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*Gendered urban fear: understanding female students' inhibitions in the public space*

*Introduction*

Fear is seen for the most part as a marginal issue in planning theory, and is often only given the attention it deserves when it is seen as indistinguishable from risk.<sup>1</sup> But fear is an emotion that can also be separated completely from risk – the result of social relations produced through intersection with others.<sup>2</sup> The possible risk that such intersection might entail causes an emotional reaction, as “the other” is seen as that which is causing us fear. At the same time, fear necessarily has an impact at the spatial level, as it is a feeling inseparable from a person’s geography, leaving an impression of certain places in the human mind. A study of the social and geographical circumstances of fear then, would allow us to understand the role that fear often plays in society, at times even unintentionally leading to certain groups becoming marginalised.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of fear as it is approached in this article refers primarily to *feelings* of a lack of safety in the urban space. The extent to which one feels fear is thus associated with how secure they feel while traversing their city, and the degree to which those feelings are

1 Hazem Abu-Orf, *Fear of Difference: Space of Risk and Anxiety in Violent Settings*, «Planning Theory», 2012, vol. 12, n. 2, pp. 158-176.

2 Hille Koskela, *Fear and its Others*, in Susan J Smith, Rachel Pain, Sallie Marston, John Paul Jones III (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Social Geographies*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2010, pp. 389-407.

3 John R. Gold, George Revill, *Exploring Landscapes of Fear: Marginality, Spectacle and Surveillance*, «Capital & Class», 2003, vol. 27 n. 2, pp. 27-50.

shaped socially and spatially. In this context, perceptions of fear will primarily be discussed as part and parcel of a fear of crime and/or harassment that emerge through intersection with others or, alternatively, associations that are made with specific places. However, fear of other factors prevalent in the urban environment will also be considered, such as fear of uncomfortable confrontations, even when such incidents do not amount to crime per se.

Whether it be fear that is actually connected to risk, or perceived fear that is the emotional result of social and spatial structures, it can constitute a barrier to an individual's access to opportunities and social affiliations, limiting specific sections of the population in different ways.<sup>4</sup> This is why paying attention to the gender dimension of fear can help us gauge the extent to which this emotion affects women's everyday choices, from the way they decide to move around the city, to the way they engage with the urban setting. Gendered fear then ought to be a central theme in planning, as its presence in the urban environment can have an impact on the fairness of access and appropriation of public spaces.

As has been shown, women are more likely to avoid certain places out of fear,<sup>5</sup> a self-exclusion mechanism that is connected with the threat of male violence, thus becoming a spatial expression of patriarchal dynamics that in many instances restricts the use of public space for women.<sup>6</sup> A fear of sexual harassment keeps coming up in the literature,<sup>7</sup> revealing itself as the most common issue in women's mobility, especially among younger ages.<sup>8</sup> This is especially true when it comes to dark and isolated areas, or during night hours, when fear tends to confine women to spaces they perceive as safe – whether because they are private, like their home, or highly visible and populated, like the centre of their city. And while not all women experience

4 Barbara Borlini, Francesco Memo, *Ripensare l'Accessibilità Urbana*, «Cittalia Fondazione ANCI Ricerche», 2009, pp. 37-41.

5 Stéphanie Condon, Marylène Lieber, Florence Maillochon, *Feeling Unsafe in Public Places: Understanding Women's Fears*, «Revue Française de Sociologie», 2007, vol. 48, n. 5, pp. 101-128.

6 Gill Valentine, *The Geography of Women's Fear*, «Area», 1989, vol. 21, n. 4, pp. 385-390.

7 Mauricio Orozco-Fontalvo, José Soto, Andrea Arévalo, Oscar Oviedo-Trespalacios, *Women's perceived risk of sexual harassment in a 4 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system: The case of 5 Barranquilla, Colombia*, «Journal of Transport & Health», 2019, vol. 14.

8 Vania Ceccato, *Women's Transit Safety: Making Connections and Defining Future Directions in Research and Practice*, «Crime Prevention and Community Safety», 2017, vol. 19, pp. 276-287.

a daily fear of crime, and fear ranges broadly in terms of frequency, intensity, but also in the extent to which it reflects actual risk, the existence of such inhibitions does have its implications in how women experience the urban, and how actively they participate in society.

This is why women's fear is to be analysed separately from men's – because it differs in nature, extent, connection to actual risks and far-reaching implications. Namely, said fear exists in women regardless of age and background or prior experiences; women are much more likely than men to have such inhibitions when moving through the public space; their worry is more connected to likely risks than men's when it comes to sexual violence; the fear that women experience has a greater impact on their lives and their participation in society than the fear of crime which men experience, has on theirs.<sup>9</sup>

### *Literature Review*

But observing the urban from a gendered perspective shows that many of the planning choices made up to now reflect political decisions which continue to accommodate the dominant social structure, and facilitate the male order, accepting male experience as the norm.<sup>10</sup> This lack of consideration when it comes to the female urban experience is not accidental and it very much reiterates a society that keeps placing barriers in the way of women's participation in public life and their engagement with the urban setting.<sup>11</sup> If women more commonly experience fear than men, this is not because fear is an innate female emotion; women are not born fearful of taking possession of the public space. If fear ends up constituting an obstacle in their lives, ranging from slight and occasional discomfort to a profound sense of dread that dictates their lifestyle, this must mean that their social and spatial everyday experiences work together to produce such inhibitions.<sup>12</sup>

9 Rachel Pain, *Space, Sexual Violence and Social Control: Integrating Geographical and Feminist Analyses of Women's Fear of Crime*, «Progress in Human Geography», 1991, vol. 15, n. 4, pp. 415-431.

