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Unequal Mobility in Kuala Lumpur



Transportation System in Malaysia

The Urban Mobility Readiness (UMR) Index is a study that examines and ranks the readiness of 60 global cities to face future mobility challenges. According to the latest report, Kuala Lumpur is ranked 40th on the UMR Index, 53rd on sustainable mobility, and 23rd on the public transit sub-index¹. The city attained a commendable result on Public Transit Sub-Index which assesses how well cities manage their public transport systems and how many commuters use them. It is measured based on the speed of public transit, distance from one station to another, the integration of different transportation modes (i.e., walking, riding public transport, cycling, etc.), and how many people utilize public transport. The report also indicates that Kuala Lumpur has benefited from public transport services such as Bus Rapid and Rapid Rails, driven by autonomous technology.

While the government has invested in public infrastructure development such as constructing the Mass Rapid Transit Line 3 (MRT3), upgrading the Automatic Train Control (ATC) system, and



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¹ <https://www.oliverwymanforum.com/mobility/urban-mobility-readiness-index/about.html>

purchasing 27 new trains for the Kelana Jaya LRT line, first-last mile connectivity is still a critical issue for the rakyat². To access public transport stations, people need to drive or use e-hailing services. Unreliable bus schedules, broken pedestrian walkways, and railway services further discourage the public from utilizing public transportation. Last year, Serafina Amelia, a local netizen, shared her frustrating experience of waiting for two hours for a public bus to the TTDI MRT Station. In her TikTok video, she noted that this was a common scenario for a senior citizen she encountered at the bus stop³.

This inaccessibility to public transportation is unequal as it renders unequal access to various socio-economic activities such as work, business trips, family gatherings, and more. It also makes private vehicles a more enticing option as it gives users a sense of freedom and autonomy, compared to the unreliability and inaccessibility of public transport⁴. To counter this situation and encourage nationwide adoption of public transport, accessibility must first be ensured. First-last mile infrastructure, including bus services, pedestrian infrastructure, and micro-mobility options such as scooters and bicycles, must be developed. Unless this fundamental issue is resolved, Malaysians will continue to rely heavily on private transport.

Why Mobility Matters to Well-Being

According to the Malaysian Well-Being Index, transportation is a crucial contributor to the nation's economic and social well-being by offering access to economic opportunities and social participation⁵. As Malaysians have a high dependence on private vehicles due to incomplete first-last mile infrastructure, urban areas in the country grapple with persistent traffic congestion. This transport issue impacts the quality of life for urban residents, causing delays, noise pollution, and air pollution. These consequences cause many urban dwellers to relocate their nests to nearby suburban areas, which in effect, increases their need to travel⁶.

Furthermore, traffic congestion is also positively linked to economic losses and traffic accidents. In Kuala Lumpur, traffic jams incur costs up to RM20 billion annually and lead to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) losses ranging from 1.0 to 1.8 per cent⁷. These statistics underscore the vital link between effective mobility solutions and the social and economic well-being of Malaysia's urban population.

Increased traffic accidents, apart from claiming lives, come at the great cost of economic and social well-being. According to our Transport Ministry, Malaysia recorded one accident every one minute in 2022. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reveals that the global fatality rate for cars stands at 1.3 deaths per billion passenger-kilometres traveled. It spikes to 5.5 deaths for motorcycles, while public transportation boasts a much lower rate of 0.2 deaths. Enhancing public transport infrastructure to encourage higher rates of adoption is pivotal to reduce traffic accidents that are caused by the excessive number of private vehicles. It is a vital step to ensure economic and social well-being, and equity for all members of

² <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/06/804339/first-and-last-mile-issues-bedevil-folk>

³ <https://waupost.com/an-old-man-faced-this-everyday-msian-netizen-calls-out-public-transport-operators-for-2-hour-long-bus-delay/>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343091601_TRANSPORTATION_AND_QUALITY_OF_LIFE

⁵ <https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/c368d7de-709d-11ed-80ec-0cc47a9b694a>

⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343091601_TRANSPORTATION_AND_QUALITY_OF_LIFE

⁷ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/2015/09/kl-road-congestion-translates-rm20b-losses-annually#:~:text=%22Including%20the%20costs%20of%20fuel,well%2Dbeing%20with%20commuting,%22>

society to access socio-economic activities. When fewer lives are disrupted by road accidents, fewer resources need to be allocated for recovery and assistance.

Private Transportation: The Only Solution to a Car-Centric Transportation System

Besides the poor public transport infrastructure, the numerous highway construction projects like the Petaling Jaya Traffic Dispersal Elevated Highway (PJD LINK), Putrajaya – Bangi Expressway (PBE), and Kuala Lumpur Northern Dispersal Expressway (KL-NODE); automotive sales; services tax exemption; and the concern to use public transport during COVID-19 have also encouraged a car-centric approach to smoother mobility.

Aziff Azuddin, a public transport data analyst, said that Malaysia's reliance on private vehicles can be traced back to the past Malaysian road expansion policies in 1960s and the protectionist policies of the domestic automotive company, Proton, in the early 1980s. These two policies have led to a rapid growth in private vehicle ownership and necessitated a car-centric urban planning⁸. In 2021, the number of registered vehicles which was 33.3 million outnumbered the population of Malaysia which stood at 32.6 million⁹. The amount of registered cars per 1,000 population in Malaysia exceeds almost all other Southeast Asia countries¹⁰.

