

MOVING BARRIERS, INCREASING ACCESS: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MOBILITY OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND ELDERLY WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The success of Sustainable Development Goal 11, particularly target 11.2 on access to safe, affordable, and sustainable transport systems will be measured through the proportion of people especially vulnerable groups with access to convenient public transport systems. In Kenya, this demographic group comprises 2.2% (0.9 million) of people with disabilities and 6% (2.7 million) of the elderly. Among these statistics, women form the largest proportion; 2.5% for people with disabilities and 55% for the elderly. The purpose of this assessment is hence to understand the vulnerabilities women with disabilities and elderly women face in accessing public transport through documenting their subjective experiences, with a special focus on Nairobi City County.

A mixed methodology approach was adopted comprising a survey targeting women with disabilities and elderly women to collect data; Focus Group Discussions; and Key Informant Interviews with transport policymakers, public transport operators and owners, and relevant government institutions. Findings from the study indicate that women with disabilities and elderly women currently face challenges in accessing public transport services due to a lack of inclusive national and county transport policies, inaccessible design of public transport vehicles and infrastructure, unaffordable and hidden costs of transport, vulnerability to sexual harassment, limited road safety, and security; inaccessible travel information; discrimination, unresponsive reporting mechanisms, and a non-representative workforce.

To enhance access to public transport for these vulnerable groups, the study recommends technical, social, and institutional interventions, including implementation of the Public Service Vehicle standard designs in Kenya to ensure inclusive accessibility, education and awareness programs to public service operators on handling and treatment of vulnerable groups, sensitization and implementation of policies governing vulnerable groups and building capacity of women belonging to these groups on self-advocacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Persons with disability and the elderly experience immense and unique challenges while using public transport and it becomes worse for women with disabilities to access public

transport. The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the World's population has one form of disability, (WHO, 2011). Kenya's 2019 census reported that 2.2% (0.9 million people) of Kenya's population have a form of disability, with women being more women (2.5%) than men (1.9%), (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The 2019 national census also reported about 6% (2.7 million) of Kenya's older adults, with females being more (55%) than men (45%). Nairobi County is among the top counties with the highest population of elderly persons, with over 100,000 older persons.

There is a correlation between old age and disability and therefore, some challenges they face while accessing public transport are similar. Age-specific analyses study conducted by UN Women in 2021 showed that women older than 55 years were significantly more likely to experience problems related to transport accessibility. A significant population of people is denied their rights to move freely and safely due to insensitive and discriminatory transport services. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the government and other stakeholders to intervene.

1.2 Problem Statement

UITP (2022) argues that mobility plays an integral role in social and economic integration of all in society. Hence, public transport providers should pay attention in tackling the mobility issues (geographical, social, and physical) faced by their customers. United Nations (2019) however paints that the reality is that only half of the global population has access to convenient public transport systems. This inaccessibility and inconvenience may be attributed to the lack of universal design of public service vehicles and associated transportation spaces which make it uncomfortable and unsafe to travel. Most of these users facing these challenges are persons with disabilities, and older persons. Such passengers include people who have mobility problems, vision or hearing impairments, difficulty in understanding road signs and directions, or hidden disabilities such as mental or intellectual impairments.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides that it is an obligation of these public transport providers to make transport systems accessible to persons with disabilities to enable them to participate in society on an equal basis as the rest. Some of the design strategies provided by (UITP, 2022) to ensure accessibility by persons with disabilities include effective communication procedures, adaptive designs for people with diverse disabilities, and provision of adequate space and size for ease of approach, reach and manipulation. However, in the largely informal or paratransit and often unregulated public transport systems in the Global South and in this case Kenya, public transport is designed with no consideration of persons with disabilities and older persons or sometimes as an after-thought which makes their to access socio-economic opportunities challenging.

1.3 Aim of Paper

The purpose of this study hence is to understand the vulnerabilities women with disabilities and elderly women face in accessing public transport with a special focus on Nairobi City County. The specific objectives of the study include:

- To review and identify technical, social, and policy gaps and implementation challenges on inclusive mobility within the county.

- To identify the barriers limiting women with disability and elderly women from accessing public transport.
- To document scalable interventions on inclusive mobility in public transport that can be replicated in other counties to enhance access by Persons with Disability and elderly women.

