



Enhancing transport safety for disabled women

Research conducted for the Department for Transport and Connected Places Catapult

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Executive Summary

For the current research, six disabled women took part in in-depth interviews about their experiences of safety and vulnerability in a wide variety of travel contexts. They discussed issues that they perceived to affect all women, and therefore to affect disabled women, as well as stories about times when their vulnerability was heightened due to travelling through environments that are not designed to meet their access needs.

Three key themes emerged from the participants' stories:

- **Disabled women's experiences around personal safety are never about disability alone.** Women, disabled and nondisabled, face risks to their personal safety and have different options to manage them based on their whole identities.
- **Disabled women have fewer options than their nondisabled peers for managing their safety whilst travelling.** In accessible and inaccessible spaces alike, disabled women have fewer options when they perceive a threat to their personal safety, to leave an unsafe situation, to change routes or transport options, or to respond to an emergency. These are all important measures to ensure their safety during travel.
- **Interactions with other people are particularly important for disabled women during travel.** When information is inaccessible or built environments have physical access barriers, disabled women are reliant on others for assistance. Helpful transport staff or bystanders can provide assistance and reduce a disabled woman's vulnerability to risks to her personal safety. Conversely, people looking to exploit the situation can take advantage of a disabled woman's vulnerability to threats.

This report presents many of the stories that the six participants shared, and summarises the concerns that they raised as well as the strategies that they are using to cope with risks to their personal safety today.

Introduction

Background and objectives

The Department for Transport commissioned Connected Places Catapult (CPC) to recommend how to grow the market for interventions to support women and girls' personal safety on the transport system. As a part of their broader initiative, the Catapult appointed Open Inclusion to conduct research into the experiences of disabled women, seeking to specifically understand:

- When and how disabled women experience safety or vulnerability to risks when they use public and private transport options,

- What tools and strategies (if any) disabled women currently use to make their transport experiences safer.

In December of 2022, Open Inclusion completed six in-depth interviews as part of an exploratory research project to learn about women's experiences on multiple forms of public and private transport. Participants needed to live in the UK and to identify as disabled to take part in the research. The six interviewees selected drew from distinct lived experiences based on the transport options available near them and based on their diverse functional access needs. Participants also needed to identify as women, and there were cisgender and transgender participants in the sample.

Participant demographics were as follows:

- Gender: women
- Age: 20-69; four of whom were under age 30
- Ethnic background:
 - South Asian British (1)
 - White British (4)
 - White American (1)
- Disabilities (some participants had multiple co-occurring disabilities):
 - Blindness (1)
 - Deafblindness (1)
 - Long-term health condition (1)
 - Low dexterity (2)
 - Low mobility (3)
 - Mental health condition (1)
 - Neurodivergent (ADHD, Dyslexia) (1)

Approach

This exploratory research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Each woman who participated learned about the interview topic when she was recruited for the research. Prior to her interview, she was empowered to decide what she would feel comfortable sharing about her experiences of personal safety and vulnerability during travel. A team of two researchers from Open Inclusion met with each participant individually and facilitated a semi-structured interview with her to discuss:

- The participant's prior experiences whilst using public and private transport options
- Her own strategies to maintain her personal safety
- Her beliefs about what interventions could potentially increase her personal safety.

Themes synthesised from the interviews, and opportunities for related possible interventions in the transport sector that could improve the personal safety of disabled women, are presented in the report to follow.

Interpretation of findings

It would be impossible to capture the diversity of disabled women's travel experiences through the stories of six individuals, and this was not the goal. Instead, the objective of this

report is to authentically present the stories and realities of the six research participants with a range of disabilities, travel behaviours and personal contexts. By doing this, the report offers readers insight into these women's safety concerns, strategies for navigating environments they feel are unsafe, and desire for interventions that increase safety.

Key safety concerns raised by disabled women

Disabled women's experiences around personal safety are never about disability alone.

Participants in this research were asked about the factors that impact their personal safety and vulnerability during travel. In some cases, participants felt they could link their safety to a specific element of their identities: for example, being female, having a particular ethnic background, or being disabled in a specific environment. More often, however, participants felt that multiple parts of their identities worked collectively to influence their personal safety during travel.

