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Examining Women's Commuting Experience in Urban Philippines: A Photovoice Exercise on Human Security

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**Examining women’s commuting experience in urban Philippines:
A photovoice exercise on human security**

Lisette R. Robles, Ph.D.,* and Sandy Mae Gaspay, Ph.D.†

Abstract

Human security is easily associated with examining disasters and other catastrophic events. However, our everyday life is filled with perpetual challenges embedded in our day-to-day activities that unquestionably challenge our human security. Many studies have shown that mobility issues are central to achieving sustainable communities and that people’s everyday mobility is a highly gendered experience due to differences in travel needs and behaviors resulting from societal norms. This study uses Photovoice to examine the daily experiences of thirty women who commute in Metro Manila. Adopting a human security lens, the study identifies the interconnected and compounded threats and challenges women face during their commutes. It also surveyed the different self-protection and empowerment mechanisms women adopt to make their commutes safer. The study found that women are more vulnerable than men with regard to their movement in public spaces. This is not only due to their physiological differences but also a result of the different roles they play in their spheres of engagement. Addressing these multidimensional insecurities of female commuters requires not just the development of quality transport infrastructure but also bringing about societal changes that remove the barriers to equitable access to public transportation for all.

Keywords: human security, empowerment, women’s mobility, women and transport, Metro Manila

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1. Introduction

Our pursuit of human security extends beyond the catastrophic events we experience, albeit our recognition of insecurities comes from the scenarios of war and conflict, torrential rain, seismic events, or deadly heat waves. Everyday life is filled with perpetual concerns embedded in our day-to-day activities, by which our interpretation of risks determines our daily decisions, the utilization of available resources, and the recognition of our capacities (Lemanski 2012; Vu 2018). Our engagement with our global reality continues as we address the concerns proximate to our everyday survival. It is within our immediate reality that we seek to be secure. The 1994 Human Development Report captures this accurately in this excerpt:

“For most people, a feeling of insecurity arises more from the worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Will they and their families have enough to eat? Will they lose their jobs? Will their streets and neighborhoods be safe from crime? Will they be tortured by a repressive state? Will they become a victim of violence because of their gender? Will their religion or ethnic origin target them for persecution?” (UNDP 1994, 22)

Our ability to move freely and safely is constantly challenged, not just during times of conflict or disaster but also in our everyday lives. Once we step out of our homes, we are potentially exposed to personal violence, harassment, property crime, environmental pollution, and the risks of traffic-related incidents. As the events of 2020 have shown, we are also at risk of contracting infectious diseases. All of these challenges are rooted in the complex developments taking place around us and compounded by vulnerabilities based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and physical ability, among other identities. These intersecting vulnerabilities can feed into distinctive encounters with discrimination, oppression, and further marginalization that, unfortunately, dictate the narratives of insecurities that many people experience every day.

Women’s everyday mobility experiences, especially those in the urban spaces, deserve further introspection. In 2021, 56.48% of the global population was reported to be living in urban areas. Among these urban dwellers, 46.18% account for the proportion of the female population aged 15 and older that is economically active.¹ While urban spaces are sites of political power and more considerable socio-economic opportunities, urban settings can be considered unsafe because of poorly planned and maintained infrastructure, high population density, and resource competition.

Despite women constituting half of the world’s population, daily mobility is a highly gendered experience (Chiang and Khan 2022; Goel et al. 2023; Joshi and Bailey 2023). Women’s mobility

¹ Data based on “Urban population vs. female labor force participation rate, 2021.” Source: “Our World in Data,” https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/urban-population-vs-female-labor-force-participation-rate?tab=table&country=~OWID_WRL, accessed, December 11, 2023.

patterns differ significantly from men's due to various factors such as employment patterns, life course (e.g., child-rearing and caregiving responsibilities), and societal norms (Gauvin et al. 2020; Goel et al. 2023; Rau and Scheiner 2020; Warner and Sharp 2016). These differences extend not only to the purpose and distance of travel but also to the selection of the mode of transportation. Women are more likely to take multiple short non-work trips and to travel with children and as elderly companions, making their travel experience more complex. Traditionally defined gender roles in households also make women more dependent on para-transit modes such as Ojek/habal-habal (taxi-motorcycle) in Jakarta and Manila, public utility jeepneys (PUJ), and minibusses in some cities in the Philippines, or Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Jakarta.

The challenges to people's mobility extend beyond the confines of public transport vehicles. The United Nations, in its 2022 Gender Snapshot, reported that half of the women surveyed feel unsafe walking alone at night in urban areas (UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2022). Moreover, Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris (2022) reported on students' experiences of harassment and violence in transit environments, which they regarded as omnipresent but underreported. This study, conducted in 18 cities across six continents, also found that females were disproportionately affected. Women's mobility patterns expose them to diverse insecurities, some of which are gender-specific. These challenges, in combination with poor-quality urban infrastructure, exacerbate women's exposure to insecure and unsafe travel conditions. Despite global initiatives to ensure safe and free movement for women (across the age spectrum) (i.e., International Transport Forum 2018), there are still complex and interconnected issues related to women's urban mobility.

Rapid urbanization and population growth define most of Asia's modern cities, particularly those in Southeast Asia; this highlights the importance of looking into urban mobility and human security. For one, transportation infrastructure varies across Asian cities, considering each location's unique context. Some cities have well-developed mass transportation systems, while others face infrastructure gaps that lead to layers of insecurity for the mobility of urban dwellers during normal times and in instances of disasters and crises. The emergence of "shared mobility" in some Asian cities can enhance human security in the transportation sector by allowing the urban dweller to access transportation services and reduce the threat in terms of environmental sustainability². However, the safety risks for female commuters remain a pertinent issue in urban mobility that must be addressed.

The Philippines is expected to have the second-largest increase in urban population in Southeast Asia by 2030, behind Indonesia (ASEAN 2022, 4). Like other city centers in the region, Metro

² See: Schechtner and Hanson, 2017.

Manila is the center of political and socio-economic activities. Consequently, the dynamic movement of people within and into the capital can have security repercussions for its commuters, especially women. In a 2022 study by the Oliver Wyman Forum at the University of California, Berkeley (2023), Metro Manila ranked lowest in the public transit index among the Southeast Asian cities included. It ranked 58 out of the 60 cities considered for Urban Mobility readiness. A 2014 study by the Thomson Reuters Foundation ranked it 10th among the cities with the most dangerous transport systems for women.

