

The Role of Women in the Transportation Sector. Opportunities and Challenges

Ester Litovsky (interviewer)

Director of Strategic Planning
of Emova Movilidad S.A. y
President of the International
Association of Public
Transport Latin America
(UITP).

elitovsky@emova.com.ar

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Abstract

RSO magazine interviewed Ester Litovsky to address the issue of women in the transportation industry. In this work, Litovsky analyzes issues ranging from the labor market to regulations on the subject and the most relevant studies and research. The interview also focuses on the interviewee's work experience in a historically masculinized environment.

Why did you choose to enter the world of transportation?

When I was studying Economics at the University of Buenos Aires, I knew that it was the social aspect of economics that fascinated me. My interest focused on finding ways to improve people's quality of life and create a more prosperous country. During the last semester of my degree, I came across an announcement calling for soon-to-be graduates to apply for a Postgraduate Program in Transportation Planning and Economics, offered by the World Bank. It was the first time something like this was being done in Argentina. The proposal seemed very interesting to me, so I applied and was selected. There were twenty professionals, both engineers and economists, with an interesting gender balance, which was quite pioneering for that time, considering it was 1979. The postgraduate program lasted a year and a half, and that's where my passion for transportation was born.

That's how I began working at the National Secretariat for Transportation. At that time, I worked in the Planning area, which was basically what I enjoyed the most. Later, I started working at Subterráneos de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Underground).

When both the underground and the railways were privatized, I continued working in transportation for one of the private companies that won a bid. In fact, what interested me was continuing to work for the underground, and I was approached by Metrovías, the company that had won the bid for the underground and the Urquiza line. I currently still work there, which has been the concessionaire of the Urquiza Railway since January 1994, and was the operator of the underground from that same date until November 2021, and I also work at Emova, the underground concessionaire since December 2021.

In both companies, it was understood that for a good management, it was very important to know what was happening around the world. For that reason, from the beginning, we became part of the Latin American Association of Metros and Undergrounds (ALAMYS), the International Association of Public Transport (UITP), and the Community of Metros (COMET), which is a group that brings together 45 metro systems worldwide, especially the most important ones. It is coordinated by the Transport School of Imperial College London, which focuses particularly on benchmarking and identifying best practices in all areas related to metro operation and maintenance.

I have always been very active in the three associations. For the past twenty years, I have coordinated the ALAMYS Planning Committee, and in 2021, I was honored with the appointment as President of UITP Latin America, and as such, I serve as Vice President of UITP International. In COMET, I

am a member of the Steering Committee; out of the 45 metros, four of us are part of the Committee, and I was appointed to this role.

There is often talk of the 'sticky floor' and the 'glass ceiling' as a way to explain the barriers women face in accessing and sustaining themselves in the workplace. With your extensive career in this sector, how have you seen the issue of women's participation around you? For example, you mentioned that there are four people on the Steering Committee, how many of them are women?

I am the only woman on the Steering Committee. The truth is that, for many years, I have experienced the feeling of being the only woman among a group of men. However, that is clearly changing in recent years.

Personally, I have to admit that I never felt the glass ceiling, as it is often mentioned. It is probably due to the passion I always had, the feeling that what I was doing in my work was the best I could do, that it was truly my path. Honestly, my growth has always been quite smooth.

"We know that more than half of the people who use public transportation are women. Therefore, we need to know their needs and desires and, as far as possible, satisfy them."



What is the concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion that has guided your steps in this field?

Well, first of all, I want to say that inclusion is not just about gender; it also includes religion, ethnicity, political inclinations, and many other aspects. We know that more than half of the people who use public transportation are women. Therefore, it is necessary to understand their needs, their desires, and, as much as possible, meet them. The perspective of women undoubtedly provides a fundamental contribution to this. Their inclusion at all levels of the company is essential, and it is crucial to listen to them.

During the last UITP meeting, we also discussed how important it is, in countries with high immigration rates, for an immigrant using public transportation to notice that the driver is from the same background. This is significant both for the passenger and the company, as it is important to listen to what that driver, who is also an immigrant, has to say. Many countries have a large influx of immigrants, and they need to understand that the needs and cultures of those populations may be different from those of the environment they are in. Therefore, it is not just a matter of gender; it goes much further.

There is another fundamental point to highlight regarding the terms diversity and inclusion. They are often considered synonyms or interchangeable, but this is not the case. There is a phrase that has been repeated a lot lately: 'Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.'

Diversity means bringing those people into our companies. But where exactly are they within the company? Are they truly being listened to? When they have something to say, is it taken into consideration? If the answer is yes, then that is inclusion.

So, diversity is the first step and it is essential. But once we incorporate women, immigrants, people of different races and backgrounds, etc., what role do we give them? No matter what position they hold, whether they work as ticket sellers or as heads of departments, how much attention do we give to what that person has to say?

To conclude, diversity is very important, but inclusion is even more substantial: that we truly listen to those people, that what they tell us is important to us, and that we try to incorporate it into the service we are providing.

"Companies that have incorporated women in all positions, from the highest to the lowest, have better results. Thus, it is clear that women's sensitivity and listening skills bring concrete benefits to companies."



We come from a culture of many years that has somehow affected us, but fortunately, there is now an awareness that this is an issue we need to reverse. Awareness does exist today. In some countries, under certain circumstances, it is required to have a specific percentage of women, and regardless of how, it must be achieved. However, it's not just about that, because in such cases, women are simply added. In other words, 'they were invited to the party, but it doesn't mean they'll be asked to dance.'

