



## **FEELING SAFE ON THE TRAIN: GENDERED PERSPECTIVES ON SECURITY IN THE JABODETABEK COMMUTER LINE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Public transportation is a critical element of urban mobility, yet perceptions of safety often vary across gender. In Jabodetabek, the KRL Commuter Line serves millions of passengers daily, providing essential connectivity but also raising concerns about harassment, overcrowding, and unequal access to secure spaces. This study explores how male and female commuters perceive and experience safety while using the KRL, with attention to both physical security and psychological comfort. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten regular KRL users, supported by field observations and another publication discussing perceptions and security on the Jabodetabek commuter line. Using a gendered perspective, an analysis was then applied to examine differences in gendered perceptions, self-regulatory behavior strategies employed to achieve a sense of security, and the effectiveness of women-only carriages. The findings reveal notable differences in safety perceptions between male and female KRL passengers. Female passengers often report discomfort when traveling in mixed carriages with male passengers, particularly in situations where close physical contact is unavoidable due to overcrowding. Such proximity can evoke feelings of fear and unease, leading to heightened vigilance during travel. In contrast, male passengers generally do not perceive close contact in crowded carriages as problematic. Consequently, many female passengers opt for women-only carriages as a preferred strategy to mitigate feelings of insecurity and enhance their sense of safety. The study underscores the role of women-only carriages in fostering a sense of safety for female passengers within Jabodetabek's urban mobility network. Nevertheless, these dedicated carriages are not without challenges, as instances of more assertive or aggressive passenger behavior are reported to occur more frequently compared to mixed carriages.

**Keywords:** gender, safety perception, KRL Commuter Line, Jabodetabek, public transportation

## INTRODUCTION

Mass transport is one of the dominant factors that shape city life, not just as a system of mobility but as an organization that decides the daily routine of millions of citizens. For a major metropolis like Jabodetabek, commuting is now part of daily life. Data from the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency estimates the number of residents who take daily trips in and out of the Greater Jakarta region at more than 17 million. These trips, wherein residents aged five and above leave their dwellings for purposeful activities such as work, school, or studies and return home within the same day, are a constant reminder of the extent to which the city relies on commuting to fuel its economic, educational, and social pursuits (Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, 2024). Here, the public transport is not only an option but a required vehicle that facilitates access into opportunities congregated in the city life.

Of the many means of travel, the KRL Commuter Line is a significant connection between the outskirts and Jakarta. It is generally utilised by Jabodetabek residents because it has the capacity to carry large amounts of people over short, medium, and long distances at relative speed and reliability. Its affordability in addition to the convenience of not having to navigate Jakarta's notorious traffic jams makes it the most viable means for the majority of commuters (Leliana et al., 2023). While the KRL is often praised as efficient and accessible, its worth lies beyond usage: in the trains, individuals of different backgrounds share the same space, negotiate proximity with the stranger, and are continuously grappling with safety and comfort concerns.

The mundane reality of travelling by the KRL does not exist uniformly. While commuting at rush hours, overcrowded carriages, fighting for personal space, and the fear of harassment often turn a regular ride into a nightmarish experience. The majority of commuters describe how overpacked carriages both cause physical discomfort and mental distress. Anxiety that builds in this situation even leads to social confrontations among commuters (Damar et al., 2025).

These issues are usually experienced most intensely by women. Research has established that women tend to view public transport as unsafe and thus board their trips more cautiously compared to men. Women also experience high levels of sexual harassment and assault, which have direct impacts on their route, travel time, and seat choice (Hidayati et al., 2020; Hidayati, 2023). There were 82 cases of sexual harassment against female commuters on the train between 2020 and 2024. That, however, is likely to be only a fraction of the actual cases because a significant number of cases remain unreported based on fear, stigma, or distrust of the authorities (Toni & Maknunah, 2025). Although men are less disturbed by overcrowding and bodily closeness, they are not entirely exempt from these risks. Research notes that men have also reported experience with harassment at a far lower rate compared to women (Haryadi et al., 2024). This suggests that while victimization is prevalent and may happen to both genders, the perception of safety is not universal. This disparity leads to a critical research question:

why do women tend to view public transport as significantly more unsafe than men, even when sharing the same space?

