



## The lived experiences of women workers in Africa's transport sector: Reflections from Abuja, Cape Town and Tunis

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Gender  
Road transport  
Patriarchy  
Affective atmospheres  
Action research  
Customer-facing roles

### ABSTRACT

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted 2019–2022 in three quite diverse city regions - Abuja, Cape Town and Tunis - to understand women's lived experiences of work in the road transport sector. The strength of connection between male identity and motor-mobility in Africa is ubiquitous and has rarely been questioned by transport sector actors. Women are still largely absent from the story, constrained at least partly by hegemonic norms of femininity and an 'affective atmosphere' that deters female entry. However, there are occasional cases across Africa where women have dared to disrupt this masculinist enterprise, either as employees or entrepreneurs. This study explores and compares women transport workers' everyday experiences, drawing principally on in-depth interviews with those in customer-facing roles (taxi and bus drivers, bus conductors). Relevant public sector organisations and major transport employers were also consulted, while focus groups with community groups of men and women explored their attitudes to women employed as transport workers, and with school-girls investigated their career aspirations and views regarding employment in the sector. A final section looks to the future, post-COVID-19. Although new opportunities occasionally emerge for women, they need much more support, not only in terms of skills training, but also through flexible working opportunities, union recognition and action, microfinance and financial management training. This support is essential in order to expand the visibility of women transport workers and thus make the wider transport milieu less overwhelmingly male and more welcoming to women transport users.

### 1. Introduction

Globally, transport is an overwhelmingly male-dominated sector, but nowhere is that dominance more glaringly obvious, even to the casual observer, than in Africa (Ng and Acker, 2020; Porter, 2008; Porter and Omwega, 2022). The strength of connection between male identity and motor-mobility is ubiquitous across Africa – north as well as south of the Sahara. Men not only dominate vehicle ownership and operations but set the whole atmosphere within which women who need to travel must negotiate their journeys. Consequently, travel is viewed by many

women – especially young women - as a hazardous affair, with potential threats ranging from theft and verbal harassment to actual physical harm. A growing body of work is demonstrating how severely this limits African women's access to services and livelihoods and threatens their wider well-being (Grieco et al., 1996, Venter et al., 2007, Salon and Gulyani, 2010, Eagle and Kwele, 2019, Vanderschuren et al., 2019, Martin, 2021, Porter, 2011, Porter et al., 2017, 2018). By contrast, we know little about the experiences of women employed in Africa's transport sector. With this significant research gap in mind, in early 2019 we commenced a three year multidisciplinary study in three cities,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2023.103695>

Received 28 February 2023; Received in revised form 21 July 2023; Accepted 1 September 2023

Available online 9 September 2023

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Abuja, Cape Town and Tunis. (A complementary strand, not reported in this paper, explored women's experiences as transport users, Porter et al., 2021, 2022, Murphy et al., 2023).

Working from a specifically feminist perspective (and employing this within an action research approach outlined in Section 2.2 below), one of our key objectives has been to interrogate, document and compare the everyday embodied experiences of those few brave and intrepid women transport workers we encountered. Taking an ethnographic approach focused on narratives and repertoires of performative practice (Butler, 1990), we also pay attention to the local cultural, political and economic contexts that are constantly at play in each local transport landscape. This intense interplay of elements – bodies, technologies, time, place – is critical in the shaping of an 'affective atmosphere' that women workers encounter and must engage with on a daily basis as they suffer exclusion and subordination in the public sphere (Walby, 1990: 178). Those who fail to 'do gender' that is seen as appropriate for the context concerned, as West and Zimmerman observe (1987: 146), 'may be called to account' (for their character, motives, and predispositions). Following Anderson (2009:78), we are intrigued by the nebulous ambiguities that surround the term atmosphere and 'the collective affects that envelope and press upon life', noting with Bissel (2010) its particular aptness when reflecting on mobile lives. The concept of affective atmospheres that 'fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze' (Bohme, 1993, page 114, cited in Bissel, 2010: 272) encapsulates so many of the experiences that women transport workers have related to us. Harassment, verbal and non-verbal, albeit not always of a specifically sexual character, is pervasive (Foley et al., 2022).

From an analysis of grounded experiences set in individual city contexts we progress to a comparative review, reflecting on commonalities (and occasional divergencies) across the three cities and then with reference to other low income country contexts. At this stage we consider the extent to which commonalities may be indicative of a broader patterning of affective atmospheres and associated underlying patriarchal practices that envelop and press against any improvement in women's access to transport sector work.

The structure of the paper reflects this approach. Following some relevant preliminary background and a description of our methodology, we examine women's experiences as transport sector workers within the specific context of each of the three study cities. The focus here is particularly on women working in customer-facing roles prior to the pandemic. A subsequent section moves to comparison of women's experiences across the three cities in this pre-pandemic phase and wider reflections of women workers' experiences in other low income country contexts. We conclude with thoughts regarding the positioning of women workers in future transport landscapes, reflecting on the conditions that have accompanied re-emergence from the pandemic and the potential for remaking a post-COVID transport environment with an affective atmosphere that is more conducive to promoting women's potential as transport workers.

## 2. Background to the research

### 2.1. Women and men at work in Africa's transport sector

Women's employment in transport globally has received only limited attention until recently, not least because of the very low numbers involved and their associated lack of visibility. In many countries in the Global North, women's employment in this traditionally male occupational domain has been gradually expanding (Turnbull, 2013; Ng and Acker, 2020; Wright et al., 2022), despite significant resistance to female encroachment (Foley et al., 2022). In Africa, however, women are constrained not only by the overwhelmingly masculine affective atmosphere of the sector (a factor that still deters some women globally), but also by hegemonic norms of femininity widely in evidence across the continent. These norms that confer substantial care responsibilities, while limiting access to skills, capital and networks, shape women's self-

understandings and help relegate them to peripheral interstices in the sector – characteristically as sex workers, cooked food suppliers or porters (Chakravarty et al., 2017; Porter and Omwega, 2022).

