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**Gender-based violence against women users of public transport in Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico.**

D. Infante-Vargas and K. Boyer.

**Abstract**

This paper details the pervasiveness of gender-based violence (GBV) that women in Saltillo, Mexico experience when using public transport. Using a mixed-method approach that included a survey (N=611) and interviews (N=11) with transit users and a local women's rights activist, we explore the experiences of violence that women face as an everyday reality, together with issue of re-victimization, and the psychological effects that violent episodes can have on women who experience them. Adding to existing knowledge about GBV in spaces of transport, we argue that women can experience myriad wide-reaching effects beyond the event itself that include not only limits on their mobility, but also financial and emotional repercussions. Policy change is urgently needed in order to redress this problem.

**Keywords:** Gender, mobility, public transport, sexual harassment, Mexico, Saltillo

## **Introduction**

Mexico follows global trends for rapidly growing populated urban areas with over 100 million people living in urban areas of over 2,500 inhabitants (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018; INEGI, 2020). Mexico also has a longstanding history of corruption, organised crime and violence (Morris, 2020), and the spectrum of violence throughout the country has serious impacts on safety, reducing criminality, governance capacity and gender violence. For example in 2019 there were over 35,000 deaths by homicide reported in Mexico (Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana, 2020), and between January and June 2020, there were 489 reports of femicides, which translates to 10.3 women killed every day (Arista, 2020). Meanwhile national statistics reveal that 34.3% of women over the age of 15 have suffered sexual violence at some point in their life (INEGI, 2016).

The community violence that Mexican women face occurs in everyday places, from religious centres and parks to public transportation and street markets (INEGI, 2016). Although there are a handful of studies around harassment and sexual abuse in some Mexican public transport systems, this issue remains largely under-researched throughout the country. The violence and corruption that reigns in the country- alongside a widespread misogynistic culture rooted in Mexican society- contribute to creating an atmosphere of impunity that supports and normalises structural gender violence (Benalcázar-Luna and Venegas, 2015). One of the examples of violence against women and girls is sexual harassment in public spaces and public transportation. This paper extends existing knowledge by exploring women's experiences of gender-based violence in spaces of public transport in Saltillo, Mexico. Adding to existing knowledge about GBV in spaces of transport, we argue that women can experience myriad wide-reaching effects beyond the

event itself that include limits on their mobility, but also financial and emotional repercussions. Policy change is urgently needed in order to redress this problem.

The harassment that women endure on public transportation is a demonstration of gender violence that turns everyday public environments into hostile situations for women (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014; Logan, 2015a). This constant and seemingly invisible violence shapes women's experiences of the city and robs them of their agency and the right to enjoy public space, with serious consequences for their everyday experience and the choices available to them.

Although public transport is considered to be a part of public space, few transport authorities around the world (including Mexico) have addressed, or even acknowledged, the pervasive gender-based violence (GBV) that exists in mass transit systems. The issue limits the mobility of women and girls affecting their perception of safety and/or decreasing their quality of life and depriving them of their right to a life free from violence. The problem of gender violence within spaces of public transport in Mexico is a significant one. Currently, in Mexico City eight out of ten women feel unsafe while using public transport (INEGI, 2017). In 2008 the government of Mexico City (then Federal District) in an attempt to respond to the gender violence existing within Mexico's City Transport System created the project "*Viajemos seguras*" (Let's travel safely), a program designed to prevent, treat and punish sexual violence against women travelling on public transportation (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2015). This project included the introduction of help stands to assist women in reporting cases of sexual abuse and the Athena program which provided services exclusively for women and were characterized by pink buses. Additionally, this project also introduced the separation of men and women inside the metrobus and light metro systems, creating specific carriages for women and young

children. This created a problem where male users attempting to use said wagons were thrown out and sometimes by the police monitoring the premises, sometimes by women themselves.

Scholars like Dunckel-Graglia, (2013), have argued that, on the surface, women-only transportation programs seem like a reasonable solution since they remove the immediate problem: men. But the issue of harassment on public transport is far from over since gender-based violence in Mexico City, and other cities, is produced and maintained through deeply rooted gender inequalities that not only diminish the value of women but that also blame them for the violence they endure.

Currently, seven out of ten women in Mexico City report feeling unsafe in the main transfer centres within the public transport network (CETRAMs); six out of ten report being groped or touched in an unwanted sexual way; three out of ten are afraid of being sexually assaulted and one out of ten report being followed by someone who they perceive to have had the intention of sexual assault (Méndez, 2020). These numbers vary depending on the transfer centre where the women were polled, but they all point to the same conclusion: the public transport network in Mexico City is still not a place where women and girls feel safe, despite government initiatives. Building on this, the research outlined here sought to trace the extent of this problem in smaller Mexican cities through the case of Saltillo, Coahuila. Saltillo is the capital of the state of Coahuila, located in the North of Mexico. With a population of 807,573 inhabitants 32% of journeys in the city are made using public transport (Instituto Municipal de Planeación de Saltillo, 2015), and 50.4% of the population are women (Instituto Municipal de Planeación de Saltillo, 2019).

Sexual harassment on public transport is not a new issue. Since 2006, when the #MeToo movement was founded by Tarana Burke, social media has provided a high-

profile forum where women can publicly denounce the episodes of sexual violence they have suffered, thus significantly increasing awareness of this issue. The stories shared on social media under the #MeToo movement hashtag have included personal experiences of abusers, but also sexual assault stories that have occurred in public places. These range from stories of harassment and cat-calling while walking down the streets and inappropriate physical contact while riding public transport, to stories of misogynistic behaviour directed at women trying to assert their right to public space while breastfeeding. Women in Saltillo have likewise used the #MeToo hashtag to share experiences of harassment on spaces of public transport (Gatica, 2020).

Authors have debated throughout the years as to what constitutes sexual harassment when the perpetrator is unknown to the person experiencing harassment. Macmillan et al (2000) categorize unwanted physical contact, verbal comments, ogling and stalking as stranger harassment that is typical in public places such as streets. This type of stranger harassment can also be encountered on public transportation (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008) and it may include actions such as catcalling, wolf-whistling and groping. These forms of gender violence can be the beginning of an interaction that results in even more serious harm, such as rape or murder (Logan, 2015).