A gendered perspective illuminates this issue by identifying how men and women differ regarding vulnerability and the threat of victimization. This intersects with the threat of victimization concept, which identifies gendered differences regarding perceiving risk. For instance, May et al. (2009) found that "*females were significantly more likely than males to fear criminal victimization, perceive themselves to be more at risk of victimization, and engage in avoidance and defensive behaviors*" (p. 174).

Taken together, these two contrasting experiences are enough to demonstrate that public transport is not just a physical movement from one point to another. It also has powerful relationships with the way that travelers experience their trips—whether or not they do or do not feel safe and comfortable, or simply encounter vulnerability and discomfort. Therefore, all discussion of the Jabodetabek urban transport system must transcend concerns about effectiveness or system capacity, and take seriously the daily experience of the commuters on whom millions of citizens rely every day.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative study design to explore the way male and female commuters feel and perceive safety when using the KRL Commuter Line in Jabodetabek. Both physical aspects of security, such as protection against harassment, and psychological aspects, such as feelings of comfort and vulnerability within dense areas, were emphasized.

Primary data collected in this study were gathered during semi-structured interviews with ten regular KRL commuters, five males and five females, who work and commute regularly on the Jakarta–Bogor and Jakarta–Cikarang lines. They were chosen because these two lines are among the most congested lines in Jabodetabek and are prone to crowding, safety, and gendered commuting experience issues. The interviews provided the opportunity for participants to report on their daily routines, offer opinions regarding perceptions of safety, and provide descriptions of practices employed to traverse full and potentially unsafe spaces. Field observations, used as a complement to the interview data, were conducted during peak and non-peak hours of travel. Observations recorded passenger volumes, stand and seat usage, spatial interaction, and use of women-only carriages. Other than primary data, the study also utilized secondary sources in the form of accessible publications and official reports on gender, security, and commuter behavior in the Jabodetabek area.

This study examines the difference between men's and women's feelings of safety in the KRL Jabodetabek carriages, based on a gender perspective. It draws upon the notion of the "threat of victimization" as formulated by Rader (2004). In the article, Rader redefined "fear of crime," which in previous research had often been treated as a dependent variable influenced by other factor, such as perceived risk and constrained

behavior. In the re-conceptualization, Rader (2004) argued that all three elements are linked together. "Fear of crime" is positioned as one of three equal indicators within the broader construct, or umbrella, of the "threat of victimization," alongside perceived risk and constrained behavior.

In this theory, fear of crime is known as the emotive indicator and is defined as "*the emotion or worry people feel over the threat of victimization.*" The second one, perceived risk is the cognitive indicator, which is defined as "*the risk individual assess to deal with the threat of victimization.*" The third one, constrained behavior, is the behavioral indicator, which is defined as "*the behaviour people take to protect themselves from the threat of victimization or the behaviour people avoid to deal with the threat of victimization*" (Rader, 2004, p. 690).

Where Rader's (2004) threat of victimization is a general concept, meaning it can apply with all people regardless of gender, a subsequent study by May et al. (2009) actually employed the same concept within a gender framework. In their study, they examined how each factor within the "threat of victimization" construct differs by gender. Using the data on Kentucky citizens, they found that there was a variation between men and women in the components of the threat of victimization. They found that "*females were significantly more likely than males to fear criminal victimization, perceive themselves to be more at risk of victimization, and engage in avoidance and defensive behaviors*" (May et al., 2009, p. 174).

This finding is mirrored in the Indonesian transportation context, where women tend to view public transport as unsafe and thus board their trips more cautiously compared to men. Women also experience high levels of sexual harassment and assault, which have direct impacts on their route, travel time, and seat choice (Hidayati et al., 2020; Hidayati, 2023).

