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The gendered burden of safety work in urban parks: women's experiences in West Yorkshire's green spaces

Anna Barker^a , Lauren Cape-Davenhill^b , George Holmes^c  and Sibylla Warrington^a 

^aSchool of Law, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; ^bSchool of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; ^cSchool of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

Urban parks offer social, health and mobility benefits, yet many women and girls experience them as spaces of unease. Drawing on 67 interviews with women and focus groups with 50 teenage girls in West Yorkshire, UK, this article examines the 'safety work' that structures their park use—avoidance behaviours, pre-emptive strategies and situational tactics—and shows how parks' spatial and affective qualities as 'spaces apart' shape these practices. It illustrates how access to urban parks is often conditional, secured through routinised, invisible safety work that imposes mental and practical burdens, limits autonomy and constrains full use. We identify three interrelated forms of safety work: *the work of avoiding parks*, encompassing behaviours that prevent use; *the work to access parks*, involving pre-emptive strategies such as planning routes, adjusting timings and seeking companions; and *the work in parks*, including situational tactics such as monitoring surroundings, altering pace or changing direction. We argue that the benefits of parks are frequently accessible only through sustained safety work, revealing urban parks as gendered landscapes shaped by the social threat of male violence and by spatial and temporal constraints embedded in their design and governance. Policy significance is demonstrated through co-produced Safer Parks guidance embedded in national and international park accreditation and policing initiatives, creating pathways to shift responsibility for safety from individual burden to institutional action. We conclude by outlining design and governance principles and a research agenda for intersectional, co-produced park safety.

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Safety work; urban parks; perceived safety; women and girls; fear of crime; male violence

Introduction

Urban parks are 'spaces apart'—socially, spatially and symbolically distinct from surrounding built environments (Booth et al. 2021)—with widely recognised social, health and wellbeing benefits, including access to nature, opportunities for physical activity and recreation, social connection and active travel (Konijnendijk et al. 2013). Yet in

CONTACT Anna Barker  a.c.h.barker@leeds.ac.uk  School of Law, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK.

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the UK and internationally, many women and girls perceive parks as landscapes of unease, particularly after dark (Braçe, Garrido-Cumbrera, and Correa-Fernández 2021; Deroose et al. 2018; Hindman, Chien, and Pollack 2022; Lak, Aghamolaei, and Myint 2020; Madge 1997; Mak and Jim 2022; Polko and Kimic 2022), restricting their ability to realise these benefits (Weimann et al. 2017; Williams et al. 2020).

This article investigates the gendered dynamics of safety in urban parks by examining the 'safety work' (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020) that women and girls undertake to navigate the threat of harassment and male violence and to feel safer. We address a key gap in the literature: while safety work is well documented in streets, nightlife and transport, its specific forms, meanings and burdens in parks remain underexplored, despite the distinctive spatial and affective conditions that characterise park environments. Women also consistently report feeling less safe in parks than in streets, town centres or on public transport (ONS 2022). We examine how these park-specific qualities shape safety work, the mental, practical and mobility costs it produces, and how responsibility for park safety might shift from individuals to institutions and men.

Drawing on interviews with 67 women and ten focus groups with 50 teenage girls in West Yorkshire, we offer a detailed account of how safety concerns shape both access to and experiences of park space. We understand safety work as largely invisible, routinised and mentally burdensome strategies undertaken to feel safer in public settings (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). These strategies often constrain movement, limit spontaneity and exclude women and girls from the benefits parks offer, reinforcing wider patterns of gendered exclusion in cities (Beebejaun 2017; Koskela 1999; Whitzman et al. 2013). Meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11.7, which commits states to universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces by 2030, requires addressing these gendered barriers directly.

We make three interconnected contributions. First, we develop an empirical typology of park safety work and foreground a central paradox in which parks' benefits are often contingent on extensive safety work. We identify three forms: *the work of avoiding parks*, encompassing behaviours that result in partial or complete avoidance and thereby prevent women and girls from accessing park benefits; *the work to access parks*, involving pre-emptive strategies such as planning routes, adjusting timings and seeking companions to secure conditional access; and *the work in parks*, including situational tactics such as monitoring surroundings, altering pace or changing direction, which can diminish restorative benefits. Together, these forms show that access to urban parks is frequently conditional, maintained through routinised and invisible safety work that imposes mental and practical burdens, limits autonomy and constrains full and equitable use. Second, we advance understanding of how women's and girls' safety experiences differ across public settings. Research on safety often treats public space as uniform, overlooking how the environmental, social and temporal features of green spaces differ from grey spaces, such as streets, town centres and transport hubs. Extending the 'spaces apart' lens (Booth et al. 2021), we show how restorative qualities such as nature, quietness and boundedness can also heighten vulnerability by reducing visibility, footfall and surveillance (Maruthaveeran and van den Bosch 2014). These dynamics, reinforced by gendered socialisation and cultural imaginaries, make parks feel less safe, particularly after dark, leading some women and girls to

opt for grey spaces instead. Park safety work therefore reflects spatial and affective dynamics unique to green space. Third, we draw on feminist theories to reframe parks as gendered public goods whose benefits rely on sustained safety work, and to locate responsibility for safety in the interplay between male violence and the spatial-temporal constraints of park design, governance and everyday use. Together, these contributions advance understanding of how safety is experienced and navigated in parks, demonstrate the costs of safety work for access, wellbeing and everyday mobility, and open a pathway for shifting responsibility from individual burden to institutional action.