This problem is now more relevant than ever. In early 2019, Saltillo's local government launched, through its transport organ, the Municipal Institute of Transport (MIT), a program to modernize the current public transport infrastructures with strategies that included the reorganization of routes to increase the efficiency and modernization of the bus fleet, together with a training program for the operators, licensees, and local authorities involved in public transport (Comunicación Social Gobierno de Saltillo, 2019). This program, however, has been heavily criticized by licensees and users of public

transport (Aramayo, 2020) for not having a clear structure to ignite real change in the current transport network. After almost two years of bus fare rises in Saltillo under the argument of financing a new modernization plan (Montenegro, 2019), conditions on the public transport system are largely the same as before. Users have not benefitted by any real change, and bus service availability has even decreased by 60% (Reyes, 2020).

Additionally, after a few viral reports of sexual harassment on the public transport system, the local authority still does not have a gender perspective agenda through which it addresses, or recognizes the existence of, sexual harassment on public transportation.

By not acknowledging the existence of GBV on public transport, the local government fails also to grasp the extent of the problem. It does not collect data nor generate reports on this issue and treats public complaints as isolated situations, rather than a systematic issue. The local transport authority dismisses harassment allegations and fails to take action to tackle this problem (Viveros, 2019), thus upholding traditional gender stereotypes and rape myths that excuse the harasser's behaviour, and minimize the seriousness of the unwanted sexual contact (Burt, 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994; Weiss, 2009). This shapes how women who experience violent episodes define the sexual aggression they are subjected to. It creates a vicious cycle where even women who have been through episodes of sexual assault start internalizing the social discourse which deflects responsibility from the harasser and blames the women or minimizes the effects of GBV, as a coping mechanism. This can lead to substantial consequences on the behaviour and well-being of women. Throughout the years, society has adopted a collective ideology of "boys will be boys" that justifies sexual aggression as men's normal or natural behaviour, and even justifies it in certain circumstances (Weiss, 2009; Infante, 2019).

This research project is motivated by a long-overdue need for information regarding the problem, since Saltillo's local transport authority has been unwilling to collect data on the incidence of sexual assault and abuse and so the severity of the issue remains unknown. The present research seeks to map the extent to which gender violence is ingrained into the current public transport system and increase understanding of the implications this problem has for the everyday lives of female users. We argue that such events can have effects that reach far beyond the event itself, including financial and emotional consequences. Further, we build a case for the need to implement a protocol that deals with gender violence on public transport in Saltillo and will start to fill a gap in the literature related to GBV in small Mexican cities that can be taken as a reference point for further studies. The paper is organised as follows: after outlining our methods we will explore our study results and conclude by summarising our key findings and pointing out directions for future research.

## **Methodology**

### ***Methods***

This research used a mixed-method approach to explore the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and harassment on the public transport system of Saltillo. The first method used to collect primary data was an online questionnaire titled "Gender violence in the public transport system of Saltillo", which 611 participants completed (all of these were women users of the public transport of Saltillo). The size of the sample required for the survey was calculated using the official number of women living in Saltillo ( $n= 407,167$ ) according to data from the intercensal poll (INEGI, 2015), and it has a 95% confidence level.

The second data collection method included two rounds of interviews with a total of 11 women users of the public transport of Saltillo who had experienced violent episodes



together with one feminist activist in the region who had experience with gender violence protocols and the implementation of the program “Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls” in Torreón, Coahuila.

The interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to 80 minutes in a semi-structured setting, and the sample was achieved through snowball sampling. The participants ranged in socioeconomic background, the neighbourhood of the city in which they lived, the bus routes they used to get around the city, and their level of education. This part of the research included young adults (from the age of 18), as well as women over 50. It also considered the different travel patterns that women engaged in throughout the city depending on their profession, so it included young independent freelancers, women working in the automotive industry on the outskirts of the city, university students and women with full-time and half-time jobs. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded, and later transcribed and translated by D. Infante-Vargas into English for this research

### ***Ethical considerations***

This study was approved by Cardiff University, and was conducted in line with their recommendations for safe and ethical research. Since the study focuses on Saltillo, Mexico, and all participants spoke Spanish as their first language, there was an added ethical responsibility to accurately translate all the testimonies from Spanish to English while protecting the essence of their feelings and narrations. The consent forms, as well as the document with information for the participants, were translated into Spanish to make possible the collection of informed consent from every participant. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, all names presented are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

### ***Protection for participants***

It is common amongst women who have undergone violent episodes, and who tried filing a report in any case of gender violence, to experience feelings of frustration, anger, lack of empathy from the local authority, and ultimately helplessness and injustice. For many, revisiting the violent episodes and retelling them can be a triggering experience; particularly if their stories have been met with a perceived lack of concern. Therefore, the interview process for this study was designed carefully to avoid any re-victimisation or psychological stress for the participants. To ensure participants' wellbeing during interviews, they were provided accompaniment by M. Berenice de la Peña, Head of the Psychology and Human Rights Department at the Autonomous University of Coahuila during and after their interviews as a means of support should they wish it.

### ***COVID-19 pandemic***

Though the survey component of this research was originally intended to be face to face, this approach had to be adjusted in light of travel restrictions brought about during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the survey was made available online and distributed via social media with the help of local non-profit organisations and feminist activist groups. Similarly, interviews were conducted online via Zoom meetings. This restricted the participation of some women who struggled to secure a stable connection, access to a computer with camera, or access to spaces where they felt safe to speak about the violent episodes they had experienced, thus constituting a limitation to the study.