Therefore, using this theoretical lens to understand the different perspectives in how men and women perceive safety, the data collected in this study were then thematically examined to identify the patterns and observations that emerged throughout the interviews and observations. The analysis focused on three key topics: (1) the differences between women and men on how they experience safety and vulnerability, (2) Commuter behavior and the ways they use to feel safe in train carriages, and (3) perceived effectiveness and limitations of women's-only carriages in creating safer and more enjoyable rides.

## **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

Traveling on the KRL is almost always associated with being in a crowded carriage. Sharing a narrow space with many other passengers, squeezing through tight standing areas, and enduring a sense of stuffiness are common experiences that commuters face. However, based on both field observations and interviews, overcrowding is not a constant reality for all journeys. For example, in one observation that I noted:

*“Arriving at Cikarang Station around 9:30 a.m., I walked to the platform and entered a KRL train waiting there. The carriage was relatively quiet, with only a handful of passengers on board. From the loudspeaker, the train staff made an announcement about the route and final destination, which was Kampung Bandan via Pasar Senen. The Cikarang–Jakarta line branches at Jatinegara Station, forming a loop line starting from there. The train departed at around 10:00 a.m., and during that time, the number of passengers inside the carriage did not increase—only two of us were present, including myself. With many empty seats available, I was able to sit comfortably. From Cikarang to several stations ahead, only a small number of passengers boarded” (A. Mayadi, personal communication, December 3, 2024).*

Similarly, some interviewees shared that they had experienced relatively empty or less crowded carriages, particularly when traveling outside peak hours or in the opposite direction of the main commuter flow. This shows that KRL journeys are not always defined by overcrowding. Even so, nearly all participants recalled at least some journeys where they were caught in packed, uncomfortable conditions. Although their descriptions varied, their underlying perceptions of crowdedness and its effects were largely consistent.



**Figure 1.** Overcrowded conditions in KRL carriages on the Jakarta-Bogor route during peak hours. (Photograph taken by author, February 12, 2025)

The physical and emotional strain of being in a congested carriage was also highlighted by many respondents. They recounted how bodily discomfort—such as difficulty maintaining balance, the pressure of constant contact with others, and the effort to avoid unwanted touch—combined with feelings of unease and stress. These experiences demonstrate that crowded conditions on the KRL are not just temporary inconveniences but can have lasting effects on passengers’ well-being and quality of life.

The findings also reveal clear gender differences in how passengers interpret and respond to these situations. Female commuters, in particular, often expressed heightened unease when traveling in mixed-gender carriages during rush hours, when physical contact was unavoidable. For many women, this became a key reason to consistently choose the women-only carriages, which they felt offered greater safety and comfort. Male commuters acknowledged these differences, pointing out that the experiences of men and women in crowded spaces are not the same. While men generally reported being less bothered by crowding, they recognized that women often face greater risks and emotional strain in these situations.

Mrs. ZH, one of the respondents, for instance, explained that she prefers to ride in the women-only carriage rather than in mixed ones: *“I usually take the women’s carriage. Honestly, no matter how safe it feels, being in a mixed carriage still makes me uncomfortable, especially when standing close to men. For me, personally, it’s less comfortable, even though there are many women in the mixed carriage too”* (personal communication, May 10, 2025). She also noted that the presence of security measures, such as CCTV cameras and patrolling officers, does not completely remove her sense of vulnerability. As a result, she remains vigilant, often observing the behavior of other passengers closely to detect anything unusual.

Mrs. D shared similar feelings. She often chooses the women-only carriage because she feels uneasy when standing in close proximity to male passengers. For her, the women-only carriage provides not only comfort but also a sense of greater safety. Her preference became even stronger after her husband was pickpocketed in a mixed carriage: *“I prefer the women’s carriage because it feels safer. My husband lost his phone a few times in the mixed carriage—even though it was kept inside his bag, someone still managed to steal it. That never happened in the women’s carriage”* (personal communication, January 21, 2025). According to Mrs. D, being a woman on the KRL carries its own challenges: in mixed carriages she feels the need to be constantly alert, both in protecting her belongings from theft and in guarding her body against potential harassment. This constant vigilance, she explained, makes commuting more exhausting and stressful.

