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*Capability approach: Women's perceived unsafety in  
 the urban environment and their capabilities*

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to study how women's perceived unsafety in the urban environment shape their capabilities. By conducting qualitative in-depth interviews, this paper gained deeper insight into women's individual experiences of street harassment and how it can shape their capabilities, rather than focusing on the number of cases. The findings show that women have many different experiences of perceived unsafety in the urban environment. This can potentially shape women's individual capabilities of mobility, bodily integrity and mental well-being. This paper has also studied which physical and social features of the urban environment are perceived to be (un)safe by women. Through adjustments in spatial planning practices and other policy areas, improvements can be made in regard to women's perceived safety in the urban environment.

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## Introduction

The Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (2022) has reported that two out of three women, aged 12 to 25, have at least once been harassed on the streets in 2020-2021, in the Netherlands. Furthermore, one-third of young women feel unsafe or scared because of street harassment, whilst only 6 percent of young men. The findings of the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics further show that street harassment particularly affects women aged 18-25. Street harassment has no consistent definition across all disciplines. Nevertheless, it is generally defined as unwanted sexual attention, harassment, or objectification by a stranger in a public space, such as streets, parks, or public transportation (Bowman, 1993; Wesselmann & Kelly 2010). Behaviours include catcalling, wolf-whistling, gazing, groping, following someone and intrusive verbal comments (Logan, 2015). Other definitions of street harassment also include the actions that would fall under the legal terms of rape and sexual assault (Gardner, 1995). Even though street harassment occurs to all genders, women are disproportionately victims and men are perpetrators (Stop Street Harassment, 2014).

Some women have indicated that they did not identify any specific incident of street harassment as harmful, rather it was the “overall impact of dozens of car horns and crude comments... that are dehumanizing.” (Fileborn & Vera-Gray 2017, p.214). Meaning that street harassment was lived as a process rather than an event (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017). Consequently, this can be a barrier for women to report incidents of street harassment, considering that these individual events are often seen as harmless and intangible.

Harris and Miller (2000) found that women, compared to men, are more fearful of dangerous situations involving men. They hypothesize that this might be caused by women's daily experiences of minor victimizations, which are often ignored because it seems to be harmless behaviour. The authors describe that the experience of “stares, whistles, condescending behaviour, being interrupted when speaking, and harassment at work” makes women more fearful and more perceptive of danger (Harris & Miller 2000, p.857).

This sense of unsafety influences how women behave in public spaces, consequently restricting their movement (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Additionally, previous literature has indicated that the feeling of unsafety is higher in larger cities compared to smaller towns among women (Zani et al. 2001). Despite the increasing attention towards street harassment, there have been limited measures implemented that improve women's perceived safety in the urban environment. There is inadequate qualitative research conducted on how the sense of unsafety is experienced and how it impacts the capabilities of women. Rather, research tends to stay limited in measuring the number of cases of street harassment.

This research aims to study women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment. Furthermore, this paper focuses on how the perceived unsafety of women can shape their capabilities in the urban setting. Also, which physical and social features of the urban environment are perceived as (un)safe.

The central question of this research is: *"How do women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capabilities?"*

The sub-questions are stated as follows:

1. *How do women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capability to be mobile?*
2. *How do women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capability to have bodily integrity?*
3. *How do women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capability to be mentally well?*

## Theoretical framework

### 1. *The complexity of Street Harassment*

Street harassment is experienced by the majority of women and girls, however, they do not experience it in the same way (Fogg-Davis 2006; Chubin 2014). Racialisation, class, and sexuality, position women in hierarchal relation to each other. “These hierarchies interact and intersect with each other and with gender inequality, meaning that street harassment manifests and is experienced by women in multiple ways, some of which are shared and some of which are not.” (Fileborn & Vera-Gray 2017, p. 205)

The term itself also poses some barriers to research. *Harassment* predefines the experience of women and limits the possible responses. Similarly, *Street*, which is used as an abbreviation for any public space, marks a division between physical and non-physical public space. This separation hinders further exploration of similarities and differences between physical and online public spaces (Vera-Gray 2016). Furthermore, public spaces such as public transport and bars or clubs, which are considered public/private, may be excluded from research by either the participants or researchers. (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017). However, this research did include these spaces as the focus is on women's wide-ranging experiences of street harassment.

### 2. *Perceived unsafety*

*Unsafety* is defined as dependent on the perspective the researcher adopts. It can mean the objective risk of being involved or being a victim of aggression in an environment. However, it can also refer to an individual's perception of such a risk and the estimate of their vulnerability (Roché, 1993, 1996). Literature has shown that there is an absence of a direct relationship between the feeling of unsafety and actual crime rates. This has led to research on social factors that influence the perceived unsafety including mass media, actual victimization, socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender) and environmental determinants (type of environment and integration into the environment) (Zani et al. 2001). This research focused on women's personal perception of unsafety, rather than the objective risk of women being involved or being a victim in the urban environment.