Urban parks as ‘spaces apart’: gendered geographies of fear and safety work

Paradoxes of fear and gendered space

Studies on women’s safety in public spaces highlight two interrelated ‘paradoxes’. The ‘fear of crime paradox’ is the well-documented international discrepancy whereby women report higher levels of fear of crime than men, despite being statistically less likely to be victims of many recorded offences (Warr 1984). The ‘spatial paradox’ describes how women are more likely to experience violence in domestic settings yet report greater fear of victimisation in public spaces (Pain 1991; Stanko 1995). Feminist scholars argue that these responses are not paradoxical but rational and patterned, reflecting the entrenchment of patriarchal power structures and the everyday intrusions that shape women’s perceptions, movements and embodied relations with space (Pain 1991; Stanko 1985; Vera-Gray 2018).

Recent feminist work suggests that women’s everyday tactics to avoid danger may themselves reduce opportunities for victimisation, meaning lower crime rates may partially reflect women’s vigilance and behavioural constraints (Vera-Gray 2018). These patterns are compounded by the normalisation and underreporting of violence against women and girls. Police-recorded crime and general victim surveys under-record many forms of gendered violence, particularly sexual violence (Davis 1994; Stanko 1995), and surveys designed specifically to measure women’s sexual victimisation consistently find far higher prevalence (for example, Fisher et al. 2003). Together, these dynamics help explain the apparent fear–crime disparity by showing that official statistics often diverge from women’s lived experiences.

The ‘continuum of violence’ framework (Kelly 2012) further demonstrates that gendered harms, from everyday harassment to serious assault, are interconnected. Sexual harassment in public spaces elevates women’s fear, while experiences of violence in domestic or intimate settings fosters a generalised sense of insecurity across private and public domains (Stanko 1985). Feminists analysing the spatial paradox argue that public space is socially constructed as less safe or ‘not for’ women, reinforcing gendered expectations that women belong in the domestic sphere (Bondi and Rose 2003; Pain 1997). Consequently, this scholarship shows that women’s fear is complex rather than paradoxical (Johansson and Haandrikman 2023), rooted in structural inequalities and socio-spatial norms that shape mobility and structure the safety work women and girls undertake in everyday environments.

Parks as intimate 'spaces apart'

Urban parks occupy a distinctive position in women's spatial experiences, shaped by their unique benefits and their role in daily life. Unlike other public spaces, parks become personal sites where intimate relationships are nurtured, milestones celebrated and memories formed. They are places where women take babies in prams, watch children play and meet friends, giving parks a sense of intimacy more commonly associated with the domestic realm. Through repeated use, parks become relational settings where emotional bonds and routines accumulate, shaping women's sense of belonging. These intimate attachments coexist with more troubling experiences. Familiarity can foster comfort, yet past harassment, stories of violence or disruptions to everyday routines can instil fear and complicate the emotional texture of these spaces.

As 'spaces apart', parks offer greenery, quietness and boundedness, alongside limited visible security. These qualities can create a restorative, convivial atmosphere and support wellbeing (Barker et al. 2019; Bornioli et al. 2024). At the same time, these features can heighten insecurity, particularly in secluded areas, when alone or during periods of low light and reduced visibility, which often coincide with lower rhythms of use (Wesely and Gaarder 2004). This duality, in which parks function as both intimate places and 'landscapes of fear' (Madge 1997), underscores their complexity as gendered spaces. Women's perceptions of park safety are shaped not only by physical attributes and rhythms of activity but also by their emotional connections and the relational significance parks hold in daily life. Recognising parks as intimate 'spaces apart' is therefore essential for understanding how design and governance can better align with the social purpose and atmosphere women value (Braçe, Garrido-Cumbrera, and Correa-Fernández 2021).

Safety work: navigating public space

Women's fear shapes a repertoire of 'safety work', the precautionary measures and habitual practices used to navigate public space securely (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). This concept is rooted in feminist notions of 'invisible work', the unpaid and undervalued work traditionally performed by women, including domestic and caring responsibilities (Daniels 1987), the 'mental load' of family management (Reich-Stiebert et al. 2023), conversational effort (Fishman 1978) and emotional labour in workplace settings (Hochschild 1979). Like these forms of invisible work, women's precautionary behaviours in public space are rarely recognised as 'work'. Instead, they are normalised as part of what it means to be a woman—'not seen as what women do, but as part of what they are' (Fishman 1978, 405). Although difficult to measure, safety work may contribute to women's lower recorded victimisation (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020), reframing the fear-crime 'paradox' as a reflection of women's hidden work compensating for gaps in public safety infrastructure.

Safety work spans spatial, cognitive and bodily strategies, such as altering appearance to deflect attention, enlisting companions, heightened vigilance and avoiding spaces (Gardner 1995; Pain 1991; Rader 2008; Siwach 2020; Vera-Gray 2018; Wesely and Gaarder 2004). Many of these practices become 'automatic', understood as 'common sense' rather than acknowledged as an added burden (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020,

269). Gendered socialisation reinforces this, conditioning girls to assume personal responsibility for safety (Vera-Gray 2018).

