

Gender-equal public transport in a caring system: A submission to the UCLG 2022 Town Hall process

This document forms part of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) engagement in the UCLG 2022 Town Hall process, leading up to UCLG's Seventh World Congress in South Korea. As participants in the Caring Systems process, we believe that public transport and gender equality are essential components to any just and caring city. The text below lays out the ITF's vision for public transport and women and provides links to further resources. We hope it is useful for UCLG, its network and other stakeholders in shaping public transport services in the months and years to come.

Public transport as part of a caring system

1. **Public transport is integral to the city as a caring system, and women are integral to public transport.** As public transport workers, women help ensure the fundamental and universal right to mobility; as passengers, they travel to undertake paid care work, and unpaid forms of care that women are disproportionately expected to undertake, which in turn keep the system flowing. There is no sustainable model of public transport without gender equality at its heart.
2. **Access to mobility is a fundamental and universal right**, and one which cannot be met exclusively or even predominantly by access to private transport. At the 2021 [International Labour Organisation technical meeting on the future of decent and sustainable work in urban transport services](#), governments, employers and unions jointly concluded that public transport "constitutes a basic service under public regulation. It is an enabler of other rights and of access to other vital services. It is a powerful driver of equity, development, sustainability, growth, productivity and employment opportunities", and "contributes to the achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals set out in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)".
3. **Workers and their unions have a vital role to play in building sustainable, resilient and caring public transport systems.** During the Covid-19 pandemic, formal and informal workers kept public transport systems moving and were recognised as "[guardians of mobility](#)" by the International Association of Public Transport (UITP). The ITF is the global union federation which represents transport workers worldwide, including across all modes of public transport. The ITF's [Our Public Transport](#) programme promotes a social and caring model of public transport, which incorporates public ownership and financing, decent work, gender equality, technological sovereignty and climate justice. [ITF Women](#) is a central stakeholder in all aspects of the Our Public Transport programme, and the 'Women in Public Transport' chapter of the [ITF People's Public Transport Policy](#) sets out a joint vision for the sector.

Challenges for women in public transport

4. **Despite the integral role of women workers in public transport systems, they face many more challenges than their male colleagues.** The ILO technical meeting also noted that "[women's] rate of labour force participation in both formal and informal [public transport] remains low. Gender occupational segregation is prevalent, and women have typically less income security and job opportunities and work in lower paid jobs. While the sector is working towards achieving a more inclusive workforce, there are still significant barriers for women to enter and remain in the



sector". Public transport will fail to meet its potential within a caring system until gender discrimination is addressed and all women workers are treated equally to their male colleagues.

5. One key challenge is meeting the basic need of **sanitation**, which especially affects women workers. Women across different transport modes experience routinely poor access to sanitary facilities which are clean, safe and dignified. This constitutes a major neglect of care. The ITF [Sanitation Charter](#) provides an outline of the problems and proposes solutions, including actions to be undertaken by employers, governments and other stakeholders in transport workplaces to ensure safe access to decent sanitation facilities for all workers. This is complemented by a [Sanitation Toolkit](#), launched on International Women's Day 2022, which provides practical guidance for workers and unions to assess and improve their workplaces. The provision of adequate sanitary conditions also has major benefits for male transport workers.
6. Another key challenge is **gender-based violence and harassment**. Women workers are perennially exposed to violence and harassment, and this is a daily reality in public transport due to persistent myths, gender stereotypes and the resulting concentration of women in particular jobs in the sector. In 2019, the landmark ILO [Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#) (and its associated [Recommendation 206](#)) were agreed during tripartite negotiations between governments, employers and unions. These instruments set a new global standard for ending violence and harassment, including against women workers. In 2021, global union federations including the ITF launched a [C190 Campaign Toolkit](#) to support workers and unions in lobbying their governments to ratify the convention. This will be complemented in 2022 with the ITF launching a transport-specific toolkit.
7. In many respects, the challenges facing **women passengers** mirror those facing women workers. As detailed by the [Sustainable Mobility for All](#) (SuM4All) consortium, passengers also experience poor access to sanitary facilities and gender-based violence and harassment, as well as health and safety hazards such as the non-gender-responsive design of vehicles and infrastructure. Even where women, children and older and disabled people make up the majority of passengers, public transport systems are too often designed and operated with biases against their needs. When gender is considered in public transport planning, all too often the exclusive focus is on women as passengers rather than women as workers.

Building feminist public transport systems

8. Following the [Covid-19 Global Solidarity Platform](#) of Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WIEGO), women's role in public transport must be based on the principle of "**nothing for us, without us**". For women workers, formal and informal, that means democratic participation in independent unions which then play a key role in transport governance, planning and regulation. For women passengers, that means active involvement in community groups and civic spaces to ensure that transport is fully gender-inclusive. Workers and passengers should build and maintain alliances to drive forward their common interests, and women's leadership is essential in both spheres in order to build a municipal feminism.
9. Public transport can act as a **job creator for women**, both within public transport systems themselves and more widely. [Research](#) published by ITF and C40 Cities in 2021 demonstrates that investing in public transport to meet climate goals could also create millions of jobs worldwide – directly in public transport, indirectly in the sector's supply chain, and induced elsewhere in the



economy by the increased mobility of workers and consumers. In order for these opportunities to work fully for women, we must end the systemic exclusion of women from decent, safe and secure work in public transport, and employers must engage in proactive strategies to hire, retain and promote women workers. Much of this vision is expressed in the [Positive Employer Gender Policy](#) signed by the ITF and UITP in 2019.

