
Public Transport and Gender

*Briefing from the UK Women's Budget
Group on public transport and gender.*

October 2018

Gender and public transport

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Key points

- Travel by public transport is highly gendered. In 2017 across England, **a third more women than men travelled by bus and a third more men than women travelled by rail**. On average men made 17 journeys by London bus, 33 journeys by local buses (not London) and 24 journeys by rail (excluding London Underground). By contrast, on average, women made 18 journeys by London bus, 42 journeys by local bus and 18 journeys by rail.¹
- Overall, **expenditure on UK public transport (2016/17) was £29.1bn**. This includes spending on national and local roads, local public transport (e.g. buses and local trains) and national rail. **54% of this was spent on rail, compared to 8% on 'public transport' including local buses.**²
- Local Authority funding for buses across England has been cut by 46% since 2010/11, and by nearly £20.2 million in 2017/18 alone; in Wales, there has been a cut of 39% since 2010/11.³
- Across the UK (excluding London), **public spending on 'local public transport' including buses, was £2.3million, whilst spending on railways was £15.7m**. This equates to about £249 per person per year in England, compared to £8 per person per year for buses.⁴
- **Bus fares increased by 3.3%** in England between September 2016 and September 2017; **rail fares increased by 3.4%** between January 2017 and January 2018.
- The vast majority of politicians and policy makers involved in high level decision making about public transport are white men.

Introduction

Affordable, reliable and dependable public transport allows people to access essential opportunities such as paid work, education, shopping and socialising. Conversely, a lack of transport, including public transport, is inextricably linked to social disadvantage, exclusion⁵ and gender inequality.

As women are far more likely than men to live on low incomes, work part-time, live in poverty and to undertake unpaid work in the home and the community, poor quality, unreliable and expensive public transport has a far bigger impact on their lives than it does on the lives of men. This makes it imperative that public transport policy and spending is

understood from a gender perspective at a local, regional and national level.

For people on low incomes, or living in poverty, or for those undertaking unpaid work such as caring for dependent relatives, low cost, highly dependable public transport can substantially increase access to paid employment, education, shopping, socialising and reaching essential services such as JobCentre Plus, hospitals and GP surgeries.

This briefing focuses specifically on **public** transport, primarily on buses and trains. Spending on public transport is not equal; some forms attract more investment than others. In 2015, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that spending on public transport (then 2.8% of total public spending) was

¹ Department for Transport (2018) *Travel by car access, household income, household type, NS-SEC and mobility status* NTS0702 (<http://bit.ly/2JbWa3f>)

² Department for Transport (2017) *Transport Statistics Great Britain 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2yrSiGU>)

³ Campaign for Better Transport (2018) *Buses in Crisis: A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010-2018* (<http://bit.ly/2P3O4iv>)

⁴ House of Commons Library (2018) *Transport Spending by Region* (<http://bit.ly/2R2Dbea>)

⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of the links between poverty and transport, see UCL Transport Institute (2014) *Transport and Poverty: A review of the evidence* (<http://bit.ly/2PIKilr>)

slightly below its average share of public spending which has fluctuated between 3% and 4% since the early 1980s.⁶ Overall, expenditure on UK public transport (2016/17) was £29.1bn⁷ but whilst spending on 'local public transport' including buses was £2.3million, spending on railways was £15.7m.⁸

Overview of transport and its impact on women

Use of public transport is highly gendered – women and men use different transport to different degrees. In 2016 across England, women made one third more trips than men by bus; men made one third more trips by train than women.⁹ On average men made 13 journeys by London bus, 30 journeys by local buses (not London) and 24 journeys by rail (not London Underground). By contrast, women made 19 journeys by London bus, 40 journeys by local bus and 18 journeys by rail.

There is little coherent analysis within central or local Government about the gendered impact of public transport policy. The Equality Impact Assessment of the 2017 Bus Act states that any impact on women as a result of the changes implemented by the Act¹⁰ should be addressed by Local Transport Authorities.

Women are far more likely than men to be in paid part-time work for significant periods of their working lives.¹¹ A key issue for many women, therefore, is the challenge of paying for annual, monthly or weekly transport passes (season tickets) when working in this way: public transport can be prohibitively expensive and inflexible for anyone working outside 'normal' full time hours.

Women are also more likely than men to have caring responsibilities that may require them to make multiple short journeys during a day, (for example to drop children off at school, visit an elderly parent and shop for food). This creates another challenge, since many transport services are based on a 'hub and spoke model' aimed at people who wish to travel into

the centre of towns or cities for work in the morning and back to residential areas in the evening.

