



COVID-19 TRANSPORT BRIEF

Gender Equality, the Pandemic and a Transport Rethink

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Covid-19 disproportionately affects women worldwide. Pre-existing inequality and the fact that the majority of healthcare and other essential workers are women underpins this significant imbalance. Women face a higher burden of unpaid care and housework than men, as well as gender-based violence. Women's travel patterns exacerbate gender inequality because of greater reliance on public transport than on private cars in many regions. In addition, women transport workers face a higher risk of Coronavirus infection because of workforce gender inequality and a lack of adequate measures to support women. Crisis responses allow a rethink of transport policies to improve gender equality. This will not only reduce the unequal impact of the pandemic on women; the long-term recovery towards more sustainable, resilient and inclusive transport will depend on measures that address the priorities of both women and men.

Why the pandemic forces us to rethink transport for equality

The pandemic highlights the existing gender inequality in transport. Women have been affected disproportionately both economically and socially because of Covid-19. Women make up the majority of essential workers, including healthcare workers, and are subject to more unpaid care and housework work and experience higher levels of gender-based violence, which has increased during the pandemic.

Takeaways from this Brief

- The pandemic offers an opportunity to improve gender equality by rethinking transport design and policies to address the needs of women transport users and workers.
- Policy responses should reduce the disproportionate risks faced by women transport users and workers by improving safety and security in transport services and the workplace.
- Greater women's participation in decision-making roles is essential to improving gender equality.
- Government policies and employer initiatives must protect women transport workers against Coronavirus as well as addressing their caring responsibilities, violence at work, commuting, and social protections including for informal workers.
- Adopt International Labour Organization (ILO) recommendations for workplace gender equality in crisis response policies.

Women are more prone to the risk of Covid-19 infection due to their travel patterns and possible lack of transport options. A higher share of unpaid care responsibilities also makes working remotely more difficult.

Existing measures for women transport workers are inadequate to mitigate their risks in both passenger transport and freight transport, especially when gender segregation in the transport workforce leads to different levels of exposure to Covid-19 for women and men.

Without a change in transport measures and without addressing the priorities of women and men, the sector will be unable to recover to achieve the goal of a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive future.

Covid-19's impact is not gender-neutral

As with other crises like natural disasters,¹ the impact of Covid-19 is not gender-neutral. Women experience greater economic and social impacts than men due to existing gender gaps, especially in industries where teleworking is not an option, and the unequal unpaid care and domestic work burden on women. Around the world, women spent between two and ten times more hours on unpaid care work than men pre-Covid-19.²

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased this burden on women due to reduced care supply.³ A higher proportion of women work in essential services. Women account for 70% of the world's health and social care workforce yet hold lower-status and lower-paid jobs in the healthcare sector, where women earn on average 28% less than men.⁴ In addition, women are overrepresented in industries hardest hit, such as food, retail and entertainment, where the pandemic has left them without jobs or income.⁵ Globally, 58% of employed women also work in informal employment: a sector where workers lost an average of 60% of their income at the beginning of the pandemic.⁶

These trends significantly heighten gender inequality in transport during the pandemic because of existing differences in travel behaviour by gender. Women travel shorter distances, chain more trips throughout the day, make more non-work-related trips, travel at off-peak hours, choose more flexible modes, make less car and two-wheeler trips, and tend to use more public transport and non-motorised modes.⁷

Women also spend on average 42% of their weekly total commuting time on the “mobility of care”, such as trips related to housework and caregiving.⁸ In addition, women caregivers, both paid and unpaid, have a more substantial dependence on public transport and fewer transport mode choices. The impact of Covid-19 on travel behaviour has been significant on public transport ridership globally. The decline in public transport use around the world, reduced services, suspended routes, and varying duration and restrictions have led to changes in the supply of services. Some cities recorded a more than 90% decrease in public transport use;⁹ others saw public transport users switching from monthly to single tickets.¹⁰ As more women depend on public transport to access jobs and services, including childcare, education and health facilities, limited public transport supply affects women more than men. Maintaining accessibility for both women and men has been a key challenge during the pandemic worldwide. One study from the Netherlands showed that women have fewer transport alternatives and need more effort to reach their destination.¹¹ Another study using data from Italy, Portugal and Spain showed that women’s mobility fell by 28% three weeks after the introduction of lockdowns, while that of men declined by about 21%.¹² Limitations on women’s mobility will restrict accessibility to critical services and direct involvement in prevention and treatment of Covid-19, putting them in more disadvantaged positions.

