

Original Article



Cultural Contexts and Urban Design: Women's Experiences of Safety in Public Spaces in Iran and the United States

Sana Avar¹, Mohammad Karimi²

¹Department of Letters and Science, Urban studies, university of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, USA

²Department of Architecture, Azadshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Azadshahr, Iran

Corresponding Author: Sana Avar

Abstract:

This study investigates the perceptions of women regarding public spaces and their sense of security in two distinct cultural contexts: Iran and the United States. Through qualitative research, including in-depth interviews with women from both locations—specifically, Milwaukee in the U.S. and various cities in Iran—this paper examines how environmental factors, such as urban design and law enforcement presence, intersect with cultural and societal norms to shape women's experiences and feelings about safety in public areas. The findings reveal that while urban design plays a significant role in influencing perceptions of safety, underlying cultural factors, including gender roles and societal expectations, are equally critical in shaping women's navigation of these spaces. Despite the geographical and cultural differences, women from both contexts expressed common concerns regarding insecurity in public spaces, highlighting the universal nature of these experiences. This research underscores the necessity for urban planning to encompass not only the physical infrastructure of public spaces but also the cultural dynamics that influence women's safety. By advocating for a more inclusive approach to urban design that considers gender-specific needs, this study aims to contribute to the development of safer public environments for women globally. The findings call for a reevaluation of urban policies to foster environments that empower women and enhance their ability to engage freely in public life.

Keywords: Women's perception, public spaces, sense of security, urban design, cultural norms, gender roles, Iran, United States, safety, mobility, public space planning, gender-sensitive urban planning, comparative analysis, women's safety in public spaces.

Introduction

Public spaces represent the vibrant heart of our cities and neighborhoods, where people from various backgrounds converge to engage, exchange experiences, and shape the character of a location. These areas, spanning from lively urban squares to tranquil parks, serve as settings for a wide array of human activities. Recognizing the multifaceted role of public spaces is crucial for designing urban environments that are not only practical but also lively, inclusive, and responsive to the desires and needs of their residents. The elements of the built environment have a profound

effect on the three notions of safety: comfort, belonging, and commitment (Tovi Fenster, 2005).

Problem Statement

Public spaces serve as the canvas upon which the diverse tapestry of society is woven. They are the backdrop for everyday life, where individuals come together, interact, and engage with their environment. However, the ability to enjoy and navigate these spaces is not universally experienced in the same way. Women often contend with a unique set of challenges and considerations that shape their perception of

public spaces and their sense of security within them.

Safety and Security

In recent years, more research has focused on how women experience public spaces. This interest stems from the realization that cities and other areas can be unequal and sometimes even unsafe for women. As Ratnayake's findings in 2013 show, the apprehension regarding personal safety not only has adverse psychological consequences but also constrains an individual's liberty and ability to navigate public spaces, resulting in a decrease in their utilization. Within this topic, women are a focal point in the literature due to the assertion that they encounter heightened safety concerns when accessing public spaces and contemplating their travel routines. Extensive literature has been dedicated to elucidating the gender-specific disparities in the utilization of public spaces and travel behavior. Blobaum and Hunecke (2005) contend that women's anxieties about their personal safety may lead to their avoidance of outdoor sports and recreational activities, contributing to reduced utilization of these spaces and a less vibrant urban environment.

One advocated approach for addressing concerns related to perceived safety in public spaces involves the strategic design and planning of urban environments. This strategy is supported by numerous studies (Blobaum and Hunecke, 2005; Dymén and Ceccato, 2012; Harvey, Aultman-Hall, Hurley, and Troy, 2015; Gargiulo et al., 2020; Jorgensen, Ellis, and Ruddell, 2002). Valentine (1990) argues that especially for women, the "public environment can influence the perception of safety and hence their willingness to use spaces and places" (p. 301). Therefore, the thoughtful design and planning of public spaces should encourage their utilization. A substantial body of research delves into the consideration of perceived safety when shaping and organizing public spaces. For instance, Harvey et al. (2015) demonstrate how various urban elements like greenery, building alignments, and the continuity of buildings, as well as building-to-street ratios, all impact the perceived safety in public spaces. Soraganvi (2017) further asserts that poorly designed urban public spaces, characterized by inadequate lighting, vacant lots, a lack of public

toilets, or insufficient signage, can be particularly discouraging for women.

Social and Cultural Norms

Numerous studies have explored the diverse interpretations and viewpoints concerning the concepts of 'private' and 'public.' These investigations have delved into their cultural underpinnings (Charlesworth, 1995; Fenster, 1999b). In this context, Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city" is clearly centered on the public sphere, particularly the utilization of public spaces, which serve as the backdrop for the daily lives and creative expressions of their inhabitants. However, certain feminist critiques view this public domain, often referred to as the 'oeuvre,' as being dominated by white, middle-to-upper-class, heterosexual males. As a result, this perception sometimes leads to the exclusion of women, both in Western and non-Western cultures, from the use of public spaces like streets and parks, especially when unaccompanied (Massey, 1994).

In some cultures, women experience evolving roles and responsibilities across different stages of their lives, which significantly shape their sense of belonging and their engagement with urban landscapes. It is crucial to recognize that these gender roles intersect with cultural and ethnic identities, resulting in diverse perceptions of women's roles and responsibilities across various contexts (Fenster, 2005). As a result, women's mobility within physical spaces is profoundly influenced, if not entirely dictated, by the cultural and symbolic meanings attributed to those spaces. Cultural and ethnic norms often create "spaces of belonging and dis-belonging," designating certain areas as either accessible or off-limits to women, depending on the cultural context (Fenster, 1998, 1999b). This dynamic is reminiscent of the societal constraints explored in Ghandeharion and Feyz's (2014) analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which critiques the patriarchal structures that confine women like Martha and Honey to predefined roles, limiting their autonomy and agency. Therefore, examining the social and cultural factors that shape women's perceptions of safety and security could foster greater awareness, ultimately leading to more inclusive and gender-sensitive urban planning. This aligns with the findings of Kookhaie and Masnavi (2014), who advocate for ecological

infrastructure design that enhances urban life quality by considering the diverse needs of all community members, including women, in creating equitable and sustainable urban environments.

