

1. Research notes



Women's mobility: literature review

Research notes

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For centuries, women and men have been assigned different characteristics and social roles: women have been associated with managing the household, the children and the private sphere, while the public sphere remained a male prerogative. These different social roles have resulted in a power imbalance that favours men. The Mobile Lives Forum wanted to explore its consequences on men and women's mobility, by reviewing the literature on women's mobility. This work is based on French and international references.

Research participants

- Mobile Lives Forum

Synthesis

Gender inequalities are linked to the fact that women have historically been assigned to the private sphere, managing the household and children and have thereby been constrained to a certain immobility. This has been partly reinforced by their supposedly softer and less adventurous nature, as opposed to men who have been associated with the public sphere and mobility. Long considered natural, these traditional roles began to be challenged in the 1970s by gender studies, which analysed them as social constructs resulting from power relations that favoured men. These differentiated social roles continue to have consequences today on women's mobility, in two specific ways.

Mobility practices impacted by traditional roles

First, women are still responsible for the household and family work. In 2014, according to a report by the French High Council for Equality between Women and Men, women performed 75% of trips to accompany children and the elderly, and 66% of domestic chores. This impacts their mobility practices, which are more restricted than those of men and are more centred around the home. The National

Survey on Mobility and Lifestyles (ref) shows that women travel 25% fewer kilometres than men per week.

Their trips are also more complex and utilitarian than those made by men: women tend to chain different activities during the same journey – a trip between work and home can be an opportunity to run errands, pick up children at school or drop them off at an activity. Managing family life and travel involves organisation: being on time, getting the children ready, carrying their belongings, supervising them during the trip, carrying groceries, etc. So many constraints generate a significant mental burden and also make women more reluctant to swap their car for more sustainable modes of transport,¹ even though, compared to men, women walk more and use public transport more often (55% in Île-de-France in 2016).² Women's cycling also tends to be limited because of internalised restrictions that have weighed on them since childhood: avoid taking risks, do not hang out in public spaces, be careful how you look, etc.

Safety and harassment, women's mobility in public spaces dominated by men

A second consequence of the differentiated social roles attributed to women and men is that, for a very long time, public space was considered to be the preserve of men. Even today, streets, public transport stations and monuments are mainly named after men, and the engineers and urban planners who developed cities have overwhelmingly been men. Women's points of view and experiences have therefore been neglected in urban planning. The public space is also a place where sexist norms are displayed through advertisements, film posters and the front pages of newspapers, that all exploit women's bodies and showcase their supposed hyper-availability. These elements contribute to making certain public places hostile to women.

For women, moving around the city often comes with a feeling of insecurity. This is particularly the case for young women and for those who go out at night. Women are more than twice as likely as men to feel afraid on public transport.³ They have internalised a sense of vulnerability, often instilled by their upbringing and by social norms that view it as a natural characteristic. Places that are deserted, badly lit, poorly maintained or which lack exits (alleys, subway corridors, etc.) are particularly stressful, especially at night. To deal with this, women develop a series of strategies, such as avoiding a particular station even if it means lengthening their journey, paying attention to how they dress when going out at certain times, avoiding interactions by looking away, wearing headphones or appearing to be absorbed in a book, etc. This need to be constantly on high alert before and during their journey constitutes a considerable mental load.

This feeling of insecurity is directly linked to the sexual harassment that women may encounter on a daily basis in the public space. 100% of women have experienced sexual harassment on public transport at least once in their life.⁴ Harassment in transport is noteworthy and unique in that it occurs in a space of transition and movement. This shapes the perception of women who are victims of it, and it influences their reaction: it is a temporary experience, in a closed public space where people come and go, where the crowd is constantly recomposed and where the aggressor can easily appear and disappear. As a result they need to react quickly, but it often takes them a few seconds or minutes to become aware of the issue; moreover, women often prefer to avoid drawing other people's attention by calling out the incident, especially since reacting would disrupt their own rhythms.

For many authors, harassment functions as a kind of reminder to women of their place, constantly giving them the impression they are not quite welcome in the public space, especially at certain times. It thereby upholds a form of male domination in the public space and contributes to reinforcing the unequal gendered power relations that govern society. Nevertheless, the memory of a past act of harassment is also an opportunity to constantly renegotiate and reaffirm their presence and safety in the public space and to reclaim it in different ways: it may be a matter of thinking about the incident as little as possible, or reporting it to the authorities, or learning how to raise their voice in the face of attackers in the event of another incident, so as to reassert their place in the public space, etc.⁵

How public and institutional actors take the issue into consideration

Developed in the 2000s, gender mainstreaming is a concept that consists of integrating gender issues into all areas of public policy. Cities such as Barcelona, Vienna and Paris have published guidelines to ensure safer and more welcoming public spaces. In particular, they call for greater polycentrism to create a city of short distances, and promote the development of public spaces to allow more diverse uses and to make them pleasant and safe (by improving accessibility, visibility, width of sidewalks, signage, etc.). To this end, exploratory walks have increasingly been used to take women's experiences into account.

Various anti-harassment measures on public transport have also been implemented in different contexts, such as women-only metro cars that were installed in various cities in the 1990s. While they have the advantage of politicising the issue and offering solutions to female victims, this system is also strongly criticised for creating a form of segregation. Public authorities and transport operators often prefer other measures, such as anti-harassment awareness campaigns, which have the advantage of focusing on prevention. However, these can be controversial. For instance, a 2018 campaign in the public transport network in Île-de-France presented sexual aggressors as dehumanised predators, which significantly weakened their ability to make harassers identify with them.

Finally, some feminists criticise anti-harassment strategies that rely on technological solutions: for instance, some digital apps have been developed that enable users to geolocate dangerous areas or phone an emergency contact. Critics claim these tools risk entrenching the issue of insecurity rather than solving it, and call for situational resources to be prioritised over digital solutions. To this end, some actors strive to raise awareness among the general population about how to react if they witness an act of harassment, through initiatives such as the Stand'Up training program.⁶

Therefore, traditional social roles still have an impact on women's mobility today. Their larger share in managing the household and children requires them to deploy more complex mobility practices than men, along with shouldering a significant mental load. For many women, moving about in the public space often comes with a feeling of insecurity and a risk of sexual harassment. Ultimately, mobility not only mirrors the social norms that govern society, but also helps to entrench them.

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Women's mobility

Literature review

Mobile Lives Forum

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Notes

- 1 Pech T., Witkowski D., « Les femmes et le changement climatique », Terra Nova, June 2021.
- 2 STIF study on the use of public transport, 2016.
- 3 Study by the Paris Region Institute, 2018.
- 4 Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes [High Council for Equality between Women and Men]
- 5 Lewis S., Sexual harassment on the London Underground: mobilities, temporalities and knowledges of gendered violence in public transport, PhD thesis, Loughborough University, September 2018.
- 6 <https://www.standup-international.com>

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities
- Rhythms of everyday life

Policies

- Reducing inequalities

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