1.4 Scope of Paper

The scope of this study explores the experiences and challenges faced by women with disabilities and the elderly in accessing public transport within Nairobi City County. The types of public transport investigated within the study are 14-seater and high-capacity buses used as public service vehicles within the city. Specifically, the study investigates the experiences of **women** who are elderly (above 60 years) and those with disabilities such as mobility, visibility, hearing, and psychosocial challenges.

1.5 Definition of Terms

“Matatu” refers to privately owned minibuses commonly used as public transport in Kenya by about 70% of the commuters. Matatu have varying designs and are characterized by loud music and graffiti, (Gupta, 2022).

“Boda-boda” refers to motorcycle taxis used in East African countries majorly for short distance travel or last mile connectivity from public transport. They are also referred to as piki piki in Kenya, (One Acre Fund, 2016).

“Saccos” refer to matatu and bus operator companies organized based on the route the vehicles ply within the country or city with the aim of better management and service delivery. The saccos are highly competitive based on how well they are organized, branding, employee conduct, and safety, (Busienei, et al., 2019).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Overview

The research study adopted a mixed methodology approach comprising both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and analysis, which targeted 74 respondents from Nairobi city.

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted between the months of August to November 2021. The methods applied include:

- **Desktop review** of the existing literature and policy documents to identify gaps in inclusivity and implementation.
- **A survey** targeting women with disabilities and elderly women.

- **Focus Group Discussions** to supplement the survey data collected, which entailed having frank and candid conversations with the women on their challenges while accessing public transport within the City.
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** with stakeholders in the transport industry to understand their role in ensuring inclusive mobility, the current situation, and the plans for improving it. The stakeholders interviewed include:
 - a. Nairobi City County Department of Transport;
 - b. Nairobi Metropolitan Area Transport Authority (NaMATA); and
 - c. Public Service Vehicle Owners and Operators.

2.3 Study Limitations

This study being one of its kind within Kenya and Nairobi, faced limitations such as a lack of gender-disaggregated data on the elderly and people with disabilities; and the Covid-19 restrictions, which limited the time to undertake extensive conversations with the respondents.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Overview

This section comprises the findings and discussions on the data collected and analyzed on the vulnerabilities faced by women with disabilities and the elderly while accessing public transport in Nairobi City County. The findings have been presented in tables and figures as follows.

3.2 Findings and Discussions

3.2.1 Mode of Transport Commonly Used

Public service vehicles are the main mode of transport used by 73% of the research respondents for their daily commute to work, school, or other purposes. 11% walk, 8% use motorbikes, and 5% use taxis as indicated in Figure 1 below.

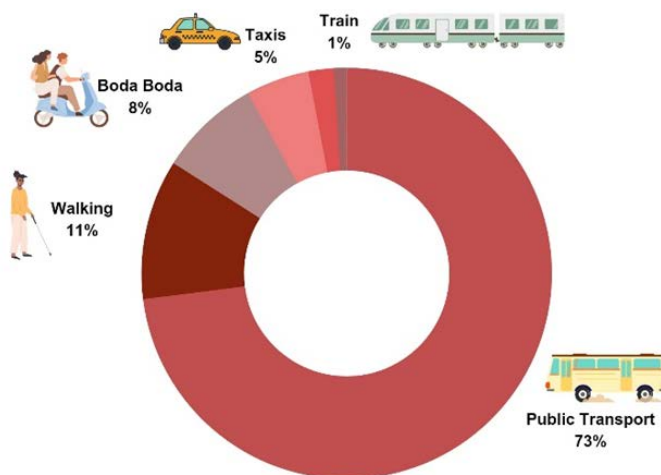


Figure 1: The main mode of transport used by women with disabilities and the elderly

Due to their mobility challenges and the unreliability of public transport to offer door-to-door services, women with a disability and those who are elderly must rely on other modes for last-mile connectivity as showed in Figure 2.