The dominance of men across Africa's transport sector is ubiquitous – they are not only the principal transport owners, operators, mechanics, vulcanisers, pump attendants, vehicle loaders and transport regulators, but also (mostly) design and construct the roads and tracks on which transport runs. So far as transport services (the focus of this paper) are concerned, this can be traced back to the colonial era when, across Africa, informal motorised transport opportunities first opened up for local entrepreneurs. The mechanics of early motor transportation, the physical strength required of drivers in the absence of power steering, financial resource issues, and prevailing gender stereotypes promoted by colonial officialdom, all combined to firmly embed male dominance in the transport sector from the 1920s (as Hart, 2016: 100–101 describes for Ghana). Reconfiguration of transport services over the ensuing century has not fundamentally changed this situation.

Literature certainly attests to the continuing challenges Africa's male transport workers face, from rent-seeking by police and other transport officialdom to political manoeuvring, intense (sometimes violent) competition from other operators (formal and informal) and the high incidence of traffic accident fatalities (Gibbs, 2014; Rizzo, 2017; Doherty, 2017; Ehebrecht and Lenz, 2018; Agbiboa, 2018). The informal transport sector that dominates in Africa remains, in essence, a place where many relatively capital-poor, low-skilled men come together in a precarious environment to try to exploit a niche that is still widely perceived to offer promise of autonomy and status (including the mobility-facilitated potential to attract desirable young women as girlfriends, described for instance by Potgieter et al., 2012). Individual performances of male bravado (Rink, 2018) are commonly supported through solidarity with other (male) workers in the sector, including through unionization.

Inevitably, the toxic culture of aggressive behaviour that characterises the sector has set an overwhelmingly male 'affective atmosphere' that women transport users find challenging to navigate (as Martin, 2021 describes in Gauteng). At the same time, the low level of women's visibility as workers in the sector may well be reinforcing women users' perceived and actual vulnerability. As our findings demonstrate, it is a brave woman who dares to enter this highly gendered transport arena in Africa as a worker, particularly in customer-facing roles. They not only have to engage and negotiate with a substantial male customer base, but also with male worker colleagues, many of whom view the transport sector as their domain, and their place within it as a personal fiefdom. Most women we encountered in customer-facing roles only ventured into the sector in desperation when no other work opportunities were available. They are concentrated in the lowest paid transport work, notably as porters, cleaners, conductors and ticket-sellers. However, a few have been able to manoeuvre themselves into potentially more lucrative roles, principally as taxi or bus drivers. There are other, somewhat wealthier women who have managed to put together funds to purchase a vehicle as a business opportunity, but our field data indicates that they employ male drivers, not women.

A literature exploring women workers' experiences in the transport sector in Africa and other parts of the Global South is only gradually emerging. It is overwhelmingly urban in focus and mostly qualitative in approach, because so few women are employed in the sector in any research location. Published research includes studies of lorry drivers and taxi drivers in South Africa (Khosa, 1997; Naysmith and Rubincam, 2012), taxi drivers in Mexico (Berrones-Sanz and Araiza-Diaz, 2019; Hiramatsu, 2021) and Iran (Beigi et al., 2020), a broad review of gender employment issues in urban transport in Nairobi (Carter et al., 2020), and another broad study encompassing five major Global South cities (Bangkok, Bogota, Cape Town, Mexico City, Nairobi) (Wright, 2018). Prevailing themes emerging from these works are the persistence of gender stereotypes that question women's abilities to work in the sector, the stresses of balancing long hours of work with caring demands at

home, the widespread incidence of violence and sexual harassment, and women's fears of safety that are exacerbated in the context of shift-work requirements and lack of appropriate restroom facilities. In essence, women firstly face high barriers to entry, and are then constrained in their ability to perform in it through physical and psychological harassment (Hiramatsu, 2021). Our ethnographic approach, discussed below, has enabled us to investigate, in some depth, how these themes have threaded through women's work-related experiences in three very diverse African contexts over a somewhat turbulent three-year period.

## 2.2. The study locations and methodology

The three city-regions selected for this study – Abuja, Cape Town and Tunis – reflect the authors' various prior field experiences and associated research networks, but also represent very different parts of the continent and contrast well in terms of their specific cultural, socio-economic and political environments. All are significant national seats of political and economic power and all have experienced substantial recent in-migration. Transport deficiencies prevail widely in all three, especially in low-income areas where there is high dependence on informal transport provision, but the precise configuration of the informal sector varies (as discussed below). In Tunis, in particular, government plays a more dominant role in transport provision across the city as a whole (through the parastatal Transtu) than is the case in either Abuja or Cape Town.

The research on women's work in the transport sector formed part of a wider project on women's engagement with transport. It involved an action research methodology in each city region incorporating academic and community-based research, some pilot interventions with women transport users and workers based on research findings, and meetings of the research team with local stakeholders (NGOs, relevant ministry staff, public and private sector transport operators and workers) at Country Consultative Groups (<https://transportandyoutheemploymentinafrica.com>). That work, conducted 2019–2022 by a multidisciplinary team, incorporating academic, community and NGO staff, provided valuable context for the women's transport employment research.

