JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
*School of Education and Communication*

# Urban Space Through Women's Eyes

## Exploring Women's Experiences of Unsafety and Everyday Navigation in Utrecht

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# Abstract

This thesis explores how women in Utrecht experience and interpret unsafety in public space, focusing on the spatial, social and emotional factors that shape these experiences and how these perceptions influence women's everyday navigation and use of urban space.

Using a qualitative dominant mixed-methods design, the study combines an image-based survey with semi-structured interviews. The analysis draws on feminist urban theory (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994) and emotional geographies (Koskela, 1999; Pain, 2000; 2001) to understand safety as a lived, relational and gendered experience.

The findings show that visibility, lighting, openness, maintenance and social activity often increased feelings of safety in Utrecht. In contrast, isolation, darkness, enclosure and unpredictable behaviour of others, particularly men or loitering groups, increased feelings of discomfort and vulnerability. However, these perceptions were not universal and remained strongly context-dependent. In addition, women frequently adapted their behaviour through route changes, increased alertness and avoiding certain places at night, limiting their freedom and mobility in urban space. The study concludes that women's perceived safety in Utrecht is shaped by a complex interplay of spatial, social and emotional factors and cannot be understood through objective indicators alone. The findings further suggest that experiences of unsafety influence how women navigate and access urban space, raising broader questions about gender equality, urban freedom and the right to the city. While the study focuses on women in Utrecht, the findings primarily reflect the experiences of participants between approximately 18 and 35 years old.

**Keywords***:* Women's perceived safety, public space, feminist urban theory, emotional geographies, gendered urban experiences

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# 1. Introduction

Across the world, questions around safety in public space are increasingly recognised as connected to issues of gender inequality, social justice and social sustainability. Public spaces are often imagined as open, accessible and inclusive environments that positively contribute to urban life. Yet in practice, experiences of the city are not equally distributed. Experiences of unsafety frequently extend beyond direct encounters with crime and include everyday forms of harassment, unwanted attention and subtle intimidation that shape how women move through and engage with urban environments (UN Women, 2017).

According to the European Commission, women in Europe are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, with an average of 64.2 women per 100,000 females reporting sexual assault in 2022, compared to 10.9 men per 100,000 males (Eurostat, 2025). Furthermore, among the eleven European Union member states for which data was collected, the Netherlands ranked second in the proportion of adults aged 18-74 who reported experiencing threatening, physical or sexual violence during adulthood (Eurostat, 2025). National data reveal similar patterns. According to Rutgers (n.d.), 24% of women in the Netherlands have experienced physical sexual violence (i.e. rape or sexual abuse) compared to 5% of men, while 53% report experiences of harassment or intimidation (i.e. all forms of unwanted sexual acts such as kissing or touching) compared to 19% of men. Beyond direct experiences of violence, women's use of public space is frequently shaped by strategies of avoidance, adaptation and compromise (Boomsma & Steg, 2014, p. 196; Roman & Chalfin, 2008, p. 309-312; Valentine, 1989).

These global patterns are directly reflected in international policy frameworks, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Most relevant to this study are SDG Target 5.2, which aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in public and private spheres and SDG Target 11.7, which seeks to provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible public spaces, particularly for women and other vulnerable groups (United Nations, n.d.). Together, these targets recognise that access to safe public space is not only a matter of personal security but also of equality, inclusion and participation in urban life. Similarly, Ceccato (2012) argues that a city cannot be considered socially sustainable when the safety of its inhabitants is not adequately addressed. From this perspective, safety extends beyond protection from crime and includes the ability to move freely and confidently through urban environments without fear, intimidation or exclusion.

Despite growing attention to safety within urban research and policy, local approaches continue to prioritise objective indicators such as crime rates and safety statistics over how safety is actually experienced. While these measures provide valuable insights into patterns of crime, they offer only a limited understanding of the everyday ways in which feelings of comfort and discomfort are produced through interactions with the city. This limitation is particularly relevant in relation to gender, as research consistently demonstrates that safety is experienced differently by women and men (Erkan & Topçu, 2021; Kern, 2020; Ratnayake, 2016).

