OVERVIEW

Ten Thousand Steps in Her Shoes

The Role of Public Transport in Women’s Economic Empowerment

Muneeza Mehmood Alam and Lisa Bagnoli
Overview

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Women across the globe face numerous mobility challenges. Transport provides many benefits that should be enjoyed equally by all users, regardless of gender or life circumstances. However, this use requires a paradigm shift in transport planning. By enabling women, men, girls, and boys from all walks of life to fulfill their mobility needs, transport planning can become an important instrument for not only promoting economic, political, and social equity but also for enabling people, cities, and countries to grow.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women’s university enrollment surpasses men’s, yet their labor force participation rate remains low and stagnant. What is preventing the women of MENA from translating their educational achievements into economic productivity? Is it a matter of personal preference or structural barriers, or both? This report examines one structural barrier to women’s participation in the labor force—the public transport system—in the context of the cities of Amman, Jordan; Beirut, Lebanon; and Cairo, the Arab Republic of Egypt.

This report finds that many women express a “latent desire” to work but face transport-related barriers that, once addressed, can lead to significant economic gains. While the report reveals that issues of public transport affordability and accessibility are common to all three cities, it also identifies important tailored and concrete city-specific actions to enhance women’s access to economic opportunities in urban MENA.

This work demonstrates that “one-size-fits-all-women” transport policies designed to benefit women may leave many of them behind. Tailored action is needed across and within cities, depending on the needs of the different women who use public transport.

Gender equity in transport use can be only partially accomplished through policy interventions, regardless of how well intentioned and progressive they may be. Public awareness and endorsement of the benefits of greater gender equality—within households, workplaces, and society at large—are as crucial to advancing women’s participation in the
economy as are policy reforms and the state, civil society, and corporate actions that protect the interests of women and other disadvantaged groups and facilitate their agency.

The analysis and recommendations presented in this report should help policy makers in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt design concrete actions, improve women’s mobility through public transport, and create an enabling environment to increase their economic participation.

Ferid Belhaj  
*Vice President*  
*Middle East and North Africa Region*  
*World Bank*
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This report originated from a collaboration between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Transport Team and the MENA Chief Economist’s Office in 2020.

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**Abbreviations**

GDP       gross domestic product  
MENA      Middle East and North Africa  
LFP       labor force participation  
PP        percentage points  

**Units of currency**

EGP       Egyptian pound  
JD        Jordanian dinar  
LP        Lebanese pound
BACKGROUND

Today, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women have a higher university enrollment rate than men, yet their labor force participation (LFP) rate remains low and stagnant. What is preventing these women from translating their educational achievements into economic productivity? Is it a matter of personal preference or structural barriers, or is it both? Although transport systems have been shown to play a significant role in women’s participation in the labor force globally, this topic has been little explored in the MENA region.

STUDY PURPOSE, DATA, AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

This report examines the role of public transport in women’s access to economic opportunities in urban MENA. It studies the links among mobility, gender, and access to economic opportunities and focuses on three metropolitan areas—Amman, Jordan; Beirut, Lebanon; and Cairo, the Arab Republic of Egypt. These cities were chosen for their contrasting size, context, and economic stability. All three cities have a low LFP rate for women and a significant disparity between the LFP rates of men and women.

This report focuses on five aspects of the public transport system and their implications for men’s and women’s mobility choices and barriers:

- The availability of public transport close to households and employment;
- The accessibility to job opportunities through the public transport network;
- The affordability of public transport;
• The acceptability of using public transport given social and cultural norms; and

• The safety from crime and harassment when using public transport and its infrastructure.

The report reveals that a significant percentage of working-age women in Amman, Beirut, and Cairo want to be economically active but are constrained due to deficiencies in the transport system. In each city, many of the interviewed non-working women stated that the lack of affordable, comfortable, safe, time-efficient, and reliable transport options prevents them from looking for work. This finding corresponds to 6 in 10 women in Amman, 5 in 10 in Beirut, and 4 in 10 in Cairo (refer to figure ES.1).

