

# Social geographies of women's fear of crime

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Traditional approaches to mapping fear of crime are limited to describing or explaining the impact of sexual and physical violence as a reflection of gender inequality. Using empirical evidence from recent research, a social geography of women's fear is developed. Four important areas of geographical analysis are highlighted: the imposition of constraints on the use of urban space, the distinction between public and private space in perceptions of danger, the social construction of space into 'safe' and 'dangerous' places, and the social control of women's spaces. Within this framework, it is shown how women's experiences of social class, age, disability and motherhood can determine their experience of, and reactions to fear of, violent crime.

**key words** fear of violent crime sexual violence urban spaces spatial constraint social control

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, women's fear of violent crime (FOVC) has been an issue of growing concern for academics, the media and policy-makers. While the implications of the social differentiation of FOVC are increasingly being recognized – for example, for elderly people (Mawby 1988; Midwinter 1990), children (Anderson *et al.* 1990; Goodey 1994) and ethnic-minority groups (Webster 1994) – gender remains the strongest determinant (Smith 1989). Recently, researchers have begun to focus on the nature and meaning of men's fear (Stanko and Hobdell 1993) but there is little doubt that the problems and constraints created by FOVC have a far greater impact on women (Gordon and Riger 1989; Pain 1991; Stanko 1987; Warr 1984). Fear of crime is a leading social and political concern in western cities and women's fear of male violence constitutes the core of the problem in terms of its quantity and nature (Pain 1993b).

Geographers have made important contributions to understanding women's FOVC,

challenging early descriptions by criminologists. In these latter accounts, the gender differences apparent from surveys tended to be viewed apolitically as well as aspatially, and seen as a consequence of women's perceived physical vulnerability (Hough and Mayhew 1983) rather than their actual risks, knowledge of male violence and aggression, or subordinate status in society (Pain 1991). Valentine (1989) first highlighted the spatiality of women's FOVC and linked this to gender inequality in a study of women in Reading. She argued that the attachment of fear to public places, and the precautions which women take as a result, constitute a 'spatial expression of patriarchy', reproducing traditional notions about women's roles and the 'places' which are considered appropriate for them to use. Ideologies and images of private space as well as public space (the home being the location of most incidents of violence against women) are central to this process:

the ideology of the family and the gender division of urban space create an implicit awareness that women are not safe in public space and need the protection of

one man from all men within a family unit. (Valentine 1992, 27)

## Methodology

This paper reports on the first extensive study of women's FOVC in a British city. The research aimed to explore and explain the spatial patterns of women's fear and to examine how other social identities mediate its extent and impact. The methodology for the research was twofold. A self-report postal questionnaire survey was employed as a cost- and time-effective means of surveying a representative sample while allowing anonymity and privacy. Six hundred questionnaires were sent to women randomly sampled from the electoral registers of three wards in Edinburgh: North West Corstorphine, an affluent suburb; Pilton, a deprived local authority housing scheme; and Haymarket, a heterogeneous inner-city area. These wards were selected to provide a sample of women from a broad range of social and economic backgrounds. Three hundred and eighty-nine questionnaires were returned, an overall response rate of 72 per cent. The quantitative survey was supported with 45 follow-up in-depth interviews with a subsample of the questionnaire respondents. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to participate further in the research. The women with whom interviews were completed were not the only volunteers but the first 45 with whom successful follow-up contact was made. In most cases, interviews were carried out in respondents' own homes and lasted between one and three hours. They were tape-recorded with permission and later transcribed.

The questionnaire sample included representative numbers of mothers, women with disabilities and women in a range of social classes and age groups. The study also aimed to examine the effect of women's ethnic background and sexual orientation but such small numbers of non-white and non-heterosexual women identified themselves in the questionnaires that statistical analysis of these variables was not possible. Due to the difficulties of determining women's social class using traditional systems (Pratt and Hanson 1988), a surrogate measure of social class was calculated for each respondent using a grading system which took education, income and occupation into account to produce four basic classes. For example, one respondent, a bank manager who had stayed in

education until the age of 21 and earned over £20 000 per annum, received a high score on each measure and was placed in SC4 (the highest social class). The use of more than one determinant ensures that, for example, a well-educated but unemployed or retired woman on a low income would not automatically be placed in the lowest social class. This method has some shortcomings which are discussed elsewhere (Pain 1993a). But, while it remains a crude guide to women's social class, it is perhaps a more representative measure than is commonly used in survey analysis. Information sufficient to allow this grading was not available for 11 per cent of the respondents and so analysis using the social class variable is based on a reduced sample size.

## Towards a geography of fear of violent crime

A number of approaches to explaining fear of crime have been taken by researchers working in geography and related disciplines. A critique of some of these perspectives when applied to women's FOVC is given below, after which a framework for the geography of fear is set out.

### *Mapping 'crime' and 'fear' areas*

A popular approach in the attempt to understand the spatial patterns of fear of crime has been to map and highlight areas in which crime appears to be a problem as well as of those in which people are most worried about being victimized, and to draw conclusions about the relationship between risk and fear. However, there are several problems with this approach when it is applied to violent crime, particularly where women's experiences and perceptions are concerned.

