

ENERGIA News Issue 2.3, August 1998

Women and Urban Transport: Improving Public Taxi Transport and Energy Efficiency in South Africa

Cheri Wonfor

Better public transport services can produce improvements in transport energy efficiency and the environment; even more importantly, they can mean significant improvements in the quality of life for ordinary people, especially women. Given its apartheid history, improving public transport for formerly disadvantaged groups is a fundamental goal of transport policy in South Africa.

A new transport association, in a local municipality in South Africa, has taken the initiative to be proactive. Current efforts aim to benefit South Africans by reducing congestion (trip reduction), minimising accident rates and cutting costs of transport while at the same time saving energy and reducing pollution.

South Africa's "inherited" transport problems

During the apartheid era, separate and differential transport systems were supplied to the white and black communities as an explicit strategy. Black townships were located long distances from economic hubs, so that disadvantaged communities had to contend with travelling long distances and spending hours between their places of work and places of residence. Bus companies and rail services enjoyed large government subsidies, thus trains or buses (often both) were used for commuting in a "dispersed, radial transport services" model. Mobility for the migrant workforce was marginalised, as the available services catered only for "mass" transportation restricted to limited hours or destinations. More flexible and demand-driven transport services, needed by displaced communities, simply did not exist.

This void was addressed in the late 1950s, when a handful of black entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to provide transport shuttle buses for their communities by using sedan vehicles. Demand swelled and the venture appeared to be economically sustainable. Thus the evolution of the African taxi service began.

At present, approximately 75% of the migrant and local workforces of South Africa are estimated to utilise taxi minibuses on a daily basis. Most of the migrant (suburban or rural) workforce depends heavily on taxis for daily transportation. The typical passenger commutes between work, home, leisure and social activities making up to 15-18 one-way trips by taxi each week.

The taxi "culture" has evolved around various formal taxi associations that cover a specific area or region. Each taxi member is affiliated to one or other association, which determines the routes and ranks (holding areas and transfer facilities) used. Bigger and more economical vehicles have gradually been deployed. Both 10 and 15 seater minibuses are presently used for daily taxi operations.

Several sources believe that this phenomenal growth of the minibus industry has a strongly political origin, arising purely due to the Africans' desire to be autonomous and independent. Politically, it was perceived as a ploy to neutralise the government's dominance and control over township dwellers and their way of life. Indeed, by 1992, the government-subsidised bus

companies had been forced out of township areas and off of main routes. The initial small-scale feeder-type services provided by the taxis evolved into full line running services.

Already by the late 1980s, however, the burgeoning taxi minibus industry was itself heading for a serious crisis. Ill-run services (no fixed fares, fixed route or fixed schedule), inefficient regulation and poor government assistance led to the industry drawing up severe battle lines. Violence became ever more imminent as the various taxi associations competed on routes or fought for ranks. Taxi operations were confronted with a myriad of problems: poor literacy levels of both drivers and owners; poor business acumen; ethnic infighting; political strains; and poor mediation structures.

During times of conflict between taxi associations:

- Commuters fear for their lives as live ammunition is used indiscriminately at ranks or at moving vehicles;
- Long distances are traversed on foot to safer transfer points, as feuding taxis fight over transport facilities or routes;
- Often, waiting/queuing times for transportation becomes very lengthy as many operators go “underground”, leaving their patrons short of transport services;
- Numerous transfers may occur on one route (where patrons use two or more mini-buses to get them to their destination) in a bid to travel the safest route;
- Apart from the difficulties in acquiring transport at night, weekend transport services are not only diminished but can also double in price.
- Passengers are physically and forcefully pulled from “enemy” vehicles and compelled to use a different operator's services;
- Certain routes are zoned as “no-go” areas during conflicts, stranding commuters;
- Due to the emergence of violence, a climate of crime (muggings, vehicle highjacking, rapes and theft) has arisen in the wake of taxi feuding.

