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Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE August 2015

## Original citation & hyperlink:

Osmond, J. and Woodcock, A. (2015) 'Are our streets safe enough for female users? How everyday harassment affects mobility' In: S. Sharples, S. Shorrocks and P. Waterson (Eds). *Contemporary Ergonomics and Human Factors 2015: Proceedings of the International Conference on Ergonomics & Human Factors 2015, Daventry, Northamptonshire, UK, 13-16 April 2015* (pp. 495-502.), London: Taylor & Francis, <http://www.crcnetbase.com/doi/abs/10.1201/b18293-87>

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# **ARE OUR STREETS SAFE ENOUGH FOR FEMALE USERS? HOW EVERYDAY HARASSMENT AFFECTS MOBILITY**

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This paper reports on the harassment women in a UK city face as they go about their everyday lives. It is argued that such experiences are not only traumatic, but have a long term effect on women's sense of worth and on their mobility patterns. Looking at the transport system as a whole as required by new mobility paradigms and whole journey experiences, this may be seen as a perpetuating, deep-rooted system failure leading to inequality and reductions in inclusivity. After having summarised the results, the participants' suggestions are put forward as solutions to address this issue.

## **Introduction**

Woodcock, Lenard and Walsh (2003) conducted a study on the safety and security of women drivers and their passengers, part of which looked at the harassment of women drivers. One of the responses contained a 'thank you' for enabling the women's voices to be heard. This paper is a companion piece, examining women's experiences of harassment as travellers in the public realm.

Street harassment represents perhaps the most common and frequent type of sexual harassment encountered by women. However, little research has been conducted into it, and it is often dismissed as a trivial and natural fact of life that women must tolerate. Bowman (1993) defines its characteristics as 1) the targets of harassment are female; 2) the harassers are male; 3) the harassers are unacquainted with their targets; 4) the encounter is face to face; 5) the forum is a public one; 6) the content of the speech, if any, is not intended as public discourse. The remarks are aimed at an individual, though they may be loud enough to be overheard and they are objectively degrading, objectifying, humiliating and frequently threatening in nature. Davis (1994) defined

harassment as 'spirit murder', with a drip feed of harassment affecting women's life and liberty.

Street harassment is a way of silencing women. It inhibits dialogue and promotes sexual oppression. Although men may argue that it is harmless flirtation, Langelan (1993) pointed out that *'it is not only ineffective, but consistently counterproductive; women react with disgust, not desire, with fear, not fascination'* and *'women never really ignore harassment....they must deal with all the emotional repercussions of victimization; fear, humiliation, feelings of powerlessness, rage.'*

Thus, street harassment is an invasion of women's privacy, an intrusion into personal space which has a negative impact on women's self esteem.

Benard and Schlaffer (1984) commented on the way in which sexual harassment restricted women's mobility, with public spaces being the male prerogative, and women denied access to the streets, and enjoyment of public resources. Bowman (1993) termed this as a *'ghettoization to the private sphere of hearth and home'*.

Adopting a feminist, phenomenological approach Turkheimer (1997) argued that men are 'blind' to the pain women suffer. Many do not 'see' sexual harassment unless it is pointed out to them and they do not understand the effects of such harassment. The only way in which action can be taken on this is if information is shared, named and articulated.

This study is timely: if we are to achieve sustainability targets, the needs of different users have to be considered. There is an obvious (Maffi et al, 2014) gender gap in transport and mobility, e.g. women travel differently from men in relation to modes of transport, distance travelled, the daily number of trips and patterns and purposes of travel. They use public transport more and are more supportive of sustainability agendas. However there is still a lack of knowledge regarding gender and mobility and the experiences of women as travellers. This gap needs to be addressed if inclusive mobility is to become a reality

## **Methodology**

The results are based on 193 online surveys and 16 telephone interviews with women in and around the city in 2013. The respondents were recruited via a variety of local online networks. The prevalent age of respondents was 17-29 years. Just over 90% of the respondents lived, worked or were attending educational institutions in the city (Osmond 2013).