### *3. Capability approach*

As previously mentioned, women's perceptions of street harassment differ per individual. Using the capability approach of Sen (1993), this research gained a deeper insight into how these unpleasant situations are experienced individually by women and how it shapes their capabilities. Sen's capability approach criticises evaluations that focus exclusively on utilities, resources or income. He argues that a utility-based evaluation might overlook some dimensions and end up with misleading conclusions. A person may be in a difficult situation and still be contented with her life since she has never known differently. Consequently, a utilitarian-based evaluation would focus on only measuring her satisfaction and might not be able to differentiate between a content, healthy, well-sheltered person, and an equally content but unhealthy and poorly sheltered person who has mentally adapted to the circumstances. Alternatively, Sen's capability approach focuses on individuals' capabilities when making normative evaluations. Capabilities constitute of an individual's potential functionings. Functionings are defined as beings and doings, for example, being able to take part in a community or being well fed. The capability approach can also be interpreted as a normative theory of justice and freedom (Cabezas & Schweiger, 2016). A framework which can be used to theorize ethical and political challenges, including gender inequality.

### *4. Operationalising the capability approach*

The paper by Robeyns (2003) investigates how Sen's capability approach can be operationalised to conceptualise and assess gender inequality in Western societies. Based on extensive literature, Robeyns selected a list of capabilities for the assessment of gender inequality. This research selected three of the listed capabilities to assess gender inequality in relation to the urban environment. This selection was based on prominence in previous literature as indicated in the following paragraphs.

#### *4.1. Mobility*

Mobility is defined as the capability to move between geographical locations. According to Ratnayake (2013), concern for personal safety does not only have psychological effects but also limits a person's freedom and choice to be mobile in a public space, consequently reducing its usage. Blöbaum and Hunecke (2005) argue that women's perceived unsafety can result in their exclusion from outdoor sports and leisure activities. Moreover, it may result in women altering or cutting out travel to places which are perceived to be dangerous (Koskela 1997; Gargiulo et al., 2020). This is especially the case in larger cities, which are perceived to be less safe than smaller towns among women (Zani et al., 2001). The CBS report (2022) shows that street harassment towards women occurs more often in urban areas, 55 percent in non-urban municipalities compared to 75 percent in highly urban municipalities.

#### 4.2. *Bodily integrity*

Nussbaum has developed the idea of the relation of various capabilities to bodily integrity. She describes bodily integrity as “being able to move freely from place to place, to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence, having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choices in matters of reproduction” (Nussbaum 2011, p.33). Bodily integrity is a multidimensional capability, it includes physical and mental health, positive relationships and agency. Agency is a very important aspect of bodily integrity since a woman could have the capability to live a healthy life yet choose to follow an unhealthy diet, not as a symptom of an illness but as a free decision on how to lead her life (Cabezas & Schweiger, 2016). Bodily integrity can also entail being able to freely express yourself in the way you dress, this can be negatively influenced by the male gaze (Roy & Bailey, 2021). This capability can be adversely affected in the urban environment as a result of street harassment. As previously mentioned, bodily integrity is multifaceted, this research focuses only on ‘positive relationships’ and ‘agency’ in regard to bodily integrity. Physical and mental health will be included in the next section.

#### 4.3. *Mental well-being*

Mental well-being refers to the absence of any negative mental states of beings and doings. Being able to be mentally healthy. According to the WHO (2004), mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”. Studies have shown that women have worse mental health than men (Robeyns, 2003). The urban environment can increase negative mental states such as worrying, feeling depressed or distress among women caused by street harassment. Therefore, negatively impacting their urban quality of life.

The selected capabilities are not isolated and are likely to interact and intersect with each other. For example, a negative mental state can adversely affect the capability to be mobile at night. The selected capabilities of Robeyns' paper contribute to the perceived urban quality of life, the achieved functioning. This paper assessed to what extent the selected capabilities can be realised by women in the urban environment.



### 5. *The physical and social urban environment*

This paper focused on the urban environment as the conversion factor, which is defined in the chapter by Ompad et al. (2007, p. 59) as: 'The specific characteristics or features of cities that influence health. It is helpful to think about the urban environment as three distinct concepts: the social environment, the physical environment and the urban resource infrastructure.' This research specifically focused on how the physical and social environment of the urban environment, as conversion factors, can limit the capabilities of women in their daily lives.

The social environment is defined as: 'the collective norms and values shared by members of social groups along with the interpersonal relationships and interactions shared among urban residents and communities' (Coutts & Kawachi, 2006). Consequently, the features of the social environment can both harm and promote the health of its citizens. Social norms, which are patterns of behaviours that are considered accepted and expected in a society, can be conceptualised as a form of informal control (Ompad et al. 2007). Therefore, gendered social norms can act as an informal control mechanism for women in cities and affect their urban quality of life negatively.

