



**TRANSPORT  
SCOTLAND**  
CÒMHDHAIL ALBA

# **Women's and girls' views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport**

**Summary Report**

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## Introduction

In early 2022, the Minister for Transport announced that the Scottish Government would consult on the safety of women and girls when using public transport, including both public transport users and those working within the public transport system in Scotland.

The Minister's announcement builds on a growing body of [international evidence](#) that shows that women and girls have unique travel behaviours and needs, which must be addressed by tailored solutions. Moreover, women are often underrepresented in the strategic planning process for [public transport developments](#). Research has also shown that women and girls (both as transport workers and passengers) view and experience public transport as being less safe compared to their [male counterparts](#).

The consultation commitment also reflected priorities set out in [Scotland's National Transport Strategy](#) (NTS2) and [Scotland's Vision for Justice](#). It was also aligned with the [Scottish Government's Equality Outcomes](#), which aim to reduce inequalities and advance equality of opportunity - most notably across the protected characteristics of age, disability and gender.

Against this backdrop, Transport Scotland commissioned independent qualitative research to explore women's and girls' views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport in Scotland, the findings of which are presented here.

The aim of the research was to provide Scottish-specific evidence and personal testimony from women and girls on the impact of concerns around personal safety on public transport. The specific objectives were to:

- understand the extent to which concerns around personal safety on public transport and accessing public transport affect women's and girls' mobility and travel choices;
- understand the impact of public transport related issues on women's and girls' employment, educational and social opportunities; and
- seek solutions from stakeholders on addressing personal safety issues on public transport.

The research was a qualitative exercise which placed individuals with lived experience at the centre of engagement, ensuring that their voices are used to directly inform policy.

## Methodology

The research combined one-to-one and group interviews with women and a focus group with girls living in Scotland who were either 'users' of public transport or were 'frontline workers' on buses and trains. A total of 35 women and girls from a diverse range of backgrounds took part, ranging in age from 14 to 86 years old.

Interviews explored: the nature, frequency and purpose of public transport use; women's feelings and perceptions of personal safety on public transport; the interaction between personal circumstances and feelings of safety; personal testimonies of women in relation to specific incidents which had made them or known others feel unsafe when using public transport in the past; any negative impacts or consequences of safety concerns on restricting or limiting women's travel choices; and discussions around what changes could be made to make women and girls feel safer. For transport workers, questions were also asked around what made them feel safe/unsafe both at work and travelling to/from work, as well as personal safety training received to protect both themselves and vulnerable others.

An online stakeholder workshop was also held which brought together representatives from transport operators, regional transport partnerships, British Transport Police (BTP) and third sector organisations working with and representing the interests of women and girls, among others. The workshop provided an opportunity to present the findings from the qualitative work to relevant partners, alongside draft recommendations arising from the research, so that stakeholders could discuss and advise on how best these could be taken forward.

## Main Findings and Recommendations

### Accessing and Using Public Transport

Alongside private vehicles, women and girls used mainly bus and train to travel, and public transport was seen as an essential and affordable way for many to achieve independent social mobility. Unanimously, women felt safer travelling in the day rather than at night or in the dark. Travel during the week was also seen as being less hazardous than travel at the weekend, largely due to perceptions that public transport attracted large crowds of often intoxicated passengers at weekends. The subway, although used by fewer in the sample, was seen as unsafe mainly at night. While there were fewer in the sample who regularly used trams, ferries or domestic flights, among those who did, these modes were seen as safe and non-problematic for the most part.

The risk of delays and cancellations, specifically to buses and trains, explicitly put some women off using public transport at night as the risk of waiting alone in the

dark was considered too great. Many women and girls reported travelling by taxi, Uber or private car to avoid being in such positions and there was feedback that improved reliability of services would help women feel more confident using public transport.

The main concerns at points of interchange were poor lighting (especially at bus stops) and lack of staff, with views that well-lit and staffed stations provided the greatest comfort (although effective lighting and staffing was often not experienced to be the case, especially in more suburban or rural locations).

