



Street sexual harassment as a barrier to the use of public space by women: the case of Panama¹

Acoso sexual callejero como barrera para el uso del espacio público por mujeres: el caso de Panamá

Nelva Marissa Araúz-Reyes*, Javier Domingo Stanziola Valenzuela**

Universidad Santa María la Antigua

Quality Leadership University and Universidad Santa María la Antigua

Received: May 17, 2024 – Accepted: June 20, 2024 – Published: July 1, 2025

APA citation format:

Araúz-Reyes, N. M., & Stanziola Valenzuela, J. D. (2024). Street sexual harassment as a barrier to the use of public space by women: the case of Panama. *Revista Colombiana de Ciencias Sociales*, 16(2), 452-472 <https://doi.org/10.21501/22161201.4983>

¹ This article is the result of the research project *Street Sexual Harassment and Women's Right to Public Space in Panama*, funded by the R&D&I Fund of Universidad Santa María la Antigua (USMA), Panama.

* PhD in Law from the Facultad de Estudios Superiores Acatlán, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM); associate professor and researcher affiliated with Universidad Santa María la Antigua; member of Panama's National Research System (SNI). Contact: narauzr@usma.com.pa, nelmar_ar@yahoo.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5929-8524>; Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=qqNnIrEAAAAJ&hl=es>

** PhD in Economics from Florida International University; associate researcher affiliated with Universidad Santa María la Antigua; faculty and researcher at Quality Leadership University; and faculty member at Florida State University. Contact: jstanzola@usma.com.pa; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5646-2755>; Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=I2CGc8gAAAAJ&hl=es&oi=ao>

Abstract

The use of public space in urban areas reflects the degree to which democracy and other territorial rights can be exercised. However, the urban experience is not gender-neutral, as it is shaped by violence that primarily affects women through street sexual harassment. This study examines the impact of this form of harassment on women's enjoyment of the right to public space in the metropolitan area of Panama City. The analysis begins by identifying perceived safety as the variable that explains the link between harassment and the use of public space. However, the results reveal how widespread this phenomenon is. Its prevalence contributes to its normalization, creating situations in which affected individuals do not immediately recognize this type of violence or its consequences. Although 9 out of 10 women reported having experienced street sexual harassment, they tend to resist it—either out of resignation in order to carry out their daily activities, or because they refuse to lose their right to enjoy public space.

Keywords

Street Sexual Harassment; Democracy; Right to the City; Human Rights; Public Space; Gender; Security; Gender-Based Violence.

Resumen

El uso del espacio público en áreas urbanas refleja la posibilidad del goce de la democracia y otros derechos territoriales. Sin embargo, la experiencia de la ciudad no es neutra respecto al género, al encontrarse atravesada por la violencia principalmente hacia las mujeres por medio del acoso sexual callejero. Este estudio explora el impacto de esta forma de acoso en el disfrute del derecho al espacio público de las mujeres en el área metropolitana de Panamá. El análisis inicia identificando la percepción de seguridad como la variable que explica el vínculo entre el acoso y el uso del espacio público. Sin embargo, los resultados dan luces acerca de cuán generalizado es este fenómeno. Esto lleva a normalizarlo y crear situaciones donde las personas afectadas no reconocen de forma inmediata este tipo de violencia ni sus efectos. Si bien 9 de cada 10 mujeres identificaron haber vivido acoso sexual callejero, tienden a resistirlo ya sea por resignación para poder realizar sus actividades cotidianas o para no perder su derecho a disfrutar el espacio público.

Palabras clave

Acoso sexual callejero; Democracia; Derecho a la ciudad; Derechos humanos; Espacio público; Género; Seguridad; Violencia de género.

Introduction

In Panama, academic literature on street sexual harassment is limited (Álvarez et al., 2022) and primarily focused on the emotional consequences of this form of violence. Despite recurrent testimonies from women on social media and in traditional news outlets regarding their experiences with this type of harassment (Ortega, 2023; Concepción, 2023; Crespo, 2022), there are no studies in the country that link this issue to the right to public space or the right to the city, nor is there legislation addressing this social problem. Other forms of violence against women appear in a fragmented way in the legal framework (for example, Law 82 of October 24, 2013, and Law 7 of February 14, 2018). When taken together, these laws may approximate an understanding of street sexual harassment, but they fail to address it fully. A legislative proposal intended to define and regulate it (Draft Law 177 of 2015) was ultimately excluded from the approved legislation, in part due to the limited understanding of this type of violence across a broad range of public opinion sectors (Semana, 2015; Aparicio, 2015; Crítica, 2015). Additionally, the draft bill did not include relevant statistics to understand the magnitude of the problem or its consequences for those whose enjoyment of public space and the city is affected, since official institutions do not systematically collect this type of information.

This study examines the impact of street sexual harassment on women's enjoyment of the right to public space in the metropolitan area of Panama City. A sequential mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches that included an online survey administered to a panel of respondents and short semi-structured interviews. The analysis presented in this article focuses primarily on the interview results, while the survey findings serve as contextual support. This approach enables a deeper exploration of these experiences of violence. To develop the interview questions and guide the analysis, diverse perspectives and findings from international literature were identified and incorporated, with particular attention to Latin American scholarship due to shared sociocultural contexts. In doing so, the study seeks to extend the body of work developed by feminist urban planners who, since the 1980s, have questioned how and by whom public space is enjoyed. The present study expands this understanding by exploring how street sexual harassment may limit women's participation as they move through the city to workplaces or to civic, cultural, artistic, and sports activities. This offers a conceptual framework that allows for more precise identification of key spaces that are primarily enjoyed in the public realm—or have a significant public component—and whose use forms part of fundamental human rights.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework of the study, followed by a description of the methodology. The final three sections present the results analysis, a discussion of their implications, and the conclusions.

