

Breaking down Barriers

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On the road to inclusivity:

Barriers faced by persons with visual impairments in Zambia's public transport

Moses Tembo, Thomas Mtonga and Willem Elbers

Abstract

Ensuring reliable and accessible transportation is vital for individuals with visual impairments, as it promotes mobility, social inclusion, and greater independence. This study investigates the inclusivity and accessibility of the public transport system in Kitwe, Zambia, for visually impaired individuals. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through observation and interviews with ten visually impaired participants, five bus drivers, and one traffic police officer. Findings revealed significant challenges, including the need for constant escorts due to the unpredictable behaviour of bus drivers, a lack of physical accessibility features like ramps and tactile paving, and the absence of audio announcements and proper signage. These issues lead to confusion, disorientation, and a reliance on others, diminishing the autonomy and confidence of visually impaired passengers. Additionally, discriminatory attitudes, lack of assistance from bus crews, and instances of sexual harassment further hinder their independence and comfort. Key recommendations for the Zambian government include improving physical accessibility, implementing audio announcements, enforcing designated stops, and providing mandatory training for transport staff. NGOs are advised to collaborate with the government for policy changes, offer training programs, and provide legal assistance and counselling to visually impaired individuals facing discrimination.

Introduction

Ensuring reliable and accessible transportation options is crucial for individuals with visual impairments, as it plays a vital role in promoting mobility, social inclusion, and independence.

Additionally, it is a fundamental component of their capacity to maintain privacy, enjoy freedom of movement, promote financial efficiency, and accomplish tasks independently. While the quality of life for individuals with visual impairments is substantially

affected by the efficiency and accessibility of public transportation, it remains problematic in numerous countries across the globe. Research has yet to explore the situation in Zambia. This study addressed this gap in our knowledge. Using the case of Kitwe, a district in Zambia, it assesses the public transport system for its inclusivity and accessibility for individuals with visual impairments.



People waiting in line to get on the bus in Kitwe district, Zambia. PHOTO: MOSES TEMBO

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative case study of one city in Zambia. A purposive sampling technique was used, resulting in a sample of ten participants with visual impairments, evenly split between five females and five males, alongside five male drivers and one female traffic police officer. The total sample was therefore sixteen: ten male participants and six female participants. The study was undertaken from March to May, 2023. The sampling method was able to abide by the principle of diversity, including participants from different age groups, genders, and levels of education. Before the study's commencement, participants were provided relevant information about the purpose and procedures involved.

This study relied on two primary methods of data collection: observation and one-on-one interviews. The researcher observed participants with visual impairments as they navigated public transportation. The researcher documented notable incidents, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms employed. For data analysis, the collected data from both observations and interviews was transcribed, reviewed, and analysed using thematic coding techniques.

FINDINGS

The Transport System in Kitwe

In Zambia, the public transport system primarily relies on privately owned buses and taxis, both in formal and informal sectors. The government does not own or operate any public transportation services. However, the government regulates the transport system through the Road Traffic and Safety Agency (RTSA) department established through an act of parliament.

The act is a preserve of instructions for all traffic-related matters. The formal bus system in Zambia comprises privately owned buses operated by various companies such as Kapeleka Buses, Power Tools Bus Services, D five, Kalimanshi Transport, Mbwe and Juldun Motors, among others. These bus companies generally follow fixed routes, providing transportation services to different parts of the country. Passengers can access these buses at designated bus stops or terminals. Though public transport is largely owned by the private sector, they are required to meet certain safety standards and obtain operating licenses from RTSA.

The transport system in Kitwe is divided into three categories: residential neighbourhoods to town, from town to other regional districts, and from town to other cities within Zambia. For the residential routes, there are 16, 18, 26, 30, and 32 seater buses. These move from residential areas to town, where the passengers can connect to other places like industrial centres, shopping areas, mines, or other residential places.

The road network is generally poor in residential areas. Mostly, the residential area roads are full of pot-holes, narrow with broken drainage, while others are corrugated gravel roads. Some of the designated stations for the busses have no special infrastructure for passengers to wait, or indicators that it is a bus station. The bus stations have no time schedules for the buses. Therefore, passengers can wait for hours without knowing when the next bus will arrive. Sometimes, bus drivers can stop even where there is no designated station as long as the bus crew notices passengers outside. This inconsistent approach and behaviour causes a lot of accidents for passengers and buses themselves.