## Data Analysis

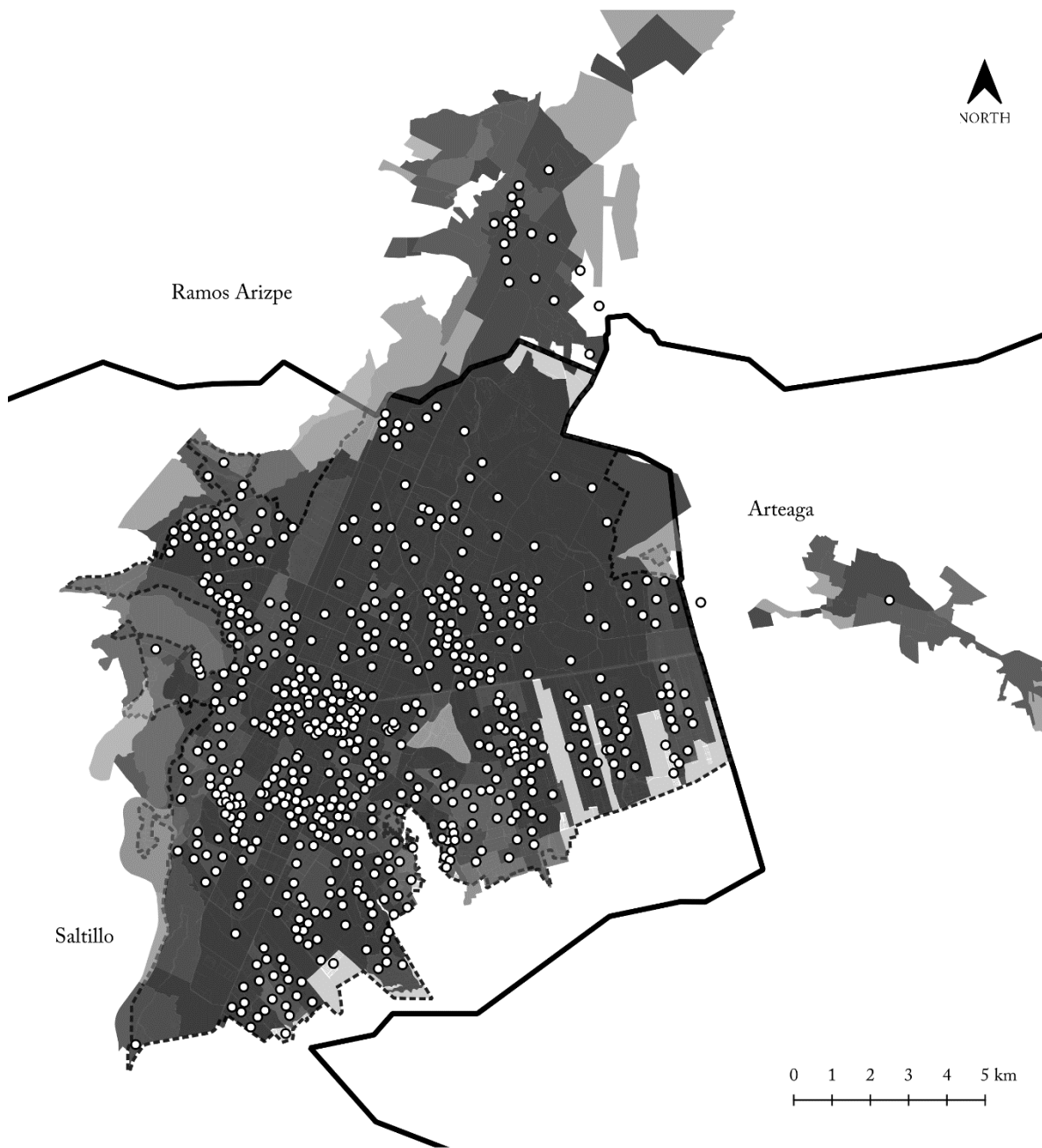
### *A Constant State of Fear: the vulnerability and perception of safety of women on the public transport of Saltillo*

To start analysing the pervasiveness of GBV on public transport in Saltillo, it is useful to first establish where women who have faced violent episodes live. In Figure 1 we have created a map of where survey participants live based on zip code, overlaying this data with levels of urban poverty by AGEBA (Basic Urban Geostatistical Area) in the city. Although survey respondents come from nearly every sector of the city, responses were concentrated in the south, east and western parts of Saltillo. According to information published by CONEVAL in 2015, these areas have the highest levels of urban poverty<sup>1</sup> in Saltillo. According to the survey results, 97.40% of participants had faced some form of gender-based violence. The most frequently mentioned form of harassment was lascivious looks which 92.79% of participants reported experiencing, followed by whistling with 74.30%, and offensive or disrespectful words (including catcalling), with 72.83%.

Although it is overwhelmingly women who are the targets of harassment from men in spaces of transport (and elsewhere), not all women suffer from harassment in the same way. As scholarship has shown class, race, sexual orientation, and other social markers shape experiences of harassment. In Saltillo, while all women are prone to experiencing gender violence on public transport, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more exposed to this violence and have a higher vulnerability since they are more likely to spend more time on public transportation than women from wealthier backgrounds (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014) *[Figure 1 near here]*

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<sup>1</sup> Direct translation of the official term “Pobreza Urbana” used by CONEVAL.



**Legend**

Range or urban poverty (%)  
 CONEVAL 2015

- 0-18
- 18-34
- 34-50

- 50-70
- 70-100
- No inhabited residences  
in the polygon
- Only one inhabited residence  
in the polygon

- Answer to the survey
- ⋯ Urban Limits 2017
- ▭ Municipal Limits 2017
- ▭ Urban Trace 2017

Fig 1. Location of the responses according to the zip code provided by participants and polygons of urban poverty across Saltillo, June 2020. Produced by authors with QGis, with Zip Code official delimitation open data from data.gob.mx, Urban Poverty Data from CONEVAL 2015, and survey: Gender Violence in the Public Transport of Saltillo.

Produced by D. Infante-Vargas

In terms of the perception of safety while using public transport, 59.74% of the women who participated in the survey reported feeling *unsafe* or *very unsafe* in contrast to only 1.64% who answered that they feel *very safe* while using public transport. Those numbers compare to other Mexican cities, like Torreón, where 48.3% of women report feeling *unsafe* or *very unsafe* compared to 7.1% who feel *very safe* (UN Women, 2017).

