

Sexual violence in South Africa: Women share their stories about the dangers of commuting on minibus taxis

September 9 2024, by Jarred H Martin



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[Millions of people](#) use minibus taxis to get around South Africa every day. These "[pillars of public transport](#)" (which are privately owned and

run rather than operated by the state) account for [66.5%](#) of all public transport on the country's roads.

The vast majority of minibus [taxi](#) commuters come from [lower-income](#) and historically marginalized [communities of color](#) that still bear the brunt of apartheid era [spatial planning](#). They often don't live close to their offices or schools and typically experience [longer](#) commuting times.

Unfortunately, taxis are not necessarily safe for [women](#). They are like so many other [public spaces](#) in a country with some of the world's highest rates of [sexual violence](#) and [murder of women by men](#).

Women's lives in South Africa are often [characterized by the threat of sexual violence](#). Research about [homes](#), [schools](#), [workplaces](#) and [university campuses](#) has consistently highlighted how the threat of sexual harassment and violence makes women feel unsafe in the everyday spaces they occupy and move through.

Less attention has focused on women's experiences of feeling unsafe in the mobile spaces they use for daily commuting. This is surprising, considering the [reports](#) of women being subjected to sexual [harassment](#) and acts of [assault](#) when commuting.

To address this gap, I conducted a [study](#) that explored women's experiences of feeling threatened with sexual violence while commuting on minibus taxis, and what they did to reduce the risks.

My findings could be used by the government, the minibus taxi industry and commuter rights groups to help make commuting safer for women.

The research also highlights that commuting systems and transport networks are not gender neutral or unaffected by the threat of sexual

violence that women face daily in [South Africa](#).

How the study was conducted

Using a small sample of participants so that I could explore their experiences in depth, I interviewed 14 women who used minibus taxis daily.

All the participants were students at a university in South Africa's Gauteng province and were aged between 19 and 32.

All 14 relied on minibus taxis to get to and from their residences, campus, part-time places of work and places where they socialized or relaxed.

The participants all said they often felt anxious and hypervigilant when commuting. This echoes [research](#) which has pointed to the "enduringly stressful impact of minibus taxi commuting" for women.

One of the foremost issues to arise was the trade-off between safety and convenience. One participant said, "If I finish a shift [at work] at ten or eleven [at night], only [minibus] taxis are still on at that time, so it's the most convenient thing for me to use ... But if I didn't have to use it I really wouldn't ... It's so stressful; but I don't have any option that's that convenient. You don't feel safe at all."

The participants had all developed a finely tuned sense of their usual routes, relying on this sense when evaluating their safety as a taxi trip unfolded, especially if they found themselves commuting at night or if alone. One said, "All I can do is try monitor what's going on. Is [the driver] going down the right road? What turn-off does he take? Is it the usual route? Is he going slow or speeding up?"

The close confines of minibus taxis, which have a legal capacity of between 10 and 15 passengers, sometimes led to fraught interactions with men.

One told me, "As a woman you never use much space on a seat because some guys will sit next to you and they just push their legs open. Like wide. Their one leg will push against your leg. Even if you're uncomfortable with it. He will always force his leg against yours. It can be very intimidating. You can feel that he expects you to give him that room on the seat."

Sadly, the interviewees viewed being unsafe, whether on taxis or anywhere else, as part of their everyday lived experience as women in South Africa. This was poignantly expressed by one woman when she mentioned the [2019 murder](#) of Cape Town university student Uyinene Mrwetyana in a Post Office building:

"As a South African woman I'm always being on guard, you know? Taxi, bus, train—it's just like any other place in this country. You can get raped anywhere. Even if you're just at the post office, like Uyinene. A man can get you anywhere. It's come to that point where you must automatically assume that any man who sits next to you wants to rape you."

Moving forward

So, what can be done?

Firstly, violence against women arises within a context where it's normal to devalue women. That must change, or the threat of [sexual violence](#) will persist, regardless of how women commute.

Secondly, the design of commuter transport infrastructure, particularly

for the minibus taxi industry, needs to be reimagined through a [gendered perspective](#). Public transport projects should make sure taxi ranks and stops are well-lit, equipped with surveillance, and designed with clear sightlines. Trained public safety personnel and emergency communication systems should be part of the planning.

There is also an urgent need for a broader range of safe, affordable and efficient [public transport](#) options. The decline of reliable public transport, in particular urban [bus](#) and [rail](#) services, has turned many commuters into "[transit captives](#)" of the minibus taxi industry.

Most public transport users in South Africa [are women](#). They should have more safe, efficient and affordable options to choose from.

Lastly, it's crucial to work with the men who [dominate the minibus taxi industry](#)—who own and drive taxis—to create safer commuting environments for women.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Sexual violence in South Africa: Women share their stories about the dangers of commuting on minibus taxis (2024, September 9) retrieved 9 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-09-sexual-violence-south-africa-women.html>

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