Improving the public transport system can enable women to contribute significantly to the economy. Statistical analysis confirms that a well-functioning public transport system is crucial for enhancing women’s LFP, but the most important constraints they face differ by city and income levels. For example, in Amman, improving the safety of public transport by 5 percentage points (pp) may increase the city’s gross domestic product (GDP) by 2.3 percent if the additional women who are seeking work find employment. In Cairo, a 5-pp improvement in accessibility may increase the city’s GDP by 0.8–1.6 percent if the additional women seeking work find employment.

The report builds on three types of data collected in each metropolitan area, all of which were collected in 2022. The first type is the transport network data for the complete public transport network in each metropolitan area, which is complemented by built environment safety audits to understand the characteristics of the public transport system. The second type is intercept surveys of public transport users (3,027 men and 2,806 women across the three cities) to understand their system utilization. The third type is a household survey (2,951 men and 2,961 women ages 18–50 across the three cities) to understand the overall mobility of the working-age population. The survey also includes many personal and community characteristics that influence the relationship between mobility and access to economic opportunities.
FIGURE ES.1
Role of Public Transport in Women’s Economic Empowerment

Share of non-working women that says that
transport barriers prevent them from looking for work is...

Amman
6/10
I wish bus stops were better lit
I wish bus rides were more comfortable
I want public transport to be more affordable
I need to reach my job faster
I want better sidewalks

Beirut
5/10

Cairo
4/10

The Challenges

1. Percentage of women public transport users who face such problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Uncomfortable</th>
<th>Length of trips</th>
<th>Waiting time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amman</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beirut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Percentage of total jobs reachable within 60 minutes by using public transport or walking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amman</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beirut</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Potential

Improving public transport in MENA can encourage more women to seek economic opportunities, potentially yielding GDP gains.

Amman
2.3% potential increase in Amman’s GDP.
If safety at public transport stops improves by 5 percentage points—39,000 more women will look for work.

Cairo
0.8%–1.6% potential increase in Cairo’s GDP.
If accessibility through public transport improves by 5 percentage points—337,000 to 614,000—more women will look for work.

In Amman, Beirut, and Cairo, improving accessibility will increase the LFP among women from low-income households.

The Road Ahead

A well-functioning public transport system is necessary to improve women’s economic participation in MENA.

This requires interventions that

Enhance the public transport network coverage, speed, affordability, and walkability of all cities

Develop customized solutions to improve public transport as one size does not fit all scenarios

Design complementary interventions in other sectors to create more opportunities for gainful employment of women

Source: Original figure for this publication.
Note: GDP = gross domestic product; LFP = labor force participation; MENA = Middle East and North Africa.
SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this report are summarized through a series of questions that build on each other. Together, these results demonstrate the importance of tailoring actions to context—a “one-size-fits-all-women” approach to improving the public transport system will leave many women behind, because it will not account for the unique circumstances and environments in which they operate.

The results also highlight the importance of intersectionality when focusing on women. For example, women in low-income households face specific challenges that would not be identified if only the average effect for all women had been investigated.

In addition, the study also emphasizes the need to go beyond transport to address other constraints that women may face, including gender norms, further underscoring the relevance of interinstitutional collaboration.

How Do Men’s and Women’s Mobility Patterns Differ Overall?

In the three cities covered by this report, men are more mobile than women. The gap between men’s and women’s mobility is greater in Amman and Beirut than in Cairo, where the average mobility is higher for both men and women. In Amman, only 53 percent of working-age women made at least one trip the day before the survey (a 16-pp gap with men); in Beirut, it was 56 percent (a 16-pp gap with men); and in Cairo, it was 90 percent (a 3-pp gap with men).

Among the men and women who are mobile, the mode of transport used differs significantly by city. In Amman and Beirut, private motorized transport is the dominant mode of travel for both men and women, whereas in Cairo, public transport is the dominant mode of travel, with taxis and call cabs a close second. This finding is reflected in the motorized vehicle ownership of households in the sample: 66 percent in Amman, 79 percent in Beirut, and 24 percent in Cairo.