In the case of the Netherlands, and Utrecht specifically, this gap becomes particularly relevant, yet somewhat paradoxical. According to annual safety surveys, Utrecht is generally considered a relatively safe city (Akkermans et al., 2024; CBS Statline, n.d.; Utrecht Monitor, 2025). However, the 2023 Veiligheidsmonitor shows substantial differences in perceived safety between women and men, indicating that experiences of safety remain unevenly distributed even within relatively safe urban environments (Akkermans et al., 2024). At the same time, several high-profile cases of gender-based violence in the Netherlands have generated increased public, political and municipal attention towards women's safety and gender inequality, further highlighting the societal relevance of this topic (KRO-NCRV, 2026).

Historically, Dutch municipalities have rarely incorporated lived experiences of safety into urban policy and planning. In recent years, however, the Municipality of Utrecht has taken initial steps towards integrating women's perspectives into urban development through participatory initiatives focused on women's safety. While these initiatives indicate growing recognition of the issue, questions remain regarding how women's experiences are translated into urban planning and policy practice.

Against this background, Utrecht provides a particularly relevant case for exploring gendered experiences of (un)safety in public space. The city combines a dense and lively urban centre with quieter residential neighbourhoods and includes diverse public spaces such as parks, streets, transport areas and nightlife environments (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.-b; Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.-c). In addition, the presence of a large university population and a relatively young and diverse demographic contributes to frequent and varied use of public space throughout the day and night (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.-b). Utrecht therefore reflects contemporary debates surrounding gender, urban space and perceived safety while providing a manageable context in which everyday experiences can be explored in depth.

## 1.1 Research aim and research question

The aim of this study is to explore how women experience and interpret unsafety in public space in their everyday lives, with particular focus on the spatial, social and emotional factors that shape these experiences and how experiences of unsafety influence women's navigation and use of urban space. Rather than focusing on objective indicators such as crime statistics or surveillance data, the research centres on how unsafety is perceived and the ways in which feelings of discomfort, unease and vulnerability emerge during daily interactions with the city. In doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gendered perceptions of unsafety are shaped in the local context of Utrecht and how these perceptions affect women's use and navigation of urban space.

Considering this, the central research question this study answers is: *How do women in Utrecht experience and interpret unsafety in public space in their everyday lives?*

This question is explored through the following two sub-questions: 1) *Which spatial, social and emotional factors shape these experiences?* And 2) *How do perceptions of unsafety affect women's everyday navigation in public spaces?*

These questions allow for an in-depth analysis of perceived unsafety as a dynamic and context-dependent aspect of everyday urban life. The research further considers how perceptions of safety may vary across different situations and types of public space, and how women make sense of these experiences in relation to past encounters and expectations.

# 2. Background

## 2.1 The case of Utrecht

At the local level, the city of Utrecht presents a particularly relevant context for examining the dynamics. Utrecht is a growing and diverse city, with approximately 377,000 inhabitants (2023). A relatively high share of inhabitants of Utrecht is aged between 20-40, making it a youthful population in which public space plays a central role in everyday urban life (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.-b). Public areas, including streets, squares, and parks such as Máximapark, Griftpark and Wilhelminapark are widely used by residents, making questions of safety and accessibility highly relevant.

### 2.1.1 Gendered safety and street intimidation

Quantitative data from the national and regional safety monitor [Veiligheidsmonitor] reveals the gendered differences in how safety is perceived in Utrecht. According to the national 2023 safety monitor [Veiligheidsmonitor], 44% of women in Utrecht reported feeling unsafe at times, compared to 26% of men (Akkermans et al., 2024; CBS Statline, n.d.; Utrecht Monitor, 2025). Among young women aged 15-25, 61% reported feeling unsafe in general, and 25% felt unsafe even in their own neighbourhoods, more than double the rate reported by men in the same age group (Akkermans et al., 2024; CBS Statline, n.d.; Utrecht Monitor, 2025). These statistics highlight the extent to which feelings of safety differ across gender, even within a city that is generally considered relatively safe.

Relationally, street intimidation is a particularly pressing issue in Utrecht and forms an important dimension of women's everyday experience of unsafety. As argued by Kern (2020), practices such as staring, catcalling and other forms of harassment play a critical role in shaping women's fear of crime and their navigation through urban spaces. In line with this, the 2024 Utrecht safety monitor [Utrecht Veiligheidsmonitor] reports that 34% of residents experienced street intimidation in the past year, with (young) women disproportionately affected (Utrecht Monitor, 2025). Nearly half of all women (45%) reported experiences such as staring, catcalling or sexually suggestive and offensive comments, compared to 22% of men (Utrecht Monitor, 2025). Notably, the number of reported experiences among women increased from 41% in 2021 to 45% in 2023, while men's experiences remained stable (Utrecht Monitor, 2025). Statistics such as these indicate that experiences of unsafety are not necessarily connected to serious crimes but also to small and often everyday interactions in public space.

