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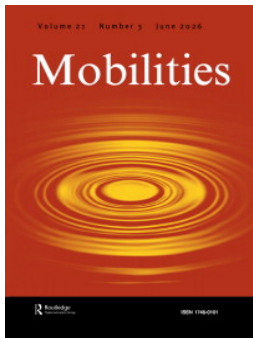
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The drama of going to the toilet': the gendered politics of sanitation in mobile work

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ABSTRACT

Women worldwide are familiar with the frustration of queuing for the women's restroom. For women drivers whose work depends on remaining continuously mobile, however, this everyday frustration takes on different meanings. In occupations organised around continuous movement, availability, and speed, the capacity to stop without penalty is closely shaped by gendered norms and infrastructural provision. This article examines how access to sanitation operates as a form of gendered infrastructure in mobile transport work. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic research with 35 women taxi and app-based drivers (Uber and Cabify) in Malaga, it analyses how bodily needs intersect with urban space, platform management, and the temporal organisation of work. Conceptualising toilets as gendered infrastructure, the article shows how difficulties accessing sanitation generate everyday disruptions that translate into lost income, health risks, and heightened exposure to algorithmic control. These effects are intensified by norms of modesty and privacy that constrain women's ability to improvise bodily relief in public space. In response, women develop everyday strategies to remain mobile, but these practices ultimately shift the temporal, emotional, and bodily costs of inadequate infrastructure onto them. The article demonstrates that mobility is sustained through embodied and infrastructural support that is unevenly available.

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Introduction

'There's a big problem. I don't know if you've heard about it. It's the drama of women in the middle of summer when they have to pee. It's the drama of the century!'

—Rosario,¹ 26, Uber driver

Rosario, an Uber driver in Malaga, Spain, described what she called "the drama of the century": the difficulty of finding a toilet during long shifts in a city where public facilities are scarce, closed, or require payment. Her exasperated remark points to a mundane yet revealing problem at the heart of contemporary mobile work. For drivers whose income depends on remaining continuously available and on the move, the capacity to work is inseparable from the capacity to manage bodily needs in urban space. Yet the infrastructures that make such management

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possible (e.g., public toilets, places to wash, and change menstrual products) are unevenly distributed, socially regulated, and deeply gendered. What might appear as a minor inconvenience instead becomes a recurring interruption that shapes everyday movement and work, carrying unequal temporal, economic, and health-related consequences.

This issue is particularly salient at a moment when urban economies increasingly rely on labour organised through continuous circulation and digital coordination. Research on platform and transport work has shown how algorithmic management, performance metrics, and just-in-time logics reward uninterrupted availability and penalise pauses, making time off the road immediately visible as lost productivity (Gibbings, Frey, and Barker 2022; Rosenblat 2018). Mobilities scholarship has further demonstrated that movement is always an embodied and infrastructurally mediated achievement, shaped by rhythms of speed, delay, and waiting (Gregson 2018). From a feminist perspective, urban mobility is profoundly unequal, structured by gendered norms of safety, respectability, and bodily control that shape who can linger, stop, and feel legitimate in public space (Kern 2020).

Despite these insights, the mundane infrastructures that sustain bodily reproduction during mobile work have received remarkably little attention. While feminist urban studies and development research have long highlighted toilets as key sites of gendered exclusion, dignity, and safety, particularly for women (Greed 2010; Penner 2013), such concerns have rarely been connected to analyses of mobile labour.

Until recently, access to toilets has remained a largely overlooked aspect of platform-based mobility work. Existing research on platform labour in Spain has focused primarily on algorithmic control, employment status, and regulatory disputes, while leaving everyday bodily needs and infrastructure largely unexamined (Scolari et al. 2025). A small and emerging body of policy-oriented research has begun to draw attention to this gap: for example, an independent study commissioned by Uber documents unreliable and discretionary access to restroom facilities for ride-hailing and delivery drivers across multiple cities, highlighting workers' dependence on informal arrangements rather than designed provision (WXY Studio 2024). By examining women taxi and VTC drivers in Málaga, this article contributes an ethnographic account of how sanitation access—typically absent from both scholarship and regulation—is experienced and negotiated in everyday mobility work.

This article addresses this gap by taking toilets as part of the infrastructure of mobility. It asks: (1) How does access to sanitation shape the temporal organisation of mobile work for women taxi and platform drivers? (2) How are bodily needs experienced and negotiated within regimes of continuous availability and algorithmic control? And, (3) what strategies do women develop to endure, rework, or occasionally transgress these constraints?

Drawing on ethnographic research with 35 women drivers in Málaga, the article conceptualises toilets as a form of gendered temporal infrastructure: a set of material and social arrangements that mediate the alignment between linear work time and cyclical bodily rhythms (Lefebvre 2017). It shows how the search for a toilet produces interruptions, detours, waiting, and anxiety, and how these temporal frictions translate into lost income, algorithmic disadvantage, and health risks. At the same time, it examines the everyday practices through which women anticipate, negotiate, and manage these constraints, from regulating hydration to cultivating networks of 'safe places' and negotiating access in cafes, petrol stations, and public buildings. In examining how women negotiate these constraints, the article attends to everyday practices of endurance, adjustment, and occasional transgression, drawing analytically on Katz's (2004) distinction between resilience, reworking, and resistance.

By foregrounding the temporal and embodied politics of sanitation, the article makes three contributions. First, it extends mobilities research by showing that the capacity to remain in motion depends on infrastructures that support bodily reproduction and that these are unevenly accessible. Second, it brings feminist urban theory into dialogue with studies of platform labour, highlighting how gendered norms and bodily rhythms intersect with software-governed time.

