"Do you really want to keep going with this?": Reporting gender-based violence in public transportation

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Abstract

This paper extends scholarship on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through a case study in Saltillo, Mexico. The work is based on interviews (N:12) and survey work (N: 611) with women who have experienced GBV in spaces of public transport (busses) in this city. We extend existing work through an analysis of the role of the local state in GBV by exploring women's experiences of the systems in place to report and redress episodes of GBV in spaces of public transport. Building on existing conceptual work in feminist geography, we argue that systems for reporting gender-based violence in public transport can function as a mechanism of re-victimisation on the part of local authorities. Based on this analysis, we argue that the Mexican state is not only failing in its commitment to enable women to live lives free from violence but also acting as an agent of further violence.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, reporting processes, re-victimisation, role of the state, public transport, sexual harassment, local authority, Saltillo, Mexico

Introduction

As scholarship within and beyond feminist geography has shown, the spectre of Gender Based-Violence (GBV) in spaces of public transport can mar women's and other feminised subjects' sense of freedom and experience of the city, limiting their choices, power, and economic opportunities (Duckel Graglia, 2016; Lewis et al, 2021; Neupane and Chesney-Lind, 2014; Tillous, 2020; Quinones, 2020). *Gender, Place and Culture* has become an important forum for scholarship on this issue: from Dunckel Graglia's work on women-only transport in Mexico city (Duckel Graglia, 2016); to Lewis et al's study of how obedience to norms about not disturbing public comfort and temporal rhythms of the city such as rush hour shape experiences of harassment in spaces of public transport in London (Lewis et al, 2021); and Tillous's study of the debate surrounding women-only carriages in Cairo and São Paulo (Tillous, 2020). Our paper extends this discussion, and scholarship in feminist geography more broadly through an examination of the reporting practices for citizens seeking justice after an experience of GBV in spaces of public transport in Saltillo, Mexico.

In 1994, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women established women's right to a life free of violence (Convention of Belém do Pará, 1994). This international treaty mandated the development of laws, politics, and national plans to protect women's fundamental human rights and liberties. In its first article, the Convention of Belém do Pará established three types of violence, ranging from physical violence with behaviour like pinches, punches and physical assault; sexual violence with behaviour like sexual abuse, touching without consent and coercion for sexual relations; and psychological violence with behaviour like humiliations, threats, intimidation, and emotional blackmail, among others. Additionally, the Convention established three spheres for violence: the private sphere including interpersonal relationships within a domestic unit; the public sphere including workplaces, schools, hospitals and any other public settings; and a third sphere for violence that's perpetrated by the State and any of its agencies.

In 2007, Mexico joined this convention and, as part of its obligations, approved the *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* (General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence); thus granting the responsibility to all authorities —in all levels of power— to

take action towards the prevention, investigation, and sanctioning of systematic violence against women (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2007). The Convention, and by extension Mexico's government, recognises the State's responsibility to establish fair legal procedures that can bring justice to victims of any type of gender violence in any sphere, and provide effective mechanisms that protect fundamental human rights and can bring damage reparation. Furthermore, the Convention places the responsibility on the state to investigate allegations of gender violence, collect data on the same, and mandates the abolishment of legal practices and systematised behaviour that perpetuates violence against women (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos México, 2013).

Sexual harassment in spaces of public transport is a global phenomenon (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021) and as research has shown, users of public transportation in the Global South are disproportionately women and especially young women (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021; Cresswell & Uteng, 2008; Moreira & Ceccato, 2020). In previous research, we have shown that 97% of women in Saltillo have experienced GBV on spaces of public transport and that women from lower-income brackets are more reliant on public transit than women with more money (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2022), and this resonates with findings across a range of cultural contexts (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014; Dunckel Gragila, 2016; Neupane and Chesney-Lind, 2014; Rivadeneyra *et al.*, 2015). This scholarship has shown that only a small proportion of GBV is reported; that fear of sexual harassment can make women and other feminised subjects decide not to use public transport (Ding, Loukaitou-Sideris & Agrawal 2020); and that transit-based GBV can lead to serious mental health consequences (Kash, 2019).