Importantly, although these findings are quantitative in nature, they already point towards the relational and experiential dimensions of safety. Indicators such as perceived safety and experiences of street intimidation capture how individuals experience, interpret and navigate urban environments rather than measuring crime alone. However, while these monitoring instruments provide valuable insights into the prevalence and distribution of such experiences, they offer more limited understanding of how women make sense of these encounters, how they shape everyday behaviour and mobility, and how spatial, social and emotional factors interact in the production of safety and unsafety.

### 2.1.2 Local municipal approaches to safety

In response to these issues, the municipality of Utrecht has initiated efforts to improve understanding and address women's experiences of safety in public space. In recent years, the municipality has developed an action plan to address street intimidation and increase public awareness of the issue (Gemeente Utrecht, 2022). Another example is the initiative *Women who Watch* [*Vrouwen die Schouwen*], which is a participatory approach in which women are invited to walk through neighbourhoods and reflect on where and why they feel safe or unsafe and what spatial changes might improve their sense of safety. In addition, the initiative allows collaborations between the municipality and local (higher) education facilities to initiate the conversation about perception of safety around the schools with their female students. Students were invited to share their experiences and opinions about safety in their neighbourhood and in the area around school. These variations on sense walks and collaborations with local schools aim to incorporate citizens' experiences into future urban policy development by identifying concrete improvement points and flaws in the physical environment.

Even though such initiatives show an important step toward more inclusive and bottom-up urban planning, they also raise questions about what kind of knowledge is produced through these participatory processes and, moreover, which aspects of unsafety remain overlooked. The participatory initiative by the municipality showed that asking about the physical characteristics of a space while someone does not have any theoretical knowledge about this often yields repetitive and superficial responses. While the initiative marks an important step in incorporating women's experiences into urban planning policy, it also highlights the complexity of capturing and translating citizens' experiences into spatial interventions. More broadly, it illustrates the challenge of moving beyond identifying where women feel unsafe towards understanding how and why feelings of safety and unsafety emerge through everyday interactions with people and places. This points to the continued relevance of qualitative approaches that centre women's lived experiences and allow for a deeper exploration of the relational, spatial and emotional dimensions of perceived safety.

# 3. Literature review

The question of how people feel in public spaces, especially whether they feel safe, has long shaped urban research. In recent decades, growing scholarly attention has been directed toward the subjective and gendered nature of safety in public space (Ceccato, 2012; Glas, 2021;

Hinkle, 2014; Kern, 2020; Pain, 2000). The literature review identifies key gaps in existing knowledge, particularly regarding the lived and relational dimensions of perceived safety and the limited use of qualitative approaches that centre women's own experiences and interpretations.

## 3.1 Contextualising perceived safety in the Dutch and Utrecht context

While perceived safety has received increasing attention in Dutch policy, municipal monitoring and urban research, the available literature remains relatively limited compared to the broader international body of work. Existing Dutch research largely consists of national safety monitors, survey-based studies and policy-oriented reports, which provide valuable insights into patterns of perceived safety but offer less understanding of how safety and unsafety are experienced in everyday life.

### 3.1.1 National patterns

In the Netherlands, local municipal and national data on perceived safety has largely mirrored these global trends, with a strong focus on statistical analysis and survey-based studies (CBS, 2024**;** Social en Cultureel Planbureau, n.d.). Institutions such as *Statistics Netherlands* [*Centraal Bureau voor de Statitiek (CBS)*] and *Netherlands Institute for Social Research* [*Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*] publish annual safety monitors, including gender breakdowns (CBS, 2024; Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, n.d.). At the start of 2024 CBS (2024) published the annual safety monitor report for 2023, which confirms that women in the Netherlands consistently report lower perceived safety in public space. In combination with this quantitative data, various academic research has been exploring different aspects of perceived safety in the Netherlands or one of its cities in particular (Glas, 2021; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025; Van Den Berg, 2016). Findings from Dutch research conducted by, among others, Glas (2021), Te Braak & Van Tienhoven (2025), Kramer et al. (2013), confirm the CBS findings that women report lower levers of perceived safety. These studies and data sources provide valuable insights into national and local patterns of both crime statistics and perception of safety, though are not always generalizable for other Dutch cities.