Third, the article contributes to debates on mobility justice by revealing how apparently banal facilities become sites where inequality is reproduced through the unequal distribution of waiting, risk, and bodily strain. In using the term mobility justice, the article adopts an infrastructural and embodied understanding of mobility justice, focused on how the costs of remaining mobile are unevenly allocated. It focuses on how the temporal, bodily, and health-related costs of remaining mobile are unevenly allocated. From this perspective, justice concerns who is expected to absorb waiting, interruption, risk, and bodily vulnerability in order to sustain continuous circulation at work. By foregrounding sanitation as a mundane but essential infrastructure, the article shows how mobility systems rely on forms of embodied endurance that are often rendered invisible, normalised, or privatised, and how these processes reproduce gendered inequalities.

Mobilities, gender, and temporal infrastructures

Mobilities scholarship has long emphasised that movement is not simply about getting from one place to another, but about the temporal organisation of everyday life, labour, and the body. A key influence here is Lefebvre's (2017) notion of *rhythmanalysis*, which conceptualises social life as composed of interacting rhythms, including linear, clock-based rhythms associated with work and capitalism, and cyclical rhythms linked to the body, care, and biological processes. Building on this, scholars have shown how mobility is shaped by regimes of speed, delay and waiting (Edensor 2010; Merriman 2013), and how the capacity to move, pause, and remain present is socially differentiated and politically organised (Sharma 2014). Within studies of mobile modes of labour, attention has focused on tightly regulated temporal environments shaped by queues (Laurier 2004), fatigue, and just-in-time logistics (Gregson 2018), as well as by algorithmic management and platform-governed time (Woodcock and Graham 2020). Therefore, this work shows that staying 'in motion' depends on how bodily rhythms are aligned, or forced to align, with dominant temporal regimes of work and circulation.

Feminist research has shown that these rhythms are profoundly gendered. Women's mobility through public space is shaped by concerns with safety, visibility, and respectability, producing uneven experiences (Kern 2020). In transport and platform labour, ideals of constant availability and endurance are modelled on masculine bodies (Rosenblat 2018), marginalising those whose mobility is shaped by care responsibilities and bodily vulnerability. This literature establishes that mobility is organised around gendered norms of bodily capacity and temporal availability.

Alongside this, feminist urban scholarship has examined public toilets as key sites through which access to public space is organised. Studies show how the under-provision of women's toilets, combined with concerns about safety, cleanliness, and propriety, has long limited women's ability to remain in public space for extended periods (Greed 2010; Penner 2013). Sanitation has been analysed as a political and moral issue that disproportionately regulates women's and other marginalised bodies (Gandy 2004; Molotch 1988). However, this literature has rarely been brought into dialogue with mobilities research or with studies of mobile labour.

This separation points to a significant conceptual gap. Although mobilities and platform labour research have devoted considerable attention to rhythm, fatigue, waiting, and algorithmic time (Gregson 2018; Woodcock and Graham 2020), it has rarely examined the infrastructures that enable workers to meet basic bodily needs while remaining present in public space.

To interpret how women respond to these constraints in their everyday working life, the article draws on Katz's (2004) distinction between resilience, reworking, and resistance. This framework provides a heuristic for understanding practices through which workers endure, adapt to, or subtly challenge unequal arrangements. In this article, it is used to analyse women drivers' practices around toilet access, from anticipatory planning and bodily discipline to negotiated detours and occasional transgressions of gendered norms.

Methodology: approaching research on mobility experiences and labour methods

This article draws on qualitative, ethnographic research carried out with women working in the taxi and ride-hailing sectors in Malaga, Spain, between September 2020 and July 2021. The study is informed by a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach (Charmaz 2014), which treats knowledge as situated and emerging from everyday practices and embodied experiences (Timonen, Foley, and Conlon 2018). This framework is well-suited to examining mundane infrastructures, such as toilets, whose significance is often rendered visible through moments of interruption, discomfort, and negotiation. Consistent with feminist methodological commitments, the research foregrounds women's experiences and acknowledges the researcher's positionality as part of the research process (Haraway 1988).

In total, 35 women participated in the study: 20 taxi drivers (*taxistas*²) and 15 platform-based³ drivers (*conductoras*), including eight working with Uber and seven with Cabify. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and online outreach, following initial difficulties approaching women drivers at taxi ranks and waiting areas. Snowballing proved more effective, allowing the research to unfold through existing relations of trust. Reaching *conductoras* was particularly challenging, as several had left platform work during or after the COVID-19 pandemic; some interviews therefore involved retrospective reflections on working conditions.

This study focuses on the experiences of cisgender women. This reflects the composition of the participant group and the terms through which gender was discussed during fieldwork. While access to sanitation is also a critical issue for non-binary and trans workers, whose experiences of public toilet use are often shaped by heightened risks of exclusion and violence (Jones and Slater 2020), these dynamics were beyond the empirical scope of this study.

Data were generated through semi-structured narrative interviews (Gabriel 2009), informal conversations, participant observation, and limited work shadowing. Interviews focused on participants' working trajectories and everyday routines, from which difficulties accessing toilets emerged as a recurring theme. Two full-shift shadowing sessions with taxi drivers were conducted in July 2021, following the easing of pandemic restrictions. Spending time in cars, taxi ranks, and airport waiting areas enabled close observation of the work rhythms, queues, and the small decisions through which drivers negotiated bodily needs during shifts.

Participant observation took place through repeated, often prolonged presence at taxi ranks, airport waiting areas, petrol stations, cafés, and other sites where drivers paused between trips. Observation was episodic and frequently interrupted as drivers were called to move, reflecting the mobile and fragmented nature of the work itself. Alongside this observational work, interviews were guided by flexible topic guides rather than fixed questionnaires, allowing participants to shape the direction and emphasis of their narratives. This adaptive approach reflects the methodological commitments of constructivist grounded theory and the empirical realities of researching mobile work, where time, access, and attention are continuously negotiated.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All participants provided informed consent, pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality, and ethical approval was granted by the University of Sussex Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Conversations took place in locations chosen by participants, most often cafes, parked cars, taxi ranks, and airport waiting areas, situating accounts of toilet access, waiting and interruption within the spatial and temporal contexts in which they were lived.