Theoretical framework

The experience of the city, and of public space, differs for men and women (Falú, 2009, p. 19). Structural violence does not remain confined to the private sphere; it crosses its boundaries and finds one of its expressions in street sexual harassment—defined as “any practice with an explicit or implicit sexual connotation, perpetrated by a stranger, unidirectional in nature, occurring in public spaces, and capable of causing discomfort to the harassed person” (Billi & Arancibia, 2015, p. 12). Previous analyses (Borja, 2000, 2011; Williner & Martínez, 2023) indicate that public space is a setting where democracy is enacted and where individuals may territorially exercise their human rights and their right to the city. In this regard, public space is “the realm in which citizens can (or should be able to) feel like citizens—free and equal” (Borja, 2011). Therefore, public space is expected to reflect principles inherent to any democratic society, including plurality, equality, participation, equity, universal accessibility, safety, and inclusion, particularly for women, children, older adults, and people with disabilities (Williner & Martínez, 2023). Indeed, the quality of the city—and even of democracy itself—can be assessed through the lived experience of public space in terms of accessibility, safety, inclusion, respect for others, and, as Borja (2000) asserts, “by the quality of the social relationships it fosters and by its capacity to stimulate symbolic identification, expression, and cultural integration” (p. 14).

In urban contexts, public space does not exist outside its relationship with the city, “whether operating as a system or because the city as a whole is understood as such” (Carrión, 2019, p. 200). In other words, the city as a collective political entity is formed and developed within public space. Consequently, public space must be grounded in “the general principle of use and enjoyment under conditions of equality and without exclusion” (Aguado, 2023, p. 62). Put differently, “the city is, above all else, public space” (Borja, 2011, p. 39), and this space has been conceived as the sphere in which:

social, political, cultural, and economic relations in the city are constructed, along with the multiple experiences that emerge from everyday life. It refers to the right of diverse citizens—men, women, children, youth, LGBTQ individuals, among others—to produce, use, benefit from, and enjoy the full range of public goods that make up cities: public services, housing, facilities, transportation, and recreational spaces. (Falú, 2013, p. 89)

Given this, it becomes necessary to conceptualize public space as a fundamental right derived from citizenship in the city, which—beyond serving as a meeting point—is where tolerance within the community is constructed. In other words, it is where a “pedagogy of otherness” is built: the possibility of learning to coexist with others in a peaceful and tolerant manner. Public space is a form of representation of the collective and an element that shapes collective life (Carrión, 2019, p. 200). Falú (2014) and Borja (2011) question which rights are being discussed and who truly has access to the enjoyment of public space in cities. Their studies indicate that the nature and essence of the city are not aligned with democratic principles, generating inequalities, limitations,

and even exclusions in its use and enjoyment. It was the contributions of women social scientists that underscored the need to identify who becomes the subject of the city, in what ways, for whom it is planned, and how it is materially constructed (Falú, 2013, p. 83).

One way in which the use of public space is restricted—and in which democratic principles are undermined—is through street sexual harassment. This form of violence is perpetrated by strangers, primarily against women, in a non-reciprocal and non-consensual manner (Astrálaga & Olarte Espitia, 2020, p. 189; Aladro, 2017, p. 1). Beyond making victims uncomfortable, this behavior “seeks to reinforce a superior position within a power relationship imposed by society” (Tuyub Basulto et al., 2020, p. 94) between men and women. For this reason, as Ana Falú (2022) argues, discussing the right to public space and the right to the city requires confronting the asymmetries that particularly affect women and non-hegemonic identities. These asymmetries stem from gender norms that place women within a set of “inequalities and dichotomies of different orders (public–private, safe–unsafe, day–night, city–periphery, reproductive–productive)” that shape, constrain, and limit their lives and conditions in the cities they inhabit. In everyday life, this dual distribution of spaces, roles, emotions, and actions challenges the democratic principles that should coexist in the exercise of the right to the city. This conflict between social norms and principles of coexistence in public space is the result of power relations that position men in hegemonic, more valued, and more socially recognized roles compared to women. For instance, activities with greater prestige—such as sports, paid labor, and politics—are, in most societies, performed by men in public space and are tied to social recognition, which is closely linked to power (Amorós, 1994, p. 2). In contrast, women’s activities have historically been confined to civic and artistic expressions that traditionally take place in private spaces, are associated with religious extensions or experiences, and tend not to challenge existing power structures (Nochlin, 2017; Rinaldo, 2014). Indeed, women have historically been assigned to reproductive activities, to the private sphere, to daytime roles, and to a construction of femininity as vulnerable—producing feelings of insecurity. Over time, however, women have moved beyond the private sphere, despite the additional burdens imposed by gender relations, entering the public realm. This shift has brought tensions, resistance, and an ongoing dialectic about what it means to be a woman in the city, as well as expressions of violence such as street sexual harassment, which begins in childhood and is normalized over time (Serrano, 2019, p. 48), with significant personal and social consequences.

Fear is the main consequence of street sexual harassment (Franco Barrera, 2022; Martínez-Líbano et al., 2022). It is accompanied by anxiety, anger, shame, and feelings of insecurity, producing “physical, social, and emotional repercussions for women” (Álvarez et al., 2022). As a result, it generates a sense of insecurity in the very space that must be inhabited in order to exist and enjoy the rights the city offers. Consequently, the primary victims of harassment limit their participation in public space, as “fear is itself a form of oppression—an expression of structural violence—that restricts women’s mobility and reinforces their self-perception of vulnerability”

(Rodó-de-Zárate et al., 2019, p. 96). In this context, the fear and insecurity produced by street sexual harassment derive from the fact that it is not an isolated incident but rather a set of accumulated experiences occurring across different spheres throughout a woman's life, which collectively reinforce social vulnerability.