10 Leslie Kern, *Feminist city: Claiming Space in a Man-made World*, London-New York, Verso, 2020.

11 Florencia Andreola, Azzurra Muzzonigro, *Sex & the City. Fra autodeterminazione di genere e governo della città*, «Tracce Urbane. Rivista Italiana Transdisciplinare Di Studi Urbani», 2021, vol. 9, n. 5, pp. 117-144.

12 Hille Koskela, *Gendered Exclusions: Women's Fear of Violence and Changing Relations to Space*, «Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography», 1999, vol. 81, n. 2, pp. 111-124.

So space is not neutral, and women's unequal status within it can often lead to feelings of fear. This means that certain spaces can function as fear generators, whether due to their physical features, their social connotations or their limited density and visibility.<sup>13</sup> This explains why insufficiently-lit alleys and uncared-for underpasses, public areas with a bad reputation or less populated areas outside the city centre can enhance perceptions of fear and insecurity among female urban dwellers – a sense of dread that is often further enhanced by how the particular space tends to be used and appropriated, which also fluctuates depending on the time of day.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, a study on women's nighttime mobility carried out in Milan revealed that almost half of the female interviewees had given up travelling after dark altogether, as nighttime accessibility to and from certain parts of the city appears limited, whether it be due to a poor quality of the transport service available and the public space surrounding it, due to a perceived lack of safety that has to do with the negative reputation of the facility, or both.<sup>15</sup> What is more, women were shown to experience a much more significant drop in perceived safety than men when travelling at night, especially when walking through green, residential areas of Milan, as opposed to mixed-use neighbourhoods which facilitate public dwelling.<sup>16</sup>

It is natural for women to adopt strategies that allow them to cope with fear, and so, it is to be expected that they will commonly distance themselves from spaces and situations that entail some level of risk. This, however, automatically means that men are given a greater right to the public space than women, thereby strengthening gender inequality in the urban setting. Several approaches have been adopted to address this inequality, while also working to increase women's feelings of safety, by looking at women's mobility in different urban contexts. A recurring experiment aiming at a resolu-

13 Marta Román Rivas, *Recuperar la confianza, recuperar la ciudad*, in Ana Falú (ed.), *Mujeres en la Ciudad. De violencias y derechos*, Santiago De Chile, Red Mujer y Hábitat De América Latina, 2009, pp. 137-144.

14 Francesca Savoldi, *Women, Technology and the Spatiality of Fear: The Challenge of Participatory Mapping and Perceptions of Safety in Urban Spaces*, in Sonia De Gregorio Hurtado, Inés Novella Abril (eds), *Engendering Habitat III: Facing the Global Challenges in Cities*, «Territory of Research on Settlements and Environment, International Journal of Urban Planning», 2016, vol. 9, pp. 159-169.

15 Nandita Basu, Mohammad Mazharul Haque, Mark King, Mohammed Kamruzzaman, Oscar Oviedo-Trespalacios, *The Unequal Gender Effects of the Suburban Built Environment on Perceptions of Security*, «Journal of Transport & Health», 2021, vol. 23.

16 *Ibidem*.

tion has been the highly controversial phenomenon of women-only transportation in cities like Mexico City,<sup>17</sup> or Tokyo<sup>18</sup> – but also less extreme measures, such as adding cameras or improving lighting, which have oftentimes been put forward by researchers.<sup>19</sup> The general consensus remains, however, that most of these changes would do little to reduce feelings of unease among female urban dwellers, as the type of fear that we are dealing with has more to do with power relations and a social setting that is conceding primary rights to men, than an actual threat of crime.<sup>20</sup>

This has been a turning point in the research, leading feminist scholars to propose design and transport changes that address deeper gender inequalities, in order to de-gender the urban.<sup>21</sup> And interestingly, where this de-gendering of the urban begins is the city centre. Let us not forget that a number of feminist movements were originally organised around the common goal that women attend the public space freely and independently – especially spaces connected to consumption. The city centre then, with its shopping district and leisure opportunities, typically middle-class, socially-minded and opposing the solitude of the domestic sphere, is the place to start, seen as a safe and free space for women, a place which grants female urbanites equal power to men to socially interact and politically mobilise.<sup>22</sup>

Achieving equal status and the autonomy, freedom and power that this brings with it, is a *process*. Which means that safety is also a process. The concept of shelter in the public space is broad and multifaceted, and it has to do with a lot more than just protection from

17 Amy Dunckel-Graglia, *Women-Only Transportation: How ‘Pink’ Public Transportation Changes Public Perception of Women’s Mobility*, «Journal of Public Transportation», 2013, vol. 16, n. 2, pp. 85–105.

18 Mitsutoshi Horii, Adam Burgess, *Constructing Sexual Risk: ‘Chikan’, Collapsing Male Authority and the Emergence of Women-Only Train Carriages in Japan*, «Health, Risk & Society», 2012, vol. 14, n. 1, pp. 41–55.

19 Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Camille Fink, *Addressing Women’s Fear of Victimization in Transportation Settings*, «Urban Affairs Review», 2008, vol. 44, n. 4, pp. 554–587.

20 Hille Koskela, Rachel Pain, *Revisiting Fear and Place: Women’s Fear of Attack and the Built Environment*, «Geoforum», 2000, vol. 31, n. 2, pp. 269–280.

21 Dorina Pojani, Dorothy Wardale, Kerry Brown, *Sexism and the City: How Urban Planning Has Failed Women*, «The Conversation», 2018, <<https://theconversation.com/sexism-and-the-city-how-urban-planning-has-failed-women-93854>> (10/2023).

