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Safety and the female business traveller

For women, fatigue and the logistics of getting to a foreign country to lead a training seminar, or attend a networking event, may be the least of their problems

FIONA TAPP

During a routine ride to catch a flight, Jen Ruiz, a lawyer and travel blogger, experienced one of the occasional drawbacks to travelling solo as a woman.

"In Argentina, an Uber driver pulled over on the way to the airport and insisted he wanted to *robar un beso*, a popular term for 'steal a kiss' in Spanish," she says.

On the side of a highway, with no way out, Ruiz played along so that she could get to her destination – and, more importantly, to safety.

For women, the fastest-growing group of business travellers, the usual fatigue and frustrating logistics of visiting a foreign country may be the least of their problems. And how companies are dealing with these realities is a mixed bag, at best. Sixty-nine per cent of U.S. travel buyers (who are charged with arranging corporate travel) believe that women generally face greater dangers than men when travelling solo for work, according to recent research from the U.S.-based Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), in partnership with accommodation service WWStay.

"While all travellers face risks, women often face unique risks when travelling, especially when alone," says Christle Johnson, GBTA president. "Some of the concerns travel managers shared with us were about risks they feel women face on the road, including sexual harassment/assault, kidnapping risk, destination-specific gender-related norms, gender-specific health risks or public transportation."

The majority of those surveyed believe it is important to take steps that address these issues, but the results revealed this doesn't always happen. While two-thirds said their travel programs offer safety/security resources through a third-party – such as 24-hour emergency hotlines – only 44 per cent said their companies recommend booking women into rooms with additional safety features such as double locks and 24-hour security. Taxi rides and airport transfers can be particularly hostile environments, as Ruiz discovered, yet three out of five respondents "rarely" or "never" offer chauffeured transportation at the destination.

This is consistent with research conducted in May, 2018, by global insurance company AIG Travel. In a poll of U.S. women, the overwhelming majority (84 per cent) stated that their employers either did not provide travel safety tips/resources or that they weren't aware of any such tools. What this means, of course, is that female business travellers are often left to manage their personal safety by themselves.



ISTOCK

Johanna Read, a management consultant for the Government of Canada and freelance writer and photographer, travels frequently to remote areas. Her safety precautions include wearing an emergency identity bracelet, dressing modestly and stashing her valuables in a zip-pable cross-body bag. She also observes local women and behaves as they do, trying as much as possible to avoid looking like a tourist.

"I never look at a map or at my phone on the street; I always duck into a store," she says. And if hotel staff loudly announce her room number upon arrival, she doesn't hesitate to ask for a new one. Once at her suite, she always checks that doors and locks are secure.

Johnson, the GBTA president, says it's important for employers to play a role in mitigating risk by providing women with appropriate advice – and the right to say no.

"The option to refuse to travel to a destination where the risk exceeds the traveller's tolerance level must be offered and accepted," she says. "Organizations should identify that female travellers may have different travel needs and be prepared to provide the appropriate level of care and support for those travelling alone or with other women."

The hospitality industry itself is beginning to address safety concerns. Some hotels, such as the Hamilton Hotel in Washington and the Ellis Hotel in Atlanta, have begun to install female-only floors.

Last year, Air India introduced female-only rows on select internal flights, mirroring the gender-segregated seats available on train carriages and buses across the country that aim to provide some protection from harassment and assault.

And Behere, a New York-based platform, helps women

live and work abroad. For a membership fee, it provides workspaces, furnished apartments and female hosts to help female business travellers and entrepreneurs acclimatize to a new country and make community connections.

"Having your own, verified, furnished apartment, a creative workspace all lined up, a gym or fitness studio to go to and a local woman to greet you makes a world of difference for your experience in a new place," says Meesen Brown, CEO and co-founder.

The city hosts are key to helping women overcome the loneliness and isolation often associated with being far from home, she says.

"They meet with you and walk you around your workspace and new fitness studio. They share their recommendations, favourite places and hidden gems about the city. It's fantastic to have that initial friendly face, especially if you've never travelled before or are a bit apprehensive about going to a new city on your own."

Read, who has travelled solo to every continent except Antarctica, would like to see tour companies abroad brief their staff on cultural differences. "Cross-cultural training is always useful so that men are reminded that a Western woman who smiles and talks to you is not saying she's interested in sleeping with you," she says. Still, despite her concerns and common-sense precautions, Read rejects fear-mongering.

"I believe it is safer for women to travel solo [as opposed to in a group]. People tend to look out for a woman on her own and ask her if she needs anything."

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