Safety work is both constraining and enabling. It restricts freedom and spontaneity, yet also functions as a skilled, agential strategy that enables women to access public spaces. Its costs are significant. Women are nearly twice as likely as men to experience ‘dysfunctional worry’, where precautionary behaviours undermine wellbeing (Jackson and Gray 2010). Safety work also generates opportunity costs in time, mental energy, mobility and civic participation, and can require financial resources for travel or equipment (Beebejaun 2017; Kern 2021; Pain 1997). These constraints reinforce gendered power relations by limiting women’s presence in public space and sustaining patterns of dependence on men (Koskela 1999; Siwach 2020).

Although safety work has been documented in public transport (Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris 2022), streets (Scarponi et al. 2023), nightlife (Stevenson 2017) and online dating spaces (Gillett 2023), much less is known about how safety work operates in parks, despite their distinct spatial and affective qualities. This paper addresses that gap by offering a detailed account of park-specific safety work. Despite evidence that green space offers substantial health benefits for women (Sillman et al. 2022), they remain underrepresented in park use largely due to safety concerns and non-inclusive design (Colley, Irvine, and Currie 2022; Derosé et al. 2018).

Methods

Study context and design

This paper draws on qualitative data from a wider mixed-methods study, which used Q-methodology alongside interviews and focus groups to explore women’s, girls’ and professionals’ perspectives on safety in parks across West Yorkshire. The quantitative findings from the Q-methodology component are presented elsewhere (Barker et al. 2022, 2026). Conducted in partnership with West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), the research spanned the region’s five districts—Leeds, Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees and Wakefield—a predominantly urban area of 2.35 million people, 65% of whom live within 2 km of a public garden or park (WYCA 2023).

Collaboration with local women’s and youth organisations ensured a supportive environment for this sensitive topic. Staff from women’s organisations provided emotional support if discussions were triggering, and youth workers helped facilitate girls’ focus groups, drawing on trusted relationships to encourage participation. This approach strengthened rapport, comfort and safeguarding throughout data collection.

Focus groups and interviews

Qualitative methods elicited rich accounts of feeling safe or unsafe in parks participants used or avoided. Focus groups with teenage girls explored their experiences and safety practices in a familiar setting, enabling naturalistic discussion and idea sharing through peer interaction. One-to-one interviews with adult women captured personal trajectories of park use and avoidance, including context-specific safety work such as route choice, timing or technology use. Both methods followed a Q-sorting

exercise where participants ranked factors associated with park safety (Barker et al. 2022), then elaborated on reasoning, with further questions around park use, avoidance, safety strategies, intersectional influences and ideas for park improvement. All sessions were semi-structured, audio recorded and facilitated primarily by female researchers alongside female staff from partner organisations, following a trauma-informed approach: participants could skip questions, withdraw without consequence and were signposted to support.

Sampling and recruitment

A feminist, intersectional lens informed sampling and analysis, recognising that gendered safety experiences intersect with age, ethnicity, disability and other axes of identity (Crenshaw 1991; Pain 2001), which also shape access to green space (e.g. Gray, Houlden, and Barker 2025). Women's organisations supported purposive recruitment to maximise diversity, following agreed protocols for participant approach and informed consent. Written consent was obtained from all participants and from parents or guardians for girls. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Leeds Business, Environment & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (AREA 20-169). Participants received an information sheet, time for questions, and either a voucher or a social outing *via* partner organisations.

Participants

We conducted two focus groups per district with 50 teenage girls in schools, colleges and youth centres, and 67 one-on-one interviews with adult women between February and June 2022 (Tables 1 and 2). Most interviews took place at partner venues; two were with university students on campus. Women ranged from ages 18–84; 45% were under 44 and 53% over 45. 34% identified as from an ethnic minority; 31% reported a disability; and 22% were born outside the UK (Table 1). Among girls, 28% identified as from an ethnic minority, 14% reported a disability and 10% were born outside the UK (Table 2). Percentages are rounded to whole numbers, so totals may not sum to exactly 100 per cent. Compared with West Yorkshire census data (WYCA n.d.), the sample overrepresents historically under-represented groups. Three-quarters of participants used their local park at least fortnightly, while about one-fifth visited infrequently or rarely. The study did not purposively include non-users, reflecting our focus on lived experiences of safety practices among those with some park engagement. We acknowledge this as a limitation and recommend future research that samples non-users.

Analysis

We adopted reflexive thematic analysis informed by feminist and intersectional theory. Coding transcripts proceeded in two stages: first, a deductive scaffold based on literature on gendered safety and 'safety work', including anticipatory strategies and self-protective tactics, linked to age, ethnicity and religion where participants made those connections; second, inductive coding to capture participants' explanations for

Table 1. Women's sample.

	Total N	Total %
Age		
18–24	5	7%
25–34	7	10%
35–44	19	28%
45–54	12	18%
55–64	15	22%
65–74	7	10%
75–84	2	3%
Total	67	98%
Ethnicity		
White	43	64%
Asian/Asian British	12	18%
Black/Black British	4	6%
Mixed	3	4%
Other	4	6%
Prefer not to say	1	1%
Total	67	99%
Country of birth		
UK	52	78%
Elsewhere	15	22%
Total	67	100%
Disability		
No	45	67%
Yes	21	31%
Prefer not to say	1	1%
Total	67	99%

Table 2. Girls' sample.