Analysis proceeded iteratively, following a process of coding and comparison (Schreier 2014). Transcripts and fieldnotes were coded inductively, with attention to recurring themes around bodily rhythms, waiting, health, access to facilities, and the organisation of work time. Coding was conducted in Spanish to retain the semantic nuance and affective texture of participants'

accounts. Through repeated reading, memo-writing, and comparison across cases, these empirical themes were gradually brought into dialogue with concepts from feminist urban studies, mobilities research, and Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking, and resistance, allowing the analytic focus on toilets as gendered temporal infrastructure to emerge.

As with all ethnographic research, the empirical material presented here is shaped by the researcher's positionality. Conducting research as a woman in a male-dominated sector shaped access and interaction, initially producing moments of discomfort or visibility, but over time facilitating rapport and trust with participants through repeated, informal encounters during waiting periods. My position as an outsider to the taxi and platform sectors also meant that access unfolded gradually and relationally, shaping the slow nature of fieldwork.

Research context: women in Malaga's taxi and app-based transport sector

Women constitute a small but slowly growing minority within Malaga's taxi and ride-hailing workforce, a sector that has long been organised around masculine norms of mobility, safety, and public presence. Although the first female taxi driver in Spain was recorded as early as 1935 (Mariño 2018), the transport sector has remained strongly gendered, with persistent assumptions about who belongs behind the wheel and on the street. These assumptions shape not only recruitment and career trajectories, but also everyday experiences of legitimacy, risk, and bodily comfort in public space.

Women in the traditional taxi sector

The *taxistas* who participated in this study form a relatively homogeneous group in socio-demographic terms. All were Spanish-born, and most had entered the profession through family connections, reflecting the endogamous structure of the Spanish taxi industry. Licences are frequently transmitted within families, often from father to son, producing a closed labour market in which access is mediated through kinship and informal networks (Ibáñez and García-Mingo 2022). As in other male-dominated trades, women's entry has historically depended on their position within these networks, shaping both who can enter the occupation and under what conditions.

Participants had between four and fifteen years of experience. Those with longer trajectories often described there were hardly any women working alongside them, and these early years were marked by discomfort, fear, and a strong sense of not belonging, particularly when working night shifts or waiting at male-dominated taxi ranks. These accounts point to the importance of gendered spatial dynamics and informal street cultures, alongside formal regulation, in shaping women's experiences of safety and recognition as legitimate workers.

Patterns of partnership and care further illuminate how taxi work intersects with gendered expectations. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 54, yet relatively few were married or cohabiting, a proportion lower than national averages (INE 2023). Many linked this to the long and irregular hours associated with taxi driving, which they felt were difficult to reconcile with family life. Twelve of the twenty *taxistas* had children, and six reported ongoing caregiving responsibilities. While self-employment was often valued for the autonomy it offered, it was also associated with extended shifts, limited institutional support, and the need to manage bodily needs and domestic demands primarily on one's own.

Women in platform-based transport work

Women working as *conductoras* represent a more recent and more precarious entry into urban transport labour. All fifteen participants were employed through intermediary companies

operating Uber or Cabify fleets, a system that differs significantly from how these platforms operate in many other countries. Although platform work formally lowers entry barriers compared to the highly regulated taxi sector, it introduces new forms of control and insecurity, including algorithmic management, continuous performance monitoring, and temporary or unstable contractual arrangements.

Conductoras generally had much shorter work trajectories than *taxistas*, ranging from three months to four years. This reflects both the relatively recent expansion of ride-hailing in Spain (Rodríguez 2022) and the sector's reliance on a flexible and often transient workforce, particularly in tourist cities such as Malaga. Many had entered platform driving after periods of unemployment, labour market exclusion, or difficulties returning to paid work following caregiving responsibilities. Their previous employment was concentrated in feminised and precarious sectors such as hospitality, retail, domestic work, and care.

Unlike in the taxi sector, entry into platform work rarely occurred through family or professional networks. Most *conductoras* encountered the job through online advertisements and had little prior knowledge of the industry. While some initially valued the promise of flexibility and independence, others described the work as isolating, unpredictable, and physically demanding. As with *taxistas*, few lived with partners or reported extensive caregiving responsibilities, often attributing this to the incompatibility between irregular schedules and the temporal demands of social reproduction.

Gender, infrastructure, and belonging

Despite differences in regulation, employment status, and career trajectories, both groups navigated similar gendered assumptions about who belongs in public urban space and in professional driving. Several *conductoras* noted that they had never previously encountered a woman behind the wheel, and their own presence was often experienced as exceptional or anomalous. Across both sectors, women's marginal position was accompanied by limited access to institutional support and to basic workplace amenities, reflecting infrastructural and organisational arrangements historically designed around a male, unencumbered worker.

This study illustrates how both traditional and software-governed forms of transport work remain embedded in gendered labour markets and urban spaces. While platforms reconfigure recruitment, control, and temporal organisation, they do not dissolve longer-standing inequalities in access, safety, and infrastructural provision. This context provides the backdrop for analysing how women's bodily needs, including access to toilets, become entangled with the rhythms of mobile work and with the uneven conditions under which presence in public space is sustained.

