

# Women in Transit

Organizing for  
social justice in  
our communities



*A Project of the Bus Riders Union*

# Women in Transit:

Organizing for social justice in our communities

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A project of

## The Bus Riders Union

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# acknowledgements

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# acknowledgements

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*Power to the Sisters,  
and therefore to the Class!*



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# Women in Transit: *Organizing for social justice in our communities*

The Women in Transit (WIT) project is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) initiative that grew out of the existing organizing work of the Bus Riders Union (BRU). The WIT project team developed over eight months, from January to August 2004. Six transit dependent women make up the WIT team: Heather Jones, Kirat Kaur, Jennifer Efting, Zailda Chan, Martha Roberts and Beth Grayer.

## Objectives

Our goals in the WIT project are manifold. First, the WIT project is a challenge to TransLink as we expose the impacts of high fares and service withdrawals on the lives of working class women. Public transit is a women's equality issue. We highlight women's experiences and hold TransLink publicly accountable for the hardships that working class women face as a result of their decisions. The expertise gained through the WIT project positions the BRU to impact planning and operation of the current public transit system in favour of the public transit needs and vision of transit dependent women. Bus riders are the true transit experts, as we experience the indignities of inadequate service on an everyday basis. As we expose women's struggles in the transit system, we also expose women's unique visions for public transit. Through understanding the problems in our transit system, we gain a positive vision: a transit system built around the needs of working class communities.

Secondly, the WIT project poses a

challenge to the Bus Riders Union to meaningfully integrate a feminist analysis into every facet of our work. While women have been the leadership of the BRU since the beginning, the WIT project was our first initiative to look at the specific experiences of working class women on the bus, and our first step towards envisioning a transit system that puts working class women at the centre of planning and budget allocations. Our feminist analysis begins from the understanding that women are the super-exploited majority. The oppression of women is based in our exploitation within capitalism; we also experience sexist ideologies, violence, and harassment from rich and working class men that go beyond any economic imperative. Women experience unique oppression under the current capitalist system; our knowledge gives us the ability to struggle most effectively for change. Women are also the majority of bus riders in our region. It is crucial that the BRU builds leadership from women, especially women of colour and Aboriginal women, within the organization as a whole.

The WIT project is not just a research initiative. The WIT project trains women organizers from working class communities to struggle against regional neoliberal interests to assert their right to mobility and public transit. We develop our feminist theory and leadership to strengthen our ability to organize the unorganized. By collectively sharing experiences, women see that their individual experiences are shared by hundreds of women in the GVRD. We speak directly with



working class women about their experiences and aim to organize them into a movement that works to win short-term concrete gains while envisioning a long-term struggle to win genuine health and justice for working class communities.

Thirdly, the WIT project is a challenge to the male-dominated Left. From the social democrats in the NDP to radical communist revolutionaries, men overwhelmingly lead the Left in the GVRD. While we consider our organization a part of the Left community, we also challenge our community to position anti-sexist, anti-patriarchal and anti-racist organizing as fundamental to expanding the rights of the working class. When we challenge the violation of the rights of women and people of colour, we are engaging in class struggle. In turn, WIT challenges the mainstream women's movement to struggle for the expansion of the rights of the working class, as the liberation of women is impossible without an end to the exploitation of the working class.

## Practice and Theory

### Direct Contact Organizing

The WIT team talks with hundreds of working class women in our on-the-bus organizing, workshops, focus groups and community meetings. In the past 7 months we have held women-only workshops with high school students, single mothers, women on welfare, university students, and recent immigrants. We document the transit experiences that women shared in workshop brainstorming and focus group discussions. We also speak to women individually on the bus, in email exchanges and over the telephone.

We collect women's experiences through the "Women's Public Transit Rights Violation Form" (also referred to as the 'testimonial form') in the on-the-bus organizing, at workshops and at focus groups. The Violation form allows transit dependent women to document their experiences on paper in their own words. We quote women's

## Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Oppressed people, primarily in the Third World, designed Participatory Action Research (PAR) to counter First World hegemony and the stealing of community-based knowledge for projects that ultimately exacerbate colonialism and the impacts of capitalism. It is a method of research that draws on the capabilities of oppressed people to lead research in their own communities. PAR builds community power with the goal of furthering the struggle for social and economic justice.

Through PAR, the WIT team works within our own transit dependent community to learn the impacts of poor transit on the lives of transit dependent women. We do this community-based research with the intention of changing the conditions of our lives for the better through collective action and strategizing.

PAR encourages a dialectical relationship between theory (literature review) and practice (direct-contact organizing). This relationship between theory and practice is called praxis. Our study of theoretical literature enriches our ability to engage in direct-contact organizing. In turn, our direct-contact organizing deepens our theoretical understanding.





direct experiences throughout this document, and all WIT testimonials are included in the Appendix for easy reference. Through the Violation form women share their experiences with the BRU and other bus riders to increase our grassroots understanding of women in transit. The Violation form allows women to see that their individual experiences with transit are also experienced by hundreds of other women in the region. The Violation Report Form is also a way for women to express their anger and resist against TransLink. Our experiences as working class women are so often made invisible that it is an act of resistance to document injustice and share our stories with one another and with TransLink.



*Yuly Chan (a member of the 'On The Bus Crew') talking to a woman on the bus*

## Literature Review

In addition to this community-based research, the WIT project team also engages in group study of existing literature on the effects of neoliberalism on working class women and communities of colour. We study existing literature on public transit, community health, imperialism and the women's movement. The documents we collectively studied are listed in a 'recommended reading' appendix for reference.

As a team, we build our understanding of public services by connecting the theory articles we read collectively to the practice of talking

directly to working class women in the GVRD about the challenges they face because of poor bus service and high fares.

## Unity and Struggle

The Bus Riders Union is a grassroots organization struggling to expand the social and economic rights of bus riders. We have been organizing in the Vancouver region since 2001, and now have over 700 members with an average of ten to twenty new members joining every week. The BRU represents the mass transit and public health needs of the transit dependent; we fight to put the

## workshops & focus groups were hosted at:

Van Tech High school, the Port Coquitlam Women's Centre, the SFU Women's Centre, the Kiwassa Community Centre, the YWCA Housing Coop, YWCA Women-In-Focus Job Training Program, the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, Multicultural Family Centre (African Women's Saturday Program), and twice by the BRU at the Lore Krill Co-op



needs of transit dependent people, overwhelmingly working class and disproportionately people of colour, at the centre of public policy.

We organize because affordable, reliable, and environmentally sound mass transit is a human right. Human and environmental needs must be the leading social, political, and economic priority. We fight to win a massive expansion of the clean-air bus fleet and lower bus fares for all bus

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*Our understanding builds from our lived experiences, from sharing experiences with one another, & from ongoing group & individual study of theory & history.*

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riders. We struggle to win short-term gains for our communities within the longer-term struggle for social justice.

The Bus Riders Union is a living experiment in Left movement building; we aim to build a vital multi-racial working class movement led by women. As bus riders unite to win more buses and lower fares, our struggle is not just to win a better transit system in the GVRD; our struggle is to expand the social and economic rights of the most exploited sectors of the working class.

## Collective Analysis

The WIT team struggles for unity in our understanding of the forces that oppress and exploit us. Our understanding builds from our lived experiences, from sharing experiences with one another, and from ongoing group and individual study of theory and history. We must identify the root of our exploitation and oppression so we can

effectively strategize and struggle for change.

## Imperialism

Why do we include an analysis of imperialism when we are discussing a regional issue like transit? Through our study and our on-the-ground practice, we know that the struggles we face as working class women are rooted in patriarchy, national oppression, and capitalism. Our everyday experiences as working class women, whether we are on the bus, at work or in the home, are shaped by these three intersecting systems of oppression and exploitation. Together, these systems of oppression and exploitation are imperialism. Imperialism is an all-encompassing economic system, which benefits the rich minority, while exploiting every opportunity to extract profit and exert domination over the poor and working class majority the world over (Program Demand Group, 6). As part of the most exploited and oppressed sectors of the working class in our region, transit dependent bus riders bear the brunt of imperialism.

## National Oppression and Systemic Racism

National oppression refers to the systemic exploitation of an oppressed nation by a colonizing nation (Program Demand, 11). For the purposes of our project, we focus on the experiences of oppressed nationalities living within Canada. Oppressed nationalities in the GVRD include, but are not limited to, people of Asian (including East Asian, South Asian and South East Asian), African, Middle Eastern, South and Central American descent. These nations and peoples all have unique experiences of forced migration and exploitation;



together we refer to them as ‘people of colour’.

There also exist in Canada internally oppressed nations. Canada is a settler state founded on the theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands and genocide waged against entire peoples. BC in particular is unceded territory with few existing treaties. Aboriginal peoples in BC have survived and continue to resist the wholesale theft of their traditional territories, and the ongoing plunder of land and natural resources. Aboriginal people in BC struggle with modern colonial oppression and exploitation through such legislation as the Indian Act, the reserve system, and the BC Treaties process.

For many, the particular intersection of race and class begins in a racist immigration process that is rooted in the hegemony of the First World over the Third World. As the Third World continues to be forcibly underdeveloped through neoliberal economic policies enforced by the International Monetary Fund/World Bank and the WTO (World Trade Organization), people from the Third World are forced to leave their home countries to survive. This is the forced migration of Third World peoples to the First World. When women arrive in Canada through forced migration they are overwhelmingly transit dependent due to poverty.

Contrary to the popular myth of Canadian ‘multiculturalism’, within Canada oppressed nations and peoples are largely excluded from avenues of economic and social power. Oppressed nations and peoples are also the most exploited and oppressed within the working class. Although their need for a social wage is greatest, they have the least access to public services like health care,

education, and transit.

We know that a disproportionate number of poor and working class people in the GVRD are people of colour and Aboriginal people. Therefore, these communities are also disproportionately represented on the bus. By adopting a ‘colour blind’ approach to transit planning TransLink contributes to national oppression and systemic racism in our communities.

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## **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy refers to the subjugation, objectification and domination of women by men. In the WIT team, we conclude, “the subjugation of women is based on the exploitation of women” (Program Demand, p.16). In other words, the rich (who are majority male) benefit materially from our daily struggles. Our productive and reproductive labour provides the surplus value necessary to sustain imperialism.

Reproductive labour is the work that creates and maintains workers. Childbearing, childcare, eldercare, teaching, cooking, cleaning, laundry and grocery shopping are all examples of reproductive labour. It is almost always women who are responsible for this work, which is overwhelmingly unpaid. Most reproductive labour is done privately in the home, so it is invisible in



# introduction

the economy. If women were not super-exploited, the entire economy would fail.

Despite the critical position of women in our society TransLink still does not consider the specific needs of transit dependent women in their planning and budget priorities. Women are the majority of bus riders, and are over-represented among the transit dependent. By not integrating a gender analysis into transit resource allocation,

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*The bus system allows the most exploited sectors of the working class limited access to work, social services, family and friends without giving us full access to the region.*

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TransLink contributes to the oppression and exploitation of working class women.

## Capitalism

Capitalism is the mode of production by which profit is extracted from the working class by the bourgeoisie through wage labour (Veltmeyer). Under capitalism, only a few people own the factories, the machines, the land and the natural resources (like fish and timber) that make up the means of production. Capitalism requires a few professionals to manage the state and accumulated resources on behalf of the rich. The rest of us are working class; we have nothing to sell but our labour. While we sell our labour to the rich the things we produce and the services we provide are worth much more than the wages we are paid. The working class does the work yet we rarely reap the benefits. Instead, the owners of the factories, land, and resources get rich off of our work.

Patriarchy and national oppression intersect with capitalist exploitation to ensure that the working class is majority women and disproportionately people of colour. Women and people of colour are the most exploited within the working class.

The hardships lived by working class communities are rooted in the exploitation of our labour, but the impacts go far beyond the factory/office/restaurant doors. Our class position affects every aspect of our lives, including our environment and our access to social services.

Similarly, the capitalist system uses ideology to reinforce the class system. Individualism enforces the notion of each to her/himself; we reap what we sow and we earn what we deserve. Neoliberalism promotes the idea that the market can sustain our communities and provide for our needs. Ideology props up the profit-driven consumer society and justifies the ongoing oppression and exploitation of the working class.

As the search intensifies for new ways to extract profit from the poor and working class of the world capitalism shifts ideologies and economics. During the post-Depression era, the expansion of the welfare state created a level of social and economic stability that was favourable to the pursuit of profit for large corporations and promoted the ideal of the ‘family wage’ and the ‘social wage’. However, starting in the 1970s, economic stagnation and a concurrent drive for increased profits led to a new economic and social order termed neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism dismantles the welfare state through privatization of public services and state-run corporations, the liberalization of trade, and



the deregulation of environmental and labour standards (Veltmeyer & Petras).

The simple fact remains that as a whole the wage labour system of capitalism cannot provide us with adequate resources to survive. Social services are a necessary 'social wage' to ensure working class people survive to work another day on sub-standard wages. Public transit is part of this 'social wage'. The bus system allows the most exploited sectors of the working class limited access to work, social services, family and friends without giving us full access to the region.

## Neoliberalism in BC

Throughout BC, women and our communities have been facing intensifying neoliberalism for decades. The election of the Liberal Party in 2001 followed eight years of a provincial government led by the New Democratic Party (NDP). Despite their claim to being the social democratic 'people's party', the NDP attacked poor and working class people by cutting welfare, privatizing public services, and prioritizing corporate profit before human need as did governments before them. Neoliberal economics are devastating to women, regardless of the party that enacts them.

Under the current Liberal government neoliberalism has been substantially accelerated. Over the past three and a half years the Liberals have undermined every aspect of social welfare. The list of cuts and human rights violations is long, and we have selected a few examples to illustrate the anti-woman nature of the Liberal party and neoliberal economics.

The Liberals have increased the barriers to accessing welfare and implemented new require-

ments that single mothers must return to work after their child turns three. At the same time, funding for childcare subsidies has been reduced by 26 million dollars (BC CEDAW). Legal aid has been cut by 38%, resulting in the closure of 60 legal aid offices across BC. Post-secondary tuition has been deregulated, resulting in tuition increasing anywhere from twenty-two to three hundred percent (BC CEDAW). Funding to women's

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*Under the current Liberal government neoliberalism has been substantially accelerated . . . The impacts of neoliberalism on working class women in BC have been devastating.*

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centres has been eliminated, and the Ministry for Women's Equality has been closed. Minimum wage has been lowered to \$6 an hour, under the



*HEU worker walking the picket line at St. Paul's Hospital in May 2004*



guise of implementing a 'training wage' for 'new workers' (BC CEDAW).

Privatization in the form of contracting out has resulted in massive job losses in the public health care sector, and it is women who bear the brunt of these cuts. The Liberals have torn up the contracts for 160,000 workers. 83% of health care jobs lost were women's and 1/3 of all jobs lost were by immigrants and people of colour (BC CEDAW). Public sector unions broke historic ground in demanding pay equity for women employed by the government. These good paying jobs are being lost to contractors who pay low wages and offer no benefits or job security. The membership of the Hospital Employees Union, for example, is 87% women and majority women of

colour.

The impacts of neoliberalism on working class women in BC and the Lower Mainland have been devastating. The further privatization of public transit in the Lower Mainland will only serve to compound the increased economic and social hardships forced onto low-income and marginalized women by the recent cuts to social programs and social assistance. As women lose jobs, unemployment soars and welfare and other social services are impossible to access. Our health and social well being are compromised because of the lack of a good public transit system. We need an affordable transit system now more than ever.

## Pat Jacobsen: The Failure of Liberal Feminism



TransLink CEO Pat Jacobsen is celebrated in some circles as a triumph of liberal feminism because she is among the few women who have reached positions of power among the business elite (Influential Women). She is the CEO of a major public institution yet holds the interests of private business to be paramount. She uses her power in the business and transit planning to further corporate interests, which exacerbates the economic and social marginalization of working class women.

Jacobsen was instrumental in pushing through the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver line, which is a privatization project that will divert millions of dollars away from the bus system.

Jacobsen has a long history of involvement in privatization schemes. She was a speaker at the 2002 conference of the Canadian Council for Public Private Partnerships. As transportation minister in Ontario she instituted a regressive taxation scheme in the form of highway tolls on the Highway 407 (Littlemore). Highway 407 was a groundbreaking privatized highway that dislocated Ontario communities and made travel many times more difficult.

We highlight Pat Jacobsen for two reasons. First, because her example exposes the failure of liberal feminism to ensure the emancipation of women. The participation of a few token women in transit planning does not ensure that the transit system meets the needs of working class women in the region. The advancement of a few bourgeois women is actually done at the expense of the majority of working class and marginalized women. Second, as TransLink CEO Pat Jacobsen has continued the legacy of former TransLink CEO Ken Dobell by prioritizing ultra-expensive SkyTrain expansion at the expense of the bus system. She embodies a contradiction within the transit system. While she is a public servant and CEO of a public transit system, she works in the interests of private corporations.



## TransLink

The TransLink board runs the public transit system in the GVRD; this board determines funding priorities, policy development, and conducts long-term planning. Twelve mayors and city councilors from across Greater Vancouver comprise the TransLink board. The Greater Vancouver Regional District board appoints TransLink board members for a one-year term (Government of BC, Province). The current TransLink board is comprised of nine white men, two white women, and one man of colour. In comparison, bus riders are disproportionately people of colour, Aboriginal people, and women. The majority of the current TransLink board adheres to the ideologies of capitalism, as is reflected in their actions on the board.

We see TransLink as a local manifestation of imperialism. Cuts to transit services, fee increases, and privatization of the transit service increase the divisions between the working class and the rich. TransLink follows the global trend of neoliberalism as they destroy our public transit system, selling it to private corporations through privatization schemes like public-private-partnerships (PPP). The TransLink board (with ongoing encouragement from TransLink staff) has an established pattern of cutting bus service and raising fares while pouring billions of dollars into privatization initiatives like the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver (RAV) Project. By making decisions that do not consider and redress racial, gender and class inequities in the transit system, TransLink exacerbates these divisions and reinforces patriarchy, national oppression and class exploitation in the GVRD.

## Transit dependent Women

Transit dependent women are those bus riders who do not have any other transportation option because they do not have access to a car. The transit dependent are majority poor people. Women, people of colour, and Aboriginal people are all disproportionately represented among the transit dependent precisely because they are the

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*Women in the GVRD are twenty percent more likely than men to depend on the bus as their mode of transportation to work.*

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most exploited and oppressed sectors of the working class and do not have enough money to buy a car.

Women are disproportionately transit dependent within communities of colour and Aboriginal communities as well. Women in the GVRD are twenty percent more likely than men to depend on the bus as their mode of transportation to work (Stats Canada, Community Profiles). In addition, women are twice as likely to depend on someone else to give them a ride to work, rather than drive themselves (Stats Canada, Community Profiles). Women who cannot drive because of age or disability are overwhelmingly transit dependent. Women who are older and women who are disabled are also more likely to be poor (Barile).

Working class women depend on social services like transit to negotiate complicated lives as workers, mothers, caregivers, family, friends and community members. Even in 2004 the average woman still makes 61 cents for every dollar that a man makes, and we are far more likely hold part



time and temporary employment (Centre for Social Justice, Gender). Since 1990 our real wages have fallen. Women in the GVRD are falling deeper into poverty as welfare is cut, employment insurance is increasingly impossible to access, and

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*Through fighting to win short-term gains for our community, we strengthen our selves and our communities for long-term victories: for justice & for genuine liberation.*

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unemployment levels soar at close to ten percent (Procaccini). Systemic racism exacerbates these gender inequities. Twenty percent of women in Canada live in poverty, but when we break it down it is clear that women of colour and Aboriginal women struggle with poverty to a much higher degree than white women. Thirty-seven percent of women of colour and forty-three percent of Aboriginal women live in poverty (Centre for Social Justice, Gender).

The average Canadian household spends \$9,078 per year on transportation costs; this is more than expenditures on recreation, health care, education and clothing combined (Stats Can, Household Expenditures). The amount spent on transportation is more than the average Canadian household spends on food (Stats Can, Household Expenditures). Due to the burden of reproductive labour, women are overwhelmingly responsible for balancing household budgets and juggling the necessities of life. Clearly, transit is an important need for working class women.

## Building a Movement

As working class women, women of colour and Aboriginal women struggle for our right to public services we struggle against the local manifestations of imperialism. Through our daily struggles to put our needs and vision at the centre of regional public policy and planning, we demand our right to economic and social justice for all. Through fighting to win short-term gains for our community, we strengthen our selves and our communities for long-term victories: for justice and for genuine liberation.

This document is a reflection of our collective analysis and a vision of one concrete strategy in the struggle for our collective rights. In the collective writing and editing of this document, we worked to synthesize the many concrete and intangible lessons that we learned over the course of working together on the Women in Transit Project. We put this writing forward as a resource on the struggles that working class women live through every day. We also attempt to advance a positive vision of what transit could be if transit dependent women were at the centre of public policy.