Methods

Research Design and Study Type

Does street sexual harassment impact women's participation in public space? To explore this relationship, a simple conceptual model was developed to guide the construction of a survey and several semi-structured interviews. The analysis links experiences of street harassment with the level and type of participation in public spaces. The definition of public spaces is broad, encompassing participation in paid workplaces; social and civic environments; and cultural and sports settings. The analysis also incorporates a vector of control variables that may influence the dynamics of different forms of participation. For example, it is anticipated that gender may be a significant differentiating factor among respondents regarding how they process experiences of street harassment in terms of perceived safety and willingness to participate in public space. Similarly, it is expected that younger individuals' experiences of harassment may be lived and interpreted differently than those of other age groups. Other control variables include sexual orientation, degree of economic dependence, and occupation.

A sequential mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) was used to collect the data across two phases. First, a survey was designed to operationalize the variables of the model and the control vectors. These variables were operationalized in the survey instrument based on the theoretical and conceptual framework. The survey questions were informed by studies that addressed similar topics in Chile, the United States, and Panama (Gómez et al., 2022; Davidson et al., 2016; Merino et al., 2022). The final instrument contained 31 questions on the topic and 6 sociodemographic questions (Appendix 1). A survey firm was responsible for administering the instrument to individuals registered in its database who reside in the metropolitan area of Panama City. An online survey was chosen to increase confidentiality and to minimize the discomfort that respondents might feel when asked about sensitive topics in person. Unlike similar surveys, we included both individuals who identify as men and those who identify as women. This provides greater explanatory power when comparing the dynamics identified for women relative to the hegemonic group.

Of the 351 individuals who completed the survey, 49.86% were women, 48.15% were men, and 1.99% either described their gender otherwise or preferred not to respond. A total of 84.33% identified as heterosexual, 12.25% as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or described their sexual orientation otherwise, and 3.42% preferred not to answer. Additionally, 60.11% were between 18 and 34 years old, 22.79% between 35 and 44, and 17.09% were 45 or older, allowing for comparisons between younger individuals and other age groups. Finally, 59.54% reported being fully financially independent, 37.32% were partially or fully dependent on others, and 3.13% preferred not to respond.

For the second phase, the survey results generated a set of questions that informed the development of an interview protocol. Broadly, the interviews explored in greater depth how the variables of interest were connected. The questions remained open-ended to reduce the risk of introducing bias into the responses. In total, four questions were asked, each of which respondents interpreted through the lens of their own experiences: 1) The interview began by asking: What do you understand by street sexual harassment? 2) Have you ever experienced street sexual harassment? If so, could you share your experience with us? 3) Do you consider the place where you live to be safe? 4) Have your experiences with street sexual harassment affected your decisions to take or leave a job, or to attend or participate in cultural, sports, or civic activities? A total of 14 interviews were conducted between September and November 2023. Eleven of the interviewees identified as women and three as men. Among the women, nine were between 18 and 34 years old, and two between 45 and 54. The three men were aged 18 to 25. Unlike the randomly selected survey respondents, interview participants were identified through the research team's professional networks. Overall, the eleven women reported involvement in social, cultural, sports, or civic groups and demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness regarding the inequalities women face in public space. The three men belonged to cultural groups and showed a good understanding of how daily life is experienced differently by women due to existing gender norms. One limitation of this interview sample is that participants already had some awareness of gender issues. A valuable extension of this research would explore perceptions among individuals with more diverse experiences and levels of understanding. Nonetheless, the sample proved useful for more effectively contrasting the survey results. Interview excerpts were coded based on keywords that emerged from the quantitative analysis and the development of the interview protocol. The software Dedoose was used for this purpose. Using the survey results and the coding outputs, a triangulation analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data was conducted.

The entire research project was submitted for review to the Bioethics Committee of Universidad Santa María la Antigua in Panama, and informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure the protection of their human rights.

Results

Who Experiences Street Sexual Harassment in Panama, and How?

The findings confirm that street sexual harassment is widespread and affects women disproportionately. At the same time, its effects can be difficult to capture through surveys when the behavior has become so normalized. Of the 351 survey respondents, 57.8% reported having experienced this type of harassment, 37.9% stated they had not, and 4.3% indicated they did not know or preferred not to answer. Among those who had experienced harassment, 34.9%—slightly more than one-third—reported that it had occurred “within the last 7 days or today.” Among all surveyed women, 75.4% reported having experienced street sexual harassment, compared with only 39.1% of surveyed men. These figures do not vary significantly by age, sexual orientation, or degree of economic dependence. Overall, the majority of results suggest that the only statistically significant differentiating sociodemographic variable is gender—indicating that women are substantially more likely to report these experiences and their negative effects.

An important aspect related to the normalization of street sexual harassment is the difficulty individuals may have in conceptually identifying it. For instance, reports of harassment increase once specific behaviors are named and individually listed (such as whistling, unwanted looks or gestures, intimidating approaches, groping, rubbing, following, and exhibitionism). When respondents are shown the list of behaviors that constitute this type of harassment, the reported prevalence rises to 80.9%. These patterns vary by gender but not by other sociodemographic variables. A total of 93.7% of women reported experiencing one or more of the listed behaviors, compared with 67.5% of men. Women reported an average of 2.54 behaviors experienced, compared to an average of 1.26 for men.

