

Women's Experiences of Sexual Harassment in Makassar's Public Transport System

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Article Info:

Abstract

Keywords:

Sexual Harassment
Public Transportation
Women
Patriarchy
Makassar

Article History:

Received on November 07, 2025
Revised on November 30, 25
Accepted on December 31, 2025

Public transportation is expected to function as a safe and inclusive space for all citizens; however, for many women, it frequently becomes a setting marked by insecurity and fear. This study examines the forms of sexual harassment experienced by female users of public transportation in Makassar City and analyzes the social, cultural, and structural factors that shape its occurrence. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with women who regularly use *pete-pete*, *pedicabs*, and *Teman Bus*. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings show that sexual harassment manifests in verbal, non-verbal, and physical forms, with *pete-pete* emerging as the most common site. The problem is rooted not only in individual behavior but also in entrenched patriarchal norms and the cultural value of *siri'*, which tends to silence women, as well as structural shortcomings in transport governance that lacks gender sensitivity. Weak reporting mechanisms further limit women's ability to seek protection and justice. The study concludes that sexual harassment in public transportation emerges from the interplay between culture, power relations, and institutional structures. It calls for gender-responsive transport policies that integrate safety measures, public education, and victim-centered reporting systems to ensure women's rights to safe and equitable mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Public transportation constitutes a vital component of the urban system, serving as a backbone for social, economic, and population mobility activities. However, beyond its strategic function, public transportation often becomes an unsafe space for women due to the pervasive incidence of sexual harassment within it (Allen et al., 2021; Ceccato & Paz, 2020). Sexual harassment in public spaces, including transport systems, is not merely an individual behavioral issue but reflects unequal power relations between men and women, deeply rooted in social and cultural structures (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2021). In this sense, public transportation can be understood as a gendered social space structured by norms, values, and behaviors that reinforce masculine dominance (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). This condition aligns with the perspective of structural

gender inequality theory, which emphasizes that gender-based violence in public spaces is a consequence of patriarchal social structures that normalize male dominance over women (Connell, 2009; Krahé et al., 2021).

Another theoretical framework underpinning this research is the Gendered Urban Safety Framework, developed by Loukaitou-Sideris (2016) and Ceccato (2020). This framework highlights that women's experiences in using public spaces are profoundly shaped by spatial factors and environmental design. Safety, therefore, is not merely a matter of police presence or surveillance technology but also concerns how urban spaces are designed to accommodate women's sense of security. Accordingly, the analysis of sexual harassment in public transportation should not only focus on the perpetrator's behavior but also on the social, cultural, and physical structures that enable such violence to occur. Combining these two frameworks enables a comprehensive understanding of sexual harassment in public transport as an outcome of the interaction between micro-level (individual experiences) and macro-level (social structures and urban governance) factors.

Globally, sexual harassment in public transportation has been identified as a serious issue that directly affects women's psychological well-being and social participation. Surveys conducted in major cities worldwide reveal that more than 50% of female passengers have experienced some form of sexual harassment while using public transport modes such as buses, metros, and trains (Gekoski et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2021). The forms of harassment range from verbal (sexual comments), and non-verbal (inappropriate stares or gestures), to physical acts such as unwanted touching (Natarajan et al., 2017; Cavallaro et al., 2021). The consequences are multifaceted: victims often experience emotional trauma and a decline in self-confidence, and many subsequently avoid using public transportation, thereby limiting their mobility and economic opportunities (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2022). Environmental factors such as poor lighting, overcrowding, lack of surveillance, and confined space design further increase the likelihood of harassment (Cavallaro et al., 2021; Ceccato & Paz, 2020). These findings underscore that sexual harassment in public transportation is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring analysis across social and spatial structures.

In Indonesia, the issue of sexual harassment in public transport remains largely neglected in gender-responsive transport policy planning (Rahmawati et al., 2020; Harnoko, 2018). Data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (Kementerian PPPA, 2023) indicate that approximately 23% of female respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment in public transport modes such as city buses, trains, and online-based rides. The low rate of formal reporting is influenced by social and cultural factors, including shame, social stigma, and lack of trust in the legal system (Sari, 2020; Widjajanti & Putra, 2022). From the perspective of structural gender inequality theory, this condition reflects how patriarchal culture continues to act as a dominant determinant that silences victims' voices and normalizes sexual violence as a part of daily public interactions (Connell, 2009). Consequently, women using public transport in Indonesia face not only physical threats but also psychological and social burdens resulting from cultural norms and expectations.

