

Professor of urban and regional planning, Dr. Ma Sheilah Gaabucayan-Napalang was the Director of the National Center for Transportation Studies of the University of the Philippines and Former Assistant Secretary for Planning and Project Development of the Department of Transportation (DOT). She is a core member of Women in Transport Leadership (WiTL), a knowledge-sharing network aimed at empowering women and women leaders in transport in Australasia.

In your view, what is a feminist transport system?

Feminism is not about saying that women are superior or more important than men. It's about recognizing the multiplicity of lived experiences and expectations of women, and how these impact the way that women navigate a city. It recognizes how visibility and safety perceptions affect mobility opportunities and choices, particularly amongst the LGBTQIA+ community. The fear of anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination and violence has profound impacts on the travel options and activity spaces for the rainbow community. Feminism should include women and girls and those not defined by the gender binary. An intersectional feminist approach is about equity rather than equality.

How have you sought to make transport more inclusive in Manila?

As a professor, my head is wrapped around data and research. As a politician, the focus is on policy. As Assistant Secretary for the DOT, I advocated for the creation of an Inclusive Transport Unit aimed at harnessing the available data, mapping out data gaps, and informing policymakers. This was then used to ensure evidence-based actions could be created to realize better transport in our city. Disaggregated data ensures that we capture intersectional realities and distinguish between gender identity, disability, age, and more. It also illuminates how structures of inequality are crosscutting and mutually reinforcing.

A lot of our work has been undone or deprioritized due to changes in political administration. Having 'male champions' in The Philippines is essential as they are the dominant voices and steer policy in the country. We need them to champion the importance of policies that recognize intersectional perspectives and provide a platform for their female colleagues. Through my position at the university, I try to involve as many men in the conversation as possible.

Has there been a transformative experience that has shaped your work in the field?

Being a mother of a child who identifies as LGBTQIA+. Seeing how public transport in Manila disempowers (instead of empowering) the community. How poorly lit bus stops and poorly enforced alightment zones, amongst many other elements, affect the community's comfort, experience, and safety. The LGBTQIA+ community has so many extra costs as they use taxis or take indirect routes due to heightened levels of fear while traveling; this is the result of having to overcome their experiences of unsafe and inaccessible public transport options. This is why I have dedicated my life's work to ensuring that public transport becomes a great equalizer instead of a great disenfranchiser.

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