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Travelling in Brussels and feeling unsafe: women's perceptions and strategies

Déplacements des femmes et sentiment d'insécurité à Bruxelles : perceptions et stratégies

Verplaatsingen van vrouwen en onveiligheidsgevoel in Brussel: percepties en strategieën

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Translator: Jane Corrigan



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Equality between men and women in terms of travelling in the city is far from being a reality. One aspect of this imbalance is linked to feeling unsafe, which affects women in particular. This article analyses the diversity as well as the scope of the feeling of being unsafe as experienced by women, in their ways of travelling in the city. This problem calls for a reflection on the interiorisation of the social differentiation between the sexes and the way in which it affects the relationship with one's surroundings, in particular in a context of anonymity specific to an urban environment. The study presented in this article has an exploratory character, and is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten women who live in Brussels.

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Introduction

1. Spatial and temporal mobility, made up of the travel involved in the activities of city dwellers, is considered as an essential element in order to take full advantage of the urban environment. This is why '[t]oday, the "right to the city" which Henri Lefebvre spoke of in 1968, is accompanied by the "right to mobility"' [Gibout, 2004]. For women, mobility cannot be dissociated from a feeling which is closely related to their presence in the public space: feeling unsafe, an essential element of their urban experience [Tacoli/Satterthwaite, 2013]. Feminist research conducted in the English-speaking world was the first to show that the personal fears of women had a limiting impact on their use of the public space in the city [Hanmer, 1987; Stanko, 1992]. In 2011, a study entitled '*Victimation et sentiment d'insécurité en Île-de-France*' (Victimhood and feeling unsafe in Île-de-France), highlighted the disparity between men and women with respect to feeling unsafe while using various means of transportation. According to this study, 43.4% of women are afraid in the underground, compared with 19.1% of men [IAU ÎdF, 2011]. The disparity between men and women with respect to this feeling is therefore obvious, and reveals the imbalanced relationships between the sexes [Condon *et al.*, 2005]. Taking note of this imbalance, on 29 March 2012, the Brussels Region adopted an order regarding the integration of gender in the policies of the Brussels-Capital Region, which also applied to urbanism and mobility [Brussels-Capital Region, 2012]. Given that this problem is still not very well known in Brussels, this article is aimed at contributing to a better understanding of women's use and experience of the urban space in Brussels, in terms of daily mobility.

1. An investigation of how women feel unsafe in Brussels

2. In a society where women are still associated with the domestic space and have marginal representation in political institutions, the female point of view is struggling to make itself heard, in particular in the area of mobility which 'is still very male', as underlined by Claudine Lienard, project coordinator at *Université des femmes* in Brussels [cit. in

Sirilma, 2011]. The study presented here aims to explore the gendered character of mobility, by highlighting the impact of feeling unsafe on the mobility practices of women.

3. Several studies have focused on the apparent gap between feeling unsafe and the 'true' insecurity of women. Already in 1992, Elizabeth Stanko noted that although the traditional studies on victimisation revealed that young men represent the group which is the most exposed to acts of violence in the public space, women express the fear of crime on average three times more than men [Stanko, 1992]. This gap leads us to question the connection between feeling unsafe and the female identity. It seems that feeling unsafe is the fruit of a complex process: it is both the consequence of actual aggression towards women which is often not included in statistics as they are not reported to the police, and the result of an interiorisation of a supposed vulnerability specific to women.

4. In any case, this subject has a direct impact on the quality of life of women in the city as the restrictions which affect them with respect to the use of the urban space 'have a significant influence on their independence and thus on their access to the public space' [Lieber, 2008]. Thus, according to a study conducted on the case of the city of Chicago [Yavuz, Walsh, 2010], fear constitutes the main reason why women refuse to use public transport. Closer to home, the report by the student Sofie Peeters, '*Femmes de la rue*' (Women in the street), documented in 2012 the verbal and gestural aggression faced by women every day, by walking with a hidden camera in the Anneessens neighbourhood of Brussels. This report allowed the public to become aware of the phenomenon of harassment in the street, which constitutes a particular type of aggression towards women. Acting as 'reminders' which suggest that more serious violence could follow, this type of aggression sends the signal to women that their presence is not accepted or respected in certain public places [Gardner, 1995; Stanko, 1992]. However, in particular in the current context of security policies implemented in the public space, it is important to underline that the question of feeling unsafe experienced by women does not boil down to a problem of 'security' which would require a 'security' intervention, as the proposal by a Brussels councillor to punish the perpetrators of