This study aims to address several key inquiries. First, it explores how women perceive public spaces across diverse countries. Secondly, it examines the influence of social and cultural dimensions within various communities on these perceptions. Furthermore, the study delves into the factors that contribute to women's feelings of insecurity in public spaces. Lastly, it investigates the strategies employed by women to cope with their apprehensions while in these environments. In essence, the overarching research question centers on understanding how women's experiences in public spaces are shaped by their geographical location and nationality, as well as the underlying factors influencing these experiences.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the evolving landscape of research on women's experiences in public spaces, aiming to shed light on the complex interplay between gender, spatial dynamics, and safety. These inequalities stem from a variety of factors, including societal norms, cultural practices, architectural design, and policy frameworks. Understanding these issues is not merely an academic endeavor but a crucial step toward fostering fairer and more inclusive communities. According to Ratnayake (2013), concerns about personal safety not only have detrimental psychological effects but also restrict individuals' freedom and choices in navigating public spaces, thereby reducing their utilization. Similarly, Blobaum and Hunecke (2005) highlight that women's apprehensions about safety often lead to their exclusion from outdoor sports and leisure activities, contributing to diminished use of public spaces and a less vibrant urban life. These findings resonate with broader discussions on age-related challenges in public participation, as evidenced by Entezarizarch et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of addressing mental workload and performance disparities across different age groups to enhance safety and inclusivity in various domains, including urban mobility. Furthermore, the role of design and

planning in shaping inclusive environments is underscored by Moghaddam et al. (2024), who highlight the impact of design team characteristics on project performance, suggesting that collaborative and inclusive design processes can significantly improve outcomes in urban spaces, ensuring they meet the diverse needs of all users.

Women's Fear in Public Spaces

The fear of violence is recognized as a major influence on women's movements in public spaces. According to Cavanagh (1998, p.169), apprehension regarding personal safety has a profound impact on women's lives and significantly influences their choices about when and where to go. However, it's essential to note that addressing safety concerns cannot be solely resolved by tackling crime rates. Recent research, such as the work of Romer, Jamieson, and Aday (2003), has provided strong evidence indicating that there is no direct correlation between crime rates and the perception of safety.

For more than three decades, researchers in the social sciences have conducted numerous studies to determine the predictors of fear of crime. Recurring research findings consistently indicate that women exhibit a higher level of fear towards crime compared to men, even though men tend to experience higher victimization rates (Alvazzi del Frate and Patrignani 1995; Ferraro 1996; Ferraro and LaGrange 1992; van Kesteren et al. 2000). This discrepancy is often explained by the "vulnerability" perspective, suggesting that women's fear of crime may be linked to concerns about experiencing specific types of crimes, such as rape or sexual assault (Alvazzi del Frate and Patrignani 1995; Ferraro 1996; Haynie 1998; Smith, Torstensson, and Johansson 2001; Warr 1985; Zvekic and Alvazzi del Frate 1995).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that natural environments, or green spaces (GE), can evoke fear in individuals. These fears encompass a range of concerns, including physical dangers such as accidental injuries (Gobster & Westphal, 2004) and threats associated with nature, such as getting lost or encountering wild animals (Van den Berg & Ter Heijne, 2005), as well as social dangers like concerns about crime (Pain, 1997). This fear, when examined more broadly, is often described as irrational and tied to an individual's personal experiences in green spaces, where perceived

safety or risk outweighs actual risk. Such perceptions can significantly influence how people interact with and utilize urban green spaces, highlighting the need for urban planning that addresses both physical and social safety concerns. This aligns with the findings of Mansourihanis *et al.* (2024), who emphasize the importance of addressing neighborhood-level challenges, such as deprivation and crime distribution, to foster sustainable urban development and create safer, more inclusive environments for all residents. People who experience fear in these settings tend to alter their behavior by avoiding green spaces in general or specific areas within them (Skogan, 1986). This avoidance can result in reduced physical activity and decreased contact with nature, ultimately impacting their physical and mental well-being. In essence, fear significantly influences how people utilize green spaces, which, in turn, can have broader implications for public health and urban livability. This aligns with the findings of Talebzadeh *et al.* (2024), who emphasize the importance of optimizing systems—whether supply chains or urban environments—to address diverse needs and enhance overall performance. Their research on the LARG framework highlights the value of integrating multiple strategies to create resilient and adaptable systems, a principle that can be extended to urban planning to ensure green spaces are designed and managed in ways that promote safety, inclusivity, and accessibility for all users.

Designing and Planning for Safety

Designing and planning for safety, particularly with a focus on women and girls, is crucial as it paves the way for the creation of public spaces that offer equal opportunities for all individuals to lead healthy, secure, and content lives. It acknowledges that women's concerns are grounded in real experiences of violence and fear and that they possess an awareness of when and where they feel unsafe in urban environments, along with the reasons behind it. The disproportionate fear of urban crime, which unfairly affects women, serves as an informal mechanism of social control, often diverting attention from the more widespread issue of domestic violence. Furthermore, this fear is needlessly exacerbated by urban planning that

lacks consideration for gender-related factors (Soraganvi, 2017).