10. Linked to job creation, it is essential that public transport reforms create opportunities for the **worker-led formalisation of employment**, especially for women and migrant workers. A large proportion of the world's public transport systems are defined by informal services and labour, especially in the global south. While technological solutions such as bus rapid transit (BRT) are promoted as means of formalisation by international financial institutions, any formalisation must be led by and act in the interests of informal workers. The ITF and Global Labour Institute have produced a [guide](#) to negotiating worker-led formalisation as part of BRT projects. Gender mechanisms should also be integrated into the investment principles for transport infrastructure projects, ensuring that all lending policies and agreements protect labour rights, promote decent work and gender equality, and impose consequences on governments and employers for non-adherence.
11. Public transport systems should be fully integrated with other opportunities for **active mobility**, primarily walking and cycling. [Recent academic research](#) shows that, around the world, women use public transport and walk more than men, while men own and drive private cars and cycle more than women. A modal shift away from car use and towards public transport, walking and cycling is both an essential component of climate action and a driver of gender equality. Gender-inclusive urban planning is necessary to maximise these opportunities, for example by integrating various travel options into mobility hubs that are accessible and safe for women.
12. The net environmental benefits of public transport and active mobility are substantial, with regard to both **climate justice and public health**. As those providing the majority of caring labour worldwide, women are on the front line in adapting to the effects of climate change on vulnerable people and communities. In parallel, and as recognised in the 2022 update to the World Health Organisation (WHO) [air quality database](#), a reduction in transport emissions will also reduce air pollution and improve respiratory health among those most affected by car ownership and use. The WHO recommendations to governments include building safe and affordable public transport systems, integrated with pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly networks. Women workers must be at the centre of a just transition to lower-emissions technologies such as electric vehicles. In 2022 the ITF laid out a [just transition pathway](#) for public transport workers in particular cities of the global south, to ensure that environmental progress does not inadvertently lead to social regression.
13. Similarly, the introduction of **digital technology** has the potential to improve gender equality, but only when it is controlled by and accountable to women workers and passengers. In 2019 the ITF published [research](#) on the impact of new technologies on women public transport workers, demonstrating that certain innovations are likely to reinforce rather than overcome gender inequality in the workplace. Women workers must play a leading role in negotiating the introduction and use of any new technology that will affect working conditions. The outcomes of negotiation should include education and training to help women access jobs created by new technology, and ensure that women gain and retain access to jobs when new transport infrastructure is introduced or upgraded.

14. Women's participation in public transport policy and decision-making can contribute to the wider project of building **just and caring cities**. This contribution can take the form of shaping local visions for public transport and influencing new developments in the sector, with the aim of benefitting both women workers and passengers and furthering gender equality. Cities around the world are already experimenting with approaches such as [participatory budgeting](#) for public services, [de-privatising](#) public services to restore democratic control and quality provision, and making public transport [free at the point of use](#) like other services such as healthcare and education. As both workers and citizens, women must play a leadership role in these democratic processes to ensure that cities become caring systems for all.

For more information, please contact the ITF at opt@itf.org.uk.



Resources

ITF resources

[People's Public Transport Policy](#)

[Positive Employer Gender Policy](#) (2019) [with the International Association of Public Transport]

[Bus rapid transit and the formalisation of informal public transport: A trade union negotiating guide](#) (2019) [with the Global Labour Institute]

[Sanitation Charter](#) (2019) and [Toolkit](#) (2022)

[The Impact of the Future of Work for Women in Public Transport](#) (2019)

[C190 Campaign Toolkit](#) (2020) [with other global union federations]

[Making COP26 Count: How investing in public transport this decade can protect our jobs, our climate, our future](#) (2021) [with C40 Cities]

[A Just Transition for Urban Transport Workers: Issues and Experiences from Unions in Cities of the Global South](#) (2022)

Further resources

International Association of Public Transport: [The Guardians of Mobility: keeping cities alive and moving](#) (2020); [Full free fare public transport: Objectives and alternatives](#) (2020)

International Budget Partnership: [Open Budget Survey](#)

International Labour Organisation: [Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#) and [Recommendation 206 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work](#) (2019); [Conclusions of the technical meeting on the future of decent and sustainable work in urban transport services](#) (2022)

Sustainable Mobility for All: [Global Roadmap of Action Toward Sustainable Mobility](#) (2019)

Transnational Institute: [Public Futures database](#) [with the University of Glasgow]

United Nations: [2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) (2015)

Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising: [Covid-19 Global Solidarity Platform](#) (2020)

World Economic Forum: [From walking to cycling, how we get around a city is a gender equality issue - new research](#) (2022)

World Health Organisation: [Air quality database](#)