Transit Sexual Harassment: A Scuffle for Women Travelers

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Abstract

Today, gender-based social issues, such as sexual harassment, assaults, bullying, etc., are prevalent in both advanced and developing nations. The transit system has been identified as a hotspot of sexual harassment in many literary works. Today’s mobility depends heavily on public transportation, particularly for individuals who lack the finances for a private vehicle or who are unable to drive. However, modern women are also venturing forth into the city and towns on their own for a variety of reasons, such as education, employment, and recreational activities. Although they use public transportation regularly, they are frequently targeted for sexual harassment. This article deals with understanding the prevalence of harassment among women travelers, their reactions, and their coping mechanisms.

Introduction

Many studies have propounded the prevalence of various versions of gender-based crimes like sexual harassment, sexual assault, and sexual abuse in public transportation systems. The Nirbhaya incident in Delhi, India, is a notorious case of gender-based crime that occurred late at night inside a running city bus in the year 2012; it sparked public outrage and drew global attention to various forms of sexual violence. Later in the year 2018, the online trend of the MeToo movement brought the issue of sexual harassment under the academic limelight. Sexual harassment is unwelcome sexual behavior that often lurks beneath social actions and interactions and deprives individuals of their basic sexual rights. A similar exposition about harassment was given by who described it as a violation of physical integrity concerning primary and secondary sexual characteristics of people, strongly backing the social notion that sexual harassment is gender-based discrimination (Lahsaeizadeh & Yousefinejad, 2012).

Studies across the globe have posited that sexual harassment is highly prevalent in public places and public transport (Madan & Nalla, 2016; Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014), which are often proclaimed as both crime generators and crime attractors (Irvin-Erickson & la Vigne, 2015). Contrary to popular belief, transit sexual harassment is prevalent at both developed and developing nations, even the most developed nations are not immune to it. In India, the phenomenon is frequently known as ‘Eve teasing’ (Gekoski et al., 2017), which showcases all prominent forms of sexual harassment, including verbal, non-verbal, and physical conducts, such as catcalling, staring, leering, ogling, whistling, winking, biting lips, masturbating etc. Similarly, in Nepal, the term ‘hensa’ is prevalent (Gekoski et al., 2017) to describe similar behaviours like groping, masturbating, staring, etc.

The act of groping is frequently reported by girls and women in Japan’s metros, especially by those in their 20s and 30s. The perpetrators are usually male co-passengers who are known as “Chiken” in their local language (Gekoski et al., 2017). A similar prevalence of sexual harassment in the rail or bus systems was communicated by a study in Los Angeles (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Another study in London estimated that more than one-fourth of the respondent experience lifetime transit-related harassment (Fielding et al., 2021). Madan & Nalla, 2016 also stated in their study that three out of five women have been victims of lifetime sexual harassment. In a study in Lucknow, every respondent reported being both a victim and
witness of harassment (Tripathi et al., 2017). In Kathmandu, Nepal, students who used to live alone and travel daily reported a high frequency of sexual harassment victimization (Gautam et al., 2019). A study in Austria found that transit harassment used to occur in transit settings (39%), inside vehicles (71%), and transit stops (29%) (Stark & Meschik, 2018). The mode of transit in which harassment prevails varies to different cities and countries; in Stockholm, Paris, and Tokyo, harassment occurs more on trains than buses whereas in Sao Paulo and Los Angeles, harassment occurs more on buses than trains (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020).

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment in Public Transport

Buses, metro, trains, vikram, majic, auto, tempo, and rickshaws are popular forms of land-based public transport in many developing nations of South Asia, out of which buses and trains/metro can accommodate a large number of passengers. Since, majic, vikram, and mini buses, have a limited seating capacity and are often lodged with more than their carrying capacity, the passengers are somehow adjusted in the vehicles for extra monetary gains. This forced adjustment creates congestion inside the vehicle and rush conditions, which creates overcrowding in peak passenger hours of morning and evening, providing ideal conditions for sexual harassment (Gekoski et al., 2017; Valan, 2020). Riders reportedly witnessed harassment while boarding buses, trains, or metro (Rahman & Nahrin, 2012).