The authors of this paper intend to examine women's mobility and its intersection with age and transit use in the Southeast Asian context, focusing on Metro Manila in the Philippines. While there are state- and government-led protection initiatives to address the multi-faceted insecurities of female commuters, it is also necessary to identify the complementary efforts rooted in the individual exercise of their agency to move freely and safely. In understanding women's urban mobility through the lens of human security, it is necessary to situate women commuters at the core of the combined demand for protection strategies and empowerment opportunities to ensure their well-being and dignified movement in urban spaces. Thus, the paper examines the commuting experience of women in urban centers, addressing the question: *How do women in Metro Manila empower themselves in their daily commute despite the compounded insecurities accompanying their urban mobility?*

While there have been many studies on women and transport (Law 1999; Root, Schintler, and Button 2000; Fernando and Porter 2002; De Madariaga 2013), including some with specific case studies on the Philippines (Herrera 2007; Mateo-Babiano, Gaabucayan-Napalang, and Abuzo 2020), the discussion of women's empowerment is mostly contained in surveys and researcher-led interviews. By utilizing combined qualitative research instruments featuring Photovoice, the study intends to examine and present the experiences of women commuters through a participant-driven methodology symbolic of an empowering academic exercise on human security.

2. Women's Mobility Experience through a Human Security Lens

Literature on human security clearly states that there is no single definition to describe the term. Different institutions and scholars offer interpretations ranging from a narrow to a more comprehensive interpretation of security. Despite the elasticity contributing to the continuing debate on human security's strengths and weaknesses as a concept, its added value rests in shifting from state-based to individual-based security. The focus is now on the individual and examining security challenges by posing the questions: *Security of whom? Security from what? Security by what means?* All three questions are addressed by considering the individual as the fundamental basis of security, where people become "agents" who can actively engage in

defining potential security threats and who can participate in efforts to mitigate them (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007, 18).

As an approach, human security offers an analytical framework for addressing cross-cutting challenges for people's survival, livelihood, and dignity through the five fundamental principles of people-centeredness, comprehensive, context-specific, prevention-oriented, protection, and empowerment measures (OCHA 2009). The combined operational framework of protection and empowerment places the individual or community at the center of protection strategies set up by states, international agencies, NGOs, and private sector actors to shield people from the menaces, while empowerment strategies are adopted by the same organizations to enable people to develop their resilience to difficult conditions (CHS 2003, 10). It is an inherent function of human security to protect people from threats; empowerment encourages more active participation from individuals and communities alike. One matches the other to fill gaps and ensure people enjoy freedom and fulfillment.

This study on the empowerment of women commuters in relation to their urban mobility is based on the United Nation's 1994 Human Development Report's broader definition of human security with a joint focus on freedom from fear and freedom from want. Grounded in the realities of everyday movement, women, as a particular focus in this study, confront insecurities that challenge their lives and aspirations. Specific to the experiences of female commuters, the study raises the following individual-based security questions to advance the research:

- What are the features of women's commuting experience in urban spaces?
- What are the challenges in women's everyday commute?
- What projects/policies/infrastructures improve women's commuting experience? What do women commuters do/what can they can do to improve their commute?

The authors acknowledge that to address these questions, it is necessary to identify the cross-cutting challenges across human security dimensions. The seven human security dimensions identified, namely economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security, are critical for everyone to live a dignified life (see Table 1). Even in the absence of catastrophic events, we confront every day the need to be free from fear (conflict/violence) and from want (deprivation/poverty), which is evident in our daily movement within our shared public space. The table below presents the scope of the human security dimensions.

Table 1: Human Security Dimensions³

Dimensions	Description
Personal security	The threats include various forms of violence that require security from physical violence and various threats. People are increasingly threatened by sudden, unpredictable violence (e.g., threats from the state through physical torture inflicted by the military or police); threats from other states such as wars; threats from international or cross-border terrorism; threats from other groups of people such as ethnic or religious conflicts; threats from individuals or gangs against other individuals, or street violence; threats from hostage-taking; threats directed against women such as domestic violence, abuse, or rape; threats directed against children such as child abuse, neglected child labor, or child prostitution; and threats to one's self such as suicide or drug abuse.
Economic security	The main economic threat is poverty, which requires an assured basic income - either from productive and remunerative work (through employment in the public or private sector, wage employment, or self-employment) or from government-financed social safety nets.
Health security	This includes injury and disease, which requires access to healthcare and health services, including safe and affordable family planning. The threats to health security are greater for poor people in rural areas, particularly women and children, who are more exposed to disease.
Environmental security	The threats are pollution, environmental degradation, and resource depletion, which requires a healthy physical environment, security from the degradation of the local ecosystems, air and water pollution, deforestation, desertification, salinization, natural hazards (e.g., cyclones, earthquakes, floods, droughts, or landslides) and man-made disasters (e.g., due to road or nuclear accidents or poorly built slum buildings).
Community security	This refers to the threat to the integrity of cultural diversity and requires security from oppressive traditional practices, the harsh treatment of women, discrimination against ethnic or indigenous groups and refugees, group rebellions, and armed conflicts.
Food security	The threats include hunger and famine, which requires that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to basic food - that they should be entitled to food by growing it for themselves, buying it, or using the public food distribution system. Food availability is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for food security. People often go hungry because they cannot afford food, not because food is unavailable.
Political security	The threat here is political repression, which requires respect for human rights, protection from military dictatorships or abuse, political or state repression, the practice of torture, ill-treatment, or disappearance, and political detention and imprisonment.

In the course of the paper, the authors will further establish the interpretations of these human

³ Adapted from Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007) synthesizing the threats to human security in seven components as mentioned in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report.

security dimensions relevant to women’s commuting experience. By mapping women’s commuting needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities across these dimensions, the authors are able to gain a more comprehensive picture of the interrelated challenges and gaps in implementing protection and empowerment strategies for a safer and more dignified movement of women in public spaces.

Context-specificity is a fundamental element in a human security analysis, and thus, it is imperative to establish an understanding of the transport system in Metro Manila to ensure that the right questions are asked, and the appropriate responses and solutions are determined and recommended. Further details are contained in the next section.

3. An Overview of the Metro Manila Public Transport

The National Capital Region (NCR), also known as Metropolitan Manila (or “Metro Manila”), is located in the middle of the island of Luzon, the Philippines. Metro Manila is the economic, political, and educational center of the Philippines. It has the country’s largest population density and second largest population among all regions. As of 2023, it has a population of 13.48 million, comprising 12.4% of the country’s total population. Metro Manila comprises 17 Local Government Units (LGUs): 16 cities and one municipality, making up 1,705 barangays.⁴

As of 2020, Metro Manila contributed 32.3% of the Gross Domestic Product of the Philippines, the highest among all regions. Centers of economic, cultural, educational, and leisure activities are spread throughout the several urban and peri-urban centers



Figure 1 : Urban and peri-urban centers in Metro Manila
Source : Metro Manila Green Print 2030

shown in Figure 1. These centers are partially connected by four major railway lines and a network of buses, jeepneys, and other transportation modes.

