

# Road Safety for Women Driving Alone

By Johann Jonck

**W**omen are regarded in the insurance industry as "safer" drivers and less likely to be in a road accident. Even though all motorists need to be alert and cautious, female drivers unfortunately have to be even more vigilant in order to avoid falling prey to criminal acts such as hijacking, intimidation, sexual assault or worse. Our women drivers are still regarded as more vulnerable by most criminals. We would like to offer advice and a few precautions that could enhance the safety of all drivers - and especially our female drivers!

## Preparation/Anticipation And Prevention Of Dangerous Situations

Drivers should always consider the threats and possible worst case scenarios - and plan to avoid as many of these as possible. Precautions would include the following:

### Vehicle Maintenance

- A well-maintained car is less likely to break down - Keep your car in good mechanical condition and have it serviced regularly by a reputable garage.
- Have a safety check done before each long trip. Even better - learn how to change a tyre, jump-start the battery, or change a wiper blade. The more you empower yourself with basic maintenance tips, the less chances of you being the damsel in distress.
- Never run out of fuel. Get into the habit of filling when the tank's half empty rather than waiting for the warning light.
- Get faults diagnosed and fixed promptly rather than waiting for them to get worse or hoping they'll go away.
- The vehicle handbook will provide important information on specification of oil, antifreeze to use if you have to top-up, etc
- Check tyre condition and pressure regularly.

Get damaged or excessively worn tyres renewed, and don't forget to check the spare.

### Plan Your Trip

- Plan your route if the journey is unfamiliar, and keep to well-lit main roads.
- Don't drive after dark into areas you don't know, if you can avoid it. It is easy to get lost, and become a target for criminal activity.
- Drive with a decent GPS for enhanced safety, and tell someone your route, and what time you expect to arrive.
- Always be ready in the event of a delay on the road - Ensure your cellular phone is fully charged - and invest in a car charger should you not already have one.
- Add emergency numbers to your phone - such as that of a motoring assistance company, car insurance, etc.

### Safety While Driving

While you drive you can enhance safety by focusing on the following:

- When stopped in traffic, leave enough space to pull out from behind the car you are following.
- Lock all doors and roll up the windows while you drive.
- Be especially cautious when you approach in-



tersections crowded with street vendors, newspaper sellers, beggars and street kids.

- Keep your valuables - laptop, handbag, mobile phone - out of sight. Even though there has been success in reducing hijackings, theft from vehicles in SA has increased!
- Drivers are often distracted at their window by a person only to be robbed by his companion on the other side.
- Should you wish to interact with someone alongside the vehicle open the window only a few centimetres to talk.
- NEVER give lifts to strangers / hitchhikers.
- Beware of anyone who signals that there is something wrong with your car, unless you know that they are right and it is dangerous to drive on.
- If you suspect that you are being followed, drive on to the nearest police station or busy place to get help.
- Sound the horn in potentially dangerous situations.
- Avoid distractions while driving - Keep the volume of your car radio at a reasonable level so you are aware of your surroundings and, tempting as it may be to check phone messages or update Facebook and Twitter while in traffic, your phone should be off every time you turn on the ignition.
- Driver distractions will leave you vulnerable to hijackers and smash-and-grab thugs who could use the element of surprise to creep up on you.
- Avoid engaging with strangers on the road - Women attract attention simply by being women drivers. No matter what type of car you drive, just for being a woman some freak may try to engage with you on the road.
- Avoid strangers trying to get your attention - just drive on, or turn at the next intersection.
- In the event of an incident of road rage, don't get into a verbal exchange, just take the high road and ignore the person.

## In Case Of Emergency

We can unfortunately not predict every emergency situation - and there is often little we can do to avoid them. What should we do during an emergency?