*Zail'a speaking at Youth of Colour in Consultation Against Systemic Racism rally*





The first section of the document, “Defend and Expand Public Services” examines the role of public services in the lives of working class women as well as the economic forces working to destroy public services and enact privatization in transit. The second section, “End Transit Racism” explains how systemic racism, interpersonal racism and national oppression are manifested in the transit system. The third section, “Public Health & Environmental Justice Now” details the implications of inadequate public transit on the health and environment of women and our communities. After outlining these numerous ways that patriarchy, national oppression and class exploitation are manifested and exacerbated in the transit system, the document concludes with concrete recommendations for change.

We plan to continue the process of educating, organizing and mobilizing to build a movement for the true emancipation of working class women, and thus for social and economic justice for all oppressed people. By talking together, sharing experiences, clarifying the forces that oppose us, and struggling for change we are confident that we can achieve a transit system that contributes to social and economic equality for transit dependent women.



*Members of the On-The-Bus crew preparing to fight the fare increase.*



## Defend & Expand Public Services

The Bus Riders Union believes that public transit is essential for working class women to participate in the social, economic, and political life of the region. The Universal Declaration of

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*Today we still struggle to defend and expand public services as a part of our larger struggle against capitalism and for the rights of our communities and the entire working class.*

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Human Rights guarantees our right to “equal access to public services” in order to fully participate in our societies (United Nations). Without public transit, women do not have equal access to the basic means of survival such as work, healthcare, education, and family contact. The experiences shared by women in the Women in Transit Project demonstrate the importance of public transit in women’s lives. Women’s experiences also expose the devastating effects of privatization on the public transit system. To ensure women the right to be healthy, independent, and active members of society, we need an expanded women-centred public transit system.

### Transit is a Public Service

#### The Emergence of Public Services

Public services were won through an upsurge in working class militancy after the Second World

War. Demands on the state made by working class people for a certain minimal standard of living were part of a larger struggle to resist the advances of capitalism and sustain workers, their families, and their communities. Workers demanded from the state the provision of a social wage. Public services like healthcare, education and transit constitute this social wage that helps working class people attain a basic standard of living. By ensuring some degree of access to services that we would be unable to afford through wages alone (Nasser), public services redistribute wealth to working class communities. In the context of a rapidly growing gap between the rich and the poor, public services are an essential resource for our working class communities.

Despite the history of struggle, public services are also responsive to the needs of private business. Pressure for public services also came from private business for the state to provide services in sectors where profits could not be made but the services were nevertheless crucial to developing industry and trade (Petras & Veltmeyer). Public services subsidize private business by supplementing inadequate wages and providing and maintaining the urban infrastructure necessary for production (Petras & Veltmeyer).

State-run services are necessary to sustain a healthy and productive workforce and also constitute an essential component of building and sustaining the private sector. Public services create a small degree of social equality not achievable through the market. Yet overall public services are



# Defend + expand public services

largely unsuccessful in re-distributing wealth between the rich and the working poor. Public services for the most part are not designed to address the roots of economic and social inequalities; as is evident in the massive disparities along class, race, and gender lines in Canada. However, advances in the provision of a social wage due to pressure from working class struggles did provide some degree of protection to working people from the worst effects of capitalism (Nasser). Today we still struggle to defend and expand public services as a part of our larger struggle against capitalism and for the rights of our communities and the entire working class.

## The Re-Emergence of Privatization

Under neoliberalism, multinational corporations in search of new markets and new opportunities for profit are once again taking over essential services like transit, education and healthcare.

Privatization shifts the production of goods and the provision of services to the private sector. Privatization can either be 'complete', the sale of state owned and operated enterprises, firms and services to private business; or 'partial' such as voucher systems, the implementation of user fees, and public private partnerships (PPP) (Nasser). PPP is an especially profitable method of privatization, as the state funds the infrastructure and guarantees returns, while private corporations collect the profits from an audience of 'captive' consumers. Working class communities have no choice but to 'purchase' services like utilities, health care, and transportation from corporations, yet these very same communities have no control over the provision of services and no say in the costs associated. The profit motivation of private corporations is irreconcilable with the provision of services based on public need.

The privatization of public services began in the Third World in the 1970s and acceler-

## Public Private Partnerships (PPPs)



PPP is a particular kind of privatization that involves the private sector completely taking over construction and/or operation of public utilities, infrastructure and services (CCPA) while the state continues to fund infrastructure costs through direct subsidy or other means.

The justification for PPP is that they are more cost-effective and efficient than publicly run projects and services (CCPA). In reality private sector provision of public services through PPP is more expensive than publicly run projects and services because of the imperative for private companies to accumulate profit (Redlin). The quality of service deteriorates and public health is compromised as corporations seek to reduce production and operating costs, cutting corners to their profit margins (CCPA). PPP involves hiring non-union labour either in part or completely in order to minimize labour costs. Not only do people pay more to use services operated privately, but also if companies don't make a profit, the state has the 'obligation' to subsidize corporate earnings (CCPA). We can see the disaster PPP can cause in the construction of schools in Nova Scotia where low-quality materials were used and students and teachers had to drink bottled water after arsenic was found in the water (CCPA). While service decreases, high user fees make services inaccessible to a large majority of working class people.



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ated through the 1980s and 90s at the hands of imperialist nations, the IMF and the World Bank. Privatization has been forcibly implemented through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. In the First World, privatization has been incremental through partial privatization (contracting out and voucher systems) and PPP. Privatization dissolves the social safety net provided by the former welfare state, rejecting state responsibility for the health and well being of the public (Nasser); privatization in the First World mirrors what has been accomplished in the Third World. Privatization eliminates democratic

process by undermining democratically elected governments and divesting people of their basic rights to food, clean water, health care, education and transit.

Neoliberal governments consistently allow what remains of public services to deteriorate. Generating financial 'crises' in the public sector allows governments to steadily increase user fees, and justifies privatization in the name of 'salvaging the system' (Petras & Veltmeyer). Where services have been under-funded and deteriorated, the state sells parts of these sectors to the private business at subsidized rates. In instances where services are partially privatized through contract-

## Richmond-Airport-Vancouver (RAV) Line



The Richmond-Airport-Vancouver (RAV) rapid transit line will connect the Airport to Vancouver's downtown core. Vancouver's big business lobby is pushing RAV, including the Vancouver Board of Trade and the Vancouver Airport Authority, the pro-Olympics lobby and the BC provincial government. It will be constructed and operated as a PPP project, which means that a private company will be paid with public money to design, build, and operate the line. The proposed length of the contract is 35 years for which they are guaranteed profits based on estimated ridership of 100 000 riders per day (Society Promoting Environmental Conservation).

The RAV project is exorbitantly expensive and will funnel approximately \$1.35 billion of public money into initial capital investment costs. While the current annual cost per seat on a bus is \$6000, the average annual cost of a seat on Skytrain is \$36,000.00 (Society Promoting Environmental Conservation). These figures are expected to skyrocket with RAV. Transit dependent bus riders will bear the brunt of the costs of the RAV line. Bus riders will pay for cost overruns generated by underground construction, debt-servicing costs, and low ridership through fare increases.

Bus riders will also suffer the consequences of RAV through decreased bus service; TransLink plans to radically cut bus service on all North-South routes including the already overcrowded Fraser, Main, Cambie, Oak, and Granville buses (GVTA). Virtually all public transit dollars are being funneled into RAV while bus riders are being forced to endure countless hardships.

All decisions surrounding the RAV line have been undemocratic, secretive, and lacking in accountability to the public. The PricewaterhouseCoopers study "Report on Financial Feasibility" that outlined the projected costs of RAV to the public has not been made available to the public (Redlin). TransLink voted on the same motion to move to the Best and Final Offer four times until it passed. RAV is a perfect case study of how privatization sacrifices public need and right to democratic process to profit making.



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ing out, vouchers, user-fees, and PPP, the costs of capital investment, debt servicing and risk are still born by the public.

## Public Transit in the Lower Mainland

The tension between state provision of services in response to public need and state responsiveness to the needs of private business has shaped the development of public transit in the Lower Mainland. Between 1889 and 1961 private companies ran transit in Vancouver. The provincial government took over transit in the early 1960s when it became unprofitable as ridership plummeted as upwardly mobile families (mostly white) moved into the suburbs and the automobile became the most common mode of transportation (Coast Mountain). The system was initially funded exclusively through fares, but with the decline in ridership government subsidies were necessary to maintain transit service needed by people who couldn't afford cars or who couldn't drive because of age or disability (Ahad).

In 1999, the province transferred responsibility for transit in the Lower Mainland to the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority, more popularly known as TransLink (Coast Mountain). Though TransLink has a mandate to provide a public service, TransLink Board and staff have pursued transit planning that prioritizes the interests of private business over those of transit dependent communities and have been moving towards privatizing the transit system.

Driven by the neoliberal imperative, the system is reverting to a user-pay and for-profit model that places private enterprise at the center of transit planning and funding priorities. This

model re-creates bus riders as 'customers' rather than entitled owners of the transit system. Rather than recognize the needs of women and people of colour and ensure their right to mobility, TransLink prioritizes the needs of the 'choice rider'. The 'choice rider' is the transit user who has other transit options available but chooses to ride transit. The 'choice rider' usually has a higher income than

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*76% of transit users ride buses while only 24% use the SkyTrain.*

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the transit dependent and is less likely to be a woman or person of colour.

76% of transit users ride buses while only 24% use the SkyTrain. However, these figures are skewed, as TransLink re-routed buses to Skytrain Stations with the introduction of the Millennium Line, and many SkyTrain riders cannot access the Skytrain without the bus (TransLink, Report). Yet, to attract the 'choice rider', TransLink funds expensive services like SkyTrain at the expense of funding the bus service, the backbone of the transit system. As TransLink Director Barbara Sharp voted in favour of the Richmond-Airport-



*Artwork by Sophie Roberts*



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Vancouver rapid transit line she revealed this motivation when she stated that a different kind of people ride rail and buses and TransLink should attract the right kind of rider. Planning that prioritizes the needs of the male middle class ‘choice rider’ over those of the transit dependent is the antithesis of running transit as a public service. As a result, transit dependent people who are majority women and disproportionately from communities of colour have their right to mobility violated.

## Working Class Women Need Public Transit

*“This is the problem with privatization; it’s an excuse not to care about the public”<sup>1</sup>*

Women carry a double burden of paid work and unpaid reproductive work and as such women have greater need for public services than men do, yet public services were not designed around the undervalued and underpaid nature of women’s work (OECD).

As a public service, transit should be accessible to and meet the needs of the people who

most rely on it. Women are the majority of transit dependent people in the Lower Mainland and are disproportionately women of colour. Women are more likely to live below the poverty line, have low-paying, part-time, flexible paid jobs and to be single parents. As women, we make enormous unpaid contributions to our society. Since public transit is a component of our social wage, transit dependent women are particularly entitled to a transit system that is centred on our needs and ensure that we can meet our basic needs such as employment, healthcare, and childcare.

Despite our significant claim to a social wage, transit service has never guaranteed our right to mobility.

## Reproductive Labour

*“I am a low-income mom living in the DTES [Downtown Eastside]. In order to go out of the neighbourhood to buy groceries, I have to pay \$5.00 each way (\$2.00 for me and \$1.50 for each child). This is ridiculous... I think it is shameful that children have to pay \$1.50 for each ride. That \$10 could buy me 8 litres of milk.”<sup>2</sup>*

Public services help equalize the burdens of reproductive labour such as childcare and elder care; without access to public social services, this work falls primarily on individual women. Despite women’s disproportionate reliance on public services, the design and provision of public transit in the Lower Mainland ignores the unique needs and visions of women and rather prioritizes nine-to-five commuters. It is women and children who suffer the greatest consequences of inaccessible



*Zaila presenting at the BRU meeting to Stop the Fare Hite*



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public transit in our region. Throughout this document, the hardships that women endure due to the burden of ‘women’s work’ are also a call to re-prioritize women at the centre of public transit.

## **Paid Labour**

*“I’ve had to pass up so many job opportunities because I couldn’t get a bus – serving jobs; you know, the ones with tips”<sup>3</sup>*

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right “to a job with just and favorable conditions of work and a living wage” (United Nations). Having affordable and reliable transit is fundamental to securing and maintaining paid work. However, the current public transit system does not serve women’s needs for traveling to and from work. The central function of public transit has always been to efficiently move workers to their job sites and particularly in and out of the downtown core (Ahad). Public transit subsidizes the private sector by absorbing the cost of transporting workers to and from workplaces. This model does not serve the transit needs of the majority of women, particularly women of colour (OECD, 24).

## **The Flexibilization of Women’s Labour**

Women are historically paid less than men and continue to be concentrated in low wage-work, particularly in the service sector. Service sector workers are disproportionately women of colour and are super-exploited as a result of the oppression of women and the pervasive racism in our society.

As a result of neoliberal economics, the flexibilization of labour has further pushed women into insecure jobs, often on contract with low wages and irregular hours. The recent wave of privatization of health care services in BC has pushed women out of secure, well-paid unionized jobs into uncertain low-wage contracts with irregu-

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*As a result of neoliberal economics, the flexibilization of labour has further pushed women into insecure jobs, often on contract with low wages and irregular hours.*

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lar hours. Bus Riders Union organizers have talked to hundreds of health care workers who have lost their jobs. Increasingly, we meet women working on contract in the health care sector being paid less than one half of former unionized rates. As women’s work is increasingly flexibilized, we rely more heavily on public transit to access jobs at all times in all areas of the region.

## **Attacks on the Rights of Working Class Women**

Women in the Lower Mainland face daily attacks on our right to public transit. From inadequate services to rising user-fees, women face daily struggles to negotiate our lives on a failing public transit system.

### **Inadequate service hours**

Women express frustration and anger that a lack of adequate and affordable transportation creates so many barriers to the already difficult task of finding and keeping work:



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*Our livelihood, my income, is dependent on my ability to reach various job sites. As a security guard, I can get called to work at any time to go almost anywhere in the Lower Mainland. When my scheduler calls, the very first thing I have to know before I can accept work is, "Can I get a bus there?"*<sup>4</sup>

Women find that they cannot support their families on their wages, spend countless unpaid hours on the bus to and from work, and struggle to afford the current bus fares.

Transit service hours are organized around the concept of 'peak hours' in which service increases in the morning and again in the late afternoon and early evening. Despite the fact that bus riders work irregular hours and use transit for other needs, bus service is centred on nine-to-five workers. The buses are especially unreliable when the service is reduced, particularly on the weekends and in the afternoons and evenings, when many shift workers are travelling to and from work:

*"I do shift work and I sometimes take the bus after 9:30 am. The buses are not frequent at this time*

*and I have to wait. Most people taking the bus do shift work... There is less service between 9:30 am and 3 p.m. Buses during this time are off schedule"*<sup>5</sup>

*"We need more service on Saturdays and Sundays and in the morning time also. Most people work on Saturdays and Sundays, we pay taxes too. I wait for a long time, then I'm late for work. That causes big problems"*<sup>6</sup>

Bus service begins at 5:30am at the earliest, and ends as early as 6:00pm on some suburban routes and between 12am and 1:30am on inner city routes. In 2001 TransLink cut the heavily used Night Owl service that ran on 16 routes from 1:30 am to 3:30 am. Shortly after the cuts, a worker confirmed:

*"Monday to Friday I take the #8 Fraser from Granville and Nelson to Fraser and 49<sup>th</sup> either at 12:30 am, 1am, or 1:30 am and every night no matter the hour the bus is completely full (every seat is full) for my entire 45 minute ride"*<sup>7</sup>

## Bus Riders Win Return of Night Owl Buses



In March 2004, the Bus Riders Union won our campaign, *Night Owl Buses: End the Curfew Now!* In September 2004, TransLink will return Night Owl service on all 16 routes cut: Vancouver routes #5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 35 and suburban routes #106, 112, 150, 242, 401, 403, 410. Despite this victory, late night and early morning service is still inadequate. Night Owl routes leave large portions of the city completely unserved, particularly in outlying areas of Greater Vancouver. The region is still without buses for over two hours, often a critical time

for late night and early morning shift workers. Women need 24-hour transit seven days a week on an expanded number of routes to have guaranteed access to work. Our demand for 24-hour transit is also a demand to end transit racism that further marginalizes women of colour already faced with severe economic and social hardship.





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As a consequence of the lack of late night bus service, many women lost their jobs, have to refuse much-needed shifts, or cannot take new jobs. Night shift workers are disproportionately from immigrant working class communities and suffer the worst consequences of the lack of late night bus service:

*“I use to do night shift and it was hard getting back [after they cut the night owl buses] – I had to switch from night shift to day shift. I was working in a warehouse at Royal Oak – I couldn’t get back. I lost my job altogether”<sup>8</sup>*

*“Denny’s workers get off shift at 4am. Three workers (all women) had to quit because can’t get a bus home and busboy sleeps in the storeroom until bus runs in the morning”<sup>9</sup>*

The lack of early morning service is also a major problem for many shift workers.

*“[I am a] health care worker. [It’s] hard to take the buses early. [I] have to miss shifts that start early because there are no buses.... Soon [I’m] moving to White Rock, where there is only one bus to in the morning to Vancouver Monday to Friday, not on weekends. This means I will be late in the morning getting to work at 41st and Oak. Only evening shifts available to me now”<sup>10</sup>*

Because the service does not run when they need it, many workers spend a high percentage of their income on cab fares. The cabs fares drastically lower take-home wages and in many cases

take money directly out of essentials such as food and rent:

*“I used to work at the Bingo Hall and get off at 1:30am. When I get off I’d have to take a cab. It’s cost me \$18 - when you’re making minimum wage – take a cab five times a week”<sup>11</sup>*

*“I work at the casino at the end of the #8 bus line as a waitress. I work till 4am and even the night service has ended. I take a \$20 cab ride home, a quarter of my tips. I can’t take certain shifts because I can’t afford it”<sup>12</sup>*

*“[I] work in a hotel, [I] work until 2:30am miss the last bus. Have to call my son or call a taxi and pay \$16 – this is more than one hour’s wages. I have to work late; I don’t have a choice”<sup>13</sup>*

The cost of taxi fares is also an indicator of the importance of public transit in facilitating women’s access to work. Without it, many women simply cannot afford mobility, and hence cannot



*Heather organizing on the bus*



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access work:

*“I worked at London Drugs from 5am to 9am. I lived five minutes away, but I moved and had to quit because the taxi would have been too much. I didn’t make enough to pay for a taxi”<sup>14</sup>*

For more information on the effects of the lack of late night bus services, see *Night Owl Buses*:

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*On accessible routes, wheelchair lifts are often broken and women are forced to wait for several buses for a bus with a working lift.*

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*Towards Social Justice in the Vancouver Region, A Report of the Bus Riders Union (2003).*

## Insufficient routes

Bus routes criss-cross the Greater Vancouver region, yet large areas remain un-served or under-served. Within Vancouver there is particularly a shortage of East-West routes. Elderly women and women with disabilities express difficulty walking a long ways to the closest bus stop. One woman who uses the #3 Main bus to get to work expressed concern that she might have to walk to Cambie if the Main bus is cut after the construction of rapid transit:

*“Don’t cut this bus... It hurts my heart. I’m getting old and I can’t walk the five or more blocks to Cambie”<sup>15</sup>*

Insufficient routes in suburban areas are also a major barrier to accessing work:

*“My car is broken and I work in the Surrey Public Library System. I live in Vancouver and it takes me 2.5 to 3 hours to get to work. There*

*are 6 or 7 branches in Surrey. One or two have a bus to get there, but it stops at 6pm. I have to beg for a ride or take a cab, which costs me \$18-25 to get to Surrey Central SkyTrain Station. I turn down sometimes 2 shifts a week. It’s really stressful not having the income. I’m on call, which so many people are, and trying to balance a few different jobs”<sup>16</sup>*

## Unreliable and infrequent service

Women find public transit very unreliable. Buses are slow because the system is overburdened, the aging bus fleet breaks down frequently, connections are badly planned, and buses are infrequent. Transit dependent women concentrated in contract and flexible work are vulnerable to being fired if their bus is late. They compensate by leaving early, but even then are often late:

*“I need to give myself one hour to get to work and it’s supposed to be a 20 minute ride”<sup>17</sup>*

*“I live in the West End. In the morning I take the #6 [Davie]. It’s such a headache in the morning. Just yesterday the bus was full, it just passed me by. I was late for work. I’m a community health worker; I rely on the bus to get from client to client. It negatively affects my clients (if I am late)”<sup>18</sup>*

Bus riders also lose job opportunities because they’re late for interviews:

*“I take the #17 [Oak]. I was late for an interview so I didn’t do the interview.... I wait a long time for the #17, so I leave an extra 20 min-*



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*utes or 30 minutes before I need to, [to] be on time”<sup>19</sup>*

*right back to what my insurance costs were for my car and that’s just for one zone fare!”<sup>21</sup>*

## Inaccessible buses

Despite expressing a commitment to make all routes wheelchair accessible, some of the busiest routes in Vancouver are not accessible, such as the #8 Fraser and #3 Main routes. The trolley buses were supposed to be replaced five years ago with kneeling trolleys, but TransLink cancelled the contract to prioritize the construction of the Millennium SkyTrain line.