In the city of Makassar, the phenomenon of sexual harassment in public transportation has gained growing attention in recent years. As one of the major metropolitan centers in eastern Indonesia, Makassar features a diverse public transport system including *pete-pete* (minibuses), pedicabs, and Teman Bus (Bus Rapid Transport) with the majority of users being workers and students. Reports by the Legal Aid Institute (LBH) Makassar (2024) indicate a sharp rise in cases of sexual violence, from 19 cases in 2023 to 55 cases in 2024, most of which occurred in public spaces, including transportation. Local government efforts, such as installing surveillance cameras (CCTV) and deploying security officers at bus stops

and terminals, have yet to yield significant reductions in such incidents (Makassar City Government, 2023). This reflects a structural gap between public safety policies and the specific needs of female commuters (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). It also illustrates how social and cultural inequalities in Makassar amplify women's vulnerability to violence in public spaces.

Previous studies in Indonesia have mostly focused on major metropolitan areas such as Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, where modern transport systems like TransJakarta, MRT, and LRT operate (Rahmawati et al., 2020; Sari, 2021). However, the social and cultural context of Makassar is distinct. Patriarchal values embedded in the local siri' na pacce culture often influence how women interpret harassment not as a violation of rights but as a threat to personal honor that must be concealed (Latief, 2022). Within a structural-feminist framework, this indicates that gender-based violence in public spaces cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural structures and power relations that sustain it (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2021). Therefore, this study not only focuses on the forms and frequency of harassment but also on how social norms, public policies, and transport design shape women's experiences of safety in urban public spaces.

Based on the above discussion, this research aims to explore in depth the phenomenon of sexual harassment experienced by women in Makassar's public transportation system. It seeks to map the types of harassment that occur, identify the social, cultural, and structural factors influencing them, and examine the reporting and handling mechanisms available. Utilizing structural gender inequality theory and the gendered urban safety framework as analytical tools, this study aspires to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between women's subjective experiences and the social structures that govern them. Furthermore, the findings are expected to contribute to the development of public transportation policies that are more responsive to women's safety and mobility needs in the city of Makassar.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at comprehensively understanding the lived experiences of women using public transportation in Makassar in relation to sexual harassment. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore complex social phenomena through the subjective meanings constructed by victims and transport users themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2019). Qualitative methods are particularly relevant for capturing narratives, perceptions, and emotions that cannot be fully represented through quantitative data, but instead emerge through contextually rich personal experiences and reflections (Denzin & Lincoln, 2020).

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with fifteen female users of public transportation in Makassar. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring variation in the modes of transportation used. The composition consisted of five *pete-pete* (minibus) users, five pedicab (manual and motorized) users, and five Teman Bus (Bus Rapid Transport) users. The inclusion criteria required informants to be women aged 18–45 who regularly used public transportation at least three times per week. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility in exploring the participants' subjective experiences regarding the forms of harassment encountered, the contexts in which they occurred, and their responses or protective strategies (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was conducted in a safe and comfortable location chosen by the informant.

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analytical process involved transcription of interview recordings, repeated

readings to identify patterns of meaning, open coding, identification of key themes, and narrative interpretation to examine the relationships between themes and the broader social context. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking, whereby interpretations were confirmed with several participants to verify their alignment with actual experiences. The entire research process adhered to social research ethical standards, including maintaining participant confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring that participation did not result in any psychological or social harm to the informants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Forms of Sexual Harassment in Makassar’s Public Transportation

Interviews with fifteen female users of public transportation in Makassar revealed various forms of sexual harassment, including verbal, non-verbal, and physical acts. Twelve informants (80%) experienced verbal harassment such as catcalls, sexually suggestive comments, and derogatory remarks. Eight informants (53%) reported non-verbal harassment, including lewd stares or unauthorized recording, while seven informants (47%) experienced physical harassment such as intentional touching or body contact. These forms most frequently occurred on *pete-pete* (minibuses), followed by *Teman Bus* and *pedicabs*.

Table 1. Distribution of Sexual Harassment Forms by Type of Public Transport in Makassar

Type of Sexual Harassment	Petepete	Pedicab	Teman Bus	Total Cases (n=15)	Percentage (%)
Verbal (comments, whistles, sexual remarks)	5	4	3	12	80.0
Non-verbal (lewd stares, recording, suggestive gestures)	2	1	5	8	53.3
Physical (touching, body rubbing, groping)	4	2	1	7	46.7
Total	11	7	9	27	100.0

Source: Field interviews, processed by researcher (2025).

The pattern of harassment identified, beginning with verbal acts and escalating to physical contact, can be understood through Structural Gender Inequality Theory. According to Connell (2009) and Fairchild & Rudman (2008), patriarchal structures create gendered power hierarchies that normalize male dominance in public spaces. Within this hierarchy, women become socially positioned as individuals who can be commented on, stared at, or touched without consent. The data from Makassar reflects this phenomenon because the majority of verbal harassment occurred on *pete-pete*, where cramped seating arrangements reproduce unequal gender relations.

