

I was groped on the tram – not for the first time

Devon LaSalle



Like many of Melbourne's 4.8 million residents, I take public transport to work every day. Anyone who has ever spent time commuting during peak hour knows how crowded it can be.

We pack ourselves into every available nook and cranny on trains, trams and buses until we can barely breathe. We may not know our fellow passengers' names, but we can tell what they ate for breakfast.

Our daily commute should be nothing more than a mild inconvenience. But too often, it's so much worse for half the population.

I stepped onto the 86 tram yesterday morning on my way to the office. As usual, it was Sardine Land. I was packed in right next to the door, with two of the vertical poles in front of my chest. I grasped the one

directly in front of my left hand while the well-dressed businessman packed in at my right held the other.

As soon as the tram started to move, I noticed his hand inch up the handle closer to my breast. This made me slightly uncomfortable, but I figured he was simply tightening his grip. After all, we were about to head uphill and it gets bumpy.

I ignored it and started thinking about the meeting I had to attend later that day.

The tram started making its way up the hill. People were being jostled around and forced to tighten their grips to maintain balance. Suddenly, I felt the back of a finger slowly and deliberately slide over my nipple.

I looked over at the man standing to my right, the only possible culprit. With a slight smirk on his face, he inched his hand slightly higher onto the pole so it was now right in front of my breast, acting like he was simply getting a better grip to avoid falling over.

I was too shocked to speak.

I didn't feel like I could say anything. While it was clear to me that it was a deliberate act, it was perhaps just subtle enough to anyone around us that he could easily claim that verticent contact due to overcrowding.

All I wanted to do was get away from him, but it was too crowded to even turn my body away. All I could do was lean my upper body as far away from his hand as possible so he couldn't casually assault me again.

My move to get away from him elicited glares and dramatic sighs from my fellow passengers until I disembarked at the next stop.

This is not an isolated incident. I have experienced all manner of vile things in my time taking public transport in this city over the past decade.

The recent death of Aiiia Maasarwe struck a chord with so many women in our city because we understand the risk we take by simply going about our daily lives.

We know there's a pretty fair chance

that we'll get harassed or assaulted in some way on public transport, and we know that no precautions "for your safety" will make a difference.

We also know we can't always rely on someone coming to our aid, and we're worried about the potential backlash we may experience if we say anything.

I'm sick of feeling unsafe, and I'm tired of seeing women dismissed just because they had the courage to defend themselves against abuse.

What if the woman speaking out was someone you loved? Would you talk about all of the "good guys" out there, or would you offer her comfort and support?

Before you bring out the pitchforks, I'm not blaming all men for this. The few who commit these crimes know what they're doing is wrong, and I'm sure the rest would stand up if they saw something happening.

The point is that too often these assaults go unseen. They can be so discreet or fleeting that even if

there's time to act, it can be hard for women to feel empowered to speak up. These little instances of abuse seem to have become so routine in our lives that we simply grin and bear it.

I didn't feel like I could turn around and explain to my fellow tram passengers that I was leaning closer to avoid getting groped again. I felt powerless.

Does my experience sound familiar? Talk about it! Ask your partners, siblings, parents, grandparents and friends what they've experienced, and support them when they tell you. You may be surprised how many others have been there before, and how healing it can be to know you're not alone.

Maybe if we talk to each other enough about our experiences – both big and small – another woman will have the courage to call out abuse and won't go to work feeling disgusted, violated and alone.

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