Yet, Dutch academic literature often remains tied to functionalist or crime-prevention paradigms, concerned more with designing 'safe' spaces than with understanding how safety is felt or negotiated (De Jong & Strikwerda, 2020; Lub & De Leeuw, 2016). Studies as such neglect the fact that in order to design safe spaces, there first is a need to understand what

spatial characteristics impact someone's feeling of unsafety in a particular space. Exceptions exist in critical urban studies and feminist geography focusing on The Netherlands. Van Den Berg, for instance, explores how women in Amsterdam adapt their movement patterns based on feelings of unsafety (2016). However, such work is limited and often city specific.

### 3.1.2 Previous research in Utrecht

At the local level, the city of Utrecht presents a particularly relevant context for examining perceived safety. Current academic studies focusing specifically on perceived safety in Utrecht remain scarce, particularly those that explore emotional, spatial, and experiential dimensions in depth. Brands et al. (2021) have in fact explored the differences of feeling welcome, home and safe in four squares in Utrecht. The focus of the study is limited to only 4 specific public spaces in Utrecht and have no specific focus on difference in safety perception between gender (Brands et al., 2021). A published thesis by Strooper (2024), does in fact focus on differences between men and women regarding perception of safety, though based its findings on the quantitative Utrecht Residents Survey from 2023. This quantitative research therefore does not present any in-depth qualitative insights.

Given the limited availability of Dutch and Utrecht-specific research, this literature review subsequently draws on a broader body of international scholarship on perceived safety, feminist urban studies and emotional geographies. These perspectives provide important theoretical and empirical insights for understanding how women experience and interpret safety and unsafety in public space, while also helping to identify knowledge gaps that remain relevant in the Dutch and Utrecht context.

## 3.2 Conceptualising perceived safety

### 3.2.1 Objective safety, fear of crime and perceived safety

From a criminological perspective, crime statistics, incident reports and surveillance data are widely used by governments to evaluate safety levels and inform urban interventions (Cozens, 2007; Jones & Fanek, 1997; Schneider & Kitchen, 2002). While these measures provide valuable information about recorded incidents, they offer limited insight into how safety is experienced by individuals in everyday urban life.

In response to these limitations, increasing scholarly attention has shifted from objective measures of crime towards the concepts of fear of crime and perceived safety (Pain, 2000; Pain, 2001; Rai et al., 2023; Valentine, 1989). Although these concepts are closely related, they are

not identical. Fear of crime is generally understood as an emotional response to the perceived risk of victimisation (Garofalo, 1981, p. 840-841; Skogan, 1987), whereas perceived safety refers more broadly to feelings of comfort, ease and security within a particular environment (Eller & Frey, 2019, p. 43-60).

Proske (2019, p. 6) defines the actual term safety as "*a situation with a lower risk compared to an acceptable risk or situation without any danger impending*". Correspondingly, research on the concepts fear of crime and perceived safety emphasize that safety is not simply the absence of crime, but rather a subjective experience shaped by social relations, spatial characteristics and everyday interactions in the city (Pain, 2000; 2001, p. 900-902; Rai et al., 2023; Valentine, 1989). Individuals may feel unsafe in places with relatively low crime rates while feeling safe in areas where crime levels are higher (Ceccato, 2012; Glas, 2021; Kern, 2020). Glas (2021), for example, demonstrates that feelings of unsafety among residents of Rotterdam remained relatively stable between 2008 and 2017 despite declining crime rates. Such findings illustrate the importance of understanding safety as a lived experience rather than solely as a measurable condition.

Feminist geographers further argue that focusing exclusively on fear risks individualising experiences that are often rooted in broader social and spatial structures (Pain, 2000; Pain, 2001; Valentine, 1989). From this perspective, perceived safety is understood as an ongoing evaluation of one's surroundings that is shaped not only by perceived risk, but also by social norms, gendered expectations and previous experiences (Ceccato, 2012, p. 10-12; Eller & Frey, 2019; Loewen et al., 1993). Ceccato (2012) therefore conceptualises perceived safety as part of a broader sense of security that combines cognitive assessments of risk with emotional responses to place.

