

# Gendered mobility and safety challenges for young women using public transport in Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal



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**Background:** Public transport is vital for mobility, but women's safety remains overlooked, especially in areas with inadequate infrastructure, economic vulnerability and high unemployment, such as Port Shepstone in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

**Objective:** The purpose of this study was to examine safety challenges experienced by young women who depend on public transport in Port Shepstone, within the given broader context of pervasive gender-based violence in South Africa.

**Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. Commuters were selected using purposive sampling to capture diverse mobility experiences.

**Results:** The findings reveal widespread harassment, assault and intimidation primarily perpetrated by male minibus taxi drivers and passengers. These experiences are compounded by a lack of transport infrastructure, including poor road conditions, inadequate street lighting and limited transport options, significantly restricting women's mobility.

**Conclusion:** Women adopt various self-protection strategies to cope with systemic failures in transport safety. This research highlights critical policy gaps and the urgent need for gender-sensitive transport planning, targeted driver training programmes, improved physical infrastructure and law enforcement to address mobility injustice and empower female commuters in Port Shepstone and similar urban areas in South Africa.

**Contribution:** This research contributes to sustainable development goal (SDG) 11, which emphasises the 'need for inclusive, safe and sustainable transport systems, special attention to be given to the needs of those in vulnerable situations including women, children, persons with disabilities and the elderly'.

**Keywords:** young females; passengers; public transport; harassment; safety; gendered mobility.

## Introduction

Safe and inclusive public transport is fundamental to achieving mobility justice. However, in many parts of the world, public transport remains unsafe and exclusionary, especially for women. Globally, women face various forms of harassment, assault and intimidation in transport spaces, which limits their ability to move freely and safely (Chowdhury 2023; Sil, Chowdhury & Thoreau 2023). The consequences of unsafe transport spaces extend beyond personal safety, restricting women's access to vital economic and social opportunities.

In South Africa, public transport is essential to many low-income households and commuters (Eagle & Kwele 2021). The country's public transport system comprises publicly owned municipal buses and metro rail, as well as privately run and owned minibus taxis, metered taxis, ride-hailing services and Bus Rapid Transport (Kekana, McKay & Gunter 2018; McKay 2020; Stats SA 2021). Among these, minibus taxis are the dominant form of public transport, used by over 11 million households (Stats SA 2021). This is because of a shift away from using buses and trains, and in some cases because of safety issues (especially trains), but also a serious decline in bus and rail services. The minibus industry is characterised by violence among rival drivers, taxi owners and taxi associations, which can affect transport users at large (Eagle & Kwele 2021). Moreover, there is a high rate of violence against women commuters using minibus taxis (Martin 2022).

Given the broader context of pervasive gender-based violence in South Africa, women's safety in public transport remains a serious concern (Moghayedi et al. 2023) and is more pronounced in small towns like Port Shepstone. Port Shepstone is a small town with limited transport resources compared to major urban areas, such as the cities of Johannesburg and Tshwane, with more extensive public transport infrastructure and formal policing. Port Shepstone has limited transport options, minimal regulatory oversight and poor infrastructure. Minibus taxi associations in Port Shepstone frequently protest against permit restrictions, which they argue limit their ability to operate legally (Miya 2024). These tensions often result in service disruptions, sporadic violence and a lack of trust between transport providers and commuters. In such a volatile and under-regulated environment, commuters are disproportionately affected, as they are forced to rely on a system that neither protects their rights nor ensures their safety. These constraints make commuters in Port Shepstone particularly vulnerable to violence, harassment and transport exclusion.

There is limited research focused on the lived experiences of young women in small towns such as Port Shepstone, despite the widespread use of public transport in South Africa (Stats SA 2021). Most studies concentrate on large cities, such as Johannesburg or Tshwane, where greater resources and visibility exist (Eagle & Kwele 2021; Phosho & Gumbo 2022). In smaller towns, the combination of weak infrastructure, unregulated transport and normalised gender-based violence creates a context in which women's mobility rights are severely compromised. South Africa has progressive transport and gender equality policies; however, their implementation often falls short, particularly in smaller towns where oversight and enforcement are limited. To inform inclusive, gender-sensitive transport planning that extends beyond metropolitan areas, it is essential to understand the specific challenges faced by young women in Port Shepstone.

Within this context, the study aimed to understand the transport experiences of young female passengers between the ages of 18 and 35 years using public transport in Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal. To do this, the following three secondary objectives were formulated:

- To identify challenges faced by young female passengers in accessing public transport in Port Shepstone
- To explore the perceptions of young female passengers of the safety and security of the existing public transport in Port Shepstone
- To identify ways in which public transport policies can better support the safety and mobility of young women in Port Shepstone.

Much research on women's mobility focuses on large cities or generalised female experiences; this study draws attention to the specific and underexplored realities of young women (aged 18–35 years). Young women often have limited

financial resources, lower levels of car ownership and restricted access to safer or more formal modes of transport (Porter et al. 2021, 2025). Their mobility is shaped not just by poor infrastructure and limited transport options but also by heightened exposure to harassment, intimidation and gendered power dynamics (Corpuz et al. 2023). The study offers a fresh perspective by focusing on this age group and how intersecting factors, such as age, gender, income and geography, exacerbate transport vulnerability. This adds to global and South African literature by highlighting a neglected section of the population, whose experiences are often unseen in mainstream transport planning and research.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: a review of the literature on women's mobility and safety in public transport. The methodology includes the study setting, sampling strategy and data analysis approach. The key findings are across thematic areas. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives. The article concludes with a summary of the main insights and provides recommendations for further research.