Urban Design and Planning

Research has shown that urban design and planning features play a pivotal role in shaping women's experiences in public spaces. The study conducted by Navarrete-Hernandez *et al.* (2021) addressed the significant concern of women's personal safety in public spaces and the role of design interventions in shaping safety perceptions. It investigates three common design interventions: public toilets, solid walls, and graffiti removal, focusing on how they affect safety perceptions, especially for women. The findings indicate that specific design interventions can significantly improve perceived safety, with variations by gender. Removing solid walls and graffiti has a positive impact on safety perception, primarily for women. However, the addition of public toilets does not seem to enhance perceived safety. According to the paper, the promoted strategy to tackle issues of perceived safety in public space is the design and planning of the urban environment (Blobaum & Hunecke, 2005; Dymén & Ceccato, 2012; Harvey, Aultman-Hall, Hurley, & Troy, 2015; Gargiulo *et al.*, 2020; Jorgensen, Ellis, & Ruddell, 2002).

Moreover, Beebeejaun (2017) focuses on the right to the city, in greater scale right to everyday life, and the feminist point of view. This article proposes that a more comprehensive acknowledgment of the diverse publics coexisting within the modern city, along with the gendered lens through which everyday experiences are mediated, could empower urban planners and policymakers to adopt more inclusive approaches when intervening in urban spaces. Additionally, Akbari *et al.* (2012) examine the sense of social security in public spaces, particularly among women, who are often more vulnerable in such environments. The study investigates the relationship between the physical characteristics of communal spaces in two distinct residential complexes—conventional and high-rise—located in the Narmak neighborhood and Ekbatan town of Tehran. The findings reveal that the Narmak neighborhood features design elements that mitigate crime and enhance social security, whereas Ekbatan town's public spaces exhibit characteristics that increase the potential

for crime and diminish the sense of safety. The research underscores that high-rise residential complexes are more likely to foster unsafe environments compared to conventional ones, emphasizing the critical role of physical design in ensuring residents' security. This aligns with the broader discourse on urban design and social dynamics, as highlighted by Ghorashi *et al.* (2024), who emphasize the role of subcultures in shaping social issues within the context of old and new neighborhoods, further illustrating the interplay between spatial design and social behavior.

On the other hand, Whitzman *et al.* (2013), in Chapter 3, examine public transportation as a critical public space, emphasizing the importance of safe and affordable transit options, particularly for women, to enable unrestricted urban mobility free from insecurity and fear. The discussion introduces a triad of social logic in urban planning: redistribution of resources, recognition of specific concerns and needs (e.g., gender), and fostering encounters with diversity, all while prioritizing women's safety and mobility. The text underscores that exclusion from the right to mobility can take overt forms, such as physical barriers, as well as subtle manifestations, including societal norms and messages conveyed by authority figures. Ensuring safe mobility is not only a matter of economic development but also a fundamental rights issue, as it grants individuals access to public spaces and collective resources while enabling the creation and recreation of identities within urban environments. This aligns with the findings of Gowhareh and Taheri Tafti (2022), who highlight the multiscale mechanisms of urban shrinkage and their implications for equitable access to resources and infrastructure, particularly in smaller cities, further emphasizing the need for inclusive planning to address mobility and safety challenges across diverse urban contexts.

Despite various research approaches, a notable gap exists in adopting ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with women. This method would provide a deeper insight into individual women's lived experiences, enabling a more authentic understanding of their unique perspectives. Ultimately, the aim is to create urban environments where women can move freely, feel safe, and fully participate in civic life. Achieving

this requires a collaborative effort among policymakers, urban planners, architects, researchers, and communities, with a focus on prioritizing women's needs and concerns in the design and management of public spaces, contributing to more inclusive and equitable cities for all.

Methodology and Data Collection

As previously mentioned, a substantial body of research has examined women's perceptions of public spaces, albeit with a notable gap in cross-national comparisons. In addressing the research question at hand, a qualitative research methodology has been selected, specifically involving the conduct of in-depth, open-ended interviews with women residing in both Iran and the United States, who actively participate in their communities by utilizing public spaces as women. While employing an ethnographic approach would likely yield a more comprehensive dataset, constraints related to the accessibility of public spaces in Iran and the limitation of available time necessitate a primary focus on the interview-based research approach.

According to Rubin & Rubin (2011), in this research, I will use responsive interviewing, which prioritizes flexibility and adaptability during the interview process. In responsive interviewing, the interviewer adjusts their questions, probes, and overall interview structure based on the participant's responses and emerging themes. The goal is to create a dynamic and open-ended dialogue that allows participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, rather than following a rigid script of predefined questions. This approach is particularly useful when exploring complex or sensitive topics, as it allows for deeper exploration and a better understanding of the participant's perspective.

For the research, four women were selected for interviews, comprising two participants from Iran and two from Milwaukee. They were chosen because they share the same age range, falling between 24 and 30 years old. The rationale for selecting women within this age group from both Iran and Milwaukee is to facilitate a comparative analysis of women's experiences in different sociocultural contexts, specifically, an Islamic country and a liberal one. These participants are either students or recent graduates, aligning with

their shared attribute of having spent considerable time in public spaces relative to other age groups in their respective positions.

The interviews I collected were coded using a mix of deductive and inductive processes. The initial themes I coded for were based on the questions that I had asked my subjects, primarily relating to women's perception. This structure involved overarching possible codes like "Cultural practices influencing spatial behavior," "Social interactions in public spaces," and "Gender-specific mobility constraints," which will subsequently branch into more specific codes such as "Fear of crime in public spaces," "Home as a safe space," and "Housing and neighborhood affordability."

However, over the course of these interviews, another strong theme emerged: the definition of crime and codes such as law enforcement presence, familiarity with the area, cultural influences, accessibility, gender regulation, and harassment, personal exposure.

