholders, facilitates community engagement and ensures that the voices of women from various backgrounds are heard.

Limitations

The study may have several limitations, including:

- The study primarily focuses on Lahore, Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or countries with different cultural, social, and infrastructural contexts. The unique challenges faced by women in other areas may not be fully captured.
- The study may capture a specific moment in time, and perceptions of safety and mobility can change due to various factors, such as changes in public policy, social dynamics, or recent incidents of violence. Therefore, the findings may not remain relevant over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence against girls and women is a significant global public concern. In a study aimed to evaluate the security & safety of women and girls in public transportation and identify factors contributing to violence in Hawassa city, Ethiopia, data from 199 randomly selected respondents (36.7% women and 63.3% girls) and 24 focus group participants were utilized. The findings revealed that 50.8% of women and girls encountered more than one form of violence while using public transportation. This underscores the urgent need to address violence against women and girls in public transport, as it poses a serious threat to their safety and mobility within the city. It is imperative for cities to prioritize the development of gender-sensitive public transport plans and policies that cater to the unique needs of women and girls in public

transportation (Kacharo et al., 2022). Media often raise concerns about women's safety on public transport. A study using data from 28 cities (2009–2018) found that women are significantly more likely than men to feel unsafe—10% more on metros and 6% more on buses. Safety concerns had a bigger impact on women's overall satisfaction with public transport than other factors. Only 45% of women feel safe on trains and at metro stations, and 55% on buses. The study also showed that issues like violence, empty carriages and large vehicles make women feel less secure.

These findings suggest that the gender gap in safety perception is shaped by real conditions, not just fear. Reports of harassment on and around public transportation are commonly found in informal publications, especially concerning women and marginalized communities. International evidence suggests that experiences of harassment and fear of resulting crime might lead individuals to choose cars over public transit. A study examined global literature on harassment and its effects on transit behavior, particularly within the framework of fear of crime. This fear of crime could be a reason for hindering efforts to increase public transport usage in Australian cities. The study reviews potential planning-relevant solutions and explores how international examples could inform addressing transit-related harassment in Australia. This analysis underscores potential research avenues to understand public impacts and develop solutions tailored to the Australian context (Gardner et al., 2017).

Sexual harassment is acknowledged as a major issue globally. It diminishes the value of human rights. Another study from Nepal determines the frequency of sexual harassment on public transit and the effects that it has on Kathmandu valley's female student population. Data were gathered from five health science locations in the

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Kathmandu Valley using a structured questionnaire. It was discovered that female students who live alone and travel more frequently in the evening have much greater rates of sexual harassment when using public transit. Furthermore, the study found a substantial correlation between female students in the Kathmandu Valley and sexual harassment in public vehicles (Gautam et al., 2019). There is a lack of comprehensive studies and data collection regarding harassment in public spaces, including harassment on public transportation. Nevertheless, several studies indicate that mobility of females is constrained by such harassment faced in public areas. Factors such as rapid urbanization, transportation demands, inadequate planning, road safety deficiencies, and substandard transport infrastructure all contribute to the prevalence of harassment and violence against women and girls.

Gender-based harassment and violence represent widespread challenges in Pakistan. Women frequently face harassment, verbal abuse, and physical violence while utilizing public transportation. According to a survey conducted by the Asian Development Bank, approximately 70% of Pakistani women who use public transit report experiencing harassment, with 75% of these incidents involving unknown male passengers (Zulfiqar, 2020). The fear of such incidents can be overwhelming, leading women to avoid using public transport altogether or resort to more expensive and less accessible private transportation options (Zahid, 2023).

A report titled "Approaches for Gender Responsive Urban Mobility" highlights security as a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by human interactions, which are often unpredictable and driven by emotional rather than rational responses. Variations in security perceptions exist among men and women, as well as within the female

population, shaped by factors such as economic status, age, race, education, and cultural background. Concerning human security, women's mobility is impacted by the violence and harassment they encounter in public spaces, including public transportation. Instances of harassment, ranging from name-calling and teasing to staring, touching, and groping, are prevalent on the public transport routes frequented by women for educational and professional purposes (Zulfiqar, 2020).

To address mobility challenges faced by women, the government of Punjab has introduced several initiatives. These include women-only pink buses, the student green card scheme, and free travel cards for seniors and people with disabilities. Complaint centres, women-designated spaces at bus stops, and dedicated help desks at police stations have been established. Helplines and a mobile app for reporting harassment have also been launched by departments like WDD, Metro, and PSCA. The 2017 Women's Empowerment Package included plans for women-friendly bus stops, and with UN Women's support, the "Women on Wheels" initiative was launched. A subsidized travel card system for working women is also under consideration.