Methodology in the women's employment research component was essentially ethnographic in approach, with an emphasis on narratives and repertoires of practice. It commenced with in-depth interviews with women transport workers in each city, whether self-employed or working for others, in both the formal and informal sectors (Abuja 12; Tunis 19; Cape Town 11). We wanted to understand women's everyday experiences, including what they saw as the challenges and opportunities open to them in their work, but numbers interviewed were low, initially because of difficulties finding women from this small cohort, and then limited by the pandemic. Additional in-depth interviews took place in each city with male transport workers, alongside focus groups with community men and women in low-income neighbourhoods, to elicit views of women's employment in the sector. Other interviews (c. 12 per city) involved (mostly male) management staff of major transport operators and women and men in associated organisations (for instance, the Female Drivers' Association in Abuja). Participant observation occurred at locations where some women were working in the sector, and included a few informal mobile conversations with women drivers when conditions allowed. In order to explore the potential for bringing more women into the sector, discussion groups (a minimum of 6 per city) were also held with school-girls (c.12–17y) from low-income areas about their career aspirations and views regarding work in transport.

COVID-19 inevitably initially closed the opportunities for in-person research with women employed in the transport sector. Each city experienced a series of major lockdowns (commencing March 2020), which raised particular difficulties, not least ethical considerations in interviewing transport workers, even by phone, since many were extremely stressed. Those who were designated key workers were often exhausted and living in daily fear of contracting the disease, while those who lost their work and income were desperately searching for

alternative means of survival. Instead, we moved to media searches, focusing on building an archive of transport sector experiences in each city as reported in local newspapers and other media outlets (available at <https://XXX>). Subsequently, however, we were able to engage directly with more women transport workers (40 in Abuja, 27 in Cape Town, 6 in Tunis) through the pilot interventions that followed as the pandemic subsided (discussed in section 5).

Most interviews were conducted by locally-resident women researchers and research assistants (predominantly in Hausa and English in Abuja, Arabic in Tunis, Xhosa and English in Cape Town). Since the majority of women transport workers we met were taxi drivers, bus drivers or bus conductors, we focus on these groups in the discussion that follows.

## 3. Women's pre-pandemic transport experiences in the three study city-regions

### 3.1. Abuja

In Abuja, customer-facing work in the transport sector is challenging and potentially dangerous. Unsurprisingly, women transport workers are rare (except in basic pedestrian portage). The majority are bus conductors working for the Abuja Urban Mass Transit company, a parastatal, or union-employed ticket sellers in motor parks. We focus on the experiences of women bus conductors and the small number of women taxi drivers that we also managed to interview.

The women bus conductors are often widows who depend on this income for survival. Conditions are not ideal: conductors get just one week's training, and have no uniform, though they are able to take 3 months maternity leave. The company has no crèche, so some women leave babies still breast-feeding with women food vendors they know at the bus stops. Pay is sometimes delayed and, when received, amounts only to approximately half that of drivers, all of whom are now male (since the one female driver has recently resigned).

Work as a conductor is hard: they often have to leave home before 5 am in order to catch the staff bus. The early morning walk to reach a point where they can catch that bus is particularly dangerous - some reported being attacked on the way, with phones stolen and in one case attack with a machete. Sometimes they will then have to continue working through till 9 or 10 pm, so their children are already asleep by the time they arrive home. The buses are reportedly often overloaded (42 seated, 50 standing!) Male passengers may refuse to pay fares and sometimes call them prostitutes: perhaps unsurprisingly, one woman had recently been fired for fighting with passengers.

*'Sometimes you go to work (and) passengers will be angry with you, talking to you any how, insulting you... They once slapped me when I was even pregnant and I was not having power to revenge because my company said we should be patient ..... While (I was) standing on the door and calling passengers, the agberos (the taxi call-boys, who stand at the bus stops hoping to persuade customers into competing, more expensive male-driven taxis) will just buy pure water, sometimes kunu (local beer), and pour it on you.'* (Conductor 32y, married to a bus driver). Another conductor – a single woman – recounted how as a new employee, she was beaten by the taxi call-boys so badly that her employers had to take her to hospital. She has even had urine poured over her.

Women taxi and tricycle-taxi drivers are very rare; those we encountered mostly belonged to southern Nigerian ethnic groups. Entry into the informal taxi market is highly competitive and women drivers tend to face significant aggression, not just from male taxi drivers and male (and sometimes female) passengers, but also from the notorious taxi call boys (Agbiboa, 2018) and from family members concerned about their reputation. Some men refuse to enter their taxis. Nevertheless, they may at least have the advantage of more flexibility in their working days and, especially if they own the car they drive, the potential to access a good income. One, from a southern ethnic group (who hired her car and had been in business just one year) had managed, through

her earnings, to accumulate fees to send one daughter to university and another to secondary school. She talked of the particular hassle from the taxi call-boys at taxi stops, who try to get her to move on by threatening to remove her number plates. Another middle-aged woman faced similar harassment:

*'When I started initially (I) use to be shy ...the agberos (taxi call-boys) will intimidate me, but now even if they shout I will shout at them. (But I) am in love with driving, I have passion for driving. (My family) were not happy initially but at least they see I don't come to beg anybody.'* (38y. Earns c. N8,000 per day – about 14 GBP- but pays 2000 to the car owner).

This same woman told how she had been attacked by robbers: *'When they just entered (the car) - before I know they strangle my neck ....and collected everything I have with me that day ....when they held my neck I thought I was dying.'* On another occasion she was stopped by the local transport task force because her car wasn't painted the correct colour for a taxi. *'When they arrested me (they said) that the fine is 25,000 but .....I plead with them that this is what am doing to survive and feed my children so they just ask me to go and pay 5,000 Naira.'* Taxi drivers – male and female- are a regular target for thieves and officialdom hoping to collect bribes because they are on the streets with their cash earnings in the cab.