On accessible routes, wheelchair lifts are often broken and women are forced to wait for several buses for a bus with a working lift. The result is that women with disabilities do not have the mobility they need in an already difficult struggle to find employment. This pushes them further into poverty and reinforces their marginalization in society:

*“It’s hard for people in wheelchairs to get on the bus. Sometimes I have to wait for the next bus but it is not accessible”<sup>20</sup>*

## High Fares

*“After moving to Vancouver from Vernon for work, I found my biggest expenses pertained to transportation... Rent and food come first, so in my family’s best interests I sold my car and now rely on public transit for commuting, shopping, school, visiting friends, etc. All 3 of us take transit, but I now find buying bus passes puts me*

TransLink is forcing those who most need the service and can least afford to pay to pay increasing user fees. Although women and men pay the same fares, women are disproportionately affected by high fares due to lower incomes and greater need for transit. User fees are a symptom of TransLink’s business mentality that transforms bus riders from entitled members of society with a human right to transit into ‘customers’ who only have access to transit if they can pay. With the drive towards privatization, user fees are a mechanism for the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich. TransLink steals money out of the pockets



*Two women struggling to get cart full of groceries on a trolley bus*



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of bus riders and funnels it directly into privatization projects like the RAVline to create profits for the rich while transit dependent communities suffer the consequences. Public transit ceases to be a public service when the people who most need it cannot access it.

With each fare increase, the cost of transit falls more heavily on individual women and families. Women have to choose between transit and other necessities, substantially lowering women's quality of living:

*"I spend \$187 on bus passes every month. I could use this money on food, bills. Things are already tight. Transit is a major expense."*<sup>22</sup>

## Zones

The fare structure through which TransLink collects fares increases the burden on transit dependent women. The zone system imposes an arbitrary cost for women travelling to work, school, social services and social activities. Increasingly, working class people are moving into the outlying



Map of the zone system in the GVRD

suburbs where the housing and cost of living is cheaper than in Vancouver. However, many bus riders find that their transit costs offset any financial savings: a three-zone trip costs \$8 (one hour's wages for many women) and a three-zone monthly bus pass costs \$120. Some women are forced to move because they cannot afford the zones:

*"I am a foreign student from Mexico. The fares are hard for us to afford. I had to move from Vancouver to Burnaby because the two-zone fare was too expensive"*

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The zone system limits where transit dependent women live, work, study, and socialize.

## Monthly passes

Women said the monthly passes are too expensive yet they are forced to buy them because the cash fares are worse. Many women don't have \$63, \$87, or \$120 to buy a monthly pass for themselves and their families at the beginning of the month when rent and other bills are also due. At a Bus Riders Union public meeting on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, one woman shared how she borrowed the money from her brother to buy a bus pass, but later found out that as a result he couldn't afford to eat for two days<sup>24</sup>. Women who cannot afford the pass end up paying far more than \$63/87/120 over the course of the month. A monthly pass is the cost of 31 rides or 15 trips. Transit dependent women who take one one-zone trip a day per month will pay \$126 in cash fares, and most transit dependent women take more than one trip per day. Those with the lowest incomes end up paying the most in user fees and are the worst hit by high fares:



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*“I take the bus a lot. If I don’t buy a bus pass, I’m paying almost \$10/day, hard for someone making minimum wage.... Sometimes I don’t have the \$63 at the beginning of month [for a bus pass] – it’s too much”<sup>25</sup>*

## Transfer times

Due to high fares, women often run all of their errands on one transfer. Women will drop off one kid at school; another at day-care, go grocery shopping and then rush home before her ticket expires. Yet, usually, transfer times are too short for women to accomplish their many tasks. Trip times are even longer when children accompany women. To compensate for short transfer times, women prioritize among essential things they need to get done, always leaving something for the next trip.

Women are also constrained in social activities because they cannot afford to pay for a second or return fare:

*“Bus fares only have a 1 1/2 hour limit, so that limits me from doing outdoor activities with my baby”<sup>26</sup>*

For long one-way trips with multiple connections or covering a long distance, one transfer is not long enough. An already expensive trip crossing zone boundaries becomes more expensive when women have to pay for another ticket:

*“I take the bus to North Vancouver. I have to pay \$1.50 and an extra \$0.50 for zone change. And if I pass my 1.5 hours I need to pay it again. So I’ll have to pay \$6 a day for going out”<sup>27</sup>*

## Women on Welfare

Due to provincial funding cuts, women on welfare in BC have lost much of their previous mobility due to a virtual elimination of free bus passes and tickets. New punitive rules surrounding access to transportation mean that women on welfare can only access free bus tickets for job-related reasons such as job interviews. Women

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*Children’s fares in the Greater Vancouver Region are the highest in Canada even without the cost of the zones (Orsini).*

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no longer can access free public transit for medical appointments or for childcare.

Women who are forced into ‘job clubs’ and ‘training’ in order to collect welfare to survive are finding they are forced to evade bus fares as the cost of public transit far exceeds their ability to pay. Women are increasingly trapped in their communities by punitively high bus fares.

The situation facing single mothers on welfare is dire. After the costs of rent and phone, a single mother on welfare in the Lower Mainland has only \$9.60/day to pay for all necessities including hydro, clothing, food, health care costs, school supplies, birthday presents, and all other expenses (BC Ministry of Human Resources, Rates). When bus fare is \$4.00 for an adult and \$3.00 for a child per each return trip, this cost consumes almost the entire daily budget for a woman on welfare with one child. Yet, in order to be eligible for welfare, women must make multiple trips to the welfare office, to family maintenance workers, and to ‘job training’ programs.



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## Children's fares

Paying the fares for an entire family is very expensive. Children's fares in the Greater Vancouver Region are the highest in Canada even without the cost of the zones (Orsini). Children 5 to 13 years pay concession fares, \$1.50 for one zone, \$2 and \$3 for two and three zones respectively, and \$40 for a monthly pass (TransLink, Fares). The price of the children's fare falls on the family, in particular mothers and hits single mothers hardest:

*"When the fares go up, I have two young children, and that [the fare increase] will be 20 cents extra every time. I cannot leave my kids at home, I have to take them with me everywhere I go to get groceries etc. It's also not good for my kids if I tell my daughters that they can't go anywhere because I can't afford the bus fare"*<sup>28</sup>

*"I have a family of 4. It costs 7\$ one way to use transit. Its expensive as it is to go out as a family (e.g. visit to Stanley Park). It's a barrier to go shopping as well. So with the fare increase it will cost even more to go to the mall and back home. For a low-income family it's really expensive"*<sup>29</sup>

## Youth and Students

### High School Students

High school students need transit to get to and from school, visit friends and family, and to have independence from parents. For most youth, while their families pay for their passes or tickets

they often share the cost. Even with the concession fare, youth and their families find the fares too expensive.

Youth 14 to 19 years old are eligible for a concession fare if they are enrolled in secondary school and have a GoCard card issued by their schools. Making concession fares for students contingent on the GoCard criminalizes youth. Youth have to prove that they are students; TransLink assumes that they are trying to cheat the system. SkyTrain cops target youth for 'fare evasion' and give out excessive fines that neither they nor their families can afford.

At the focus group at Vancouver Technical Secondary School, a young woman recounted how SkyTrain Police harassed her and her friends for not having their GoCards, even though they were carrying textbooks with them:

*"I was going out with four friends. Three out of four of us didn't have our GoCards. One because [she] didn't receive it. They [the SkyTrain police] gave us tickets [fines]"*<sup>30</sup>

Immigrant youth and youth of colour are especially targeted and criminalized by SkyTrain police and subject to racial profiling as part of a greater process of criminalization.

### College and University Students

In 2003, Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia implemented the U-Pass, a mandatory three-zone pass that all part-time and full-time students have to buy into. Students are required to pay for the pass through student fees at the beginning of each semester, averaging at \$23 (SFU) and \$20 (UBC) per month



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respectively. TransLink anticipated the pass to be 'revenue neutral' or equal to what students previously paid in monthly passes. In 2003 TransLink received \$300 000 from VanCity as the corporate sponsor and \$8 per student per term from Simon Fraser University (Hui).

The U-Pass is meant to attract students to public transit as 'choice riders', although it also provides transit dependent students with a cheaper pass. The pass has successfully attracted new riders as transit use rose over 40% at SFU (SFU). The cheaper pass is also very popular with transit dependent students; it is an indicator of how a cheaper pass and no zones could serve the needs of the transit dependent.

Other post-secondary institutions in the region do not have access to the U-pass. These institutions usually have cheaper tuition and a higher percentage of working class students who are more likely to be working their way through school. Full-time students receive a "fast trax" sticker with which they can travel through all zones on an adult one-zone monthly Fare Card (TransLink, Fares). College students currently pay three times what SFU and UBC students pay for transit, adding onto to student debt and increasing the need for additional employment on top of studies. Rather than based on need, TransLink negotiates who has access to the U-Pass based on cost and profitability and attracting the 'choice rider'.

Students at private schools do not receive a fast trax sticker that would allow them to travel through all three zones on a one-zone pass. These students are far more likely to be foreign students and immigrants and experience compounded

hardship:

*"I go to private school in Burnaby, but I live in Vancouver. I have to pay two zones and I don't get a sticker for the zones because it's a private school. We are all students but only the public school students get the sticker. Why do we have pay extra?"<sup>31</sup>*

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*The fight against 'fare evasion' allows TransLink to blame bus riders for funding shortfalls and fare increases and to justify fare enforcement and criminalization.*

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## Seniors and people with disabilities

A provincial program provides a \$45 pass for low-income seniors and people with disabilities (BC Ministry of Human Resources, Special). The



*Yuly talking with a bus rider*



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importance of the senior's pass was exposed in 2002 when the provincial government proposed cutting the pass and the protest was so great that the provincial government backed down.

Low-income seniors and people with disabilities cannot afford the \$40 monthly concession pass or the regular adult pass. Senior working class women are low-income because they've spent their lives working for low wages and carrying the burden of unpaid reproductive labour. Women with disabilities are disproportionately poor and marginalized due to the pervasive inaccessibility of our society and the

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*Criminalization is based on ability to pay and not on need or commitment to ensure universal human rights.*

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systemic exclusion of people with disabilities. When applying for the means-tested provincial pass, these women are subjected to a humiliating process of proving that they are low-income. Means testing undermines our entitlement to public services and violates our human right to transit; means testing makes us feel like charity cases.

Means testing also legitimizes user fees for public services by creating an arbitrary definition of 'low-income'. We know from discussions with bus riders that most cannot afford the fare and many have been denied use of the service as a result.

TransLink further humiliates and violates the privacy of senior women and women with disabilities by making the pass easily identifiable

and printing the bus rider's age in large numbers on the front of the pass:

*"I have a seniors bus pass and I think it's outrageous that they put my birth year in such big numbers for everyone to see. In my generation, you don't ask a woman her age"<sup>32</sup>*

Women are forced to put the pass in the electronic fare boxes despite the fact that many seniors and people with disabilities carry the passes around their necks to avoid losing them and find it physically difficult to take the pass out and put it in the box. Women using a can or a walker are at risk of falling and seriously injuring themselves when standing on a moving bus. The same woman continued:

*"They try to make me put my card in the box. I take it out and tell them I can't see and they have to put it in for me. Usually they [the drivers] apologize"<sup>33</sup>*

## Bus Drivers

Bus riders' experiences of paying high fares often manifest through conflict with drivers. Bus drivers are required simply to inform bus riders of the fare, not to enforce them. However, many drivers do not consider transit as a public service to which everyone is entitled regardless of their ability to pay and hence believe it is their responsibility to collect fares. For many transit dependent women, drivers refuse to let them on if they cannot pay; often women experience a condescending attitude from bus drivers who do let them on without paying.





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## Criminalizing Bus Riders

While women are expected to cope with increasing fares and less bus service, they face increasing humiliation and criminalization in the transit system. Women are criminalized for not being able to afford high fares, which is especially problematic for women having to pay for children and having difficulties getting strollers, wheelchairs and groceries on and off the bus. Instead of being treated as entitled owners of the transit system, women are treated as undeserving customers. Criminalization created through mechanisms like fare increases and increased transit 'security' is based on the idea that entitlement to transit service is based on ability to pay and not on need or commitment to ensure universal human rights.

TransLink criminalizes transit dependent women through high fares and fare enforcement. The fight against 'fare evasion' allows TransLink to blame bus riders for funding shortfalls and fare increases and to justify fare enforcement and criminalization. In 2002, TransLink spent \$30 million on new electronic fare boxes to monitor fare payment. In an interview with the Vancouver Courier, TransLink spokesman Ken Hardie reported that on SkyTrain 100,000 riders a week are checked for fares. In 2002, TransLink issued over 41,000 violation tickets of \$46 each for non-payment of fares (Howell). TransLink has applied to the Provincial Ministry of Transportation to raise the fine to \$150 and a mechanism to force riders to pay their tickets. Money that goes into security and monitoring bus riders comes out of the bus system:

*"I think they should spend less money on security and more on buses. What do they think we're all criminals? They did a test and 0.01% don't have tickets. Where's the evidence?"<sup>34</sup>*

In addition to raising fares, TransLink has also created a 'war on crime' on the SkyTrain in which every bus rider becomes a potential criminal (in addition to a fare evader). In April 2004, the Solicitor General Rich Colman announced that SkyTrain constables will be given new powers to enforce drug laws, execute outstanding warrants and arrest people who have committed crimes outside of a SkyTrain station. The unit of 77 officers will also undergo review of their equipment policy, which might allow them to carry handguns. The increased security creates an unsafe and fearful climate in which bus riders' fear TransLink security:

*"I take the SkyTrain to and from Joyce and Granville station. On several occasions I have stepped off the train at Joyce to see/hear the security guards dealing with people. I am not impressed with their attitude, tone (very aggressive), body language (very aggressive) and language choice (very very aggressive). ...I do not feel safe when I get off the train to hear SkyTrain guards yelling and swearing. I saw many older immigrants get away from there as fast as they could"<sup>35</sup>*



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## TransLink's Unaccountable and Undemocratic Process

TransLink consistently makes decisions that are not in the best interests of transit dependent communities. The TransLink board does not represent transit dependent communities and is in no way directly accountable to bus riders. Undemocratic structures exclude transit dependent women

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*For bus riders, attending a TransLink meeting can mean leaving home at 7 am, transferring several times, paying a two or three zone fare, and committing to several hours of travel time.*

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from meaningful decision-making. Women's experiences are tokenized or derided in sham public consultations. Women are not provided with information necessary to develop educated opinions on transit planning.

## Appointed not Elected

The TransLink board is comprised of twelve mayors and councillors from the municipalities that make up the Lower Mainland.



*Kirat presenting on behalf of WIT at the TransLink Board meeting at Burnaby City Hall*

Board members are appointed to TransLink, unlike the directly elected Vancouver School Board and Vancouver Parks Board. As a result, the board is not accountable for its decisions via the electoral system. Moreover, not one of the board members is transit dependent and they do not reflect the class, racial or gender make-up, or interests of the transit dependent.

## Inaccessible meetings

TransLink holds monthly board meetings at which people can sign up to give a five-minute presentation. However, these meetings are inaccessible to transit dependent women. Meetings are held at 9 am on weekday mornings when transit dependent people are working, caring for children or have other commitments. Meetings alternate between the municipalities of the Greater Vancouver Region and are generally difficult to access by bus. For bus riders, attending a TransLink meeting can mean leaving home at 7 am, transferring several times, paying a two or three zone fare, and committing to several hours of travel time.

TransLink does not provide free childcare and does not tolerate the presence of children in the meetings. For transit dependent mothers, this makes attendance and meaningful participation at TransLink meetings impossible. In one WIT workshop, women with small children expressed the desire to speak at a TransLink meeting but lamented multiple barriers to attending the meeting such as the cost of childcare and the length of time women would spend separated from their children due to long travel times.

Transit dependent women who do not



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speakers that since the presenters were all addressing Night Owl buses they were thus all saying basically the same thing and could make it quick. Despite McCallum's racist and sexist generalization, each speaker conveyed particular experiences of hardship in their communities due to the lack of late night bus service.

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## Lack of Democratic Participation

transit dependent people when making decisions. When the TransLink board voted to restore Night Owl service, board member and North Vancouver mayor Barbara Sharp responded to the delegations by denying TransLink's culpability for the experiences of gender and racial violence lived by transit dependent communities due to the lack of late night bus service. Sharp suggested that bringing back the Night Owl buses made "good economic sense" citing that urban regions considered to be 'World Class Cities' have 24-hour bus service<sup>36</sup>. Sharp's comments demonstrate how TransLink does not make decisions to provide a public service according to need, but as a private business.

Delegates must apply to TransLink to be allowed a five-minute delegation at least two business days before the meeting. Permission to speak is never guaranteed: Bus Riders Union organizers were briefly 'banned' by TransLink from speaking on an issue more than once in a lifetime, until political pressure forced TransLink to back down.

The TransLink board members, particularly the chair, are quick to become impatient with the presentations of transit dependent people and frequently interrupt. While they give TransLink staff and business organizations lengthy amounts of time to make their presentations, bus riders are told to "keep things brief." At the March 2004 meeting, representatives from the Filipino Nurses Support Group, Vancouver Rape Relief, the Palestine Community Centre, the South Asian Youth Alliance, student groups from Simon Fraser University, and the Bus Riders Union made presentations on the motion to return Night Owl service. TransLink Chair Doug McCallum suggested to the

transit dependent people when making decisions. When the TransLink board voted to restore Night Owl service, board member and North Vancouver mayor Barbara Sharp responded to the delegations by denying TransLink's culpability for the experiences of gender and racial violence lived by transit dependent communities due to the lack of late night bus service. Sharp suggested that bringing back the Night Owl buses made "good economic sense" citing that urban regions considered to be 'World Class Cities' have 24-hour bus service<sup>36</sup>. Sharp's comments demonstrate how TransLink does not make decisions to provide a public service according to need, but as a private business.

Periodically, TransLink holds public consultations in which they seek public input on a specific issue. The barriers put in place to inhibit democratic participation in the monthly meetings expose these consultations as a sham. Secondly, TransLink's interests invariably shape the 'options'. In 2002, TransLink initiated public consultations where the public was asked to choose



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between Option 1 and Option 2: putting severe restrictions on the opinions, ideas, and input of communities on transit planning that meets our needs.

## Not transparent or accountable

TransLink does not provide the public with information with which to form educated opinions about public transit planning. Decisions that hurt transit dependent women are framed in crisis situations and a lack of funds, for example the fare increase of April 2002. The publicity around the fare increase was intended to mislead the public; TransLink has money for more buses and lower fares, but they choose to spend it on privatization projects that do not benefit the transit dependent.

The process around the Millennium Line SkyTrain extension provides a poignant example of the inherently undemocratic nature of TransLink's decision-making process. The fact that the public would bear the burden of paying \$332 million in debt servicing costs for the extension project was never disclosed to the public. The fact that fare increases and massive cuts to bus service would be needed to pay the costs of debt servicing for the project was never revealed to bus riders (Stromberg). Furthermore, the evidence that overwhelmingly suggested that TransLink also disregarded ridership targets for the Millennium line that would not materialize despite the fact that the money lost by inadequate ridership would be paid by the public (Stromberg). In order to cater to the private sector, TransLink withholds information from the public to disguise the negative impacts of its decisions on transit

dependent communities. One transit dependent woman, a senior, articulates her frustration with TransLink's lack of transparency:

*"I think they should spend less money on security and more on buses. What do they think we're all criminals? They did a test and 0.01% don't have tickets. Where's the evidence?"*

*P.S. Can we have accurate statistics i.e. do cheaters cost TransLink 10m per year, according to your bulletin? We read that less than one percent of SkyTrain riders cheat – certainly I rarely see anyone stopped. How about published evidence of the above?"*

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## Conclusion

Public transit is a human right. Working class women especially rely on public transit to manage a double workday, to find and keep employment, and access other public services. Yet neoliberalism undermines our entitlement to public transit; transit is increasingly driven by the needs of private profit and a business agenda.

Public transit is a crucial public service for working class women and our communities across the region. Public transit is a necessary component of our social wage and plays an important role in the redistribution of wealth in our society. For our right to mobility to be guaranteed, and for women to lead our lives with independence and dignity, with adequate income and access to our entire region, women need affordable, accessible, fully-public transit throughout the entire region.



