

A Sanctuary for Female Commuters

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

A large pink sticker with a floral design has been attached to the train. The same stickers are on the platform where the carriages stop, and male passengers hesitated to stand in the area. Last spring, each station had two workers holding placards leading female passengers to the specific carriages.

Major railway lines in Tokyo introduced “Women-only-cars” in May 2005, and they are already part of the morning commuting scene. There have been no reports of men breaking the rule and forcing their way into the carriages. When the morning rush hour ends at 9:30, an announcement is made: “The carriage for female passengers is now suspended. We thank you for your cooperation.” Even after the announcement is made, the men still hesitate to enter the women’s sanctuary. It seems that the etiquette regarding the separation of men and women is being carefully observed.

The idea of introducing a car exclusively for women was prompted by the poor manners of some male passengers.

Last year, 2,200 men were arrested for molestation and surreptitious photography in the Tokyo metropolitan area, a threefold increase over eight years. According to a survey of female passengers in their 20s and 30s, some 64% have had the experience of being groped in a train. The majority of the victims said they silently endured the molestation, so the number of arrests can safely be considered to be the tip of the iceberg.

Tokyo’s rush hour is really horrendous. You cannot move your arms and legs and they are stuck the moment you get in the train, and even if you release your grip on your bag, it will not fall to the floor. This abnormal situation of being tightly squeezed between other people may not only provide a cloak of invisibility for illegal acts, but it may also trigger such behavior. If a male passenger moves his hand even slightly, he may be wrongly suspected of molestation.

Policemen, tax officials, politicians, school principals, journalists, lawyers, zoo animal handlers – men of all occupations have been arrested for groping in trains. There are rumors of groups that attempt to entrap certain men, and cases of false accusations have come to light in court judgments where the defendant is found innocent. Therefore it is not always the case that the man is guilty. However, the former representative of a group which supports such defendants was caught taking surreptitious photographs of the lower body of a woman in the subway, so the problem is not very easy to deal with.

The introduction of women-only-cars, which started in the Kansai area several years ago, was a simple solution to the problem. In Tokyo last May, 10 railway systems introduced similar measures, devoting one out of 10 carriages to the plan.

The system was kicked off with a ceremony at the East Exit of Shinjuku Station, in which a cooperative declaration pledging to



Illustration: Keio Sasumu

eliminate groping was read out. A person who has the courage to help subdue a groper on a train should not be reproached by his employer for being late for work, so the railway companies have decided to issue certificates explaining the reason for the delay.

The introduction of women-only-cars was welcomed by the public. “Now it’s no longer necessary to fear being touched by someone or to move to another place. It’s great to be able to commute without having to think about this,” said one female passenger. A male office worker commented, “I used to be wary of being accused of groping someone, so I always had to keep my hands up on the straps. Now I can breathe a bit freer.”

On the other hand, there have also been female passengers who have complained in letters to newspapers about the situation in the women-only-cars where women are freed from men’s eyes. “In the special cars the powerful fragrance of perfume is enough to give you a headache.” “There are high school girls squatting on the floor of the train putting on their makeup, and young women talking loudly on mobile phones.” It would appear that women-only-cars are not exactly an oasis.

Among men there are also complaints that the new system is discriminatory. “Due to the women-only-cars, the other cars are even more crowded. Women get to ride in the other cars as well, so the chance of being falsely charged of groping hasn’t been eliminated. Give us some cars for men only!” says one male office worker. In response to complaints from male passengers, a report mentioned that a railway company in Hyogo prefecture has reduced the number of women-only-cars in use. The traditional Japanese public bath has separate entrances for men and women. A radical person might say that the same method should be used for trains as well.

Chikan is a Japanese word for groper or molester, a term which literally means “a foolish man,” but it appears that the measures for dealing with such people are actually making fools of the public transportation system. **JS**

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