Despite these efforts, challenges related to women's safety and comfort in public spaces and on public transport remain. The goal is to identify these issues and their root cause in order to develop targeted, actionable policy recommendations. This objective is central to the Women's Safety Audit in Public Transport project in Lahore. While much research links women's fear of crime to public spaces, transit environments are often overlooked. Another study, based on interviews with 16 U.S. women's groups, found that women have unique safety concerns when using public transport. Many adjust their travel behavior to avoid

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uncomfortable or threatening situations especially those who feel more vulnerable to harassment. Participants suggested improvements like better design, policing, security tech, and public education to make transit safer for women.

Women who have been in terrifying circumstances are more likely than other women to steer clear of specific locations, routes, and modes of transportation. There is also a notion that women's travel habits are generally restricted due to concerns for their personal safety. Women are forced to choose undesirable transportation options, even in the face of terrifying circumstances, when it is not possible to alter the route or travel time, for example, because of personal constraints, or when there is just no other form of transportation accessible. Women's travel behaviour is significantly influenced by their personal security, and that in order to create sustainable built environments, authorities as well as municipal and transportation planners should give this issue more consideration. Given the high percentage of impacted women and the likelihood that they are more frequently in danger than males, it is unclear if this will ultimately lead to unequal possibilities for mobility and a societal deficit for women (Stark & Meschik, 2018).

In order to document the occurrence and effects of transit sexual assault in two Latin American transit systems—El Alto, Bolivia's informal transit system and Bogotá, Colombia's Trans Milenio BRT, a mixed-methods study uses surveys and interviews with transit users. While it occurs in both systems, the congested Trans Milenio system has a higher rate of transit sexual assault (37% of female users reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact while using transport). It has been observed that transit users generally adopt defensive behaviours in

response to the risk of transit crime, such as travelling in groups, avoiding specific times of day, using more expensive modes, or not travelling at all. In addition to these behaviours, victims of sexual assault on public transportation are more likely to participate in victim-specific defensive behaviours, such as choosing defensible postures within a carriage, gathering around "safe" individuals—usually other women—or using objects as shields.

Some victims are able to feel safe again while travelling due to these routine actions, but others still battle anxiety, hypervigilance, and other reactions to sexual trauma. While preventing sexual attacks on public transportation is crucial, many women have already experienced abuse, are still traumatised, and require further assistance to regain their freedom of movement. Potential strategies to guarantee that public transport is secure and inclusive for individuals of all genders are examined in a study, including reducing crowding, enhancing reporting, bystander intervention, and implementing women-only carriages (Kash, 2019).

Women use public transit at higher rates than males do in many places, but most systems are not constructed with them in mind. Many female cyclists worry about becoming victims. The majority of their unfavourable encounters are typically connected to the urban setting of stations and stops. Users of integrated public transport systems will have to make more transfers, which will increase the amount of time they spend waiting for a vehicle (both initial and transfer waiting time) during their trip. Women are particularly sensitive to transfer waiting times, according to earlier studies, though it's unclear why. One study looks into how female riders' perceptions of safety during wait times are influenced by their fear of

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becoming victims. In Auckland, New Zealand, an online survey was conducted, yielding results from 448 female users of public transit. Results show that women experience a significant amount of anxiety when they are waiting. The findings indicated that they use headphones and cell phones as a coping method for their anxiety.

They wait looking assured, but they are nevertheless aware of their surroundings. In finding of a study, compared to Caucasian women, women from ethnic origins feel less secure during the day. Compared to Caucasian women, they were found to use mobile apps more frequently to find out how long they would have to wait. Furthermore, it was discovered that women's judgements of their own personal safety when waiting at terminals are influenced by social perceptions of safety from friends and relatives. In order to establish a fair public transport system where women predominate, it is advised that decision-makers give female riders' safety needs in and around terminal areas greater explicit consideration (Chowdhury & van Wee, 2020).

While promoting public transit is key to sustainability, many daily commuters especially women face ongoing challenges like sexual harassment, fear, and the need to adjust their travel behavior. A cross-sectional study found that these experiences are strongly linked and negatively impact women's life satisfaction. Furthermore, women who were "in touch" with sexual harassment while on the go exhibited more behavioural changes than other groups, though not entirely. Furthermore, structural studies indicate that the full statistical mediator of the frequently unpleasant, undesirable travel changes made by commuting women suggests that life satisfaction rates are significantly lowered by harassing encounters and fear of non-sexual crime.

These results lend credence to the hypothesis that unpleasant commuting experiences and bothersome response behavioural demands may have a substantial impact on the general satisfaction with life of female everyday users of public transportation (Alfaro et al., 2024). Unmet need, latent demand, suppressed travel, and forgone travel are some of the factors in the literature that involve unrealised travel and its accompanying activity participation. The scoping review focuses on suppressed travel when people are unable to travel or take part in activities due to social exclusion and mobility barriers. It explores how researchers have studied this issue through surveys, examining who is affected, which destinations are involved, the reasons behind limited travel, and how these limitations shape people's mobility and opportunities.