First, data must be reliable if mapping is to be justified but statistical evidence on violent crime is extremely limited. Violent crime, and particularly sexual violence against women is, as the British Crime Survey has shown, seriously underreported not only to the police but undoubtedly also to research using the survey method (Stanko 1987). More sensitive research methods have uncovered high levels of violence against women (e.g. Hall 1985; Hanmer and Saunders 1984; Painter 1991) but, while providing great insight and having a valuable role in uncovering hidden forms of abuse, such information is not usually sufficient to be 'mappable', either in terms of sufficient coverage or

in accurately portraying where abuse most commonly takes place. The vast majority of incidents of violence against women take place in the home or other private and semi-private spaces. An accurate map of urban rape would highlight far more bedrooms than alleyways and parks.

A second problem lies in the interpretation of geographical crime and fear data. The incidences of crime and fear have often been directly compared, leading to the conclusion that high levels of fear amongst women are irrational compared to the ostensibly low chances of victimization (Hough and Mayhew 1983). This has been an influential conclusion and policy responses to FOVC based on this wisdom have been heavily criticized (Stanko 1990b) but it no longer holds much credence. Quite apart from the immense difficulty of measuring the objective risks of violent crime, fear is subjective and so not directly comparable (Young 1988). Women's FOVC is also fed by more minor forms of intimidating behaviour such as sexual harassment as well as the prospect of violence itself and relates to the broader cause of gender inequality (Jones *et al.* 1986; Stanko 1987; Valentine 1989). Moreover, 'fear' involves such a complex set of emotions and cognitions that to label it with polarities such as 'rational' or 'irrational' has little meaning (Sparks 1992).

The case here is not to reject crime area mapping altogether. It does appear that fear is higher in certain areas and, where the risks in question are localized, as appears to be the case with mugging for example, this level of geographical analysis may be justified. There is, however, a need to pay closer attention to *what* is feared and *who* is fearful. It is not areas themselves which create crime or which are frightening and, whilst maps of the incidence and fear of crimes against property have been useful in targeting policing and preventive strategies, it is not an appropriate level of analysis for the geography of violent crime.

### *Fear in the built environment*

A related effort, and again an influential one, has been to highlight particular features of the built environment which are implicated in fear of violent attack. Women's fear in urban spaces has received considerable policy attention in the 1980s and 1990s (Matrix 1984; Trench *et al.* 1992; Women's Design Service 1988) as part of a wider movement to include the concerns of traditionally silent groups within urban planning. While this

approach answers more specifically 'who fears what, where?' than macro mapping approaches, the effort to 'design out' crime and fear has been criticized for omitting the question 'why?' and carries the danger of focusing attention away from the social and political causes of crime (Valentine 1991; Women's Design Service 1988). Indeed, it has been suggested that this is one reason why it has been a politically popular crime- and fear-prevention strategy (Smith 1987; Stollard 1991). Perhaps most importantly, the focus of policy-makers on public spaces as an arena for violent crime carries the danger of denying the reality of the geography of sexual violence while appearing to legitimize women's widespread fear of public places. This is not to deny the association between environmental cues and situated fear, nor to question that policy measures in this direction can have some value in place-specific fear reduction. The current research suggests that FOVC is always expressed in particular places but this tendency scarcely varies by social area, type of built environment or local landscape features. The environment itself may redistribute fear on a relatively small scale but the explanation of fear lies elsewhere. In this paper, analysis is focused on the interaction of social relations with space.

### *A theoretical framework for the geography of fear*

Recent work on fear of crime by social geographers provides an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of gendered FOVC since it has stressed the spatiality of fear and its effects on behaviour and the quality of urban life. As it has become clear that fear closely follows lines of disadvantage in society (see, for example, Crawford *et al.* 1990; Kinsey 1984), these discussions have related fear to social, political and economic inequality. It has been suggested that those who feel a lack of integration into their neighbourhoods, isolation or a lack of social acceptance those who have little control over resources and those who are marginalized and experience a sense of powerlessness within society are most likely to fear crime (Smith 1989; Van der Wurff and Stringer 1988). General feelings of unease become focused on specific fears about crime and are manifested in spatial perceptions and behaviour. Smith (1986, 177) has argued that

the unintended consequences of informal reactions to crime include the reproduction of patterns of dominance, subordination and resistance that are expressed in the national political economy.

**Table I Effects of fear of sexual violence on women's behaviour and lifestyles**

<i>'Always' or 'sometimes' do the following because of fear of sexual attack</i>	<i>All (per cent) (n=389)</i>	<i>SC1</i>	<i>SC2</i>	<i>SC3</i>	<i>SC4<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>p<sup>b</sup></i>
Do not go out	8.9	11.3	7.6	4.7	7.1	ns
Do not go out alone	35.0	39.6	29.5	37.2	32.1	ns
Do not answer the door	35.7	42.3	35.9	26.7	46.4	ns
Put off routine calls	10.8	9.8	11.8	8.3	3.6	ns
Watchful when walking	84.6	82.7	86.9	81.4	85.7	ns
Avoid certain streets/areas	83.8	76.9	84.9	84.9	89.3	ns
Avoid certain types of transport	70.7	63.9	71.0	74.2	83.9	ns
Choose certain types of transport	84.8	75.4	85.2	90.3	96.8	<0.05
Fear of sexual attack						
affects social life	76.9	63.9	81.5	82.8	80.6	ns
affects leisure activities	53.6	62.3	65.4	61.3	77.4	ns
affects working life	41.6	52.5	39.5	40.9	41.3	ns