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<sup>1</sup> WIT Testimonial 42

<sup>2</sup> WIT Testimonial 44

<sup>3</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 40

<sup>4</sup> WIT Testimonial 16

<sup>5</sup> WIT Testimonial 40

<sup>6</sup> WIT Testimonial 37

<sup>7</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 16

<sup>8</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 25

<sup>9</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 33

<sup>10</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 31

<sup>11</sup> WIT Testimonial 18

<sup>12</sup> WIT Testimonial 23

<sup>13</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 44

<sup>14</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 70

<sup>15</sup> WIT Testimonial 14

<sup>16</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 44

<sup>17</sup> WIT Testimonial 10

<sup>18</sup> WIT Testimonial 27

<sup>19</sup> WIT Testimonial 22

<sup>20</sup> WIT Testimonial 8

<sup>21</sup> WIT Testimonial 17

<sup>22</sup> WIT Testimonial 9

<sup>23</sup> Testimonial 62

<sup>24</sup> Bus Riders Union, Stop the Fare Increase Public Meeting; July 24, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> WIT Testimonial 26

<sup>26</sup> WIT Testimonial 31

<sup>27</sup> WIT Testimonial 56

<sup>28</sup> WIT Testimonial 58

<sup>29</sup> WIT Testimonial 41

<sup>30</sup> WIT Testimonial 65

<sup>31</sup> WIT Testimonial 33

<sup>32</sup> WIT Testimonial 24

<sup>33</sup> WIT Testimonial 24

<sup>34</sup> WIT Testimonial 24

<sup>35</sup> WIT Testimonial 3

<sup>36</sup> TransLink Board Meeting March 23, 2004, Burnaby City Hall, BC

<sup>37</sup> WIT Testimonial 24



## End Transit Racism

The Bus Riders Union knows from our on-the-ground organizing that working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities are among the most exploited and oppressed groups in the Lower Mainland, and are

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*Racism is experienced not just in interpersonal relations, but is more deeply entrenched in the structures, policies and practices of the nation-state and of capital.*

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among the worst served by public transit. We recognize the existence of systemic and interpersonal racism in Canada. Therefore we insist that TransLink cannot be colour-blind in its provision of a public transit service. The public provision of transit services must include an analysis of systemic racism, and must address the needs of working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities, particularly the needs of women of colour and Aboriginal women, in the transit planning process.

## Systemic Racism in Canada

Canada is a systemically racist society. People of colour and Aboriginal people experience systemic racism daily, from the education system to the legal system to the health care system to public services and beyond. This means that racism is experienced not just in interpersonal relations, but is more deeply entrenched in the structures, policies and practices of the nation-state and of capital.

## Colonization

Canada's racist history begins from its very inception as a colonial settler state. This means the exploitation and oppression of the indigenous peoples of this land, through appropriation and theft of land, forcing local indigenous communities onto reserves, and a genocidal residential school system. This oppression and exploitation continues today in the continued use of the Indian Act and the Treaty Process. This plays out in the lives of

## The Indian Act

The Indian Act is legislation that was first devised in 1876 by Parliament (not by Aboriginal people), and has been updated several times. It is based on earlier legislation such as the 1858 Civilization of Indian Tribes Act whose main goal was the assimilation of Aboriginal people. Through the Indian Act, the Canadian government used treaties with Aboriginal leaders to expropriate the land, while allotting minor portions of it to the Aboriginal populations as reserves. However, much of BC remains unceded.

The Indian Act denied Aboriginal people the right to vote, prohibited them from purchasing land, outlawed spiritual ceremonies, forced their relocation and segregation on reserves, restricted their civil and political rights, and expropriated their land. Aboriginal women who married outside their 'race' would lose their position as Status Indian (until 1985), while Aboriginal men could maintain their status and gain status for their non-Aboriginal wife. While some of these restrictions have now been lifted, the Canadian government continues to use the Indian Act to keep Aboriginal people from struggling for self-determination.



both urban and reserve Aboriginal women.

## Immigration Process

Since the inception of Canada as a colonial settler state, the nation has actively sought to lure migrants here to the (junior) 'land of milk and honey' in order to exploit them in the construction of the capitalist nation state. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, for example, Chinese labourers were imported to build the railroads for the Canadian Pacific Railway company in very exploitative conditions, as part of opening up the West of the continent for the colonial nation-building project that would benefit the European settlers. This trend of manipulating the migration of peoples in order to serve the needs of capital continues today.

Today's migrants are forced from their homelands due to difficult and repressive conditions created and maintained by the countries of the North, propelled by the hope for a 'better life'. They are selectively chosen by an

immigration system that calculates their value in terms of how well they can contribute to the perpetuation of a Canadian capitalist state. The immigration system imposes an ideology on those who are selected, making them feel like the 'lucky ones' and indebted to the state; this keeps them economically useful as workers and uncomplaining about the conditions they face when they arrive here. Immigrant women are made to feel grateful for being allowed into the country, and thus made to feel no sense of entitlement to public services such as health care, pension and transit.

Until the 1900s, immigrants came from European countries, the United States and Asia. But from 1900 until the Second World War, overtly racist policies became more exclusionary, ensuring that exclusively Europeans were admitted into Canada (Hiebert). Canada placed particular emphasis on entrepreneurial and investor immigrants, new categories made to attract

## The Komagata Maru



The case of the Komagata Maru is an example of the ways in which Canada has, at several times in its history, systematically excluded communities of colour. In 1914, this Japanese ship carrying 376 Punjabi South Asians (only two were women and four were children) hoping to find work in Canada was docked at Vancouver Harbour for two months. After a long journey from India, the men and women were detained in the ship and barred from entry onto Canadian soil. After eight long weeks of hardship where they had limited access to food and other necessities and were forced to endure cramped and unpleasant conditions on the ship, the ship was finally forced to return and its pas

sengers embarked on yet another arduous journey back to India. Legislation such as the Continuous Journey Provision of the Immigration Acts of 1908 and 1910 was used to justify the exclusion of the passengers of the Komagata Maru.



immigrants with business experience and capital to invest (Hiebert). The ‘changes’ in immigration policy in the 1900s were really moneymaking ventures designed to extract as much profit as possible from the backs of immigrant workers while denying them the benefits of citizenship and at times barring them from entry, as in the cases of the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act of 1923 to 1947 and the Komagata Maru incident in 1914. Through the long history of overt racism against immigrants of colour, the Canadian government

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*Systemic racism continues to manifest itself in the invisibility of the cheap labour of immigrant communities and the unpaid reproductive labour of women.*

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could make immigrants of colour earn their entrance into Canada by putting their lifetime and generations of savings into the receding Canadian economy.

Then and now, immigrants are socialized to be thankful for the pressures of migration brought on by the illusion of opportunities – illusions ultimately shattered by everyday and generational experiences of unemployment, low wages, harsh working and living conditions, and intense segregation. Middle-class immigrants with money in their countries of origin bring in money to be able to survive economically while their families are torn between different sides of the world. Those who sold everything to come here and ‘invest’ soon become working class immigrants trying to earn their ‘citizenship’. Downward mobility in terms of class and social

status has become a part of the immigrant condition for migrants of colour.

The systemic racism only begins at the level of immigration policies; systemic racism continues to manifest itself in the invisibility of the cheap labour of immigrant communities and the unpaid reproductive labour of women.

## What is Transit Racism?

While recent statistics indicate that residents of Vancouver are 36.9% people of colour and 2% Aboriginal people (Stats Can, Community Profiles), the Bus Riders Union knows from our experiences of organizing on the bus that people of colour and Aboriginal people are over-represented as bus riders, anywhere from 60 to 90% depending on the route. When TransLink makes decisions that prioritize corporate interests over those of bus riders, such as spending \$1.35 billion on a Richmond-Airport-Vancouver SkyTrain mega-project while planning to reduce service on all North-South bus routes, many of which serve predominantly working class communities of colour, they violate the right to mobility of a group that is largely Aboriginal and people of colour. When working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities end up bearing the brunt of the right to mobility for the rich, yet have their own right to mobility violated, and when they are left with inadequate transit service so that the rich can profit off expensive and unnecessary transit projects, this is transit racism.

Transit racism is rampant in the transit system, especially in TransLink planning and policy decisions. People of colour and Aboriginal





people, particularly women, are disproportionately represented in the working class. A systemically racist transit system exacerbates the inequality of Aboriginal women and women of colour. A 1995 Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) fact sheet reported that people of colour earn on average 15% below the national average, even though they tend to have higher levels of education (Growing Gap). The CSJ reports that more than 1 in 3 people of colour live in poverty, compared to 1 in 5 of the rest of the Canadian population, and the gap is greatest for people of colour born in Canada (Growing Gap). Many people of colour and Aboriginal people in the Lower Mainland are forced to be transit dependent because they cannot afford a car or because their family shares a car, and they need to rely on public transit to provide for their needs. When the public transit system does not get them where they need to go, people of colour and Aboriginal people are negatively impacted and are

prevented from participating meaningfully in their communities.



*Yang listening to speakers at the Youth in Consultation Against Systemic Racism Rally*

## Transit Racism Attacks Women

Working class women of colour and Aboriginal women are particularly impacted by transit racism because of the intersecting forces of race, class and gender in their lives. Transit

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*Many people of colour and Aboriginal people in the Lower Mainland are forced to be transit dependent because they cannot afford a car or because their family shares a car.*

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racism does not take into account the needs of transit dependent women of colour and Aboriginal women, and this has deep implications for their lives.

### Aboriginal Women

An inadequate transit system serves to exacerbate the effects of historical conditions of colonization and continued exploitation on the lives of Aboriginal women.

### Reserves

Poor public transit service to and from the reserves in the Lower Mainland has serious repercussions for the health and well being of Aboriginal women. Inadequate conditions on the reserve mean that Aboriginal women lack access to nutritious food, quality education, adequate housing, services, and other essential needs. One WIT organizer recalled a visit to a reservation where the only source of food was a Macs



convenience store.

Aboriginal women are forced to rely on public transit to access off-reserve services. However, the current public transit system does not serve this need. For instance, the closest bus stop to the Musqueam reserve in Vancouver (for the #41 bus) is at the corner of South West Marine Drive and Camosun, forcing women to walk at

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*For Aboriginal women living on Lower Mainland reserves, then, poor public transit service keeps them isolated and prevents them from accessing essential services that they need.*

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least 15 minutes from the bus stop to get to the reserve itself. Moreover, reserves are not recognized as valid landmarks when trying to do a trip plan on TransLink's website. TransLink customer service operators are often not helpful in providing information about transit access to reserves in the Lower Mainland. One WIT organizer who telephoned the TransLink customer information service phone line to find out how to get to the Musqueam reserve was told that the operator "[doesn't] know the area well" and was not provided with the information by TransLink on how to access reserves by transit. One young Aboriginal woman told us:

*"One night I had to walk 3 hours from the PNE to my dad's house on the Musqueam reserve. I wasn't afraid, because my cousin was with me, but it was a long walk" <sup>1</sup>*

For Aboriginal women living on Lower Mainland reserves, then, poor public transit service keeps them isolated and prevents them from

accessing essential services that they need.

## Access to Services

75% of urban Aboriginal people in the Lower Mainland reside away from current Indian reserves (Didluck). Urban Aboriginal women living in the Lower Mainland, many of whom have been displaced from rural reserves in other parts of British Columbia and Canada, often lack social and cultural supports. The migration from rural reserve to unfamiliar urban territory, combined with a lack of access to a strong support system and essential services makes them even more marginalized in society.

The few support services that are in place for Aboriginal women are difficult to access due to inadequate transit service. For instance, while the city of Surrey has a large urban Aboriginal population, it does not deliver any direct Aboriginal community programs (Didluck). Most Aboriginal service agencies are located only in downtown Vancouver, particularly in the Downtown Eastside. The concentration of social and cultural services in Vancouver's downtown means urban Aboriginal women often need to travel there in order to access these services. An inadequate transit system acts as a systemic barrier for them to access these services.

Another barrier that Aboriginal women face in using transit to access essential support services is unaffordable bus fares. Urban Aboriginal women often have to choose between spending money on food or on the bus fare they need in order to access such essential services. One Aboriginal woman told us:

*"From 8am to 9am the #9 is always crowded so I end up getting*



*to the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre later than I want. I don't take the SkyTrain in the morning because it is crowded – we are treated like sardines. It is unhealthy for me to stand for a long time because I had leg surgery. I have a yearly bus pass and I don't want the bus fares raised because the bus fares come out of my food money. Do not raise the fares”<sup>2</sup>*

As a public service, the public transit system should be run based on the needs of the bus riders who rely on it the most. However, the fact that transit dependent Aboriginal women living in poverty are forced to pay high fares for an inadequate service that they need highlights the harsh reality that the public transit system is systemically racist in its denial of service to those who need it most.

## Immigrant Women

Immigrant women, particularly Third World immigrant women, face numerous barriers to meaningful participation in their communities, and are harshly impacted by inadequate transit service.

## Accreditation

Immigrant women from the Third World have traditionally been excluded from entry into Canada, and continue to face unique challenges in terms of migration. Those who do make it into Canada continue to be commodified in terms of their economic 'value' to Canadian capitalist society and face additional barriers in their lives. Many immigrants from the Third World face struggles over accreditation, as the Canadian state or professional association does not recognize their foreign credentials. Women become de-skilled because they face so many hurdles to actually working in their field.

Inadequate transit makes it even more difficult for immigrant women, particularly women with children, to go through the accreditation process. The WIT team heard many stories about the de-skilling of migrant women during our participatory research. A woman at the Kiwassa Neighbourhood House workshop who was an engineer in China is now out of work as she did not have the money to go through the accreditation

## Accreditation of South Asian Women Physicians: A Case Study of Injustice

One study on South Asian women physicians who migrated to Canada in the 1960s found that most had to go through a four or five year process including an internship and a residency to re-qualify to practice as doctors when they came to Canada. One of the exams that was required was only offered once a year, the exam format (multiple choice) was unfamiliar to many, they often had trouble finding internships and residencies, and they often faced racial and gender biases at their workplace in terms of racist and sexist comments as well as being overworked and underpaid compared to other interns and residents. (Giri)



process due to the responsibilities of bringing up her young child.

An inaccessible and unaffordable transit system that is incomprehensible to newcomers who are not familiar with the geography of the GVRD makes it even more difficult for immigrant women to enquire about their accreditation applications, attend classes and take tests while

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*Infrequent and unaffordable transit service makes women's days even more challenging to plan and negotiate.*

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shouldering the responsibilities for other traditional areas of 'women's work' like buying groceries and taking the kids to and from childcare.

## Employment

When immigrant women begin looking for work, they often face a Catch-22 situation; potential employers tell them that they cannot be hired because they do not have 'Canadian experience'. As a result, many immigrants are forced into low-paying, exploitative jobs or volunteer work, where they provide free labour to Canadian capitalists. Immigrants from Third World countries whose skills and university education are not recognized are forced to take the only jobs available – for instance low-wage jobs in security and the service industry, where they often have to work late at night. Inadequate transit creates additional barriers to accessing even those jobs.

A bus rider from China explains:  
*"I applied for janitorial job. Un-*

*able to apply because of lack of late night buses. I have a good chance because of a friend who worked there. Company asks for employees to have own transport because of no late night buses. Suffered depression as a result of loss of job opportunity"* <sup>3</sup>

The Bus Riders Union's campaign *Night Owl Buses: End the Curfew Now!* to win back late night bus service brought out clearly that those most impacted by the bus cuts were late night workers. These workers are mostly women and men of colour working as security guards, office cleaners, janitors and restaurant and bar staff (Bus Riders Union). One woman of colour told us:

*"I'm going to get a night shift job as an RCA and I need bus to get me home. Relies on husband for a ride home at 1am because she does not wish to sleep in the hospital. Her husband must work the next day. Gas is expensive."* <sup>4</sup>



*Two women reading over a WIT leaflet on the bus*



Because immigrant women in particular are funnelled into temporary, part-time, on-call, shift and volunteer work, this often means that they have to move around several times in a day, at different times of the day. Infrequent and unaffordable transit service makes women's days even more challenging to plan and negotiate. The few support services that are in place for Aboriginal women are difficult to access due to inadequate transit service.

This woman of colour told a WIT organizer how transit impacts her life as a shift worker:

*I do shift work and I sometimes take the bus after 9:30 am. The buses are not frequent at this time and I have to wait. Most people taking the bus do shift work. We should eliminate the zone structure. There is less service between 9:30 am and 3 p.m. Buses during this time are off schedule. Three times out of five the #19 is behind schedule. Buses are always packed, wall-to-wall, at 9 p.m. There aren't that many buses. Saturdays and Sundays they have to add more buses on the #19. Schedules: you can wait anywhere from 10-30 minutes. They cut service along the #19 when the Millennium line came in. Service used to be every 3-5 minutes.<sup>5</sup>*

Moreover, many women of colour (mostly Filipino and South Asian women) work in the homes of rich Canadians as care-aids, Live-in Caregivers, nannies or maids. Their employers' homes are most often located in the high-income areas of the city like Shaughnessy and the British properties in West Vancouver – some of the areas worst served by transit. Women in such jobs have to work at all hours of the day and regularly on weekends as well, when transit service to these areas is ridiculously inaccessible or non-existent.

One East African Asian woman living in Coquitlam who works as a care-aid in a home in North Vancouver told a WIT organizer that she has to transfer 4 times between buses and the SkyTrain in a 2 or 3 hour journey to work everyday. On Sundays, when the bus between Lonsdale Quay and her employer's home does not run, she faces a 20 to 30 minute uphill walk in order to get to work.<sup>6</sup>

Women's' responsibilities do not end on Friday at the close of the traditional workweek, but they have to deal with inadequate transit service throughout the Lower Mainland on weekends.

Another South Asian woman told us:

*We need more service on Saturdays*

## The Live-In Caregiver Program (LCP)

The Live-In Caregiver Program is another example of the systemically racist immigration system. Through this program, the Canadian government brings in women from the Third World, mostly from the Philippines, to work in the homes of rich Canadians as caregivers for children, the elderly or those with disabilities. These women often hold professional qualifications from their country of origin. They are forced to live in the homes of their employers, where they can be called on to work 24 hours a day, and are therefore paid below minimum wage for the work that they do. Live-In Caregivers must work 18 out of their 24-month contract, even if they have 'grievances' or 'complaints' about their employers, or they face deportation. Not only are they physically exploited in terms of the work they do, but the program requirements also put them at high risk of sexual exploitation by their employers.



*and Sundays and in the morning time also. Most people work on Saturdays and Sundays, we pay taxes too. I wait for a long time, then I'm late for work. That causes big problems.*<sup>7</sup>

Such stories expose the discrepancy between the transit needs of women of colour and the current inaccessibility of the Lower Mainland's transit

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*An incomprehensible, inaccessible and unaffordable transit system further attacks the independence of immigrant women, who face social isolation and decreased mental health when they are forced to stay home because of inadequate transit service.*

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system.

For transit dependent women, the way the transit system is designed can determine where they live and work. The transit hours, routes and cost determine when and where transit dependent women of colour can or cannot work; transit dependent women of colour are particularly vulnerable to being fired or losing work because of inadequate transit.

*"Denny's workers get off shift at 4am. 3 workers (all women) had to quit because can't get a bus home and busboy sleeps in the storeroom until bus runs again in the morning"*<sup>8</sup>

The concentration of women of colour in low-wage work and inner-city neighbourhoods, coupled with the inadequacies of the transit system, means women often have to 'choose' between walking and spending a portion of their

wages on an unaffordable taxi:

*"To walk all the way to Main and 60<sup>th</sup>. 3-hour walk home. 6 miles because I can't afford at \$20 cab ride, putting my health and safety and risk"*<sup>9</sup>

*"Have to call my son or call a taxi and pay \$16 – more than one hours' wages because I work until 2:30am and miss the last bus. I don't have a choice"*<sup>10</sup>

A poor public transit system thus exacerbates the marginalization of working class women of colour, and maintains their low social position among the ranks of the most exploited workers in the Lower Mainland.

## Independence

Women are particularly impacted by racist and sexist immigration policies. Because the system places value on education, ability to speak English or French, and professional work experience – things immigrant women already face barriers to accessing in their home countries – women disproportionately have to be sponsored



*Kinat + Yang participating in the Youth of Colour in Consultation Against Systemic Racism Conference*



to enter Canada under the family class rather than apply as independents. This means that women enter the country already in an unequal power relationship to both the state and to their families within patriarchal societal structures. Immigration sponsorship regulations make women who enter Canada under the family class dependent on their sponsors financially and legally for ten years. This institutionalizes their unequal access to social entitlements like social housing, job training programs, and social assistance and old age security. “This processing of women under the family class increases their vulnerability to increased control by sponsors” (Thobani).

Moreover, as ‘dependants’, in both the legal and patriarchal sense, immigrant women are constructed as a ‘non-economic’ category, thus making invisible their unpaid work in the home, as well as their reproductive role of creating and caring for future generations of workers for the Canadian economy (Thobani). A transit system that is not centred around the lives of immigrant women who are disproportionately burdened with the responsibilities of housework and childcare makes even more invisible their unpaid and undervalued contributions to society and further marginalizes them in society.

An incomprehensible, inaccessible and unaffordable transit system further attacks the independence of immigrant women, who face social isolation and decreased mental health when they are forced to stay home because of inadequate transit service. One Iranian student at SFU told us:

*“Had a meeting at Harbour Centre related to my area of study. After we decided to go for dinner.*

*After dinner buses passed were “not in service” and then only going to Kootenay loop (#135). Then the bus riders were drunk. Me coming from an Islamic country, I am not sure if the men are coming on to me. After that I try to be home early at 11:30. Don’t have family here so social activities are really important. Only thing I can get into in this country and to improve English, the only way is to talk to*

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*Although many transit dependent women do not speak English or speak very little English, TransLink does not provide information, beyond limited information about paying fares, in any other languages.*

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*people. Really important for success at school”<sup>11</sup>*

For this woman and many others, then, poor transit is a barrier to their ability to learn and practice English, and to participate fully in their communities.

