



EMPOWERMENT

Modified Feminist Self-Defense:

Violence Against Women in Transit
in Metro Manila

THE TEAM

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Issues and Observations

▲ **Transport systems in Metro Manila are dangerous and unsafe for women.**



Buses and Trains

Manila is one of the cities (along with Mexico City) with the highest incidence of women experiencing sexual harassment in buses (90%) and trains (80%).



Transit Captives

Women commuters in Metro Manila have no choice but to primarily rely on public modes of transportation.



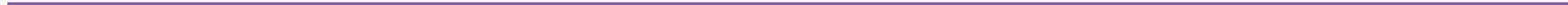
Platforms and Stops

Women also experience harassment in bus stops or station platforms or on their way to or from a transit stop



Women's Participation

Filipino women should be consulted on urban transport planning through participatory methods.



Motivations

Women's Needs

Public spaces, particularly public transportation, were not created by women nor do they address women's needs.

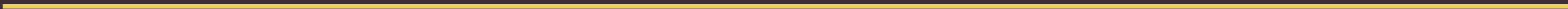


New Urban Agenda and UN SGDs

The promotion of safety and inclusiveness in transport systems to track sustainable progress.

Lack of Women's Involvement

There is a need for participatory approaches not only in general urban transit planning but also in the development of efforts that would ensure women's safety as they traverse their daily paths



The Need for Localized Research Design and Policy Recommendations



Environmental Conditions



Risks of Victimization



Levels of Vulnerabilities



Transport Infrastructure

If urban safety interventions were to work, mechanisms should be tailor-fit according to the distinctive circumstances and situations of the city and its commuters.

Measures should adhere to Manila's particular socio-spatial contexts.

Severely traffic congested
and even more densely
populated than New York City

Diverse transit systems but
they remain unreliable
and inadequate



Poor pedestrian
Infrastructure

Urban floods and other
climate-related issues

The Tasks



A systematic collection of data to understand the nature of victimization and harassment, and experiences of groups to inform appropriate gender mainstreaming policies



In-depth investigations about women's needs and the issues they encounter while in transit



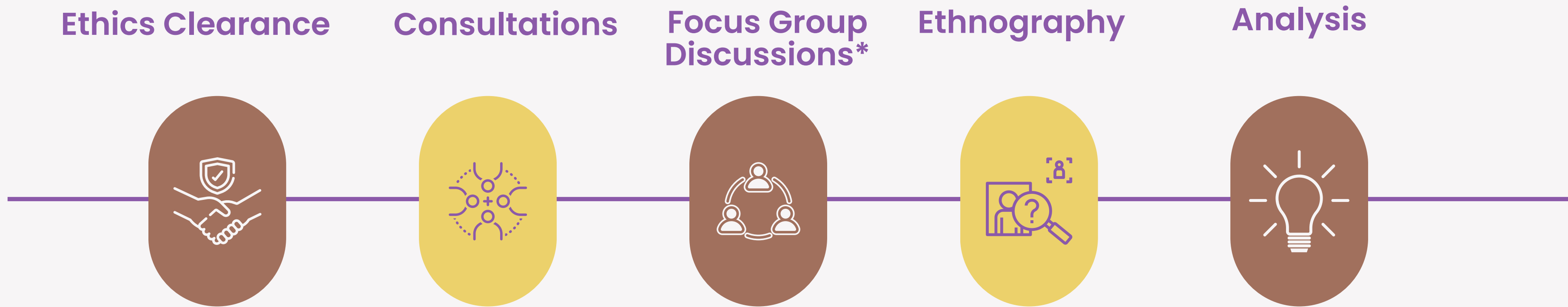
Examine "the way women act and interact with transport in local contexts" in fast growing Asian cities such as Metro Manila



Add on to the empirical data related to various factors to urban transit safety



Approach and Methodology



*All participants were asked for their informed consent before participating in the FGDs. To determine if participants were fit to take part in the FGDs, a specialist conducted a psychological pre-screening test through a distress scale for transit crime survivors. A psychologist was present during the conduct of the study whenever sensitive topics were discussed.

Qualitative Mixed-Method Approach

Focus Group Discussions

One FGD involves Filipino adult women survivors of transit harassment or violence, and another FGD was conducted on Filipino adult women who have no experience of such violence in the past.

