

# Trans on Trains: Lived Experiences of Filipina Transgender Women on the MRT

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This study sought to explore the overall lived experiences of transgender women in riding the MRT using a qualitative field research design and conducting short interviews with one MRT official, three security guards, and in-depth interviews with five transgender women. Findings show that there is no official policy for transwomen in the existing MRT segregation scheme, which places the exclusion or inclusion of the women to be primarily dependent on security guards and personnel who have varying attitudes and conduct towards transwomen. Transwomen participants place primacy on the general hassles of the MRT system (long lines, congestion, and unpleasant environmental conditions), the experience of which seems to be influenced by the phase of transition and apparent femininity of the transwomen, with transitioning and less feminine-looking transwomen being more likely to be excluded and receive harsher reactions. All transwomen participants experienced sexual harassment in one form or another. The importance of changing the attitudes of people and the wider culture before structural and policy changes is recognized. Narratives of transwomen's coping strategies, experiences with officials and fellow passengers, and their outlook on various MRT issues are also presented.

*Keywords:* transgender, transwomen, trains, public transportation, MRT

Simone de Beauvoir (1953) parsimoniously said that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, a sentiment which is shared by transgender women. However, becoming a woman or transitioning into one is neither simple nor painless. Many of the studies done on issues transwomen face have focused on prejudice, identity, and the process of transitioning (Doan, 2007; Winter, Rogando-Sasot & King, 2007; Winter, 2009; Winter et al., 2009). Furthermore, documented psychological experiences have revolved around settings such as workplaces, schools, and families (Brewster, Velez, Mennicke & Tebbe, 2014; Joseph, 2012; Sausa, 2005). These institutions' policies and norms shape gendered spaces and affect daily mobility and functioning (Herman, 2013; Namaste, 1996). However, not much work has been done on transportation and public commuting spaces. In this study, we explored the lived experiences of Filipina transwomen in their MRT commute.

Transgender people cross over gender boundaries, both in terms of how they identify and how they express themselves to others (Winter, 2011). And the transgressions of these gender norms often lead to consequential social penalties, from discrimination to various forms of harassment (Doan, 2007; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002) making the transgender population "one of the most vulnerable and least protected communities in social space" (Doan, 2007). From reported cases of hate crimes to instances of microaggression, the vulnerable state of transgenders is a growing concern.

### **Transgender People in Social Spaces**

Assault towards transwomen in public spaces is a phenomenon that has been reported globally (for example Merevick, 2014; Molloy, 2014). For transgender women, harassment is an unfortunate reality, manifested not only in explicit physical harm but also in subtle forms of discrimination as well. For example, in one study (Doan, 2007) around one-third of the surveyed transgender participants report experiencing blatant and hostile staring.

Gender determination occurs in daily interactions and scenarios (Westbrook & Schilt, 2013) as in the issue of public restrooms, whose two-gender scheme is an everyday hassle because acceptance into the

facility may be based on biological jurisprudence (Weinberg, 2010). That is, gender-segregated spaces are more likely to use biology-based criteria (e.g., genitalia, biological, and physical markers) rather than identity-based criteria (acceptance or non-acceptance of other people determining their gender) (Westbrook & Schilt, 2013). This especially disfavors transwomen who do not wish to or have not yet been able to obtain gender-reassignment surgery, and who do not appear to “pass” as women. This entails that these biology-based criteria be visible and that these visual cues are expected to ‘match’ the person’s gender, the incongruence of which is linked to discrimination across different social settings (O’Connor, 2014; Cavanagh, 2010; Westbrook & Schilt, 2013). Such a basis continues on to other gender cues, for example the voice of the individual. Speaking in a masculine voice while having a female outward appearance is said to pose difficulties for the transperson’s social integration (Neumann & Welzel, 2004). Thus, being “visibly transgendered” may provoke more extreme discriminatory behaviors (Namaste, 1996; Witten & Eyler, 1999 in Doan, 2007)

It is almost an obvious conception that biased and gender-based segregation is a cause of stress that negatively impacts transgender women’s lives (Herman, 2013), and transpeople react in a myriad of ways. While feelings of anger, distress, hopelessness, and not being understood are reported, many cope through rationalizations about the aggressors’ lack of sensitivity. They also become extremely vigilant about their surroundings and either become avoidant or find ways to attain empowerment and resiliency despite the circumstances (Nadal et al., 2014).