[Figure 2 near here]

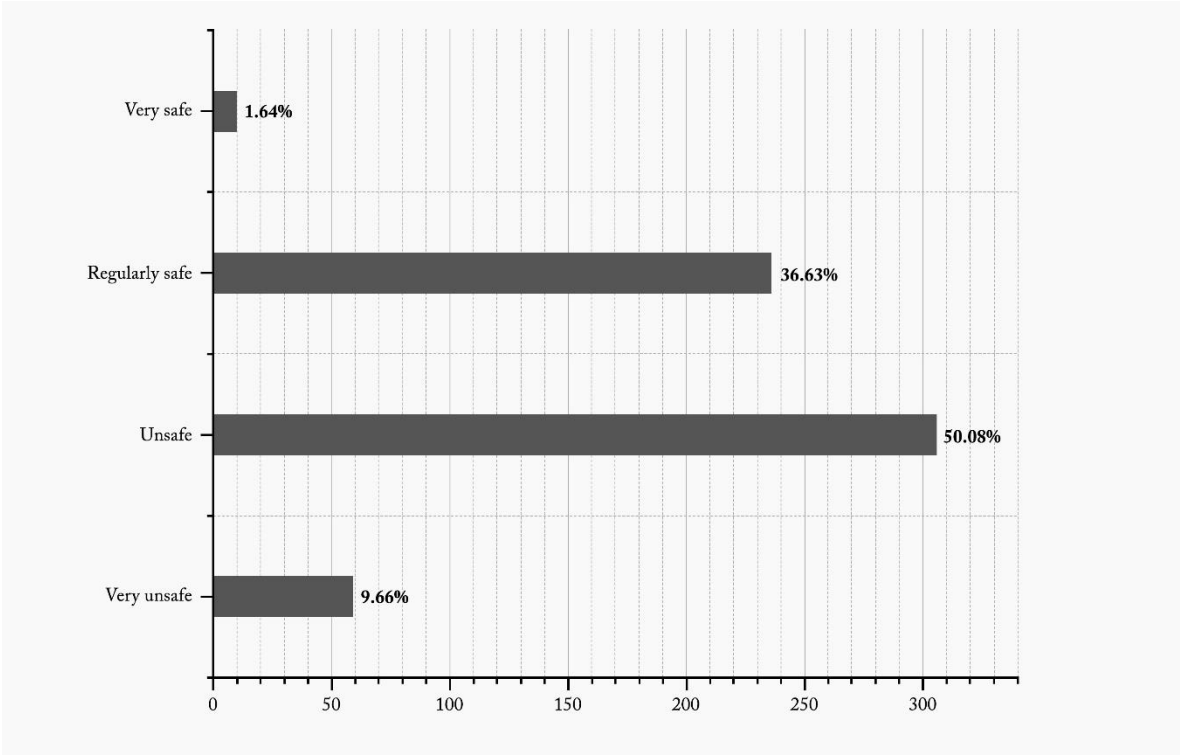


Fig 2. Responses to survey question: “As a woman user of the public transport of Saltillo, how safe do you feel using this method of transportation”. Produced by D. Infante-Vargas

When participants were asked if they were afraid of experiencing lascivious looks, catcalling, unwanted sexual touching, or other inappropriate or unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport in Saltillo, 95.9% answered affirmatively.

These data speak to the extent to which sexual abuse and harassment are an everyday fear and reality for many women. Authors like Fairchild and Rudman (2008) have argued that stranger harassment turns public spaces into an everyday hostile environment for women. This research and research from other Mexican cities, such as Torreón and Monterrey, demonstrate this. For example, when the UN conducted a study of the sexual violence that girls and women face in public spaces in Torreón in 2016, 78.2% of respondents replied “yes” to the question: “Are you afraid of being sexually assaulted while in public transport in Torreón?”. In the Metropolitan Area of Monterrey a similar study under the same name was conducted by UN Women in 2018, to which 77.8% of women indicated they were afraid of being sexually assaulted or harassed on public transport (UN Women, 2019).

As Macmillan, Nierobisz and Welsh (2000) argue, perceptions of safety for women are intimately connected to fear of sexual assault and rape, and this fear casts a shadow in ways that typically go unnoticed by men. As this research shows, stranger harassment in particular can have a strong effect on the perception of safety. The feelings of insecurity and the constant looming possibility of being harassed in public places can lead to changes in the behaviour of women of all ages, including adjustments to travel patterns, choice of clothing and behaviour in the public sphere (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014); it can also impact

psychological well-being, regardless of the severity of the episode of harassment or assault (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008).

***Geographies of Fear: types of gender-based violence that occur in the public transport system of Saltillo, and their effects on women***

According to information obtained through our survey, 52.21% of women who used public transport in Saltillo during 2020 report having been groped with sexual intentions, and this number goes up to 68.09% when asked if this behaviour had happened since they started using public transport. The same pattern can be identified with other violent conduct ranging from insults or derogatory words against themselves or other women, with 45.01% reporting experiencing this in the previous year and 58.1% since they started using public transport. Participants also reported unsolicited spanking with 18.17% saying this had occurred within the last year and 28.97% since they started using public transport. Finally, even more violent behaviour, such as being forced to perform sexual acts, was reported by 1.8% participants in the last year and 4.26% historically.

The survey also revealed that in 19.64% of violent episodes experienced within the last year the perpetrator(s) showed their genitals or masturbated in front of women. This number escalated to 29.3% when asked if this had ever happened since participants started using public transport. *[Figure 3 near here] [Figure 4 near here].*