	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6	FG7	FG8	FG9	FG10	Total N	Total %
No. of Participants	6	8	3	5	5	6	4	7	3	3	50	100%
Age												
13	2		2	4		1	4		1		14	28%
14	4	3	1	1	3	1				3	16	32%
15		1				4					5	10%
16		1			1			2	2		6	12%
17		3			1			3			7	14%
18								2			2	4%
Ethnicity												
White	1	3	3	5	5	6	4	3	3	3	36	72%
Black/Black British	5	1						2			8	16%
Asian/Asian British		2						2			4	8%
Mixed		2									2	4%
Country of birth												
United Kingdom	2	5	3	5	4	6	4	7	3	3	42	84%
Elsewhere	2	2			1						5	10%
Prefer not say	2	1									3	6%
Disability												
Yes	1	2	1		3						7	14%
No	5	4		3		3	3	7	3	2	30	60%
Prefer not say		2	2	2	2	3	1			1	13	26%

engaging in safety work and its impacts. Two researchers developed the initial code-book calibrated from a subset of transcripts and independently coded all data. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, refining definitions and merging or splitting codes as necessary through immersion in the data, consistent with feminist

qualitative principles. Quotations from adult women are presented with ethnicity. For girls, individual attribution was not possible because focus group speakers could not be reliably distinguished; their quotations are presented with group-level identifiers (for example, Girl, FG1).

Two overarching themes structure the results: (1) accounts of women's and girls' safety work in relation to parks and (2) the impacts of these strategies on access, wellbeing and quality of life. As feminist scholars, we aim not just to reveal safety work's gendered burden but to drive change. With this in mind, the discussion considers how action by relevant authorities and men to create safer public spaces might reduce the burden of women's and girls' safety work.

Although situated in West Yorkshire and shaped by local park networks, design features, governance and public transport, the patterns identified resonate with international scholarship on gendered safety in public spaces, and parks in particular (Braçe, Garrido-Cumbrera, and Correa-Fernández 2021; Derosé et al. 2018; Gray, Houlden, and Barker 2025; Hindman, Chien, and Pollack 2022; Mak and Jim 2022; Polko and Kimic 2022; Williams et al. 2020), suggesting wider relevance. We interpret the findings as locally grounded expressions of broader structural dynamics affecting women's and girls' access to green space.

The gendered burden of safety work in urban parks

We identified three distinct forms of safety work used by women and girls when navigating parks. *Avoidance behaviours* involve fully or selectively avoiding parks based on perceived risks. *Pre-emptive strategies* are proactive measures taken in advance to enable park access while minimising danger. *Situational tactics* are in-the-moment behaviours within parks to reduce threats and enhance safety. Together, these strategies demonstrate skilled agency and adaptability while revealing the unequal burden of managing safety in the face of male violence (see Barker and Cape-Davenhill 2025).

The work of avoiding parks

Avoidance behaviours, involving 'isolating or removing oneself from danger' (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020, 269), contribute to reduced use and exclusion of women and girls from parks. Accounts suggest that avoidance stems from perceptions that parks are more dangerous than other public spaces such as town centres due to lower footfall and greater perceived isolation. Most participants (57% of women and 76% of girls) perceived their local parks as unsafe for women and girls, leading some to walk, exercise or socialise in streets or town centres where the presence of others and access to shops provided greater perceived security.

If on a street you can run into a shop or something. In a park, you are in a space that is secluded. (Girl, FG2)

While some avoided parks entirely, most did so under certain conditions—after dark, when alone, or during quieter times. Reluctance to visit alone reflected concerns about being targeted and the lack of others to intervene.

I would never, like, go to the park by myself... [as] you're more easy to target. (Girl, FG8)

Temporality was crucial as fear rose sharply after dark (97% of women and 86% of girls in our sample reported feeling unsafe in their local park at this time of day), echoing national trends when four out of five women in Britain report feeling unsafe in parks (ONS 2022). This fear links to the legacy of historical park design and management where parks were closed after dusk and rarely intended for evening use, often lacking lighting, open facilities, staff presence and regular activities. These conditions reduce natural surveillance and opportunities for assistance, while darkness itself limits visibility, making it easier for potential offenders to hide and harder for women to identify escape routes.

I don't like being outside after dark... I feel like anything can happen. (Girl, FG2)

Seasonality compounded this, with winter darkness affecting early mornings and late afternoons (Rahm, Sternudd, and Johansson 2021), limiting mobility for school, work or study. As UK cities aim for 40% green cover (Natural England 2023) to promote active travel, ensuring perceived safety is critical.

Many participants recalled being socialised from childhood to view parks as unsafe, reinforced by media portrayals, and recent high-profile murders of women in London parks (sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, and Sabina Nessa) heightened vulnerability. Many chose security over autonomy, forgoing park visits despite their benefits for exercise and recreation (Miles, Broad, and Oldham 2026).

...Sometimes that has had an impact where I have heard something [bad happen] and then it stopped me from using the park. And then I have gone through the process of, is it safe, do I *need* to go to the park? (Asian woman)

It's the young woman who was a teacher in London who got abducted and killed in a park, the two sisters that got murdered in the park... So, you know, if you are running, do I run through this park at night when these things have happened, or do I just stick to that lit road? (White woman)

Others cited local incidents of sexual violence:

Last month a girl got raped in the park... she was just taking her kids to school and it was eight in the morning... And the thing is it's not the first time I've heard of it, so I kind of feel weird going there. (Girl, FG8)

The Crime Survey for England and Wales shows heightened risks for young people: 8.9% of rape victims (including attempts) aged 16–19 were attacked in parks or open spaces, compared to 1.9% aged 25–34 (ONS 2021). Police data also link parks and canal towpaths to harassment of women runners (Miles, Broad, and Oldham 2026). For some, hearing of such incidents led to avoiding specific parks; for others, parks altogether.

