

WALK WITH WOMEN

GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY IN URBAN SPACES



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Segment of **“Activating the Night”** in collaboration with **Nocturno Collective**
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Women in colorful saris in the village of Agra, India
photo credit: bugphai, Freepik

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Foreword

Since humans first began to settle in communities, these places of work, life and pleasure have been shaped by the inherent gender bias in what we now refer to as urban design. Though it is not surprising that the male-dominated industry of urban design would yield gender-biased results, it was surprising to Leading Cities how little research on this challenge has been conducted—even now, in the 21st century.

I want to congratulate and applaud the efforts of Leading Cities' Research Fellows, Shagun Sethi and Juliana Velez-Duque. Their vision, execution, and conclusions pave the way forward for future generations to question the social norms of gender-based discrimination and oppression in even the most overlooked areas of our daily lives, like such simple issues as the lack of lighting in public spaces.

A community where approximately 50% or more of its population feels unsafe after sundown has tremendous ripple effects ranging from discrimination and personal well-being, to lost economic opportunity and social justice—which results in negative impacts for the entire community.

The ground-breaking impact of this long overdue study is anchored less in the results and more in the powerful validation that the results provide to common ways of thinking and our collective acceptance. This report gives us cause and purpose to challenge what has been accepted for too long.

It is our hope that this study serves as a catalyst for further research, discovery, and understanding of how we can better shape, grow, and design our cities to be more inclusive for all.

With hope and gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael Lake". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Michael Lake

President & CEO of Leading Cities

Leading Cities Mission

Drive resilience and sustainability for all
by unleashing the potential of the world's cities.

Introduction

In the process of city planning and urban design, safety is a key concern. However, today's understanding of what is considered safe and unsafe, is based on crime rates and statistics of violence. This report seeks to understand how people access cities and how perceptions of fear and safety influence behavior. Specifically, we look into the ways people from all genders perceive fear while accessing urban environments when walking through the city and how this can be affected by elements of urban design. Violence against women is an amorphous entity. Women are subject to different forms and types of abuse in their life and this abuse is not limited to either the public or the private sphere - it is prevalent in both. Violence against women refers to *“any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”*¹. However, aside from the actual cases of gender violence that may occur in cities, we are more interested in the psychological state of fear and alertness with which women operate in their daily lives as they navigate urban settings. We suspect this is the result of perceiving their vulnerability to specific types of violence, Violence Against Women (VAW).

This question becomes important for two reasons; firstly, it provides a new perspective into the city planning process, because it looks into perceptions of fear and feelings towards elements of urban design, helping planners understand the psychology of residents who are inhabiting the space. Second, sociologically, this paper seeks to understand the differences in psychological dispositions of men and women - how do men and women differ in their feelings of safety in urban spaces and does this affect their behavior patterns, or the way they access the city?

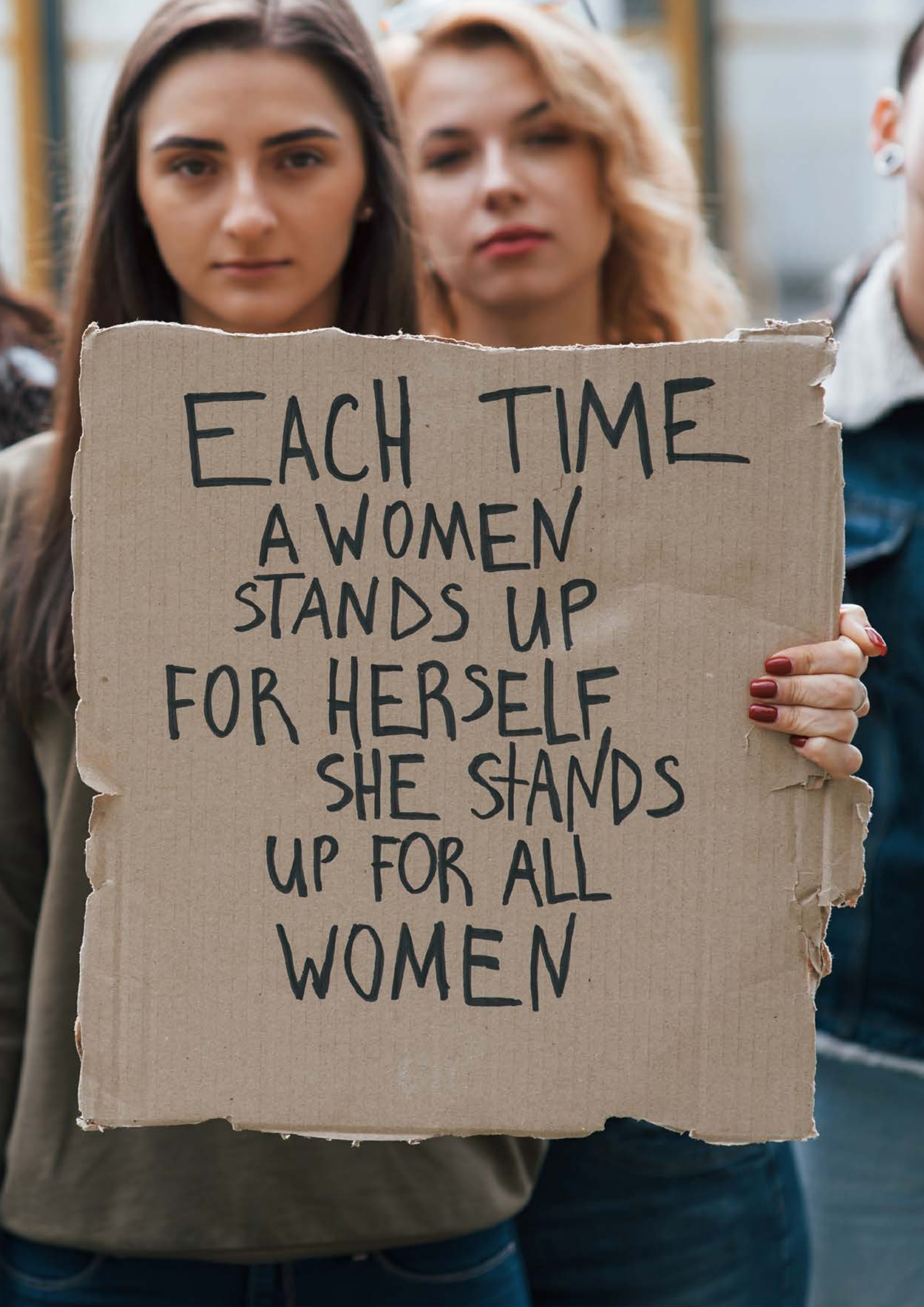
We start our research with the question ‘Which elements of urban design impact women’s perception of fear when accessing the city by walking? How do these elements correlate for men and women differently?’. We suspect that women are subject to more stress due to the fear for their safety and that specific elements of urban design can make them feel safe/unsafe. We also suspect that the lack of these elements in urban spaces restricts women’s access to the city, alienating them from the public space.

What is VAW (Violence Against Women)?

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life

¹ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “OHCHR | Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,” accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>.



A woman with long dark hair is holding a large, rectangular sign made of brown cardboard. The sign has a rough, torn edge. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. Behind her, another woman with blonde hair is partially visible, also looking forward. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting with other people.

EACH TIME
A WOMEN
STANDS UP
FOR HERSELF
SHE STANDS
UP FOR ALL
WOMEN

Background

Gendered Spaces

Globally, work and public spaces have historically been masculine, as such the interaction of women to and with these spaces has been restricted. Dating back to World War I, women were to only be concerned about marriage, family and children. At the time of World War II, women entered the workspace, only to provide flexible, cheap and adaptive labor, due to the vacuum created by men leaving the workforce to serve in the army². The World Bank's 'Labor force participation rate' (2019) shows that 47.7%³ of all women participate in the workforce while 74.7%⁴ of all men participate. There are just 33 women CEOs within all the 500 in the Fortune 500 companies list. Feminist geographers like McDowell argue that urban structure in capitalist societies reflects the construction of space into masculine centers of production and feminine suburbs of reproduction⁵.

Space does not have an independent agency. Its meaning or power is determined by the way groups of people organize their social, political, economic, and other interactions.

Space does not have an independent agency. Its meaning or power is determined by the way groups of people organize their social, political, economic, and other interactions. "Space is produced by those who use it every day; to the extent that spaces reflect social norms, they also embody gender relations"⁶. Public spaces and workspaces are therefore controlled by men, who have had access to them and the sole power of shaping them. Women then become invaders of this space and the lack of ownership to it restricts their access and agency and induces fear. In *Gendered Spaces*, Spain argues, "Spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created, and when they provide access to valued knowledge for men while reducing access to that knowledge for women, the organization of space may perpetuate status differences"⁷.

Urban Design. Cities and Safety

As aforementioned, cities have generally been masculine in nature; by virtue of construction and use. As a result, women are robbed of various opportunities and abilities to use cities, the way they please. Women's safety in the city is important to understand before and during the planning process. "The concept of women's safety grew out of this recognition that women have just as much right to go out and to use public spaces as men, and that their lives should not be restricted by fear or actual violence. It has been defined as involving 'strategies, practices and policies with the goal of

² Pat Hudson, "BBC - History - Women's Work," accessed March 1, 2020, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/womens_work_01.shtml.

³ "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) | Data," accessed March 2, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>.

⁴ "Labor Force Participation Rate, Male (% of Male Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate) | Data," accessed March 2, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.ZS?end=2019&start=1960&view=chart>.

⁵ L. McDowell, "Towards an Understanding of the Gender Division of Urban Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, January 3, 1983, 59–72, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d010059>.

⁶ Daphne Spain, "Gender and Urban Space," *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014): 582, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071913-043446>.

⁷ Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press., 1992), 3, <https://search.ebscohost-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=1531&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

reducing gender-based violence and women's fear or insecurity of violence"⁸. Urban design and city planning is hence inherently concerned with questions of safety, security and equality, "It emphasizes the need to work towards more equitable access to the opportunities cities can offer, regardless of age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, immigrant status, disability or any other factor, for all city dwellers, and it strongly reaffirms that solutions introduced by women to enhance safety will make cities safer for all"⁹. Women have the same rights as men to access and use the city, any restriction of this is a failure of planning and state functions. "Women's lack of safety is a serious obstacle to achieving gender equality. It curtails their mobility and ability to participate fully and freely as citizens in their communities. Women's 'right to the city' includes the right to live free from violence and fear, in more equitable, democratic and inclusive cities"¹⁰.