Interview findings also confirmed the widespread nature of these experiences. All eleven women interviewed reported experiencing street sexual harassment from a young age and on a continual basis. Male interviewees, for their part, were highly aware that this problem overwhelmingly affects women for gender-related reasons: “In my condition as a man, it’s not common for us to be harassed” (Interviewee 6).

Fear of Using Public Space Due to Street Sexual Harassment

Among respondents who had experienced one or more harassment behaviors ($n = 284$), 47.5% stated that their reaction was to “ignore it because I don’t care” (Table 1). This indicates a relatively high degree of normalization, suggesting that harassment is seen as routine or even tolerable. For some, disregarding these behaviors may operate as a resistance strategy—an attempt to minimize emotional impact or avoid deeper confrontations. Another 21.8% reported “showing a facial expression of disgust, anger, or another nonverbal reaction.” In other words, they expressed disapproval without engaging in direct confrontation. This, too, may serve as a defensive strategy—one that signals discontent or attempts to deter the harasser without escalating the situation. Finally, 18.7% reported ignoring the harassment because they felt intimidated or afraid. Of this group, 69.8% were women, while 22.6% were men. For these individuals, personal safety becomes the priority, and any type of confrontation is perceived as an unmanageable risk. Gender differences here highlight how women may perceive higher threats due to structural power inequalities and a greater risk of escalation to more severe forms of violence. The lower proportion of men may reflect gendered differences in socialization around personal safety and in expressing fear or confrontation.

Table 1.

Reaction to Street Sexual Harassment

Reaction	Percentage of Respondents
Ignore it because I don't care	47.5%
Show a facial expression of disgust, anger, or another nonverbal reaction	21.8%
Ignore it because I feel intimidated or afraid	18.7%
Other reactions (I like it; I respond verbally; I physically confront; I report publicly)	12%

The interviews expanded the understanding of these effects. Unlike in the survey, the interviewed women emphasized that street sexual harassment does affect them. All women described the fear it generates as a powerful, constant, and oppressive presence: “It’s something that’s just there, like a shadow or a fear, or a... I don’t know, a constant dread. It’s something that’s always there” (Interviewee 12). Interviewees explained that these harassment experiences leave a mark—a form of lasting trauma—that creates an aversion to returning to the public spaces where the incidents occurred. Interviewee 10 shared that she “uses public space with terror” after one such experience. She added that she did not want to return to that place, but avoiding it was impossible due to her daily obligations. Despite the fear it generated, she had to face it:

Yes, I really don't feel like going back to the same place or returning there. But in many cases, I don't have another option because I have to pass through that area or I need something from that location. Yes, it scares me; I wouldn't want to go back there. (Interviewee 10)

This fear begins to take shape in childhood through early experiences with this type of violence in public spaces, which accumulate over time and become instructive. These experiences occur even though harassers clearly identify underage girls by their school uniforms:

I was telling you that when I was a minor, I had several incidents while wearing my school uniform, and one of them—well, there was this man on X Street who directly told me he wanted to have some kind of intimacy with me while I was walking. I was extremely scared—just a little girl—and I didn't even know what he was talking about. (Interviewee 4)

I have a very clear memory of the first time I was harassed on the street. I was about 13 years old, wearing my school uniform, walking from school to my house, and I remember that every time I walked, it was very common for cars—particularly those driven by older men—to stop and say things about my body, about me. I even remember them saying, 'Oh yes, keep walking like that, it'll make your legs look even nicer.' At the time, I saw it as something annoying; I didn't fully understand it as a direct threat. But as I grew older, I realized that there are certain situations where it is not only about the intention to make you uncomfortable—there is also an element of intimidation and the possibility that you may be put at risk. (Interviewee 3)

For the women interviewed, this fear creates and reinforces a permanent sense of insecurity, leading to self-questioning about their bodies and restricting their freedom to dress in ways that might make them less visible or less likely to be harassed: “Lately I've been trying to wear certain jackets... I have to be mindful of how I dress.” (Interviewee 9)

One interviewee reported that these experiences caused injuries to her self-esteem and led to self-rejection:

I don't feel comfortable in my own skin. If I leave home wearing something I chose because it made me feel happy and satisfied, later I start thinking that if someone said this or that to me, it's because... it's no longer about the clothes being nice—it's that the clothes make me look like a piece of meat. And I don't want that. So then I don't feel as happy with myself. (Interviewee 8).

Use of Public Space Shaped by Fear and Insecurity

Does this sense of insecurity or fear influence decisions regarding the use of public space? Among individuals who reported experiencing at least one form of street sexual harassment, 59.5% stated that their behavior in public space had not changed. A total of 80.7% of men in this group reported no change, compared with 45.1% of women (Table 2). Behavioral changes were reflected mainly in “avoiding going out at night” (15.8%) and “I still go out, but I feel nervous and unsafe”

(16.2%). As two interviewees explained: “I have even preferred not to do nighttime activities so I don’t add the stress of being harassed or followed” (Interviewee 10). “Maybe partly for my safety, I don’t go out at night” (Interviewee 5).

Table 2.

Changes in Behavior as a Result of Street Sexual Harassment

Behaviors	Women	Men
Avoid going out at night***	22.6%	7.0%
Go out accompanied by someone***	22.0%	2.6%
I still go out, but I feel nervous and unsafe***	25%	4.4%
My daily behavior has not changed***	45.1%	80.7%

Note. *** Statistically significant difference at the 99% level.

Individuals who reported feeling fear or intimidation were more likely to report changes in their behavior. For example, among the 53 people who indicated this reaction to harassment, only 30.2% responded that their behavior had not changed. Despite the relatively small number of respondents in this category, the differences are statistically significant at the 99% level.