### **The Philippine Context**

In the Philippines, while there is an increasing number of local ordinances that offer transgender individuals and other sexual minorities a legal outlet against discrimination (Manalastas et al., 2015), this does not translate into the national law. In fact, Winter, Rogando-Sasot, and King (2007) succinctly say: “No matter how long they have lived as female, how successfully they pass, or how much they have changed their anatomy to make it female, all Filipina transwomen are regarded in law as male” and this still holds true in the national

arena as of the time of writing. This in turn denies them the option of changing their gender on key identification documents (Winter, 2005; Winter et al., 2007). Undergoing procedures that require these, including having a police ID check and traveling abroad, is made more difficult and leaves them vulnerable to discrimination. One study details that transwomen in the Philippines (along with those in Laos and Thailand) are frequently “read”; that is, the participants report that strangers know them to be transwomen most or all of the time (Winter, 2009). In another sample, the most reported perception was of Filipinos ‘tolerating’ transgender individuals, followed by ‘rejecting’ and then ‘accepting’ and the least reported attitude was of Filipinos being ‘encouraging’ of transindividuals (Winter et al., 2007)

Winter and colleagues (2007; Joseph, 2012) report many forms of prejudice and harassment, including “verbal, emotional, physical and sexual” abuse. Furthermore, they state that transfilipinas are said to be taunted as *bakla* or *bayot* (“gay”) as a form of derision. This reflects the notion that there is a lack of a direct Filipino concept and equivalent for the term “transwomen.” Moreover, the popular term *bakla* conflates gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation (Garcia, 2009; Tan, 2001). In the absence of single word concepts, rough analogs like *bakla na kinikilala ang sarili bilang isang babae* (Tagalog) or *bayot panghunahuna pariha sa babaye* (Cebuano) can be constructed (Winter et al., 2007) which do not see general or ecological use.

While Pew Center Research (2013) reports that the Philippines is one of the most gay-accepting countries in Asia and the Pacific, and Winter (2009) dubs it as “comparatively transfriendly”, Bagas (in Tubeza, 2013) asserts that Filipinos’ perceived acceptance of the LGBT community is simply due to their high visibility in media and that Filipinos still have strong biases against them. One concrete manifestation of this can be seen in the negative reactions and comments of Filipino netizens on the murder of Jennifer Laude, a transgender woman. Instead of condemning the murder and the perpetrator, many people criticized if not outright blamed her for the incident (Gamil, 2014). As the Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines (2012) reports, transgender people are still amongst the most marginalized sectors in terms of education, health and well-

being, and employment, among others.

### **On Transportation Spaces**

One dimension where these trans-negative attitudes may be manifested is public transportation. Transportation, both public and private, is a largely gendered issue (Transportation Research Board, 2004). Transit systems play a distinctive role in urban transportation. However, being highly crowded and having a particular mix of social (weary passengers, potentially anonymous lurkers) and physical variables (concealed areas, environmental layout, possible low surveillance) it affords a setting of incivilities and crime (Loukaitou-Sideris, Liggett & Iseki, 2002).

In one western study, a majority of transgender participants report experiencing discrimination in public spaces, of which transportation (including buses, trains and terminals among others) was the most common setting in which discrimination occurs (Reisner et al., 2015). In an autoethnographic study by Doan (2010), the author recounted a distressing encounter at an airport where a man hurled derogatory remarks at her and another inside an elevator where she was sexually assaulted. Both instances occurred after the aggressor realized she was a transwoman. These experiences of being singled out in transportation spaces and general public spaces highlight transwomen's vulnerability to incidents of discrimination.

### **The Manila Metro Rail Transit Line 3 (MRT-3 or MRT)**

As this study aims to zoom in on the experiences of transwomen on the MRT and its segregation scheme, it is important to take note of the history and rationale for the separation of train compartments for women. The onset of women-only cars in railway systems can be traced back to Japan in 1912. It was first established to separate male and female students who boarded the train. Over time, more railway systems in Japan and other countries followed suit. Initially, the reasoning for such a scheme was to provide convenience for women who often got badly pushed and squeezed due to the overcrowding in trains, but as time went on, the rationale behind the segregated cars

evolved into the prevention of groping incidents and other forms of sexual harassment that women riding trains tended to experience (Tsunozaiki, 2009).

In the Philippines, the Manila Metro Rail Transit System (MRT3 or MRT) is a train system built to alleviate traffic congestion along Epifanio delos Santos Avenue (EDSA). It runs along a 16.9 kilometer track, traversing five cities of Metro Manila (Quezon City, Pasig City, Mandaluyong City, Makati City, and Pasay City). It has 13 stations, of which three are connected to or are near the stations of other railways. Daily trips start at around 4:30 a.m. and the closing trip departs at around 10:30 p.m. Travel time from one end to the other only takes approximately 40 minutes and as of 2015, the fare only ranges from P13 to P28. Because of its cost-efficient nature, the MRT remains a popular alternative to other modes of transportation such as buses and private vehicles (Metro Rail Yellow Line Mass Rapid Transit- Line, 2014).

The MRT began its operations in 1999 and was then designed to accommodate 360,000 to 380,000 passengers daily. However, as of November 2015, around 500,000 passengers were already riding the MRT per day. (de Fiesta, 2014; Abadilla, 2016)

Because of the substantial increase in MRT commuters, MRT authorities implemented a segregation scheme in 2006 to address the “observed difficulties and discomfort suffered by female, elderly and handicapped MRT riders during peak hours.” (Lastimoso as cited in Araneta, 2006). Accordingly, the passengers of the first car of the trains are then limited to females, persons with disability (PWD), senior citizens, children with guardians, and pregnant women including accompanying husbands. Security guards near the platforms enforce the segregation, occasionally calling out to transgressors through their megaphones. In relation to segregation, the lines for security checks near the entrances are also differentiated by sexes.