Building on these perspectives, perceived safety can be understood as a multidimensional concept that incorporates cognitive, emotional and social elements. It reflects how individuals interpret their surroundings, anticipate potential risks and position themselves in relation to others in public space (Loewen et al., 1993). As Raue et al. (2019) argue, safety itself is fundamentally experienced as a feeling and is therefore influenced by contextual and psychological factors such as trust, control, age and previous experiences. Perceived safety is consequently dynamic, context-dependent and experienced differently across individuals and groups.

### 3.2.2 Perceived safety and public space use

Perceived safety is particularly relevant in public space because it shapes how urban environments are used and experienced. Public space has been conceptualised as a place of public access, social interaction and civic activity (Carr et al., 1992; Madanipour, 1996; Mitchell, 1995). Building on these perspectives, Mehta (2014, p. 54-56) defines public space as a "*space that is open to the general public, which generates public use and active or passive social behaviour, and where people are subject to the general regulations that govern the use of space*". Kern (2020) argues, the extent to which individuals feel safe in public spaces such as streets, squares and parks influences whether and how they use these environments. Research suggests that perceptions of safety emerge through the interaction between physical characteristics of space and the social dynamics that occur within it (Cozens & Love, 2015; Day, 2001; Kern, 2020). Feelings of unsafety can lead to avoidance of particular places, changed routes and restrictions on mobility (Boomsma & Steg, 2014, p. 196; Roman & Chalfin, 2008, p. 309-312). On the other hand, feelings of safety encourage presence, participation and engagement in urban life (Jacobs, 1961).

## 3.3 Gendered experiences of perceived safety in public space

Feminist urban scholars further argue that cities themselves are not gender neutral (Fenster, 2005; Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994). Kern (2020) suggests that cities have historically been designed through a predominantly male perspective, shaping how public spaces are planned, used and experienced, often to the disadvantage of women's feelings of safety and belonging. Fear in public space therefore extends beyond isolated incidents of crime and becomes embedded in everyday life. Valentine (1989) argues that women's fear is often structured through a geographic logic in which certain places, times and situations become associated with danger and are consequently avoided. In contrast, Groskop (2024) argues that women do not necessarily fear public spaces themselves, but rather "are afraid of men in public spaces".

Correspondingly, women's perceptions of unsafety are often associated with the threat of harassment, street intimidation and gender-based violence, as well as with more subtle spatial and social cues such as poor lighting, limited visibility and the presence of unfamiliar groups (Ceccato, 2012; Day, 2001; Erkan & Topçu, 2021). Importantly, these experiences cannot be

explained by crime statistics alone. Rather, they are shaped by everyday interactions, social norms and previous experiences in public space (Kern, 2020; Pain, 2001).

As a result, women frequently develop adaptive strategies to manage perceived risk, including avoiding particular places, changing routes, remaining highly alert or limiting movement at certain times of day (KRO-NCRV, 2026; Pain, 2001; Rai et al., 2023; Valentine, 1989). Such practices often become normalised as part of everyday life and reflect broader gendered expectations regarding vulnerability and safety in public space (Kern, 2020). Chaney et al. (2024), for example, show that men generally report being less conscious of whether their surroundings are safe or unsafe.

Despite the consistency of these findings, gender is often treated as a descriptive variable rather than an analytical lens in urban safety research (Ceccato, 2012; Cozens & Love, 2015; Pain, 2001). While many studies identify gender differences in perceived safety, fewer examine how these perceptions are produced through everyday social interactions, urban design and broader power relations (Ceccato, 2012; Erkan & Topçu, 2021; Kern, 2020). Feminist urban scholars instead conceptualise gender as a structuring force that shapes experiences of urban space through social norms, spatial design and unequal power relations (Ceccato, 2012; Falú, 2010; Kalms, 2023; Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994; Van den Berg, 2016). These perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences by examining not only fear and risk, but also agency, exclusion and adaptation.

In addition, a lack of methodological diversity remains within the field. Research continues to rely heavily on large-scale surveys and secondary data analysis, while comparatively few studies employ qualitative or participatory approaches that centre women's lived experiences and interpretations of safety (Cozens & Love, 2015; Pain, 2004).

