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Navigating the city: gendered work experiences in urban spaces

Belén Martínez Caparrós ⓘD

ABSTRACT

Women around the world experience much higher levels of fear of crime, profoundly impacting their perceptions of safety and influencing their interactions with public spaces. This fear prompts women to alter their behaviour, such as avoiding specific urban areas and public transport, especially after dark. While many amend their habits and limit their exposure to public spaces due to the fear of crime, what happens to those women for whom the urban space is also their workplace and whose work occurs solely in public spaces? This article focuses on women whose work demands engagement with public spaces, exploring the experiences of women drivers in male-dominated sectors such as taxi and platform-based (Uber and Cabify) services in the city of Malaga, Spain. Drawing on 35 semi-structured interviews, the article explores their experiences as mobile workers navigating urban spaces and their dual role in the dynamics of violence: as the receiver of violence and sexual harassment from clients and colleagues, and simultaneously acting as protectors for their women clients, ensuring their safety in public spaces. Rather than understanding women as passive victims, the article explores how women deploy a sense of agency in creating strategies that help them navigate these challenges. While some responses involve self-censorship to mitigate potential dangers, others defy gender by not conforming to the cultural norms of traditional femininity. Through these processes, women survive, challenge, and resist violence, and move from the sense that 'this city is not for me' to developing a higher sense of power.

Partout dans le monde, les femmes affichent un degré beaucoup plus élevé de peur face à la criminalité ; cela a un profond impact sur la manière dont elles perçoivent la sécurité et influence leurs interactions avec les espaces publics. Cette peur incite les femmes à modifier leur comportement et à éviter certaines zones urbaines et les transports en commun, en particulier une fois la nuit tombée. Si nombre d'entre elles modifient leurs habitudes et limitent leur exposition aux espaces publics par crainte de la criminalité, qu'en est–il des femmes pour qui l'espace urbain est aussi leur lieu de travail et dont l'activité professionnelle a lieu exclusivement dans des espaces publics ?

Cet article se concentre sur les femmes dont le travail exige qu'elles évoluent dans des espaces publics, et se penche sur les expériences de conductrices dans des secteurs dominés par les hommes, tels que les taxis et les services basés sur des plateformes (Uber et Cabify) dans la ville de Malaga, en Espagne. S'appuyant sur 35 entretiens semi–

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structurés, cet article examine leurs expériences en tant que travailleuses mobiles naviguant dans des espaces urbains et le rôle double qui est le leur dans la dynamique de la violence : en tant que victimes de violences et de harcèlement sexuel de la part de clients et de collègues, et, simultanément, en tant que protectrices de leurs clientes, cherchant à assurer leur sécurité dans des espaces publics. Plutôt que de considérer les femmes comme des victimes passives, cet article traite de la manière dont les femmes déploient un certain libre arbitre en créant des stratégies qui les aident à gérer ces défis. Si certaines réponses comportent l'autocensure afin d'atténuer des dangers potentiels, d'autres défient les normes de genre et englobent le refus de se conformer aux normes culturelles relatives à la féminité traditionnelle. Grâce à ces processus, les femmes survivent, tiennent tête et résistent à la violence, et cessent de ressentir que « cette ville n'est pas pour moi » pour acquérir un sentiment plus fort de pouvoir.

Las mujeres de todo el mundo experimentan niveles de miedo muy elevados a la delincuencia, lo que incide profundamente en su percepción de la seguridad e influye en sus interacciones con los espacios públicos. Este temor hace que modifiquen su comportamiento y eviten ingresar a determinadas zonas urbanas o tomar el transporte público, especialmente al anochecer. Si bien muchas modifican sus hábitos y limitan su exposición a los espacios públicos por miedo a la delincuencia, ¿qué ocurre con aquellas mujeres para las que el espacio urbano es también su lugar de trabajo, un trabajo que sólo puede desarrollarse en espacios públicos? Este artículo se enfoca en mujeres cuyo trabajo exige su involucramiento en espacios públicos. En este caso explora las experiencias de conductoras en sectores dominados por hombres, como son el taxi y los servicios disponibles en plataformas (Uber y Cabify), en la ciudad de Málaga, España. A partir de 35 entrevistas semiestructuradas, el artículo examina sus vivencias como trabajadoras móviles que navegan por los espacios urbanos, así como el doble papel que desempeñan en la dinámica de la violencia: como receptoras de violencia y acoso sexual por parte de clientes y colegas del trabajo, y actuando simultáneamente como protectoras de sus clientas, para garantizar su seguridad en los espacios públicos. En lugar de considerar a las mujeres como víctimas pasivas, el presente artículo analiza hasta dónde las mismas despliegan un sentido de agencia creando estrategias que les ayudan a sortear estos retos. Aunque algunas respuestas implican la autocensura para mitigar peligros potenciales, otras cuestionan el género y no se conforman con las normas culturales de la feminidad tradicional. Gracias a estos comportamientos, las mujeres sobreviven, impugnan y resisten a la violencia y pasan de la sensación de que "esta ciudad no es para mí" a desarrollar un mayor sentido del poder.

Introduction

Although fear of crime is a concern for people of all genders, studies consistently find that women around the world experience much higher levels of fear of crime than their male counterparts (Koskela 2000). Indeed, the image of a woman walking home at night, clutching her keys or faking a phone call, has become a familiar one and an indelible symbol of the precautions women take to navigate urban spaces. The fear is significantly

influenced by gendered experiences. Women walking to school or work in cities such as Jakarta, Semarang, Bristol, and Washington frequently encounter harassment (Shadwell 2017). In Spain, a study in 2018 revealed that 92 per cent of women had experienced some verbal or physical aggression of a sexual nature when in public spaces (Ayuso 2018). Because of these experiences, women feel insecure while walking on the streets and prefer to avoid certain urban areas and public transport, especially after dark. While many women change their behaviour and limit their exposure to public spaces due to this fear of crime, what happens to those women for whom the urban space is also their work-place and whose work occurs solely in such public spaces?