Transit also represents the right to safety and independence, particularly for immigrant women whose everyday lives are shaped by their time and energy spent taking care of others – their children and their husbands as well as their extended families – parents and grandparents. For many immigrant women transit is an imperative to independence and safety, as without it many are forced to depend on others for a ride or to accept rides from strangers. It is disproportionately women who bear the effects of poor transit and become dependent on their husbands, as it is often men who drive when working class families are



forced to buy cars.

About 5% of people in the GVRD speak neither English nor French, and about 37% have another mother tongue, with Cantonese, Punjabi and Tagalog being the most common (Stats Canada, Mother Tongue). Although many transit dependent women do not speak English or speak very little English, TransLink does not provide information, beyond limited information about paying fares, in any other languages. This makes it very difficult for non-English-speaking transit dependent women to find out information about bus routes, schedules, and the running of the transit system in general. Even TransLink's new voice automated telephone information system discriminates against immigrants, by not recognizing words spoken with an accent different from the Canadian one. No translations of TransLink documents are available, making the decision-making process around our region's transit service even more undemocratic for non-English speakers. The mystification of the transit system for non-English-speaking immigrant women contributes to their isolation from their communities and poses a major challenge to immigrant women escaping abusive situations.

## Refugee Women

A refugee is a person who has to flee her country of origin because of who she is or what she believes, and cannot return because her government will not or cannot protect her or because she is in danger of persecution, including torture, execution or 'disappearance'. There are currently approximately 36 million refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons around the

world, the majority of whom are in Africa and Asia (Amnesty International)<sup>12</sup>.

Canada has a positive image as a 'great humanitarian nation' that takes in refugees out of the 'kindness of their hearts'. However, the real reason Canada is willing to allow refugees to come and live here is because refugees serve as a source of cheap and often highly-skilled labour.

Refugee women in the Lower Mainland are ill-served by an inadequate transit system. With already few overburdened social support services available for refugee women, a poor transit system that is inaccessible, unaffordable and incomprehensible adds another barrier to their ability to overcome their difficulties from having faced persecution.

An unaffordable transit system also attacks refugee women's right to mobility. While refugee claimants have the same rights as all other Canadians under the Charter, they are required to apply for a work permit in order to be able to hold a job in Canada. This is often a very long and bureaucratic process, forcing refugee women to rely on charity and insufficient social supports in order to survive. Enforced poverty means that



*Jen talks with a woman on the bus during an on-the-bus organizing session*





refugee women are often unable to afford too-expensive bus fares. The high cost of fares means women face hardships in accessing services, and face social isolation in an already alien environment; additional barriers to healing from the persecution they have escaped.

An ideology of gratitude is imposed even more strongly for refugee women than for immigrant women - an ideology that discourages women from fighting for better services. Even if women do decide to organize they are at risk of deportation. While refugee women have been able to escape persecution, they are often not much better off since their rights are still violated within Canada.

Like immigrant women, refugee women also suffer from a transit system that can be incomprehensible because of insufficient information and because TransLink does not provide translations of routes, schedules and other important information necessary to understand how to use the transit system.

## Racial Profiling

Many First Nations women at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre workshop shared experiences of racist bus drivers who drove past them as they were standing at the bus stop. Women are also verbally abused and regularly humiliated when they cannot afford the bus fare.

One woman told a WIT organizer: *"It's mainly a safety issue. The bus drivers who are old, white men take off before people have had a chance to get off the bus. I've had drivers pass me by, an instance of racism. They pick up white women. After I showed him my fare the*

*driver stopped the bus and came to the back of the bus to argue with me three times. He was a white, old man. There's an Aboriginal education centre at 5<sup>th</sup> and Main, the bus driver said: "are you going to that Indian school?" He was a white, older man. I've been kicked off the bus for defending myself"*<sup>13</sup>

Several African women at the Eastburn

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*High fares are user fees imposed on public services that disproportionately hurt communities that can afford transit the least and need it the most.*

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Community Centre workshop shared stories about being ignored by bus drivers who simply drove past them as they were standing at the bus stop. After much running and waving, a bus driver stopped and let a woman on while making racist comments like "You blend in the dark. I couldn't see you at the bus stop". Another African woman at the workshop said a similar incident of interpersonal racism happen to her. The bus driver said "You should smile to show your white teeth so I can see you in the dark". Yet another African woman said the bus driver ignored her and looked away as she was speaking to him directly, asking about routes and directions.<sup>14</sup>

A bus rider who was new to Canada said: *"I noticed bus drivers treat Chinese people differently from other people on the #3. Bus drivers shout very hard at them only and tell them to shut up when they talk on the bus"*<sup>15</sup>

The result is that both the interpersonal and



the systemic manifestations of racism are part of the everyday experiences of the working class of color and of Aboriginal communities, and are complicated by the forces of patriarchy for women of colour and Aboriginal women. These incidents of interpersonal racism are not isolated or accidental incidents where drivers ‘unintentionally’ display racist behavior. Any racist behavior -

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*As TransLink increases fares, more and more transit dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour are unable to afford the bus fare, and are forced to rely on others for rides or beg bus drivers to be let on for free.*

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whether indirect or unconscious - is still racist and serves to reinforce unequal positions between people.

As public servants, bus drivers should be accountable and respectful to all bus riders, regardless of race, class or gender. This is what public transit is for, to serve the needs of the people. The transit dependent are disproportionately Aboriginal people and people of color who are immigrants and refugees - a significant number of whom are women. The racist behaviour exhibited by some bus drivers poses both an individual and as a whole, a systemic problem for bus riders that TransLink needs to recognize in the transit system.

An Aboriginal bus rider asserted:  
*“I believe that drivers should be held accountable for their actions, this would reduce drivers from treating women and ethnic groups in violation of our right to safe public transit”*<sup>16</sup>

While we expose and challenge the racist behavior of some bus drivers, we also recognize that the conditions under which all drivers work largely impacts the extent to which they can fully serve the needs of the public. Infrequent service and the breakdown of old trolley buses lead to overcrowding and late buses; in this environment both drivers and riders become agitated and stressed, often at one another. Yet, these working conditions by no means justify racist behavior. Instead, these conditions further impede the role of public transit as a service that is safe and there to serve the needs of people who use it and need it the most.

Moreover, we recognize that the transit system creates hierarchies within the working class by dividing bus riders and bus drivers by the forces of race, gender and relative class status, and maintains our oppression by keeping us from uniting in our struggles against our common oppression and exploitation.

## High Fares

TransLink’s decisions in the last five years to increase bus fares three times accompanied by a poorer service are reflected in the experiences of transit dependent women. People of colour and Aboriginal people, particularly women, are especially impacted by high fares because they disproportionately make lower wages. One Aboriginal woman said:

*“We are treated like sardines. It is unhealthy for me to stand for a long time because I had leg surgery. I have a yearly bus pass and I don’t*



*want the bus fares raised because the bus fares come out of my food money. Do not raise the fares”<sup>17</sup>*

As we can see, high fares not only systematically deny Aboriginal women and women of colour the right to mobility, but also deny them other basic necessities for their health and the health of their families:

*“I have a family of 4. It costs 7\$ one way to use transit. Its expensive as it is to go out as a family (e.g. visit to Stanley Park). It’s a barrier to go shopping as well. So with the fare increase it will cost even more to go to the mall and back home. For a low-income family it’s really expensive”<sup>18</sup>*

Working class people of colour and Aboriginal people are forced to buy cars, leading to more environmental pollution and economic hardship by families already facing barriers to employment.

*“When we first came to Canada, we had to take our children out everywhere. My baby is very big - about 15kg - he’s very heavy. The stroller can’t go on the bus. So I had to stay home, and my husband and I had no choice but to buy a car. It’s very expensive, especially with the insurance and the gas. If the bus was working well, we wouldn’t need to spend so much money on a car. It’s hard to take 3 children on a bus. It’s very clumsy. The drivers are usually impatient for us to get on/off the bus. To stand at the bus station with kids, for 30 minutes, they can get frantic”<sup>19</sup>*

High fares are user fees imposed on public services that disproportionately hurt communities

that can afford transit the least and need it the most. “What if I billed TransLink for the amount of time I spend waiting?”<sup>20</sup>, asked out loud an Aboriginal woman in one of our workshops. Aboriginal women and women of colour are forced to pay out of their own pockets *and* with their time, as they spend hours waiting for the bus and travelling on the bus while businessmen will soon be able to

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*Racial and class profiling targets those who are already demonized in our society and pits bus riders against one another when, in fact, the real problem is that the fares are too high*

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travel in and out of the downtown core in minutes through the air-conditioned, frequent and state-of-the-art RAV line.

## Criminalization

Along with the TransLink board’s decision to increase fares comes the creation of a ‘security’ budget where SkyTrain police are hired to check fares and give out fines to fare evaders. As TransLink increases fares, more and more transit-dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour are unable to afford the bus fare, and are forced to rely on others for rides or beg bus drivers to be let on for free. Transit-dependent women face stress, guilt and public humiliation if they are caught by the transit police for trying to access an increasingly inadequate public service. Meanwhile, public funds are being poured into securing bus fares and not into more buses and lower fares.

TransLink paints a picture of fare evaders



in the minds of other bus riders as ‘free-loaders’ and ‘bad citizens’, and then spends money on security to target and criminalize those who cannot afford the high fares.

In particular, TransLink targets youth of colour, older immigrants, and people who ‘look poor’. TransLink’s ‘Special Constables’ behave in intimidating and often violent ways that threaten

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*The ghettoization of working class people of colour means that we are systematically cut off from participation in society while our rights, needs and wants are unacknowledged to favour the needs of the predominantly white middle and upper class.*

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the safety of transit users.

One woman told us:

*“I take the SkyTrain to and from Joyce and Granville station. On several occasions I have stepped off the train at Joyce to see/hear the security guards dealing with people. I am not impressed with their attitude, tone (very aggressive), body language (very aggressive) and language choice (very very aggressive). But I do not feel safe when I get off the train to hear SkyTrain guards yelling and swearing. I saw many older immigrants get away from there as fast as they could”<sup>21</sup>*

Another woman who we talked to on the bus said: “What do they think we’re all criminals?”<sup>22</sup> This racial and class profiling targets those who are already demonized in our society

and pits bus riders against one another when, in fact, the real problem is that the fares are too high.

Bus riders of colour and Aboriginal bus riders are being criminalized in a context where people of colour and Aboriginal people are already racially profiled in many other aspects of their lives. SkyTrain police target people of colour and Aboriginal people when checking fares, and have even been known to call Immigration Canada when bus riders do not provide identification. This means that transit-dependent immigrant and refugee women are faced with the constant threat of deportation even as they try to live their lives and go where they need to go on the public transit system. For refugee women in particular, who have recently left situations of conflict, war and torture, and have had to face a humiliating and degrading Canadian refugee claimant process, their criminalization in a public space puts them at higher risk of being forced to return to those situations, and adds to their stress and anxiety levels, seriously attacking their mental and physical health. We see this manifestation of the ‘war on terrorism’ in our public service, as TransLink uses its institutional power to attack the right to mobility of the most vulnerable in our society – women of colour and Aboriginal women.

## Youth of Colour

TransLink policies requiring youth to ‘prove’ their age are a systemic attack on youth that treats them as criminals, since the underlying rationale is that youth are trying to ‘cheat’ the system by paying concession fares, which are already the highest in Canada (Orsini). Moreover, the need to prove that they are youth to SkyTrain



police places them in a powerless position as youth trying to defend themselves against older SkyTrain police who assert their authority.

As part of their daily experiences using transit, transit dependent youth of colour told us that they often face direct racism from SkyTrain police. At one of our WIT workshops at Vancouver Technical Secondary, where many students are transit dependent, a young woman of colour said “Skycops were mean” when she lost her Go Card, a card youth receive to ‘prove’ that they are in high school. As other young women in the room nodded in agreement, another woman said that Skycops intentionally “look for kids without Go Cards”.

TransLink’s ‘security’ budget for SkyTrain police manifests itself as both a form of systemic racism and interpersonal racism, exposing youth of colour as vulnerable targets of supposedly ‘random’ fare checks.

## Segregation

There are push and pull factors that cause communities to become segregated in the Lower Mainland. In the context of a systemically racist society, people of colour must often ‘choose’ between familiar community and proximity to employment and services.

Although there are pockets of immigrants of colour throughout the GVRD, working class Aboriginal people and immigrants of colour are over-represented in certain areas, such as East Vancouver, with poor living and working conditions. Here, a reservoir of unemployed and low-wage workers exists, accompanied by a concentration of poverty with heavy police monitoring.

Dependency on public transit shapes the daily experiences of Aboriginal women and women of colour. A woman in a workshop at the YWCA employment program for single mothers exposed her typical day on the bus in her community:

*“I ride the bus everyday. I leave at 7am get here at 9am. Leave here at 3pm and get home at 5pm. One*

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*Environmental racism is the degradation of an environment over-represented by working class people of color and Aboriginal people brought on by institutions that implement the neoliberal imperative that gives the predominantly white middle and ruling class control over the entire environment.*

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*week there was a problem with trolley buses – wanted 45 minutes for the bus for 2 mornings in a row. The buses are so crowded I had to fight to get on the bus. I feel unsafe on the bus. When I can afford it I want to stop riding the bus”<sup>23</sup>*

An Aboriginal single mother shared how inadequate transit traps her and her family in certain parts of the GVRD:

*“Numerous times I’ve had to stay in Surrey due to lack of transportation back home to Vancouver on Sundays. Two times me and my son were stuck at New West station because there’s no bus to connect to at 12pm. The New West bus from downtown used to run late but now there’s no bus. You get stuck in New West; you have to wrap up by 10pm to get home. My mom lives in Surrey. My son bikes or walks from Vancouver to Surrey - he’s only sixteen- when he comes to visit me because there’s no bus after 11pm*



*in Surrey*"<sup>24</sup>

Not all people of colour live in the same area. Class divisions within communities of colour are visible in the higher spread of middle and upper class people of colour throughout wealthy suburban neighbourhoods, contributing to drastically different experiences than working class communities of colour.

A disproportionate number of workers of colour rely on public transit or are forced to buy inexpensive used and polluting cars because of the inaccessibility of their work hours and location and to be able to take care of their families; whereas the Chinese Business Association supports the RAV line, since they profit from tourism and gentrification as private business and property owners.

Inadequate transit also prevents already-segregated women of colour from accessing religious and spiritual services that can connect them to their communities. During the month of prayer for Muslims, many go to the mosque early in the morning or late at night. At a presentation to the TransLink Board at the March 2004 meeting, one bus rider commented that many people could not go to pray with their community, families, and friends and take part in the important and sacred events because the buses stopped running at 1am and did not start until 6am (Barakat).

The ghettoization of working class people of colour means that we are systematically cut off from participation in society while our rights, needs and wants are unacknowledged to favour the needs of the predominantly white middle and upper class. By being unreliable, inaccessible and unaffordable

the public transit system poses systemic barriers that actually exacerbate the daily experiences of marginalized communities who rely on public services more than others in order to access jobs, public services, family and other forms of support.

## **Environmental Racism In Our Communities**

Environmental racism is the degradation of an environment over-represented by working class people of color and Aboriginal people brought on by institutions that implement the neoliberal imperative that gives the predominantly white middle and ruling class control over the entire environment. Environmental racism is alive when diesel buses are put on the road each time older trolley buses (which were supposed to be replaced seven years ago) break down. The difference in air quality between poorer neighbourhoods where Aboriginal people and people of color dominate such as East Vancouver and parts of Surrey, and where predominantly white, middle class families live such as the West Side and West Vancouver, is astounding.

## **Conclusion**

The Bus Riders Union's continuous struggle to End Transit Racism has come out of the politicizing and collectivizing of everyday experiences disproportionately shared by Aboriginal people and people of colour, many of whom are immigrants and refugees from Third World countries forced to migrate and endure systemic racism under capitalism. Through the Women in Transit initiative, we gain a deeper understanding into the



lives of the most oppressed and exploited in our society – women of colour and Aboriginal women.

We are not saying that a poor transit system only affects Aboriginal people and people of colour, as it highly impacts everyone who is transit dependent, including white working class communities. However, transit service that is made unaffordable, unreliable and inaccessible because of irresponsible undemocratic spending of public funds that prioritize the interests of corporations and ‘choice-riders’ when a *disproportionate* number of Aboriginal women and women of colour who have no other way of mobility other than public transit cannot use it, this is systemic racism in our public transit system.

Dismissing the fact that racism exists in the transit system is an act of racism in itself, as it denies and devalues the everyday lived experiences of Aboriginal people and people of colour, particularly of women, in the Lower Mainland. TransLink cannot hide behind the rhetoric of multiculturalism, and must take into account the position of Aboriginal women and women of colour among the ranks of the most exploited and oppressed in our society.

The process and continuing fight against systemic racism comes with meeting the immediate transit needs of women, as they struggle to survive in a society where they are objectified as ‘exotic others’, serve as a pool of unemployed and cheap labour, and are further exploited in their undervalued, unpaid reproductive labour. The struggle against transit racism continues by building women’s power to put an end to their oppression and subjugation. We openly expose and criti-

cize TransLink’s systemically racist policies and practices and demand an End to Transit Racism!

<sup>1</sup> WIT Testimonial 72

<sup>2</sup> WIT Testimonial 7

<sup>3</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 50

<sup>4</sup> WIT Testimonial 17

<sup>5</sup> WIT Testimonial 40

<sup>6</sup> Kirat’s conversation with Zehra, April 2004.

<sup>7</sup> WIT Testimonial 37

<sup>8</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 33

<sup>9</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 34

<sup>10</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 45

<sup>11</sup> WIT testimonial 50

<sup>12</sup> <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/refugees-background-eng#refugee>

<sup>13</sup> WIT testimonial 38

<sup>14</sup> Eastburn Workshop on June 12, 2004

<sup>15</sup> Zailda’s conversation with bus rider on the #3 Main, Spring 2004

<sup>16</sup> WIT Testimonial 29

<sup>17</sup> WIT Testimonial 7

<sup>18</sup> WIT Testimonial 41

<sup>19</sup> WIT Testimonial 53

<sup>20</sup> WIT Testimonial 43



<sup>21</sup> WIT Testimonial 3

<sup>22</sup> WIT Testimonial 24

<sup>23</sup> WIT Testimonial 1

<sup>24</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 7





## Public Health & Environmental Justice

The Bus Riders Union believes that public transit is fundamental to our community and environmental health, ensuring our right to mobility, providing our communities with access to regional services, and protecting the environmental quality of our neighbourhoods. An affordable, accessible, integrated, clean-air, bus-centred public transit system is an integral component in the achievement of public health and environmental justice. The experiences, needs, and vision of the hundreds of women who participated in the Women in Transit project substantiate and develop this position.

### Understanding Health

The Bus Riders Union struggles to improve the health and environment of working class communities and communities of colour throughout the Lower Mainland. Understanding public health is essential to this work and for all social justice organizations, public institutions, policy makers, and social planners. The Bus Riders Union uses nationally accepted definitions of health as a basis for our analysis, which allows us to ground our arguments within a common

understanding and framework.

### Defining Health

Over the course of developing a nationally-accepted working definition of health, the Canadian government has expanded traditional conceptions of health as the absence of disease to consider broader definitions of health that include life circumstance, income inequality, and the total social environment.

A cornerstone of health theory in Canada is the 1974 “White Paper, A New Perspective on the Health of Canadians” which proposed that health is most significantly enhanced through improvements in our social and physical environments, rather than simply increasing expenditures on health care delivery systems (Health Canada, New Perspectives). This document is a federal acknowledgement that the just distribution of wealth is significant for health. In 1978, Canada signed the Alma Ata Declaration calling for urgent action to promote and protect health as a state of “complete physical, mental, and social well being... and ...a fundamental human right” (People’s Health Movement). Alma



### Our definition of Health:

Health is a resource for every day living; a holistic weave of mind, body, emotion, spirit, and location. Health is experienced as an individual, as a family, and as a community. “The fundamental conditions and resources for health are peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity. Improvement in health requires a secure foundation in these basic prerequisites” (Health Canada, Ottawa Charter)



# + environmental justice

Ata was a ground-breaking event in world health history, firmly concluding that in order to achieve health, the impacts of rampant capitalism on our lives, and the grossly unequal distribution of wealth between and within our societies must be curbed through international and national action (People's Health Movement).

Continuing the accomplishments set by

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*Public transit is an essential method of redistributing the benefits of our society to working class communities and communities of colour and ensuring that public health and environmental justice can be achieved.*

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Alma-Ata, the 1986 Ottawa Charter urged Canada to achieve health for all by the year 2000. The Charter declared that to achieve health people and their communities must be able to realize their aspirations, satisfy their needs and respond to and cope with their environments. More importantly, the Ottawa Charter declared the fundamental conditions for health as “peace, shelter, education, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity” (Health Canada, Ottawa Charter). The Charter was a critical step in calling on all levels of government and governmental agencies to realize their active role in the achievement of health through recognizing and addressing systemic inequalities and ensuring a just distribution of social resources.

Health Canada now promotes a population health perspective of health as “the capacity of people to adapt to, respond to, or control life's challenges and changes...Health is also intimately

tied to personal circumstances that, in turn, are tied to social, cultural, economic and environmental influences” (Health Canada, Population Health). Preventing situations that give rise to disease and ill health has become the major focus of health care systems in Canada.

