



Why Women-Only Transit Options Have Caught On

DANIEL KRIEGER 8:25 AM ET COMMENTS



Aimi Nakano

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Japan's first women-only trains. The idea, back in 1912, was to spare young women the indignity of being ogled by admiring men.

Over the course of the century Japan's women-only trains were discontinued and resurrected several times until they were at last fully restored in late 2000. At that time, the term *sekuhara* – 'sexual harassment' – had become a bit of buzzword in the Japanese media, as stories of just how often most women were subjected to public groping began to receive more attention.

"I've been groped on the train, and I don't want that to happen again."

Standing on a crowded Osaka subway platform during a rainy rush hour last month, it was easy to find women willing to talk about why they prefer women-only trains. Chinatsu Kawamoto, an 18-year-old high school senior, offers a typical response.

"I've been groped on the train, and I don't want that to happen again," she says.

Japan is not the only country to offer women-only transportation. Cities in Indonesia, India, Brazil, and Russia operate similar programs, while women-only buses have gained popularity in cities in Guatemala, Mexico, and most recently, Pakistan.

But Japanese cities may be unique in the sheer scope of their mass transit groping issues. In 2010 alone on the Midosuji line, a mixed-gendered subway line that runs through Osaka, 104 groping incidents were reported. And that figure is most likely just a fraction of

the total since many victims don't come forward out of embarrassment, inconvenience, or the sheer difficulty of figuring out who on a packed subway car touched them.

"We decided to have women-only cars to protect women from gropers," says Shiei Kotsu, a spokesman for Midosuji. "The number of groping incidents decreased compared to the time before we had women-only cars, so we think this measure helps curb the problem."

Whether or not these trains actually make much of a difference is an open question, as more comprehensive data is hard to pin down. Even if the number of incidents goes down, with an uptick in women reporting them, the numbers could hold steady or even rise. This might explain why the number of annual groping arrests hasn't changed a whole lot since the trains were rolled out (around 4,000 cases per year nationwide, with roughly half in Tokyo, Japan's groping Mecca, where a [survey found](#) two-thirds of young women have been harassed on trains).

Riyo Yamamoto, a 21-year-old college student, tells me she opts for women-only trains when possible because she's been groped during her commute over 20 times since junior high school. Rather than going to the police, she handles it herself.

"I stamp down hard on their foot or punch them," she says. "If I go to the police, it could get them fired and divorced and ruin their lives. I feel sorry for them, even though they're disgusting and annoying."

Some Japanese men don't believe that women-only trains solve the groping problem. A few have even banded together to oppose the trains, claiming they aren't effective and smack of gender discrimination (against men) to boot.

"We think women-only cars came about more for political reasons than protecting women from gropers," says Hiroshi Fukuyama, a 41-year-old office worker in Tokyo who heads an opposition group to women-only trains that boasts about 300 members. What these cars really accomplish, he says, is helping politicians curry favor with voters and the train companies sell ads targeting women.

In fact, some of the women I spoke to confessed that their main reason for riding them was comfort – they tend to be less crowded and less smelly.

Fukuyama's group protests by riding women-only trains (which is technically legal), proclaiming their views with a loudspeaker in front of big stations, and lobbying railway companies to demand the abolition of the special trains. He argues that a much more effective way of combating groping would be with security cameras.

Japan's train systems have opted instead for promoting groping awareness campaigns and supporting stiffer penalties for offenders – from months to years in prison and thousands of dollars in fines. But there are worries the harsher penalties may have actually led some women to falsely accuse men of groping in the hope of a cash settlement. For this reason, a movement for men-only trains has sprung up. A 2009 survey found that 40 percent of Japanese think they are necessary.

It looks like until Japanese men and women – but especially men – learn to behave themselves on trains in mixed company, completely gender-segregated cars might sadly be the safest way to ride.

Keywords: Tokyo, groping, sexual harassment, Women-only trains, Japan



Daniel Krieger is a journalist based in New York City. [All posts »](#)

Copyright 2012 The Atlantic Media Company