Familiarity with routes, with drivers and fellow passengers, was a key feature in providing confidence when travelling alone. Unfamiliar routes and being surrounded by strangers caused angst and was often a reason why women chose ideally to travel with others rather than alone. Where women did have to travel alone, use of technology (especially for younger and professional women) such as tracking apps, was something that provided reassurance (and a sense of not being alone).

**Recommendation: To raise awareness of the technology that is currently available to assist women and girls, and explore means of making this more accessible to all, including raising awareness of the immediate and intermediate support that is available to those who feel vulnerable at any point before, during or after public transport journeys.**

Specifically in relation to female transport workers, examples of good practice were mentioned throughout the research of things that made them feel safer travelling to and from work at night, not least being access to parking facilities for private vehicles and provision of designated transport in the form of taxis and staff buses to ensure safe travel. That being said, there was expressed desire to see such practices extended, to reduce the negative impacts that lack of travel choice may be having on some female workers' employment decisions.

**Recommendation: To gather and share best practice in relation to options for ensuring the safe return home of those working in the transport industry at night, with a review of measures and resources in place to support and promote safe travel home options for transport workers.**

## Main Concerns

Although women often found it difficult to pin-point their exact fears, most participants described feeling the need to maintain a constant state of 'vigilance', rather than feeling 'unsafe' per se. This generalised anticipatory anxiety was usually (but not exclusively) related to concerns about men as potential perpetrators of harassment, assault or anti-social behaviour rather than about other women.

Anti-social behaviour was perhaps the most frequently cited concern that women had (although was not necessarily what they feared most), with potential for both individuals and groups of strangers to act in hostile, aggressive or otherwise unacceptable ways towards others. Women tended to worry that some of the anti-social behaviour could end up being directed at them specifically.

Alcohol and drugs were seen to fuel much of the inappropriate behaviour that women and girls were exposed to and caused anxiety due to how unpredictable others became as a result.

**Recommendation: To strengthen existing rules around non-consumption of alcohol on public transport and at points of interchange. Increased penalties for non-compliance and better enforcement of legislation in this regard may also be required.**

Women and girls also expressed explicit concerns and previous experiences of being the targets of inappropriate comments that were sexual in nature and unwanted attention from male passengers, including feeling that their personal space was being violated (which made them uneasy). Being followed by strangers and/or not being able to get away from strangers was something that women feared, again because of underlying concerns about how seemingly innocent interactions might escalate or become unmanageable. Female transport workers were those most likely to report previous incidents of unwanted physical contact or assault from men.

Previous personal experience, the experiences of others, word of mouth, stories in the media (including social media) and warnings from other people about the dangers of travelling alone/at night all influenced perceptions of safety and associated behaviours. Traditional media and social media were seen to perpetuate and reinforce negative messages about women's safety on public transport.

Overall, women and girls feeling unsafe when using public transport was described by many as 'the norm' with all respondents speaking of making at least some modifications to their travel behaviours as a result of feeling unsafe.

## Influence of Personal Characteristics

Age, ethnicity and disability were the three features of participants' personal characteristics that intersected with gender to make them feel most vulnerable. Young women were most likely to report being victims of sexual harassment, disabled women were most likely to report general anti-social or intolerant behaviour from fellow passengers and women from ethnic minorities were most likely to report extreme examples of verbal abuse (including both sexist and racist abuse).

## Adapting/Changing Behaviour

Numerous self-protection strategies were reported by women to help them feel safer (e.g. not travelling alone, not travelling at night, avoiding certain routes, using tracking apps, managing their self-presentation and using taxis or private transport, especially late at night.) While women seemed to accept that this was typical behaviour among their peers, most expressed that there was also significant scope for others (including transport providers and policing authorities) to take practical measures which would enhance their feelings of safety further. Knowing who to report incidents to and knowing what support was available was seen as an important first step.