## 3.4 Perceived safety as an everyday, lived experience

Recent literature increasingly emphasises that perceived safety is produced through everyday interactions with urban environments rather than being determined solely by objective factors. Feelings of safety and unsafety develop through previous experiences, daily routines and repeated engagement with particular places (Kern, 2020; Pain, 2001). Consequently, perceptions of safety are dynamic and context-dependent, varying across individuals, places and moments in time.

As argued by Pain (2001), safety perceptions are shaped by how individuals interpret and experience their surroundings in everyday life. Safety is therefore not a fixed characteristic of

a place, but emerges through ongoing interactions between people, environments and social relations. In this sense, public spaces are not experienced in a neutral or purely physical way. Rather, individuals continuously assess and negotiate their surroundings based on personal experiences, social expectations, memories and perceived risks (Kern, 2020; Pain, 2001; Zhang et al., 2021; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025). This is particularly significant because perceptions of safety can influence who feels able to access, use and participate in public space, connecting safety to broader questions of belonging and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1967). Urban environments are therefore not experienced in a neutral or purely physical way. The interpretation of an urban environment is dependent on an individual's experiences, social norms and broader power relations. In essence, an individual's interaction with both physical elements of space (e.g. lighting, visibility and spatial layout) and social dynamics within an urban environment (e.g. the presence of others, gendered expectations and previous experiences) influences how safe or unsafe a specific space may feel. These perceptions are not uniform but vary across individuals and contexts and are shaped by factors such as age, gender and background. As a result, understanding perceived safety in urban space requires looking beyond physical or social characteristics alone and considering how space is experienced and interpreted in everyday life.

## 3.5 Social dimensions of perceived safety in urban context

### 3.5.1 Social norms, gender and power relations

Public space is not experienced as a neutral or purely physical environment but is shaped by social norms, expectations and power relations that influence how individuals behave, interpret and navigate everyday situations. From this perspective, perceptions of safety are shaped not only by the presence or absence of others, but also by how these others are socially understood. Feminist urban scholars such as Kern (2020) and Massey (1994) argue that public space is structured through power relations, resulting in unequal levels of comfort, belonging and freedom of movement among different groups. As Kern (2020, p. 1522) explains, urban spaces are historically designed, regulated and socially reproduced through dominant, often male, norms that influence who is considered to belong in public space and under what conditions.

Consequently, daily interactions in public environments are not experienced equally across genders. Bennetts et al. (2017) argue that experiences of safety are shaped not only by potential risks but also by social expectations regarding vulnerability, behaviour and responsibility. The

presence of men, particularly in contexts where harassment and intimidation are recognised as common experiences, may therefore be interpreted differently from the presence of women (Kern, 2020). Such interpretations are often rooted in previous experiences and broader social expectations rather than immediate threats. As a result, women are frequently positioned as responsible for managing their own safety through behavioural adaptation, avoidance and vigilance (Bennetts et al., 2017, p. 16; Pain, 2001).

### 3.5.2 Presence of others and social activity

A key social characteristic influencing perceived safety concerns the presence of others and levels of activity in public space (Bennetts et al., 2017, p. 16; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025, p. 6). Cozen and Love (2015) argue places that are busy, active and socially monitored are often perceived as safe due to the presence of potential witnesses and a sense of collective oversight. Similarly, Zeng et al. (2023, p. 4) state that "*feeling unsafe is partly the direct product of an undesirable social environment*". This idea is reflected in Jacobs' (1961, p. 35) concept of *eyes on the street*, which proposes that populated environments enhance safety through informal social surveillance. Consequently, empty or low-activity spaces are often associated with higher levels of perceived unsafety, particularly at night or in unfamiliar environments (Bennetts et al., 2017; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025).

However, the presence of others does not automatically generate feelings of safety. Research suggests that social presence is interpreted through previous experiences, stereotypes and social norms (Day, 2001). For example, groups of men may be experienced differently from mixed groups or groups of women, particularly in contexts where harassment is a concern (Day, 2001; Lupton, 1999). Likewise, familiarity with a place or its users may increase predictability and trust, whereas unfamiliarity can heighten discomfort and uncertainty (Bennetts et al., 2017; Lupton, 1999). Age, behaviour and, in some cases, perceived ethnicity or background may also influence how others are interpreted within a space (Day, 2001).