Work by Jackie Longworth at the University of the West of England has shown how a lack of public transport is a cause of the gender pay gap in the West of England. In 2014, citing evidence from external agencies,¹² she argued:

Some 30 per cent of women have no access to a car particularly during the working day because either they cannot afford one or the family car is used by their partner for work.¹³ Except in London, public transport systems tend to be designed on a 'hub and spoke' model focused on the centres of conurbations. This means that a journey to work via school or childcare drop-off might involve several changes and a long commuting time. Combine this with the fact that high paid jobs [in the West of England] are unevenly distributed and it is not surprising that many women seeking work choose a more local, lower paid, job. Planners, transport authorities and developers need to consider the differing needs of women and men when deciding how to distribute residential and employment space and to ensure that public transport opens up the connections between them.¹⁴

However, aside from Jackie Longworth's work, transport as a barrier to women's employment receives far less attention than other barriers such as childcare.

Transport and political representation

Political and public representation of public transport is overwhelmingly white and male.

Since 1981, there have been 22 UK Government Ministers covering transport, of whom 2 have been women and all have been white. In the Scottish Parliament, there have been 9 Ministers with transport responsibilities of whom 2 have been women. The current incumbent Humza Yousaf is the first BAME MSP to hold this portfolio. In the Welsh

⁶ IFS (2015) *Transport spending* (<http://bit.ly/2R2Dohs>)

⁷ Department for Transport (2018) *Public expenditure on transport: UK* (table TSGB1301) (<http://bit.ly/2AhpXlI>)

⁸ Department for Transport (2017) *UK Public Expenditure on Transport by function: from 2005/06* (Table TSGB1303) (<http://bit.ly/2Csu95X>)

⁹ Department for Transport (2018) *Average number of trips (trip rates) by age, gender and main mode: England, 2017* (Table NTS0601) (<http://bit.ly/2yNMIOV>)

¹⁰ Department for Transport (2016) *Impact Assessment: Changes to bus market legislation – bus franchising and partnership*

improvements for inclusion in the Buses Bill

(<http://bit.ly/2CsW063>)

¹¹ WBG (2018) *Women, employment and earnings* (<https://bit.ly/2ExUEtI>)

¹² For example, <http://bit.ly/2JbZ87T>

¹³ Citizens Mobility (n/a) *Gender and mobility – Buses are female, cars are male* (<http://bit.ly/2yQzKQO>)

¹⁴ J Longworth (2016) *How to eliminate the gender pay gap? Local actions* (<http://bit.ly/2PG9Qpl>) p 7

Assembly, there have been 8 Ministers with responsibility for transport of whom 2 were women.

Modes of Public Transport – Buses and Trains

Buses

There are currently five main bus operators: Stagecoach; FirstGroup; Arriva; National Express; and Go-Ahead. In 2011 the Competition Commission calculated that these five companies accounted for 70% of the market (by number of services registered).¹⁵ Commercial bus operators are not required to consult before making changes to timetables or the position of bus stops; nor do they have to consider either public demand or the availability of existing services: each company can operate timetables and introduce new services solely on individual operators' views on the demand and commercial viability. The role of local authorities is to secure, using subsidy, 'socially necessary' services which are not provided by the commercial market and to specify fare levels, type of bus and so on for these services, on the condition that they are provided by private contractors. Under this system, the UK Government spent £2.3bn on bus services in 2016/17.¹⁶

Impact of austerity

Across the UK, particularly in rural and isolated communities, the bus is often the only form of public transport. However, such routes are often considered 'unprofitable' by private providers so rely on subsidy from local authorities. Significant cuts to local authority budgets since 2010 have severely affected the provision of subsidised bus services. Local Authority funding for buses across England has been cut by 46% since 2010/11, and by nearly £20.2 million in 2017/18 alone; in Wales, there has been a cut of 39% since 2010/11.¹⁷

The Campaign for Better Transport found that over 3,300 bus routes had been reduced or completely withdrawn between 2010/11 and 2017/18.¹⁸ Analysis conducted by the BBC¹⁹ showed that there had been a

loss of 134 million miles of bus coverage across the UK over the past decade. The North East of England was hardest hit, losing nearly a quarter (23%) of miles from its network in that time. Since women make a third more bus journeys than men they are disproportionately affected by these cuts.

Unprofitable routes that rely on local authority subsidy are often those where the passengers are primarily holders of concessionary bus passes – due to age or disability. Such passengers are therefore doubly dependent on local authority subsidies, and hugely at risk of being isolated as a result of cuts to public transport budgets.