Measures to improve gender equality

Various Covid-19 response measures around the world aim to promote gender equality during the pandemic. Measures include changes in transport services, like the provision of priority or free access to public transport for health and essential workers¹³ and tailored transport services for frontline workers in partnership with public entities and hospitals.¹⁴ Private sector transport services can also complement public transport, notably for healthcare staff and essential workers. Private transport operators, including ride-sharing services, MOIA, FreeNow, Lyft, and Uber, have replaced bus services during off-peak hours or have offered night services to reduce the strain on public transport systems.¹⁵

Other initiatives include demand-driven services, vehicle rentals at cost price, offering different mobility options or free transport.¹⁶ Gender-specific transport measures include free access for pregnant women who need maternal health services during Covid-19¹⁷ or digital access, for example mobile phone-based health services and smart travel applications, to avoid walking long distances or having to use other transport modes to reach health care facilities.¹⁸ Travel restrictions on some streets have allowed safer travel for cyclists and pedestrians. An increase in bike lanes and free repair stations, and measures to respace cities¹⁹ will increase transport safety for all.

In the short term, these changes can address the disruption in public transport. In the long run, they could help women by allowing more efficient trip chaining. An increase in women cyclists is an opportunity to increase the uptake of more sustainable transport modes. Ultimately, this could be more beneficial for women who do not have access to private vehicles and will also have overall health benefits.

Health and safety are paramount

The concern for both the health and safety of transport passengers and workers has been a top priority since the beginning of the pandemic. Transport operators took measures to ensure a balance between workers' safety and maintaining services so that transport networks could continue to operate in extended periods of lockdown. This is vital for women who constitute more than half of public transport users in many cities.

In order to ensure the safety of public transport users, many transport agencies around the world have adopted a set of social distancing and sanitation measures, including spaced seating, open windows, frequent cleaning and disinfection, mandatory mask-wearing, crowd monitoring, thermal screening, supervised boarding and deboarding, signage and other visual cues.²⁰ Contactless payment through digital or electronic platforms also helps ensure passenger safety. At the same time, there also needs to be enforced protocols to avoid violence against women, especially given that over 80% of women already felt unsafe in public spaces pre-Covid-19.²¹

In urban areas, public transport and associated public spaces need measures to reduce harassment against women. In 2017, the French Île-de-France Region found that 39% of all violence against women happened in public spaces, like train stations.²² With governmental measures to contain the pandemic, the decrease of commuters could heighten safety concerns for women in public transport: stringent social distancing measures may make women even more vulnerable targets for violence and assault.²³ Some governments have identified that the problem of violence against women has worsened with social distancing measures and they have responded accordingly. Cumbria in the UK implemented an initiative to reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 on women. The police department joined forces with postal and delivery workers to identify and report signs of violence against women, reinforcing the work done online through the "Bright Sky" mobile app, which helps victims of abuse.

The government of New South Wales in Australia introduced Artificial Intelligence (AI) initially to increase women's security on public transport at night-time. They subsequently found that the technology could also be an effective security tool during the pandemic. The winning project of the "Safety After Dark" innovation challenge uses AI in security cameras to identify suspicious behaviour. Providing these types of resources in the fight against gender-based violence remains a decisive action to achieve gender equality during and post Covid-19.

Gender equality in the transport workforce

The pandemic has reinforced the existing challenges for women in the transport workforce and could have significant and long-term implications for gender equality in transport. Although the pandemic has a severe impact on all workers, there have been specific and additional adverse effects on women. This is primarily because women are disproportionately affected by inadequate policy designs, which place them at increased health and occupational risks in the transport sector. For example, the risks to men workers are better known given that occupational safety and health considerations had previously focused on jobs in sectors dominated by male workers.