The gendered burden of toilet access

Clara Greed (2014) brilliantly stated, 'If you want to know the true position of women in society, look at the queue for the Ladies toilet!', a sentiment that underpins the experiences shared by all participants in this study, who stated that accessing a toilet was one of the main issues of their job. Words like 'discrimination', 'horrible', or 'drama' were repeatedly used to refer to their experiences of trying to find a toilet during their shifts. These accounts were almost always accompanied by a comparison with the easier position in which their male colleagues were perceived to be. Alejandra (26, *taxista*) put it plainly: 'This is what annoys me the most. Because men, at the end of the day, in any corner, boom! But for us [women], you have to depend on a petrol station or something like this'. Many echoed this frustration, highlighting the freedom men have to urinate discreetly outdoors, while women must rely on formal facilities, often scarce, locked, or far between.

While the gendered inequality of toilet provision has long been noted in feminist geography and urban planning, it has rarely been examined from the standpoint of mobile workers whose ability to work depends on remaining present in public space. For women drivers, unequal access to toilets is not only a matter of comfort or dignity, but a condition that shapes whether they can remain in circulation at all. As Greed (2014) notes, although not desirable, the reality is that it is easier for men to urinate when there is no toilet available than it is for women. Silvia (54, *taxista*) was categorical:

When I need to go to the toilet, I either pass by a petrol station, or I stop here (pointing to a taxi rank) and go into the bar across the street. Men have it easier because they take their churrina⁴ and pee anywhere.

Though public urination is illegal in Spain, many women pointed out that men often take the risk, while women cannot. María Rosa (31, *conductora*), who usually came across as quiet and shy, voiced her anger on the matter: 'I know that men, when they leave the airport, they go behind the industrial estate and pee in the field. But for me, if I want to go to the toilet, I need to drive to a petrol station'. For her, peeing in the street or a field is simply not an option. This inequality, noted by scholars such as Greed (2014), is not only anatomical but deeply social, rooted in gendered norms of modesty, privacy, and dignity that render women's bodily exposure in public space unacceptable (Burt, Nelson, and Ray 2016).

The additional effort women must make to comply with these norms was a frequent source of resentment. Juana (28, *taxista*) recognised that 'it is easier for men' and admitted, 'I've always said that this is one of the reasons why I would like to be a man. I know it's silly, but it's true that they have it easier'. In Juana's account, there is a clear distinction between what is socially imaginable for men and for women. As a woman, she does not consider peeing at the roadside, as her male colleagues do; instead, she fantasises about becoming a man in order to be able to do so. The lack of appropriate toilet facilities thus produces a felt sense of exclusion from the freedoms that structure everyday mobility at work.

Only two participants acknowledged that not all men are comfortable urinating in public. In a group discussion, one *taxista* claimed 'men don't care!', but Alejandra (26, *taxista*) disagreed: 'No, there are men who are also bothered by it and who are also pressuring to get toilets. Because most of them do look for hidden places and so on, but hiding can also cost you a fine if the police comes after you'. As Alejandra points out, men who pee in the street also take a risk and may be fined. However, all participants recognised that men at least have the option to take this risk, whereas for most women, this possibility does not exist.

The link between toilet provision and gender inequality is well established. Greed (2014) argues that because women take longer to use the toilet, they require more facilities. Instead, participants described frequent closures, queues, and restricted access that routinely hindered their use. Chelo (48, *taxista*), for instance, explained that the toilets designated for taxi drivers at the airport were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving the petrol station outside the airport compound as the only available option. There, the women's bathroom had a single cubicle, was often locked, and required asking the cashier for a key, while the men's toilets were usually open and quicker to access. Such arrangements made visible how infrastructural provision itself reproduces gendered differences in ease, speed, and entitlement.

Despite these difficulties, none of the women supported the idea of de-gendering toilets. This resonates with Jeffreys (2014, 42) argument that women's safety and privacy depend on 'good, copious and segregated facilities', a view echoed by participants who valued women-only spaces even while recognising how their scarcity and inaccessibility placed them at a disadvantage. This unequal toilet access is the starting point for the temporal, financial, and bodily costs that participants had to pay.

Temporal disruption

A major, though often overlooked, challenge for women in mobile work is the time required to locate and use a toilet during their shifts. For both *taxistas* and *conductoras*, this need produces interruptions that cut across the rhythm of work, forcing them out of circulation and out of sync with the temporal organisation of ranks, apps, and customer demand. Participants repeatedly reported time loss as an unavoidable consequence of leaving their vehicle to search for a suitable facility. Chelo (48, *taxista*), for example, estimated that each time she needed to use the toilet, she lost approximately fifteen minutes, during which she was unavailable to customers and unable to work. For *conductoras*, this period included not only using and returning from the restroom, but also the time spent disconnected from the app in order to allow for a detour. Moreover, these time pressures were closely tied to platform-based systems of monitoring and availability, a dynamic examined in more detail below.

The queuing system at major taxi ranks, such as those at train stations or the airport, was described as intensifying these temporal penalties. Juana (28, *taxista*) explained how even a short absence could have lasting effects on the working day:

When you are at a taxi rank, you are in a queue and each taxi has a turn. If it is your turn and you are not there because you have gone to the bathroom, the customer who has arrived will go to the taxi behind you, and you will miss your turn. When you return to the car, you need to get back in the queue, as if you had just arrived.

For Juana, going to the toilet does not simply mean a brief pause, but a disruption that resets her position in the order of the rank. Several participants contrasted this with what they perceived as men's greater ability to remain synchronised with the flow of work. Because male drivers can often relieve themselves discreetly nearby, they are less likely to leave the rank and lose their place. Celia (37, *conductora*) was convinced that men rarely miss their turn for this reason, as they can use the nearest grove or tree. Margarita (41, *taxista*) expressed similar frustration:

Men, if there is no toilet, they take out their churrina behind a tree. They don't have to worry about losing their place in the queue. And I often get into arguments with them about this. What am I going to do? Pull down my knickers? My stockings? It doesn't make sense. They say to me: 'Don't you want equality?' Of course, we want equality, but this has nothing to do with equality. Your body is not the same as mine. If I had a churrina like yours, I would do the same. But since I don't...