Notes: <sup>a</sup> SC4 is the highest social class and SC1 the lowest. Figures for social class are based on 89.3 per cent (n=347) of the sample for whom social class could be calculated. <sup>b</sup> Observed frequencies were compared with expected frequencies using the Chi<sup>2</sup> test. Where the difference is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level, the value of p is given (ns=non-significant)

The geography of women's fear can also be placed within this broad framework. Valentine (1989, 1992) discusses the role of space in the formation and reproduction of patriarchal structures and ideologies. Hence the geography of women's fear reinforces dominant patterns of political relations. However, both patriarchal relations and – as the research reported in this paper suggests – women's perceptions of male violence are constantly changing and affecting each other. The aim of this paper is to build upon these recent geographical analyses. An analytical framework for the geography of women's FOVC is developed based on empirical data from the survey.

### **A framework for the geography of women's fear**

#### *Constraints on the use of urban space*

The first role of geographical analysis lies in a familiar area of the study of social disadvantage. Fear of violent crime can have profound effects on lifestyle, mobility and behaviour. The personal geographies of men and women can vary dramatically and fear of attack is one of the most influential constraints on women's freedom of movement in towns and cities. The spatial constraints imposed by violent crime can be observed to operate on two levels.

First, some quantitative measurement of effects on lifestyle is possible by looking at responses to a

perceived threat. In Table I some of the effects of fear of sexual attack on women's lives are listed. Precautions range from not answering the door, to avoiding certain areas or streets, to choice of employment, leisure and social activities. However, reactions to danger are more pervasive across a range of arenas of women's lives than crime surveys – with their emphasis simply on what people avoid doing – have suggested in the past (Stanko 1990a). Many of the behavioural adaptations made in response to the perceived threat of attack are very subtle, involving the way in which certain times and places are negotiated (Valentine 1989). Fear of attack may mean a 'virtual curfew' on women at night in some urban areas (Kinsey 1984) but more often it means an assiduous state of vigilance and the deployment of well-developed coping strategies as women continue to use particular spaces and domains in a highly restricted way.

Secondly, the qualitative research suggests that the constraints imposed by fear of violent attack also have deeper emotional and psychological effects. Many operate at a subconscious level, stemming from behaviour socialized in childhood and adolescence, or adopted over a period of years to become part of everyday life. These constraints reinforce notions about femininity and sexuality more generally: they preclude certain activities in public space, restrict independent mobility and police an unofficial code of 'appropriate' dress and

behaviour. Hence the process of coping with fear involves a psychological as well as a physical guardedness which becomes part of the make-up put on when outside in shared public spaces (Gardner 1990). Spatial constraints have a broader effect on well-being and self-identity which many women identified as one of the most damaging effects of fear.

See, in my mind I must be aware that I'm taking precautions but, you know, I'm not aware of it. I've never really thought about it till we've had this conversation. So you're doing things more or less because you always do them. You're doing it and you're not aware of it. It must be a sort of ingrown feeling that you're protecting yourself. (Elizabeth, Haymarket)

Well I don't like the feeling that I've got to take the car everywhere, um, I would like to be as free as I was years back . . . you could leave your door open years ago, now the first thing you do when you come in the door is shut it, lock it and bolt it. You know, so it's different. You feel as if sometimes you're in a fort. You know, for security, to protect yourself against other human beings. It infuriates me sometimes, thinking 'hell I would like a nice walk', or something like that. (Diana, Corstorphine)

### *The distinction between public and private space in perceptions of danger*

As these constraints on behaviour and identity show, the impact of women's FOVC is largely located in public space. Indeed, the geography of women's fear reflects the broader symbolic division of space into the public and private (Valentine 1989). Even if there is no tangible distinction between women's experiences of sexual violence and harassment across space (Painter 1992; Stanko 1988), most women hold powerful concepts of public space as dangerous and private space as safe (Table II). Interviewees' descriptions of places and environments in Edinburgh where they felt unsafe make this distinction plain. It is dark, lonely and unfamiliar places which women associate with the possibility of attack.

It would generally be at night time, anywhere. Um, or areas of the high-rise flats like Wester Hailes [local authority estate]. (Olivia, Corstorphine)

Well, roundabout here obviously it's the Meadows [city centre park], there's no way I would cross the Meadows either early in the morning or late at night. Um, basically isolated places where there's not a lot of people around. Anywhere that's unlit. (Yvonne, Haymarket)

**Table II Women's fear of violent crime in public and private space**

<i>'Very worried' or 'fairly worried' about each incident</i>	<i>Percentage (n=380)</i>
Sexual assault outside by a stranger	68.7
Physical assault outside by a stranger	59.0
Sexual assault in your home by a stranger	45.2
Physical assault in your home by a stranger	42.0
Physical assault in your home by someone you know	23.4
Sexual assault in your home by someone you know	25.2