All these women do their daily commutes in Metro Manila, Philippines. They use various modes of transportation such as jeepneys, trains, buses, and motorcycle/taxis (such as pedicabs, tricycles, UV Express, etc.).

The next two FGDs were conducted on transit authorities or traffic enforcers in Metro Manila and jeepney/ bus drivers or operators in the metropolis.



FGD Domains and Variables



Perceptions

- Perception about the level of public safety
- Perception of risk
- Perception of fear
- Characterization of common survivors of harassment or violence in transit
- Characterization of common offenders of harassment or violence in transit
- Norms about transport use
- Patterns/reasons of transport use
- Use of weapons and AI-driven apps in public safety
- Recommendations on how to be empowered women in transit
- Recommendations on how to mitigate or if not eradicate urban transit related harassment and violence



Experiences

- With or without experience related to harassment or violence in transit
- Being a witness to transit-related violence
- Location where transit-related violence was committed (for those with experience or being a witness to such offenses)



Practices

- Personal measures to protect oneself from transit-related violence
- Empowerment practices
- Personal coping after surviving harassment
- Transportation use-related practices

Qualitative Mixed-Method Approach

Ethnography

- Two ethnographers (1 male and 1 female) spent a week observing women commuters in Metro Manila, particularly, the time when there is a high volume of women commuters, the general features of women commuters (morning, lunch time, night rush hours), the type of interactions in transit, negative and positive disruptions; and passenger behaviors while waiting, boarding, riding, and alighting.
- Observations were done in jeepneys, buses, trains, and train stations.



Results

Focus Group Discussions

Women in Transit

- The first thing that comes to women's minds is their safety in connection to being a commuter, looking after their personal belongings, and how operators and drivers manage their chosen public utility vehicles.
- Being safe in transit means being protected and defended by transport operators and being able to travel comfortably without worrying about being harassed.



Results

Focus Group Discussions

Time of Transit

- Transit safety is also determined by the time of transit.
- Participants who have not had experience in transit violence claim that it is safer to travel at the daytime versus at nighttime.
- They believe that women should take extra care and vigilance when commuting at night due to the perceived prevalence of harassers, snatchers, pickpockets, robbers and holduppers.
- This perception is based on the news that they receive about urban jeepney commuters.



Results

Focus Group Discussions

"Weak" Women

- Participants believe that male offenders tend to take advantage of female commuters because they are perceived as weak, and they are not capable of fighting back.
- They tend to target individuals who appear weaker because they believe they are stronger than them.
- One participant argued that it is not because they look weak but because they are women.
- Intoxicated (drunk) individuals are more prone to being offenders.



Results

Focus Group Discussions

Keeping Safe

- They bring pepper spray, avoid streets or paths that have few people, ensure awareness, vigilance, and consciousness about surroundings, do not sleep in public vehicles, do not use cell phones or bring out wallets, ride near exits, alight immediately if uncomfortable, hold the bag in front, hugging bag, take photos of cab plate number and inform family and friends about plate number, sharing locations, walk fast in dark areas or walking in a zigzag pattern, observe co-passengers, bring companions (buddy system), keep alert and do not sit beside men, bringing pocket scissors as a weapon.
- They believe that “perpetrators are scared of vigilant people”.



Results

Focus Group Discussions

Women in Transit

- They believe that empowered women ask for help if there are suspicious people, confront offenders, embark on information campaigns on what to do when faced with certain situations, talk back, and speak out or call out offenders.
- To defend themselves, they stare back at suspicious individuals, call out offenders, and voice-activate Siri and Google speakers (activating emergency calls, i.e., “Hey, blank, call 911!”).



Results

Focus Group Discussions

Authorities and Operators

- The transit authorities believe that women are empowered when there is equality on the road, the VAWC laws and “Bawal Bastos” Law (Safe Spaces Act) are enforced, they know self-defense, and are aware of their surroundings. They suggest bringing ball pens or tear gas which can be used as a weapon. If one cannot fight, however, the best recourse is to run (flight).
- Operators and drivers define transit safety as the wearing of masks, and drivers/ operators constantly ensuring that brakes and wheels are in excellent condition. Drivers should ensure that passengers are always safe, and drop them off in safe places. They should also remind passengers to take care of their personal belongings such as cell phones and bags. Drivers should not have a hangover or be taking drugs.



