

# WOMEN AND GIRLS' PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY ON THE UK BUS NETWORK

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Literature Review (Georgie Rogers, 2026)



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**Significant gender safety disparities exist on UK public transport, with 48% of women reporting feeling unsafe travelling alone after dark, compared to 19% of men.**



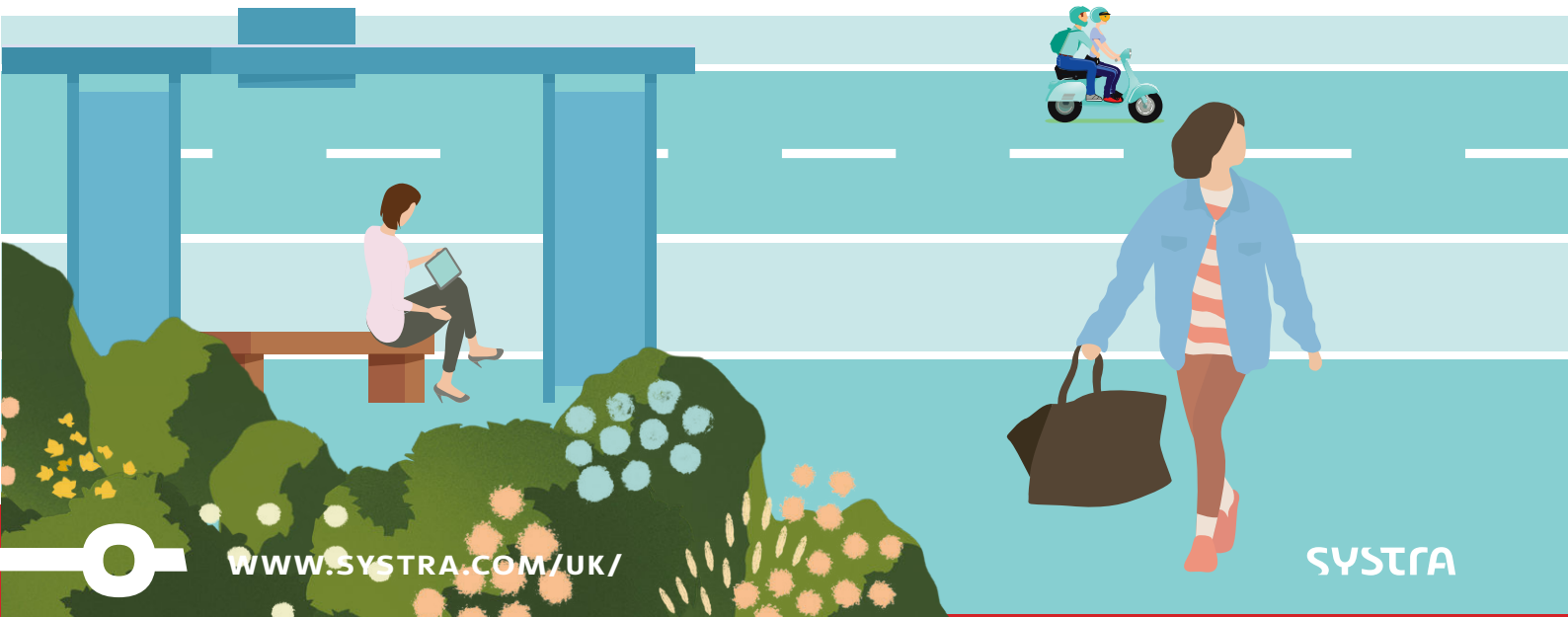
**While roughly 11% of women feel unsafe during the day, this rises sharply at night, with 63% avoiding evening travel and many altering behaviours to feel safe<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, a 2025 Girlguiding survey found 31% of girls and young women avoid public transport alone, and 86% avoid going out after dark, because of safety fears<sup>2</sup>.**

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With research emphasising that women and girls' perceptions of safety is shaped less by any single feature than by the whole journey<sup>3</sup>, including walking routes to the bus stop, waiting at the stop or shelter, conditions onboard the bus, and interchanges. Research also finds that women associate safety with being able to travel without harassment, with personal space respected, with visible staff who can help, with good lighting, and with a reliable journey that does not leave them stranded<sup>4</sup>.

