

## 1. Research notes



# The Flone Initiative tackles sexual harassment and violence against women in Nairobi

Research notes

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In Nairobi, Kenya, an association is mobilising to tackle sexual harassment against women in matatus, the thousands of informal minibuses that provide public transport in the city. Their goal : to integrate the issue of gender inequality into transport policies and the training of professionals in the sector, in order to remove obstacles to mobility and the emancipation of women. How successful has it been?

Research participants

- Mobile Lives Forum

## The project's goal

The Flone Initiative is a Kenyan association that aims to tackle sexual harassment and violence against women on matatus - the thousands of informal minibuses that provide public transport in Nairobi. The goal of the study is to document this concrete initiative through its politics, analytical tools, modes of action and operation.

## Key results

Created by five feminist students in 2011, the Flone Initiative started to develop and structure its activities from 2015, in the wake of a widespread protest against the violent assault of a young woman at a bus stop. This case garnered national media attention and put the problem of gender-based and sexual violence on the agenda in public debate. Today, the association has six employees and a budget of \$500,000 per year.

## **The Flone Initiative's actions**

### **Documenting the specific situation of women to set up targeted actions**

The organization promotes the concept of "gender mainstreaming" (equality between men and women). In this approach all public policies should take into account the specific situations of women and men before actions are taken to implement them. This method must also be followed when assessing public policies, to understand their gender-specific effects. As such, in the case of transport in Nairobi, this means understanding the determinants of women's transport needs, which are conditioned by two main factors: one the one hand social norms and gender roles, which impose particular travel demands (taking care of children and the elderly for example); and sexist and sexual assaults on the other, which means employing avoidance strategies and experiencing fears that then limit certain movements. The Flone Initiative's first job is therefore to document these practices and occurrences, quantitatively and qualitatively, through studies (based on interviews, questionnaires, etc.) and online crowdmapping. This has led to publications that are now a reference for public authorities: for example, a report on gender-based and sexual assaults revealed that 88% of matatus users had already witnessed such behavior.

### **Training and raising awareness to transform representations and behaviors**

The second component of the Flone Initiative's work is to develop training and awareness-raising programs. These programs are first of all aimed at matatus operators (cooperative managers, drivers and their assistants), in order to raise awareness about violence against women and train them to prevent and tackle such incidents. Other programs are intended for women who want to work in the matatus sector. As it remains a male-dominated industry with strong gender stereotypes, it is very difficult for women to work there, and as a result, they are doubly penalized: on the one hand they are deprived of an economic opportunity in a growing sector, and on the other, the lack of women among matatus operators reinforces the sense of impunity with regards to sexual harassment and violence directed towards female passengers.

## **The organization's impact**

While the data may be too recent to measure any concrete impact on the frequency of instances of sexual violence, several observations can nevertheless be made concerning the Flone Initiative's actions:

- The number of projects developed locally is significant and the number of participants keeps growing: the program for matatus operators has already trained over 700 people and the program to support women in the profession, over 150.
- The Flone Initiative has become a leading authority on gender-based and sexual violence in Kenya: its many reports and studies have helped raise awareness about the issue and are considered a legitimate source of data to inform public policies.
- The organization's communication has a national and international scope: the support of NGOs and international organizations, as well as the success of the annual "Women in Transport" conference, demonstrate the Flone Initiative's ability to make its demands heard beyond Kenyan borders.

## **The conditions for success**

The Flone Initiative has experienced rapid growth thanks to funding from international organizations: UN Habitat, FEMNET (the pan-African organization for the promotion of women's development), among others. But it is also through its strong local and social presence that the organization manages to achieve results: by working closely with those concerned (matatus workers and women), it offers adapted tools and solutions for the issues within the sector. Moreover, according to founder and director

Naomi Mwaura, the other pillar of the organization's success is its educational approach: in an environment that remains hostile to women's rights, the initiative's training methods aim to defuse conflicts and instead generate empathy among men for the female matatus clients.

## **Levers of development**

- Increase the budget so as to allow the scheme to operate on a national scale: one of Naomi Mwaura's priorities is to increase funding and donations for the organization. These resources will allow the organization to hire new employees to reinforce its activities and deploy them on a national scale (whereas today, they are mainly concentrated in Nairobi).
- Train more matatus operators: with the transport sector growing, the Flone Initiative must train more operators each year. However, it has to contend with strong cultural resistance from men, and therefore it plans to develop specific actions intended for children, in order to transform gender stereotypes from an early age.
- Communicate more widely on the crowdmapping platform : the online mapping tool, developed by the Flone Initiative to track the most frequent places of gender-based and sexual assaults, is currently underused. In order to reach a critical mass of users and thus make it a powerful tool, its existence must be better publicized, especially among young people.

## **Download the full report**

To find out more about the Flone Initiative's history, work and achievements, download the report produced by the Mobile Lives Forum.

## The Flone Initiative: tackling sexual harassment and violence against women on public transport in Nairobi

### Introduction



The Flone Initiative is a Kenyan association that aims to tackle sexual harassment in order to make Nairobi's collective transport network of *matatus*<sup>1</sup> safer and more welcoming for women, whether they are passengers or workers. To this end, it strives to raise awareness and disseminate information about gender-based and sexual violence and discrimination, supports women who wish to work in the *matatus*, and trains *matatus* operators on how to prevent and tackle such aggressions.

The association was created in 2011 by five university friends, but it has been developed and given a more formal structure following the #MyDressMyChoice<sup>2</sup> movement in 2015. This social media movement was launched in response to the assault of a young woman in public transport, and gave rise to widespread protests against sexual harassment and violence directed at women in Kenya, garnering media attention and putting this issue on the political agenda. The association is now composed of six employees and two volunteers, with an annual budget of \$500,000 thanks to the patronage of public and private organizations, as well as individual donations. To conduct its activities, the Flone Initiative partners with many local actors (associations, *matatus* cooperatives, etc.) to communicate and organize workshops, as well as with international actors to hold conferences and set up research projects. One of its flagship initiatives, a training and awareness program for male *matatus* operators, has trained over 700 people over five years. Another program called "Women in Transportation" - that aims to support women wishing to work in the transport sector - has seen its number of yearly participants increase from 12 in 2017 to 150 today.

Methodology: The description and analysis of this initiative is based on data and documents in English made available on the Flone Initiative website and on interviews with the organization's director, Naomi Mwaura.

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Associated Thematics :

### Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities
- Work

## Policies

- Civic Action
  - Reducing inequalities
  - Public transport
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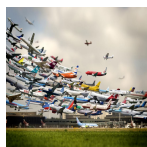
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