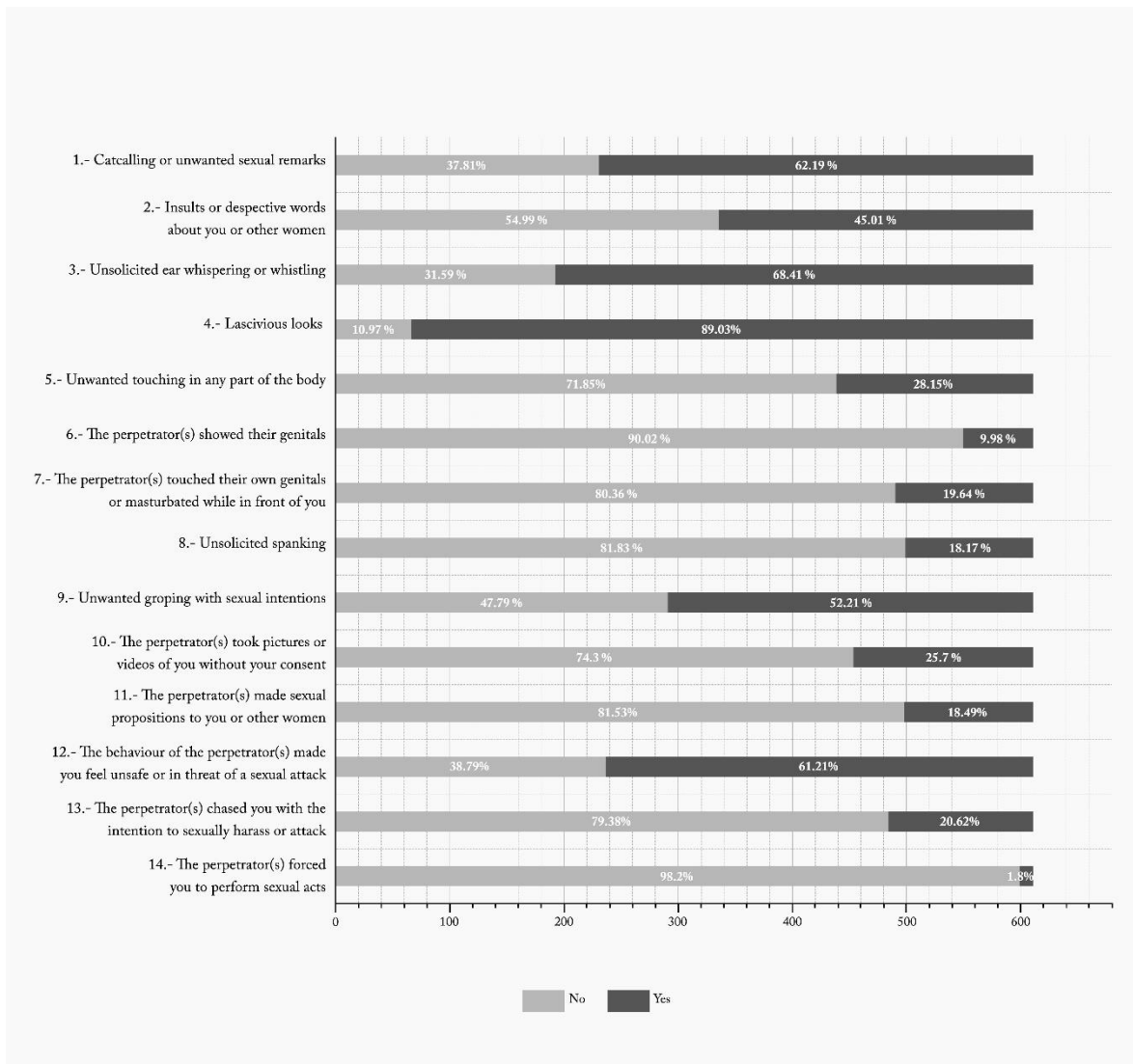


Fig 3. Responses to the survey question: “Have you experienced any of these behaviours in the last year of using the public transport of Saltillo?” Produced by D. Infante-Vargas.

The relationship between these answers confirms what has been an open secret for women in Saltillo who use public transport: the more frequently you use public transport, the higher the chances of being harassed, groped, touched, or assaulted. For some women, this problem goes deeper. According to the survey, for 14.6% of women these episodes



happen in each or most of the trips they make in public transport. For 33.4% of the participants, this behaviour occurs more than twice a week, and the recurrence of these episodes contributes to the normalisation of the problem. [Figure 5 near here] Having traced out overall patterns in women’s experiences of GBV on public transport in Saltillo, let us now turn to how these experiences were understood by participants through our qualitative data.