**Recommendation: To develop more credible and accessible information and guidance for women and girls regarding what to do and who to contact if they feel threatened or unsafe or if they are victim to incidents when using public transport. Any information and guidance must be developed in collaboration with women and girls directly (including those from ethnic minority communities) to ensure solutions can address existing low levels of trust in authorities that appear to exist.**

The main social impacts of women's and girls' personal safety concerns was extending or reducing their journeys, being selective in the type of public transport chosen based on the time of day/situation, using private instead of public transport to complete all or part of their journeys or restricting their travel to only familiar routes or travel at certain times of the day.

Some of the guidance and protocols in place to help women feel safe were seen as lacking in robustness. This included strategies of 'locking in', for example, female train workers being advised to lock themselves into station offices or into the 'back cabs' on trains, and female bus drivers being advised to lock themselves into the driver's cab on buses. Such strategies provided only temporary respite but could

also make some women feel even more vulnerable especially if they were unable to communicate their plight to others, leaving them feeling 'trapped'.

Mixed views were also expressed about the usefulness of CCTV in relation to perceptions and experiences of safety for women. Some felt this was helpful, acted as a deterrent against bad behaviour and provided evidence should something happen. Others however, noted that CCTV had limitations, including: whether it was connected/working; doubts around whether anyone was watching in real time and therefore able to react; that it did not stop incidents from happening, merely recorded them; and that recording quality was questionable. Similarly, facilities such as help lines/buttons did not provide the level of comfort or immediacy of safety that was desired by the women and girls who were interviewed.

**Recommendation: To introduce systems for the regular monitoring, reporting and upgrading of lighting and communications systems for all transport services (including on board and at stops/stations) with strategies in place for the immediate repair and redress of any reported failings or absence of communications and surveillance equipment at interchanges and on-board services.**

## Interventions from Organisations/Other Individuals

Increased staffing at points of boarding and interchange, as well as on board vehicles was seen as something that would add significantly to women's sense of safety and may also lead to an uptake of public transport use at night. Many women spoke of feeling safe in well-staffed areas/stations, and of feeling less safe in unstaffed areas (such as unstaffed stations, at bus stops, etc). They also commonly agreed that having a visible staff presence would help to reduce the likelihood of situations escalating, and that there would be someone there to step-in and help if and when situations did arise.

**Recommendation: To explore the feasibility of increasing staff presence at both points of boarding, alighting and interchange, as well as the possibility of increasing on board staff presence at the times that women and girls feel most vulnerable (including evenings and weekends, in particular).**

Increased police presence and improved incident reporting systems in particular was something that women and girls would welcome. Women spoke of being unsure who incidents should be reported to and when it would be appropriate to do so. Scope

exists for normalising reporting of even minor incidents to mitigate the unease that women reported in deciding whether or not their own experience constituted a significant enough infringement to proactively take things forward. This was seen as necessary, alongside more visible and stringent enforcement of penalties for inappropriate behaviour, to act as a deterrent to perpetrators. At present, many viewed that there were no repercussions, especially for anti-social behaviour and low-level harassment, especially that committed by younger perpetrators.

**Recommendation: Joint working between stakeholders to map and improve existing reporting protocols and develop more consistent and transparent systems for reporting and recording incidents that affect women on public transport. Improved evidence gathering will help to crystallise the nature and scale of negative personal safety experiences that passengers endure, and help to target resources and refine responses.**

Where women had reported incidents (or thought about doing so) there were perceptions across the sample that improved follow-up communications from policing authorities and others was necessary to give women confidence in reporting again in the future. Under-reporting may result not only from lack of confidence in the reporting platforms themselves, but also from lack of confidence that any meaningful action would be taken in response. Although all women in the sample described at least one (and often several) experiences of unwanted attention or other more serious incidents, none described any short- or long-term satisfactory outcomes, and instead just lived with their experiences as part of their personal histories. Having more robust follow-up procedures would also help address women's perceptions that 'feeling unsafe' was a socially tolerated and accepted norm, i.e. tackling wider systemic issues around gender inequality that permeate beyond public transport.

