# Columnist turns 'womenspreading' into a quiet tactic to reclaim space on public transport



I was on the Northern line when a stranger’s thigh began rubbing against mine, and what started as a small moment of annoyance turned into a deliberate refusal to cede the space I was entitled to. In a Metro column, the writer describes planting her foot, pressing her thigh back and, after a tense exchange, watching the man move away — a victory she calls “liberating” and has since repeated on trains, buses and aeroplanes as a form of quiet resistance to manspreading.

She frames these repeated small acts as intentionally reclaiming crowded public space: refusing to give up an armrest on a long-haul flight, sitting squarely rather than folding away on the Tube, and sometimes — she admits — retreating when a situation felt unsafe. The column is personal and anecdotal, but it also presents the tactics and reactions she met: some men moved seats, others reacted with huffs or pushed back physically, and women around her often recognised and supported her actions.

The behaviour being protested has a name. Merriam‑Webster defines “manspreading” as men sitting with legs wide apart in public seating so as to intrude on others’ space, a neologism that gained traction in the mid‑2010s. Linguistic analyses trace the term’s rapid rise to public debate and transit campaigns — for example, city authorities and transport operators in places such as New York and Madrid produced visible anti‑manspreading messaging that helped the word enter mainstream use — and corpus data show spikes in public discussion after those campaigns were launched.

That public debate matters because unwanted touching and space‑invading behaviours on public transport sit in a wider pattern of harassment. Survey analysis shows a majority of women in London report experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport — from deliberate pressing up against them to groping — yet only a small proportion report incidents to police. Transport authorities have responded: Transport for London launched campaigns urging passengers to look out for and report sexual harassment, explicitly listing rubbing, groping, leering and taking images without consent among behaviours passengers should report, and stressing there is no need to show criminal intent in order to make a report.

Online discussion has amplified both condemnation and counter‑claims. Research into Twitter conversations around #manspreading finds that the hashtag surfaced many everyday accounts of men occupying space and also captured performative responses — including women posting about “womanspreading” as a deliberate rebuttal. That scholarship shows the debate is contested: some portray manspreading as deliberate dominance rooted in gendered power dynamics, while others argue physiological or inadvertent explanations; social media both documents harassment and becomes a stage for performative pushback and backlash.

That complexity has practical implications. Pushing back physically against an encroacher may reclaim space and make an individual feel empowered, but it can also escalate tensions or endanger someone who is isolated. Campaigns and academic work both stress the importance of reporting and of bystander support as safer, system‑level responses; the columnist’s experience of mutual recognition with other women — and of men generally not manspreading beside other men — reinforces the argument that such behaviours are gendered and socially negotiated, not merely random spatial habits.

Small acts of resistance, the writer argues, are a form of peaceful protest in a wider moment when women’s rights and safety feel contested. Whether those acts alone shift culture is uncertain — linguistic, survey and policy evidence suggests change will hinge on a mix of public awareness campaigns, reporting and enforcement, and shifts in everyday etiquette. Still, personal stories of reclaiming space do more than describe discomfort: they feed into public conversation about whose comfort is prioritised on shared transport, and they illuminate why some passengers see taking up space as a political as well as practical choice.

