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Between Hierarchy and Informality: Innovation Barriers and Catalysts—The Case of Gender-Sensitive Public Transportation in Local Authorities

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Abstract

Innovation is necessary yet challenging for local governments. This paper focuses on gender sensitivity in public transportation in major cities in Israel, as an example of organizational innovation, with the goal of identifying the factors that impede innovation in local government and the factors that may encourage such innovation. Studies have shown that for social, economic, and psychological reasons, women use public transportation differently than men do. However, decision-makers have not tended to integrate gender considerations into the planning and design of public spaces. This exacerbates social inequality. Data were collected from semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were conducted with 30 stakeholders in public and private organizations and focus-group discussions, which involved 40 participants (70 participants in total). The interviews and focus-group discussions revealed a complex system of organizational, management-related, and bureaucratic barriers that impede or completely prevent innovation in the field of public transportation. They also revealed a variety of factors that encourage innovation, including the local authorities perceiving themselves as responsible for promoting public transportation that meets the public's needs, informal organizational structures, and intra-organizational initiatives that contribute to the implementation of gender-sensitive policies in the field of public transportation.

Keywords: municipal innovation; gender-sensitive transportation; network governance; innovation barriers; local government

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, social, economic, and political changes have led to a growing need for innovation in the public sector, in order to make public services and their delivery more efficient (Torfing, 2016). However, attempts to promote innovation in the public sector often hit barriers and this is especially true with regard to issues related to the fairness and equality of public services. One type of innovation that is prominent in this sector is found in the procedural field and is powered by the desire to make processes more efficient and to provide services more quickly with fewer resources (Torfing, 2016). But, its implementation, which has been based on concepts from the private sector, has had direct effects on the fairness and equality of the public services delivered to different populations.

One example of the promotion of innovation in the context of public transportation is the placing of an emphasis on gender sensitivities in this field. Studies have shown that women use public transportation more than men do and differently than men do, reflecting, among other things, the effects of social, economic, physiological, and psychological

differences on mobility (Hamilton et al., 2005; Levy, 2019; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). These differences are particularly noticeable in the urban space, which is designed in a manner that is not gender-neutral and which creates different experiences for women and men (Gauvin et al., 2020). Technological changes in the field of public transportation can also benefit male and female passengers in an unequal manner (Pooley et al., 2006) and can even help to perpetuate gender inequality (Woodcock et al., 2020).

Due to the traditional, gendered division of household labor, the structures of women's daily schedules are more complicated than those of men. Women spend more time than men on household tasks and taking care of children (Kwon & Akar, 2021; Shirgaokar, 2019) and, as a result, women deal with a large number of daily tasks and activities at home, in addition to their salaried work (Ng & Acker, 2018). Although recent studies, conducted from a male perspective, have identified a trend of men becoming more involved in household tasks, that trend is slow and selective (Bleske-Rechek & Gunseor, 2022; Grether & Gonzales, 2024).

This study investigated the gap between the existing, multi-year knowledge regarding gender inequality in public transportation and the lack of adoption or only partial adoption of a gendered vision for the field in practice. This study examined the factors that impede or encourage innovation related to equality and equity of public services, with an emphasis on the case of gender equity in public transportation in major cities in Israel.

This longstanding social issue invites deep study to identify factors that could help to minimize social inequities. Although the literature in the fields of gender, and public transportation provides important insights into different dimensions of this issue, few studies have brought these dimensions together to offer an integrated public-management perspective. To fill in this gap in the literature, this study asked why local governments fail to implement gender-oriented organizational innovation, despite longstanding accumulated knowledge about gender gaps in public transportation, and what public-management mechanisms enable or hinder such efforts.

Hence, this study aimed to explore why local governments do not fully adopt gender-oriented organizational innovation.

Specifically, the study sought to identify and analyze the public-management mechanisms, organizational practices, and contextual factors that enable or hinder the advancement of gender-equitable transportation policies in major cities in Israel.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Innovation in the Public Sector

Organizational innovation has been consistently defined as the adoption of a new idea or behavior in an organization and can take the form of the presentation of a new product, technology, or management practice (Hage, 1999). The concept of innovation in the public sector is far-reaching. Despite the fact that its limits have not been explicitly defined in most of the existing literature (de Vries et al., 2016; Hameduddin et al., 2020), there is relatively broad agreement among researchers that it is a matter of "new ideas that the organization adopts." However, there are those who claim that the adoption of a new idea is just the beginning and that, in order to be considered innovation, the abstract idea or ideas need to be translated into concrete products or services that customers want (Afuah, 2003) and, in that manner, to create public value.

In many cases, the literature on innovation, including that related to gender, has not paid sufficient attention to the many people who work together to create and disseminate innovations. This approach lends itself to a focus on a male "figure who takes the initiative" and related concepts that also tend to be gendered (Andersson et al., 2012). Even the OECD, which is an organization that is an important source of data and recommended

techniques for addressing gender equality in a range of fields, including the management of innovation, has not integrated this subject into the working infrastructure of its directorate. Similarly, social policies in an organization may not put enough bottom-up pressure on managers to ensure that gender sensitivity is integrated into the work of those managing information, technology, and innovation (Rowe, 2018).

Public organizations have unique characteristics, such as complex rules and regulations that limit potential changes (Rainey, 2009) and excessive bureaucracy (red tape) that can dampen any personal motivation to locate information that could be used to facilitate change in the organization (Pandey & Garnett, 2006). These characteristics discourage innovation (Moussa et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2008). Public bodies are also characterized by a tendency to focus on urgent issues and work that is dependent on political pressures (Rainey, 2009), as well as by high levels of concentration in decision-making processes (Walker et al., 2008), expressed, for the most part, as a small number of participants in those processes (Aiken & Hage, 1968). Other barriers known from the literature are a preference for conservative solutions, resistance to change, rigid organizational cultures (Moussa et al., 2018), short-term aspirations of politicians, a culture of risk-aversion and fear of failure, difficulty solidifying authority in complex political organizations (Munro, 2015), and difficulty securing public legitimacy for the process of innovation (Owen et al., 2020).

According to Roy (2013), understanding the tension between the world of innovation, which is based on openness and networks, and the bureaucratic environment, which is characterized by confidentiality and conservative management practices, is "central to dealing with the challenges faced by the public sector today." To overcome some of the organizational barriers described above and to encourage innovation in the public sector, researchers have proposed a multi-actor cooperative process that includes citizens and a variety of organizations, to encourage different types of innovation (Cinar et al., 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2017).

The public-management literature offers a theoretical approach that explains how public organizations make decisions, define goals, and cope with change. Understanding these managerial approaches is a necessary precondition for analyzing how innovation may be delayed or enabled in the public sector.

2.2. Models of Public Administration and Innovation

After four decades of reforms, most Western countries are still dealing with the question of how to enhance and improve their public organizations and there is a growing need for new institutional arrangements to improve the ability of governmental agencies to serve the public interest and enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Lahat & Sher-Hadar, 2020). Over time, older models of administration in the public sector have been replaced by newer models. Each administrative model that has been applied in public institutions expresses a different socio-economic philosophy, which is reflected in unique organizational processes and roles and goals for members of the public, public employees, and politicians (Sicilia et al., 2016).