However, given the increasing participation of women in the workforce, gender-related questions about the different effects of work-related risks on men and women, in terms of exposure to hazardous substances, or the impact of biological agents on reproductive health, the physical demands of heavy work, the ergonomic design of workplaces and the length of the working day, especially when domestic duties also have to be taken into account, would all need to be addressed.²⁴ This is especially critical as occupational safety and health (OSH) hazards affecting women workers have been traditionally underestimated because OSH standards and exposure limits to hazardous substances are based on male populations and laboratory tests.²⁵ In fact, work-related risks to women's safety and health have been underestimated and neglected compared to men's, both regarding research and prevention.²⁶

In 2018, women workers only represented 17% of the global transport workforce.²⁷ Where women do participate in the transport workforce, relatively few rise to managerial positions, a phenomenon that is shared by most sectors. In global supply chains and logistics, women occupy less than 20% of top executive positions across all sectors.²⁸ It is also more common for women to have less job security and lower-paid jobs than men²⁹ across the transport sector. The historically low representation of women in the transport sector creates gender-biased attitudes and barriers, as well as discriminating work environments and conditions.³⁰

These reasons have all led to a gender-segregated transport sector, where more women are working in the frontlines of the pandemic and in customer-facing and cleaning roles, which expose them to a higher risk of infection. This increased exposure, combined with a lack of adequate and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and the fact that women also make up the majority of informal workers and workers in non-standard forms of employment, mean that women transport workers can disproportionately suffer the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. A study in Canada found that more women than men left the workforce due to Covid-19.³¹

In response to the pandemic, the International Labour Organization (ILO) recommends including a gender perspective in all crisis responses, gender-inclusive social dialogue, and gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls for enabling recovery.³² The specific recommendations follow. These provide a framework for recovery measures by countries choosing their pathways towards greater transport sustainability and inclusivity.

1. Ensure that women are on all decision-making bodies.
2. Provide adequate income and social protection, including paid leave.
3. Provide access to sanitation and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).
4. Ensure access to secure work, as women are more vulnerable to layoffs and loss of earnings without any form of income protection.
5. Consider facilitating the transition of workers from the informal to the formal economy in line with ILO Recommendation 204, potentially facilitating access to income protections, healthcare benefits and leave.
6. Put care before profit.
7. End violence and harassment against women, particularly in the context of increased violence against women during the pandemic.
8. Ensure that new technology benefits rather than negatively impacts women workers.
9. Obtain gender-disaggregated data to ensure that policies, strategies and measures are evidence-based and meet the needs of women transport workers.
10. Provide gender-responsive economic stimulus packages.

A more sustainable and inclusive transport future

The pandemic offers an opportunity to shift to transport that is more inclusive and improve gender equality for both users and workers. Without changes in existing transport measures and without addressing the priorities of both women and men, the sector will not be able to recover nor will it achieve a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive future. Hence, Covid-19 policy responses must include women's priorities and reduce the risk to women transport users, including on public transport, ride sharing and taxi use. This means improving the safety and security of transport through infrastructure and operational improvements, public awareness campaigns, well-trained transport employees, and better reporting systems, combined with a zero-tolerance approach to harassment.

Covid-19 has redefined public transport in many parts of the world and as new resources are available to support public transport, it is critical to also reassess services that will meet the travel patterns of both women and men. Different transport services may also emerge from the pandemic through the adaptation of existing public transport services or the launching of new services that meet the changes in transport demand.

Covid-19 recovery guidelines need to include a gender equality aspect both for women as transport users and as workers. This is especially important due to the correlation between gender equality and economic recovery, as women represent an untapped pool of labour. More data are required to better understand the full and differential impacts of Covid-19 and how they affect transport behaviour by gender in order to design more equitable policies and efficient mobility. Understanding travel patterns and behaviour trends by gender can help in designing and implementing more equitable policies and efficient mobility.

Similarly, addressing the structural barriers to women's employment in the transport sector will improve the sector's ability to hire and retain women, and to support economic recovery. Awareness campaigns can help attract more women to the sector in the short term, but education and training are of critical importance to overcome the challenges faced by women in the transport workforce.³³ Governments should continue to invest in these areas, ensuring that job requirements and training become more flexible and digital to allow workers to spend less time away from home or in remote areas, thereby increasing their attractiveness for women. More women being involved in relevant decision-making processes will also improve and ensure gender equality, especially during crises.

Notes

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