All this has led in effect to taxi operations being restricted to “safe hours”(daylight) and “safe routes”(police presence).

Special Problems of Women Commuters

It is easy to see how many of the problems listed above would effect women commuters in general. But in order to better understand the special problems of women commuters, we need to discuss the employment structure for female workers in the national economy. The majority of positions available to women are as shift workers (nursing and community services), overtime-workers (production line and factories) and housekeepers (such as cleaners, launderers, baby-minders).

Of the housekeepers, only a minority are employed full-time at one home, in which case they generally live-in. Most are employed at five or six different places during the week (“piece work”). For example, Maria Ndou might work for Mrs. Jones in Pretoria on Monday; for Mrs. Tom in Johannesburg on Tuesdays; Mr. Lyons in Midrand, on Wednesdays, etc. Thus, her travelling pattern alters considerably from day to day. A majority of “piece workers” are thus traversing a great area, on different routes and between different cities/towns/suburbs weekly.

Shift workers, overtime workers and piece workers are exposed to a plethora of different taxi networks. They are constantly in the “eye of the storm” during conflict situations as they may be caught “off-limits” “on foreign territory”. The need for convenient travel services for women, as well as for children and the aged, has been poorly addressed in the past. Shift and overtime workers require transport services that are reliable and safe during off-peak periods and at night. For women, safe and secure taxi services are especially critical. Taxi services, due to the

violence and criminal elements provoked by conflicts, do not operate after 19:00 in an evening. This has left a large void especially for women commuters filling these working opportunities.

Environmental Issues in the Taxi Industry

South Africa has approximately 180,000, internal combustion engined, 15-seater mini-busses, traversing the country. The implications and impacts of these vehicles on the environment are multiple. Generally, the initial life span of these vehicles does not exceed three years due to severe wear and tear. As the vehicles age, they are simply “rebuilt” from reconditioned parts. CO₂ and NO_x gasses are rife in cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town. Commuters, pedestrians and the broader community are constantly exposed to varying degrees of pollution. Furthermore, taxi ranks, where hundreds of commuters and vehicles converge on one point, reduce the surrounding natural environment (parks and scenic walkways) to “slum-like” areas.

MIDTRAN: A New Approach to Community Transport

In 1993 MIDTRAN was established as a unique transport management company located in Midrand, the fastest growing city in South Africa, situated between Pretoria and Johannesburg. MIDTRAN has looked at various options for providing refreshing and innovative means of public transportation for its local community. Transport services are developed and implemented as a functional venture between the commuting public, the private sector and local government.

MIDTRAN has been attempting to remodel the transport systems that in the past resulted in a vacuum for public transport reliant commuters. Although in-depth planning and restructuring will be a lengthy process, the formation of MIDTRAN has resulted in a new culture in which transportation systems can emerge.

To address the critical problems of the taxi industry, MIDTRAN set out to facilitate and monitor an effective transport service by contracting service providers (mini-combi taxis and relevant bus companies) to execute transport services beyond their normal operation. This involved taking workers straight to their destinations without two or three transfer points, and catering for overtime and shift workers, as well as setting up a platform to diffuse taxi conflict. Currently, policy formulation to assist in conflict resolution is an ongoing process.

MIDTRAN has successfully directed its efforts at:

- encouraging a Third World transport service to fulfil a First World function by way of contractual (obligatory) services;
- affording an informal service industry numerous opportunities for positive self-improvement (education and training on business principles, leadership and conflict resolution);
- forging a solid foundation of co-operation and goodwill across the local economic environment (workers reach work on time and safely);
- creating multifaceted benefits through liaisons between local government and the private sector (negotiating transport funding for facilities in and around the city centre);
- redefining public transport policies (eliminating non-integrated services); and
- creating a climate of negotiation during change.

