

## **Sexist Language against Female Passengers by Matatu Crew: A Case of the Kawangware-Nairobi Route 46**

**Wekesa Ameda**  
**St. Paul's University**

### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to analyze Sexist Language used by the Matatu crew against female passengers on the Kenyan public transport system popularly known as Matatu. Although several studies have been done on language and gender, little has been explored on the sexist language used by the Matatu crew. Sexism includes both genders in terms of discrimination, but in the real sense, women are always the most vulnerable to sexism. A language is a social tool, and a speaker may deliberately and consciously use language that reflects their attitude to their listener or reader in this case women folk. This study sought to analyze sexist language as a tool used by the matatu crew to women in Matatus plying route 46 Kawangware of Nairobi County. The study intended to achieve three objectives that focused on the words used by Matatu Crew and the response of the female gender on how it affects them psychologically and emotionally. This was achieved using Grice's theory of implicature (1975) and Speech Act Theory advanced by Austin (1962). Combining the two theories allowed the researcher to examine the implicature and indirect speech attacks to avoid misinterpretations. Speech act theory was undertaken in comprehension of public rules to produce meaningful assertion of sexist words used and why they are viewed as going against required ethical standards, in contrast Grice theory will handle the perlocutionary aspect of total speech act addressing the psychological effect of such words on the female gender. The result of the study will be used to sensitize people in general and the Matatu industry in particular to the current portrayal and its implications on female passengers in Matatus.*

**Key Words:** *Sexist Language; Gender Inequality; Matatu Culture; Public Transport; Verbal Harassment.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

This study focused on the sexist language used by the Matatu crew on Route 46 of Kawangware in Nairobi County. According to Paddison (2017), physical abuse and harassment of women around the world are preventing them from using public transport safely. Global Mobility Report (GMR) (2017, p. 24) indicated that transport promotes development and links people to goods, services, social and economic advancement opportunities. In addition, the mobility of women is greatly burdened by security issues. The attractiveness of public transport can decrease due to the inability of being utilized without the fear of victimization and lack of personal security either while walking to or from a transit facility or traveling on board.

Culture is a people's way of life, encompassing several aspects, with language being one such

important aspect. It brings out how people think and helps them connect. In Kenya and more so Nairobi County, transport is a major activity as people must move to and from their working places daily with Matatu being the main means of transport. In the transport sector, language is the major tool used in communication.

The report by World Bank-led partnership SuM4All (Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017), is the first major assessment of the global transport sector, and it established four areas in which the transport sector has failed they include accessibility, efficiency, green credentials, and safety of all forms of transport. A Reuters survey conducted worldwide involving 16 major cities showed that in Latin American cities, 6 out of 10 women encountered the highest physical harassment rates on transport systems. In a city like Bogota, it was reported as the most dangerous to the extent that women said they were scared to use transport after dark. According to Paddison, (2017) 64% of women in Mexico City are said to have been groped or physically harassed after boarding public transport. In Kenya, a survey done by the Women's Empowerment Link showed that more than 50 percent of the 381 interviewed women responded that they have encountered gender-based harm while using public transportation.

Some men use language to marginalize abuse, and demean women. Language is a social tool and a speaker may decide to deliberately and consciously use language that reflects their attitude towards listeners or readers in this case the womenfolk. Language could be used to marginalize women based on their gender, revealing that language is a medium of discrimination against the female gender. Kinyatti (2003) asserts that most of the slogans in Matatu use sexist language that is derogatory and abusive to women.

According to Manas (2011), language, communication and Ethnography are interlocked. Hymes introduced Ethnography of Communication which is the understanding of society and culture of an ethnic group. Manas (2011) provided an example of a Speaking model developed by Hymes in 1960, to comprehend the society and culture of an ethnic group. Dell Hymes constructed the acronym S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G, which represents setting and scene, participants, ends, acts sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. The Tenor involves the way the participants in the communication (sender and receiver) perceive one another, their relationship, and roles. The Mode, on the other hand, represents the role language plays in the interaction whether spoken or written, the particular genre for instance, a conversation.

Language is the basic unit of communication. Kenya has over forty languages; however, English and Kiswahili are the dominant discourses. English is the official language while Kiswahili is the national language. The majority of Matatu operators use English and Kiswahili sheng languages as their modes of communication. Matatu conductors use these two languages to communicate with passengers because most Kenyans understand the languages, as they are universally spoken. Fairlough (2001) states that language is a means of communication, therefore the kind of language an individual internalizes influences his or her perception of self and the environment. Language is used as an act of communication in a community, and as an utterance, it can only be understood properly by associating it with the context, state of participants, their knowledge, the topic, field, the environment, and other constraints of communication.

Scholars have studied language and gender as a tool used to abuse women Kinyatti (2003). Graffiti in Matatu that portrays sexist language that is biased against women Onchiri (2010), the impolite language used by Matatu conductors Goro (2014), and Gender issues on sexism encrypted word connotations and structure Githinji (2008). Though studies have been conducted on gender and language used in Matatus, little has been done on the sexist language used by the Matatu crew. Therefore, there is a need to explore the sexist language used by the crew. This current study will focus on the utterances used by the crew as sexist and insensitive; spoken discourses that help construct gender identity in the Matatu industry and to show how spoken language used by crew plays a role in perpetuating certain gender identities.

According to Rasmussen (2012), Matatus are minibusses that transport passengers from one point to another, and this started at the time of colonialism. During the time of colonialism, Matatus were illegal, but still, operators would provide their services to residents for three ten-cent coins 'mangotole ihatu, and that is how the name Matatu which means three in Kiswahili, came to being and gave the industry its present name, Mungai (2020). Mutongi (2006) argued that these types of vehicles are mostly found in low-income countries and can be utilized when there is a need for public transportation that the state is not able to provide and that is why the Matatu sector in Kenya is a private entity despite the state's ceaseless efforts to regulate it.

Matatu industry is an informal sector and Kenyans have embraced the use of matatus. The Matatu industry has played a major role in mobility hence, the residents of Nairobi have

become dependent on Matatus to transport them to and from various destinations. However, the perception of Nairobi residents has changed over time when Matatu operators increasingly engaged in unbecoming behavior of driving carelessly, playing loud music, over speeding, carelessly overtaking, and the use of rude and insensitive language to the commuters (Mbugua Wa Mungai 2013).

The World Health Organization (WHO) 2014 report states that many people moved from rural to urban centers to look for employment and as a result, the urban population increased causing the rise of informal settlement in urban centers and, hence, the high demand for public transport. The high population in Nairobi County has brought about the increase in demands for goods and services hence the necessity of public transport. Nairobi County, being the capital city of Kenya, has an estimated population of 4.397 million and roughly 80% of Nairobi residents at one time or another are forced to use public transport (Obure, 2017).

## **2.0 Literature Review**

According to Mutongi (2006), the President of the Republic of Kenya decided to remove all the regulations in the transport sector in 1973 since he saw it as significant to the livelihoods of citizens and allow the owners to participate in a liberalized market. According to Mungai (2020), the most affected included women, because of a culture that views women as weaker beings who cannot defend themselves.