⁴ A barangay is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines.

Urbanization in Metro Manila has increased uncontrollably over the years, with the growth spilling over into the neighboring provinces of Bulacan, Rizal, Laguna, and Cavite (BLRC). Hence, the term Greater Capital Region (GCR) or NCR plus, which includes Metro Manila and the BLRC area, is often used during planning activities.

Most of the public transport modes in the Philippines are road-based. Metro Manila is served by three metro lines and one sub-urban line, with future lines still under construction. Other public transportation modes used on major roads are buses, public utility jeepneys (Figure 2), and the Utility Vehicle (UV) Express (Figure 3). The private sector provides these transport modes with permission to operate from the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB), a national agency. Meanwhile, last-mile connectivity is provided by tricycles (Figure 4) that apply for permits from their respective local government offices. The private nature of public transport service providers has led to overlapping routes and unhealthy competition among transport operators. These have also posed challenges in requiring compliance with regulations. For a long time, public transport vehicles did not comply with environmental and safety regulations. In 2017, the Department of Transportation initiated the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (more details can be found in Sunio et al. 2019) that aims to introduce reforms to the regulations, business models, and environmental compliance for public transport vehicles, especially jeepneys. The program has so far converted several traditional jeepneys to “modern” jeepneys, but the full transformation of the sector has not yet been achieved.



Figure 2: Traditional (L) and modern (R) jeepney. (Source: Philippine News Agency)



Figure 3: UV Express (Source: Philippine Star)



Figure 4: Tricycle (Source: Philippine Star)

4. Photovoice: An Empowering Methodology

This qualitative study triangulates a literature review, expert interviews, and Photovoice as research instruments. The literature review will include academic journals and publications, institutional reports, and official documents covering the themes of gender mobility, human security, and empowerment. In addition, relevant experts on these themes will be consulted to substantiate the data gathering. The main research instrument for examining the empowerment of women commuters is Photovoice.

The novelty of this research stems from the use of Photovoice, a participatory photographic research method, as a critical instrument. Photovoice involves the study participants taking photographs that represent their individual perspectives and lived experiences. These pictures are then shared and discussed with other study participants to draw out connecting themes. Narratives or stories explaining the significance of the images can be attached to the photographs.

Through Photovoice, people are enabled (1) to record and reflect on their strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through discussions of photos, and (3) to reach policymakers (Wang and Burris 1997, 370). Handing the data collection over to the female commuters empowers them to create their own narrative in defining their human security, whilst addressing the individual-based questions of: *Security of whom? Security from what? Security by what mean?* Beyond understanding people's empowerment in relation to their everyday movement, this research utilizes an instrument that empowers the subjects of the study.

For this part of the study, an application for human research ethics approval was lodged and approved at the JICA Ogata Research Institute before data collection commenced.⁵ Below are the detailed steps used to conduct Photovoice for this study.

4.1 Recruitment of Participants

In order to understand the commuting experiences of women in Metro Manila and the accompanying human security issues attached to this activity, the researchers used a purposive sampling strategy to reach potential study participants. The study defined “women commuters” as individuals who identify themselves as female and use public transport modes at least three times a week along a regular route for work or study to or from any city in Metro Manila. The use of taxis and Transport Network Vehicle Service (TNVS), such as GrabCar, were not considered as public transport. Snowball sampling was used to locate the research participants who identified as women commuters and were 18 years or older. Participation in the study was voluntary, and an open call for participation was disseminated online on city-based social media groups (by district) and through the researchers and their extended networks for a period of two weeks. The study was limited to participants with a smartphone/mobile phone that could capture and document their daily commute. Those interested in participating were screened to confirm their age, commuting patterns, and availability. Thirty participants were invited to take part in the study. The proportion of participants was based on the age proportions of female Metro Manila residents published in JICA and DOTC (2015). Twelve participants (40%) were between 18 and 29 years old, 10 (33.33%) were between 30 and 44 years old, and 8 (26.66%) were 45 years old and above.

4.2 Photovoice Data Collection

The Photovoice activity participants were engaged in the study for approximately four to five

⁵ Ethics Approval was granted on July 10, 2023, lodged as JICA (DI) 202307100001.

weeks from August to October 2023. Once the participants confirmed their interest in participating in the study, they were requested to watch a five-minute onboarding video that provided an overview of the research and guidelines on taking photos safely and ethically. The participants began with the data collection only when the onboarding activity was completed.

An activity cycle refers to the period allotted to complete the data gathering for each Photovoice theme, which took about one week. Figure 5 illustrates the process in each activity cycle. At the start of each activity cycle, the study participants were tasked to capture a photo that best answered the researchers’ questions for the week (see Table 2). Each participant sent their photo entry directly to the researcher with a one- or two-line caption. The researcher then acknowledged receiving the photograph. Following submission of a photo, the researchers contacted the study participant for a short phone call or chat interview so they could further explain the photo submitted. The interviews typically lasted 10-15 minutes and were conducted in combined Filipino and English.

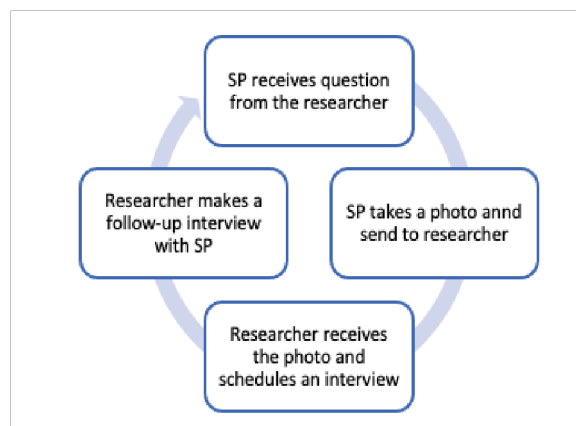


Figure 5: Activity Cycles

Table 2: Questions to be answered by participants via Photovoice

Activity 1	How would you describe your daily commute? What picture would best describe your commute?
Activity 2	What is a challenging part of your everyday commute?
Activity 3	What projects/policies/infrastructures improve your commute?
	What do you and your co-commuters do to improve your commute?

4.3 Post-Photovoice Group Discussion

After completing the third activity cycle, participants were invited to join a group discussion with the other Photovoice participants to collectively discuss their reflections about the research theme, recommendations, and overall Photovoice activity. To accommodate the varied

availability of the participants, a face-to-face (Figure 6) and online group discussion (Figure 7) session were organized.

