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Sexual harassment on public transport and its impact on women's daily mobility: a comparative study in London, Madrid, and Paris

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Abstract: Objective. This study aims to put on the spotlight those subtle yet persistent sexual harassment offences that force women to navigate everyday spaces with discomfort. It is through those "innocuous" behaviours that sexual harassment creates an environment where speaking up feels like an act of rebellion against an ingrained status quo. To do so, this paper explores the relationship between sexual harassment on public transport and women's daily mobility choices across the cities of Madrid, London, and Paris. Methodology. Self-collected data through online survey method is used to perform a comparative quantitative analysis of the incidence of prior instances of sexual harassment on the frequency of route alteration in public transport due to safety concerns. Descriptive analytics of the phenomenon are provided, while also regressions with control variables and interaction terms are performed, allowing for the extrapolation of the study. Results. Besides demonstrating the prevalence of sexual harassment in socially advanced societies, the study shows how prior instances of sexual harassment increase the likelihood of altering transport route due to safety concerns. (ii) how this relationship is stronger among women than men, and (iii) how the gender difference in this relationship is stronger among younger generations of women. It also analyses route modification choices and their implications for gender equality, while proposing solutions to the problem drawn from the respondents themselves. Conclusion. By systematically measuring route disruption and adopting a standardized and holistic definition of the studied phenomenon, this research offers a novel approach to understanding sexual harassment in public transport, revealing the urgent need for intersectional policies to safeguard women's mobility.
Keywords: Sexual harassment; public transport; gender; security; mobility; quantitative analysis; survey.

ENG El acoso sexual en el transporte público y sus repercusiones en la movilidad de las mujeres: un estudio comparativo en Londres, Madrid y París

Resumen: Objetivo. Este estudio pretende destacar aquellas acciones, sutiles pero persistentes, de acoso sexual que hacen que las mujeres se desplacen con incomodidad en su vida cotidiana. Es a través de esos comportamientos "inocuos" como el acoso sexual crea un ambiente en el que alzar la voz se percibe como un acto de rebelión contra un estatus quo profundamente arraigado. Con dicho propósito, esta investigación explora la relación entre el acoso sexual en el transporte público y la movilidad femenina diaria en las ciudades de Madrid, Londres y París. Metodología. Se analizan cuantitativamente los datos recolectados mediante una encuesta online, para realizar un análisis comparativo de la incidencia de casos previos de acoso sexual en la alteración de rutas en el transporte público por motivos de seguridad. Se proporcionan análisis descriptivos del fenómeno y se realizan regresiones con variables de control y términos de interacción, lo que permite la extrapolación del estudio. Resultados. Además de demostrar la prevalencia del acoso sexual en las sociedades socialmente avanzadas, el estudio muestra cómo los casos previos de acoso sexual aumentan la probabilidad de alterar la ruta de transporte por motivos de seguridad y cómo esta relación es más fuerte entre las mujeres que entre los hombres. También se analizan las opciones de modificación de ruta y sus implicaciones para la igualdad de género, al tiempo que se proponen soluciones al problema, extraídas de las respuestas de las personas encuestadas.

Conclusiones. Al medir de manera sistemática la alteración de rutas, así como al adoptar una definición estandarizada y holística del fenómeno estudiado, esta investigación ofrece un enfoque novedoso para comprender el acoso sexual en el transporte público, evidenciando la necesidad urgente de políticas interseccionales que protejan la movilidad de las mujeres.
Palabras clave: Acoso sexual, transporte público, género, seguridad, movilidad, metodología cuantitativa, encuesta.

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1. Introduction

1.1 An approach to sexual harassment and its conceptualisation difficulties

The concept of "sexual harassment" has been haunted by an ambiguity of definition, which stems from its sociological nature, characterized by the interplay of contextual factors and subjective perceptions. Indeed, it is a relatively recent term, as its first mentions date back to the 1970s, within the context of the second wave of feminism (Gutek, 1985; Farley, 1978; MacKinnon, 1979). This issue of defining the term "sexual harassment" has become one of the most researched topics in the sexual harassment literature, so much that some suggest scholars have spent more time researching the definition than the phenomena itself (Campbell & McFayden, 2016). Quantitative work is affected the most by this problem, as prevalence and frequency measures are influenced by what counts as harassment (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023).

Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley (1997) emphasize the need to differentiate between legal and psychological definitions of sexual harassment, recognizing that they are not entirely aligned. Not all behaviour considered sexual harassment meets legal criteria or warrants legal action, yet it can still have significant psychological impacts (Chapman, 2009). Legal definitions emphasize external factors that cannot always be measured by psychometric tools (O'Donohue et al., 1998), while psychological definitions prioritize the victim's experience "unwanted sex-related behavior appraised as offensive, exceeding resources, or threatening well-being" (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). In this sense, Radonjic (2024) posits that the subjective experience of insecurity in public transport frequently transcends legal thresholds, thereby complicating the identification and reporting of such behaviours.

The scholarly literature on the determinants of sexual harassment can be summarized into four main models: the natural/biological model, the organizational model, the sex-role spillover model, and the sociocultural model. The natural/biological model posits that sexual harassment is a natural manifestation of attraction between genders, minimizing its consequences and viewing aggressive behaviours as natural sex rituals without harmful intent (Tangri et al., 1982; Barak, 1995). The organizational model examines harassment as an abuse of power within social hierarchies, where individuals in positions of authority, typically men, harass subordinates for sexual gratification, though it can also occur the other way around (Cogin & Fish, 2007; Pina et al., 2009).