As scholarship has argued concerning GBV at other scales and cultural contexts, the state is not a passive bystander in these patterns of behaviour, but can in fact play a role in enabling GBV by failing to acknowledge it, take steps to stop it, provide proper legal remedies or allocate funding for programmes to support survivors in a meaningful way (Brickell and Como, 2020; Pain, 2014; Pain and Smith, 2008; Phillips, 2008; Pratt, 2012; Walklate, 2008; Wright, 2011). In recent years, scholarship has begun to examine the role of the state in allowing GBV to continue by considering the reporting mechanisms that exist for those who experience GBV in a public space (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Dhillon

and Bakaya, 2014; Dunckel Gragalia, 2016; Quinones, 2020). As Bhattacharyya (2015) and Dhillon and Bakaya (2014) note based on research on GBV in India, women seeking redress for GBV in public spaces can face shame or non-belief from authorities for how they are dressed, or for approaching the authorities on their own without an accompanying family member. Indeed, as Dhillon and Bakaya (2014) found, police themselves can be viewed with distrust by participants who had experienced sexual harassment *from* police. Experiences of event-minimisation, victim non-belief, victim-blaming, shaming, or mocking are all classed as forms of re-victimisation survivors can face when seeking redress after an experience of GBV (Maier, 2008). Scholarship on the experiences of intimate partner violence survivors seeking redress in the US has shown that when control over the process is taken away from survivors it can be frightening and experienced as a re-victimisation (Cuomo, 2013). This resonates with work on the experiences of rape survivors in the US, who can experience not being believed, insensitive treatment, loss of control of the process, and being dissuaded from pursuing claims as forms of re-victimising (Maier, 2008). These findings further chime with research on South Asian domestic violence victims in Canada, who have experienced being silenced and made to feel marginalized in the course of trying to report abuse, as well as being given misinformation about legal rights from professional service providers/social workers, and discouraged from reporting incidents of gender violence (Auila, 2021). As this work shows, institutions of the law and the police have long failed to deliver on the demands of gender justice in cases of gender-based violence. As feminist scholars across different disciplines have argued, survivors' well-being needs to be at the centre of reporting processes (Nichols, 2013) and advocates should provide emotional support, make sure victims know their rights, and help them navigate the process (Carroll, 2022).

Research on GVB in spaces of public transport in Central and South America highlights the impact that GBV in public spaces has on women's lives and everyday mobility.[i] While Dunckel Gragalia's (2016) research on women-only transport initiatives in Mexico City found some promising practices, with purpose-built reporting hubs in five subway stations staffed by specially trained women officers, research from Colombia and Bolivia shows women transit riders adopting various defensive tactics such as just riding during the day, standing or sitting near other women and shielding their bodies

with backpacks or bags (Kash, 2019). Quinones (2020) found in her study of sexual harassment in spaces of public transport in Bogota that women often either don't know how to report an event of GBV or don't realise it is possible to do this. The few study participants that had tried to report an event of GBV in her study found the process burdensome and authorities to be largely apathetic: one participant filed a complaint that required being in the police station for six hours (which six months later was still unresolved); two further participants filled out forms that were never followed up, and a fourth was told by authorities they were unable to act on her claim (Quinones, 2020). This work provides an excellent framework for beginning to analyse reporting practices for events of GBV in spaces of public transport. However, none of these studies focuses on reporting practices (or victims' experiences of them) as more than an aside or small component of the argument.

Saltillo is the main city within the metropolitan area of Ramos Arizpe, Saltillo, and Arteaga, and it is located within the state of Coahuila, in the north of Mexico. Saltillo's population as of 2020 reached almost 880,000 people (INEGI, 2020), higher than some of the main cities in the UK like Manchester and Edinburgh. Still, Saltillo's urban mobility relies solely on buses for public transportation. Our paper extends existing knowledge about the role of the state in the maintenance of GBV through an in-depth analysis of women's experiences seeking redress for episodes occurring in spaces of public transport. This work extends existing scholarship in and beyond feminist geography by shedding light on experiences of GBV outside mega-cities. In the Mexican context it is particularly important to understand the way reports of GBV are handled outside of Mexico City both because such places are often underrepresented in public policies and national programmes, and because these cities have differentiated access to financial resources and technical capacities. Saltillo represents a more relatable reality for experiences in mid-sized cities, thus enhancing the transferability of our research findings.

Building on existing conceptual work in feminist geography and scholarship on intimate partner violence and rape, we argue that the systems for reporting gender-based violence in spaces of public transport can function as a mechanism of re-victimisation. We argue that the reporting processes reflect entrenched patterns of sexism, expressed through event-minimisation, victim non-believing, and other

types of dismissive behaviour across different branches of local authorities. And lastly, we argue that in the resulting lack-lustre response to GBV, the Mexican state is not only failing in its commitment to enable women to live lives free from violence but also in fact acting as an agent of further violence.

