



Where Do Women Feature in Public Transport?

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WHERE DO WOMEN FEATURE IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT?

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses women and the public transport business environment. It considers the current position of women, changes that have occurred over time and those that are sought for the future.

Women's transport needs are distinct from those of men and they are poorly met by current transport policy and provision. The transport world has been slow to see the relevance of women, women's needs or women's issues to planning and decision-making. To a certain extent, this is because there has been a culture pervading the industry which believed the product should be its focus with people, the staff who produce it or the customers who buy it, being incidental.

But no product has value until it is sold. In public transport, we as operators produce vehicle kilometers and then sell a proportion of these as passenger kilometers. It must be our major aim to sell the product rather than to produce it. Service design, therefore, should be about tailoring the service to the customer's needs rather than trying to entice customers to use an inappropriate service. Getting the product right in the urban transit context means supplying the type of service the market wants at a price it is willing to pay.

Women are significantly in the majority as public transport users so planning and service design for women is essentially about ensuring the delivery of quality services to the real world. However, for decades transit service designers have focused on producing the product rather than selling the product with the result that they bear no resemblance to what is wanted or needed by women.

The fact that women are woefully under-represented as professionals and as service providers in the industry is also a major contributing factor. Workforce gender segregation within public transport management and operations is central to the debate of adequately catering for women's needs both as employees and customers.

In examining workforce statistics for 5 major public transit providers from various Australian States, it is hoped to provide an insight on where women do—and don't—feature in the Australian transit industry. Participating agencies are tabled below:

| Public Transit Agency | Total Employees |
|--|------------------------|
| ACTION, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT) | 849 |
| Brisbane Transport, Brisbane, Queensland (QLD) | 1393 |
| Metrobus, Perth, Western Australia (WA) | 1598 |
| Sydney Buses, Sydney, New South Wales (NSW) | 4147 |
| TransAdelaide, Adelaide, South Australia (SA) | 2291 |

WHERE DO WOMEN CURRENTLY FEATURE?

IN SOCIETY

The number of female headed single parent families has increased by more than 50% in Australia over the last two decades and the number of older women living alone—one of the groups most reliant on public transport—has also increased considerably. (ABS 1996)

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, women now comprise 42% of the workforce compared to just 25% in 1961, and more women work part-time than full-time. In fact, women comprise 76% of the total part-time workforce. 60% of couples with dependent children have both parents in the workforce. 65% of working mothers have children under 12, and around half the working mothers have children of preschool age. (ABS 1992)

Clearly the ground has shifted. Work and family life are no longer separate spheres of activity. Significant changes in family composition, expectations and the roles of men and women have transformed the way people organize their work, family and community lives.

These social and demographic changes are extremely important for public transport operators. Both in terms of ensuring service provision matches customers' needs and in terms of catering for employees' needs because the cultures of many transit organizations, their structures and work patterns have changed little from the era when men were usually the only breadwinner.

IN PUBLIC TRANSIT

Any analysis of gender and the labor market quickly reveals a high degree of occupational segregation. Women and men are unevenly distributed in terms of both the type and level of work they perform. Women occupy few managerial positions and hardly any technical or trade jobs. Those areas of activity in which women have been most commonly accepted are generally extensions of the traditional roles that a woman assumed in the family such as that of teacher, nurse, or domestic help.

In the transport arena, men dominate to an even greater extent with a very marked occupational segregation by sex across all disciplines and areas of work. There are many areas, particularly in technical or engineering oriented functions, where women do not feature at all.

While more than 50% of Australia's population is female, and women are significantly in the majority as public transport users, we are woefully under-represented in transport management, operations and service delivery.

Unfortunately, statistics are difficult to obtain, extremely difficult to directly compare, and are only likely to become increasingly more difficult to come by with the fragmentation of services between private and public operators. For this reason, much of the material I cite relates specifically to my own organization, TransAdelaide.

Across the five organizations examined, women averaged 8.4% of the total number of employees with the smallest representation being 4.9% (WA) and the largest 11.2% (QLD). These participation figures are all significantly lower than that of 42% previously quoted for the total Australian workforce.

As is typical of most organizations and industries, women working within public transport tend to be concentrated in lower-qualified, lower-paid jobs. Within TransAdelaide, nearly 60% of our female employees are between the ages of 26 and 35 years, are employed at a salary level or wage rate of between \$24,600 and \$29,700, and have worked for the organization for less than 5 years.