Researchers evaluate the calibre of their studies as well. Using keyword sets related to equity, transportation, and surveys, we ran a search. Significant proof of mobility suppression among older persons and individuals with disabilities is discovered by the authors of a study. The main reasons are determined to be inadequate transit service and reliance on others for transportation. While populations facing TRSE confront travel suppression for business, education, and other necessary excursions, unrealised travel is higher among the public for leisure and dining out trips. The authors conclude with suggestions on how to further research in this field after pointing out gaps in the populations and reasons examined (Palm et al., 2024).

Theoretical Perspective

This study is framed within the broader understanding that mobility is not merely a physical activity, but a socially constructed experience influenced by gender, class, and spatial access. Women's everyday mobility is deeply

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affected by societal norms, power structures, and the way urban spaces are organized and governed. Therefore, public transportation systems are not just technical infrastructures; they are also sites of social interaction where inequalities become visible and often reinforced.

The theoretical foundation of this research draws from the concept of spatial justice, which asserts that all individuals should have equal access to safe and inclusive public spaces. In many urban contexts—particularly in patriarchal societies like Pakistan—women face heightened vulnerabilities to harassment and violence, which significantly affects their travel behaviors, access to services, and participation in public life. Additionally, the study incorporates the lens of social exclusion, emphasizing how mobility-related constraints can marginalize women economically, socially, and psychologically. The absence of gender-sensitive planning and enforcement mechanisms does not just create discomfort—it actively reproduces inequality by limiting women's autonomy, productivity, and sense of agency. By examining women's fear and mobility from these intersecting theoretical viewpoints, the research underscores that urban transportation must be approached as both a technical and social issue. Policy solutions must move beyond infrastructure and consider lived realities, power imbalances, and systemic barriers to inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences with public transportation in Lahore. The primary focus was on female commuters aged 18 and above, including students, working women, home-based

workers, domestic workers, pregnant women, elderly women, women with disabilities, and members of the transgender community.

Perception Survey

A multistage random sampling technique was used to conduct a perception survey targeting women commuters in Lahore. The survey aimed to capture the diverse experiences of women from different socio-economic, professional, and demographic backgrounds. A total of 903 respondents were surveyed, drawn from Metro and Speedo bus routes using stratified random sampling. The sample was categorized into several distinct groups: home-based workers, female students, working women, domestic workers, and housewives/mothers with children. The geographic scope of the sampling included urban slums, parks, markets, hospitals, educational institutions, and both residential and rural areas. Approximately 25% of the respondents used the Metro Bus system, while 75% used Speedo feeder routes, reflecting the difference in scale between the two networks. The survey was conducted in Urdu and Punjabi, the region's commonly spoken languages.

Metro Bus Routes Selected

Nine of the 27 Metro Bus stations were included in the study: Shahdara, Azadi Chowk, Kalma Chowk, Walton, Civil Secretariat, Old Hailey College, Youhanabad, Ichra, and Gajju Mata.

Speedo Feeder Routes Selected

Three out of the 16 Speedo feeder routes were chosen:

- Route 10: Multan Chungi to Qartaba Chowk
- Route 8: Daewoo Terminal to Canal
- Route 12: R.A Bazar to Civil Secretariat

These routes were selected based on coverage, diversity of neighborhoods, and density of female commuters.

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Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Purposive sampling was used to conduct three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), designed to capture deeper insights from a variety of stakeholders. Each FGD consisted of 8 to 15 participants, and sessions lasted between 2 to 2.5 hours. The FGDs provided space for women to narrate their experiences, fears, and suggestions in an open and participatory format. Participants included:

- Students, factory workers, domestic helpers, home-based workers, and business owners
- Women from both public and private sectors
- Pregnant women, elderly women, and persons with disabilities
- Members of civil society organizations, women's unions, and marginalized groups who rely on public transportation

In addition, representatives from local government, metropolitan corporations, the Punjab Safe Cities Authority (PSCA), Women's Development Department (WDD), transportation authorities, and international NGOs were also included. This multi-stakeholder approach ensured a holistic understanding of the issues at hand.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the perception surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data from FGDs underwent thematic analysis. The major themes derived from the discussions included:

- Fear in public spaces
- Lack of facilities for vulnerable groups
- Empowerment through safe mobility
- Gaps in public transport systems
- Creation of safer travel environments for women

This triangulation of methods allowed the study to capture both the scale and depth of women's mobility challenges in Lahore.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to established ethical research standards to ensure the protection, dignity, and informed participation of all respondents. Prior to data collection, verbal and written consent was obtained from all participants in both the perception survey and the focus group discussions. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To maintain privacy, no personally identifiable information was collected, and all the data was anonymized during analysis and reporting. In cases where sensitive or traumatic experiences, such as harassment or assault were disclosed, participants were treated with empathy, and referrals to support services and hotlines were provided upon request.