The sex-role spillover model asserts that gender-based roles are inappropriately carried over into the workplace, leading to a sexualized environment and affecting women in non-traditional jobs more severely (Barak, 1995; O'Hare et al., 1998). Finally, the sociocultural model argues that sexual harassment originates from the cultural legitimization of power and status differentials between men and women, perpetuated by patriarchy to maintain male dominance, thereby limiting women's growth and participation in the workplace (Mackinnon, 1979; Lamesoo, 2017).

Most supranational bodies suggest a consensus on defining sexual harassment as inappropriate behaviour with a sexual component (O'Donohue et al., 1998). The EU similarly describes it as any form of unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity, particularly when creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment (EU, 2004). Nonetheless, consensus remains elusive on paramount aspects of the phenomenon (O'Donouhue et al., 1998, Pina et al., 2009).

Within the EU area, the most credible source is said to be the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EFRA) EU wide survey (2014). This provides, approximately, 83 million to 102 million women (45% to 55% of women) in the EU-28 have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment since the age of 15 (EFRA), 2014). Given that 35% of those women kept the incident to themselves only a small percentage reported it to authorities or support organizations (EFRA, 2014), it is crucial to address the issue of underreporting when talking about sexual harassment. It is not surprising that women would not complain of an experience for which there has been no name (Mackinnon), 1979).

1.2 Literature on sexual harassment on public transport and research objectives

Substantial differences persist between genders when it comes to mobility patterns. Indeed, gender distinctions in travel patterns hold true for both the Global North and the Global South (Ceccato & Newton, 2015) and up to date, no study has shown that there is no gender mobility gap (Kawgan-Kagan, 2020). According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2017) women tend to display more complex patterns of mobility, as they must combine their caring role with their income activities. In addition to the differences in daily mobility patterns, there are paramount dissimilarities concerning risky behaviour, danger perception and vulnerability during trips (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022; Basbas et al., 2023).

Official research (FRA, 2014; European Parliament, 2021) has shown the prevalence of sexual harassment within modern European societies, alongside notable disparities in gender-specific transport usage. In the case of France, the Fédération Nationale des Associations d'Usagers des Transports (FNAUT, 2016) confirms that 87% of female users of public transport have been victims of sexual harassment. The same goes for the United Kingdom, where over a third of women have been victims of sexual harassment while commuting by train or tube, according to British Transport Police (BTP, 2023). In Spain, the Instituto de Estudios Regionales y Metropolitanos de Barcelona (2022) strikes with 57% of women having suffered some kind of sexual harassment at least once during their use of public transport in Catalonia.

Sexual harassment in public spaces appears to be a new way for men to grasp onto that idea of a superior masculinity entrenched in societal norms. It relates to the idea of "natural" claims of such spaces (Srivastava, 2012). That is to say that once the "private" is defined as the (inferior) complement to the "public", some people are seen to more "properly" belong to public spaces than others (Srivastava, 2012). Indeed, events that may appear innocuous —and thus are not considered crimes or even aggressions— may serve as "calls to order'' for women, reminding them that they are not in the right place and thus making them feel unwelcome and unsafe (Quinones, 2020). In societies where masculinity is narrowly defined and associated with dominance and control, harassment of women in public transportation can occur as a way for harassers to reaffirm their power over women in a shared space (Useche et al., 2024).

Whilst, national and European legislation against sexual harassment in spheres such as the workplace has been enacted through the European Union Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (2006). The realm of public transit remains a scarcely regulated domain. Thus, only narrowed prohibitions concerning most serious conducts may apply (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020). The new EU directive 2024/1385 on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2024) has not changed this focus, and while targeting sexual harassment, attention is mainly devoted to the workplace and the Internet.

Consequently, both women and girls are experiencing various types of physical, mental and sexual molestation in their everyday mobility across urban areas, while this problem is not given priority in the gender and development discourse (Noor & Iamtrakul, 2023). However, sexual harassment on public transport epitomizes the most profound demonstration of the rejection against women occupying those spaces traditionally earmarked for men. Unrestricted mobility constitutes a prerequisite for women to access most opportunities and for allowing their full participation in society (Zamurrad, 2020). Conversely, mobility constraints on women facilitate the persistence of their association with the private sphere.

Postmodernism and poststructuralism have called attention to the fact that space is never neutral but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the dominant power structures and forms of knowledge (Winther, 2023). As such, space is not constituted entirely by the sole material reality it has but includes socio-functional properties and has cultural-symbolic and representative layers (Grbin, 2015) yet most European transport networks continue to be gender blind. Given that the primitive idea of female subordination was built upon spatial distribution, public spaces such as transit cannot be blind in their attributes, as they inevitably have social character (Srivastava, 2012). This social character is masculine, as it derives from a division between genders where masculinity was coded as mobile and active while femininity was coded as relatively stationary and passive (Cresswell & Uteng, 2008). Consequently, gender-neutral transportation ignores that initial women discrimination was spatially based, reinforcing sexual harassment practices that restrict women's full enjoyment of mobility.