The new public management (NPM) reform introduced private-sector–inspired management styles aimed at increasing efficiency in public services, relying on economic principles and professional, metrics-based management (O'Flynn, 2007). Its administrative logic and contractual mechanisms required public managers and services to operate according to market preferences (Robinson et al., 2015). In addition, its networked administration model placed organizations on equal footing to promote economic efficiency (O'Flynn, 2007) and separated policy formulation from policy implementation (Klijn, 2012).

After two decades of the NPM approach, criticism of NPM has focused on the main public values that have been compromised on the way to achieving the desired economic

efficiency (Stoker, 2006). Among other things, it has been claimed that NPM is appropriate for solving relatively simple problems, but that when it comes to more complex problems, its success is questionable (Klijn, 2012).

In response, the public value management (PVM) theory was proposed as an alternative narrative. According to PVM, public-sector management should focus on the production and management of value for the public, just like managers in the private sector aim to maximize profits for their shareholders (Moore, 1994).

The current era, often viewed as the "third wave" of public management, is sometimes referred to as the "post-NPM" era (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), the era of new public governance (NPG; Runya et al., 2015) or the era of collaborative government (CG) (Sher-Hadar et al., 2020). This wave represents another attempt to respond to the set of problems presented by the NPM model, with an increased emphasis on the importance and great inherent value of trust in public institutions and the trust of citizens and that of other interested parties within and outside of those institutions. This era has been characterized by a wealth of ideas, including NPG, governance in the digital age, and PVM, all of which focus on the building of a system of trust, cooperation, and partnership; working in networks; and identifying holistic perspectives for the management of public services (Sher-Hadar et al., 2020).

At the heart of the model-rich third wave, we find the partnership paradigm, which emphasizes the mutual dependence between the state and other actors in society (Sher-Hadar et al., 2020). Partnership between sectors is seen as a necessary and desirable strategy for addressing complex challenges, including the development of more complex social needs in times of limited resources (Almog-Bar, 2021). In this paradigm, the network is created and managed by public authorities and strives for vertical and horizontal partnerships (O'Flynn, 2007).

Unlike many researchers in the field of innovation and in the context of the partnership process, who have focused on public institutions at the national level, in 2016, Lewis and colleagues examined innovation specifically in local government, since, as they reasoned, local authorities have ongoing interactions with citizens and could be able to meet their needs and propose innovative solutions. According to those researchers, over the past three decades, local governments have taken on roles of increasing importance in many countries, due to processes of devolution of authority from higher levels of government to more local levels of government. These researchers showed that, today, city governments are responsible for providing a broad range of services and programs for local communities (Lewis et al., 2016). Therefore, local government is currently considered fertile ground for innovation.

The managerial approaches discussed above have shaped the incentives, rules, and capacities of local governments to implement innovation. Therefore, to understand the context in which gender-sensitive innovation may develop or be hindered, it is necessary to examine the central public-management theories that explain how organizations operate, how authority is distributed, and how different actors interact within the system. The following section discusses how these managerial frameworks influence the ability of local authorities to promote social innovation, in general, and gender-sensitive innovation in public transportation, in particular.

2.3. Innovation and Gender Inequality in Public Transportation

For many women, public transportation systems are insufficient and their use of those systems is frustrating and involves the wasting of a lot of time (Aloul et al., 2018). Despite this, women tend to make more use of public transportation than men do (Goel et al., 2022; Miralles-Guasch et al., 2016). Men tend to prefer to travel in private vehicles (Rosqvist,

2019). The reasons for this stem from, among other things, the fact that fewer women have access to cars, whether because the family car is not available to them or because they are more likely to not have a drivers' license (Kloof & Kensmil, 2020; Nadimi et al., 2020). Similarly, women who do have private cars are more likely to decrease their use of those cars or give them up entirely (CIVITAS, 2014; Polk, 2003, 2004) if they see public transportation options as convenient or worthwhile (Carver & Veitch, 2020). Women also use public transportation differently than men do, due to cultural, economic, physiological, and psychological differences that influence mobility (Hamilton et al., 2005; Levy, 2019; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). These differences include the choice of mode of transport, the time at which trips are made, trip purpose, route, trip chain, and the distance traveled in a single trip (Gauvin et al., 2020; Shirgaokar, 2019; Rosqvist, 2019). The unique characteristics of trips made by women, which have been well-documented in the literature, often reflect processes of socio-economic development (Rosenbloom & Plessis-Fraissard, 2009). On average, women tend to travel more frequently on public transportation, but travel shorter distances than men do (Kwon & Akar, 2021; Sánchez & González, 2016; Ng & Acker, 2018). Women's trips also tend to take shorter amounts of time (Troncoso et al., 2021), to be closer to their homes (Titheridge et al., 2014), to be made at different times of day, and to include more than one stop along the way (i.e., multiple trips linked together; Li et al., 2020). These gender differences are particularly noticeable in the urban space, which is designed in a manner that is not gender-neutral and which men and women experience differently (Gauvin et al., 2020). These behavioral differences between women and men have a significant impact on accessibility and equality of opportunity in the public sphere (Hamilton et al., 2005), wage gaps (Troncoso et al., 2021), and women's access to essential services, as compared to men's access to those services (Schiller & Kenworthy, 2017).

To address these issues, transportation policy must adopt a softer approach that considers not only inequalities stemming from traveler behavior, but also differing group preferences, passenger experiences and abilities, and the alignment of physical travel conditions with social needs to promote social well-being (Banister, 2019). Examining the views of women and men who use public transportation is an effective way to assess service quality and gather information for improvement (Bellizzi et al., 2020), yet existing public-participation processes, though potentially valuable for planning, tend to involve small, unrepresentative groups that may be biased by ethnicity, gender, and/or class (Triplett, 2015). Awareness of the complex nature of mobility is demanding and challenging for decision-makers and planners (Joelsson & Lindkvist Scholten, 2019). To ensure equality among all users of public transportation, there needs to be great sensitivity in the policy-making process (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2008), including sensitivity to gender-related issues that may present barriers and create inequality for women (Sánchez & González, 2016). That said, transportation policies and planning are considered technical matters whose goals—decreasing the distance between people, places, and goods with minimal operational costs—can be measured (Healey, 2006). Therefore, most planning focuses mainly on variables related to economic growth and geographic conditions (Litman, 2014).

Everyone agrees that technology has changed how people move through space, but do we fully understand the effects of technology on gender equality in mobility? The field of information technology—under whose influence new digital tools for smart mobility have been developed—suffers from a lack of gender balance, which influences the design of these tools and may deepen existing inequalities in society (Singh, 2020). Against this backdrop of persistent gender inequalities in public transportation, the rise in smart-mobility technologies raises new questions about whether innovation will reduce these gaps or, if these technologies are not carefully designed, reinforce them.