Negative personal experiences reinforced avoidance. Over half of all participants (54%) had experienced harassment in public in the past year. Harassment by male strangers acts as a 'shadow of sexual assault' (Ferraro 1996), as women cannot know if intrusions are precursors to more serious crimes.

It was last year now but we have like a greenway, which you do feel okay down because there's a lot of dog walkers... but there was a flasher there... So that obviously put me off even going down there. (White woman)

Intersectionality also shaped avoidance, with some Asian women and girls avoiding parks due to fears of racially-motivated harassment:

I wear a hijab and that can make you a target... I was approached by a man in a local park... After that I don't think I'd wanted to go to the park on my own again... It was during the day as well, but it just really did put me off, because he obviously targeted me because of my scarf. (Asian woman)

Avoidance highlights the limits of individual safety work and the need for structural and cultural change to ensure safe public spaces.

Work to access the park: pre-emptive strategies

Despite safety concerns, most participants continued to use parks (61% of women, 62% of girls weekly), underscoring their importance in daily life. To manage risks, they used pre-emptive strategies: planning visits, choosing routes and times, favouring familiar parks, enlisting companions, attending organised activities and using technology.

Many timed visits for busier periods, valuing the safety of informal surveillance and bystanders (Jacobs 1961); empty or desolate parks were seen as particularly unsafe (Ceccato, Canabarro, and Vazquez 2020; Jorgensen, Ellis, and Ruddell 2013).

I don't like walking in empty parks. So, when I go to a park, I need timing. It will be school times, or it will be busy or there will be dog walkers. So, it's like planning your time to walk in the park on your own with this in mind. (Asian woman)

Participants preferred familiar parks, which felt safer due to known layouts, exits, cafes and other informal places of help as well as the familiar rhythms of use. Repeated visits fostered belonging and shaped safety expectations (Beebejaun 2017).

... if I had a choice to go to a park where I am familiar with it, I would go to that as my first choice. Because I know where the exit routes are, I know the routes, I know where the clear areas are, café, shop. (Asian woman)

Participants preferred parks with people from similar backgrounds, enhancing belonging and perceived safety:

I think it's important if I know there are other Asian people... again it's about being a target... I want to enjoy myself, I don't want to be worried why is that person looking at me. (Asian woman)

Women and girls favoured routes along park boundaries for visibility and escape:

...if I do have to go in a park during the night, I'm always gonna go around the edge just because... there's cars and people witnessing. (White woman)

Even in familiar parks, secluded areas were avoided. Designated footpaths were favoured due to perceived risks of encountering predatory men, drinkers or drug users off-track, concerns shaped by experience or the area's reputation. When harassment occurred, women often temporarily avoided the location or altered their planned route.

I'd just stick to the footpaths and, even then, I make sure that it's during the day and they'll be plenty of people walking their dogs and that, so I feel safe. (White woman)

I use my local park all the time, but there's times when if I've been harassed in a certain area I'll walk a different way through it for a while. (Mixed Ethnicity woman)

Participants also planned companions. Friends and being in a group offered reassurance, though girls noted peers provided little protection from harassment or assault, showing how safety strategies vary by age and vulnerability (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020).

I generally do feel safer with my friends going round the park ... You're less likely to get harassment or bother... [also] other women are more likely would say something if something were to happen. (Mixed Ethnicity woman)

Friends, they're your age as well so, they're not really going to be able to help cos it'd happen to them as well. (Girl, FG6)

Organised activities, such as sports, volunteering or events, provided safety in numbers and could extend women's use of parks:

I am part of organised groups... A part of it is just there's other people around... then someone's in charge. (White woman)

Technology was used to share routes or confirm safe arrival. Participants also kept partners informed, ensuring someone could act if they didn't return as expected:

I'll say this run will take me about 50 minutes... So, he knows where I've gone and how long to expect me away for it. (White woman)

However, safety apps and alarms were rarely used, seen as shifting responsibility onto women rather than addressing structural issues. The desire for parks to remain relaxing 'spaces apart' also limited their appeal. Overall, pre-emptive strategies enabled access to the benefits of parks, but these remained conditional, shaped by time, activity and companions.

Work in the park: situational tactics

Unlike pre-emptive strategies that involve advance planning, situational tactics are in-the-moment behaviours to mitigate harm. For many, simply being in a park meant entering a risky space (Ceccato, Canabarro, and Vazquez 2020), making vigilance routine. Participants described staying constantly 'on guard' (Gardner 1995, 113), assessing their surroundings and especially men. Risk was judged through cues such as whether a man was alone, with a dog or family, or engaged in socially accepted activities like jogging.

It makes you wonder why he's there if he doesn't have any children, he doesn't have a woman with him. What is he looking for? Is he looking to rape a woman? A woman's always going to have that at the back of [her mind]. (Mixed Ethnicity woman)

This risk assessment formed part of an 'escalation calculation' (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020, 269), where women and girls evaluated both social context and physical

environment to gauge threats and responses. A lone man might seem less threatening in a well-populated area of the park. Participants were especially vigilant near dense vegetation or secluded spaces, shaping their movements accordingly. This is consistent with previous research, which shows that women tend to remain in busier sections of parks, whereas men explore remote areas (Bornioli et al. 2024; Pérez-Tejera, Valera, and Anguera 2018).