Perception of Safety

"Although fear of rape has not been a central topic in feminist literature on rape, two themes appear repeatedly in that literature. One is that fear of rape is a universal condition of women (e.g., Griffin, 1971; Brownmiller, 1975:15; see generally, Burt and Estep, 1981). In Griffin's words, "... rape and the fear of rape are a daily part of every woman's consciousness" (1971:27). The second theme is that fear of rape significantly limits the freedom of women by placing constraints on their activities, even to the point of producing passivity or dependence. These constraints take the form of precautionary or avoidance behaviors that preclude opportunities (e.g., staying home after dark) or require adjustments in lifestyle (e.g., walking a longer - but safer - route to work). Quoting again from Griffin, "The fear of rape keeps women off the streets at night. Keeps women at home. Keep women passive and modest for fear they be thought provocative."¹¹. Fear and the subsequent psychological stress of physical safety, hampers and alters the ways in which people conduct their daily lives and operate in society. Women are vulnerable populations, for centuries they have been treated as second class citizens and their bodies have been used to fulfil purposes for men - sexually, functionally and psychologically. Crimes against women - sexual and violent are common in both public and private spheres. When women operate with this fear of violence and sexual assault, the ways in which they access cities and public spaces, changes. "Researchers have consistently found that women, far more so than men, are afraid of cities (Gordon et al. 1981, Miethe 1995, Pain 2001, Riger et al. 1978, Schafer et al. 2006, Stanko 1995). When women avoid certain places or modify their daily activities out of fear, they are forfeiting opportunities to engage in political, economic, or social pursuits"¹². In her work, Spain says that the greatest inhibition to women's mobility is their fear of sexual assault, and rape by a stranger ranks at the top of that fear hierarchy. Feminist scholars have argued that rape is the ultimate expression

⁸ Carolyn Whitzman et al., *Building Inclusive Cities: Women's Safety and the Right to the City* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 4, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=1143752>.

⁹ Whitzman et al., 1.

¹⁰ Whitzman et al., 6.

¹¹ Mark Warr, "Fear of Rape among Urban Women," *Social Problems* 32, no. 3 (1985): 239, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800684>.

¹² Spain, "Gender and Urban Space," 588.

of patriarchy. It is the way all men control all women, by actually carrying out the deed or threatening to"¹³. Here, we infer that rape or the fear of it, is the ultimate expression of patriarchy and control over women's bodies. Women's movements are controlled by patriarchal expressions of power, their access and agency is restricted by the control (by men) over their minds and bodies.

Research Question

Which elements of urban design impact women's perception of fear when accessing the city by walking? How do these elements correlate to men and women differently?

Objectives

- Identify the ways in which women perceive fear, and how this perception differs for men
- Detect instances that women believe are most likely to happen to them when walking alone, what they are most afraid of. How do these answers differ for men?
- Determine if urban design influences the perception of safety when accessing the city. Is this gendered?
- Recognize the behaviors women engage in to keep themselves safe when accessing the city. How does this differ for men?

Method

For the purpose of this research, we conducted an online survey of people of all ages, genders and demographics because we wanted to understand what cities mean to people, how they perceive them and access them. We used the data collected to determine trends between people and perception(s) of fear, and how this perception differs by gender. We wanted to understand how women look at and feel cities.

We made an online survey for multiple reasons. Firstly, it protects privacy. By using tools, which do not require physical and personal interaction, online surveys allow people to express themselves without feeling judged and fearful about the interviewer's opinion. We did not ask for people's personal data (name, address, emails and phone numbers) to ensure anonymity. Secondly, online surveys are convenient, the survey should take no more than 5-10 minutes for people to complete and they should be able to do it from anywhere, at any time. Thirdly, they are cheap and inexpensive. "A mail survey was chosen because it is relatively inexpensive, and because fear of victimization appears to be a primary cause of non-response in urban surveys using personal interviews"¹⁴.

¹³ Spain, 588.

¹⁴ Warr, 1985, .239

Lastly, we wanted to reach a global audience. Our research aims to analyze a global problem and find global, holistic and inclusive solutions, Evans and Mathur say that “The internet will [be a] valued tool to obtain information from respondents living in different parts of a country or around the world, simply and at a low cost”¹⁵, and the online survey allowed us to reach people from across the world, in less than three weeks and at no cost.

Finally, in order to cushion our research with policy recommendations, we conducted a global, free-of-cost, open to all webinar on the 30th of March, in collaboration with Leading Cities. After presenting our research and findings, we conducted breakout sessions, to discuss people’s experiences in cities, and inform recommendations with real world examples and contexts. We also collaborated with Noctorno, a Colombian collective working specifically on making the night time more accessible for all, to frame recommendations on how we can make the night time safe.

Data sheet for the survey

The survey was conducted using google forms¹⁶, over a period of 17 days. It was completed by 298 people from 12 different countries, and it comprised 13 questions. The following message was displayed at the beginning of the survey to inform responders about the purpose of the survey, and how the collected data would be managed:

“The following survey seeks to explore the perception of safety when walking around the city alone and how it relates to certain elements of public spaces. The data collected for this survey will be completely anonymous and used only for research purposes and statistical analysis”.

Even though this research project is centered around how women perceive fear in the city and how that correlates with urban design, we didn’t want to mention this in the disclosure, to prevent biased and prompted answers.

¹⁵ Evans, Joel, and Anil Mathur. “The Value of Online Surveys.” Internet Research, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662240510590360>.

¹⁶ The questionnaire design for the survey can be found in the appendix of this report.

Results

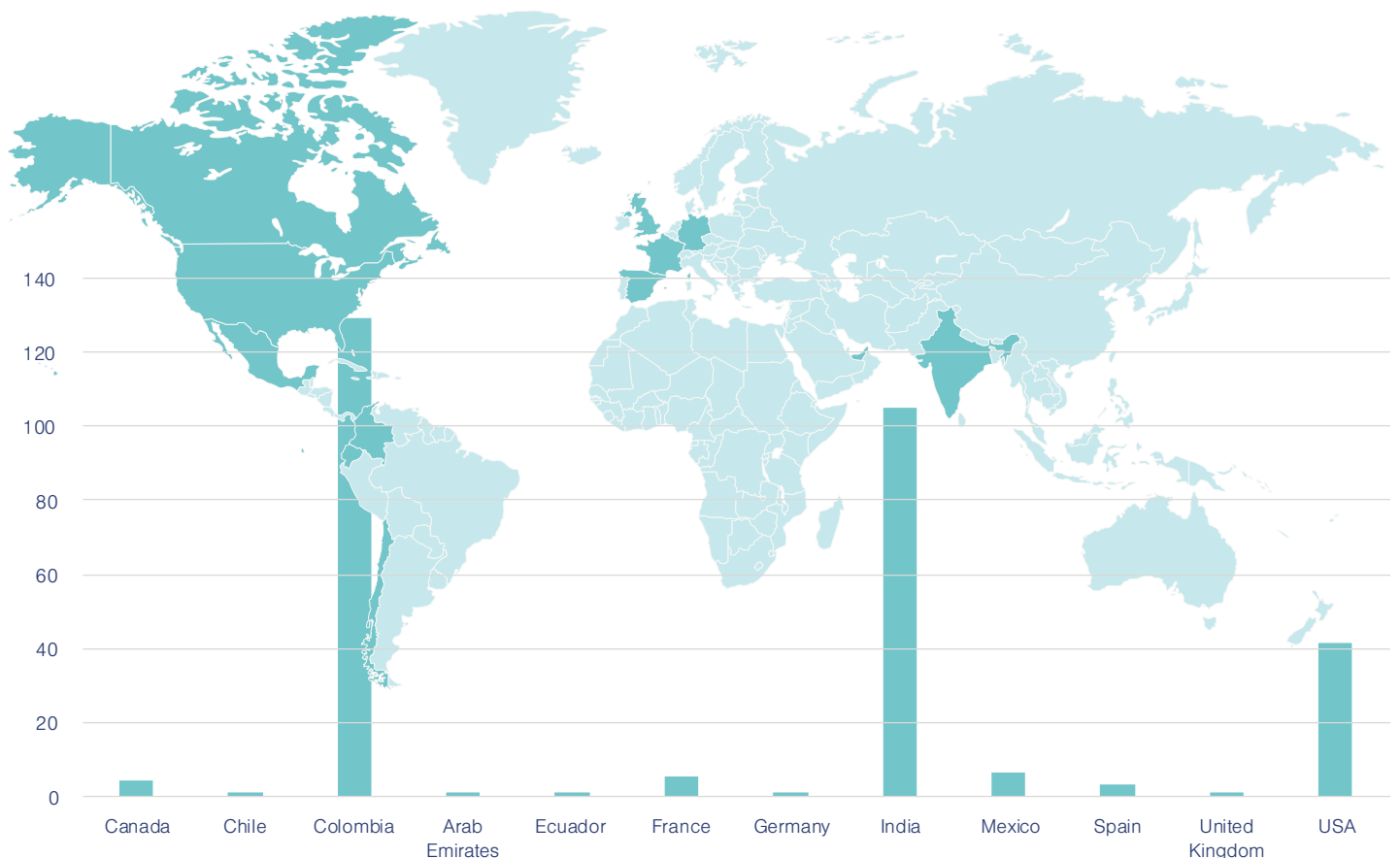
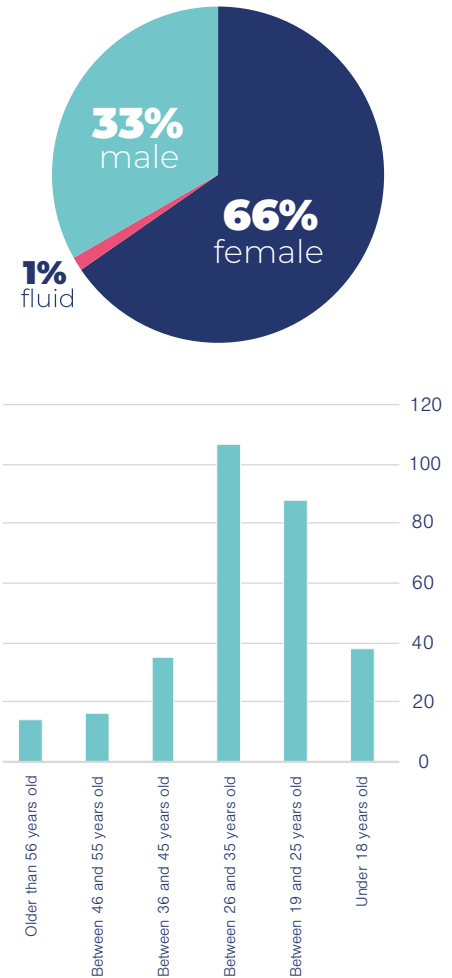
The following chapter illustrates the executive summary of the results we got for each of the variables identified on the questionnaire design.