2.4. Smart Transportation and Gender

Many cities in Israel and around the world have adopted smart-transportation initiatives, in an attempt to cope with transportation challenges (Benevolo et al., 2016). One of the main challenges in large cities is heavy traffic, due mainly to increased use of private vehicles and population growth (Dabiri & Heaslip, 2018). Smart transportation or smart mobility is part of the management strategy for a smart city (Repko & DeBroux, 2012) and is based on sensors and information technology. These technologies create large, rich sets of data to which advanced algorithms can be applied, to help to improve the safety of transportation, increase the efficiency and reliability of the transportation network, and reduce negative effects on the environment (Chen & Lam, 2016).

Smart transportation helps organizations to collect information about users' experiences and opinions regarding the quality of local public transportation services (Benevolo et al., 2016). This information can be used by public-transportation operators to improve their decision-making processes and the planning of the transportation system, to improve travel experiences (Dabiri & Heaslip, 2018; Nunes et al., 2014).

However, in the field of public transportation, innovation is not just technological; it is also a matter of perception. Traditionally, the users of public transportation have been viewed as passive, but that view is increasingly seen as inappropriate. According to the new approach, public transportation, a natural monopoly, is viewed as a service for the public good (Gebauer et al., 2010). This change has been based on, among other things, the understanding that each traveler in a public-transportation network possesses unique information about the public service (Vecchio et al., 2018), as well as the fact that most travelers now have electronic devices that connect them to the internet and allow them to exchange structured information in order to improve their trips, for example, real-time updates on travel times (Nunes et al., 2014).

That said, analyses of data by gender have not been included in studies based on big data, which limits our ability to take a closer look at gender-related aspects of urban mobility and to design strategies that advance gender equality (Gauvin et al., 2020). As long as women's mobility patterns are not sufficiently documented, designed systems may perpetuate existing inequalities (Woodcock et al., 2020). Being smarter will not make these systems fairer.

2.5. What Is and What Ought to Be: Adoption of Gender-Sensitive Policies for Public Transportation

Among public-transportation decision-makers today, there is a clear lack of access to gender-related data, only superficial familiarity with the issue, and a generally low level of awareness (CIVITAS, 2014; Parnell et al., 2022). The gender-mainstreaming approach emphasizes that public organizations must integrate gender considerations into every stage of decision-making (True & Mintrom, 2001; Verge, 2024).

Yet, in practice, its implementation is often partial, technical, or merely symbolic (True & Mintrom, 2001).

In recent years, a few countries have tried to improve the efficiency of transportation systems within their borders and a few of them have included gender-related issues in their transportation planning (CIVITAS, 2014; EIGE, 2016; Legovini et al., 2022). For example, in Great Britian, the transportation network for London has launched several initiatives, collected statistical data that include gender, and instructed networks to act to promote equality and oppose gender discrimination, including sexual harassment on public transportation (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2009; TFL, 2019). In Canada, several local governments in the Toronto metropolitan area have established an action committee to combat violence toward women and children on public transportation (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2009).

Sweden has been among the few countries to explicitly incorporate gender considerations into transportation planning (Greed, 2019; Meyer, 2004). The city of Malmo, for example, conducted a public-participation process after which it decided to take several actions to improve public safety, such as trimming trees around transportation stops, adding security on public transportation at night, and establishing a "between-stops" nighttime service that allows women to get off at spots that are convenient for them after dark.

In Vienna, efforts were made to widen sidewalks, install pedestrian-friendly traffic lights, improve the safety of passageways, and generally improve the subjective sense of security. In Berlin, comfortable, well-lit, safe, and short transport vehicles have been made available (CIVITAS, 2014). In Mexico City, under government leadership, in 2008, the *Viajemos Seguras* (Women Traveling Safely) program was implemented, which included actions to increase women's safety, including the installation of cameras and buttons to be pressed in case of emergency (Soto-Villagrán et al., 2017).

In Israel, in contrast, only a few cities have tried to identify gender-related needs in public transportation. The most prominent among these is the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, which in 2016 held a conference on transportation and gender (Transport Today & Tomorrow, 2016). The City has even included this issue in its budget, mainly in the context of gender analysis of sustainable transportation and bicycle use (Tel Aviv–Yafo Municipality, 2019). In 2021, the City built a strategic plan for this field, in which it addressed and provided budgets for different gender-related aspects of public transportation (Zagrizik, 2021). In addition, the City of Rehovot, in a course on leadership and gender held for the women of the city, advanced a plan to improve public transportation and make it more accessible. That plan included a survey to identify needs, which was conducted in partnership with the Adva Center (City of Rehovot, 2018).

Local government also has a comparative advantage in the context of gender-related issues. A study of budgeting and gender found that local government is the most appropriate level at which to instill the importance of gender, since local decision-makers tend to be the most familiar with the situation on the ground and the most likely to invite local residents to participate in decision-making processes (Reyes et al., 2006). Although local initiatives in gender-sensitive transportation exist, most remain at the pilot stage due to their complexity, lengthy decision-making processes, and budgetary constraints (CIVITAS, 2014). Even in Sweden, often seen as progressive, integrating gender considerations into transportation planning remains limited because of difficulties in defining and implementing gender-equality goals (Joelsson & Lindkvist Scholten, 2019).

Feminist institutionalism helps to explain these persistent gaps by highlighting how formal rules and informal organizational norms often reproduce gendered power structures that hinder meaningful policy change. This perspective emphasizes that without addressing the institutional environment itself, even well-intentioned reforms are likely to be weakened, delayed, or implemented unevenly (Mackay et al., 2010; Vilhena et al., 2025).

Criado et al. (2025) noted the importance of studies of organizations that have not undergone change, in order to learn about the reasons why they have not changed. Those researchers also claimed that even in places where changes have been made, innovation is not always effective in a way that is equitable for all parties (Criado et al., 2025). For these reasons and those mentioned above, this study attempted to examine the barriers and catalysts to the advancement of innovative policies that address gender equality in public transportation, from the viewpoint of public administration.

3. Method

3.1. Research Orientation

This qualitative study aimed to investigate different interpretations of a single reality through the construction of clear experiential memory, to facilitate the description of the subjects and the explanations for them, in all of their multifaceted complexity (Tzabar Ben Yehoshua, 2016). Data were collected using several different research tools: semi-structured, in-depth interviews; focus groups; and a survey of documents and websites.

In this study, which addressed a social issue that is affected by many interested parties, a qualitative approach facilitated the broad and deep examination of many processes. Through triangulation and cross-checking (Carver & Veitch, 2020), this work made use of a range of techniques and sources of data, with the goal of developing a comprehensive and credible understanding of the examined phenomena (Patton, 1999).

This study focused on two of the four large cities in Israel (Tel Aviv-Yaffo and Beer Sheva) and employed the critical-case technique, which invites a deep and rich understanding of the case and allows for the inclusion of the findings and their application in a broad manner (Patton, 2014). These two cities are major cities with surrounding suburbs to which we can apply Patton's statement, "If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere" (Patton, 1990, p. 174).