The research also took special care to protect vulnerable groups, including transgender individuals, women with disabilities, and elderly participants, by ensuring that interviews and discussions were conducted in safe, accessible, and non-judgmental environments. Focus group sessions were moderated by trained facilitators familiar with gender-sensitive communication, ensuring that all voices were heard and respected. The researchers committed to do no harm, and findings were presented in a way that avoids traumatization or stigmatization of participants. No financial or material inducement was provided for participation, ensuring that responses were voluntary and unbiased. The study was conducted in alignment with ethical guidelines outlined by social

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 science research institutions and adheres to the principles of confidentiality, consent, and respect for human dignity.

DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic Profile

Table 1: Age

Age	N	%
10–19	47	5.2
20–29	366	40.5
30–39	283	31.3
40–49	136	15.1
50–59	45	5.0
60 and above	26	2.9

Table 2: Education

Education	N	%
Illiterate	213	23.5
Madrassa	4	0.4
Primary	83	9.2
Middle	96	10.6
Secondary (Matriculation)	115	12.7
FA/ FSc	98	10.9
BA/ BSc	137	15.2
Postgraduate	133	14.7
Other	24	2.7

Table 3: Income

Income	N	%
Up to 10,000	149	16.5
10,001–20,000	330	36.5
20,001–30,000	181	20.0
30,001–40,000	88	9.7
40,001–50,000	72	8.0
50,001 and above	81	9.0

Table 4: Occupation

Occupation	N	%
Working from home	60	6.6
Domestic Worker	216	24
Factory Worker	46	5.1
Business	24	2.7
Study	168	18.6

The majority of respondents were younger persons in the workforce (40.5% were between the ages of 20 and 29). Women over 60 made up a very small percentage of respondents. The respondents' educational backgrounds were varied. Twenty percent of women had a bachelor's degree, while nearly one-quarter (23.5%) were illiterate. The majority of sample responses were from lower-class backgrounds, which often accounts for the majority of public transportation users. Merely 9% of participants indicated that their monthly salary exceeded Rs 50,000. About 24% of the respondents were domestic workers, 18.6% were students, 6.6% home-based workers, 5.1% were employed in factories, and only 2.7% were business owners.

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Purpose of Travel

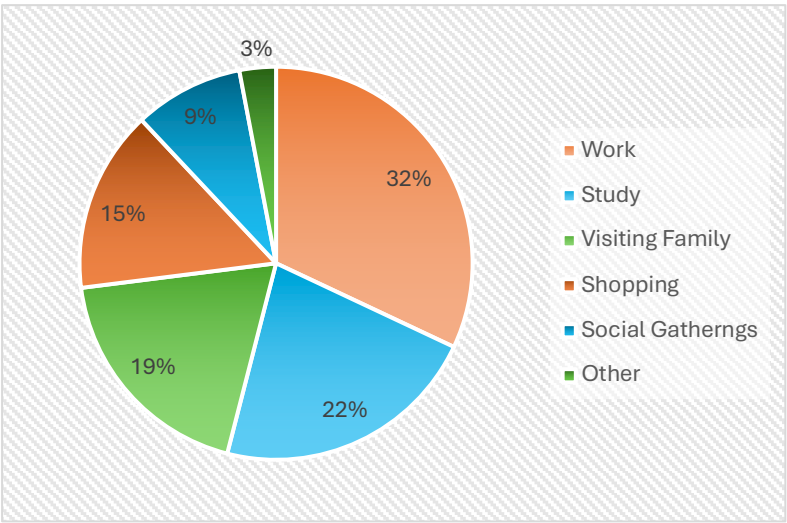


Figure 1: Purpose of Travel

Figure shows that majority of women (32%) travel for work while 22% travel for studying to schools/colleges/universities.

Security Concerns at Bus Stops

At bus stops, 82% of female riders reported experiencing harassment. Merely 18% of the female participants reported not having experienced harassment on bus stops. Housewives were the responders that were most probable to report about sexual harassment, followed by students and domestic workers. Housewives may be less confident than professional women who travel regularly since they travel less frequently. Housewives may travel alone most of the time, while students and working women frequently travel together or at least have acquaintances who travel regularly at the same time. Compared to Metro bus stations, Speedo bus stops have a significantly greater

percentage of harassed women (78% versus 44%). Women and girls stated they felt more insecure during lengthier waits and that Speedo bus stops were poorly managed.