### **Research Objectives**

In line with this, our research aims to contextualize the experiences of transgender women who commute via the MRT. The primary objective is to explore their lived experiences as well as to learn how the

MRT policies, supervisors, front line agents (i.e., security guards and personnel) and other passengers enforce a culture that facilitates or hinders transwomen's participation in commuting spaces. Specifically, we aim to look into the general commuting experiences and challenges of transwomen in the MRT and to explore such experiences whether positive, negative, or neutral, and whether these can be attributed to their gender identities or their being transgender women.

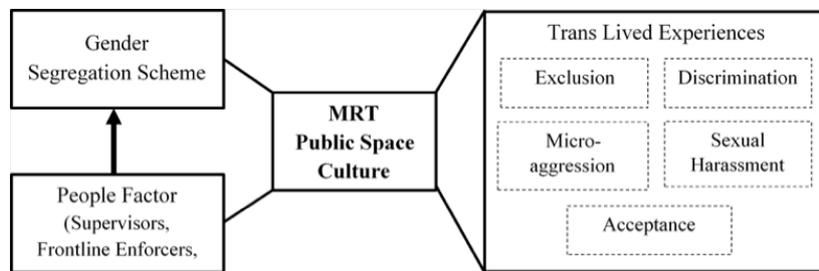


Figure 1. Research Framework

Figure 1 seeks to map out the constructs in our research questions. The narratives of transwomen are linked to the public urban space of both the station and the train itself. This is hypothesized to be influenced by the people they share the space with and the policies and regulations that the MRT system enforces.

In looking at studies on LGBT individuals, it is apparent that the transgender population receives a disproportionate share of the research. The studies that do focus on the transgender population are often focused on topics such as prejudice, identity, transitioning, or attitudes of the public towards transindividuals. Studies that tackle transpeople's experience are mostly relegated to workplace, school, and family settings. Furthermore, studies that do zoom into public spaces and various modes of transportation are often limited to cisgender populations. It is in the hopes of filling this gap and painting a vivid picture of the more specific and concrete experiences of transgender women that this study is conducted.

## METHOD

### Participants

To explore lived experiences, a purposive sample of five transgender women whose ages ranged from 19 to 34 participated in the study. All five participants currently reside, as well as work or study, in Metro Manila. Four are college educated while one is still finishing her college degree. They vary in their occupations: an officer for an NGO, an officer for an LGBT organization, a research assistant, a hairstylist, and a student. One participant (Riza) is still in the process of transitioning, while all others have transitioned. To be eligible for the study, the participant must be a transgender woman who has regularly used the MRT within the last 6 months from the time the study was conducted. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used in the writing of this article.

To establish triangulation, a short interview with one MRT official was conducted. He supervises the GMA- Kamuning station and has been in service for 15 years. Furthermore, three MRT security guards of the train platforms took part in the study. These guards patrolled the North Avenue (10 years in service), Quezon Avenue (unconfirmed years of service) and Guadalupe station (4 years in service).

### Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the transwomen participants. They were briefed about the purpose of the study, given copies of the consent forms and were verbally affirmed of the ethical stipulations. They agreed to have the interviews audio recorded for transcription. After each interview, a debriefing regarding the full purpose and scope of the study was conducted. The research team reported no signs of undue distress or discomfort from any of the participants during the debriefing.

Short interviews with an MRT official and several MRT frontline enforcers were conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the MRT's general policies on gender segregated spaces (e.g. comfort rooms, baggage checks, first train car segregation policy) and its

implementation. The interviews were conducted at the MRT stations they were patrolling or supervising and only lasted for a short duration.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the gathered data. All interviews with the transwomen participants were transcribed, while field notes for the MRT official and frontline enforcers were encoded. These were then coded for each basic idea espoused and the codes were clustered into similar themes. Trends, comparisons, and contrasts were facilitated by an outline map the research team approved in consensus.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **MRT Official and the MRT Segregation Policy**

The MRT official we interviewed stated that the primary purpose of having a separate car for the elderly, PWDs, individuals with children, and women was to protect them in cramped carriages and to help prevent sexual harassment against women.

When asked if they allow transwomen to board the first car train, the official replied that transwomen are not included in the segregation scheme policy. He said that as of the time of the interview, only biological females were allowed to ride the first train but he was open to the idea of including transwomen in the scheme, should the policy be revised in the future. This non-inclusion of transwomen in their policy is associated with the report of Winter et al. (2007) showing that the Philippine national law does not recognize the assumed identity of transgender individuals. Because no such law exists which gives the right of Filipina transwomen to a legal female identity, there is also no penalty for the MRT system's policy which excludes gender minorities.

