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# Women in the Road Transport Sector in Africa

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## Introduction

The road transport sector in Africa remains one of the most male-dominated industries, presenting profound and multifaceted barriers to women's entry, participation, retention, and advancement.

Despite incremental progress, women continue to confront deeply entrenched gender stereotypes, pervasive harassment, limited access to training and financial resources, and frequently hostile working environments. At the same time, important shifts are underway. The growth of ride-hailing applications, donor-supported training programmes, women-only transport services, and evolving policy frameworks are beginning to reshape the landscape. These developments do indeed create new opportunities, yet structural inequalities remain deeply embedded.

The historical roots of male dominance in Africa's road transport sector can be traced to the early twentieth century. From the 1920s onwards, as motorised transport expanded across the continent, operating early vehicles required physical strength and mechanical skill. These requirements aligned with prevailing colonial gender norms that framed men as naturally suited to mechanised labour. At the same time, women were systemically excluded from formal education, technical training, and access to financial capital. Over time, motor-mobility became closely associated with masculine identity, cementing transport work as a male domain.

This legacy continues to shape workplace cultures today. In many contexts, motor parks, taxi ranks, and other transport spaces remain intimidating and exclusionary spaces for women. In Abuja, women conductors report being labelled as prostitutes. In Cape Town, women drivers face verbal abuse, intimidation, and at times physical aggression from male colleagues and touts.

Cultural expectations that women shoulder primary caregiving responsibilities further reinforce the perception that transport work - often characterised by long or irregular hours - is unsuitable for women.

Challenging these entrenched norms is essential to creating a more inclusive and equitable transport sector.



Rachel Lwanga, tondeka bus driver in Uganda

## Gender Stereotypes and Societal Norms

Societal norms continue to restrict women's access to technical education, financial capital, and professional networks. Stereotypes questioning women's competence persist across the occupational hierarchy - from low-paid customer-facing roles such as conductors and ticket sellers to senior positions including transport planners and engineers.

In Abuja, interviews with men both inside and outside the sector revealed perceptions of women drivers as "fragile" or "soft," supposedly incapable of handling challenging customers, motor park touts, late-night shifts, or childcare responsibilities. Similar attitudes are evident in Cape Town, Tunis, and Nairobi, where women in transport roles are frequently viewed as transgressing social expectations. Such stigmatisation not only discourages entry but also undermines women's confidence, authority, and career progression.

## Key Challenges

Harassment and safety risk remain among the most significant barriers to women's participation in the transport sector. Women in customer-facing roles - including conductors, porters, and ticket sellers - frequently experience sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and physical intimidation from male colleagues, passengers, and touts.

In Nairobi, demeaning treatment contributes to high resignation rates among women conductors, particularly when family disapproval of late working hours compounds the pressure. In Dar es Salaam, women conductors report both physical and mental health issues arising from sustained harassment. A Tunisian ticket seller observed starkly that: "all women ticket sellers suffer from physical and mental problems."

Women drivers face distinct but equally serious risks. Those working late shifts or in isolated areas report heightened concerns around assault and robbery. Long-distance truck drivers are especially vulnerable during overnight stops, where inadequate security and poor sanitation facilities increase risk. In Cape Town, women bus drivers report concerns about bus stoning during strikes and the threat of armed robbery, concerns often amplified by worried family members.

Compounding these risks is the absence of effective reporting and accountability mechanisms. Inadequate police training in responding to gender-based violence (GBV) and weak institutional follow-up discourage reporting and perpetuate impunity. Addressing safety concerns therefore requires both strengthened policy enforcement and shifts in workplace culture among male stakeholders.



Belville Taxi Rank, Cape Town, South Africa

### Informal Sector Opportunities

The informal sector, where most women in transport work, is undergoing gradual transformation driven by technological and social change.