3.2. Research Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 participants (i.e., managers, professionals, and politicians) from local authorities, the Ministry of Transport, public transportation operators, and transportation technology companies. An additional 40 participants took part in focus groups (70 participants in total). The interviews were the main tool used to examine the perceptions of managers and professionals in public and private organizations. Documents and the minutes of meetings were also collected and analyzed, as well as articles in the traditional media and social-media posts. To examine attitudes among the public, focus groups were conducted that included men and women who use public transportation and live in the cities of Tel Aviv-Yaffo or Beer Sheva. Interviews were also conducted with prominent figures in a civil-society organization related to public transportation and a female member of the public who uses public transportation. All of the interviews and all of the discussions in the focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

3.3. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique for identifying subjects within the body of knowledge that is created in the course of a qualitative study (Terry et al., 2017). This technique concerns the identification of patterns of significance within a set of data and the organization of those data and the presentation of the features that are acquired from them in a superficial manner. It allows the identification of the meanings and experiences shared by all of the participants. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis provides flexibility in the analysis of content and allows researchers to deal with rich, complex sets of data.

To preserve their anonymity, each interviewee was assigned a number, based on the order in which the interviews were conducted, and each quote presented below will be labeled with the interviewee's number. For example, "Interview 1" refers to the interview conducted with Interviewee 1. For the quotes from participants in the focus groups, I will indicate whether the quote came from a participant from Tel Aviv (T) or Beer Sheva (B), whether the focus group was made up of men (M) or women (W), the focus group for his/her respective city that they took part in (1 or 2), and the number of the quoted

participant. For example, the label BW27 refers to the second focus group that was held in Beer Sheva, which was made up of women, and the quoted woman is participant number 7.

The thematic analysis was conducted by a single researcher using ATLAS.ti. version 25.0.1.32924 Following an initial comprehensive reading of all of the transcripts, a wide range of preliminary codes were identified. These codes were subsequently merged, refined, and grouped into higher-order categories through an iterative analytic process. From these categories, three overarching thematic domains emerged. While the coding process was inductive, the conceptual framework informed the interpretation and refinement of these domains. Although the coding was carried out by one researcher, the credibility of the analysis was enhanced through research supervision and the cross-checking of the emerging interpretations with the literature, which helped to ensure methodological rigor. In addition to the triangulation already described—across interviews, focus groups, and documentary sources—this multistage coding process strengthened the coherence and trustworthiness of the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

This research explored the barriers and catalysts to the adoption of innovative practices at the municipal level, in the context of the provision of essential public services with an emphasis on fairness and equality. Specifically, it explored the level of gender sensitivity in public transportation services. The research findings in three main areas are presented below: the encounter between personnel and the organizational environment, the bureaucratic environment, and innovation and incremental change.

4.1. People and Organizations: The Encounter Between Personnel and the Organizational Environment

Analysis of the interviews revealed the complexity of interactions between the size of a workforce and its quality, in the context of the promotion of innovation in the public sector. The research literature has emphasized that a shortage of human resources is a significant barrier to innovation in the public sector (Cinar et al., 2019). The findings of this study support that claim, as they present a picture of organizations with limited workforces, with that situation influencing processes of innovation within those organizations.

4.1.1. Personnel: Quantity and Quality

The interviewees referred to the great importance of the human capital available at the planning and design stages of public transportation services, as well as at the time of the implementation of programs. The Ministry of Transportation was described as a "lean" organization that is limited and weak: "To start now a project that you're committed to? Again, as I said, they're a very lean organization" (Interview 8).

The Ministry's employees were described as few in number, but professional. "They are also, like, I'm sorry to say, they're a regulator, yes, but they are very few people. They're not really capable of controlling everything. But, they're professional and they're really OK" (Interview 20).

That said, in light of changes in the order of priorities among transportation issues, it was interesting to see the differences in the expansion of workforces among all of the public organizations, particularly the local authorities. For example, since 2018, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of employees in the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo who are working in the field of transportation:

> When I started this job [. . .] two people were in charge of this whole field [. . .] and then the City began to hire more personnel. We, from two people [. . .] they

> gave us another 10 positions [. . .] The addition of more personnel allowed us to take things and do them for the community, also in a different way. (Interview 11)

In Beer Sheva, actors in the Transportation Department perceived the existing workforce as significant for leading processes, but as smaller than the staff in Tel Aviv. "For us, yes [dealing with public transportation, V.U.], because there are personnel who deal with this" (Interview 1).

Despite the significance assigned to quantity, in both cities, we heard from individuals who thought that, for matters related to gender sensitivity in public transportation, it is worthwhile to note the gender of those working in public transportation and not only the number of people working in that field: "[The] gender problems in transportation in general stem from the fact that most of the providers of this service are [. . .] They're not women" (Interview 1, Beer Sheva).

> "The folks who are working on this are men and they're less like, maybe less aware of these things". (Interview 10, Tel Aviv-Yaffo)

There were also those who said that women also did not always act to promote the gender issue:

> I'll say two things: This is not sufficiently on the agenda [. . .] and, in my opinion, still, in my opinion, the discussion is male and the decision-makers are men [. . .] I think that women in high positions, some of them don't [. . .] don't see this as a real need. (Interview 15)

It was difficult not to notice the importance of the personal factor for the promotion of gender equality in public transportation (Uziel, 2019, p. 71). I first encountered the phrase "training hearts" (softening the resistance of actors in local government) in the context of the subject of gender and transportation in 2017, in a series of interviews that I conducted among individuals within the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo. When I returned there in 2021, to conduct the current study, I once again heard the claim that there was a need to "train hearts" in the same context. "You know, it's like whipped cream [an unnecessary extra, V. U.] for the experts. Unfortunately, that means, but like I said, there's a sort of process" (Interview 10).

That is, despite the increased awareness of the issue of gender and public transportation within the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, this issue is still seen as unimportant. I found that personal initiative, driven by personal interest, strongly influences the decision to deal with this issue. This was nicely explained by one of the interviewees who "took the reins in hand":

> I started to dive in and learn and study and see what's being done around the world and to discover Vienna [. . .] and I saw that a lot of the activity in the world is around transportation. And, [when] I had the opportunity to transfer to here, this was one of the reasons that I said, "This is a good fit. I can promote agendas.". (Interview 12)

The personal desire of the worker also carries weight, in addition to whatever the organization might ask of them or how their role has been defined. "We have here several people, mainly women, what can you do, who are involved in these matters and want to change [things] and to act in this field. I'm one of them" (Interview 10).

Actors in the local authorities also said that if there is no personal initiative or personal desire, matters will not progress:

> To be honest, the subject of gender and public transportation is not the subject that I, as you say, am advancing full speed ahead, OK. It's not anywhere on my

> agenda [. . .] I do think it's important that I take part in those initiatives, but I can't say that I'm an opinion leader in this area, OK. (Interview 15)

These findings are supported by the research literature on the importance of encouraging organizational initiatives and the importance of their activity for promoting innovation and solving complex problems in public organizations, in general, and local public organizations, in particular (Bartlett, 2017; Bartlett & Dibben, 2002). The perception regarding the importance of the involved individuals can also be seen with relation to the mayor. "The closer the issue of public transportation is to the heart of the mayor, the more attention it will get" (Interview 4).