### **MRT Security Guards and Enforcement of Segregation Policy**

Of the three guards interviewed, two (Quezon Avenue and Guadalupe stations) reported that their practice is to ask transwomen

to transfer to the general train car when they identify transgender women (or at least noticeably transgender ones) lining up for the first train car. Both shared the sentiment of *“lalaki pa rin po kasi yun”* (“he is still a man”) when asked why they do not allow transwomen into the first train car. Both guards also cited that they are only following the policy, and that the first train car is only for women, PWDs, and the elderly. One security guard illustrated the rule when he says he excludes transwomen *“maliban na lang kung disabled yung trans”* (“except if the transwoman is disabled”). One guard also consistently referred to the transwomen (as explained by the research team through verbal and pictorial information) as *“bakla”* (“gay”). This illustrates the finding that in the Philippines, there is a lack of vocabulary for “transwoman” and the conflated term *“bakla”* (gay) is used instead (Garcia, 2009; Tan, 2001; Winter, 2005). This may mirror the fact that the concept itself of being transgender may not be accepted or even understood by some Filipinos.

The North Avenue guard, meanwhile, painted a different picture. He said the practice of the station is to allow the transwomen to line up for the first train car, *“Pinapayagan na lang namin”* (“we just allow them”). He mentioned that this is *“konsiderasyon na lang po”* (“as a form of consideration”). While qualitatively different from the previous guards’ reaction, it can be inferred from the words *“na lang”* that the guard was more tolerant than actively accepting—a finding which supports the views of transwomen in the study of Winter and colleagues (2007).

We can thus conclude that the lack of official policy regarding transwomen makes segregation primarily dependent on the personal judgment and biases of security guards, many of whom may not be sufficiently sensitive about matters regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE).

### **Transwomen Lived Experiences**

**General experiences.** All five transwomen participants emphasized the general hassles that they faced whenever they commuted using the MRT. Such hassles include the overall congestion in the MRT, from the queues at the baggage check and on the platform

to within the train cars:

*The lines are really long, it's really cramped inside... There are really people who every inch of your body [ay nakadikit], parang imagine sardines, ganun siya kasiksik tapos it's rush hour tapos I have to go pa from the second station to the last station which takes around one hour, so pagdating ko ng Taft like, gusot gusot na yung damit ko, yung amoy ko medyo deliks na ganun and sobrang hassle niya talaga, tapos parang wala kang sense of private space. (The lines are really long and it is really cramped inside the train cars. There are people sticking to every inch of your body. It is like a can of sardines; more so in the rush hours. I get on the train on the second station and get off at the last and the ride takes around one hour, so by the time I am at Taft Avenue, my clothes are very wrinkled and smelly. It really is such a hassle, and you feel as if you do not have private space.) [Riza, 19]*

From this congestion, incidents of pushing and shoving (especially when getting inside the train car) are reported. The participants also generally complain of the negative environmental conditions within the MRT system, ranging from the humidity and high temperature to the unpleasant smell. Eve recounted this as “...mabaho, masikip, mainit...” (“... smelly, congested, hot...”). It was also Eve who mentioned a time when she and other passengers were all asked to unload the train because it was not safe anymore. Other stories of train malfunction were reported as well.

**Assertion of gender identity.** Most of the participants asserted their gender identity by lining up at the female baggage check, queuing for the first train car, and by using the female comfort rooms. As Riza said when lining for the baggage check “*sa female, sa female ako palagi*” (“at the female, I always line up at the female baggage check”).

While most participants reported this matter-of-factly, for Trixie, a 34-year old hairstylist, this comes with a more conflicting scenario. Although she has desired to line up at the female baggage check, she has always tried to discern if the guard who is checking is strict or understanding. Furthermore, among the participants she is the only one to have never tried to line up for the first train car, saying that, “*Hindi talaga. Kasi alam ko na ang mangyayari*” (“Absolutely not. I

already know what's going to happen"). This is parallel to the finding of Nadal and colleagues (2014) that transwomen know the possible consequences of confronting their aggressor. Additionally, how transwomen act in the face of discrimination may be influenced by their background and social and/or economic resources. It is noteworthy for example, that Trixie, unlike Riza, Anne, Eve and Noemi, has not participated in any organization (NGO, LGBT, or other affiliated institutions) that provides her awareness about shared issues faced by gender minorities and subsequently, would empower her to tackle these. While the authors have not gathered objective indicators, given Trixie's occupation and the financial difficulties professed during the interview, she also seems to be the least economically able among the five.