The group discussion was designed to map out the (1) needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of women commuters across the seven human security dimensions introduced in the study and (2) the existing and aspired protection and empowerment strategies to improve women’s commuting experience. During the discussions, the photos taken by the respondents were pasted on the wall or shown via a slideshow (for the online case) as an aide memoire for participants and to showcase the photo entries submitted.



Figure 6: Face-to-face discussion with Photo Voice Participants

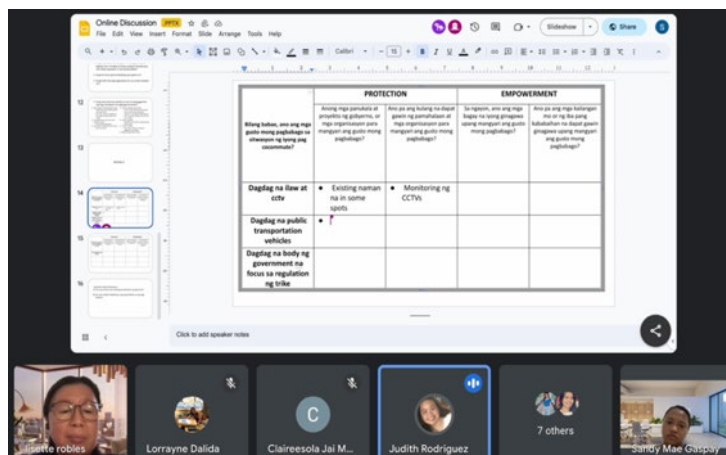


Figure 7: Online group discussion

4.4 Data Analysis

Data collected from the Photovoice activity include combined photographs with captions and transcripts of follow-up interviews. The authors employed thematic analysis of the captions and interviews guided by qualitative coding (Charmaz 2006, 42). The study used inductive and deductive thematic coding. The coding groups are based on the three sets of questions asked in

each cycle of the Photovoice activity. These questions answer the human security questions of: *Security of whom? Security from what? Security by what means?* Each set of questions used a set of inductive themes adopting the seven human security dimensions identified in section 3 of this paper.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Profile of Photovoice Participants

A summary of the profiles of the thirty participants is shown in Table 3. It can be observed that most of them travel using between two and five transport modes. Participants traveled to or from twelve out of the seventeen cities of Metro Manila.

Table 3: Profile of Participants

Code	Occupation	Commuting starting point	Commuting destination	Mode of public transportation
A: 18-29 years old				
A1	Student	Malabon	Malabon	Jeepney, Tricycle
A2	Student	Malabon	Malabon	Jeepney, Tricycle
A3	Student	Makati	Makati	Mini-Bus, Jeepney
A4	Employed	Manila	Manila	LRT
A5	Employed	Marikina	Muntinlupa	Bus, Jeepney
A6	Student	Quezon City	Quezon City	Jeepney, Tricycle
A7	Student	Quezon City	Pasay City	LRT, MRT, Jeepney
A8	Student	Quezon City	Quezon City	Bus
A9	Employed	Manila	Taguig	LRT, MRT, Bus
A10	Employed	Manila	Manila	Tricycle, Jeepney
A11	Student	Manila	Manila	Jeepney
A12	Employed	Quezon City	Pasig	Tricycle, Jeepney, Bus Carousel
B: 30-44 years old				
B1	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Jeepney, Tricycle
B2	Employed	Caloocan	Caloocan	LRT
B3	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Jeepney, Tricycle
B4	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Jeepney, Tricycle
B5	Employed	Manila	Manila	Jeepney, Tricycle, Bus, LRT, MRT
B6	Employed	Valenzuela	Valenzuela	Jeepney, Tricycle

B7	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Tricycle, Motorcycle
B8	Employed	Quezon City	Taguig	Train, Jeepney
B9	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Tricycle, Jeepney, MRT
B10	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	MRT
C: ≥ 45 years old				
C1	Employed	Makati	Quezon City	Jeepney, MRT
C2	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Tricycle, Jeepney, MRT, LRT, Bus
C3	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Tricycle, Jeepney
C4	Employed	Caloocan	Quezon City	Jeepney, FX, Tricycle
C5	Employed	Quezon City	Manila	UV Express, Jeepney
C6	Employed	Manila	San Juan	LRT, Jeepney
C7	Employed	Quezon City	Quezon City	Bus
C8	Employed	Bulacan	Quezon City	Bus, e-Jeepney, Jeepney

5.2 Cycle 1: Description of Participants' Daily Commute

The photographs submitted by the participants were categorized into positive, neutral, and negative statements based on the caption of their daily commute (see Table 4). This was done to gain insight into the participants' overall impression of their commuting experience. The results showed that most participants (66.7%) negatively perceived their daily commute.

Table 4: Participants' general impression of their daily commutes

Impression of the daily commute	Count	Percentage
Positive	5	16.7%
Neutral	2	6.7%
Negative	20	66.7%
Positive and Negative	3	10.0%

The following keywords were identified based on the follow-up interviews with the participants. The interviews revealed that participants associate their commuting experience with "overcrowding," "discomfort," and "stress," among other things. To visually represent these themes, a word cloud was created (refer to Figure 8). Furthermore, a few selected photos related to these themes are provided in Figure 9.

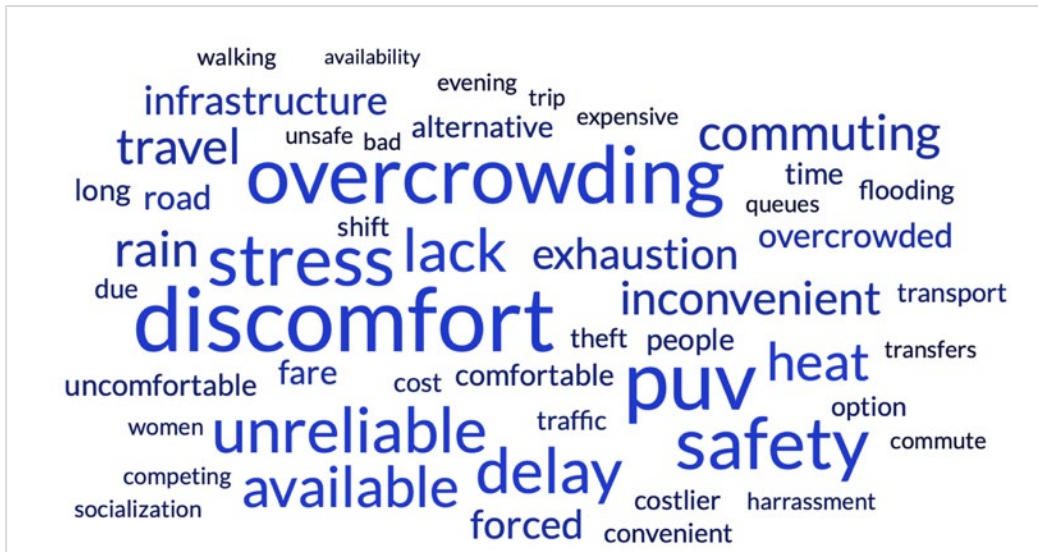


Figure 8: Prominent themes extracted from participant answers to Question 1: How would you describe your daily commute? What picture would best describe your commute?