Active Travel England says bus stops should sit on safe, direct, convenient, accessible walking routes, with natural surveillance, lighting, shelter, seating and real-time information<sup>5</sup>. Transport Focus's 2025 shelter research found that most passengers are satisfied with the safety of the bus shelter that they use most often during the day, however, a third of women (twice as many as men) feel unsafe during the evening/ in the dark. Dim or broken lighting, vandalism and damaged shelters also have a large effect on perceived safety<sup>6</sup>.

The problem is clear, women do not feel safe on our public transport network, and policy is beginning to address this. The Bus Services Act 2025 states that measures must be in place to tackle violence against women and girls by mandating training for bus staff, including drivers, to help them to recognise and handle incidents of anti-social behaviour and crime. Bus operators must train drivers to identify and respond to violence against women and girls and other crimes on buses, aiming to make public transport safer<sup>7</sup>. And in August 2025, the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) worked alongside the White Ribbon Campaign and Women's Aid to release a training package created for bus drivers to spot the signs of violence against women and girls. Operators are also doing their bit, several campaigns are underway across the UK, with First Bus and Stagecoach spearheading work to raise community awareness of the impact of violence against women and girls (VAWG) on public transport.



# WHAT DOES “FEELING SAFE” MEAN TO WOMEN AND GIRLS

Transport Focus’s research for Transport for the West Midlands<sup>8</sup> asked women directly what safety means to them. The answers are consistent: safety means freedom to travel without being “on guard,” confidence that the journey will be free from harassment, clear standards of acceptable behaviour across the network, visible staff able to intervene, sufficient light to see who is around you, enough space to move away from others, and dependable journeys without unexplained waits or being left alone at night. CCTV helps, but respondents felt that cameras only reassure if they believe someone is monitoring them and will respond.

Research consistently shows that actual safety risks and perceived safety risks carry equal weight, and the Department for Transport’s 2024 review of interventions for women and girls found that both the real and perceived risk of sexual harassment influence travel choices<sup>9</sup>. Taken together, this evidence underscores the need for policies that address not only incident reduction but also confidence-building, through thoughtful design of public transport environments so that women and girls feel safe.

## The Rest of The World

Trends from research into women’s perception of safety on public transport from the rest of the world echo the same message. A 2025 study into the topic, found that up to 87% of women in France have experienced sexual harassment on public transport, the rate is 75% in Japan, and even higher in less developed regions such as Pakistan, seeing 90% and up to 84% in Colombia. The research, by Soltani et al., found that fear of victimisation leads many women to avoid public transport<sup>10</sup>. A study by Kash in 2019<sup>11</sup> found that in some settings crowded stations and platforms are the most hazardous for women, finding also that a lack of amenities such as benches makes women feel less safe. Shi et al., 2019, found that short journeys to reach a public transport station or stop reduce perceived risk, because there is less exposure to perceived danger<sup>12</sup>. Bennetts et al. 2017<sup>13</sup> found that women feel safer walking to public transport along active building frontages such as shops or restaurants because there is more likely to be people around if help is needed.



## Environmental Changes to Improve Perceptions of Safety

Evidence has shown that environmental changes, such as lighting, CCTV, present staff, clear timetables, and real time passenger information, can improve perceived safety and reduce harassment. TfL's Accessible Bus Stop Design Guidance reinforces this whole-journey approach. It recommends stop locations close to key facilities, near pedestrian crossings, away from likely obstructions, and with adequate footway width. Those details matter for women and girls because direct walking routes and easy crossing all reduce isolation and ambiguity when catching the bus.

Active Travel England also says that routes to bus stops should be safe, direct, convenient and accessible; footways should be wide enough, step-free where possible, and stops should benefit from natural surveillance from surrounding buildings. Active Travel England also says stops should provide shelter, seating, lighting and real-time passenger information<sup>14</sup>.



Transport Focus's 2025 survey, conducted in partnership with Clear Channel, published in April 2025, found that 58% of frequent bus users are satisfied with the safety of their local bus shelter, but that figure drops to 50% for safety in the evening or dark. Among women, that sense of safety in the evening falls to 44%. It also found that 85% say dim or broken lighting has at least a moderate effect on how safe they feel waiting for a bus, and 82% say broken or damaged shelter walls or seating has at least a moderate effect. Around 60% say CCTV would be beneficial, and a similar proportion say a help button would be beneficial<sup>15</sup>.