Margarita's account highlights how bodily difference translates into unequal temporal vulnerability. While some male drivers may also feel uncomfortable urinating in public, all participants agreed that men at least have the option of staying close to their vehicles. In contrast, women are forced to leave the rank and absorb the consequences of absence. As a result, women are more likely to fall out of sequence with the tightly ordered rhythms of turn-taking and waiting that structure taxi work.

While both groups face similar challenges, *conductoras*, whose work is mediated by an app, frequently encounter added pressures due to the nature of platform-driven labour. Because *conductoras* rely on the app to find customers, it is harder for them to plan breaks for food or toilet use. Surveillance through the application and the targets they were required to meet per day shaped their access to a toilet. As several women explained, stopping to look for a toilet meant not only leaving the physical flow of traffic, but also temporarily disappearing from the digital flow of requests, ratings, and assignments.

Across both sectors, using the toilet was rarely experienced as a neutral pause. Instead, women described it as a disruption that unsettled the flow of the working day and made it harder to stay aligned with taxi queues and platform systems, resulting in waiting, missed turns, and temporary inactivity. These temporal frictions set the context for the financial implications discussed in the following section.

Financial cost

Beyond lost time, toilet access also carried direct financial costs. In the absence of accessible public facilities, many drivers relied on bars or petrol stations, where access was often conditional on making a purchase. For street-based workers, these expenses could accumulate over long shifts, and were likely higher for women, who tend to need to use the toilet more often (Beebejaun 2017). Chelo (48, *taxista*) described the dilemma: ‘We have this problem: in a bar, if you don’t drink, you can’t go to the toilet. So, what do you do? Do you have to pay every time you need to go to the toilet?’. Carla (48), who had worked as a *conductora* for five years, recalled that when she first started, she regularly used the toilet at a petrol station and bought a Coke to be allowed in. ‘But every Coke was two euros,’ she explained, ‘so I stopped doing that. Now I have my places.’

These direct expenses were compounded by the loss of income associated with taking a toilet break. As discussed earlier, leaving a taxi rank to use the toilet often meant losing one’s place in the queue and missing a potential fare. Chelo estimated that she spent around fifteen minutes each time she needed to go to the toilet—time during which no money was earned – and, as she put it, ‘you come back, and you’ve lost your place in the queue’. Participants also stressed that each toilet break involved time that could not be spent working. As quoted earlier, Chelo (48, *taxista*) estimated she spent around fifteen minutes each time she needed to use the toilet. In a job where earnings accumulate ride by ride, such intervals were rarely perceived as neutral pauses. As she put it, ‘You are not working, you are not making money. Moreover, on top of that, you come back, and you’ve lost your place in the queue’. Taken together, the cost of purchasing access to toilets and the income forgone while leaving the queue created a double financial penalty, which became economically consequential when repeated across long shifts and busy days. Over time, these cumulative costs prompted some women to seek more stable solutions, developing networks of reliable toilets that reduced both the need to make purchases and the risk of losing income – a process discussed in the following section.

At regulated taxi ranks, the effects of leaving to use the toilet were often intensified by the queuing system, where missing one’s turn could mean losing a fare and having to wait again at the back of the line. For some male drivers, a brief, spatially improvised stop could be acceptable; for many women, it was a longer interruption with more visible economic consequences. The possibility of remaining close to the vehicle and staying ‘in line’ thus appeared unevenly distributed, shaped by bodily norms and by what kinds of stopping were considered socially acceptable.

These minor but repeated expenses and delays illustrate how access to sanitation is frequently mediated through commercial spaces and informal transactions. Over the course of long shifts, the price of a coffee or soft drink, together with the time spent queuing or detouring, became part of the practical cost of remaining in public space and continuing to work. For some women, this prompted the gradual development of more stable arrangements and trusted locations, a process discussed in the following section.

For *conductoras*, economic concerns were further shaped by the organisation of platform work. For *conductoras*, this loss often extended beyond the toilet break itself, as returning online did not guarantee immediate access to new trips and could coincide with slower repartitioning or reduced offers. Going offline to use the toilet meant temporarily losing access to ride requests and, in some cases, missing periods of higher demand. Several participants described the difficulty of balancing bodily needs with the pressure to remain available, to meet daily targets, and to avoid falling behind in the app’s allocation of work. Stopping was therefore often experienced as a decision with potential economic implications, even if these were not always immediate or predictable.

Health costs

For participants in this study, difficulties in accessing toilets during shifts were frequently associated with urinary infections and other physical problems. Research on mobile workers shows that limited access to toilets often leads to strategies such as delaying urination and restricting fluid intake, which carry recognised health risks including urinary tract infections, bladder dysfunction, and dehydration (Rutter, Madden, and White 2023; Tan and Chlebicki 2016). Many *taxistas* and *conductoras* described holding urine for long periods or deliberately reducing their water intake, particularly during the busy summer months, when work intensity and heat coincided. Juana (28, *taxista*), for instance, explained that she avoids drinking water when she knows she will be busy, even though she is aware that this is unhealthy in the heat of Malaga. She preferred, as she put it, to avoid having to go to the toilet ‘all the time’. Similar practices have been reported among transport and food delivery workers elsewhere (see, for example, Schofield 2021), with fluid restriction serving as a coping mechanism in response to limited opportunities to stop (Norén 2010a). Such strategies reveal how women come to treat a structural lack of infrastructure as an individual problem, adapting their bodies and rhythms to the temporal demands of work rather than expecting the organisation of work and urban space to adapt to them.

For women workers, the inability to access a toilet is not only inconvenient, but also a serious health risk; a concern long recognised by development and human rights organisations. In the context of mobile work, where remaining in circulation and available is a condition of earning a living, the inability to stop when needed means that bodily care is repeatedly postponed, compressed, or endured, with cumulative consequences for health.