In all three cities, men are much more reliant on private transport, and women rely on taxis and call cabs to meet their mobility needs, as evidenced by the share of men and women who hold a driver’s license in the studied sample. In all three cities, men are much more likely than women to have a driver’s license. The share of men and women who have licenses is lowest in Cairo. These results demonstrate that women in all three cities are likely to be more dependent than men on others (such as male household members driving them, taxis, or the equivalent) and on public transport to meet their mobility needs.
How Does the Use of Public Transport Vary between Men and Women?

Most men and women in Cairo use public transport, while only a minority do so in Amman and Beirut. Regardless, in all three cities, men are more likely than women to use public transport daily, even in Cairo, where women are more likely than men to use public transport overall.

Among public transport users, microbuses are the dominant means of transport used by both men and women in the three cities. Both spend almost an hour completing a trip by public transport in Amman and Cairo and three-quarters of an hour in Beirut. They also use multiple vehicles to complete a single trip, highlighting the importance of the feeder network and the coverage by public transport. In Amman, men and women use 1.8 and 1.9 vehicles, respectively, on their trip. This figure is more than in Cairo, which is 1.8 vehicles for men and 1.6 for women, and in Beirut, which is 1.4 vehicles for men and 1.3 for women.

In all three cities, work is the main reason for using public transport among men, while personal and other activities are the main reasons for women. This difference is reflective of the division of labor within households.

Do Men and Women Report Facing the Same or Different Barriers to Using Public Transport? Are These Barriers the Same in Each City?

When using public transport, women face different challenges in each of the three cities, but the challenges faced by men and women within each city are, on average, similar. This finding affirms the notion that fundamental deficiencies in the public transport system can affect both men and women.

In Amman, the three main challenges for women using public transport are uncomfortable riding environments, long trip times, and long wait times. In Beirut, the three main challenges are road safety concerns, cost or affordability, and uncomfortable riding environments. In Cairo, the issues are long trip and wait times and cost or affordability.

Is Transport a Binding Constraint Preventing Women from Being Economically Active?

Essential differences exist in the commuting patterns of workers across the three cities. In Amman and Beirut, private vehicles constitute the main mode of transport, while in Cairo, public transport is the main transport mode. Among those who use public transport to commute to
work, minibuses are the most used in Amman and Cairo, while buses or minibuses are the most used in Beirut.

Non-working women in all three cities express an openness to becoming gainfully employed if the conditions were favorable, indicating a “latent desire” to work. In all three cities, most non-working women say they would be willing to accept a job if it were available: 65 percent of non-working women in Amman, 59 percent in Beirut, and 67 percent in Cairo.

Among non-working women, many—62 percent of women in Amman, 52 percent in Beirut, and 48 percent in Cairo—identify commuting as a barrier to employment. When asked whether transport- or non-transport-related barriers constrain them, most women in all three cities indicate that transport-related barriers constrain them; a significant share also cite non-transport-related barriers, especially in Cairo. In Amman, 97 percent of women identify at least one transport-related constraint, while 14 percent identify at least one non-transport-related constraint. In Beirut, the figures are 97 percent and 16 percent, respectively, and in Cairo, the figures are 78 percent and 55 percent, respectively.

For transport-related constraints, women in Amman report commuting cost as the leading barrier to work, followed by trip length. This figure flips in Cairo, where trip length is the most reported barrier, followed by commuting cost. In Beirut, commuting cost is, by far, the dominant constraint. In terms of non-transport-related barriers, family preference that women do not work outside the home is the main non-transport barrier to commuting in Amman, while domestic duties are the main constraint in Beirut and Cairo.

How Much Can Improving the Public Transport System Enhance Women’s Economic Participation?