The physical environment is referred to in Ompad et al. (2007) as: 'the built environment, pollution and the geological and climate conditions of the area the city occupies'. Similarly, the physical environment can have an impact on the health of the members. Research found that living in areas with walkable greenspace contributes to increased longevity among elderly urban residents in Japan (Takano et al. 2002). In gender studies, the paper by Valentine (1990) argues that particularly for women, the public environment can affect the perception of safety and, resultingly, their willingness to use spaces and places. Soraganvi (2017) describes how women are particularly deterred by poorly designed urban public spaces, such as those with poor lighting, empty lots, lack of public toilets or inadequate signage.

## 6. Conceptual model

All the above-mentioned theoretical concepts were integrated into the conceptual model (figure 1) which is based on the ecobiological model (Bronferbrenner & Ceci 1994; Bronferbrenner & Morris 1998, 2007). Similarly, this model was utilised in the paper of Yousefzadeh (2019) on child growth. However, the urban commodities/resources/services are not discussed in this paper, it only focused on the influence of the conversion factor on the selected capabilities. Furthermore, the conceptual model works as a cycle, meaning that the perceived unsafety as a functioning can again shape women's capabilities (see discussion).

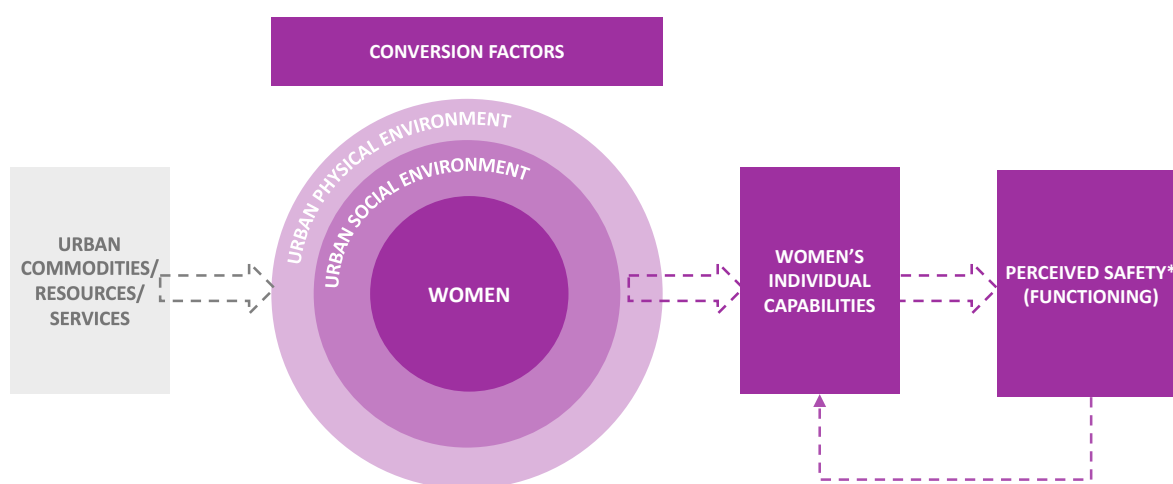


Figure 1: Conceptual model (Author, 2022)

## 7. Expectations

The expectation of this research is that women, individually, experience different forms of street harassment. Furthermore, the physical and social environment of the urban shapes women's capability of being mobile, having bodily integrity and being mentally well. The features of the urban environment which increase the sense of unsafety can negatively affect women's capabilities. The other way around, urban features that decrease the sense of unsafety can positively affect women's capabilities in the urban environment.

## **Methodology**

### *1. Qualitative data collection*

This paper has conducted qualitative in-depth interviews to explore the concepts and the experiences of the target group. By this means, the research gained a deeper insight into how street harassment is experienced by women. This is similar to the research by Valli (2016) which focused on what gentrification means in the lived experiences of residents in a gentrifying neighbourhood. Qualitative research was beneficial as the capabilities could be studied more thoroughly and efficiently compared to quantitative research. This research emphasised the individual experiences of women as the capability approach focuses on individuals' capabilities rather than the collective capabilities of a particular group. Thus, this research got a better understanding of women's perceived unsafety in the urban environment, in relation to mobility, bodily integrity, and mental well-being. Hereby, answering the sub-questions and the main research question.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow the participants to explore topics that they particularly find important (Clifford et al., 2016). The interview started with a general introduction of the topic and the freedoms of the participant (discussed in research ethics). After that, questions centred around the main three capabilities were asked, which include: bodily integrity, mental well-being, and mobility. This was linked to the participants' perceived sense of unsafety in the urban environment. Depending on the given response, follow-up questions were asked. Additionally, the participants were asked which features of the physical and social environment were perceived as (un)safe, and how they thought barriers for women could be lowered. At the end of the interview, the participants had the opportunity to share something about the topic and add/remove anything to their existing answers.

### *2. Research population and sampling strategy*

According to CBS (2022), women aged 18-25, are impacted the most by street harassment in urban areas, meaning that their capabilities are most probable to be affected. Hence, the target group were women, aged 18-25, living in the city of Groningen. One city was chosen for this research to find similarities and differences in the experiences of the female participants in the same urban environment. Groningen was selected as the location due to its large student population. Hence, it was easier to gather female participants, aged 18-25. Participants were collected through Social Media platforms and the University of Groningen (Appendix 2). The research aimed to interview at least 10 individuals, due to the limited time frame. Furthermore, the interviews were a maximum of 1 hour per individual. This took place in a safe environment, where the respondent could comfortably talk about their

experiences, such as in a coffee place and a public library. This was dependent on the participants' preference. This is crucial as street harassment might be perceived as a sensitive topic by the participants. Additionally, drinks were provided for the interviewees.