22 Jessica Ellen Sewell, *Women and the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco, 1890-1915*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

violence.<sup>23</sup> To create shelter for women relies primarily on a protection from *feelings* of fear and unease, situations that create inhibitions and thus compromise the female *experience* within the urban setting. To get out of this insecurity, we ought to broaden the concepts of fear and safety to the extent that they come to integrate as many actors and elements as their construction seems to have required in the first place. Fear, just like any human emotion, is complex, and therefore tackling it is just as complex, needing as many different agents and areas of research and discussion as we can summon. Not to mention that safety is a *collective* process, one which reclaims the public space as a place of relationships, shared comfort, and mutual trust,<sup>24</sup> and a perceived lack of it, may even become an inadvertent side-effect of well-meaning changes within the urban, which further stresses the need for addressing it collectively.<sup>25</sup>

In this collective effort, gathering data from female university students –a demographic that reflects well the broad range of possible experiences of insecurity– could allow us to both gauge the extent to which fear differs among young women, as well as to trace common ground. A study involving students from 18 cities on six continents, recently looked into how the worry that sexual violence might occur when using public transport, leads to precautionary strategies being adopted, from avoiding certain routes to opting out of travelling altogether, both barriers to movement which limit life opportunities.<sup>26</sup> Identifying then the different forms of fear that female students might experience –the type, frequency, intensity and effect– in different urban realities, and any subsequent barriers, could help explain the impact of such inhibitions on the lives of young women more broadly.

### *Methodology*

The reflections and data presented in this article have been developed from a broader study on the mobility of students at the

23 Giada Bonu, Rita Petruccioli, *In principio fu "la città delle dame". Da Christine de Pizan agli spazi transfemministi: immaginari, genealogie, mutamento*, «Tracce Urbane. Rivista Italiana Transdisciplinare Di Studi Urbani», 2021, vol. 5, n. 9, pp. 94–115.

24 Rivas, *Recuperar la confianza, recuperar la ciudad*, p. 143.

25 Simone Tulumello, *Fear and Urban Planning in Ordinary Cities: From Theory to Practice*, «Planning Practice & Research», 2015, vol. 30, n. 5, pp. 477-496.

26 Vania Ceccato, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, *Fear of Sexual Harassment and Its Impact on Safety Perceptions in Transit Environments: A Global Perspective*, «Violence against Women», 2021, vol. 28, n. 1, pp. 26-48.

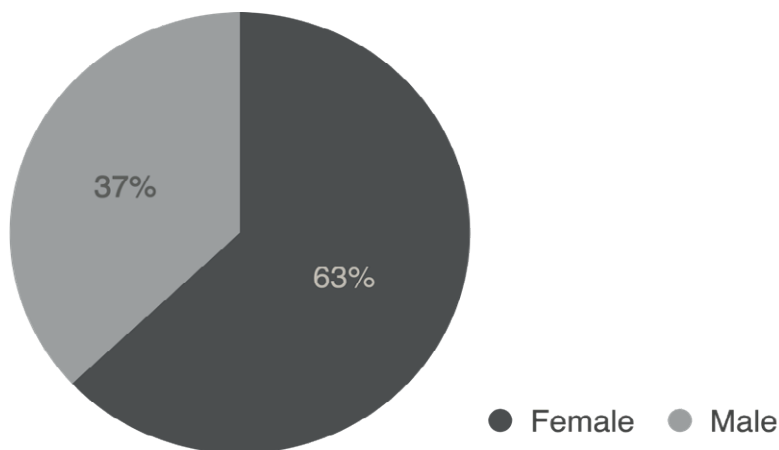


Figure 1: *Sample gender distribution*

University of Florence, aimed at detecting a) the characteristics of systematic student mobility and a possible propensity towards sustainable forms of transport and b) non-systematic trips as a key to understanding students' relationship with the urban context. The study has employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies: a) the handing out of standardised questionnaires with predominantly open-ended questions on mobility (systematic and non-systematic) and urban practices; b) the carrying out of semi-structured interviews aimed at facilitating the interpretation and classification of the answers to the before-mentioned open-ended questions regarding urban practices.

The quantitative part of the study (standardised questionnaires) involved a random sample of 2006 students (accounting for 3.7% of the total students enrolled in the University of Florence). The survey, conducted in May 2022, was carried out at all University of Florence sites, and it consisted of 63% female and 37% male students (Fig. 1), a gender distribution which, according to official data, seems to represent that of the overall UniFi student body.<sup>27</sup>

Participant age ranged largely between 19 and 26 but the study did not exclude the possibility of gathering data from older students. Since those who were interviewed were selected only on the basis of

<sup>27</sup> According to official University of Florence data, the gender distribution of UniFi students is 58.4% women and 41.6% men (reference year 2021-22) <[https://www.unifi.it/upload/sub/bilancio/2021/bilancio\\_genero\\_21\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unifi.it/upload/sub/bilancio/2021/bilancio_genero_21_eng.pdf)>.

their status as UniFi students, it is hard to discern patterns in social status and/or ethnicity. This may present a limitation to the study, since it is evident that the effects of fear also hinge on social status. However, in analysing the data gathered, it can be assumed that for the most part the interviewees do not represent the lower rungs of the social ladder, based on established indicators of social class, such as education level (all interviewees hold a high school diploma and/or a degree).<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, emphasis will remain on gender for this study, and focus will be placed specifically on the students residing in Florence, who make up 55% of the overall sample. While social status will remain uncertain and/or in the background, it is acknowledged that the group under study is largely homogeneous, both with regards to education level and, in this case, residence within the City of Florence.

Questionnaires were written, which meant that participants were given the time to compose their answers onto an answer sheet. The two authors later transcribed the students' answers, which were coded and processed using SPSS. A descriptive analysis of the data followed, based primarily upon measures of frequency (of a response) and the statistical patterns that emerged.

The qualitative part of the study involved 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with 7 female and 7 male students of the University of Florence in May 2022. A year later, in June 2023, the data that had resulted from the interviews was supplemented by another 21 student interviews –which 12 female and 9 male– during the Urban Workshop “I live in Florence”, which was set up as part of the UniFi Master's programme in *Geography, Spatial Management, Heritage for International Cooperation*, held at the Casa del Popolo di San Niccolò, and which deepened the existing insight on the students' relationship with the urban context.