Drawing on the literature, the study sought to understand whether these reactions and behavioral changes varied across different types of public spaces. Indeed, the results indicate that 4 out of 10 people reported some behavioral change. This appears to have the greatest impact on participation in cultural, sports, and civic activities, as 26.4% reported that their experiences of street sexual harassment had influenced their decisions regarding these activities. These responses do not seem to vary significantly between men and women. The interviews, however, show that harassment experiences of this kind restricted—and in some cases excluded—women from participating in various cultural, sports, and civic activities. This reflects the normalization of both harassment and its consequences in their daily lives. It was only after being asked a general question about the effects of street sexual harassment in their lives that they became aware of these impacts. In the artistic sphere, Interviewee 9 described how her experience in performance-type events can be affected depending on whether they take place in a public or private space where she feels safer, and on the type of clothing or costume she chooses in order to avoid being exposed to offensive remarks or to street sexual harassment.

In sports, engaging in individual activities such as running or walking poses a greater risk than participating in group sports. Because of experiences with harassment in public space, women reported decisive incidents that prevented them from continuing these activities:

I used to run, and a guy who was usually seen running in the area touched me—on my buttocks. And yes, I didn’t know how to react. At first I froze, and then I insulted him, but he just laughed and ran off. It was because of that experience that I stopped running. I thought about changing my schedule, but there was still the possibility of running into him, so... no. (Interviewee 8)

Similarly, another interviewee emphasized how, in sports contexts, street sexual harassment becomes normalized through the sexualization of women athletes:

Because the men who are around—or who go to practice the sport, or who go as spectators—instead of watching the game itself, they go to see the woman already objectified, or how sexy you look when you practice or do the activity. (Interviewee 2)

Those interviewees who, despite street sexual harassment, expressed a desire to remain involved in sports described strategies such as always going with another woman athlete. In sports like hiking or trail running, where one may end up alone or fall behind, one interviewee mentioned that she carries objects to defend herself or alert others in case of risk: “There will be a moment when you end up alone, you fall behind. So I carry a small knife in my hydration vest, and I carry a whistle.” (Interviewee 12)

A total of 20.4% of respondents reported a similar effect of street sexual harassment on their work-related decisions. In this case, 30.5% of women reported this effect, compared with only 14.9% of men. Interviewee 9 recalled her first job as a waitress, which she balanced with her night studies. Leaving home at 4:00 a.m., while it was still dark, she experienced several instances of harassment. Both she and her family felt afraid, and over time she had to quit her job.

While the interview findings make clear the impact that fear and insecurity—produced by these harassment experiences—have on women's lives, the survey does not yield similar results. Several simple correlation analyses and logistic regressions indicate that these decisions are not mediated by fear or perceived insecurity. This may be partly due to the response gap noted earlier between the general question about harassment and the one listing specific behaviors—suggesting a normalization of this form of violence. It becomes difficult, then, to name and recognize the emotions caused by behaviors that many women are forced to ignore.

Indeed, the survey shows that at least 6 out of 10 people affected by this form of violence reported no change in their behavior regarding public space. The interviews nuance this finding by revealing a kind of resignation in the face of a phenomenon women have had to grow up with since childhood, and with which they must contend—despite fear and insecurity—in order to continue carrying out their activities: In the end, the places where this happens most frequently are public transportation services, and they're places you have to use if you want to get to the university or to work. (Interviewee 13)

A common feeling among the interviewees was vulnerability, which in turn led to perceptions of insecurity in public space. This was especially evident at night, although it also occurred at other times of day. Because of this insecurity, they relied on constant communication with friends and family to let them know when they were in transit and when they arrived at their destinations: “I always try to be accompanied, and if not, I let my mom know when I leave” (Interviewee

8). Another interviewee explained that she asked relatives and friends to take her or pick her up, avoiding moving through public space alone. This made her feel safer—even when those accompanying her were men: “Maybe asking a man to accompany me” (Interviewee 4). “My dad picks me up when he leaves the office. It’s a better option to go accompanied than alone” (Interviewee 13). At the same time, they mentioned communication strategies through social media to warn others about places where they had experienced street sexual harassment, as a form of solidarity and prevention toward other women: “Now it’s common to see Instagram posts saying, ‘Be careful, something happened in X place’” (Interviewee 13). Despite these warnings, interviewees noted that these posts have limitations, as they reach few people, may be deleted, or may not be taken seriously by authorities.

Collective Appropriation of Public Space

A common theme that emerged from conversations with the interviewees was their resilience and their ability to seek strategies to minimize the risks associated with street sexual harassment. Three significant forms of collective appropriation of public space for this purpose stand out. One is *Fémina*, which is centered on art and culture, and the other two are sports initiatives: *Hiking Feminista* and *Birria de Giales*. These last two emerged directly in response to harassment and violence experienced by their founders while practicing sports in public space. For example:

In the case of the Fémina² collective, it is a group of women in the arts who come together to foster the development of a continuous feminist cultural and artistic community, creating alternative spaces for gathering, coexistence, and recreation. (Fémina Panamá, 2024, para. 1)

Fémina’s mission is to raise awareness about violence against women and machista culture through activism: “Members of this collective explained how participating as a group with other women helped them recognize that they were not alone in their experiences of street sexual harassment, and allowed them to release the anger they felt, feeling supported and accompanied” (Interviewee 10).