The prevalence of the phenomenon, added to states' inaction —materialized through gender blind transport— promotes the naturalization of women's self-imposed restrictions of mobility to avoid instances of sexual harassment. While most acts of sexual harassment are not widely noticed by passengers because they are '"commonplace" (Ceccato, 2017), women are expected to adapt their mobility patters to circumvent such behaviours. Indeed, some studies have documented how, far from punishing street offenders, women are often socially blamed for not embracing risk avoidance measures (Useche et al., 2024). Public spaces then become sites where women may both be allowed and afforded security of movement *"*as long as they behave as women should*"* (Srivastava, 2012).

One could argue that both men and women find somehow their mobility restricted due to general fear of crime, understood as an emotional reaction of dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with it (Ferraro, 1995). However, studies show that women tend to exhibit greater mobility reductions than men in response to similar levels of insecurity and fear of crime (Contreras et al., 2024; Loukatiou-Sideris, 2014). This comes as no surprise when taking into consideration that a major predictor of fear of crime is our own victimization or witnessing other people's victimization, particularly the victimization of a family member or friend (Ceccato & Loukatiou Sideris, 2022). For women, unpunished sexual harassment offences are everyday occurrences (Contreras et al., 2024).

This effect is more prominent among younger generations, as the youth per se are statistically more at risk of being victimized (Ceccato & Loukatiou Sideris, 2022). Within the female population, women experience

the highest sexualization of their bodies at earlier ages (12 to 34), as opposed to older females who report lower frequency of both sexually objectifying experiences and lower body surveillance (Sherman, 2023).

In relation to what has been stated, there appear to be four main categories of behavioural responses to perceived risk of victimization and emotional response to threat: i) avoidance behaviour; ii) protective behaviour; iii) behavioural and lifestyle adjustments and iv) participation in relevant collective activities (Jackson, 2013). In the field of transport, research into the geography of women's fear has revealed that pervasive awareness of vulnerability to sexual assault results in an array of self-protection strategies and behavioural constraints that fit within the first three categories (Law, 1999). Rana (2023) supports this argument by asserting that the aforementioned behavioural responses result in significant constraints for women, including avoiding travelling alone or relying on private transport services.

Based on this rationale, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1a: People who have suffered prior sexual harassment experiences on public transport are more likely to alter their travel routes due to safety concerns.

H1b: The relationship between prior sexual harassment experiences on public transport and travel route alterations is stronger among women than men.

H1c: The gender difference in the relationship between prior sexual harassment experiences on public transport and travel route alterations is stronger among younger generations than older generations.

2. Methodology

As it has been stated, the aim of this paper is to provide an insight into how sexual harassment conditions women's freedom of mobility. Specifically, the focus is on delineating how it imposes constraints on women's route selection, thereby limiting their transport choices. When related to transport, scholarly literature on sexual harassment becomes even more scarce and most papers concerning behavioural constraints are either qualitative or case-based studies with small-sample datasets (Ceccato, 2017).

With the overarching goal of addressing this research gap, a quantitative analysis was performed. This type of analysis was chosen based on two main reasons: i) figures continue to play a fundamental role when it comes to governments developing policies to address these issues; ii) this paper aimed to focus more on finding sequential data rather than specific details about each incident (Bartolo, 2021), as the latter could not allow for further comparison and extrapolation.

2.1. Research design method

The selected research design for data collection was the survey method, as it allowed for sampling from a large population (being the research target the public), copious amounts of information, easy statistics generation and availability of validated models (Jones et al., 2013; Zainudin et al., 2024). A closed-ended questionnaire designed with the Google Forms tool, as set out in Table 1, was used as the primary instrument. This design was chosen not only to reduce ambiguity but more importantly to minimize respondents' burden, consequently encouraging participation (Zhou et al. 2017).

Moreover, this choice was made not only due to cost-efficient rapid diffusion but also because participants tend to be willing to provide more information on sensitive issues if the questionnaire is not being mediated by an interviewer (Quinones, 2020). This design was found to be the most ethical, as it allowed to preserve the respondents' anonymity and to obtain reliable data in the least intrusive way possible. In fact, it was observed to be the preferred choice for most quantitative studies related to sexual harassment analysis (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Zainudin et al., 2024). Finally, the questionnaire was translated into each country's official language to maximise accessibility and minimize bias.

Table 1. Administered questionnaire

1.	Age group
2.	Gender identification
3.	Sexual orientation
4.	Highest level of education completed
5.	Area of residence
6.	Frequency of transport use (1 to 5 scale)
7.	Most used means of transport
8.	Prior experiences of sexual harassment-constituting behaviours while using public transport (UN model policy of Sexual Harassment list)
9.	Common situations of route alteration due to safety concerns
10.	Ways of route alteration in response to safety concerns
11.	Frequency of route alteration due to unsafely or discomfort (1 to 5 frequency scale)
12.	Sexual harassment concerns' influence on travel route choice (1 to 5 scale)
13.	Ways of increasing safety in public transport (open question)
14.	Platform used to reach the survey.