This article explores the daily challenges of women working in the Spanish transport sector, specifically as taxi and Uber/Cabify drivers. Women represent less than 15 per cent of the global transport sector's workforce (International Transport Workers' Federation 2019), and while male-dominated sectors are not rare, the fact that their work takes place in urban public spaces provides a unique opportunity for exploring their experiences around mobility and exposure to the city. Even though the World Bank has stated that incorporating women in the design of transport systems would provide safety and better service to all women users and aid gender equality in many cities worldwide (Gonzalez Carvajal and Alam 2018), there has been scant research in this area, and little attention has been paid to the experiences of these women. In order to attract women into the transport labour market, Turnbull (2013) identifies a need to improve work–life balance conditions such as inflexible working hours or changing working locations. Other issues raised are the lack of segregated toilet facilities (European Commission 2017), as well as concerns about personal safety (European Transport Federation (ETF) 2017). The results of a survey carried out among women workers for the ETF in 2017 showed alarming evidence of high levels of violence against women at work in transport across Europe (ETF 2017). According to the International Labour Office, violence is one of the main factors affecting the retention and attraction of transport jobs for women (Turnbull 2013).

Additionally, the transport sector, operating exclusively in public spaces, is also a highly risky profession. Taxi drivers in the United States face a staggering 60 times higher risk of on-the-job murder than the average worker (Hamill and Gambetta 2006). In Spain, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an alarming rise in violent attacks and robberies against taxi drivers (Perez-Alberca 2022). A survey conducted amongst women taxi drivers in Spain in 2022 found that six out of ten women taxi drivers have experienced harassment while working (Chinea 2023). This sector is particularly dangerous because once drivers accept a passenger, they are in an exposed and potentially dangerous position: on their own and unarmed, with one or more strangers sitting in close proximity, often cruising unfriendly neighbourhoods. In the case of women drivers, the feeling of being exposed and in a potentially dangerous position while working is even greater because they feel an exaggerated exposure to danger due to their work and also their gender.

This article draws on the case study of two groups of women working in the taxi and platform-based ride-hailing (Uber and Cabify) sectors in Malaga, Spain. For these women, their workplace consists of physical places such as streets, highways, and their

own cars. As mobile workers navigating urban spaces, women drivers have daily safety concerns as part of their work. Even in the new and apparently gender-neutral gig platforms (Lopez 2020), studies have increasingly highlighted how algorithmic management results in bias, harassment, and safety issues for female workers (Ma et al. 2022). In this article, I analyse the challenges that *taxistas* (taxi drivers) and platform-based *conductoras* (drivers)[1] face as they navigate public spaces, focusing on experiences of fear and harassment and the strategies that they deploy to feel safer, usually by trading off economic gain.

Some of these challenges derive from the frequent encounters of sexual harassment that women in public spaces experience, which leads to a feeling of exclusion and discomfort, resulting in a sense that 'this city is not for me' (Lowe 2019, 65). Here, the concept of the 'right to the city' introduced by Lefebvre (1967), becomes a powerful framework to explain which social groups feel empowered to occupy these spaces. For women, the threat of crime is significant enough to alter their behaviour. According to Madriz (1997), this is how women are socially controlled and kept in the private domain. Another factor that limits the presence of women in public domains is the access to toilets. Women are disproportionately impacted by the difficulties of accessing toilets as they cannot relieve themselves in public as discreetly as men do, mainly due to gendered cultural values of modesty. Fear of crime and access to toilets are two examples of fundamental elements to the social control of women because they organise 'consent around a strict code of behaviour that "good women" need to follow' (Madriz 1997, 155). This article aims to shed light on the interplay between vulnerability and resilience in the daily lives of female drivers and contribute to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within public spaces.

Furthermore, the article investigates traditional norms related to 'appropriate femininity' (Butler 2004) and how societal conditioning plays a role in shaping women's behaviour, specifically in terms of women's responsibility for avoiding risky situations in public spaces. Feminist geographer, Leslie Kern (2021), suggests that there is a link between women's extreme fear of being attacked by strangers and the patriarchal power structures that stoke them. This means that if patriarchal belief systems adhere to the notion of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, then women being too frightened to venture outdoors could serve a purpose within that framework. This is evidenced by reports of women being more fearful of being attacked in a public space by a stranger than being attacked in their own home by a cohabitee, despite statistical analysis that shows that the latter is more likely (Stanko 1995). In unravelling these dynamics, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender, fear, and safety in public spaces, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women negotiating urban landscapes as their workplace.

The paper adds to the existing literature on gender, mobility, labour, and the gendered dimension of platform work. First, it inspects women's experiences as mobile workers navigating urban spaces, illustrating women drivers' daily concerns as part of their work. It delves deep into some of the root causes of gender inequalities, such as the threat of violence, and the existing gendered restrictions that impact how long, where, and when women can work. It also explores the experiences of those who trespass the gendered expectations.

Finally, the article discusses the range of strategies and resources women use to reclaim a sense of protection and safety within the workplace, allowing them to stay on the job.