### 3. *Research ethics*

This research followed the Nederlandse Gedragscode Wetenschappelijke Integriteit (2018) which describes the code of conduct for research across the Netherlands. The data obtained from the conducted interviews are exclusively used for educational purposes. Furthermore, the collected data was handled with honesty and preciseness, meaning that the transcripts of the interviews were anonymised, and the identities of the interviewees were kept confidential. The research was transparent about the whole research process and did not try to influence the participants in any way. The researcher and interviewees were co-creators of data through the interview (Punch, 2013). The interviewees also had the right to withdraw from the research process at any moment, with no strings attached. Additionally, the participants had the right to refuse answering questions and to add or remove anything of their answers during or after the interview. Most importantly, the researcher recognized her own positionality, as a woman herself, and how this might have influenced the findings. The researcher was knowledgeable on issues surrounding street harassment prior to the research. Furthermore, as a woman, the researcher has experienced forms of street harassment herself. This was critically reflected during the whole research process.

### 4. *Data analysis*

For the data analysis, inductive coding has been applied. Experiences, characteristics (including urban features) and mental states of the female participants have been coded using the program ATLAS.ti. After that, deductive coding has been applied using the gender inequality assessment list of Robeyns (2003), the codes concerning capabilities are bodily integrity, mental well-being, and mobility (appendix 3.1.). The urban features were coded based on Ompad et al. (2007) conceptualization of the urban environment (appendix 3.2.). However, during the data analysis, new themes might have appeared to be prominent which were previously not addressed in the theoretical framework, this was taken into account during the process.

This method of analysing data has been utilized in the course *Methods of Academic Research* to analyse how the closure of public spaces was experienced by the students during the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected their mental health. This was done by conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews. The program ATLAS.ti was used for the coding; it was an efficient method of storing and organising the data of the interviews.

## Results

This paper conducted 7 in-depth interviews, with female students ranging from the age 21 to 24. 4 out of 7 participants had a Dutch nationality and all originated from the province of Groningen. The other three participants were international students. All the participants are currently residents in the city of Groningen. Through interviews, the female students could share their experiences in the city of Groningen and other urban environments within and outside the Netherlands. The interview focused on the themes surrounding mobility, bodily integrity and mental well-being.

### *1. Mobility as a capability for dealing with feelings of unsafety*

The first sub-question concerned how women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capability to be mobile. The women described situations they perceived as unsafe, which lead them to alter their mode of transport and routes they took. In some cases, their mobility was altered to the extent that they were not mobile in the evening/night.

#### *1.1. Mode of transport*

The women described situations related to going home in the evening/night, they experienced these situations as unsafe. The mode of transport frequently mentioned was cycling or walking home. Many participants mentioned that they preferred using the bicycle over walking, specifically during the evening/night. Using the bicycle increased their perceived safety. One of the reasons given was that the bicycle makes them more flexible and faster.

*"I would rather bike than walk. Because I feel like you are faster, you are more in a role that you can decide what is happening. So, I think that influences my mode of transport. You can escape kind of faster... I do not know if I have ever took a taxi because I felt unsafe.. but no. Mostly taking something which makes me more flexible or faster."* (Participant 5)

The participants mentioned that they did not feel safe walking during the evening or night. They described being wary of their surroundings. Two participants even mentioned that they do not walk in the evening/night because of this.

### 1.2. *Alternative routes*

The female students mentioned that they take alternative routes when they travel home, specifically in situations that they perceive as unsafe. A lot of the women perceived bigger/wider streets, streets with good lighting and crowded places to be safer.

*“And also in my hometown when I cycled home from a friend of mine to my place there is this really small path which was the shortest route. Sometimes I took it but on other days I was like ‘ah maybe not today’. And then I took the one along a bigger street. I guess in that way it influences me. But I don’t think that I have ever stayed home because I was so scared of going out or those kind of things.”* (Participant 5)

*“So, I usually call someone and I try to avoid, I usually prefer crowded streets and places. I think it’s safer. If something happens there would be a lot of people. At least in my head it’s more safe.”* (Participant 6)

Contrastingly, one participant mentioned that she preferred to walk through the less crowded street in the city centre after her evening shift. She described that she felt more safe walking there, mainly because there was no nightlife. Likewise, many other women described that they avoided streets in the city centre with the presence of drunk people. However, this avoidance of drunk people was also the case during the day.

*“Actually, about during the day, now that I have thought about it for a while some things popped up in my mind. I feel like sometimes, I said that its only during the night that I sometimes feel unsafe, if it is during the day it is also related to drunk people.”* (Participant 5)

The researcher also asked if the gender of the drunk person mattered, and all the participants replied that they were referring to men. A few of the women were also slightly embarrassed to say that this was the case.