2.2. Selection of the sample

The countries chosen for the study were Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. This choice of countries was made by using a Most Similar System method (MSS). Similar nations in terms of socioeconomic development were selected, to keep constant as many extraneous variables as possible (Anckar, 2008) and focus on the differences in sexual harassment prevalence and its impact on women's mobility. Special attention was devoted to gender equality indexes, where according to the EU's Gender Equality Index 2020, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom obtained similar scores. The analysis was limited to those countries' capital cities because they did not only display the largest European metro systems by track length in Europe[1] but also displayed great transport network infrastructures for both train and bus.

The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted via online, promoting it through social media platforms (Instagram), messaging apps (WhatsApp) and other online platforms (Reddit). This helped maximizing the potential impact and minimizing the costs (Zainudin et al., 2024), which was crucial given the international character of the study.

Respondents were also encouraged to share the questionnaire link with their networks, which is commonly referred to as the snowball sampling method (SSM), a non-probabilistic method of sample selection proposed by Goodman (1961). These shares also happened mainly through social media and messaging apps. The SSM played a key role, especially when accessing harder to reach populations, such as older generations from other cities than Madrid. Before sharing the survey, a pilot test was conducted, opening the questionnaire to a small sample of the target population in a controlled setting to correct spelling errors, any possible bias or other deficiencies that could impair reliable research (Jones et al., 2013).

2.3. Data analysis

With the aim of allowing comparison, a cross-sectional study was performed to provide a snapshot of different populations at the same given point in time.

The dependent variable or outcome to be explained was route alteration, here understood as broadly as any intentional modification of the travel route due to safety concerns. This variable was operationalized through question 11) *How often do you alter your travel route to avoid areas or situations where you feel unsafe or uncomfortable?* A frequency scale from 1 to 5 was used, 1 being never and 5 being always.

The explanatory unit or independent variable was previous sexual harassment experience, sexual harassment understood as "any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation" (UN, 1993). As not everyone identifies the same behaviours as sexual harassment, this research aimed for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon that could also allow for extrapolation. The questionnaire provided with a set of sexual harassment constituting behaviours according to the "UN Model Policy on Sexual Harassment".".

Those behaviours included: (i) attempted or actual sexual assault, including rape, (ii) sharing sexual or lewd anecdotes or jokes, (iii) making inappropriate sexual gestures, such as pelvic thrusts, (iv) unwelcome touching, including pinching, patting, rubbing, or purposefully brushing up against another person, (v) staring in a sexually suggestive manner, (vi) rating a person's sexuality, (vii) making sexual comments about appearance, clothing, or body parts, (viii) name-calling or using slurs with a gender/sexual connotation, (ix) making derogatory or demeaning comments about someone's sexual orientation or gender identity (UN, 2018).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that, due to the lack of anonymity, the acts of "sending sexually suggestive communications in any format", "repeatedly asking a person for dates or for sex" and "sharing or displaying sexually inappropriate images or videos in any format" are unlikely to happen in public spaces (Ison et al., 2023) and were, therefore, excluded from the survey.

The independent variable was operationalized through question 8, which asked the participants to check the corresponding boxes if they had experienced the aforementioned sexual harassment constituting behaviours. If the respondent marked at least one type of behaviour, the response was coded as a 1; if none of those behaviours were selected by the respondent, it was coded as a 0, therefore establishing prior sexual harassment victimization as a binary variable.

Three control variables were introduced —gender, age and frequency of transport use — to disclose the full effect of our independent variable, prior sexual harassment experience. The variable "gender" was operationalized through question 2 and subsequently dichotomized, coding females as 1 and males as 0. Similarly, the "age" variable was operationalized through question 1, which provided a set of age group options. Lastly, the variable "frequency of transport use" was operationalized through question 6, using a frequency scale from 1 to 5 (1 being never, 5 being daily). Cities themselves were eventually also used as control variables. The remaining questions were included to develop further descriptive statistics and inspire new proposals for improvement in the field of study.

As for the participants, the questionnaire targeted the population aged 15[2] and above living in the metropolitan areas of Madrid, Paris, and London. The sample size estimation aimed to reach a minimum N =

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1 Moscow also has one of the biggest metro systems by track length but was not taken into consideration in this study due to its current political situation.

2 Age minimum choice was established at 15 to be adequate to the minimum legal age to consent to the use of personal data without parental authorization in the three countries of the sample. In the UK it is established at 13 years old (art.8 of the UK GDPR),

210 respondents (70 per country) to achieve 90% power for detecting a moderate effect (Cohen's d = 0.5) of the main independent variable (prior SH experience) on a standardized dependent variable in a basic difference-in-means comparison.

To analyse the responses, a descriptive analysis was performed by using Microsoft Excel analysis tools, specifically pivot tables and their corresponding charts. Additionally, STATA was used to draw correlations between the independent variables and the explanatory and control variables. This program was also used to perform a regression model, which required us to assume the dependent variable was continuous, yet it was deemed more reliable for smaller sample datasets[3]. Nonetheless, an ordered logistic regression was also conducted to verify that either way the results remained significant.

When performing this regression, the robust standard errors command was used to help address the potential issue of heteroscedasticity. Moreover, the regression was also performed introducing interaction terms, to deepen the analysis of our target population (women who had suffered sexual harassment).