## Literature review

Globally, urban women have long relied on transport systems to attend work and activities away from their homes, essential for economic and social engagement (Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). Access to transport enables women to reach various services, activities and opportunities in urban areas (Coxon, Napper & Richardson 2019; Gómez-Ortega et al. 2023; Moghayedi et al. 2023; Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). Women are generally less likely to own private vehicles; however, they frequently depend on a variety of public transport modes, including both formal (e.g. municipal buses) and informal options (e.g. tuk-tuks; minibus taxis), to fulfil their mobility needs (Saigal, Vaish & Rao 2012; Scheiner & Holz-Rau 2012). This dependence underscores the need for safe, accessible and gender-responsive public transport systems (Zalloom 2024).

## Safety as a dimension of mobility

Safety is an essential dimension of public transport, encompassing the physical security of passengers, operators and pedestrians (Keblawi et al. 2025). Across the developing world, transport services seldom provide a conducive and female-responsive environment (Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). In addition, the provision of public transport services in developing countries is weak, with any gaps filled by the private sector, which operates for profit, with the safety of transport users not always a priority (Kumar & Barrett 2008). While unsafe transport affects all users, it can be especially disempowering for women, as they are usually less physically able to protect themselves and more likely to be targets of harassment of a sexual nature than men. As a result, lack of access to safe transport can reduce women's participation in socio-economic and cultural activities (Sil, Chowdhury & Thoreau 2024a; Sil et al. 2023).

Safety in public transport is also shaped by the surrounding conditions of the transport environment. Poorly designed transport infrastructure such as walkways, waiting areas, street lighting and bus stops undermines feelings of safety among women (Araya, Legesse & Feleke 2022; Kacharo, Teshome & Woltamo 2022). The transport environment amplifies vulnerability as it creates opportunities for perpetrators to act without being detected. Women frequently adapt their travel behaviour to minimise exposure to unsafe conditions (Martin 2022). In Japan, some women protect themselves by not using trains during peak hours (Chowdhury 2023), as these are associated with overcrowding and conducive to various forms of harassment. In Tanzania, Niboye (2023) found that during overcrowding at peak times, groping and pickpocketing occurred. In some Asian countries, software applications have been developed for women's protection in the public transport space, for example, SafeBand and SaftiPin (Sil et al. 2023). Protective strategies can impose additional physical, emotional and economic costs, thereby reducing women's equal access to mobility (King et al. 2025).

Equally important is the role of institutional neglect in unsafe transport systems. In the Global South, many service providers adopt a stance of 'invisibility' towards safety concerns of women (Forsdike et al. 2024; Uteng, Singh & Lam 2019). A lack of accountability and enforcement of passenger rights further discourages women from reporting incidents of violation when they occur. Research shows that assaults that women experience in the public transport space are significantly underreported (Chowdhury 2023). For example, in Tanzania, Niboye (2023) found that many women who experience violence in the public transport space do not report the incidents to the police for various reasons. Women internalise responsibility for their safety while systematic shortcomings remain unaddressed (Eagle & Kwele 2021; King et al. 2025). Safety as a dimension of mobility therefore requires more than infrastructural fixes. It calls for gender-sensitive policies, institutional reforms and collective cultural change to redefine public transport as a space where women can travel freely, securely and with dignity.

## Intersectionality

Women are, however, a heterogeneous group, and categorising them as a single vulnerable category fails to recognise their diverse and unique needs (Ison & Matthewson 2023; Sil et al. 2023). Women's transport experiences are driven by a complex interplay of factors, including race, socio-economic status, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and patriarchal norms (Forsdike et al. 2024; Nasrin & Chowdhury 2024; Niboye 2023; Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). These intersecting factors significantly shape how individual women access, perceive and experience transport systems. These factors affect individual women's needs and can significantly affect their use and experience of public transport. For example, women with disabilities may face more difficulties in accessing public transport because of a lack of universally accessible transport (Duri 2023).

LGBTQ+ women are especially vulnerable, often facing targeted sexual harassment or assault in the public transport space (Forsdike et al. 2024). In South Africa, for example, such women can be subjected to 'corrective rape'. Corrective rape is a hate crime and refers to the act of raping a LGBTQ+ person with the intent of 'correcting' their sexual orientation based on the perpetrator's false belief that the victim's sexual orientation is 'wrong' and can (and should) be changed through sexual assault (Ngongoma & Maweni 2024).

Women from higher socio-economic backgrounds have easier access to safer transport options compared to poorer women (Sharma-Brymer & Sharma 2021), who may have to walk long distances if they lack the means to pay for transport (Porter et al. 2021, 2025). Age is also a critical factor in understanding gendered mobility challenges. Young women are likely to endure sexual, physical and verbal harassment, violence and even death (Eagle & Kwele 2021).

## Harassment in public transport

Harassment includes unwanted physical contact, unwelcome innuendoes, sexual advances, sexually suggestive comments, insults, unwelcome whistling or unwelcome graphic comments about a person's body (Ajide 2020; Useche et al. 2024). Non-verbal sexual harassment includes unwelcome gestures and indecent exposure (Prinsloo 2006). Several social factors contribute to the heightened vulnerability of young women to such experiences in a public transport environment. Young women may be naive, making them targets for perpetrators seeking to exert power or control. In addition, young women are often sexualised, objectified and deemed 'acceptable targets' for harassment. Young women may also lack experience and assertiveness, making it difficult for them to navigate such situations.

