Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive issue globally, and Cape Town, South Africa, is no exception. Here, women face numerous challenges as users of public transport.

Safety is a major concern for women using the minibus taxi system in Cape Town. Women are vulnerable to physical and sexual assault, particularly when travelling alone or at night. There have been reports of women being robbed, harassed, and even raped while using minibus taxis.

Another challenge that women face in the minibus taxi system is a lack of access to information and resources. Many women are not aware of their rights as passengers or of the services and support available to them. This can include access to emergency services or helplines or information on how to report incidents of harassment or assault.

All of these factors make it difficult for women to feel safe and secure when using public transport in Cape Town. In response to these challenges, the project "Youth engagement and skills acquisition within Africa's transport sector: promoting a gender agenda towards transitions into meaningful work" was implemented in Cape Town (2019-2023). This action research project aimed to understand more about the vulnerability of women as both users and employees within the public transport sector, and, implement pilot projects to address these challenges.

The project team employed a multi-pronged approach, engaging female commuters and minibus taxi industry employees through skills development training, awareness campaigns, and the creation of a Safe Taxi Charter. Supported by strong local partnerships, including a gender justice non-governmental organization (NGO), academic and peer researchers, and the private sector, the project sought to foster a gender-sensitive and violence-free environment.

This article explores the impact of these interventions and highlights the potential of locally-led, interdisciplinary collaborations in driving positive change.

Male drivers as catalysts for change

Equipping men to act as catalysts of change in preventing GBV can be a powerful tool which not only benefits women and girls but also creates healthier, safer, and more equitable communities for everyone. This involves engaging them in education and awareness-raising initiatives that promote gender equality and challenge harmful gender norms and attitudes.

Men can be powerful allies in preventing GBV by challenging toxic behaviours and promoting healthy ones. This includes advocating for the rights of women and girls, speaking out against GBV, and actively working to prevent violence in their own lives and in their communities.
**GBV awareness training**
The training was led by local NGO, Sonke Gender Justice, and aimed to sensitize male drivers and operators on GBV and how it affects women in public spaces, particularly in public transport.

The GBV awareness training delivered to male drivers yielded promising results, as evidenced by the insights gathered during the end of project evaluation. Their feedback indicated a shift in their attitudes and behaviours. The drivers recognized the significance of the training and proactively shared their learnings with fellow drivers and sliding door operators. They established support networks among themselves and took steps to educate sliding door operators about inappropriate behaviour, creating a safer environment for passengers. These drivers also emphasized the importance of terminology and understanding different forms of harassment, enabling them to address and educate others effectively.

A driver shared, "When I heard that there was going to be training on gender [based] violence, I took it with both hands. What we learned here, we took it with us, and went and had our own meetings...what we learned here, we went back there [on the rank] and started implementing it."

The feedback underscored the importance of extending the training to sliding door operators who frequently interact with commuters. By equipping these operators with similar knowledge and sensitization, women’s overall safety and experience in public transport can be further enhanced.

By advocating for a more gender-sensitive transport environment, these drivers demonstrated the potential for locally-led initiatives to effect positive change. This also highlights the need for comprehensive and inclusive training programmes that reach all stakeholders within the minibus taxi industry.

**Amplifying the voices of women in the Taxi Industry**
The key outputs from the project have been co-developed through consultations with female commuters in the Cape Town city region, as well as with women working within the taxi industry. Transaid worked in partnership with the SANTACO (South African National Taxi Council) Women’s Desk to deliver the proposed activities. Through the Women’s Desk, the project team was able to amplify women’s voices and reflect their inputs in the Safe Taxi Charter, as well as in Safe Taxi Stickers, with the aim of further disseminating the charter and its messages.
The Safe Taxi Charter is a guiding document highlighting a duty of care on the part of the transport provider towards its passengers. The charter was developed in collaboration with female commuters and SANTACO, and was disseminated in conjunction with GBV awareness training, which targeted male drivers operating from Bellville's transport junction under the Bellville Operators Taxi Association (B.O.T.A.).

The distribution of Safe Taxi Stickers played a crucial role in raising awareness about the Safe Taxi Charter, and promoting accountability among taxi drivers. These stickers, which contained important safety messages and contact information for passengers to report incidents, were willingly displayed by drivers working with participating taxi associations. The stickers served as a visible symbol of their commitment to addressing GBV and violence against women in their taxis, and a QR code allowed passengers access to the charter online.

Commuter feedback
The insights gathered from the commuters that were interviewed shed light on the ongoing challenges faced by women in public transport. Issues such as overloading, poor customer service, and road safety, persist, diminishing the overall travel experience for female commuters. The role of sliding door operators was identified as a key area for improvement, as their behaviour often contributes to violence, harassment, and discomfort for women passengers.

However, it is essential to recognize the diversity of experiences across different taxi associations and routes. Some associations demonstrated more favourable conditions, emphasizing the need for cross-industry collaboration and knowledge sharing to implement best practices. Moreover, the interviews highlighted a lack of awareness regarding the Safe Taxi Charter, signalling the need for improved dissemination efforts to empower female commuters with vital information on their rights and reporting mechanisms.
Collaborative measures for lasting change

The engagement with taxi association executives and owners proved critical in assessing the value and appropriateness of the GBV awareness training and Safe Taxi Charter implementation. Key themes that emerged from these discussions included the need for increased accountability among owners and drivers and improved harmonization and communication within the industry. Recognizing the responsibility of owners and drivers in creating a safe travel environment, the conversations highlighted the importance of re-evaluating existing practices and fostering a culture of accountability and respect.

To further strengthen the impact of the project, collaboration between the minibus taxi industry, local government, NGOs, and relevant stakeholders is crucial. By working together, these actors can develop comprehensive strategies to address GBV, improve working conditions, and enhance women’s overall safety and experience in public transport.

Conclusion

The success of this project lies in its locally-led approach, which empowered the taxi industry to take ownership of addressing GBV. By actively involving key stakeholders such as B.O.T.A. and the SANTACO Women's Desk, the project fostered a sense of ownership and commitment among taxi operators.

One driver's involvement in the project, as an ambassador for safety and GBV prevention, exemplifies the positive impact of locally-led initiatives. Through his efforts, he effectively disseminated his learnings and inspired others to adopt similar practices. His call for formalizing taxi operations by establishing a network of sliding door operators demonstrates the potential to enhance accountability and promote ethical behaviour within the industry.

The implementation of the GBV prevention work in Cape Town's minibus taxi industry, as detailed in the project reports below, signifies the potential of locally-led, interdisciplinary collaborations in effecting positive change.

- Youth engagement and skills acquisition within Africa’s transport sector: promoting a gender agenda towards transitions into meaningful work - project report
- Youth engagement and skills acquisition within Africa’s transport sector: promoting a gender agenda towards transitions into meaningful work - follow-on project report

The project provides a blueprint for a scalable approach in Cape Town, and in other cities and regions to tackle gender-based violence in the transport sector. A multi-stakeholder approach involving local communities, NGOs, the transport industry, and government is crucial for the success of such initiatives. It is also essential to recognise the importance of engaging men in addressing gender-based violence, as they play a critical role in creating a GBV-free environment.