Meanwhile, *Hiking Feminista*³ seeks to connect with nature through group hiking and mountain climbing among women “in a respectful environment, free from harassment, to create safe spaces for coexistence and to demystify the weakness associated with one sex” (ELLAS, 2021). Hiking or climbing in groups of women transforms their perception of safety: “If we’re 20 women, it’s much harder for something to happen” (Interviewee 12). In fact, together they conduct risk assessments, strengthen their knowledge, and work to deconstruct the social role historically assigned to them—one that places them in a position of social and public vulnerability. In addition:

² More information about the *Fémina* organization can be found at <https://www.feminapanama.com/>

³ More information about the *Hiking Feminista* organization can be found at the following link: <https://www.instagram.com/hikingfeminista/?hl=e>

Upon reaching the designated locations, they hold dialogues and activities led by professionals such as sociologists, psychologists, lawyers, or physicians on topics including the myth of the superwoman; health, hygiene, and sexuality on the mountain and beyond; self-care; confronting self-love; healing with nature; and how to file complaints or seek help if you experience harassment while camping. (ELLAS, 2021, para. 12)

Finally, Birria de Giales⁴ is a collective of women residing in Panama that emerged as a response to harassment and to the exclusion of women from using public space to practice sports by men. This exclusion occurred through the intrusion of men into public sports courts while women were using them. Its founder, Nash Beitía, has described the reasons behind this initiative in various interviews with traditional media. In one interview with a national newspaper, she noted: “We have been victims of violence in public courts along the Cinta Costera. We have been harassed during matches by groups of more than 20 men who try to force us out of the courts, devaluing our practice” (Carrasquilla, 2023). She also noted that the organization is made up of Afro-descendant women, migrant women, women from low-income neighborhoods, women of various ages, and sexually diverse women. For this reason, the organization adopts a comprehensive approach with an emphasis on intersectionality, gender equity, and social justice, aimed both at enabling women to use public space for sports and at strengthening decision-making in favor of women athletes. Additionally, they seek to highlight the achievements of women athletes through research (Rodríguez, 2022).

Members of the group have a high level of awareness regarding the prevalence of harassment against women athletes in public spaces as compared to private settings. In this regard, one interviewee explained how, at the moment of harassment:

It also depends on the space you are in—whether it is public or private—at least in sports. I think that in public space the harassment is worse, more direct, because there are no limits on what they can say to you. There is no one who can protect you. It's more dangerous. It's not that it's not dangerous in private spaces, but I think maybe people measure their words more because there are more people around, perhaps more families, different kinds of people, and so they restrain themselves. (Interviewee 2)

This collective appropriation of public space through Birria de Giales also fostered a greater sense of safety among its members: “When we're in the birrias we're always together as a group. If anything happens, we let each other know to stay aware of the situation, and that's how we've protected one another” (Interviewee 5).

⁴ More information about the Birria de Giales collective can be found at the following links: <https://linktr.ee/BirriadeGialesGeneral> <https://www.instagram.com/birriadegiales/>

Discussion

The statistical data and the experiences shared by the women interviewed demonstrate that street sexual harassment is a pervasive and recurrent form of violence in Panama. The results also show that although both men and women are affected, women are its primary victims.

At the same time, the difficulty respondents showed in identifying certain actions as forms of street sexual harassment is striking. This is theoretically consistent with the idea that acts such as whistling, catcalling, unwanted looks or gestures, or physical encroachment are often experienced as socially accepted behaviors, perhaps without full awareness of the repercussions these acts have on women's lives.

Moreover, the results reveal a disconnect between the way women experience public space and what is proposed in the theoretical framework. Contrary to Borja's (2011) idea of public space as a place where people reinforce feelings of freedom and equality, the findings show an experience of oppression and limitation among women, leaving lasting effects from early childhood into adulthood. In this sense, the democratic principles that should materialize in public space, as outlined by Williner and Martínez (2023), are constrained for women. This forces them to alter their habits, routines, and ways of dressing. In some cases, women restrict their participation in recreational, occupational, social, and cultural activities.

The results also show that the "pedagogy of otherness" described by Carrión (2019) does not materialize in the interactions between men and women in public space or in the city. Although women, through ongoing and sustained efforts, have for decades moved from the private or domestic sphere into the public sphere—by entering paid work, studying, and participating in social, sports, and cultural life—this shift has also transferred domestic power dynamics into public space due to prevailing gender norms. This generates major challenges in how masculinity continues to be expressed in relation to women in public space. The findings show that these relations are far from being horizontal, respectful, and peaceful in a way that would allow both men and women to enjoy the right to the city in conditions of freedom, plurality, and safety.

In this regard, the results suggest that Panamanian society lacks effective recognition of women as full subjects entitled to exercise their right to public space, from an inclusive perspective that allows them to fully develop within it. Instead, women experience public space as one marked by violence, which forces them into a state of constant alertness, anxiety, fear, and vulnerability. In response, and in the face of continual violence, women demonstrate a strong capacity for resilience, devising strategies to move through and confront public space despite the fear. Specifically, the interviews show that women organize themselves around shared experiences as a way to collectively reclaim public space.

Conclusion

Street sexual harassment is a form of violence that violates women's human rights, undermines democracy, and distorts the experience of living in a city or public space that is meant to be pluralistic, inclusive, diverse, and safe.

The study suggests that public space in Panama is unequal, marked by male dominance that does not recognize, respect, or accept women as full subjects of that space. Although 9 out of 10 women in Panama report having experienced street sexual harassment, they generally resist it—either out of a kind of resignation stemming from the need to use public space to carry out their daily activities, or because they refuse to forfeit their right to enjoy it. For this reason, women develop strategies to navigate public space despite the fear they describe as a permanent feeling while doing so. The study highlights the need to develop legislation and public policies that address these behaviors and their effects comprehensively and accurately. At the same time, the results suggest that experiences of street sexual harassment among both women and men are highly tolerated and normalized, making it likely that such legislative initiatives would face limited public support. Even if such legislation were enacted, its implementation would likely be hindered by a lack of public awareness on the issue.