Menstruation, although largely absent from studies of mobile labour, emerged as an important aspect of women's working lives. While none of the participants reported resorting to extreme measures such as hormonal suppression, as documented in other occupational contexts (see Lowe 2019), they consistently described menstruation as requiring careful planning, detours, and heightened vigilance. Juana explained that on days when she had her period, she could not simply follow her usual routines. Instead of going straight to the next taxi rank after finishing a trip, she would actively seek out a petrol station to use the toilet and change her sanitary products. She noted that this was a common practice among women drivers. The need for such adjustments highlights the tension between cyclical bodily rhythms and the linear, uninterrupted time of transport work, in which stopping is always potentially costly.

This tension was particularly acute for *conductoras*, whose working time is structured by apps that reward continuous availability and make pauses visible. Any pause required disconnecting from the system or rejecting trip requests, with potential negative consequences for how the algorithm places drivers and allocates future work. Ana María (39, *conductora*) described how she relied on the proximity of her home to access a toilet, something she recognised as a matter of luck rather than choice. Comparing her situation with that of male colleagues, she remarked that while men could simply ‘open a door [of their car] anywhere and that’s it’, women on their period ‘need a different kind of hygiene’. Her comment points to how the design and expectations of mobile work continue to be organised around male bodies, for whom bodily care can be quicker, less visible, and more easily improvised.

Rosario (26, *conductora*) spoke openly about the anxiety menstruation generated during long shifts:

With your period it's much worse. In other words, pray as much as you can. I have used a [tampon] Tampax and a sanitary towel. On the days when I had my period, I knew I had to stop to take a bathroom break, no matter what, but there have been situations when I was close to staining my trousers, especially during weekends in the summer. Even if you want to stop, you can't, or you don't have a bathroom nearby.

Her account captures the stress and anxiety caused by the constant risk of staining her clothes at work, an example of trying to align bodily needs with the tempo of work, and the fear of failing to do so. For *conductoras*, who often drive company-owned vehicles, the risk of staining seats also carries the possibility of awkward explanations or disciplinary consequences. These pressures are compounded by cultural taboos that demand discretion and silence around menstruation, reinforcing what Sang et al. (2021) describe as a 'menstrual etiquette' that renders bodily processes invisible in the workplace.

Other participants emphasised the importance of cleanliness and hygiene, particularly during menstruation. Victoria (43, *taxista*) noted: 'If you are on your period, you end up all day with the [tampon] Tampax. It's not the same as being in an office where you have a clean bathroom and you can get changed'. Her comparison highlights the unequal distribution of sanitary infrastructure across different forms of work and the additional health risks associated with prolonged use of menstrual products when access to clean facilities is uncertain (Greed 2014). She also draws a stark contrast between mobile and office-based work, where access to hygiene infrastructure is more reliable in the latter.

Cleanliness emerged as a recurring concern. Celia (37, *conductora*) noted that 'women are neater [than men] when it comes to hygiene', a sentiment others shared. Chelo (48, *taxista*) and Alicia (26, *taxista*) described how the women's toilet at the airport remained locked to stop men from using it and 'making a mess'. They viewed this positively, appreciating that women maintained the space effectively. Similarly, Victoria (43, *taxista*) valued the airport taxi rank most because it offered a private, clean women's bathroom, equipped with towels and wipes.

These concerns stem not only from biological factors, such as women's higher susceptibility to infection (Greed 2014), but also from enduring cultural expectations that position women as guardians of bodily purity (Kogan 2010). In mobile work, where stopping is difficult and facilities are unevenly distributed, such norms intensify the health consequences of infrastructural absence. The lack of clean, accessible toilets becomes a site where gendered expectations and the temporal demands of continuous mobility intersect, forcing women to absorb risk and discomfort in order to remain in circulation.

Platform-based control

Although all participants faced similar difficulties accessing toilets, the app-mediated nature of *conductoras'* work created additional constraints. Their dependence on the app made it difficult to plan breaks for food or toilet use, while surveillance through the application and daily performance targets further shaped when and how they could stop. For *conductoras*, bodily interruption was a practical and visible problem, as any pause required disconnecting from the system and momentarily stepping out of its continuous flow of requests and monitoring.

For *conductoras*, working time was organised through platform systems that closely monitored availability and responsiveness. Remaining logged into the app signalled readiness to accept trips, while pausing to use the toilet often required rejecting requests or disconnecting from the system altogether. Participants explained that such interruptions were not neutral: repeatedly declining trips or going offline could negatively affect how the algorithm positioned them, reducing the number of future ride requests or exposing them to supervisory scrutiny. Toilet breaks were therefore entangled with concerns about visibility, compliance, and ongoing access to work.

Several *conductoras* described instances in which they urgently needed to use the toilet but still felt compelled to accept a new trip. Rosario (26, *conductora*) recalled desperately trying to hold her urine, 'crossing her legs', when she was assigned a long journey from Malaga to Ojén, around an hour through the mountains. After dropping off the passengers, she could no longer wait and stopped by the roadside to relieve herself. She noted that such situations were common, given the frequency of long-distance trips to towns along the Malaga coast. Her account

illustrates how platform time pressures can compel women to endure bodily discomfort and risk to remain available.

Further complicating their situation was the extent of employers' control. Unlike *taxistas*, who work independently, *conductoras* often need permission to disconnect from the app. Inés (48) could log off for lunch, but not specifically to use the toilet. María Rosa (31), who worked for Cabify, described the tension of knowing that activity was monitored and that drivers were not supposed to close the app, especially during peak hours when requests arrived in rapid succession. 'It's a lot of pressure', she explained. 'You know they're checking up on you, but if there's a lot of work, you have to close the app to go to the bathroom.'