Our paper builds on existing work through an in-depth examination of how the local state handles cases of GBV and how these processes are experienced by women victims of GBV in spaces of public transportation. After briefly outlining the study on which this paper is based, we will turn to explore the testimonies of participants about their experiences filing reports for GBV occurring in spaces of public transport in Saltillo. We will then reflect on how the local authority responds to these claims, arguing that together this process functions as a mechanism of re-victimisation for individuals seeking redress for GBV, ultimately perpetuating institutional GBV. Finally, we will summarise our findings and provide directions for future research.

Methodology

This paper is based on a mixed-method study of GBV on the public transport systems of Saltillo which employed quantitative data through surveys (n=611), and qualitative data through (online) interviews (n=12). 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 had a 95% confidence rate. It included participants that ranged by income, education, place of residence and age. Qualitative data was analysed thematically, reviewing interview material through the lens of existing themes in the literature and looking for new themes and trends. Although our study focused on women's experiences of sexual harassment, it is important to note that gay and bisexual men as well as gender-diverse people also experience sexual harassment in public and spaces of transport specifically (Lubitow et al, 2017; McNeil, 2012). It is also important to note that not everyone experiences harassment in the same manner or is exposed to the same amount of it. As research shows, factors of race, class and age also play a role in shaping patterns of privilege and disadvantage, and these factors likewise shape how – and how much- harassment and other forms of GBV are experienced (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). While, as noted, nearly all women in Saltillo experience gender violence in public spaces, women from lower-income brackets are more exposed to GBV on public transportation

because they are more reliant on public transit than women with more money, who are more likely to have access to private transport (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2022).

This study was undertaken by two researchers: Infante-Vargas is Mexican, in her 20s and speaks Spanish as her first language. Infante-Vargas led the data collection and interviewing. Boyer is a white, middle-class UK academic in her 50s. Boyer worked with Infante-Vargas on the analysis and writing. Both researchers have experienced sexual harassment at different stages of their lives in spaces of public transport and elsewhere. Motivated by a personal experience of sexual assault in the public transport system of Saltillo, Infante-Vargas sought the support of Boyer to undertake the study. Infante-Vargas experienced a similar case of revictimization and victim non-believing as the ones presented in this study by both the MIT and the Ministerial Police, and that first-hand experience greatly shaped the approach to the study.

This study was approved by the Ethics committee at Cardiff University and was conducted in line with their recommendations for safe and ethical research. To look after participants' mental health given the sensitive and potentially upsetting nature of this research, we constructed the study design in collaboration with a psychologist in Saltillo with a background in human rights who also served as a post-interview contact for any study participants wishing to process feelings after the interview. All interviews and correspondence with participants were undertaken in Spanish and translated into English by Infante-Vargas. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, all names presented are pseudonyms chosen by the participants. Considering travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic 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 internet connection, access to a computer with a camera, or access to a space where they felt safe to speak about violent episodes they had experienced, thus constituting a limitation to the study.

Analysis

The process of reporting an episode of gender-based violence on public transport

María was a 19-year-old student at the time she experienced the most troubling episode of GBV for her, so far. During her 2019 summer job, on a quiet Sunday morning, she took the bus heading to the city centre. María recognised the driver from a few weeks back since she always used to take that bus route at the same hour and that driver had that shift often. At first, over those few weeks, María noticed that he would always say "Good morning/afternoon", take her fare, and sometimes stare at her through his rear-view mirror. "That is a common behaviour in drivers," she said, so she ignored it.

On Sundays, Saltillo has a program called *Ruta Recreativa* (Recreational Trail) that involves closing traffic on some streets around the city centre until 2:00 pm; this means that all buses must take route diversions. That Sunday morning María recognised the bus driver but, as usual, she decided to ignore his behaviour, and since she had been taking that same route for weeks, she knew the journey from memory, even the Sunday route. When she first got on the bus, she did not notice that she was the only passenger aboard. She went to the back of the bus, as she usually did, and took out her phone to browse social media and update her co-worker on her journey to work.

"He cut off a couple of streets, he was supposed to turn right, go into one neighbourhood, and then go back into the main street, but he did not" she recalled to us, noting it was at that moment that she started to become more alert. She took her headphones out and began to assess the situation. The driver was driving at a high-speed, significantly faster than allowed for public transport buses, and was sending voice notes through a messaging app. "I tried listening, but buses are so old and noisy that I could not", she said.