## **Results**

Overall, just over 60% of the sample had experienced some form of harassment over the last 12 months. This broke down as 40% having received unwanted

sexual comments, wolf whistling (32.8%), and groping (12.3%), and 20% some other form of harassment. Over half of the respondents ignored the incidents, 14% challenged it directly, and in just over 3% of the cases someone intervened.

The following results are presented as a reflection of the whole journey experience of women (i.e. from origin to destination). As such only the results pertinent to travel and use of public spaces have been included (i.e. work and school place harassment has not been included, neither have those cases which could not be specifically attributed to the public realm or transport). Bearing this in mind 14.2% of the incidents were on public transport and 52% on the street.

Asked how safe they felt on public transport or in the public realm, only 6% stated that they felt very safe, with 51.2% indicating that they felt fairly safe, 35% not very safe and 6.8 % not safe at all.

The following section looks at the incidents in more detail and the recommendations suggested by the respondents.

#### *Examples of incidents in the last 12 months*

Over 75 separate incidents were reported, most of which occurred in the street, e.g. near bars and nightclubs, on deserted roads or coming home from work, while women were walking, jogging, with children. The perpetrators were single men, men in groups, on bikes, in cars or on public transport. The incidents related to:

1. Unwanted physical contact (sexual and physical assaults, hair stroking of children, bottom slapping, being pelted with bottles/eggs, forced into cars).
2. Nonverbal behaviours including exposure of genitals, and sexual gestures, being followed (on foot and in car) and having movements blocked or copied, being 'accompanied', kerb crawling, being leered and beeped at.
3. Verbal behaviour included being sworn at by pedestrians, cyclists and motorists, wolf whistles, being subjected to crude, sexual and patronising comments, propositions and being forced to engage in unwanted (sexual) conversation.

All of these form part of the everyday experience of being a female traveller. They are neither novel nor astounding. What is astounding is that such behaviour is tolerated and almost to be expected regardless of the damage it does:

*'I was walking to a friend's house and a man walked passed me, waited until I was a few steps away and whistled and stated making crude comments at me'*

*'...on a bus I was made to feel intimidated by two males sitting behind me wolf whistling, calling me sexy and asking me to talk to them - 'at least now we have something sexy to look at' was one comment. After ignoring them I became a 'stuck up slag' and when I got off the bus they were discussing the way my jeans made by bum look'*

*'Earlier in the year I had to change my route to work as a man was making me uncomfortable by staring at me as I stepped up on to the bus each morning, and I was informed by another passenger that he had ducked down to look up my skirt'*

*'...walked past a group of middle aged men, one muttered cunt under his breath. The others laughed.'*

*Walking to the bus stop feeling low - someone shouted 'cheer up love it will never happen' then 'give us a smile' then 'fuck off I was only trying to be friendly'. It is not my duty to look cheerful and smile for men'*

#### *Location of incidents*

The location and time of incidents varied (outside bars, walking in the street, cycling, waiting outside work, in city arcades, in taxis) with one woman commenting *'hundreds of incidents, too many to articulate, this is the reality of day to day life'*. The duration of the incidents might be short (one off comment), persistent – does not stop until the woman is able to escape (forced to listen to lewd comments, or conversation), repeated (e.g. on commuter journeys) and prolonged (e.g. being followed home over 20 miles).

#### *Actions of respondents*

The actions of respondents revealed their lack of empowerment and victimisation. For example, on being subjected to day-time harassment outside a bar, one respondent commented that she did not go into the bar because she was frightened he would follow her and *'ultimately, my main fear is that perhaps, even with bouncers on the door at the time, I wouldn't have felt capable and sure enough of my position in the situation to ask them.'*

*'...the sad truth is that your only option is to ignore it, put up with it and internalise the self loathing that doing this brings with it'*

Clearly the nature of the harassment and the reaction of others to the situations makes the women feel guilty. They are too pretty, dressed wrongly, or are in a place where such behaviour is expected. If they react aggressively, they become the aggressor or are seen as unable to take a joke. Mostly, women chose to ignore it because they were afraid of an escalation, e.g. *'I just tried not to react in any way to avoid further engagement, in the hope they would stop'* and *'I had a combination of shock and of fear of what would happen if I challenged it. Spent the whole of the next day coming up with responses in my head.'*

Many women chose to carry on walking, putting distance between themselves and their assailants, an act which might instead led to more danger, *'ran away – ended up having to run across the ring road due to there being nowhere else to go – risking safety even more.'* One woman said she *'walked away fast and hoped the children wouldn't notice the bad language'* and *'I ignore it, because I worry that if I challenge it the situation may escalate, especially if I have children with me, or I fear for their safety'*.