Dependable bus services

Public transport of any mode needs to be reliable and dependable for it to meet the needs of the public it serves. In a Government survey of public attitudes towards buses, of those who didn't use bus services, 18% of women and 15% of men said it was because the buses were infrequent or didn't run when needed. Transport Focus, the Government sponsored body which measures passenger satisfaction with GB transport, captures information on satisfaction with punctuality rather than dependability. This is unfortunate because, in transport terms, these are not the same things at all. A bus that turns up once a day may turn up on time every day (and thus be punctual) but is not a dependable form of public transport if someone needs to travel at a time when there is no bus. Interestingly, in a survey conducted in 2013, 35% of people said they would use buses more often if the buses were more frequent, including 41% of people who describe themselves as bus users.²⁰

Affordable bus services

People on low incomes are significantly more likely to use buses than people on higher incomes who are more likely to use trains. Data from 2017 shows that people in the lowest income quintile are three times more likely to use buses than those in the highest income quintile.²¹ So affordability of bus services will

¹⁵ House of Commons Library (2018) *Bus Services Act 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2CszDO4>) p 10

¹⁶ Department for Transport (2017) *UK Public Expenditure on Transport by function: from 2005/06* (Table TSG1303) (<http://bit.ly/2Csu95X>)

¹⁷ Campaign for Better Transport (2018) *Buses in Crisis: A report on bus funding across England and Wales 2010-2018* (<http://bit.ly/2P3O4iv>)

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ BBC News (16 Feb 2018) 'Britain's bus coverage hits 28-year low' (<https://bbc.in/2ExZkQ2>)

²⁰ Department for Transport (2013) *Public attitudes towards buses: March 2013* (Table ATT0109 Statements by user/non-user status) (<http://bit.ly/2CTzj2g>)

²¹ Department for Transport (2018) *National Travel Survey* (Table NTS0705 Travel by household income quintile and main mode/stage mode: England, 2017) (<http://bit.ly/2CsADBO>)

have a bigger impact on women than on men as women are more likely than men to live in poverty.²²

The Government's public attitudes survey published in 2013 showed that 38% of adults would use buses more often if fares were cheaper.²³ In this same survey 14% of women and 12% of men said they didn't use buses because fares were too high. Bus fares increased by 3.3% in England between September 2016 and September 2017: there was a 1% increase in London, compared to 4.1% increase in metropolitan areas and a 5.3% increase in non-metropolitan areas.²⁴

However, an expensive, irregular bus service hinders more than just access to paid employment. It can also lead to isolation, loneliness and poverty, denying people access to education, health and other vital services and opportunities for socialising.

Trains/Railways

Although the rail industry in Great Britain was privatised in 1993, the UK Government still invests around £15bn in the railways. This equates to about £249 per person per year in England, (compared to £8 per person per year for buses).²⁵ As with bus services, the state subsidises 'socially necessary' (and often unprofitable) services that might not otherwise be provided by private companies. Across Great Britain, rail travel has more than doubled in the past 20 years²⁶ but rail travel in England remains far less popular overall as a mode of transport than the car, walking or travelling by bus: in 2016, rail accounted for 2% of trips made, 8% of distance travelled and 7% of time spent travelling.²⁷

And whilst trains attract more funding, resource (and media interest) than buses do, on the whole this is reserved for large intercity projects (e.g. HS2) that move wealthy people (mainly men) from one part of the country to another.

²² WBG (2018) *The Female Face of Poverty* (<http://bit.ly/2CRlx8N>)

²³ Department for Transport (2013) *Public attitudes towards buses: March 2013* (Table ATT0109 Statements by user/non-user status) (<http://bit.ly/2CTzj2g>)

²⁴ Department for Transport (2017) *Quarterly bus statistics: July to September 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2Aj07QA>)

²⁵ House of Commons Library (2018) *Transport Spending by Region* (<http://bit.ly/2R2Dbea>)

²⁶ Department for Transport (2017) *Rail Factsheet: November 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2AiMUHz>) p 2

²⁷ Ibid. p 1

²⁸ Department for Transport (2013) *Public attitudes towards buses: March 2013* (Table ATT0412) (<http://bit.ly/2CTzj2g>)

Rail fares and affordability

One of the key issues with railways is affordability and availability – many areas outside of major towns and cities do not have access to a reliable railway system. For those who travel 'short journeys' (50 miles or less) by train, train frequency and fare costs are the two areas that they feel most need improvement: 30% report frequency and 42% report the cost of the fares.²⁸

In addition, rail travel remains the preserve of the wealthiest people. Those in households of the highest income quintile are four times more likely to use the railways as those in the lowest income households.²⁹ Indeed, average trip numbers are almost double between those in the highest income quintile and those in the *second* highest.³⁰

In 2018, rail fares in the UK increased on average by 3.4%³¹ which was the largest increase in five years. According to the TUC, this fare increase means that a season ticket costs a British worker five times more than those working on the continent of Europe.³² However, one of the stark aspects of the debate on fares is how much it concentrates on 'commuters' and the expense they face, rather than people who may need to use rail for different purposes, or who use it for paid work but don't consider themselves 'commuters'.