In 1984, the entry barriers for the middle-class owners of matatus was intensified with minimal legislation, the annual regulative Matatu inspections made by the Traffic Amendment Act made the operations unaffordable since the vehicles had to be maintained making the cost not affordable to all middle-class entrepreneurs given the economic restrictions of liberalization (Mutongi 2006). Therefore, ownership of Matatu was monopolized to the extent that only the top of the social class elites could access this market.

The misogyny observed in the Matatu business is a result of the traditional gender role viewed by people in the urban spaces (Sommers 2010). Despite the massive rural-urban migration by the youths, there is still a misconception that males should dominate the public transport sector which has negative implications on how women's agency is seen. This has resulted in women being viewed as incompetent in a male-dominated world.

The artwork and stickers used to decorate the matatus are a major contributing factor to the misogyny existing in this sector (Mutongi 2006). Some stickers read, “*A woman is like a common maize cob for every man to chew,*” and “Men are like oxygen women cannot do without them”. According to Wa Mungai and Samper (2006), this is an indication that this sector provides an environment that allows misogynistic language. Nevertheless, no research has seen the need to investigate the culture of sexist words used by Matatu crews on women and the effect it has on their emotional well-being and existence, thus the need to fill the gap.

The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) (2009) reported that approximately 45% of women aged 15-59 have been violated either physically or sexually by people involved in this sector. According to research by the United Nations Education Plan (UNEP) (2016), about 100,000 matatus operate on Kenyan roads. According to Mwaura (2001), the Matatu industry is described as organized chaos. Mbugua Wa Mungai in his book *Matatu world* says that ‘The Matatu space is no respecter of age, socio-economic status, gender, tribe or other categories. In Mbugua’s opinion, matatus is a kind of temporary community where passengers and crew can discuss all kinds of subjects and share the same space. The Matatu industry has played a major role in mobility hence, Nairobi residents have become dependent on Matatus to transport them to and from various destinations. However, over time, this perception changed when the Matatu operators engaged in unbecoming behaviors of driving carelessly, playing loud music, over speeding, carelessly overtaking, and using rude and insensitive language to commuters.

### **Use of Vulgar Language by Matatu Crew**

The GeoPoll RapidPoll noted that 56% of Kenyans said they had been harassed by the Matatu crew by use of vulgar language, while 75% of males responded to having witnessed a woman being insulted in the last 2 months by the crew. This data is alarming and needs immediate attention.

The Kenyan advocacy Group Women’s Empowerment Link (WEL) 2015 through an interview found out that 54% of almost 400 women interviewed had gone through physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, or verbal harm in public transport vehicles. In this survey, 55% of Kenyans said that most passengers have been verbally harassed by the Matatu crew. Vulgar language was the most common form of harassment. A notable percentage of these passengers being harassed verbally by being insulted by the Matatu crew were female.

### **Use of Gendered and Sexist Language**

Gender is the social distinction in the position of men and women in society. Sexists, on the other hand, show prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping against women based on sex. In 2018, during a World Bank and World Resources Institute conference held in Washington, DC, it was noted that transport isn't gender-neutral because women are harassed through the use of language.

Githinji (2008), in his study states that although sexism encompasses linguistic discrimination of both sexes, we are cognizant that women are the victims. Kinyatti (2003) observes that language as a tool for evaluating women was a common feature among Matatu touts. It was also a process of attribution of bad qualities emphasizing negatively that women use sex not only to get jobs but also as a tool for promotion. They also depict them as too emotional with hysterical feelings and their inability to make sound judgments and practical decisions. In his study, he quotes a tout;

***Tout:** Nilisikia mzee akisema atapatia dinga manzi dere. Akido hivyo sisi tumeisha. Madame na ndiyo wako emotional, na proud ataweza kweli . (I heard the boss saying he would give the matatu to a woman driver. We are finished because women are too emotional and proud. Will she be able to manage?)*

Sexist language is gender ambiguous, gender-inaccurate, and very misleading since the use of "man" as a generic term leads to the presence or absence of a woman to remain unaddressed. When it comes to job titles, the use of terms that are inclusive or separate for males and females helps to place women as equal with men. Nonetheless, it is not easy to find people using unbiased terms and keeping them neutral in cultural settings whereby only from the sexiest point of reference do we find words acquiring meaning.

Lei (2006) refers to sexism as discrimination based on one's sex he discusses sexism in English language proverbs. Lei (2006, p, 60) mentions that 'seven women in their right senses are surpassed by a mad man. Larsen (2006) says that there is an existence of sexism in a language only when the language used decries members of a certain gender. Murugi (2003) examines the sexist language used by male University students and how the language is used to abuse female students and passengers in the Institution. It was noted that language can therefore be used to transmit, create and sustain gender differences. Stereotypes are, therefore, sexist because they

arbitrarily assign characteristics to people or things based on sex. For example, in public works on road construction. Road closed men at work (sexist) while Road closed people at work is non-Sexist

### **The Ethnography of Communication**

Theoretically, communication is an unbiased way of knowledge or global views, maintaining social relationships, and in any written, graphical, acoustic, or spoken form of transmitting a message worldwide. Geographical areas, social class, gender, age, and level of education are some of the factors which can practically lead to variation in the aspects of communication. Some of the successful tools of communication and efficient means of proffering communication skills that are group-specific are letters, photographs, conversations, or commercial advertisements. In an ethnographic analysis of communication, a functional perspective is unavoidable since speech and language communities do not exist in a vacuum. Hymes (2014) states that common linguistic norms define a speech community as an interpretation of at least one linguistic variety and community sharing rules for the conduct, interpretation of speech, and rules. He further states that aspects like 'speech act', 'speech situations' and 'speech events' must be looked for by ethnographers within a speech community. According to Johnstone and Marcellini (2010), ethnography of communication is a method but also a coherent theoretical approach to language.

Ethnography is an area of strength in gender, language, and sexuality research, and that its influence has extended to other areas of sociocultural linguistics. Linguistic anthropologists have adopted ethnography as a method closely associated with the discipline of anthropology. A speech community is the focus of the ethnography of communication, the way communication is patterned and organized as a system of communicative events, and how these interact with all other systems of culture. The primary aim of this approach is to guide the collection and analysis of descriptive data about how social meaning is conveyed making the ethnography of communication a mode of inquiry carrying with it substantial content. Ethnographic descriptions are the basic products of ways in which speech and other channels of communication are utilized in diverse communities which range from tribal groups in Africa to the Amazon regions, nomadic herdsman, to highly industrialized peoples in Europe, Asia, and North America.

Hymes (2014) repeatedly stressed that what language is, cannot be isolated from how and why

it is used, and recognition and understanding of much of linguistic form are to be considered. While the goals of ethnography are at least in the first instance descriptive, a legitimate contribution to knowledge is more information about the diverse 'ways of speaking, the potential importance of the ethnography of communication goes far beyond mere cataloging of facts about communicative behavior. Matatu conductors could be helped by the ethnography of communication to identify cultural, gender, and sexist sensitive language to make the Matatu environment conducive and safe for their passengers.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The purpose of the study was to analyze the sexist language used against female passengers by matatu crew on Kawangware-Nairobi route 46 in Nairobi County. This chapter presents the research design, study area, target population, data collection methods, data collection tools, validity and reliability, pilot testing, and data analysis.