Ethnography

Jeepneys

Most of women are alone, some in pairs or groups of three. They would engage in conversations about their day at work. Women who are alighting are more alert. Some women have their bags slung over the front as they get off. Some cover their necklines as they hurriedly walk to the next jeepney to avoid being left behind.

Buses

While waiting and boarding the bus, most women securely carry their bags in front of them. Those wearing skirts would pull their skirts down as they exit the bus. They hold their bags (such as backpacks and laptop bags) and other belongings close to their bodies when changing modes of transportation. They are attentive as they repeatedly scan their surroundings.

Trains

While waiting for the train, women use their phones and scroll through their social media accounts. Most of them have their bags (backpacks) in front of them. Some are wiping their sweat due to excessive heat in the station. Others use their hand fans. As they prepare their train ticket/card, they made sure their bags were zipped and close to their bodies.





Summary and Discussion

Types of violence experienced by women in Metro Manila transit systems



Verbal-Sexual

Conversations about personal information
Improper language
Unsolicited invitations
Catcalling
Rape jokes
Whistling



Non-Verbal-Sexual

Staring
Taking photos without consent
Exhibitionism/ indecent exposure
Masturbation
Sticking tongue out, licking actions



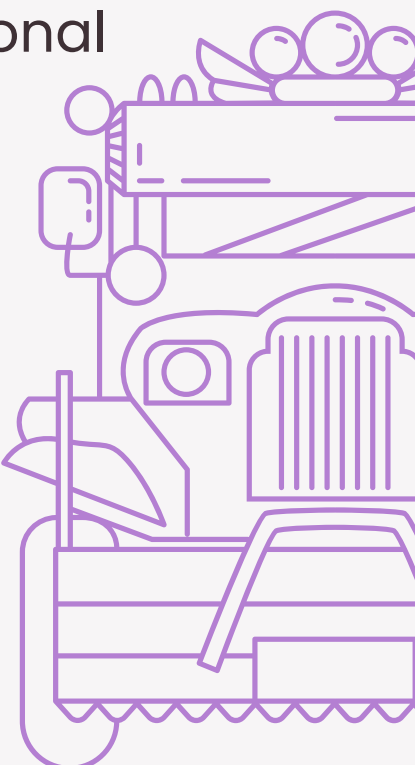
Physical-Sexual

Sitting too close (even if it is not crowded)
Rubbing body parts against another
Touching or hitting body parts
Groping
Putting head on shoulder



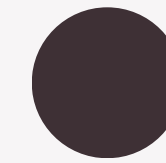
Non-Sexual

Grabbing of bags
Slashing of bags
Snatching of personal belongings (bags, cellphones)



Both the length of time in a commute and the built environment in Manila contribute to the experiences of unfortunate incidents such as robbery, physical and verbal sexual violence.

Women take certain precautionary measures such as avoiding dark areas, holding on to their personal belongings, and using their bags to shield possible perpetrators from coming close, keeping emergency numbers ready, taking pictures of cab plate numbers, and being constantly aware and vigilant of their surroundings.



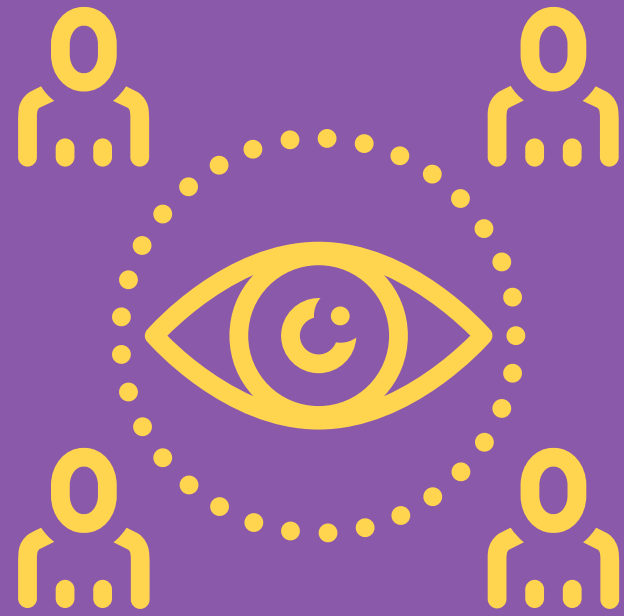
Filipino women "accept" violence in transit. They are resigned that such occurrences are "normal" and that men are predisposed to being perpetrators. This has, therefore, led to women's self-conditioning that they should be cautious whenever taking public transportation.



