

Gender-Responsive Transportation Policies in the MENA Region

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INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure is a cornerstone for national progress, driving economic growth, improving societal well-being, and supporting sustainable development. It serves as the foundation for key policy goals like expanding access to employment, reducing poverty, addressing income disparities, minimising regional inequalities, and improving overall quality of life. However, a common misconception is that infrastructure development benefits all genders equally. This assumption overlooks the reality that men and women have distinct needs and use infrastructure differently due to their varying social roles, economic circumstances, and preferences (OECD, 2021).

In regions like the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), transportation planning often disregards these differences, leading to a lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure. Limited availability of sex-disaggregated data, combined with insufficient expertise on gender-related transportation issues, exacerbates this gap. Moreover, the voices shaping infrastructure policy and design are predominantly male, even when the outcomes significantly impact women (Clarke, 2012).

Reliable and accessible transportation is vital for connecting women and girls to education, jobs, and markets in both urban and rural areas. However, effective solutions must consider the diverse cultural, economic, and geographic contexts across the MENA region. By examining gender-responsive transport initiatives from other regions and adapting them to local contexts, MENA countries can create more inclusive infrastructure that empowers women and boosts their economic prospects.

Ensuring safety and comfort in public transportation is crucial for narrowing the global gender gap. This requires comprehensive approaches that include improved urban design, strengthened regulations, and capacity-building within the transport sector. Women's safety must be prioritised through well-lit streets, thoughtfully designed waiting areas, and reliable transport personnel. Furthermore, involving women in every phase of transport planning and development ensures that their needs and perspectives are integrated, leading to transportation systems that benefit all users.

1. BUILDING INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE: CLOSING THE GENDER GAP FOR EQUALITY

Infrastructure is essential for driving economic progress, enhancing societal welfare, and promoting sustainable development in all countries. It is the backbone of various crucial policy objectives such as enhancing access to employment opportunities, alleviating poverty, bridging income disparities, tackling regional inequalities, and enhancing overall quality of life. However, there exists a widespread misconception that infrastructure is impartial to gender. The assumption that both men and women benefit equally from public investments overlooks that their distinct needs and usage patterns stem from differing social roles, economic statuses, and preferences (OECD, 2021). Unfortunately, transportation planning often overlooks these variations, and there is a severe lack of sex-disaggregated data on transportation needs and trends in MENA regions, as well as in other areas. Similarly, expertise on gender-related transportation matters is scarce (Clarke, 2012). Furthermore, there is limited acknowledgment that infrastructure planning, design, and execution predominantly involve male perspectives, even when the infrastructure is intended for female users (OECD, 2021).

Principle 5 of the G20 Quality Infrastructure Investment (QII) principles emphasises the necessity for inclusive infrastructure, facilitating economic engagement and social integration for all members of society. Effective infrastructure policymaking and implementation governance aims to foster sustainable and inclusive growth, focusing on achieving policy objectives like gender equality and combatting violence against women and girls. Additionally, adopting a comprehensive life-cycle approach is crucial to ensuring that public investments contribute to gender equality, from the strategic planning phase to monitoring and evaluation (OECD, 2021).

The significance of infrastructure in advancing development, gender equality, and women's empowerment is underscored by its capacity to influence the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Infrastructure plays a pivotal role in realising the objectives outlined in SDG 5, focusing on Gender Equality. However, it is imperative to recognise that not all women and girls face identical levels of disadvantage. Their susceptibility to exclusion depends on their positioning at the intersection of various marginalised and disadvantaged groups, a concept known as intersectionality (Morgan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, it is essential to highlight that inadequately developed and gender-blind infrastructure stands as an immediate barrier preventing women and girls from accessing essential services necessary for their social advancement and narrowing the gender gap (Morgan et al., 2020). Developing transport infrastructure that is sensitive to gender disparities in travel patterns and requirements can significantly contribute to addressing gender inequalities and enhancing the safety of women and girls as they access social and economic opportunities (Morgan et al., 2020). Studies also consistently indicate that men prioritise transport efficiency, whereas women prioritise safety when making travel decisions. For example, women often use public transportation during off-peak hours due to safety

concerns, leading to a decrease in the number of trips women take, especially after 7:00 pm (OECD, 2021). Adding to this, a study across multiple countries in the Middle East and North Africa region revealed that between 40 to 60 percent of women had experienced sexual harassment on the streets. (Morgan et al., 2020)