It is important to acknowledge that harassment of women is not unique to South Africa's taxi industry. Research highlights that harassment occurs across workplaces, homes, schools and other transport modes, including rail and bus systems (Chowdhury 2023; Cortina & Areguin 2021; Conley, Ahamed & Wright 2022; Eagle & Kwele 2021). The taxi industry, however, provides a particularly stark case because of its dominance in the transport system and the relative lack of oversight compared to more formal modes such as Gautrain.

Sexual harassment is normalised and is an element of public transport across South and South Asian countries (Sil et al. 2023). In Tokyo, Japan, sexual assault of women using trains remains a pervasive social problem. Women in Asian countries experience sexual harassment that is compounded by patriarchal societal norms (Noor & Iamtrakul 2023; Sil et al. 2023). It appears that women often feel powerless to speak out against harassment in the public transport space (Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). Similarly, in Japan, women find it difficult to be vocal about violence on public transport because of patriarchal norms, and in some cases, male

perpetrators become defiant and violent towards the victim (Chowdhury 2023). Patriarchal norms instil fear of judgement or blame among women victims of transport violence.

The harassment of women in the public transport space is a pressing global issue but is widespread in Latin American and African countries (Chowdhury 2023; Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). Globally, young women across race, ethnicity or class lines rely on public transport and face threats of interpersonal violence (Eagle & Kwele 2021). Moghayedi et al. (2023) found that a significant number of South African women have experienced violence on public transport, while many have experienced it multiple times. Sexual harassment and violence towards women are common, especially in minibus taxis (Eagle & Kwele 2021; Martin 2022).

## Mobility justice

One of the key theoretical frameworks for this study is the concept of mobility justice, which goes beyond physical movement, including the right to move safely, affordably and with dignity (Karner & Shuster 2025; Sheller 2018). Mobility justice emphasises equitable access to transport, viewing it as a fundamental right linked to social inclusion, economic opportunity and individual well-being (Karner & Shuster 2025; Sheller 2018). From this perspective, barriers to mobility, such as fear of violence, poor infrastructure or harassment, are not just service gaps but forms of injustice that disproportionately affect marginalised groups, particularly women.

## Method

Port Shepstone is one of the largest towns in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, located in the Ray Nkonyeni Municipality. The town itself is about 120 km south-west of Durban and serves as an administrative and magisterial capital for the Hibiscus Coast. Economically, the town is supported by trade and tourism, agriculture and manufacturing. The unemployment rate is estimated at 60% (Ziphakamise 2024). Furthermore, Port Shepstone is home to approximately 70 000 people, most of whom are black African. The most common languages are English and IsiZulu.

This study used a qualitative research method. The study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect data from 10 young female passengers. The sample size was guided by the concept of 'information power', as developed by Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016). Rather than focusing on numerical adequacy, information power emphasises the quality, relevance and richness of the data concerning the study's objectives (Malterud et al. 2016; Morse 2015). According to the information power concept, a smaller sample may be sufficient if the participants are well positioned to provide rich, detailed insights on the phenomenon under investigation, the research question is specific, and the data collected are of high quality (Malterud et al. 2016). While there are no universally accepted standards

for sample size in qualitative research (Aguboshim 2021), a range of 1–20 participants is commonly recommended, particularly for narrative inquiry, phenomenology and case study designs (Boddy 2016; Malterud et al. 2016; Subedi 2021). Creswell and Poth (2017) also suggest that qualitative sample sizes may vary from 1 to 30 participants, depending on the specific qualitative approach employed and the depth of inquiry required. The study sample of 10 participants therefore falls within accepted parameters for qualitative studies of this kind.

Table 1 shows the profile of participants.

The study was designed to include women aged 18–35; however, the actual participants ranged in age from 22 to 30 (see Table 1). According to the South African National Youth Policy (2020–2030), the youth age group is defined as 15–35 years. For ethical reasons, individuals aged 15–17 were excluded from the study, as they are minors. This study therefore adopts the 18–35 age bracket to frame the category of 'young women'. This has been considered as a limitation, as the actual age range does not include ages 18–21 or 31–35. 'High school' in Table 1 refers to participants whose highest level of completed education was matric. These participants were not currently in high school at the time of the study. 'Undergraduate' in Table 1 refers to participants whose highest level of education was a diploma or a bachelor's degree.

In this study, the 10 young women aged 18–35 were purposively selected, all of whom had regular experiences using public transport in Port Shepstone. While purposive sampling does not aim for representativeness, it is appropriate when the goal is to capture detailed accounts of a specific group's lived experiences. The interviews generated in-depth narratives that reflected a high degree of relevance to the research aims. Malterud et al. (2016) shed light on how the concept of information power has emerged as a valuable alternative to the traditional notion of saturation based on the five key factors that contribute to information power, which are 'study aim, sample specificity, use of theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy'. To reduce bias, the researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency, quoted participants directly, and kept researcher notes to reflect on possible personal influence. The interviews were also audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing what was actually said, rather than what the

**TABLE 1:** Profile of participants.

Participant	Age (years)	Highest level of education	Employment status
Participant 1	23	Undergraduate	Employed
Participant 2	24	Undergraduate	Employed
Participant 3	24	High school	Employed
Participant 4	22	High school	Unemployed
Participant 5	26	Undergraduate	Unemployed
Participant 6	34	Undergraduate	Employed
Participant 7	20	Undergraduate	Employed
Participant 8	30	Undergraduate	Employed
Participant 9	33	High school	Employed
Participant 10	30	High school	Unemployed

researchers thought was said. These recordings allowed for later review to check for interviewer influence. To make sure the results reflected the participants and not just the researchers, we included many direct quotes from the women themselves.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Bryman and Bell (2017) emphasise that thematic analysis is the most appropriate tool where people's opinions, experiences, knowledge or values are explored. As the themes were predetermined from the literature, a deductive thematic approach was followed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. In Step 1, the researchers familiarised themselves with the collected data by reading all transcripts multiple times to understand the depth, tone and context of the participants' experiences. Initial notes and impressions were recorded during this phase to support later stages of coding. In Step 2, initial codes were generated by systematically identifying significant features across the dataset. These codes reflected recurring issues, such as experiences of harassment, fear, infrastructure concerns and coping strategies.