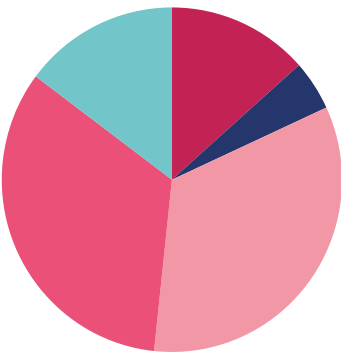
Houses on the hills of a comuna in Medellín, Colombia
Photo credit: Boggy Freepik

Demographics

- **Variable 'Gender':** Out of the 298 people who answered the survey, 66% identified themselves as female, 33% as male and 1% identified as fluid gender. Even though we had 5 proforma answers for the "gender" variable, we weren't able to get a sample on each of the gender identity options.
- **Variable 'Age':** The majority of responders are between the ages of 19 and 35 years old. Responders between 36 and 45 years old were represented equivalently as those under 18 years old. The smallest representation comes from people above 46 years old, which can be explained by the fact that the survey was online.
- **Variable 'Country / City':** The survey collected information from people across 12 different countries, with majority of the sample represented in Colombia (43%), India (35%) and the United States (14%).
- **Variable 'Frequency of engaging in the behavior studied through the survey':** Almost 60% of the people who responded to the survey said they walk in the city more than once a day, followed by approximately 30% who answered that they walked in the city approximately once per week. This means that 90% of the responders engage frequently in the behavior studied through the survey.



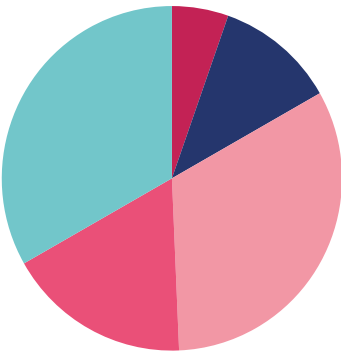
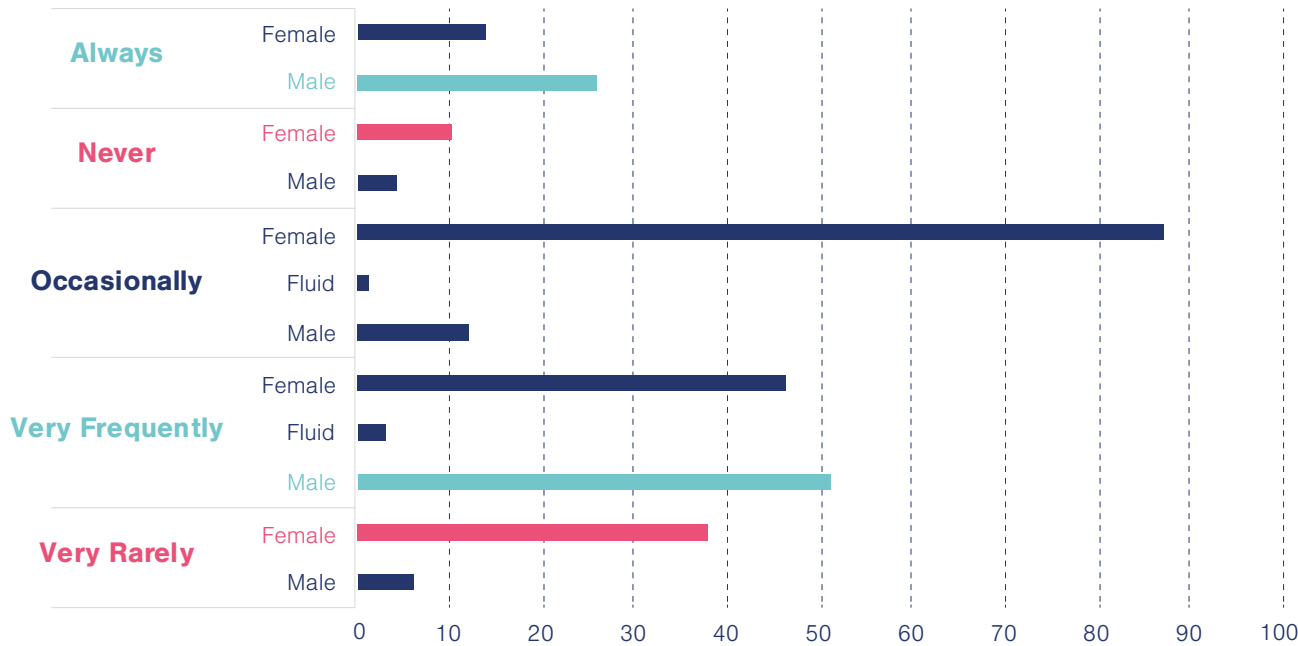
Perception



- Always
- Very Frequently
- Occasionally
- Very Rarely
- Never

Variable ‘Perception of Safety’: Almost 50% of the responders said they felt safe walking alone (always and very frequently), whereas roughly 20% didn’t feel safe walking alone (never and very rarely). This might lead to indicate that the majority of the sample has the perception of being safe when walking alone. However, when the answer is examined by gender, the results attest to a different reality. Women predominantly feel unsafe when walking alone with the answers ‘never’ and ‘very rarely’ towering above men. These responses account for 25% of the surveyed women. When considering the ‘occasionally’ response, approximately 70% of the surveyed women are accounted for in the lower spectrum of the safety perception of scale. Men on the other side, consider themselves usually safe with almost 80% of the men responding to always feeling safe (26%) or feeling safe very frequently (52%). This indicates that the majority of the surveyed men have a positive perception of safety in the complete spectrum of the question.

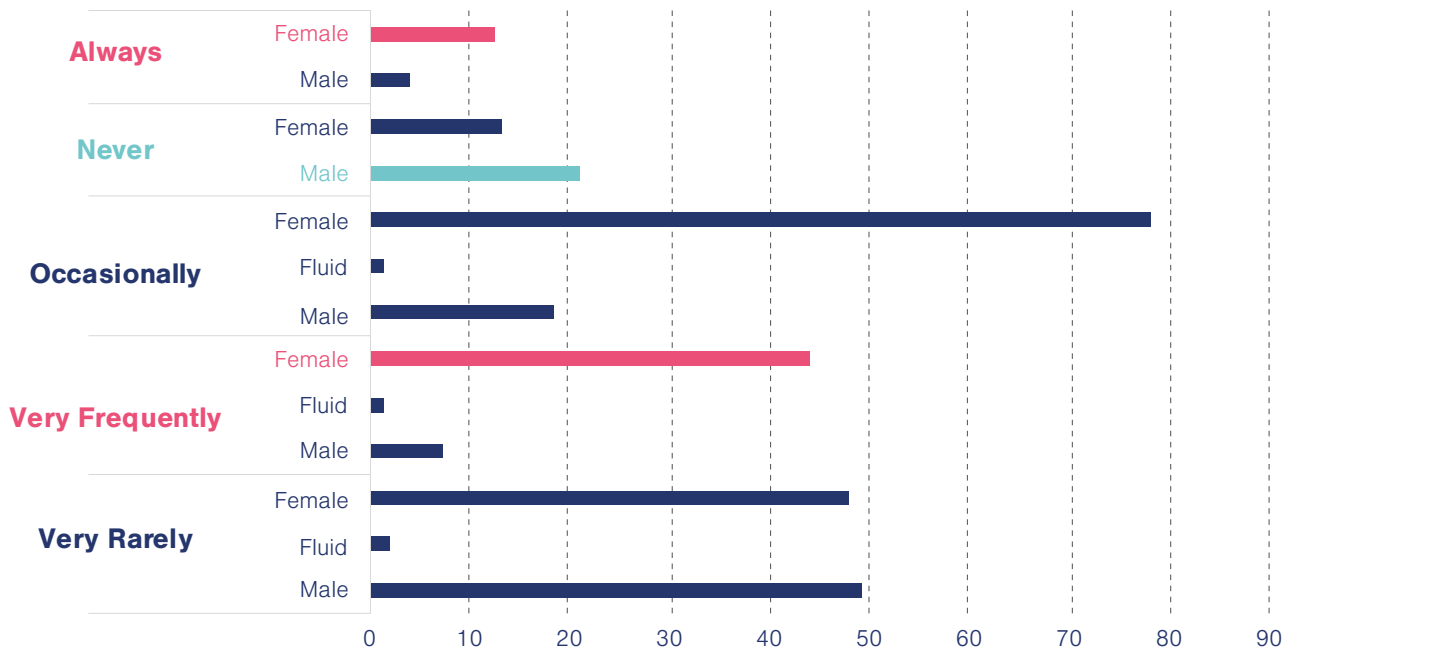
Gendered answer to the question “Do you feel safe walking alone?”



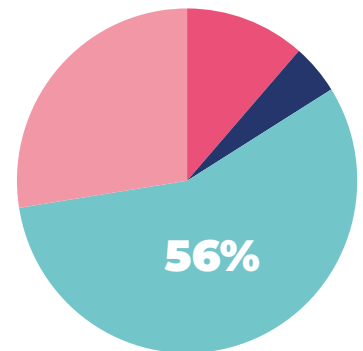
- Always
- Very Frequently
- Occasionally
- Very Rarely
- Never

Variable ‘Restriction of access to the city because of fear’: Most of the respondents of the survey ‘occasionally’ (33%) or ‘very rarely’ (33%) avoid walking in the city because of fear. 17% of the respondents expressed they avoid walking in the city ‘very frequently’, and only 5% said they ‘always’ avoid walking in the city because of fear. When considering the gendered answers to the same question, women again display more restrictions in access to the city because of fear, with almost 30% of the surveyed women answering they ‘always’ (6%) avoid walking in the city because of fear, or ‘very frequently’ (23%). When considering the ‘occasionally’ category, almost 70% of the surveyed women are accounted for in the lower spectrum of access to the city. When looking into men’s responses, around 70% of the surveyed men said they ‘never’ (21%) or ‘very rarely’ (49%) avoided walking in the city because of fear. This again shows how men perceive to be safer in the city, thus engaging in walking far more often than their female counterparts.