Since, the transit system is by its very nature designed to be open and anonymous (Smith & Clarke, 2000), and are mandated to be easily accessible to the masses, the generated rush conditions become toilsome to manage. The risk of harassment is reported to be equal across day and night and prevails during all seasons (Tripathi et al., 2017). The prime age of victimized girls and women is estimated between 12 to mid-30s (Valan, 2020), proclaiming young girls and women to be more prone to sexual harassment (Gekoski et al., 2017). Mostly, such acts are primarily perpetuated on women by male perpetrators (Herzog, 2007). Similar harassment of men has also been reported by some studies (Thompson, 1994), but the frequency of male harassment reported is comparatively less than that of female.

Distinct traveling needs of women folk

Besides education, work, and other tasks women are concerned with taking care-related trips, such as picking up and dropping children from schools, elderly care, buying medicines, buying groceries, etc., and thus, require “trip chaining” (Chant & McIlwaine, 2015a; Levy, 2013). Women report sexual harassment during traveling on public transport as a regularly occurring phenomenon (Bhatt et al., 2015). Their travel needs and patterns are more complex and heterogenous in comparison to their men counterparts (Meloni et al., 2009). Moreover, urban women are expected to be working, educated, and independent in their approach. Thus, the demands of both city life and family obligations ask them for frequent traveling; therefore, urban women tend to experience a higher degree of insecurity and conflict in the public transit system in comparison to their rural counterparts and are especially exposed to non-partner violence (McIlwaine, 2016).

Sexually exploitative behaviours

Sexually inappropriate behavior such as leering, sexual invitations, masturbation, frotteurism, stalking, lewd comments, unwanted sexual touching, groping, smacking, lip biting, whistling, remarks over body and attire, kissing sounds, asking for sexual favors, striking up an unwanted conversation, voyeurism, leaning, pressing bodies, have been widely observed in the transit system (Gekoski et al., 2015; Valan, 2020). Stranger harassment is easily executed in public transport due to the conflux of strangers in a narrow space, excessive closeness, happenstances, and transit confinement. Harassers take advantage of the crowd for performing stranger harassment as the crowd facilitates them to hide their identity and keep it undetected (Horii & Burgess, 2012; Hsu, 2011; Madan & Nalla, 2016; Valan, 2020). The excessive proximity raised in the crowd dilutes the idea of personal space inside the transport and thereby solidifies the idea of exploitation of contact (Goffman, 1963). Friends, relatives, neighbors, strangers, and colleagues are also reported as harassers (Valan, 2020).

Besides passengers, drivers and conductors were also recognized as harassers by the victims. They play
obscene music, perform sexual gestures, stare, sexualize their tones, set mirrors to different angles to see passengers, and sexually touch and rub their bodies against passengers while collecting ticket fare. Some passengers tend to tie up with others and forcibly try to interfere in their personal space by having forced conversations. Catcalling and objectifying women are common forms of verbal harassment. Grading women in accordance with their appearance is a well-observed behavior among friends who stand at bus stops, in public transport, or enroute to and from public transport. The appearance-grading behavior is eventually followed by stalking, teasing, and forceful conversation. Women considered such acts an intrusion (Bowman, 1993; Vera-Gray, 2016) and a violation of their personal space and rights.

Beyond transit harassment

Scholars have competently argued for considering the "whole journey approach" to understand the diversity of sexual harassment (Natarajan, 2016). Residential neighborhoods are mostly located at a certain distance from the stops and stations, which have to be covered by walking after getting off the transit. In some places, men are often observed strolling, smoking, gossiping, or sitting in groups in tea stalls (in South Asian countries), at the roadside, or passing in their bikes and cars, judging women, passing comments, or doing deliberate hooting at them. Both crowded and deserted transit systems induce fear of harassment among women (Gardner et al., 2017a). Gedi culture is also visible in South Asian cities, where bikers or car riders tend to stalk women and passers-by. The walking route which connects the public transport and destination, is also threatened with stalking and other harassing activities and highly impacts a person’s transit behavior (Natarajan, 2016). Thus, neither routes nor stops are safe and pose the equivalent risk of harassment. CCTV and police patrolling are frequent only at certain points of the city, leaving the other areas unsafe without any promising surveillance. Moreover, women often remain dubious about the proper monitoring of CCTV cameras (Yavuz & Welch, 2010). Though CCTVs are set up at specific locations only, its real-time monitoring is improbable, which makes the doubt obvious. Lack of formal and informal surveillance during the night at most public places (routes and stops) also makes them more prone to harassment (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Yavuz & Welch, 2010). Frequent victimization and daily face-off with harassment put the victim into certain apprehensions. The fear articulated by harassment tends to deter women from moving around, and discourage their access to public transport and city life to a certain extent (Chant & McIlwaine, 2015b; Levy, 2013). Various factors of the transit environment are significant in perceiving the degree of sexual harassment among women. Studies have reported that drunk people, poor illumination, and vandalism create a high risk of victimization (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Places with clear visibility, illumination, CCTV, police patrolling, and bystanders’ presence can play a significant role in subsiding the fear of probable harassment among women.