Figure 9: Some photo submissions to describe the participants' commuting experience for Question 1

Study participants commonly reported negative experiences related to traffic congestion, uncomfortable conditions due to heat (or hot weather), long waits for public transport, overcrowding, and travel delays. These challenges often cause discomfort, stress, and exhaustion. Once their commuting condition was deemed unbearable, many participants had to switch to more expensive modes of transportation. One participant stated: *"Every day is a foot race. Every minute counts. You cannot be slow or walk like you are walking on the moon, or you will have to wait a long time for the next train."* Figure 10 visually represents this sentiment.

Some participants also mentioned that poor transport infrastructure quality, such as damaged road pavements and unsafe pedestrian walkways, cause difficulties and inconvenience for the participants. A participant from the age group 45 and above stated: *"I pass by this place twice a day. The pavement is a bit damaged. Because I am quite old, there are times at night when I would trip"* (see Figure 11). Inconvenient access to public transport was also mentioned, such as the need to climb multiple flights of stairs to get to the bus stations. As one participant mentioned: *"I really thought of taking this photo because after taking two rides to get here, I have to go up the footbridge because the bus stop is in the middle of the highway. I find myself saying, "I need to go up the stairs again" (see Figure 12).*



Figure 10: Participant's photo of her daily commute being a "foot race."



Figure 11: A most senior age group participant often passed through this area with damaged pavement and would trip.



Figure 12: A participant expressed exhaustion over the stairs that she needed to go up to reach the bus stop.

5.3 Cycle 2: Challenges in Daily Commutes

As the participants shared their commuting experiences in Cycle 1, they highlighted some of the challenges they faced while traveling to school or work. In Cycle 2, participants were explicitly asked about the difficulties they encountered in their daily lives. To systematically identify these challenges and the accompanying insecurities, the seven human security dimensions were used to describe them.

5.3.1 Personal Security

Participants identified personal security issues, including harassment, assault, and violence, as the main challenge in their commute. According to the responses of most participants, females are at a disadvantage compared to males when taking public transportation; therefore, it's crucial to remain alert. *“Everyone's telling me not to sleep during their commute. If you're commuting alone and you're female, you should be 100 times [more] conscious of your surroundings. So, I shouldn't sleep because females are helpless in times of danger. In terms of strength, we are weaker than men.”* The archaic stereotype that men are physically stronger can act as a deterrent for women to stand up for themselves. *“Men can defend themselves easily, but for women like me who are small and slim, it's difficult to argue,”* said one participant when discussing the challenge of confronting drivers about their inappropriate behavior.

Participants also provided stories of unsafe experiences including being coerced into paying fixed fares, often higher than the actual fare, by taxi drivers. Women also shared experiences of receiving unwanted looks from men while using public transportation and reports of attempted bag snatching in broad daylight, bags being slashed, and incidents of groping in public vehicles. There were also instances where vehicles were held up by armed men, posing a threat to the safety of all passengers and the driver. Most of the instances reported were in overcrowded areas or vehicles. In many of the responses, being a woman is linked to higher exposure to safety risks: *“I think women have more concerns than men regarding their commuting...When I would commute in a skirt, it would be difficult. I have to think of what I wear and be conscious of how others would look at me, unlike boys who can wear whatever they want because they have nothing to be careful about.”*

Commuting in the early morning or late at night was also viewed as unsafe. *“Although it is a relief not to have to travel during peak hours with most people, my biggest challenge is going home at midnight because public transport is not easily available, and I fear for my safety, especially*

because I am a woman traveling during those unsafe hours” (see Figure 13). One participant recounted her experience when her bus was held up: “Inside the bus on the way home, somebody declared a “hold up.” There were only three women, plus the driver, conductor, and two hold-uppers [sic]. The lights were turned off, and we were made to sit at the far end of the bus. They took all our bags. I fainted. When I regained consciousness, I thought it was over, but it wasn’t. We were still going around. From then on, I would always be wary of how many passengers remain in the vehicle, and whenever I feel unsafe, I would just get off in a safe place.”



Figure 13 : Participant saw her evening commute as both positive and negative. Positive because she gets to escape the peak hours but negative because traveling at night is unsafe.

Personal insecurities experienced by female passengers are derived not only from other passengers or non-passengers but also from public transport drivers. These drivers' unsafe behavior of speeding and reckless driving impacts their sense of security.

5.3.2 Economic Security

Commuting is an essential element of people’s economic activity. Participants identified cost-related concerns with their public transport commute. For many participants, transportation expenses make up a significant portion of their monthly budgets. The rising cost of fuel prices impacts the frequent fare hikes and has direct consequences on their budget. Another common theme that emerged was that participants must opt for more expensive modes of public transportation, such as taxis or a ride-hailing application when public transport is in short supply. While the absence of public transport vehicles is not exclusively the concern of women commuters, the accompanying perceived safety threats are the prevalent reasons for the participants to take a more costly mode of transport. According to one participant, “*There are*

times when you have a feeling that something bad will happen. Sometimes, when I have to go home late at night, and I have that feeling, I would take a tricycle even if my house is right around the corner. The tricycle fee is 25 pesos when you are riding alone. I would normally walk, but when I feel unsafe or when I read about some alarming cases on Facebook, I take the tricycle.”

Compared to the large number of commuters in the metro, the scarcity of public transport vehicles often leads to commuters arriving late to work or skipping the entire workday. As a result, they may experience salary deductions or reduced income. Additionally, the high volume of vehicles along the roads exacerbates this issue, making it even more difficult for commuters to get to work on time. Some participants also reported how their commute affects work productivity: *“I am no longer in the mood to work because I’ve become irritable. I leave the house feeling fresh, but I’m sweaty or wet from the rain when I arrive at my destination. That’s why, at times, I have pending work at the office.”* The stress experienced during their commutes was also reported to have led to missed opportunities. One participant reported missing a job interview because she got stuck in a crowded train.