Coping strategies and everyday agency

In response to the challenges described above, participants developed individualised routines to manage toilet needs, grounded in practical knowledge of where and when toilets were accessible. Inés (48, *conductora*), for instance, preferred shopping centres and supermarkets, which she found in the western areas of the city. The Vialia Shopping Centre, next to Malaga's central train station, was particularly popular among *taxistas*, despite the inconvenience of its third-floor toilets located far from the taxi rank. This resonates with Kern's (2020) findings that commercial spaces historically designed for women often provide more abundant and better-maintained facilities, making them key nodes in women's everyday geographies of bodily care.

Another strategy was shared by Margarita (41, *taxista*):

Sometimes I might call the girl at the *emisora*,⁵ but on the phone, not on the transmitter. If I'm at a nearby taxi rank, I tell her, 'Look, I'm going to go to the toilet, don't take me out of the queue'. [...] I usually go to a taxi rank where there's a shop, and the guy lets us go in there. And if it's a 'number 2', I go home and lose my spot in the queue.

Her strategy depended on two kinds of relationships: trust with the *emisora* employee, who could hold her place in the queue, and familiarity with shopkeepers controlling access to nearby toilets. Rosario (26, *conductora*) described a similar reliance on relational access:

I had my reliable petrol station. I always went there at the beginning of the shift to fill up the car with petrol. [...] Sometimes I would ask them to give me the key to the men's room if the women's toilet was dirty. And they always gave it to me. I had no problem.

Such accounts show that toilet access was shaped less by formal public provision than by informal, relationship-based arrangements. Participants described having 'their' trusted toilets in bars, petrol stations, or shopping centres—spaces selected for cleanliness, reliability, and free access—which they came to refer to as 'places of trust'. Securing these places required sustained relational labour, including time, emotional effort, and the cultivation of familiarity with staff. These findings echo broader accounts of street-based workers, where negotiating access to private facilities becomes part of maintaining dignity in public space. This tension was particularly acute for

Knowledge about these places circulated informally among women drivers, forming what Korczynski (2003) calls 'communities of coping': loose, everyday forms of mutual support through which workers share practical information and emotional reassurance in order to manage the pressures and constraints of their jobs. Silvia (54, *taxista*) described a bar where she could always use the toilet without buying anything, a place that, as she put it, gave her 'the security that you can go'. Such information circulated through everyday conversations and WhatsApp groups, enabling less experienced drivers to learn to anticipate interruptions and to smooth the temporal frictions of the working day.

Access, however, was uneven. *Taxistas*, with their longer presence in the city and more stable working routines, were often better positioned to build and maintain these trust networks. Elena (45, *taxista*) noted that at petrol stations, ‘they generally treat taxi drivers quite well’, recognising that occupational visibility helped to legitimise their presence. The proximity of taxi ranks to cafes and bars facilitated these relationships, advantages that *conductoras*, who moved across wider and less predictable urban territories, often lacked.

The fragility of these informal arrangements became particularly visible during the COVID-19 lockdown. Many places of trust closed or restricted entry. Chelo (48, *taxista*) recalled that even public buildings were only accessible by appointment, forcing her to return home to use the toilet, something she had previously tried to avoid. The pandemic exposed how quickly these carefully built micro-infrastructures could disappear, leaving women once again to absorb the costs of interruption individually. As Chung et al. (2021) have shown, crises tend to intensify gendered divisions of labour by shifting hidden costs of time, health, and care onto women. In this case, the absence of accessible sanitation reinforced what Acker (1990) calls the ‘ideal worker’ norm, in which the body is assumed to be endlessly available and unencumbered.

Many of the strategies described above exemplify what Katz (2004) terms resilience: practices that allow people to endure and survive within existing constraints. Juana avoided drinking water during long summer shifts; Chelo went home when she needed to use the toilet. What emerges here is a pattern of bodily self-discipline in response to infrastructural absence, where women adapt their own rhythms rather than expecting the organisation of work to change, a dynamic that Lowe (2019) also identifies in other occupational contexts.

Other practices can be understood as forms of reworking. Inés (48, *conductora*) planned toilet stops around shopping centres and supermarkets, regardless of immediate need. Ana María (39, *conductora*) sometimes logged off the app because, as she explained, ‘I really had to go to the toilet and wanted to avoid the interruption of a new trip arriving’. These were not openly confrontational acts, but small adjustments that subtly reshaped the rhythms of platform work, aligning linear, algorithmic time more closely with bodily rhythms.

More rarely, participants described practices that approached resistance, in that they openly transgressed norms of modesty and gendered propriety. Beatriz (26, *taxista*) laughed as she described challenging her male colleagues’ claims of equality: ‘[Male] colleagues pee anywhere; we [women] just don’t’. She went on to explain her own method:

You open the back door of the passenger’s side and the driver’s door. You take less risk this way. And if you’re on a hill and go uphill, you pull down your trousers and create a bit of a screen with them, so you don’t pee on yourself... It has been tested. [laughing]

Beatriz joked that she was ‘becoming more masculine’, adapting to a working environment in which the freedom to urinate in public is taken for granted for men. Rosario (26, *conductora*) similarly described using a female urination device and, at times, entering men’s toilets:

Later, I discovered what I call ‘my plastic dick’ [laughing]... I’ve even gone into a men’s restroom if there was a queue at the ladies’... One day an old man said, ‘But this is the men’s restroom!’, and I replied, ‘With this, I am like a man’. [laughing]

Not all women felt comfortable with such practices. For example, Ana María (39, *conductora*) admitted, ‘to be honest, I don’t see myself doing that’. Those who experimented with these forms of bodily transgression tended to be younger and to identify as feminists, suggesting that resistance was shaped by generation, ideology, and differing relationships to norms of respectability.