The finding that verbal harassment frequently escalates into physical harassment underscores how symbolic violence operates in everyday mobility spaces. Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2021) argue that symbolic violence manifests through seemingly trivial acts such as comments or stares that legitimize more severe forms of intrusion. Many informants described a pattern in which verbal harassment was followed by intentional body contact, particularly in crowded vehicles. Similar escalation patterns were documented by Gekoski et al. (2017), who highlight that perpetrators exploit social environments where anonymity and impunity are high.

From the perspective of the gender-based urban safety framework, environmental factors such as lighting, seat arrangement, and crowding shape women’s vulnerability in

public transportation (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). Pete-pete and pedicabs, which have open layouts and lack supervision, provide minimal spatial protection. Although Teman Bus is equipped with CCTV, informants reported that surveillance did not prevent covert recording or intrusive stares. This illustrates the limits of technology-only safety interventions.

Women's reluctance to resist harassment must also be understood within cultural and structural contexts. Only two informants confronted perpetrators. The cultural value of *siri'* in Bugis-Makassar society, which emphasizes modesty and personal honor, discourages women from drawing public attention to incidents of harassment (Latief, 2022). Within the structural gender inequality perspective, this represents cultural silencing, where social norms suppress women's ability to claim their rights (Krahé et al., 2021). Environmental conditions such as nighttime travel, inadequate vehicle lighting, and the absence of authority figures create situational vulnerabilities that align with what Cavallaro et al. (2021) describe as high-risk urban mobility settings. These findings confirm that sexual harassment on public transportation in Makassar is shaped not only by individual behavior but also by the interaction between structural gender inequality and unsafe urban transport environments.

2. Social, Cultural, and Structural Factors Influencing Harassment

Social, cultural, and structural factors jointly shape patterns of sexual harassment in Makassar's public transport. Through the lens of Structural Gender Inequality Theory, patriarchal norms position men as controllers of public space and women as legitimate objects of gaze or commentary (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). The normalization of catcalling or whistling as ordinary acts, rather than harassment, illustrates how discriminatory behaviors become socially accepted through symbolic violence (Connell, 2009). The cultural value of *siri'* reinforces expectations that women should avoid actions that may be perceived as dishonoring their families. This pressure discourages them from confronting perpetrators or reporting incidents (Latief, 2022). Within a structural inequality framework, *siri'* becomes a cultural mechanism that compels women to internalize violence rather than seek justice, thereby reinforcing patriarchal control.

Power relations in mobility spaces further amplify women's vulnerability. Pete-pete users often felt unable to reject inappropriate behavior from drivers or male passengers because their mobility depended on these actors. Gomez et al. (2022) highlight that public transportation often mirrors broader power hierarchies, transforming vehicles into micro-level representations of gendered domination. The gender-based urban safety framework also helps explain how transport infrastructure in Makassar fails to protect women. Poor lighting, lack of security presence, and malfunctioning CCTV at bus stops and terminals create what Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris (2020) call infrastructural vulnerability, which refers to weak surveillance systems that allow gender-based violence to flourish.

Policy gaps contribute to these vulnerabilities. Existing efforts emphasize physical measures such as CCTV or patrols but overlook gender-sensitive training or public-awareness programs. Lee and Harrison (2023) argue that cities that successfully reduce harassment typically combine infrastructure improvements with gender equality-based social interventions. Makassar has not yet implemented such a comprehensive approach. Consequently, women adopt adaptive strategies such as sitting near drivers, dressing conservatively, or avoiding night travel. These practices offer short-term protection but reveal gendered spatial injustice, since women must change their behaviors to accommodate unsafe environments rather than benefiting from structurally safe systems (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2016). Overall, these findings indicate that urban mobility in Makassar is shaped by a social system that determines who is entitled to safety in public spaces.

3. Reporting and Response Mechanisms

Findings indicate that reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment in Makassar's public transport remain weak and informal. Only three of fifteen informants attempted to report incidents, and none received follow-up. Many were unaware of formal reporting channels and assumed that their complaints would not be taken seriously. Within Structural Gender Inequality Theory, weak reporting systems reflect institutional practices that reproduce patriarchal dominance. When authorities or transport operators dismiss verbal harassment as a minor or insignificant behavior, they perpetuate women's unequal access to justice (Connell, 2009; Widjajanti & Putra, 2022). As a result, victims tend to cope informally or confide in friends rather than in institutions. This reflects horizontal solidarity, which Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2021) describe as a collective support system that helps women process shared experiences. Although valuable, such solidarity cannot replace institutional mechanisms required for long-term reform.

The absence of integrated reporting systems signals a lack of coordination between transport agencies, law enforcement, and support services. Ceccato and Paz (2020) emphasize that effective urban safety frameworks require cross-sectoral coordination and accessible reporting procedures, including anonymous digital channels to ensure victim confidentiality. Weak reporting mechanisms also influence public perceptions of safety. Several informants indicated that they avoided public transport and opted for private vehicles. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (2023) notes that restricted female mobility due to fear constitutes an indirect form of violence with social and economic consequences.