I prefer the bits [in the park] where it's near the duck pond where there is a lot more people, or down near the tennis courts ... Whereas, if I walk into certain parts of it, it's a beautiful park, but it's more secluded and that then does make me more nervous... I need to be more aware of what's going on than if I am more surrounded by people. (White woman)

The need for constant vigilance underscores gendered inequalities that constrain the potential of parks as restorative spaces (Bornioli et al. 2024). Participants adapted behaviour and routes in real time to avoid perceived threats—walking faster, changing direction to avoid groups of men or boys, and ignoring unwanted attention to reduce their visibility and increase distance from potential perpetrators.

If any men come behind me, I let them go in front of me... I don't trust anybody. (White woman)

Ignoring unwanted attention was a common tactic to prevent escalation, with many prioritising removing themselves or staying silent over confrontation.

I would rather ignore someone and be continually harassed rather than challenging them, because it's not safe. (Girl, FG5)

Some ethnic minority women used visual tactics, such as making gestures to pretend not to understand English, whilst those with visible religious markers like a headscarf felt they had fewer options to reduce visibility, highlighting unequal access to safety strategies. Other women adopted the opposite approach, projecting 'boldness' (Koskela 1997) to deter threats.

I walk with my head up, I stride out, I look around with massive amounts of confidence, even if I don't feel it... if you look more confident and more self-assured, you're less likely to attract the attention of someone who wants to harm you. (White woman)

Some sought to defuse tension through positive engagement, like smiling or greeting men before unwanted attention escalated.

Sometimes it's nice to make eye contact and say hello before that [unwanted attention] starts... there is a way of handling it and it depends how the situation goes. (White woman)

These tactics, while not unique to parks, may be more frequent or intense there, underscoring how fear transforms parks from restorative spaces into sites of risk management (Bornioli et al. 2024). Safety concerns shaped both access and quality of park experiences, reinforcing gendered inequalities, as discussed further in the next section.

Even to the fact of taking a bag and having it under your coat... and not answering your phone and holding your phone in your hand because you don't know who is in the park and they might come and attack you... So yes, it's quite massive, you know, thinking about all these things. (Asian woman)

The costs and burdens of safety work in parks

Reaffirming broader research, our findings show that women and girls routinely organise their lives and everyday mobilities in and around parks with safety uppermost in mind. This is not a matter of individual perceptions but imposed systems of gendered violence and fear, inequalities in urban design and social norms that place the burden of risk management on women and girls. These conditions prompt precautionary behaviours that shape access to public space, wellbeing and quality of life. Avoidance leads to women's and girls' exclusion from the benefits that parks can offer, while pre-emptive strategies and situational tactics impose considerable mental burdens, constrain full use and reduce enjoyment. Because parks are experienced as 'spaces apart', these impacts are often felt more acutely than in grey spaces. This occurs in two main ways: first, safety work restricts park visits—limiting times, requiring companions or resulting in avoidance altogether—leading to lost physical, mental and social benefits; second, situational tactics create psychological burdens that undermine the experience of parks as spaces for leisure and relaxation. Indeed, the need for safety work was seen as especially troubling in parks, given their role as 'spaces apart' for leisure and wellbeing.

They [parks] are such important spaces... And they need to be safe spaces for women to be, whether they want to cycle or to run or to walk or to sit, you know, safely and without harassment. (White woman)

Many participants said safety concerns stopped them from taking exercise or enjoying leisure activities in parks, reflecting tensions between the desire to use parks and the need to constantly assess risk. Feeling unsafe, and the safety work it prompts, limits access but also restricts the ability to fully benefit from parks, reinforcing gendered inequalities in public space.

I like to go jogging... but I wouldn't go running in a park during the daytime, never mind when it's dark. (Black woman)

...being outside and being busy and exercising or walking through nature, it's so good for your mental wellbeing... if the parks were more accessible, if people could go and feel safe, if women could go and feel safe, that would have a good knock on effect. (White woman)

Avoidance behaviours also limited active travel. Parks serve as key conduits within cities, connecting homes, schools and workplaces. When women and girls avoid these spaces, they lose access to greener, more direct routes, often taking longer, less enjoyable alternatives.

I walk through [my local park] to work in the morning. And on the way home, when it's dark, I don't walk through, I absolutely don't. Even though it's the most direct way. (White woman)

Pre-emptive strategies require planning before visiting parks, undermining the spontaneity and accessibility that these spaces are meant to offer. They become spaces requiring gendered forms of work to access, imposing a mental burden that men do not typically share.