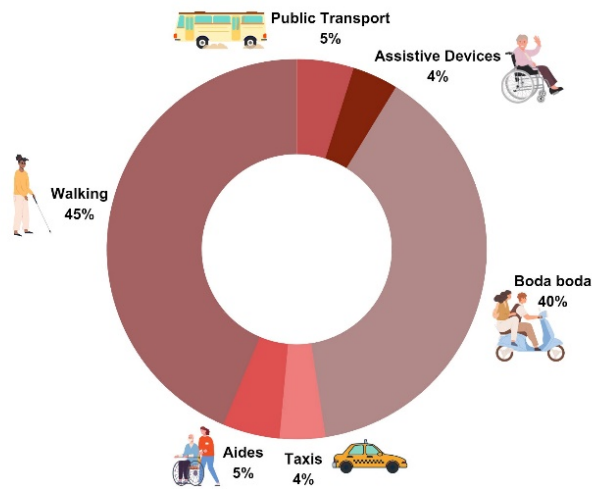


Figure 2: The modes used for last mile connectivity

The modal choice, according to the respondents, is determined by:

- Availability and reliability.
- Affordability.
- Design: For instance, the presence of enough legroom that offers comfort to the passenger.
- Safety.

A caregiver of two children with cerebral palsy made this comment: *“As a person with a disability, you have to be very careful about the mode you use. For example, a person with multiple disabilities lacks balance and unless you hold them, they cannot be stable; thus, boda boda is not suitable. The riders rush to meet their daily needs. Therefore, they do not care if you have a disability or not. They will ride at the highest speed, which is very dangerous for a person with a disability.”*

3.2.2 Accessibility Challenges of Public Transport

3.2.2.1 Poor Design of Public Transport Vehicles and Infrastructure

70% of the respondents referred to public transport vehicles as difficult to board and alight due to their designs. These vehicles are characterised by narrow doors, high steps, and narrow aisles, which make their accessibility by the elderly and persons with disability a challenge. In this regard, elderly women and those with disability have to rely on help from public transport operators to either board or alight, which becomes a daunting task and can lead to injuries while boarding. As an adaptation, some women boarding chose to board the vehicles earlier by crawling or alighting while facing backward due to the steep steps, which puts their safety at risk. Further, the non-inclusive vehicle designs in Kenya are attributed to the lack of approved legal standards for vehicle designs; the current standards (ISO DKS 372) are in draft form.

A female respondent with muscular dystrophy made this comment: *“The legroom in matatus is not friendly to people with muscular dystrophy because they require somewhere to stretch.”*

3.2.2.2 Unaffordable and Hidden Costs of Transport

The cost of travel is already unaffordable since many women with disabilities and the elderly have limited sources of livelihood. The respondents who use mobility devices and travel with an aid reported that they have to pay triple the fares: for themselves, their aide, and the mobility device. In addition, they often have to pay for motorbikes, tuk-tuks, or taxis for last-mile connectivity. The respondents reported that public transport operators sometimes delay giving them their change until they forget, due to dementia, and disappear with it. In other circumstances, elderly women are charged in excess because they are not frequent users of such routes, hence they resort to avoiding traveling at all costs.

A female respondent with a physical disability made this comment: *“If you have a wheelchair, you are charged triple, for the wheelchair, the caregiver, and you the person with a disability.”*

3.2.2.3 Vulnerability to Sexual Harassment

Due to their need for help to board or alight, the respondents highlighted that they are highly susceptible to sexual harassment from these public transport operators. Sexual harassment manifests through for instance indecent touch or inappropriate commentary.

A Female respondent with visual impairment made this comment: *“Some conductors do not even ask for consent to lift you; they just assume you are sick and want to lift you right away. This makes one feel bad. You have to keep explaining the situation, which makes you feel humiliated.”*

The time one travels also presents a safety issue, especially during late hours. Late hours can be occasioned by traffic congestion or long waiting at a bus terminus. Some respondents felt that it is safer for men with disabilities to travel at late hours than women because late travels increase their vulnerability to sexual abuse. The situation even becomes riskier when the matatu drops them past their destination at night or uses a different route.

In an ideal situation, a case of abuse or mishandling in a public service vehicle should be reported and acted on by the public transport associations. An aggrieved passenger can also report to the police station especially if it is a criminal case. The study respondents felt that the existing reporting channels are unresponsive and inaccessible to them. Therefore, many have given up reporting the incidents to the police or public transport associations.