Empirical measures of the accessibility, availability, and safety of public transport were constructed to assess how the spatial accessibility of jobs in each city, the availability of public transport near residential locations, and the safety at or near public transport stops affect the LFP of women as well as the likelihood of their employment.

All three cities have low accessibility levels to jobs by public transport and walking. On average, people in Amman can reach 18 percent of the total jobs in the metropolitan area in less than 60 minutes using public transport and walking; in Beirut, this figure is 30 percent, and in Cairo, a larger city, 13 percent. All three cities also have unequal access to public transport. Inequality in accessibility to jobs via public transport or walking is the highest in Amman, followed by Cairo and Beirut.
This measure of accessibility relates closely to transport type. In all three cities, as spatial access to jobs through public transport and walking improves, the reliance on public transport, walking and bicycling, and shared transport increases, whereas the reliance on private transport declines.

For safety and the built environment at or near public transport stops, poor pavement or sidewalks is the most salient issue in Amman and Cairo, whereas in Beirut, the lack of lighting at the stops is the most prevalent problem. Both aspects can affect the safety and security around public transport stops. Moreover, in Amman and Beirut, fewer women are present at transport stops than in Cairo.

Statistical analysis reveals that, in each of the three cities, women's LFP is differently influenced or constrained by the three spatial measures of public transport—accessibility, availability, and safety—and these constraints differ by income levels. In Amman, safety appears to be the most critical constraint women face, whereas spatial accessibility to jobs is more important for women from low-income households. A 5-pp increase in safety (from the composite safety index of 66 percent to 71 percent) is estimated to increase working-age women's LFP by 4.7 pp (from 13.6 percent to 18.3 percent). In practice, this figure corresponds to 59,000 additional women in the labor force in Amman.

In Beirut, we found no evidence that improving public transport availability, accessibility, or safety would significantly improve women's overall LFP. This finding may be due to the economic and financial crisis that Lebanon currently is facing that began in 2019 and was compounded by the Port of Beirut explosion in 2020. These crises have severely depressed the Lebanese economy and impacted available employment opportunities. However, evidence exists that spatial accessibility matters for women from low-income households.

In Cairo, both accessibility and availability of public transport appear to play an important role in determining women's LFP. A 5-pp increase in accessibility (from 13 percent to 18 percent) is estimated to increase working-age women's LFP by 4.9–8.9 pp (from 19.1 percent to 23.9–27.9 percent). In practice, these data correspond to 337,000–614,000 additional women in the labor force in Cairo. However, improving availability by 5 pp may increase women's LFP by 0.7 pp (52,000 additional women in the labor market).

Although accessibility, availability, and safety appear to affect women's likelihood of seeking a job to varying degrees, these measures seem to have little impact on women's subsequent employment probability. This finding is consistent with the idea that, while public transport is critical to improving women's access to employment opportunities, making women more likely to actively seek jobs, complementary actions are needed to
translate this participation into gainful employment. Therefore, this finding represents missed opportunities both for women and cities overall.

Following the previous scenario, if all 59,000 additional women seeking a job in Amman were to find employment, on average, there would be a total extra income of more than (Jordanian dinar) JD 356 million per year (a 23 percent increase in Amman’s GDP). Similarly, in Cairo, if all 337,000–614,000 women were to find employment, on average, it would lead to a total additional income of (Egyptian pounds) EGP 12.4 billion–EGP 22.7 billion per year (an 8–16 percent increase in Cairo’s GDP).

What Concrete Actions Are Needed to Improve the Public Transport System?

This report reveals that, while some issues need to be addressed in all three cities, as common barriers and deficiencies exist, areas of improvements are specific to each city and context. In all three cities, affordability poses a major barrier to women commuting to work. Thus, lowering the cost of public transport or offering targeted fare concessions is needed. In addition, the overall low and unequal levels of accessibility of employment opportunities through public transport and walking highlight the need for the following concrete actions:

• Prioritizing public transport through integrated corridor management or the creation or improvement of mass transit;

• Improving existing land regulations to foster dense, diverse, and well-designed urban development; and

• Enhancing the walkability of the cities by improving sidewalks and walkways and developing pedestrian-first policies.