One participant who uses a wheelchair explained that she feels she is harassed not simply because she is visibly disabled or because she is a woman, but because of the two characteristics together:

“Harassment is very often a concern, unwanted attention particularly from men. As a disabled person I’m worried about unwanted attention from the general public – stares, questions that feel invasive or uncomfortable. I think this happens to disabled women more than disabled men because of the intersection of identities.”

20–29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

A participant who is blind and autistic described harassment in a similar way. She has experienced assault and verbal abuse when travelling. She said:

“When people harass me it’s not just because I’m disabled, it’s because I’m a disabled woman. You can’t separate the disability and the misogyny, they work together”

20–29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

Participants shared stories about times that their sexuality, gender identity, ethnic background and disability operated together to impact how transport staff, fellow travellers and bystanders perceived them and responded to them. One woman who is White and uses

a wheelchair talked about the tactics she uses to protect herself, which include asking for help from transport staff and bystanders. She believed that her strategies might not be effective for another woman with a different ethnic background:

“Although I’m a woman who’s a wheelchair user, I know that my experiences of safety would differ from a Black woman who is a wheelchair user. A lot of times the intersection of being White and disabled means I’m getting more charitable interactions.”

20–29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

When asked about solutions that could make travel safer for themselves, the women interviewed rarely shared ideas that were about disability in isolation. Instead, they put forward solutions that took all elements of their identity into account.

Disabled women have fewer options for managing their safety whilst travelling

The six disabled women participating in this research were asked about the actions they take to manage their safety whilst travelling. They explained that they have preferred strategies for protecting themselves, however these strategies are not always available to them when they travel. The participants talked about situations when access barriers prevented them from using their preferred safety strategies entirely. They also told us about times when their options to protect themselves were limited, even in accessible spaces.

This section focuses on participants’ stories around four aspects of maintaining their safety: monitoring threats, leaving unsafe environments, changing routes or transport options, and managing emergency situations.

Monitoring threats

Many of the women who participated in this research emphasised the importance of being vigilant during a journey. They felt that they could more effectively detect and address risks to their personal safety if they monitored their surroundings whilst travelling. Some of these women have limited options for scanning the space around them during travel – for example due to sensory loss. As a result, they have been in situations where they were unable to gauge how close they were to potential risks, or to determine whether they were near exits or safer spaces such as a toilet with a locking door.

A woman who is blind and autistic described how she monitors her environment in the train station. When her local station did not have tactile paving in place, her ability to monitor her setting was compromised:

“The most challenging part is when I’m on the platform, unable to see who is around me or know how I can access help urgently if something goes wrong. For instance, there is no tactile paving at my local station. This is an issue because I worry about being too close to the edge of the platform and being able to be pushed off. I don’t have that situational awareness without the tactile paving.”

20–29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

When access barriers made it difficult for women to monitor their surroundings, they reported feeling especially unsafe. This could deter them from travelling at all or it could influence whether they travelled in contexts when they felt more unsafe, such as late at night or in sparsely populated spaces.

Leaving unsafe situations

Participants in this research said they would prefer to move quickly and confidently away from people whose behaviour is erratic, suspicious, or directly threatening to their personal safety. This option was not available to every participant, as some faced access barriers that reduced their freedom and speed of movement, and could limit the possible alternatives available to them.

A woman who uses a wheelchair pointed out that as there are limited numbers of wheelchair-accessible spaces on trains and buses it can be difficult or impossible for her to move to a safer location:

“I don’t usually get to make choices about where I sit or wait because there’s only one wheelchair spot. I remember a time when I was on a train with a friend and the carriage was nearly empty - there were two men inside. One was being loud and combative – what a woman would often do is move to another carriage. I can’t do that.”

20-29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

In some cases, women could leave a threatening environment but could not move quickly, and they were followed or chased by a harasser.