Shortly after that, María's sense of danger multiplied when the driver took a turn onto a street that was not on the usual route (not even on regular weekdays). "I messaged my co-worker, she is a friend of mine, so I told her what I was wearing and shared my live location, I told her every physical characteristic of the driver I could think of and all the bus details I could gather", Maria said. Then the driver turned down a narrow alley. María recalled the driver standing up, staring at her sitting in the back, and then getting off the bus and locking both sets of doors. "What is he doing?" Maria wondered: "Why is he doing this?", noting that she was in shock at the increasingly worrying turn of events. María tried calling 911 but they did not answer, so she kept messaging her friend instead, scared for her life at this point. As Maria told us:

> I was terrified. I started thinking back about all those times he stared at me through the rear-view mirror, how he would only greet *me*. I know everything that is going on in Mexico concerning femicides, it all came to my mind as I kept looking on both sides to see what was happening. The alley was extremely narrow, you could only see the wall on the other side, and that was it. Suddenly I see him come back, and he stands against a wall staring at me on the inside of the bus.

María's instincts made her fake a call, and the driver started walking toward the doors, then she noticed that the driver had a black pipe in his hand. "Yes mom, I am almost there, but the driver took an odd diversion, I do not know why," she said while faking the call. María started talking louder than usual to make sure the driver heard her giving out his physical characteristics and her location. When the driver got on the bus, he stared at her, listening to her fake phone call, dropped the pipe and drove the bus towards the city centre. This episode lasted around 20 minutes.

When María's parents heard about the episode, her father was furious and managed to track down the bus and the driver to get the driver's information and even took a picture of him. María's father then went to the Municipal Institute of Transport's (MIT) offices and reported the situation. However, as Maria told us:

> Things were weird from the beginning. The driver that I was describing was not even supposed to work that day according to the timesheets. The director of the MIT asked me to go to their offices and have an interview with him. I went to the MIT's offices and met with a couple of workers from different departments of the institute, along with the director; I told them everything that happened and [the director] kept asking me: "Okay, but what did he do to you? Did he physically hurt you? Did he touch you?" I told them no because he never did any of that and then he said: "Well, then he did not do anything" I told them he did, he locked me inside the bus in an enclosed, remote alley, went down the bus and grabbed a pipe from the street. I felt like he was going to attack me, and he kept telling me: 'He must have gone to the bathroom,' but I know it was not the case. He could have left the doors open; he could have warned me, he did

> not have to take such a strange detour and park in an enclosed alley with no one around. They told me and my family that the report would not proceed but that they would let us know for sure in a couple of days.

After the local transport authority (The Municipal Institute of Transport or MIT) interviewed María, they also interviewed the driver, who admitted to everything María narrated. As there is a system of licencing bus drivers through private sub-contractors in Saltillo, the driver then got referred back to the licensee he worked for, from whom he got a two-day suspension and a MXN 52.00 fine. According to Maria:

> The MIT was covering everything up, according to them if [the driver] did not touch me then nothing had happened. My father has some connections in those offices, and they told him that the driver already had two other similar reports and [the MIT] did nothing. Are we worth less than MXN 52.00?

Maria's attempt at reporting this event casts a light on the internal handling of GBV complaints within spaces of public transport in Saltillo. As we see from this case the MIT questioned her recollection of events and minimised the situation, ultimately deflecting responsibility for accountability to the private licensee. The MIT has stated that they only permanently suspend bus drivers when they have been found guilty of criminal charges (Viveros, 2020). Thus, when complaints are dealt with internally and do not become legal cases, drivers are allowed to keep working. These internal practices form a vicious cycle that leaves violent episodes from bus drivers unpunished and thus normalised, and ultimately reduces women transport users' sense of trust in the local transport authority.

We argue that this experience suggests an institutional culture of sexism in which GBV is not taken seriously. Maria's experience trying to report this episode became a re-victimisation process in which her story was invalidated and minimised by the local transport authority. This chimes with research which shows that such experiences of re-victimization are not isolated cases. For example, Dunckel Gragalia (2016) has shown that women in Mexico City who report violent episodes face highly masculinized institutions in which officers place responsibility for attacks onto the women who suffered

them. We suggest that a similarly misogynistic environment exists within the local transport authority in Saltillo, and, as we shall see, this is also evident in other public offices. Our research suggests that women who experience GBV in spaces of public transport can also suffer re-victimisation from other governmental authorities or police institutions. Consider Violeta's experience, below.