When focusing on the functions of human resource management, finance and corporate services, it is found that less than 24% of the more than 1300 staff across all 5 agencies are women. These women are predominantly employed in secretarial and clerical roles but this figure of 23.9% is still woefully short of the 75% national clerical administrative workforce participation rate. Those women that are employed at the customer interface are generally in service roles as opposed to operational.

Those women who are employed in finance and operation control roles or are involved in driving or maintaining vehicles are in the minority. Again, looking across the 5 participating agencies, some 8,600 staff are employed to drive, maintain and clean the various fleets involved in direct service delivery. As an average, just 5.5% are women. NSW has the highest representation with 8.4% and ACT the lowest with 2.1%.

Granted that, over time, a greater number of females are gaining positions in middle management ranks, however, very few work in the top echelons of these organizations. When exploring where women feature in senior management, an analysis was undertaken of those employees earning greater than \$50,000 per annum. A total of 174 employees earn more than this, 20 of whom (or 11.5%) were women.

In general, those women who do attain senior positions tend to be concentrated in human services and marketing roles and rarely in metropolitan strategy or transportation planning. In fact, the NSW operator was the only agency to employ a woman—and just one—within the service design function.

While certain aspects of the public transport industry's workforce composition reflects patterns of gender distribution that are evident within many industries, it does tend to differ markedly in the area of part-time employment. Nationally, 25% of males and 75% of females in the Australian workforce are employed on a part-time basis. Within TransAdelaide, almost 340 staff are employed under part-time conditions, the vast majority of whom work in the operations area. Certainly within the salaried or clerical ranks, it is predominantly women working in those few part-time roles, however, within the daily paid ranks the tables are well and truly turned, with 85% of those working under part-time conditions being men.

These statistics generally confirm what is obvious to almost everyone; women are clearly under-represented and, in essence, are still very much on the periphery rather than at the centre of public transport planning and provision.

ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Differences between men and women in terms of the ways in which they use public transport have been well-documented. Increasingly, the typical public transport user is not only a woman, but also a 'captive customer' being without access to a car or without a licence. In fact, two thirds of all public transport trips are made by such captive customers.

Women's Travel Issues

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Generally speaking, women make proportionately more trips by bus, on foot and as car passengers than men do. The bus is the most used mode of transport for young and older women with two thirds of all bus users being women. Women make more local trips and undertake travel more often in the interpeak than men. Male commuters are typically employed in white-collar professional occupations while women commuters are generally employed in less well-paid clerical positions.

KEY TRANSPORT NEEDS

In essence, there are three key transport issues which are consistently raised by women or on behalf of women. These being reliability, safety and security, and physical access. Of these, the first and most important concern is safety.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Vulnerability is a key issue for women. While it is argued that the perception of fear far outstrips the actual situation, we as service providers continue to underestimate the degree to which this misconception seriously impacts on a woman's willingness to use each and every mode of public transport and, thereby, dictates her travel patterns and those of her dependents.

Parents, generally consider the introduction or graduation to public transport an important part of their child's social development, but worry that their child may be stranded at school or at a stop in winter or after dark, or be seen regularly waiting at the same bus stop everyday, or walking the neighborhood streets. Parents are happier if their children travel in a group rather than alone which poses an interesting dilemma because this 'group' of children, seen through the eyes of a bus driver, may easily be regarded as a 'gang'.

Customers need to feel valued, to feel they are welcome and belong on public transport. In order to achieve this, operators need to provide:

- someone in uniform—to be visible at stations and on-board trains and trams
- better lighting at stations and improved siting of bus stops
- the avoidance of closed shelters and waiting areas
- ticket booths sited with a clear line of vision to platforms
- adequate signage which is well lit at night
- clearly identified safe zones providing customer information, timetables and maps as customer confidence is seriously eroded by a lack of information or communication
- passenger amenities at major stations and interchanges—baby change facilities, parent rooms and toilet facilities
- more installations of closed circuit television (CCTV)
- route maps, driver announcements, and passenger access to mobile telephones should all be available on-board vehicles; and
- enhanced linkages with complementary services such as taxis and community buses to enable a door-to-door service provision.