The only solution for Malaysians to guarantee unhindered access to socio-economic activities is to buy a car, but it comes at a high cost. The 2022/2023 Belanjawanku estimates the monthly expenditure of a car owner who is single in the Klang Valley to spend RM2,600 on food, housing, social participation, transportation, and more. Out of all the spending categories, transportation takes up the most, accounting for nearly 29 percent of the total budget¹¹. Another report also points out that 10 percent of the Malaysian household income is spent on transportation, compared to 4 percent in Tokyo and Hong Kong¹². The ever-rising costs of petrol, road tax, toll charges, vehicle maintenance, and insurance will only continue to rise and plague the quality of life of Malaysians, especially car-owners, as their living costs increase.

Unequal Mobility

This significant cost required for private transport is not affordable for every economic group. Only individuals who can afford buying vehicles can enjoy a more seamless mobility in Malaysia, while individuals without the purchasing power are left to struggle with the shortcomings of our current public transport system. The Statistics Department's Salaries and Wages 2021 Report indicates a lower median monthly income for women (RM2,145) compared to men (RM2,315)¹³. The lower

⁹ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2022/06/803654/vehicles-outnumber-people-malaysia>

¹⁰ https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GSMA_Harnessing-technology-and-data-for-sustainable-urban-mobility-in-Malaysia_Oct2022.pdf

¹¹ https://www.dosm.gov.my/uploads/release-content/file_20230808213825.pdf

¹² https://www.pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/National-Transport-Policy-2019_2030EN.pdf

¹³ [https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2023/02/16/tackling-pay-equity-for-malaysia-madani#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,093%20in%202020\)%20for%20men.](https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2023/02/16/tackling-pay-equity-for-malaysia-madani#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,093%20in%202020)%20for%20men.)

income received by women, owing to the unequal pay, results in a downgrade of purchasing power. Hence, women and individuals with low income are more vulnerable to the impact of the car-centric transport landscape.

The GSMA report rightly points out that a nation's labour force which is mainly composed of men, will develop public transport infrastructure that cater primarily to work commutes. Such planning risks neglecting women who also need access to different socio-economic activities such as schools, markets, medical appointments, running daily errands, and so on¹⁴. A key area neglected in the public transport infrastructure is safety and security. The recent sexual harassment incident at Maluri LRT precisely demonstrates the lack of safety precautions for women in the public space¹⁵. Thankfully, following the incident, Prasarana timely implemented a women-only coach at the MRT and LRT lines¹⁶. However, other public infrastructures also imperil the safety of women. Concerning streets or pedestrian pathways, the lack of CCTV, dysfunctional street lamps, low visibility on streets, and the type of activities found on streets exposes many female users to danger¹⁷. The issue of safety becomes an impediment for many women to access public transport services, de incentivising its use and driving people toward car adoption instead.

Our current public transport system and facilities have much to improve in terms of inclusivity. Recently, a wheel-chair bound resident shares her struggle to navigate through her residential area in Taman Kepong due to the broken and dangerous walkway. To overcome this daily challenge she has to use the main road, which poses a greater risk to her safety as she shares the road space with cars¹⁸. Earlier this year, a twitter user (@nursmusings) posted a video of a few pedestrians battling for a narrow walkway to reach MRT Bandar Utama¹⁹. Pedestrians have to pass through the risky construction sites with excavators, bulldozers, and construction waste piling on the sides. As seen, the poor walkability of pavements and lack of walkways complicates the journey for all, what more for the elderly and persons with disabilities who have to deal with the lack of elevators, ramps, and priority lanes at public transport stations.

Article 9 of the Federal Constitution provides that citizens have the right to freedom of movement²⁰. While the government has never violated this law by limiting the movement of any lawful citizen, its half-hearted efforts in developing public transport infrastructure are, in fact, a form of restriction. What is a basic right of Malaysians becomes a privilege exclusive to those who can afford private transportation. The impoverished and disabled individuals who cannot afford a vehicle also cannot benefit from the socio-economic activities like job-seeking or job creation, which provide employment opportunities that will promote their overall well-being and quality of life.

¹⁴ https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/GSMA_Harnessing-technology-and-data-for-sustainable-urban-mobility-in-Malaysia_Oct2022.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nst-viral/2023/07/936247/nstviral-woman-sexually-harrassed-maluri-lrt-platform-rapidkl-and>

¹⁶ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/09/953046/loke-mrt-kajang-line-designated-ladies-coach-be-operations-soon>

¹⁷ https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/25314191/Gender_Transport_Inequalities_in_Malaysia_and_Pakistan_Harassment_as_a_Barrier_to_Mobility_Yong_Adilah.pdf

¹⁸ <https://thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2023/06/12/broken-tiles-along-kepong-walkway-pose-safety-hazard>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/nursmusings/status/1620792290712117248>

²⁰ <https://www.malaysianbar.org.my/article/news/legal-and-general-news/members-opinions/freedom-to-move>

Conclusion

Disjunctive mobility, a result of negligent public transportation planning, opens up a gap between the higher income groups and the lower income groups. Thus, the government bears a huge responsibility in developing a sustainable public transportation mobility with a complete first-last mile infrastructure to alter Malaysians' habitualised reliance and prevalent bias towards private vehicles over public transport. Only then can we achieve equity for the rakyat to unlock potentials that lie behind a connected chain of mobility.