*“Yes, (laughing) I think so. I feel like that there are less drunk women... they wouldn’t shout over the street. They wouldn’t say weird comments. So, I guess it’s very much a man’s thing.”* (Participant 5)

Remarkably, one of the routes which were avoided by several women was the park near the city centre of Groningen, Noorderplantsoen. This was primarily the case during the evening/night. The dense vegetation of trees and bushes made the park an obscure environment, which increased the feeling of unsafety amongst women.

*“Yeah, because it is dark over there and it is not obscure. There are bushes or trees, and you can not exactly see where people are. So, it does give you an unsafe feeling, so I rather go through wide streets with street lighting and other people around.”* (Participant 4)

A few women also perceived the quietness and emptiness of the park as unsafe. If an unpleasant event would happen, they could not ask for help from people nearby. One participant described that she did not avoid Noorderplantsoen even though she perceived it as unsafe. Instead, she increased her alertness to her surroundings by calling a friend and turning off her music.

*“I always turn off my music. Then you can hear something if by any chance someone is walking behind you. I do continue to walk through Noorderplantsoen because it remains to be the fastest way home.”* (Participant 3)

### *1.3. Texting or calling a friend*

Likewise, many participants mentioned calling/texting a friend on the way home. It increased their perceived safety while travelling home in the evening/night. This was the case while cycling and walking.

*“I realised whenever I walk not every time but the majority. When I walk alone at night, I call someone. But I never thought about it as safety reason, but it does make me feel safer. When I talk to someone I don't necessarily look around. And also, when someone potentially approaches me, they know that I am talking to someone. It is an unconscious thing I do apparently, and I never actually thought about it.”* (Participant 1)

Several women mentioned that they make sure to text their friends when they get home. However, one participant was rather sceptical about this since a lot of the time friends forget to text after they have arrived. So, it did not increase her sense of safety.

## *2. Bodily integrity as a capability for dealing with feelings of unsafety*

The second sub-question concerned how women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capability to have bodily integrity? The women altered the way they dress, out of uncomfortableness and fear of the male gaze. The impact was even more extensive for the participants who had personally experienced sexual harassment. It shows that women experience different forms of street harassment and are impacted differently.

### *2.1. Self-conscious about the way they dress*

The participants experienced situations in the urban environment, in which they felt uncomfortable in their bodies. Specifically, wearing shorter clothing in public spaces, such as dresses, skirts and "more revealing" tops, primarily during warmer months. A few participants mentioned that they felt uncomfortable because of the gaze of men. As a result, some were self-conscious about the clothes they choose to wear. The women asked themselves the question: Is this too revealing? Will this give the wrong impression? One participant felt that it would increase the chance of being catcalled. The women stated that this was the case both during the day and the night.

*"Yes, I always check that (the way she dresses) when I leave the house. Also, because it has happened during the day that I have been in an uncomfortable situation. Even though I tell myself that 'I am not the one who is provoking' I do check if they can interpret it 'as'. I really want to prevent this."* (Participant 2)

However, it did not affect all of the women to that extent, several women mentioned that they still choose to wear the clothing that they would want to wear. The female student described that even though she sometimes feels uncomfortable, she perceived it not to be her problem, that people are looking at her in a certain way.

*"I was thinking about it actually, but I never changed the way I especially when it is summer, I never changed it. Like dresses. But sometimes I did feel uncomfortable because I knew someone is looking at me. Which I knew if I wore jeans, they wouldn't have looked at me this way. So, I didn't necessarily change my behaviour in terms of this, but I do feel uncomfortable sometimes because of it."* (Participant 1)



## 2.2. Non-consensual touching (nightlife)

Several women mentioned that they altered the way they dress during nightlife. They felt that wearing more revealing clothes could give the wrong attention of certain men and would increase the chance of being involved in unpleasant situations. The women mentioned that they felt uncomfortable and/or irritated when people touched their bodies without consent.

*“Yes, I think it is really annoying when people do that. However, it is also like, you know it happens, so it does not really shock you, but it is annoying, just do not do it. I would never do it myself, why would you ever do it, that is what I think in that moment.”* (Participant 4)

One participant explicitly described her strong sense of bodily integrity in regard to this.

*“You feel more hands on your body when you go out, when you stand close to each other. Somehow I do not mind when it stays like this, however I never really feel comfortable in those situations. I do have a strong feeling of my body, my body is mine and I do not want someone touching my body unexpectedly. It is my body, you do not have the right on it. It is an aura of me and do not come near to it.”* (Participant 7)

## 2.3. Street Harassment during the day

Several participants shared their stories of street harassment, which had a huge impact on them, and surprisingly all of these events took place during the day. Although, most of the women indicated that their sense of unsafety was primarily during the evening and night. One female student had experienced a man repeatedly touching her without any consent, at a very young age. The event occurred in a crowded street during the day. The participant described feeling very anxious and afterwards, the experience increased her perceived unsafety in the urban environment.