Male attitudes to women transport workers in Abuja are negative: only a few of the men we interviewed in four community focus groups (of mixed age, religion and ethnicity) had ever seen a woman taxi or Keke-NAPEP (tricycle-taxi) driver in Abuja, though some said they had seen them driving in southern Nigerian cities. No-one had encountered a female *okada* (motorcycle-taxi) driver, though this is a major transport mode in low-income areas of the city. A few spoke of women being capable as car drivers, possibly even more safety conscious than men, but there were common concerns that being *'fragile, most of them'*, or *'soft'*, they would find it difficult to cope with unpleasant customers and the rough motor park touts. They would not wish to see their own wife working as a driver, *'in the car roaming about'*. Other men spoke about women's childcare responsibilities and especially of the security issues and the dangers women would face if they had to work after dark (often a busy time of day for taxis): mugging, car-jacking, rape and women's perceived potential for promiscuity. Men of northern Nigerian ethnicity we interviewed were particularly negative, whether or not they were working in the sector themselves. One well-established Fulani motorcycle-taxi owner/driver summarised these concerns: *'(It) is not right for woman to be driving all round the city. For us our religion kicks against it... If I see any woman doing such (driving) job I will pity her husband that allow her...The devil is near and he will tempt her!'*

Those few men we interviewed with actual experience of working with women were slightly more sanguine but, even so, had reservations. One senior staff member of a bus company observed, *'Working with women you need tolerance... (it) is very difficult to sanction because (they) come with a lot of baggage... you need to have patience.'* By baggage he was referencing the wider family responsibilities that women workers are expected to fulfil.

### 3.2. Cape Town

In Cape Town - as in many South African cities – violence permeates the transport sector, formal and informal, as numerous interviews emphasised. Hijack, for instance, is an ever-present danger, particularly for women taxi-drivers. Even so, a few women have managed to build careers in the operational side of the business as drivers; some even report their enjoyment of this work and its challenges.

Entry into the taxi business is challenging for both men and women because of the difficulties involved in obtaining a government permit to operate and the heavy penalties incurred for driving without one. For women drivers, entry tends to come as a result of the unavailability of male family members to take on an established business. Not infrequently, especially in the townships, this is a direct result of the untimely death of the husband or father who previously operated it. Unfortunately, transfer of the taxi permit to the widow is reportedly a highly

contentious issue and may never occur due to the resistance of the male-dominated taxi unions that are expected to facilitate such transfers.

One such woman is Vera,<sup>3</sup> a woman in her late 40s, who commenced driving after her father was shot and badly disabled during the taxi wars.<sup>4</sup> There were no male siblings to take on the business so, though college educated, she has done so. In the early years she experienced much trouble, including from the traffic police and from male competitors who told her she should be at home in the kitchen. Her reaction was to fight back, *'I'm stronger than them.. I don't feel offended by their jokes; I'll put them right!.. I'm thinking of my father, the legacy of my father.'* At one point she had tried bus driving too, but didn't like the work environment, concluding *'I belong to the taxi'*. Even now, her day starts very early in order to earn enough money to feed the family: *'If you are a single parent, it does affect your life and you don't have a social life'*.

Another woman, now in her late 30s with three children, had taken over her father's township-based business due to the absence of male siblings and the cheating the family had experienced when employing male drivers. She elaborated on the various challenges, but also noted opportunities that taxi driving had brought to her:

*'The passengers are always amazed because they are not used to see women driving a taxi (in this township) but they do not give me any difficulty (unless drunk)... passengers are not much abusive compared to the people I'm working with.. men... They always perceive that the taxi business is for men and it belongs to them...(It) needs one to be brave.... The women I know..they don't want to drive...they perceive it as a man's job...(but) women are strong and they can conquer anything. It is just that they look down on themselves and they lack support from men...I enjoy being in the business...I know my daily route and there is no one to boss me around.'*

She observed that her job has become easier over time as she has gained confidence and the flexibility it offers is preferable to her previous employment in nursing because she can take time out for childcare and taking her children to school. Nevertheless, as with Vera, the challenges of operating in a sector overwhelmingly dominated by men have clearly been substantial. A small group of women minibus-taxi drivers interviewed at their union offices agreed that they are *'frightened every day'*. A woman student (without any licence) who borrows a brother's car and, on her way to school, regularly picks up 3 or 4 people she sees waiting for transport (thus gaining a small income), observed that she would never join the taxi industry: *'all these men have bruised egos, that is why they are so rude.'* Men interviewed in one of the township taxi associations run by the black community reinforced these impressions: given the high level of competition in the industry they stressed the need to recruit men who would ensure the survival of their association, being *'willing [to] join the violent fight when the time calls for it. Women tend to withdraw when things get this heated.'* This may explain why it seems to be even harder for black women to enter the taxi business than for women from the Cape Coloured community. One Xhosa woman observed, *'even women will look at you and ask, why are you doing this. We get trashed.'*

In the formal sector, meanwhile, there are some women employed as bus drivers: one of the major companies actively recruited women over the decade prior to the pandemic, offering initial training for those unable to drive, with an emphasis on recruiting school-leavers.<sup>5</sup> As with taxi driving, however, there can be many challenges, and the daily work regime is particularly hard because there is little flexibility. Eliza, a driver, who is a single mother in her mid-30s, presented this as a major concern given the demands of her young children: *'the baby... he had to wake up by himself, to wash himself and go to school... I get maybe a duty*

<sup>3</sup> All women's names are pseudonyms

<sup>4</sup> The turf wars fought between taxi associations and individual minibus taxi drivers in South Africa from the late 1980s

<sup>5</sup> Sadly, this internship/apprenticeship scheme was cut in the pandemic. Avenues such as these for young women are often the first to be cut during economic recession.



