

# WOMEN IN TRANSPORTATION

PAULO RUI ANCIAES

Cite as: Anciaes, P. (2015) Women in transportation., in M. Garrett (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Transportation: Social Science and Policy*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, USA, pp.1727-1730.

Women tend to be underrepresented in the transportation industry in most countries, especially in management positions and in some traditionally male-oriented professions. This phenomenon is partly linked to broad economic, social, and cultural factors affecting the full participation of women in the job market and to barriers restricting their opportunities in technical and operational professions. Women working in the industry may also face challenges not face by male colleagues, such as discrimination both on the job and outside work.

Public policies have increasingly addressed the issue of women in the sector, given the increased political focus on the provision of equal opportunities for all and the realization that the low participation of women in business organizations leads to efficiency losses. Private companies and professional organizations have also lead initiatives to promote gender equality in the industry.

In the United States, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 15.9 percent of the full-time workforce in transportation and material moving occupations were female in 2012, while in the total labor force of the country, the proportion of women was 47 percent.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions reports values of 25 percent and 30.9 percent for the proportions of women in the transportation and communications sector in western and central/eastern Europe respectively. In developed countries with a traditionally low proportion of female in the workforce, such as Japan, and in the developing world, the underrepresentation of women in the industry is even more conspicuous than in the United States and Europe.

As in other sectors of the economy, the underrepresentation of women in transportation is especially noticeable in management positions (15.6 percent in the United States). The proportion of women is also low in technical and operational positions. Only customer service positions show proportions of women similar (or in some countries, slightly higher) than proportions of men. Gender-based segregation is also pronounced in professions traditionally dominated by men.

In the USA, professions in the industry with a very small percentage of women include truck drivers (5.4 percent), railroad conductors (5.6 percent) and aircraft pilots (4.1 percent). In most professions, women are particularly under-represented in older age groups. Statistics in some regions of the world, such as in Europe and Australia, also suggest that the proportion of women in many professions seems to be stagnating during the last decade.

## **Barriers to participation**

The low participation of women in the transportation industry may be partly explained by broader social issues restricting women's employment prospects. For economic, social, and cultural reasons, women often have more demanding space and time restrictions than men, because they are often responsible for tasks such as child care, elder care, shopping, and domestic chores.

The work-life balance is therefore more difficult to manage for women than for men. The issue is especially relevant in the case of jobs in public transportation, because of a high prevalence of shift and night work. The job security of women is also often at risk before and after childbirth, while the right to maternal leave or child care leave is not universal, even when enshrined in the law.

Barriers are also posed to women at the level of recruiting, because they may be faced with intrusive questions not usually asked men regarding age and marital status, which may be used to discriminate in the selection of job candidates.

Other social and cultural issues may explain women's underrepresentation in some professions in the industry. For example, the gender imbalance in the case of science and engineering jobs may be linked with the lower proportion of women having the required skills, such as mathematics and physics. This fact is, in turn, explained by the traditionally low proportion of women studying in technical universities.

Other professions, such as bus drivers and conductors, may show a gender imbalance because women are at a higher risk than men in terms of personal safety on the job, especially in night buses.

The representation of women in job advertising may also be biased and lead to gender segregation within the industry, because women are more often portrayed as service providers than as technicians, especially in the case of public transportation. Despite the relevance of these social and cultural factors, there is little research on their specific role in shaping women's career choices in the sector, because they also depend on personal preferences.

As in most sectors of the economy, women working in transportation also tend to be at disadvantage in terms of average earnings. This pattern is mainly explained by their higher relative concentration in lower-paying jobs and by limitations on the opportunities for promotion. The International Transportation Workers' Federation reports that in most countries, women have lower rates of membership in trade unions, leading to lesser power in voicing their specific views.

Women in the transportation industry may also experience discrimination on the job. Discrimination may start at the level of recruiting, because women can be assessed in terms of physical appearance to a higher degree than men, especially in industries such as aviation or in professions such as customer service.

Isolation can also occur because of the minority position of women in a male environment, along working cultures that may alienate women. The work environment itself may also be hostile because of such factors as the need to wear uniforms that were originally designed for men's bodies, or the lack of female toilets in the workplace. Women may also experience discrimination in the larger society due to stereotypes and prejudices against women employed in some jobs, such as truck drivers.