In Step 3, the researchers collated codes into potential themes, identifying broader patterns that captured the essence of the participants' narratives. These themes went beyond simple categorisation and sought to interpret the deeper meanings embedded in young women's transport experiences. Step 4 involved reviewing and refining these themes to ensure internal consistency and alignment with the full dataset. This step included re-examining all coded extracts within each theme and assessing their coherence, as well as evaluating the themes of the overall data to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants' perspectives.

In Step 5, the themes were clearly defined and named, paying particular attention to articulating their core meanings and boundaries. Each theme included a detailed description to highlight its contribution to the overall narrative of mobility injustice and safety concerns. Finally, in Step 6, the themes were brought into a coherent analytic narrative, supported by relevant participant quotes. This final write-up aimed to present a rich account of the young women's lived experiences with public transport in Port Shepstone.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg and CBE Research Ethics Committee (No. 2024-TSCM024).

## Results

This study employed a deductive thematic analysis, where five main themes were identified based on literature. Rather than emerging purely from the data, the themes were predetermined, reflecting key constructs, such as mobility justice, gendered spatial dynamics, intersectionality and coping strategies. The

**TABLE 2:** Coding table.

Main theme	Sub-themes	Frequency (out of 10)
1. Assault and harassment	1.1 Groping, verbal abuse, body shaming, power imbalance, culture of impunity	10/10
2. Fear and insecurity	2.1 Taxi wars, fear of male drivers, fear of darkness, lack of policing	10/10
3. Service quality	3.1 Cost of minibus taxis, route limitations and affordability trade-offs	8/10
4. Coping strategies	4.1 Behavioural modifications, hiding valuables, de-escalation strategies	10/10
5. Transport infrastructure	5.1 Poor roads, non-functioning lights, inaccessible areas, vulnerability in dark environments	10/10

analysis was guided by these theoretical lenses while allowing for flexibility in how participants' narratives shaped the interpretation of each theme. A summary of the coding structure used in the analysis is provided in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that participants consistently reported problems that fell within the themes identified. Although all participants referred to the key themes reported in Table 2, not every quotation could be included in the article. The researchers selected illustrative extracts that were particularly representative, while recognising that similar sentiments were expressed more broadly across participants.

## Assault and harassment of female passengers

Theme 1 captures the everyday violations of women's bodily autonomy and dignity through sexual harassment, intimidation and verbal abuse, primarily within the minibus taxi system. Participants reported groping, unwanted advances and insulting comments that reflected deeper gender power imbalances in transport spaces.

One participant narrated her experience:

'I was in a taxi coming from town, and I was sitting next to a drunk passenger. He kept complimenting me, saying that I look beautiful and he has cows that he can send to my parents. I tried to tell him that I am not interested and the next thing I knew was his hands on my thighs and when I tried to remove them, he told me that I am not even that attractive.' (Participant 10)

This incident illustrates both sexual harassment and the invasion of personal space, which several participants described as commonplace.

One participant recalled a driver groping her at a taxi rank:

'I was standing outside of the taxi as I did not want to seat at the backseat, and then I felt a hand on my bum, and it was one of the taxi drivers. And he looked at me like I deserved it and it was my fault because I have a big bum and I was wearing a tight dress. His friends or other taxi drivers did not say anything, while others laughed.' (Participant 7)

The reaction of the taxi driver reflects victim-blaming and body shaming, reinforced by bystander inaction. The aspect of body shaming: that is, body size or clothing does not give anyone the right to touch someone inappropriately.

Drivers either laughed or remained silent, indicating a culture of impunity and encouraging such bad behaviour.

Other participants observed that harassment can occur at any time:

‘Women are always victims of harassment whether it is catcalling, groping or rape and it does not matter what time is it. It can occur in a full taxi or empty taxi and during peak or off-peak hours.’ (Participant 3)

The implication here is that women are consistently facing threats regardless of the time of day or occupancy levels of the taxi. This highlights the pervasive nature of the problem in Port Shepstone.

One referred to the ugly rivalry between transport service providers she encountered:

‘When you use Uber or Bolt in Port Shepstone, you use it at your own risk. For instance, requesting [a pick-up] in an area near minibus taxi drivers or metered taxi drivers, both you and the Uber driver might get assaulted by the taxi drivers.’ (Participant 1)

Participant 1 is referring to the ugly rivalry between transport service providers. That is, metered and minibus taxi drivers fight with ride-hailing drivers. This even extends to passengers using a ride-hail service, raising the risk of physical assault (or worse) by taxi drivers.