The cost of train travel for part-time workers

People working part time, the vast majority of whom are women, face huge financial penalties in the rail fare system: most can either pay the highest peak time fares on the days they travel or pay for a full season ticket and pay for journeys they never take. In recent years, the Government has sought to address this anomaly publishing a report exploring this issue in some detail³³ and inviting companies tendering to run services to consider ways they can provide flexible

²⁹ Department for Transport (2013) *Travel by vehicle availability, income, ethnic group, household type, mobility status and NS-SEC* (Table NTS0705) (<http://bit.ly/2Ow3GM6>)

³⁰ Department for Transport (2017) *Rail Factsheet: November 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2AiMUHz>) p 3

³¹ National Rail (n/a) National Rail website: 'About your rail fare' (<http://bit.ly/2PM6VvD>)

³² TUC (2 Jan 2018) 'UK commuters spend up to 5 times as much on their salary on rail fares as other Europeans, finds TUC' (<http://bit.ly/2QVg4Lq>)

³³ IFF Research for Department for Transport (2013) Report: *The scope of flexible working in future* (<http://bit.ly/2J73yNa>)

fares to those commuters working part time and/or flexibly. In 2016, the Essex train company c2c offered a 'flexible season ticket' offering travellers 5% discount on fares (as opposed to 33% discount many 'full time' season tickets provide!).³⁴ But on the whole, those working part time do not benefit from any reduction in the cost of travelling by train.

Distribution of rail travel

Rail travel is not evenly spread across the country. In England, 69% of rail journeys take place in London and the South East. Furthermore, 64% of rail journeys start or end in London and residents of the capital are four times more likely to use rail than those living elsewhere in England.³⁵ This means that the focus of transport debate on railways is in danger of bias towards wealthy male workers commuting in and out of London ignoring those who don't have access to the railway system or use it in this way, but still heavily depend on public transport for getting around.

There is a particular challenge for those who live in areas that are poorly served by public transport. In a 2015 survey,³⁶ 40% of people had to walk over 30 minutes to get to their nearest railway station and 17% had a bus journey of over 30 minutes to get to their nearest railway station. When asked about their main reasons for not using 'short distance' train services (50 miles or less), 36% of people said it was because it was easier to travel by car.³⁷ The latest figures show that almost 40% of people in the lowest income households do not have access to a car, compared to fewer than one in ten of people in the highest income households. This means that people living in poor or low-income households in towns, villages and city edges that are badly served by public transport are essentially trapped.

Conclusion

The impact of cuts to local authorities is having a harmful effect on public transport provision, particularly buses, which in turn, is hurting women and those living on low incomes across the country.

As women are far more likely than men to live on low incomes, work part time, live in poverty and to undertake unpaid work in the home and the community, poor quality, unreliable and expensive

public transport has a far bigger impact on their lives than it does on the lives of men. A lack of public transport creates barriers to women accessing employment opportunities, education, health and other essential services and reduces women's ability to socialise and participate in public life. This makes it imperative that public transport policy and spending is understood from a gender perspective at a local, regional and national level, and that the harmful cuts to local authority budgets are halted as a matter of urgency.

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This briefing draws on a forthcoming report on gender and public transport which will be published in 2019.

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WBG is an independent, voluntary organisation made up of individuals from Academia, NGOs and trade unions. See www.wbg.org.uk

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³⁴ Working Families (1 Jun 2017) 'Time for fairly-priced train tickets for part-time commuters' (<http://bit.ly/2S1MpbS>)

³⁵ Department for Transport (2017) *Rail Factsheet: November 2017* (<http://bit.ly/2AiMUHz>) p 2

³⁶ Department for Transport (2012) *Attitudes towards train services* (Table ATTO402) (<http://bit.ly/2CTIk4W>)

³⁷ Department for Transport (2012) *Attitudes towards train services* (Table ATTO4013) (<http://bit.ly/2CTIk4W>)