Table 4: Factors Leading to Harassment

Factors	Metro			Speedo		
	N	%	Rank	N	%	Rank
Crowded Buses	104	11.5	1	110	12.2	1
Presence of Male	86	9.5	2	98	10.9	2
Poor Maintenance	75	8.3	3	77	8.6	3
Poor Lightning	68	7.5	4	72	8	4
Poor Signage	66	7.3	5	65	7.2	5
Lack of poor facilities for women with disabilities	52	5.8	6	30	3.2	6

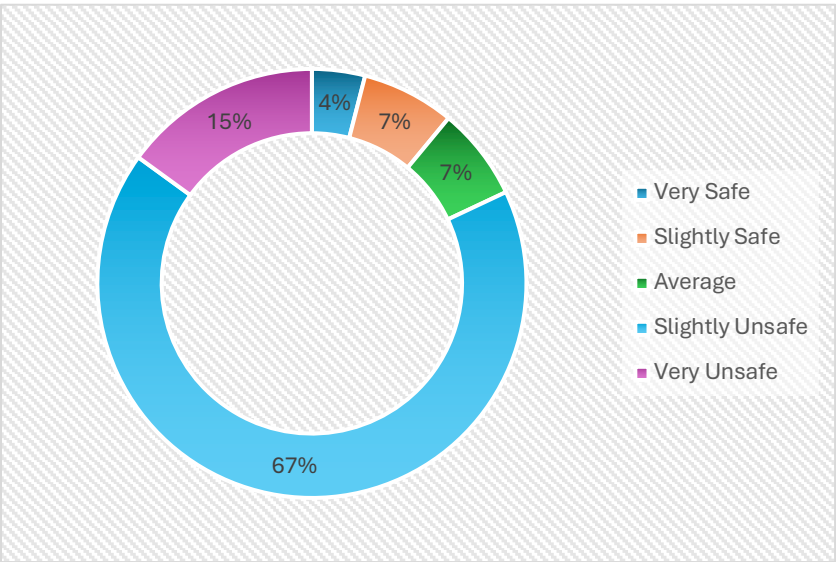
The above table shows that the major factor of harassment is overcrowded buses in the case of both Metro & Speedo buses. While some other factors are also discussed with rankings.

Figure 2: Perception of Security at Bus Stop
Safety concerns on Buses

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There are no significant differences between users of the two systems; around 90% of respondents who travel by Metro and Speedo buses report having experienced sexual harassment at least a single time utilising these modes of public transportation. Put another way, the problem of sexual harassment persists irrespective of the bus service.

Safety concerns on Buses



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Table 5: Sexual Harassment on Bus

Metro	Speedo
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	N	%	N	%
Sometimes	159	70.7	477	50.4
Always	42	18.7	135	39.9
Never	24	10.7	66	9.7

Table 6: Suggestions for public transport which are women-friendly

Suggestions		Metro		Speedo		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Space for women	For	188	83.6	408	60.2	596	66
Induction of female bus conductors and drivers	of bus	2	0.9	45	6.6	47	5.2
Separate buses for women	buses	6	2.7	35	5.2	41	4.5
Increase awareness about helplines and pro women laws among women		7	3.1	34	5.0	41	4.5
Maintain bus stops	bus	8	3.6	57	8.4	65	7.2
Allocate seats for older/pregnant women	seats	3	1.3	11	1.6	14	1.6
Increase security and surveillance at bus stops		5	2.2	23	5.2	44	4.9
Install proper signage at bus stops	proper signage at bus stops	1	0.4	34	5.0	35	3.9
Timely service	bus	1	0.4	19	5.8	20	2.2

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About the changes that could be implemented to make transport more gender-friendly for women commuters, approximately 83.6% of female Metro bus passengers and 60.2% of female Speedo bus passengers recommended expanding the amount of space designated for ladies.

Focus Group Discussions

Three focus groups were convened: one for women of different ages and backgrounds, one for policymakers and decision-makers involved in transport, and one for representatives of civil society. Following themes were derived from obtained data.

Fears in Public Spaces

Participants in all groups concurred that the crowded areas and male-dominated environment at bus stops make women feel insecure. For women and girls, there is little shade and seats, which is especially problematic for individuals with special needs. The lengthy wait periods sometimes make women and girls feel intimidated.

Women and girls who participated in the discussion recounted being harassed by male passengers at bus stops, including groping, following, and whistling. At busy bus stops, they saw the presence of small-time offenders such as hawkers, pickpockets, drug sellers, purse snatchers, and addicts. Some have brought attention to the fact that prostitution, drug sales, and begging all occur at bus stops. Some ladies said that they would rather their daughters and kids use vans or Qingqi rickshaws for emergency trips than wait at bus stations (Clusters 1, 2, 3). Every bus stop should have a robust surveillance system, it was felt. Most women reported experiencing sexual harassment at bus stops from men: "... *"It doesn't matter what you wear or how you look—being a woman alone makes you a target."* said a

representative of the MUMKIN Alliance, aged 48 (Cluster 3).

Despite holding a prominent political position, a 46-year-old MPA claimed that she still feels intimidated when travelling through the city *"My biggest fear is that someone might snatch my handbag or phone, and this constant worry makes me feel unsafe."* She brought out the fact that most victims of street crimes in the city, such as snatching of bags or cell phones, are women (Clusters 1, 3).

Facilities for Special Women

There are no accommodations for older people, particularly for women, according to several discussants, particularly older women. They claimed that getting on Speedo and even Metro buses is really tough for them. Discussants who identify as transgender mentioned a few specific difficulties they have, which are indicative of societal perceptions of this community, such as being placed in the male section where they are more likely to be abused (Cluster 1, 2).