Gendered answer to the question “Do you avoid walking in the city because of fear?”

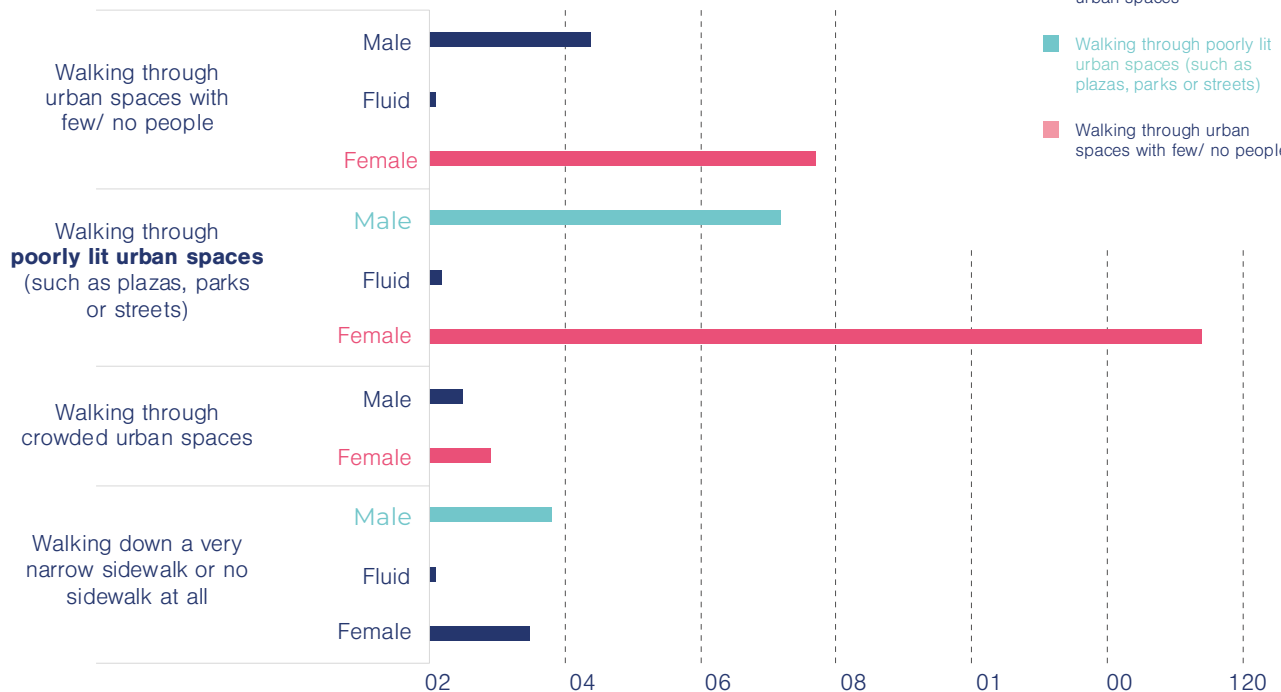


Variable ‘Perception of unsafety’ triggers associated with urban design’: Over half of respondents said walking through poorly lit urban spaces made them feel the most unsafe, making this the most important category followed by spaces with few or no people (28%). Only 5% found walking through crowded urban spaces as the situation which made them feel most unsafe. The rank for these situations was the same for both men and women, with poorly lit urban spaces coming first, followed by spaces with few or no people, narrow sidewalks and walking through crowded urban spaces, in that order. Finally, ‘walking down a very narrow sidewalk or no sidewalk at all’ was the only category that got more responses from men than women.



- Walking down a very narrow sidewalk or no sidewalk at all
- Walking through crowded urban spaces
- Walking through poorly lit urban spaces (such as plazas, parks or streets)
- Walking through urban spaces with few/ no people

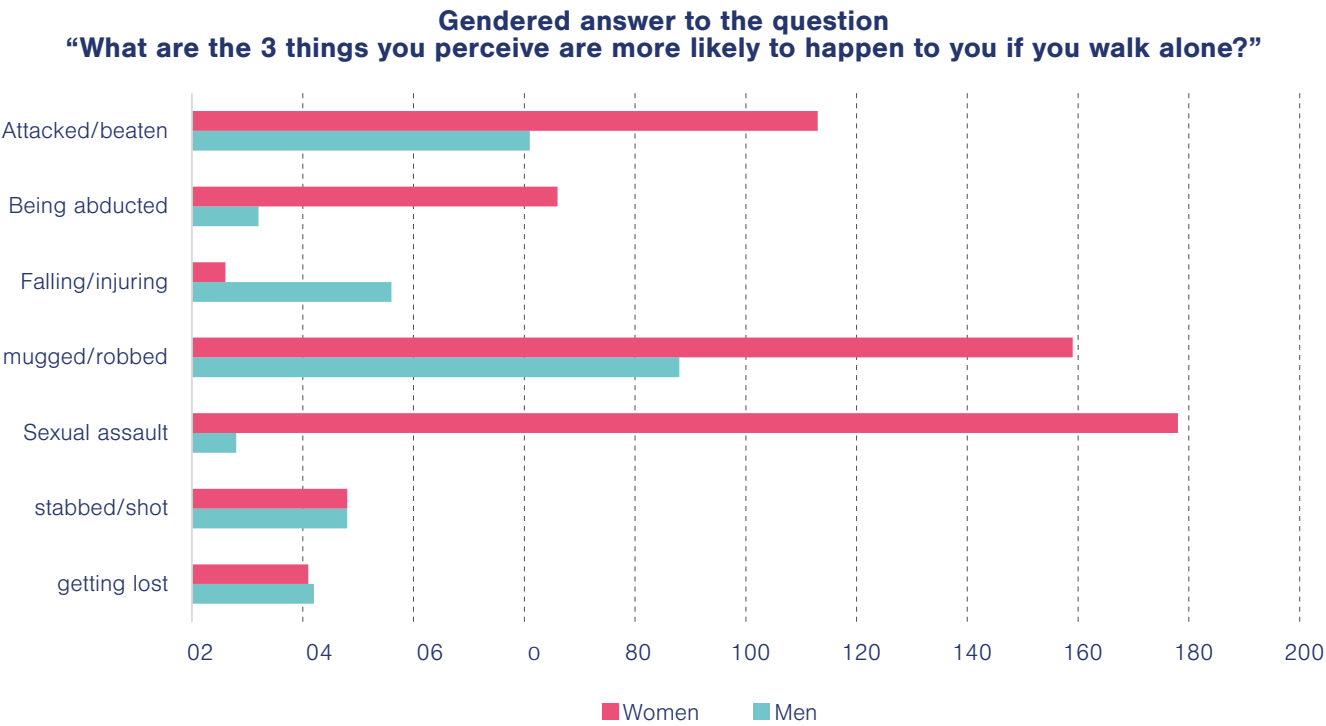
Gendered answer to the question “Which of the following things make you feel the most unsafe?”



What are people afraid of

Variable ‘Perception of the probability of an event occurring if walking alone’: The majority of people who responded to the survey considered that the 3 more likely things to happen to them if walking alone included being mugged or robbed (30%), being sexually assaulted (23%) and being attacked or beaten (23%). When we divide the responses by gender (men vs. women and fluid gender) we get the results that are shown in the graphic below. Women considered the three things most likely to happen to them while walking alone were being sexually assaulted (92%), getting mugged or robbed (82%) and being attacked or beaten (58%). Men on the other hand, considered the three things most likely to happen to them when walking alone included being mugged or robbed (89%), being attacked or beaten (62%) and falling or injuring themselves (36%). Even though ‘sexual assault’ is one of the things women perceive is most likely to happen to them (with approximately 90% of women respondents marking this an option), only 8% of the surveyed men considered ‘sexual assault’ as something likely to happen to them.

Even though ‘sexual assault’ is one of the things women perceive is most likely to happen to them, only 8% of the surveyed men considered ‘sexual assault’ as something likely to happen to them