## **Efficiency Gains**

The gender imbalance in the transportation industry is increasingly relevant in terms of public policy, in light of recent studies showing that increasing the diversity in a business organization lead to gains in efficiency. For example, a report by Catalyst (a nonprofit organization focusing on women in the business world) shows that the companies in the Fortune 500 group with more female board members tend to show the best performances.

There are also reasons to believe that women can bring unique inputs to organizations in the transportation industry. For example, surveys of practitioners and researchers in the field have shown that women seem to attach more importance than men to the social dimensions of transportation projects, such as the effects in terms of the social inclusion of the populations affected.

Because women are currently underrepresented in managerial positions, women's perspectives on the use of public transportation may also be underrepresented in decisions. As such, an increase in women's share in those positions could have synergic effects in gender equality.

Studies on the role of women in the transportation sector, such as the European Project Wise (Women Employment in Urban Public Transport), have also mentioned the benefits of the communicative qualities of women in administration and customer service.

## **Legislation**

The employment prospects for women in the transportation industry have benefited in recent decades from general equal opportunity employment laws. These policies emphasize the need for equal access to employment and seek to eliminate gender-based discrimination in recruitment and in the workplace.

The issue of establishing mandatory quotas for women is more controversial, and although it has been subject to regular public discussion in several countries, it has rarely been included in equal opportunity laws. Nevertheless, larger companies may set their own targets. Equal opportunity laws also set minimum requirements for the length, timing, and payment of maternity leave.

Despite the advances in this type of legislation around the world, in many developing countries, women are still at a considerable disadvantage in the access to jobs in this sector. This is mainly because transportation firms in these countries operate in a largely informal market, especially in the case of urban public transport, which tends to be provided by a large number of minibus companies.

In addition, given the informal character of the business and of some of the outer urban areas crossed by these buses, female workers may be at a risk of sexual abuse, especially in the cases of night travel. Women are also more exposed than men to harassment from passengers frustrated with poor levels of service.

However, government-led programs have been used to attract women to the transportation industry. In the United States, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) provide training, scholarships, and internships to improve the skills of women and other groups underrepresented in the transportation sector. A long-running example of these projects is the Summer Transportation Internship Program for Diverse Groups, which offers opportunities for field work and work experience for students in transport companies.

## **Private Sector Initiatives**

Initiatives in the private sector have also been important in the quest for increasing the participation of women in the industry, and many of the larger employers now have equal employment policies. Some common measures have the objective of reconciling work hours with women's time restrictions. These include part-time work, flexible working hours, and work from home options.

The scope for implementation of these measures is variable. Smaller companies or companies with only a small number of female employees may not have the flexibility required to implement them. The provision of conditions for maternal leave may also be a part of the company's equality program, while larger companies may also provide facilities such as kindergartens.

Other initiatives aiming at increasing the attractiveness of transportation jobs for women include job regulations and education regarding sexual harassment between colleagues and, in

the case of jobs in services like public transport, a firm stance against harassment from passengers.

Professional organizations have also led an active role in the promotion of professional development for women in the industry by organizing courses and offering scholarships and opportunities for networking. One example is Women in Transportation, an international network of women in the public and private transportation sector that organizes mentoring and leadership training programs.

Workers unions, such as the International Transportation Workers' Federation, have also worked to solve challenges faced by women in the transportation industry, highlighting the specific barriers posed to women in different countries and providing forums for the exchange of experiences.

**See also:** Public Transit Employees, Labor Issues of; Social Equity and Discrimination in Transportation; Travel Patterns of Women; Truck Drivers: Labor Issues of; Women's Issues/Gender Issues

### **Further Readings**

French, Erica and Glenda Strachan. "Evaluating Equal Employment Opportunity and Its Impact on the Increased Participation of Men and Women in the Transport Industry." *Transportation Research A*, v.43/1 (2009).

Hanson, Susan and Elaine Murakami. "Women in Transportation." *Public Roads*, v.73/5 (2010).

International Association of Public Transportation (UITP), European Transportation Workers' Federation (ETF), and Verband Deutscher Verkehrsunternehmen (VDV) Akademie. "Project Wise-Project Report: Women Employment in Urban Public Transport", [http://www.wise-project.net/download/final\\_wise\\_project\\_report.pdf](http://www.wise-project.net/download/final_wise_project_report.pdf).