The analysis has been divided into two macro-themes. First, how women drivers navigate the city, where I analyse the challenges they face when working in small private spaces, such as the car, but also in accessing public spaces. Second, how these women create safety at work. These themes help us understand the everyday experiences of female drivers, from the risks and fear they experience to the strategies and tools they use to create safety. Away from the idea of women as passive victims, this research shows that they deploy a sense of agency, developing strategies to help them navigate these challenges. Often, women make decisions that prioritise their safety and well-being, trading income for safety, but that allow them to stay in the job.

Literature review: the geography of women's fear and creating safety

The gendered discussion of fear and violence is far from novel. Studies consistently find that women around the world tend to face much higher levels of fear of crime than men (Koskela 2000). It has been demonstrated that this women's fear prompts spatial precautions, such as avoiding specific city areas or refraining from going out after dark, reflecting and perpetuating unequal power relations in public spaces. These 'gendered exclusions' (Koskela 1999) reflect the unequal power relations and women's status, which are perpetuated in public spaces. This article investigates the geography of women's fear in urban environments, highlighting how everyday experiences of violence and sexual harassment contribute to the creation of exclusionary spaces.

Table 1. Demographic information.

	Taxistas (n = 20)	Conductoras (n = 15)
Age		
18–25 years	2	1
26–30 years	4	4
30–40 years	5	5
40–50 years	5	3
Over 50 years	4	2
Marital status		
Single	6	7
Married	5	5
Divorced	8	3
Widow	1	0
Motherhood		
No children	8	10
1 child	3	3
2 children	8	1
3 children	1	1
Time working in transport sector		
Less than 6 months	0	6
6 months to 1 year	1	3
1–3 years	2	4
3–5 years	3	2
5–10 years	6	0
10–15 years	6	0
Over 15 years	2	0

To cope with the constant state of fear, women need to know where and when they may encounter the 'dangerous men' (Valentine 1989) to avoid them. To do so, women create a personal map of safety and fear through layers of personal experiences but also media, rumours, urban myths, and 'common sense'. The mental map of women's fear shifts from day to night, weekday to weekend, season to season (Kern 2021). Importantly, these are not only geographical maps with the areas of the city where it is more likely women will find danger; it is also a map of the qualities of the 'dangerous man' (Madriz 1997), the kind of man that is potentially dangerous and that usually corresponds to a poor, uneducated, drunk, or immigrant man (Christie 1986).

Most women in Western societies negotiate public spaces based on the control exercised by different groups at different times (Valentine 1989), with the night city often being perceived as a 'masculine' area (Koskela 1999) where women's presence is atypical. Paradoxically, women's decisions to stay indoors due to fear of being attacked contribute to the reinforcement of male-dominated spaces, creating a 'virtual curfew' (Pain 1997) for many women. Therefore, as long as women's presence in public space continues to be framed within the public–private dichotomy and in the hierarchies of class and gender, the right of women to public space will not be achieved (Phadke, Ranade, and Khan 2011).

As women create mental maps of safety and danger, they decide where to go, how to get there, what to wear, or how to behave to feel safer. These practices have become so normalised that women often think about them not so much as a choice but as 'just what you do' (Vera-Gray 2018, 11). While the forms and frequencies of men's harassment of women may be different across the world, the work that women perform to limit it is constant. Kelly (2016) refers to these actions as 'safety work', which describes the strategies women develop in response to their experiences in public spaces and that aim to maintain a sense of safety. Safety work encompasses the thinking processes, decision-making, and embodied watchfulness that women undertake, often unnoticed, to create safety for themselves. This term is critical in analysing how research participants negotiated their willingness to work with their fear and is part of women's invisible work.

This invisible work is intrinsic to the idea of safety work and the fact that women themselves are able to, or responsible for, creating safety for women. This is a lesson that girls receive about sexual violence and that highlights 'it's us, not them' (Vera-Gray 2018, 79). This is when women start making changes to what they do to create safety. As these changes become part of what women 'just do' (Vera-Gray 2018), they are rarely acknowledged, even by women. The invisible work is not only part of what women do but also what constitutes being a woman. Consequently, it also creates an image that those who do not act according to gendered expectations can be blamed for any experiences of violence (Vera-Gray 2018).

Methodology

This study was conducted through ethnographic research in the city of Malaga, Spain, between September 2020 and July 2021. The study used the snowball sampling method,

and I interviewed 35 participants: 20 *taxistas* (taxi drivers) and 15 *conductoras* (platform-based drivers) – eight Uber drivers and seven Cabify drivers (see Table 1). The ethnographic research was based on semi-structured interviews, shadowing workers, and general observations. During my interviews, I took a narrative approach, which involved encouraging participants to adopt the role of storyteller (Gabriel 2009), as it invites them to construct storied accounts about their personal experiences. The strength of the narrative approach is that it offers first-hand access to the participants' lived experiences (Leavy 2014). While I had some 'generative narrative questions' (Flick 2006), the interview process was largely unstructured. The aim was to encourage the construction of rich narratives, which were recorded and transcribed as empirical data.

Due to participants' intense working shifts, most interviews were conducted outside their working hours, which was usually suggested by the participants themselves and allowed for longer and deeper conversations. This was a first glimpse into their work's unpredictability and temporal demands. The airport was one of the few places where I could meet *taxistas* when they were working. In Malaga, taxis have a prominent role at the airport, with two large areas reserved solely for their taxi ranks. Taxi drivers are assigned to the airport in a rotation system; they can spend hours waiting for work there. These waiting hours allowed me to meet and see the *taxistas* in their element and experience the taxi sector from the inside.