We can clearly see that the working class in Canada currently faces multiple barriers to the achievement of health; however, taking action to address inequities in health and promote health at the population level is a different matter. Knowing that economic and social inequities themselves reduce health status (Wilkenson) prompts us to first address the unequal distribution of wealth and resources in Canada; this is the definitive step towards achieving health for all. Allocating social and economic resources towards working class communities and communities of colour is the first priority for health and environmental justice in our communities. Public transit is an essential method of redistributing the benefits of our society to working class communities and communities of colour and ensuring that public health and environmental justice can be achieved. The resounding message to social justice organizations and public institutions is that the allocation of social and economic resources plays a fundamental role in the ability of working class communities to achieve and maintain health for all.

## **Public Transit & Women's Health**

Women's health and well being are connected with their social and physical environments, the ability to function in daily routines, to fulfill family needs and responsibilities, to provide for and care for children and elders, to



find time for socialization and recuperation, and to ensure the cohesiveness and well being of all members of our extended families (Meadows et al; Women's Health Bureau, Gender Inclusive). Well being is an important concept for understanding women's health. Women view well being as a state of balance fundamental to good health; a balance of positive physical, cognitive, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual functioning (Lauver). Women consider the health and well being of the entire family as essential to their personal good health (Meadows, et al). Women consider their place of residence, employment situation, access to social networks, education and social services, and participation in our broader communities and society as fundamental to their achievement of health for themselves and their families.

A broad view of women's health is necessary to grasp the complex interweave of individual, family, and society that determines the health of women and their communities. The Provincial Governments BC Health Goals for Women state that "the most important influences on women's health are the conditions experienced in our day-to-day lives. Having a safe workplace that supports gender equity, income based on the value of work, opportunities for advancement, safe communities, and adequate, affordable housing significantly enhances our health" (Women's Health Bureau, Health Goals). What women say is that their personal health practice "involves building supportive environments in which [they] can thrive rather than merely survive" (Lauver, p. 76). In all spheres of life women require access to the resources and supports necessary to lead healthy

and fulfilling lives. Public transit is a critical economic and social resource in women's lives.

Women make extraordinary paid and unpaid contributions to the fundamental health and well being of our communities; the contributions of women are the foundation upon which our communities thrive (Lauver; Women's Health Bureau, Gender Inclusive). Thus, when women

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*TransLink must go against the rising tide of neoliberal imperatives and prioritize the health and social needs of women's communities.*

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lack access to the public services necessary for accomplishing their responsibilities, their individual experiences of health deteriorate, but so does the community experience of health. Women-centred research into public transit in the



*Yuly talking with a bus rider during an on the bus session*

# + environmental justice

Lower Mainland affirms that working class women within communities that rely on public transit have less opportunity for good health than wealthy communities who have controlling interest in our social and economic resources. The Women in Transit project details how the lack of adequate public transit actively undermines the health of working class women and their communities

When enforcing increasing user fees takes precedence over the provision of adequate service to transit dependent communities, the health of women and our communities suffers. When the right to mobility for working class women and our communities is violated through a lack of affordable, accessible, bus-centred, clean-air public transit, our chances of achieving health slip away.

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*When the right to mobility for working class women & our communities is violated through a lack of affordable, accessible, bus-centred, clean-air public transit, our chances of achieving health slip away.*

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throughout the Lower Mainland.

In order to have a positive impact on the health of working class women and their communities throughout the Lower Mainland, TransLink must go against the rising tide of neoliberal imperatives such as privatization and deregulation which benefit corporations and instead prioritize the health and social needs of women's communities. Rather than representing the needs of the vast majority, current TransLink priorities are directing social and economic resources necessary for social justice, a reduction in inequalities, and the achievement of health away from working class and marginalized women and towards the wealthy and elite. TransLink prioritizes mega-projects to save businessmen a matter of minutes between downtown and the airport while working class communities suffer from the deterioration of the bus system and the subsequent violation of our right to mobility.

## Environmental Justice

The environmental justice movement encompasses “the struggle against racism and poverty; the effort to preserve and improve the environment; and the compelling need to shift social institutions from class division and environmental depletion to social unity and global sustainability” (Matsuoka). A critical examination of our community environment and subsequent actions to achieve environmental justice is significant for the achievement and maintenance of health, as our bodies, minds, and spirits are interconnected to our communities and our environments (Ermine).

Transportation systems have massive ramifications on our environment, impacting air and noise pollution, pedestrian safety, and our right to mobility. Environmental justice principles affirm that transit dependent communities, who currently suffer the greatest negative impacts of transportation systems, have the right to determine the assessment, planning, and implementation of public transit solutions for urban transit issues and for the attainment of environmental and social justice (People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit).



To achieve environmental justice, public services, and in particular public transit, must honour the cultural as well as the economic viability of our communities. The recognition of cultural viability requires a commitment to allocate resources and design services that support the totality of our community needs, and in particular, the needs of women. In order for our communities to have sustainable environments, the full environmental impacts of all service and infrastructure decisions must be made available to our communities. We must all have equal access to affordable and accessible public transit for environmental justice in our region.

Achieving environmental justice for our communities requires an end to transit racism that favours wealthy communities and the profitability of corporations over the cultural and environmental integrity of our communities. It is women who bear the greatest brunt of injustice in our communities, and it is women who now struggle for justice. Rather than trading our individual and community health for corporate profit, women demand that health hazards and air and noise pollution in our communities be halted by a just distribution of public transit dollars to communities who currently experience the greatest negative impacts of urban transportation (Bullard & Johnson, Environmental Justice; Bullard et al, Transportation Justice).

Currently, systemic racism, environmental degradation, and class divisions exist in the Lower Mainland, undermining the achievement of environmental justice, healthy communities, and health for all women. Rather than fulfilling public responsibility and working to reduce the gap

between the rich and working people, TransLink's policies and priorities increasingly exacerbate inequalities, fuelling ill-health and a deteriorating environment. Public dollars are increasingly poured into mega-projects that funnel public dollars into the pockets of private investors while the service declines in our communities, forcing low-income riders to turn to used and polluting

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*TransLink's policies and priorities increasingly exacerbate inequalities, fuelling ill-health and a deteriorating environment.*

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cars. Increasing fares for bus riders means that women in our communities subsidize corporate profits as service reductions curtail our own right to mobility. Working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities increasingly suffer the consequences of the right to mobility for the rich, while our own communities experience violations of our right to mobility. Access to affordable, accessible, clean-air public transportation is necessary for ensuring public health and environmental justice.

## **Attacks on the Health of Working Class Women**

It is well established that the rich have better health than the poor do; high incomes facilitate healthy living and ability to improve health. There also exists a lengthy body of evidence suggesting that inequities within a society ultimately determine the health status of those at the lower end of the social hierarchy (Wilkinson). Public services, such as public transit, are an economic



redistributive measure that reduce the gap between the rich and the working class and are thus an essential resource for the health of working class communities. Working class communities are disproportionately transit dependent; our daily experiences of public transit shape our experiences of individual and community health. Public transit also determines our access to and use of existing social resources, including health care.

Women suffer particular health impacts of the lack of an affordable, accessible public transit system that meets their transportation needs. These impacts affect women's physical, mental, spiritual, and community health. Women live longer than men, but suffer more illness in their later years (Women's Health Bureau, Gender Inclusive). Women bear the burden of reproductive labour. Poor women suffer more illness and disease and frequently rely on public transit to access necessary health services. Low-income women work longer hours, for less pay, and have higher levels of stress, all of which undermine health. Inadequate public transit service exacerbates all factors in women's lives, increasing the risk that women will suffer physical, mental, and spiritual ill health.

## Physical Health

*"I have to pay \$87 a month for a bus pass; it is too much to pay. I have to cross the water to take the sea bus. [I] work in North Van. We want this bus [#3], because we need it to get to work and other places. Don't cut this bus... it hurts my heart. I'm getting old, can't walk 5 or more blocks to Cambie"*

Physical health is greatly impacted by the lack of affordable, accessible, clean-air, bus-

centred public transit. Women must have access to public transit to ameliorate the impacts of longer life, lower incomes and greater family responsibilities.

## Unaffordable Fares

In Canada, a growing disparity between the rich and the poor has been steadily widening over the last decade. For women, this disparity and the decline in available redistributive measures is even more marked as women still earn between 64-75% of the earnings of their male counterparts (Region of Waterloo, Economic Aspects). For immigrant women, whose wages are one-third less than their non-immigrant counterparts, the income gap is much wider. Increasing polarization suggests that the attempts to redistribute income at all levels of government have not been successful (Health Canada, Income Inequality). Dedicated as a public service, public transit is supposed to help reduce the impacts of the unequal distribution of wealth on our health. Instead, high user fees for public transit have the opposite impact, detracting from our abilities to achieve good health. Income data highlight that rising user fees for public transit hit women's personal and familial budgets hard, with immigrant women hardest hit:

*"I have to pay \$87 for a monthly pass; it is too much to pay"*<sup>2</sup>

*"After moving to Vancouver from Vernon for work, I found my biggest expenses pertained to transportation... Rent and food come first, so in my family's best interests I sold my car and now rely on public transit for commuting, shopping, school, visiting friends, etc. All 3 of us take transit, but I now find buying bus passes puts me*



*right back to what my insurance costs were for my car (and that's just a one zone fare!)"*<sup>3</sup>

*"I take the bus a lot. If I don't buy a bus pass, I'm paying almost \$10/day, hard for someone making minimum wage... Sometimes I don't have the \$63 at the beginning of the month (for a bus pass) – it's too much"*<sup>4</sup>

Low-income women are far more likely to be dependent upon public transit and are often unable to afford bus passes at the beginning of the month and are thus forced to pay cash fares. Women are more likely to make multiple trips throughout the day and therefore end up facing huge transit expenses. Even those women who can afford to purchase bus passes are finding that even the high price of monthly passes leaves them struggling to make ends meet for their families. Transit costs are eating into the family food budget, putting low-income families at risk of nutritional insufficiency. Hunger is a reality in British Columbia, as low-income women struggle to feed themselves and their families (BC CEDAW). In this harsh economic climate, women are spending more on transportation than on food (Stats Canada, Household Expenditures):

*"I am a low-income mom living in the DTES. In order to go out of the neighbourhood to buy groceries, I have to pay \$5 each way (\$2 for me and \$1.50 for each child). This is ridiculous...I could almost get a taxi and carry my groceries up from my front door for this rate. I think it is shameful that children have to pay \$1.50 for each ride. That \$10 could buy me 8 litres of milk"*<sup>5</sup>

*"Bus fares come out of my food money"*<sup>6</sup>

*"I spend \$189 on bus passes every month. I could use this money on food, bills. Things are already tight. Transit is a major expense"*<sup>7</sup>

Women in focus groups shared that they must frequently decide between social/educational activities with their families or purchasing

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*The most important influences on women's health are the conditions experienced in our day-to-day lives.*

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necessities such as food and paying bills. This 'no choice' decision-making takes a severe emotional and physical toll on women, where either choice carries health consequences. When women choose groceries, children lack opportunities to play and grow; when women prioritize social activities familial nutritional status declines. Guilt and shame at not being able to provide for our families has serious consequences on our physical and emotional health.



*Heather leaving a discussion on high fares at the BRU community meeting in July 2004*

# + environmental justice

Women shared during workshops and focus groups that they require the bus to access food banks, yet the expense of the bus and the sheer effort of transporting children and groceries take a toll on their physical well being. When women cannot access food banks due to high fares or inaccessible buses, their individual and family health deteriorates. The additional stresses of dealing with negative emotions and juggling material necessities are taking a negative toll on women's experiences of health.

## Travel Time

For transit dependent women, their double workday, the complex matrix of family and employment-related responsibilities, creates a heavy reliance on public transit, forcing women to take multiple trips on public transit throughout the day and night. Inappropriate scheduling, inadequate routes, poorly timed transfers, and overcrowding significantly lengthen women's travel times, resulting in physical and emotional exhaustion:

*"Afternoon leave work, takes me 1½ to get home (4:30-6:00pm). I take #3 and #4/7 unreliable. I need to give myself 1 hour to get to work and it's supposed to be a 20-minute ride...I've had a migraine"* <sup>8</sup>

Exhaustion and sleep deprivation caused by inadequate public transit exact a harsh toll on women's health, contributing to and exacerbating conditions such as fatigue, depression, and irritability.

The sheer amount of extra travel time adds stress and anxiety to women's days:

*"The bus is 15 minutes late every morning. I am sometimes late for*

*work. I don't have to work until 6:30am, but I have to catch the bus at 5:30 am. It would take me only ½ hour by car"* <sup>9</sup>

When buses are late and overcrowded, the stress and anxiety levels rise, generating anger and frustration, reducing immune function, and impacting emotional and physical health (Reference).

## Children on the Bus

Women reported a high level of physical strain and stress when negotiating their daily activities with small children on public transit:

*"#8 hard for people with kids because the buses don't lower. If you have two or more kids it's very hard."* <sup>10</sup>

*"I don't have equal access to transit because I can't stand with small children and there often isn't seating available."* <sup>11</sup>

Immigrant women who rely on public transit to re-establish their lives, rebuild their sense of community, and develop social and personal well being are finding themselves isolated due to



*Woman + kids boarding crowded trolley bus*





inaccessible public transit:

*“When we first came to Canada, we had to take our children out everywhere. My baby is very big – about 15kg – he’s very heavy. The stroller can’t go on the bus. So I had to stay home”*<sup>12</sup>

Many women shared difficulties they experience when traveling with young children in strollers. The buses are not designed with the needs of parents in mind: the doorways and aisles are too narrow, seating is poorly arranged, and space is tight. Many strollers do not fit through the door or up the stairs on trolley buses; a large proportion of the bus fleet is inaccessible to women with strollers:

*“The #8 hard for people with small kids because the buses don’t lower. If you have 2 or more small kids it’s very hard.”*<sup>13</sup>

Carrying a heavy stroller and a small child up three steep stairs is simply impossible for many women. For transit dependent women, this means they cannot travel on certain bus routes and do not have access to entire parts of the city and all of the services that are located there. If they live in one of those areas, it means that they can only access those services with great difficulty:

*“I have a baby, and I don’t take the bus because it’s so hard to get the stroller on the trolley buses. I have to wait for my husband to take me.”*

Even on kneeling buses, if the bus is overcrowded bus drivers sometimes request that women fold up their strollers and carry them on, or even refuse to allow women with strollers on the bus. Women can be forced to put themselves and their babies in dangerous situations by stand-

ing on the bus, or have to wait for the next bus, which usually also arrives overcrowded.

Mothers of small children report that social and emotional isolation due to poor public transit service is a common experience. New mothers who lack social supports are more likely to suffer post-partum depression and low parenting confidence (Australian Nursing Journal).

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*As TransLink cuts transit service and raises fares, the health of transit dependant women suffers. Punitively high fares deter women from accessing necessary health care services.*

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Friendships and other social supports are critical for new mothers; yet, women are being limited in their activities by public transit:

*“In the building I live in I have 3 close friends and between us all we have 4 kids. They are all under two and in strollers. If I want to go anywhere I have to walk or take the longest route possible to catch accessible buses. Yesterday we had to walk from 43<sup>rd</sup> and Fraser to 41<sup>st</sup> and Fraser to Oakridge Mall to 33<sup>rd</sup> and Cambie and then back to 43<sup>rd</sup> and Fraser. We had a double stroller and the driver wouldn’t let us on the 41”*<sup>15</sup>

The difficulties that women face when bringing small children on the public transit system in the Lower Mainland are having massive implications on their health and well being. Fatigue, physical strain, social isolation, and post-partum depression mean that women require more health care services. However, women are also having difficulties accessing health care due to the



public transit system.

## **Access to Health Care**

Much emphasis has been placed on the importance of an accessible health care system, yet for transit dependent women, access to public transit is essential for accessing necessary health care. Low-income women are more likely to suffer

*“My son is diabetic and I was taking him to Children’s hospital. During the bus ride his condition got serious and I asked the driver to stop and call an ambulance. He would not call an ambulance and kept telling my son to shut up because he was breathing really loud. He did let us off the bus and he had not called an ambulance, he said “It’s not my responsibility”<sup>18</sup>*

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*For disabled women, every aspect of their daily lives depends on accessible transportation*

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physical and mental illnesses, and are also disproportionately transit dependent. Many poor women must take the bus to their health care appointments:

*“When we go to the doctor... we have to wait 20-25 minutes – I thought they’d [the bus] be frequent but they’re not and they’re crowded. I’m late for my appointments – even if I leave early”<sup>16</sup>*

As TransLink cuts transit service and raises fares, the health of transit dependant women suffers. Punitively high fares deter women from accessing necessary health care services. In many ways, being forced to rely on an inefficient and unaffordable public transit system can exacerbate women’s health conditions:

*“I had a specialist appointment; I was coming from E. 47<sup>th</sup> and going to Langley. It took 2.5 hours to get there. I had an 11am appointment and I left at 9, so I was ½ hour late so I missed ½ my appointment so I was really pissed off. I had to pay \$4 each way for service that got me ½ my appointment and the transfer almost ran out on the way there before I caught my last bus”<sup>17</sup>*

As TransLink raises fares, the cost of transporting women to and from appointments increasingly falls on the limited budgets of other public service providers. Downtown Eastside health agencies, and other health care services which serve primarily low-income women, are noticing a decline in appointment attendance and a marked increase in the request for bus tickets. Most social service agencies are already facing massive budget cuts, and simply cannot bear this additional cost. In the end, it is the health of women and children who bear the brunt of the neoliberal economic agenda at all levels of government. As TransLink pursues an economic agenda that favours privatization, they do a disservice to the physical health of women.

## **Bus Accessibility**

Disabled women suffer profoundly harmful health impacts due to the lack of accessible public transportation. Disabled women are disproportionately transit dependent; but despite their heavy reliance on public transit, very few routes are wheelchair accessible. When women are forced to wait for accessible buses, their health and well being suffer:

*“Hard for people in wheelchairs to get on the bus. They get stranded*



*in the rain, get soaked. I've had a cold for 1½ weeks because I was wet in the rain. Umbrellas don't work after 15 minutes. Sometimes I have to wait for the next bus but it is not accessible”* <sup>19</sup>

Accessible public transit is essential for the equality and dignity of disabled women, and for disabled women to have independence and positive experiences of health. For disabled women, every aspect of their daily lives depends on accessible transportation in every aspect of the public transit system (Council of Canadians with Disabilities).

## Mental Health

Public transit plays a crucial role in our mental as well as our physical health. Women's mental health is very much connected to their social circumstances, inequalities, discrimination, the health of their families, and the stress and pressures encountered in their daily lives (Stoppard). Due to a heavy burden of unrealistic social expectations and multiple responsibilities, women are more likely than men to suffer depression and profound stress (Stoppard); women experience greater negative consequences of depression and stress on their health.

Many aspects of women's lives contribute to poor mental health: the sheer amount of our reproductive and paid labour, our relative lack of independence, the racism and sexism in our society, and the resulting violence, social exclusion and isolation.

## Unpaid Care-giving

*“I cannot leave my kids at home; I have to take them with me every time I go to get groceries, etc.”* <sup>20</sup>

In Canada, women do 70-90% of unpaid caring work in the home and in the community. Women's health interconnects with the social and physical well being of their entire family. There exists a double-impact of family well being on women; women must care for ill and isolated family members, and the ability to fulfill this

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*When women are unable to fulfill their responsibilities, the health of our entire communities deteriorates, as children, elders, and ill family members are left stranded, without necessary care.*

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unpaid caring work is essential for our health and well being. When we are unable to fulfill familial responsibilities, this has a tremendous impact on our mental and physical health. Public transit plays a crucial role in the fulfillment of responsibility and subsequently in women's experiences of health.

One story illustrates the fear and anxiety that mothers bear when their children lack access to public transit:

*“My son works at Main and 7<sup>th</sup>. When he gets off late and misses the last bus from the SkyTrain, he has to walk at least 2 miles home very late at night, alone. It's not safe and he's already very tired...My daughter has now started working and I'm afraid for her. I just had my car break down, and I can't pick her up”* <sup>21</sup>

Women in workshops and focus groups expressed fear, frustration and feelings of inadequacy when



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they are unable to pick their children up and an inadequate public transit system leaves their children stranded and in dangerous situations.

Other women share the frustration caused by inadequate public transit and the impact on their family relationships:

*“My child and I barely saw each other during the time we relied on public transit. TransLink’s service*

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*Poor public transit services in the Lower Mainland are forcing women to rely on male family members, bosses, co-workers, or complete strangers for transportation.*

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*has severely diminished the quality of our lives”* <sup>22</sup>

Transit dependent women are disproportionately low-income, and thus are far less likely to place children and adult dependants in institutional care or hire nurses, nannies, or domestic workers to provide care in the home. Thus, women must often travel long distances via public transit to care for family members or to access care from other family members or in their communities.

*“The #318 in Ladner stops running at 6:30 p.m. It’s imperative; it’s the only way to get out there. After 6:30 p.m. that’s it. I needed this bus to visit my family”* <sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the reason, when women are unable to provide necessary care for family members, women experience depression, anger, and low self-esteem.