**Recommendation: For stakeholders to implement more robust procedures and standard practice for following-up with transport staff and public transport users who do report negative incidents to the authorities. Women and girls need to know that their complaints are taken seriously, and that they are being heard, to give them, and others, the confidence to share their experiences in the future.**

Training around personal safety for transport workers appears to be irregular and inadequate, including guidance and training on how to respond to the needs of vulnerable colleagues and passengers. There was also cynicism about the potential effectiveness of public campaigns to help make women feel safer, with some indications that such campaigns can often do more harm than good. It was also

stressed that campaigns needed to give the right balance of information without victim blaming and resting all responsibility on women and girls.

**Recommendation: To carry out a comprehensive review of the training that is currently offered to those working in the transport industry on the topic of personal safety (both their own safety and the safety of others) to identify any gaps in content, frequency of provision and reach as well as to explore how these can best be filled.**

A lack of bystander intervention was also noted by many women, who themselves also reported not wanting to get involved in situations that didn't involve them, despite feeling 'guilty' about not doing so. Overall, a lack of people to offer immediate help to women was also noted and this lack of certainty over such support made the women feel more vulnerable and more anxious about travelling on public transport.

**Recommendation: Further targeted research, consultation and training specifically with drivers of public transport, to explore their own fears in relation to protecting those on-board services and to better understand what could be done to assist them in communicating more effectively with passengers and responding to incidents, while not jeopardising their own or others safety.**

## Cross-Cutting Themes

A number of cross-cutting themes emerged from the research including:

- women and girls felt 'responsible' for keeping themselves safe (rather than the threat of danger being removed by others) and also keeping other females safe (by not leaving them to travel alone). Nevertheless, there was consensus that women and girls should never be blamed for finding themselves in an unsafe situation and that cultural change was needed to bring about better understanding of this stance;
- women and girls often spoke of feeling guided or restricted by others' thresholds of what was perceived as 'safe' and 'unsafe', or as 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' behaviour and, therefore, not always using their own judgement about when it would or would not be appropriate to ask for help;
- familiarity with both people and places was something that made women and girls feel safer in various contexts and the notion of the 'unknown' caused underlying fear (both unknown strangers and unknown situations). Familiarity gives a greater sense of being in control - where the likely risks can be predicted, planned for and managed, feelings of vulnerability are reduced;

- behaviour modifications were made by all who took part and were discussed as being an accepted part of daily social life, not only in relation to travel, but more generally. Women often described detailed strategies for keeping themselves safe and complex pre-planning of journeys (including what they would wear and where they would sit or stand to make themselves less conspicuous);
- women and girls spoke of cognitive dissonance and needing to constantly make difficult choices as part of their travel planning, often feeling forced to choose between two unappealing options, rather than feeling that a safe alternative was in place. Women experienced discomfort, tension and anxiety as a result; and
- women and girls acted to try and make themselves 'feel' safer but recognised that often there was little they could do to actually 'be' safer as the risks could never be fully controlled.

## Conclusion

The research, while not without limitations, shows that much needs to be done to improve the experience of women's and girls' personal safety when using public transport in Scotland. It shows that women and girls are already shouldering significant responsibility for adapting their behaviours to try to 'be' and to 'feel' safe when travelling on public transport, but that wider systemic change, supported by more practical interventions is required to enhance safety further and give women and girls a greater sense of freedom to maximise the opportunities afforded by public transport travel. The transport specific recommendations presented above must be accompanied by broader partnership action among those working in policing, education, equalities and aligned fields to help challenge wider stereotypes and systemic issues which lead to and compound women's normalisation of the need for self-protection. A joined-up approach is required that involves operators, community safety stakeholders and the travelling public to increase their awareness of the challenges faced by women and girls, so that concerns can be proactively addressed and gender inequalities removed.

If you have been affected by any of the issues discussed in this report, or need to report an incident, further information and advice can be found online via [Victim Support Scotland](#), the [British Transport Police](#) or via the free [Railway Guardian](#) app.



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