

Why won't women give me a seat on the bus?

PERHAPS past experience should have taught me otherwise, but as I boarded the packed bus yesterday I was sure I would be offered a seat.

After all, with just over a month to go until my due date — and with a stomach the size of a watermelon — I couldn't be mistaken for being anything other than heavily pregnant.

Yet nobody so much as looked me in the eye, let alone stood up. Instead, they carried on laughing with their friends, staring out of the window or fiddling with their smart phones. After a couple of minutes, a woman — my age and a mother, too, judging by the buggy in front of her — did talk to me. But not to help. 'You'd better watch your bag,' she said coldly. 'It's getting in my way.'

Had she asked politely, I would have

At eight months pregnant, ANTONIA HOYLE has been horrified by the unchivalrous behaviour of her own sex

apologised. But she showed not a shred of compassion for my third trimester fatigue. 'You could ask me nicely,' I replied. 'There's no need to be rude.'

With a shrug, she turned back to her female friend.

I wish I could say this kind of rudeness is unusual. Infuriatingly, it's not. And

the worst culprits? Women. Strangely, notions of sisterhood seem to disappear when one of you is pregnant.

Those you might expect to be most supportive — namely females who have been through the ordeal themselves — are very often the least helpful. I eyed the woman's buggy and shuffled away from her.

Swallowing my annoyance, I spotted a free seat next to a kinder-looking middle-aged woman. I asked her if I could take it. But she looked at me with blank disinterest. 'I'm saving the seat for a friend,' she said brusquely. I was incredulous. 'But I'm eight months pregnant,' I said.

She finally moved over, but not before the rest of the bus had gone quiet. I felt too humiliated to speak and, despite being 34, did something better befitting of my two-year-old daughter and started to cry. Ashamed of my tears, I got off at the next stop and walked — well, waddled — to my meeting.

It was only after a couple of hours had passed that my embarrassment morphed into mounting anger. Pregnancy is not, as popular myth would have it, a romantic adventure full of gentle foetal flutters and burgeoning curves.

Pregnant women suffer heartburn, haemorrhoids, acid reflux and acne. We develop gum disease, our bladders are squeezed to smithereens and we rarely manage more than an hour of uninterrupted sleep at a time when our unborn baby squirms inside us.

Physically exhausted and hormonally fragile, we often feel depressed, afraid, vulnerable to the point of childishness and so sensitive that even the simplest of rebuffs can reduce us to tears.

So yes, a seat on a bus might be nice, but so would a modicum of sympathy from, at the very least, other women. And yesterday wasn't the first time I have been treated shoddily by my own sex. A couple of weeks ago, a young mother with a buggy barged past me, ordering me to watch where I was going as our shoulders bumped.

Shortly before that, I was struggling to carry my two-year-old daughter up some steps to the train station when a couple of 30-something women waltzed merrily past, without even thinking to interrupt their conversation to ask whether I would like some help.

My friend Laura, meanwhile, was eight months pregnant when she was sent flying by a fellow commuter on her way to work. Instead of apologising or helping her up, the woman told her to, 'f*** off b****'. Station staff called



Picture: MIKE LAWN

Bumpy ride: Antonia had to fight for a seat on the bus

an ambulance and she was so left so shaken that she started her maternity leave early.

'I still wonder if she felt any guilt,' says Laura. 'I honestly can't imagine knocking a pregnant woman over and not even stopping.'

Another friend, Claire, due any day, adds: 'Men are more willing to give up seats on packed Tube trains. Women, especially older ones, stare outright at my massive bump for a few seconds then go straight back to their magazine or book or simply close their eyes.'

She's right. Most men, these days, are more chivalrous than ever. They leap out of their seats as soon as a woman who looks like she's had so much as a second helping of pudding get on, they're so concerned about being perceived as neanderthals. My husband goes one step further and refuses to sit down on public transport at all.

But women don't feel under such pressure. Of course, I've encountered plenty who have been polite over the course of my two pregnancies. But why are many more so rude? Perhaps in part our own experience of pregnancy and motherhood robs us of empathy. We become so embroiled in the relentless struggle of child-rearing that we develop compas-

sion fatigue for others going through it after us.

Or we become smug and unkind, as new mother Kate believes is the case.

'When I was pregnant my neighbour asked if I was expecting twins,' she says. 'When I said no she said, "some people gain more weight than others". Women can be jealous and judgmental. Motherhood is increasingly child-centric and as a result has become more competitive.'

Then there are those who think any type of baby talk is beneath them. I remember wincing with hurt during my first pregnancy when one woman I met dismissed my plans for my baby's birth as 'boring.'

Perhaps there is also an element of jealousy, too. For all my moaning, I know I am fortunate enough to have been able to conceive in the first place when plenty of others who want children can't.

My presence could serve as a painful reminder to those who long to be pregnant. It is a sobering thought, and one I try to remind myself of when I feel snubbed by my own sex.

Nonetheless, surely it is time we learned some solidarity. Before I walked off the bus yesterday, the woman who objected to my handbag being in her way muttered in my direction: 'Your problem isn't with me. It's because people don't give up their seats to pregnant women any more.'

Well, that certainly didn't help. But I hope she too felt a twinge of regret.

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