5.3.3 Health Security

Threats to health security include injury and disease, which are usually more significant for poor people in rural areas. These identified threats were prevalent in the participants' commuting experiences, even in the metro. Injury may be incurred due to reckless driving and other road-related accidents. As for diseases, exposure to air pollution and the perceived state of uncleanliness of public transport vehicles and pedestrian infrastructure were often seen as posing health risks. *“There are filthy vehicles. At times, a cockroach would suddenly appear. The seatbelts are also filthy. I feel like I’d get sick in these conditions.” “I’m always conscious because the environment doesn’t feel clean. Especially the waiting area near Philcoa. When I go up the footbridge, I need to hold the handrail to maintain my balance, but it feels unhygienic when I touch it.”*

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the risks of contracting diseases from other people during their movement in public spaces. Even before the pandemic, some participants felt the need to wear masks and frequently sanitize their hands as a safety precaution. *“I caught a cold. Some passengers do not cover their mouths when they cough or sneeze. My first defense is to disinfect my hands and cover my nose.”*

Health insecurities were also attributed to the poor state of public transport infrastructure. In general, commuting is seen by many participants as the stressful and exhausting experience of their everyday lives. Overcrowding and poor temperature regulation in vehicles and stations would expose passengers to varying temperatures and conditions affecting their health. *“The mix of odors during the trip home is nauseating. The air conditioner sometimes does not work, barely works, or leaks, so it's very humid and smelly or freezing; that's why I would get a headache after getting off [the vehicle].”* *“I tested positive several times. I think it's because of the aircon, sweat, then heat. I would get sick at times.”*

Sexual and reproductive health concerns are more pronounced (if not exclusively) experienced by women commuters. For example, women's menstrual cycles and prenatal conditions are significantly impacted by the more challenging commuting environment and infrastructures. Overcrowded spaces and poorly built infrastructures add to the stress and physical discomfort that women experience.

5.3.4 Environmental Security

A common challenge identified by the participants was exposure to air and noise pollution. Smoke and fumes from old jeepneys, coupled with those from smoking drivers, were mentioned as sources of pollution. One participant detailed: *“There is a “No Smoking” sign inside the jeepney, but the driver himself was smoking. The smell of cigarettes really annoyed me. There was a time when I got off the jeepney even if I [had] already paid because I got fed up.”*

For the study participants, air pollution was considered an inevitable consequence of commuting, and thus, most of them have resorted to adopting coping strategies. *“I think the air pollution is already there, so I have no choice but to strengthen my immune system. The daily commute really has health risks that cannot be avoided. It's up to you how to mitigate those risks.”*

The climate-related concerns mentioned were mainly related to heat and rain. Many participants remarked that commuting becomes much more challenging during rainy days. Heavy rain would result in far fewer public transport vehicles, longer queues, and overcrowded vehicles and transport terminals. Occasional flooding has been identified as a challenge, even during days with light rain. *“The most challenging part of my everyday commute is the flood. Since it easily floods on Taft Avenue, going to and from school is a hassle even under light rain because the flood level is high and smells bad. Add[ed] to this are fast vehicles that would splash water on you so you'd*

get wet no matter how careful you are” (see Figure 14).” The discomfort in commuting brought about by flooding also leads to commuters incurring additional costs: *“My area is flood-prone, so I have to take a tricycle to reach the jeepney stop unaffected by the flood.”*



Figure 14: Participant's regular encounter with flooding

5.3.5 Community Security

With reference to community security as described in the 1994 HDR, the explicit threat relevant to this study is the threat collectively experienced by women during their commute. A common theme that emerged from the responses was safety considerations during their commute. Specific examples of safety concerns include fear of theft or potential sexual harassment, which would be experienced especially in overcrowded public transport vehicles and areas. Some participants alluded to being targeted for theft or harassment because they were women and perceived as incapable of fighting back. One participant felt uncomfortable as the bus conductor would give her inappropriate looks. The lack of sufficient lighting around the vicinity of transport transits and terminals was also a concern, especially for those who traveled late at night. Nevertheless, participants expressed a collective feeling of safety when surrounded by other women commuting. This is why the women-only train car is perceived as safe.

5.3.6 Food Security

The intersection between people’s commuting and food security was less salient than the other human security issues covered. Despite the absence of a direct impact on large-scale hunger and famine, related concerns pertain to intended or unintended increases in transport costs. One participant described how long queues or extended commuting time due to traffic can result in

additional food-related expenses. As a result, they needed nourishment during their long commutes, especially when returning home. Another perspective is that the daily budget covers food and commuting expenses. Increasing the cost of commuting reduces the budget amount available for food and consumption. In essence, the impact on the food budget is not limited to the commuter but extends to the household's budget for food.

5.3.7 Political Security

No issues related to political repression were raised by the participants. For political security threats, we also borrow from Alguliyev et al. (2021), who state that social and political security is also a matter of realizing the principles of social justice in society, providing citizens with the minimum level of social welfare and high living standards. Taking quality public transport provision as a basic need, commuters' poor experiences can have deleterious effects on their living standards. Participants expressed discontent over the state of public transport services and poor implementation of policies. During the group discussion, participants complained that the government would implement programs without adequately disseminating information. They also noted the lack of police visibility in areas where they are needed. One participant expressed dissatisfaction with the government's execution of road projects: *"It [the road] took too long to get fixed. The road was under construction for one year. It makes one think about where government funds go. Some roads need repair but are not fixed. Those that appear okay are meanwhile being repaired."*

In this section, the authors summarize the multidimensional insecurities held by commuters during their daily travel, such as safety concerns and lack of accessibility. Against this backdrop, we now examine the availability of protection mechanisms and empowerment strategies that could help mitigate these issues and improve the overall experience of using public transport services.

5.4 Cycle 3: Commuting Protection and Empowerment

The third Photovoice cycle concentrated on identifying the protection measures, vis-a-vis projects, policies, and infrastructure the participants observed and experienced that improve their commute. This is complemented by the final question on the empowerment strategies they (individual or other women commuters) practice.

Regarding protection mechanisms, participants pointed out several aspects of the transport infrastructure that helped make their trips safer (see Figure 15). The most common answer was the train car dedicated to women, which made them feel more at ease, especially during congested times of the day. The presence of traffic enforcers, the availability of pedestrian overpasses, road repairs, and proper loading and unloading areas in the case of buses were also mentioned. Some participants also cited that government fare subsidies (i.e., free rides) during the pandemic had helped them. Although these measures are available, most of the time they are not sufficient to ensure a safer and more secure commuting experience.