They have also conditioned themselves to avoid "dangerous" situations or to avoid men completely



Normalized Violence



Chronic Transit Insecurity

Since women are insecure while in transit, they believe that transit safety is their own sole responsibility, and they should always be careful



Victim-Blaming

Both transit authorities and transit operators still tend to victim-blame women in Manila. Some of them claim that wearing "daring" or expensive clothes and accessories provoke thieves, snatchers and harassers



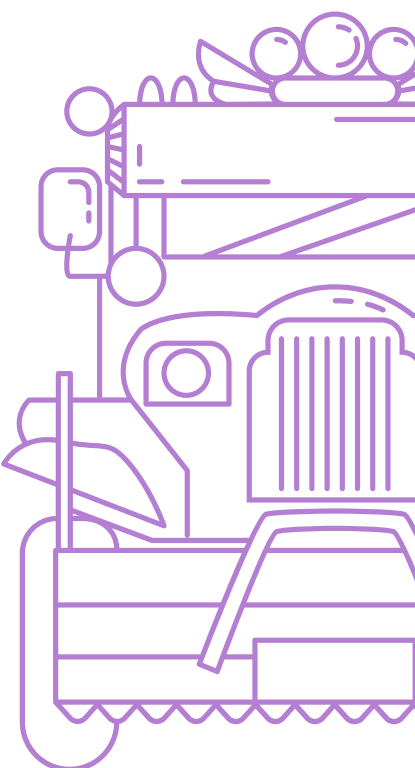
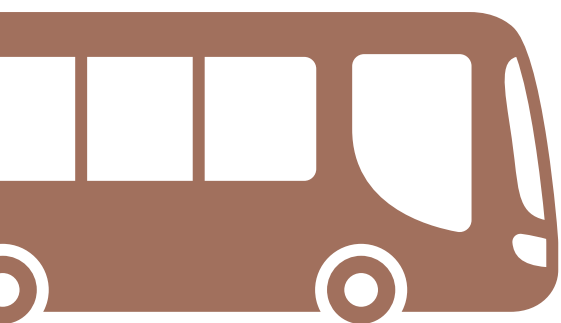
Vigilance

Filipino women choose to generally "self-sacrifice" to give up their safety and security. Filipino women have become vigilant to address the normalized and justified violence.

The Hypervigilance of Women

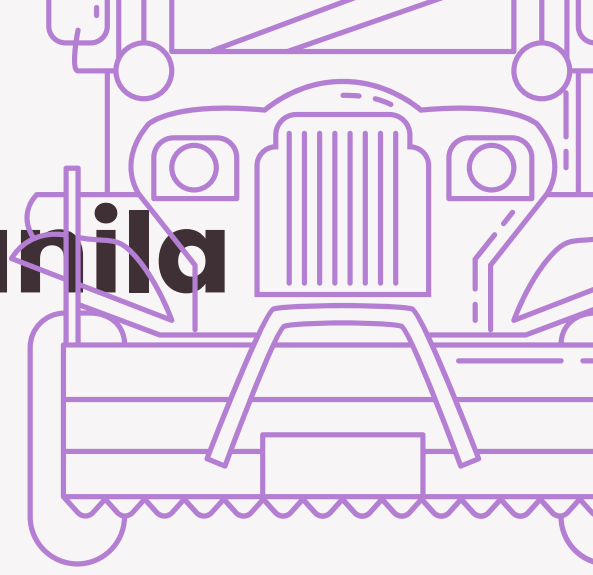
A study claims that chronic transit insecurity leads to the hypervigilance of women (Kash, 2019).

When walking or traveling alone, the women participants make sure that their mental faculties are alert (they are not intoxicated). Some of them bring weapons such as pepper sprays, pocket scissors, and ballpoint pens. Some Filipino women even bring a personal safety alarm called Bella, which flashes strobe lights and sounds a siren at 130 decibels (comparable to a jet engine flying 100 feet above) to scare off possible perpetrators. Others use women's safety apps to keep emergency alarms ready or to inform their friends and family of their whereabouts.