Bus stops falling into disrepair contribute to feelings of being unsafe, graffiti, broken glass, damaged seats and unreadable timetables are not just cosmetic issues; passengers interpret them as signs of neglect and this in turn leads to reduced perceptions of safety. Transport Focus found that damage to shelters substantially worsens safety perceptions<sup>16</sup>.

Reliability is one of the most important factors in passengers' decision to use the bus; reliable timetables and real time passenger information aid passengers' perceptions of safety, as uncertainty extends waiting time, and makes journeys feel less controllable. Inconsistent or missing information can heighten feelings of isolation, anxiety, and vulnerability, especially after dark or in rural areas<sup>17</sup>.

### Strut Safe

First Bus have partnered with Strut Safe, a volunteer-run phone service offering reassurance to anyone travelling home alone. First Bus are also White Ribbon accredited, meaning they give sustained focus to training their colleagues to challenge harmful behaviour, to raising community awareness of the impact of VAWG on public transport, and to fostering a culture of respect and accountability across their colleague base.<sup>18</sup>



# SAFETY ON BOARD BUSES

Research conducted for the Department for Transport found that the transport environment can be appealing to sexual harassment offenders because crowded buses and trains allow unwanted touching to be disguised as accidental contact, while passenger anonymity and a weak visible staff presence can reduce the perceived risk of getting caught to perpetrators. The research found that 28% of public transport users had experienced unwanted sexual harassment, and in particular young females noted experiencing staring, an invasion of personal space, or sexual harassment. These experiences were most common on buses and trains, rather than at stations and stops, and were most likely to occur in the mornings on weekdays suggesting they may be related to commuting or travelling at busy times<sup>19</sup>.

Transport Focus' research found that women linked safety to journeys being free of harassment and assault, to clear rules of behaviour, and to staff who could intervene. It also highlighted how overcrowding affects personal safety because it removes control over personal space and the ability to move away<sup>20</sup>. Practical on-board features that are most likely to improve safety perceptions include visible and well-maintained CCTV cameras throughout the vehicle, clearly publicised methods to report issues, audible and visual next stop information, and drivers that are encouraged to summon help, or intervene when a concern arises. Evidence suggests that these methods work best when they are well publicised.

## Transport for London (TfL)

TfL's campaign launched in October 2025 draws on real life experiences of Londoners. Encouraging people to 'act like a friend' to those who experience harassment on the transport network. Encouraging bystanders to look out for and support one another if something doesn't feel right. Suggested ways to act like a friend include: striking up a conversation with the person being targeted, ignoring the perpetrator if possible, speaking directly to the victim to provide a distraction. TfL advises bystanders to take a note of what is happening, the date, time and location, and what the perpetrator looks like. A complementary campaign was launched alongside to target perpetrators, warning that they will be caught and will face justice. TfL is helping to deliver hundreds of free places on active bystander training sessions with the charity Protection Approaches<sup>21</sup>.



# TRAINING FOR DRIVERS

Training for bus drivers in the UK is now mandatory rather than optional. The Bus Services Act 2025 includes a section on “Training about crime and anti-social behaviour,” and the government said while the bill was progressing that it would require staff, including drivers, to undertake training to recognise and respond to incidents of criminal and anti-social behaviour, including violence against women and girls<sup>22</sup>.

This legislative direction is now also being matched by industry action. In March 2026 the Confederation of Passenger Transport launched a national Driver CPC training module on tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG). CPT says the module is designed to equip drivers across the country with the awareness, confidence and practical tools to recognise, safely respond to and report incidents of harassment or violence. CPT emphasises that the purpose is not to ask drivers to put themselves at risk, but to give them safe intervention options and clear reporting pathways.

A central element of the training is the introduction of the “Four Ds” approach to bystander intervention, an established framework promoted by organisations such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, British Transport Police and Transport for London. The framework, adapted from the “Five Ds” by Right To Be, encourages drivers to consider different ways of responding to incidents depending on the situation: distract to interrupt or defuse a situation, direct to calmly address unacceptable behaviour where safe to do so, delegate by alerting control centres or emergency services, and document key details to support follow-up and reporting<sup>23</sup>.

## Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre

In 2024, Stagecoach East in Cambridgeshire partnered with Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre and the Police and Crime Commissioner on what’s described as the largest VAWG prevention initiative in the country’s transport sector, focused on bus travel. Bus drivers have received specialist training, backed by Rape Crisis, to identify predatory behaviour and prevent it from escalating into a possible sexual offence<sup>24</sup>.



# RECOMMENDATIONS LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND OPERATORS

The following considerations regarding bus network operation and design are synthesised from a review of the best practice guidelines to improve passenger perceptions of bus network safety particularly for women and girls. They are suggestions of best practice and should be considered when reviewing bus networks and operations:

## Location



The 400m bus stop rule, is a guideline that suggests all dwellings should be located within a 400m (5-minute walk) to encourage public transport use. West Midlands Combined Authority access standards, dictate that no one should be more than 400 metres from a bus service between 0700 and 1900 and within the 700-metre standard for areas of lower density at other times.

## Lighting



Bus stops should have artificial street lighting in the hours of darkness; Buses should also be well lit throughout the lower and upper saloon to aid perceptions of safety.

## Accessibility



Consideration of routes taken to and from the bus stop. Bus stops may need to be near formal crossing points with dropped kerbs and tactile paving. There should be pedestrian walkways allowing easy, unobstructed access to and from the stop. Street furniture preventing passengers boarding and alighting should be removed.

## Surveillance



Visible CCTV on buses and at stops can act as a potential deterrent to unsafe behaviour and provide reassurance to waiting passengers. Not only this, but reassurance that CCTV is being monitored helps women and girls feel safer. Bus stops should be located so that they have natural surveillance from surrounding buildings, transparent bus shelters naturally allow for passive surveillance.

## Safety Reporting



Bus networks should clearly promote a method for reporting any instances of unsafe acts such as abuse and sexual harassment. Bus stops should have good mobile phone and internet connectivity, rural areas with unreliable connectivity can add to the perception of unsafety.

## Accurate Information



All bus stops should provide real-time passenger information regarding bus arrival times and delays. Where shelters are not present, posters should be displayed to allow passengers to scan a QR code or access a webpage to view real-time service information.



63% of women avoid evening travel and many alter their behaviours to feel safe

### Regular Maintenance and Cleaning



All buses and bus stops must be regularly maintained, cleaned, and inspected to improve passenger comfort and aid perceptions of user safety. There should be a system for user fault reporting, where timely action is taken to investigate and rectify any faults found.

### Shelters



Bus shelters play a valuable role in protecting users from adverse weather, but also help shape users' perceptions of safety. Lighting is important in bus shelters, whether motion activated or consistent lighting in non-daylight hours, lighting helps users. Bus stops should have an accessible seating area and seating provision should be at an accessible height with arm rests where possible.

### Signage



All bus stops should have a post and bus flag clearly visible as a minimum; it is helpful to have consistent branding clearly visible on all bus flags and buses, to aid perceptions of trust. Every bus and bus stop should have a clear unique code so that the location is identifiable for reporting purposes.

### Staff Presence and Reporting Channels



Staff presence matters, with trained drivers, network patrol staff, well-briefed control rooms, incident reporting channels and communications that explain what passengers should do if they feel unsafe. Marketing campaigns help, with strong evidence for interventions that teach people what to do when incidents occur.

### Reliable Timetables



Ensure reliability and communicate unavoidable changes clearly and early. Real-time updates at stations, on vehicles, and via apps should specify the nature of the disruption, expected delays, alternative routes, and estimated time to resolution. For women and girls, dependable timetables and transparent messaging are important safety measures.

## Conclusion

Women's and girls' perceptions of safety on the UK bus network are shaped by design, operations, behaviour and trust. The most consistent themes across the evidence are straightforward: good lighting, natural surveillance, clear information, reliable services, adequate space, visible staff, believable reporting routes and confident intervention when needed. What makes women and girls feel safer is not only protection after an incident, but a network that shows in advance that someone is paying attention.

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