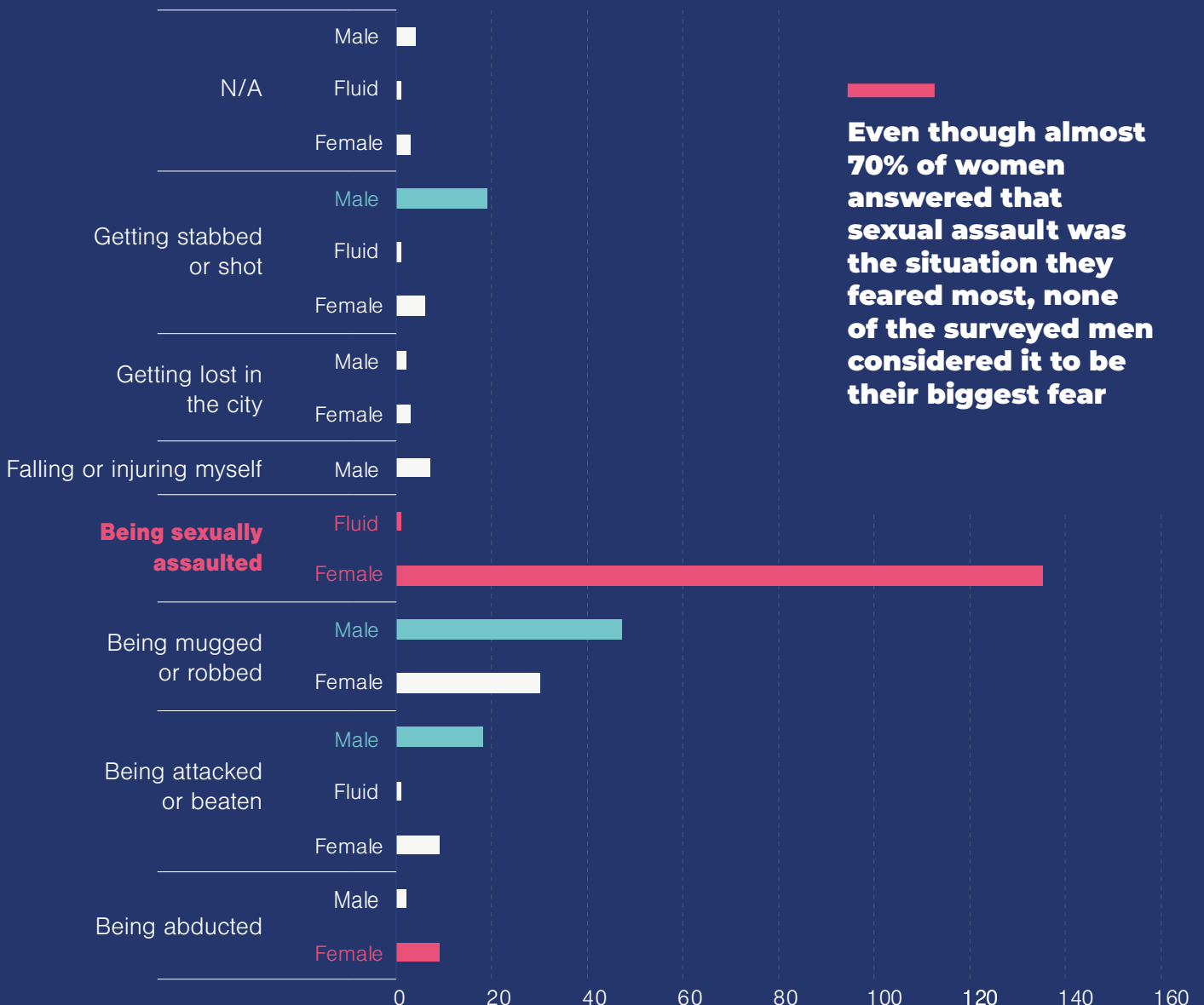


Variable ‘Biggest fear of experiencing a situation when walking alone’:

The reason why the previous question addressed the concept of “likelihood”, was to get people thinking about the situations they thought could happen to them realistically, before we asked them what they were most afraid of. This would eliminate circumstances that seem to be scarier than others (for example getting shot as opposed to getting lost), that might not be likely to happen to the respondents in their context. Almost half of the people who answered the survey identified sexual assault as the situation they feared the most from the array we provided them, and that they consider to be likely to happen. The second activity that respondents fear the most, aside from sexual assault, was being mugged or robbed with approximately 30% of responders marking it as an option. When we look at the gendered answer for this question the thing that strikes the most is that even though almost 70% answered that sexual assault was the situation they feared most, none of the surveyed men considered it to be their biggest fear.



**Gendered answer to the question
“Which of the previous 3 do you fear the most?”**



Even though almost 70% of women answered that sexual assault was the situation they feared most, none of the surveyed men considered it to be their biggest fear

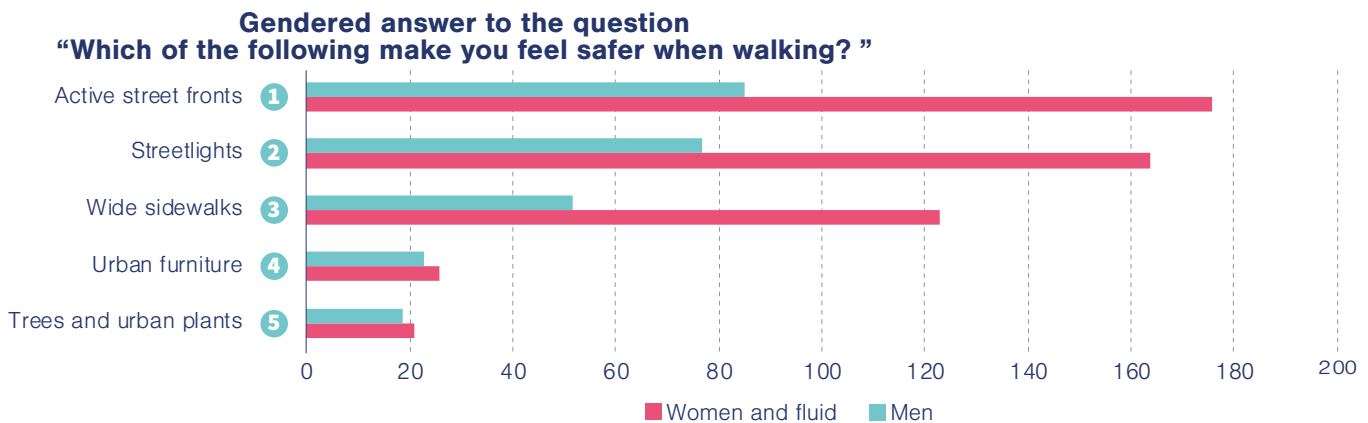


View to skyline of Frankfurt during twilight sunset
Photo credit: gar1984 Freepik

Influence of urban design

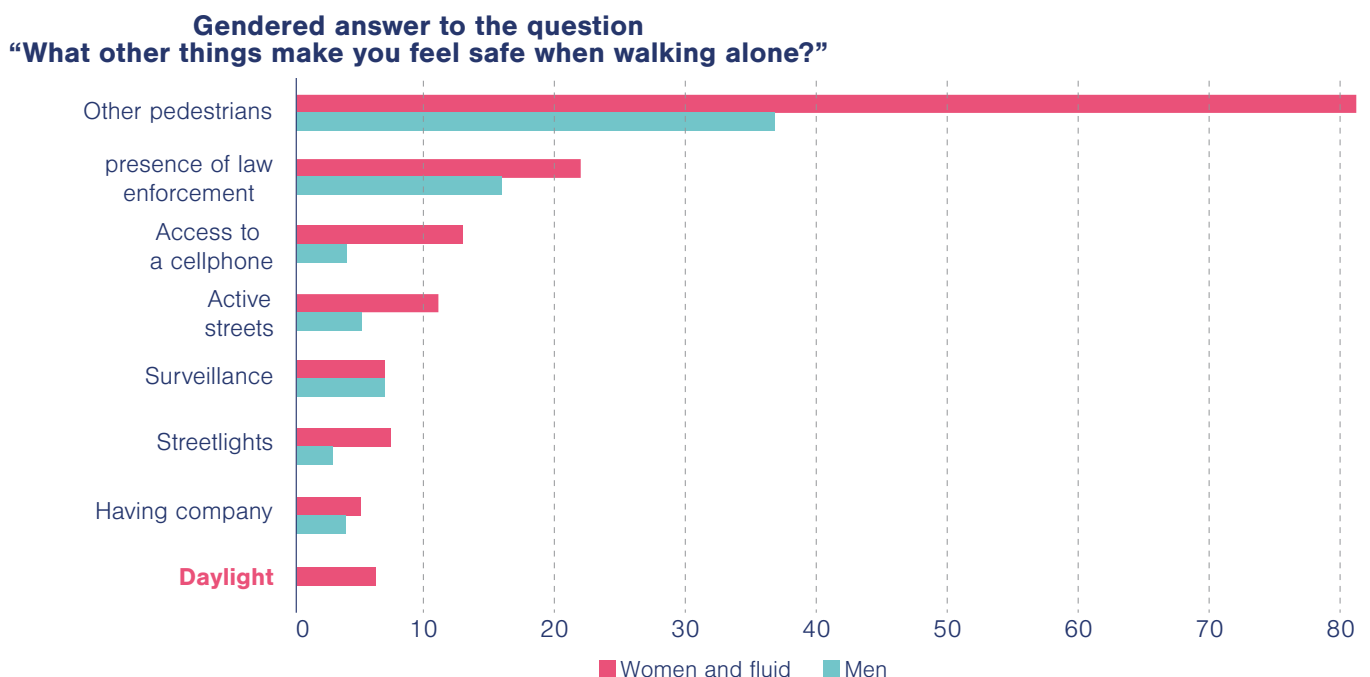
Variable ‘Elements of urban design that increase the perception of safety’: The two elements of urban design that increased the perception of safety for the people who answered the survey were ‘active street fronts’ and ‘streetlights’ comprising 65% of the sample. The elements which were perceived to increase the perception of safety by the least were ‘trees and urban plants’ (5%) and ‘urban furniture’ (6%). The ranking of the elements that increases the perception of safety was the same for both men and women.

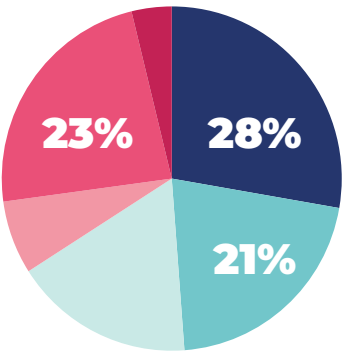
The ranking of the elements that increases the perception of safety was the same for both men and women



Variable ‘Other elements that increase the perception of safety’: Almost half of the respondents said that ‘other pedestrians’ made them feel safe when walking alone, followed by the presence of law enforcement with approximately 20% feeling safe in this particular circumstance. When looking into the gendered response for this question, it can be seen that both men and women consider ‘other pedestrians’ the most important element in the perception of safety when walking alone. Men and women have similar opinions in the elements that make them feel safe and rank them in equivalent ways. The only thing that stands out in the gendered answer is that no man considered daylight to be important as a driver to feeling safe when walking alone.