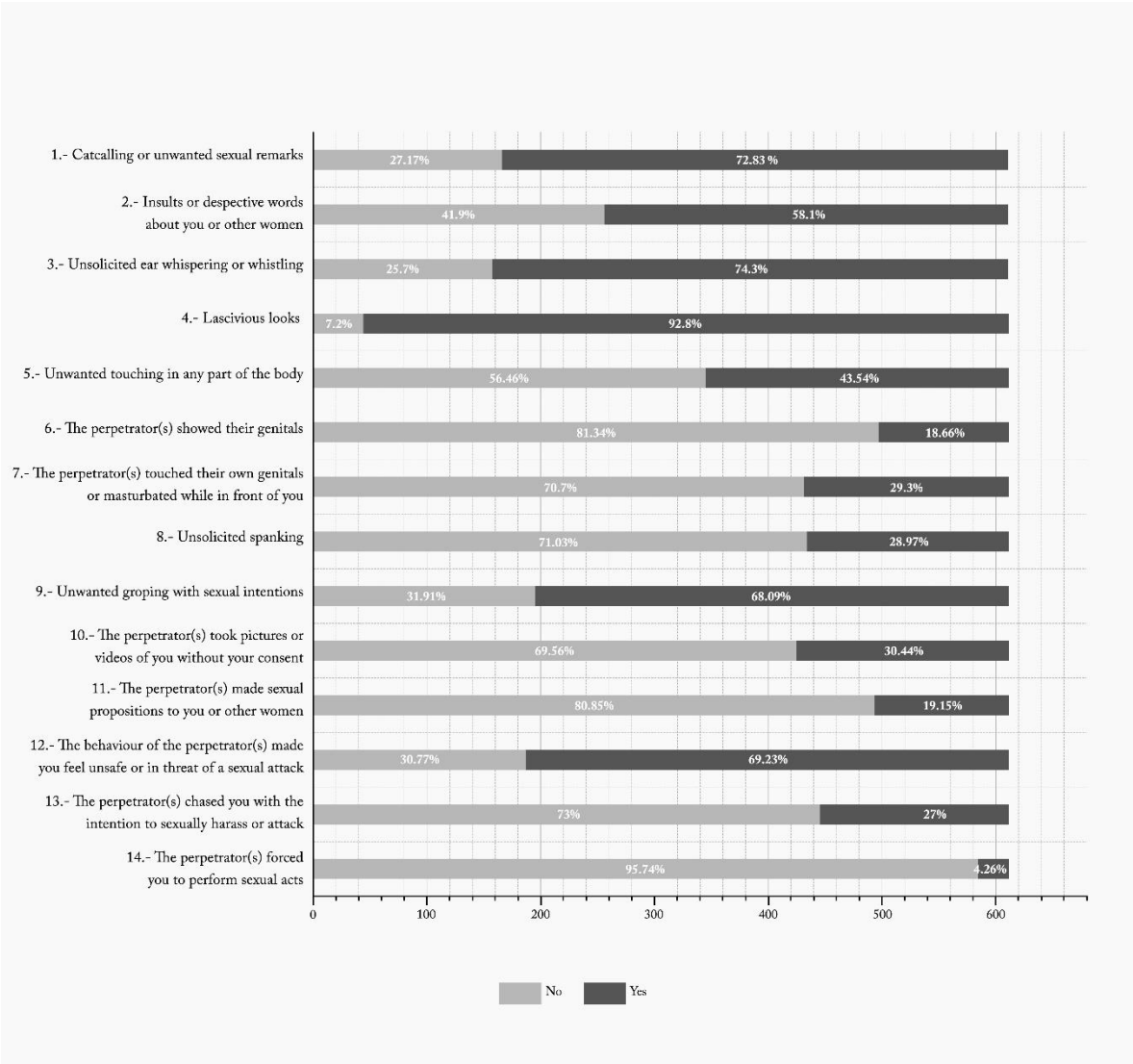


Fig 4 Responses to survey question: “Have you experienced any of these behaviours since you started using the public transport of Saltillo?”. Produced by D. Infante-Vargas

Fig 5. Responses to survey question: “From your experience, how often does this behaviour take place in average?” Produced by D. Infante-Vargas.

**From your experience, how often does this behaviour take place in average?**

<b>Once or twice a month</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>52.00%</b>
More than twice a week	204	33.40%
In every or most of the trips you make in public transport	89	14.60%

Luisa, a 22-year-old student, started narrating her experience as a user of the public transport in Saltillo by saying: “I have experienced what every woman I know has lived too. I do not want to call it normal, but somehow it is considered normal for us”. Going from lascivious looks, whistling, and winks—from drivers and passengers—to more violent behaviour—like inappropriate touching and men exposing their genitals or masturbating—Luisa began recalling the following episode:

I started using public transport when I was in high school; I think I was 15 years old at the time. One day, when I was going home from school, a man who dresses up as a clown and asks for money on the buses, entered the bus on which I was going. I accidentally made eye contact; I was sitting in the seat by the window, two rows behind the driver. I thought he would begin his act, ask for money, and then leave, but he sat in front of me and started asking me questions. He asked my name, where I went to school, and so on. He said I was beautiful and started propositioning me. ‘You would be perfect to dress up in a doll costume, do you want to work for me in my shows?’ he said. I said ‘no’, I never engaged in any of his questions, and I did not know why he was talking to me.

A few minutes later the bus encountered in some potholes —that street is always terrible— and the bus moved very abruptly, but after that, the man turned around and grabbed my breasts. Then he said ‘Oh, I am sorry, it is just that the bus moved so awful and I could not help it’, but that was not the case. A couple of blocks later, he left the bus.

The idea that jarred driving due to poor road conditions creates the opportunity or excuse for harassers to molest women transport users as suggested above is documented in the literature in a study conducted in Nepal about sexual violence on public transport in which Neupane and Chesney-Lind (2014) found that participants mentioned that harassment occurred more often when the drivers repeatedly brought the vehicles to a sudden halt due to bumpy roads. The physical conditions of the roads and the buses also create an environment where harassers can easily blur the boundary between intentional harassment acts and the natural consequences of the poor conditions of the infrastructure or inadequate driving. Women who experience such episodes have a particularly hard time proving their cases with authorities.

It also bears noting that young women are not the only group who experience violent episodes on public transport. Consider the experience of Elena, a 51-year-old worker and housewife. Elena was sitting on the bus, on the seat by the window when a young man sat next to her. After a while, he started to nudge her, and when she got tired of it and looked at him. He directed her with his eyes to look down: “I do not know why I looked, but I did, and he had his penis out. He was covering it with his backpack, but he was masturbating”. For Elena, episodes of this kind are so recurrent that, among her group of neighbourhood friends and family, this topic of conversation arises at least three times a

week: “It is kind of a routine. It is normal for us to talk about this. I think the earliest memory I have of being assaulted on the bus is when I was nine years old”. Here Elena demonstrates how the experience of sexual harassment constitutes a life-long pattern.

As research shows, assault or harassment on public transport is a common experience shared widely by women in Mexico. For some, sharing stories with other women who have had similar experiences can be a source of relief, but it can also contribute to the normalisation of the problem. Julia (26), for example, had witnessed violent episodes that had happened to other women on public transport and had also experienced harassment herself. When she shared her experience with her friends and family, they soon began telling her their own stories of violent episodes. The answer always seems to be the same: “it happened to me too”:

It can be a double-edged sword. On one side it can be good because you do not feel alone, you start realising the scale of the problem, and maybe that way something can be done. But on the other side, which is the most common one, we normalise it, and we think ‘well, maybe it was not that big of a deal because it happens so often, to so many women’.

Along with the re-victimizing that surrounds the reporting of sexual harassment, the *normalisation* of these experiences can further normalise the decision for women to modify their conduct and limit their movement and use of public transport. As Leslie Kern argues in her book ‘Feminist City’ (Kern, 2020) the constant spectre of urban violence limit women’s choices, power and economic opportunities. This pattern is evident in Mexico, for example through research on sexual harassment in Bogotá (Quinones, 2020) which found that women attempted to shield themselves from GBV on public transportation by changing their clothes, taking longer detours to avoid places perceived as unsafe, not

boarding crowded buses and even carrying non-lethal weapons as a measure of self-protection. Research has also found that women adopted “dead-pan” facial expressions and avoided eye contact with strangers (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). This ties in to research that has repeatedly shown that harassment by male strangers greatly influences how women approach life in the city, their everyday activities, limiting their freedom of movement and restricting how, when and where they travel in order protect themselves from rape or assault (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Quinones, 2020; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). These limitations are part of women’s coping mechanisms to the anticipated violence they know they will face in the public sphere — and specifically on public transport— and these mechanisms extend to other types of behaviour – including financial sacrifice - that women adopt to feel more secure.