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive analysis

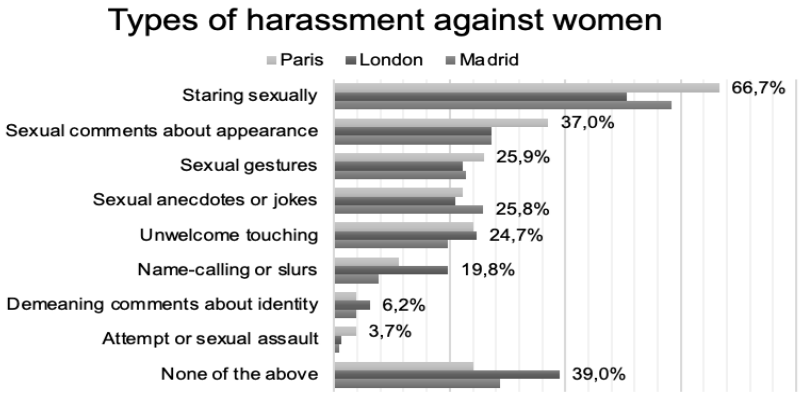
The total number of respondents achieved was N = 417 (193 for Madrid, 152 for London and 72 for Paris). For all three cities, most respondents were female (68.94% in Madrid, 53.29% in London and 75% in Paris). The average age of respondents was 26 for Madrid, 30 for London and 24 for Paris. Mean frequency of public transport use of respondents was higher than 4 points — "several times a week" — in all three cities, with no significant differences between genders. The most used means of transport across the three samples was the metro or equivalent.

Concerning sexual harassment experiences in public transit, no significant differences were found that were not attributable to the variable composition of the sample. In all three cities, there were critical levels of sexual harassment (aggregated total of 52.04%), being women the most common target (aggregated total of 68.16% women). More precisely, younger generations of women (15-34) were found to be the most prone to sexual harassment victimization. Responses from underage participants (15-17) were only achieved in London, yet not enough to infer a specific pattern in relation to our independent variable.

Out of the 193 respondents of Madrid, 108 (55.96%) of them admitted having experienced at least one of the sexual harassment behaviours listed when in public of transport. Out of those 108, 94 were women (87.04%) and 14 were men (12.96%). Similar results were found in London, where out of 152 respondents, 62 (40.79%) had experienced some type of sexual harassment in public transport. Out of those 62, 47 (75.81%) were women and 15 (24.19%) were men. The same pattern was observed in Paris, where out of 73 respondents, 45 had experienced sexual harassment in public transportation (61.64%) and out of those 45, 41 (91.11%) were women, while only 4 (8.89%) were men.

Once proven the main target of sexual harassment on public transport were women, we proceeded to analyse the type of offences they were suffering. As it can be observed in the following graph (Figure 1), in the three cities the most common type of sexual harassment among women was by far type (v) "staring in a sexually suggestive manner", followed by type (vii) "making sexual comments about appearance, clothing, or body parts", and type (iii) "making inappropriate sexual gestures, such as pelvic thrusts" (UN, 2018).

Figure 1. Types of Harassment against Women



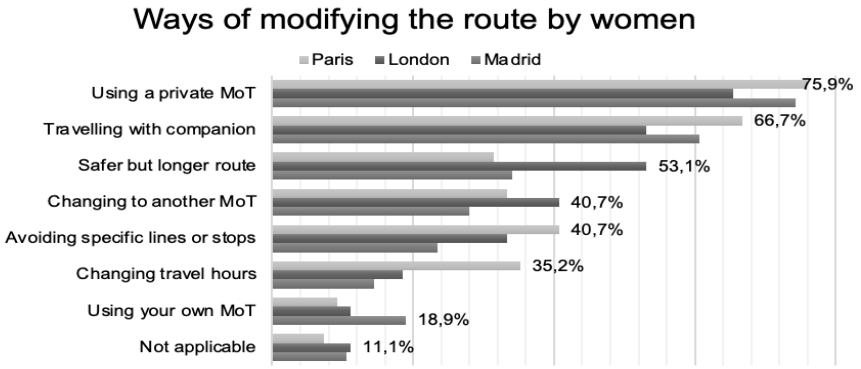
Source: Own elaboration, based on data collected.

in Spain at 14 years old (art. 7 LOPD) and in France at 15 years old (art. 8 RGPD), therefore this last one was used as the overall minimum. There was no need to adequate the sample to the legal age of consent because we are always speaking of unwelcome sexual conducts, so no consent is ever involved.

[3] Ordered logistic regression seemed a more appropriate model for our dependent variable, ranked on a 1 to 5 scale (despite the assumption of equal probability of the outcomes). However, the use of small samples in this model does not only lead to bias, but it also translates to more variability and more extreme values in the empirical distribution of the model parameters. Consequently, it is not recommended for sample sizes under 500 (Nimako et al., 2020). For this reason, a regression model was used as the preferred choice, yet ordered logistic regression was kept as the second source of verification.

In relation to the general frequency of route alteration due to safety concerns, some conclusions may also be drawn. In all three cities, average frequency of route alteration was higher for women (2.17% in Madrid, 2.44% in London and 2.52% in Paris) than for men (1.57% in Madrid, 1.65% in London and 2% in Paris).

Figure 2. Ways of modifying the route by women



Source: Own elaboration, based on data collected.

