

WHY IT'S OK TO PUT WOMEN FIRST

Carolyn Pearson,
CEO and founder of
Maiden-Voyage.com,
explains why it is
acceptable to have
a gender-specific
conversation about
travel risks



Our company is unapologetic about focusing predominantly on the female business traveller. In 2016, when everybody is pushing for equality, you might wonder why we 'call out' one gender over another?

Today, more women are reaching senior positions, and as a result more women are travelling on business. Organisations have an obligation to provide a duty of care to all travellers. We know however that many organisations are failing to have a gender-specific conversation with their female travellers because they don't want to patronise or offend women, be accused of being sexist, or of neglecting the needs of the male or Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, Queer+ (LGBTQ+) communities.

Whilst our advice isn't to treat women differently, it is to treat everybody appropriately, personalising the travel planning to travellers as individuals. The point of gender-specific travel safety advice isn't about disempowerment but about reducing risk, driving home the message that complacency is our biggest enemy and that politeness should come secondary to personal safety.

They key differences facing women travellers include:

Gender-specific legal restrictions

Women are not permitted to drive in Saudi Arabia. In some countries women have to adhere to certain dress codes unlike their male counterparts.

Gender-specific cultural restrictions

Attitudes to bodily contact, public displays of affection, handshakes and even eye contact vary in certain countries and are different for men and women.

Handbag theft

Handbag theft is just one of the perils experienced by women travellers with rings of organised criminals targeting travel hubs and busy hotels. Because most women will carry their travel documents, money and telephones in their handbags, the loss of a handbag can further compound the risk to the traveller and her safety.

Sexual assault

Women are at a higher risk of sexual assault. In our 2016 Women in Business Travel research, we found that of the 25 per cent of women who had suffered a negative incident when travelling on business, 51 per cent of those incidents were related to sexual harassment or sexual assault.

Physical strength

Whilst a slight generalisation, it is more common for women to be asked if they need assistance with their baggage which can lead to further unwanted attention.

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Gender-specific health issues

This is particularly relevant to pregnancy and business travel. Can employers be sure they are not putting pregnant staff at risk when travelling? Things to consider are local health facilities, pre-trip vaccinations, insurance and fit-to-fly certificates.

Of the women we surveyed, 31 per cent of those in the corporate sector and 21 per cent in academia felt their employers did not adequately look after them when they are travelling on business, and a staggering 75 per cent of women agreed that their companies should prioritise suppliers who pay particular attention to the needs of female travellers. Thankfully we are now seeing this reflected in the travel procurement of Request for Proposals (RFPs).

This wasn't the case for sportscaster and TV host Erin Andrews who had a stalker. Her hotel gave the stalker her room number and allocated him the room next door. He went on to film her getting undressed and broadcast the footage online. Andrews was awarded \$55m in a joint claim against the hotel group and her stalker.

Unfortunately, 51 per cent of women surveyed by Maiden Voyage also claimed to have felt vulnerable when staying in a hotel allocated to them by their employer with many claiming to have slept with a chair or luggage placed behind the bedroom door.

Failure to adequately support any business traveller will have a negative impact on their ability to perform their duties to the best of their ability but could also negate the business trip expenditure. The risk of occasionally offending a relatively experienced traveller is worth this risk if it prevents a serious incident, the reputational damage to your organisation or a significant claim.

There are a number of organisations that provide female traveller safety training and gender-specific pre-trip briefings. ■

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Carolyn has spent more
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