After Violeta was groped and touched by another passenger on the bus, she screamed and alerted the driver, who closed the doors of the bus to prevent the attacker from fleeing, as the protocol commands. A few blocks later they encountered a police patrol and Violeta started filing her report. She was later directed to the Centre for Justice and Empowerment for Women in Coahuila (CJEMC) where a male lawyer was assigned to her case. Interestingly, there isn't a standardised process for reporting cases of gender-based violence that occur in spaces of public transport in Saltillo. Some cases (like Maria's) are investigated by the MIT, some (like Violeta's) by the CJEMC and others are investigated by the police. In Violeta's case, the lawyer convinced her to take her case through the mediation process which means both parties (the aggressor and the person filing the report) try to solve the situation with the help of a mediator. This also involves a face-to-face meeting with the aggressor and a public written apology for the person who filed the report. "[The lawyer] told me I had no proof, that it would take a lot of time, we would have to ask the driver and other passengers to come as witnesses, they would not want to help me. he said it would be better if I settled for mediation."

During this process, Violeta went several times to the CJEMC to get an update on her case, and at these meetings, the lawyer made repeated remarks that made Violeta feel uncomfortable.

> [The lawyer] made me feel like he did not care about my case, it was just a folder that was assigned to him, and he wanted to be done with it. He even told me: '[The aggressor] is already looking for a job, he is going to change,' but of course, I did not care about that. [The lawyer] kept telling me: 'He has a family; he regrets it very deeply.' I would have liked having a woman as a lawyer, maybe she could have understood me better. He kept asking me 'Did [the aggressor] do anything else? Did he touch you more or did something else?', like what had happened was not insulting and humiliating enough.

The Centre for Justice and Empowerment for Women in Coahuila (CJEMC) was created in 2013 and functions as a multidisciplinary decentralised government organisation that offers services such as psychology and health departments, legal counsel, and a specialised ministerial department that addresses legal cases and complaints related to gender violence. The CJEMC also offers shelter services for women in dangerous situations as well as day-care, financial counsel, educational opportunities, and job-search advice (Estado de Coahuila de Zaragoza, 2013). Violeta's process of filing a report through the CJEMC became a re-victimisation process during which she had to put up with the downplaying of her attack and even talk about the 'virtuousness' of her attacker through appeals to his status as a family man and supposed feelings of remorse. But even when Violeta was pressured into agreeing to mediate the case, the problems did not stop:

> The mediation process involves him publicly apologising to me and declaring that he will not [harass me] again. I signed the paperwork, but I told the lawyer that I did not want to see him. He acted like he was doing me a favour by not forcing me to have a face-to-face meeting with my aggressor, but I later found out that it is stipulated by the law that women filing reports for sexual assault crimes do not have to go through that. I also asked the lawyer to cover all my personal information [full name and address] because he could retaliate. However, the lawyer said: 'Well, I do not know if I can cover that because it is part of the official records, I will try.' When I got my copy of the signed paperwork, I noticed that he lived a couple of blocks down from my house, and I know that he got a copy of the paperwork too; he has my information. All that year, I lived with fear; I still do.

From this, we see how survivors of GBV on spaces of public transport can be made to feel that they are 'being done a favour' by those whose job it is to secure legal remedies and, even more worryingly, a system in which attackers can even learn the home addresses of their victims. The lawyers at the ministerial department in the CJEMC deal specifically with crimes against women, and although they do not specialise in GBV complaints in public spaces, or specifically against bus drivers or passengers, they receive training courses on how to deal with cases in a gender-sensitive way, and how not to revictimize women who have experienced GBV. They are supposed to look after the interests of

women seeking their services. Despite this mandate and the training these lawyers receive, the microaggressions performed by Violeta's public lawyer suggest the same kind of event minimisation and tendency to re-victimise as seen in the local transport authority.

In a similar vein, Elena, a 51-year-old woman tried filing a report with a ministerial police agent after she got assaulted by a young man masturbating next to her while making inappropriate remarks. She had lived through violent episodes before, but after that episode, she thought "What if it had been a child or a teenager, I have two granddaughters, it could have happened to them", so she went to the police.

> [The ministerial police agent] kept telling me: 'Well, he liked you, he is very young, and at your age [+50 years old] you should be grateful, take it as a compliment.' They didn't listen to you [the interviewer] because you are young, well, they did not listen to me either because I am an older woman.

Depressingly, cases in which women who live through GVB are cast as overly sensitive or unable to "take a compliment" are not uncommon (Logan, 2015), and this is part of a broader culture of victim-blaming in Mexico (Rodriguez-Dominguez, 2017). As research has shown, other aspects of victim-blaming culture include gaslighting and tone policing, in which authorities question the victim's motives to report and how they conduct themselves while reporting, or try to shift responsibility for the episode onto the victim, thus deterring them from moving forward with their report (Garza and Derbez, 2020).