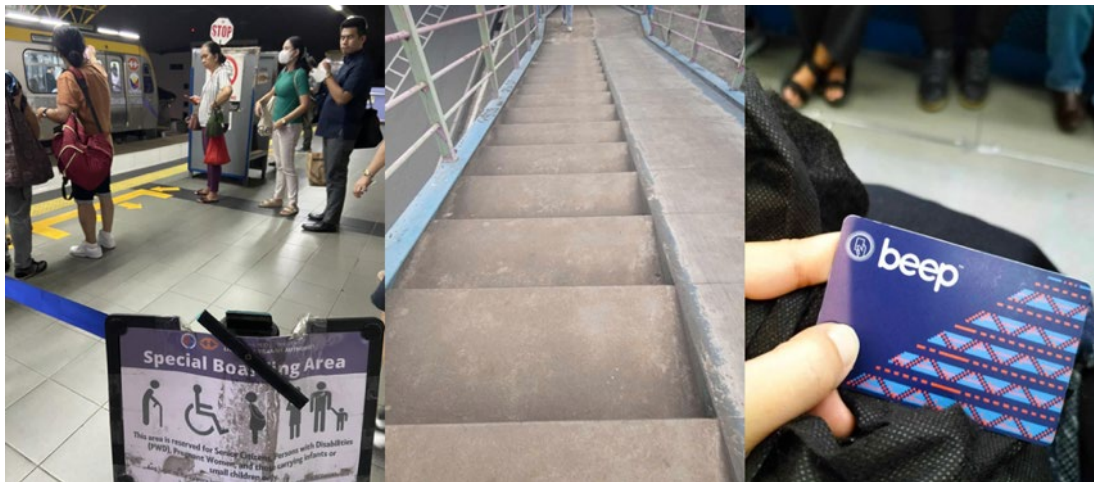


Figure 15: Participant's entries on aspects of transport infrastructure that help make their trips better.
(Left-right: Female-only train car, pedestrian overpass, automated fare collection card)

In the course of the study, many participants also pointed out protection measures that they wanted to be present. Some participants emphasized that improved infrastructure, such as working elevators and better connectivity, would enhance the convenience and comfort of commuters while increasing accessibility for different vulnerable groups, such as older people and people with disabilities. *“There are escalators and elevators that are sometimes not working. I hope they add more buses or bring back those that used to ply along EDSA. Right now, the point-to-point buses require a lot of walking. Anti-poor, they make us poor people walk long distances. The Carousel bus is also difficult for us seniors as the stairs run high and [are] sometimes slippery.”*

There were also answers pertaining to the aspired improvement of public transport service quality, such as increased capacity, improved reliability, and training for drivers and conductors, among others. Investments in cleaner technology, such as solar-powered vehicles and the promotion of cycling, were also mentioned.

Empowerment is context- and population-specific (Zimmerman 2000), interpreted by people differently, from varied perspectives and even time. As an approach, empowerment is a strategy built upon the capacities of the affected community(ies) to cope with the identified threats and to strengthen their resilience and ability to act on their own behalf and on behalf of others (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2009, 18). Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland's analytical framing of empowerment gave a similar interpretation, situating it between people's capacity to act and make free choices (agency) and the institutions that govern and compel their actions (structure). This implies that people's agency is not equivalent to being empowered; instead, this agency is negotiated with the specific institutional contexts that may limit or influence the transformation of their agency into action (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006b; Luttrell and Quiroz 2009). Thus, empowerment is not limited to what women can do, but they must be provided with the space and opportunity to exercise their agency to undertake a secure and dignified commute. In the case of women commuters, the empowerment mechanisms derived were only based on individual measures adopted by the participants. Being alert or being wary of one's surroundings was often pointed out by participants as something that they often did during their commutes. Many of them also brought their own tools or means for self-protection, such as a pocketknife, pepper spray, a whistle, or a flashlight. The participants protected themselves from health risks by taking vitamins, wearing facemasks, and using hand sanitizers.

Another way that women commuters empowered themselves was to avoid unsafe situations. Many opted to leave their homes early in the morning or go home much later at night to avoid the peak commuting hours. Many also mentioned not wearing clothes or jewelry that would attract potential wrongdoers. Some participants also habitually cut their trips short and transferred to another vehicle when they felt unsafe.

The participants also indicated strategies for making their commutes more convenient to save time or to make their trips easier. Some mentioned breaking down cash into smaller bills to avoid the hassle of collecting change or asking for the driver/conductor to return their change. Others also befriended the drivers and *barkers*⁶ so they could be given reserved seats. The use of electronic wallets and automated fare cards were also identified as ways in which they are able to make their trips more convenient.

⁶ "Barker" is a local term for individuals who stay in transport terminals in the Philippines loudly calling out vehicle routes and destinations, attracting passengers.

In pushing for policy measures to benefit women, forming women's groups was identified as a potential solution. This line captures how collective participation of women can advance their empowerment: *“If women band together and form a network, the voices of women in terms of commuting would be easily heard. There would be a space to discuss common experiences and formulate initiatives and programs appropriate for the needs of women.”*

6. Discussions

Men and women commuters have different movement patterns and thus confront varying insecurities and risks related to their public commute. A gender and development expert explained how the transportation patterns of women and men differ. Men tend to move more directly from point A (home) to B (workplace). Women travel shorter distances because of their responsibilities for taking the children to school, going to the office, stopping by the grocery store, and doing other errands before reaching their homes. Among the different commuting patterns, women often face more vulnerability than men, not just because of their physiological differences but also because of the roles they play in their spheres of engagement (family, community, and city).

The findings in Activity 2 confirmed the multidimensional challenges faced by women commuters. Regarding safety, women are vulnerable because of poor infrastructure. Women are also prone to harassment, especially on poorly lit streets and highly crowded places. It is important to note that women's movement in the public space is not limited to a single activity. Women take public transportation more frequently than men, as they also have to take other trips related to their care function, like caring for children and elderly relatives and other tasks beyond commuting for economic opportunities. Women traveling with children (except for traveling as a whole family) or with goods (i.e., groceries or merchandise) are also exposed to many difficulties.

The participants were requested to state their challenges during their respective commutes, and the responses were coded following the seven human security dimensions. The answers revealed the interconnectedness of the seven human security dimensions and the multidimensionality of women's commuting experiences, centered on the poor quality of public transportation infrastructure and services. For instance, personal security risks faced by the respondents, such as theft, sexual harassment, and violence, occur as a result of overcrowding as well as a lack of sufficient protection measures during periods of low passenger demand. Exposure to environmental hazards such as the warming climate or flooding leads to discomfort, stress, and

even sickness that affects passenger health. The avoidance of risks associated with public transport leads to women incurring additional costs as they decide to shift to a more expensive but safer transport mode, thereby threatening their household budget allotted for food and other necessities. Delays due to congestion or difficulty getting a ride also led to lower incomes, loss of productivity, and missed opportunities, threatening their economic security. Throughout the Photovoice exercise, the respondents believed that women are more vulnerable to safety threats compared to men as they are perceived as physically weaker or less assertive. Moreover, social norms also limit the options and mobility of women. For example, many people still think that women should avoid wearing skirts when they commute or that riding a bicycle or motorcycle is for men.