**Experience with frontline enforcers.** With their forays into gendered spaces, transwomen participants described instances of exclusion and discrimination or the threat thereof. Many of these experiences occurred when the participants came into contact with security guards and some staff members. Participants reported that even early on in the commuting process, MRT guards at the baggage counter urge them to move to the male designated line. More salient were instances when they were excluded from the waiting platform of the first train car. Anne narrated: "I did that [line up for the first train car] with my friends na transwomen rin but unfortunately, one of us was not allowed to get in" ("I did that [line up for the first train car] with my friends who are also transwomen but unfortunately, one of us was not allowed to get in"). MRT personnel's negative attitudes towards transwomen were also demonstrated in participants' experiences involving usage of the MRT comfort room. Riza recounted having an argument with a staff member who asked her to transfer to the male comfort room:

*During that time kasi I was in a blouse and skirt so ako, "Ate pag cCR- in mo ko sa mga lalaki? Ano sa tingin mong gagawin nila sakin dun? Yung totoo, feeling mo ba maninilip ako [dito]? Gusto ko rin kaya ng ganyan" so parang I was arguing with her, "No! Dito ako mag-cCR, wala kang magagawa, kung gusto mo magreklamo ka sa management niyo, tignan natin kung sinong matatalo sa 'ting dalawa' tas nagsabi ako, 'merong Anti-*

*Discrimination Bill Ordinance dito sa Quezon City, baka gusto mo ipadali kita.” tas ayun pina- CR na niya ko.* (During that time, I was wearing a blouse and a skirt so I replied to the personnel, ‘Miss, are you seriously asking me to pee in the male restroom? What do you think they would do to me in there? Do you really think that I would peep at the people in here? I also wish to have that’ so I was arguing with her, ‘No! I will use this female restroom and you cannot do anything about it. If you want, complain to your management, let’s see which of us will win.’ I also added, ‘In Quezon City, we have the Anti-Discrimination Bill Ordinance and I can have you apprehended.’ Then she finally let me use the female comfort room) [Riza, 19]

Furthermore, another transwoman commuter reported an episode when a guard laughed after hearing her speak with a deep voice. This illustrates the assertion of Neumann & Welzel (2004) that possessing a male voice with female physical markers poses difficulty for social integration. For many participants, being stared at by the guards also emerged as a salient point.

Despite these instances, the transwomen also described that some guards stationed at platforms or baggage checks were more tolerant than others. Trixie said there are guards “... *yung mabait na iniintindi na lang*” (“those who are kind and try to understand”) who allow her to line up at the female baggage check. Another transwoman said such guards allow her to ride the first train car and that is why she often chooses to board on that particular station.

Interestingly, these incidents fit the pattern of responses that the guards themselves have given, with some guards in select stations more tolerant about the transwomen than others. From the lack of inclusion in the MRT segregation policy to the subsequent authority of the frontline personnel in enforcing segregation, these narratives trace how this setting directly impacts the daily commuting experience and lives of the transwomen.

**Reaction of other passengers.** The transwomen interviewed stated that their fellow passengers were generally indifferent towards them. This was attributed to the fact that in the cramped cars of the MRT, passengers are pretty much indifferent to one another just as long as they get inside the train cars and reach their destination. “...

*wala nang iniisip yan kung hindi makapunta nalang sa pinapasukan nila, madalas naman mga tao naka tingin sa labas.* (“... the people don’t really care because they usually just think about their destinations. They also mostly just look outside the train during the travel.”) [Noemi, 34]

While this might be the case, blatant staring was a salient point for transgender participants, corresponding to findings from previous research (Doan, 2007). One reported that she has been stared at for the whole duration of her trip. While some of them acknowledge that these staring incidents might not be because of their gender identity, or if it is, that it might not be malicious, the fact that they are still being singled out adds to an uncomfortable experience. Noemi described it as:

*Ganoon yung reaksiyon na nakukuha ko before. Wala naman yung violent pero makikita mo yung nakatingin, yung nakatingin dahil curious o nangungutya, You wouldn’t know pero meron yun nakatingin.* (Those were kinds of reactions I garnered before. There were no violent reactions but I still see those who stare whether out of curiosity or ridicule. You wouldn’t know but someone would be looking.)

Another especially salient issue stemming from fellow passengers is that of sexual harassment that all the transwomen participants have reported to experience. This ranges from groping such as “*nanghihipo ng pwet*” (“caressing the buttocks”) [Riza, 19] to dry humping. Eve related:

So in a way, he was humping. So it was really eww. I can’t really – I cannot go anywhere. So what I did, the next station, I got out and then I – I let other passengers to come in so, I can just yeah, I can get a distance. Cause I really needed, I needed to get home since I live here in [name of place distant from the starting station].

Whether groping, unwanted touching, humping or other physical advances, all participants report to being subject to some form of harassment. However, a possible mediating factor when attributing emotional valence to the experience would be (as jokingly admitted by Eve) the attractiveness of the perpetrator. In fact, certain acts which are sexual in nature may not be viewed as entirely negative by some participants. Noemi admitted “When I say it’s positive, it’s only for me

[because] somehow I enjoy it. But it doesn't mean that I want every transwoman to experience the same thing because it may not be a positive experience for them."