these acts with a fine might lead one to believe [RFI 01/08/2012]. The problem is not limited to a neighbourhood or a social group either. Harassment in the streets is instead part of a group of interactions in which both men and women present their gender identity deeply rooted in a society structured by the male/female dichotomy, with restrictive consequences for women. Feeling unsafe is more than a ban on benefiting freely from the public space, as it leads to a limitation of what is possible and to a multitude of limitations and eviction strategies [Kramer/Mischau, 1993; Condon *et al.*, 2005; Hanson, 2010]. While being mobile constitutes more than ever a condition for participating in social life, the question is raised as to the effect of these restrictions on the mobility potential of women, which Vincent Kaufmann refers to as motility [2001].

5. The study presented in this article has an exploratory character, as it deals with a problem which has not been formalised in the context of Brussels. It is based in particular on qualitative research derived from individual semi-structured interviews conducted with ten women who live and travel independently in Brussels. Unlike quantitative studies which analyse statistical correlations, qualitative studies are focused more on the 'underlying mechanisms of behaviour and [on] the stakeholders' interpretation of their own behaviour' [Alami *et al.*, 2009]. In this perspective, the choice of women interviewed is in keeping with a desire to diversify the profiles, in order to gather a range of accounts and at the same time bring to the foreground a possible similarity between women's stories. This sought after diversity involves age (the age varies between 23 and 56), country of origin (Belgium: 5, France: 2, Italy: 1, Turkey: 1, Romania: 1), profession (employed, job seeker, student, stay-at-home mother, etc.) and marital status and family situation (married or not, with or without children). The women were introduced to the study in the same way: they were informed of the overall subject of the research work (mobility of women and feeling unsafe in Brussels), its context (thesis for an advanced master's degree in urban and regional planning) and the fact that the interviews would be recorded, transcribed and rendered anonymous. The questions asked during the interviews dealt with the representations (the perception of elements which cause them to feel unsafe, the reactions and the meaning given

by the person interviewed) as well as the practices (travel, motives, means of transportation, etc.) of the women interviewed.

6. In order to investigate such a sensitive subject, the semi-structured interview seemed to be best adapted, considering that 'the expression of fears often requires a long preparation in order to free oneself' [Condon *et al.*, 2005]. This method of research runs the risk of introducing a 'study effect': the interviewer's intention – the search for information – may influence the person interviewed by directing, suggesting or amplifying certain answers. In an in-depth interview approach, this disadvantage is nevertheless more than offset by the subtle, nuanced and self-reflective character of answers provided by the people interviewed, aspects which cannot be obtained via standardised or roundabout methods. During the interviews, the respondents continued to question themselves about the very nature of this 'insecurity' which they were asked to speak about. Another methodological choice deserves to be justified: as our objective was to shed light on fear in the public space as a female experience, and not to describe all of the social manifestations of this feeling or the diversity of its sources, we interviewed women only. Consequently, in the framework of this work, we shall not give an opinion on the convergence or divergence of the female and male experiences of feeling unsafe, as a complete picture of this issue would involve an exploration of the male side. The conclusions drawn from the interviews thus constitute hypotheses which would require a more in-depth study.

7. This study does not intend to be exhaustive, but instead provides some insight into the impact of feeling unsafe on women's travel in Brussels and invites one to reflect on the connection between this feeling and their female social identity.