I look at the weather and think, oh it's nice, and then I have to go through the rigmarole of do I go in the park on my own? What time is best? I will wait for somebody or I will wait for a certain time... I may need to cover [up], wear a long jumper because I have gold bangles on... before you have left the door, you've thought about all these things. (Asian woman)

While pre-emptive strategies involve 'work to access the park', situational tactics require 'work in the park'; ongoing vigilance, risk assessment and behaviour shifts to feel safe, undermining parks as restorative spaces. For many women and girls, these situational tactics become instinctive, embodied parts of navigating public space (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). Environmental and social cues shape this work: concealment, dense vegetation and the absence of others heighten fear and prompt increased vigilance, while open, busier areas feel safer (Min et al 2022; Jorgensen, Ellis, and Ruddell 2013). As one participant explained:

So, if I was on my own, I'd probably avoid those [secluded] areas...Even if you want to look at the wildlife or the flowers, you just sort of stay away... it's like an automatic instinct, you're constantly scanning and thinking, even without being aware that you're doing it... It's just think, think. (Mixed Ethnicity woman).

As a result, women's and girls' public worlds contract, limiting their access to green spaces and the wellbeing advantages they afford. This constitutes a wider equity problem because parks are public goods that should be equally accessible, yet safety concerns prevent women and girls from using them with the same freedom as men (ONS 2022).

Many participants felt strongly that they shouldn't have to do safety work. They stressed that the responsibility lies with authorities to ensure safety, address male behaviour, and challenge structures of power and misogyny.

We shouldn't be ones to go out of our way to feel safe, when we should already feel safe... I shouldn't have to go out of my way to feel safer when other people are the problem. (Girl, FG5)

I think anything that we can do to make women feel safer to use them [parks] by themselves, not feel they have got to have a man with them to make them feel safe, but women just to be able to claim that public space is really important. (White woman)

While many opposed safety work on principle, they often took a pragmatic view, accepting it as necessary considering the threat of male violence. As one woman put it, 'it's better to be safe than sorry.' Despite this, many expressed fatalism, doubting the effectiveness of their endeavours but fearing blame if they didn't strive to demonstrate responsibility. This underscores the need for structural and cultural change, not merely leaving women with responsibility for enacting individual solutions to systemic problems. Women often carry the burden of anticipating threats, planning routes and adjusting behaviour to stay safe in public spaces. Many called for a broader

distribution of responsibility, urging men to be more mindful of their behaviour and public authorities to take greater action. In practice, this includes men becoming allies and avoiding behaviours that may evoke fear, like walking too closely, and systemic efforts from authorities to address male violence and misogyny through policing and education campaigns as well as changes in design and management practices that respond sensitively to gendered fear.

Feminist scholars of ‘invisible work’ seek not only to expose its burden but to drive systemic change, reducing the responsibilities that fall disproportionately on women and girls. The research has informed the development and adoption of gender-sensitive approaches to park planning and management within key policy and practice frameworks. Working with partner organisations, the authors co-developed the *Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls* guidance, now embedded in park accreditation and policing frameworks (Safer Parks Consortium 2025). It acts as supplementary guidance to the Green Flag Award—the UK Government’s standard for well-managed outdoor spaces, operating in 20 countries—and is integrated into policing initiatives such as Secured by Design, enabling pathways for system-level change locally in West Yorkshire as well as nationally and internationally.

The guidance sets out ten principles grouped under three themes: *Eyes on the Park*, adapts Jacob’s (1961) idea that safety is supported by mixed activity and ‘natural proprietors’, emphasising natural surveillance, staffing and activation so parks feel well-used and safe; *Awareness*, which emphasises wayfinding, visibility, escape routes and communication so that users feel informed and in control; and *Inclusion*, which considers foundational the importance of co-designing spaces with input from a diverse cross-section of women and girls. This should be underscored by management, policing and social norms that challenge harassment and foster respect. Together, these principles aim to redistribute responsibility for safety by embedding gender-sensitive practices into park systems, reducing the invisible work women and girls currently perform to stay safe.

The guidance is rooted in women’s and girls’ lived experiences from this research, valuing this knowledge and expertise alongside professional viewpoints from the Safer Parks Consortium. It reflects wider evidence that shows that features like good lighting, staffing, regular activities and greenspace maintenance improve women’s feelings of safety (Braçe, Garrido-Cumbrera, and Correa-Fernández 2021; Ceccato, Canabarro, and Vazquez 2020; Hindman, Chien, and Pollack 2022; Maruthaveeran and van den Bosch 2014; Polko and Kimic 2022; Rahm, Sternudd, and Johansson 2021), and that women tend to prefer open views over enclosed settings (Jorgensen, Ellis, and Ruddell 2013; Mak and Jim 2022). It also reflects the greatest area of consensus among women found in the wider study, that the presence of other women acts as a signal of a safe park (Barker et al. 2022), and that well-designed, well-used parks that encourage social interaction can create positive feedback loops of increased use and perceived safety (Ceccato, Canabarro, and Vazquez 2020).

In the bigger parks... definitely you feel much more comfortable being around those facilities because there is people there and there is stuff going on and there is a sense of it being official... And it attracts people throughout the day. (White woman)

Inclusive design and management can help address women's and girls' safety concerns, potentially extending park use and reducing avoidance after dark.

...especially in the winter months... extra lighting and lots of extra security measures for me personally, that would help knowing that, oh well, it's coming darker now, I don't have to just stay in or whatever at half past two, three o'clock, I can go to the park because the security lighting and other things that make me feel safe. (White woman)

I think a visible presence of a person that is employed by the park would make you feel safer... It would allow me to use the park a bit more freely without me having to think too much, knowing that there was somebody there. (Asian woman)

However, some teenage girls and women of colour expressed concerns about the presence of (male) authority figures noting that policing alone may not build ease for all users; one Black teenage girl stated that she would 'probably go home' if she saw a police officer in a park, fearing she might be unfairly targeted.