This study was carried out on Kawangware route 46 of Nairobi County, in Kenya. Two different matatus ply this route: the buses (Kenya Bus and City hopper) stationed at Kencom Stage situated on City Hallway outside Kencom House, opposite Hilton Hotel, and the Nissan Matatus stationed at Railways terminus. These vehicles ply through the CBD, high-income areas to low-income Kawangware slums. This route starts from the city center at Railways terminus or KenCom stage through Upper-hill or Kenyatta Avenue, Valley Road, Argwins Godhek road, Hurlingham, Yaya, Kilimani, Gitanga road to Kawangware Mwisho as shown in A cross-sectional design was adopted for this study. This is a type of observational study design, in which the investigator measures the outcome and the exposures in the study participants at the same time. To fully respond to the objectives of this study, a mixed-methods research methodology was adopted.

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e. g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Schoonenboom. and Johnson, 2017).

Kosomo (2007) states that a target population is a group from whom information can be acquired to obtain answers to the research questions. The required sample size for this research



was obtained from the larger female population that uses the Kawangware route 46 public service vehicles and the Matatu crew to generalize the results of the research study.

Kawangware route 46 has an estimate of 50 matatus plying the route from Nairobi Central Business District with an estimate of 110 Matatu crew. The matatu crew encompasses a team of staff that serve clients in the Matatu industry, that is; the driver, the conductor who is responsible for getting the passengers into the Matatu and collecting the transport fee and the touts. The Touts help the conductor in getting the passengers into the vehicle. They mostly are localized at a given drop and pick points commonly known as ‘Stages’. The 50 matatus ferry thousands of passengers to and from the city Centre every day. The target population, therefore, is 150 matatu crew and 1000 female passengers. It is from this estimated population that the study sample size was selected.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the area of study. Purposive and stratified simple random sampling procedures were used to sample the respondents. The respondents were first divided into two strata/sub-groups: matatu crew and female passengers. The matatu crew was purposively sampled; the sample size was drawn from the pool available at the stage who were willing and had time to respond to the question. This is a highly mobile population with no guarantee that the person leaving with the vehicle will be back every time.

Out of the 150 matatu crew (Touts, Conductors, and Drivers) operating on Kawangware route 46, 15 of them were sampled and out of an estimated target population of 1000 female passengers, 100 were sampled to respond to the questions. These two samples accounted for 10% of the total population of each stratum.

*Table 1: Sample frame*

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
Matatu Crew	150	15
Female Passengers	1000	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,150</b>	<b>150</b>

Source: Researcher, 2021

#### 4.0 Discussion and Findings

This study sought to analyze sexist language as a tool utilized by the Matatu crew on Kawangware route 46 and how it is consciously or unconsciously used to demean female passengers. The spoken language used by the Matatu crew was analyzed to find out if indeed the language is sexist and if so, what could be the motivating factor behind it.

#### Demographic Data

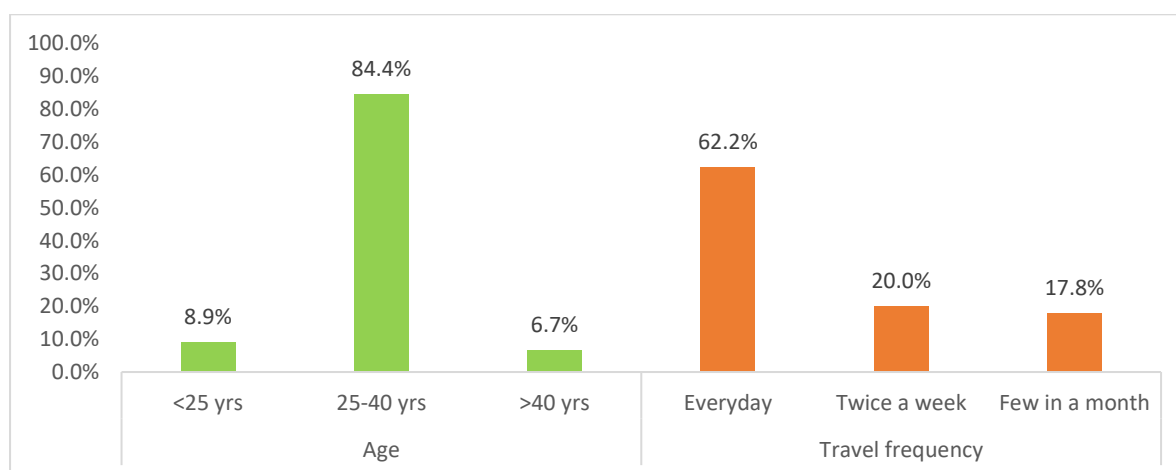


Figure 1; Demographic Information

Table 2: Frequency of using Matatu as transport means

	Everyday	Twice a week	Few in a month	Total number of Respondents
Age category <25 yrs	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0%	4
Age category 25-40 yrs	25 (66%)	5 (13%)	8 (21%)	38
Age category >40 yrs	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	0%	3

#### Characteristic features of sexist language used by Matatu crew



aspects of female passenger body-shaming stereotyping (Figure 5). Of the total respondents, 82.2% had personally experienced stereotyping as portrayed in the language used by the matatu crew to address women based on their appearance, body shape, or body size. Comments related to the general appearances of clients were reported in 88.9% of respondents, followed closely by comments on body shape (84.4%). Murugi (2003) in his study about the use of the sexist language used by male University students and how the language is used to abuse female students and passengers in the Institution, concluded that language can be used to transmit, create and sustain gender differences and that stereotypes are sexist because they arbitrarily assign characteristics to people or things based on sex. Body-shaming comments related to how the passengers had dressed were the least experienced among the respondents.

*They would sometimes use demeaning language especially if you are plus size woman, I was told to pay for two seats due to my weight, ... I felt violated due to my body figure- R23*

*One day they asked me if God gave me my neighbor's buttocks. "Madam uko sure hukupewa ya jirani – unatumaliza." I feel disrespected when people discuss my body loudly and in public.*

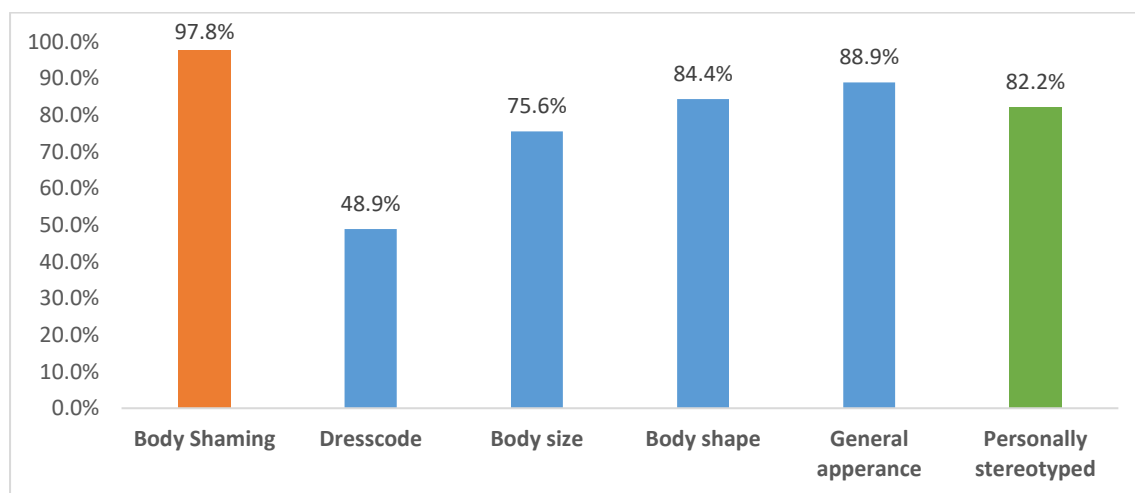


Figure 4: Proportion of women who have experienced or witnessed body-shaming features

Data in Table 4 below shows that one is most likely to witness stereotype comments based either on the facial or general appearance of the female passenger. On some days, comments on the body shape and size will feature in the language used by the crew towards female passengers. How the women dressed was the least used by the Matatu Crew to stereotype women with 51% of the respondents indicating they had never witnessed it.