Furthermore, power dynamics between male drivers and female passengers limit women’s agency. One discussed the power dynamics during interactions with taxi drivers:

‘When I am being greeted by a taxi driver, I always make sure that I reply in a manner that is respectful. Because if I do not, I might get called names by him and other taxi drivers, or the taxi driver will make feel uncomfortable when I am in his taxi. For instance, he will stare at me using the rear-view mirror for the whole trip.’ (Participant 9)

Clearly, there is a culture of ‘toe the line’ or else, prevailing in the minibus taxi industry. Prolonged staring instils a sense of fear among young female passengers. Prolonged staring is a form of harassment.

One of the participants narrated how the driver exhibited verbal aggression, intimidation and a dismissive attitude towards her:

‘I was in a taxi going home and the driver was driving at a high speed and one of the ladies in the taxi complained and told the driver that can they please reduce the speed they are driving in because we are not in a hurry. The driver looked at her using the rear-view mirror and told her that she must buy her own car and then she would drive at any speed she wants. Afterwards he increased the speed and the lady missed her stop. He did not care because it looked it like he did it on purpose.’ (Participant 4)

As the driver intentionally increased speed and skipped the passenger’s stop, this indicates a disregard for passenger safety, a deliberate inconveniencing of the passenger and

the use of fear to bully passengers into submission. This incident demonstrates the power imbalance between passengers and drivers.

These experiences illustrate overlapping sub-themes, including sexual harassment, verbal abuse, intimidation and a broader culture of impunity that enables such behaviour. Together, these patterns highlight how gender-based violence in public transport is not random but systemic, shaped by power dynamics, social norms and a lack of accountability within the minibus taxi industry.

## Fear and insecurity

This theme highlights the emotional toll of commuting in an environment where danger is often present, whether from violence, theft or harassment. For many young women in Port Shepstone, public transport is not merely a mobility service but a space fraught with unpredictable risks and survival strategies. Fear and insecurity were recurring emotions tied to various contexts, including taxi-related violence, physical assaults, being alone with male drivers and the lack of visible law enforcement.

One major source of fear is taxi violence and wars. Participants described how rivalries between minibus taxi operators create a deadly environment for both drivers and innocent passengers:

‘Just recently, two innocent women were killed because they were in a taxi and they got caught in the crossfire. One now prays when they leave the house that they do not get shot, as taxi wars have become a normal thing and that can occur at any time without knowing.’ (Participant 8)

The normalisation of violence was echoed by Participant 3:

‘Taxi wars in Port Shepstone are normal because the taxi drivers are always fighting for the taxi routes, and you even get advice from your friends that you should not sit in the seat behind the taxi driver just in case he gets shot.’ (Participant 3)

Participants also expressed fears related to mugging and physical assault, particularly during early morning or late evening commutes:

‘Because it gets less safe as it is dark and I fear getting mugged or being robbed, as I have been mugged before.’ (Participant 7, 20 years, undergraduate, employed)

A strong thread of anxiety emerged around being alone with male drivers, especially in private or ride-hailing services:

‘Using metered taxis or Ubers is still not safe because I am still a woman and I am alone in the taxi with the male driver, and everyone has heard stories of women being raped or harassed by their Uber drivers.’ (Participant 1)

Similarly, Participant 3 highlights the potential risks of being alone with a driver early in the morning:

‘Having to take taxis early in the morning is always a risk as I sometimes find myself having to be the first one in taxi alone with the taxi driver.’ (Participant 3)

The presence of law enforcement helps:

'When there are police officers at the taxi rank ... criminals are nowhere to be seen. It makes one feel safe.' (Participant 1)

Thus, visible policing deters criminals. Overall, the participants expressed a pervasive sense of fear when using ride-hailing services, taxi cabs or minibus taxis because of taxi violence, aggressive drivers, harassment, intimidation and a lack of visible policing.

In summary, this theme reveals how fear is embedded in daily transport routines. Because of the risk of taxi-related violence, male aggression or crime in unlit areas, female passengers internalise a constant sense of vulnerability. The absence of visible protection from authorities reinforces their exposure to harm, pushing women to rely on informal strategies to avoid danger, often at the cost of comfort, time or dignity.

### Service quality

Participants frequently reflected on the quality of transport services related to reliability, affordability, availability and route coverage. While minibus taxis were often perceived as more dependable and offering broader route options than municipal buses, they were also described as more expensive, creating a trade-off between cost and convenience.

Several women acknowledged that minibus taxis were more reliable for their daily commuting needs, especially in areas with limited bus routes:

'The municipal buses are cheaper; however, the buses only use one route. I do not have access to other means of public transportation, so I rely heavily on taxis. And when taxis are not available, I am unable to go to work.' (Participant 6)

This quote reflects a key issue of availability and dependence. Many women do not choose minibus taxis based on preference but because there are no viable alternatives.

Cost was a major concern, particularly for women with limited incomes:

'Having to take two taxis to my place of employment and with the high costs of taxis is not good because of the low income I receive.' (Participant 6)

Overall, a limited and intermittent bus service results in a dependence on minibus taxis. Others observed that additional fees were sometimes charged for non-standard trips:

'Taxis are expensive compared to municipal buses. When I wake up late or get home late, I pay an additional R40 to the taxi driver to drop me in front of my gate.' (Participant 7)

These experiences reveal how affordability is compromised in favour of accessibility and safety, with minibus taxi drivers imposing unofficial surcharges during off-peak hours or for personal drop-offs.

Overall, women's experiences of service quality in Port Shepstone highlight a difficult balancing act between affordability and reliability. While municipal buses offer lower fares, their limited routes and poor availability force women to rely heavily on the more accessible, yet costly, minibus taxi system. The modal choice is shaped more by necessity than choice, underscoring systemic issues in the design and delivery of public transport services in the area.