that is going to go out at maybe 5 o'clock up until 9, so I don't have time to go home...it was nice for me until I got these little ones.' She has already sent her older children to live with her mother-in-law in Eastern Cape due to the lack of reliable childcare available to her in the city. At this particular bus company, one of the management staff expressed his concerns regarding the challenges the work presents for women. Drivers have to start between 4 am and 6 am in the morning: 'Now when the children need her the most, she is not there... she starts working at 5 o'clock. She works until 8 or 9'clock. Now she's got a break... but the kids are gone to school already ....(and) at 2pm when the kids come out of school, that is when that driver needs to come back for her second shift and she only gets home at 8 o'clock in the night.... So you are really messing up the social structure of the house..... that is the problem that we have experienced and somehow these ladies make it work but it is a tough environment...(so) how hard should we push for female drivers because I know what happens in the background with the family. What is best for them; to have the money or to have a mother around?' Another suggested that 'it takes a special breed (of woman)', while a third reflected: 'Nobody wakes up wanting to be a bus driver...they don't want to particularly be in our industry, they just want a job.'

Male passengers present another challenge, while interactions with male workers who dominate the sector seem to depend more on the specific circumstances and the company concerned. Taxi driver Vera, whose account of driving was noted earlier, observed that when in the past she had worked as a bus driver, things had been difficult with male workers and passengers, 'men want to be bosses... they are rude, they don't trust you.. and the passengers don't trust you – they ask, are you the driver?!...Men gossip ... they feel offended we are going to take their jobs'. By contrast, Eliza emphasised that 'working with men here is so nice...'. Her experiences may be more positive because of recent company policy of zero tolerance for sexual harassment among staff and associated induction training for all drivers. However, Eliza still sometimes has challenges with male passengers as she noted wryly: "Sometimes when they go out, they will say: 'nice driving, you were driving like a man, I thought we were going to be late!'" Other challenges – stoning of buses by children, firing of buses during strikes, and armed robberies - are difficulties faced by all drivers. Despite all these problems and the concerns expressed by family members, Eliza emphasises: 'I really like driving...I am very happy.' Disappointingly, we had little success in eliciting a clear perspective of male views on women as transport workers in either formal or informal sectors in Cape Town beyond that of bus company administrators; violence seemingly throws a long shadow across the sector.

### 3.3. Tunisia

Many of the reflections relayed by customer-facing women workers in Abuja and Cape Town are echoed north of the Sahara in Tunisia. Women taxi drivers are rare in this city, where they not only face safety and security issues at work, but also strong disapprobation from family and the wider community, male and female (Murphy et al., 2023). Traditional Islamic cultural norms and values still prevail widely (as in many Abuja neighbourhoods), so it is mostly widowed and divorced women who pursue driving work: for them it offers income and independence. Interviews with two such women give a flavour of the pressures they face, and the determination with which they have continued to work, despite the challenging environment (which has reportedly further deteriorated since the 2011 revolution). Both work as taxi drivers in higher income areas of the city. Women seem unable to access the two-year apprenticeships required to obtain a licence to drive the collective taxis that dominate in lower income areas: male collective taxi drivers reportedly feel it is too risky to take on women.

'I am perceived as a vulgar tramp and I am treated as such. ... I wear baggy and less feminine clothes ...in order not to get harassed... I get randomly stopped at police checkpoints and sometimes officers ask for my phone number.. When they realise I'm not interested they find a reason to fine me.... my family doesn't like my job... My siblings think it's a tramp job.' (47y,

graduate, widow, taxi driver for 25y).

'It is not easy to work as taxi driver... Also, it's not safe to work in the evening... I like my job ...It gives me a sense of freedom. If I am sick, I can take a break... Weak women cannot work as taxi drivers..... You must be strong to be able to handle passengers. ...Not only male passengers, but also female passengers can cause troubles ...I have had some troubles with unionists because they don't like people working outside the boundary of the union. One day, they even threw eggs at my taxi.' (59y, divorced, taxi driver for 35y).

Mirroring conversations with women in Abuja and Cape Town, this latter quotation also references the flexibility and freedom that owning one's own cab can present and the pride and confidence that comes from being a 'strong' woman.

Other women are employed with the parastatal and private companies as bus conductors and a few as bus drivers. One private company official observed that their policy is to have women conductors because it 'encourages customers': in this particular company there are around 50 female ticket sellers, and only 10–20 male sellers. However, many women do not stay long in this work: 'Husbands don't accept that their wives have to work in the late evening.... Many women who entered this sector left this job after one or two months.... Because they arrived their home late, they encountered problems.' (Woman conductor). Those women who do persevere encounter many challenges, especially if their bus is routed through low-income neighbourhoods. Salma, a young married woman graduate<sup>6</sup> in her early 30s, who has been working on the buses selling tickets for over a decade, talked about the trouble she faces from male passengers: "They may ask 'how much is the ticket?' I say 'to where?' ... He says 'I will not pay' and says bad words." This is a significant issue as, at the close of day, the company will require any shortfall in receipts to be covered by the conductor. She continued, 'When dealing with the people (you) should be cautious.... sometimes men harass women workers. (It has happened) to my colleagues in a threatening way. (But) I know how to deal with people and passenger, (so) since 2008 ....until now, nothing happened to me.' Other women conductors report similar stress, as one with 15 years experience emphasised: 'All women ticket sellers suffer from physical and mental problems, especially nowadays (i.e. since 2011), because of the lack of security in this country. Lots of problems, terrorism and exhaustion.'