*Often the conductors in the buses use vulgar language when you refuse to board their matatu..they will comment on female passengers describing their dressing, body type, pregnant women, and women traveling with children asking them why they cannot buy cars of their own (R4).*

*Table 3: Frequency of experiencing or witnessing body-shaming features*

	Never	Some days	Most days
Body shape	16%	53%	31%
Body size	24%	47%	29%
General look	9%	51%	40%
Dresscode	51%	29%	20%
Appearance	11%	47%	42%

During observation, we witnessed two scenarios in which body-shaming language was used against female passengers.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Scenario, the Matatu conductor requests a plus-size woman to move to a smaller back seat space. The woman tries to explain how difficult it would be through a very narrow space with her size and instead of the conductor understanding and allowing her to sit at an easily accessible seat, he suddenly starts using mocking and body shaming remarks that leave the woman disgusted and ashamed

**Tout:** *mama pita kaa nyuma (Pass and take the back seat. Gently pushing her and pointing to the space at the back)*

**Passenger:** *Siwezi kupita nika nyuma, (I can't easily get to the back because the space is too narrow for me)*

**Tout:** *ni wewe uko na shida, ona vile umenona kaa nguruwe, utalipia viti viwili (That is your problem, see how much fat you are, just like a pig, you should pay for 2 seats, not one)*

The quantity maxims in Grice's theory states that in a communicative event one should make their contribution informative as is required for exchange and that their contribution should not be more informative than is required. This demands that our contribution to any communicative event should focus on the topic of discussion. It is clear in this scenario that this maxim was violated by the conductor.

In the second observation scenario, a pregnant woman did not want to board a matatu because

there was no convenient seat for her, and a tout not very pleased with her refusal to board his vehicle started to mock the woman.

**Tout male** – *hiyo tumbo hotel ni matwins umebeba? (That hotel like stomach, you are carrying twins or what)*

**Victim:** *shughulika na za kwako (mind your own business)*

**Tout;** *hiyo sura yako hakuna mtu anaweza shughulika nayo. (that your face shape, no one would want to mind it)*

**Woman passenger:** *remains quiet.*

**Tout:** *Naona umevaa kenya uniform (I see you are putting on a Kenyan uniform- meaning a dress that everyone is buying and wearing, usually may denote cheap)*

**Passenger:** *ile ulinunua. (the one you bought for me)*

**Tout:** *Sivaangi vitu ovyo kama hizo, umaskini ndio inakusumbua (I don't usually put on useless clothes like you, poverty must be disturbing you.*

In this scenario, the tout deviates from his role of onboarding passengers and begins discussing the passenger's physical appearance over issues that do not relate in any way with his work using insulting language. In t Grice's theory, one's contribution to a communicative event should be relevant but if the communication has no relevance to the issue at hand, then it violates the relevance maxim. In the process makes jokes and remarks on the victim's body size as well as her looks and appearance. The passenger responses show dissatisfaction with the topic of discussion urging the conductor to mind their business, but he seems determined to humiliate her.

The matatu Crew on the other hand when interviewed, they indicated that the female passengers sometimes provoke them to speak the unfriendly language. The passengers' presentation or how they ignore or snob their efforts leads them into commenting as the crew finds this as disrespectful from the women. Some observe the mood of the customer, and some just observe their appearance and this triggers their sexist speech.

*Saa ingine unacheki vile mteja amevaa unafeel tu lazima ucomment; (sometimes the way some women dress makes you feel like just commenting) (C1)*

*Saa nyingine unamuita customer na anakulenga, unakaribia anakuambia usiniguze wewe mjinga au wewe ndiye unajua mahali naenda? – (sometimes you call a customer, and she ignores you. You get close to talking to her and she tells you don't touch me you fool; do you know better where I am going than myself?) C2*

### Use of Sexist Remarks

Most of the respondents (95.6%) had either experienced or witnessed different aspects of sexist remarks (Figure 5). 60% of the total respondents had personally experienced sexist remarks being used on them. Sexual undertone remarks, as well as the use of threats, intimidation, and harassment remarks, were both reported in 88.9% of respondents followed closely by the use of insulting terms (84.4%). Use of sexist language based on whether the crew found the passenger proud or arrogant was reported by 75.6% of the respondents. This aligns with findings in a study done by Kinyatti, (2003) that asserts that most of the slogans by the Matatu crew use sexist language that is derogatory and abusive to women.

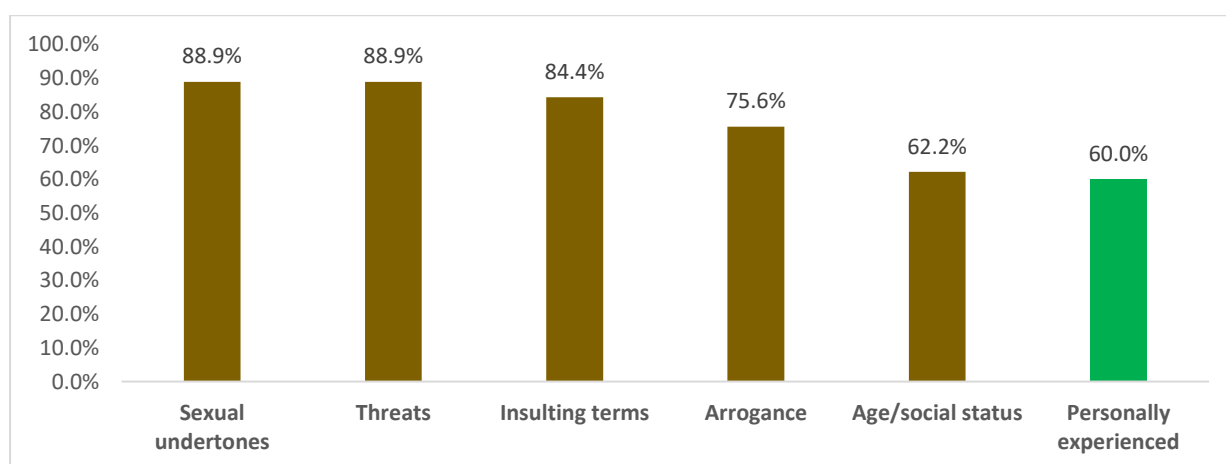


Figure 5: Use of sexist remarks features

As shown in Table 5 below, 3 in every 10 respondents reported often experiencing or witnessing the use of insulting terms, use of sexual undertones, or use of threats to women passengers. Five in every 10 respondents also reported experiencing or witnessing the use of sexist remarks among passengers who were perceived as arrogant (53%), the use of offensive terms (53%), remarks with sexual undertones (51%), and use of threats (53%). Sexist remarks based on the age or social status of the passenger were the least experienced among the respondents with almost 40% indicating they had never experienced them.