Well, I suppose just an area where I didn't know it too well, and perhaps there weren't many other people around. And it was dark. (Irene, Pilton)

Notwithstanding this 'spatial paradox' (for the majority of women, most incidents of violence are domestic) there is a need to look more closely at violence in private space in analysis of crime and fear. In the research, 29.3 per cent of the respondents report having been the victim of an incident of sexual or physical violence (as distinct from incidents of harassment), almost all involving men known well to the victim. In addition, around a quarter of the respondents expressed concern about victimization in private space (Table II). These fears tend to be informed by experience of sexual or physical danger from known men in childhood or adulthood. Encounters with men in public space are 'unpredictable, potentially uncontrollable and hence threatening' (Valentine 1989, 174), and this is one reason why fear gravitates around public space for many women. Yet it would be wrong to assume that private space and intimates are, in contrast, always experienced as predictable and controllable: for some women, experiences of violence or FOVC mean that the home is no haven. This private threat of crime has the ability to shape women's experiences of space and place. For example, Valerie discusses the effects of what she describes as forcible rape by her husband:

I will do anything to avoid a scene where he demands sex . . . There have been occasions where I've stayed downstairs, in the hope that he goes off to sleep, found lots of hoovering to do. But no, I mean there is a serious point which is that it's not sort of something that can be avoided when it's coming from someone you live with.

**Table III Women's perceptions about rape**

<i>Most likely rapist (in general)</i>	<i>Percentage (n = 386)</i>	<i>Most likely rapist (if you were the victim)</i>	<i>Percentage (n = 386)</i>
Relative	4.2	Relative	2.1
Friend/acquaintance	39.2	Friend/acquaintance	8.5
Stranger	47.3	Stranger	70.2
Do not know	9.4	Cannot imagine	19.2

Put off, yes, perhaps . . . And especially having children, I think that if you're just on your own and you don't have any commitments, for one thing you can just walk out the door but also you can sort of shout and yell and scream and stand up for yourself. (Valerie, Corstorphine)

### *The social construction of space into 'safe' and 'dangerous' places*

How do different spaces come to be perceived as holding particular meanings about personal safety? With regard to women's fear of violence, a key area of research has been the processes by which public and private space are gendered on an ideological level, in particular why most women misplace their fear in public places when private space is the usual location of attacks. In keeping with the feminist commentators Hammer and Saunders (1984), Valentine (1992) suggests that this is due to inaccuracies in the information about sexual danger which women receive from the family, their experience of public space, the media and social contact.

While confirming that there is a clear paradox in the geography of women's fear, the current research suggests that the mismatch continues despite, rather than because of, information flows. As research by Pawson and Banks (1993) in Christchurch has also found, most women are not in fact mistaken in their beliefs about the geography of sexual violence. There is, however, a wide gap between beliefs about risk in general and feelings about personal risk. When respondents were asked who is most likely to rape in general, just under half suggested a stranger. However, when asked who would be the most likely attacker if they were the victim, this proportion rises to over two-thirds of the women in the survey (Table III). Only 10.6 per cent imagine that they would be more likely to be raped by a relative, friend or acquaintance; yet 43.4 per cent believe that men who are known to the victim are the most likely to

commit rape in general. Moreover, twice as many women 'can't imagine' or 'don't know' who the most likely rapist would be if they were the victim compared with rape in general.

These findings may be explained by the massive changes in the visibility of domestic physical and sexual violence against women since the late 1980s (Dobash and Dobash 1992). Media publicity has escaped few women's notice, alongside the continuing prominence given to far rarer attacks by strangers. It is central to the management of fear in daily life, however, that violence is associated with certain people and places, and this process continues despite many women holding common-sense knowledge to the contrary. It became apparent from interviewing women in more depth that this ostensibly contradictory state of holding different beliefs about personal and aggregate risk is achieved by distancing violence from the self, both geographically and socially.

Yes, I would [think that violence is linked to deprived areas] because poverty, you know people are driven to these things in lots of ways . . . With domestic violence, maybe the frustration of the fact that they're unemployed or whatever, you know, and lack of money and all the rest of it that causes these things to happen within the family unit. (Christine, Corstorphine)

There was a bit in the questionnaire about domestic violence and I think that's very, very common. But I know it wouldn't happen to me because I would be out of the door like a flash. (Deborah, Pilton)

As far as I'm personally concerned it doesn't affect me at all. I think I'm quite good at, you know, just assessing people by initially meeting them, so I don't, no, I don't think I ever feel worried, no. (Marie, Corstorphine)

As the experiences of women in the survey who have suffered violence from boyfriends and husbands show, it is not always so easy to distinguish between violent and non-violent men on first meeting them, nor to escape from relationships which

**Table IV Effect of sexual harassment on women's fear of sexual attack**

<i>Incident</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>
	<i>Percentage of respondents who record this happening at least once</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents in (a) who report that incident made them worry about sexual attack</i>
Being followed	49.8	85.1
Being flashed at	33.5	49.8
Obscene phone call	55.2	49.6
Being touched up	38.3	42.5
Being leered at	64.8	22.0
Unwanted sexual comments	76.4	20.8
Being whistled at	89.5	3.1

turn violent. But, importantly, most women have not been, and will not become, victims of sexual violence, either in private or public space. The key question, therefore, is not why women do not fear violence from intimates but rather why so many fear it from strangers. Clearly, information from the media and social contact have a role in shaping perceptions about dangerous places but this is invested with meaning by women according to the bearing it has on their existing knowledge, personal circumstances and experience.