From a gender-based urban safety perspective, Makassar lacks the multi-layered safety governance described by Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris (2020), which requires collaboration among government, operators, and community actors. Without such governance, public transport systems cannot adequately ensure women's safety. Ultimately, the findings reveal that women in Makassar experience a dual burden. They face harassment within public transport while simultaneously dealing with institutions that fail to protect them. Sexual harassment in public transportation should thus be seen as an institutional failure rooted in structural gender inequality and insufficient gender-responsive urban governance. The phenomenon of sexual harassment in public transportation reflects issues that extend far beyond individual misconduct, revealing unequal power relations within public spaces. Public transportation, which should function as a neutral and safe environment, instead often reproduces gender-based inequalities. This study underscores how women's bodies are frequently positioned as vulnerable objects, particularly within transport modes that lack regulation and adequate supervision. Women's mobility, therefore, is not merely a technical matter but a deeply social and political issue. The finding that harassment predominantly occurs in *pete-pete* highlights how the characteristics of transportation modes significantly influence levels of vulnerability. Non-standardized systems, overcrowding, and strong power relations between drivers and passengers create conditions conducive to gender-based violence. This demonstrates that transport design and governance possess an often-overlooked gender dimension in urban planning. Transport modes commonly perceived as "traditional" or "informal" emerge as the most hazardous spaces for women.

From a socio cultural perspective, the study reveals how patriarchal norms operate subtly yet effectively to silence victims' experiences. The cultural value of *siri'*, which is often associated with honor and dignity, in this context contributes to the internalization of shame and fear that discourages reporting. Women tend to bear the moral burden of harassment, while perpetrators frequently escape social accountability. This condition illustrates a cultural

paradox in which values intended to protect dignity instead function as mechanisms of control over women. Structurally, weak transport governance and the absence of a gender perspective in policymaking further exacerbate the problem. The lack of accessible, safe, and victim-centered reporting mechanisms causes sexual harassment to be perceived as a “normal” risk of using public transportation. This reflects an institutional failure to fulfill citizens’ basic rights particularly women’s rights to safety and security. The state and local governments have not yet fully assumed their role as protective actors within everyday mobility spaces.

A key contribution of this study lies in its intersectional approach, which links culture, power relations, and institutional structures. By centering women’s lived experiences, the research enriches gender and transportation studies in the Indonesian urban context, a field that remains underexplored. Moreover, the study challenges the assumption that transportation modernization is solely an infrastructural issue, demonstrating that social and institutional transformation is equally essential. The practical implications of these findings underscore the urgency of gender-responsive transportation policies. Preventive efforts cannot rely solely on the provision of physical infrastructure but must also include public education, training for transport operators, and reporting systems that guarantee confidentiality and victim safety. Through such comprehensive measures, public transportation can genuinely function as an equitable and inclusive space, supporting women’s right to safe and dignified mobility.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that sexual harassment in Makassar’s public transportation is not merely the result of individual perpetrator behavior but emerges from the interaction between patriarchal norms, local cultural values, and structural weaknesses within the transportation system. The various forms of harassment experienced by women, ranging from verbal to physical, occur within a broader context of entrenched gender inequality, as explained by Structural Gender Inequality Theory. Unsafe transport environments, limited supervision, and vehicle designs that do not consider women’s experiences further heighten these vulnerabilities. The cultural value of *siri*, which emphasizes modesty and familial honor, reinforces practices of cultural silencing that discourage women from speaking out or reporting incidents.

The absence of effective reporting mechanisms and the lack of institutional responsiveness reveal weak governmental and operator commitment to ensuring women’s safety. This aligns with the Gender-Based Urban Safety Framework, which highlights the necessity of integrated and gender-responsive safety governance. As a result, women bear a dual burden: they are subjected to harassment while simultaneously receiving inadequate protection from institutions. Addressing sexual harassment in public transport therefore requires structural changes that extend beyond technical interventions, including policy reform, improved institutional capacity, gender-sensitive infrastructure planning, and cultural transformation to challenge norms that hinder women from claiming their right to safe public spaces.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all the women in Makassar who courageously shared their experiences and insights throughout this research. Their voices form the foundation of this study and contribute meaningfully to the discourse on gender and urban safety in Indonesia. Appreciation is also extended to the local transport operators,

advocacy organizations, and academic colleagues who provided valuable information and feedback during the research process. Special thanks are due to the research assistants who supported data collection and transcription with great dedication. Finally, heartfelt acknowledgment is given to the Department of Political Science at UIN Alauddin Makassar for its academic guidance and institutional support, which made this study possible.

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