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There are also notable discrepancies between men and women regarding access to various transportation modes. In certain cultural contexts, men are more likely to own or have driving skills for motor vehicles, while women may face social barriers to driving (Asian Development Bank, 2013). Moreover, [inadequate access to timely transportation significantly contributes to preventable deaths among girls and women during pregnancy and childbirth in developing countries](#). Thus, improving transport accessibility and reducing travel time and distance to healthcare facilities could prevent many deaths (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

Moreover, [women's multiple roles in reproductive, productive, and community spheres often lead to 'time poverty', limiting the time they can allocate for travel](#). Due to these time constraints, many women are compelled to accept lower-paying local job opportunities or informal income sources closer to home or within the household (Asian Development Bank, 2013). Nonetheless, [female involvement in the workforce and civic and political spheres is notably lower in the MENA region compared to other global regions](#). The region grapples with a significant unemployment problem. Young women in particular face challenges, with around 40 percent of them being unemployed, contrasting with young men at around 20 percent. This situation carries significant repercussions in a region where approximately one-third of the population falls within the 15-29 age bracket in most countries (Clarke, 2012).

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise the extensive socio-economic disparities within the MENA region, including the socio-cultural barriers to female mobility. [As the region's poorest nation, Yemen exhibits lower levels of development in stark contrast to Qatar and Kuwait, which are among the wealthiest globally](#). Lasting conflicts have also afflicted many countries in the region, with the West Bank and Gaza enduring prolonged turmoil, impacting the mobility of both genders. Additionally, significant discrepancies in mobility and autonomy exist based on socio-economic standing and other factors. For instance, in Casablanca, professional women with independent incomes enjoy greater autonomy, whereas impoverished women have limited or no autonomy (Clarke, 2012).

2. COUNTRY ANALYSES

Analysing the cases of MENA countries with relevant data is crucial to understanding the ways transportation infrastructures are facilitating or constraining women's access to resources, markets, training, information, and employment.

2.1 Yemen

Yemen is the region's most economically challenged and least urbanised nation, characterised by rugged terrain that presents significant obstacles. These challenges are further compounded by strict socio-cultural norms, particularly concerning women's mobility. Research reveals that one-third of women cite a lack of transportation as a barrier to accessing education, while an equal proportion give birth at home without medical assistance due to transportation limitations. Unfortunately, only five percent of women residing in remote areas without road access have access to maternal and child healthcare services. Additionally, women face further socio-cultural barriers, including restrictions on riding bicycles or motorbikes and the requirement to travel in covered vehicles accompanied by a male relative, known as a *muhram* (Clarke, 2012).

Consequently, in Sana'a, Yemen's capital city, walking is a significant mode of transportation for women, constituting 56 percent of their travel compared to just 15 percent for men. Nevertheless, women often feel deterred from walking long distances due to the prevalent risk of harassment. Furthermore, while shared taxis mandate female passengers travel with a *muhram*, women have the freedom to travel alone by bus, resulting in a notably higher proportion of female bus users at 51 percent compared to 25 percent for men (Clarke, 2012).

2.2. Morocco

The Moroccan case illustrates the positive outcomes of enhanced rural accessibility and highlights further potential benefits of investing in rural access across the MENA region, particularly when accompanied by a sex-disaggregated social database to monitor outcomes. In Morocco, the National Rural Roads Program (1995-2005) utilised research findings on the effects of improved road access and reduced travel time from four rural pilot projects, which resulted in doubling women's school enrollment rates. The program's decision to commission research on these pilot projects signifies also a shift toward prioritising rural women's access to road construction initiatives. Furthermore, the Moroccan Roads Directorate established a social database that includes school attendance data for girls and boys in areas serviced by the roads (Clarke, 2012).

In Casablanca, Morocco's bustling metropolis, walking stands out as a vital means of transportation, particularly for lower and middle-income women who rely on it for 70 percent of their journeys within their neighbourhoods and 33 percent of their trips beyond. Additionally, a significant majority of women, 76 percent and 65 percent respectively, utilise public buses and taxis for their travel needs. There is also a notable gender disparity in

driver's licences, with only 18 percent of women, predominantly those in managerial or professional positions, possessing one, compared to 54 percent of men (Clarke, 2012).