Changing routes or transport types

Participants in this research explained that their transport options can be limited in environments that were not designed to meet their access needs. For example, women who use wheelchairs said that it was possible for them to travel using public transport, but they would need to invest time to plan step-free itineraries and to request staff assistance at specific points in the journey. Planning trips in this way meant that some disabled women had more rigidly planned travel itineraries from which they could not deviate relative to non-disabled travellers.

In cases of travel disruption, these women required an accessible option to continue their journey. Some felt that their physical and personal safety were threatened when they were left without another viable travel option and needed to wait in a potentially unsafe environment. One woman who is neurodivergent and has a long-term condition explained:

“Let’s say there’s only one bus and one route, you can’t get other routes. Just being warm, having water or food with you, having a coat, there’s

quite a lot of things that matter. Late at night it's completely deserted and cold, you're vulnerable."

20-29-year-old, ADHD and dyslexia, cognitive loss and a long-term health condition

Some of the women interviewed spoke about the distress they felt when facing travel disruption. A woman who uses a wheelchair described times when travel disruption left her flustered and panicked. She worried that her visible anxiety could make her more vulnerable to bad actors who would take advantage of a person in distress, especially if it were clear that she had fewer options to swiftly leave the situation:

"Transit changes move you into unexpected routes and environments. If I'm very visibly panicked and upset, I'm more of a target."

20-29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

A woman who is deaf and blind also felt that her distress could leave her more vulnerable, especially in contexts where she had made it clear to the people around her that she was dependent on help due to an access barrier:

"If I'm more anxious and I'm asking for help and not getting it, I would get emotional and that could make a difference."

20-29-year-old, deafblind

Aggressive and threatening behaviour from others could also be a source of travel disruption. Participants explained that leaving an unsafe situation might mean having to abandon a carefully choreographed itinerary, sometimes losing assistance that was booked for later in the journey. A woman who is blind and autistic explained why she might choose to stay in a situation she felt was unsafe, rather than abandoning her itinerary:

"A major safety concern is that, as a totally blind person, I can't just jump off whatever transport I'm taking and know, 'okay, I'm at this tram stop, and I'll have to do x, y, z to get back on again.'"

20-29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

The same woman described how using technology such as Google maps and other mapping software to create a new itinerary could compromise her privacy. She would need to use screen reading software that would read her route and destination aloud, potentially revealing her plans to bystanders. She said she uses mapping technologies with bone conduction headphones to ensure that others cannot overhear her conversations in such cases, and she feels that this increases her personal safety in cases of travel disruption.

Some women interviewed felt that travel disruptions were too difficult to manage and they would cancel a journey if the chances of disruption were high. Others were willing to risk

the possibility that their travel would be disrupted, understanding that they might be more vulnerable to risks to their physical and personal safety as a result.

Managing an emergency

In this research, disabled women reported that they have substantial barriers to manage in the event of an emergency. This is often due to inaccessible features of transport design.

Women described times when they could not use the protocols in place to report an emergency, because the systems for reporting were not designed with their access needs in mind. A woman who uses a wheelchair and has limited upper arm strength said that she had not yet needed to use a call button on trains, but she doubted it would be an option for her in an emergency:

“There is a call button on the wall, and I’d probably struggle to reach that.”

30-39-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

Another woman who uses a wheelchair described a time when she did need the call button and it was out of reach. Fortunately, although she required help in this situation she was not in immediate danger:

“I had one experience on the tube, where there were no help buttons or alarm buttons that I could reach. My only thought was to tweet at TfL, saying, ‘hello, I’m stranded...’ and they replied after 10 minutes.”

20–29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

This woman who had texted for help in a non-emergency concluded that the call button would be of no use to her in a true emergency.

Interactions with other people are particularly important for disabled women during travel.

The disabled women in this research felt that interactions with others were distinctly important to their transport experiences for two reasons. First, they expected that they would need to seek assistance from others at some point in the journey when they encountered an access barrier. For this reason, they rarely assumed that an interaction-free journey was possible. Second, they expected interactions to be affected by whether and how other people perceived their disability.

Seeking help from others

The women interviewed were keenly aware of the possibility that they might encounter an access barrier at some point during their journeys. They anticipated the need to interact with other people, and in particular the need to ask others for help.