Table 4: Experiences with the use of sexist remarks

	Never	Some days	Most days
Pride and arrogance	24%	53%	22%

Insulting or offensive terms	16%	53%	31%
Age or social status	38%	38%	24%
Remarks with sexual undertones	11%	51%	38%
Threats, harassment, and intimidation	11%	53%	36%

---

It's appreciated that sometimes well-intended communication may not go well but some comments perceived by the Crew as positive are perceived as negative by the recipient. For example, to the matatu crew, the phrase 'Baby girl' is a positive complement to a beautiful well-groomed lady, however, to some recipients, this phrase carries a sexual undertone meaning that they may not appreciate in public and may end up triggering negative emotions and actions like not wanting to board that specific matatu, which the Matatu crew will interpret as being snubbed or disrespected.

*Calling me the names sometimes does not affect me and I don't find them offensive and if they don't abuse me but when they do It makes me angry. abused and degraded. I would say I depend on the words used, but when they use abusive language, it makes me very angry and furious in how I respond (R46).*

According to the findings, any resistance by a woman to do what the crew says like refusing to board a certain matatu or trying to ask back change would attract verbal harassment whether the woman is put off or called names or sometimes physical move where the crew would even try to drag or pull them to force them into a Matatu. In some cases, when a woman is treated well or addressed well, it's usually with ulterior motives and not a genuine intention.

*When the conductors call you to their matatu or bus, they use sweet words like mrembo (beautiful) and msupa that's ok. But there are times they go to the extent of grabbing you in an aggressive manner that's very uncomfortable and to some extent it's sexual harassment. And war unto you if you ignore them. They will threaten to rape you, call you ugly names like Malaya (prostitute), or verbally express how ugly you are. It's hurtful and demeaning when that happens R30*



*I have once witnessed the conductors bluntly call women unacceptable names because they didn't accept to board their matatus e.g. wachana na huyo ni Malaya (let that one be she is a prostitute). R3*

During the observation incidences, during our third observation scenario, the Matatu touts and conductors were keener about getting the vehicle full and would tell the passengers anything to get them in the vehicle. There was observed use of inaccurate information by the conductors that later inconvenienced the passenger.

**Conductor:** 'ungwaro mbao ' (Kawangware 20 shillings)

**Victim:** 'nashukia valley arcade' (I will alight at Valley arcade bus stop)

**Conductor:** 'sawa.' (Okay)

**Victim:** 'shukisha' (at valley arcade the passenger informs the driver that she would like to alight)

**Conductor:** 'hii sio nduthi inasimama kila mahali, kama unaharaka sema nikurushe nje' (This is not a Motorbike that stops everywhere,

### Reporting of sexism incidences

Only 8 (15.6%) respondents indicated that they have ever reported an incident in which they felt the speech used by the Matatu Crew was disrespectful or triggered actions that left them disgraced.

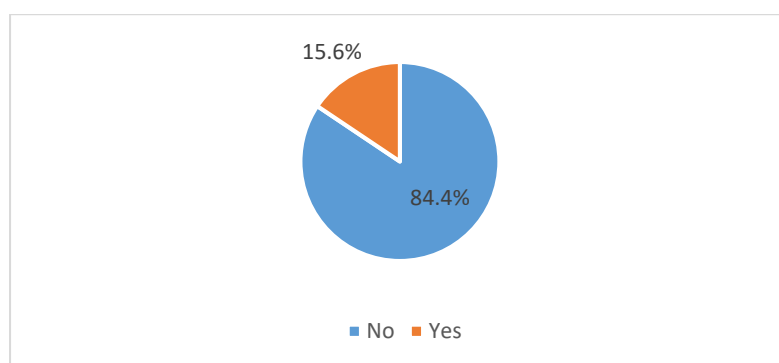


Figure 6: Proportion of respondents who reported incidences

Of those who took a step to report the incidences, the majority of them said they reported to the respective Sacco offices (37.5%) followed closely by the route management teams (25%) usually available on duty in various matatu terminals and major stops. Only one person reported the matter to the Police while 25% of these respondents did not indicate where they made the reports. Of the 8 respondents who reported, 5 (62.5%) of them indicated that no action was undertaken even after reporting.

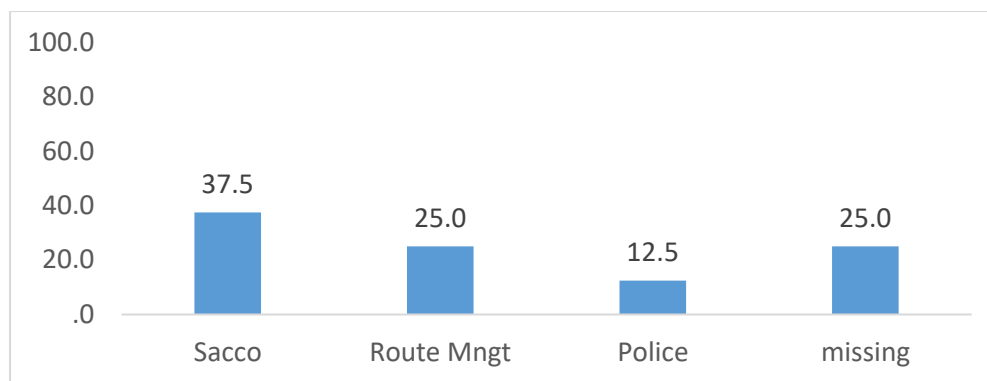


Figure 7: Where reporting was done

84.4% (38 respondents) indicated that despite having sexist experiences or witnessing sexist incidences, they never took a step to report the incidences for different reasons. Half of the respondents did not report the matter because they believed no action would be undertaken. This corresponds to the findings reported among those who reported as, in 62.5 %, no action was taken against the propagators. .

*The fact that most of the police tend to be friendly with the operators and nothing meaningful will be done. Many reports have been made and the culprits end not being arrested or charged in a court of law The police will not take the matter seriously, they also discriminate against women (R6, R20, R23).*

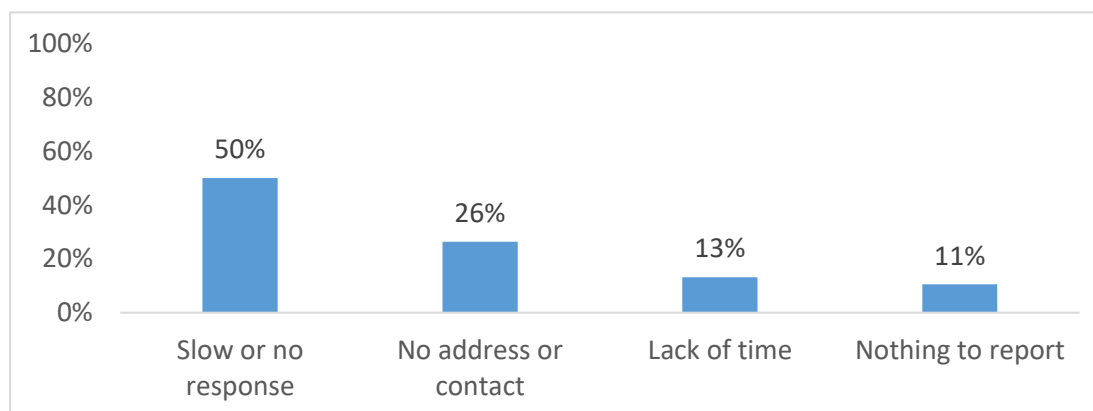


Figure 8: Reasons for not reporting

In 26% of the respondents, they did not know where the offices for the SACCOs were or who they needed to contact to report the incidences. Some of them had thought of reporting to the police, however, the police being close allies of the matatu crew feared no action may be taken and instead they would likely be subjected to the same stress and trauma.