These moments challenge dominant expectations of modesty, cleanliness, and decorum. As Norén notes, public urination remains culturally coded as masculine: men can be ‘dirty’ without social sanction, while women risk shame. Rosario observed that male colleagues often dismissed the problem itself: ‘The toilet issue is one of the worst things for me, but talking to my [male]

colleagues, they don't see the problem'. This echoes Molotch's (1988) argument that toilet queues and shortages are blamed on women rather than on gender-blind design, a process through which responsibility is individualised and structural shortcomings rendered invisible (Richard and Knight 2011).

The strategies described by both *taxistas* and *conductoras* reveal a highly individualised form of agency in how women cope with the everyday constraints of mobile work. Through subtle adaptations, relational negotiations, bodily discipline, and, at times, more transgressive practices, women find ways to remain mobile and available for work despite the absence of adequate infrastructure. These practices can be read through Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking, and resistance, grounded in participants' lived routines and day-to-day decision-making. While such strategies make continued circulation possible, they do so by shifting the temporal, emotional, and physical costs of infrastructural neglect onto women themselves, thereby exposing the unequal conditions under which mobility is sustained.

Concluding discussion

This article has examined how access to toilets functions as a mechanism of gendered inequality in mobile transport work. Drawing on the experiences of 35 women taxi and app-based drivers in Malaga, it has shown that something as mundane as the need to urinate or manage menstruation becomes a critical site where exclusion is produced and normalised. In occupations structured around continuous movement, availability, and speed, the capacity to stop without penalty is unevenly distributed, shaped by gendered norms of modesty and bodily concealment as well as by the uneven provision of urban sanitation.

The analysis reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of mobile labour and help us sharpen how we understand the relationship between mobility, infrastructure and the body. Urban transport economies and digital platforms are organised around uninterrupted, linear time, presuming bodies able to manage their needs quickly and discreetly. Women's bodies, by contrast, are subject to cyclical processes and social regulation that do not fit these temporal regimes. When adequate facilities are absent, this misalignment generates waiting, income loss, and health risks, positioning toilets as a form of gendered temporal infrastructure that shapes who can remain in motion, for how long, and at what cost.

While the article focuses on cisgender women drivers, similar constraints are likely to carry even greater consequences for workers with disabilities, chronic illness, pregnancy or continence conditions, for whom access to toilets can be more frequent or time-sensitive.

From a mobilities perspective, the analysis makes visible the hidden work required to sustain the appearance of continuous circulation. Mobility is sustained by vehicles, roads, and algorithms, but also by workers' capacity to absorb interruption, discomfort, and self-discipline. Toilets are therefore part of the material and social conditions that make mobile labour possible.

At the same time, the article has shown that women are not passive in the face of these constraints. Through practices of resilience, reworking, and occasional resistance (Katz 2004), they negotiate infrastructural absence by disciplining their bodies, cultivating 'places of trust', managing algorithmic visibility, and at times transgressing norms of feminine respectability. These strategies enable continued mobility but do so by shifting the emotional, temporal, and physical costs of infrastructural neglect onto women themselves.

Read through the lens of mobility justice, the findings demonstrate that injustice operates not only through unequal access to movement, but through unequal access to the infrastructures that allow bodies to endure movement over time. When toilets are scarce, locked, or monetised, the costs of continuous circulation are redistributed onto workers' bodies as waiting, anxiety, pain, and health risk.

An infrastructural approach therefore raises practical questions for municipalities, transport regulators, and platform companies. Where can a mobile worker stop without economic penalty?

Who is responsible for ensuring that stopping is possible across urban space? What counts as adequate provision when work is organised around continuous circulation rather than fixed workplaces? Addressing these questions involves recognising toilets and hygiene facilities as part of occupational infrastructure for mobile workers, ensuring reliable and free access at key urban nodes, and treating time itself as a policy concern, not merely a personal inconvenience.

Finally, the paper opens several trajectories for further research. One direction is comparative: examining how sanitation as mobility infrastructure operates across different cities and regulatory contexts, and how its absence is experienced across different forms of mobile labour (ride-hailing, delivery, logistics, bus driving). A second direction is intersectional: exploring how toilet access and the policing of bodily needs intersect with gender identity, race, class, migration status, disability, and age, including the experiences of non-binary and trans workers whose relationship to public toilets is often shaped by additional risks and exclusions. A third direction is organisational and technological: investigating how algorithmic management interacts with bodily needs—for example, how platform metrics, demand surges, or automated dispatch intensify the costs of stopping, and how workers adapt their bodily rhythms in response. Together, these pathways would deepen understanding of how everyday infrastructures shape the uneven conditions under which mobility—and mobile labour—becomes possible.

While this study is grounded in the specific context of Malaga and focuses on the experiences of cisgender women, the dynamics identified here are unlikely to be unique to this context. At the same time, the single-city focus and the absence of non-binary perspectives necessarily limit the scope of the analysis. Future research could extend this work by examining how access to sanitation intersects with gender identity, race, class, and migration status, and by exploring how similar tensions between bodily rhythms and regimes of continuous availability play out across different urban contexts and mobile occupations.

Notes

1. All the names that appear in this thesis are pseudonyms.
2. To simplify the terminology in this paper, I use the term *taxista* to refer to a female taxi driver, and *conductora* to refer to an Uber and Cabify female driver.
3. Platform-based work refers to the digital application tool that brings supply and demand together thanks to their technological and algorithmic infrastructures. From the possibility of someone doing your grocery or cleaning your house, to private transport of passengers.
4. *Churrina* is an informal and childlike way to refer to penis, akin to 'willy'.
5. *Emisora* is the term that taxi drivers use to refer to a radio service that manages services such as bookings. Taxi drivers linked to an *emisora* are members of the association. The staff answering the phone are employees of the entity.

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