These incidents may also contribute to the fact that some transwomen participants feel as though men perceive them as sexual objects who enjoy unsolicited sexual advances. They believe that this perception makes transwomen passengers more vulnerable to harassment than either cisgender men or women:

*Feeling ko mas maraming sexual advances ang mga lalake sa mga trans. Mga obviously trans na passengers kaysa sa non-trans. Kasi sa trans, feeling ko na may 'sense of entitlement' sila kasi na "okay lang naman na bastusin yan kasi gusto naman nila eto." (I think that the male passengers more frequently make sexual advances to obviously transgender passengers compared to non-trans passengers. I feel that they have a 'sense of entitlement' wherein it is acceptable to harass the trans passengers because they think that the trans like it.) [Noemi, 34]*

### **Coping Strategies**

**Preemptive behaviors (before any incidents).** The transwomen responded to slights and challenges in a variety of ways. Riza, for example, admitted that she asserts another identity which is viewed as more positive or impactful—in her case, her identity as a student at the University of the Philippines—so that authorities and potential harassers would think twice about confronting her. She narrated:

*Kung lumalabas ako, I make sure that mayroon akong something na nagshow na taga-UP ako. So that they would have second thoughts kung ano yung gagawin nila sa akin. Parang 'di ko to pwedeng galawin kasi taga-UP 'to.' (When I go out, I make sure that I have something to show that I am from UP so that people will have second thoughts if they plan on doing something to me. It's like 'I wouldn't touch her because she's from UP.')*

Others were even less direct in their strategies. A particularly salient theme among the trans commuters is what Eve called "stealth

mode”. To avoid getting caught in female assigned queues and female comfort rooms, many attempted to express themselves and act in ways that do not attract attention. This includes, as shared by Anne, a certain “single-mindedness” in performing the necessary motions. Eve animatedly recounted:

*Every time I go to the MRT, I go there straight. Meaning, no – walang lingon-lingon. As in, just go straight. And then recently I’m wearing my glasses... So I’m just wearing my glasses, just to you know, hide every – I don’t really face them like that [gestures outright staring at guards]. I’m really not like standing straight, I’m very, very – yeah I’m slouching in a way, and I’m always looking down. I normally look [down]. Since I’m really tall I really - so I have to really be slouching just to. So you really have to adjust. (Every time I ride the MRT, I just go straight ahead. I do not look anywhere else. I just go straight. Recently, I also started wearing my glasses to hide my face. I don’t face the guards directly. I try not to attract attention and since I am very tall, I really have to slouch. You really have to adjust.)*

**Reactive behaviors.** If their precautionary steps to avoid unwanted attention were not sufficient, our participants usually confronted the people who accosted them. For example, Riza insisted on riding the female car of the train when she was asked to transfer. In another case, Trixie told off other female passengers in the female CR when they expressed discomfort in her presence, “*Bakit te? May reklamo po ba? Babae rin ako. Hindi naman ako interesado sa makikita ko sa inyo. At saka may cubicle naman eh.*” (“Miss, are there any problems? I am also a woman. I am not interested in what I might see from you. Additionally, there are cubicles for privacy.”) This finding parallels those of previous research (Cavanagh, 2010; O’Connor, 2014; Westbrook & Schilt, 2013) which shows that transwomen may find their claim to use a public women’s restroom challenged or denied by other women if they do not present the expected physical cues necessary for access.

Participants also reported using a confrontational approach in responding to instances of unwanted sexual behaviors. Such instances were met with verbal castigation such as Riza’s rebuke, “*Wala bang*

*gustong makipagsex sa'yo at ako talagang dinadry hump mo? Kung tigang na tigang ka na, 'wag ako please.*" ("Are there really no other people who are willing to have sex with you that you have to dry hump me? If you're that desperate, not me, please.")

On the other hand, some of them used passive means of reacting. They resorted to "*dedma*" (expressing indifference) either when approached by guards and when blatantly stared at by fellow passengers. Trixie explained, "*Hindi ko na kakausapin kasi pag pinansin mo, lalo kang babastusin eh.*" ("I don't call them out or anything, because if I do, they will act out and be more rude to you.") Eve related that when she experiences subtle negative acts she just thinks that the aggressor might simply be uneducated about LGBT issues. These instances of confrontational and passive ways of reacting to such encounters reflect that transwomen either become avoidant or find a way to be empowered and resilient in the face of microaggressions. Transwomen also passively cope with the rationalization that the aggressor is just ignorant on the matter (Nadal et al., 2014).

It is noteworthy to see that among the coping strategies cited by the participants, reporting to the authorities was not one of them. This is in contrast to the study of Nadal and colleagues (2014) where American transwomen considered contacting authorities as a legitimate form of action to protect themselves from harassment. In the MRT system and from the narratives of the transwomen, the front line authorities themselves could be the source of harassment.

**Reaffirming experiences.** This is not to say that the MRT experience is one that is entirely negative. A positive experience for many transwomen is simply being allowed inside the first train car. Riza for example states, "*Pumipila ako dun sa women's carriage okay lang sa kanila. I think na reaffirm ako dun, yung pagkababae ko*" ("When I line up at the women's carriage and that the people are okay with it, I think it reaffirms my gender identity as a woman"). Many also attribute being granted access in the first train car to the fact that in the cramped cars of the MRT, passengers are pretty much indifferent to one another.