A factory worker informed the group that although her profession requires her to travel late at night, she gets scared because there isn't much light on the streets or at the bus stations. The bus stations of Metro bus are better than Speedo, according to both domestic workers and students.

Perspectives on feeling of empowerment while travelling safely

Nearly all of the participants admitted to not feeling comfortable when travelling, especially at night. Due to the biased actions of the police, the majority of discussants stated that they typically remain quiet and do not report harassment to the police or helplines. A housewife shared, "It happens every day—you can't raise your voice about it

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all the time." Women claimed that they are reluctant to produce the evidence that the police request.

After more debate, it was discovered that women become subservient through socialisation at home, which renders them mute about harassment or "It's actually our culture that heavily influences how society interprets and responds to sexual acts and sexual violence," said a 58-year-old representative of a civil society organization. "It exists on a continuum—from overtly forceful coercion to forms of coercion that society tends to tolerate." A 52-year-old representative of civil society also discussed: *"A woman's modesty is closely tied to family honour and pride, which is why she's often not permitted to travel alone and her mobility is heavily restricted."* A fifty-two-year-old male civil society member continued: *"Bus stops have become common spots where young men target and harass girls. I've personally witnessed women feeling unsafe while waiting, as bikers honk to get their attention and make inappropriate gestures."* (Clusters 1, 3).

Perpetrators of Sexual Harassment

All women shared that male on lookers, passing motorcycle riders and male fellow travellers harass them at bus stops. *"I face harassment not just by boys but also by men aged 50 and above in the bus,"* said a university student, aged 22. A 34-year-old factory worker shared, *"I was returning from work when a fellow passenger began staring at me and making sexually inappropriate comments. I tried to ignore him, but he wouldn't stop. When I got off the bus, he followed me and, near my home, suddenly grabbed my hand. I was so terrified, I froze. He touched me inappropriately and then ran off. I can still feel his hands on me."* When the participant related this incident, other participants had a look of desperation and anger on their faces.

Discussants revealed that boys engage in inappropriate behaviours such as taking pictures, playing songs that aren't appropriate, tossing papers or visiting cards containing their phone numbers, and making unwanted remarks about girls' beauty and attire at bus stops. Even in designated women's sections on buses, guys manage to touch and look at women, especially students, making them feel unsafe. A 28-year-old housewife said, *"If a woman tries to confront boys or men harassing other girls, they respond by saying, 'It's none of your business—we're not bothering you.'"* (Cluster 1, 3).

Gaps and needs in public transport and public spaces

While constructing and developing infrastructure, it is important to take into account the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups which are gendered, such as expectant mothers, disabled women, the elderly, the ill, and women with small children. They encounter several issues with Metro and Speedo buses. There aren't enough seats or comfortable seats available. Women who participated in the discussion claimed that there is no female staff on buses and that they are afraid to complain to the male workers. A house wife, aged 28 said that "Women don't speak up much about the harassment they endure, which is why it continues."

Some participants claimed that bus conductors and drivers don't take harassment events seriously. The majority of drivers urge those who file complaints to move on: *"Madam, let it be."* Participants in the discussion suggested installing security cameras and alarms inside buses as well as at bus stops. The participants added that Metro bus services offer greater comfort compared to Speedo. Still, women are not safer at Metro bus stations than they are at Speedo stops. Participants in the discussion stated that cases of stealing, snatching bags, and using cell

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phones are really more common on the Metro bus than on the Speedo and other bus routes. They also mentioned that there is a shortage of seating on buses, and there are broken lifts, missing benches and malfunctioning security cameras in several Metro bus stops. The elderly, ill, and expectant women, as well as those who have young children or are travelling long distances, find this uncomfortable, particularly during rush hour. Buses may be hot and devoid of air due to sealed-shut windows and malfunctioning air conditioning.

Safe environment creation on public transport

Improving public transport infrastructure is a shared responsibility between the government and the people. A 37-year-old civil society representative stated, *"The real tragedy is that no government department is willing to take responsibility; it's all about shifting the blame."* A 37-year-old female representative from Speedo added, *"While I agree with the participants who've highlighted women's harassment issues at bus stops, improving and securing bus stops for women isn't solely the responsibility of the transport authority or LTC. It falls under the local government's jurisdiction, and it is their responsibility to build and maintain safe bus stops for women."*

One participant, ages 25, shared, *"During my pregnancy, traveling on public transport was like a struggle. There was no place to sit, no fans, and not even water."*

The MPA stated, *"The government ignores issues that aren't making headlines. The public doesn't demand better public transport, and women haven't raised concerns about harassment at bus stops or on buses. Sexual harassment or violence is seen as a byproduct of a patriarchal society, and women often adopt a submissive attitude as victims. As a result, the government tends to*

sweep these issues under the rug.” Participant from UN Women said, “The situation is concerning and requires the attention of the relevant authorities. Hearing from various stakeholders shows that we are aware of the issues; what is needed now is to prioritize them.”