Those who witness harassment rarely confront or apologise for the behaviour of the perpetrator. They sometimes attribute blame on the victim, ignore it or exploit the situation,' *one time after being harassed I sat down at a bus stop to cry and another man came along, asked if I was ok, and then stole my phone*'.

### *Perceptions of safety*

From the results of the survey it would seem that women travelling alone or with children have experienced harassment at levels which significantly affect their mobility. *'It has almost become a part of life that us as women have to accept and put up with it as it is not tackled'*. They feel unsafe when they are alone, especially at dusk or night time, near groups of men, in public spaces and car parks, in taxis, in deserted precincts, in underpasses and poorly lit areas.

The effects on mobility are marked in comments such as *'I think I'm constantly waiting for someone to follow me, shout at me, engage me in conversation; 'I drive whenever I can as I hate being on my own in the streets'; 'I actually feel safer when running because I am on the move and clearly engaging in an activity (which I probably naively feel protects me from more attention)'; 'I just hate walking anywhere on my own...am constantly waiting for someone to follow me and sexually demean me in some way.'* and *'I am always on guard whenever I am out and about on my own'*.

The impact on mobility patterns is clear. *'I would not travel on a bus after 6pm'; 'commonplace for me to bolster my safety by not going to lonely places, by using public transport at night rather than return to a car park'; 'walking down the centre of my own street at night, and not going out alone at night' and 'always aware of my surroundings and not to put myself in a vulnerable position'*.

Although often overlooked, the quality of the public realm was considered important. Most frequently mentioned was lighting, dark subways and car parks. Other items mentioned included the physical fabric of neighbourhoods - litter, cars parked randomly, poorly maintained roads and pavements and poorly maintained properties.

### *Recommendations*

Over half of the respondents mentioned better lighting in either dark areas, in specific places, near bus stops or car parks. Increasing police or community warden presence and visibility was mentioned by over a quarter of respondents, especially at night, with additional comments around the need for sexual harassment to be treated more seriously, and to increase police powers moving to a zero tolerance of antisocial behaviour. This was accompanied by calls for better treatment of victims, better conviction rates and raising the awareness of support and increasing the number of support centres.

With regards to transport, respondents were able to specify locations where more lighting, patrols and traffic restrictions were needed and specific bus routes which had regular incidents of 'domestic violence, teenage violence, marijuana

smoking'. Many of the comments pointed to a need for cultural change and education:

*'Until society's attitudes change I don't think there's anything that can be done to make us feel safe. I'm getting really tired of being told as a woman it's not safe for me to walk alone especially at night: why not tell men it's not okay to treat us the way they do? It angers me that society has the ability to make women feel like victims just because of our gender'.*

Thomson (1994) discusses the need for transport operators to highlight harassment, as women form significant users of public transport reflected by 43% of female participants in a recent study stating that they feel vulnerable on public transport (Mason 2014). Thus administering a system to report harassment and publicizing anti-harassment regulations may create more public awareness and education. A similar approach was adopted in Medellin Colombia, to promote thoughtful travel behaviour on the new Metrocable (Atkinson et al, 2013). Additionally, the US captive audience legislation (where people are not able to remove themselves from a situation) could be used to uphold women's rights and freedom to travel in safety.