Additionally, I could shadow two *taxistas* during a day of work. This happened in July 2021, when COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, and I was allowed to be inside the car with them. Being with a *taxista* for a day enabled me to witness some of the aspects of their work, such as the uncertainty and inability to plan the day, the challenge of deciding when to stop for a break or when to keep moving, the fatigue, and the strategies used to cope with these challenges. Shadowing also allowed me to observe the interactions between drivers and their customers, from spaces of intimacy and shared confidences with some (usually women) clients, to the invisibility and disregard from others.

All interactions and conversations were in Spanish, which was both the researcher's and participants' native language, and the transcription and translation of interview conversations were done by the researcher. The names of women drivers in this article are pseudonymised.

Contextualising the research: the taxi and Uber/Cabify sectors in Spain

Although old newspapers locate the first female taxi driver in Spain as early as 1935 (Mariño 2018), today's taxi sector remains highly male-dominated. Despite this daunting reality, the good news is that things are changing. The longer-serving female drivers of this study highlight that the sector is gradually gaining more women drivers. Participants range from having four to 15 years of experience within the taxi sector, but only those with more than ten years stated that when they started, there were no women on the scene. Furthermore, these were the participants who would refer to the sector's male dominance as a deterrent to entering it.

One of the main characteristics defining the taxi sector in Spain is its endogamous nature, with licences often being inherited and passed within families. This limits the entry of people who are not part of these families or circles, limiting diversity and representation among participants. This was evident from the participants of this study, who were owners of their taxi licences and cars, which often had been inherited or purchased from their fathers. Another consequence of this endogamic system is seen through the lack of representation of migrants or those from diverse nationalities among the participants. That all women drivers who participated in this research were born in Spain is a consequence of the close net in which the sector operates. As taxi licences are often kept within the family, most of the people within the sector are there through a family member. Additionally, it is common practice for taxi owners to hire drivers by asking for references from their colleagues. This word-of-mouth hiring practice reinforces the endogamic system.

Participants cited work's demanding and unsociable nature as barriers for mothers to work in this sector. They described their shifts as not family-friendly and highlighted the difficulty of doing care work when they spend so much time at work. This was exemplified by the relatively low number of married women and women with young children among participants: only six of the 20 *taxistas* had small children that represented a significant caring responsibility. However, some *taxistas* highlighted the flexibility and lack of a boss as the main advantage of working in the sector.

Conductoras are also women who have entered a highly male-dominated sector, but in this case, one mediated by apps. In this research, all *conductoras* worked through intermediary companies for either Uber or Cabify platforms. Comparing the sociodemographics of the *conductoras* group, they share many similarities with the *taxistas*: age range, marital status, education level, and background. Notably, the main disparity lies in the time women have been working in the sector, with *conductoras*' time ranging only from three months to four years. This difference can be explained by the recent emergence of Uber and Cabify, which arrived in Spain in the 2010s. Due to demanding schedules, *conductoras* also found maintaining relationships and caring responsibilities challenging. The difficulty in balancing work and family duties was evident when looking at the number of women drivers with caring responsibilities: only three out of 15 had small enough children that represented a significant caring responsibility. Another key distinction is their unfamiliarity with the sector before joining, as many had not even heard of Uber or Cabify until seeing job adverts. The majority transitioned from traditionally feminine sectors, such as cleaning or hospitality, into platform work driven by a sense of necessity and desperation for employment, stability, and income. These differences in sector entry and characteristics significantly influence women's experiences in these roles and the agency they deploy while working, affecting how they negotiate the urban spaces.

Another critical difference between *taxistas* and Uber/Cabify *conductoras* was their employment status. Despite Uber and Cabify claims that the gig economy allows workers to 'be your own boss' (Ravenelle 2019) promising freedom, flexibility, and independence, none of the *conductoras* in this research were self-employed, nor were they their own bosses. Instead, they were all employees of third companies who own a fleet of cars

and hire the drivers to operate the Uber and Cabify licences. This peculiarity of the Spanish system has some implications for the participants in how they negotiate their daily encounters with the city and navigate difficult situations.

Challenges in navigating the city: a place and time for men

The shadow of sexual assault

> I went to pick up a client at a brothel. The client sat next to me in the passenger seat. Halfway there, he put his hand on my boob. I told him: 'the public service is the car. I'm not a public service. Try again and I'll leave you here with a tattoo of my hand on your face'. He apologised, but it happened again. I wanted to leave him as soon as possible, but I wanted to have some colleagues back me up and help me get him out of the car. All the taxi ranks were empty. It was only in the last one that there were some colleagues. They helped me and took care of him, and they made sure he paid for the trip. Afterwards, I found a private spot to cry my eyes out because, you know, that thing of someone touching your boob, touching your hand … I needed to take it all out. We have a double problem because our [male] colleagues are exposed to someone pulling a knife on them and taking their money, but we are exposed to being raped and being taken somewhere you don't know. (Carmen, interview, Malaga, 21 May 2021)

Sadly, Carmen was not the only participant with stories of being inappropriately touched by customers. As mobile workers, participants occupy urban public spaces as part of their working day and do that alone in a car. For this reason, participants shared feelings of being '*muy vendidas*' (very exposed). In line with what has been highlighted in the literature on women and public spaces, participants reported feeling less safe at certain places at different times of the day, showing that the right to public space is limited for women. In the context of this research, the limited access to urban spaces results in total exclusion or restricted access to work and income for women.

