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The gender of urban safety

Urban safety has become one of the main politics and rhetorics both at the local and the national level in most European countries. Yet, the way this politics and rhetorics is argued about and, often, implemented, does not take into account that the urban population is composed by both women and men, and that there are great differences in the way they perceive and live safety issues. To indicate the main ones: it is men who victimize women, and not viceversa, and women are victimized by men more within the safety of homes and work situations than in open and public urban spaces.

This paper wants to show that by taking into account women's perceptions and problems, politics adopted should be very different from the ones advocated: what women need is not the sterilization of urban terrain, but more social, economic and cultural resources to traverse this terrain with confidence.

In a song by a now deceased Italian songwriter, there is a man walking by himself along a lonely street in the middle of the night. All of a sudden, he sees somebody walking towards him. He cannot see this person clearly: but he can discern that he's carrying something in his arms. The man starts thinking: what should I do, is this person dangerous, maybe what he's carrying is a weapon? Yet, though very worried, he doesn't stop walking, nor does he seek refuge in an open doorway, or looks for a different way to go. So the two figures keep advancing one towards the other, until the second man is in clear view of the first, and this last can see that what the second one is actually carrying in his arms is a bunch of flowers.

This song tells us many things. One: the person walking alone in the middle of the night in a deserted city street is a man. Indeed, not many women, unless obliged, would do such a thing. Two: when the man sees somebody walking towards him, he wonders whether he might be dangerous, not whether this person is a man. He takes it for granted. And that is why he is worried: if he thought the person might be a woman, he wouldn't have felt threatened. Three: the man doesn't stop, doesn't look for refuge elsewhere, but keeps walking looking fixedly at the advancing figure. This is what most men appear to do when confronted by a perceived threatening person in a public space: they stare at him. Staring is exactly what most women wouldn't do, and do not actually do when walking the street, as staring may be taken as either an insult or an invitation. Four: men fear men, not women, though they do not realize it.

In the end, the person is more than innocuous, he is actually a very nice person, as he's carrying flowers, but that is now beside the point.

The night, and many public spaces, appear to be off limits for lone women. They may be dangerous for men as well, especially disabled or older men, but they are more so for all women. Or at least, that is how they are perceived by women and described by men.

The city, as the site and symbol of modernity, has always been constructed as being both a site of opportunities and a site of dangers. What has been less remarked upon is that opportunities are for men and dangers for women. The modern city is where individuals become such, where they free themselves of old ties and launch themselves into new adventures: this freedom and these adventures are for men, though, as at the same time the city is depicted as dangerous for women who are not attached to a man, that is "free" women. The story of how the Jack the Ripper scare was used to keep women at home in late 19th London, as told by Judy Walkowitz, is very revealing. Thus, "free" women are immediately public women, e.g. permissible prey for men.

Not so very paradoxically, though, we know that women are much more victimized at home and generally by men they know very well, rather than in the streets, by strangers. What most fear of crime researches called the paradox of fear, whereby women are more afraid than men but less victimized, can be easily explained by the fact that women take many more precautions than men when in public, and do so because taught from infancy that streets, nights and strangers are dangerous for them. This is of course a form of "victimization", but rarely noted, nay, taken so much for granted that if women are victimized in the street by strangers they are often blamed for not having been careful or prudent enough. Actually, victimization is not an adequate word to describe the situation in which half the city population is obliged to live. As it implies a relative lack of freedom compared to the other half of the population, shouldn't we rather call it discrimination, oppression, or some equivalent word? A lack of freedom compounded by at least three elements: that homes are no safe refuge, but often more dangerous than streets; that this lack of freedom goes unrecognised and taken for granted by women themselves; that men are at the same time constructed as protectors and predators: a very difficult double bind.

Fear of crime researches also tend to neglect the gender of those who are feared: whatever else they are, they are men, not women. Prostitutes, who often appear among the street scene figures indicated as signs of urban degradation, are not feared. Certainly they are not feared by men, who are their clients. Women are not afraid of prostitutes: rather they are ill at ease in sites where women are bought and sold, and where threatening men, both clients and protectors, abound.

Much else could and should be said about most fear of crime researches, but here I will keep to the results of a research we conducted in three northern Italian cities on the perception of in/security by women, in order to point to the necessity of very different policies from those adopted or advocated by many national and local governments nowadays.

Not very surprisingly, we found that women's feelings of insecurity, regardless of age, education, occupational status and story of previous victimization, had to do with the perception of being bodily vulnerable: e.g., they disliked (though not necessarily feared) many of those male behaviors and attitudes that men perceive as totally innocent and harmless. Indeed, when we interviewed a bunch of young men, they said two revealing things. First, while many said they had been accosted sexually by other men in bars or other places, they denied they had felt threatened in any way: they had reacted by simply refusing the advances, or laughing them away. Secondly, they resented the unease many young women expressed when they perceived to be followed by them in the streets as they thought it was exaggerated and incomprehensible. This means that insecurity is related to what is actually felt to be at stake: in the case of women, themselves as always vulnerable bodies, while for men in the same situation, nothing of great importance.