The need for escort

According to a person with a visual impairment: "The transport system in Kitwe is confusing [for persons with visual impairments]. Most of the time, my nephew escorts me to the school where I teach. When we start off from there, you find that just along the way and in the middle of the road, the bus driver just stops and asks you to jump in. So, you can jump on a bus even in undesignated stations. Then, when they see that there are very few going to town or going to Kawam, they will tell you to get on another bus, and they go to pick up other passengers. So, you will be left stranded. This creates a lot of challenges for us who are totally blind". The confusion caused by the bus drivers compels blind passengers to need escorts. This mitigates freedom of movement, and independence to travel alone for blind passengers, knowing that anything is possible on the way. The bus driver could decide to leave you on the way, creating many further challenges for disabled individuals.

Physical accessibility

Most taxi and bus stops and terminals lack appropriate accessibility features such as ramps, handrails and tactile paving. When there are minimal or no accessibility features, visually impaired people encounter many significant challenges. The absence of tactile guidance leads to disorientation, making it difficult or potentially impossible for persons with visual impairments to locate the designated boarding areas, or safely navigate through the bustling surroundings. The lack of ramps and handrails further impedes mobility, making boarding and exiting vehicles difficult and potentially hazardous. It diminishes the independence of persons with visual impairments and undermines their confidence in their ability to navigate freely.

Communication and information

Audio announcements at bus stops or inside buses can greatly assist individuals with visual impairments regarding identifying their desired transportation options and destinations. Unfortunately, most bus stops and buses in Kitwe do not provide audio announcements, resulting in passengers with visual impairments relying on inaccurate or incomplete information from fellow commuters or staff. Audio announcements are important for all passengers. However, the absence of audio announcements significantly impacts visually impaired individuals more than non-visually impaired individuals.

Without clear and consistent audio announcements or accessible information, passengers with visual impairments face uncertainty regarding stops, transfers, and route changes. This lack of information creates a sense of disorientation and insecurity, making it difficult for passengers to navigate the transportation system independently. Missing or unclear announcements can lead to missed stops or connections, causing frustration and delays in travel. Moreover, it heightens their reliance on others for assistance, diminishing their autonomy and freedom of movement. The resulting anxiety and discomfort erodes their confidence in using public transport.

Clear and visible signage is crucial for independently locating bus stops, and identifying the destinations of buses or taxis. However, the lack of proper signage, including raised tactile symbols, poses a significant obstacle for individuals with visual impairments. It hinders their ability to understand announcements or instructions. This limitation isolates them from crucial information about routes, schedules, or safety measures, causing confusion and dependency on others. The absence of proper sign language exacerbates their challenges in navigating the system independently, again limiting participation and autonomy while using public transportation.

Lack of assistance

Owing to a lack of proper assistance by the bus crew, persons with visual impairments have great difficulties in boarding and exiting vehicles. A lack of trained staff or guides who can aid passengers with visual impairments can lead to increased dependency on others, or deter individuals from using public transport. Stopping at undesignated stations and asking the passengers to disembark and to change to another bus greatly inconveniences passengers with visual impairments. As one passenger with visual impairments said, "I have to keep reminding the conductor to tell me when we reach my destination. I was taken beyond my station recently. My neighbour on the same bus was the one who said it to the bus driver. So, they had to put me on another bus."

Bus company employees display impatience, frustration, or a lack of understanding towards individuals with visual impairments. This can result in rushed boarding or disembarking processes, creating unsafe conditions for passengers with visual impairments. It also contributes to feelings of unease and discomfort for blind individuals when using public transport. This can be attributed to the bus driver's unawareness of the needs of persons with visual impairments.

Discrimination and stigma

Discriminatory attitudes and experiences of stigma present further challenges. Individuals with visual impairments in Zambia face social barriers and experience prejudice while using public transport. This includes discriminatory attitudes from bus drivers. This can manifest itself in different ways, including derogatory comments or insensitive behaviour towards passengers with visual impairments. One respondent illustrates: "I was with my sighted guide. We stopped at the station for a long time without seeing any bus. Finally, a bus came, and the conductor disembarked to come and help us get on the bus. When I heard from the front, "iwe, niabo? Baleke, bablind bali shupa," (is it those people, leave them, blind people are a problem). Therefore the bus drove off, leaving us stranded at the bus station".