Findings

By listening to the voices of women and discerning the patterns within their narratives, this research endeavors to illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of how women navigate, interpret, and shape the public sphere. Through the lens of participant interviews and the subsequent coding process, we aim to unravel the subtleties of women's encounters with public spaces, shedding light on both the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to assert their presence and agency in these shared environments. As we embark on this exploration, the richness of interview quotes and the structured codes derived from them will guide our journey into understanding the diverse ways in which women perceive and engage with the public realm.

By listening to the voices of women and discerning the patterns within their narratives, this research endeavors to illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of how women navigate, interpret, and shape the public sphere. Through the lens of participant interviews and the subsequent coding process, we aim to unravel the subtleties of women's encounters with public spaces, shedding light on both the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to assert their presence and agency in these shared environments. As we

embark on this exploration, the richness of interview quotes and the structured codes derived from them will guide our journey into understanding the diverse ways in which women perceive and engage with the public realm.

In exploring women's perspectives on public spaces through interviews, a complex web of factors influencing safety perceptions showed up. Participants consistently cite location, law enforcement presence, and specific neighborhoods as pivotal external elements shaping their experiences. Simultaneously, a theme of subjectivity emerges, with personal comfort crucial in determining safety levels, whether navigating public spaces alone or with companions which is clear in words of one of interviewers from Iran:

It differs from place to place in the public space, what space are you talking about, what time of the day. Are you alone or with someone, now I may be the person who feels safe even alone, it's not like if I'm alone, I feel unsafe and safe with others. Sometimes I feel more secure with others, but I have this feeling when I'm alone.

Temporal and spatial dimensions add further nuance, with safety perceptions fluctuating based on the time of day and specific locations. The dynamic nature of safety underscores the importance of contextual considerations in understanding women's experiences in diverse urban environments. The communal aspect of safety is also emphasized, with the presence of a community and engagement in communal spaces integral to enhancing overall security as an American woman claimed:

It probably depends some on like the public space at the time of day, but I would say generally here pretty safe like I live right by Riverside Park and like that's I feel fine. I even walk around there at night, sometimes and Take phone calls. I think Milwaukee has Quite a few public spaces that feel pretty safe to me, and that's really nice.

In examining the responses of interviewees regarding the factors influencing their feelings of safety in public spaces, distinct patterns and nuanced considerations emerge. One from Milwaukee placed a strong emphasis on personal familiarity and background knowledge, navigating her surroundings based on an intricate understanding of the neighborhood, cultural

behaviors, and income levels. The presence of known individuals, such as family or community members, also significantly contributes to her sense of security as she mentioned:

So again, if it's like a touristy place, there was, there's a lot of people and usually there's like police or security around that enhances the security and safeness or my feeling of security and safeness. Outside of that I mean. Either like which part of the block maybe that I or what direction to travel in that may not be safe. I may choose a different direction depending on my knowledge about the neighborhood itself, so I think like my own personal background knowledge about the area or neighborhood definitely helps with the safety because I can choose and understand I know. Typically, those that are higher income are perceived as safer, but I wouldn't say that's necessarily always the case. I think the two, if I'm around people that you know, I know the culture, I know.

Another from Iran, on the other hand, delves into the specific characteristics of the public space, considering the level of crowd, communal activities, and even the dress code's impact on her perceived safety. Her experiences with hijab highlight the intersectionality of safety perceptions and cultural expectations:

But again, it is very related to the three points I said. Which space and what time of fasting, I don't mean darkness and light, I mean the crowdedness of that space. Like one place may be busy at night, another place may be quiet during the day. Look, for example, I generally feel safe in the park. Especially in places where people are sitting with family and people are present, children playing. It's interesting, maybe when I used to wear hijab, if I passed by a suspicious man, I would be worried. For me, now that I don't have a hijab, this story has not changed. But a new fear has been added to me, that is the safety of a woman who does not wear a hijab in Iran is threatened by someone who feels that this person is religious and because of this he may cause trouble and show that I do not like your veil.

Meanwhile, other perspective revolves around the visibility of other people in the public space, emphasizing the reassuring presence of fellow individuals engaging in communal activities. Additionally, she noted the role of open spaces in

providing a clearer understanding of her surroundings as an Iranian women claimed:

Look, verbal abuse has no place for me and it happens everywhere, even in that market. I feel insecure when there is no light, no people, and you feel that the possibility of something happening to you is more and more dangerous than when you are just being told something. But well, in the solitude of the alley, the window is not activated and no one will see if something happens to you. But a man once stuck me in a busy street, but after a while I went into a shop and the shopkeeper helped me, even though it was noon and the sidewalk was quiet, but the shops were open. So the issue is not the sidewalk, the issue is what is happening on it. What is on the sidewalk? shop or house

Together, these narratives underscore the intricate blend of personal and environmental factors that shape women's perceptions of safety in public spaces, reflecting the complexity inherent in their urban experiences.

Focusing on the personal experiences of them offers valuable insights into the diverse factors influencing women's perceptions of safety in public spaces. One's reflection on the NBA Finals in downtown Milwaukee reveals the significance of events and the effectiveness of high police presence in fostering a sense of safety, even amid incidents involving firearms. Her experiences in Chicago further emphasize the importance of awareness when navigating well-lit and populated areas at night, emphasizing the need for strategic choices in a bustling urban environment:

In college, too, I would work till probably 10:00 and I lived off campus, so I lived maybe 15 minutes away in Chicago. So there would be times where I have to walk home at night. In a busy St. you know to my apartment, which usually would take a 15-minute walk after I get off the. Pain. So I'd be more aware of my surroundings just because it's late, just because I don't know who's out and it's taking me a little bit to get home. But I usually would, you know, specifically choose specific routes that were well lit on populated streets rather than taking side streets to walk home just being. Smart about that. So that would be like another situation where I'd be more aware of my surroundings in case it could turn into a

dangerous situation which in Chicago being a big city.