Other participants echoed these concerns, but some also highlighted differences in perception depending on carriage conditions. Miss DH observed that the level of comfort and security often depends on how crowded the carriage is. She noted that when the carriage is less packed, visibility improves and security officers can monitor passengers more effectively, making the environment feel safer overall (personal communication, April 24, 2025).

Male respondents, however, generally reported less sensitivity to the discomfort caused by crowding or close contact. Mr. F, for example, stated that he does not feel disturbed when traveling in a full mixed carriage, though he acknowledged that for women the experience is often different—which explains why his wife prefers the

women-only carriage (personal communication, May 10, 2025). Similarly, Mr. I reflected that women are more concerned about the risk of harassment, while men usually feel more relaxed. Although he admitted that harassment can also happen to men, he considered such cases far less common. For him, the main priority is simply reaching his destination, regardless of carriage type (personal communication, April 9, 2025).

Mr. B offered another perspective, noting that as a man he sometimes feels awkward when pressed too closely against female passengers in crowded spaces. He tries to maintain distance whenever possible to avoid unwanted contact, though he recognized that not all men share the same attitude. He also acknowledged that some men deliberately exploit overcrowded conditions to stand close to women, underscoring the risks that female passengers regularly face (personal communication, April 12, 2025).

With regard to women-only carriages, all participants agreed that their existence is highly important. These carriages are considered effective in providing female passengers with a sense of safety from harassment, while also offering greater comfort as they avoid the unease of direct physical contact with male passengers. In this sense, women-only carriages are widely viewed as a protective space for women against potential risks during their commute.

Mrs. ZH emphasized this further: *“I agree, they’re good and effective. For someone like me who feels insecure, even if it’s already safe to take the train, I still feel uncomfortable when men and women are freely mixed. So, the alternative is the women’s carriage. Even though sometimes women there can be a bit rougher, I honestly feel safer and more comfortable. If I have to be pressed against someone, at least it’s another woman, not a man. So yes, I support women’s carriages—they help women who don’t feel comfortable being in mixed carriages”* (personal communication, May 10, 2025).

Miss DH also supported this view: *“Yes, they’re effective. I also use them sometimes, especially during off-peak times when the train is emptier. It’s definitely more comfortable because everyone is female, so the risk of crime is smaller. But when it gets really crowded, I sometimes move to the next carriage, the mixed one. Still, I think women-only carriages are helpful, because women need more protection. That awareness is why they were separated from men in the first place—to give them their own space”* (personal communication, April 24, 2025).

Taken together, these narratives highlight a consistent pattern: female passengers perceive mixed carriages as more threatening and stressful, while men tend to view them as neutral or less problematic. This difference in perception has direct consequences for commuting behavior, with many women deliberately choosing women-only carriages to mitigate risks and feel safer. Across interviews, respondents consistently agreed that women-only carriages are crucial. They are widely seen as effective in reducing the threat of harassment, offering both practical protection and greater comfort for women navigating the crowded commuter system. Nevertheless, some interviewees also pointed

out limitations, noting that women-only carriages can sometimes feel more “rowdy” compared to mixed ones, reflecting that these spaces are not without their own challenges.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Difference in perspective between men and women**

Interviews with respondents revealed that most felt uncomfortable with the forced close bodily contact in crowded carriages. This was particularly prominent among female travelers. Many preferred the women-only carriages (WOCs) rather than being pressed against men in mixed cars, with some women asserting that they actively avoid physical proximity to men in anticipation of sexual harassment. These findings highlight that the train's physical environment is highly gendered, forcing women to shoulder an additional burden of fear. In contrast, male respondents did not express these same fears and showed a greater tolerance for crowding, even during rush hours. This aligns with previous studies on the gendered differences in the perceived threat of victimization (May et al., 2009; Hidayati et al., 2020; Hidayati, 2023).