Questions in both the questionnaires and the interviews largely revolved around the ways students opt to get around and enjoy the city. The survey's main objective was to attempt to identify patterns regarding the transport choices students make for their routine and leisure movements, as well as regarding their urban practices. And upon processing the data, what was soon clear was that gender only became a significant variable when the questions regarding favourite

28 Huda Zurayk, Safwan Halabi, Mary Deeb, *Measures of Social Class Based on Education for Use in Health Studies in Developing Countries*, «Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health», 1987, vol. 41, n. 2, pp. 173–179.



pastimes, as well as places that students favour or avoid in Florence, were asked. Up until that point, gender did not seem to affect the results in any major way. This significant pattern was what ultimately led to this study, and what highlights a need for further exploration into how gender affects the way that women experience the urban space, in order to attain a deeper understanding of the places and situations that lead to feelings of fear or safety among female dwellers.

This means that no questions explicitly phrased so as to gauge feelings of fear were asked, but rather the authors set out to understand the students' social behaviours, and how said behaviours might be interpreted from the point of view of risk perception. Specifically, rather than relying upon closed questions such as "are you afraid of...?" or leading questions like "why are you fearful of...", the interpretation of the answers depended upon an assessment of the students' social behaviour. This approach is advocated by Liska et al. who assert that "two general patterns have been studied in the literature: avoiding sites and protecting oneself while in sites".<sup>29</sup> Subjects will thus "constrain their behaviour to safe areas" or adopt protective behaviours.<sup>30</sup> Questions revolving around which areas students avoid, or how they act in those areas, potentially then yield more accurate behavioural patterns than explicit "fear" questions, since participants of the study will likely feel less willing to open up when confronted with if and why they are afraid.

While this is likely the case, it has also been posited that "fear" as it has already been defined above, may lead to protective behaviours (for example, avoiding certain areas at night, opting not to wear headphones), and such protective behaviours may *also* lead to a *reduction* in fear.<sup>31</sup> This potential contradiction ought to be considered in analysing the results. This is how, for instance, the shopping district of a city becomes not simply a "protective" space but also a place of potential empowerment.<sup>32</sup>

So, analysing the data in the discussion section that follows, three research questions will drive the study forward: 1. *Does routine modal*

29 Allen Liska, Andrew Sanchirico, Mark Reed, *Fear of Crime and Constrained Behavior Specifying and Estimating a Reciprocal Effects Model*, «Social Forces», 1988, vol. 66, n. 3, p. 828.

30 *Ibidem*.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 835.

32 José Nederhand, Fior Avelino, Isabel Awad, Petra De Jong, Michael Duijn, Jurian Edelenbos, Jiska Engelbert, Jan Fransen, Maria Schiller, Naomi Van Staple, *Reclaiming the City from an Urban Vitalism Perspective: Critically Reflecting Smart, Inclusive, Resilient and Sustainable Just City Labels*, «Cities», 2023, vol. 137.

*choice manifest feelings of insecurity among female UniFi students? 2. Is there a gender difference in the way that students choose to spend their free time? 3. Is the decision to favour or avoid certain areas in the city motivated by feelings of safety or fear?*

### *Discussion*

#### *1. Routine trips*

The data revealed that 86% of the female students that participated in the study use public transport or walk to access their university department. The percentage of active or collective transport drops to 70% when we look at the male students in the sample. But a more interesting gender difference worth pointing out regarding UniFi students' routine trips concerns the use of private motorised transport, with a much higher percentage of male students choosing this mode of transport when getting to university (Fig. 2).

A couple of things to consider regarding the above data: First, the fact that a significantly higher share of male students choose to drive to university. Considering the fact that gender did not prove to be relevant when analysing the students' answers to the open question regarding income ("average monthly income excluding accommodation costs"), it does not seem likely that this is down to financial restraint. Also, keeping in mind that this examination focuses solely on the students residing in Florence, this does not seem to be connected to important differences in distance. It would be reasonable to assume then that something else prevents female students from driving as much, and we could argue that this decision may in itself be rooted in feelings of fear – perhaps a fear of traffic accidents, of sexual violence, of theft or mugging, or even a feeling of insecurity while driving, which could be associated to the possibility of confrontation.<sup>33</sup> Research has demonstrated that male drivers are more likely to display aggressive behaviour on the road, and that this tendency is partly due to traditional gender role socialisation, which establishes assertive male drivers, while female drivers tend to remain passive, refraining from reacting to instances of male aggression in

33 Nilüfer Ercana, Özden Melis Uluğ, *You See That Driver? I Bet That's a Woman!': A Social Psychological Approach to Understand Sexism in Traffic*, «International Conference on Knowledge and Politics in Gender and Women's Studies», 2015, pp. 789-798.

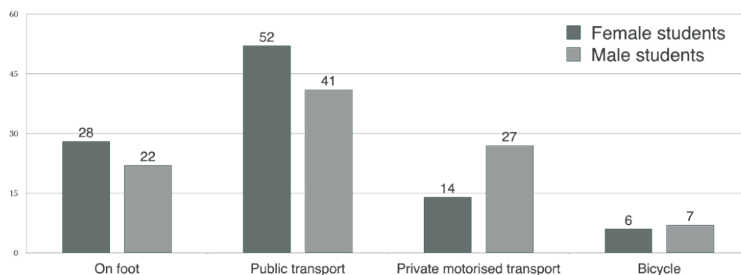


Figure 2: UniFi students' routine modal choice

order to avoid uncomfortable confrontations.<sup>34</sup> On top of this, male drivers are generally more likely to become aggressive with a female driver than with a fellow man, since it has been argued that female-initiated disruption can spark more hostile behaviours from men.<sup>35</sup> This might then add a layer of insecurity that could reduce women's eagerness to drive when there is a viable alternative and the infrastructure in place to allow them to get to their destination, avoiding unnecessary stress and tensions.