A woman who is deaf and blind said that she requires assistance from transport staff to learn information that is conveyed via the auditory or visual announcements. She often

seeks out a staff member and informs them of her needs when she arrives at a train station, asking to be guided to a staff member on the train itself:

“Once I’m on the carriage, I’m very much dependent on staff for alerts and information going forward.”

20 -29-year-old, deafblind

Although the women interviewed for this research preferred to ask transport staff for assistance, they described times when staff members were unavailable and it was necessary for them to gauge whom to approach out of a group of people they did not know. Participants felt that it was not always possible to protect themselves from anti-social behaviour whilst approaching members of the public for assistance. A participant who is deaf and blind explained:

“You’ve got to ask someone where the lifts are, where the steps are. It’s navigating those help points. I meet the best and the worst people, members of the public.”

20–29-year-old, deafblind

Participants explained that requesting information from others can require them to disclose information about their journey, for example where they are disembarking. Sharing this information publicly can make them feel anxious and potentially put them at risk of harassment by other passengers. For example, one participant who is blind and autistic had experienced stalking, and no longer felt that she could inform transport staff members about where she was going without risking that this information could be overheard and used by others around her.

“The reason I don’t take the bus is that you’ll often have a really nice driver who will ask where you want to get off. I don’t want people to hear my answer. Now you don’t have the element of surprise if you just get off at your stop.”

20–29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

Accepting assistance from bystanders

Some participants shared stories about ‘active bystanders,’ people who recognised that a woman was in need of assistance and volunteered to help without being asked. A participant who uses a wheelchair described the type of help she has received, and the type she would ideally like to receive:

“Sometimes people are just helpful by being other eyes there; they don’t have to do anything. But when someone is an active bystander, when they say something or do something, that’s fantastic. More often than not I’m wishing someone would intervene and say ‘okay, leave her alone; you’ve asked enough questions; she’s busy’ ...and they don’t.”

20-29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

Some participants believed that bystanders wish to help, and simply don't know when it is appropriate to offer their assistance. Some felt that a better-informed public would more proactively offer assistance to disabled women if they could more easily recognise unsafe situations, and if they knew an appropriate strategy for intervention.

“An intervention could just be: ‘are you okay? Should we go and sit somewhere else? I can find you another place to sit. Do you want me to wait while you make a call to someone?’”

20-29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

Importantly, multiple women in this research raised the issue that informing the public about risks to the personal safety of disabled women travellers might not make these women safer. Instead, it might embolden some people to target women for anti-social behaviour during their journeys.

Managing responses to visible disability

Most of the women in this study had a disability that other people could see and recognise. Some used an assistive aid like a wheelchair, a white cane, a hearing aid, or a guide dog, and this made it apparent that they have a specific access need that may impact their travel.

Some women said that being perceived as disabled made it possible for them to ask for help in a way that transport staff, fellow travellers, or bystanders easily understood. It was evident to others why a woman in a wheelchair would ask for directions to a lift, or why a woman with a white cane would ask about announcements that were posted visually. Understanding the reason for the request did not mean that other people would always supply the help needed, however. A participant who is deaf and blind told us that some bystanders have ignored her request to use disabled seating:

“You also get people who are sat in the disabled seats and just sort of look at me with my guide dog and don't move. Sometimes other passengers have offered me their seat when they have noticed what is happening. How bystanders treat the situation matters – just be considerate!”

20-29-year-old, deafblind

One participant who uses a wheelchair said that she was often refused the single wheelchair-accessible space on London buses by passengers who had parked prams in the space. Even in a context where signage clearly gave the wheelchair user the priority, and a staff member was present to enforce the policy, she needed to negotiate with these other passengers and she was not always prepared to do so:

“In London, there is only one wheelchair space on the bus. I often find myself in conflict with people who have prams and who are in that space. In theory the driver is meant to tell them that they are responsible to move. In practice it is on me to somehow socially manoeuvre them to

physically move. Sometimes I don't do that; I just stay at the stop and wait until the next bus."