After establishing that women were remarkably more inclined than men to adjust their routes due to safety concerns, common scenarios encouraging those alterations were analysed. Most route alterations took place in two situations: i) when travelling alone at night and ii) when passing through poorly lit or secluded areas. The most interesting aspect was how these modifications were executed. As it can be observed in Figure 2, most women responded they resorted to privately-operated means of transport (Uber, Cabify, taxi and similar), while many others relied on a companion.

Table 2. Matrix of correlations

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) frequency of route alteration	1.000				
(2) sexual harassment	0.283	1.000			
(3) gender	0.385	0.463	1.000		
(4) age	-0.160	-0.147	0.018	1.000	
(5) frequency of transport use	-0.044	0.114	-0.005	-0.232	1.000

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

As it can be observed in Table 2, there is a positive correlation between frequency of route alteration and gender (0.385), consistent with the aforementioned statistics, where women also displayed higher values on average. As expected, there is also a positive correlation between gender and sexual harassment (0.463). Most importantly for our study, there is a positive correlation (0.283) between the frequency of route alteration due to safety concerns and sexual harassment. It is also interesting to observe a negative yet weak correlation (-0.160) between age and both the frequency of route alteration and sexual harassment, as it reinforces the rationale about the higher victimization experienced by the youth.

3.2 Testing the hypotheses

As no significant differences were found at country level, the data was analysed in an aggregate way in STATA using the aforementioned models, yielding the following results.

Table 3. Linear regression with robust variance estimates

Fr. route alteration	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
Sexual harassment	.57	.095	6.03	0	.384	.756	***
Constant	1.876	.065	28.84	0	1.748	2.004	***

Mean dependent var	2.170	SD dependent var	1.008	
R-squared	0.080	Number of obs	417	
F-test	36.323	Prob > F	0.000	
Akaike crit. (AIC)	1158.454	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	1166.520	
*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1				

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

Table 4. Linear regression with robust variance estimates

Fr. route alteration	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
Sexual harassment	.229	.108	2.13	.034	.017	.441	**
Gender	.701	.106	6.61	0	.492	.909	***
Age	-.016	.005	-3.20	.001	-.025	-.006	***
Fr. transpor use	-.101	.057	-1.77	.078	-.214	.012	*
Madrid	-.115	.14	-0.82	.412	-.391	.161	
London	-.067	.158	-0.43	.67	-.377	.243	
Constant	2.544	.325	7.82	0	1.904	3.183	***
Mean dependent var	2.170	SD dependent var	1.008				
R-squared	0.194	Number of obs	417				
F-test	20.888	Prob > F	0.000				
Akaike crit. (AIC)	1113.215	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	1141.447				
*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1							

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

For the first linear regression performed with STATA (Table 3) the p-value is lower than 0.01, which hints a strong relationship between the frequency of route alteration due to unsafely and previous instances of sexual harassment. The second regression (Table 4), performed to ascertain whether the observed relationship remained robust when controlling for potential confounding factors, also yields promising results. Our predictor, "prior sexual harassment experiences" (sexual harassment), remains statistically significant (p-value smaller than 0.05) even upon the introduction of control variables—namely, gender, age, frequency of transport use and city — all of which exhibit great significance but for the cities (London and Madrid) as it could be expected from our previous descriptive analysis. As for the coefficient, a unit increase of sexual harassment in experiences accounts for an increase of 0.229 in the frequency of route alteration. These results stay consistent even when performing an ordered logit regression. Consequently, our first hypothesis (H1a) can be confirmed, as people who have experienced prior instances of sexual harassment on public transport are indeed more likely to alter their travel route due to safety concerns.

Table 5. Linear regression with interaction term (SH=1 if previous experience, gender = 1 if women)

Fr. of route alteration	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
SH#gender	0	.	.	.	.	.	
0 1	.692	.131	5.28	0	.435	.95	***
1 0	.213	.173	1.23	.219	-.127	.552	
1 1	.929	.103	9.04	0	.727	1.131	***
Age	-.016	.005	-3.19	.002	-.026	-.006	***
Fr. transport use	-.101	.058	-1.76	.079	-.214	.012	*
Madrid	-.115	.14	-0.82	.413	-.391	.161	
London	-.067	.157	-0.42	.672	-.376	.243	
Constant	2.546	.327	7.78	0	1.903	3.19	***
Mean dependent var	2.170	SD dependent var	1.008				
R-squared	0.194	Number of obs	417				
F-test	18.132	Prob > F	0.000				
Akaike crit. (AIC)	1115.203	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	1147.468				
*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1							

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

After proving our first hypothesis, we proceeded to analyse if the relationship between sexual harassment experiences and frequency of route alteration due to safety concerns was stronger for women than for men. To do so, we performed the same analysis in STATA, but this time introducing an interaction term between prior sexual

harassment experiences (SH) and gender[4]. By looking at Table 5, we see how the first coefficient (0.692) hints that women alter their transportation route due to safety concerns more frequently than men, even if they have not experienced sexual harassment in the past (0,1). Indeed, this could be explained with our theoretical framework, as in this study we are only taking into consideration their own previous experiences of sexual harassment on public transport. Yet knowing about other women's victimization also remains a robust forecaster of women's fear.