RELIABILITY

As already outlined, women today tend to be combining a number of roles. As a result, women have a higher value of time. That is, we have less time to achieve more activities, such as work, study and family responsibilities. Convenience becomes a key factor in balancing these activities and, with current service provision levels, it is no wonder we tend to favor the car.

Users of public transport want certainty and reliability. To roster customer service personnel only on some trains, at some times, means there is no knowing whether there will be someone there to assist you when you need it. Similarly, to have some train drivers announce station names and others not is bewildering, particularly for infrequent users of the system.

PHYSICAL ACCESS

Women's use of public transport is also affected by physical and practical considerations relating to the structural design of buses, trains and trams. The characteristics of a woman's role means that we must often travel with small children, with baby strollers, with heavy shopping, or with frail or elderly relatives. The design of many vehicles and carriages makes getting on and off under such circumstances extremely difficult.

- Practical constraints that seriously hinder women's access and ease of movement include:
- high steps which are difficult to negotiate for the elderly and the very young
- a lack of storage space for shopping, baby strollers, and other paraphernalia
- no proper provision of seating for children and no seat belts
- no organized assistance for women getting on and off who are laden with children, pushers and shopping.

Constraints often extend beyond the actual vehicles to:

- impractical siting of bus stops and train stations
- inadequate provision of seating and shelter at stops and stations
- toilets at stations and interchanges which are too small to accommodate an adult with a baby stroller
- awkward steps and crossings at railway stations.

In some instances, these 'constraints' and difficulties' can be positively dangerous. At the very least, they serve to deter women from using public transport and hamper them when they do choose to use it.

Parents cite trips on public transport with children are being more tiring than using a car and often they encounter negativity from other passengers, especially in peak periods, when travelling with a pram, bags and children. Not being able to strap a toddler into a seat on a bus, perhaps while holding an infant and balancing shopping, makes choosing public transport all too difficult.

KNOW BUT NO

What I have just outlined is not new. These facts and issues are now well-documented and have been discussed at length. So why has change not occurred?

The first Women and Transport Issues Conference, was held in 1978 in Washington D.C. and was followed during the next decade by a flourish of attention to gender in policy through “women and” literature—women and housing, women and transportation, women and economic development, women and media.

Since that time, a number of studies have pointed to the difficulties that many women face in their day-to-day negotiation of transport systems but little attempt has been made to act upon the issues raised by women about transport and, to date, they remain largely unaddressed. (Hamilton, 1989; Beuret, 1991; Little, 1994; Morris, 1995)

The reality is public transport provision remains an industry which is male dominated and little influenced by any awareness of the importance of gender. The integration of the more recent research on women and public transport into the operations of the public transport policy makers and service providers is still to materialize.

Australia as a country actually has a significant history of expanding services for women and their dependents and passing antidiscrimination and equal pay legislation, however, all of these strategies have relied on:

- a significant role of Government as a service provider and legislator; and
- a politics of economic difference, whereby the differences between women and men in terms of income, wealth, leisure, labor market position, and responsibility for unpaid work are argued as a basis for targeted and special needs policies for women.

Both of these points have their weaknesses when considered in the context of the current public transport environment.

Firstly, competitive tendering within public transport is being driven, primarily, by a need to reduce the cost of the provision of services. Unfortunately, the link between more women employees and the capacity to better deliver the services required by the industry's major user group—women—will become increasingly difficult to make where responsibility and accountability is taken away from government agencies and contracted to multinational companies whose managers are principally accountable to overseas shareholders.

Secondly, the success of a ‘politics of economic difference’ in changing public policies to better reflect women's needs has always been to some degree problematic. Economic policy analysis still rarely disaggregates by gender. In fact, the Women's Budget analyses at Federal and State levels of Australian government bear testament to the fact that many government departments have great difficulty in thinking about the gender of their clients. (Sharp, 1995)

Certainly, a lack of specific initiatives targeting women customers has often been excused by public transport operators by quoting improvements introduced to enhance the quality of service delivery to that unisex individual, 'the passenger'.

Another difficulty faced by service providers, is that so many of us working in the industry would have been fortunate enough to have been sheltered from the grimmer realities of limited access to goods and services, real economic hardship and isolation. If for no other reason, as transport operators we must question *how* we listen to women, *what* we hear and *why* the same old stories of frustration, cynicism and disappointment in *our* planning efforts keep circulating. This needs to be done while involving the community—setting agendas with women, not for them—and we need to make a concerted effort to be much more accepting of how and why women say what they do. (Stratford, 1995) I believe that this is an important area in which women employed within the industry can make a valuable contribution to the reshaping of service provision.