Another experience that affirms the gender identity of the transwomen is when male passengers offer their seats to them. Noemi would coin this as "*sa ibang trans sisters, ang lakas makababae noon*"

(“For many of my trans sisters, the act of being offered a seat by male passengers strongly affirms their womanhood.”) However, while other participants feel this affirmation, the situation also produces a conflict with their feminist beliefs:

*Parang merong struggle sa sarili ko na, should I take that affirmation that people see me as a woman or should I hold on to my feminist values na parang ‘that is affirmative action, I don’t support that.’ (It seems like there is an internal struggle of whether I should take it as an affirmation that people see me as a woman, or if I should hold on to my feminist values, ‘that is an affirmative action, I don’t support that.’) [Anne, 25]*

While participants perceive such instances of chivalrous behavior as “*nakakababae*” (Noemi, 34), some still see these as embedded in the problematic issue of sexism.

#### **MRT experiences of cis versus transwomen passengers.**

Participants’ narratives reveal that they perceive a difference between their experiences in the MRT and those of cisgender passengers. This includes the rampant sexual harassment they experience: All participants of the study were subjected to groping or dry humping in the train. Interestingly, this only started happening when they had transitioned and dressed in feminine clothing. The MRT officials said that the reason for having a PWD, pregnant, and more importantly, a female-only car in the trains was to avoid such cases, but evidently, the current set-up does not consistently extend such protection to transwomen and may thus disfavor them.

Another difference they notice is that of blatant staring. Individual cisgender passengers are not usually singled out by the public gaze. Significantly, Noemi also said that she constantly fears the possibility of being ejected from the train if she uses the female facilities:

*...ako pag nagMMRT ako, at the back of my head, baka palabasin ako ng first car. Or baka pagmasdan ako ng masasama ng mga babae andoon sa first car. Baka hawiin ng security pa lang tanggalin na. Yung mga non-trans women, wala naman silang ganoong concern. Pag sumasakay sila ng MRT, ang concern lang nila ay ang pila, concern na masikip, concern ng mainit. Concern ng masira ang train. Ako, bukod pa doon, concern ko din yung baka palabasin ako. Na kahit hindi pa man nangyayari,*

*concern ko pa rin siya everytime na sasakay ako ng MRT. (If I use the MRT, there are these constant worries: What if the train personnel will remove me from the first car? What if the women in the first car would stare at me maliciously? Maybe I cannot even enter the first car because I would already be caught by the security guards and be forced to enter the regular cars. Ciswomen do not have any of these concerns. When they ride the MRT, their main concerns would be the long lines, the lack of personal space in the cars, the heat. Concern that the train might break down. For me, aside from those, I am also concerned that I will be forced out of the train car. Even if it has not yet happened, it is still one of my worries every time I ride the MRT.)*

**Influence of transition phase and femininity on the MRT experience.** Comparing the overall experiences of four of our participants who have transitioned already (Anne, Eve, Noemi and Trixie) to that of our one participant who is still in the process of transitioning (Riza) who still sometimes goes out wearing masculine clothing, it is evident that the latter has more negative lived experiences in the MRT. It seems that a transitioning woman is more likely to be excluded by frontline enforcers for the first train car and receive harsher reactions from other staff, while transgender participants who have already transitioned, and who ‘pass’ as biological females were more likely to go through the commuting process with less negative experiences. That is, the current narratives support the claims that incongruence is likely to provoke discriminatory behavior (O’Connor, 2014) and being “visibly transgendered ” leads to more extreme forms of these behaviors (Namaste, 1996;Witten & Eyler, 1999 in Doan, 2007)

**MRT future usage and suggestions for MRT improvement.** While the whole MRT commuting ordeal was presented as an experience of hassle, or as Eve laughingly quipped “It was hell in the MRT,” participants still continue riding the MRT due to sheer necessity. Riza stated that, “*personally mas na didiscourage ako pero do I have a choice?*” (“Personally, I feel discouraged riding the MRT but do I have a choice?”) and that taking the taxi costs too much, and taking the bus is inefficient, “*pag wala na akong pera, wala na talaga akong pera. Pag na-late ako sa pupuntahan ko, late talaga ako. Wala*

*lang talaga akong option.*” (“Once my money is gone, it’s gone. Once I’m late to my event, I’m late. I really don’t have other options.”) The transwomen also cited time saving as a huge factor why they continue riding the MRT. Anne shares that although she can always take the cab:

*Pero mas faster kasi talaga ang MRT. Medyo madami pa nga akong activities na kailangang gawin . . . so sobrang daming meetings and I cannot be late . . . so if I want to be there early I should take the MRT cause I cannot risk taking a cab and at the end of the day paying so much for the fare and spending so much time inside the cab other than - ang dami ko na sanang nagawa kung hindi ako [nag cab] . . . sobrang time saving [ng MRT].* (“Riding the MRT really is faster compared to riding a cab. I have a lot of things to do; so many meetings to attend and I cannot be late. So if I want to be early, I would take the MRT because I cannot risk taking a cab and at the end of the day, pay so much for the fare. Aside from that, I could have done so much more in the time I would have spent in the cab. Riding the MRT really saves time.”)