The second coefficient (0.213) represents the effect of prior sexual harassment experiences on men (1,0). Despite it being positive, in this case the p-value is nonsignificant (0.219), which means that men do not change their transportation habits even if they have experienced sexual harassment. The third coefficient proves this is different for the case of women, where prior experiences of sexual harassment are associated with more frequent transport route changes. This accounts for an increase of almost one whole point (0.929) in their frequency of route alteration. These results allow us to confirm our second hypothesis (H1b), as the relationship between previous sexual harassment experiences on public transport and frequency of travel route alterations is undeniably stronger among women than men.

Table 6. Linear regression with interaction term (SH=1 if previous experience, gender = 1 if women)

Fr. route alteration	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
SH#gender	0	.	.	.	.	.	
0 1	.759	.168	4.52	0	.428	1.089	***
1 0	.19	.211	0.90	.371	-.227	.606	
1 1	.954	.127	7.50	0	.703	1.204	***
Fr. transport use	-.008	.061	-0.13	.9	-.128	.112	
Madrid	-.09	.145	-0.62	.533	-.375	.195	
London	.022	.18	0.12	.905	-.333	.376	
Constant	1.763	.327	5.40	0	1.12	2.406	***

Mean dependent var	2.303	SD dependent var	0.979
R-squared	0.177	Number of obs	261
F-test	11.162	Prob > F	0.000
Akaike crit. (AIC)	691.674	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	716.625

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

Table 7. Linear regression with interaction term (SH=1 if previous experience, gender = 1 if women)

Fr. route alteration	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
SH#gender	0	.	.	.	.	.	
0 1	.667	.272	2.46	.016	.127	1.207	**
1 0	.305	.467	0.65	.516	-.623	1.233	
1 1	1.087	.208	5.24	0	.674	1.5	***
Fr. transport use	-.103	.116	-0.88	.38	-.334	.129	
Madrid	.029	.314	0.09	.927	-.595	.653	
London	.188	.311	0.60	.548	-.431	.806	
Constant	1.787	.672	2.66	.009	.45	3.123	***

Mean dependent var	2.067	SD dependent var	0.969
R-squared	0.250	Number of obs	90
F-test	5.629	Prob > F	0.000
Akaike crit. (AIC)	236.874	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	254.372

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

[4] Bear in mind that having experienced prior instances of sexual harassment was coded as 1, otherwise 0. Within the gender variable, being a woman was coded as 1, while being male was coded as a 0.

Lastly, to test our third hypothesis, we divided our answers by three age groups: 15 to 24, 25 to 34 and 35 onwards. We then proceeded to perform the exact same analysis to see if the effect of sexual harassment was even more prominent when talking about younger generations of women.

Table 8. Linear regression with interaction term (SH=1 if previous experience, gender = 1 if women)

Fr. route alteration	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
SH#gender	0	.	.	.	.	.	
0 1	.429	.335	1.28	.205	-.241	1.1	
1 1	.191	.247	0.77	.443	-.304	.685	
1 1	.526	.306	1.72	.091	-.087	1.139	*
Fr. transport use	-.354	.153	-2.31	.024	-.661	-.048	**
Madrid	.145	.739	0.20	.845	-1.333	1.623	
London	.219	.681	0.32	.749	-1.143	1.581	
Constant	2.674	.913	2.93	.005	.848	4.5	***

Mean dependent var	1.788	SD dependent var	1.074
R-squared	0.153	Number of obs	66
F-test	1.603	Prob > F	0.162
Akaike crit. (AIC)	198.805	Bayesian crit. (BIC)	214.133

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

Source: own elaboration, based on data collected.

From what it can be observed, age plays an important role when it comes to frequency of route alteration due to safety concerns among women. Table 6 points out how younger women (15 to 24) tend to alter their route more due to safety concerns, regardless of whether they have experienced sexual harassment or not (0,1). This effect is persistent within the 25 to 34 age group, yet both the coefficient and the significance are smaller, as it can be observed in Table 7. Eventually, this effect vanishes for the older age group (p-value = 0.205), as we can see in Table 8.

As for what concerns our studied relationship, the interaction between prior experiences of sexual harassment and being female (1,1) has a significant impact on the frequency of route alteration for all three age groups. Notwithstanding this persistent significance, it is worth mentioning that the highest p-value is observed among the younger generations (Table 6 and 7). Prior instances of sexual harassment on public transport account for about a point increase in the frequency of route alteration due to safety concerns. For the older age group, this effect is still significant, yet it only accounts for half a point increase in the overall frequency of route alteration due to safety concerns, as it can be observed in Table 8. Consequently, we can also affirm that our third hypothesis (H1c) has been proved. The gender difference in the relationship between prior sexual harassment experiences on public transport and travel route alterations due to safety concerns is stronger among younger generations (15 to 24, 25 to 34) than older generations. (35+).

4. Discussion and conclusions

As it was mentioned at the beginning of this study, one of the main problems that haunts sexual harassment research is the lack of consensus on the phenomenon itself — definition and sexual harassment constituting behaviours. After a meticulous analysis of the available definitions, we have concluded that the scholarly discourse could greatly benefit from adopting "United Nations Model Policy for Sexual Harassment" (2018) definition and behavioural criteria for sexual harassment. This taxonomy provides a holistic framework of understanding for the phenomenon that could enhance comparability and allow for standardized survey methodology.