The widespread adoption of mobile phones and ride-hailing apps has created new opportunities for women drivers. These platforms offer more flexibility, GPS tracking, cashless payment systems, and greater control over passenger selection, helping to mitigate some safety risks. Women-only ride-hailing services, established by female entrepreneurs in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, further enhance safety for both drivers and passengers while challenging assumptions about women's capabilities.

Social media has also emerged as a powerful tool for visibility and solidarity. In Kenya, campaigns highlighting women boda-boda riders have fostered greater public acceptance of women in non-traditional roles. These platforms allow women to share experiences, build professional networks, and advocate collectively for improved working conditions, amplifying their voices in a male dominated industry.

Transaid's institutional interventions can also make a difference. Transaid's work with SANTACO's Women's Desk in Cape Town has strengthened reporting mechanisms and specialist support for women experiencing GBV within the minibus taxi industry. The initiative has garnered strong support from women operators and passengers alike, increasing accountability among taxi associations for the welfare of their female workforce and commuters.



GBV champion - Safer Minibus Taxis project with SANTACO

### Formal Sector Opportunities

Opportunities are also expanding within the formal transport sector, particularly through training programmes supported by NGOs and some private sector transporters.

Holcim's Women on Wheels Initiative supports women into professional driving roles, while Transaid's partnership with Safe Way Right Way in Uganda has achieved notable progress in the number of women entering training, accounting for almost 10% of trainees.

In Nigeria, economic pressures following fuel subsidy removal have prompted more women graduates to enter the transport sector, including through Lafarge's Driving Institute, which began training women in 2021. Participants report positive experiences as



Jackline Oundo, boda boda rider in Nairobi, Kenya

community role models and benefit from equal pay policies, though harassment from touts and officials persists.

The expansion of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems in cities like Dar es Salaam and Cape Town may also offer more structured and less informalised employment environments. While these systems can displace informal workers, including women, they may also provide pathways into more stable, regulated employment if gender-inclusive policies are prioritised. These examples highlight that women can thrive in higher-paying and more secure transport roles when access to training, institutional backing, and supportive workplace policies are in place.

### Recommendations for Advancing Inclusion

Achieving meaningful and sustained change requires coordinated interventions at multiple levels:

#### 1. Policy and Legislative Reforms:

Governments should implement and enforce affirmative action, equal pay laws, and robust anti-harassment frameworks to address gender biases. South Africa's recent zero-tolerance policy for workplace violence and harassment provides a promising model for other countries.

#### 2. Improved and Expanded Training and Education:

Affordable access to accredited driver training and technical education should be linked to mentoring, leadership development, and support career progression.

#### 3. Improved Access to Finance:

Provide vehicle loan schemes, savings groups, and reforms to inheritance and property rights can strengthen women's access to capital and enable entrepreneurship.

#### 4. Workplace Improvements:

Introduce flexible working hours, childcare facilities, better sanitation, and secure rest stops to improve retention, well-being, and safety.

**5. Data and Research:** More comprehensive gender-disaggregated data and longitudinal studies to assess intervention impacts and inform policy. Current research is limited, particularly in rural areas where women's experiences remain understudied.

#### 6. Union and Institutional Support:

Strengthening women's leadership within unions and transport associations is critical. Support women-led businesses through government contracts and professional networks to foster inclusivity. Initiatives such as SANTACO's Women's Desk demonstrates the potential of institutional advocacy, though greater autonomy is needed.

### Conclusion

The under-representation of women in Africa's road transport sector is rooted in historical exclusion, reinforced by persistent gender norms, and sustained by structural barriers. Yet change is underway. Technological innovation, targeted training programmes, institutional reform, and growing public visibility of women in transport roles are gradually reshaping the sector.

To accelerate progress, efforts must go beyond increasing participation alone. Structural inequalities, workplace cultures, safety concerns, and access to capital must be addressed in tandem. By rebalancing power dynamics and investing in women's leadership and entrepreneurship, Africa's road transport sector can become more equitable, resilient, and sustainable - enabling women not only to enter the industry, but to thrive within it.



Safe Way Right Way driver trainees in Uganda