This difference in priorities was clear in the male responses. Male respondents generally did not focus on the threat of harassment, but rather on the functional goal of reaching their destination on time. While research confirms that harassment against men does occur, it happens at a much lower rate (Haryadi et al., 2024). More surprisingly, many male respondents confessed to actively maintaining their distance from female travelers in mixed cars. This behavior, however, was not driven by a fear of being victimized, but by a "social etiquette" or a desire not to appear intrusive. This suggests that men's commuting practices are shaped by a sense of social obligation, while women's are shaped by a fear of being victimized.

These differing sensitivities—fear for women, social obligation for men—resonate with existing literature on how gender shapes environmental perception. Yavuz and Welch (2010), for example, argue that women feel unsafe when there is no "guardian" (like a security officer) to deter crime or intervene. Men, conversely, feel unsafe when they cannot "manage their immediate environment." In the KRL, this explains why official safety measures like CCTV are not perceived as effective by women. CCTV does not offer instant protection; what female commuters feel they need is the physical presence of an officer who can intervene at once. In reality, officers cannot always be present, especially when extreme overcrowding prevents them from moving between carriages. Therefore, the majority of female passengers still feel unsafe, even when surveillance systems are operational.

Together, these testimonies show a broad gender disparity in how safety and comfort are perceived within the KRL system. For women, traveling in crowded mixed carriages causes stress, anxiety, and a fear of harassment that, in their view, justifies the need for women-only carriages. For men, these specific safety concerns are not the main priority; their goal is efficiency—arriving at their destination as smoothly and quickly as

possible. This disparity illustrates how urban transport systems, while appearing objective and neutral, are actually experienced in profoundly different ways. It also shows why this gendered gap must be factored into any policy seeking to make cities safer and more accessible for all commuters.

### **The Option to go For Women-only Carriage**

From the interviews, it emerged that several female passengers purposely choose to board the women-only carriages as a way of feeling safer and more comfortable during their commutes. For these passengers, the fact that they were not in close contact with men was an important part of maintaining their perception of safety. The women-only carriage thus offers an accessible alternative space—one in which female commuters can travel without fear of being crushed too near male commuters or the risk of potential sexual harassment.

This choice to seek a separate, safe space is the primary reason the women-only carriage (WOC) was first introduced on the KRL Jabodetabek network on October 1, 2012. It was a tangible move by PT Kereta Api Indonesia in response to the increasing cases of sexual harassment experienced by women in mixed carriages (Ginting et al., 2022). Since then, these exclusive carriages have become a norm and an essential feature of the KRL system, not only as a safety measure but also as a symbol of protection and respect for women's comfort in public transport space.

Indonesia was not the only country to implement this solution. Japan, for example, had already introduced women-only carriages in the early 2000s. A study there, which examined their effectiveness as a countermeasure against groping, found that one-third of female Japanese passengers consider the WOCs to be a solution, indicating a notable degree of appreciation for their effectiveness (Shibata, 2020).

However, research from other crowded rail systems, like in Mumbai, India, shows that this safety calculation is not always simple. Research by Hirsch and colleagues (2014) highlights a similar struggle faced by women in Mumbai. They found that passengers must make complex and often stressful safety calculations that can flip entirely depending on the time of day. For instance, during off-peak hours, an empty women-only car felt more threatening, as they worried the isolation made them an easy target. In this situation, many felt safer in a general carriage, where the small crowd felt like a "protective shield." Conversely, during rush hour, that same crowd became the danger, turning into a "cloak" that could hide a harasser. It was at these times that women would actively avoid the general cars to find safety in the women-only carriage (Hirsch et al., 2014).

In everyday life, the experiences of Indonesian passengers in the KRL's women-only carriages seem to align more with the search for a "safe zone." Most women described the WOC as a place where they could relax a bit during their commute without the fear of unwanted physical proximity to men. Several said that even when the carriage was packed, the discomfort felt "different"—they still experienced the crush of the crowd, but felt less stressed because everyone around them was female. For them, the atmosphere was less threatening, more relaxed, and they felt able to focus on their journey, sleep, or use their phones without having to be on high alert.