Women feed, dress, change bandages, ad-

minister medications, grocery shop, and perform countless other caring tasks. When women are unable to fulfill their responsibilities, the health of our entire communities deteriorate, as children, elders, and ill family members are left stranded, without necessary care.

## **Independence**

*“I have a baby, and I don’t take the bus because it’s so hard to get the stroller on the trolley bus. I have to wait for my husband to take me”*  
<sup>24</sup>

Women have a human right to live independently from men. Yet, poor public transit services in the Lower Mainland are forcing women to rely on male family members, bosses, co-workers, or complete strangers for transportation. This lack of independence creates income insecurity for women, creates high levels of immune-disabling stress, and places women at high risk of sexual harassment, emotional trauma, and physical violence (Lynn; Lakeman).

Young women who must rely on public transit to have autonomy from their parents are finding that the high cost of transit fares and the lack of service are limiting their ability to access social events, develop friendships, and be free from sexual harassment from men. When teens are unable to afford public transit fares, requesting tickets from their parents can cause arguments over money and other family parameters. Young women at the Vancouver Technical High School focus group shared that due to the expense they are given a certain number of bus tickets per week, and when they have used them up, they are forced to borrow tickets or money, or accept unsafe rides,



often from men. Asking for more tickets causes arguments and conflict in their homes.

Lack of public transit also causes strain in women's interpersonal relationships with their partners and families. One Registered Care Aide shares the strain that dependence puts on her husband:

*"Relies on husband for a ride home at 1:00am because she does not wish to sleep in the hospital. Her husband must work the next day"*  
25

Deciding between walking home and troubling their partners is a daily no-win decision for many transit dependent women; this ongoing stress and inability to be independently mobile is taking a toll on the health of women and their families.

### **Violence Against Women**

*"I was attacked at 2<sup>nd</sup> and Wallace because bus service only went to Broadway and Alma. It was around 2:30 am ... this guy followed me off the bus, put his arm around me, grabbed me and tried to push me to the ground...if there were more buses running late at night, working class women would be safer"* 26

Violence against women in Canada is a serious issue. Women are vulnerable to abuse at any time in their lives; every year hundreds of women are seriously injured or murdered by their partners or other men, and hundreds of thousands experience rape, sexual harassment, and physical violence at the hands of men (Health Canada, Woman Abuse; Lynn). Statistics and the direct experiences of women illustrate that pregnant women, young women, Aboriginal women,

women with disabilities, and immigrant and refugee women are more likely to suffer male violence, as men attack women below them on the social hierarchy (Health Canada, Woman Abuse; Lynn). Violence against women leads to physical, psychological, psychiatric, and sexual health issues among women who are abused (Health Canada, Woman Abuse).

Public transit is an essential safety for women in our communities. Lack of public transit is a barrier for women escaping an abuser in their home, in accessing transition houses and other

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*Lack of public transit is a barrier for women escaping an abuser in their home, in accessing transition houses and other services, or escaping violent situations on the street.*

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services, or escaping violent situations on the street. Women with disabilities are two times more likely to experience violence (DisAbled Women's Network). Disabled women face significantly greater barriers to escaping male violence due to the lack of accessible buses in our communities.

Access to women's centres is often determined by the availability of affordable and accessible public transit, yet TransLink does not consider access to women's services when making decisions about bus routes and shifting public transit resources to fixed rail lines such as SkyTrain. Community service deteriorates as major projects are increasingly eating up larger portions of public transit dollars. A Vancouver Rape Relief collective member explained the



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importance of Night Owl buses for women's safety and equality at a TransLink meeting:

*"Women such as myself, my friends and co-workers, the volunteers at Rape Relief and the women who live at Rape Relief shelter all need effective, adequate transport, including Night Owl buses. Women offered shift work, taking night classes and/or coming to volunteer at Rape Relief travel to and from their destinations at night. We need the benefit of accessible night buses in order to participate fully in the work, education, and women's equality activism of our lives."* <sup>27</sup>

Women at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre mainly rely on public transit to access the many services offered by the Centre. Clustered in this same area are also Bridge Housing and Vancouver Co-operative Radio Station. However, there is no bus stop located at Hastings and Columbia to serve the transit needs of women who live, work, volunteer, and rely on these services.

Sexual harassment on the public transit system is a serious issue for transit dependent women. Women on the bus, in workshops and in focus groups repeatedly recounted stories of unwanted sexual attention while riding the buses and SkyTrain throughout the region. The design and operation of the public transit system does not facilitate freedom from unwanted sexual attention for women.

*"I get off two stops after Gilmore. A lot of bushes where I get on and off the bus from Gilmore SkyTrain station. I have to walk for a couple of minutes to the bus stop; it's very possible to miss the bus. The bus only comes every 1/2 hour. The bus is not coordinated with the SkyTrain. You have to wait in the dark and the rain. As a woman, I*

*feel very insecure. It's a very desolate place, not much traffic."* <sup>28</sup>

From unlit bus stops in areas of poor visibility to isolated and invisible SkyTrain platforms to overcrowded buses that encourage unwanted touching, the public transit system does not meet the safety needs of women:

*"Up near Nanaimo, I didn't notice that the bus had emptied out as I was thinking. But you know that feeling when someone is looking at you? I turned my head to the right and saw a man looking at me intently. Something was strange and another moment later it clicked that he was doing something in the front of his body. He was jerking off on the bus! I freaked out and ran up to the driver. I think I was screaming something like "stop the bus... get this guy off the bus...this guy is jerking off on the bus!" I was afraid. The driver was going fast; he looked at his watch and said, "I'm behind schedule." He would not stop. The guy rang the bell and got off the bus... but then the driver told me I had to get off. It was only one stop away from the guy who had exposed himself to me...I saw the same guy walking up the hill towards the same bus stop I was at. Now I was afraid and alone..."* <sup>29</sup>

Women also need bus drivers who can ensure equal access to the public transit system. Racism puts women in dangerous and sometimes life-threatening situations. When bus drivers pull away from bus stops where Aboriginal women are waiting, women consider this a racist act of violence:

*"I've had drivers pass me by, an instance of racism. They pick up white women."* <sup>30</sup>



When women are at bus stops without telephones, and the bus doesn't show up, or the bus passes them by, women are forced to borrow cell phones or accept rides from strange men. Women proposed sound measures for increasing their safety during Women in Transit focus group 'envisioning' exercises. Women need proper lighting at every bus stop, and safety buzzers or telephones within the vicinity. Women need bus drivers that respect the safety and dignity of all women, regardless of race. It is evident to women that their public transit system requires an influx of funding and their ongoing consultation in the redesign of services to offer genuine safety to all women.

## **Lesbian and Transgender Women**

Up to one third of hate crimes in the province are directed towards gays, lesbians, and transgender people (Coalition of Progressive Electors). Lesbians and transgender women bear the brunt of hate-related and sexist violence in our society. In particular, lesbians and transgender people walking on the street are exposed to verbal and physical assault at night and in isolated areas where public transit service is inadequate (Bradd). Bus riders are concerned for their safety on the bus system in Greater Vancouver:

*"I experience physical and verbal violence on the bus every day, twice a day. I'm sick of dealing with it. People throw things at me. I waited for 45 minutes for the Arbutus bus (#16)-worst bus. The #14 takes forever and isn't an alternative.*

*Coming home late at night, after 11 p.m., I was mugged at Broadway & Arbutus. I waited for the bus there for 1/2 hour. If the bus had*

*come on time, the mugging wouldn't have happened. My girlfriend won't take the bus out of fear. The SkyTrain cops are useless, they don't do anything to address intimidation I face"*<sup>31</sup>

Public transit is crucial for the physical safety, dignity, and emotional well being of lesbian and transgender women.

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*Public transit is necessary for immigrant women to access culturally appropriate services, to gain education, to build community, and fulfil life goals and develop self-worth*

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## **Systemic Racism**

Systemic racism in Canada concentrates women of colour in the working class. In the Lower Mainland, immigrant and Aboriginal communities have significant barriers to the achievement of health.

The more support available to women, the better their health (Health Canada, Population Health); lack of access to appropriate social support networks has profound impacts on women's health, causing exhaustion, lack of leisure time, and cultural dislocation (Abdool & Loiselle-Leonard; Oxman-Martinez). Public transit is necessary to access the services and networks that provide social support and practical services:

*"I stopped going to my community centre because transit is inconvenient and infrequent"*<sup>32</sup>

Immigrant women are isolated from the broader society due to systemically racist policies



# + environmental justice

and practices (Region of Waterloo, Ethno-cultural). Isolation from community and culture greatly contributes to profound depression, increased stress, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Region of Waterloo, Ethno-cultural). Public transit is necessary for immigrant women to access culturally appropriate services, to gain education, to build community, and fulfill life goals and

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*When bus riders experience racism on the public transit system, the negative emotions that arise take a serious toll on their mental health, and their individual and family well being.*

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develop self-worth; women report that the lack of affordable and accessible public transit exacerbates their social exclusion:

*“Me and my Dad went to a party in Surrey. After the party, we didn’t have a car and had to take the bus. We thought the bus stop... was about two blocks away... we waited for an hour – then I noticed a sign on top of the bus stop saying that the bus only ran till 5pm. Then we had no choice and we had to hitch-hike home”* <sup>33</sup>

*“Had a meeting at Harbour Centre related to my area of study. After that we decided to go for dinner. After dinner buses passed were “not in service” and then only going to Kooteney Loop (#135)... after that I try to be home by 11:30[p.m.]. Don’t have family here so social activities are really important.”* <sup>34</sup>

Well being is crucial to women’s experiences of health, and yet the well being of immigrant women is not considered in the planning and

operation of the public transit system. Cultural holidays and celebrations contribute greatly to a sense of community and personal well being. However, TransLink holiday services are designed around a very Eurocentric schedule, often overlooking the transit needs of some communities. For example, extra bus services are not allocated on Chinese New Year, despite a massive proportion of Chinese bus riders. During the course of our project, bus riders shared that they are forced to walk home from Chinese New Year celebrations, as the bus does not run later on Chinese New Year.

## **Racial Profiling**

Recent research illuminates the impacts of racism on the mental and emotional health of Aboriginal women and women of colour (Health Canada, Social Inclusion). However, racial profiling is a frequent experience for women on the public transit system. Women experience harassment from bus drivers and criminalization and accusations of ‘fare evasion’ from bus and SkyTrain security.

*“... I do not feel safe when I get off the train to hear SkyTrain guards yelling and swearing. I saw many older immigrants get away from there as fast as they could”* <sup>35</sup>

Such instances of racism on the public transit system contribute to the escalation of anger, frustration, and humiliation:

*“I rang the bell, and the driver ignored me. The driver said the bus didn’t stop there anymore. I said; drop me here because I have to walk 15 minutes to get to work at the hotel. I have to walk; I am not going to get a taxi...I said, “Why*





*are you doing this, because I'm Asian?"*<sup>36</sup>

When bus riders experience racism on the public transit system, the negative emotions that arise take a serious toll on their mental health, and their individual and family well being. Internalized anger and resentment impacts our health; racism is known to cause and exacerbate mental health issues. TransLink must take seriously allegations of racial profiling on the public transit system; overt racism on the public transit system violates the right to mobility of all transit dependent women of colour and Aboriginal women.

### **Conditions of Work**

The benefits of employment extend far beyond determining income, as employment significantly influences physical and mental health. For many people, employment provides a sense of purpose and identity, social contact and status, and contributes greatly to health and well being (Health Canada, Ethno-cultural).

It is a public health issue when women can't access work. Those with control over their work circumstances have better health, while those of us who lack control have shrinking incomes, poorer self-esteem, and reduced quality of life (Health Canada, Population Health). Control over work can include ability to travel to and from work, as well as other daily conditions that surround employment. Lacking control over work can cause stress and anxiety, which reduce immune function and contribute greatly to a gamut of illnesses, both physical (such as bacterial and viral infections, cancer, and heart disease) and psychological (such

as depression and insomnia):

*"I was late for an interview so I didn't get to do the interview...I got a job that started at 6am and I needed to get a bus at 4am, but there was no bus"*<sup>37</sup>

Women who work in casual or low-wage jobs are frequently dependent upon public transit to move to and from work each day; the public

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*The poorer the community, the more likely is that community to bear the greatest burden of the right to mobility for the rich: air and noise pollution, lack of green space, major traffic thoroughways, poor pedestrian access, & an unequal allocation of social & economic resources.*

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transit system has a huge impact on the health of low-wage workers:

*"My car is broken and I work in the Surrey Public Library System. I live in Vancouver and it takes me 2.5 to 3 hours to get to work. There are 6-7 branches in Surrey. One or two have a bus to get me there, but it stops at 6pm. I have to beg for a ride or take a cab, which costs \$18-25 to get to Surrey Central SkyTrain Station. I turn down at least 2 shifts a week. It's really stressful not having the income...I'm on call, which so many people are, and trying to balance a few different jobs. These transit problems make it so much more difficult and stressful. Like today, I got a call saying I was supposed to be there at 1pm but I can't get there..."*<sup>38</sup>



## Health Care Workers

In many ways, the viability of the public health care system also depends on the viability of public transit. Women are a vast majority of health care workers in British Columbia. Many women health care workers are relegated to the lower-income roles within the health care system, such as licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered care

*to take the buses early. Have to miss shifts that start early because there are no buses. Sometimes late at night there are no buses – have to take cabs, very costly, don't have the money to do that. Only evening shifts available to me now. As new parents and couple on a budget, this is not acceptable”<sup>39</sup>*

Women health care workers are providing a majority of bedside and direct patient care. Thus, their experiences on public transit often set the tone of the care provided, and the outcomes of their patients. One woman describes the impacts of public transit on the intricate interplay of individual and community health:

*“I live in the West End. In the morning I take the #6. It's such a headache in the morning. Just yesterday the bus was full, it just passed my by. I was late for work. I'm a community health worker; I rely on the bus to get from client to client. It negatively impacts my clients (if I am late). They are elderly and they worry, they get upset”<sup>40</sup>*

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*Women reported that the current regional public transit system design and operation does not take into account women's needs to access spiritual/religious communities.*

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aides, food services and housekeeping staff. In 2003, the Hospital Employees Union reported that 87% of its membership was women, majority women of colour, and a majority caring for child or adult dependants (Bus Riders Union). Located at the lower end of the health care spectrum, women health care workers frequently require public transportation to and from work.

*“[I'm a] health care worker – hard*



*Women line up to get on the bus*

## Spiritual Health

Spiritual well being is an important component of total health and well being. For women, spirituality and the practice of religion can take many forms, but there exists within many traditions a common understanding of spirituality and religion as relatedness to something greater than self, providing deep life meaning, and acting as a guiding force in our lives (Lauver). Women are more likely than men to practice their religion or experience spirituality in groups and communities (Lauver). Relationships with others in our communities foster our sense of spirituality and life-meaning, connecting with the spirit inside



ourselves, in others, and in our natural environments. Women join in groups to celebrate significant life events, such as births, deaths, and life transitions. Through participation in ritual and prayer communities are built, transformed, and empowered.

Studies suggest that there is a strong relationship between spirituality, physical symptoms of illness, and psychological mood (Lawler & Younger; Ermine; Koenig). Spirituality can fulfill psycho-spiritual needs and in turn facilitate life meaning, healing and coping in women's lives (Lauver). Participation in ritual and religious practice can contribute to women's social well being; the relationships established through spiritual communities form a necessary foundation of social support and practical assistance in women's lives. Spiritual practices can positively impact individual and community health, and promote healing, well being, and mutual aid.

For many throughout the Lower Mainland, access to their places of worship and their spiritual communities is directly determined by access to public transit. What women reported during the Women in Transit project is that the current regional public transit system design and operation does not take into account women's needs to access spiritual/religious communities.

At a workshop at the Downtown Eastside Women Center, participants shared that due to public transit cutbacks the Sunday service on one downtown route that passed a building for disabled seniors was eliminated, leaving the seniors in the building unable to attend Sunday worship. Women are finding accessing places of worship during holiday service hours tedious and frustrating.

At the March TransLink Board meeting, members of the Palestine Community Centre shared that during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan some community members could not attend late night or early morning prayers due to the lack of public transit.

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*Women in focus groups and on the bus share that diesel buses are increasingly appearing on trolley routes as the old trolley buses fall apart.*

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## Community Health

### *Community Environment*

The community environment can be defined as the geographical and social boundaries of where people work, play and worship. Some of the qualities of a healthy community include: "clean and safe physical environments; peace, equity and social justice; adequate access to food, water, shelter, income, safety, work and recreation for all; adequate access to health care services; ...and, protection of the natural environment" (Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition). There are many factors that impact the health of our communities, one of the greatest being the income level. The income level of our communities is directly correlated to the health of our environment.

Those of us who live in working class communities have less access to employment, poorer housing, and a lack of social services. Working class people in poor communities also experience humiliation, social isolation, political



# + environmental justice

exclusion, greater health risks, and poorer health status (Health Canada, Social Inclusion). The poorer the community, the more likely is that community to bear the greatest burden of the right to mobility for the rich: air and noise pollution, lack of green space, major traffic throughways, poor pedestrian access, and an unequal allocation of social and economic resources.

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*Diesel bus and SkyTrain noise are concentrated in poorer communities, as wealthier communities have the resources to organize and mobilize their communities*

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Public transit has a massive impact on the quality of our community environment. The equal allocation of public transit dollars to the public transit needs of working class communities is one step towards the achievement of public health and environmental justice in our communities. Providing affordable and efficient bus service to those communities already experiencing the bulk of negative consequences of heavy commuter traffic, overcrowded buses, diesel fuel, and poor pedestrian safety is essential for our health and the health of our families and communities.

Currently, our communities are not provided honest or accurate environmental assessments of the impacts of major transit projects on their communities. What involvement of 'stakeholders' that does occur revolves mainly around property values and the conditions of communities surrounding new SkyTrain stations. Environmental damage and a subsequent loss of public bus services are not explained in full to

communities prior to decision-making. Public decision-making surrounding public transit funding, policy, design, and operation is essential for maximizing the environmental and social quality in our communities and improving the health of transit dependent women and our families.

## **Air Pollution**

Transportation activities are the biggest cause of air pollution in Canada's urban areas, and air pollution brings with it substantial negative health impacts. Actions to reduce air pollution, such as public transit, can have a positive effect on the air quality in our communities. Despite this, the current direction of public transit under directorship of the TransLink Board is moving working class communities away from public transit use and towards the car; once again the 'choice rider' is the focus of service at the expense of the transit dependent.

As TransLink reduces bus service on major routes, raises fares, rearranges familiar bus routes disturbing travel patterns, and as buses consistently break down and are completely unreliable, working class people turn to the car to move around the region. Yet it is our working class communities that suffer the most as traffic congestion increases, as pedestrian safety declines, and as air quality worsens; working class communities bear the burdens of car traffic as TransLink increasingly violates our right to public transit. Women who participated in the Women in Transit project share concerns over the health and safety of their children as pollution levels and car use increase in their communities while pedestrian safety deteriorates.



Women in focus groups and on the bus share that diesel buses are increasingly appearing on trolley routes as the old trolley buses fall apart and are replaced with fossil-fuel burning vehicles. In 2002, TransLink decided to run diesel buses at a lower grade fuel, increasing risk of childhood asthma.

Women also shared that their communities suffer the impacts of SkyTrain construction, yet were not informed nor involved in a meaningful public decision making process, nor were accurate cost-benefit analyses provided (Rapid Transit Project 2000). One woman describes the impacts on her environment:

*“I was living on East 8<sup>th</sup> when they were doing the Grandview clear-cut. They were doing cement work for months. I was choking on dust every day. Construction was 24 hrs. Neighbors did petitions. City and TransLink didn’t care that people were choking on dust, didn’t want to put up the extra cost. They wouldn’t put up a net to keep the dust out. We didn’t get compensation for anything (like a free bus pass, etc.).”<sup>41</sup>*

## Noise Pollution

Working class communities are exposed to greater noise pollution; constant and excessive noise is detrimental to the health of our communities. Women in particular experience negative health consequences of excessive and repetitive noise in our environments through increased agitation, stress, reduced concentration, mental and physical fatigue, and reduced immune function. When family members can’t sleep or develop illnesses due to noise pollution, often women in the family bear this burden as well.

In the Lower Mainland, diesel bus and

SkyTrain noise are concentrated in poorer communities, as wealthier communities have the resources to organize and mobilize their communities to protect their environment and their property values. TransLink environmental assessments have completely inadequate measurements of noise increases in working class communities; our communities are inadequately warned of increasing diesel bus noise, SkyTrain noise, electrical buzzing, construction noise, and a myriad of other sources of ambient noise which exact a trying toll on women and their communities.

## Public Transit Conditions

Conditions on the public transit system in the Lower Mainland consistently deteriorated, aggravating the condition of our communities and our daily lives. Women experience the public transit system as overcrowded, unsafe, dirty, and unreliable. Due to the current enforcement-centred ‘security’, many women and children feel like criminals riding the bus and SkyTrain. Women’s biggest concerns are bus stop safety, bus maintenance and cleanliness, overcrowding, pedestrian safety and an absolute lack of people-centred security.