In contrast, a girl from Iran's narrative shifts the focus to the impact of solitude on her perception of security. She challenges traditional warnings about crowded places, expressing a sense of security in places such as Bazaar. However, an unsettling incident near her home in a quiet village disrupts this perceived safety, prompting a reevaluation of the concept of security in seemingly protected private spaces. She also highlighted the increased vulnerability experienced in less populated areas, where reduced visibility and assistance may elevate the risk of harassment, providing a nuanced perspective on safety considerations.

A girl's experience from Milwaukee brings a more interpersonal dimension to the discussion. Her discomfort when alone, particularly when strangers approach her at Bradford Beach, sheds light on the challenges women face in navigating social interactions in public spaces. Unwanted attention from individuals trying to strike up conversations becomes a focal point in her narrative, underlining the impact of interpersonal dynamics on feelings of safety as she said:

I guess the times I've I feel unsafe is often times when I'm alone and like a band that comes up and keeps trying to Talk to me. That oftentimes does make me kind of feel like, OK, I've got to pay attention to my surroundings. So like, sometimes I'll go to Bradford Beach and like, guys will just come up and like, be like, so what are you reading? What are you doing? can I have your number? And it's like, no, I'm not here to talk to you. Everyone, not all the time, but every once in a while, it's like, oh my gosh, I don't, I don't want to talk to you.

In comparing these experiences, American women emphasis on event-specific safety measures and highlighting of unwanted interpersonal interactions showcase the varied factors influencing women's perceptions of safety. Women from Iran nuanced consideration of solitude's impact, These narratives underscore the complexity of safety considerations for women in public spaces, shaped by both local dynamics and personal encounters, and reflect the need for comprehensive approaches to address these multifaceted concerns.

Regarding the responses of interviewees about the influence of their gender on feelings of safety in public spaces, distinct patterns emerged. American-African woman heightened awareness stems from societal expectations that women may face a higher risk of crime when alone at night, even though she hasn't encountered specific incidents. This reflects a broader perception of women's vulnerability and the precautionary measures women often adopt. But the African-American woman believed that because of her body shape she is more secure in public spaces:

Yeah, I think the tying to the identity with Prime, I think women are primarily targeted more just because they're seen as more vulnerable and that in terms of physical strength, not necessarily the same. But I wouldn't say that that's always the case. So like me myself, just because like I'm a bigger person, I'm taller. Like I'm not a small stature. I probably have a better chance of fighting off an offender than somebody else who's smaller.

One from Iran challenged cultural norms in Iran, questioning societal warnings to women about their vulnerability. She emphasized that sexual harassment is not exclusive to women and discusses prevalent fears among women related to sexual and verbal abuse in public space and she advocated for a shift in societal attitudes and consequences for harassers:

See, this discussion is very cultural, apart from the discussion of whether the society is safe or not. We always warn women and girls that you should take care of yourself because you are weak and vulnerable and if something goes wrong it will happen to you. You are the one who is hurt. This is not defined for men, while it happens to them too. The last thing a boy may think of is sexual and verbal abuse, while for women, this is the first fear. In my opinion, this fear is greater than the fear of theft, that they will be physically and verbally abused.

In my opinion, this sense of being a woman goes back to the fact that this role was instilled in you from childhood. My personal experience says that if all Iranian women who saw harassment instead of acceptance and discomfort, they would have reacted by shouting and announcing and helping. Taking it from others and defining the situation

was different. Being defined as a woman is going to hurt you.

These perspectives lead to the societal expectations shaping women's behavior in public environments. For women in Iran, cultural and societal factors shaping her experiences in the city. They explore the complex interplay of hijab (Dezfuli, 2024), legal mechanisms, and societal attitudes toward gender dynamics and mentioned the absence of clear legal mechanisms for addressing verbal and sexual harassment in Iran, attributing the prevalent issues to societal suppression of sexual needs and the separation of sexes from childhood.

In examining the perspectives of women on the role of urban design and planning in women's perceptions of space, nuanced differences surface. In comparing these perspectives, women from Milwaukee emphasized accessibility and community-centered development and advocated for pedestrian-friendly spaces and well-lit streets. Women from Iran, challenged the cultural underpinnings of harassment rather than design strategies:

Look, these places where I had problems, the

design has no problems. What can you expect from a residential alley or a park that is designed to a standard, and in my opinion, there is no problem in this aspect that I say it is not suitable for women. Cultural and social discussion for women is the driving force of this issue. In my opinion, it is not possible for a person to have the intention of harassing, but by coming into a space because of its design, he regrets his behavior or does not do the harassment. The person who wants to hurt is just looking for a suitable opportunity like the solitude of the space.

Together, these viewpoints underscore the multifaceted nature of creating safe and inclusive public spaces, considering factors ranging from physical design and accessibility to cultural attitudes and community empowerment.

In examining the cultural contexts of safety, Figure 1 illustrates the trend in current research and the results obtained regarding women's experiences in public spaces in Iran and the U.S.