2.3. Saudi Arabia

In Middle Eastern nations, a narrow emphasis on public transportation has also encouraged individuals to depend on private vehicles for daily mobility. An investigation carried out in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia indicates that the majority (70.4 percent) of women rely on private cars, with taxis (22.5 percent), walking (3.0 percent), and public buses (2.2 percent) being less frequently used options. However, around 52 percent of women lacked access to a private household car during the day, especially between 09:00 a.m. and 05:00 p.m., which emerged as a notable obstacle to their daily mobility (Al-Rashid et al., 2020).

2.4. West Bank

In the West Bank, the cultural norms surrounding women's mobility are relatively more flexible than in other territories in the MENA region. However, it is not social restrictions but rather the challenging economic circumstances and political barriers, such as barriers like walls and checkpoints, that pose significant challenges to both men and women when it comes to getting around. For instance, both women and men rely on walking for only a tiny portion of their travels, at 19 percent and 18 percent, respectively. Due to checkpoints and concrete barriers, public transportation emerges as the primary mode of travel, with 73 percent of women and 61 percent of men using it (Clarke, 2012).

Buses and shared taxis are particularly favoured by women, as they are considered more socially acceptable than private taxis. In conservative societies like the West Bank, unwritten rules about gender interactions can make the close proximity to a male driver in a private taxi uncomfortable or inappropriate for women. Public transportation, on the other hand, offers a more communal and culturally accepted environment. Despite the widespread use of public transportation among women, a significant portion of the population, over 25 percent, views women's use of public transportation as inappropriate. Moreover, only 13 percent of women in the West Bank possess a driver's licence, in contrast to 45 percent of men, and a mere 8 percent of women utilise private cars (Clarke, 2012).

2.5. Cairo

According to UN Women (2013), 83 percent of female respondents expressed feeling unsafe or insecure while on the street. Consequently, when deciding on transportation options, women take into account the level of safety and personal security provided by available modes of transport. In a survey conducted at the public transport terminal involving 481 commuters, it was found that over 60 percent of women surveyed reported experiencing physical harassment. Additionally, verbal harassment rates were notably high, with over 80 percent of women surveyed reporting instances of cat-calling and over 60 percent reporting incidents of whistling. Women also express concerns such as "drivers asking passengers to squeeze in more, even when there is no available space" and "some individuals taking

advantage of crowded situations to harass others". The issue of overcrowding was identified as a contributing factor to the harassment (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, 2021).

Furthermore, the overall cost of gender-based violence on public transportation in Egypt was estimated to be EGP 241 million in 2015 because of seeking legal recourse, altering one's route, travelling with a companion, or missing school or work (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). Additionally, in transportation companies, women comprise at most 2 percent of the workforce, and all companies reported having no women in senior management positions. Moreover, none of these companies have sexual harassment policies in place (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, 2021).

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To begin with, moving past stereotypes concerning socio-cultural limitations on women's mobility is crucial. While socio-cultural norms impose restrictions on women's movement in the MENA countries outlined, the degree and manner in which women's opportunities are curtailed vary significantly among these nations. Increasing access to transportation enables access to education and economic prospects, fostering increased mobility, autonomy, and empowerment, even in environments with significant socio-cultural constraints on women's mobility. Therefore, the following part of the paper proposes policy recommendations under four different angles of gender-responsive infrastructure policies.

Firstly, as the country examples have shown, **there is a need to increase transport availability, reliability, and quality.**

Policy recommendations:

- Implementing regular bus stops and constructing shelters equipped with seating, adequate lighting, and protection from inclement weather;
- Enhancing the frequency, regularity, and predictability of public transport services to minimise the time women spend waiting on the street, vulnerable to harassment or theft;
- Incorporating features that facilitate comfortable seating and storage for women's belongings;
- Offering training programs for bus drivers focused on providing respectful customer service, particularly to female passengers; and
- Introducing light rail systems to connect urban hubs with peripheral areas (Clarke, 2012).

Secondly, traffic accident rates are high and growing in the MENA region. **Improved traffic and pedestrian environment safety are essential for women because they rely heavily on walking.**

Policy recommendations :

- Implementing measures such as stoplights, traffic signs, speed bumps, and other tactics to regulate traffic flow;
- Enhancing street lighting, particularly in suburban areas;
- Enhancing pedestrian infrastructure with clear pavements, designated crossings, pedestrian islands, and overpasses on rural roads;
- Monitoring regular maintenance and upgrading of vehicles;
- Initiating public traffic safety awareness campaigns tailored to diverse audiences, including commuters, homemakers, students, drivers, and pedestrians; and
- Investigating the possibility of forming public-private collaborations with restaurants, hotels, and other enterprises that profit from the public transportation network, as well as businesses interested in advertising products at bus stops and within public vehicles. For example, in Nairobi, a company installed 185 lights along main roads and in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in exchange for the opportunity to display their advertisements on the lampposts (Clarke, 2012).