There is undeniably room for improvement in the MRT system, especially in making it more trans-friendly. The participants elucidated this through several suggestions. Some advocated for gender neutral bathrooms to be made available in the train system. Others meanwhile suggested educating the MRT staff and personnel on SOGIE sensitivity and appropriate conduct.

However, by and large, a prominent suggestion of the participants was to focus on the attitudes of the Filipino people and the larger commuting culture. Riza related that even though long lines and congestion might be fixed:

*Kung hindi mo pa rin naayos yung perception ng tao towards transwomen specifically, nandun pa rin yung problema ng mga trans na oo maayos na yung pila pero sa panglalaki pa rin papapilahin, oo malawak na yung bagon pero sa regular bagon pa rin ako papasakayin, oo hindi na masikip, pero babastusin pa rin ako.* (If you don’t alter the perception towards transwomen specifically, there will always be that problem. Yes there will be decent lines, but you’re still forced to line up in the male queue,

yes the carts are spacious but I'm still placed in the regular cars, yes it's not congested but I will still be harassed.)

She asserts that the problems do not stem from the structure of the MRT, but rather, from the passengers that ride and the personnel that operate the train system. This sentiment is shared by Eve when she stated that, "I think it's the way, the attitude, the Filipinos' attitude when taking public transportation. That should be changed first, before you can really consider other factors." Nevertheless, these sentiments for encompassing social change do not go uncontested, as evidenced by the remarks of Trixie, a transwoman whose history with her family is marked by anti-LGBT prejudice: "*No. Hindi na mababago ang pag-iisip [ng] Pilipino kasi pag-uugali na ng Pilipino yan kahit ano nang gawin natin eh.*" ("No. The way of thinking of the Filipino will never change no matter what because that really is their nature."). In spite of everything, Noemi endorsed the former view, "*Feeling ko ang kailangan magbago ay yung culture na hindi naman masosolusyonan ng improvements sa MRT*" ("I feel like what must be changed is the culture itself and that this will not be addressed just by improvements in the MRT.")

## **Conclusion**

Gender minorities are prone to negative experiences in gendered spaces. How they experience these are influenced by other people present in the situation and the structural policies set in place. Through the triangulated exploratory design, we found that transwomen were not included in the MRT official segregation scheme which made the guards and personnel (who vary in attitudes and conduct) the main determiners of whether the transwomen will be excluded in female-assigned spaces. A particularly salient finding is that the general hassles of congested train cars, long queues and unpleasant environmental conditions inconvenienced the participants more than other negative experiences. While many declared that the reactions of fellow passengers are one mainly of indifference, they also still reported of being blatantly stared at. Significantly, all participants narrated experiences of sexual harassment in one form or another, which is noteworthy as one rationale for the segregation scheme was to

protect women from unwanted sexual advances in the first place. Of the many ways to cope with these negative experiences, the transwomen learned to adopt a “stealth mode” or if engaged, to directly confront their aggressors. There is an understanding that transwomen have challenges and anxieties that cisgender passengers do not have to worry about. Furthermore, transitioning and less feminine expressing transwomen tended to be more vulnerable to the various negative experiences.

Nonetheless, experiences during which Filipina transwomen’s gender identity were affirmed were also documented. While most agreed that the MRT commute is troublesome, it is seen as almost compulsory due to demands of time and finances. Lastly, primacy is placed on wider social and cultural acceptance before specific interventions in the train system are enacted to improve the MRT commuting experience.

The study was focused only on the experiences of transwomen on the MRT. Exploring the lived experiences of transmen as another research direction may also surface unique issues and themes, as well as confirmatory research of how social and economic resources interact to affect self-identity, various coping behaviors and other experiences of transindividuals in the local context. The researchers have also chosen to focus on the MRT system but the larger study of transgender people in other commuting systems and public spaces in the Philippines is yet to be undertaken.

Given the multifaceted lived experiences of the transwomen in this mode of transport, a valuable point is how current laws, ordinances, policies, and measures that seek to protect LGBT rights actually translate, become implemented, and fulfill their purpose in public spaces. Efforts to uphold LGBT rights in larger contexts such as workplaces and establishments are commendable, but less monitored spaces should also be given importance. One concrete way in which this might be attained is to mandate SOGIE sensitivity training that focuses on contexts where the need for such might not be as apparent, such as in transport systems. Furthermore, our study showed a need for the inclusion of transgender individuals in the official MRT segregation scheme, as well as the need for significant improvement of the train’s facilities to alleviate commuting distress for both trans and

non-trans individuals alike.

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