Coping Behaviour and Reaction against Sexual Harassment in Public Transport

According to Garfinkel, people use accounting to explain their everyday life and social situations. Victims’ accounts of reactions and coping behavior are essential to understand the intensity of transit sexual harassment. Victims’ response to incidents is either directed externally to others or internally toward themselves. Some self-reported psychological reactions after incidence have been reported by the victim in many studies (Valan, 2020), such as feeling angry, irritated, scared, shocked, depressed, humiliated, and traumatized (Fielding et al., 2021).

Reactions to sexual harassment can be broadly understood as confrontational and non-confrontational reactions (Gardner et al., 2017a). Confrontational reactions are those reactions in which both harassers and victims are actively involved. Non-confrontational reactions are elucidated by the active participation of the harasser and the deliberate ignorance or avoidance of the victim. Crowded spaces often witness non-confrontational crime whereas deserted areas have high chances of confrontational crime (Gardner et al., 2017b). Mostly non-confrontational reactions are sought in response to behaviors including leering and sexualized slurs, whereas the confrontational reactions that result from the behavior include groping, following, touching, and leaning (Gardner et al., 2017a; Gekoski et al., 2015; Hsu, 2011). Often, the confrontation against the harasser is done through verbal responses or scolding (Karki et al., 2021). Yet, sometimes the victims get too inflicted to use physical power against the harasser and don’t step back from hitting or
showing a physical response (Quinones, 2020). Silence and ignorance were the most common responses reported due to many socio-economic reasons. Women avoid reacting to sexual harassment in transit because of the fear of escalation and public embarrassment (Horii & Burgess, 2012; Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014). The fear of more severe attacks creates feelings of unease and insecurity among women (Pain, 1991). The apprehension that harassers may turn out to increase the degree of harassment in case they retaliate restricts them from reporting and reacting strictly. Women anticipate that being silent will help them pass through the incident because the main purpose of public transport is to take people somewhere else (Urry, 2016). Thus, they don’t need to focus on secondary or tertiary involvements besides their first objective of utilizing transit to reach their destination. The interaction between harasser and victim on transit is considered temporary and insignificant in comparison to the urgency and importance of reaching work, education, and the desired destination. Due to the mobile nature of the transit system, ambiguity over harassment acts, and unfamiliarity with the harassers, the victim often considers retaliation time-consuming and not fruitful.

Superficial Acceptance of Harassment

In most countries, public buses, metros, and trains are available as subsidized modes of transportation. Moreover, riders are incompetent switch easily to other modes of conveyance due to financial constraints; taxi fares and private automobiles place an additional burden on the passenger’s pocket. Further, not all places have ample options for conveyance; many sites have one or two alternatives handy in addition to public buses. All these factors make people stick to crowded public transportation, travel during peak hours and bear the harassment. Women frequently believed that retaliation against sexual harassment in public places subjected them to free publicity for harassment of them and their family among friends, acquaintances, educational or working institutions, or society. The involvement of formal authority and cumbersome formal-informal social grilling makes women fearful for their social image and reputation. Complaining to authorities and the police is typically regarded as futile by the victim due to fear of the police and the lack of desired response by them, as well as non-satisfaction with the commencement of the litigation process itself (Quinones, 2020; Weinstein Agrawal et al., 2020). Moreover, the normalization of sexual harassment also contributes to its non-reporting, as the incidents are considered to be repeatedly and commonly occurring and, thus, not worth reporting (Quinones, 2020).