Men and women have similar opinions in the elements that make them feel safe and rank them in equivalent ways



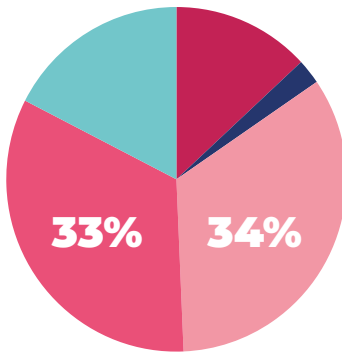
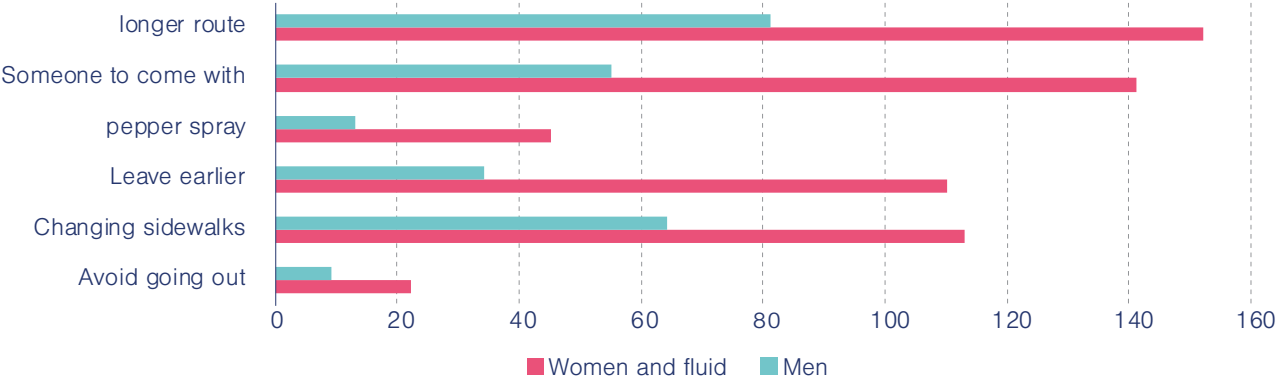


- Taking a longer (but safer) route
- Changing sidewalks from one side of the street to the other
- Leave earlier if the sun is about to set
- Keeping pepper spray or a sharp object in my hand
- Looking for someone to come with me
- Avoiding going out altogether

Access to the city

Variable ‘Behaviors performed to keep oneself safe while walking alone’: The predominant behavior people perform/engage in to keep themselves safe is ‘taking a longer but safer route’ (28%), followed by ‘Changing sidewalks from one side of the street to the other’ (21%). Only 4% of the respondents avoided going out altogether in order to keep themselves safe. When looking at the gendered response for the question, both ‘women and fluid people’ and men will choose a longer route as their first choice in keeping themselves safe. Women and fluid people will look for someone to come with as a second choice, as opposed to men who would change sidewalks from one side of the street to another. The two behaviors least engaged by women and fluid people and men were ‘Avoiding going out altogether’ and ‘Keeping pepper spray or a sharp object in my hand’.

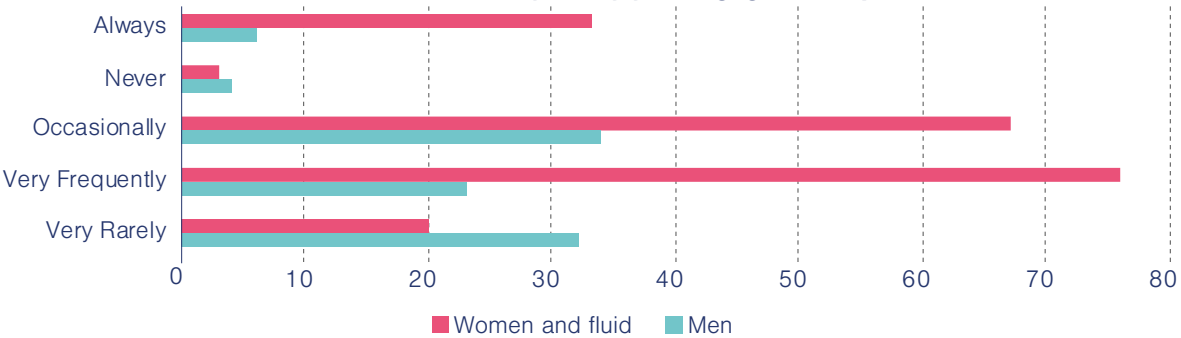
Gendered answer to the question “Which of the following behaviors are you likely to engage to keep yourself safe when walking in the city”



- Always
- Very Frequently
- Occasionally
- Very Rarely
- Never

Variable ‘Frequency of engagement in behaviors to keep oneself safe’: Almost 70% of the surveyed people answered they ‘occasionally’ (34%) or ‘very frequently’ (33%) engage in the previous behaviors in order to keep themselves safe. Only 2% of the respondents said they ‘never’ engage in these behaviors. When looking at the response from a gender perspective, over half of the surveyed women said they ‘always’ (17%) engaged in these behaviors, or ‘very frequently’ (38%), whereas roughly 30% of the men surveyed marked the ‘always’ (6%) and ‘very frequently’ (23%) options. This prompts the idea that women are more prone to engage in these behaviors far more often than men, and therefore, lose access to the city while doing so. This confirms our premise that women lose time and free mobility in order to go out of their way to engage in the behaviors mentioned in the previous question.

Gendered answer to the question “How often would you say you engage in the previous behaviours?”







Discussion

We started this research with the hypothesis that women and men would have different expectations from cities and that elements of urban design would mean different things to different people. We also hypothesized that women are more affected by the lack of certain elements of urban design and that they change the way they operate in cities due to these urban design factors. Lastly, we believed that crimes are gendered in nature and that women and men fear different things while walking in cities. To ensure an absence of any kind of bias, our survey provided people with many options to choose from, for every question. As aforementioned, we concealed the purpose of the survey, to prevent any preconceived notions from hampering results.

The results and conclusions drawn from the data collected in the survey are presented under the following categories:

Perception of fear

When men and women are asked “Do you feel safe walking alone [in the city]”, we find that men are more likely to answer in the affirmative whereas women tend to only occasionally or very rarely feel safe. When asked “Do you avoid walking in the city because of fear?”, men answered by choosing options like ‘very rarely’ and ‘never’ whereas a majority of women chose ‘occasionally’ and ‘very frequently’. In terms of what makes people feel unsafe, the majority of women respondents said that poorly lit urban spaces and urban spaces with few or no people, made them fear their safety.

Men on the other hand feared vehicles and hence indicated that wider sidewalks, which would tailor the pedestrian-to-vehicle relationship on the road, made them feel safer. This is an important observation because we note that while women feared an attack by other people, an attack of sexual violence, men feared an unfortunate accident. Women’s fear then is rooted not only in the fears men hold, a fear of safety as a pedestrian, but also in their gender, and the gendered nature of crimes faced by them.

This strengthens the premise of this paper - women and men perceive fear differently and their psychological experiences of cities are different. Women feel unsafe in cities and tend to avoid accessing cities by way of walking due to this fear. Perceptions of safety and fear hence hamper the experience women have in cities.

Gendered crime

When asked about what people think is most likely to happen to them when they walk alone, a majority note sexual assault, followed by being mugged or robbed. However, when asked to rank these in order of importance, not one man studied said that sexual assault was their biggest fear. In contrast, over 70% women respondents noted sexual assault as their biggest fear.

Women feel unsafe in cities and tend to avoid accessing cities by way of walking due to this fear

Not one man studied said that sexual assault was their biggest fear. In contrast, over 70% women respondents noted sexual assault as their biggest fear

We conclude here that sexual assault is hence both a gendered crime and fear. Women fear sexual assault as their biggest fear and this in turn impacts their perception of cities and inhibits their access to them. Men on the other hand are much more likely to fear being mugged or robbed. The underlying notion is simple, while men fear civil crimes and minor criminal acts of violence, women face or fear facing criminal acts of violence as a constant.

The role of urban design

Our primary hypothesis for this research assumed two things: 1) men and women would want or would perceive elements of urban design differently and 2) that women are more affected by the lack of certain elements, than men. Our first assumption was proved wrong. We found that men and women both perceive elements of urban design in similar ways and they both find that these elements would enhance their experience in the city, by making the city feel safer.

Both men and women chose elements including streetlights, store fronts, urban furniture and trees/urban plants, while responding to the question 'Which of the following [elements] make you feel safer while walking?'. However, our second assumption was correct. When asked what behaviors people would engage in to feel safer, women were more likely to answer by choosing options like taking a longer route, asking someone to accompany them, changing their time (leaving earlier) and so on. Additionally, when asked the frequency of such engagement, women chose the options 'occasionally', 'very frequently' and 'always', men on the other hand mostly chose 'very rarely'.

From this aspect of the survey, we draw **three conclusions**:

- Firstly, men and women perceive elements of urban design in similar ways. It is important then to recognize that aspects of design, including streetlights, which are assumed to cater to women's needs, are in fact demanded by all genders. Design elements, theoretically, fulfil the same purpose for all. This is very promising, because it implies that when we make cities safer for women, by including elements of urban design that prompt feelings of safety, we in turn make cities safer for all genders - including men. For city planners and policy makers, this is key because it sheds light on how designing inclusive cities caters to the entire populous and not only one group.
- Secondly, it is important to note that while men and women may want similar elements of urban design, the absence of these elements disproportionately affects women. This implies that men do not alter their behavior and ways of accessing cities due to the absence of the elements they want in cities. For women however, these elements are fundamental to their city experience and facilitate the decisions they take regarding their behavior in cities. We argue that these elements have the power to limit and promote the access vulnerable groups have

the power to limit and promote the access vulnerable groups have to urban spaces and that in order to build inclusive cities, we must not think of these elements only in terms of wants, but also as fundamental requirements for the functioning of cities.

- Thirdly, it is imperative here to also note that it is perception of fear which actively guides decision making for men and women and due to existing social and cultural realities and norms, these fears affect women more than men. These perceptions are intrinsically linked to elements of design and hence to decisions regarding access. It is not the crime in the city that guides fear and decision making, but the fear of safety that acts as a decision-making force.



Policy recommendations

“In many countries, much of the work to eliminate violence against women focused initially on private or intimate violence. The fact that women were also at risk of violence and felt insecure about their safety in their daily lives outside the home and in public spaces remained unarticulated in policy terms.”¹⁷

Through this survey and the subsequent analysis of results and conclusions, it is evident that firm, streamlined and tangible action plans need to be developed and adopted, because women, across the world, do not feel safe while walking in cities, and due to this perception of safety, women tend to alter their behaviours and ways of engaging with urban spaces. Women's feelings, fears, and perceptions need to be accounted for while planning and developing policies around urban spaces, so as to ensure a safer and equitable access for all. “In this way, the right to the city for women and girls is actively linked to the voice and active participation of women and girls in building safer and more inclusive cities.”¹⁸

In this section, we will explore policy recommendations for city planners, policy makers, politicians, corporates and individuals alike. This is a global, all-encompassing problem, and we believe that the solution then also needs to be found globally. We need all stakeholders to be part of the process and need every industry, every voice to be on the table to shape the solutions. As they are today, cities are made by men, for men. With this research, recommendations and conversations, we hope to design cities by all, for all — inclusive of gender, race, age, ethnicity and other identity markers.