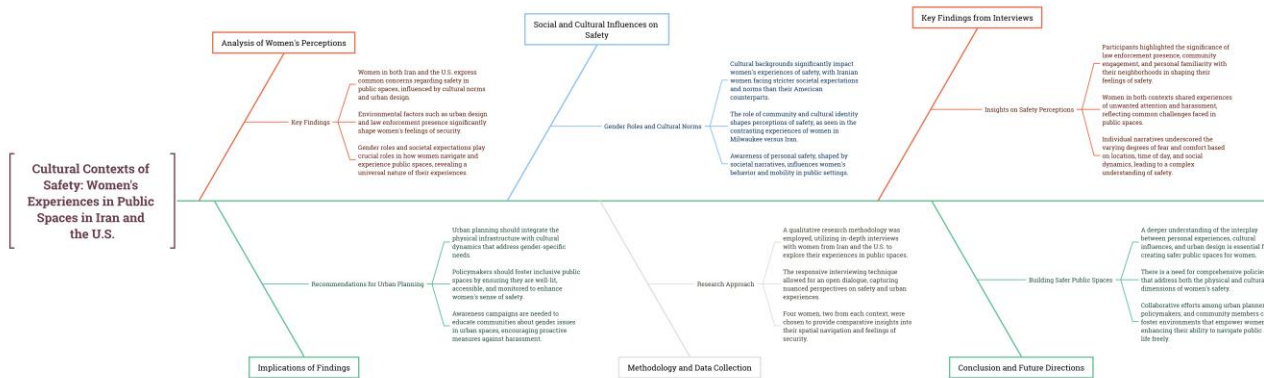


Figure 1: Trends in Current Research on Women's Experiences in Public Spaces in Iran and the U.S.

Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding women's perceptions of public spaces necessitates a nuanced exploration of individual experiences and the multifaceted factors that shape these perceptions. Insights gathered from interviews reveal the complex interplay between personal experiences, cultural influences, and urban design considerations. This comprehensive analysis seeks to distill key themes and draw overarching conclusions from the diverse perspectives presented. Such an approach

aligns with the work of Bevilacqua and Sohrabi (2020), who highlight the importance of networking analysis in urban contexts as a tool for managing urban transitions, emphasizing the need to integrate diverse perspectives and systemic thinking to address the complexities of urban environments effectively. By doing so, urban planning can better address the unique needs and experiences of women, fostering more inclusive and equitable public spaces.

Personal Experiences: Varied Realities

One participant, hailing from Milwaukee, offers valuable insights into how personal experiences shape women's perceptions of safety. Her recognition of the connection between urban familiarity and feelings of security underscores the role of exposure and prior knowledge in influencing these perceptions. While she expresses a sense of safety in familiar environments, she also emphasizes the significance of factors such as police presence, cultural awareness, and socio-economic context in shaping these views. This aligns with the broader literature, which suggests that individual experiences play a critical role in determining feelings of safety or insecurity in public spaces. These findings resonate with the work of Azimi Asmaroud (2022), who explores the importance of knowledge transfer and reasoning in understanding complex systems, highlighting how prior experiences and contextual factors influence decision-making and perceptions in both educational and real-world settings.

The perspective of women from Iran adds a valuable cultural dimension to the analysis, challenging the conventional notion that urban design alone can mitigate harassment and highlighting the pervasive influence of cultural attitudes. Their experiences underscore the deeply gendered nature of societal expectations and reveal the necessity of broader societal transformations to address the root causes of women's vulnerability in public spaces. This aligns with the findings of Rezaei and Gholami Gowhareh (2021), who explore the role of individual investors in driving urban change, particularly in historic districts, and emphasize the interplay between cultural norms, economic dynamics, and urban development. Their research further illustrates how localized cultural contexts shape urban experiences and the need for inclusive strategies that address both physical and social dimensions of urban spaces. Additionally, the importance of addressing uncertainty and systemic risks, as highlighted in Roshdieh's

(2024) study on monetary policy uncertainty and stock market dynamics, as well as Sadeghi et al.'s (2022) work on optimal stock portfolio selection, underscores the broader relevance of managing uncertainty and risk in both economic and urban systems to foster stability and inclusivity.

Cultural Influences: Unpacking Gender Roles

Iranians' narrative provides a profound reflection on the deeply ingrained gender roles in Iranian society. Their suggestions for raising awareness and empowering women to react against harassment reveal a societal need for cultural transformation. This aligns with broader discussions on the importance of dismantling gender norms to create safer public spaces for women globally. The definition of crime diverges significantly between the two countries. In Milwaukee, crime is predominantly characterized by acts like theft, mugging, and catcalling. On the other hand, in Iran, the perception of crime is more centered around verbal and sexual harassment, particularly concerning women. As they say in Milwaukee:

But when I think of crime, I think of like robbery, petty thefts like. Things of that nature, like somebody pulling out and going. Hey, I want your purse or, you know, stealing your car. Like, even when I'm pumping gas at night, I pay attention to, like, my surrounding.

And a woman from Iran said:

I have never had the experience of being stolen from myself and it was mostly about verbal and sexual harassment. So it is the definition of crime for me.

Urban Design: A Balancing Act

American women both highlight the significance of urban design and planning in shaping women's perceptions of public spaces. One underscores the need for accessibility and community-centered development, emphasizing the role of transportation in ensuring equal access and the other, while acknowledging her limited knowledge on urban design, advocates for pedestrian-friendly spaces and well-lit streets. These perspectives emphasize the importance of balancing physical infrastructure with cultural and social considerations to create truly inclusive

public spaces. However, in Iran, they think it is more about social measures and cultural reinforcements:

My suggestion does not have any practical result in the city. I think that people talking to each other about their experiences and raising awareness in the sense that women can take a series of actions in the situation of harassment. Everyone may not be able to shout loudly, but they should know that something can be done against harassment and telling similar stories, they can show a reaction or ask others for help or shout so that the person may be afraid of these reactions. Nothing can be done to prevent harassment until there is a law for it, except for women's own actions. Women should be empowered to defend themselves. Regarding other crimes in the public space, there is a series of laws to some extent, for example, for pickpocketing or theft.

Across the diverse cultural and geographical landscapes of Iran and Milwaukee, striking similarities emerge in the way women perceive safety in public spaces. Both contexts reveal a pronounced influence of cultural norms on women's feelings of vulnerability, although it is much important in Iran. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations contribute to a shared sense of caution and awareness among women in navigating public environments. This common thread underscores the universal impact of cultural influences on shaping perceptions of safety.