*“Yes, I think, especially that one time because I was still so young. It was one of the first times that I was confronted with this kind of behaviour. It was for me kind of... well you are not a child anymore but at the same time you are. But, people do not see you as a child anymore... so for me that was kind of the moment of, well this kind of things will apparently happen from now on. So, this experience did influence me, as a kind of eye opener.”* (Participant 4).

Another participant experienced a similar unpleasant situation on public transport. She expressed feeling very uncomfortable and it had a huge impact on her afterwards. It made

her even more self-conscious about her body and the way she dresses in public spaces. She mentioned that when she goes to the toilet in the train, she covers her behind.

*“...but he was looking at me in a really uncomfortable way. He was also using his hands and gesturing. I perfectly understood that he was saying something about the way I was dressed. I was wearing jeans, I felt really uncomfortable. He looked at me like that. And he said in French like ‘you are so pretty’ and then something about my jeans. Asking me questions. I just froze. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t.”* (Participant 6)

Additionally, another participant stated that she did have unpleasant experiences related to bodily integrity, but she did not feel comfortable discussing it during the interview.

### *3. Mental well-being as a capability for dealing with feelings of unsafety*

The last sub-question dealt with how women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capability to be mentally well. The participants experienced negative mental states when they perceived the physical or social environment to be unsafe. However, many of the participants did not experience an extensive impact on their capability of mental well-being. Contrastingly, the participants who personally experience street harassment did experience a huge impact on their mental well-being, but also on their capability of being mobile and having bodily integrity.

The perceived unsafety was primarily experienced during the evening/night. The women mentioned that the unpredictable behaviour of drunk people, specifically referring to men, increased their perceived unsafety. It made the women more alert in those situations and in some cases even anxious.

*“I am not comfortable when I see that someone is drunk. This is more towards men, I trust women more in general when they are drunk. So, when I see a group of guys, drunk, it makes me feel to some extent uncomfortable but also a sign to be more aware. I don't necessarily do anything with it, but I am more conscious.”* (Participant 1)

Another participant described a situation on the train with an ‘unstable’ man, referring to unsober behaviour, which had a huge impact on her mental well-being. The participant described that she increased her alertness to her surroundings from that moment onwards, out of fear of being followed. The impact of the experience was not limited to public transport but also to other situations such as jogging in the evening.

*“Yes, I could hear him coming in my direction and eventually he stopped. I saw him, I think he wasn't sober. I was so scared because it was just me and this person and he was clearly unstable. Since then, I've been scared of trains which is quite weird to say but I always make sure that I am not in a coach alone with one person. It was one of the first trains (in the morning).”* (Participant 6)

Furthermore, the women experienced an increased sense of unsafety while walking or cycling home during the evening/night. A few participants described being paranoid of their surroundings.

*“It is really something that I experience but I am a bit paranoid when I cycle home (laughs). I look ten times or even more, like every minute behind me if someone is cycling next to me or behind me.”* (Participant 4)

However, many women described that after they arrived home, this sense of unsafety was no longer there. The negative mental states were not present anymore. One participant described that in those situations in which there is no actual danger, she felt a bit stupid after she got home because there was no actual reason to worry.

*“No, when I close the door then it is done. Like, you are home now.”* (Participant 4)

The participants were also asked which urban features increased their perceived safety in the urban environment. Thereby, improving their ability to be mentally well but also be mobile and have bodily integrity. These physical features included good street lighting, wider streets, crowded spaces and familiarity with the neighbourhoods. A social feature which was mentioned by many women was the culture surrounding harassment, besides calling/texting or being accompanied by a friend. Many women commented that they wanted men to be more aware of their actions and change their behaviour. Additionally, a few women mentioned that they felt safer when there were police nearby.

*“It would make me feel better, if I knew that is not like completely social cultural accepted. And whenever someone sees it, they will react because they know it is not acceptable.”* (Participant 1)

## Discussion

The theoretical framework was developed using the capability approach of Sen (1993) and the operationalisation of the capability approach by Robeyns (2003). The findings of the research show that the urban environment has a high potential of shaping women's capabilities of mobility, bodily integrity and mental well-being. The physical and social environment of the urban, as a conversion factor, has also provided interesting findings. However, similarly to the responses of the participants, it is difficult to indicate whether the physical or social environment plays a bigger role in increasing the perceived unsafety of women. Furthermore, several of the urban features mentioned by the participants did not fit fully with either the physical or social environment, such as the police. They are part of the physical environment due to their physical presence, however, the police also contribute to the norms and values in the urban environment. Thus, the enhancement of women's perceived safety through the increase of presence of police in the city centre is also dependent on the police's perception of street harassment. Moreover, as indicated in the conceptual model, women's perceived unsafety as a functioning can shape the capabilities of women. This was evident from the interviews, where some participants described that previous experiences in the urban environment heightened their sense of unsafety, therefore, potentially shaping their capability to be mobile, have bodily integrity and be mentally well.