It is clear that great personal initiative is needed to advance this issue. But, that also has clear negative consequences, at least in terms of the long-term implementation of initiatives. When the focus person for the issue leaves his or her position, all of the work they have led may disappear, too. Therefore, it is very important to anchor the advancement of gender equality in public transportation in formal legislation, similar to the legislation that has been enacted regarding public transportation and individuals with disabilities.

Personal initiative and the available workforce were found to be important. However, the professional training of personnel—which can influence their personal initiatives, particularly in leaner organizations—is no less important.

4.1.2. Professional Training

The literature has emphasized the importance of knowledge and expertise in innovation processes (Moussa et al., 2018) and professional training is important for the ability to advance innovation in public organizations. Despite this, the current study found that many position-holders in the field have had to learn on their own. "I read before I came into this job. I say, the first stage, when you enter a role, is studying, to read as much as you can. So, I read, I read a lot of reports" (Interview 2).

> "Lots of times, we come into a field that isn't our main area of activity [. . .] The first thing I do is to learn what we're talking about". (Interview 5)

> "Roles are defined [. . .] an understanding of what they want and what they need [. . .] many things developed". (Interview 13)

Sometimes, this intense study leads to surprising insights. For example, as someone from local government who was exposed to the subject of gender sensitivity in public transportation described, "We were surprised [by the relationship between gender and transportation, V.U.] [. . .] Transportation, for example, hadn't been part of our plan" (Interview 17).

Training is critical, especially when it comes to complex topics. In organizations that grant their managers and workers broader space in which to act, independent learning occurs, which greatly helps to overcome the initial lack of knowledge. However, this style of professional development also leads to a degree of randomness in efforts to address gender sensitivity in transportation. Professional and institutional training constructs a world of values, which may facilitate efforts to address complex issues that cross the boundaries of a specific role. But, this requires a "permissive" organization, as will be discussed in the following section.

4.1.3. "Permissive" or "Limiting" Organizations

The organizational atmosphere carries a determinative weight in advancing and impeding innovation in the public sector. According to the research literature, public organizations generally have rigid organizational cultures that act as barriers to innovation

(Rainey, 2009). But, the findings of the current study revealed nonnegligible differences in this context between the local governments that were studied.

The local government of Tel Aviv-Yaffo allows its workers a certain degree of initiative and independent thinking, beyond the officially defined boundaries of their roles. "I think that there were goals that I set for myself that I want to accomplish" (Interview 13).

This approach can also be seen in the field of gender. An individual in local government emphasized their personal motivation to address the issue and the role of the local government, which gave them space to do so. "I came here with relatively a lot of knowledge that I'd accumulated just out of curiosity [. . .] re-examination [of the department, V.U.] from a gender perspective" (Interview 12).

> "There is a female project leader [in the Transportation Department, V.U.] and it's [gender and transportation, V.U.] really, it's one of the issues [. . .] that she wants to move forward". (Interview 10)

In contrast, within the local government in Beer Sheva, there was a more limiting atmosphere between the different levels of the organization, which could discourage new initiatives. "There's a certain lack of trust between the professional staff and the elected ranks and the very senior ranks" (Interview 3).

It is interesting to see that despite the differences observed between the two local governments, in both cases, work routines were based, to a great degree, on informal relations between different actors within and outside the local government. This phenomenon is congruent with the literature that has addressed the importance of informal networks for the advancement of innovation in the public sector (Sørensen & Torfing, 2017). But, naturally, in public organizations there is sometimes an abundance of caution regarding the strict limits of the role of an individual or department. Recently, there has been some movement toward a more holistic approach and greater cooperation between departments. "From a broad, systemic perspective, it's not me, it's accessibility or technology" (Interview 4).

In both local governments, in recent years, an improved structure that crosses departmental boundaries has been observed. "We took on some of the work ourselves [. . .] we brought forward some sort of decision that's a finished product for, let's say, the Transportation Department [. . .] so that they'd implement it in practice" (Interview 11, Tel Aviv-Yaffo).

> "I received a sort of survey in an Excel file [. . .] They know that this tool is there; they're familiar with my abilities and they put me to work as needed". (Interview 3, Beer Sheva)

The findings show that the successful promotion of innovation, particularly with regard to complex subjects like gender sensitivity in transportation, can proceed via two prominent practices: official instruction from above or informal relationships. As one of the interviewees noted, "There's great support and a budget and everything that's needed to advance this" (Interview 12).

In the implementation of ideas, even if they were imposed from above, the strength of informal relationships is most important. "This is what's called a lack of cooperation [. . . someone who] wants to cooperate, we'll work with them. Someone who doesn't want to cooperate, the subject will 'fall asleep a little'" (Interview 16).

> "They're also physically close to us, which was just a matter of luck, but has really, really brought us closer together and allowed us to work together". (Interview 12)

Informal personal relationships allow more rapid advancement of gender equality in public transportation and allow the issue to gain prominence and to be prioritized in the field. This has been true, for example, in Tel Aviv-Yaffo, in the context of the formulation

of the local government's strategic plan with regard to gender: "Today, transportation is really the plan that we're pushing forward the most" (Interview 17).

Beyond the subject of gender in public transportation, individuals noted the importance of informal interpersonal relationships within and outside the organization. "[The advancement of the different projects was done] on the basis of cooperative initiative [. . .] First of all, it's really, really, really based on an interpersonal relationship" (Interview 2).

> "We are a very, very professional level. Unlike, the political levels [. . .] It's always related to the personal". (Interview 1)

These statements support the broad agreement regarding the importance of personal relationships. "At the end of the day, I believe that these things are very, they're really very much interpersonal. Is there someone who wants to come toward me [to work together]?" (Interview 12).

Despite the inherent advantages of work based on informal relationships, similar to informal personal initiatives, this situation also has some disadvantages and raises a complicated issue. Informal relationships do allow flexibility and the rapid advancement of ideas, but they also establish dependence on specific individuals and make it difficult to formalize initiatives and integrate changes for the long term. For example, as we heard from several of the interviewees, "It depends on the individuals, depends on the district, there's no rule for this, it's not anchored [in anything]" (Interview 6).

> "It's not a member of the council, or another delegation, that, for example, despite the fact that I approached them, doesn't really want to cooperate". (Interview 16)

Limited manpower, insufficient training that is based, to a great extent, on personal motivation, and reliance on interpersonal relationships lead to work processes that are lacking and to the avoidance of complicated, societal transportation problems. It appears that, compared to 2017 (Uziel, 2019), team members do indeed have greater strength when they are bound to one another by informal relationships, but despite the advantages of such relationships, those relationships do not guarantee the existence of long-term processes. Therefore, in the end, they also serve as barriers to the implementation of innovation. The more permissive the organization, the more the advantages of these factors will overcome their disadvantages, particularly in terms of the ability to encourage broad learning, develop new organizational initiatives, and build broad partnerships. But, since they exist within the boundaries of a bureaucratic environment, even in a permissive organization, they will be overpowered by the unique features of that environment. This pattern reflects what gender-mainstreaming scholarship has identified as the institutional tendency to marginalize gender considerations, which produces a form of institutionalized gender blindness.