Some of the targeted concrete actions in each city could include the following:

• **Amman**: Providing a safe environment, such as well-lit and visible public transport stops and better walkways and bicycle paths. There is also a need for a code of conduct for public transport drivers and an easy mechanism to report gender-based violence, as well as to receive a swift response to these reports. To this end, Jordan adopted a code of conduct for public transport in January 2019 and has developed a mobile phone application that enables bus service users to report misconduct in the public transport system.

• **Beirut**: Enhancing the first and last mile coverage of, and comfort with, public transportation. There is also a need to enhance the lighting at public transport stops and to improve accessibility to them.
Executive Summary

- **Cairo:** Expanding the availability of public transport near residential locations. This action requires reassessing the placement of public transport stops and increasing the frequency of public transport vehicles in addition to widening the network coverage of the public transport system.

**What Else Is Needed to Enable Women’s Active Employment in the Economy?**

Although a good public transport system improves women’s LFP, converting this participation into actual employment depends on many other factors, such as the labor market and environment, social, and household constraints, as well as gender norms and expectations about gender roles. For instance, there is a need to provide flexible work arrangements and supportive jobs that would allow women to balance their personal, family, and work lives, as well as protect them from gender-based discrimination, and provide childcare options, such as high-quality day-care centers at or near where people work or live. Thus, along with improving the accessibility, availability, and safety of public transport, policy measures that address the work environment and social and household constraints are also needed.

**NOTES**

1. The labor force participation rate is the proportion of the population ages 15–64 that is economically active. This rate includes both people working and actively seeking work.
2. Throughout this Executive Summary and publication, all references to Amman, Beirut, and Cairo cover the entire metropolitan areas (also known as Greater Amman, Greater Beirut, and Greater Cairo) for the sake of conciseness.
3. These activities include social, medical, and care visits; accompanying someone else on their trip; and worship.
4. Some firms may have a business culture that does not value the contribution of their female staff or favors male employees to avoid providing maternity-related benefits or risking the loss of female employees after they are married.
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Women around the world face numerous mobility challenges. Public transport can provide many economic benefits that should be enjoyed equally by all users, regardless of gender or life circumstances. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women have a higher university enrollment rate than men, yet their labor force participation rate remains low and stagnant. What is preventing them from translating their educational achievements into economic productivity? Is it a matter of personal preference or structural barriers, or is it both? Although public transport systems can play a significant role in women’s participation in the labor force globally, this topic has been little explored in the MENA region.

*Ten Thousand Steps in Her Shoes: The Role of Public Transport in Women’s Economic Empowerment* examines the role of public transport in women’s access to economic opportunities in urban MENA. The book studies the links among mobility, gender, and access to economic opportunities and focuses on three metropolitan areas—Amman, Jordan; Beirut, Lebanon; and Cairo, the Arab Republic of Egypt. Chapters focus on the availability of public transport close to households and employment centers, accessibility to job opportunities, affordability, social and cultural norms, and safety from crime and harassment. Data collected in 2022 reveal that a significant percentage of non-working women in urban MENA lack affordable, comfortable, safe, time-efficient, and reliable transport options, thus preventing them from seeking work.

Women can contribute significantly to the economy. Improving public transport and tailoring it to the needs of various communities can help women be economically active. In addition, providing flexible work arrangements that support balancing personal, family, and work lives; protecting women from gender-based discrimination; and offering high-quality childcare options near where people work or live are key.

However, gender equity in transport use can be only partially accomplished through well-intentioned policy interventions. Public awareness and endorsement of the benefits of greater gender equality—within households, workplaces, and society at large—are also crucial toadvancing women’s participation in the economy. The analysis and recommendations presented in this report will help policy makers in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt design concrete actions, improve women’s mobility through public transport, and create an enabling environment to increase female economic participation.