Like María, Paloma tried filing a report with the MIT after a driver and his illegal companion harassed her in June of 2019. This time, the director of the MIT who interviewed María deflected Paloma's case, telling her to instead file her report with the CJEMC. After reporting the incident, she returned several times to the Centre's offices but the lawyer responsible for her case would only give her excuses to justify why there had been no progress on her case. As she told us:

> I wanted them to investigate deeper, to involve the licensee and the MIT, but they told me: 'We do not have the money nor the time for that, but if you want that, then you do it.' It was a process plagued with obstacles, and I started to feel bad because I was

> taking a lot of time from the people who accompanied me during the process. After the month of the complaint being active, the lawyer in charge of my case at the CJEMC told me: 'Do you really want to keep going with this? It is going nowhere, and nothing is going to happen.' After that, I lost track of the process and shortly after opted to buy a car, so I would not have to see the driver again. The MIT never contacted me again.

Although the referral of sexual assault cases to justice institutions like the CJEMC may seem like a sensible route since it's the foremost institution that handles GBV cases in the state of Coahuila, where Saltillo is located, this organisation is under-staffed and under-funded. And, as these data suggest the lawyers and the ministerial police that work there can engage in re-victimising patterns that dismiss sexual assault and abuse complaints.

These patterns of re-victimisation resonate with other scholarship on Mexico and elsewhere which has argued that re-victimisation is a product of the deeply entrenched cultures of sexism that exist within a wide range of cultural institutions within and beyond the local state. For example, in 2011, Melissa Wright shone a light on how police corps in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico re-victimised women that had been murdered and dumped like garbage around the city in early 2000, telling their families (and the media) that if they had gone missing in the first place, they most likely lived "double lives" to blame them for their own deaths and deflect any responsibility of investigating and bringing justice to their families (Wright, 2011). Even more recently, as Rodriguez-Dominguez documents, justice institutions throughout Mexico keep reinforcing victim-blaming patterns and re-victimising as a tool to deflect cases of GBV(Rodriguez-Dominguez, 2017). In the latest report "State Performance Index of Ministerial Departments and Prosecutors", in Coahuila in 2020, over 34% of the reports took over four hours to submit the initial complaint and, as a national average, the possibility of a crime being reported and solved is only 1.04% (Impunidad Cero, 2021). The outsourcing of MIT's responsibilities to investigate and seek redress for victims of GBV episodes in spaces of transport to other justice institutions further contributes to the inefficacy in preventing GBV in spaces of public transportation in Saltillo.

María, Paloma, Elena and Violeta all tried filing sexual assault or harassment reports in different ways, with different authorities, but they all dismissed their cases and allegations with re-victimising actions that aimed to minimise their experiences. As we can see through the testimonies collected as part of this study, the MIT sometimes deflects responsibility to other organisations and does not always directly involve itself in complaints. In late 2021, after backlash from the publication of the original study around gender violence in Saltillo's transport system (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2022; El Heraldo de Saltillo, 2021b, 2021a), the Municipal Government launched a campaign called "*Espacios Seguros" (Safe spaces)* to encourage women to report cases of abuse and harassment in transport (Coahuila En Línea, 2021), but the organisation responsible for dealing with the reports is the Municipal Police force, and the number of cases reported is not publicly available information. In this way, we can see how the MIT, the main local transport authority in the city can step out of the process of punishing and seeking to end GBV on public transportation.

As Fairchild and Rudman have shown, most women's responses to stranger harassment are passive strategies, and it is less common for women to confront their harassers or file a report (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008). The decision to report an episode of GBV generally or a harasser specifically becomes a cost-benefit analysis in which women weigh the potential costs and benefits of reporting (Mellgren, Andersson and Ivert, 2018). This calculation often includes factors such as shame, stigma, fear of retaliation, insensitivity of the police or other authorities involved, long and complicated legal procedures, low conviction rates, and an overarching culture of impunity (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014).

As the data produced by our study show, the experiences of women who report violent episodes they have experienced within the public transport system reveal a pattern of re-victimisation, through the minimisation of the experience and clear efforts to shield perpetrators. These practices reinforce the widely-held perception that reporting sexual harassment is useless and that authorities will not take action (Quinones, 2020). According to data generated by our survey, 95.9% of the participants that had experienced an episode of GBV in Saltillo did not report it to any local authority, which is roughly in line with scholarship which has suggested that less than 10% of the incidents of harassment that occur in spaces of public transport in Latin American cities is reported (Ding, Loukaitou-Sideris & Agrawal,

2020). But, as we have seen, the story does not get better even for the 4.1% of women in Saltillo who do decide to report. As seen by the testimonies reviewed here, those who report a case of gender violence face re-victimising, pressure to keep quiet, and further abuse by the exposure of their personal information, leaving them vulnerable to subsequent attacks.