4.2. The Bureaucratic Environment: Barriers and Catalysts

The development of management models for the public sector—traditional management, NPM, PVM, and NPG—represents a move from a hierarchical-bureaucratic perspective toward a perspective based on networks and partnership (O'Flynn, 2007; Torfing, 2016). That said, in the public sector, there is inherent tension between the need for innovation and traditional, bureaucratic structures. The interviews conducted as part of this study brought to the surface prominent bureaucratic features of stakeholders, which act as significant barriers to addressing the issue of gender inequality and implementing long-term solutions. Local governments tend to avoid dealing with these issues and how they manifest within the bounds of their authorities. Issues raised include hierarchy and concentration, complications, conservativism, a focus on putting out fires, and budgetary issues.

4.2.1. Rigid Structure: Hierarchy and Concentration in Public Organizations

According to the research literature, public organizations have unique characteristics, such as complicated rules and regulations, which limit potential changes (Rainey, 2009). These characteristics are prominent in the public transportation system in Israel, which is characterized by a high degree of concentration. A newspaper article published in 2021 noted that first government decision regarding the establishment of transportation networks for entire metropolitan areas in Israel was made in 2011, but had not yet been put into practice. At that time, the Finance Ministry was requesting that that government decision be revised as part of the Arrangements Law and that the first metropolitan area-level transportation network be established in the Gush Dan region (i.e., the Tel Aviv metropolitan area; Sadeh, 2021). Later that month, the Finance Ministry reportedly requested that this subject be removed from the Arrangements Law due to an "excess of reforms," as opposed to any budgetary issues (Liberman, 2021). The following May, the issue returned to the headlines, when the minister of transportation proposed the authorization of "transportation areas, also in the Golan and the Galilee, which would gradually be granted authority over public transportation and road signs and signals." This would be conditional on agreement between neighboring communities, in an arrangement modeled on the system of water authorities (Etzion, 2022). It appears that the omission of the subject of metropolitan-area transportation networks from the Arrangements Law in 2021, despite the declarations of the then-minister of transportation, could have left the situation as it had been previously. This is despite the fact that the individuals we interviewed from the local governments of both Tel Aviv-Yaffo and Beer Sheva saw themselves as the ones responsible for public transportation for the residents of their cities.

The concentration-based approach influences the accessibility of information and the decision-making process.

> Also Dan [a bus company, V.U.], for example, and the Ministry of Transportation [. . .] they have a system to analyze all the information [. . . need] to come and just ask the Ministry of Transportation [. . .] without taking the initiative and presenting our plans it doesn't work, because the Ministry of Transportation also has limited resources. (Interview 11, Tel Aviv-Yaffo)

> "Today, there are systems [. . .] that are installed on buses to count passengers [. . .] We can ask for and receive [. . .] we don't have this. We don't have information that belongs to us". (Interview 1, Beer Sheva)

This situation is congruent with Klijn's (2012) critique of the NPM model, in which the surface network, which includes private actors, is mainly suited to solving relatively simple problems, with the success of the model more questionable when it comes to more complicated problems. According to people interviewed in this study, the issue of concentration also affects long-term processes that involve local government. "This time it's being done in a cooperative manner, but it's under the complete control of the Ministry of Transportation. We have no formal status" (Interview 6).

One claim is that the division of responsibility is not sufficiently clear. "The Ministry of Transportation, the operator and the City [. . .] Let's say, the division of responsibility between these three actors is not sufficiently clear" (Interview 1).

This problem was also noted by the passengers who participated in the focus groups. One of them noted that:

> Even if I wanted to, I don't know who I'd turn to. You travel every day; it's not made accessible; we don't know who takes care of these things. I'd be happy if there was someone to ask [. . .] We have a better understanding of the situation on the ground and there's no such option. (BW27)

> "I don't see any connection to the Municipality. There isn't that knowledge of who to ask, even if you want to". (BW21)

A similar sentiment was observed among the operators, who mentioned hierarchy and the high level of concentration. "Here, there's only one actor that has any influence—the Ministry of Transportation. In the end, the buses are not even ours, everything belongs to the Ministry of Transportation. We're just the operator" (Interview 8).

The operators' perceptions express a complicated reality, since if you asked members of the public who to turn to in most situations, they would point to the operators. Indeed, according the participants in this study, in most cases, passengers prefer to present complaints to the operators (23 out of 40). Only a few (3 out of 40) said that they had complained to the Ministry of Transportation in the past and, in extenuating circumstances, 2 of the 40 participants had complained to the technology companies. That is, a great deal of knowledge is accumulated in the private organization, which operates based on profit-driven considerations, and that information is not necessarily used to adapt the public service to the needs of its users (i.e., the passengers). This complexity is created by the number of actors, which makes it difficult for individual citizens to understand the system by which services are provided (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998) and expresses the dominant position of the operators and the importance of cooperation between all of the actors.

The importance of cooperation is congruent with the literature on public-sector innovation, which calls for a balance between economic goals and the need to improve services for the public (Bartlett & Dibben, 2002). However, it appears that the concentrated structure impedes partnership and its influence on different processes is clear in the context of routine issues and, certainly, in the context of more complex issues. That is, hierarchy and a high level of concentration impede innovation (Cinar et al., 2019) and create long, complicated processes.

4.2.2. Long and Complicated Processes

Pandey and Garnett (2006) described how the bureaucratic burden can dampen the personal motivation of actors within public organizations to seek or supply information that could facilitate change processes in the organization. Something similar was observed in this study. In the local governments, the popular perception is that many routine processes are too long and complicated. Someone from the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo expressed this perception regarding public organizations in general. "Every government ministry is considered bureaucratic, with many branches" (Interview 12).

The heavy bureaucracy leads to long processes, even when it comes to intra-organizational operations. As one interviewee noted, "Every work process here takes time" (Interview 16).

Processes that involve both local government and the Ministry of Transportation take even longer. "The process is very, very long, very complicated [. . .] Say, if I compare it with processes that occur in the city government that don't require the Ministry's authorization [. . .] it takes three of four times the amount of time" (Interview 13).

Therefore, in Tel Aviv-Yaffo, the widespread belief is that if they were working alone, the City's staff would be more efficient. "We can work more quickly, that means, in the end, we can prepare the plan [. . .] but still the bottleneck is usually the Ministry of Transportation" (Interview 13).

Interviewees in Beer Sheva described complication rooted in the complexity of the law. "The system is basically very hierarchical, very bureaucratic, because that's the law, the law is very complicated, very complex; it's not a simple law" (Interview 6).

The nature of the relationships with external vendors can sometimes also be a barrier to innovation. "We really turn to more and more actors, until we succeed and find [what we're looking for]" (Interview 5).

Sometimes, these long and complicated processes are due to the public organization's fear of change and its conservative tendencies.

4.2.3. The Difficulty of Supporting New Ideas: Fear of Change and Conservatism in Organizations

The research literature has also identified conservatism and resistance to change as important barriers to innovation in the public sector (Moussa et al., 2018). The findings of this study show how conservative views are expressed in different contexts related to the issue of gender and transportation. In the Ministry of Transportation, the conservative approach is expressed as resistance to the collection of information regarding gender. For this reason, the Rav-Kav [transportation pass] database, for example, does not include any gender-related data.