*I have not had any extreme cases so no need for a report. But the reality is getting the*

*authorities is a hard task. Sometimes it's a waste of time because no one may act (R40).*

A proportion of the women (13%) are either in the morning hurrying to get to work in time or they are very tired after a worker and all they needed was to get home to their families. They, therefore, lacked time to report or follow through with the incidences. The remaining 11 % indicated that they had nothing to report as they considered the occurrences petty, or it happened to another person whom they presumed should take the responsibility of reporting. *I think it wasn't done to me and so I saw it as a responsibility of the other since everyone takes things differently. Other people may enjoy being told such things. Chose to ignore them because I believe such comments are a show of 'uncivilization' and ignorance (R38, R41)*

### **Sexist Language Motivating Factors**

When asked about what triggers the use of sexist language among the crew, the respondents said, excessive abuse of alcohol or bhang and acting under the influence of the same. Also, lack of proper education and exposure to good mannerism, and generally It is the culture in the industry where the vice has been normalized. The stress associated with their work may also trigger the use of sexist language. On the other hand, the failure of women passengers to pay the required amount of fare and provocative dress code may also be tempting and trigger the verbal sexist actions from the Crew. Sometimes it emerges from a misunderstanding of a well-intended conversation.

Most matatu Saccos (90%) where the crew is members rarely offer training on customer relations. They exist for protecting and safeguarding their crews and business. Where these training are offered in the (10%), they are done occasionally, but the training content is very crucial as they apply it on a day-to-day basis in the industry. The crew however felt that if the training is held, they should be focused on areas of optimizing customers reach, cleanliness, courtesy, handling people with disabilities, customer service, and road safety.

### **The link between sexual abuse of female passengers and linguistic sexism language**

The American Psychological Association defines sexual abuse as unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats, or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent. On the other hand, sexual harassment is defined as any form of unwelcome sexual behavior that's offensive, humiliating, or intimidating. Sexual harassment can include someone touching, grabbing, or making other physical contact with you without your consent, making

comments to you that have a sexual meaning, displaying rude and offensive material so that you or others can see it, cracking sexual jokes and comments around or to you, etc. Extreme sexual harassment results in an act of sexual abuse. Based on the responses, the linguistically sexist language used by the crew had aspects of sexual harassment. This ranged from making comments with sexual undertones such as calling women who differed in opinions with them as prostitutes or even touching women passengers in what someone described as unnecessary.

*I once saw a woman being threatened to be raped by some conductors and then they proceeded to spank her just because they wanted to teach her a lesson for ignoring them. R30*

Only one in every 10 respondents had not experienced the use of language with sexual undertones. Half of the respondents had at least experienced or witnessed on some of the days while almost 40 % of the respondents experienced the use of sexual undertones in the language used by the Matatu crew. The Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) (2009) reported that approximately 45% of women aged 15-59 have been violated either physically or sexually by people involved in the matatu sector.

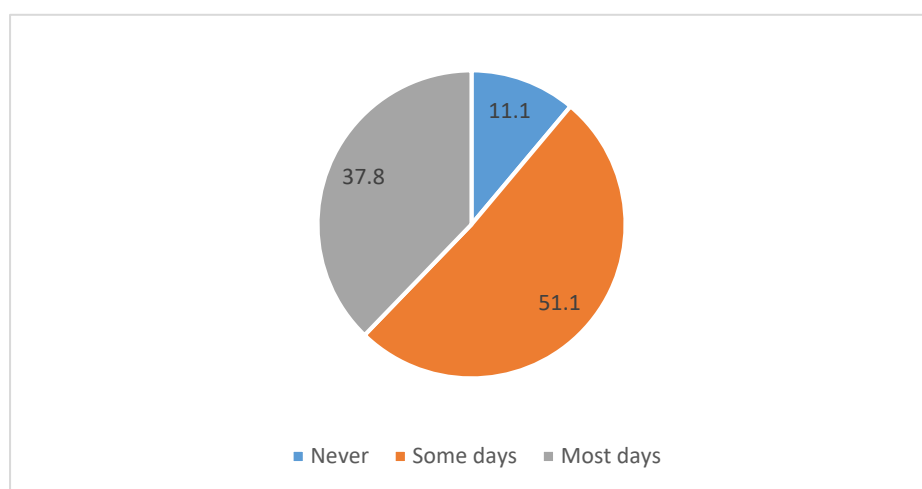


Figure 9: Proportion (%) of respondents who witnessed the use of sexual undertones

Any woman being threatened to be stripped naked in an environment full of men who most of the time are drunk would be frightened and may be forced to comply for fear of the threat happening. Threatening victims using sexual terms is a form of sexual abuse and cracking sexual jokes is a form of sexual harassment. From the responses, women do not like being addressed with sexist words because it hurts their feelings especially when with children or

people known to them. The findings are in line with Kinyatti (2003) who observed that language as a tool for evaluating women's sexism was a common feature among Matatu touts. It was also a process of attribution of bad qualities emphasizing negatively that women use sex not only to get jobs but also as a tool for promotion.

*I would feel inferior, scared, and threatened. If men can freely say cruel things such as calling women, they don't know prostitutes and take it as a joke then what actions are that capable of? These are the men that can openly rape women and not feel an ounce of remorse (R30)*

*A woman asked for her change and the tout told her not to hurry him, after all, she got the money from 'umalaya'-prostitution-R41*

A woman's body size or shape should not be a cause for public ridicule...it's body shaming, it's humiliating and some people suffer self-esteem because of such treatment. For the smaller-sized women, they mostly suffered from the sexual undertones where they will be referred to as 'Size yangu' (my perfect size). While this looks like a general statement, usually the intended meaning is that they are the perfect size for a sexual partner. From the crew's perspective, most women are happy when the titles they are referred to are respectful eg, siste, mrembo, aunty, mathe, madam. However, some customers expressed dissatisfaction when referred to with these terms. Some felt sexualized when referred to as 'size yangu'.

*I am human and I have a dignity that should be protected and respected; I am not less equal to men and I should be treated as such; my body should not in any way be a reason for anyone to orchestrate any form of violence against me(R23)*

In another scenario, one of the respondents indicates that while she demanded to get rightful change from the Matatu conductor, the matatu conductor tells her to stop hurrying him over money she got from her prostitution work. One is left wondering about the relationship of her getting back her change and the source of her money. The term prostitute has a negative sexual meaning and leaves the victim embarrassed in public.