Specific Behaviors and Actions of Women in Metro Manila

Based on Kash's (2019) defensive behaviors



Temporal Avoidance

Going home early, avoiding late night or early morning travel

Group Travel

Traveling with companions or friends
Buddy system

Physical-Sexual

Walking in a zigzag pattern
Changing routes
Walking in amply lighted areas
Rushing

Defensive Positioning

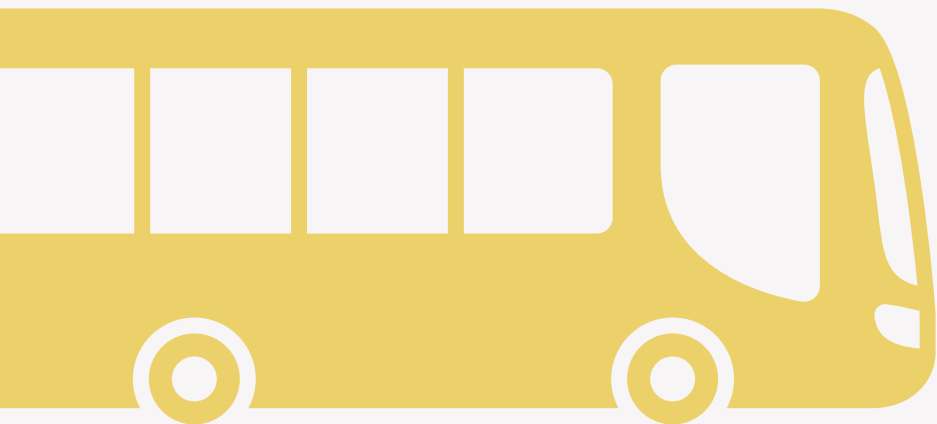
Not sitting beside men
Riding designated women-only train cars

Defensive Objects

Bringing weapons such as scissors, ballpoint pens, tear gas, safety alarms
Using women's safety applications
Voice-activate Siri and Google speakers
Using bags to shield themselves
Covering their neckline with hands

Uncategorized by Kash

Asking for help
Documenting transit activities (taking photos of cab plate numbers, sharing live locations)
Presenting themselves as assertive and confident
Looking tough
Staring back
Calling out offenders
Being knowledgeable about transit safety