The utilisation of the capability approach in this research has shown how diverse women's individual experiences (of perceived unsafety) are in the urban environment. The participants indicated that the situations experienced by women have been normalised, therefore, women are not given enough opportunities to express their thoughts. This qualitative research has provided an opportunity for women to share their experiences in their urban environment, which in some cases, they have not openly talked about before. A limitation of this research is that the number of participants is limited to 7 female students, therefore, this research did not reach full saturation. Furthermore, most of the female students were aged 21, it would be insightful to see how it shapes women's capabilities of a range of ages differently. The operationalisation of the capability approach is not only important to study women's experiences but also the experiences of other residents of the urban environment, related to ethnicity, sexuality, age, gender, religion and disability. This research has contributed to this expanding literature. For future research, the focus can be on the functioning *urban quality of life* as discussed in the paper by Blečić et al. (2013). Since the influence on women's capabilities does not directly indicate women's life satisfaction in the urban environment.

Moreover, the findings on women's experiences of perceived unsafety provide crucial insights for future urban planning practices, but also other policy areas, such as education on street harassment. The research has identified features of the urban environment which

increase the sense of unsafety or decrease it. By improving street lighting and adding more pedestrian and bike-friendly on certain routes, women's perceived safety can be improved. The social features that construct the urban environment can also contribute to women's sense of safety. For example, by increasing the awareness of street harassment through effective street campaigns. Both physical and social features of the urban environment should be addressed to improve the sense of safety for women in cities.

## **Conclusion**

The research aimed to study women's perceived unsafety in the urban environment with the research question "How do women's feelings of unsafety in the urban environment shape their capabilities?". The research demonstrates that women's perceived unsafety in the urban environment can shape women's capabilities to be mobile, have bodily integrity and be mentally well.

Women indicated that their perceived sense of unsafety is primarily the case while travelling home during the evening or night. The women preferred the bicycle as a mode of transport and took alternative routes, which they perceived as being safer. They also increased their alertness to their surroundings. In this way, women's capability to be mobile can be shaped. Women's capability to have bodily integrity was mainly related to how women dressed in public spaces and respect for their bodies. The perceived unsafety of women was caused by different forms of (potential) street harassment, including male gazing, groping, catcalling, wolf-whistling and being followed. This was the case during the day and nightlife. The capability of mental well-being can be potentially decreased by the conversion factors, the urban environment. The individual experiences of the women show that street harassment has many forms and the impact on women can differ extremely. The women who personally experienced street harassment can have a more extensive negative effect on their mental well-being. This contrasts with the experiences of women, who only heard of stories or news related to street harassment.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview guide**

### **Structure of the interview**

- Introductory questions
- Introducing the topic of the interview
- Questions about (pre-handed) subjective mapping
- Central questions
- Closing questions and comments

### **Introductory questions**

- How are you?
- What are you currently studying?
- How is it going with your study?
- Do you enjoy living in Groningen?
- How many years have you been living Groningen?

### **Introducing the topic of the interview**

(Introduction of the researcher)

I am going to talk to you about your experiences in the city of Groningen, specifically your sense of safety in the city. However, it could also be linked to your experiences in other cities. I focus on how your perceived safety in the city can create a barrier or a facilitator to your capabilities in the city. So, for example, how your sense of unsafety in the city can affect which routes you cycle in the city at night, so your mobility. Other themes I will focus on are your bodily autonomy and mental well-being.

The answers will only be used for educational purposes. You will be fully anonymized.

During the interview you are allowed add or remove any of your answers or refuse answering any questions. You also have the right to step out of the research at any moment. *Do you consent to this?*

**Central questions**

*Have you ever experienced a situation in the city in which you felt unsafe? Or uncomfortable/irritated/bothered/etc.*

**Yes...**

Probing questions:

- Can you describe the event? For example: What were you doing at that moment?  
Where were you at that moment?
- In what way did it make you feel unsafe/uncomfortable/irritated?
- How did it affect you afterwards? Did it change your behaviour in any way?
- Did this event have a big influence on your life?
- Do you feel like your behavior has been limited due to these experiences?
- How do you think this barrier can be reduced?

**No...**

Probing questions:

- Can you describe particular events in the city that make you feel safe?
- How does the city make you feel safe? What factors influence this?  
For example, a lively neighborhoods, bright streetlight, friends which you can contact at all times.

If the conversation does not flow at this point or not all capabilities are addressed... use the following questions:

**Mobility**

*(2). Have you ever experienced a situation in the city in which you altered your mobility through the city? For example, such as altering the route you take during the night etc.*

- Probing questions of Q1

**Bodily integrity**

*(3). Have you experienced a situation in the city in which you felt uncomfortable about your body? For example, a stranger has stared at your body that has made you feel uncomfortable.*

- Probing questions of Q1

***Bodily integrity***

(4). *Have you ever experienced the feeling that you could not express body as you would want to? For example, you avoid dressing in a particular way when you are jogging through the city park.*

- Probing questions of Q1

***Mental well-being***

(5). *Have you ever experienced a situation in the city which made you feel anxious/stressed/other negative emotion?*

- Probing questions of Q1

***Physical and social environment***

**(Negative)** Are there any physical features in the city of Groningen that make you feel unsafe/stressed or any other negative emotion?

