



World Multidisciplinary Civil Engineering-Architecture-Urban Planning Symposium 2016,
WMCAUS 2016

Fear of Crime in Public Spaces: From the View of Women Living in Cities

Oksan Tandogan^a, Bige Simsek Ilhan^{b,*}

^a *Namik Kemal University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture, Department of Architecture, Tekirdağ, Turkey*

^b *Amasya University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Urban Design and Landscape Architecture, Amasya, Turkey*

Abstract

This paper relates to “fear of crime” in public open spaces from the point of women living in cities. Fear of crime, in general terms, can be described as a feeling of “fear” and “insecurity” derived from a feeling of a person who senses his/her personal security to be under the threat. This fear of crime is a fact which has a considerable impact of the daily lives of urban dwellers directly or indirectly by causing urban open spaces such as public parks, squares, plazas, streets not be used; causing routes preferred to travel between working places and dwelling places be changed; and causing roads and streets chosen for commerce be altered. According to the scientific researches, it has been detected that elders and women are more exposed to fear of crime in cities. Consequently, women have to prefer to stay closed and safeguarded places and to avoid urban streets, parks, plazas, public transportation vehicles and areas, especially in the evenings; they feel insecure while walking on the streets and even at their homes; they restrict the right to freedom of movement of their children in the city; and they have to take measures in public open spaces for the reason of this anxiety. This situation restrains the personal involvements of women in public life of the city.

Discussing the reasons for fear of crime in public open spaces, in this paper, it is aimed to focus this fact from the point of women. To conclude, it is examined the reasons and degrees of fear of crime; measures taken due to this fact; and handicaps which restrains the personal involvements of women in public life of the city.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of WMCAUS 2016

Keywords: fear of crime, women in the city, public life, public open spaces;

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-358-250-0017; fax: +0-358-250-0047.
E-mail address: bigesimsek@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Maslow [1] argues that humans have a set of inborn needs that motivates their behaviours. As one of these basic needs, the safety needs comes right after psychological ones are relatively satisfied. In the absence of the safety needs as we see in the absence of psychological needs, this basic need entirely dominates and motivates behaviours and turns the individual into a mechanism looking for security by using his/her full capacity. Therefore, it is not possible for humans to move the next set of needs once such a basic need as safety are not met since insecure person only wants to fight for safety [2]. If safety needs are not met properly, then fear comes to forefront. The Dictionary of the Turkish Language Association defines the word “fear” as a sense of anxiety, distress, suffer, danger, hazard triggered in response to threat or perceived risk of threat. Psychologically, the dictionary defines the word “fear” as signs of symptoms (joy, paleness, dry mouth, cardiac, respiratory acceleration and etc.) induced against real and expected danger and deep sorrow or an emotion occurred as a result of more complex physiological changes [3].

As many writers recognized, fear of crime is an inadequately theorized concept [4, 5, 6, 7]. Ward and his fellows [8] define fear of crime as a sense of security and/or feelings of vulnerability. Sacco [9] defines fear of crime as a form of psychological disorder reducing quality of life, restricting access to social and cultural activities, impairing social interaction within community.

Defined as a sense of insecurity as well, the fear of crime also is defined as “emotional reaction characterized by a sense of danger and anxiety generated by crime or symbols associated with crime” [6, 5, 10, 11]. Although closely related concepts, fear of crime is independent of crime [12] and many researches assert that fear of crime has become a major social and political problem, perhaps bigger than crime itself [13, 14].

With devastating impact on life quality of an individual, fear of crime, as a social problem, have many adverse effects on individual, society, economy and social cohesion. Such negative impacts on individuals as withdrawing, being introverted and social alienation are observed [12]. On the other hand, it has also negative influences on individuals such as anxiety, stress, insecurity, incompatibility, alienation and even psychological disorders [15]. Damaging social peace and shared sense of trust within community, the fear of crime reduces human relation, weaken and severe ties [12]. It could impose limitations on people’s daily routine [16]. People being afraid of crime do not often go outside and they tend to stop their communications with other people [17].

