

1. New voices



Sexual harassment in the metro: the experience of violence on the move

New voices

09 March 2022

This article focuses on research that explored experiences of and the policing of sexual harassment on the London Underground. It highlights that the research took a qualitative approach in the form of interviews with victims and the police. Using a novel conceptual framework built around the concepts of space, mobilities and rhythm, temporalities and knowledges, this research opens up a new perspective at the intersections of feminist research on gendered violence and a mobilities perspective. This thesis as a whole makes an important contribution to our understanding of a particular form of gendered violence happening within the transitory space of an underground in a major Western metropolis. This thesis was awarded the New Voices Award in 2021.

Research participants

- Sian Lewis

New Voices Awards 2021

Thesis title : Sexual harassment on the London Underground: mobilities, temporalities and knowledges of gendered violence in public transport

Country : United Kingdom

University : Loughborough University

Date : 2019

Research supervisor : Paula Saukko.

1. What is your research topic? What thesis are you defending?

Sian Lewis – Sexual harassment that happens on public transport is sexual harassment that happens on the move. It is an endemic issue that impacts women and girls across time, space and cultures. Yet despite the increase in recognition of the prevalence of sexual harassment in all spheres of life, including in transit, there are few social scientific studies which explore what sexual harassment in public transport looks like, or, how sexual harassment manifests in a very particular physical and social space.

My research sought to address this gap in knowledge by focusing on the locale of London and addressing the question: ‘What are women’s experiences of sexual harassment on the London Underground?’. To make sense of these experiences in this particular context I used a novel conceptual framework using space, mobilities and rhythm, temporalities and knowledges to address three key aims:

- Explore how women experience and negotiate London and the Underground in everyday life.
- Understand the key features of women’s experiences of sexual harassment in a transport environment.
- Understand how women negotiate the memory of sexual harassment, and how it impacts on their mobilities over time.

This research offers an empirical analysis of women’s experiences of sexual harassment in the London Underground, in a situation where sexual harassment in public transport has mainly been studied in the Global South. It also opens up a new perspective at the intersections of feminist research on gendered violence and a mobilities perspective.

2. If your thesis/dissertation involves empirical research, what does this consist of?

Sian Lewis – I wanted to centre women’s voices in my research. I conducted 29 in-depth interviews with women who had experienced sexual harassment on the London Underground. I also interviewed members of the British Transport Police in order to explore how the issue is understood and policed on the network. Concurrently, I conducted observations of the space of the Underground so I could observe and understand the embodied and affective experience of ‘the tube’ and the way the space impacted social interactions that occurred within it.

3. What are the main findings?

Sian Lewis – Firstly, I found sexual harassment is shaped by the rhythms of the city that permeate the Underground: the rush hours, lulls and night time, which facilitate and conceal harassment. Secondly, the sociabilities on the network, shaped by rhythms, mean that women are often anxious about ‘making a scene’ in an enclosed public space and do not want to disrupt their own urban rhythms. Thirdly, the transitory nature of the space of the Underground is important, as women often envisage the situation as temporary and act accordingly. The ephemeral nature of the tube also allows the perpetrator to disappear quickly. Essentially, using a mobilities framework has connected incidents of sexual harassment to general time- space structures of the city and the transport network, illustrating how the various rhythms come together to produce a circumstance where particular incidents of harassment are perpetrated. The framework illustrates how harassment is, in part, a spatio-temporal issue, facilitated or hindered by the specific spaces, paces and times of the city.

My thesis as a whole makes an important contribution to our understanding of a particular form of gendered violence happening within the transitory space of an underground in a major Western metropolis. It demonstrates that: urban space and transport are experienced in a gendered way; mobilities and rhythms intertwine with space, shaping how sexual harassment is perpetrated and how women experience it in public transport; that memories and the impact of sexual harassment are

negotiated over time and space, and; that knowledge of sexual harassment is situated, varying from different perspectives (victims, police), depending on how a knowledge base is constructed.

4. What is your contribution to theoretical and policy debates?

Sian Lewis – Significantly, my research uncovered particularities in the ways in which sexual harassment manifests and is experienced within a transport environment. While feminist work has highlighted how sexual harassment happens differently across contexts including the workplace, educational settings and public space, and mobilities literature has uncovered general behaviours that are specific to transport, connecting these two bodies of work and taking a spatio-temporal approach has allowed conceptual observations to be made as to how sexual harassment manifests and is experienced by women in a public transport environment.

By drawing on women's first hand, in-depth accounts of these experiences, the thesis draws attention to space and motion as affective and as playing an active role in the shaping of social relations and gendered inequalities. These findings contribute to feminist work that has focused on how sexual harassment is perpetrated and experienced across contexts, addressing the gap that has existed around public transport environments. It highlights that whilst there are similarities across contexts (for example, sexual harassment on the streets and in transit is committed by men who are strangers to the victim), there are discerning features that are particular to the transport environment.

This is also a significant contribution to mobilities studies that seeks to address the complexity and impact of social actions and encounters that happen on the move. A mobilities perspective has been particularly pertinent for theorising experiences of sexual harassment that are happening in a transport environment: a moving space.

These findings, which offer a more nuanced understanding of the way sexual harassment happens, how women react and the impact it has on mobilities have been fed back to policy makers at British Transport Police, Network Rail (UK), POLIS and used as evidence in the UK Women and Equalities Committee's work on sexual harassment in public space.

5. What questions have arisen from your research that could be addressed in the future?

Sian Lewis – A key expansion of this research would be taking a holistic approach to examining a city's transport network. This would determine differences between transport modes across settings, and help establish local needs in terms of combatting such behaviour. This also applies to geographical variation as well as transit type. Cross-cultural studies would be highly beneficial in order to draw attention to the socio-cultural aspects that foster the perpetration and tolerance of sexually harassing behaviours in transit. Other areas of focus for the future could include evaluations of anti-sexual harassment campaigns, bystander behaviour and offender motivations.

Download the full thesis

Sexual harassment on the London Underground:
*Mobilities, temporalities and knowledges of gendered
violence in public transport*

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A thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

Loughborough University
School of Social Sciences

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Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities
- Rhythms of everyday life

Policies

- Reducing inequalities
 - Public transport
 - Cities & Territories
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