Second, and along the same line of argument, it is worth hypothesising on the higher shares of female students using public transport and soft modes as being connected to a stronger need for women to rid themselves of the stress that they might feel comes with driving. The insecurity and feelings of powerlessness that sharing a competitive space can give rise to for a female driver – especially a young and relatively inexperienced one – have been greatly disregarded by studies that deal with gendered urban fear, and it is really only online blogs and forums or similar informal outlets of everyday interaction that touch upon this issue.<sup>36</sup> One female UniFi

34 Dwight A. Hennessy, David L. Wiesenthal, *The Relationship between Driver Aggression, Violence, and Vengeance*, «Violence and Victims», 2002, vol. 17, n. 6, pp. 707–718.

35 Michael M. Kasumovic, Jeffrey H. Kuznekoff, *Insights into Sexism: Male Status and Performance Moderates Female-Directed Hostile and Amicable Behaviour*, «PLOS ONE», 2015, vol. 10, n. 9.

36 To the angry male drivers out there, road rage is no excuse for sexism, <<https://the-riotact.com/to-the-angry-male-drivers-out-there-road-rage-is-no-excuse-for-sexism/554332>> (10/23). Sexism on the roads – Told by women who drive, <<https://gendermatters.in/sexism-on-the-roads/>> (10/23). Road rage is sexist & these female drivers know it, <<https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2018/11/216815/road-rage-sexist-women>> (10/23).

student from China admitted during her interview that she does not drive to university, even though she has both a license and a car, because she is “worried about making a mistake while driving, misreading a road sign, or going down the wrong road”. But in order to understand the extent that fear of this kind might actually prevent women from driving more broadly, pertinent surveys would need to be carried out, based on interviews specifically directed at women who routinely and intentionally opt out of driving.

## 2. Leisure trips

Students have little power over the location of their university site and where the majority of their classes will take place. However, they do get to completely decide how, where and when their leisure activities will be carried out. Being free to choose everything that concerns their pastimes means that students will arrange their free time in a way that keeps any discomfort down to a minimum – with female students then opting for activities, as well as locations and ways to access them, that rid them of feelings of fear and allow them to fully enjoy themselves. In our survey, we posed an open question in order to gauge the kind of activities that UniFi students choose to engage in during their free time. Their responses were then grouped into 10 pastime categories, of which two activities stand out, mentioned by more than 1/5 of the students – “indoor workout” and “going into the centre”. The two pastimes that follow these in terms of popularity are “individual cultural activities” (for example, painting) and “outdoor workout” (Fig. 3).

What is interesting to stress here is that first, “going into the centre” is exactly the expression used by the respondents to define the activity, which means that they see it as a pastime in itself because of *where* it takes place. In a sense then, the centre of Florence emerges as a favourite place *and* a collective pastime, thus a space of contact between the students and the city, a place of relationships, and as such, a space that favours socialisation and increases feelings of safety.<sup>37</sup> Approached as a leisure activity, “going into the centre” is not so much about the specific places within it, as much as it is about the communal character of the centre as a notion, and the kinds of shared and public experience that it facilitates. In a way, “going into the centre” here can be understood along the same lines as “going

37 Rivas, *Recuperar la confianza, recuperar la ciudad*, p. 143.

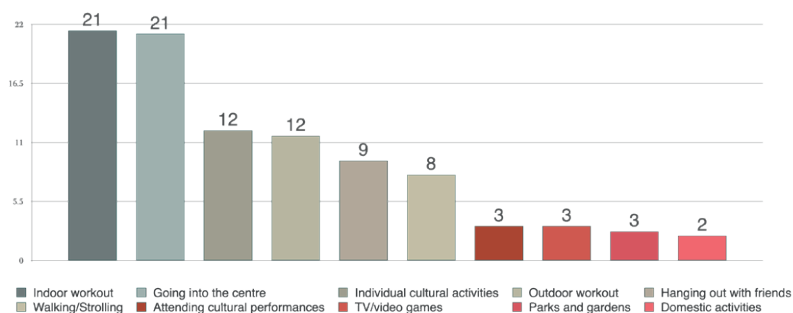


Figure 3: *Students' favourite pastime activities*

to the mall”); a pastime and a built setting that come together to conjure up visibility and closeness, and evoke feelings of safety, by providing its dwellers –especially women– a sense of control over their surroundings. At the same time it should be stressed that the city centre, just like the mall, only *appears* to be a public, civic place, when in reality it is largely privately owned,<sup>38</sup> with its spaces driven by consumption and run for profit.<sup>39</sup> It is troubling that the space which by definition offers a sense of independence and safety, only does so because its very existence is dependent upon the extent to which its dwellers are free to consume. So, although a safe place to commune, this communing comes at an obscured cost. Which essentially means that a sense of safety comes at a cost.

Second, considerable gender differences are observed – while indoor and outdoor sports are more prevalent among men, “going into the centre” is significantly more common among women (Fig. 4). Neither is surprising, as exercising outdoors requires one to feel comfortable with being exposed and fairly vulnerable, not to mention, often listening to music with headphones on, hence, with compromised reflexes – a precarious state for a young woman to be in. This might also explain why the share of the female students that engage in indoor workouts is noticeably higher – probably because the susceptibility and unease that are associated with being outside, and

38 Mirella Loda, Silvia Aru, Manuela Barsotelli, Stefania Sbardella, *I dehors fra erosione dello spazio pubblico e nuove forme di convivialità*, in Mirella Loda, Manfred Hinz (a cura di), *Lo spazio pubblico urbano. Teorie, progetti e pratiche in un confronto internazionale*, Pisa, Pacini, 2011, pp. 83-104.

