WOMEN FEARS WHEN TRAVELLING: AN ACCURATE PERCEPTION OF RISK?

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Several recent surveys [1] have found that fears of physical attack, harassment and other anti-social behaviour are a significant influence on the travel habits of many urban dwellers. Although apprehension about personal security affects many people, certain groups are particularly vulnerable. Obvious examples are women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, lesbians, and gay men. However, many reports and several transport operators point out that the actual number of recorded incidents of attack or violence is in fact very low. Indeed, recorded crime statistics often suggest that men are more frequent victims of mugging and assault than women, yet men are less apprehensive. The unwillingness of men to report fear for reason of self-esteem has been considered by some authors, but a more common suggestion, either implicitly or explicitly, is that women's perception of risk are wrong. Are women's fears therefore 'unjustified'? Should the target for action be women's unrealistic perceptions of the risks they face, rather than the direct causes of those fears? [2]

Such analysis of women's travel experience disregards several important factors. Firstly, it fails to consider the frequency of incidents other than those which are recorded. Some revealing statistics from the Islington Crime Survey (ICS) concern what is described as 'non-criminal' violence. These incidents such as being stared at, being followed, being shouted at or called after are sometimes regarded as relatively minor, even trivial in nature. Although ICS describes these as non-criminal, certain incidents, like being touched or held, could indeed be crimes but are seldom reported to the police. Including sexual offences and sexual pestering in a wider definition of harassment, ICS produces rates of reporting during the previous twelve months, as shown below.

	16-24		25-44		45+	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
White	21.8	60.9	24.0	40.8	7.3	8.9
Black	43.3	72.0	24.3	43.4	12.8	18.6
Asian	33.3	42.4	35.4	47.6	19.6	14.3
Other	44.4	64.7	37.1	33.3	15.2	30.0

Percentages indicate those respondents experiencing one or more incidents in the previous twelve months.

Source: Jones, Maclean and Young, 1986, Table 4.21, p180

Furthermore, most victims of harassment experienced several such incidents in one year. The effect of these so called 'minor'

incidents, including the cumulative influence, is certain to exacerbate fear, apprehension and avoidance behaviour. The suspicion that today's harasser may be tomorrow's mugger or rapist certainly promotes feelings of insecurity. Indeed, it might be more helpful to consider an uncategorised continuum of anti-social behaviours. Certainly Jones, Maclean and Young (1986) conclude that the ICS results show that: 'the perceptions of risk are probably more accurate than other research suggests' (page 166).

Secondly, it fails to recognise the very great psychological impact of attacks and harassment, which can often be very long lasting. While rape trauma is now recognised, it should also be noted that even 'minor' incidents can be extremely upsetting and disturbing, given the uncertainty of the outcome of any particular incident. The effects influence personal behaviour, including travel decisions, but can also have very profound influence on the way victims view society, even changing or modifying personality. A contributory factor is the way victims are treated by society. A lack of appreciation and understanding is common, together with a presumption that such incidents are an everyday, normal occurrence and should be accepted as a part of urban living for females. The treatment of victims by police can be unsympathetic and this general lack of institutional support for victims contributes to feelings of powerlessness which exacerbate fears.

Finally, such limited analysis fails to give credence to risk aversion behaviour which is generally treated as being entirely logical in other contexts. Insurance companies rely on the fact that most people are unwilling to accept even a very small degree of risk if the possible consequences are very serious. Considering both the high probabilities of encountering disturbing incidents and the potentially serious consequences of at least some of those incidents, high levels of expressed fear should not be considered either surprising or unrealistic.

All crime statistics require care in interpretation, but perhaps none so more than those concerning the type of crime against women, which some men, particularly policemen, may regard as trivial. Women are being constrained in their travel choices and their lifestyles restricted. Action to tackle both fears and their causes is imperative. [3]

1- See, for example, GLC/LSPU Women on the move Booklets (1985-87); Jones, Maclean and young. Islington Crime Survey. Gower (1986); Manchester City Council Police Monitoring Unit Women and violence survey report (1987); Lynch and Atkins Influence of personal security on women's travel patterns Universities Transport Studies Group Conference (1987); Southampton City Council Safety of women in public places (1987).

2- For an excellent analysis of this and related issues see E. Stanto Typical violence, normal precaution in Hanner and Maynard (eds) Women, violence and social control Macmillan (1987).

3. The author is currently engaged on an ESRC contract investigating official responses to personal security fears when travelling.

Probability problems geared to local environment and culture: a Malaysian perspective.

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In an introduction course in probability, the indiscriminate use of probability problems and examples as found in existing English text-books may make Malaysian students shy away from the course. Quite often in order to make the text interesting, these Western text-books contain problems and examples drawn from the everyday life of a Western society; i.e., the problems are real-life situational problems. These problems are culturally oriented problems. There are certain aspects of Western environment and culture that are totally alien to Malaysian students who have to:
i) grapple with probability concepts, and
ii) try to figure out what the unfamiliar situation is about. The student is thus given a two-fold task. It seems only reasonable to try to eliminate "unfamiliar situations" in a problem.

Foreign culturally- and environmentally- based problems and examples are unsuitable for Malaysian students. Technical examples of probability applications (e.g. in computing manufacturing, physical sciences, genetics, and technology), geometric problems, urn problems, coin and dice tossing problems are appropriate for Malaysian students. Games of chance and real-life situational examples with local flavour are useful to make the course interesting. Well-phrased, may be well-illustrated and easily understood though unfamiliar or not commonly encountered situational problems may also be suitable for Malaysian students.

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