## Bus Stops

Women are angry and frustrated at the lack of benches, shelters, lights and schedules at public bus stops. Safety from heavy traffic, shelter from the rain, a place to rest weary feet or seat children, and lights to illuminate a threatening night are necessary to facilitate a secure trip on public transit. The conditions at bus stops are a part of our



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community environment, and contribute to our perception of the value and importance of our communities and its members.

## **The Condition of the Bus**

Cleanliness and the working condition of the bus also shape women's perceptions of their community environment. Women feel unsafe and unhappy about broken down and dirty buses. Women are concerned over their physical safety and the health of their children. Women, youth, and children feel like criminals when they can't afford rising fares or when near 'security' staff whose primary goal is to 'catch' the 'cheater' and write a ticket. All of these factors take away the dignity of the transit dependent. Despite being the backbone of the public transit system, the bus is commonly referred to as the 'loser cruiser' due to inexcusably poor conditions.

## **Overcrowding**

Women know that overcrowding is a major health hazard for themselves and their families. Overcrowding contributes to unwanted sexual attention, sexual assault, extreme fatigue, child



*Women waiting to get on the #9 Bus*

injuries, and strain in pregnancy. Overcrowding also greatly reduces women's sense of well being and safety while using the public transit system. Our communities increasingly suffer from inadequate or reduced bus service and longer waits, overcrowding, and reduced health and well being are the result.

## **Safety**

Women throughout the project, on the bus, in workshops and focus groups, and in our communities consistently pointed out that the conception of 'safety' according to TransLink and women's conceptions of safety are often at odds. Women perceive the focus of Coast Mountain and SkyTrain (TransLink) security to be fare enforcement, valuing money over the true safety of women and their families. Women need safety-oriented public transit staff that focus on their physical and emotional well being and who can be counted on if trouble arises during the course of their travels. Women report that the allocation of public funds towards mega-projects and away from less politically and economically attractive items such as proper lighting, safety buzzers, and street-level maintenance are compromising their actual safety. Women have clear ideas of what is required for their safety while using public transit; however, TransLink has very little avenue for public participation in the direction of the transit system.

## **Conclusion**

For over three years, the Bus Riders Union has been meeting with bus riders in their communities, analyzing the impacts of public



transit on our lives, and advancing people-centred alternatives to current public transit funding allocations, policy and planning. The 8 months of women-centred research conducted by the Bus Riders Union confirms that an affordable, accessible, bus-centred, clean-air public transit system is fundamental to the achievement of public health and environmental justice in the communities where women and their families live, work, worship, and play. Our physical, mental, spiritual and community health rests on a strong foundation of social, economic, and environmental policy and action. Only through the allocation of public dollars towards public services such as the public transit needs of women and their communities can the gap between the rich and the poor be lessened, and can public health and environmental justice truly be achieved.

<sup>1</sup> Testimonial 14

<sup>2</sup> Testimonial 14

<sup>3</sup> WIT Testimonial 16

<sup>4</sup> WIT Testimonial 26

<sup>5</sup> WIT Testimonial 44

<sup>6</sup> WIT Testimonial 7

<sup>7</sup> WIT Testimonial 9

<sup>8</sup> WIT Testimonial 10

<sup>9</sup> WIT Testimonial 45

<sup>10</sup> WIT Testimonial 12

<sup>11</sup> WIT Testimonial 13

<sup>12</sup> WIT Testimonial 53

<sup>13</sup> WIT Testimonial 12

<sup>14</sup> WIT Testimonial 33

<sup>15</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 36

<sup>16</sup> WIT Testimonial 20

<sup>17</sup> WIT Testimonial 60

<sup>18</sup> WIT Testimonial 59

<sup>19</sup> WIT Testimonial 8

<sup>20</sup> WIT Testimonial 58

<sup>21</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 72

<sup>22</sup> WIT Testimonial 46

<sup>23</sup> WIT Testimonial 49

<sup>24</sup> WIT Testimonial 33

<sup>25</sup> WIT Testimonial 17

<sup>26</sup> WIT Testimonial 35

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Piovesan; Vancouver Rape Relief presentation to the TransLink Board, March 2004

<sup>28</sup> WIT Testimonial 51

<sup>29</sup> WIT Testimonial 43

<sup>30</sup> WIT Testimonial 38

<sup>31</sup> WIT Testimonial 71

<sup>32</sup> WIT Testimonial 51

<sup>33</sup> WIT Testimonial 63

<sup>34</sup> WIT Testimonial 50



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<sup>35</sup> WIT Testimonial 3

<sup>36</sup> WIT Testimonial 32

<sup>37</sup> WIT Testimonial 22

<sup>38</sup> Night Owls Testimonial 44

<sup>39</sup> WIT Testimonial 31

<sup>40</sup> WIT Testimonial 27

<sup>41</sup> WIT Testimonial 42





## Our Vision: Women at the Centre of Public Transit

After eight months of organizing on Vancouver's buses, talking to hundreds of women in workshops, focus groups and on the bus, and studying collectively, the Women in Transit team has learnt the numerous ways in which the transit system does not serve the needs of women.

When we struggle for public services, we are struggling against neoliberalism; when we struggle for public services designed around the lives of working class women and particularly Aboriginal women and women of colour, we are struggling against patriarchy, national oppression and all other forces of imperialism that intersect to exploit and oppress us. We see the limitations in the Lower Mainland's transit system now, and while we struggle to defend what we do have, we also fight to expand the transit system so that it fully serves all our needs.

As we struggle for a better transit system, we build on past struggles for public services that work to redistribute wealth from the rich to the

poor, struggles for the rights of women, and struggles for the rights of Aboriginal communities and communities of colour. We struggle to improve the lives of all women, and to expand our power and resistance to exploitation, so that we can



win short-term gains for a long-term struggle that envisions social justice for all.

What follows is our positive vision for change in the transit system, beginning with our guiding principles for change, and then specific recommendations to be immediately acted-upon by TransLink board members and staff.

### Guiding Principles for Change

#### Keep Public Transit Public

In order for everyone in the Lower Mainland to have the human right to mobility, transit must be kept public. Public transit improves social equality where private enterprise, including the private provision of transit, exacerbates existing social inequality. Public transit redistributes wealth towards the needs of working class communities in the context of a growing gap between the rich and the poor.

#### Plan Transit to Serve Women, People of Colour, & Aboriginal People

Public transit cannot be planned in a vacuum. Public transit must be centred on the needs of transit dependent women, particularly women of colour and Aboriginal women, who are among the most marginalized in society. The public transit system operates in a social, political and economic system that exploits and oppresses working class women and particularly women of



colour and Aboriginal women. In order to fully provide everyone with the right to mobility, the transit system must address the specific transit needs of women.

Since women are responsible for the majority of socially necessary reproductive labour, the transit system must be designed to facilitate this work. Women need a transit system that allows them to travel with children, to access public services, and to visit family and friends.

With the flexibilization of labour, women are increasingly working in short-term, low paying, and irregular contract work. Women need a transit system that allows them to access work at all hours of the day and in all areas of the region in order to provide for themselves and their families. Since women work a double workday, women are in special need of a reliable transit system that minimizes their unpaid time in transit. Public transit must value women's time and provide service that is comprehensive, frequent, and reliable.

In addition, women in wheelchairs, women who do not speak English, and women travelling with children all have a right to transit. TransLink must make transit accessible to all women and eliminate any barriers to use.

## Implement Democratic Process

Public transit must be run for and by the transit dependent. As a public body, TransLink must be accountable to those who need it. Democratic process must provide avenues for transit dependent women to have their needs heard, to determine priorities, and to have meaningful involvement in the design and planning of the

transit system.

## Systemic Problems Require Systemic Solutions

TransLink must recognize that systemic problems require systemic solutions. TransLink must realize that public transit provision in the Lower Mainland occurs in the context of systemic and interpersonal racism against Aboriginal people and people of colour who are perceived as 'Other' and demonized in society, coupled with systemic and interpersonal sexism against women of colour and Aboriginal women. TransLink must recognize and address the real systemically racist barriers that women of colour and Aboriginal women face in Canada.

An anti-racist perspective should direct the TransLink board and staff throughout its transit planning process. An anti-racist perspective is one that looks beyond multiculturalism and alleviates transit racism by concretely prioritizing serving the needs of working class communities of colour and Aboriginal communities.

Transit can help equalize the hierarchies brought on by class, race and gender exploitation by facilitating the needs of the most oppressed in their access to employment, community participation, education, and in fostering healthy communities.

## Move Beyond 'Multiculturalism' to Alleviate Transit Racism

Public transit plays a vital role in the economic and social vitality of working class communities of color. In addition to meeting the basic right to mobility, transit can play a crucial role in alleviating the systemic racism that working class com-



munities of colour and Aboriginal communities face daily in their lives.

TransLink must recognize the independence of Aboriginal peoples and how they need to travel between their land and the services they need. For transit dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour, transit is more than just a transportation that brings them home from work and back again. Transit represents the right to participation in their communities, places of worship, employment at all places, hours and days of the week, safety, school and access to other public services we need in our everyday lives. Public transit as a right means that the needs of transit dependent Aboriginal women and women of colour must lie at the centre of transit policy and planning.

## **Acknowledge that Public Transit Planning is Public Health Planning**

While health is a personal and community experience, our capacity to achieve or maintain health rests on a foundation of public policy, social planning, and access to resources. Our health is determined by the course of our daily lives and our social environments. Alma Ata declared health as a “social goal whose realization requires the action of many other social and economic sectors in addition to the health sector”, and the subsequent Ottawa Charter called for health to be put on the agenda of all public policy makers. In this context, there is growing support for the fundamental principle that all public policy constitutes health-related policy.

Public transit policy and planning must be considered as health planning. This perspective has the potential to positively impact the health of

women and communities throughout the region, and in particular low-income communities where immigrant and refugee women, single mothers, and low-wage workers are clustered.

## **Recognize Public Transit as a Determinant of Health**

The social determinants of health prompt an examination of the role of the social environment in the creation and maintenance of health. Social determinants of health include gender, ethnicity/race, income inequity, social exclusion, employment, working conditions, food security, and access to public services. When the social determinants of health are lacking, health is virtually impossible to achieve. Social determinants detail the social resources and policy actions necessary to ensure a just and equitable distribution of resources.

Over the course of the project women shared the impacts of a poor public transit system on their health, the health of their families, and the health of their communities. Reversing the trend of public transit cuts and increased user-fees and designing a system to meet the unique needs of women and families could help reverse the pattern of ill-health for transit dependent women.

## **Build Healthy Communities & Environmental Justice**

The health of the community is determined by the women who live there; this became increasingly clear throughout the Women in Transit project. A healthy community is one that reduces disease by ensuring equitable opportunities, promotes and protects health, and achieves optimal



# recommendations

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quality of life. When women envision the kind of public transit system that would meet our needs, the connection between public transit and a healthy community has persistent correlation.

The attainment of environmental justice and healthy communities includes the involvement of all people in determining the development of environmental assessments and decision-making based on their own determination of needs and priorities. Our working class communities must be key stakeholders in determining their own liveability. In order to ensure both social and environmental justice, full and meaningful participation based on accurate and honest information must occur immediately, starting with a revision of the recent Richmond-Airport-Vancouver Line decision.

All decisions made at TransLink must include an environmental assessment based on the health and environmental justice needs of individual communities who will be impacted by those decisions. Those assessments must be presented to the communities involved in a fully accessible manner, and democratic discussions and decision-making must take place.



## Specific Recommendations

Public transit is a human right and a woman's right, it is a necessary part of ending systemic racism, sexism and class oppression, and it is an essential determinant of women's health. The Women in Transit team therefore makes the following concrete recommendations for the continued provision of public transit services in the GVRD.

It is important to note that all the following recommendations need to work together in order for women to truly be put at the centre of public transit policy and planning.

### Keep Public Transit Public

Put the needs and visions of transit dependent women at the centre of transit planning. TransLink must keep public services public! In recognition of the fundamental role of public services, and in particular public transit in impacting public health, TransLink must keep all aspects of the public transit system public and return all aspects of the public transit system currently under private control and operation to public control.

#### Steps to achieve this goal:

- Reject contracting out, PPP and all forms of privatization
- Immediately stop passing the responsibility for providing an affordable public transit system to other social service agencies. Shift the bulk of funding to an affordable public transit system for all regardless of life circumstance
- Consider the expansion of an affordable, accessible, clean-air, bus centred public transportation system as a fundamental determinant of public health
- View the region from a population health perspective, and examine public transit impacts on the determinants of health in public transit decision-making



*From visioning drawing, BRU focus group*

### Implement Democratic Process

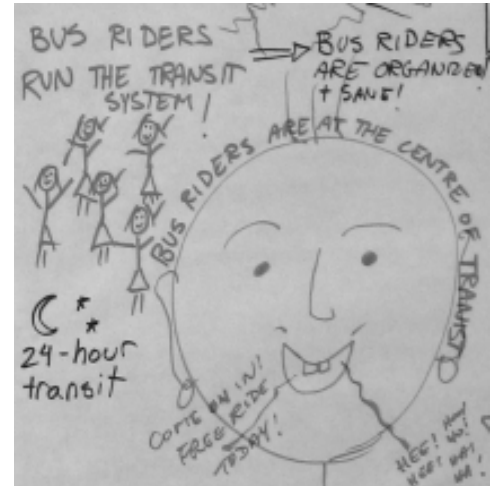
Women are the experts of our own lives, and we know best how the transit system can best serve our needs and keep us healthy. Transit planning in the Lower Mainland should be led by transit dependent women, particularly transit dependent women of colour. TransLink must facilitate women's full participation in the transit planning process by taking measures to create spaces for a democratic participation where women, particularly Aboriginal women and women of colour, can openly share

# recommendations

their experiences and knowledge for a people-centred transit system, be able to criticize and challenge TransLink for its decisions, and have meaningful impact over long-term changes.

## Steps to achieve this goal:

- Ensure transparency and full accountability to the public
- Involve working class communities in genuine decision-making and democratic process for budgets
- Engage in meaningful democratic process with existing women's organizations and public health agencies to determine the gendered and health implications of public transit policy and planning
- Involve all communities in genuine decision-making about infrastructure investments, such as SkyTrain, that could potentially divert funding from other necessary services
- Provide all communities potentially impacted by a public transit decision a clear cost-benefit analysis to form the basis of community consultation.
- Provide environmental assessments and public consultations of all new service or infrastructure proposals in clear and accessible language with translations
- Make all documents accessible and available to transit dependent people at all times
- Translate all documents in different languages that reflect the languages spoken by transit dependent women in the region
- Hold smaller community meetings in working class communities of color with translators to gather meaningful information from transit dependent women
- Ensure all meetings are:
  - Accessible by bus
  - Held in neighborhoods that are highly represented by the transit dependent
  - Prioritize bus riders to speak before business people
  - Posted in advance in different languages
  - Provide childcare



*From visioning drawing from BRU Focus Group*

## Affordable Transit Fares

For transit dependent women to access employment, schooling, social and recreational services, places of worship, and other parts of their community, they must be able to afford the bus fare.



## Steps to achieve this goal:

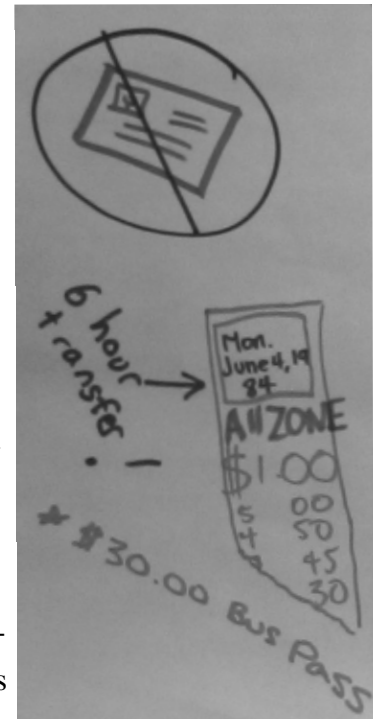
- Decrease fares, and make them affordable for everyone
- Eliminate the zone structure
- Extend transfer times
- Eliminate means testing for youth, seniors, people on disabilities and people on low income
- Make available family fare packs that are affordable
- Provide free bus passes to people on welfare
- Provide free bus passes to all refugees

## Make Transit Accessible to All

Transit dependent women must have full access to existing transit services.

### Steps to achieve this goal:

- Make all buses wheelchair- and stroller-accessible
- Publish information about the transit system (e.g. schedules and fares) in multiple languages to reflect the languages spoken by transit dependent women in the region
- Make information about the transit system more widely accessible by posting schedules at each bus stop
- Offer tours about how to use the transit system for new immigrants



*from visioning drawing  
Van Tech Workshop*

## Stop Systemic and Interpersonal Racism

All communities, including Aboriginal communities and communities of colour, have the right to equal access to public services, and to well-paid, secure unionized work.

Hiring more Aboriginal bus drivers and bus drivers of colour, particularly those who speak the commonly spoken languages among transit-dependent women (such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Tagalog) would increase Aboriginal women's and women of colour's ability to access transit. In addition, TransLink would be addressing a systemic barrier to Aboriginal women's and women of colour's access to transit. By hiring bus drivers who are Aboriginal or of colour, this would both increase Aboriginal and people of colour's sense of entitlement to using public transit as a public service. This would also increase their right and entitlement to well-paying unionized jobs, particularly in an environment where people of colour and Aboriginal people, especially women, are disproportionately denied such jobs and concentrated in non-unionized, low-paid and flexible work. In this way, TransLink would be addressing a systemic barrier to Aboriginal and women of colour's access to public transit by



# recommendations

combating different manifestations of systemic racism head-on.

## Steps to achieve this goal:

- Hire phone operators that speak languages overwhelmingly used by bus riders such as Punjabi, Cantonese and Tagalog
- Hire bus drivers who reflect communities who are transit dependent: women and working class people of color
- Match multi-lingual bus drivers according to the routes they serve
- Hire bus drivers with class, race and gender consciousness

## Prioritize Women's Safety

Women have a right to feel safe when accessing a public service such as transit. Women's safety means that we want to be free from sexual harassment and racial profiling.

### Steps to achieve this goal:

- Provide frequent bus service that runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Eliminate SkyTrain police.
- Provide good lighting at all bus stops.
- Provide washrooms at close proximity to every bus stop and SkyTrain station.
- Involve all transit dependent women and their communities in designing a people-centred system of safety that meets their needs.

## Massively Expand the Public Transit System

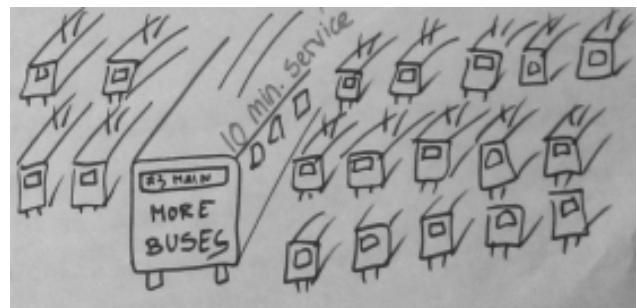
Public transit must be comprehensively developed to accommodate the needs of women.

### Steps to achieve this goal:

- Re-invest money into a bus-centred system
- Place a moratorium on SkyTrain spending
- Expand the frequency and reliability of bus service
- Implement a 24-hour transit system
- Expand current bus routes, especially East/West routes
- Create new routes that are accessible to places of worship, community centres, grocery stores, etc
- Expand public transit in suburban areas

## Make Transit Environmentally Just

The quality of our environment has a huge impact on the health and well-being of



*from Visioning drawing from BRU focus group*





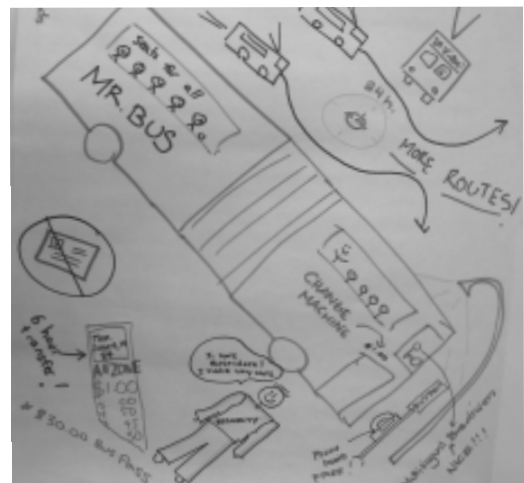
women and our communities. Public transit is fundamental to the health of our environment and our communities.

## Steps to achieve this goal:

- Provide environmental assessments of all new service or infrastructure proposals in clear and accessible language with translations.
- Immediately convert all diesel buses to clean-air buses.
- Fund community-directed SkyTrain Station evaluation and improvement/beautification projects.

## Conclusion

Women have a right to mobility, and must be served in the Lower Mainland by a public transit system that allows them to travel where they need to, when they need to. It is only when TransLink takes into account the above recommendations and affirms a strong commitment to the public provision of transit service will women begin to benefit from the transit system. When we have a strong anti-racist, anti-sexist public transit system that serves the needs of those who need it most – working class women, particularly working class women of colour - we will be on our way to social justice in the Vancouver region. Therefore, we demand: Put women at the centre of public transit!



*Visioning Drawing from Van Tech Workshop*



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