### Coping strategies

Faced with persistent threats in public transport environments, young women in Port Shepstone have developed a range of coping strategies to protect themselves. These strategies reflect a constant state of hyper-awareness, driven by the need to reduce the risk of harassment, theft, or intimidation. For many, navigating public transport resembles moving through a space of risk where self-regulation and self-protection become necessary survival tools.

One of the most common strategies involves modifying appearance and behaviour to avoid drawing unwanted attention. As one participant explained:

'Everyone knows that you should not wear revealing clothes in town or at the taxi rank because it invites stares or whistling from the commuters and driver. And in some cases, the women get touched *without their consent*.' (Participant 1)

This reflects broader societal attitudes where women are expected to monitor their clothing choices to avoid being harassed. The fear of being blamed for their victimisation leads many to adopt a more conservative dress code and subdued demeanour when commuting.

In addition to appearance, women take proactive steps to safeguard their belongings, Participant 4 opined:

'I always make sure that when I leave the house or when I am in town, the zip of my bag is at the front and I can see it.' (Participant 4)

Similarly, another described more concealed methods of protecting valuables:

'I put all my important small belongings in my bra, which include my phone, ID, money and bank cards, so that if they take my bag, I know that I have everything important on me.' (Participant 6)

Some women also engage in de-escalation techniques when confronted with unwanted advances. Another participant shared her response to being propositioned:

'When being asked out by a taxi driver or commuter and I am not interested, I always give them my phone number to avoid being called names. And later, I will block them on my phone.' (Participant 3)

Although this may appear to concede to inappropriate behaviour, it serves as a strategic response to avoid potential escalation or retaliation in a context where women often lack formal recourse.

Together, these coping mechanisms reveal how deeply embedded insecurity and fear are in the everyday mobility of women in Port Shepstone. From modifying one's dress code to hiding valuables and strategically engaging with harassers, women are forced to adapt to an unsafe system rather than being protected by it. These strategies are not empowering acts of agency but rather survival responses to structural vulnerability. It reflects the profound mobility injustice experienced by female commuters.

### Transport infrastructure

Participants consistently highlighted the limitations of transport infrastructure in Port Shepstone as a key factor contributing to unsafe and unequal access to mobility. Poor road conditions and inadequate public lighting were identified as structural barriers that restrict the availability and safety of transport options for young female commuters.

One of the most pressing concerns was the condition of the road network, particularly in periurban and township areas:

'In my area we only have access to minibus taxis because of small (narrow) and terrible condition (of roads, I doubt that municipal buses will be able to drive here if they were to be allocated.' (Participant 2)

This quote illustrates how poor infrastructure not only limits transport modes but also reinforces dependency on minibus taxis. The result is a system where women often lack safe, reliable and affordable alternatives.

Another major concern was the lack of functional lighting, both at taxi ranks and in residential areas. One participant described the risks associated with commuting at night or in the early morning hours:

'The taxi rank's lights have not been working for a while, and they make it unsafe for one to use the taxi rank at night, as you cannot see properly. The taxi rank is also home to criminals at night. Even in my neighbourhood the streetlights are not working, and this makes the taxi stops to be dark and thieves are able to mug you ... knowing that you are not going to be able to identify them.' (Participant 6)

Poor lighting is not just an inconvenience but a direct threat to personal safety, creating conditions where criminal activity is more likely and visibility is compromised. Similarly, Participant 3 described the vulnerability of walking to work early in the morning in complete darkness, fearing attack in areas without functioning streetlights:

'I sometimes have to wake up early to get to work because when I get to town, I need to walk to my workplace. And I am sometimes scared because in the mornings it is dark and there are no streetlights in my area.' (Participant 3)

The issue of lights extends to streetlights. The lack of these not only compromises the safety of commuters but also the community at large.

These accounts reveal how the infrastructure and safety are inextricably linked. The physical environment constitutes narrow roads, unlit pathways and unsafe taxi ranks, which heighten women's exposure to danger and limit their transport choices. In this way, transport infrastructure in Port Shepstone is not only underdeveloped but also contributes to the structural exclusion of women from safe, dignified mobility.

### Discussion

This study explored the public transport experiences of young women in Port Shepstone and uncovered deeply rooted safety challenges that shape their daily mobility. Five main themes emerged, each highlighting the intersection between gender, space, infrastructure and power. These findings reflect broader socio-cultural norms and expose the limitations of South Africa's transport and gender policy in protecting women commuters.

The study found that assault and harassment in the public transport space can take many forms, including physical, verbal or emotional acts, such as sexual assaults, groping, unwanted advances, aggressive staring, verbal threats and intimidation. Women's underreporting of assaults and harassment is compounded by the lack of specific laws in many countries to protect women in the public transport space (Chowdhury 2023; Sil et al. 2023; Sil et al. 2024b). Without reporting, the true extent of women's assault and harassment remains hidden and efforts to create safety solutions become hampered.

The study found that the behaviour of drivers and the culture of silence regarding harassment create a hostile public transport space for women, especially young female commuters in Port Shepstone. The constant threat of assault and harassment among young female transport users also creates a cycle of fear of using public transport. Women's mental and emotional well-being is significantly impacted once they have experienced sexual assault or harassment (Forsdike et al. 2024). During the study period, there were no reports of sexual assault (i.e. rape) by the participants. However, there were incidents of sexual harassment, verbal harassment, aggressive staring and intimidation experienced by the participants.