Regarding this concept, in general terms, do you notice any changes in the job market in the transportation sector?

Yes, a tremendous change! There has been a growing awareness of the importance of including women in this field.



Photo: courtesy of Trenes Argentinos.

Moreover, companies that have incorporated women in all positions, from the highest to the lowest, have better results. It is evident that female sensitivity and their ability to listen bring tangible benefits to companies. Additionally, there is a noticeable improvement in the behavior of employees who work alongside women, exhibiting more polite attitudes.

When I started working in the underground, there were almost no women, neither in managerial positions nor in operational roles. There were no female drivers or conductors, and no one would have thought that women could occupy those positions.

Moreover, the only comments about the inclusion of women were 'they miss work a lot,' 'they get pregnant,' 'they have children, and the children get sick.' That paradigm has changed today. Now, we can see all the positive aspects of including women, which also influence decision-making.

Currently, at Emova, the underground concessionaire, there are 26% female drivers, 35% female conductors, and 44% female ticket sellers. Overall, women make up 21% of the company's workforce, a percentage similar to that found in the most advanced public transportation companies worldwide in terms of gender.

In the Urquiza Railway, it is a bit more difficult; the percentage of women is 13%.

We must keep in mind that more than half of public transportation users worldwide are women. Therefore, having female staff within our companies who can provide their perspective on femininity, the empathy of femininity, and understand the specific needs of women is crucial.

This was not really seen a few years ago. Now it is visible.

What initiatives would you highlight in this area over the past few years, both nationally and internationally, in the transportation sector?

At UITP, a lot of effort is made to promote inclusion in transportation, both among its members, who number over 1,900, and within the association itself, to ensure a balanced number of men and women at all levels.

Additionally, there is a permanent competition where projects on various topics are submitted. One of these topics is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Two projects were presented this year that I would love to share. I will mention two from Latin America as examples, which I find very interesting.

One of them relates to bus drivers. It is a project presented by the city of Mérida, in the State of Yucatán, Mexico.

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The main complaint from users was the attitude of the public transportation drivers. As a solution, it was proposed to conduct various sensitivity training courses for the drivers.

The courses aimed to help drivers empathize with passengers. As part of the workshop, drivers are sit in wheelchairs and move around on the buses. They are blindfolded and have to walk as if they were blind, or their legs are bound and have to walk like an elderly person who needs to use public transportation. Additionally, they have to board and disembark from the buses under these conditions. All of this is done on very busy avenues, where they are observed by the public.

I really thought it was a fantastic idea because, typically, it's not easy for drivers to put themselves in the shoes of the passengers. It's probably easier for a female driver, as it's common for her to travel with her children or take her parents to receive medical care, for example.

There is another project I would also like to mention: the Technical and Safety Apprenticeship Program for Women, proposed by the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The requirement for applying to these positions was to be a woman. Men were not accepted. Some might say this is discriminatory, but it is not, because the program aims to include women in technical fields that are predominantly occupied by men. It provides them with the opportunity to train and work as industrial electricians. The apprentices undergo twelve months of professional training and ten months of on-the-job training, with the possibility of developing a career within the company.



It was the company's first apprenticeship program aimed exclusively at women, with no prior work experience required. There were over 2,500 applications from young women between the ages of 18 and 21. Later, something similar was done within the same company for the safety department.

On another note, I also find it very interesting to share the work carried out in 2022 by the European Commission, which was adopted by UITP, to promote campaigns for female leadership. The concept of the campaign is: 'You can't aspire to be what you can't see.'

The study focused on the transportation sector, recognizing that it is one of the areas of the economy where the inclusion of women in the workforce is more challenging. The study concluded that one of the main reasons for the gender imbalance in the transportation sector is the persistence of strong gender stereotypes. Gender perceptions about certain jobs and careers develop at an early age (5-7 years). These perceptions influence the aspirations of boys and girls and their decisions to pursue certain careers. The European Commission developed toolkits to work with children and their families in schools, aiming to overcome the bias that there are jobs for men that are not suitable for women. A second toolkit was developed for secondary school students when they must decide what careers they will pursue in the future.

Among those initiatives, do you know of any that show the relationship between diversity and accidents or incidents across different modes of transportation?

There are numerous road safety studies from Argentina and around the world that highlight the fact that women tend to drive more cautiously. They drive at lower speeds, respect traffic signals more, and, as a result, have significantly fewer accidents in general, and far fewer serious accidents as drivers. There are many studies and statistics on this. There are studies from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the European Commission, road safety reports from Argentina, etc.

What I haven't seen, and I am not sure they exist, is the same analysis focused exclusively on the different modes of public transportation. It would be interesting to start working on that.

Finally, what are the main challenges that lie ahead?

One of the main challenges ahead is to eliminate the remaining restrictions for certain highly technical positions.

We experience this firsthand. We visit technical schools and engineering schools, and we find it very difficult to find women. In the maintenance area, we have less than 1% women! We have a strong interest in incorporating female staff. The difficulty lies in the fact that women studying in technical schools and engineering schools are few, and those who are there are generally not very inclined to work in a sector like transportation, which requires staff to work 24 hours a day, whether driving vehicles or performing maintenance tasks, which often occur at night. Therefore, it is not easy for women to work in these roles.

On the other hand, and above all, it is necessary to break the stereotype that there are jobs that are only for one gender and not the other. Working in the transportation sector helps contribute to a better quality of life for citizens, and makes cities and countries more productive, sustainable, and have greater growth. This is a task for both men and women, and the more balanced it is, the better the results will be. It is an exciting mission worth getting involved in.