**Figure 2.** The condition on the platform at Sudirman KRL Station, Jakarta, where female passengers were waiting to board the women-only carriage. (Photograph taken by author, January 8, 2025)

Nevertheless, some participants also mentioned that the women-only carriages are not without their own issues. A few noted that other passengers in these carriages can sometimes be more demanding or irritable, especially during rush hour when everyone is competing for limited space. Despite this, they mostly agreed that the feeling of safety outweighed the occasional discomfort. This trade-off—exchanging physical crowding for psychological comfort—demonstrates how female commuters are actively negotiating their mobility in public spaces, compromising between their desires for safety, convenience, and efficiency.

### **The Effectiveness of Women-only Carriage**

The findings from this study suggest that the women-only carriage (WOC) is a place of complex trade-offs. The majority of interviewees agreed that the WOC provides a crucial sense of security and convenience that is often missing in mixed-gender cars. Female commuters described these carriages as "safe zones" that protect them from the

risk of sexual harassment, allowing them to travel with less anxiety. However, participants also pointed out that this safety is not absolute. They noted that the WOC is not problem-free, with some describing other riders as more "assertive" or "rough," especially during rush hour when competition for seats and space is high.

This complex dynamic—where safety from men is traded for social tension with other women—is strongly supported by previous research. One study by Ginting and colleagues (2022) found that while WOCs aim to provide safety, they can become "tension areas." Because all passengers are female, a traditional sense of obligation to yield space is sometimes lost, leading to a higher potential for conflict. This includes passengers shoving to get on or off the train, quarreling over seats, and even pregnant or elderly travelers not being guaranteed a priority seat (Ginting et al., 2022). Furthermore, research by Prabowo and colleagues (2020) discovered that some women avoid the WOCs altogether precisely because of this aggressive behavior. In that study, some women reported feeling more comfortable in mixed compartments, where they found male passengers to be "more polite"—offering them space, helping them alight, or giving up their seats (Prabowo et al., 2020).

These findings stand in contrast to other studies that paint a simpler, more positive picture. For example, research by Saliman & Putranto (2020) concluded that the quality of WOCs is generally satisfactory, that security is strong, and that passenger behavior is "normally well-disciplined." While these observations about cleanliness and order may be true, they seem to overlook the nuanced social conflicts and tensions reported by passengers in other studies and in this one.

Overall, these findings suggest that while women-only carriages are a necessary and effective step in improving the perceived security of female passengers, their introduction also creates a new social dynamic—one of congestion, rivalry, and complicated daily negotiations of shared space.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the experience of commuting on the KRL Commuter Line is deeply shaped by gender. Women and men pass through the same physical spaces but have vastly different experiences. For many women, the packed and intimate environment of the train creates strong feelings of vulnerability, especially in mixed-gender carriages where unwelcome physical closeness is common. In contrast, male riders are more likely to see these same packed conditions as neutral or just an inconvenience, concerned more with efficiency than with personal safety.

Faced with this reality, women use personal strategies to reduce their distress and risk—most notably, by the simple act of choosing the women-only carriages. This choice is not a matter of convenience; it is a conscious negotiation of space and an act of self-protection. The women-only car is therefore a practical and symbolic response to

gendered insecurity. It offers women a feeling of collective security and, crucially, psychological relief from the fear that comes with dense, mixed environments.

However, while the women-only carriages succeed in creating a safer space from harassment, they are not without their own challenges. Respondents indicated that overcrowding, disorganization, and even fighting can occur among female commuters during rush hour. This outcome suggests that a true sense of safety depends on more than just physical separation. It is also tied to deeper cultural norms and commuting habits that shape how passengers behave in and understand that space.

Overall, this study underscores that gender remains a significant influence on daily mobility in Jabodetabek's transport system. The women-only carriage is a powerful social and symbolic intervention, but it also highlights the ongoing need for transport policies that truly acknowledge these different gendered experiences, enhance safety, and create inclusive public spaces for all commuters.

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