The findings also highlight the role of social norms in society. It seems that participants have normalised the aggressive behaviour of minibus taxi drivers and disrespectful behaviour by men in public transport spaces. The study found that drivers are often rude and aggressive towards female passengers. This is consistent with Eagle and Kwele's (2021) research, where young female passengers often experience unacceptable behaviour from Johannesburg drivers. In Japan, girls in school uniforms are vulnerable to sexual violence on commuter trains (Chowdhury 2023). Chowdhury (2023) highlights a complex interplay between cultural perceptions and societal norms surrounding the fetishisation of girls in school uniforms and how it contributes to the objectification and exploitation of young females.

The study also found that participants do not feel safe being alone with a driver, especially when using ride-hailing services and metered taxis. The findings align with Duri's (2023) study, where women expressed apprehension about riding alone with ride-hail drivers because of media reports and a sense of vulnerability in isolated situations.

It is important to acknowledge that harassment of women is not unique to South Africa's taxi industry. Research highlights that harassment occurs across workplaces, homes, schools and other transport modes, including rail and bus systems (Chowdhury 2023; Conley et al. 2022; Cortina & Areguin 2021; Eagle & Kwele 2021). The taxi industry, however, provides a particularly stark case because of its dominance in the transport system and the relative lack of oversight compared to more formal modes such as Gautrain. The experiences reported in this study therefore reflect not only failures within the taxi industry but also deeper societal issues such as entrenched patriarchal norms, weak law enforcement and limited political accountability. Systemic factors shape the behaviour of individuals in public spaces and contribute to the normalisation of harassment across many areas of life.

This study highlights how some women pray to God before leaving home for their safety in public transport spaces. The finding reflects potential trauma in some women as they feel the need to pray before leaving the house for a routine activity. This finding aligns with Eagle and Kwele's (2021) study in Johannesburg, where women use prayer as a coping mechanism and for protection against violence in the public transport space.

The public transport space across many cities in South Africa is complex and can easily transition from safe to dangerous. South African cities grapple with the complex nature of public transport (Moghayedi et al. 2023; Thomas 2016). A prime example is the ongoing challenge of taxi violence that threatens the safety of commuters and other road users. On 29 February 2024, a student from the University of Johannesburg was killed in a drive-by shooting between two taxi owners, while another student was seriously injured (Ngcuka 2024). This incident highlights the unsettling effect violence has on the public transport space.

This research found that participants are highly aware of taxi violence that can erupt in public transport space. It also appears that participants may have normalised experiencing taxi violence, where young female passengers have personally experienced taxi violence and been left traumatised in the City of Johannesburg (Eagle & Kwele 2021).

The taxi violence in Port Shepstone is documented in the media (Mdletshe 2010). Taxi violence has a significant negative impact on the communities at large. Commuters are often left stranded when taxi violence erupts. When minibus

taxi drivers shut down operations, communities are affected. For example, in 2024 some schools were closed because of taxi violence, and 26 minibus taxi drivers were arrested over taxi violence (Mzobe 2024).

Despite drivers' harassment, female transport users are forced to use minibus taxis because of the lack of bus routes and late-night options but have to pay a premium for basic safety in Port Shepstone. Women who earn a low income compared to those who earn high incomes are more vulnerable to unsafe transport options, especially at night (Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). In India, women with high incomes use more expensive modes of transport, such as cab services, while women with low incomes have limited options (Mahambare & Dhanaraj 2022).

The safety precautions adopted by females demonstrate their resilience in the public transport space. However, in Port Shepstone, the measures young female transport users take to protect themselves underscore the systematic failure of the current public system. The study found that when using public transport, women resort to wearing a certain style to avoid harassment; however, this approach fails to address the root cause of the problem. Women are advised not to wear clothes that reveal their bodies (Niboye 2023), but the advice to change their clothing style is pointless. Instead of burdening women commuters with the sole responsibility of keeping safe, perpetrators should be held accountable for their actions. Ison and Matthewson (2023) advocate that the concept of 'primary prevention' stops violence and harassment of women occurring from the onset by effectively addressing the root cause.

Despite these safety innovations, women remain responsible for their safety, while the perpetrators evade accountability (Sil et al. 2023). In Japan, a mobile application, 'Digi Police', is used to combat harassment in the public transport space (Chowdhury 2023). Other measures adopted by some countries for the same purpose include 'women only' buses or vehicles and separate train carriages (Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). 'Women-only carriages' were implemented in Japan in the 2000s; however, some women do not find them useful (Chowdhury 2023).

The study also found that malfunctioning lights in taxi ranks pose a safety risk for women, especially at night. Noor and Iamtrakul (2023) found that poor transport infrastructure often promotes violence against women, for example, the lack of street lighting, poorly spaced bus stops and poor seating arrangements (Niboye 2023). Poor lighting in transport facilities can prevent women from using these places, especially at night (Uteng et al. 2019). Ayyoub and Aldeek (2025) recommend bus stop upgrades with lighting and accessibility for all users, especially the elderly, people living with disability and women.

## Limitations

This study focused on a small group of young women in a specific town, using a qualitative, purposive sampling approach. While purposive sampling does not aim for representativeness, it is appropriate when the goal is to capture detailed accounts of a specific group's lived experiences. To reduce this limitation, researchers collected in-depth detailed accounts that allowed them to identify recurring themes rather than relying on isolated experiences. Purposive sampling ensured that the voices of young female commuters most affected were highlighted. While this provided rich, in-depth data, the findings are not generalisable to all geographic contexts or demographic groups. In addition, the study did not include the perspectives of male passengers or transport operators, which could offer a more complete picture of the gender dynamics at play.