**(Positive)** Which features of the city (of Groningen) or other factors in general make you feel safe?

For example: your friends, streetlight, a crowded street

**Measures**

How do you think these barriers that you have described can be reduced?

**Closing questions and comments**

- Do you have any comments you would like to add to your answers?
- Do you want to remove or adjust any of your comments?
- Thank you for your time and for your participation in this research.

## Appendix 2 – Collecting participants

# LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS

### FOR BACHELOR'S PROJECT

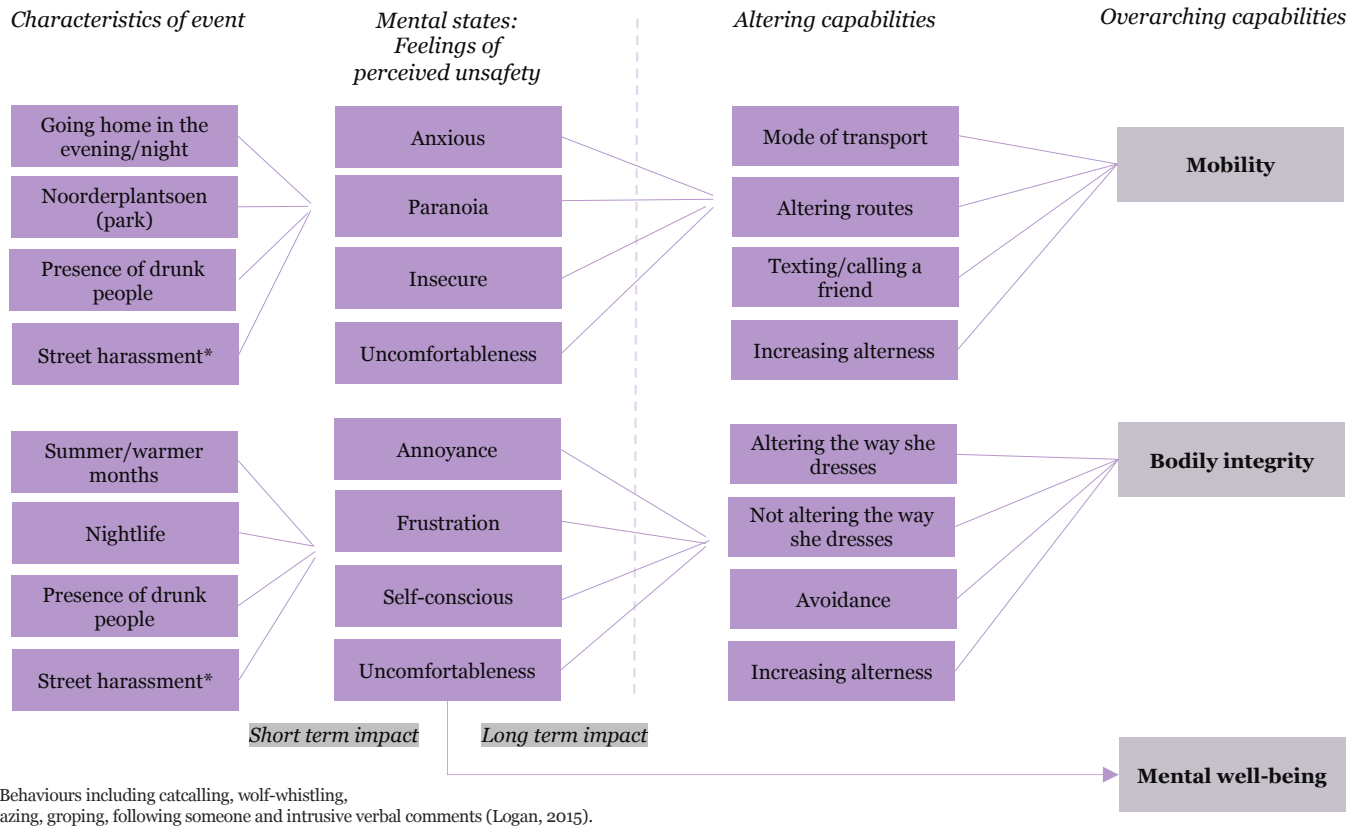
Hi! My name is Seilina and I'm in my third year of Human Geography and Planning. I am looking for female students (age 18-25), who would be willing to be interviewed about their perceived (un)safety in Groningen and cities in general.

- Duration: min. 30 mins
- Somewhere in the upcoming 3 weeks, dependent on the participant
- Will be treated to a cup of coffee/tea during the interview :)
- Will be in English or Dutch

An illustration of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a pink top and a patterned skirt, standing on a train platform. A purple train is approaching on the tracks. The background is a light yellow color with large, soft-edged purple and pink shapes.

### Appendix 3 – Codes

#### Appendix 3.1. Code tree (surrounding capabilities)



*Appendix 3.2. Code tree (features of the urban environment)*