Sexual harassment

Two of the five female participants in the study also shared stories of sexual harassment from the bus crew. Instances of sexual harassment towards female passengers with visual impairments vary, ranging from sexually charged comments to physical actions. A respondent shared, "I stay at the end of this Chimwemwe compound, and every day, early in the morning, I rush to go buy vegetables for sale at the market. I was picked up by this bus going to town around 04:00, and I was alone on the bus. The bus conductor came and sat next to me, and he started touching my breasts. I told the bus driver to stop and drop me off. I was counting on my low vision to be able to get on another bus. I told the bus driver that what was happening was not good and I was not safe".

Overall, social and attitudinal barriers create discomfort, hinder independence, and limit confidence for blind individuals in public transport.

Conclusions

In Kitwe, the public transport system creates significant challenges for individuals with visual impairments, leading to a persistent need for escorts and limiting their autonomy. The unpredictable behaviour of bus drivers, such as stopping at

undesignated stations and requiring passengers to transfer to other buses, leaves visually impaired individuals stranded and confused. This confusion forces them to rely on family members or others to navigate the transport system, depriving them of the freedom to travel independently. The lack of physical accessibility features, such as ramps, handrails, and tactile paving, further complicates their journey by making it difficult to locate boarding areas and navigate safely, thereby undermining their confidence and independence.

Moreover, the absence of audio announcements and proper signage exacerbates the difficulties faced by visually impaired passengers, leading to disorientation and a reliance on incomplete information from fellow commuters. This gap in accessible communication increases their dependency on others and creates a sense of insecurity and anxiety about navigating the transportation system. Additionally, the lack of assistance from bus crews, coupled with discriminatory attitudes and instances of sexual harassment, further hinders the independence and comfort of visually impaired passengers. These social and attitudinal barriers create a hostile environment, diminishing their confidence and willingness to use public transport, and ultimately limiting their participation and autonomy in daily life.



Bus, driving on a road full of pot-holes. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

Recommendations

The findings result in a number of recommendations for the government and for NGOs. Key recommendations for the government are:

1. **Improve physical accessibility:** The government should mandate the installation of ramps, handrails, and tactile paving at all bus and taxi stops to ensure ease of navigation for visually impaired individuals. This includes ensuring that boarding and disembarking areas are safe and accessible.
2. **Implement audio announcements:** Introduce and enforce the use of audio announcements at bus stops and inside buses. These announcements should provide clear information about stops, routes, and any changes in service, helping visually impaired passengers to navigate the transportation system independently.
3. **Enforce designated stops:** Create and strictly enforce regulations that prevent bus drivers from stopping at undesignated locations and requiring passengers to transfer to other buses randomly. This would reduce the confusion and potential abandonment of visually impaired passengers.
4. **Training for transport staff:** Implement mandatory training programs for all public transport staff to raise awareness about the needs of visually impaired individuals. Training should cover how to assist these visually impaired passengers properly, ensuring safe boarding and disembarking, and addressing any discriminatory attitudes.
5. **Increase penalties for discrimination and harassment:** Strengthen and enforce laws against discrimination and harassment in public transport. Establish a clear reporting system and ensure that offenders, including bus drivers and conductors, face appropriate consequences.

Recommendations for NGOs:

1. **Collaborate with the government:** Work closely with government agencies to advocate for policy changes that improve the accessibility and safety of public transport for visually impaired individuals. This includes pushing for the implementation of the physical and communication improvements recommended above.
2. **Provide training programs:** Develop and offer training programs for public transport staff on how to assist visually impaired passengers. NGOs can also create materials and resources that transport companies can use to train their employees.
3. **Support services for visually impaired individuals:** Establish support services, such as volunteer escort programs, to assist visually impaired individuals in navigating the transport system until government-led improvements are fully implemented.
4. **Legal Assistance and Counselling:** Offer legal assistance and counselling services to visually impaired individuals who face discrimination, harassment, or other issues while using public transport. This support can empower them to take action and seek justice.
5. **User friendly infrastructure:** the government, councils and the Ministry of Infrastructure should ensure that they build stations that reflect tactile features to be able to guide persons with visual impairments.

Credits

Picture on the front page: Traffic in Kitwe district, Zambia PHOTO: MOSES TEMBO

About the authors

Moses Tembo is a postgraduate student at Rockview University and a special education teacher. Dr. Thomas Mtonga is senior lecturer at the University of Zambia. Dr. Willem Elbers is the Principal Investigator of 'Breaking down Barriers' at Radboud University.