

Maimunah Mohd Sharif is the Executive Director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Under her leadership, UN-Habitat is promoting gender-sensitive planning, policies and investment for sustainable, safe and accessible cities for all. Prior to this appointment, Maimunah Mohd Sharif was the Mayor of the City Council of Penang Island, Malaysia. She has two daughters and is an avid cyclist in her daily life.

Having lived in many cities around the world, I have realized that transport is often incorrectly considered to be “gender neutral” by the people who plan these systems. However, this approach does not consider the unique needs of systemically marginalized groups, especially diverse groups of women who navigate cities.

In our world, women undertake various roles, we often refer to them as “multi-taskers”. These range from productive to reproductive and community roles. Most transport systems around the world do not cater for such multi-purpose trips that arise from these roles, often done during off-peak hours, and at a higher cost.

In my role as the Executive Director of UN-Habitat, I am truly excited to have the opportunity to support cities to develop inclusive and affordable mobility and remove the “gender-blindness” of transportation planning, implementation and operations.

Under my leadership, we have worked, among other things, on planning a gender-sensitive Bus Rapid Transit system in Cairo, Egypt. In collaboration with the Government of Egypt, UN Women, USAID and the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), a unique and highly participatory approach was taken to fully reveal the specific needs of women to improve the public transport system. I recall that the focus group discussions

brought out the inadequate perception of bus crews of the problems women face; exemplified by a remark of one bus driver: “Women don’t have any problem on buses, if they ever do, male passengers will intervene and protect the victim from any harassment.” This, however, differed greatly from the perception of women and girls in exercising their movement. Women are disproportionately exposed to violence and harassment during their movement and this real or perceived insecurity limits women’s access to opportunities.

With a large share of public transport passengers being women, women simply cannot be an afterthought in transport planning.

I want to urge decision-makers to intentionally ensure that women and girls meaningfully participate in planning processes to develop safe, inclusive, and accessible mobility systems that cater to their needs.

Despite many years of discussions on the challenges and interrelations between gender and transport, progress has been slow in implementing a ‘real’ gender perspective in transport planning and policy. But there is no time for further delays. We only have around 2500 days left to achieve the 169 targets of the SDGs and to make progress toward Gender Equality and Inclusive Mobility. I am ready to act now, and I hope you are too!

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MALAYSIA