39 Jon Goss, *The ‘Magic of the Mall’: An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment*, «Annals of the Association of American Geographers», 1993, vol. 83, n. 1, pp. 18–47.

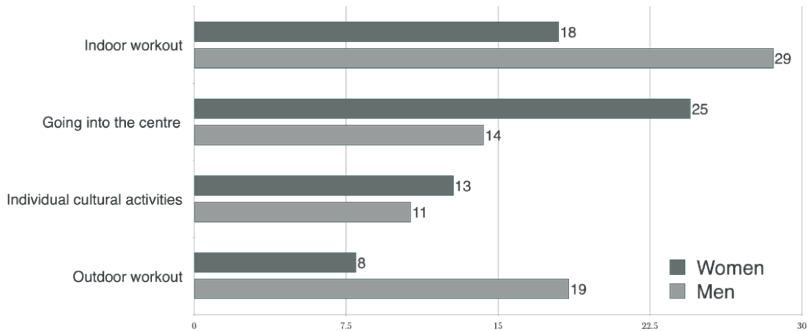


Figure 4: *Most popular pastime activities among female and male students*

in a fragile state, disappear. Now as far as “going into the centre” is concerned, again the prevalence among women was to be expected, mainly for the reasons discussed above. Both the setting and the pastime allow for a seen, close-knit, socially minded female experience. Women get to move around freely and independently in the city centre where the middle-class spaces of consumption stand in physical and mental contrast to the seclusion of the domestic sphere.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, “going into the centre” affirms itself as an invigorating female pastime in a setting which grants female urbanites safety and an equal power to men to socially interact and politically mobilise. Even if the social and political potential of this environment, being dependent upon the act of consumption, is partly limited by the fact that it comes at a cost.

The sense of security provided by public spaces in the city centre links back to how fear was defined by the authors in the introduction to this article. The answers to the open question “What do you like doing in your free time?” helps to illustrate this. The fact that young female students opt for the gym more frequently than a solitary run, or opt for spending their free time in the city centre rather than privately, seems to point to the conclusion that young women gravitate towards where there are people, where there is activity. This possible motivator provides footing for further exploration into why this might be the case, beyond more conventional notions of female behaviours (a superficial preference for shopping and so on) and towards deeper understanding of the differences between how men

40 Sewell, *Women and the Everyday City*.

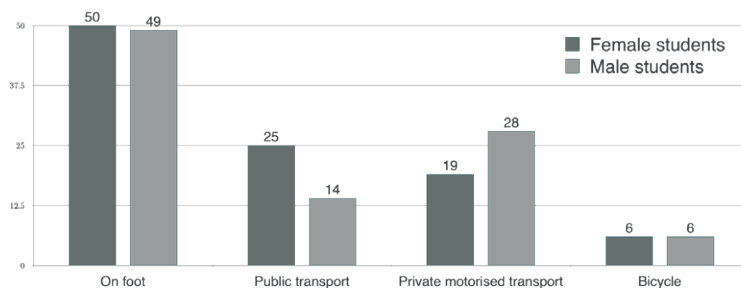


Figure 5: *UniFi students' leisure modal choice*

and women approach the urban space. In this light, the choice to be around people could be read as both a consequence of “behaviours, values and attitudes, which are conventionally linked by societal norms to one or the other sex” *and* a way to shed themselves of such stereotypes by seeking empowerment through being together, or in groups, where they cease to be vulnerable, or feel less vulnerable.<sup>41</sup>

Gender equality with respect to the city centre is highlighted through the students' ways of accessing their pastime locations. Our results reveal that just as many male as female students choose to walk to get to the location of their favourite pastime (Fig. 5). There are two things worth mentioning here regarding student modal choice for leisure trips, especially when juxtaposed with student modal choice for routine trips. First, the fact that a much higher percentage of female students choose to walk to their favourite pastime than to university, which shows walking as being considered for them part-and-parcel of the free-time activity, with the leisure activity starting when the walk to its location begins, and with socialising, mingling and taking control of the public space often commencing before the place of their pastime is even accessed. What we can deduce from this is that women are more willing to walk for leisure than they are to get to class, which might again come down to a more pronounced sense of agency, in the sense that they might have chosen their pastime in such a way so as to be able to completely determine their route, time of day and perhaps even availability of walking partners, so that they walk to their location of leisure completely on their own terms, which makes the journey feel safer and thus, more pleasant.

<sup>41</sup> Sofi Johansson, Karen Haandrikman, *Gendered Fear of Crime in the Urban Context: A Comparative Multilevel Study of Women's and Men's Fear of Crime*, «Journal of Urban Affairs», 2021, vol. 45, n. 7, p. 3.

Second, according to the data, women again use public transport for leisure trips more than men, which contrasts with studies asserting a fear of sexual violence when using public transport to lead to precautionary strategies being adopted, from avoiding certain routes to opting out of travelling altogether, both to varying degrees barriers to movement for female students.<sup>42</sup> This deviation is likely connected to the city's size, as the more compact the urban environment, the easier it becomes to achieve a continuity of safety in public transit nodes, without too many interruptions in visibility and density. Also, female students, again, drive less than their male counterparts. Both these results are in line with what the data revealed regarding routine trips, and as discussed previously, it might be worth investigating the connection between traffic-related stress, and female students shying away from driving. Finally, in the case of the car, a further source of unease and insecurity might be for a woman to be alone in one, especially during evening hours, and the limited visibility that this is associated with, as well as the fact that parking spaces are not always easy to find, which means that especially in the case of female students "going into the centre", parking has to be sought outside the very centre, in less populated areas, perhaps further enhancing feelings of vulnerability. One female student from Florence confirmed this assumption when she stated in her interview that she opts out of driving because using her car comes with then having to look for a parking spot "somewhere outside the main central zone, in more remote areas which are not always well-lit".