Salma would like to become a driver, but we were told by the manager of one of the private bus companies that few women are appointed because they don't have a bus driving licence, which is expensive. In the previous year they had hired 20 male drivers, having received applications from 200 men – no women applied. We encountered a few determined women who have managed to get employment both driving and ticket selling (which pays better than conductor work alone). Nour, who has been bus driving for a decade is now the only woman driver in her company but 'love(s) driving the bus'. She emphasised the importance of keeping control: 'When men see their driver is a woman, they sometimes want to make troubles. For instance, sometimes they don't want to pay the exact fare. (But) I don't allow such thing to happen. ... I behave kindly to passengers, but that doesn't mean I accept inappropriate behaviours. I don't allow that.' She has experienced similar childcare stresses to those of women bus drivers in Cape Town (though she has a seemingly somewhat shorter day), but support from her mother has enabled her to continue working alongside her husband (another bus driver).

## 4. Reflecting on women's pre-pandemic transport work experiences across the three cities and beyond

Our research suggests that women's experiences as transport workers are disturbingly similar across all three cities, despite the

<sup>6</sup> We were told by a woman ticket seller in Tunisia that all are graduates, 'you must have a bachelor's degree in any field because if you have a degree, you are intellectual, you know how to deal with people.'

somewhat different contextual factors at play in each. For those in customer-facing roles, this employment is mostly taken up only out of necessity, not from choice. The majority are women with precarious livelihoods, notably widows and divorcees in Abuja and Tunis and single parents in Cape Town. To accrue the income essential for family survival, they have to cope with long hours of work and long shifts, often extending late into the night, especially in the case of bus conductors in Abuja and bus drivers in Cape Town. This can impose considerable stress and guilt on those with young children, as stories of leaving un-weaned babies with petty traders at bus stops (Abuja) and having to send young children away to live with distant family (Cape Town) attest.<sup>7</sup>

Women driving their own taxis are in a slightly better position, a point acknowledged by women in all three cities, especially if they own the vehicle themselves, since this usually confers some flexibility and control on the scheduling of their work. Nevertheless, comparison across the cities demonstrates the regularity with which similar negative themes recur. The transport industry is deeply embedded in patriarchal networks: in the enactment of their everyday lives, women working in the sector exhibit a gendered identity that is open to regular, potentially violent abuse. A woman's failure to 'do gender' as is conventionally expected in that society (West and Zimmerman, 1987) exposes her to the threat of being called to account, through acts of punishment meted out by a diversity of actors. During the long hours at work, male passenger harassment (mostly verbal, sometimes physical) is widely reported in all three cities by women drivers and conductors, with potential for harassment often exacerbated by congestion on overloaded transport and during journeys after dark, especially in poorer neighbourhoods. Other transport actors interpose additional challenges: this includes male transport workers competing for employment or customers, and aggressive transport officialdom. Permit-related trouble affects men as well as women taxi-drivers in Cape Town, but traffic officers in Abuja often seemingly expressly look to extract bribes from women drivers. In Abuja the taxi call-boys (paid to bring custom to male taxi drivers) physically attack both conductors and women taxi drivers if they stop at the designated taxi stops. Further threat extends to armed robbery and car-jacking (especially in Cape Town and Abuja) and kidnapping (Abuja). In Tunis those taxi drivers who don't belong to the (seemingly entirely male-run) taxi unions can face significant aggression: one, who had refused to join because she perceived no benefits, had eggs thrown at her. In Cape Town, women drivers in the national taxi union complained that although they are able to participate in the union, men get paid positions whereas they are expected to volunteer!

Outside the work environment, women transport workers across the three cities face additional hazards. Simply walking to and from work in darkness (with morning shifts commonly requiring a 4 a.m. start from home) can prove extremely dangerous, especially for residents of low-income areas. Family and (especially male) community disapprobation represents another massive hurdle, especially for Moslem women in Tunis and Abuja, where travel outside one's own neighbourhood is perceived as not only dangerous but a potential incitement to promiscuity. This helps explain why only the women most desperately in need of income dominate the sector, and why many women who venture into this work soon resign. The atmosphere is heavy and through the movement of affect, women's bodies are inevitably made keenly defensive. Bissel's (2012: 284) observations, 'of communicative registers at play...that transcend the limiting grammars and vocabularies of discourse' have resonated in the very different settings discussed in this paper. Atmosphere is 'distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal' (Bissel 2012 citing McCormack, 2008: 41). Primed by expectant unease and foreboding, women

scurry furtively through dark streets to work in the early morning, dress to escape attention, and act subserviently with officialdom and passengers. Suspense and shame pervade the atmosphere, being absorbed back into bodies, intensifying as they circulate (Urry, 2007: 73). Women are 'frightened every day' and such oppressive fear is well justified when physical transgression follows: being slapped while pregnant and unable to make any retort, having urine poured over one's clothes, 'trashed as a vulgar tramp' – all of these experiences inevitably contribute to the emotions of fear, anger, exhaustion and failure women sense through the body. Verbal and non-verbal gender harassment (not always of a specifically sexual character) is widespread (Foley et al., 2022). Only a few of the older women drivers we interviewed have built sufficient confidence over time to stand their ground and fight in these overwhelmingly hostile environments.

Unsurprisingly, given the levels of violence associated with transport work, it is viewed very negatively by girls and young women as a career option. When we interviewed groups of school-girls in lower income areas about their career aspirations, in order to gauge the potential for building a stronger female work force, transport was never mentioned except in extremely negative terms (principally regarding safety and status issues). Specific queries about a career in transport only elicited thoughts of owning a taxi (to rent out, as indicated by Tunis and Cape Town girls) and possible work as a pilot or flight attendant (mentioned by girls in all three cities). Clearly, unless the work environment and status of women's transport sector work can be much improved, the transport sector in each of the study cities will continue to exhibit the features that currently make it so unwelcoming to women, whether as (reluctant) workers or users. The latter point is particularly disturbing from an environmental viewpoint: women users will continue to shun public transport, and dream of acquiring their own (safe) car, so long as public transport remains an overwhelmingly male domain.