Moreover, fear of crime also affects the liveability and viability of the city [18] and negatively impacts on everyday life of city residents [19]. Fear of crime is widely accepted as a phenomenon and it leads to direct and indirect negative outcomes. Fewer people use streets; public spaces (park, squares etc.) are deserted; city services may not be used by the people who need them; stores in downtown centres may lose customers; and employers have a more limited pool/market of employees [18, 19]. This situation paves the way for deserted or abandoned urban spaces and city dwellers become dissatisfied [19].

Dark subways, long alleyways, deserted areas, poorly-lit streets, empty parks and dense woodland [20], along with silent-isolated streets, subways and park areas [21], are defined as urban spaces where fear of crime is highly perceived.

On the other hand, there is a negative correlation between fear of crime and victimization. Numerous studies have statistically revealed that women are less victimized than men and older people have less chance of being victimized than young people [13, 22]. However, women and elderly are more fearful compared to young people and men [23].

Women often report levels of fear of crime that are two to three times higher than men’s [24]. Due to their fears and safety anxiety, women and elderly take more precautionary behaviour and spend more time in safer places rather than public spaces and in return, they have less chance of being victimized. On the other hand, as men and young people have less fear of crime, they take less precautionary behaviours against crime and they spend more time outdoors and are more likely victim of crime [13, 25, 26].

Although current findings show that women admit to more fear of crime, specific researches on the women’s fear of crime are very limited. In fact, there is a great need to explore underlying factors and circumstances related to fear of crime among females to overcome it.

This study focuses on women’s fear of crime in urban open spaces. Throughout the study, we try to examine the following aspects of women living in different cities having different social, economic and cultural features:

- the scope of the fear of crime among women
- underlying factors / circumstances in fear of crime
- whether women’s fear of crime change their behaviours in urban space and restrict their lives

- precautionary behaviours taken by women due to fear of crime

For this purpose, an online survey has been conducted. Based on the results of this survey, underlying factors related to fear of crime and existing barriers to women's participation to public life in urban open spaces have been addressed.

2. Women, fear of crime, and their precautionary behaviours in public spaces

Fear of crime is correlated with individuals' education level, income level, race, age, duration of residence, sense of belonging to the place of residence, and most of all with their gender [27]. However, gender is one of the most salient individual characteristics that impacts fear of crime [6, 24]. According to current studies, women are more fearful of crime than men [28, 29, 30]. It has been found that although men have more chance of being victimized [24], women often report levels of fear of crime that are two to three times higher than men's [31, 32, 33]. Women have been shown to have lower victimization risks for all crimes except rape and sexual assault [34]. Women's rape and sexual assault rates are ten times higher men's [6, 31], and as a result of this elevated risk of victimization, they fear rape and sexual assault more than any other crime, including murder [31, 32, 33]. In short, fear of sexual violence is generally perceived as fear of crime among women.

There have been different opinions concerning the reason that women are more fearful of crime than men. Sutton and Farrall [35] explained this situation stating that men behave discreet about reporting their fears and they are more reluctant and hesitant about sharing their fears in line with their own taught truths. Truman [36] states that women's fears trace back to their childhood. Disturbing warnings beginning from their childhood increase fear of crime among women. On the other hand, some researchers outlined that women have exaggerated anxieties about falling victim to crime and it is illogical [37].

Yet, whatever the reason is, fear of crime imposes limitations upon women's daily lives. They feel unsafe walking around, even when they are alone at home [13]. For this reason, fear of crime keeps women off, especially after dark, and out of parks, plazas and public transit [18]. Due to the fear of crime, women constraints their social lives. Such factors as dressing style, arriving-departure hours to home, contacted people are repositioned by fears and in case of too much fear, and these factors are restricted [38]. It is a substantial barrier to participation in the public life of the city [18]. Besides, women's anxiety, particularly for their children, nurtures their fears more as well [39]. This prevents the participation of women to active life public in urban space [18].