The reliance on 10 in-depth interviews is both a strength and a limitation of the study. The interviews allowed for detailed exploration of women's lived experiences of mobility and safety in Port Shepstone but do not provide information on how widespread these challenges are among all commuters. As such, the findings of this study highlight the types of problems women face rather than their statistical prevalence. Future research could build on this study by combining qualitative approaches with larger-scale surveys or comparative studies across multiple towns to better capture the scale and generalisability of the issues identified.

The study was designed to include women aged 18–35; however, the actual participants ranged in age from 22 to 30 years. The study did not include participants aged 18–21 or 31–35, even though these groups fell within the intended age range. While this does not undermine the relevance of the findings, it may mean that the perspectives of those at transitional life stages or women at middle adulthood are absent. Future research could include a wider age spread to explore whether these groups experience public transport differently.

## Future research

Further studies could explore the experiences of women across different towns and provinces in South Africa to examine variations in safety, access and infrastructure. Comparative research involving minibuss drivers and policy stakeholders could provide insight into the systemic issues that reproduce unsafe transport environments. Finally, more work is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-sensitive transport interventions at a policy and operational level.

## Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of a small group of young women commuters in Port Shepstone, shedding light

on the ways gendered risks and vulnerabilities shape their daily mobility. The findings show that public transport spaces are not merely fraught with physical safety concerns but also serve as areas for gender-based violence, harassment and systemic intimidation. Women are left feeling powerless and unprotected, highlighting how the existing transport infrastructure and social norms fail to safeguard their basic rights. These daily challenges are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including socio-economic status, gender identity, sexual orientation and the normalisation of aggressive behaviour by both drivers and male passengers (Nasrin & Chowdhury 2024; Noor & Iamtrakul 2023). While these insights are drawn from a narrow sample, they illustrate how structural neglect, fragmented governance and entrenched social norms combine to restrict women's mobility and undermine their rights.

The unsafe transport environment faced by women aligns closely with Sheller's (2018) theory of mobility justice, which emphasises that equitable access to movement must include safety, dignity and respect. The findings suggest that the systemic lack of safety measures in public transport spaces, coupled with inadequate policing and infrastructural neglect, creates an environment where women's mobility is constrained by fear and violence, as reported by participants in this study. The reliance on minibuss taxis because of poor road conditions and the absence of other viable transport options further exposes women in this study to the risk of harassment and violence. This aligns with the work of Moghayedi et al. (2023), who highlighted similar patterns in South African cities where infrastructure and service delivery gaps disproportionately affect women (Moghayedi et al. 2023).

The findings are also situated within the wider policy and governance framework. South Africa has had transport and gender equity policies in place for many years; however, participants' experiences suggest that their impact has been limited, partly because of weak implementation. As observed in existing literature, oversight of the taxi industry is fragmented across several actors, including the South African National Taxi Council (SANTACO), local municipalities, provincial governments and the National Department of Transport. Although systems exist for operating licences and route allocation, enforcement is often inconsistent and undermined by limited political will and weak accountability. These governance gaps create conditions in which unsafe practices can persist, leaving some commuters in this study feeling unprotected. The harassment and violence experienced by women in the taxi industry may reflect entrenched social norms as well as gaps in regulatory oversight, which, according to participants' accounts, leave women vulnerable. Addressing women's mobility injustice will require both cultural change and stronger institutional commitment to enforcing existing policies and regulations.

The accounts in this study point to normalisation of harassment in public transport spaces, which may reflect a broader social tolerance for gender-based violence, which undermines the

effectiveness of current transport policies (Eagle & Kwele 2021). Addressing these challenges may require not only physical improvements, such as better street lighting, visible policing and CCTV installations but also a fundamental shift in societal attitudes that currently allow such behaviour to persist. Programmes aimed at driver education and gender sensitivity are essential, maybe important, as they can play a role in reshaping public transport as a safer space for women. The findings from this study point to the need for a multifaceted approach that combines infrastructural upgrades with social interventions to challenge and change the cultural norms that tolerate harassment. Gender-sensitive planning should prioritise women's needs and safety concerns, as recommended by Ison and Matthewson (2023). Robust accountability mechanisms would also be important to implement to ensure that perpetrators are held responsible. Such measures could contribute to creating a transport system that is more just and inclusive, enabling women to participate more fully in economic and social life without fear of violence or discrimination. While the study is based on a small and context-specific sample, these insights highlight issues that merit further exploration in other settings as part of efforts to promote broader socio-economic equality and empowerment for women.

Although a wide range of challenges were identified, some issues emerged as particularly pressing in this context and may warrant prioritisation in policy and planning. Harassment and gender-based violence within the taxi industry were among the most commonly reported concerns and were described by participants as carrying severe personal and social consequences. Addressing these issues may require a change in the behaviour of drivers and visible enforcement mechanisms. A second priority relates to the absence of infrastructure such as street lighting and safe taxi ranks that can enhance safety, directly heightening women's vulnerability to crime and harassment. In addition, weak regulation and fragmented oversight of the taxi industry allow unsafe practices to persist. Without stronger accountability mechanisms at municipal, provincial and national levels, other interventions will remain limited in impact. Finally, affordability and service quality also restrict women's mobility in this study. Together, these priorities indicate that improving safety and regulation must precede and accompany broader service improvements if women's mobility rights are to be realised, especially within the context explored in this study.

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### Authors' contributions

B.D. contributed to the conceptualisation and writing up of the original draft. T.M. reviewed and edited the manuscript. A.G. reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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## Data availability

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