Beyond our study cities, there are strong echoes of these findings in other low-income country contexts where pre-pandemic studies have included some women transport workers in customer-facing roles. In this literature it is women's fears for their personal safety – spoken and unspoken – that resound most strongly. Every one of this still small set of publications references the pervasive and distressing degree to which women workers are the targets of frequent systematic sexual harassment. Social norms that marked women drivers as prostitutes in Abuja appear to be commonplace (for instance as reported from Kampala by Muhoza et al., 2021 and in Mexico City by Hiramatsu, 2021). They are used as a justification for sexual harassment and violence both by male passengers and other male transport workers. Inevitably, this creates an affective atmosphere heavy with threat and foreboding that permeates and envelops most women's work experiences in the sector.

Other pressures we observed as widely felt by women workers have also been identified elsewhere. Data collected in Nairobi from women working as conductors and drivers in the matatu (minibus) business or as platform taxi drivers points to similar long hours, shift-work, pressures of care responsibilities, lack of appropriate sanitary facilities, low pay, hostility, bullying, verbal abuse, harassment by police and other authorities (as well as persistent sexual harassment by colleagues and passengers) (Wright, 2018; Carter et al., 2020). This is despite the fact that Kenyan women enjoy relatively strong formal legal and policy protections (Carter et al., 2020:83). The double days, where work shifts are sandwiched between domestic care shifts are extremely common in Mexico City too: a potential contributor to ill health (Berrones-Sanz and Araiza-Diaz, 2019). Here, a small study of just 12 women taxi drivers (Hiramatsu, 2021) is particularly valuable for comparative purposes because of the level of detail presented. As in our three study cities, the majority of the respondents are vulnerable women who took up transport work when in urgent need of an income (probably a common characteristic in many other cities too). They similarly face the hostility of male drivers, verbal abuse and treatment as a sexual object by passengers and co-workers, but also make the same point regarding the benefits of work as a driver: the flexibility it allows for fulfilment of

<sup>7</sup> Tunis bus schedules seem to offer women rather more flexibility, and services tend to close earlier due to security issues on the late buses since the 2011 revolution, but even so, family disapprobation is a significant concern.

caring responsibilities. Less evident in our study is the emphasis these Mexican women drivers reportedly placed on professionalism (being a good taxi driver). This may be partly due to the fact that some are involved in the tourist industry or work with ride-hailing companies where customer service is particularly valued.

Across the Global South, the relative rarity of female co-workers and the commonly dispersed nature of women's transport work seem to be factors adding to many women's feelings of isolation and vulnerability, as they do in our study cities. In some cities, including Cape Town, Nairobi and Mexico City, there have been efforts to bring women transport workers together in formal or informal associations of support to improve working conditions, but progress seems slow and hard won (Wright, 2018, Hiramitsu 2022). The pressures of the currently oppressive atmosphere will arguably be reduced for women only with concerted effort in urban locations where precarity adds to the general dysphoric effects of urban living (Bissel, 2010, citing Davis, 2002, Thrift, 2005: 134).

Threat and aggression are also likely constituent parts of the affective atmosphere experienced in male transport working environments, but men benefit from the conviviality and status that is conferred by working alongside other men in what is perceived to be 'a man's thing' (Muhoza et al., 2021, talking of Nairobi), supported by dense patriarchal networks and often by significant unionization and associated political clout (Gibbs, 2014; Hart, 2016:172-73). In this positive affective atmosphere, being a public transport driver carries 'an aura of adventure, power, strength, autonomy, competence' (as reported for Mexico City by Berrones-Sanz and E.M. Araiza-Diaz, 2019). A stark contrast to the atmosphere of weakness, fear and shame that hovers around so many women transport workers.

##### 5. Looking forward: Towards a better future for women transport workers, post-pandemic

The negative emotions that shaped so many women's narratives of work in the transport sector pre-Covid inevitably intensified as the pandemic took hold, though, as noted in the introduction, the pandemic inevitably closed the opportunities for in-person research with women working in transport. However, media reports and the limited information we were able to gather in the study cities indicated that many low-paid women transport workers in customer-facing roles faced even greater challenges than before. Costs rose for all taxi drivers due to COVID-19 transport regulations and increased operational costs (reduced passenger numbers; sanitiser purchase; bribes when rules were flouted etc.), but women generally had fewer resources available to cover these. Women bus conductors meanwhile were sometimes furloughed (the case in Abuja), while women designated as 'essential workers' in Cape Town and Tunis faced the emotional stress of needing to continue working to maintain constrained family incomes, when at the same time they were often key carers for more vulnerable elders in their families (Porter et al., 2022). The atmosphere was enveloping and pressing on most women's lives in previously unprecedented ways.

Nevertheless, a few cases of positive adaptation to pandemic exigencies also emerged, notably Cape Town's women-only taxi services.<sup>8</sup> In August 2020 we interviewed (by phone) one young female student who, having observed the burgeoning Gender Based Violence (GBV) reported on social media, including on transport, saw the potential to set up a (6 am to 8 pm) women-only e-hailing taxi service. Women Go, with

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/women-only-taxi-service-launched-in-south-africa-as-sexual-assault-rises-43369> (18th Jan 2021) last accessed 13/02/2023; <https://www.goodthingsguy.com/business/bolt-launches-women-only-taxi-service-in-south-africa/> (1st Feb 2021) last accessed 13/02/2023; [ol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/watch-nyanga-teen-launches-safe-women-only-taxi-service-65c5111a-ac36-4edc-9bec-f3a1236eaa53](https://ol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/watch-nyanga-teen-launches-safe-women-only-taxi-service-65c5111a-ac36-4edc-9bec-f3a1236eaa53) (9th Sept 2020) last accessed 13/02/2023.