WHY SHOULD WE INVOLVE MORE WOMEN?

WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO OFFER?

As previously mentioned, the Australian public transport environment is compelling industries to become more flexible, more responsive to customers and market opportunities, and more collaborative. There is also pressure to seek closer ties to customers, staff and suppliers and to improve the quality of our products. Employers are seeking to create a committed and skilled workforce where managers and employees share a common purpose and a sense of commitment to the business. Whilst employees are seeking policies and work practices that will enable them to balance family and work roles.

In keeping with this trend, public transport is in the throes of great change which provides an opportunity to harness the goodwill, talents and energy within our people to place the industry on a new plane of operation—redefining our business, and building a new culture and new working relationships. Why is it essential that women play a key role in this change process? Why should we have equal representation in the workplace and equal input to decision-making? Whether we call it social justice or human rights, women make up half the population and more than one-third of the workforce so our right to equality of opportunity and treatment in employment must be clearly expressed by participation in all levels of activity. It is also essential for the acceleration and effectiveness of organizational development, as women are capable of providing an ability and creativity which has so far remained largely untapped.

Admittedly, the debate continues on the qualities women contribute in the workplace. In researching this paper, I found much of the literature refers to the "inherent and distinctly feminine" characteristics that women have to offer. Unfortunately, many fail to elaborate on just what they consider these characteristics to be and, of the few that do, I feel qualities such as "task orientation" and "attention to detail" can be equally attributed to men. So, I will attempt to portray what I believe women have to offer the astute employer. Many women are socialized to have an intuitive respect for other people's ideas, thus, women are very comfortable with consultation, cooperation and reconciliation. Delegation and team-building are often the most natural ways for women to approach work. Women also tend to be very concerned about social and ecological issues and how these fit with forward looking policies. One of the most interesting areas of women's involvement to date, has been government sponsored and led community consultation within the context of strategic planning. Many of us can relate to the significant changes women have made through grass roots community action.

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Women tend to speak with a “different voice” which as a rule lays stress on the social ethos of development, that is to say education, health, children, and the environment. Conversely, men tend to concentrate on the economic aspects such as production, profitability, finance, and technology. Women are generally more people-oriented, while men are more object-oriented; women tend to be better with words and language, men with visualization; women at give and take, men with spatial orientation and conceptual skills. But all this really means is that, together, men and women can achieve more. An incredible synergy is created.

The new competitive environment provides women with greater opportunity than they have enjoyed in the past. I believe the emerging environment to be more conducive to women's skills, and the shift in corporate culture to be more conducive to women's aspirations. While the potential opportunities in this environment are substantial, women must seek to involve themselves to ensure they gain access to these emerging opportunities. Without a doubt, women can contribute importantly to the exploration of the human dimension of service development, to the negotiation of new work practices and to the creation of more innovative forms of employment.

The recognition of women's needs in planning and service design and a commitment to addressing those needs is influenced, to a considerable extent, by the participation of women in decision-making processes. So, what might we expect from a greater representation of women in the industry and a commitment on the part of service providers to consult with and seek the opinions of their key customers?

Clearly there are costs associated with NOT involving women. If we reflect on the profile of the typical public transport user, for example, one can quickly draw the conclusion that planning and service design for women is essentially be about ensuring the delivery of quality services to the real world. Given that the concerns about safety, travelling with children and/or shopping, making local journeys etc. are well known to male transport planners but, to date, have gone unaddressed, it is to be hoped that involving women in service design would ensure a choice availability that matches the demand and conforms with the performance levels women expect from today's lifestyles. Competitive edge is based on innovation and improvement and smart employers will recognize that women add-value to their organizations and will incorporate women's particular knowledge of problems and solutions.

STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

The search by all employees for a balance between work and family life is impacting on organizations as never before. It makes good business sense, therefore, when reviewing organizational cultures and work practices in an effort to become more competitive, to include the integration of women-friendly and family-responsive practices in order that the full potential of the workforce might be realized.