For example, after Julia was groped and touched inappropriately while using public transport, she started taking small actions to feel safer. She would no longer sit next to the window, only on the aisle seats. She started actively avoiding sitting next to men. Additionally, she resorted to changing her seat if a man sat next to her, and sometimes she would stand during her journey rather than sitting next to another man. But these actions did not solve the issue, so she started using ride-hailing services (at significant cost) and was dependent on her parents to move around the city. As she told us: “When I used public transport, I would spend around MXN 250.00 to MXN 300.00 every week. Now that I use [ride-hailing services], I spend around MXN 600.00 weekly”. Similarly, for Juliette, university was too far away from her house, so when she stopped feeling safe on public transport she opted for ride-hailing services. However, her transport expenses increased significantly:

I used to have a student bus-pass, so I think I spent around MXN 120.00 each week to go to university, but after [the episode] I started using [ride-hailing services]. If I wanted to take a different route, I would have had to walk two, or three km at 6:00 am. That was just not viable either, so my transport expenses went up to MXN 600.00 to MXN 700.00 weekly.

As this excerpt suggests, there are both behavioural and economic consequences that come with being intimidated, harassed or assaulted on public transport. Yet as some of our participants noted, switching to more expensive modes of transport could also give rise to new problems. For example, Juliette, as other interviewees, had to get a job while completing her undergraduate studies to cope with the dramatic increase in her transport expenses. She would work during weekends and study during the week; and this routine left her exhausted and underperforming in her undergraduate studies to the point of jeopardising her professional development. Also, this situation isolated her from her mother and sister. Sometimes weeks would go by without seeing her family. She was keenly aware of how much her new routine was draining and costing her (both financially and emotionally), but she felt she had no other options. This ties-in with research which has shown that the impact of a sexual harassment or abuse can be far-reaching. Behavioural adjustments, as small as they may be perceived for the women adopting them, can have harmful consequences (Mellgren, Andersson & Ivert, 2018). Repeated over time small actions can cause a ripple effect on other aspects of women's lives, impacting their psychological and emotional well-being, as well as their self-esteem (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014; Logan, 2015).

Building on this, Barsoum, Rashed and Hassanein (2009) (Barsoum, Rashed and Hassanein, 2009) further argue that women's limited geographical mobility (due in part to fears of being sexually assaulted) contributes to their limited participation in some professional fields and stops them from asserting their right to vital services necessary for them to achieve their full potential (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014). As women have fought for equality in other aspects of life, such as equal access to opportunities to study or work, these opportunities require women to be able to use public transport systems that are safe and accessible for them. In line with what other researchers in other regions have found, sexual harassment on Saltillo's transport system limits women's access to the city and their mobility, and by extension their access to jobs and educational opportunities (Quinones, 2020).

Although privatised transport does not necessarily guarantee women's safety (Rodriguez-Dominguez, 2017), it is still perceived as safer than public transport and this creates a problematic division between women who can afford private transport and those who cannot. As discussed earlier, women who frequently use public transport systems are typically not from affluent backgrounds and rely on the lower cost of public transport, compared to paying for daily taxis or similar services.

For example, although Carmen experienced repeated violent episodes on public transport, she could not afford to change her method of transport for getting to high school. Her family's routine was always rushed, and the expense of private transport was not one they could even consider, so she had to endure such episodes as many women in Saltillo do. Similarly, other women who cannot afford to change their method of transport opt to change their trips and take different routes, but for Elena, who also suffered harassment from drivers of public transport, this decision left her feeling even more frustrated.

Well, yes [I modified my travel patterns], but the thing is: every route is the same; they [the local authority] only exchange the drivers between them.

Now I no longer take the same route where [the episode] happened. I have to take two buses instead of one, but I do that to avoid that specific route. It fuels your anger and sadness because you see the same drivers on other routes. When you report it, and they remove the driver you think: ‘Oh, well, they finally listened to me’, but I use multiple routes, and then I notice that they did not fire him, they just moved him to another route. You start thinking: ‘What is this about?’

Beyond the economic impacts, for some women these episodes can also impact their professional and social development, as it did for Juliette. Many other women, like Lola and Jade, also noted the psychological issues that episodes of harassment had caused. As Lola told us, after she was groped and assaulted during a bus journey, her anxiety started to rise: “Before leaving my house, I used to mentally prepare myself [to use public transport], and I limited myself a lot. I checked the hours; I knew when the buses got crowded, and I would modify my routine because it gave me anxiety attacks to be in very crowded buses”. Similarly, Jade recalled experiencing anxiety and fearfulness of re-encountering her attacker, since changing her route was not an option, noting: “A lot of things go through my mind every time I go on that bus route. I start thinking: What if I see him again? Will I be able to scream for help the next time? What if I cannot? What if he does something more awful next time?”

Lola and Jade’s comments correspond with findings from previous studies. Experiencing an episode of stranger harassment is associated with feelings of