Commuting insecurities spill over to other security dimensions. For example, commuting affects women's food security, as budget allocation for food is impacted by the increase in fare and other commuting-related expenses. Also, the absence of more women in public spaces between transport terminals can cause community safety concerns for female commuters. One resource person shared how the problem of long hours and challenging commutes for women cascade into other societal issues that can affect the family, health, and personal savings.

The government has put in place some protection strategies to improve conditions for female commuters, but these are limited and not applicable to all modes of transport. Women-only cars, for example, are only implemented in trains. The respondents have adopted self-protection and empower strategies, albeit on a personal level, focused mainly on avoiding unsafe circumstances. They have also resorted to creative coping strategies such as befriending the drivers to get seat reservations or pretending to be pregnant in order to avail themselves of priority seating.

Rail-based and road-based transport in Metro Manila have different mechanisms to protect women and other vulnerable groups. There are train carriages that are allotted exclusively for women commuters and vulnerable groups (the elderly, persons with children, pregnant women, and persons with disabilities). Together with trains, road-based transport such as jeepneys and buses actively promote the "Safe Spaces Act (RA 1131)". This law covers all forms of gender-based sexual harassment (GBSH) committed in public spaces, educational or training institutions, workplaces, and online spaces, including public transport. While these measures are good on paper, women and other vulnerable groups are constrained from fully owning their commuting experience.

Study participants and resource persons interviewed for the study highlighted various ways women cope with commuting challenges and find ways to be empowered in their daily travel. The coping strategies identified range from their creative and practical approaches to avoiding harassment in public transport and ensuring a more comfortable commute to reach their destination. Additionally, utilizing reporting mechanisms is an example of addressing their safety-related insecurities. This is viewed as empowerment by asserting and questioning irregularities and knowing their rights as commuters.

7. Conclusions

The study elicited the experiences of thirty female commuters in Metro Manila by using Photovoice. Through this visual research methodology, the participants were able to document, reflect on and raise issues using photos supplemented by telephone interviews. The female respondents came from different backgrounds and varying age categories and had different travel patterns. Most of them described their daily commutes in a negative light, indicating the difficulties they normally face. Common keywords encountered were related to overcrowding, discomfort, unreliability, and stress, affirming their commuting experience is filled with compounded insecurities. Through this Photovoice exercise, participants were empowered to capture their commuting narratives, identify their interconnected challenges, and reflect on means to address the issues and be resilient.

The study collected the experiences and challenges of women commuters in Metro Manila using a human security lens. Most of the obstacles identified were related to the poor quality of public transport services and infrastructure that exacerbate human security issues for women commuters and expose them to unnecessary vulnerabilities. Although these are not exclusively experienced by a singular sector of the commuting population, women are more vulnerable than men with regard to their movement in public spaces. This is not only due to their physiological differences but also a result of the different roles they play in their spheres of engagement – within their family, community, and society.

The shared commuting experience of women drives a more collective call for action for a more gender-responsive transportation system. For example, installing breastfeeding corners, creating VAW (Violence Against Women) desks, and installing diaper changing stations in restrooms can promote better commutes for women in rail-based transport. Addressing the challenges of women

commuters requires women-inclusive policies and programs and must ensure the active participation of women and men in the discussion on public transportation. Capacity training and orientations should not be limited to female commuters but should include other actors engaged in the transportation sector (i.e., drivers, train staff, and other commuters). One resource person emphasized that *“it is essential to have men allies to support women commuters. Having safer streets for women is an indicator of safety.”* Women commuters and other stakeholders are significant in the discussion of issues and solutions, and men need to acknowledge and understand women’s rights when it comes to mobility.

Commuting is often seen as a mundane and tedious task that people may not usually think of as a matter of security concern beyond ensuring one’s immediate safety. However, the reality is that multiple and cascading insecurities can arise during routine movement in public spaces, thereby needing an examination through a human security lens. The study revealed the multilayered and cascading insecurities women commuters face, highlighting the need for improved protection measures and meaningful empowerment strategies for vulnerable and marginalized groups during their daily commute. Beyond the efforts to implement adequate safety measures is the need to provide women with the necessary resources and support to ensure a secure and comfortable movement in public spaces suited to their needs and contexts. Women in public transport continue to have limited representation, and very few women are in a position to make meaningful changes to transportation. While the issues are recognized, the challenge is the full implementation of such ideal solutions. The transport industry and governance in the Philippines (and perhaps most parts of the world) are still male-dominated. Public planners often unintentionally leave out the perspectives of women and other vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, children, pregnant women, and older people), overlooking the diversified commuting needs. Societal transport-related changes are required, especially in how we think about women and other sectors of society. It is important to underscore that a human security approach to understanding the commuting experience of women in urban areas is not about prioritizing the needs of one sector over the other; it is about removing the barriers to equitable access to public transportation for all. Only by considering diverse groups’ experiences, needs, and capacities can the progress in public commuting be optimized.

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Abstract (in Japanese)

要 約

人間の安全保障というと、災害などの大惨事を連想しがちである。しかし私たちの日常生活にも、日々の暮らしに埋め込まれた絶え間ない懸念が満ちあふれ、私たちの人間の安全保障を脅かしている。多くの研究が、移動しやすさ（モビリティ）の問題は持続可能な地域社会を実現するための中心的な課題であること、また社会規範に起因する行動の違いにより、人は日常生活の中で移動する際にも、ジェンダーに基づき異なる経験をしていることを示している。本研究では、マニラ首都圏に通勤する30人の女性の日常的な経験を、フォトボイスという手法を用いて検証する。人間の安全保障の視点を取り入れ、女性が通勤中に直面する困難は、いくつもの課題が作用し合って複合化していることを明らかにした。また、より安全に通勤するために、女性が採り入れている様々な自己防衛やエンパワメントの仕組みについても調査した。その結果、調査に協力した女性は公共交通機関やそれを支えるインフラの質の低さゆえ、多面的な人間の安全保障上の課題に直面していることがわかった。

キーワード：人間の安全保障、エンパワメント、女性の移動しやすさ、女性と交通、マニラ首都圏