A notable commonality is the intersectionality of factors that women in both Iran and Milwaukee must navigate. Their safety considerations are intricately woven with personal experiences, exposure to varied urban environments, economic constraints, and societal expectations. This intersectionality highlights the complex nature of women's perceptions and the multifaceted influences that contribute to their sense of security. Personal experiences play a significant role in shaping perceptions of safety for women in both Iran and Milwaukee. Exposure to different urban environments and familiarity with specific neighborhoods contribute to individual perspectives. This subjectivity emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unique and diverse ways in which women navigate their surroundings, irrespective of cultural nuances.

In acknowledging these similarities, it becomes evident that while cultural contexts differ, the universal challenges women encounter in public spaces call for comprehensive and inclusive approaches. Addressing issues such as gendered harassment, urban design, and the intricate interplay of societal factors requires a nuanced understanding that transcends geographical boundaries.

In conclusion, women's perceptions of public spaces are deeply intertwined with personal experiences, cultural influences, and urban design considerations. The narratives from interviewees collectively underscore the complexity of the issue, highlighting the need for a holistic approach. To create truly inclusive public spaces, urban planners and policymakers must consider not only the physical design but also address cultural norms and societal attitudes that perpetuate gender-based vulnerabilities. By fostering community engagement, raising awareness, and challenging ingrained gender roles, societies can work towards creating public spaces where all individuals, irrespective of gender, feel secure and empowered. This analysis serves as a testament to the diversity of experiences and perspectives that must be taken into account to build a safer and more inclusive urban landscape for women.

References

1. Azimi Asmaroud, S. (2022). Preservice Elementary Teachers' Categorical Reasoning and Knowledge Transfer on Definition Tasks With Two Dimensional Figures. *Theses and Dissertations*. 1588. <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/1588>
2. Baur, Jenelle. Fear of Crime: The Impact of Age, Victimization, Perceived Vulnerability to Victimization and Neighbourhood Characteristics. Australasian Centre for Policing Research, 2007.
3. Beebeejaun, Yasminah. "Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 39, no. 3 (2017): 323-334.
4. Bevilacqua, C., & Sohrabi, P. (2020). Networking analysis in the urban context. Novel instrument for managing the urban transition. *Urbanistica Informazioni*, 12 (Special Issue), 6-10.

5. Blöbaum, Anke, and Marcel Hunecke. "Perceived danger in urban public space: The impacts of physical features and personal factors." *Environment and Behavior* 37, no. 4 (2005): 465-486.
6. Charlesworth, Hilary. "Prospects and Problems for Feminist Theories in International Law." *Thesaurus Acroasium Vol XXXV: Multiculturalism and International Law* (2007).
7. Cook, Rebecca. "Women's international human rights: the way." *Human Rights of Women* (1995).
8. Del Frate, Anna Alvazzi, and Angela Patrignani. *Women's Victimisation in Developing Countries*. Vol. 5. UNICRI, 1995.
9. Dezfuli, S. M. K. P. (2024). The Biopolitics of Hijab in Iran. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 14(3), 512-530. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2024.143029>
10. Dymén, Christian, and Vânia Ceccato. "An international perspective of the gender dimension in planning for urban safety." In *The urban fabric of crime and fear*, pp. 311-339. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012.
11. Dymén, Christian, and Vânia Ceccato. "An international perspective of the gender dimension in planning for urban safety." In *The urban fabric of crime and fear*, pp. 311-339. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012.
12. Entezarizarch, E., Zakerian, S. A., Madreseh, E., Abbasinia, M., & Abdi, H. (2024). Comparative analysis of mental workload and performance between young and elderly drivers: Implications for road safety and age-related driving challenges. *Work*, (Preprint), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3233/wor-230473>
13. Fenster, T. (1999a) Culture, human rights and planning (as control) for minority women in Israel, in: T. Fenster (Ed.) *Gender, Planning and Human Rights* (London: Routledge).
14. Fenster, T. (1999b) Space for gender: cultural roles of the forbidden and the permitted, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 17, pp. 227-246.
15. Fenster, Tovi. "The right to the gendered city: Different formations of belonging in everyday life." *Journal of gender studies* 14, no. 3 (2005): 217-231.
16. Ferraro, Kenneth F. "Women's fear of victimization: Shadow of sexual assault?." *Social forces* 75, no. 2 (1996): 667-690.
17. Ferraro, Kenneth F., and Randy L. LaGrange. "Are older people most afraid of crime? Reconsidering age differences in fear of victimization." *Journal of gerontology* 47, no. 5 (1992): S233-S244.
18. Gargiulo, Irene, Xavier Garcia, Marta Benages-Albert, Javier Martinez, Karin Pfeffer, and Pere Vall-Casas. "Women's safety perception assessment in an urban stream corridor: Developing a safety map based on qualitative GIS." *Landscape and urban planning* 198 (2020): 103779.
19. Ghandeharion, A., & Feyz, M. (2014). Desperate housewives in Albee's who's afraid of Virginia Woolf. *Analele Universității Ovidius din Constanța. Seria Filologie*, 25(1), 12-21.
20. Ghorashi, S. M., Ezzatfar, M., Hatami, R., Bagheri, A., Naseri, S., & Najafabadi, R. N. (2024). The role of subcultures in creating new social issues (with an emphasis on the context of old and new neighborhoods in Tafresh): Qualitative analysis. *Current Opinion*, 4(3), 679-696.
21. Gobster, Paul H., and Lynne M. Westphal. "The human dimensions of urban greenways: planning for recreation and related experiences." *Landscape and urban planning* 68, no. 2-3 (2004): 147-165.
22. Gowhareh, M. R. G., & Taheri Tafti, M. (2022). Multiscalar mechanisms of shrinking small-size cities: the case of Kermanshah Province. *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, 148(1), 05021057. [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(ASCE\)UP.1943-5444.0000779](https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)UP.1943-5444.0000779)
23. Greed, Clara, and Marion Roberts. *Introducing urban design: interventions and responses*. Routledge, 2014.
24. Harvey, Chester, Lisa Aultman-Hall, Stephanie E. Hurley, and Austin Troy. "Effects of skeletal streetscape design on perceived safety." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 142 (2015): 18-28.
25. Harvey, Chester, Lisa Aultman-Hall, Stephanie E. Hurley, and Austin Troy. "Effects of skeletal streetscape design on