### *3. Urban experience*

When the students were asked about their favourite leisure spots, the historic centre –whether as a whole or a specific place within it– stood out in terms of popularity. Green city spaces came in second place, while cultural venues (libraries, museums) within the centre, and places in the suburbs, were mentioned by only a small number of students. It should be noted here that a number of other places were mentioned by just one or perhaps two students, places that were not particularly significant in any objective sense, but which the qualitative interviews showed the students to have developed a special connection with, as was highlighted through responses like:

42 Ceccato, *Fear of Sexual Harassment*, p. 28.



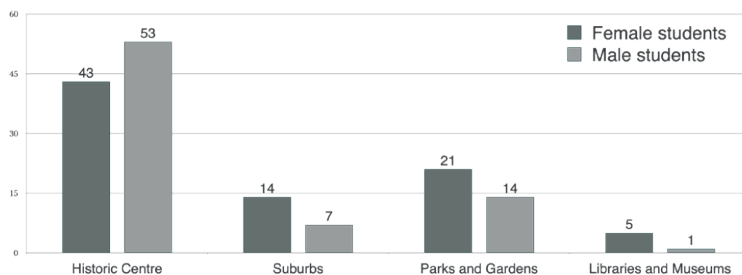


Figure 6: *Places students tend to favour*

“I feel at home here”; “I like that the people know me here, so I can chat with them”; “There is neighbourhood life here, because you’re away from the tourists”. Such responses reveal a need of students to be seen and recognised, a desire for them to be comfortable in a familiar setting with people that know them, as well as a propensity towards places that are populated but not overcrowded – environments that are dense enough as for the dweller to feel seen, but not as dense as for the individual to become nameless. This finding is also backed up by the survey’s data, showing that the most popular places in Florence among students do not actually coincide with the most popular tourist spots.

Interestingly, when we approached the answers students gave regarding their favourite places from a gendered perspective, we discovered that female students cited specific places within the historic centre –city spaces, libraries and museums and the area stretching along the river– whereas male students more often generalized, referencing the city centre more broadly as one single area (Fig. 6). As we will see later on, female students were also more specific in their answers about places they avoid. So combining the two results, it would seem that women tend to spatially distinguish more clearly than men, and be more specific about spaces they feel comfortable in, as well as spaces that generate feelings of insecurity in them. This is worth looking into further in future research, especially in connection to feelings of fear. Namely, why are women’s perceived safe spaces so much more fixed and finite than those of men? It appears the boundaries of places that women favour or avoid are much more concrete and they can immediately pinpoint them, which leads us to believe that what they interpret as welcoming or uncomfortable is indeed very specific too. In other words, women come to more directly associate spaces that cause them fear with dangerous places to

avoid, and spaces in which they feel protected with enjoyable places to dwell in. But since the social construction of a “dangerous” place is influenced by a number of things, from past experiences, and perceptions of risk to information flows,<sup>43</sup> unpacking such notions of danger seems a mandatory first step towards clarifying women’s urban distinctions, yet relevant studies are completely absent from the literature on gendered urban fear.

Something else that stood out is the fact that a higher percentage of female students cited places in the suburbs (Fig.6). Embarking on informed guesswork as to why this could be the case, and keeping in mind the fact that significantly fewer female students drive to access their favourite pastime destination, we can assume that the female students who favour places in the suburbs probably also live in those areas and have thus come to develop a sense of familiarity and homeliness with the spaces and their people. Knowing the area well, and being known by its people, but also being free to move around the place independently, makes for a comfortable and empowering experience that they then may come to perceive as safe. Given that two UniFi sites situated in Florence but outside the historic centre –Novoli and Morgagni– feature student residence halls, it would make sense, for example, that the central areas of those two neighbourhoods have come to provide students with what they consider their favourite places – in a sense, these settings become the city centre for students living within the university complexes. And in the case of female students who might prefer spaces and routes to said spaces that feel safe, it would be reasonable to infer that places close to their accommodation, that favour social interaction and grant them a sense of agency, could often establish themselves psychologically as their favourite places in the city.

To move now to the places that students stated to avoid, a significant majority of the respondents answered that there are no places in Florence that they consciously stay away from, which was to be expected in a city generally considered safe.<sup>44</sup> What is interesting, however, is that while only 21% of the male students admitted to be refraining from accessing certain areas, a significantly higher percent-

43 Savoldi, *Women, technology and the spatiality of fear*, p. 162.

44 For a breakdown on crime rates, level of worry connected to safety and safety-relating problems in Florence, see Numbeo, *Crime in Florence; Safety in Florence*. <<https://www.numbeo.com/crime/in/Florence>> (04/2024). At the time of writing this, the feeling of safety walking alone during daylight is 79.07/100 (high), and the feeling of safety walking alone during night is 49.02/100 (moderate).

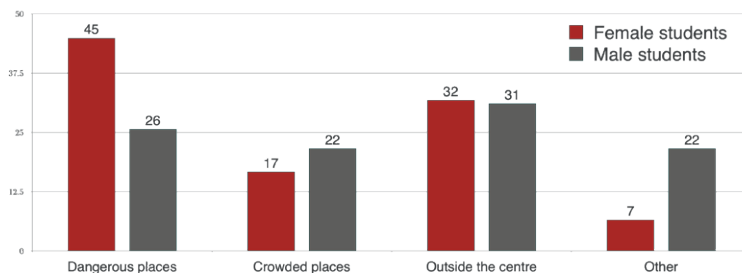


Figure 7: *Reasons for the students avoiding certain areas*

age of women (31%) said that there are places in the city they would rather avoid. Also, even though only 1/5 students specified which places they avoid, 3/4 of the female respondents mentioned distinct areas they would rather keep out of, which greatly widens the gender gap, and which, as we said earlier, attests to women more clearly distinguishing between spaces in the urban setting and placing more emphasis on the spatial and temporal limits of the areas that they perceive as safe or unsafe.