As stated in the European Declaration of Urban Rights, crime prevention is beyond the necessity; it is a right for citizens of towns. According to the Declaration, citizens of European towns have various rights. The first one is the right of "security". In this sense, urban residences have the right to live in a secure and safe town, free, as far as possible, from crime, delinquency and aggression [40].

To create safer and peaceful spaces, it is necessary to overcome fear of crime perceived among individuals, along with reducing crime rates [38].

Women have a greater fear of crime in the society. Therefore, it is significant to focus the issue of fear of crime in women and to examine underlying factors related to fear of crime among women. Creating safe public places for women and transforming urban and social environment for everyone will be very effective at reducing fear of crime and crime rates.

3. The Methodology

The methodology of the research is based on a questionnaire/survey study. In this context, a survey study was delivered to female friend list of the authors of this paper via internet. 300 females in total were invited to fill out the questionnaire/survey through e-mail. Totally, 252 female responded the survey. According to each question, responses have been evaluated by their frequency distribution and percentage.

4. The Survey Questions

- Descriptive questions were asked to women in the first part of the survey.

- In the second part of the survey, questions were asked to explore whether the individual exposed to any crime before.
- In the third part of the survey, questions were asked to find out in which cases the individual feel fear of crime (sense of insecurity) in urban space.
- In the fourth part of the survey, questions were asked related to precautionary behaviours taken by individuals against fear of crime in urban space.

5. The Evaluation

5.1. The evaluation of the descriptive questions asked to the respondents

The most part of the participants responding the survey consists of women between the ages of 21 and 30 (29.9%) and 31 and 40 (25.9%). The higher percentage of survey respondents is graduates, post graduates or doctorate holders (% 79.4). Also the higher percentage of the surveyed women is employed (62.2%) or student (29.9%). Only eight percentages of the women responded to the survey are housewives.

5.2. The evaluation of the questions related to crime or fear of crime

The higher percentage of the women (69.7%) responded to the current question exposed to a crime before (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents by their exposition to crime before.

Have you ever been exposed to any crime?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	69.7%	170
No	30.3%	74
	answered question	244
	skipped question	8

202 women among participants responded to this multiple-choice question asked to find out whether they exposed any crime before. According to women's responses, the most frequent crime exposed is verbal abuse of a stranger in urban space with 63,4%. The survey found that 47,5% of the surveyed women exposed to disturbing attention of a stranger in a urban space. Among all women, 36,1% exposed to physical abuse of a stranger in urban space, 33,7% was followed in street, 19,8 % exposed to obscene, frightening telephone conversations and 12,9 % exposed to theft from the person. 5,9% subjected to sexual abuse and rape attempt (Table 2).

Table 2. Respondents by their types of crimes exposed.

If you exposed to a crime before what type of crime/crimes were they?		
You can mark multiple options.		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
My house was broken into.	29.2%	59
I was exposed to theft from the person in urban space.	12.9%	26
I was exposed to verbal abuse by a stranger.	63.4%	128
I was exposed to physical abuse by a stranger.	36.1%	73
I had a sexual abuse/ rape attempt.	5.9%	12
I exposed to obscene / frightening telephone conversations	19.8%	40
I was followed in the street.	33.7%	68
I was exposed to disturbing attention of a stranger.	47.5%	96
Other(Please specify)	8.9%	18
	answered question	202
	skipped question	50

While only 27.3 % of the respondents reported that they feel safe alone in urban space, 72.7% of the respondents reported that they feel unsafe in urban space (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents by their sense of security in urban space.