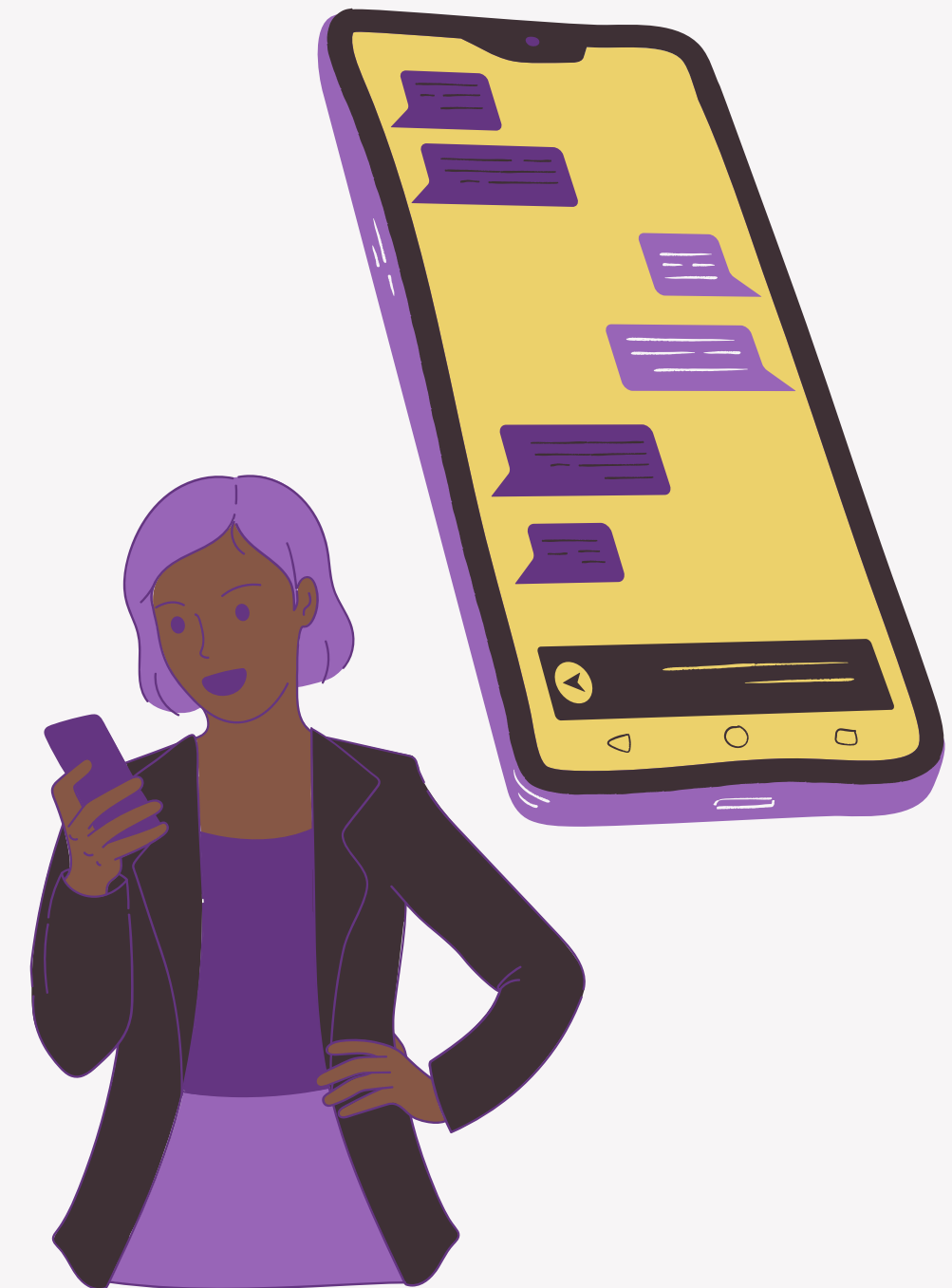




Empowerment or Defense?

- Participants mentioned that their vigilance and alertness is more of an empowerment mechanism rather than defensive behavior.
- Such behaviors and actions that empower them include asking for help, confronting offenders, staring back at suspicious individuals, calling out offenders, and voice-activating Siri and Google speakers. Group travel or being a part of a buddy system is also seen as an empowering behavior.
- Women participants believe that knowledge is power. Awareness of their surroundings and transit safety empowers women. They do their homework about transit safety.

- Actions and behaviors appear to be proactive and on the offense.
- Some examples include documenting transit activities (taking photos of cab plate numbers, sharing live locations), presenting themselves as assertive, street-smart, and confident, and trying to look tough by staring back.
- Projecting confidence and strength is an expression of women's power rather than their vulnerability.
- This is based on the belief that potential male offenders will take advantage of female commuters who look weak and incapable of fighting back.



Calling Out

- If women appear unafraid and prepared about varying situations, then they will not be “targets” of perpetrators.
- Women should confront their perpetrators head on and actively seek help.
- This is like calling out (as in call-out culture), wherein offenders are publicly named due to their oppressive behaviors or actions.
- Some participants immediately report unacceptable behavior to drivers and operators.
- People in transit are called out and confronted for their specific behaviors and actions that are harmful to women.



Modified Feminist Self-Defense

Filipina women engage in both defensive and proactive behaviors to mitigate the risk of violence in transit. Echoing empowerment or feminist self-defense, we find that women in Metro Manila practice victim-prevention strategies in their everyday commutes.

Both women and transit authorities and operators seek empowering measures in terms of infrastructure and system adjustments.



There are two major approaches to feminist self-defense namely
1) strengthening individual capacities and decreasing individual vulnerabilities, and
2) instituting environmental modifications (Searles & Berger, 1987)