*Being called a prostitute because I failed to respond to greetings...or telling me that he will give me the balance on my fare if I cooperate in 'other-ways-R23*

### Use of sexist language by Matatu Crew on route 46 and gender bias.

The theme of gender bias was strongly linked to the use of Sexism language with 71.1% indicating that the language used portrayed gender bias.

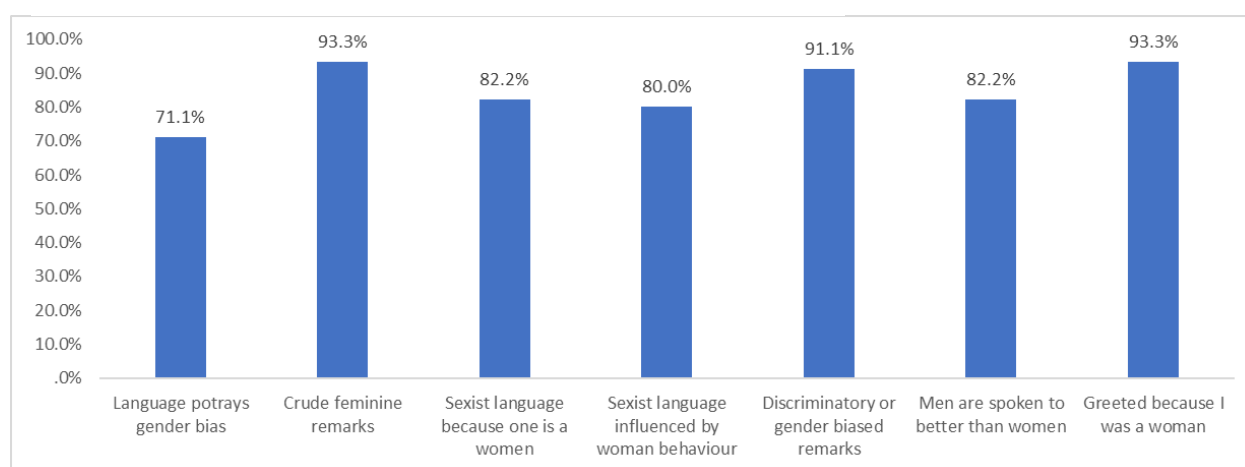


Figure 10: Gender bias perceptions

In most cases, the matatu crew uses different phrases when calling out passengers. Most of these phrases are derived from how a passenger is observed or their outlook. However, there was a difference in how men would be addressed compared to women. According to the respondents, female passengers are treated by the Matatu crew as weaklings and are referred to in derogatory and demeaning language and when they try to express their feelings, they still receive physical or verbal abuse in return. Males on the other hand are called by names that implicate fame or respect. Kinyatti (2003) observes that language as a tool for evaluating women was a common feature among Matatu touts. It was also a process of attribution of bad qualities emphasizing negatively that women use sex not only to get jobs but also as a tool for promotion. They also depict them as too emotional with hysterical feelings and their inability to make sound judgments and practical decisions. In 82.2% of the respondents indicated the language used by the matatu crew to address men was more respectful compared to the language used to address women. For instance, when referring to men, it is “*ingia gari*

*mzito, brathe ingia, Buda ingia, kiongozi, beba huyu morio, bazenga* ” but when referring to ladies, they will use phrases like “*we mrasta ingia gari, Size yangu ingia gari, karibu msupa,* ‘etc. Most terms used when referring to men have a more positive meaning compared to terms used to refer to women passengers. As per the findings, most Matatu crews use gender-insensitive words while addressing female passengers, sometimes they are just rude or use foul and demeaning language.

*Women are seen and treated as a minority and weak, they are easily bullied and talked to disrespectfully with the mindset that they cannot defend themselves R 43*

Kenya is largely a patrilineal country where men should have a say first and women should take instructions without much questioning. The Matatu industry has historically remained a male-dominated industry and this has therefore normalized the habit of the superiority of men over women. Wa Mungai and Samper (2006) described the Matatu sector as one that provides an environment that allows misogynistic language. Women are also sometimes expected to behave like men to Jump in or out of a moving vehicle and when they don't or can't, it becomes another opening for insults. They can easily tell you to do something like a man when they know very well you are a woman. It is like the only way things should be done is their way, the men's style.

*Expect me to alight faster even when the vehicle has not come to a complete halt which I can't, yet my male counterparts can. This makes the matatu crew irritated and would start body shaming or addressing you in a demeaning way (R31).*

In figure 8 above, eight in every ten respondents (82.2%) believed that sexist language was used on them by the Matatu Crew simply because they were women. 93.3% of respondents indicated that they were mostly greeted because they are women. If a man and a woman both arrived at the stage or are passing by, a woman will be greeted while the man in most instances will not. How the woman responds to the greetings or does not respond to the greetings is the catch, as the greetings are used then to provoke the women. According to 93.3% of respondents, sexist language is usually mainly towards women. Sometimes just being in the company of a male person will guarantee you respect treatment from the crew. Peter Githinji (2008) had similar findings in his study. He states that ‘although sexism encompasses linguistic discrimination of both sexes, we are cognizant that women are the victims.’ In 2018 during a

World Bank and World Resources Institute conference held in Washington DC, it was noted that transport isn't gender-neutral because women are harassed through the use of language.

*When I'm with my brother or a male friend, I rarely get any lewd comments, so I find it discriminatory to get them when alone (R34)*

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings indicated that the majority (91%) of respondents had experienced or witnessed Matatu crew use sexist language on women, 60% had ever personally experienced the use of sexual language while 44.4% experienced the use of sexist language on them on the day they were interviewed. Of all the respondents, 82.2% had witnessed the use of sexist language and would also still feel discriminated against if similar words were to be used at them. Three characteristic features of the sexist language that were common include body shaming stereotype remarks (97.3%), use of sexual undertones (88.9%), and use of crude feminism terms. Only 16% of the respondents had ever reported the cases despite the majority of them feeling abused and offended by the language used by the matatu crew.

Female passengers experienced body-shaming stereotyping as portrayed in the language used by the matatu crew to address women based on their appearance, body shape, or body size. Aside from the sexual undertones, other sexual remarks included the use of threats and insulting words. Some well-intended communication or comments perceived by the Crew as positive were sometimes perceived as negative by the recipient which would end up triggering negative emotions and actions which the Matatu crew in return interpreted as being snubbed or disrespectful. There was also a lack of specificity in the language used by both the crew and female passengers that violates the quality maxim and as a result, contributes to the existence of sexist language. While the use of Sexist language in the matatu industry on route 46 was common, respondents also appreciated the fact that generally, the situation is improving compared to the recent past. The low reporting rates or desire to report was associated with fear for lack of action and justice as the existing systems of justice had a link to the propagators that would prevent them from acting, and lack of information of where to report. Excessive use of abusive substances and lack of customer care training were listed as the reasons why sexist language against women was common in the Matatu transport industry.