The starting point of advocacy and policy development is to frame the problem, identify the web of stakeholders and understand the voices of those most affected. While the issue of safety is widely spoken about and discussed, we are distanced, both literally and figuratively, from the ways in which it penetrates society and affects our behaviors and actions. To develop a holistic and inclusive policy, an understanding of all perspectives, and especially the ones which we don't know, which we do not have access to, is imperative. Herein, it is important to give voice and platforms to women, for them to express their problems, and identify elements of urban design that make them feel safe/unsafe. An understanding of the different types of stakeholders is also key. There are those who are directly affected by the issue of safety, and who alter their lives/routes in order to feel safe, those who have to continue living in vulnerability because of the inability to change their work and other commitments¹⁹, those who participate in bringing about change and those that implement change - all these, and many more stakeholders need to be

¹⁷ Whitzman et al., 4.

¹⁸ Whitzman et al., 6.

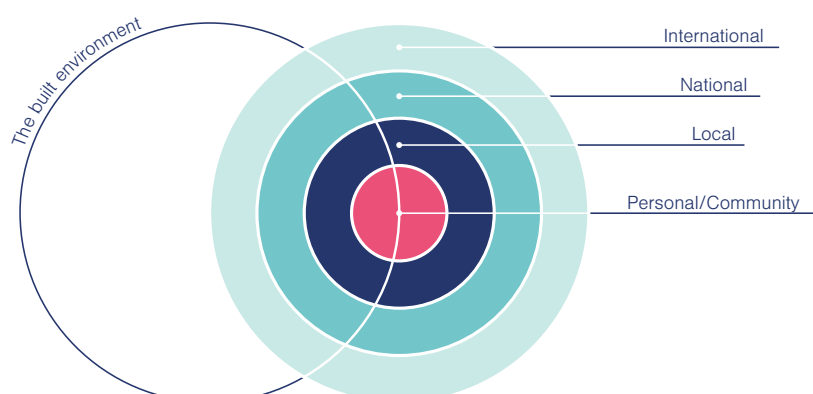
¹⁹ An interesting anecdote shared by a woman working in the field of public policy in Bogota - For many women, perhaps 20% of the population, the days begin very early - women are on the streets, in dark and dingy areas by 3 am. These women are out and about by 2 am, sometimes earlier, to serve and sell coffee to truck drivers, plantation workers and others who are working in the fields/ on their way to corporate offices. Work starts at 2 am and carries on till about 10 am - however, policy and decision makers operate with a limited, biased perspective, and the 'day' only begins at 7 - 8 am. So, the work done in the early hours of the morning by women is not only disregarded and completely ignored, there are no provisions of safety for these women. No police vehicles, no streetlights and no crowds - this is the invisible labour that takes place, and the number of cases of harassment in this group of women are uncountable.

With this research, recommendations and conversations, we hope to design cities by all, for all-inclusive of gender, race, age, ethnicity and other identity markers

identified and involved in the policy formation process. An understanding of spheres of influence is the next step in the policy framing process.

This task is twofold, on the one hand it is to identify the spheres which the policy will influence once implemented, and the other to identify the build environment in which these stakeholders and the spheres of influence operate - the local associations and community corporations, the national voter, the international and global citizen and so on.

- **Personal/ Community:** This sphere includes people in the immediate surroundings and community that the policy is being framed for. So for instance, it would include the neighbourhoods, the blocks, colonies and communities residing in the area for which the policy is being drafted. This means people who are immediately affected by the policy, and so a clear mapping of who the policy is being framed for is key in this first sphere.
- **Local:** This sphere is the city in itself - what does it look like, what is the climate and what are the amenities that exist in the city? What are the community regulations and are there any religious notions that dominate the city? Is there a dominance of a political group? What is the discourse that controls and affects the actions of its people? In terms of framing, and inclusivity, this would mean a thorough demographic mapping of residents, local laws and natural resources that constitute the environment.
- **National:** What country is this policy being drafted for? What are the laws that affect urban spaces, design and safety? Who are the bodies working towards ensuring safety? What are the means of ensuring safety? Essentially, this sphere is the national and country specific unit which affects and should be influenced by ethics, demographics and needs of those who reside in the country.
- **International:** This sphere is global, and includes the whole world. It can affect policy formation in two ways - the first is to study the laws and policies framed in other countries and global paradigms which can inform the framing of the policy that is being drafted. On the other hand, it is the sphere which can be influenced by drafting a policy that is replicated and applied in other global locations and cities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct a thorough **mapping of the community** to understand the demographics, genders, cultures, politics, ages that dominate the area.
2. A **deep dive into the female population** of the city is essential.
3. Create **two maps of the city** - one that is seen from a male perspective and the other from a female perspective (this should be done for all genders and sexualities).
4. It is imperative to have **women at decision-making tables**
5. Implement **community maps** of the city through outreach workshops that have a **gender approach**.

Our first recommendation is to conduct a thorough mapping of the community to understand the demographics, genders, cultures, politics, ages that dominate the area. This would also include mapping important community structures like schools, office complexes, subway stations and others, in order to understand the locations most accessed by people, and those that are not accessed. Mapping as an exercise is quite simple - quite literally draw the map of the city/location that is being studied and then mark the aforementioned structures.

The next step would be to conduct a community survey on safety - what are the major elements, that make people feel safe/unsafe? Once surveyed, mark the elements of urban design that make people feel safe on the map. This exercise will help planners and policy makers visualise the extent of the challenge, and understand where enhancement of these elements is required, for instance. This is a simple, effective and quick way to analyse the area, map problems and identify solutions.

Following this, a deep dive into the female population of the city is essential. What do women do? What is their major occupation? How do they make money? What is the gender ratio like? What are the literacy levels? What age group do a majority of the women belong to? What time do women usually leave their homes and come back? This will help planners and policy makers understand the various activities that occupy women and will help map the area most accessed by women.

This would be the first place to increase safety measures. "It is also important to understand the context within which women do (or do not) use public spaces. Much of that context does constrain their activities and does limit the potentially positive aspects of their experiences."²⁰ By understanding schedules, planners and policy makers will also be informed about the times during which specific safety measures should be heightened - for instance, if women start their days early, streetlights, police vehicles and essential service stores should be made available during those hours. Again, there are two approaches we recommend to conduct this deep dive - the first is an anonymous survey of the female population, which could be completed through simple interviews or mail-in services. The second is to allocate anthropologists to the study and enable them to study the population through in person observations.

In line with our first recommendation, a very effective tool is to create two maps of the city - one that is seen from a male perspective and the other from a female perspective (this should be done for all genders and sexualities). These maps should depict the differences in the ways men and women view cities. Then black out the areas that women do not access/use due to concerns of safety (quite literally use a black marker and cancel out these areas/streets on the map that is created). When compared, we predict that you would have two maps in front of you, and that the map created from

²⁰ Franck, K. A., & Paxson, L. (1989). Women and urban public space. In Public places and spaces (pp. 121-146). Springer, Boston, MA.

women's perspective(s) would have many areas blacked out - this is both important and saddening. Urgent action should be taken to ensure that the whole city is accessible to women and other genders.

After a thorough understanding of the demographic and women's needs, based on the three aforementioned recommendations, the next few recommendations discuss the ways in which real action can be taken to ensure a safer experience for women in cities.

At the outset, it is imperative to have women at decision-making tables. Women need to be present at policy, planning, design and implementation stages, in order to not only provide voice to concerns of women, but also to provide solutions to problems which affect women - cities need to be designed by all, so that they provide functions for all. "In this way, the right to the city for women and girls is actively linked to the voice and active participation of women and girls in building safer and more inclusive cities."²¹ Once we have all voices at the decision-making tables, conversations on achieving and attaining full equality both conceptually and in practice can be started. The first step is to have women leaders and create platforms to usher change.

In terms of city planning and design, another recommendation is to implement community maps of the city through outreach workshops that have a gender approach. This allows communities to express how they view space aside from the planning perspective, including their daily struggles and decision drivers. This can help planners gain unique and specific insights to understand missing elements or requirements specific to women's needs.

Another suggestion is to create *centers of service* rather than scattering services across the city. For instance, having a common area/complex with office buildings, doctors, food and grocery stores, and other essential services. This could be a way to ensure a safe space for women to work and co-exist, while at the same time enabling them to be in the public and use public spaces. Fear of accessing cities is more often than not associated with travel and walking alone - hence by reducing the distance between services, you reduce exposure and increase feelings of safety and thereby access.

An interesting observation shared by a telecom provider during our webinar on Sex(ism) and the City, hosted by Leading Cities on the 30th of March, was that while deciding where to put towers of cell phone service, telecom providers map areas of high activity and create a heat map of places which people visit. They then tend to provide better services, cell coverage and internet connectivity in those areas. Except crimes against women do not only occur in those spaces, they occur in the back lanes, streets and lonely sidewalks, which due to these reasons do not have active cell and internet coverage. This is a groundbreaking examination of the status quo and shines light on the plethora of industries that function in this fashion, which is inherently and perhaps unknowingly discriminatory and exclusionary. If

²¹ Whitzman et al., 6.

cell phone providers, internet service providers, transportation departments, police services and others kept this observation in mind while mapping cities and planning services, we would undoubtedly have safer cities for all.

It is also important to map the distance between subway stations and public transport services to final destinations, the longer the distance, the longer women have to walk and the more exposure they have to violence and crime. It is essential to ensure door-to-door connectivity and/or ensure that the distance between the public transport station and the locations accessed by women (offices/homes/common spaces) is safe and cushioned by elements of urban design that prompt feelings of safety - streetlights, active store fronts and others.

Activating the night

Two of the most important findings from the research were that active streets and streetlights were the elements of urban design that made people feel safer when walking alone. When this is coupled with the fact that none of the surveyed men considered daylight as an important factor in feeling safe, the night becomes a vulnerable time with little to no access to the city for women. With this in mind, the collective **NOCTURNO**²² drafted special policy recommendations for activating the night.

NOCTURNO is a Colombian collective that comprises a multidisciplinary group committed to investigating, intervening and integrating the night, because it recognizes night time as an opportunity for the construction of citizenship, identity, territory, habitat, landscape and social innovation. As an organization, they work at different territorial scales linking citizens and the diversity of each place to their projects surrounding nocturnal activities.