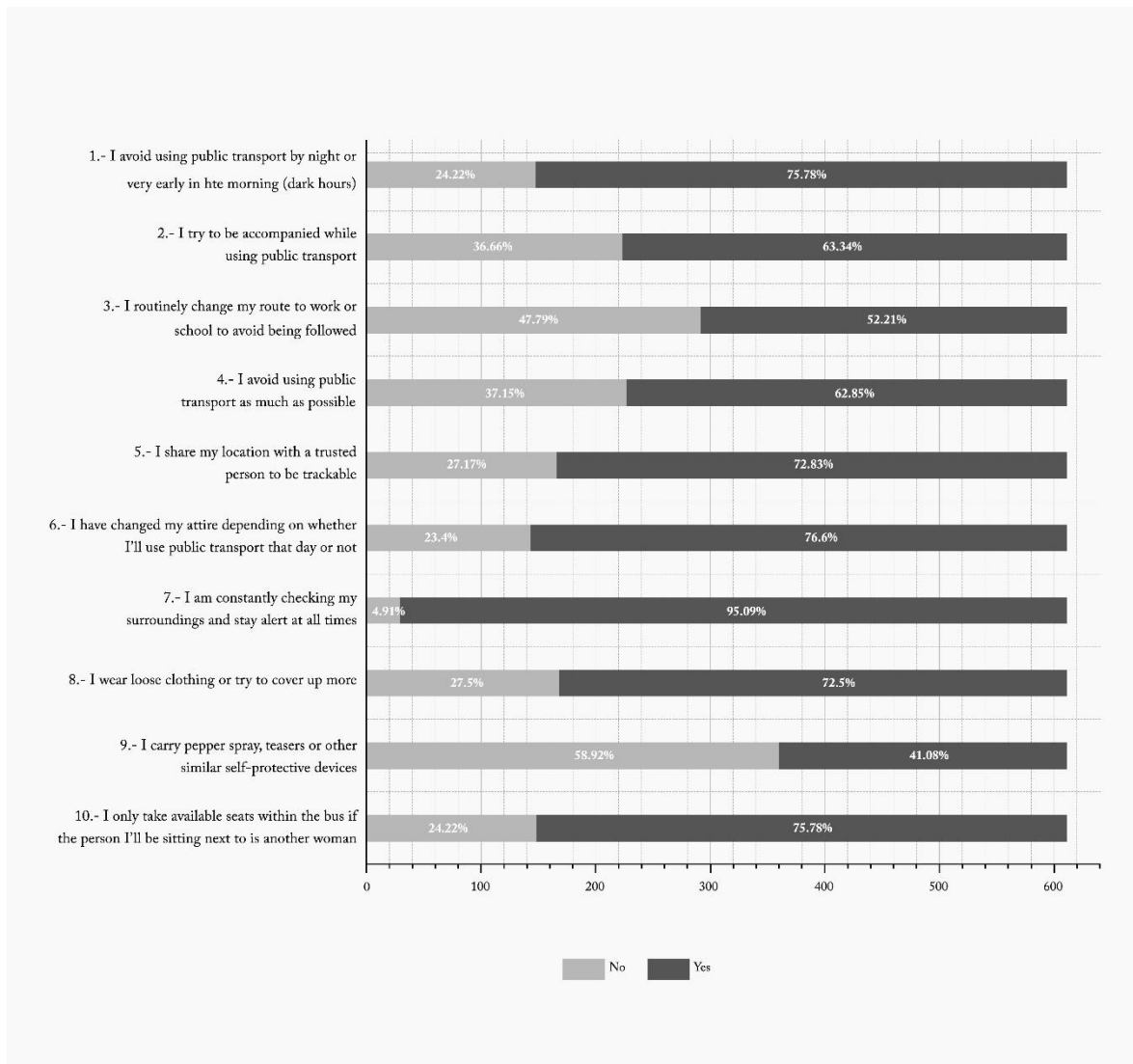


embarrassment, uneasiness, and frustration. It can lead women to feel unsafe, disgusted, and objectified (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). It has also been argued that such episodes can increase the likelihood that women will objectify themselves, experience body shame and monitor their external appearance as a coping mechanism (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008).

The testimonies from the participants in our study connect with what has been found by other scholars (Neupane & Chesney-Lind, 2014; UN Women, 2019; Quinones, 2020) and undercore findings from our survey, in which 95.09% of women constantly check their surroundings, and a further 72.83% use their smartphones to share their location with a trusted person. Other changes in participant's behaviour include 75.78% of women only taking available seats on the bus if the person sitting next to them is another woman, and the same percentage of women modifying their routine to avoid using public transport when it is dark. Similarly, a further 63.34% of respondents report trying to be accompanied while using public transport, while 62.85% try avoiding it altogether whenever possible, and 41.08% carry pepper spray, teasers, or other similar self-protective devices. *[Figure 6 near here]*

Fig 6. Responses to the survey question: "After living through these violent behaviours, please select the following behaviours that best describe your situation".

Produced by D. Infante-Vargas.



Leslie Kern (2020) has argued that women ‘map danger’ in order to feel more in control. Since women have no control over the presence of men in their surroundings, they start developing a map of danger, and displace some of their fears onto city spaces such as streets, alleyways and darkened sidewalks. As Kern shows, these geographies of fear are dynamic and change throughout women’s lives as they experience different things. It could be argued that such geographies of fear in women who are users of the public transport in Saltillo also translate into the changes in behaviour about which participants spoke, such as only taking seats at the front of the bus. This appears to happen because men mostly appear

to occupy the back of the bus, which is usually dark and unsupervised, and episodes are likely to occur or have already taken place there. It also translates into women visually scanning the bus as soon as they get on to look for seats available next to other women. Sometimes those fears can be translated to entire bus routes and not just particular bus units.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have shown the pervasiveness and severity of sexual harassment and GBV episodes on the public transport system of Saltillo, Mexico. As we have shown nine out of ten women are afraid of being assaulted or harassed in these spaces, and this affects the way they conduct their everyday life in a negative way. As we have argued the effects can extend far beyond the event itself and can include financial as well as emotional/psychological consequences. Similar to women in other cities around the world, women in Saltillo create maps of danger when it comes to experiencing the city, and those maps are highly influenced by their experiences of public transport. Their maps are made up of behavioural changes that are adopted while using certain routes, as well as adjustments to their routines and journeys. Yet, such mental mappings are not something that is taught to them, they are something women start composing as they go through life in public spaces in which they are objectivised and abused. These maps are also complemented by the experiences that other women in their social circles share with them.

As we have noted in Mexico, as elsewhere, social markers such as class, race, ethnicity and area of residence place women in hierarchal relations to one another; such that the problem of sexual harassment on public transport —while affecting most women—does not affect all women in the same way. Although the present research provides a much-

needed baseline to understand the extent of GBV in Saltillo, the next question to look into would be the reporting process that women who decide to come forward after an episode of sexual assault or harassment on public transport have to face, and the role this plays in the normalization of GBV. Scholars such as Logan (2015) have argued that stranger harassment in public places like transport systems robs women of their safety, power and opportunities while turning public places into hostile and unwelcoming environments. Further work is needed to understand how this dynamic is extended through reporting processes that re-victimize women who have experienced violent episodes, robbing them of their agency with each episode that goes unpunished. Building on our findings, we suggest that the next step is to assess and understand reporting practices around sexual harassment and other forms of gender based violence how these may become a vicious circle of lack of accountability and impunity that sends the message that harassers are entitled to own, monopolize and sexualize public space (Neupane and Chesney-Lind, 2014), and, importantly, conceptualising ways of holding local authorities to account.

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The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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