20-29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

A participant who is autistic and blind spoke about a time when she was refused help in an emergency. She had to ask multiple bystanders for assistance at a time when it was urgently needed:

"I remember a time when I was being followed by someone on the train. I stopped several people and said: 'can you help me, I'm being followed by this man, he's scaring me and I don't know who he is.' I think three sets of people said: 'No, I'm sorry'. One of the reasons why I think people didn't help me is, if you accept that blind women are being harassed on trains, then the world's pretty dire isn't it? I think people would rather ignore that."

20-29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

Some participants shared about times when transport staff and fellow travellers appeared to expect disabled women to behave 'sweetly' and gratefully to receive the assistance they needed. One woman who uses a wheelchair described the disempowering experience of needing to change her style of speaking to receive help from transport staff:

"I know that staff have the freedom to refuse to assist and they will not have consequences. In that situation it's almost like I have to grovel or be particularly sweet and grateful in order to get what I need. It's not a pleasant experience, it definitely feels dehumanizing and disempowering."

20-29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

Negative interactions with others went beyond refusals of help. One concern raised by the women in this study is that they can be targeted for antisocial behaviour expressly because they are perceived to be vulnerable due to their travel access needs.

Participants felt that they would be targeted for opportunistic crimes such as theft because they would be less likely to pursue a thief, and targeted for assault because they would be less able to defend themselves from a physical attack. This concern, coupled with disabled women's requirement to interact with others more during travel, left many of the women feeling worried about aggressive behaviour from others during their journeys.

One participant who uses a wheelchair said that she will never travel unaccompanied. She has given up this aspect of her independence to manage travel concerns and mitigate the threats posed by others. She described her decision not to travel alone this way:

"I don't travel on my own – the idea of it terrifies me, to be honest." Later in the interview: "I would be quite uneasy if anybody approached me because I can't really use my arms well so I can't defend myself easily. So how I would manage in these situations?"

30-39-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

It is clear from this research that other people – both passengers and staff - play a significant role in shaping the overall transport experience of these disabled women; in particular, how likely they are to feel safe throughout journeys.

From coping strategies to design opportunities: How disabled women's approaches can inform transport design

Participants in this research were asked to share details of the personal strategies they use to feel safe when travelling.

Disabled women proactively manage interactions with others

The six women who participated in this research assumed that they would need to interact with other people at some point over the course of their journeys. Many of the personal strategies they shared related to how they manage these interactions with others.

Travelling in populated areas

Participants described feeling safer whilst travelling through well-populated areas. They assumed that a high number of bystanders would deter anti-social behaviour towards them, especially in conditions where the behaviour would be easy to see (such as well-lit transport stations and taxi stands).

Many chose to reduce their travel at night, partly because transport stations would be more sparsely populated and partly because it would be more difficult for bystanders to witness, and hence, deter antisocial behaviour carried out in poor lighting. When considering the role of bystanders, one participant who uses a wheelchair explained:

"I think there's safety in crowds, because you feel there are people to witness whatever might happen and dissuade the anti-social behaviour."

20-29-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

Importantly, participants felt that the benefits of travelling in well-populated areas were counterbalanced by a new set of concerns in overcrowded areas. Some pointed out that anti-social behaviour towards them could be harder for bystanders to notice in a dense crowd. Crowds could also bring physical safety risks to disabled women: a blind participant worried about being moved to an unexpected location on a rail platform as a crowd surged forward, while a woman in a wheelchair was concerned about being jostled and injured by people who were not anticipating someone at her height.

Participants in the research said they try to avoid travelling through environments that are either relatively deserted or extremely crowded. Either extreme in the number of people around them can make them feel less safe when travelling.

Walking/wheeling or using taxis to avoid waiting in dark and isolated spaces

The participants in this study said that they chose alternatives to public transport, or modified their routes, when they felt that a risk to their personal safety was too high.

Waiting alone in an unpopulated area was considered to be a personal safety risk by participants in this research, and it was common for them to walk or wheel to a location with more people present rather than waiting alone.

“There are some bus stops that are near me that are really isolated. So if I was travelling on my own I wouldn’t wait there, I would walk farther to a stop in a busier area.”