As part of the limited access to the city, participants tried to avoid certain areas or times of the day based on safety concerns. Most *taxistas* who participated in this study would not work nights if they could avoid it, even when working at night usually means earning more. For example, Yurena, a *taxista* for more than ten years, admitted she had never worked at night. She works mornings, and her husband works evenings and nights. This distribution of shifts by gender was standard amongst heterosexual couples that shared the same car: the woman would work during the day, and the man would work in the evenings and nights because nights were considered more dangerous. This shows that the fact that the night becomes a 'masculine time' immediately excludes most women from working in urban spaces. This is done through the message that nights are not for women to be out in public spaces because it is dangerous.

Although most women rejected working at night, a few defied the message of the city as a dangerous place after dark. Those who did it reported feeling more frightened and alert and changing their working methods. For these women, the main fear was being sexually harassed or attacked, as evident from Carmen's quote. This fear is explained by Ferraro's (1996) theory of the shadow of sexual assault, which shapes women's early understanding of the need for self-protection against potential sexual assault, a

sentiment echoed by women drivers who recognised a higher risk of sexual attacks compared to their male counterparts.

The fear of sexual assault often dominated the work lives of participants, leading some to contemplate leaving the industry due to concerns for their physical safety. This fear is perpetuated by the discourse of 'stranger-danger', reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and making women more alert and cautious with unknown men. Participants' feelings of danger were particularly heightened with male clients, influencing their behaviour. For example, Sara, who had a safety screen installed in her car, told me:

> Only at night, in the wee hours of the morning, I would raise it. At night, if I saw that I liked the client, that it was a girl or a man but he looked ok, I would lower it. If I didn't like the client, I would keep it up, and the client would pay through the small drawer. (Sara, interview, Malaga, 15 June 2021)

Sara's account shows that the time of day and the client's gender impact her feeling of safety and, consequently, her decisions. Out of fear, women make decisions on whether to accept or reject a client, therefore prioritising safety and well-being and trading income for safety. The constant assessment of clients reflects the safety work practices women employ, which often go unnoticed and are part of the invisible work that women do. Women drivers, both *taxistas* and *conductoras*, also faced experiences of sexual objectification and propositions. Raquel's account is a good example:

> I was with a passenger who was looking for a brothel. I took him to several, but he didn't like any of them. Finally, he said, 'I want a woman like you.' I started sweating. I told him, 'What do you mean, a woman like me? No. I'm the taxi driver, the one who drives the taxi.' He said, 'But I'd like to be with a normal woman. A woman like you.' I pulled the handbrake. You are not supposed to throw a person out of the taxi, but I wanted to throw him out. 'No, I'm not a whore. I am the driver! And you are disrespecting me.' (Raquel, interview, Malaga, 19 November 2020)

This kind of interaction further contributes to a sense of fear, vulnerability, and powerlessness, ultimately reinforcing gender stereotypes and unequal power dynamics.

Although there were no significant differences in the experiences of harassment between *taxistas* and *conductoras*, the different way both groups operate impacts the precautions they can take. *Taxistas* are mainly self-employed, and an app does not govern them. This means they are the ones to define their relationship with the city and set the boundaries for their work. *Taxistas* in this research could decide what areas of the town they would drive through and where they wanted to seek potential clients, and they had well-defined places to which they would not take clients. They could decide whether they wanted to accept a ride based on the destination, right at the outset. By contrast, *conductoras* are governed by the app. The app reveals the client's destination only after the driver has picked them up. If they decide not to proceed to the destination then their only option is to cancel the trip. However, this action penalises as it lowers their rating, which is crucial for their work as higher ratings lead to better and longer rides. This has been discussed by scholars in digital work who have confirmed that in the

case of platform-based drivers, technology limits women's control over their movements and safety work rather than empowering them (Ma et al. 2022).

I have already discussed how participants had to navigate spaces that were considered to be for men. The narratives of participants reveal the challenges they face when navigating spaces traditionally considered for men. They shared instances where women driving at night or helping clients seeking brothels exposed them to objectification and propositions, as shown in Raquel's account above. This reinforces the perception of women as sexual objects and challenges their right to occupy public spaces. Raquel's account vividly illustrates a passenger's attempt to solicit her for sex, causing discomfort and defiance against the demeaning proposition. Similar experiences of monetary offers for sexual services during the day highlight the pervasive objectification faced by female drivers. These encounters transcend night-time work and contribute to the creation of 'masculine' spaces where women are unwelcome. Such experiences not only violate women's rights by reinforcing a fear of crime, but also perpetuate gender stereotypes and underscore the notion of men's presumed access to women's bodies and sexuality, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness.

The 'drama' of women accessing toilets

I have illustrated that one consequence of my participants working in public was that they were often offered money for sex, which instilled in them a sense of being limited in their access to the city. The right to the city is a powerful framework to show which social groups can occupy the public space, and that can be enforced through various elements. For example, participants in this research pointed out 'the drama of accessing toilets' (Rosario, interview, Malaga, November 2020), as one of the big challenges they faced. All participants reported this issue, adding that this was one of the main differences between them and their male colleagues. The feeling of being discriminated against was based on the idea that men had a clear advantage, as they could relieve themselves even when there was no toilet available, reporting many examples of male colleagues who did that regularly. Although not desirable, the reality is that it is easier for men to urinate when there is no toilet available than it is for women (Greed 2014). Women's accounts showed that they often needed to drive to a petrol station, a shopping mall, or a restaurant to use the toilet while working, with a considerable time and financial cost, which they felt men did not have to pay. So much so that Juana recognised that:

> It is easier for men as they just need to move away from the main road to relieve themselves, while for us [women] it is much complicated. I've always said that this is one of the reasons why I would like to be a man, in order to have this opportunity. I know it's silly, but it's true that they have it easier. (Juana, interview, Malaga, 5 November 2020)

In Juana's mind, there is a clear distinction between men's and women's behaviours.