The local transport authority in Saltillo maintains that GBV in spaces of public transport is not a systematic issue, but rather that these are isolated cases that do not reflect the reality that everyday users face. This is based on the logic that there are only a few reports of GBV in their records (Viveros, 2020). Before concluding, let us briefly turn to consider these reporting mechanisms.

As of 2022, the Citizen Service Module in Saltillo receives all types of reports, from potholes to public transport complaints, and many others. Then, those reports are transferred to the municipal department that has it in their competencies to deal with that issue. In 2019, the MIT received seven reports explicitly related to sexual harassment, according to their records (Table 1). However, the document with the entire record of reports has no categorisation and describes the episodes poorly, with ambiguous language and generalisations that make it hard to discern the type of situations that are being reported.

Meanwhile, the official document provided by the MIT, after requesting it via Coahuila's Access to Information Institute (ICAI), denotes 27 permanent suspensions and 24 temporary suspensions of bus driver's licences but does not specify the reasons for these suspensions. The lack of clarity regarding the few cases of GBV that are reported, combined with the lack of information about the suspensions that are being made raises questions about the MIT's ability to accurately track cases or understand the reasons for actions they take.

Table 1.- Reports filed by users of the public transport of Saltillo in 2019

Source: Municipal Institute of Transport of Saltillo, via ICAI. Produced by Author A

Month	No. of general reports	No. of reports that relate to sexual harassment	Description of the reports that relate to sexual harassment	Status
January	160	1	On route 18, Bus No. 21: The bus takes an hour to go by, a man was playing with his penis on the bus. BD got the passenger off of the bus	ID: MAC(SP)195660 OK/Solved
February	185	-	-	-
March	180	-	-	-
April	104	1	On all routes: A citizen asked to prohibit street performers (clowns) going into buses to ask for miney, they disrespect passengers The MIT talked to the licensees to ban street performers from all routes, otherwise they will recieve a sanction	ID: 5254 OK/Solved
May	176	3	On route 3A, Bus No. 400: BD is smoking, inappropriately touching a woman next to him, yelling curse words BD recieved a fine On route Guayulera, Bus No.34: BD is dislaying inapropiate behaviour to a passenger BD recieved a fine On route 8-Morelos, Bus No.26: BD is dislaying inapropiate behaviour to a passenger BD recieved a fine	ID: MAC8SP)204636 OK/Solved ID: MAC8SP)204642 OK/Solved ID: MAC(SP)206711 OK/Solved
June	134	1	On route 5B, Bus No.103: BD harassed a passenger with words and looks BD recieved a fine	ID: MAC(SP)207849 OK/Solved
July	175	-	-	-
August	159	-	-	-
September	174	-	-	-
October	148	-	-	-
November	139	1	On route 13A, Bus No. 1304: BD took photos of the passenger filing the report No evidence of the event	ID: MAC(SP)225415 OK/Solved
December	106	-	-	-

Total of reports regarding public transport in Saltillo: 1840 reports

In addition to the reasons women and other feminised subjects may not report episodes of GBV noted above, it may be that victims do not know where or how to report an incident (or don't know they could report it). In 2020 for example, when survey participants were asked why they did not file a report, nearly half said that they did not know whom to call or where to go, while another 35% said they did not realise they could file a report. *[Table 2 near here].*

Table 2.- Responses to the survey question: "When the episodes of violent behaviour occurred, did you report it to any local authority, if not, please select a reason that aligns better to your situation, produced by Author A.

Didn't knew I could report it	205	35%
It seemed insignificant	126	21.5%
I didn't knew who to call or where to go	**263**	**44.9%**
I didn't have the time	65	11.1%
I was afraid to report it	125	21.3%

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

We interpret this data as an indication of historically poor advertisement of reporting outlets to the public. Although, as noted, in late 2021 the Municipal Government of Saltillo launched a campaign to encourage women to report episodes of GBV in public transport (Reyes, 2021) the MIT remains largely outside of efforts to address this issue, instead, leaving the Citizen Service Module and the Municipal Police Force to handle these cases. While the launch of the *"Espacios Seguros" (Safe Spaces)* campaign aims to tackle the lack of knowledge about resources for those who experience GBV episodes in public transport, it still leaves victims to deal with their reports on their own in highly masculinised institutions that, as we have seen, can discredit and minimise their experiences.