The evidence undoubtedly demonstrates the prevalence of sexual harassment within the realm of public transportation across Europe. Data further indicates that women remain the primary victims of these offences, irrespective of the location, underscoring the pervasive nature of the issue. When using the aforementioned taxonomy, most frequent behaviours include subtle and non-physical actions, such as sexually suggestive stares. As it highlighted by the existing literature, these actions are often normalised or perceived as "commonplace" (Ceccato, 2017), reflecting a broader societal challenge to achieving gender equality, even in regions regarded as socially progressive.

Most women adapt their mobility patterns by either using privately-operated transport services or travelling with a companion. Women's caregiving responsibilities typically necessitate higher travel expenses, such as additional fares when accompanied by children. This analysis reveals another layer of disparity, showing that women frequently need to resort to privately-operated means of transport to access the same level of mobility as their counterparts. Consequently, this translates into further financial

constraint for the segment of the population that already suffers from the repercussions of a late entry into the labour market and a pay gap. Similarly, travelling with a companion perpetuates outdated stereotypes of women requiring male protection for public mobility, consequently undermining their independence.

The statistics also proved all our three hypotheses: prior instances of sexual harassment on public transport make people more likely to alter their travel route due to safety concerns (H1a), this relationship is stronger among women (H1b) and within women, this effect is more prominent among younger generations (H1c). This is consistent with the theoretical framework, as ages 12 to 34 were associated with peak sexualization of the female body (Sherman, 2023). Moreover, even when prior instances of sexual harassment are taken out of the equation, women still alter their route due to safety concerns more than men on a regular basis. This could indeed be explained by the other predictors of victimization mentioned in our theoretical framework, such as witnessing other women being sexually harassed.

Via the survey method, not only qualitative data on the impact of sexual harassment on women is gathered but also, for the first time, sequential figures on an internalized behaviour: route alteration due to safety concerns. Those numbers are then used in regressions to determine how much do prior instances of sexual harassment condition de frequency of route alteration. To ensure broader applicability, it has been developed a structured, survey-based instrument designed for adaptability across various cities and cultures. Grounded in consistent definitions and criteria, this replicable tool fosters comparative analyses and contributes to a standardized corpus of research on sexual harassment in public transport.

With regard to the potential mitigation of this problem, it is worth resorting to the insights gathered from question 13 of the proposed questionnaire, which asked respondents which measures could improve their sense of security when in public transit. A significant proportion of both male and female respondents wrote heightened video surveillance and security guards' presence as their preferred measures. The implementation of these measures, which are in fact pragmatic and feasible, would result in safer public transport for all passengers, yet it would make a significant difference for women.

Having said that, there were also answers that differed between women and men. Many women suggested implementing a women-only transport option, what is now commonly referred to as "pink transportation". This segregated way of public transport has already been implemented in several cities, such as Pakistan, Tokyo, or Rio de Janeiro. Although it can surely be an effective practice in the short term, advocates for women's rights have suggested that segregation tactics are likely to deepen gender divides, making long-term equality between men and women difficult to achieve (Dunckel-Graglia, 2013). Therefore, it shall only be conceived as a solution as long as it may serve to raise awareness on the issue.

Ultimately, this study might be considered innovative, as well as relevant for gender studies, insofar as it offers a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment in public transport. It effectively addresses the gaps in previous research by adopting a standardized and holistic framework. By incorporating both overt and subtle forms of harassment, as well as internalized coping mechanisms such as route alteration, the research expands the understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions, including practical policy recommendations such as increased security measures. Finally, this work adds valuable empirical evidence to the ongoing discourse on sexual harassment and offers a foundation for future studies to further explore the intersectional dimensions of this pervasive issue.

5. Limitations of the study and further research

To conclude, it is also imperative to address the limitations of this study to ensure a proper understanding of the work performed and to contribute to the reliability of academic literature. Firstly, it is paramount to mention the inherent limitations to the diffusion methods chosen for the questionnaire. Social media platforms and messaging apps inevitably restricted the access to a truly representative sample, yet it was the only method available to our resources. This was more noticeable when considering older cohorts, who do not usually engage with these digital channels as often as the youth. It was also challenging to gather enough responses from London and Paris, as acquaintances were too limited to enable snowball sampling to function correctly through the platforms. Specifically, there was a prominent geographical disparity in the accessibility to Reddit forums. While the engagement with London-based Reddit forums was met with fruitful participation, the attempts to distribute the questionnaire through Parisian forums were met with resistance and subsequent bans, eventually leading to a smaller sample for that city.

Another limitation of our study is the assumption of gender being a binary variable. As it can be observed in the questionnaire, other possible gender identifications than cisgender males and females were included to align with the current understanding of the gender concept. Nonetheless, the representation of non-binary individuals was regrettably minimal, leading to their exclusion for the sake of simplicity. In what concerns transgender females and males, they were categorized according to their identifying genders —females and males, respectively. While it certainly would have been enriching to examine these groups on a separate note, once again, their numbers were insufficient. Consequently, a plausible further line of research on this topic could focus on sexual harassment on public transport and its impact on the daily mobility of these groups. Moreover, sexual considerations should be added to broaden the academic discourse on the subject, which lacks an intersectional perspective (Cullen-Rosenthal & Fileborn, 2023).

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