Attitudes and behavior are shaped by strong organizational cultures and, while they are not easily changed, now is the time to ensure the introduction of quality workplace programs to increase women's opportunities and maximize their potential. To do otherwise in an era when women have never before received the levels of education they now do, is a waste of skill, ability and goodwill.

In fact, some very compelling figures come from the field of education. The cost of educating a girl to Year 12 (the completion of high school in Australia) is nearly \$50,000. An additional three years of higher education sees this figure rise to \$75,000. The community cannot tolerate wasted potential represented by the under-utilization of women's skills and ability, nor can the industry ignore this issue if it is to be competitive.

Through my reading on this topic and in discussions with people both in and affiliated with public transport, I have identified a number of initiatives that could be put in motion to progress women within the industry. They are presented in no particular order, however, I am aware that some could be more easily achieved than others. Nonetheless, I believe it is up to each of us to continue to push for change no matter how large or small our individual contributions may be. Suggestions for the acceleration of change include:

- Participation and representation by women at all levels and in all relevant areas is fundamental. Each of us has an obligation to take every opportunity to put our views forward and to express our opinions to make sure the public transport system becomes better and more workable for everyone.
- The development of a list of women of high potential through the establishment of a database of suitable women in each State and across Australia.
- Recruitment needs to be targeted more effectively, and greater encouragement for women to apply for positions needs to occur.
- Comprehensive employment profiles need to be developed and maintained to allow for detailed analysis of workforce participation.

A review of existing and/or the development of new complementary policies and practices should be undertaken. These might include:

- maternity or paternity leave supported by a benefits policy accommodating extended leave. A number of organizations have introduced career break or extended leave of absence schemes (varying from 3 to 7 years), and dependent care leave.
- greater flexibility of working time arrangements with more opportunity for part-time employment, job sharing, compressed working weeks, split shifts, nine-day fortnights, school year work contracts.
- an assessment of the impact of business travel demands.
- a rethink of how training is offered where extended time before and after work hours, or on weekends is required, in particular, residential training programs; and
- the assessment of pro-rata remuneration and education benefits for flexible working time employees.
- To change entrenched attitudes, such policies must be clearly linked to other strategic organizational issues such as those dealing with quality, diversity, gender equity and retention, and career development.
- The introduction of corporate/education partnerships possibly through executive shadowing for secondary students—high profile women are simply “shadowed” for a week to expose the student to an example of what their life could be like if they pursued further education and professional careers—or participation in corporate visits to school or university ‘careers days’.

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These initiatives do not create a threat to people who are in the workplace currently and incur very little cost to an organization.

- TransAdelaide's Customer Panels provide an avenue for users of public transport to actively contribute to the development of a quality transit system by drawing on members' experience and expertise who, in turn, represent the interests of their community. An extension of the customer panel concept to specifically address women's needs within local operations should be encouraged.
- Lunch time or meal break seminars on topics such as managing dual careers, or evaluating child care and elder care facilities could be offered.
- Incorporation of affirmative action principles into corporate policies and the application of an affirmative action framework are integral to enabling workers to balance family and work roles with minimum conflict.
- And lastly, women empower other women through encouragement. Whenever the opportunity arises, endeavour to say something positive about another woman.

IN CONCLUSION

Women's issues are really business issues. Even more so when you operate a public transport system. Smart employers are becoming aware of the fact that they need the skills and perceptions women can bring to their businesses. In order to achieve both economic growth and social equity, businesses need men and women sharing in decision-making. As already stated, I believe this industry holds great potential for women. Yes, it is an industry that is male dominated, but opportunities exist simply because we are under-represented.

Public transport service providers operating in today's competitive environment can no longer afford to ignore women under-utilized skills as employees. By incorporating more women in all areas of transport provision, it will become easier to communicate the fundamental issues involved and operators will achieve the competitive edge they seek over business rivals.

Similarly, it is important that a transport system provides for the whole community but operators can no longer afford to ignore the particular needs of their primary customers. It is appropriate that women's needs are identified and considered within the overall framework of service delivery. I can't stress sufficiently the importance of women—both as employees and customers of public transport—taking every opportunity to put their views forward, to express their opinions and to make sure they get what they want and need to make public transport better and more workable for everyone. I hope this paper has served to demonstrate that there are a number of areas within public transport in which change is possible to effect which will influence women's use of services.

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