Do you feel safe alone in urban space (public open spaces , e.g., street, road, square)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, I feel safe.	27.3%	68
No, I feel unsafe.	72.7%	181
	answered question	249
	skipped question	3

250 out of 252 women in total responded the current multiple-choice question asked to find out spaces or cases that women most frequently perceived fear of crime. Women have the highest fear of crime in following spaces when they are alone during late night hours : isolated, quiet street and roads (88%), dark subways (85,6%), poorly-lit street or other places (81,2 %), empty parks and woods (70,4%), abandoned, desolated and poor buildings in urban spaces (67,6%), subway station and other public transits (57,6%), densely wooded areas (50%) and every kind of urban space where women dressed in mini-skirt and decollete (49,6%), urban spaces with no mixed use available after dark (41,6%) They feel sense of insecurity at the highest levels when they walk by graffiti spaces (8,4%) or overcrowded places (11,6%) during morning rush hours (Table 4).

Table 4. Fear of crime among respondents by spaces and cases.

Under which following cases do you have fear of crime (sense of insecurity)? (You can choose more than one option)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
While walking alone in deserted street and roads in the daytime	22.4%	56
While walking alone in deserted / quiet street and roads during late night hours.	88.0%	220
In overcrowded places during morning rush hours	11.6%	29
In abandoned / ruined /poor buildings in urban space	67.6%	169
In graffiti walls in urban spaces	8.4%	21
In vandalized areas	26.0%	65
In poorly-lit streets and places after dark,	81.2%	203
In places where no mixed used are available after dark, (for example: such places as Eminönü where heavily commercial use are available)	41.6%	104
In dark subways	85.6%	214
In empty parks and woods	70.4%	176
In densely wooded areas	49.6%	124
While I use subway station or public transit during late night hours	57.6%	144
While my child goes to school alone or with friends or play outside (e.g. on street or playground)	23.6%	59
When dressed in mini-skirt and decollete	44.8%	112
Other (Please specify)	2.0%	5
	answered question	250
	skipped question	2

240 out of 252 females in total responded the multiple choice question asked to explore precautions taken by women against spaces or cases which they perceive fear of crime. Female's responses to the precautionary behaviours against fear of crime in urban spaces are presented below by their marking frequency.

The survey found that 64,2% of the women never use dark and isolated subways alone; Among all women, 62,5 %never walk by abandoned/ desolated/poor buildings in urban space alone; 61,3% never walk by quiet street and roads alone during late night hours /after dark; 57,9% never walk by an empty park or woods alone ; 56,3% don't walk by poorly-lit streets and roads late at nights; 50% never dress in mini-skirt or décolleté if they are outside alone or feel sense of insecurity; 39,2 % never walk / go outside alone during late night hours and 37,9 %of the women are accompanied by a man if they go outside. While the rate of women carrying a weapon to protect themselves is 13,3%, 7,9% of the respondents attends or plans to attend a self-defence/ martial art course (Table 5).

Table 5. Respondents by their precautionary behaviours against fear of crime in urban space.

Do you take any precautions against fear of crime in urban space? If you take, what type /types of precautions you take? You can choose more than one option)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
I never walk / go outside alone during late night hours.	39.2%	94
I never walk by isolated street and roads alone during daytime.	10.8%	26
I never walk by quiet street and roads alone during late night hours /after dark.	61.3%	147
I never walk by overcrowded spaces during morning rush hours.	4.2%	10
I never walk by abandoned/ desolated/poor buildings in urban space alone.	62.5%	150
I never walk by graffiti or vandalized urban spaces alone.	16.3%	39
I never walk alone by spaces where no mixed use is available after dark.	27.5%	66
I never use dark and isolated subways alone.	64.2%	154
I never walk by an empty park or woods alone.	57.9%	139
I never walk by densely wooded areas.	47.5%	114
I don't use subway station or public transit during late night hours.	31.7%	76
I do not allow my children to play outside/ go to school without me.	17.5%	42
I attended/ am attending/ am planning to attend a self-defence / martial art course.	7.9%	19
I carry a weapon for self-defence.	13.3%	32
I don't walk by poorly-lit streets and roads late at nights.	56.3%	135
When I walk around alone / perceive sense of insecurity, I am not dressed in mini-skirt or décolleté.	50%	120
If I go outside at night, I am accompanied by a man.	37.9%	91
Other (Please specify).	6.3%	15
	answered question	240
	skipped question	12

While 97,6% of respondents reported that fear of crime restricts their freedom, only 2,4% of them said that it doesn't restrict their freedom (Table 6).