2. Travelling while feeling unsafe: drawing a geography of the city from a female perspective

8. Women feel unsafe at different levels and different degrees of 'intensity' when they travel. This feeling may, first of all, lead to a renunciation of mobility. Fear 'immobilises' them, in particular at certain hours, in certain places or when they are alone. Generally, these three aspects are connected; for example, in order to avoid a return trip at night and not give up an activity, some respondents take specific organisational measures in order to leave the journey until the next day, when daylight has returned: 'I have a friend who lives in the neighbourhood, and because it takes a long time to get home, I often ask if I can sleep at her place when there is a party' (Sarah, aged 23). Some women are against going on foot; even if going on foot would be conceivable, the evening often ends with the last underground or last bus: 'It's not that I avoid going for dinner at my friend's place, for example, but I always go home with the last underground. [...] [I]f I go on foot, I would have to go past the South Station, and I would never do that all alone' (Valentina, aged 32). Finding someone to accompany them is sometimes the indispensable condition in order to participate in an event or an activity: '[I]f I'm interested in a conference but it's at Anneessens or in an isolated area of the city, I don't go if I'm all alone' (Justine, aged 27). Such a limitation has a significant impact: it represents a loss of independence, at least at certain hours or in certain places, which may be compensated only by additional organisational efforts.

9. Next, women often travel via certain modes, in particular as pedestrians. Being a pedestrian makes one particularly sensitive and receptive to the physical environment, as the person is totally submerged in his or her environment due to his or her (relative) slowness and the absence of a protective structure. This makes women feel uncomfortable, and they want to go through the space as 'quickly' as possible: 'I think it's at the Central Station. I don't know if you have seen the long corridor when you enter the station and go towards the underground. I go through it very quickly' (Elena, aged 27). Speed therefore allows them to escape danger, in any case to get out of the frightening space more quickly. When the public space simply separates the point of departure and the point of destination, the objective is to get through it as

quickly as possible. The other possible activities and interactions are therefore no longer considered: 'I follow my route, and that's all. I'm not someone who looks around, because I'm careful about myself' (Cemre, aged 47). This is an example of 'passing by', the frequently observed habit whereby women go through public space quickly [Gardner, 1995]. As Raibaud concludes, women 'consume less public space' than men: they are 'in corridors', travelling simply from one point to another [Raibaud, cit. in Gresuard, 2014].

10. Unlike travelling on foot, the bicycle may be a refuge which allows one to 'regain freedom in the public space' (Anne, aged 30), to the extent that it allows one to be 'on the move at all times' (Sarah, aged 23). The means of transportation which is the most reassuring and comfortable is still, however, the car: 'I get in my car and close the door. And I am safe. At least I think I am' (Françoise, aged 50). It provides a comfortable space, a bubble which allows one to escape the public space. Studies conducted in the United States on the use of the car, and in particular the 4x4, establish a connection between the popularity of this type of vehicle among women and the fear of crime [Lauer 2005]. Regardless of the type of car, this space is appreciated due to the fact that it allows one to 'cross' a hostile terrain – to remove oneself from society and thus gain something in terms of 'security' – rather than for its physical characteristics.

11. Finally, another obstacle encountered during the daily travels of women is the fact that they feel it is necessary to be strategic in their choice of journey, route and positioning in order to avoid inconveniences and potential dangers. Thus, the fear of certain places may lead women to avoid them by choosing one route rather than another, which involves what one of the respondents calls additional 'short trips': detours in order to avoid narrow streets or certain underground stations. Perhaps more intuitive than the choice of route, is the choice of positioning in the immediate space at the moment of travel. The interviews show that in a micro-space, women seek the proximity of certain elements, such as groups of people leaving the underground at the same time: 'I don't seek immediate proximity, but I like to keep them in sight, and therefore try to walk at their pace in order not to be too far away from them' (Françoise, aged 50). On the contrary, others avoid dreaded

places or people by walking around them, which may involve the subtle practice of moving to the other pavement. Guy Di Méo speaks of 'invisible walls' (an allusion to 'glass ceilings', the tacit and implicit obstacles preventing the hierarchical ascension of women in the world of work) which define the spaces accessible to women. Finally, being immobile while travelling does not prevent women from thinking about the most strategic and reassuring positioning in the space they are in; thus, during a bus journey, some women sit near the driver. In the underground at night, some women choose a position which allows them to monitor their surroundings: 'When I take the last underground at one o'clock in the morning, when there aren't many people on the platforms I try to be against the back of a carriage in order to see what is going on' (Judith, aged 27). Thus, the choice of journey, route and positioning is affected by feeling unsafe, creating a geography of urban travel specific to women.