1

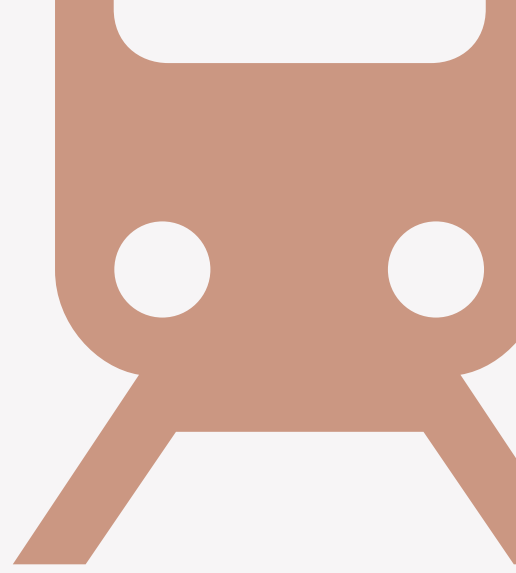
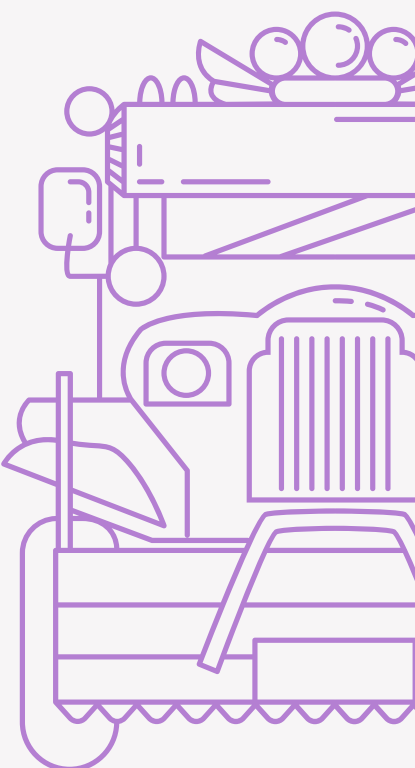
The holistic development of defense skills. Such development of physical and psychological capacities strengthens women's capacities, reduces their vulnerabilities, extends mobilities and promotes their independence (Searles & Berger, 1987, p. 63)

2

The second approach to feminist self-defense has been called out by both Filipino women participants and transit operators and authorities. Environmental modifications that they hope to see in transit include police visibility such as more roving patrollers and additional CCTVs, and well-lit and commuter-friendly spaces

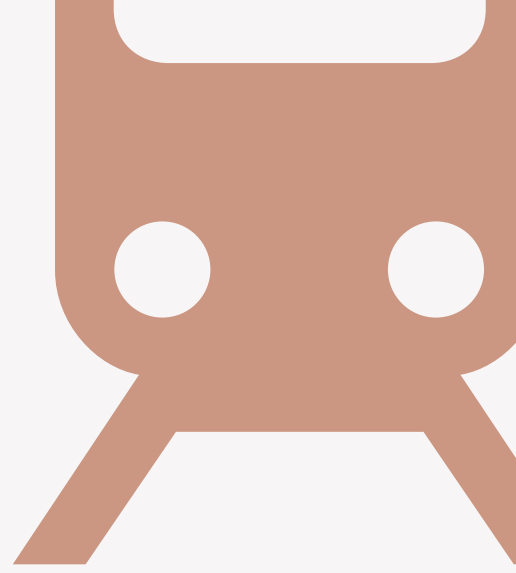
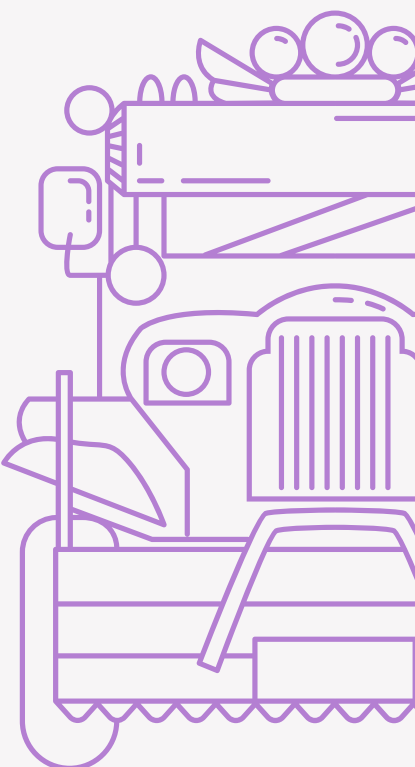
Modified Feminist Self-Defense

- The women participants have shown modified and makeshift ways of defending themselves by carrying weapons and safety alarms. In terms of psychological capacities, on the other hand, they have updated themselves about transit safety, are well-aware, vigilant, and conscious of their surroundings, and have their own safety systems in place.