As a woman, she does not consider 'moving away from the main road' when she needs to pee. This can be explained by the responsibility for maintaining cultural standards of purity that women have long carried (Kogan 2010). Beebeejaun (2017) signals the social

norms of modesty as one of the reasons why women are constrained to use only female toilets and private cubicles. Thereafter, for street-based women workers such as drivers, being able to use restrooms is an opportunity to comply with social rules. This highlights some of the elements that reinforce the idea that women are excluded from certain spaces, ultimately affecting the ability to work as a driver.

The (invisible) work of creating safety

This article encapsulates the gendered experiences and daily challenges faced by women working in the transport sector. To overcome these challenges, women drivers develop a range of strategies and resources to reclaim a sense of protection and safety within the workplace, allowing them to stay on the job. These survival strategies were mainly anticipatory, not aimed at affecting systemic changes, and often go unnoticed.

Anticipatory strategies of coping and avoidance

One of the most common strategies used by participants was dismissing any fear and not allowing themselves to think of any dangerous situation. For example, Silvia, a young *taxista*, admitted she had never felt in any danger until she was in a situation where a group of male clients touched her when she was driving. Many women reported not thinking about the risks, like Maria Rosa, who told me, 'You don't think about the worst that could happen. You just can't.' This shows that for women, ignoring the fear of victimisation is the most viable strategy to continue with their work.

Another strategy is to adapt their appearance and behaviour to feel safer (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). This is a consequence of understanding that a sense of unsafety is attached to the female body, and the way to keep it safe is to move away from traditional feminine behaviour. This strategy was followed by some participants who seemed to deviate from gender normative rules of 'appropriate femininity' (Butler 2004). Ana Maria was one of them when she described this experience:

> Once I had three male clients with me in the car and one of them started touching me. I told them that I would stop the car and leave them there if he did that again, but he kept touching me. I told them, 'If you touch me again, I'll go down the embankment, and we'll all go down. I will accelerate the car, pull the handbrake, and we all go down.' The guy sitting next to me started yelling to his friend, 'Shut up! Stop it! Can't you see she's *loca*?' (Ana Maria, interview, Malaga, 20 November 2020)

For Ana Maria, behaving like a violent or *loca* (crazy) woman and, therefore, unpredictable, was her protective strategy. This behaviour resonates with previous research that shows methods of assimilation (Acker 2006; Yount 1991) and women exercising traits associated with masculinity, such as using language, aggressiveness, and toughness, to protect themselves in the workplace (Hiramatsu 2019). Indeed, I found several examples of this assimilation during my research. For example, Raquel admitted that when she feels that clients want to intimidate her, she just needs to be 'a little too rough and they think you are driving very badly and that you are going to kill them' (Malaga, interview,
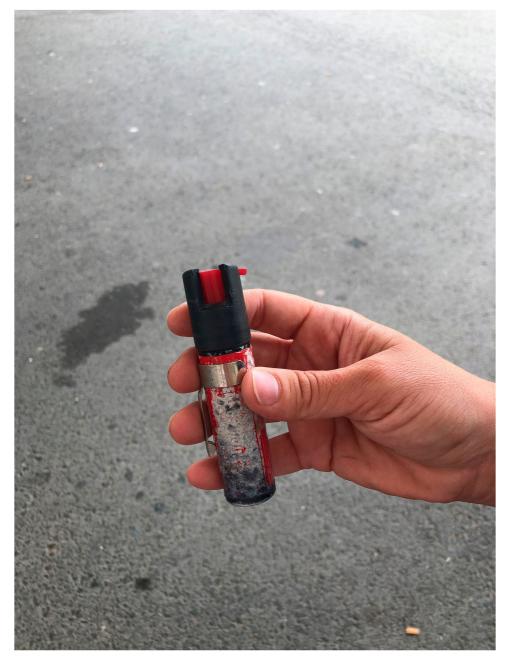
Figure 1. Sara's anti-rape spray.

November 2020). Driving aggressively contradicts the gender normativity of women being quiet, careful, and submissive, and helps women feel safer by moving away from traditional feminine behaviour.

I noticed other strategies as well, such as not to wear jewellery when working, and to try to carry minimal cash in the vehicle. As Uber and Cabify trips are mainly paid through
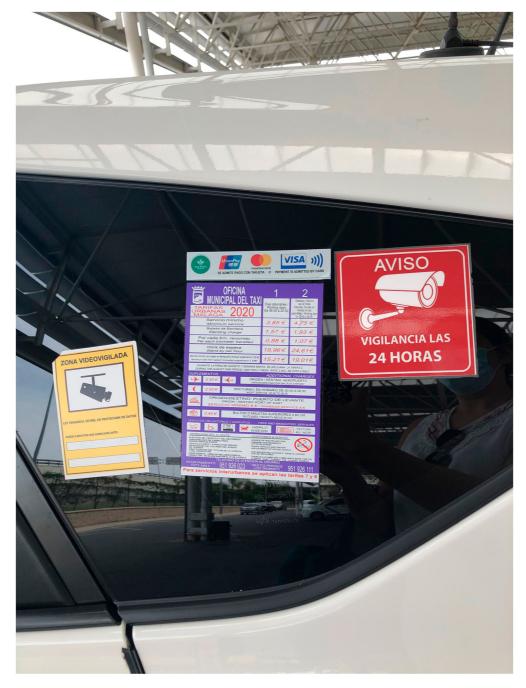
Figure 2. Sara's security camera warning in her taxi.

the app, *conductoras* do not need to worry about having too much money and being robbed. *Taxistas*, on the other hand, would carry more cash as clients would likely pay by cash. For example, Victoria, a taxi driver for 14 years, tries not to have too much money with her. She would take €50 (US$54)[2] in cash for change. Anything above that, she would drive home and leave it there.