Actual experiences of social relations in public places also feed into the way women perceive space and place (Painter 1992; Valentine 1992). Common experiences of sexual harassment provoke considerable amounts of concern in themselves (Pain 1993a) but they also bolster the idea of public places and strangers as unpredictable and threatening, and reinforce women's spatial perceptions of their own vulnerability. Table IV shows that most respondents have experienced a range of harassing behaviours in public places which, influenced by the severity of the incident, often provoke worry about becoming a victim of sexual attack. Many women gave anecdotal evidence in interviews which support this link.

I was followed home the other night. Now I don't know if it was serious, if there would have been an assault or whether it was just a sick way of winding me up. But he kind of quickened his footsteps, you know, and he was so close behind me that I could smell the alcohol on his breath. At first I had thought 'don't panic, it's just somebody else walking home' but by this point I had decided to run for it. I thought he may be fooling but I'm not going to hang around to find out. (Sheila, Haymarket)

A friend and I used to go together to a club, at that time I stayed near Dalry Road, and we went down what they call Coffin Lane [an underpass]. And a man followed us down there. And we ran. And luckily when we got to the bottom, we got to Dalry Road, and he went away. But, um, we really got a fright then. We used to go down there every time, you know, and it never bothered you but once that happened, well, you didn't because it frightened you. (Maureen, Corstorphine)

#### *Sexual violence and the social control of women's spaces*

Crime is one of the key ways in which space is appropriated by dominant groups (Smith 1986) and the spatial constraints imposed by FOVC on many women can be seen as a means by which their social disadvantages are reproduced. Feminist theories of male violence have implicated women's subordinate social and political status in the pattern of violence between the sexes and described fear as having a central role in their oppression (Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1986; Hanmer 1978). Certainly, the evidence from the research reported here would suggest that the consequences of women's FOVC on their spatial behaviour not only reflect but also reinforce the structure of gender relations.

There are many contradictions and difficulties within this body of feminist theory which have been highlighted, for example, by Pain (1991) and Segal (1990). It is monocausal, isolating sexual violence as the key determinant of female oppression. It implies that all men benefit from the social control of women which results from fear of rape and that male/female relationships are inherently unequal. It could be argued that images of women

**Table V Fear of violence in public and private space among women in different social classes**

Percentage 'very worried' or 'fairly worried' about each incident (n=347)	SC1	SC2	SC3	SC4 <sup>a</sup>	p <sup>b</sup>
Sexual assault outside by a stranger	69.5	68.1	68.8	64.5	ns
Physical assault outside by a stranger	66.1	56.9	55.9	51.6	ns
Sexual assault in your home by someone you know	36.7	26.7	17.2	9.7	<0.01
Physical assault in your home by someone you know	36.8	23.6	16.1	6.5	<0.01

Notes: <sup>a</sup> SC4 is the highest social class and SC1 the lowest. Figures for social class are based on 89.3 per cent (n=347) of the same for whom social class could be calculated. <sup>b</sup> Observed frequencies were compared with expected frequencies using the Chi<sup>2</sup> test. Where the difference is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level, the value of p is given (ns=non-significant)

as universally vulnerable to male abuse and passive in the face of oppression have been reinforced rather than challenged by feminist social control theory. In contrast, interviews in the current research show that women are generally aware of the constraints imposed on their lives by violence, and that they are angry about them and determined and sometimes ingenious in their efforts to limit the effect of these constraints. But, regardless of the problems of intentionality and universality implied by this body of theory, the outcome remains. The notion of sexual violence acting as a social control on many women's lives remains a useful one which all the research evidence presented here would seem to support.

### *Temporal dimensions of fear*

As some of the examples given so far suggest, women's FOVC is characterized by its temporality as well as its spatiality. This is commonly manifested in the significance of darkness as a cue of danger and by changes in feelings of security between summer and winter as well as day and night. The temporal nature of women's fear is discussed in more depth by Valentine (1989) and Warr (1990), and there is room for further research on this relatively neglected dimension. Individuals' FOVC is also dynamic over longer periods of time, sometimes being deeply influenced by lifestage and life events, giving weight to the call for intensive analyses of fear which take a life history as well as a spatially situated approach (Pain forthcoming).

### **Social difference and women's fear**

The second aim of the research reported here was to examine the differences between women in their experiences and perceptions of FOVC. While the

survey findings are perhaps surprising in what they suggest about the extent and pervasiveness of fear among women in Edinburgh, there are clearly many differences between individuals in how this is experienced and the impact it has on the broader context of their lives. In addition, interviews show that, for each individual, FOVC is not a static condition but changes according to space, time, lifestage and social context. Some of the more important factors which influence women's experiences of FOVC are now examined.

