Integrating Intersectionality and Gender Equality in Public Transport Planning

Lisbon, Portugal

Mobility   Safety

Introduction

Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, has long grappled with questions of accessibility, equity, and mobility in its urban development. As one of Europe's rapidly evolving cities, Lisbon has embarked on progressive planning efforts to foster inclusive public spaces and services. Gender equality has increasingly become a theme in municipal governance, especially in areas of transport, public safety, and pedestrian accessibility.

Rita Jacinto, a senior planner at Lisbon City Council's pedestrian accessibility division, has been at the forefront of this transformation. Her team began exploring how public space design and mobility patterns intersect with gender, realising that a deeper, intersectional approach was urgently needed. About this project and her motivations for pushing it forward, she said:

"Spaces can be very accessible in theory… but not considering how the place is used, at what time, how the lighting is, do people feel safe at night… that started to be an issue we saw."

Problem Statement

Despite Lisbon's investment in infrastructure, its transport systems often neglect the nuanced needs of women and marginalised groups. Traditional transport planning has emphasised efficiency and coverage but has rarely accounted for how people feel using these services especially at night, in peripheral areas, or when traveling alone. These oversights disproportionately affect women, lower-income residents, and those with caregiving responsibilities who work irregular hours. In our interview, Rita stated; "*Why is it expected that, of course, a woman is not going to be alone at a bus stop at night in that area, but it's okay for a man to do that?*" Furthermore, women's mobility choices are shaped by personal safety concerns, leading many to avoid public transport altogether. Rita Jacinto highlighted the implications: "*If you don't feel safe taking public transport, you're more likely to take your personal car or ask for a lift… We're also interested in modal shift, and if women avoid buses, that impacts everything.*" This recognition pushed her team to look beyond gender as a single lens and examine how class, age, ethnicity, and occupation intersect with gendered mobility experiences.

Implementation and Actions

The initiative began in 2017, driven internally by municipal staff rather than top-down political will. The team decided to conduct in-house research, focus groups, interviews, and international surveys, to uncover gendered experiences in Lisbon's public spaces and transport. "*It wasn't something politically decided. We thought it was important… and in a sneaky way we started working on it. Then we decided to put the topic on the agenda*".

Choosing the Pilot Neighbourhood

The team selected Bairro Padre Cruz, a peripheral social housing neighbourhood, due to both strategic and ethical considerations: It lacked upcoming renovation plans (important to avoid overlap or bureaucratic delays). It was home to many shift workers and lower-income residents, those most dependent on public transport and least able to avoid it when feeling unsafe. The local borough leadership was supportive, enabling smoother collaboration and proved to be absolutely critical for the success of the project.

Community-Centered Approach
The project invested heavily in community engagement by taking steps like:

- ❖ Meetings with over 12 local groups (resident associations, schools, police, youth clubs).
- ❖ Participatory mapping sessions with 50 women and girls, identifying "red zones" for safety concerns.
- ❖ On-site interviews at bus stops, both during day and night-time hours.
- ❖ A high school survey that included both boys and girls, focusing on perceived safety, access, and daily habits.
- ❖ Jacinto noted the impact that this community-oriented strategy had on recognition of what a serious issue this was in this quarter: "Girls as young as 13 were very aware of what sexual harassment is, and they had their own strategies to cope with it".

This grounded, bottom-up research shaped the design phase, helping the team identify key physical interventions, such as:

- ❖ Adding new bus stops to increase visibility and comfort
- ❖ Adjusting street lighting and sidewalks
- ❖ Improving crossing areas for pedestrian safety
- ❖ Moving a bus terminal to a more visible and frequented area
- ❖ Reducing traffic speeds in sensitive zones.

The project was co-designed with an architecture firm whose staff participated in focus groups to better align physical design with social realities.

Overcoming Bureaucracy and Funding Gaps
Despite limited political support initially, the project's readiness enabled it to seize future funding. Jacinto states it plainly: "*If the project is not ready, it will never happen. Better to have something ready and wait than have nothing at all.*" Eventually, the team secured funding through the EU Resilience and Recovery Plan under the "accessibility in public space" theme, although bureaucratic delays and interdepartmental conflicts created major hurdles.

[Lessons Learned]

1. Intersectionality Matters: The project revealed how mobility inequalities are deeply shaped by overlapping factors: "*It's not just about women and men. It's about class. It's about who can afford to take an Uber when they feel unsafe… and who can't*"

2. Leadership Can Start from the Middle: While top-level political endorsement came later, initial momentum relied on mid-level leadership within departments: "*To kickstart something, it's immediate leadership that matters. If we're just waiting for the top guy, we're not going to start anything like this*"

3. Community Engagement Is Time-Consuming, but Essential: "*At the time I thought we were wasting too much time meeting with everyone… but looking back, it was absolutely key.*" Strong early relationships build trust and legitimacy, even if the pandemic temporarily disrupted continuity.

4. Data Collection Must Reflect Real Experience: From participatory mapping to on-the-ground interviews, the team prioritised lived experience over abstract metrics. However, Rita emphasised that data on ethnicity and socioeconomic status remains limited in Portugal, which made intersectional analysis difficult: "*We have data, but not enough. If we had more socioeconomic and ethnic data, the outcome could've been even stronger.*"

5. Preparedness Enables Opportunity: Having a full, ready-to-implement project allowed the team to apply quickly when funding emerged, even after years of delay: "*It took 12 months to get a response from the EU, but the project was ready. That's what made the difference.*"

[Key Takeaways]

Intersectional planning means understanding how class, race, gender, and occupation shape transport use. Bottom-up research and participatory design foster legitimacy and ensure interventions are grounded in lived experience. Our key takeaways from this interview are:

❖ Internal champions and mid-level leadership can initiate change, even without initial political support.
❖ Collecting rich, disaggregated data is critical to designing inclusive systems.
❖ Success depends on both technical preparedness and strategic patience.

Jacinto's reflection summarises the ethos of the project: "*People take the bus even if they hate it. That's not the whole picture. We don't want them just to take the bus, we want them to feel safe doing it*". Lisbon's pilot project is a model of how cities can move from theory to practice, embracing intersectionality not as a buzzword, but as a blueprint for more just, accessible, and human-centred urban mobility.

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Rita Jacinto
Senior planner at Lisbon City Council's
pedestrian accessibility division

[+] Learn more about this Project

Lisbon's Feminist Transport Planning - POLIS Network : https://www.polisnetwork.eu/news/lisbon-a-truly-intersectional-mobility-agenda/

Lisbon Improving Safety and Mobility for Women and Girls - Sustainability Exchange : https://use.metropolis.org/case-studies/improving-safety-mobility-and-access-for-women-and-girls