Women's perception of space on public transit in Toronto: An analysis of Glenfield-Jane Heights and Regent Park

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The program is designed to encourage students to carry out independent research projects in city-building and urban scholarship.
ABOUT ME

- Recent graduate from the University of Toronto Scarborough
- Previous work experience:
  - Ministry of Transportation
  - Bike Share Toronto
INTRODUCTION

- Public transit is a crucial service for people living in the City of Toronto.
- In Toronto, 58% of public transit users are women while 42% are men (Cruickshank, 2017).
- Impact of transit on the lives of low-income women specifically is important to research because they have fewer transit options.
- One’s perceptions and feelings towards transit also influences their travel decisions and could hinder their ability to reach places with confidence.
- My research focuses on 2 low-income neighborhoods in the City of Toronto: Glenfield-Jane Heights and Regent Park.
Public transit as one of the most fear-inducing activities in a public setting because people are confined and restricted in their movement (Yavuz and Welch, 2010).

Women are more likely to alter their behaviour by choosing alternative routes to maintain their safety (Loukaitou-Sideris and Fink, 2008).

Women are also more likely than men to perceive greater risk and sensitivity to risk in their environments (Yavuz and Welch, 2010).

Women have a greater fear of crime than men.

Transit as a gendered experience.
STUDY DETAILS

- Focus: Glenfield-Jane Heights and Regent Park
  - Both neighborhoods were identified as Neighborhood Improvement Areas and also have higher percentages of residents classifying as low-income than the city rate of 19%
- Surveys (via Google forms) with women, aged 18-30 living in both neighborhoods
- Each participant was compensated with a $10 Tim Hortons/Starbucks gift card
- Reached out to community organizations to find participants
  - 8 from Regent Park
  - 10 from Glenfield-Jane Heights
Survey questions were focused on participants’ feelings and attitudes towards transit, as well as a few questions regarding their relationship to transit:

- Ex. How often did you use public transit before the pandemic?
- Ex. At what times did you normally feel safe/unsafe on transit?

Participants reported taking TTC buses, and subways.
SURVEY RESULTS

Age of participants

Do you identify as low income (having an income of less than $30,000 annually)?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer
Harassment on Public Transit

- 77.8% of participants experienced harassment on public transit (TTC buses and subways)
- Participants reported that the most common types of harassment were strangers asking personal questions, unwanted sexual looks, and whistling.
Lack of Support Before and After Harassment

- Participants perceived lack of support around reporting affected their decision to tell anyone about their experiences with harassment.
- Transit operators were not equipped to handle harassment reports.
- Crowded public transit and empty spaces both enable harassers to act without repercussions.
Fear of Crime & Lack of Safety after Dark

- 100% of participants felt unsafe taking the public transit after dark/at night
- Using the public transit evoked feelings of anxiety, fear, and nervousness
- Due to fear of crime, participants avoided going out at night and travelling alone
- Fear of certain public spaces (due to perceptions of crime and safety) limited participants' freedom and enjoyment of public life
At what times do you feel safe and unsafe while using public transit?

- Morning
- Afternoon
- Night

Number of Participants

- Participant felt safe using public transit at that time
- Participant felt unsafe using public transit at that time

"I just wanted to remove myself from the situation as soon as possible and did not want to encounter them ever again." - Participant 6
Participant responses:
- “I did not know where to go to report.”
- “I did not want to make a big deal.”
- “I know nothing would happen if I reported it.”
- “I just ran on the subway as I was being followed and left.”
- “I wanted to remove myself from the incident as soon as possible and forget about it.”
RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Representation - Women in Public Transit Roles
2) Changes in Infrastructure
3) Harassment Prevention
4) Affordable Housing in the City
1) Representation: Place Women at the Forefront of Public Transit Companies

- Historically, public transit systems were more geared towards men, rather than women
- Exclusion of women’s perspectives in transit discussions has resulted in unsafe public transit experiences
- More women need to be in transit organizations
  - Create hiring quotas for major organizations (TTC, Metrolinx, Ministry of Transportation etc.) to encourage women to apply
2) Changes in Infrastructure

There is also a need for changes in the physical infrastructure of public transit. Factors that negatively impact women's perception of safety include:

- **Poor lighting**: dim/dark environments make it difficult to see who's around
- **Unstaffed stations**: no one to witness or help if a woman is harassed
- **Bus stops in isolated areas**: being alone furthers safety concerns
- **Infrequent and unreliable transit services**: lack of reliable service makes it harder for women and others to plan their trips and spend time waiting, potentially alone

Recommendations:

- Bright lighting, staffed stations, bus stops in busy areas, reliable service, more space between seats so people can move around freely
3) Harassment Prevention

- More than 75% of participants had reported facing some type of harassment while on public transit.
- Reporting instances of harassment was viewed as being ambiguous and cumbersome.

Recommendations:

- Women-only transit services
- Mechanisms in place to catch perpetrators
- Reliable and accessible reporting systems
4) Affordable Housing in the City

- Toronto’s transit suburbs have 150% more transit use than the city average
- There is a lack of building development and affordable housing
- Living spaces and neighborhoods such as Regent Park are also becoming more gentrified, which pushes people out and further away from their employment

Recommendations:
- Need for integrated and affordable housing, employment, and transit services so that people can minimize their time on transit
- More consultations with those in low-income neighborhoods
Upon completing this study it is evident that a lot more research needs to be done.

Transit is a gendered issue, but also a socio-economic issue.

Women deserve to take public transit while feeling safe and confident that they’ll be able to reach their destinations.

Can improve transit services based off of other transit systems around the world, such as women-only vehicles offered during late night hours in Tokyo, Japan.

Thank you to the participants!
REFERENCES