A female respondent with visual impairment made this comment: *“As a person with visual impairment, if you are sexually harassed and report to the police, you are told to describe the person who defiled you, yet you cannot see. For a person who is deaf, there are no sign language interpreters in most government entities.”*

A representative of matatu owners made this comment: *“We have a 24-hour radio room to register a complaint. You look at the fleet number and not the vehicle registration number. But a blind person cannot access that information. Need for audio or braille to announce stages and fleet number.”*

3.2.2.4 Limited Road Safety and Security

About 50% of the respondents reported having felt unsafe while on the road. Transferring from one terminus to another increases their vulnerability to crashes, especially when crossing busy roads. The respondents reported having felt more unsafe from vehicular traffic due to poor road etiquette by other public service vehicles and motorbikes. Additionally, the pedestrian crossings within the city are not marked, and even when marked, some motorists ignore them.

A female respondent who is audibly impaired and is a vendor in Nairobi County made this comment: *“Most of us get into accidents when walking by the roadside just because we are deaf and cannot hear any hooting. Most of the matatu operators think we assume or ignore the signals.”*

3.2.2.5 Inaccessible Travel Information

54% of the respondents reported that they often do not easily locate different matatu routes due to the unavailability of travel information. Often passengers have to keep reminding the conductors of their destination. The available travel information is however not accessible to passengers that are audibly or visually impaired.

An elderly female respondent made this comment: *“With old age, you develop a low vision and therefore you cannot see the placards that show various destinations. The matatu staff can lie to you and you can find yourself boarding the wrong bus.”*

3.2.2.6 Chaos and Unruliness in the Public Transport System

Some matatus are reported to operate despite being unroadworthy due to being old or poorly serviced to the extent that they pollute the environment and make the passengers uncomfortable. Elderly women with chronic breathing and other health problems are easily affected by such fumes and other pollutants. Public service vehicles in Nairobi are often filled with loud and sometimes obscene music, which is uncomfortable for most passengers and affects persons with autism. The respondents reported that it is not easy to request the operators to reduce the volume because they can easily become rude.

A government officer from Nairobi County made this comment: *“I travelled with an old man once and the matatu we were in had loud music. He requested the driver to reduce the volume. The driver refused. We intervened, but later, he kept increasing the volume. The old man decided to alight and pay the extra fare to board another matatu.”*

3.2.2.7 Infrastructural Challenges

The transport infrastructure in Nairobi hinders the accessibility of women with a disability and the elderly. These infrastructural challenges manifest through:

- *Inaccessible and often congested bus terminuses.* These passenger waiting areas are encroached with vendors hence elderly women and those with a disability lack resting areas while waiting for matatus.
- *Lack of accessible supporting amenities* such as washrooms which are not designed to meet the needs of these vulnerable groups.

- *Inadequate NMT Infrastructure* such as walkways that are safe and comfortable for them to use. The existing infrastructure has barriers such as potholes, blocked walkways, lack of street lighting, and encroached footpaths by hawkers and other road users. These obstructive barriers can cause severe injuries to people with mobility and visual impairments and make them disinterested in travelling to the city centre.

3.2.2.8 Lack of Awareness of Public Transport Operators Regarding the Elderly and Persons with Disability

Progress has been made in employing women in the transport sector. However, the study revealed that there are no persons with disability who are employed in the matatu sector. The respondents reported that this lack of representation results into:

- Discrimination by public transport operators. A majority of the respondents reported having been rejected by a matatu hence resorting to longer waiting times at the stage, which may exacerbate their conditions or expose them to harsh weather conditions.
- Public transport operators profile them as people who cannot afford to pay their fares.
- Some staff perceive the women as a burden and time wasters.
- Some public transport operators have an indifferent and insensitive attitude towards them since they do not understand and support their needs.

A government officer in Nairobi County made this comment: *“The matatu staff are not trained to handle persons with disabilities hence lack the etiquette to handle elderly women and those with disability.”*

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

This assessment was aimed to determine the accessibility of public transport services for women with disabilities and elderly women. The assessment identified technical, social, and policy barriers affecting the freedoms of mobility for women with a disability and elderly women. These findings reveal that currently the public transport sector in Nairobi City County is not inclusive hence limiting the women with a disability and the elderly to access opportunities and services. In this regard, the findings chart the way for providing practical and scalable interventions and inform policy advocacy to enhance public transport usage by women with a disability and elderly women.