In terms of planning, participants suggested that the traffic department create gender-sensitive traffic plans that prioritise the safety of women and girls. It is necessary to have strong cooperation between the departments of transportation, local bodies, law enforcement, politicians, and legislators. Additionally, a plan for integrated monitoring needs to be created and adhered to. Campaigns to raise awareness of gender sensitisation were thought to be appropriate. To raise public awareness of the problems women encounter when using public transit, the laws against harassment, and the functions and duties of law enforcement, media campaigns should be launched. A 26-year-old PSCA representative made the suggestion that social media can be used to disseminate ideas and alter people's perspectives. *“Women’s issues, especially harassment in public transport, can be tackled effectively through social media.”* she said.

DISCUSSION

The study’s findings confirm that a significant majority of women experience harassment while using public transport, particularly at bus stops and on buses themselves. According to the perception survey, 82% of women reported being harassed at bus stops, while nearly 90% experienced sexual harassment at least once while using Metro or Speedo buses. Housewives, students, and domestic workers were the most frequent victims of such harassment. Notably, the Speedo bus stops were perceived as less secure than Metro stations, often due to poor lighting, lack of seating, and overcrowding.

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The analysis revealed that overcrowded buses were the primary factor contributing to harassment, followed by the presence of men, inadequate maintenance, and lack of signage and disability-friendly facilities. These factors collectively generate a sense of insecurity that affects women's choices and freedom of movement.

Focus Group Discussions added critical context to these findings. Women across various age groups, occupations, and social strata described a persistent feeling of fear while navigating public spaces. Participants shared personal stories of being followed, groped, stared at, or subjected to unsolicited comments. Even women holding political positions admitted to feeling unsafe, emphasizing that status offers no immunity from street harassment. Transgender individuals and elderly women also highlighted serious barriers to safe mobility, such as being forced to use male sections or having no assistance for boarding buses. Many participants expressed a sense of helplessness and resignation, indicating that harassment has become normalized. Several women admitted that they no longer report incidents due to lack of trust in law enforcement or fear of being blamed or dismissed. Additionally, respondents stated that social norms often silence women, linking their mobility to notions of family honor, which further reinforces gender-based restrictions.

Despite governmental initiatives like women-only buses, awareness campaigns, and complaint centers, women continue to feel vulnerable and unsupported. The study underscores that these interventions are insufficient in the absence of accountability, enforcement, and comprehensive policy integration. The present study contributes to a growing body of research that underscores how urban transport systems particularly in patriarchal contexts like Pakistan can exacerbate gender inequalities

by failing to provide safe and inclusive mobility for women. Drawing from the experiences of 903 female commuters and multiple focus group discussions in Lahore, the findings confirm that fear, harassment, and infrastructural neglect are pervasive and intersectional challenges that severely restrict women's autonomy and participation in public life.

The finding that over 80% of women reported harassment at bus stops and nearly 90% experienced sexual harassment on Metro and Speedo buses echoes earlier international studies, which documented similar trends in cities like Bogotá, Kathmandu, and Auckland (Kash, 2019; Gautam et al., 2019; Chowdhury & van Wee, 2020). These studies confirm that such incidents are not isolated, but systemic and widespread. Furthermore, the normalization of harassment, as observed in the focus group testimonies, reflects Ceccato et al.'s (2022) notion of “cultural normalization,” where everyday violence against women in transit spaces becomes an accepted part of life. This normalisation has led many women to internalize risk and adopt passive avoidance strategies rather than seek redress, a trend that has been documented globally (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Alfaro et al., 2024).

As highlighted by Lucas (2012), restricted mobility is not simply an issue of inconvenience but one of social exclusion. The Lahore-based data demonstrate how fear and insecurity reduce women's access to essential urban resources—education, employment, healthcare—thus limiting their agency. Participants revealed that even middle-class, educated women hesitate to use public transit due to the fear of verbal or physical harassment, which confirms the assertion by Loukaitou-Sideris (2010) that safety perceptions, not just actual risk, shape women's travel decisions. This aligns with Gardner et al.'s (2017)

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research from Australian cities, which found that women were more likely to opt out of public transit altogether, or alter their routes and travel times significantly, thereby increasing the financial and psychological cost of mobility. In Lahore, women similarly reported using expensive rickshaws or limiting their movement—an example of suppressed travel, as discussed by Palm et al. (2024).

While fear and harassment affect women broadly, the focus group discussions revealed that vulnerability is exacerbated by age, class, and social status. Elderly women, pregnant women, domestic workers, and transgender individuals experience unique hardships, such as lack of assistance, poorly designed buses, and social discrimination. These findings affirm Chowdhury and Van Wee's (2020) conclusion that perceived safety varies based on factors like ethnicity, socio-economic status, and physical ability.