women drivers, and clients sending their location and destination by WhatsApp, had been paused by the city licencing authorities at the time we contacted this young entrepreneur, but the ride-hailing company Bolt also set up a women-only service (6 am to 7 pm) in South African cities, including Cape Town, with women drivers (charging the same rate as the regular service) and other such services, notably ChauffER emerged. Similar ride-hailing services for women are emerging in other African cities, including Abuja, where a woman CEO established her company HerRyde in August 2022 with 10 women drivers,<sup>9</sup> though seemingly there are none, as yet, in Tunis.<sup>10</sup>

As cities emerged from the pandemic we were able to undertake some modest pilot skills-focused interventions in each city aimed at benefitting women's employment opportunities (together with others interventions focused on women as transport users, <https://transportandyoungemploymentinafrica.com>). The trainings offered were shaped by our resources, needs identified by the research and associated consultations, plus the practicalities/local support available in each transport context as the pandemic waned. In Abuja this took the form of an 11-day programme of transport management training for 39 women workers (including bus conductors) at the Abuja Urban Mass Transport Company, to improve their promotion prospects<sup>11</sup>; in Cape Town, a 5-day workshop for c. 27 women (supported by the South African National Taxi Council SANTACO Women's Desk and Sonke Gender Justice) to build skills of women minibuss taxi operators at one of the main taxi ranks and develop a Safe Taxi Charter<sup>12</sup>; and in Tunis, transport management systems training for 6 women (mostly heads of departments) at the parastatal Transtu, conducted online over 6 weeks (due to COVID resurgence) plus 4 days in-person. In Abuja and Cape Town, commitment from local transport operators and interest from women workers were both pronounced. In Tunis, women's time constraints coupled with COVID-related concerns limited participation, though one woman director, an engineer and CCG member, has consistently supported our study.

Inevitably, all these interventions were small scale actions with limited potential to improve the affective atmosphere that envelopes women workers. Discussions during each training (where women workers had a rare opportunity to get together) emphasised the challenges that women workers face currently and the crucial importance of building skills, resources and networks that can support women's solidarity and thus enable them to achieve a more secure position in the sector. These points were further reinforced during our (pandemic-delayed) final project review meetings in each city. Although pandemic disruptions may have offered a few new opportunities - high rates of GBV having seemingly promoted some demand for women-only taxi services - the future for women transport workers does not look bright. In each of the study cities, the pandemic has been overtaken by other crises, and most women transport workers in customer-facing roles are back with the same challenges that have so long dogged their lives: they endure an atmosphere shaped by violence and systematic stigmatization by passengers, taxi touts, male co-workers and local officialdom, perceived as lower-class women, out of their proper place and thus potentially sexually available.

Because women working in the sector are so few, time-poor and spatially dispersed, there is rarely opportunity to build the empathy and associational solidarity required for concerted demands towards

<sup>9</sup> <https://techcabal.com/2022/08/18/womens-only-ride-hailing-platform-herryde-launches-in-abuja/>

<sup>10</sup> Such women-only services are controversial, of course: as many feminists point out, they do not address or solve the fundamental issue of gender inequality which causes violence and harassment (Dunckel-Graglia, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> By February 2023 this training had enabled promotion of 9 administrators and some ticket vendors.

<sup>12</sup> This women operator-led initiative has been adopted by four minibuss taxi associations.



improved working conditions (as women traders sometimes achieve, Bryceson, 2010). Networks that can bring support from women's rights/gender justice organisations are needed. Legislative frameworks that may currently impede women's entry into the sector as professional drivers (as noted in Cape Town and Tunis) would benefit from review and revision. Skills training (carefully attuned to local needs) is also important and can help improve the status of women working in the sector, including through improving prospects for promotion, but this needs to be complemented by other elements: more flexible working opportunities that allow women (often single-parents) to train and satisfactorily fulfil child-care responsibilities; microfinance and complementary financial management training for women who wish to work independently as taxi drivers; a better deal from the transport unions (currently a bastion of male privilege)<sup>13</sup> including a fair allocation of key positions to women workers and specific attention to women workers needs (e.g. segregated lavatories and changing facilities; transparent procedures for reporting and addressing sexual harassment; fair pay for conductors; transfer to women of deceased husbands' taxi permits and licences in Cape Town). Such support will be essential in order to expand the visibility of women workers in the sector and help dissipate currently dominant negative atmospheres – a first small step towards the transformation of the wider transportation milieu into a safe and welcoming space for all.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

This is to confirm that there are no interests to declare with regard to this paper and that the work has not been published elsewhere. Its publication is approved by all authors. If accepted, it will not be published elsewhere in the same form, in English or any other language, including electronically without the written consent of the copyright holder. We use inclusive language throughout.

The corresponding author conceptualised the study and wrote the paper, following her initial design of the study methodology, some data collection, overall field supervision and data analysis. The co-authors were all involved in field data collection, data analysis and review and editing of the final paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

### Acknowledgements

This research was funded by an award from the Economic and Social Research Council: Grant ES/S005099/1. We wish to thank the many people who helped with this study, especially the women workers who were so generous with their time. Thanks are also due to management staff we interviewed in public and private sector transport organisations, to our Country Consultative Groups and to Hichem Mansour who facilitated research in Tunis. Hadiza Ahmad, Mshelia Joseph Yahaya, Hanan Keskes, Hamza Zaghdoud, Nwabisa Gunguluza, Luntu Quntana and our peer research teams all contributed to field research in the wider project. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers of the paper for their helpful feedback.

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<sup>13</sup> In Nigeria, the (female) head of the women's affairs department at the extremely powerful National Union of Road Transport Workers argued that they have made progress nationally, with some women in leadership positions.

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