> In the end, our ability to analyze who uses [the services] according to users' Rav-Kavs is almost zero, for privacy reasons [. . .] I can't say, 'OK, I see that on this trip there were x number of women and y number of men.' Unfortunately, this is information that I can't, I'm not allowed to produce. (Interview 24)

> We're not allowed. We're not allowed to collect any data about passengers that's not relevant. The only thing we know about a passenger is whether or not they're eligible for a discount. (Interview 9)

Based on the statement made by Interviewee 9, it appears that gender is not a relevant factor in the context of discounts for passengers.

Public organizations are also characterized by a fear of change, a tendency to stick with what is familiar, and a concern for sunk costs.

> Lots of times, there's opposition. It's hard to prevent, because there's pressure, strong pressure to get the things done. Even if we already know that the things have been found to be no good, so they don't want to develop [it] all over again. (Interview 10)

> The conservatism is perceived as part of the essential nature of the city government. First of all, the DNA of the city government is DNA that is opposed to working with developers and technology suppliers [. . .] They don't live together; a 'pilot' is a creature that's a bit strange in the city government, but it has a lot of advantages. (Interview 5)

It appears that even when the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo decided, for example, to change the traffic lights for pedestrians in a gender-specific manner, conservative reactions from the government prevented it.

> We decided to change the figure in the traffic lights from a man to a woman for a day or two [. . .] About an hour later, the whole state of Israel, the police, the Ministry of Transportation, jumped on us and told us to immediately remove this [. . .] closed-mindedness on the part of the central government that has fears and concerns that I don't know where they come from. (Interview 11)

In the local governments, there is a very noticeable conservative approach that does not allow change or innovation, claiming that all that exists works fine and sticking with that which is familiar and already exists. "It would appear that we're doing everything right. That means, there's sometimes a perception of 'everything's fine' [. . .] Often times, they just say, 'We're already doing it and everything's already taken care of'" (Interview 10).

> In the city government, everything works and everything's successful, in every city government. There's no such thing as we failed. Now, the whole story with checking the initiatives of this type [pilot projects, V.U.], which are in great danger, that means, they live on the shelf for a month or two. (Interview 5)

The reluctance to change and the conservative approach together with the long and complicated processes that are part of the work routine often lead to a focus on "putting out fires".

4.2.4. Putting out Fires Gets in the Way of Innovation and Change

Rainey (2009) noted that public bodies are characterized by a tendency to focus on urgent issues and work that is influenced by political pressures. The findings of the current study show how this pattern also affects the ability to further innovation. The Ministry of Transportation has claimed that there has been a move away from the putting-out-fires approach and that, today, there is more of a focus on long-term planning: "There really have been organizational changes that have transformed it into an organization that places greater importance on strategic aspects of long-term planning" (Interview 24).

However, another study participant noted that, in practice, the main focus continues to be the finding of immediate solutions for urgent problems. "Here, there's always movement between dealing with the here and now and dealing with improvement for the medium-long term and the long term [. . .] There's a tendency to be drawn to the here and now" (Interview 9).

Within the putting-out-fires mindset, dealing with the issue of gender is seen as a privilege. "If there's a catastrophe outside and the catastrophe occurs at 7:30 in the morning [. . .] in the world of drawing on limited resources [. . .] in this world, you know, you first deal with the big stones" (Interview 24).

Interviewees from the organizations that operate public transportation claimed that most of their work is focused on dealing with current, immediate problems. "We mainly deal with putting out fires in the moment" (Interview 23).

The interviewees from the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo claimed that, with regard to the City's activities, the time dedicated to long-term projects is equal to the time dedicated to putting out fires. In contrast, the interviewees from the City of Beer Sheva claimed that their heavy routine workload affects not only the priorities of those doing the work, but also the feasibility of cooperation.

Work routines focused on the here and now lead to constant prioritization. This situation is accompanied by budgetary issues or, as many of the interviewees put it, "the limited resource".

4.2.5. Budget

According to O'Flynn (2007), NPM emphasizes economic efficiency. However, the findings of this study show that a focus on budgetary considerations can come at the expense of other public values. At the Ministry of Transportation, they explained that the inherent tension in the gender issue stems from, among other things, the interplay of values within a limited budget.

> It's all a matter of scale [. . .] In the end, [when] you invest money toward a value, that comes at the expense of other values. In the end, what is the greatest value that public transportation serves, the very, very highest value, the most basic? It's freedom of movement. (Interview 14)

But within the bounds of this supreme value, what space is granted to the freedom of movement of women, as compared to men?

> "We can't always answer these requests [made by local governments, V.U.] due to a lack of budget, especially these last two years, which have gone by without a state budget. Often we can't respond". (Interview 4)

Budgetary limits are important, but the interviewees' statements show that the issue of gender and transportation is absent from the discourse not only due to budgetary limits, but also due to features of the bureaucracy, particularly conservatism, a desire to stick with existing models, fear of change, and the existence of rigid hierarchies, all of which limit innovation and affect the decision-making process.

4.3. Innovation and Incremental Change

In the research literature, it is customary to distinguish between incremental innovation, which adds to and improves what already exists, and disruptive innovation, which proposes radical change (Dan & Chieh, 2008). As Streeck and Thelen (2005) noted, institutional change in public organizations generally occurs in small, incremental steps. The findings of the current study demonstrate how this perception is expressed in the field.

There is structural tension between features of bureaucracy, on the one hand, and innovation and the ability to create institutional change, on the other (Roy, 2013). The local governments have defined clear conditions for change, but that change has apparently been localized and incremental.

> From the moment that I understand, I do it. Here, there's no—From the moment that I receive, even in an e-mail, an inquiry from the public [. . .] I act to take care of it, I improve [things] wherever I can [. . .] localized issues—another bench, another streetlight, or something like that—that's definitely in the toolbox that we have and we do it. (Interview 11)

As can be seen from this quote, the road to institutional change in the public sector is often made up of small, incremental steps (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Thelen, 2009). This approach provides an answer to the difficulties of acquiring public legitimacy for change processes (Owen et al., 2020), in that it helps to build a foundation of trust within the organization and among the public. This can also be seen in the caution taken by the actors on the ground.

> Anything that he'll come and say, I will make it accessible [. . .] need to understand whether it's significant and what it's significance is, and whether it'll harm others. Need to understand, I don't know what the proposal is, it could be that they're very simple and they also help others and they don't harm anyone. (Interview 14)

According to the participants in this study, in the context of dealing with gender inequality in transportation, the relevant actors are still taking the first steps. "In gender, particularly in the context of transportation, it's still, we're in a sort of desert [. . .] Here, we need to start to plant the trees that will grow" (Interview 10).

Importantly, gender-sensitive interventions in public transportation constitute a form of organizational innovation in their own right. Such initiatives require changes to routines, decision-making processes, and underlying assumptions about users' needs—processes that naturally challenge established practices. From this perspective, the reluctance to adopt gender-responsive measures mirrors the broader barriers to innovation identified in this study: resistance to change, fear of disrupting what is perceived as working, and the prioritization of immediate crises over systemic improvements. Integrating a gender lens, therefore, becomes a test case that exposes institutional rigidity, highlighting the need for public organizations to adopt collaborative management models that support experimentation, learning, and inclusive forms of value creation.