12. The accounts reveal that the possibility to adapt one's behaviour to fears related to travel is highly dependent on the social skills of individuals, i.e. their acquired knowledge and their organisational capacities, such as how to plan their activities (search for information, ability to react, etc.), as well as their economic resources, which allow access to various modes of travel (with a pass, for example). An inequality of access to these economic and intellectual resources may be observed, which creates different types of 'motility', and also influences the degree to which women are affected and limited by feeling unsafe. Sarah, for example, feels reassured thanks to her 'Villo !' pass, as it allows her not to be 'dependent on public transport' and not to be 'condemned to go on foot'. She also depends on the applications on her mobile telephone to manage her travels, in particular at night, in order to make the most sensible choice: 'I have the STIB and 'Villo !' apps, and I spend my evening finding out when the last bus leaves or when the next one arrives, in order to plan my time. [...] I think that I have become addicted to these apps because they really help me to cope in the evening'. Before taking the underground, Justine does some research to find out which exit to take at her destination. Having access to a car seems to be an important advantage to offset the potentially limiting effect of feeling unsafe. Christine, aged 56, who states that she does not often feel unsafe, happens to be the respondent who travels 'espe-

cially by car'. In order to manage their daily mobility, some women take into consideration the feeling of being unsafe in their choice of place of residence. Fear therefore becomes a factor which influences their residential mobility: 'For example, when I'm looking for a flat to live in, I look at the address and think, "Did you see the street you'll have to take when you come home late in the evening?"' (Françoise, aged 50). Such reflections involve choosing one's place of residence based not only on the criterion of real estate prices, but also on that of a prior mapping of 'safe' travel. All of these women therefore make use of significant economic (purchase of a pass, a car, choice of residence, etc.) and intellectual resources (reading a map, searching for information on the internet, etc.), allowing them to broaden the scope of what is possible, which has been structurally affected by feeling unsafe.

13. Cemre, aged 47, has a very low level of education, being illiterate and having limited economic resources. She is the daughter of Turkish farmers and immigrated to Belgium at the age of 18, and is part of a disadvantaged social class. She also excludes categorically the possibility of going out after eight o'clock in the evening. Her female identity is interlinked with other parameters specific to a society torn by a multitude of hierarchical relationships, which shape Cemre's position in the urban space in Brussels as well as the differences between her motility and that of the women mentioned previously.

3. Various interactions and feelings in the urban space

14. While it is less visible at geographic level, the impact of feeling unsafe on the various interactions and feelings in the urban space is just as significant in the accounts gathered. Entering the public space while feeling unsafe means entering a territory which is considered as threatening, and in which one must not linger or attract attention. Thus, an important aspect which affects the way women travel is that of attitude and appearance. The clothes, the ways of walking, the gestures, the looks, etc., are considered as forms of communication which must convey a message to the surroundings, i.e. to move away or in any case to stay away.

15. These strategies involve concealing one's female identity, in particular by wearing 'neutral' clothing, i.e. the least feminine possible: 'Once again, I don't know if it protects me, but I wear the most neutral clothes possible so that they don't see whether I am a woman or a man' (Valentina, aged 32). These strategies are not necessarily seen as effective, but they do show that women have internalised what makes them vulnerable, i.e. their female identity. This vulnerability may also be offset by a display of strength and courage: 'have a determined look', 'appear to know where I am going even if it is not the case' (Judith, aged 27), 'show that I am going somewhere and that I should be left alone' (Anne, aged 30), 'have an angry and hard look' (Rika, aged 45), etc. The most important element is to avoid attracting the attention of someone of the male gender, which is an initial invitation to unwanted contact, by minimising the impact on one's surroundings and by appearing to be inaccessible. Let us underline the restricting character of these attitudes – this 'neutral look' – as one respondent calls it (Elena, aged 27). Looking hostile and cold, wearing a mask to discourage any possible contact, etc. are attitudes which therefore exclude possibly welcome contacts. Cemre expresses this in the most outspoken way: 'I never look at anyone. [...] I am very careful. I don't speak with just anyone. [...] I speak with no one.'