Table 6. The relation between fear of crime and freedoms in urban space by respondents' views.

Do you think that fear of crime (sense of insecurity) restrict women's freedom in urban space?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, it restricts.	97.6%	245
No, it doesn't restrict	2.4%	6
	answered question	251
	skipped question	1

In the final part of the survey, respondents are asked to report precautions that should be taken to feel themselves safe in urban space. In view of the women's responses, it is understood that the most necessary precaution that should be taken against fear of crime in urban space is to educate society, particularly male children, about gender mainstreaming. Other precautions that should be taken and are frequently reported are tighten the security measures, increase sentence length of crime penalties and improving lighting of public spaces (Table 7).

Table 7. Respondents by their views on precautionary behaviours against fear of crime.

Precautions	Frequency
Gender mainstreaming education	52
Tightening security measures	32
Sentence length of crime penalties should be increased	32
Improving lighting of public spaces.	27
Carrying a weapon for self-defence by women	4
Training women as well	6
Functionalizing streets and squares, to prosper social communication, bringing street and roads to life with activities, recovering blighted areas	6
Other (Please specify)	9

6. Conclusion

The survey findings revealed that fear of crime or sense of insecurity imposes limitations on women's participation to public life of the city. Women mostly perceive fear of crime after dark or when they are alone. The silent-isolated

streets, dark subways, poorly-lit streets, empty parks and dense woodland, desolated urban spaces, subway station and other public transits during late night hours are defined as urban spaces where fear of crime is highly perceived. The mentioned places are consistent with places identified in literature review [20, 21]. However, the date results showed that a non-negligible proportion of the women has fear of crime in urban space when they are dressed in mini-skirt and décolleté and are alone (44.8%).

According to the survey outcomes, women's fear of crime in urban space constrains their lives and affects their behaviours. In this respect, women take several precautions in urban spaces due to their fear of crime. They never use dark and isolated subways alone, never walk by desolated buildings in urban space alone, never walk by quiet street and roads alone during late night hours or after dark; never walk by an empty park or woods alone during daytime or after dark, never walk by poorly-lit streets or roads late at nights.

According to the respondents, they are not dressed in mini-skirt or décolleté if they are outside alone or feel sense of insecurity. Consequently, women limit their way of dressing because of their fear of crime. In short, women are not free in urban space.

Women reported that crime rates should be reduced to prevent fear of crime. Therefore, the first and foremost precaution is to educate society, particularly male children.

Crimes against women such as violence, harassment, rape, murder are not only witnessed in Turkey, women subject to these crimes all around the world. Yet, the rate of reported crimes against women such as rape, harassment, domestic violence in Turkey is increasing. For instance, according to Statistics Institute of Turkey (TÜİK), sexual assault crimes have climbed by 30 percent in the past 5 years [41]. The respondents argue that patriarchal mindset exists strongly in society, it should be changed to reduce fear of crime and crime rates and it is only possible through education.

Women also reported that the sentence length of crime penalties should be increased and security measures should be tightened in urban spaces.

In conclusion, women's fear of crime is greatest among the society Therefore, it is necessary to examine underlying factors of fear of crime among women and to carry out studies, implementations and initiatives to reduce fear of crime.

It is essential to set out principles regarding "security measures" that can be taken in the planning, design, monitoring phases of the public open space organization process. In this context, it is planning to adopt this "descriptive research" on measuring women's fear of crime in public spaces of cities as a framework for this kind of further researches of the authors and also other researches in the field.

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