Through these anticipatory strategies, participants seek to reclaim the control they have lost and want to reclaim the power and control they should have as drivers, which was taken away because they are women. Therefore, the ultimate aim of these strategies is to regain control, avoid any risk of rape, and protect themselves within their public work environment.

Protective devices

The participants who recognised feelings of fear at work often had different tools or gadgets as a way of protection. The panic button was a popular one. Some *taxistas* have it installed under the steering wheel so they can press it discretely by touching it with their knees. For *conductoras*, the platforms have introduced their versions of panic buttons in the app. However, *taxistas* and *conductoras* felt that these mechanisms were insufficient in addressing their needs during instances of harassment. Victoria, for example, recognised that 'if you ask for help, but you are far away, by the time they arrive anything can happen to you' (Malaga, interview, February 2021). As noted by Victoria, the delay in response time made the panic button less effective in preventing harassment. Consequently, some participants opted for more proactive measures. Sara is a good example:

> I go with my anti-rape spray. I carry it in the door (Figure 1). I've never used it. I bought it at a police shop. This is at least ten years old. Thank God I have never had to use it. I've thought many times about buying a Taser, too. I've carried a wooden stick under the seat. I've also carried a box cutter. Now I take a pair of scissors, which is useless, but ok. And I also have a security camera inside the taxi that records images without sound (Figure 2). (Malaga, interview, 15 June 2012)

Sara's long list of gadgets shows that she spends much time, energy, and money finding ways to feel safer. This is an example of the safety work that women must do to work in the transport sector.

The tools and gadgets described above are small-scale, individualised, and sometimes technical solutions. These solutions tend to characterise women's safety as a personal responsibility instead of challenging the structural causes that caused them. It is essential to note that they can provide a solution individually but will not return the right to the city to women (Whitzman, Andrew, and Viswanath 2014).

Strategies of solidarity

Research indicates that women often cope with their fear of crime by seeking guardians or protectors. For example, Madriz (1997) observed that many of her participants admitted feeling safe in public spaces only in the company of others. However, this strategy becomes impossible for women drivers who work alone in a car. Unable to have companions during work, women sought alternative forms of support. Many expressed turning to their colleagues for assistance, forming informal networks for safety. For instance, Rosario and Raquel shared that they would text their colleagues about

potentially concerning situations, providing details of their location and actions. This practice of seeking support through texting or messaging was prevalent among both *taxistas* and *conductoras*, who often created women-only WhatsApp groups for this purpose. Some participants even carried separate mobile phones to stay connected with colleagues, showing the importance of these informal networks for safety in their solitary work.

Interestingly, I noticed that participants' invisible safety work facilitated other women to do so too. In line with Ma et al. (2022), I observed that the other women in the public domain had a sense of comfort and safety when they saw the women drivers. This is because as women develop a fear of male strangers (Scott 2003), they see other women as safety; sisters, together in this struggle, creating a sense of solidarity. For women drivers, this translated into a sense of responsibility towards all the other women who are challenging gendered social conventions and occupying public spaces at night. This was evident in different occurrences. For example, participants often highlighted that when they take women back home at night, they always wait at the door until they see them going inside safely. It is common among taxi drivers to wait for women clients while they get their keys, open the door, and get inside the building. In many of the conversations I had with participants, this was stressed, and it became clear to me how important this act was for women drivers. Chelo, a *taxista*, shared this story with me:

> At night, sometimes I take a group of young girls who are going back home after a night out, and they tell me, 'Ah, this is so good, so quiet! When it's a woman [driving], it's calmer. When it's a man [driving], he starts looking at you in the rear mirror, and when he drops everyone else at home, and you are the last one, you're scared.' (Chelo, interview, Malaga, 5 March 2021)

This shows that women provide a perceived safety and social support to other women. Through these actions, women drivers develop a sense of solidarity, which at the same time provides a feeling of pride and responsibility towards all the other women who, like them, are challenging gendered social conventions and occupying public spaces at night. To better understand the phenomenon of women drivers helping other women, I find the feminist concept of social reproductive labour useful. Social reproduction encompasses the efforts associated with the daily processes of biological and social reproduction, and regeneration of people, ideologies, and life itself (Backer and Cairns 2021; Luxton 2018). In this research's context, it makes explicit the processes through which women cope and mobilise resources to sustain each other. Different from the original activities identified as social reproduction in the 1970s and 1980s, such as cooking, cleaning, and care work (Federici 2020), I decentre it from the house, and instead situate in the workplace, where it involves supporting each other on the streets and creating acts of solidarity. Women's extra work to provide safety for their clients can also be considered social reproductive labour. Much like the unpaid and invisible work performed in the private sphere of the home (Federici 2020), this work contributes to the capitalist accumulation process (Dalla Costa and James 1975). By helping other women to occupy public spaces, move around the city, attend work or enjoy leisure activities, they are playing a key role in replenishing workers and sustaining capitalism itself.

Conclusion

This research among women drivers in the city of Malaga shows there are many commonalities between the two groups of workers. Both *taxistas* and *conductoras* share the constant fear of becoming victims of crime, particularly of sexual assault. However, *taxistas* work directly with the city, allowing them to set boundaries for their work. They can decide what areas of the city they would drive through and where they want to seek potential clients. By contrast, *conductoras* are governed by the app, resulting in a loss of agency and power to negotiate and define their relationship with the city.