60-69-year-old, getting older with mobility, dexterity and cognitive loss who uses a mobility scooter

Some participants ordered taxis or used ride-hailing apps to call a car to a location where they felt it was unsafe to wait. Wheelchair-accessible rides could take longer to arrive, making this a less effective solution for some of the women. Some drivers for ride-hailing services also refused to pick up disabled travellers, cancelling the ride when they see them. A participant who is deaf and blind shared why she felt that ride-sharing apps would not be a solution for her:

“As a guide dog owner there is a struggle to get rides using Uber and other rideshare apps. Uber [drivers] have always cancelled my journey as soon as they have seen me and my guide dog.”

20-29-year-old, deafblind

The stories of these disabled women reveal the importance of establishing personal strategies to ensure they feel safe when travelling. Their reliance on tried and trusted approaches to manage their own safety across different contexts suggests they do not take feeling safe for granted; they take it upon themselves to proactively mitigate risks.

Sitting near transport staff

Some of the disabled women interviewed said they make a special effort to sit near staff whenever possible when using public transport options, making it possible to ask for assistance as needed. Some look for female staff members in particular, as they expect women will be more alert to dangers for female passengers and therefore more proactive in offering assistance, when compared to male staff. Some participants also felt that sitting near staff lowered the possibility that others nearby would show anti-social behaviour to them during their journey.

“When I’m on the train I always go in the back where the guard is, since the guard is reliably there.”

20-29-year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

Use of apps to signal a woman's location and to call for help

Many of the women interviewed have begun using digital technologies to update trusted friends and family about where they are, and how safe they feel, whilst they travel. Some participants said they use messaging platforms to send a report of their location that updates in real-time. One woman who is blind and autistic described how she uses WhatsApp to let others know when and where she is feeling unsafe during her journey:

“I use WhatsApp to send my current location, for emergency purposes. I send a message saying: ‘Hi, I’m not feeling safe and I want you to know where I am’, and then it pops in a map that updates with my current location.”

20-29 –year-old, autism, blind, uses a white cane

Some participants saw an opportunity to develop an app especially designed to promote the safety of women travellers. A woman who uses a wheelchair took inspiration from the Passenger Assistance App that she already uses to book assistance at rail stations and to alert staff that it is time to meet her at the train platform. She suggested that a similar technology for women to signal where they are and to request help could make her feel safer. She suggested that the app could function both inside and outside of stations, allowing women to report that they are feeling unsafe at any point in their journeys.

“An app to check in could work, like a buddy-type system. There’s the Passenger Assistance App, and it notifies the staff when you’re going to be on the train, and that helps with safety because you won’t be left. I guess when you’re off the train it comes back to an app that you can use to check in.”

30-39-year-old, power wheelchair user with a dexterity impairment

Participants noted that messaging platforms are operable on mobile phones with digital accessibility features, making it possible for women with sensory loss and low dexterity to access them reliably and adaptively. Many of the women interviewed said they were hopeful that more interventions designed to increase their personal safety could be operated on their mobile phones.

Conclusion

This research with six disabled women identified a number of issues that affected their feelings of personal safety and vulnerability when travelling. The strategies that these women use to mitigate risks to their personal safety, and their perspectives on their experiences today, can inform future research and possible interventions to support the safety of women and girls on the transport system.

Acknowledgments and further reading

This research was carried out as a disability-specific addendum to the “Assessing how to grow the market for interventions to improve transport safety for women and girls” report for the Department of Transport and Connected Places Catapult.

Please also download and read the primary report through the link above if you are interested and have not yet done so.

The research was conducted in December 2022 by Open Inclusion, a disability and age-inclusive research agency based in London.

The insights included in this disability-specific report were informed qualitatively by in-depth interviews with six women who travel and identify as disabled. These women were diverse in terms of their impairments, age, and other characteristics, such as where they live in the UK. They used a range of assistive technology and adaptive approaches when travelling. We are deeply appreciative of each of these women for sharing their travel experiences, concerns, and preferred approaches so clearly and fully.