Moreover, the testimony of a transgender woman forced to use the male section—where she faced increased risk of abuse—indicates a critical gap in inclusive transport design. Despite Pakistan's legal recognition of transgender individuals, institutional responses remain grossly inadequate in addressing their mobility needs (Zahid, 2023). The study found that both Metro and Speedo buses, though better structured than informal modes of transport, fail to meet basic standards of gender-sensitive planning. Poor lighting, overcrowded vehicles, lack of female conductors, malfunctioning CCTV systems, and broken facilities were common complaints. This aligns with findings from studies in other developing urban contexts (Ouali et al., 2020; Zulfiqar, 2020). Furthermore, the perception that harassment is more common at Speedo bus stops suggests a lack of consistency in service delivery across systems. In a broader sense, these deficiencies point

to what Gamman and Armitage (2009) define as the absence of “defensible space,” where urban design fails to deter crime and foster a sense of ownership and security among users. Participants also highlighted the bureaucratic fragmentation of responsibilities between local governments, transport authorities, and law enforcement. The lack of accountability was a recurring theme, with one participant describing the situation as “a tragedy of blame-shifting.” This reinforces the argument made by Alfaro et al. (2024) that legal frameworks, while necessary, are insufficient without institutional coordination and enforcement.

A major insight from the qualitative data was the internalization of fear and the normalization of abuse. Women reported that cultural notions of family honor and modesty often prevented them from speaking up or reporting incidents. A similar phenomenon is reported in Quinones’ (2020) study on Bogotá, where social stigmatization often silences survivors of harassment. This silence, as noted in the current study, is not due to lack of awareness but a rational response to systems that offer little protection and often blame victims. Moreover, participants described a “culture of submission,” where women are taught from a young age to endure rather than resist. This patriarchal conditioning further widens the gender mobility gap and reinforces what Rayment-McHugh (2023) calls the “structural silencing” of female voices in urban safety discourses.

While the Pakistani government has introduced several initiatives—like women-only buses, helplines, and safety apps—participants viewed these efforts as piecemeal and symbolic. Without systemic reforms, including structural changes in law enforcement, transport infrastructure, and public messaging, these interventions

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are unlikely to yield transformative results. The findings affirm Zahid's (2023) call for a gender-responsive urban mobility policy that includes female staff in transport services, real-time surveillance, and stronger accountability mechanisms. Awareness campaigns and civic education must target not only women but also men, especially young commuters, to reshape cultural attitudes toward gender and public space.

International models, such as women-only carriages in Japan and public education campaigns in Latin America, offer useful lessons. However, these should be adapted carefully, considering Pakistan's socio-political context and resource constraints (Spicer & Song, 2017). This study illuminates the deep-rooted gendered challenges that define public transport use for women in Lahore. Far from being a neutral or technical issue, mobility in Pakistan is a deeply social experience—conditioned by class, power, fear, and societal control. As such, transport planning must transcend infrastructure and embrace a rights-based, feminist approach that centers the voices and needs of women and other marginalized commuters. Only then can cities move toward equitable and sustainable mobility systems.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the urgent need to address women's safety in urban public transport systems, particularly in contexts like Lahore, where cultural norms, institutional gaps, and weak enforcement mechanisms intersect to limit women's mobility. Through both perception surveys and focus group discussions, it is evident that harassment is pervasive and deeply impacts women's confidence, choices, and social participation. The fear of being targeted while commuting discourages many

women from pursuing education, employment, and public engagement, reinforcing cycles of inequality. The study contributes to an expanding body of work that views transportation not just as a technical service, but as a space of gendered experience—one that must be designed, managed, and regulated with women’s safety and dignity at its core.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study puts forward the following recommendations:

- Firstly, there is an urgent need to increase the number of women-only sections and seats on buses, as supported by 66% of respondents.
- Secondly, the introduction of female conductors and drivers could help foster safer and more comfortable environments for women.
- Thirdly, infrastructure improvements—such as better lighting, clear signage, secure seating areas, and dedicated waiting zones at bus stops—should be prioritized, particularly in high-risk areas. Surveillance systems, including CCTV cameras and emergency call buttons, must be installed and actively monitored.
- Fourth, awareness campaigns about legal rights, helplines, and reporting mechanisms should be conducted using local languages and community channels. These efforts must also address the stigma associated with reporting, which deters many women from seeking justice.
- Fifthly, authorities should ensure timely and frequent bus service, minimizing long waiting periods that contribute to women’s vulnerability.

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- Lastly, there is a critical need for inter-agency coordination involving local transport authorities, law enforcement, gender specialists, and civil society to implement a gender-responsive transport policy framework. This includes not only designing better spaces but also ensuring that perpetrators of harassment are held accountable under the law.

By centering women's experiences and voices, policymakers can move toward a public transport system that is not only efficient but also equitable, inclusive, and safe.

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INTEGRATED PUBLIC TRANSPORT ROUTE MAP, LAHORE (PHASE-1)