The local transport authority in Saltillo still avoids acknowledging the extent of GBV within the city's public transport system under the argument that the number of reports is insignificant in their records. However, as we have shown neither they, the police nor the CJEMC is providing an

appropriate reporting system that reassures women who have experienced episodes of GBV that their experiences will not go ignored or unpunished and that they will be treated with respect through the process. Instead, the MIT deflects responsibility by involving municipal police forces and directing women to helplines or other authorities that may eventually dismiss or mishandle their cases, as our testimonies suggest.

Conclusions

In this paper, we set out to explore the reporting process for women who have lived through episodes of sexual assault and harassment while on public transportation in Saltillo, Mexico. We approached this question through a critical review of the systems in place in this city for reporting and seeking redress for incidents of gender violence through a review of women's experiences trying to navigate these systems. The *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia,* General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, to which Mexico subscribed in 2007 (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2007) grants all levels of government the responsibility to take action preventing, investigating and sanctioning systematic violence against women. Herein we have shown one local transport authority's many failures in guarantying women's rights and protecting their well-being, advancing scholarship by showing the role of the local state (in the form of the MIT, the police, and the CJEMC) in perpetuating GBV and re-victimising through reporting processes.

We have shown that women and girls in Saltillo are forced to live and function within a system that sexualizes and abuses them; and that the public transport network –on which low-income women are disproportionately reliant – together with its reporting process are some of the mechanisms by which that happens. We have argued that systems for reporting GBV can themselves function as a mechanism of violence and that the MIT needs to create effective, safe, and accessible mechanisms to allow women who suffer GBV episodes in transport to report if they wish to do so. We suggest the MIT and the other organizations we have discussed here (CJEMC and the police) would be capable of changing their reporting systems so they do not re-victimise women, and that they must endeavour to do this. A starting point for ways to do this can be found in the cross-disciplinary scholarship on preventing re-victimisation. This scholarship has highlighted the need to put survivor's well-being at the centre of the

reporting process (Nichols, 2013), and has suggested this can be done by making sure victims have more say and control in the process (Cuomo, 2013); affirming that experiences of gender violence were not the victims' fault; and ensuring that the victim is believed (Maier, 2008).

Although it is crucial to redesign the reporting process, it is also important to acknowledge that GBV in public transport will not be solved just by providing a new reporting system. Reporting an episode of GBV in any setting is a right of all citizens. Instead, the responsibility of addressing this issue must be fulfilled by the local transport authority in a much more active way that aims to prevent and eradicate GBV in public transport generally, not just seek redress once episodes have been reported. Eliminating GBV in spaces of public transport must include redesigning the reporting process, but it should also include developing a broader protocol to combat GBV. This should include: involving feminist collectives, activist groups, and other civil associations in the design of programmes; deploying an anti-harassment campaign; promoting reporting mechanisms creatively through signage and social media; giving citizens a role in shaping (and evaluating) reporting systems in a meaningful way (Nichols, 2013); and exerting more oversight over third-party employers. While we have focused on Saltillo, we suggest these findings and recommendations have utility for other places as well, since the scholarship clearly shows the issue of GBV in spaces of public transport to be a pervasive one.

Finally, we argue that future modernization of public transport systems in Mexico (and elsewhere) must include a gender perspective as a central axis of design, with an intersectional approach that considers how women and other feminised subjects are situated differently by race, class, sexual orientation, and other factors experience GBV differently, as well as how travel patterns are shaped by care work. This future planning should also involve ensuring there are more women in all parts of the system: as decision-makers as well as in the administrative and operational side of the local transport authority.

While this research complements previous work (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2022) it both advances understanding of the role of the state in the perpetuation of GBV in spaces of public transport through reporting systems and raises further questions. The current transport system in Saltillo functions through licensees and private concessions, and further research lines should analyse the economic and

political context of the transport system; how this concession-lead model plays a role in the deflection of accountability from local transport authorities and licensees; and ultimately how that contributes to the perpetuation of GBV patterns in public transport. Relatedly, the risk and/or experience of re-victimisation, if the perpetrator is a bus driver rather than a fellow passenger, would be a further line of future research. And finally, since the testimonies collected for this study raise a number of issues regarding how the CJEMC deals with GBV in spaces of public transportation and public space in general, the effectiveness of the specialised ministerial department at the CJEMC would be a further topic for subsequent research.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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Figure captions:

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Table 2.- Responses to the survey question: “When the episodes of violent behaviour occurred, did you report it to any local authority, if not, please select a reason that aligns better to your situation, produced by Infante-Vargas.

[i] This paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive review of scholarship on GBV in spaces of public transport in global perspective, but instead focuses on scholarship that is empirically and conceptually closest to this study.