- perceived safety." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 142 (2015): 18-28.
26. Haynie, Dana L. "The gender gap in fear of crime, 1973-1994: A methodological approach." *Criminal Justice Review* 23, no. 1 (1998): 29-50.
 27. Jorgensen, Lisa J., Gary D. Ellis, and Edward Ruddell. "Fear perceptions in public parks: Interactions of environmental concealment, the presence of people recreating, and gender." *Environment and Behavior* 45, no. 7 (2013): 803-820.
 28. Kookhaie, T., & Masnavi, M. R. (2014). Environmental Design for Ecological Infrastructure of Urban Landscape through Aggregate with Outlier Principle (AWOP) in Order to Enhance the Quality of Urban Life; the Case of District Two, Tehran City. *Journal of Environmental Studies*, 40(3), 559-572.
 29. Mansourihanis, O., Maghsoodi Tilaki, M. J., Sheikhsfarshi, S., Mohseni, F., & Seyedebrahimi, E. (2024). Addressing urban management challenges for sustainable development: analyzing the impact of neighborhood deprivation on crime distribution in Chicago. *Societies*, 14(8), 139. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14080139>
 30. Massey, Doreen. *Space, place and gender*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
 31. Moghaddam, P. K., Izadian, N., Haghightajoo, M., Jafari, A. M., & Zahedi, M. The Impact of Design Team Characteristics on Construction Project Performance with the Mediating Role of Construction Project Costs. *Tehnički glasnik*, 19(2),1-8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.31803/tg-20240829131515>
 32. Navarrete-Hernandez, Pablo, Arielle Vetro, and Paz Concha. "Building safer public spaces: Exploring gender difference in the perception of safety in public space through urban design interventions." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 214 (2021): 104180.
 33. Pain, Rachel H. "Social geographies of women's fear of crime." *Transactions of the Institute of British geographers* (1997): 231-244.
 34. Pateman, C. (1988) *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity).
 35. Pateman, Carol. "The Disorder of Women (Cambridge: Polity)." (1989).
 36. Ratnayake, Rangajeewa. "Fear of crime in urban settings: Influence of environmental features, presence of people and social variables." *Bhumi, The Planning Research Journal* 3, no. 2 (2016).
 37. Ratnayake, Rangajeewa. "Fear of crime in urban settings: Influence of environmental features, presence of people and social variables." *Bhumi, The Planning Research Journal* 3, no. 2 (2016).
 38. Rezaei, N., & Gholami Gowhareh, M. (2021). Individual Investors as Drivers of Urban Change: The Case of Historic District of Kashan, Iran. *Heritage & Society*, 14(2-3), 304-326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2022.2126212>
 39. Romer, Daniel, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Sean Aday. "Television news and the cultivation of fear of crime." *Journal of communication* 53, no. 1 (2003): 88-104.
 40. Roshdieh, N. (2024). The Effect of Monetary Policy Uncertainty on Stock Market Uncertainty with NARDL Approach. *Research Journal of Finance and Accounting*, 15(10), 1-9.
 41. Sadeghi, S., Marjani, T., Hassani, A., & Moreno, J. (2022). Development of Optimal Stock Portfolio Selection Model in the Tehran Stock Exchange by Employing Markowitz Mean-Semivariance Model. *Journal of Finance Issues*, 20(1), 47-71.
 42. Skogan, Wesley G., and Michael G. Maxfield. *Coping with crime: Individual and neighborhood reactions*. Vol. 124. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981.
 43. Skogan, Wesley. "Fear of crime and neighborhood change." *Crime and justice* 8 (1986): 203-229.
 44. Smith, William R., Marie Torstensson, and Kerstin Johansson. "Perceived risk and fear of crime: Gender differences in contextual sensitivity." *International Review of Victimology* 8, no. 2 (2001): 159-181.
 45. Talebzadeh, H., Fattahiamin, A., Talebzadeh, M., Sanaei, F., Moghaddam, P. K., & Espahbod, S. (2024). Optimizing Supply Chains: A Grey-DEMATEL Approach to

- Implementing LARG Framework. *Tehnički glasnik* 19(3):1-8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.31803/tg-20240302201341>
46. Valentine, Gill. "Women's fear and the design of public space." *Built Environment* (1978-) (1990): 288-303.
47. Van den Berg, Agnes E., and Marlien Ter Heijne. "Fear versus fascination: An exploration of emotional responses to natural threats." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 25, no. 3 (2005): 261-272.
48. van Kesteren, Johannes Nicolaas, Pat Mayhew, and Paul Nieuwbeerta. "Criminal victimisation in seventeen industrialised countries: key-findings from the 2000 International Crime Victims Survey." (2000).
49. Warr, Mark. "Fear of rape among urban women." *Social problems* 32, no. 3 (1985): 238-250.
50. Whitzman, Carolyn. "Women's safety and everyday mobility." *Building inclusive cities: Women's safety and the right to the city* (2013): 35-52.
51. Whitzman, Carolyn. "Women's safety and everyday mobility." *Building inclusive cities: Women's safety and the right to the city* (2013): 35-52.
52. Yuval-Davis, Nira. "Women, citizenship and difference." *Feminist review* 57, no. 1 (1997): 4-27.