Finally, we grouped the students' answers on their reasons for avoiding certain places, and this resulted in three categories taking shape – places they avoid because they are perceived as dangerous, places they avoid because they are considered overly crowded, and places they avoid because they are situated outside the centre (Fig. 7).

More specifically, areas perceived as dangerous are typically the train station and the Cascine park, even more so in the evening hours, as well as what the students referred to as “underpasses”, “alleyways”, and “side streets at night”. Via Palazzuolo was also mentioned on several occasions, even though it has not been associated with incidents of violence so as to be seen as a fear generator. The conversation then comes back to certain areas having acquired a bad reputation through information flows and establishing themselves as dangerous places in the public discourse, which naturally enhances perceptions of fear, especially among women.<sup>45</sup>

And as expected, the group of respondents who avoid specific places due to a fear of violence is female-heavy – 45% of the women interviewed stated to avoid places that they perceive as dangerous, while only 26% of the men are prevented from accessing certain places out of

45 Savoldi, *Women, technology and the spatiality of fear*, p. 162.

fear. This finding once again highlights the extent to which space is not neutral and the degree to which women's unequal status in it can lead to feelings of fear, with certain spaces functioning as fear generators, due to their appearance, their social connotations or their limited density and visibility.<sup>46</sup> What is more, the results in this case completely back up the literature in that they confirm that women experience a much more significant drop in perceived safety than men when travelling at night, especially when walking through green and remote areas, as opposed to mixed-use neighbourhoods that facilitate public dwelling.<sup>47</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Going back to the three research questions that have guided this study, what has the discussion revealed?

First, the data showed that female students in Florence drive less than their male counterparts. Thinking of the private vehicle as a travel mode that entails a higher risk of accidents, as well as a more solitary means of transport that separates the traveller from the group, and conceptualising the road as a competitive space where female drivers may experience stress, it is reasonable to assume that such a modal imbalance might be connected to feelings of insecurity. However, *does routine modal choice manifest feelings of insecurity among female UniFi students?* The data gathered is not sufficient to answer with certainty that it does – nonetheless, the results do point in that direction. To that end, further research, aimed at investigating the possible connection between female fear and driving, is required.

Second, the data showed that “going into the centre” is a very popular pastime for female students, seeing the historic centre as both a place *and* a free time activity. At the same time it showed that solitary endeavours were comparatively unpopular. So, *is there a gender difference in the way that students choose to spend their free time?* The answer is unreservedly positive, and it has led the authors to discuss the possible reasons behind such gender differences. More specifically, it begs the question as to why female students gravitate towards more populated spaces and activities, with this article suggesting that it might reflect the adoption of protective behaviours, which are employed to reduce feelings of fear.<sup>48</sup>

46 Rivas, *Recuperar la confianza*, p. 143.

47 Basu, *The Unequal Gender Effects*.

48 Liska, *Fear of Crime*, p. 835.

Third, the students' answers have revealed women to spatially distinguish much more than their male counterparts. Women's answers about the places they favour or avoid in the city show that their favourite places to go to, as well as those they would rather stay away from, have very clear boundaries. Spaces are perceived as either safe or unsafe, and these unambiguous distinctions are more important to female than to male urban dwellers. So, *is the decision to favour or avoid certain areas in the city motivated by feelings of safety or fear?* The answer in this case too would be yes. Among the female students who stated that they avoid certain places in the city, the results show that a fear of violence is the reason behind this decision in almost half of the cases. This tendency deserves further exploration, if we are to compile a comprehensive list of features that make spaces and activities feel safe or unsafe for young women. This can then serve as a solid base upon which to work towards suggesting and designing changes for such settings and their functions.

Moving forward, this study has divulged a need for gender-specific data, to be able to structure policy proposals in a way that they respond to the very different needs of female urbanites. Within this context, the authors suggest that further research is carried out, a) in order to understand the possible connection between female fear and driving; b) in order to be able to design spaces that emulate the openness and inclusivity of the city centre, but without the limitations that its cost-oriented nature imposes; c) in order to pinpoint the exact features that make spaces and their relating activities feel safe or unsafe for young women.

*Abstract:* La letteratura sulla mobilità ha mostrato che l'esperienza dello spazio urbano è diversa a seconda del genere, e che l'accesso della popolazione femminile agli spazi ed alle opportunità offerte dal contesto cittadino è talvolta compromesso da sensazioni di scarsa sicurezza o di parziale esclusione. Questo contributo si propone di esaminare da questo punto di vista la realtà Fiorentina. Focalizzando l'attenzione sulla componente femminile degli studenti dell'Università di Firenze ed esaminandone il modo di muoversi e di trascorrere il tempo libero, i luoghi preferiti o evitati, l'articolo tenta di leggere le possibili connessioni fra sensazioni di timore o sicurezza e le scelte di mobilità delle giovani donne nei diversi ambienti dello spazio urbano.

The literature has shown that cities are experienced differently by men and women, and that women's access to spaces and opportunities is at times compromised by feelings of insufficient safety and a lack of inclusivity in the urban setting. This paper attempts to examine the extent to which this is the case in Florence. Focusing on female students at the University of Florence and the ways in which they choose to move around the city, as well as the places and pastimes they favour or avoid, the article searches for possible connections between feelings of fear or

safety and the different environments that young women experience when moving through the city.

**Keywords:** Studentesse, genere, timore, sicurezza, tempo libero, mobilità; female students, gender, fear, safety, leisure activities, mobility.

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