### *Social class*

Two arguments have been made about the effect of social class on women's FOVC. On the one hand, it has been suggested that class affects women's likelihood of fearing sexual violence (Gordon and Riger 1989); on the other, that fear of sexual violence affects all women but that those with advantages of class, income and education are able to bypass its harmful effects on lifestyle more easily (Painter 1992; Stanko 1990a; Valentine 1989). The current research confirms that social class is influential in how women deal with danger but that FOVC is equally widespread amongst women across the social classes. It can be difficult to separate social class from area of residence but, despite the three study areas being so diverse, there are no differences between their residents in the amount of concern felt about sexual and physical violence.

Rather than social class affecting levels of fear, it has a strong bearing on the places, situations and people which women fear, particularly its distribution between the public and the private. Women in each social class are equally worried about being attacked by a stranger outside but concern about becoming a victim of private violence is closely and significantly linked to social class (Table V). Over three times as many women in SC1, the

lowest social class, worry about being sexually assaulted by someone they know than women in SC4, the highest. The relationship is most significant with fear of sexual assault in the home by a known man. A similar pattern can be seen for fear of physical violence: women in lower social classes, particularly SC1, are significantly more likely to be worried about domestic incidents involving the home or a known man.

One possible explanation is that higher rates of FOVC in private space are related to a greater likelihood of working class women having experienced some form of violence in private space. But all the incidents of domestic rape and other violent attacks reported to the survey came from middle class women. However, these reports are voluntary and the greater tendency of middle class respondents to categorize violence as discrete events and report it to surveys has been noted by others (Hough 1986). Elsewhere, there is mixed evidence for the link between class and violence against women. Official statistics and some research suggest that working class women suffer more violent crime (Crawford *et al.* 1990; Painter 1991; Segal 1990) but 'visible' incidents reported to the police or which come to the attention of welfare groups are more likely to involve women who have no independent means of support and nowhere else to turn.

The findings show that social class accounts for a large part of the paradox between the location of fear and the risk of sexual violence; the mismatch is far greater for middle class women, despite this group having more accurate common-sense beliefs about the usual location of attacks. Part of the explanation, which interviews would support, may be that women in SC1 have more personal knowledge of domestic violence occurring around them. The majority of these women live on the Pilton estate where physical and social barriers between neighbours are less sturdy than in the other study areas. For middle class women (except for those who have personal experience), knowledge of domestic violence is more often based on what they have read or seen on television and so the threat is more easily distanced from the self.

Social class also has some bearing on how women react to, and negotiate, their fearfulness. It has been argued elsewhere that more affluent women are able to circumvent the potentially harmful effects of fear on their lifestyle more easily (Painter 1992; Valentine 1989). However, in the

current research, there is no evidence to suggest that women in lower social classes experience more of the constraints imposed by fear than women in higher social classes. In some cases, there appears to be a slight relationship in the opposite direction (Table I). This difference should be viewed with some caution, as middle class women may be more likely to recognize and report this type of constraint. Conversely, the finding may reflect the fact that middle class women have greater access to leisure and social activities outside the home (Green *et al.* 1987), or that they have more means at their disposal to employ coping strategies including, for example, higher incomes and better access to private transport (Painter 1992). Whatever the reasons, it is clear that there are some differences in the ways that middle class women negotiate safety, if not in their general propensity to do so. These differences relate to the tendency of women who have access to a car or the money for taxis to use them frequently to avoid public space.

There is no evidence that this ability to avoid public space reduces fear of attack. Clearly, establishing cause and effect is problematic but the use of coping strategies does not appear to reduce FOVC. The women who regularly use cars are no less concerned about their safety in public places than those who do not. Becoming overdependent on private transport can mean less contact with public space, a less balanced view of its risks and less expertise at negotiating it on the occasions when this becomes necessary:

If I go out to post a letter at night, I get in the car to go down to the post-box. Or up to Safeways. Er, I'd never dream of walking out at night. I wouldn't do it. I don't even cross the park to baby-sit. You know, we're in the baby-sitting circle and it's about a hundred yards across the park and I don't do that now, I go round in the car. (Myra, Corstorphine)

In addition, several women said that they felt driving was less safe than public transport in some respects:

I actually got stopped in my car a few years ago, on some pretext that there was something wrong with my car, and I was absolutely terrified. I wouldn't get out the car. But I later found that the fuel line had been cut on the car. So I don't know what happened then, but, um, I wouldn't say you were safe in your car because if anything does happen you're completely on your own. (Deborah, Pilton)

**Table VI Comparison of older and younger women's fear in public and private space**

Percentage 'very worried' or 'fairly worried' about each incident	Age group				<i>p</i> <sup>a</sup>
	18-30 ( <i>n</i> =136)	31-45 ( <i>n</i> =115)	46-60 ( <i>n</i> =93)	60+ ( <i>n</i> =47)	
Sexual assault outside by a stranger	83.2	71.9	53.5	39.2	>0.01
Physical assault outside by a stranger	65.1	63.8	48.0	44.4	<0.01
Sexual assault in your home by someone you know	28.0	28.0	18.4	21.7	ns
Physical assault in your home by someone you know	23.7	29.5	18.2	20.1	ns

Note: <sup>a</sup> Observed frequencies were compared with expected frequencies using the Chi<sup>2</sup> test. Where the different is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level, the value of *p* is given (ns=non-significant)

Class may, therefore, influence how women respond to FOVC but the extent and impact of fear is determined to a far greater degree by their gender.