## Engine Failure

- It helps to have an emergency kit, snacks and water with you in the vehicle at all times. A coat, sensible shoes, blanket, torch, money and cellular phone may well be the best items to provide comfort in an emergency situation.
- Should your vehicle break down, pull over, turn the fourway flashers [hazard lights] on and call for emergency assistance.
- If someone offers to help, stay in your car and roll down the window only a few centimetres - just enough to tell the person that help is on the way, or to ask them to make the phone call if you do not have a phone.
- If someone tries to get into your car, attract attention by sounding your horn.
- Never accept a ride with someone you don't know. Unfortunately, we live in a country with a history of abuse towards women. No matter how friendly the help may seem, you need to stay in your vehicle until help arrives.
- Never follow a stranger who offers to help you find your way on an unfamiliar road or street. Wait in your vehicle and ask for directions.
- If you have a flat tyre in a dark or dangerous location, drive slowly to the nearest service station or public place. Even if you ruin the tyre, you will not have risked your life.
- On fast flowing highways it is safer to retreat and park up the bank, or behind a barrier rather than wait in the car where you would be exposed to danger from passing vehicles. If you do feel at risk from another person, return to your vehicle by the left-hand side and lock all doors. Leave the vehicle again and get back behind the barrier as soon as you feel the danger has passed.
- If your car is rammed from behind and the hit seems to be deliberate, stay in the car with the doors locked. Wait for the police to arrive.
- Do not assume that an unmarked vehicle with flashing lights is a police car. Keep on driving slowly until you can pull over in a well-lit area such as a fuel station. Park as close as you can to the entrance of the kiosk or a fuel pump and hoot to attract attention.
- Should you be followed by genuine police in an actual police vehicle, open your window only a



- fraction, just enough to be able to speak to them when they approach you and ask to see their police IDs.

### Noticing That You Are Followed

- Should you notice a vehicle following you closely, turn into a different road than the one you would normally take, but take note of road signs and landmarks so that you remain aware of your surroundings.
- Should the other vehicle turn into the same road, take a few more twists and turns. If the other vehicle continues to stick with you, it would be safe to assume you are being followed and may be the target of foul play.
- Do not stop or allow the other driver to pull up beside you, or try to out-drive them.
- Drive to the nearest police station - but if it is too far or you don't know where it is, drive to the nearest fuel station or convenience centre. In an emergency there is indeed strength in numbers!

### Parking And Safety In Parking Areas

Our female drivers should pay close attention to safety when parking their vehicles in the street or at the mall. These car parks are often a haven for criminals to prey on innocent and vulnerable victims:

- Always park in a central, well-lit place, preferably where there are attendants on duty or people passing by.
- Note which floor and area you have parked in, and have your keys ready when you return.
- Try to park so that you will approach the driver's side of the car when you return. You won't be surprised by someone who is crouching by the door.
- Hold your keys in your hand as you approach your parked car. Don't wait until you reach the car to search for them in your purse. Experts say you're most vulnerable when you are getting into or out of your car.
- If there is a large vehicle or suspicious looking car parked next to yours, or even if you feel uneasy about approaching your vehicle, rather find a security guard or car guard to walk you



- to yours.
- If no one is available, look for a nearby couple or group of people and either ask for an escort or simply blend in with them should they be walking in the direction of your vehicle.
- When approaching your vehicle, regardless of where you have parked it, always walk around it to check for any irregularities.
- Wait until you're close to the car before unlocking it, and if the car design allows it, unlock the driver's door only.
- Avoid conversations on the cellular phone as you return to the car as this will only distract you.
- Do not fiddle with your handbag and do not lean too far into the boot.
- Some security experts even advise women with long hair to tie it back for a clearer, all-round vision.
- Position your body and trolley in a manner which would give you an advantage over a potential attacker.
- Check the back seat before getting into the car, even if you left it with the doors locked.
- Be particularly vigilant with regard to your wheels, as often criminals place sharp objects either behind or in front of your tyres in an attempt to puncture them, or when placing goods into your boot.
- If you park on the street always choose a busy, well-lit place.