To combat and denormalize street sexual harassment, it is necessary to invest in communication campaigns that promote respect, gender equality, and rejection of such behaviors. Any initiative of this kind must directly involve men, adolescents, and boys in its design and implementation—not only as allies against harassment, but also as an effective tool to increase their awareness of the nature and impact of this type of violence in public space.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest with any institution or commercial association of any kind.

Funding sources

This project was funded by the Academic Incentive Program of the Office of the Vice-Rector for Research and Outreach at Universidad Santa María La Antigua, Panama.

Acknowledgments

We extend our special thanks to the individuals who voluntarily participated in the interviews and survey, as well as to students José Jauregui and Luzmery Sucre for their contributions to the research process.

Authorship note

Nelva Araúz-Reyes is the principal investigator.
Javier Stanziola Valenzuela is the co-investigator.

Literature review and design of the survey and semi-structured interview questions:
Nelva Araúz-Reyes and Javier Stanziola

Survey data collection:
Metrics Consulting

Interview data collection:
Nelva Araúz-Reyes and Javier Stanziola

Survey analysis:
Javier Stanziola

Interview analysis:
Nelva Araúz-Reyes

Manuscript drafting and revisions:
Nelva Araúz-Reyes and Javier Stanziola

References

- Aguado, V. (2023). El espacio público como bien común. Seguridad y convivencia ciudadana [Public space as a common good: Security and citizen coexistence]. *RESI: Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional*, 9(1), 61–72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18847/1.17.5>
- Aladro, A. (2017). Mujeres en la ciudad: El acoso callejero en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires [Women in the city: Street harassment in Buenos Aires]. Jornadas “Desafíos actuales de la Justicia porteña: Autonomía e Igualdad”, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina. <https://www.adaciudad.com.ar/docs/Aladro-Mujeres-en-la-ciudad.-El-acoso-callejero-en-la-Ciudad-Aut%C3%B3noma-de-Buenos-Aires.pdf>
- Álvarez, Y., Gómez, L., Pauli, E., & Oviedo, D. (2022). Impacto del acoso sexual callejero sobre el desarrollo del miedo y la ansiedad en mujeres jóvenes en Panamá [Impact of street sexual harassment on fear and anxiety development in young women in Panama]. VIII Congreso Universitario Internacional Investigación y Género, 369–382. <https://doi.org/10.33412/rev-ric.v8.1.3509>
- Amorós, C. (1994). Espacio público, espacio privado y definiciones ideológicas de “lo masculino” y lo “femenino” [Public space, private space, and ideological definitions of “the masculine” and “the feminine”]. In C. Amorós, *Feminismo, igualdad y diferencia* (pp. 23–52). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Aparicio, G. (2015, February 22). Proponen despidos y multas por lanzar piropos [Dismissals and fines proposed for catcalling]. *La Prensa*. https://www.prensa.com/politica/Proponen-despidos-multas-lanzar-piropos_0_4147085382.html
- Astrálaga, S. M., & Olarte Espitia, J. (2020). Acoso sexual callejero y derechos humanos [Street sexual harassment and human rights]. *Universitas Estudiantes*, (21), 187–210. <https://salutsexual.sidastudi.org/resources/inmagic-img/DD67100.pdf>
- Borja, J. (2011). Espacio público y derecho a la ciudad [Public space and the right to the city]. *Vientos del Sur*, (116), 39–49. https://cdn.vientosur.info/Vscompletos/Vs116_Borja_EspacioPublico.pdf
- Borja, J. (2000). Ciudadanía y espacio público [Citizenship and public space]. In D. Jiménez (Ed.), *Laberintos Urbanos en América Latina* (pp. 9–56). Publicaciones ABY YALA. https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1163&context=abya_yala

- Carrasquilla, M. (2023). Las chicas también “birrean” [The girls also “birrean”]. *La Estrella de Panamá*. <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/deportes/mas-deportes/chicas-birrean-HFLE484614>
- Carrión, F. (2019). El espacio público es una relación, no un espacio [Public space is a relationship, not a space]. In F. Carrión & M. Dammert-Guardia, *Derecho a la ciudad: Una evocación de las transformaciones urbanas en América Latina* (pp. 191–219). CLACSO, FLACSO–Ecuador, IFEA. <https://biblio.flacsoandes.edu.ec/libros/digital/58083.pdf>
- Concepción, M. (2023). Hombres le ponen “sus partes” encima de las mujeres en los transportes públicos [Men rub “their parts” on women in public transport]. *Mi Diario*. <https://www.midiario.com/nacionales/hombres-le-ponen-sus-partes-encima-a-las-mujeres-en-los-transportes-publicos-acoso-callejero/>
- Crespo, S. (2022). Acoso callejero, el desprecio hacia la necesidad ajena de ser respetada [Street harassment: Contempt for others’ need to be respected]. *La Estrella de Panamá*. <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/vida-y-cultura/cultura/acoso-callejero-desprecio-necesidad-BKLE476263>
- Crítica. (2015). Ana Matilde: caricaturizaron ley antipiropos [Ana Matilde: Anti-catcalling law caricatured]. *Crítica*. <https://www.critica.com.pa/nacional/ana-matilde-caricaturizaron-ley-antipiropos-378999>
- Davidson, M. M., Butchko, M. S., Robbins, K., Sherd, L. W., & Gervais, S. J. (2016). The mediating role of perceived safety on street harassment and anxiety. *Psychology of Violence*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039970>
- ELLAS. (2021). Mujeres, al monte: la naturaleza también es de nosotras [Women to the mountain: Nature belongs to us, too]. <https://www.ellas.pa/mundo-ellas/mujeres-al-monte-la-naturaleza-tambien-es-de-nosotras/>
- Falú, A. (2022). El derecho a la ciudad de las mujeres: Construyendo el urbanismo feminista en las prácticas [Women’s right to the city: Building feminist urbanism in practice]. *Crítica Urbana*, 5(23). <https://criticaurbana.com/el-derecho-a-la-ciudad-de-las-mujeres>
- Falú, A. (2014). El derecho de las mujeres a la ciudad: Espacios públicos sin discriminaciones y violencias [Women’s right to the city: Public spaces without discrimination or violence]. *Revista Vivienda y Ciudad*, (1), 10–28. <https://revistas.unc.edu.ar/index.php/ReViyCi/article/view/9538>