### Old age

Similarly, age emerges as an influential variable but not in the way which might be expected. Previous research has suggested that elderly people, though considerably less at risk, are more concerned about violent crime than other age groups and that elderly women are most fearful of all about safety on the streets (Mirrlees-Black and Maung 1994). The current study contradicts this finding and suggests that FOVC among different age groups is characterized again by private and public space differences.

The older women in the research are significantly less fearful of being physically or sexually attacked by a stranger in public space than younger women (Table VI). They are also less likely to be constrained by fear of violence: for example, women aged 18-30 are significantly more likely to avoid going out alone because of fear of sexual attack than women over 60. This could be related to the fact that older women are less likely to go out, especially at night. But interviews with older women evidenced a far higher degree of independence and resistance than the picture of helpless victims of fear painted by both the media and academic research would suggest (Midwinter 1990).

I think if I had to stay in because of something like that [fear of attack], I'd be more determined to go out, you know. I can appreciate it with people if they're feart, but I think it makes me more determined to go. (Moir, Pilton)

That's part of the reason why my handbag is so heavy. A clonk from that would knock him out for - you know

[laughs]. I always put an umbrella in the bottom of ma bag to make it extra heavy. Just in case I need it. (Sharon, Pilton)

However, there is very little difference between age groups in fear of attack in the home by someone known (Table VI). The elderly women in the survey also reported a slightly higher level of experiences of domestic violence than younger women (Pain 1995). What this research suggests is that the spatial patterns of elderly women's FOVC bear closer relation to actual patterns of violent crime, not less. Just as women's fear was trivialized in early aspatial explanations by criminologists, elderly people's fear has been labelled irrational and related to their physical vulnerability (Hough and Mayhew 1983), so ignoring the heightened risks of private violence to which all women are subject. Old age does not cloud women's perceptions of the geography of violent crime. Rather, lengthier experience of 'what it means to be universally vulnerable, a subordinate, in a male-dominated society' (Stanko 1987, 134) throws it into sharper perspective.

### Disability

The research indicates that violent crime can have a particular impact upon the spatial experiences of women with disabilities, compounding the restrictions which they may experience. Of the women surveyed, 8.5 per cent reported having a physical disability and, as interviews with some of these women confirm, this can make them feel more prone to attack and less able to respond to it. Glenys has osteoarthritis and her use of public spaces is restricted by these fears:

Well, I tell you one thing see, we can't run the same. I mean I used to be, even up until a couple of years ago I was quite a good runner. But now I find my knee's so

**Table VII Effects of fear of sexual attack on women with and without a disability**

<i>'Always' or 'sometimes' do the following because of fear of sexual attack</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents with a physical disability<sup>a</sup> (n=33)</i>	<i>Percentage of respondents with no physical disability (n=356)</i>	<i>p<sup>b</sup></i>
Do not answer the door	45.5	35.0	ns
Put off routine calls	23.8	10.6	ns
Feel unsafe with strangers	59.1	61.8	ns
Feel unsafe with people I know	18.2	4.8	<0.01
Do not go out	27.3	8.3	<0.01
Do not go out alone	59.1	33.7	<0.01

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Women who reported having 'a walking difficulty or other physical disability which limits how you get around'. <sup>b</sup> Observed frequencies were compared with expected frequencies using the Chi<sup>2</sup> test. Where the difference is significant at the 95 per cent confidence level, the value of p is given (ns=non-significant)

stiff I can't. And last summer, it wasn't here, it was in Cardiff, I did really feel a moment's panic. I was in a back lane because it was quicker, and I heard a sound and I tried to run and I realized I couldn't, I realized my knees were going to go. (Glenys, Haymarket)

This concern about being seen as an 'easy target' and being unable to respond because of having a disability is commonly mentioned by women in the study. These fears are an extension of the discrimination and, in some cases, harassment which disabled people may face using urban spaces in everyday life. Physical constraints on access are often reflective only of social attitudes and the example of violent crime demonstrates well that the 'urban problems' which disabled people may face are more to do with social relations than innate physical limitation.

The precautions taken against the risk of attack by the women with disabilities also differed from those of the sample overall (Table VII). Women with a disability are no more likely to say that they take precautions while out on the streets than women in general. However, as Table VI shows, they are more likely to employ avoidance behaviour, bypassing certain places, people and situations altogether in response to their fear of attack. As is the case for elderly women, the public/private distinction in fear of attack is less clear-cut than for the sample overall. While there is no difference between women with and without a disability when it comes to feeling unsafe with strangers, the women who have a disability are significantly more likely to say that they felt unsafe with people they know (Table VII). Disability may heighten fear of victimization in ostensibly 'safe' spaces as well as those commonly labelled as

dangerous. Although most crime surveys have taken little account of disability as a potentially relevant factor in victimization, one survey in Hammersmith and Fulham (Galey and Pugh 1992) found that disabled people were twice as likely to have been attacked or assaulted on the streets as the general population and more likely to have been victimized in private space.