Women and girls are not a homogenous group, and experiences of safety and preferences for intervention are shaped by intersecting identities such as ethnicity, age and gender. This underscores the importance of co-design that centres diverse lived experiences, building on the foundations laid by Women's Safety Audits (Whitzman et al. 2013). In the UK, several initiatives have begun to embed this approach, including Publica's (2022) incorporation of co-design and co-clienting into public realm guidelines and projects; the London Legacy Development Corporation's (2024) Handbook on Creating Places that Work for Women and Girls, alongside its associated work at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park; and Parks for London's (2025) Environmental Visual Evaluation tool, which supports landowners in conducting structured, on-site assessments with women and girls. Placing women's perspectives at the centre of diagnosing site-specific issues and identifying remedies through participatory assessment reconfigures responsibility by making authorities answerable to what women and girls actually encounter in parks (Gustafsson and Dalén 2025). This approach shifts the emphasis away from individual safety work toward institutional accountability.

European precedents demonstrate the value of gender-sensitive planning (Safer Parks Consortium 2025). Vienna's gender mainstreaming programme used participatory audits and co-designed changes—such as opening sightlines, reconfiguring play and sport facilities to avoid male domination and improving path networks and lighting—which increased girls' use and overall diversity of park users. Umeå similarly advanced inclusive practice through women-led co-design, tailored lighting strategies, artistic interventions and attention to prospect-refuge conditions, improving women's ease of use. These examples show how political commitment to improving the public realm through co-production shifts responsibility away from individual vigilance to institutional action, reducing the burden of safety work and supporting women's and girls' right to occupy parks as spaces of leisure and relaxation.

Conclusion

This study reframes parks as distinct gendered spaces and as public goods whose benefits are often accessible to women and girls only through sustained safety work. Conceptually, we integrate feminist theories of the fear/crime paradox and invisible

work to explain how design, governance and social norms intersect to reproduce exclusion. Empirically, we demonstrate park-specific forms of safety work and their costs for mobility, autonomy and wellbeing, grounded in extensive qualitative evidence. Practically, we show that co-produced *Safer Parks* guidance embedded in park accreditation and policing initiatives provides a pathway to shift responsibility from individual vigilance to institutional action and men's behavioural change.

We also demonstrate that parks function as 'spaces apart'—urban environments whose environmental, temporal and social characteristics differ from grey spaces and therefore require differentiated treatment in planning, management and policy. Qualities that feel restorative, such as greenery, quietness and boundedness, can simultaneously heighten feelings of isolation and vulnerability, especially after dark. In the context of male violence, these conditions make gendered vigilance routine and help explain why women's and girls' access is often conditional on safety work.

Recognising parks as different in kind from other public spaces strengthens the case for tailored approaches in urban planning and public realm governance. Such approaches should consider physical features (e.g. prevalence of secluded spots) and social characteristics (e.g. levels of activity), alongside the cultural narratives and norms that render parks risky or inappropriate for women and girls. They must recognise that safety work extends beyond situational tactics within parks to include pre-emptive decisions about when, how and whether to enter park space at all. Policy and planning therefore need to span actions both within parks and those taken to avoid them, the decision-making underpinning these behaviours, and their structural drivers. Ensuring equitable access requires both spatial interventions and cultural change that challenges norms sustaining harassment and misogyny. We call for intersectional, co-produced practice and a research agenda that includes after dark evaluations and impact assessments examining reductions in safety work, increases in autonomous park use and narrowed gender gaps in access and wellbeing. Gendered safety concerns are a matter of equity, access and spatial justice. If parks are to fulfil their promise as inclusive public goods, as places for recreation, active travel and wellbeing, the burden of safety cannot remain invisible and individualised.

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Author contributions

Barker and Holmes secured the funding and led the research project. All authors contributed to the design of the study, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to drafting the manuscript. The final manuscript was approved by all authors.

Additional information

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Microsoft Copilot Enterprise to identify improvements in writing style and reduce word count. All content was subsequently reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript. An early version of this paper was presented at the Past Present and Future of Public Space, Proceedings of the Academic Conference held in Bologna on 25-27 June 2024, City Space Architecture (see Barker and Cape-Davenhill 2025).

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Notes on contributors

Anna Barker is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice & Criminology in the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies at the School of Law, University of Leeds. Her research focuses on policing, urban insecurity, gendered fear, conviviality, public space and parks.

Lauren Cape-Davenhill completed her PhD in Geography at the University of Leeds, focusing on criminal justice, immigration, and their intersections through critical and feminist geographical lenses. She has worked as a research assistant on this project and previously held third-sector roles related to migration justice across the UK and Europe. She is now an independent researcher.

George Holmes is a Professor of Conservation and Society in the School of Earth & Environment at the University of Leeds. His research studies conservation, conservationists, and the interaction between conservation projects, particularly protected areas, and local communities.

Sibylla Warrington, now an independent researcher, worked as a research fellow on this project with interests in VAWG, gendered labour and urban space. She has also worked and volunteered in the third sector on policy and programmes focused on women's rights, VAWG and personal safety.

ORCID

Anna Barker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7801-4216>

Lauren Cape-Davenhill  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0121-1243>

George Holmes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5393-5753>

Sibylla Warrington  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-7476-6123>

Data availability statement

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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