A related MIDTRAN effort is the Clean Commute Initiative, a joint venture with the International Institute for Energy Conservation (IIEC) and the South African Department for Minerals and Energy Affairs. It encourages car and van pooling, flexitime and transportation for staff working overtime, in an attempt to create alternative approaches to commuting patterns that help optimise

transport time and density. MIDTRAN and ESKOM (the largest electric utility) have also co-operated with IIEC to test an electric car shuttle service at a large business park in Midrand.

Other issues that are receiving attention from MIDTRAN are:

- encouraging a balance in male and female roles in the transport sector;
- establishing a commitment for environmental causes;
- embarking on projects and programmes to achieve a “holistic” equilibrium in the local transport market;
- providing training on the above aspects.

Women in the Transport Industry

Women are only beginning to become involved in the transport industry in South Africa, however there are significant opportunities for them and they are beginning to make their mark, especially in the sensitive negotiations needed in the taxi industry at present.

Due to cultural ethics, women have been regarded as the submissive sex, particularly in the disadvantaged (African) communities. Nonetheless, the African National Congress (ANC) Constitution and Policy Framework strongly advocates female integration into all sectors of the economic market. Affirmative action policies are encouraging women to embark on many careers previously only held by men.

Women drivers are still few and far between. The motor industry has been regarded as a mechanical/technical one where women simply are not “qualified” to be active participants. Only over the past three years have females become visibly involved in the taxi industry. Albeit only a small percentage, there are female transport consultants & planners, team-builders and taxi association officials. There are female drivers and treasurers. Female association officials are also increasingly active in conflict negotiations, especially over education and training, and law enforcement.

Cheri Wonfor, Liaison officer for MIDTRAN has been closely associated with the local taxi industry for the past six and a half years. Through MIDTRAN, her exposure to ethnic differences, political nuances and inter-association conflicts has provided her with valuable experience in channelling reform. Ms Wonfor believes that the role that MIDTRAN plays can be replicated in other fast developing areas, not only in South Africa, but also in many emerging countries. She points out several areas where women can play positive roles in the transport industry. “Females are regarded as more approachable and more resourceful than men. I can mention many instances where conflict resolution, training and environmental campaigns have come to fruition under female guidance. Females are regarded as sensitive and neutral. The “nurturer-of-life” principle”.

Recently, a remarkable swing away from inter-association violence has taken place. Fewer feuds are taking place and a climate of tolerance has emerged. One hypothesis is that the increasing female participation, as executives of large taxi associations, is partly responsible. A platform for arbitration has been generated, and a “softer” approach to volatile issues is being used.

Environmentally, issues like pollution and litter can effectively be addressed through women, simply because they are not regarded as “hardcore” issues. Environmental issues are categorised as a “discerning” or more sensitive form of survival. Conversion from internal combustion engines to electric or hybrid vehicles may also be more acceptable when female “driven”, as women's involvement may not be considered as aggressive or contentious.

Fiona Bottomley, a Marketing Manager for a reputable bus company in Johannesburg, has spent the past 15 years in the transport milieu. First as an aviation official, then as a tourist manager, and currently as a commuter specialist, she had the following to say:

“It is difficult for the average South African female, advantaged or not, to find a comfortable niche in transportation. Male predominance has left the impression that females are inadequate to fulfil a “technical” portfolio. I find a serious lack of females at the middle-management level of transportation. Yet transport issues lend themselves to female involvement as it serves the very communities they are building. Nurturing is a typical female quality. Females are excellent as team workers and fulfil a supportive role. There is plenty of scope for semi or unskilled females (from the disadvantaged communities) to be integrated in transportation.

I believe the government should address this void by taking responsibility for training women in various transport disciplines. Gender equality should be made a priority by all service providers. Perhaps the government could offer companies incentives to devise schemes where women are given opportunities to become more active in transportation”.

Since 1994 Cheri Wonfor has been Public Officer to Midrand Transport Association (MIDTRAN). For more information, please contact:

Ms. Cheri Wonfor, MIDTRAN, P.O.Box 1071, Halfway House 1685, South Africa.