The sexist language used by the Matatu crew had indeed aspects of sexual abuse. The language is characterized by making comments with sexual undertones such as calling women who differed in opinions with them as prostitutes, threats of abusing women sexually if they did not



cooperate by saying they will rape them as well as use sexually abusive jokes such as referring to female passengers as '*size yangu*'. These attributes are forms of sexual harassment and abuse.

One other key finding was the diverse positions of what the Matatu crew thought about their language and how the women passengers perceived the message. Some phrases are commonly used to refer to well-figured female bodies by crews which to them they thought was a compliment but to the recipients or victims, this was not in order since some of the terms had to refer to their sexual life.

The sexist language used by the Matatu crew also propagated gender bias with 71.1% indicating that the language used portrayed gender bias. 82.2% of the respondents believed that sexist language was used on them by the Matatu Crew simply because they were women. A similar proportion of respondents (82.2%) indicated the language used by the matatu crew to address men was more respectful compared to the language used to address women.

A few respondents also argued that while there was disrespect, it was for aspects not necessarily portraying gender bias or discrimination. Others indicated that the Matatu crew is nowadays more respectful and polite compared to the past. However, some of the examples of what the respondent considered respectful like 'baby girl, swits' would be graded as sexual undertones. This would implicate either that dent has been so common that people are taking it as a normal happening or they are too naïve to appreciate it as disrespectful. Some other thoughts were around the fact that some women may provoke the men into the situation and complain later.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to establish if the spoken language used by the Matatu crew was indeed sexist and if so, what could be the motivating factor behind it.

The study showed that women remain the main victims of sexist language and phrases confirming that language continues to be used in sustaining inequality between men and women i.e. women are victimized based on how they look and even dress while the same is not directed to men. There was a disconnect between what the crew thought of their language towards the women and the perception of women passengers of the language and the actual effect of the language on women passengers.

The lack of specificity in the language used by both the Matatu crew and the female passenger had a contribution to sexism in the language used in the matatu industry. There are no clear systems and policies of what and where to report as well as actions being taken after reporting. This in a way gives freedom to the propagators. Excessive use of abusive substances and lack of customer care training were listed as the reasons why sexist language against women was common in the Matatu transport industry.

There existed a very thin line between the two aspects because some of the commonly used sexist words had sexual undertones. However, because of how commonly this happens, women passengers perceive this as a normal happening. This normalization simply shows how powerless women passengers continue feeling while on the other hand encouraging the vice among the crew since no one is questioning their actions. There is a need for a sensitization intentionally showing the matatu crew how language not only affects how we act but also how we think and affect others will ensure avoidance of sexist language use amongst matatu crew resulting in a growing awareness that women are not sex objects and our language towards them should not reflect this.

The existence of sexual abuse characteristics in the language used by the Matatu crew towards clients was found to be quite common. It's clear from the crew's perspective that they have not appreciated that while they dominate the matatu industry, women who are part of their day-to-day clients have their rights to how to dress and a choice of which Matatu to board without being coerced. And they should be able to respect their decisions or use respectful language to welcome them to their vehicles. A matatu industry is a mode of public transport for all people, as such there is need to have the right attitude and respect of all people irrespective of their gender. It's through this that we have many women touts coming up, creating equal opportunities for both genders and so should be the passengers also. The findings, therefore, reflect verbal sexism that discredits the female gender, condemning women to an inferior social status and thereby depriving them of the right to proud of their success and roles in sustaining and enhancing development in society.

### **Recommendations of the Study**

**Based on the findings of the study, the researcher made the following recommendations:**

- There is a need to develop and implement guidelines on sexist language use clarifying its effects, the roles, rights, and responsibilities of actors in the Matatu industry.

- There is a need for the Matatu owners' associations to have an induction package for their formal and informal staff, especially on customer care habits.
- Excessive substance abuse was one of the reasons Sexism languages are common in the matatu industry. The industry however is not proactive in cubing this habit. There is a need for deliberate efforts towards the reduction of substance abuse among the matatu crews, especially on service duty.
- There is a need for national interagency collaborations among the security state actors, public transport ministry, Gender activists, sexual and reproductive health as well as the Matatu associations to successfully address this issue of sexist language in the Matatu industry.

## References

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Besnier, N. (2003). Crossing genders, mixing languages: The linguistic construction of transgenderism in Tonga. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 279–301). Blackwell.
- Citizen TV. (2021, May 21). Gangster Sacco | Unearthing rot in matatu industry [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSYzwrP2g9U>
- Geurts, B. (2019). Communication as commitment sharing: Speech acts, implicatures, common ground. *Theoretical Linguistics*, 45(1–2), 1–30.
- Githinji, P. (2008). Sexism and misrepresentation of women in Sheng. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 20(1), 15–32.
- Global Urban. (2017). Taking action to empower women. Retrieved January 10, 2017, from <https://www.globalurban.org>
- Hall, K. (2005). Intertextual sexuality: Parodilas, identity, and desire in liminal Delhi. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 15(1), 125–144.
- Hymes, D. H. (1972). Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 35–71). Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Johnstone, B., & Marcellino, W. M. (2010). Dell Hymes and the ethnography of communication. Carnegie Mellon University Research Showcase @ CMU website: <http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&cont>

[ext=English](#)

- Kinyatti, M. (2003). Sociolinguistic techniques and attitudes used in sexist language [Unpublished thesis]. University of Nairobi.
- Kombo, D. K., & Tromp, D. L. A. (2006). *Proposal and thesis writing: An introduction*. Pauline Publications Africa.
- Livia, A. (2001). *Pronoun envy: Literary uses of linguistic gender*. Oxford University Press.
- Motschenbacher, H. (2010). *Language, gender, and sexual identity: Poststructuralist perspectives*. John Benjamins.
- Manas, R. (2011). A study on ethnography of communication: A discourse analysis with Hymes' speaking model. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 2(6), 1–12.
- Martin Luenendonk. (2019). Interview schedule: Definition, types, templates and tips [Webpage]. Cleverism.com.
- Mugenda, O., & Mugenda, A. (1999). *Research methods: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Acts Press.
- Murugi, K.L. (2003). Language as a tool of abuse against women: The case study of the language of matatu touts and university students in Nairobi [Unpublished thesis]. University of Nairobi.
- Mutongi, K.B. (2006). Thugs or entrepreneurs? Perceptions of matatu operators in Nairobi 1970 to the present. *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 76, 549–568.
- Mwaura, A.K. (2001). Perceived service quality: The case of matatu industry [Unpublished MBA research project]. University of Nairobi.
- Otsola, J. (2012). Baseline survey report on gender-based violence in Kasarani, Nairobi Kenya [Report]. Women and Children's Wellness Centre Policy.
- Paddison, L., & Mexico City Journal Staff Writers. (2017). Women around the world are harassed and abused on public transportation [Webpage].
- Rasmussen, J. (2012). Outside the law – Inside the system: Operating the matatu sector in Nairobi. *Urban Forum*, 23(4), 415–433.
- Sapir, E. (1956). Communication in encyclopaedia of the social sciences (Vol. 78–81). Macmillan.
- Schoonenboom, J., & Johnson R.B. (2017). How to construct a mixed methods research design. *Kolner Z Soz Sozpsychol*, 69(Suppl 2), 107–131.
- Sommers M., & Environment Development Staff Writers.(2010): Urban Youth in Africa,”

## Environment Development