- Falú, A. (2013). Derecho a la ciudad, mujeres y seguridad ciudadana en los gobiernos locales [Right to the city, women, and citizen security in local governments]. *Économie et Solidarités*, 43(1–2), 86–97. <https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/handle/11336/70225>
- Falú, A. (2009). Violencias y discriminaciones en las ciudades [Violence and discrimination in cities]. In A. Falú (Ed.), *Mujeres en la ciudad, de violencias y derechos* (pp. 15–37). LOM Ediciones. <http://www.sitiosur.cl/r.php?id=902>
- Franco Barrera, M. I. (2022). El acoso sexual callejero y la percepción de las mujeres [Street sexual harassment and women's perceptions] [Undergraduate thesis, Universidad Técnica de Ambato]. DSpace. <https://repositorio.uta.edu.ec/jspui/handle/123456789/36163>
- Gómez, L., Álvarez, Y., Pauli, E., & Oviedo, D. (2022). Efectos del acoso sexual callejero sobre el desarrollo del miedo y la ansiedad... [Effects of street sexual harassment on fear and anxiety...]. *Revista de Iniciación Científica*, 8(1), 35–41. <https://doi.org/10.33412/rev-ric.v8.1.3509>
- Ley 82 de 24 de octubre de 2013. Que adopta medidas de prevención... [Law 82 of October 24, 2013: Preventive measures against violence toward women]. <https://mujer.gob.pa/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/LEY-No-82-DEL-24-10-2013.pdf>
- Ley 7 de 14 de febrero de 2018. Que adopta medidas para prevenir... [Law 7 of February 14, 2018: Measures to prevent, prohibit, and sanction discriminatory acts]. <https://vlex.com.pa/vid/ley-n-7-miercoles-862468244>
- Anteproyecto de Ley 177 de 2015. Que previene, prohíbe y sanciona... [Draft Law 177 of 2015: Preventing, prohibiting, and sanctioning harassment, street harassment, sexual harassment, stalking, favoritism, sexism, and racism].
- Martínez-Líbano, J., Gallegos Bulnes, J., Oñate Torres, N., & Villagra Arancibia, I. (2022). Consecuencias psicológicas, emocionales y sociales del acoso callejero: revisión sistemática [Psychological, emotional, and social consequences of street harassment]. *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología*, 2(142), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.56294/saludcyt2022142>
- Merino Solar, B., & Jara Reyes, R. (2022). Ciberactivismo feminista en Chile... [Feminist cyberactivism in Chile]. *Apuntes*, 49(90), 53–80. <https://doi.org/10.21678/apuntes.90.1372>
- Nochlin, L. (2017). Why Are There No Great Women Artists? [¿Por qué no hay grandes mujeres artistas?] (pp. 1–22). https://cz.tranzit.org/file/Linda_Nochlin__Why_have_they.pdf

- Ortega, E. (2023). Acoso callejero, ¿normalizado y aceptado? [Street harassment: Normalized and accepted?] *Metro Libre*. <https://www.metrolibre.com/cultura/acoso-callejero-normalizado-y-aceptado-BY4450461>
- Rinaldo, R. (2014). Pious and critical: Muslim women activists and the question of agency [Piadosas y críticas: Las activistas musulmanas y la cuestión de la agencia]. *Gender & Society*, 28(6), 824–846. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0891243214549352>
- Rodó-de-Zárate, M., Estivill i Castany, J., & Eizagirre, N. (2019). La configuración y las consecuencias del miedo en el espacio público... [The configuration and consequences of fear in public space]. *REIS*, (167), 89–105. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26897733>
- Rodríguez, M. (2022). Nivelando la cancha... Birria de giales y su lucha... [Leveling the field: Birria de Giales and their fight for harassment-free public spaces] [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgcwvNBql24>
- Semana. (2015). Buscan prohibir piropos en Panamá [Attempts to prohibit catcalling in Panama]. <https://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/piropos-en-panama-podrian-prohibirse/418923-3/>
- Serrano, C. (2019). Acoso sexual callejero en mujeres de una institución privada y una institución pública [Street sexual harassment among women in a private and a public institution]. *Revista Paian*, 10(1), 46–60. <https://revistas.uss.edu.pe/index.php/PAIAN/article/view/1092>
- Tuyub Basulto, J., Valle Anguas, V., & Alpuche Salazar, S. (2020). Repercusiones psicológicas del acoso sexual callejero en mujeres meridianas [Psychological effects of street sexual harassment on women in Mérida]. *Alternativas en Psicología*, (45), 93–101. <https://alternativas.me/attachments/article/242/Repercusiones%20psicol%C3%B3gicas%20del%20acoso%20sexual%20callejero.pdf>
- Williner, A., & Martínez, M. (2023). Políticas públicas integrales: el caso de las políticas de desarrollo territorial [Comprehensive public policies: The case of territorial development policies]. CEPAL. <https://hdl.handle.net/11362/68020>