Thirdly, policies by the MENA governments should be applied to **improve the personal safety of female transport users**.

Policy recommendations:

- Deploying security personnel at terminals, platforms, buses, and trains during peak hours, and recruiting female officers;
- Initiating a public awareness campaign promoting respectful behaviour towards women in public transportation settings;
- Addressing vacant areas and abandoned buildings by encouraging business development to revitalise these spaces into bustling hubs with shopping and various activities;
- Installing cameras to monitor gender-based violence and harassment;
- Displaying emergency phone numbers inside vehicles and in waiting areas;
- Establishing reliable reporting processes and legislation to eradicate the fear of using public transport;
- Introducing women's-only sections to transportation; for example, the front section of each bus can be reserved for women;
- Introducing gender-specific transportation options such as women-only buses, train compartments, and taxis operated by female drivers; and
- Introducing specially coloured taxis driven by women for women, as seen in Oman, could be applied to other cities across the MENA region to meet women's privacy, flexibility, and safety concerns (Clarke, 2012).

For instance in Beirut, Banat Taxi, also known as pink taxis, driven by women for women, has gained popularity among families for transporting their daughters. A similar

service in Tehran employs 700 women drivers on a larger scale. However, while separate services may temporarily address some issues, they tend to cater primarily to higher-income women, operate only during peak hours, and reinforce divisions rather than tackle the entrenched gender biases that hinder women's mobility and perpetuate gender-blind transport planning (World Bank, 2010).

Fourthly, it is necessary to ensure **the existence of gender-informed transport policies in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation**.

Policy recommendations :

- Ensuring the appropriate allocation of human and financial resources to address gender and other social aspects of rural transportation;
- Including gender audit checklists in infrastructure offers a tool for public and private transportation providers, regulators, and advocacy groups to evaluate the extent to which gender and transportation concerns have been incorporated into policies, plans, and initiatives (SSATP et al., 2011);
- Incorporating gender-inclusive participatory consultations into transportation planning processes by enhancing women's participation through organising focus group discussions led by women for women, scheduling town meetings, and ensuring ongoing consultation with women throughout the project duration;
- Achieving a balanced gender ratio, with women in mid- and senior-level management positions, ticketing, driving, security, and cleaning. To create a welcoming environment for women in the workplace, transportation authorities and law enforcement agencies should implement and publicise sexual harassment policies outlining procedures for addressing, reporting, and documenting incidents. Workplace anti-discrimination policies should also be established to ensure equal pay for equal work;
- Utilising gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation is crucial for guiding adjustments during implementation and informing subsequent phases or related projects. It also serves as a means of accountability, ensuring that essential gender-related initiatives are effectively executed and their impacts accurately measured;
- Adopting key performance indicators and targets for gender equality along the different stages of the infrastructure life cycle. The systematic measuring of progress toward gender equality performance, based on impact indicators and measurable outcomes, should be implemented; and
- Integrating gender-inclusive indicators into gender-blind projects can still allow governments to make them more inclusive by keeping track of their contribution to gender equality goals and adopting corrective measures throughout their performance (OECD, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, accessible, reliable, and high-quality transportation infrastructure is pivotal in facilitating women and girls' access to education, employment, and markets in urban and rural areas. However, addressing the diverse cultural, economic, and geographical landscapes across the MENA region requires tailored and gender-sensitive transport solutions. By drawing insights from gender-informed transport planning initiatives from various nations, adjustments can be made to accommodate the socio-cultural contexts of the MENA region, thereby empowering women and enhancing their economic opportunities.

Creating a safe and secure public transportation environment is essential for bridging the global gender gap, necessitating comprehensive measures, including urban design enhancements, regulatory frameworks, and capacity-building efforts in the public transport sector. Women must feel safe and comfortable throughout their journey, with provisions for adequate street lighting, designed waiting areas, and reliable transport personnel. Furthermore, the active involvement of women at all stages of public transport development is crucial, ensuring that their perspectives are considered and their needs are met effectively. By prioritising women's safety and mobility, societies can foster inclusive and equitable transportation infrastructure that benefits everyone.

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