We further found, again not surprisingly, that women took many precautions and behaved prudently, though they often did not realize it. But they clearly perceived threats as being male gendered. They said so very explicitly. Men, on the other hand, did not seem to realize that what they feared was also male gendered.

There were of course important differences among women, depending on age and all the other variables. Yet, even young educated women studying or working in a relatively large city like Bologna, active women not likely to easily give up going out during the night or transgressing the implicit limits posed to women in the city, expressed unease and feelings of insecurity not so much towards risks of being subjected to simple property crimes but towards the risk that their personal, psychic and body space might be invaded by male aggressors. Thus, it is not so much "fear of crime" that our analysis discovered among women, but rather a diffuse sense of insecurity which we could name "ontological", intimately related to the persistent internalisation, from infancy, of an image of our bodies as eminently vulnerable –by men, of course, and especially strangers, whereby "our" men are needed to protect us precisely from strangers. That is, in short, women's insecurity has to do more with the actual status of the relationship between the sexes, than to crime rates or some such. Rather: concern and fear about predatory crime is always tied to this insecurity and compounded by it.

Such insecurity, though, it is as much a product of socialization, and therefore of the internalisation of an image of the self as ontologically at risk –continually reinforced by the dominant cultural discourse-- as it is of a persistent lack of autonomy and freedom. This has to do with two main factors: on the one hand, the relative lack of social and economic resources compared to those of most men, and what I called the double bind, e.g., the construction of the public and of (stranger) men as dangerous and of homes and (known) men as necessary protectors.

Dominant urban safety discourses and policies, both at the national and the local level, reinforce rather than diminish this insecurity. By insisting on the danger of public spaces, especially for women, they support and legitimate women's lack of freedom; as they ignore women's prevalent victimization at home and private spaces, they compound the double bind.

Urban dwellers come in all colors and shapes: but discourses and policies are actually addressed at “good citizens”, pointing to the danger of migrants, homeless, and poor people in general. Yet, even good citizens come in at least two shapes: men and women, but the very different experiences men and women have of the urban space are ignored.

Urban safety policies and discourses appear, by and large, to adopt two dominant strategies. The first is territorial sterilization: enclosure of public spaces; cctvs; increased police presence; clean up of the streets of homeless, beggars, prostitutes, drug addicts. The second is partnerships with private actors and agencies, such as vigilantes, private policing, subsidies for commercial sites to provide themselves with protection. Plus engaging the so-called voluntary sector in providing services for victims, older people, victimized women.

But the increasing privatisation of safety and security takes also another aspect. Many local councils launch campaigns to warn urban dwellers to take precautions, buy all sort of gadgets to secure their homes and properties, and so on. Particular targets of this type of propaganda are women (with older people in general): both for themselves (and if they do not follow this advice, they are blamed when victimized) and for those they are supposed to take care of, namely children and older people.

Sterilization and privatisation increase rather than decrease mutual diffidence, the desertification of the rich diversified life of the city, the search for refuge among intimates, families, already well known people. Trust, a scarce resource nowadays, is further reduced to particularized trust, as Offe calls it, that is trust granted only to those who “are like us”, in one respect or another. Bauman calls these type of collectivities “communities of accomplices”.

If this is detrimental to all, especially already marginalized people, it is more so for women. If women’s insecurity is at least in part the result of the existing relationships between the sexes, what is perceived as threatening by them cannot be thrown out of the city borders, surveilled by cctvs, put into detention. From the point of view of half the city population, dominant urban policies are both senseless and perverse, which doesn’t mean, of course, that many women do not see them with favor: it would be strange if it wasn’t so, since women inhabit the same mediatic and political world like everybody else, and both these worlds insist on dangers coming from the outside, from strangers and strange people. Besides, since women have, by and large, fewer resources than men, they can extend even less trust than men. Actually, though, if we were to follow these policies’ logic to its extremes, then we should say that a city safe for women is a city without men, whether outside or inside private spaces.

However, in our research we found something else: women who behaved less insecure were those who felt more in control of themselves and their life. Confidence was built of economic, social and cultural resources, to be sure, but was also fed and reinforced by these women’s ability and willingness to run risks, rather than avoiding them. Running risks, Offe again insists, breeds trust rather than diminishing it, especially generalized trust. Of course, one must be in the position of running risks without fearing to pay too high a cost if one fails. Which means, again, being in possession of adequate social economic and cultural resources, adequate enough to traverse the world without the necessary protection of a man.

Freedom and security are often seen as at opposite ends. Yet, this is true only when safety and security are interpreted as being under protection, as permanent dependency from somebody or something: when security is seen as confidence in oneself and possibility to trust others, then it is a fundamental condition of freedom.

Policies geared to produce safety and security should then start from women's predicament, in the sense that they should be directed to increase everybody's possibilities of running risks, rather than avoiding them: until a few years ago, we called them social policies. Contemporary concern over safety intended as diminishing the risks for "nice people" to be victimized by street crime may serve immediate political ambitions, or even give the sense that the "state" has still some important functions to perform, as Bauman comments: but, in the end, it is a self defeating concern (see Castel on this), and bound to make the living conditions of half the urban population worse.