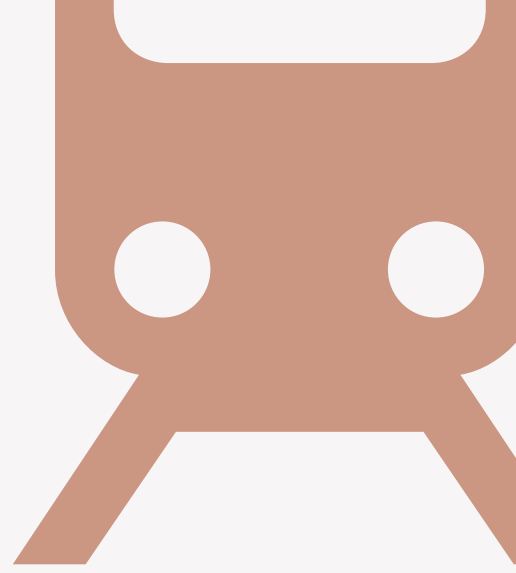
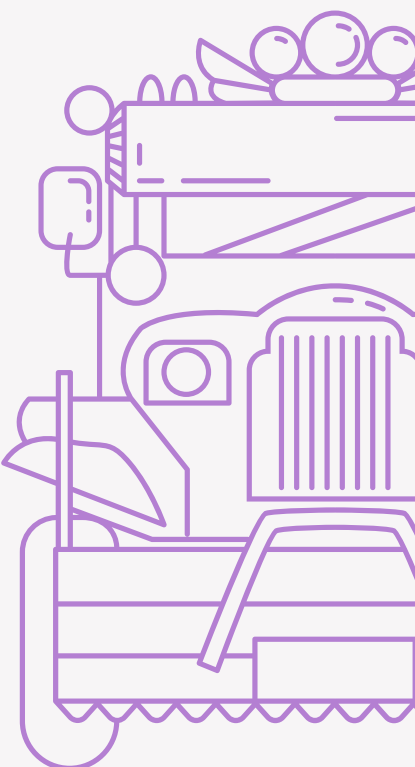
Modified Feminist Self-Defense

- Ann J. Cahill (2009, pp. 367, 368) refers to feminist self-defense as being “grounded in a political understanding of sexual violence and its relationship to other social and political phenomena” and it has “the potential to position women differently with regard to hegemonic heterosexuality in general.”



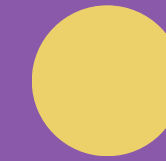
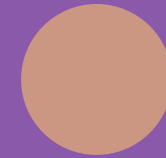
Modified Feminist Self-Defense

- Filipino women recognize that there is inequality in transit and women are targeted because they appear weak. Even transit authorities assert that equality is necessary for transit safety. Such awareness reflects the psychological skills necessary for feminist self-defense. Vocal resistance, and calling out perpetrators, along with actively seeking help, are practices of assertiveness as self-defense.



Conclusion and Recommendations

For lack of choice, women commuters in Metro Manila have already taken various measures to keep themselves safe in transit by practicing a modified or makeshift type of feminist self-defense wherein they develop their physical and psychological capacities. We, however, recommend metro-wide quantitative studies to verify these feminist and empowering actions and interactions in transit further



Empowering women within the community could include integration of the two approaches of feminist self-defense with institutional and policy-based systems which are already in place at a barangay (village) or national level



Conclusion and Recommendations

While participants do not practice feminist self-defense on a full-blown scale, they manage to get by everyday by being empowered and street-smart.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Rather than having “Violence Against Women” Desks, villages should have Women’s Empowerment desks. Nathaniel Buckley (2016) refers to this as “reversing the bystander effect” wherein the normalization of sexual violence is addressed. Women should be empowered to ride the bus, rather than avoiding the bus. Buckley (2016, p. 47) even goes as far as saying that harassers be pushed off the bus to make transit spaces safer.



Conclusion and Recommendations



- Aside from adequate transit and security infrastructure, women feel more empowered with certain resources, or in this case “weapons” for self-defense.
- Technology and mobile device apps can be a first line of defense in the absence of other weapons.
- Access to information, along with awareness and vigilance also contributes to their empowerment or feminist self-defense in transit.
- Given high perceptions of risk in transit, knowing the best routes and being updated also matter to women.

Metro Manila Transit System Wishlist



Adequate transit and security infrastructure



Technology-driven applications

Access to Information



Immediate response from authorities



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Acknowledgements

This research would not have been undertaken without the support of the <A+> Alliance and the aid of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Thank You

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