

Women-Only Passenger Cars in Cairo's Metro: Widening the Gap to Bridge it Later?

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The research presented here is a part of broader research project that studies male-female interactions in different subway systems, particularly those where sex segregation has been in operation. This project involves a community of researchers: Martin Aranguren, Carole Gayet-Viaud, Perrine Lachenal, Rashmi Sadana, Mina Saïdi-Sharouz and Stéphane Tonnelat.

The research presented here looks at the institutional decision to separate men from women in within the context of urban transportation, based on a case study of women-only passenger cars in Cairo Metro trains. This work-in-progress research aims to identify the reasons why the decision to institute such a system was taken, at the end of the 1980s (3 years after the opening of Line 1, not before), to launch these cars, and how these reasons are currently being updated in reaction to the resistance of men who have been deliberately entering women-only cars, particularly since the 2011 revolution.

In Egypt (Khalifa, 2011), as well as in other countries concerned by women-only cars, the literature (Horii & Burgess, 2012; Sadana, 2010; Tara, 2011) focuses on the practical implications of the system for the passengers. Here, we intend to understand who decided that the separation was the most suitable response to the harassment problem in transportation and why. Importantly, we aim to determine which alternative solutions could have been taken and why they have been ruled out. This means analyzing how the issue of harassment in public transportation in itself has emerged as a public problem.

Our research method consists of interviews with the stakeholders (institutions, lobbies, public) involved in both contexts (the launch of the system as well as the post-revolutionary challenges to it), analysis of press articles, and study of historical archives. As the institutional stakeholders (National Authority for Tunnels and Cairo Metro) felt reluctant to speak about what they considered to be a subject and fearful that information supplied may harm their country's international reputation (Abu Amara, 2011), we decided to focus our interviews on representatives of women action groups (associations and NGOs). This has allowed us to examine the question of institutional intentions of the sex segregation in the subway while approaching it from the perspective of its reception by the civil society. Furthermore, it has opened up a new field of research: how women's activist organisations might use sex segregation as an effective way to combat harassment inside subway cars (as some women passengers are doing), and the linking of this issue to a political agenda. The development of closer ties with women's activist organisations is an opportunity to increase the potential for the practical implementation of this research by practitioners.

A short comparison with other cases across time (New York, 1909 ; Tokyo, 1912) and space (for the case of Mexico: Hancock, 2000) will help to demonstrate that factors specific to Egypt play a secondary role in comparison to more transverse factors such as class.

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