At the time of writing, there is little evidence that UK transport operators are specifically addressing the issues identified in this paper. However, there have been police-led moves to address unwanted sexual behaviour in two particular cities. In London, there is Project Guardian: the police are working closely with Transport for London to help reduce unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport (British Transport Police 2014); and in the West Midlands there is Project Empower, which is training public transport staff to spot any incidents and support passengers to report. This initiative is backed up with an on-board and in-station marketing campaign (West Midlands Police 2014). To date Project Empower 'has investigated nearly 100 allegations and made 26 arrests; 11 of whom have now been convicted whilst several others are awaiting trial'. (West Midlands Police, 2015)

Although any attempt to address unwanted sexual behaviour on public transport is to be welcomed, the focus at the moment seems to be on policing behaviour, rather than designing public transport systems with passenger safety in mind. The findings of this study are reflected in recommendations produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which published the findings of an inquiry into harassment of disabled people on public transport. It is therefore recommended that all public transport operators both undertake a review of their existing services and include – at the very least - the following issues in any new transport initiatives (EHRC 2013):

- Transport designers should routinely take into account a diversity of users when considering design of vehicles
- Transport providers should identify ways to design out potential for conflict in new fleet and transport infrastructure design. For example, they should

review their vehicles and waiting areas to ensure that they have adequate lighting, seating and staffing

- Public transport operators should develop reciprocal reporting arrangements between providers so that people can report harassment experienced at stops, stations and on transport to whichever operator they encounter. They should also develop systems to allow repeat perpetrators to be refused entry to each other's vehicles (similar to those already used by licensed premises).
- Regular equality training should be provided for frontline staff on handling harassment and clear guidance to staff on routes to take when reporting an incident. This should be included as part of core training, before transport staff work with the public.
- A wide range of groups should be involved in public transport policy development and transport providers should work in partnership with criminal justice agencies to reduce risk on and around transport provision.
- Data on high risk areas and subsequent actions to reduce risk should be collated. Based on this data they should provide adequate protection where known high risks exist, in the same way as other provision is made, for example, around football matches.

## Conclusions

Harassment in streets and on/around public transport is almost so commonplace as to be unnoticeable. Woodcock (2012) has previously argued that the whole journey experience is 'other' than the sum of its parts, and that the experience, from planning to arrival at destination should be the focus of attention, as depicted in the H-S model (2012b). While it has been contended that the experiences of the longest journey have the greatest effect on perceived quality (Susilo and Cats, 2014), evidence presented here may support a contrary view - that there is a threshold level at which experiences may be so unpleasant, even on short parts of a journey, that they not only bias perception but change mobility patterns. Therefore a microlevel analysis of the whole journey experience is needed. Such an analysis is again in line with the H-S model, which in its external layers looks at what influence external and cultural factors (in this case the objectification of women) have on person/transport interaction as exhibited through social interactions in the personal sector of the model.

This paper has clearly presented evidence of the everyday harassment women have to contend with when they are going to and from work, the shops or leisure activities. The harassment takes place in the public realm, on transport, whether women are walking, exercising or with their children. Both young and older women are targeted, with additional abuse levelled at older women who should be 'grateful' for the attention. Abuse can range from wolf whistling to serious sexual assault and molestation in public places, where women should be safe.



The sense of outrage the authors feel is immense. Transport policy abounds with schemes to encourage greater use of active and public forms of transport; technology providers are quick to develop apps to report crime, to track journeys, yet little investment is placed where it is needed - in providing heightened police presence, better lighting, more regular services, more serious regard towards the nature and effects of this harassment and in education.

Harassment and perceived safety affects women's mobility patterns at planning, mode, time and route choice levels. Women incur additional direct/indirect costs associated with unsafe streets and poor system design in which they are truly third class citizens. We are left asking two questions 1) why would any women support a system where she is left feeling wounded and degraded; 2) why, with all the investment and hype surrounding smart, safe and inclusive transport is so little attention being placed on tackling inherent system inequalities.

It may be concluded that the commonplace harassment of women on streets is yet another symptom of the gender inequality in transport provision. The complexity of women's trips (trip chaining) has and continues to be ignored in many national surveys (e.g. National Household Survey in UK), and those conducted by transport authorities and operators. Despite the lack of research and support for the multimodal journeys that women take (e.g. when balancing multiple jobs, social and childcare duties), and the harassment that women face, it is still the expectation that women will play a vital and leading role in promoting and using sustainable and active forms of travel (Maffi et al, op cit). Without steps to guarantee their safety and security this hope will not be realised.

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