Goals that are overly vague are another barrier to innovation in public organizations (Cinar et al., 2019) and can sometimes lead to things not getting done. That said, it appears that some of the actors in the Ministry of Transportation and in local governments prefer proposals focused on localized goals and concrete solutions that are easy to understand and implement. "You'll come and say, 'Listen, this is not safe for women' [. . .] First, I take a very, very serious look at this [. . .] Second, I check" (Interview 18).

"I really look for more 'meat' for concrete activities". (Interview 17)

The findings indicate that the use of off-the-shelf solutions that are readily available and easy to implement can help to overcome bureaucratic barriers and advance gender-sensitive policies in public transportation. This approach is congruent with the understanding of incremental changes that allow an organization to gradually adjust itself while preserving operational stability.

In addition, recent studies of public-sector innovation have pointed to the importance of public organizations identifying real needs and choosing appropriate strategies, while adopting a long-term perspective (Criado et al., 2025). This approach is congruent with the findings from this study that emphasize the challenge of social innovation and support the importance of the identification of needs, the selection of a management strategy, informal organizational structures, and intra-organizational initiatives, which can facilitate the implementation of gender-sensitive policies for public transportation.

Against this backdrop, the new public governance (NPG) and the public value management (PVM) models, as a part of the era of collaborative government (CG), offers a promising framework for addressing the problem. Unlike NPM, which evaluates success primarily through efficiency metrics, CG emphasizes the co-creation of public value with diverse stakeholders and recognizes that equity and inclusion are integral components of that value. Applying a collaborative-government approach to gender innovation in transportation would shift the focus from short-term operational pressures to long-term societal outcomes, legitimizing gender-responsive planning as a core public responsibility rather than an optional addition. This model also aligns with the study's findings that collaborative, multi-actor processes that include local authorities, operators, civil-society organizations, and users themselves are essential for overcoming institutional barriers and enabling meaningful organizational change.

These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Key barriers and catalysts of innovation (Framed by CG).

Theme	Description	Related CG Paradigm
Personnel and the Organizational Environment	Public organizations with limited staff struggle to advance innovation and collaboration. Professional staff help, but progress requires training, recruitment, and capacity building.	In CG, organizational capacity and strong human resources are essential for collaboration. Staffing shortages hinder participation, while training and professional support strengthen trust, shared language, and interorganizational coordination.
Bureaucratic Environment	The bureaucratic system is hierarchical, centralized, and conservative. Complex projects, constant "firefighting," and budget constraints delay innovation and hinder gender-sensitive policy.	Centralization and long approval chains undermine procedural legitimacy, and operational pressures reduce opportunities for coordination, dialogue, and joint problem-solving.
Incremental Change	Public-sector change occurs gradually. Innovative initiatives often stall, and major change requires legitimacy that is not always present. Incremental change may be the only feasible path, especially in sensitive areas.	Collaborative decision-making builds trust and legitimacy, reduces resistance, and enables new collaborative working patterns.

5. Conclusions

In the field of public transportation, the City of Tel Aviv-Yaffo is more innovative and more gender-sensitive than the City of Beer Sheva. The difference between these two cities reflects, to a great extent, the existing reality at the national level. Few municipalities in Israel have successfully advanced real innovation in the field of public transportation and this has had real consequences for the level of service and for gender equality in public transportation.

The difficulty of integrating gender-sensitive considerations into Israel's public transportation system illustrates a broader policy problem that goes beyond the operational level. As the findings show, gender-responsive initiatives are repeatedly postponed, deprioritized, or framed as nonessential, particularly within organizational cultures shaped by fire-fighting routines and conservative administrative norms. When viewed through the lens of public-administration theory, these challenges reveal the limits of traditional bureaucratic structures and of NPM-style, efficiency-driven management, both of which tend to privilege short-term outputs over long-term value creation. Thus, the marginalization of gender concerns is not merely the result of resource constraints; it reflects deeper institutional logic that shapes what is considered legitimate, urgent, and worthy of attention.

The issue of gender sensitivity in public transportation demonstrates the structural tension between the need for innovation and the limits of the public sector. The findings of this study revealed tensions in four areas that affect the ability of local governments to innovate.

First, there is tension between the traditional bureaucratic structure and the need for organizational flexibility, alongside the dominant position of private organizations in the provision of services. This study found that the concentration and hierarchy in the public transportation system in Israel are significant barriers to innovation, particularly in the context of the adoption of innovative solutions for complex issues like gender equality. Strong local governments, like that of Tel Aviv-Yaffo, have developed mechanisms to successfully bypass bureaucracy through leadership and by assuming responsibility. In contrast, in Beer Sheva, there has not yet been any noticeable progress regarding gender equality in public transportation.

Second, there are tensions related to the weight of human capital and informal relationships in promoting innovation. The research literature has focused on organizational structures and formal processes, but the findings of this work show that the ability to innovate is greatly dependent on the individuals promoting initiatives and informal work networks. This phenomenon is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows for flexibility and is a way of overcoming bureaucratic barriers. On the other hand, it creates dependence on specific individuals and makes it difficult to anchor the changes and implement them for the long term.

Third, there is tension between the recognition of the importance of innovation in theory and the ability to implement innovation in practice. The findings show that even when managers and professionals within local governments are aware of the need for innovation and change (as in the case of gender sensitivity in public transportation), the bureaucratic structure and conservative organizational culture make it difficult to translate that into effective action, sometimes due to a lack of broad training and sometimes due to a lack of simple solutions that will lead to small successes and incremental innovation, which would encourage cooperation and build legitimacy and trust. Finally, there are tensions between the absence or minimal presence of the most important actors—the public that the public services were established to serve—and the increased presence of technology companies, which over the years have come to carry a tremendous amount of weight in the context of data collection and the provision of services.

These findings indicate a need for a paradigm shift in how innovation is perceived in the Israeli public sector. Instead of focusing only on technical or structural changes, there is a need for new thinking about how to tailor innovation processes in this sector, with its unique characteristics. A better understanding of these problems, which happen to characterize the Israeli public sector, might contribute to a broader understanding of public-sector innovation, especially with regard to concepts of fairness and equality.

Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study had several limitations. First, as a qualitative investigation based on interviews and focus groups, the findings reflect participants' perspectives and are not generalizable. Second, although the study focused on two metropolitan areas (i.e., Tel Aviv-Yaffo and Beer Sheva) that represent critical cases offering meaningful insights, they do not capture the full range of organizational, cultural, and political conditions that shape gender-sensitive innovation in public transportation nationwide. Future studies should employ a broader geographic scope and mixed methods to yield more transferable findings.

Future research should include a broad, comparative evaluation of equality in public transportation in all localities, with long-term monitoring following the initial implementation of new initiatives. It should include a look at the ability of local governments to innovate in different fields and the identification of innovative management tools to help implement innovative solutions for urban problems. Among other things, there is a need for management tools based on the integrated governance model, which places the resident at the center and includes actors from a range of sectors in decision-making processes and the design and provision of services.

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