There is a need for caution in interpreting these results. First, the sample of women with disabilities in the present research is small (n=33). Secondly, the onset of disability may lead to, or be led to by, other changes in social circumstances which may also shape vulnerability to FOVC. As with many other issues in social geography where disability appears to be salient, this relationship with fear of crime would benefit from further intensive research.

### *Motherhood*

For women with children, FOVC takes on another dimension. Although they are not alone in their concern, most of the work involved in educating and protecting children from danger usually falls on mothers (Finkelhor 1986). Table VIII shows that high levels of concern about child sexual assault exist among the 195 women who had, or who looked after, children who were under the age of sixteen at the time of the research. Six out of ten of these women worry about the girls they look after being sexually assaulted or abused, and half worry similarly about boys. The extent of women's fears for their children is well-founded, as child abuse by adults and other children is relatively common, especially for girls (Baker and Duncan 1985). A quarter of the women in the current research

**Table VIII How often do you worry about the children you look after becoming victims of sexual assault or abuse?**

	Worry about girls (per cent) (n=195 <sup>a</sup> )	Worry about boys (per cent) (n=195)
All the time	11.1	6.9
Frequently	19.3	11.9
Sometimes	30.4	31.4
Rarely	19.3	25.2
Never	19.9	24.5

Note: <sup>a</sup> 195 respondents had, or were looking after, children under the age of sixteen

reported at least one incident of sexual abuse having occurred to them before the age of sixteen.

However, the spaces and places in which women locate their fear for children's safety present another paradox. Warnings about dangerous spaces given to children, and the constraints imposed on their activities, tend to focus on the avoidance of public space while bypassing the far more likely risk of abuse in private space from known adults. Mothers in the current research held clear images of public space as dangerous and private space as safe for their own children, despite often holding 'common-sense' knowledge to the contrary. The age, gender, social class and ability of children, and the degree of control which parents feel they have over their spatial and social activities all influence this process (Pain 1994). But, because it is largely public-space attacks which women who care for children are concerned about, the social and spatial constraints which child protection has on women's lives compound many of those which result from concern for their own safety. Many women said that they go to great lengths to ensure their children spend as little time as possible on their own outside:

I've got a twelve year old daughter and she gets taken everywhere by car as well. There's lots of places I wouldn't be happy about her going on her own at night. (Valerie, Corstorphine)

I don't let the kids out late, like as soon as it's dark, I call them in from the streets. They have to sit in from six o'clock which isnae fair on them really. It's like an added worry because you're worried about yourself anyway but then I don't go out at night for that specific reason ... so I try and do the same with my kids. (Jeanette, Pilton)

For most women, fearing for children is fearing public space; concern comes to an end once a child is indoors in the company of adults. For those who also worry about children's vulnerability to attack in private situations, the emotional and physical effort put into protection is even more taxing. Amanda, who has four children, was abused by a close relative as a child and goes to considerable lengths to ensure that the same does not happen to her own children:

I'm paranoid about my children. Even with workmen in the house, and if we go to visit anybody I'm on edge ... And, um, I dinnae like my daughter staying overnight at other people's houses because - I maybe ken the couple but if I dinnae know them that well I won't let her stay. I just can't trust people ... When I was potty training them, they never got to run around with their pants down. If strangers came in they were put in a dress - I mean I just didnae allow it. It's there the whole time. And certain people that come in, I mean my older laddie's friends come in and I think 'no I dinnae like him', I mean the hair on the back of your neck stands up and that makes you all agitated. And it's stupid. It's stupid. But it's there all the time. I cannae get away from it. (Amanda, Pilton)

Whether fears can be easily justified or not, women's childcare responsibilities are growing with concerns about sexual and physical danger to children and this creates additional constraints on their own opportunities.

## Summary

The research has shown that women's fear of physical and sexual violence is widespread and that its effects are pervasive. Perceptions of safety and danger are strongly bound up with the ideological division between public and private space. Although knowledge about the risks of violence in private space have dramatically improved in the last decade, women's fear of male violence is still usually manifested in fear of public places. This is especially true of middle class women and younger women, whose fears tend to reflect the geographies of risk less accurately. Other social identities also mediate gendered fear: in this paper, the effect of disability and motherhood have been considered alongside that of social class and old age. While gender itself is the overriding determinant of women's FOVC, the research gives some support to the idea that other bases of social and economic inequality compound it.

Violent crime remains a major constraint on the spatial behaviour and activities of women in all social groups. Sizeable changes have occurred in recent years in social attitudes to violence against women (Dobash and Dobash 1992) and greater openness means that a 'conspiracy of silence' (Hanmer and Saunders 1984), as identified by feminists in the 1980s, can no longer be alleged over sexual violence. But despite this, as the research shows, sexual violence and fear of it continue to exert the same controls over women's lives. Ideologies about safe and dangerous spaces remain firmly in place. This situation is currently underpinned by assumptions about the role of the family in crime-prevention policy which has a clear geography of its own. The threat of violent crime is externalized as being outside the family (Stanko 1990b; Walklate 1989). Academic research has had a tendency to compound this misplaced geography of risk and there is a need to assert the reality of the geography of violent crime and its effects in private as well as public space.

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