Indifferent Bystander Intervention

Bystanders are present alongside the harasser and victim during transit harassment. Any critical situation obviously expects a bystander intervention, but, in the case of sexual harassment incidents, bystanders rarely intervene; mostly, they tend to witness the incident from a certain distance and pretend to ignore it (Lea et al., 2017; Weinstein Agrawal et al., 2020). More pronounced bystander intervention occurs when the victim takes a stand for herself and creates a scene to shame the harasser (Lea et al., 2017), and only then does the bystander get instigated enough to consider the situation problematic and assistance-demanding (Darley, 1970) and intervene.

Partial avoidance - a transient shield

People’s various commitments and engagements do not allow them to completely avoid the public transit system. Therefore, victims strategically opt for partial avoidance of the public transit system (Vanier & d’Arbois de Jubainville, 2017) to regulate both their travel needs and avoid harassment. Partial avoidance helps the victim utilize transit facilities by partially regulating travel time and space. Space avoidance is enacted via changing routes, changing modes of transit, and changing transit lines and stops. Victims tend to avoid both overcrowded spaces and deserted places. They prefer to access transit-associated locations during a less rushed time in the presence of a considerable number of people so as to seek intervention if it becomes necessary. Time-based avoidance is done by changing the timing of boarding, either by taking it earlier or later than usual. Majority women avoid traveling at night because they are afraid of being victimized, since, darkness is frequently associated with severe forms of sexual crime, such as rape and sexual assault. As preventive measures, women passengers have adopted some measures to counter or avoid the situations, such as keeping ‘serious’ or ‘angry’ expressions in public, wearing headphones, or carrying
personal defence non-lethal weapons such as pepper spray (Quinones, 2020). They try to sit or stand next to female passengers, keeping their bags between them and the other passengers. All the changes, individually or collectively, contribute to infringement of the victim’s right to freedom.

**Victim Blaming- a Defensive Attribution by Harasser**

Though harassment incidents are transitory, they have a relatively long-term impact on victims. It leaves them in physical, psychological, and social distress. Victims use many coping techniques to deal with the effects and unpleasant memories that victimization has caused. Victims tend to alleviate their incidence by sharing them with their family, friends, or siblings (Valan, 2020). Most victims avoid informing their families about the incident due to anticipated restrictions on their mobility, timing, outings, and clothing, as well as fear of the forcibly imposed company of a male or a senior female everywhere outside the home. The slightest indication of sex-based crime or involvement is sufficient for them to force marriage upon girls and women. Fear of early and forced marriage prevents them from reporting as well. Here, families exercise substantial influence over the education and occupational prospects of girls and women. Women are terrified of dropping out of school and being forced to quit their jobs. Though the normalization of sexual harassment prevents victims from reporting, reporting is also considered taboo and highly ridiculous for the victim. In the end of itself, society’s two-sided approach to sexual harassment is delusional. According to attribution theory, people define the actions and behaviors of others as their personality characteristics and internal causes, and their behavior as situationally determined (Gouws & Kritzinger, 1995). Many harassers justify their deliberate touching as accidental, extreme closeness, and other similar behaviors result of crowds or situations of the public transportation system conditioning. But they deliberately blame the victim on the pretext of their behavior and personality characteristics and humiliate women by stating their behavior as “looking for it.” Late-night outings, traveling alone, modern dressing sense, no or less constraint over their behaviors, or simply being a female are considered potential grounds for sexual harassment. Victims fear further victimization from the judicial system and society at large. The fear of social guilt and victim blaming keeps victims from reporting harassment. The fear of harassment is more deeply installed in the minds of women than actual harassment (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009), which makes them adopt preventive measures. Thus, society and the harasser shift the blame onto the victims and make the victim suffer two-way torture.

**Conclusion**

Transit sexual harassment is prevalent in most societies and has severe implicit and explicit impacts on victims. In addition to the many physical and psychological effects of harassment, women have also manifested latent social exclusion in public spaces (figure1). Coping behaviors and preventive measures such as changing routes, skipping routine, and changing the timing, deprives women of their liberty to act at their discretion, restrict their access to the easily accessible transit system, and slowly eliminate them from mainstream welfare. Even in the 21st century, women get belittled by harassment and the social stigma associated with victimization. Women long for a safer disposition from both their harasser and society itself.

**Disclosure**

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

**References**


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**Figure**

Figure 1. The flowchart depicts the socio-economic exclusion paradigm of women folk as a result of transit sexual harassment