16. These attitudes towards others go hand in hand with these inner concerns – the ideas, thoughts and emotions which cause one to feel unsafe. They may be grouped into different frames of mind, typical of the experience of women who travel in the city. As an expression of the anticipation of imminent danger which they need to protect themselves from, the state of alert consists in being ready to react and to defend themselves at any moment, when an environment is perceived as threatening. Protecting themselves physically with elements of defence in these cases allows them to feel reassured and to be mentally prepared: 'When I feel uneasy, I take my keys and hold them between my fingers' (Rika, aged 46). The feeling that they must keep an eye on their environment at all times is part of this state of alert. The women interviewed say that they are on their guard, analysing the people coming towards them, listening to the echoing voices when they go through a passageway, or looking over their shoulder. Some of them speak explicitly of a 'fear', of feeling 'stressed', or of the suspiciousness they feel

at a certain moment or place during their journey. This feeling must be considered as a limitation in itself, as 'it is already a significant restriction to go out with a sense of fear' [Condon *et al.* 2005].

17. Some of the women interviewed did not spontaneously identify feeling uncomfortable – with respect to fear or to being addressed as women – as being an element of insecurity. This involves the anticipation of a forced interaction during which a woman would be unable to defend herself, due to a lack of confidence or knowledge of an appropriate reaction, as well as to a fear that the situation could get worse. If a woman responds in an active or aggressive way to a man's attempt to approach her, she is breaking a 'tacit agreement', which, according to Erving Goffman, connects men and women as part of the role of the sexes in their interactions in the public space. This contract applies to the game of gallantry, in which the man has the role of conquering the woman, as well as to the supposed non-aggressiveness of women, who are, in contrast, more sheltered from physical violence in the public space than male city dwellers. Women who dare to break these established rules risk causing a commonplace interaction – embarrassing and even humiliating, but under control – to become an unpredictable situation [Goffman 1977/2002]. It would appear that, due to a concern that this may happen, most of the women interviewed conform to the behaviour expected of them, i.e. to keep a low profile.

18. Faced with this feeling of powerlessness, another strategy observed is a form of passive firmness demonstrated by resistance, i.e. a determination not to be intimidated. Mobility therefore becomes a challenge in itself: refusing to let themselves be prevented from going out or to make a modal choice due to a fear of danger, certain women sometimes choose to do the opposite and travel despite being fully aware of the potential risks, asserting the principle of an equal right to mobility.

19. Be that as it may, the different states of mind of women when they travel are malicious and invisible obstacles to fully enjoying urban life: 'It is unpleasant, you know. I go out anyway because I don't want to limit myself. But sometimes I'm afraid when I go home' (Valentina, aged 32).

4. The reasons why women feel unsafe in an urban environment

20. Feeling unsafe results from the way women perceive the presence of men, particularly in the context of anonymity specific to an urban environment, as well as the social relationship between them.

4.1. Perception of the presence of men in an urban environment

21. From an anthropological point of view, urban anonymity contributes to feeling unsafe at two levels: that of the other, the unpredictable and uncontrollable unknown, and also that of oneself, one's own unknown person in an environment of anonymity, lacking in any protective connection. In his work entitled *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne*, Erving Goffman shows how – due to the difficulty of knowing the reality of those one sees in the city – everyone undertakes a 'decoding' of others, which consists in an analysis of the 'personal façade' and its different perceptible attributes [Goffman, 1973]. In this context of latent tensions which characterise the urban environment, the 'decoding activity' – which is specific to every city dweller – leads to an attempt to identify those who could be potential aggressors among all of the strangers one encounters, especially in the case of women. Not all profiles cause the same apprehensions, as certain types of presence are felt to be reassuring, and others, on the contrary, are felt to be frightening or stressful. The types of presence which are felt not to be very reassuring have one thing in common, i.e. their male identity. The public space is perceived and experienced in a very different way by the respondents according to whether it is occupied exclusively by men or whether there are women present. This worry is partly related to the fact that, unlike women, men are seen as potential sexual aggressors, with rape being a crime which terrifies women. Sociologist Kenneth F. Ferraro put forth the hypothesis that the fear of sex crimes is so deep among women that in the end it covers all areas of life, which Ferraro calls the 'shadow' effect [1996]: any aggression, in particular when it is perpetrated by a man, is perceived as a threat, as it risks transforming itself into this particularly serious form of violence. It is in this sense that men are threatening in their quality as males, and women are reassuring simply due to their presence, which reduces male domination in the public space.