Through this article, I have examined the experiences of women drivers and shown how, as mobile workers, they are exposed to risk and sexual harassment, indicative of how the city becomes a space from which women are excluded. The right to the city determines which social groups can utilise public spaces, enforced through various means. One of these instruments is the access to toilets. Participants in this study identified this as a major challenge, particularly for women compared to men, leading to feelings of discrimination. Men can relieve themselves even when toilets are not available, while women face time and financial costs in accessing toilets. This disparity reflects social norms of modesty, constraining women's access to certain spaces. Further, the study reveals how participants felt that certain parts of the city during certain times of the day were seen as too unsafe to work. Consequently, only a minority of participants worked nights and weekends, the busiest and most profitable times for drivers. This highlights how women prioritise their safety and well-being, trading income for safety.

A constant fear of becoming a victim of crime, especially sexual assault, permeated the experiences of women drivers, reflecting a recurring theme in general studies on women's fear. The strategies commonly employed by women in public spaces, such as avoiding solitary walks on the street or at night, are incompatible with women working in the transport sector or come at a high cost. My research highlights that participants frequently faced unwanted sexual advances and were often unfairly treated as sex workers simply because they were present and working in public spaces. This is an example of the power that 'the right to the city' presents in signalling which social groups are deemed acceptable occupants of public spaces. The fear of crime, particularly as a tool for social control over women, plays a fundamental role. It shapes societal consent around a rigid behavioural code that dictates what is expected of 'good women' and underscores the need for adherence to these societal norms.

Furthermore, the practice of assessing clients, focusing on verbal and non-verbal cues, listening to intuition, and avoiding clients visibly affected by alcohol or drugs, forms an integral part of safety work for women drivers. As discussed in the analysis of this article, this safety work is often relegated to be just 'what women do' and is perceived as being inherent to women, going unnoticed and emotionally affecting those who carry out these assessments.

This article also highlights women's strategies to cope with the sense of working with fear. Away from the idea of women as passive victims, these women deploy a sense of agency, creating strategies to help them navigate these challenges. Often, these responses

contain silence and self-censorship of the potential danger. Yet, in some brave instances, women drivers chose to challenge gender stereotypes by not conforming to the cultural norms of traditional femininity. The strategies can be arranged along a continuum. At one extreme are strategies that reinforce traditional women's roles, confirming that fear of crime helps enforce gender hierarchies in society and organise consent about an appropriate code of behaviour for women (Madriz 1997). Most of the participants' responses fell into this traditional category. At the other extreme are strategies that imply a more radical approach towards fear of crime and challenge conventional etiquette regarding women's behaviour, such as behaving in a 'non-feminine' way. Additionally, some women purchase protective devices with their own money, therefore trading income for security.

Notably, women drivers play a dual role in the dynamics of violence: as the receiver of violence and sexual harassment from clients and colleagues, and as the protector of other women, usually clients, making sure they enjoy violence-free spaces. Therefore, this research has highlighted the importance of recognising that female workers provide extra value to the male-dominated transport sector. This situates women at a crossroads. On the one hand, they are building nets of solidarity to improve the perceived safety and support for other women to occupy public spaces; while doing this, they also perform a kind of labour that goes unpaid and unnoticed, contributing to capitalist value extraction and accumulation.

More research is needed to highlight these women's experiences so policymakers and unions can implement measures to support them. Moreover, additional research is required explicitly on digital platform work and how gender interacts with digital and algorithmic work. While most of the debate has focused on the employment status of platform workers, not enough pressure has been put on companies to upgrade digital tools to improve workers' working conditions and safety. The findings of this study show that some minor changes in the app could drastically enhance the sense of safety for drivers. For example, if the driver could access early information about the destination or the passenger, this would allow the *conductoras* to reject those destinations where they feel unsafe.

Additionally, policies and incentives to increase the presence of working women in the transport sector would help deconstruct gendered ideas that associate driving with masculinity and challenge the presence of women in public spaces. Policies aiming at addressing violence and sexual harassment, such as increasing police presence, would help improve the safety concerns of women working in the transport sector and, more generally, for women to feel a right to the city that is currently absent. Additionally, more attention should be given to women's access to restrooms. Municipalities need to ensure there are enough restrooms in public spaces, and the facilities should be designed to accommodate the different gendered nature of experiences and needs. A collaborative programme between the public and private sector may be a solution. Municipalities can subsidise business owners who, in return, would offer their restrooms to the public for free. Such an arrangement would provide additional free and safe restroom facilities to the public.

Notes

1. To simplify the terminology in this paper, I use the terms *taxista* to refer to a female taxi driver and *conductora* to refer to an Uber/Cabify female driver.
2. On 20 March 2024, the exchange rate of the US dollar against the Euro was €1 = US$1.08. As a result, when presenting in dollars, the closest round of values is used. The real value of 50€ was US$54.23.

Data Statement

No data are associated with this article.

Notes on contributor

Belén Martínez Caparrós is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Sussex in the UK. The findings in this article stem from the research undertaken for Belén's doctoral thesis, titled '¡*Mujer y Taxista*! Analysing the experiences of women in Malaga's male-dominated passenger transport sector'. The thesis focuses on how women drivers navigate the challenges of working in a male-dominated sector, unravelling the labour, resources, and costs, and their strategies to cope with those challenges. Belén explores their experiences as mobile workers navigating urban spaces and their challenges, such as mistrust of their professional capabilities, sexual harassment, occupational hazards, and managing care responsibilities. Postal address: University of Sussex, Sussex House, Brighton BN1 9RH, UK. Email: b.martinez-caparros@sussex.ac.uk

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