The night as an opportunity for equity and meeting in public

Historically, night time has been associated with a spatiality where people are more vulnerable, given the low level of lighting that they have in their surroundings due to the absence of sunlight and poor public lighting in our cities. Aspects such as the increase in crime, the secrecy that darkness provides to those who hope not to be seen, and the decrease in the number of people in public spaces after sundown, have been associated with this.

Given this perception of night time as a time of high vulnerability, it is important to think of strategies that allow all citizens regardless of gender, age, economic situation a motive to be in public space during the hours when the sun is not out. The night is also, in many cases, the time for meeting, celebration, culture, change of routine, and hence, diversity and inclusion.

When we think about a gendered approach to the night, the problem increases, because women perceive the night as a time of greater risk given

Night time as an opportunity for the construction of citizenship, identity, territory, habitat, landscape and social innovation

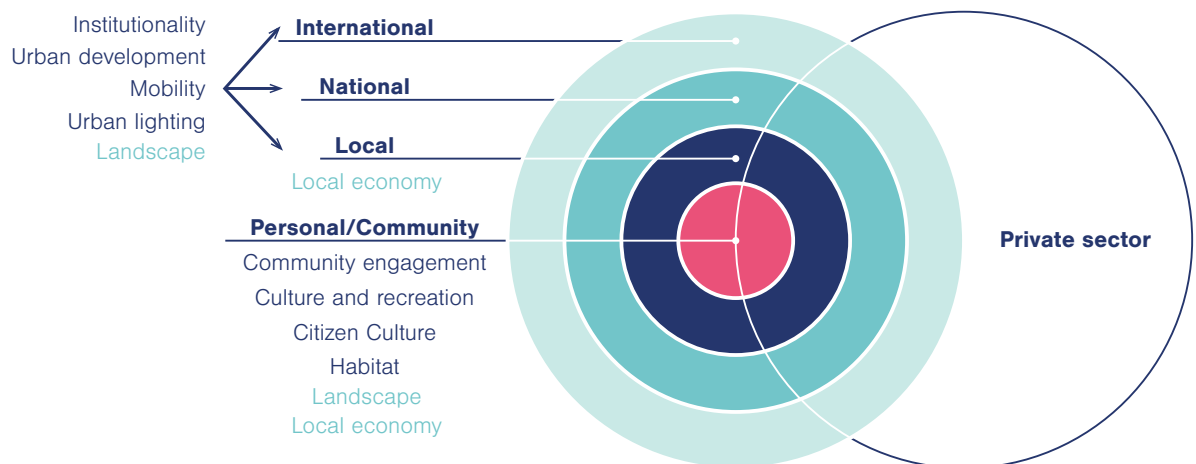
²² Nocturnal in spanish

the statistics of theft, mistreatment, abuse, or sexual violence to which they are the most prominent victims. In the case of women, adequate lighting in transit and living spaces is an essential factor to feel safer. For this reason, it is an urgent and imperative need to think about equitable night spaces that are enjoyable for everyone.

Dimensions to consider in the design and activation of the night in the city

- **Mobility:** This aspect is essential to ensure that all people, regardless of their economic status, can move safely around the city, having accessible and affordable transportation 24-hours a day.
- **Institutionality:** The management of city administrations for the generation of programs and policies that promote activities at night, the presence of authorities, and the strengthening of the activities that are carried out at night, in an equitable way with what happens during the day.
- **Urban development:** Thinking, designing, and planning the city from a perspective that changes and adapts at all hours of the day (as well as the night). This includes creating adequate spaces to move around, places to stay comfortable and safe, urban lighting relevant to the needs of communities, and a recognition of gender issues, socio-cultural aspects, and cost-efficient solutions.
- **Habitat:** The night as a time for the integral development of citizenship, but at the same time respecting those who want to rest at home without affecting their daily lives.
- **Community engagement:** The engagement of multiple actors in the activation, planning, monitoring, and use of night time public space is essential to recognize the needs of late-night and early risers in favor of healthy coexistence of both.
- **Local economy:** The presence of commercial and economic activity during the night puts more eyes on the street, making it possible to have a broader offering when going out and greater economic growth in cooperation with security networks.
- **Landscape:** The conservation and design of landscape elements that highlight identity, patrimonial, institutional, and social elements that are significant to certain aspects of night time.
- **Culture and recreation:** The support and promotion of the cultural, artistic, recreational, and gastronomic nocturnal activities allows citizens to go out and think of themselves as a collective.

- **Citizen Culture:** The construction of cultural imaginaries where the use and appropriation of the nocturnal are understood as everyone's space and where respect for difference is the main rule of coexistence.
- **Urban lighting:** From a more holistic and urban management approach, lighting can contribute to planning our cities, improving the perception of security, encouraging citizen appropriation of urban space, and preserving the different environments in our territories during the night, keeping in mind needs of people and local biodiversity.



Closing remarks

We believe that this research paves the way for a better understanding of urban space, design and gender relations in cities. Using a psychological perspective to design urban spaces provides a preventative solution in making cities feel safer and more accessible for women. Instead of waiting for crime to occur and then crafting solutions in order to make cities safer, we provide an approach which will first make cities feel safer for all. This research sheds light on the pre-existing and all-encompassing sexism within which women operate in cities. It is not that women and men need different things from urban planners, but that women start off with a point and position of vulnerability and by facing the effects of social, personal and cultural patriarchy. To be better planners and build more inclusive cities, we need to first equalize the starting point and that process begins with the recognition of the effects psychological dispositions have on people's movement and behavior.



Appendix

Questionnaire design

In order to design the survey, we identified the variables that would be needed to answer the research question. The objectives are broken down into a series of questions which help identify the variables that will be addressed in the survey. This allows for a clear image of the data that will be collected and helps avoid unnecessary questions.

Objective	Questions that define the objective	Variable
Establish the demographics from the survey's responders.	Which Gender do you identify with?	Gender
	What is your age?	Age
	In which country and city do you live?	Country / City
	How often do you walk in the city?	Frequency of engaging in the behavior studied through the survey
Identify the ways in which women perceive fear, and how it differs from men.	Do you feel safe walking home alone?	Perception of Safety
	Do you avoid walking in the city because of fear?	Restriction of access to the city because of fear
	Which of the following things make you feel the most unsafe?	"Perception of unsafety" triggers associated with urban design
Detect which things women believe are most likely to happen to them when walking alone, and what they are most afraid of, as opposed to men.	What are the 3 things you perceive are more likely to happen to you if you walk alone?	Perception of the probability of an event occurring if walking alone
	Which of the previous 3 do you fear the most?	Biggest fear of experiencing a situation when walking alone
Determine if urban design influences the perception of safety when accessing the city in a gendered way.	Which elements from urban design make you feel safer when walking?	Elements of urban design that increase the perception of safety
	What other things make you feel safe when walking alone?	Other elements that increase the perception of safety
Recognize which behaviors do women incur in to keep themselves safe as, opposed to men, when accessing the city	In which behaviors are you likely to engage to keep yourself safe when walking in the city?	Behaviors incurred to keep oneself safe while walking alone
	How often would you say you engage in the previous behaviors?	Frequency of engagement in behaviors to keep oneself safe

After the questions are identified, the survey is phrased properly by identifying the appropriate proforma answers that will be given to the responders. Table 2 shows the “questionnaire design control chart” which was used to create the survey.

No.	Variable	Questions	Proforma answer
1	Gender	Which Gender do you identify with?	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Non-binary <input type="checkbox"/> Fluid <input type="checkbox"/> Other
2	Age	What is your age?	<input type="checkbox"/> Under 18 years old <input type="checkbox"/> Between 18 and 25 years old <input type="checkbox"/> Between 26 and 35 years old <input type="checkbox"/> Between 36 and 45 years old <input type="checkbox"/> Between 46 and 55 years old <input type="checkbox"/> Older than 56 years old
3	Country / City	In which country and city do you live?	Open answer
4	Frequency of engaging in the behavior studied through the survey	How often do you walk in the city?	<input type="checkbox"/> More than once a day <input type="checkbox"/> Approximately once per week <input type="checkbox"/> Roughly once per month <input type="checkbox"/> Hardly ever
5	Perception of Safety	Do you feel safe walking home alone?	<input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Very Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally <input type="checkbox"/> Very Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never
6	Restriction of access to the city because of fear	Do you avoid walking in the city because of fear?	<input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Very Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally <input type="checkbox"/> Very Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never
7	“Perception of unsafety” triggers associated with urban design	Which of the following things make you feel the most unsafe?	<input type="checkbox"/> Walking through poorly lit urban spaces (such as plazas, parks or streets) <input type="checkbox"/> Walking through crowded urban spaces <input type="checkbox"/> Walking through urban spaces with few/ no people

8	Perception of the probability of an event occurring if walking alone	What are the 3 things you perceive are more likely to happen to you if you walk alone?	<input type="checkbox"/> Getting lost in the city <input type="checkbox"/> Falling or injuring myself <input type="checkbox"/> Being mugged or robbed <input type="checkbox"/> Being sexually assaulted <input type="checkbox"/> Being attacked or beaten <input type="checkbox"/> Being abducted <input type="checkbox"/> Getting stabbed or shot
9	Biggest fear of experiencing a situation when walking alone	Which of the previous 3 do you fear the most?	Open answer
10	Elements of urban design that increase the perception of safety	Which of the following make you feel safer when walking? (mark your top 3)	<input type="checkbox"/> Streetlights <input type="checkbox"/> Wide sidewalks <input type="checkbox"/> Urban furniture (Like benches, chairs or tables) <input type="checkbox"/> Trees and urban plants <input type="checkbox"/> Active street fronts (like shops or cafés)
11	Other elements that increase the perception of safety	What other things make you feel safe when walking alone?	Open answer
12	Behaviors incurred to keep oneself safe while walking alone	Which of the following behaviors are you likely to engage in to keep yourself safe when walking in the city (mark your top 3 choices)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Changing sidewalks from one side of the street to the other <input type="checkbox"/> Leave earlier if the sun is about to set <input type="checkbox"/> Keeping pepper spray or a sharp object in my hand <input type="checkbox"/> Looking for someone to come with me <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding going out altogether
13	Frequency of engagement in behaviors to keep oneself safe	How often would you say you engage in the previous behaviors?	<input type="checkbox"/> Always <input type="checkbox"/> Very Frequently <input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally <input type="checkbox"/> Very Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Never

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