4.2. The power of the idea of weakness: female vulnerability with respect to male aggressiveness

22. The accounts of the women interviewed bring out the fact that they are well aware of how their imagination feeds their fear: 'just imagining things', 'it's all in the head', 'it's just psychological', etc. The strategies presented as being reassuring are often rejected as useless, as their targets are presented as being purely fictitious. Feeling unsafe, which is at the origin of this behaviour, is therefore denounced as a purely psychological process. The justification of behaviour which is apparently 'irrational' or felt to be exaggerated, is considered by some to be a personal character trait: 'I'm stupid', 'I'm paranoid', 'I've always been like that', etc. Obviously, fear is not an individual character trait, but a shared experience. How can we explain the power of the idea of permanent danger with respect to men and the (assumed) incapability of women to defend themselves in the case of aggression? For Pierre Bourdieu, male domination and the way it is imposed and suffered, is the fruit of 'symbolic violence' resulting from communication regarding gender and generating a 'paradoxical submission' [Bourdieu, 1998]. Symbolic violence, unlike physical violence, is based on the 'recognition' by the dominated woman of her inferiority. This form of violence takes place in particular through 'instruments of knowledge' shared by both sexes, and determines how the dominator as well as the dominated think: how to consider oneself as well as the dominator. This process produces an acceptance by the dominated of her state of submission, which allows such a relationship to continue [Bourdieu, 1990]. As this study shows, male domination uses all of its strength in a 'process of dehistoricisation and naturalisation of gendered roles' [Rimbaud, 2013] after which women are perceived by others and by themselves as 'inherently' vulnerable. To link female vulnerability to a woman's body or to her 'nature', prevents a questioning of the social relationship which it expresses, and therefore contributes to prolonging the perception of women as the weaker and vulnerable sex. The power of the idea of female weakness stands out in the incapability of many women to think about and express the gendered character of their urban experiences. According to a study conducted in Bordeaux, a large part of women interviewed regarding improvements to be made in order to reduce the androcentric character of urban development were

not able to respond, accepting as it were their condition and denying the existing gender inequalities in the public space [Hesselle, 2013].

Possible answers with respect to the daily mobility of women in Brussels

23. The aim of this article was to show the various facets of how feeling unsafe affects the mobility behaviour of women. It illustrates that women's journeys depend on strategies of adaptation and eviction which they adopt and which constitute an obstacle to their free use of the city. Feeling unsafe becomes the expression of a feeling of an illegitimate presence, and is an illustration of the marginalised presence of women in the public space. Despite the methodological constraints related to the relatively limited number of women interviewed as part of this work, the accounts allow an awareness of a particular female experience of the urban space, which may be taken into consideration in the design and development of public space. They also show the relevance of a gendered point of view of the use of the city and prompt an investigation of this area of study in the Brussels context.

24. Faced with the problem of the insecurity of women and the unequal sharing of the public space between the sexes, many development programmes propose urbanistic answers. A study conducted in Toronto in 1989 on how women feel unsafe in more than 65 underground stations and bus stops, led those responsible to create the 'between two stops' service offered in the evening, allowing women to be closer to their destination.

25. In Belgium, the low number of women involved in planning and management, in particular in the area of mobility, is still flagrant. Methodologically, the 'exploratory steps' could constitute an interesting tool to understand the female perception of public space in view of integrating it in development proposals [SPP, 2006]. In Brussels for example, the Garance association conducts this type of field study and then distributes the many proposals gathered in order to make the public space more accommodating to women [Zeilinger/Chaumont, 2012]. 'Mobil2040', which is intended to be a 'prospective and multidisciplinary

study' on mobility in Brussels by 2040, denounces the received ideas regarding the dangerousness of the public space for women, while proposing development measures intended to make the public space favourable to shared use. Among these proposals is an organisation of mobility to offer services dedicated to women such as 'pink taxis' (driven by women) [Mobil2040, 2014].

26. These experiences indicate a growing consideration of the female point of view in the development of public space. The infrastructure or management measures must not, however, overshadow the fact that the feeling of being unsafe experienced by women basically results from the imbalanced social relationship between the sexes, which still structures our society today.

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