4.2 Recommendations

This research study proposes interventions that will be anchored on robust collaboration between government agencies, public transport associations, public and civil society organizations, and training and awareness programs. These interventions include:

4.2.1 Safe, Accessible, and Inclusive Public Transport Vehicles

The Ministry of Transport should adopt the current vehicle design standards (ISO DKS 372) to pave way for their implementation and enforcement and help restore the dignity of women with a disability and elderly women while using public transport. To facilitate compliance and a

smooth transition, the government can provide tax incentives to the PSV operators that comply.

Further, the Noise Control Regulations, 2009 on loud music in public service vehicles should be enforced to ensure that public service vehicles are a friendly environment for not only women with a disability and elderly women but also to all passengers.

4.2.2 Mandatory Staff Training Courses for Public Service Operators and Management Staff

The government in collaboration with civil society organizations should develop a mandatory certifiable training course on customer care, disability, and gender for all staff working in the public transport sector. Priority should be accorded to the conductors who are always at the forefront of handling passengers with different needs.

4.2.3 Establish an Accessible and Responsive Complaint-Reporting System

Public transport associations should invest in complaint reporting systems that are universally accessible, anonymous, free, technology-based, and links to the concerned government agencies such as the police should be established.

The government should also strengthen the existing [Policare](#) initiative by making it accessible and responsive to any criminal cases, especially in public transport and spaces for women and persons with disability. To ensure the effectiveness of this system, the police force also needs to be sensitized and trained on how to handle such cases regarding women with a disability and elderly women.

4.2.4 Fare Regulation Policies

The Ministry of Transport and public transport associations should develop policy regulations on fares that provide waivers or subsidized fares, especially for persons with disabilities and elderly persons. Through stakeholder consultations, such regulations should consider the economic needs of persons with disabilities who mostly rely on social protection programs or dependence on other members of the household.

4.2.5 Diversify Public Transport Services

The public transport associations can invest in alternative transport services that respond to the specific needs of persons with disabilities and the elderly. For example, dial-a-ride service for passengers who need door-to-door travel and require assistance at the start and end of their journey. It may also be used by those who need help during a journey or use a wheelchair that cannot be accommodated by an inaccessible bus. Alternatively, owners can provide transport service routes that use small vehicles to provide last-mile connectivity. These alternatives should be easily accessible vehicles with specially trained staff and flexible schedules so that passengers can board and alight without feeling rushed.

4.2.6 Practice Inclusive Staffing Norms

Public transport associations should review their human resource policies to ensure inclusivity. The employers should conduct a thorough background check on the staff before employment and induct them into customer relations. The SACCOs should also formalize the engagement with drivers and touts affiliated with them to ensure they are well-trained and committed to their respective policies. Public transport associations and owners should reward disability champions. Civil society groups such as Flone Initiative can support internal policy strengthening to support employment opportunities for women with disabilities. For

instance, Flone Initiative has developed a database that captures the data for women in transport with information on whether they have a disability, which is a resource that can be embraced by the owners and operators.

4.2.7 Capacity Building of Public Transport Operators

The capacity of matatu operators to become responsive to the needs of women with disabilities and elderly women should be enhanced through:

- Developing guidelines for public transport operators in engaging and supporting persons with disabilities and the elderly.
- Partnerships with public transport associations in training their staff on disability inclusion of women with disabilities, and the elderly.
- Continuous sensitization and awareness campaigns to the public transport owners and operators on the specific needs of women with disabilities and elderly women.

4.2.8 Capacity Building of Women with Disabilities and Elderly Women on Agency/Self-Advocacy

Civil society groups such as Flone Initiative can build the capacity of organizations for women with disabilities and elderly women to lobby for inclusive transport. Such groups, when empowered, can be vocal against mistreatment and systemic discrimination within the public transport sector. The opportunities for inclusive participation should be strengthened to ensure their needs are taken care of during policy development.

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