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://metro.co.uk/2025/08/09/im-fed-men-invading-space-started-womenspreading-23837109/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://metro.co.uk/2025/08/09/im-fed-men-invading-space-started-womenspreading-23837109/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manspreading), [[3]](https://blog.oup.com/2015/12/manspreading-word-origins/), [[7]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40233435)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/27367-most-women-have-been-sexually-harassed-london-publ), [[4]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/january/new-campaign-encourages-customers-to-look-out-for-sexual-harassment-and-support-others-on-public-transport)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119861807)
* Paragraph 6 – [[6]](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119861807), [[4]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/january/new-campaign-encourages-customers-to-look-out-for-sexual-harassment-and-support-others-on-public-transport), [[5]](https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/27367-most-women-have-been-sexually-harassed-london-publ), [[1]](https://metro.co.uk/2025/08/09/im-fed-men-invading-space-started-womenspreading-23837109/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://metro.co.uk/2025/08/09/im-fed-men-invading-space-started-womenspreading-23837109/), [[2]](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manspreading), [[3]](https://blog.oup.com/2015/12/manspreading-word-origins/), [[4]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/january/new-campaign-encourages-customers-to-look-out-for-sexual-harassment-and-support-others-on-public-transport)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://metro.co.uk/2025/08/09/im-fed-men-invading-space-started-womenspreading-23837109/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manspreading> - Merriam-Webster’s online entry for “manspreading” defines the term as the act of a man sitting with legs spread wide apart in public seating so as to intrude on others’ space. The entry gives pronunciation, grammatical forms (verb, noun) and brief usage notes, noting first recorded usages around 2014. It situates the word in contemporary discourse about etiquette on transit, referencing campaigns and media coverage that popularised the term. The page summarises cultural reactions and includes short historical context for the word’s emergence into common English, presenting a neutral lexicographic explanation useful for understanding the label attached to the behaviour today.
3. <https://blog.oup.com/2015/12/manspreading-word-origins/> - The Oxford University Press blog post traces the rise of the word “manspreading”, linking its rapid adoption to public debate and transit campaigns, especially New York’s MTA initiative circa December 2014. It explains how the term met lexicographic criteria for inclusion through widespread evidence across media and social platforms, and illustrates how the MTA campaign’s artwork and messaging amplified public attention without explicitly using the neologism. The post analyses corpus data showing a spike in usage after the campaign and how city-level efforts to discourage space-hogging helped the term enter mainstream English, offering linguistic context and examples from news outlets.
4. <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/january/new-campaign-encourages-customers-to-look-out-for-sexual-harassment-and-support-others-on-public-transport> - Transport for London’s press release outlines a campaign urging passengers to look out for and report sexual harassment on public transport. It defines sexual harassment to include rubbing, groping, leering, indecent acts and taking images without consent, and stresses there is no need to prove criminal intent to report an incident. The release describes a marketing campaign using posters and digital material across the network to raise awareness and encourage support, and notes TfL’s CCTV coverage and coordination with police. It emphasises passenger safety, guidance on reporting, and the aim of supporting victims while deterring abusive behaviour across the network.
5. <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/27367-most-women-have-been-sexually-harassed-london-publ> - YouGov’s analysis of survey data reports that a majority of women in London have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour while using public transport. The piece presents statistics: over half of women reported incidents such as deliberate pressing against them, staring at breasts, and groping; it notes the Tube as the most common location and reveals that few victims report incidents to police. The article outlines types of harassment experienced, maps prevalence across transport modes, and highlights low reporting rates. It provides context for public campaigns urging reporting and measures to improve passenger safety, highlighting the scale of the problem in London.
6. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119861807> - This SAGE journal article examines Twitter discourse around gendered neologisms including #manspreading. Analysing tweets, the authors show how the hashtag surfaces everyday accounts of men occupying space and how users debate intent, etiquette and gender politics. The paper identifies examples where users report deliberate manspreading and where others describe performing womanspreading in response, revealing strategic and performative aspects of space-taking. It discusses how online conversation reflects broader power dynamics and contested meanings, noting both support for victims and backlash claiming physiological or anti-male bias. The study situates manspreading within digital activism and everyday life.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40233435> - The BBC report covers Madrid’s 2017 initiative to discourage manspreading on buses and the metro, following an online petition led by Mujeres en Lucha. It describes the EMT’s installation of pictogram signs showing a seated man with legs akimbo and a red cross, intended to remind passengers to respect others’ space. The article notes the campaign’s partnership with the city’s equality department, public reaction on social media using #MadridSinManspreading, and international precedents such as New York’s anti-manspreading posters. It summarises the rationale emphasising civic behaviour and equality in shared spaces while acknowledging some public debate and criticism.