This complexity is further highlighted by Wirth (1938), who argues that social presence does not necessarily produce comfort. Environments such as nightlife districts or transport hubs may provide informal social control while simultaneously exposing individuals to unwanted attention, harassment or unpredictable behaviour (Day, 2001; Lupton, 1999, p. 12-13; Zeng et al., 2023). Social presence can therefore function as both a source of reassurance and a source of tension, depending on the context in which it is experienced (Raue et al., 2019).

### 3.5.3 Behaviour of others

Beyond the presence of others, the behaviour of others plays an important role in shaping perceptions of safety. Individuals assess not only who is present, but also whether behaviour appears predictable, controlled or potentially threatening (Hinkle, 2014). Signs of unpredictability, such as intoxication, disruptive behaviour or visible confusion, can increase feelings of discomfort and uncertainty even in crowded environments (Hinkle, 2014; Lupton, 1999). Lupton (1999, p. 12-14) and Hinkle (2014, p. 146-150) suggest that signs of social disorder or unpredictability, such as intoxication, impulsive behaviour or visible confusion, can increase an individual's feelings of discomfort even in crowded spaces. For instance, individuals who appear intoxicated or act loudly and unpredictably may be perceived as less controllable, which increases uncertainty about potential interactions (Lupton, 1999, p. 12-14). Similarly, the presence of homelessness is often associated with feelings of discomfort or unsafety, although these perceptions are frequently shaped by broader stereotypes and assumptions rather than actual threats (Kinsella, 2012, p. 122-123). Perceptions of unsafety are therefore influenced not only by the number of people present, but also by subjective interpretations of behaviour and social meaning.

### 3.5.4 Social mixed use of environments

Bennetts et al. (2017, p. 18-19) found that mixed-use environments, where residential, commercial and social functions coexist, are frequently associated with higher levels of perceived safety. Bahadure and Kotharkar (2012) argue that mixed-use urban environments support more continuous social activity throughout the day, as different functions attract different users at different times. Compared to mono-functional areas, these environments tend to sustain a more consistent presence of people, reducing periods of inactivity and isolation.
This dynamic aligns with Jacobs' (1961) argument that ongoing social presence contributes to perceived safety. Nevertheless, the effects of mixed-use environments are not universally positive. While continuous activity may increase opportunities for assistance and informal social control, it can also generate interactions that are not always experienced positively. Lupton (1999) notes that diverse users and competing activities can create tensions, while nightlife functions may increase exposure to intoxication, noise and unwanted attention (Bennetts et al., 2017; Evans, 2014, p. 18-22). Mixed-use environments should therefore not be understood as inherently safe, but rather as spaces where perceptions of safety depend on how social activity is experienced in practice.

## 3.6 Spatial dimensions of perceived unsafety

A large body of literature examines the relationship between spatial characteristics and perceived safety. Commonly discussed features include lighting, visibility, openness, crowding and the presence or absence of other people (Cozens & Love, 2015; Day, 2001). These characteristics influence how individuals experience public space and are therefore frequently addressed in urban planning interventions aimed at improving safety.

However, research suggests that spatial characteristics do not have fixed or universal effects on perceived safety. The same physical environment may be experienced differently depending on time of day, social context and previous experiences (Chaney et al., 2024; Kern, 2020). Consequently, spatial features often associated with safety do not necessarily produce feelings of comfort or security for all users. Perceived safety is therefore increasingly understood as relational and context-dependent rather than as a direct outcome of spatial design alone.

### 3.6.1 Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

A prominent planning approach linking physical design to safety is *Crime Prevention Through Environmental* Design (CPTED). According to Cozens and Love (2015), CPTED is based on the assumption that crime can be reduced through spatial interventions that limit opportunities for offending. Central to this perspective is Newman's (1972) concept of defensible space, which suggests that visibility, territoriality and spatial organisation can strengthen informal social control and increase feelings of safety (Cozens & Love, 2015, p. 394-395).

Although CPTED highlights the importance of spatial design, it has also been criticised. Kern (2020) argues that the approach assumes a relatively predictable relationship between physical interventions and perceptions of safety, overlooking the ways emotions and experiences shape how environments are interpreted. Similarly, Koskela and Pain (2000, p. 269-271) emphasise that safety cannot be understood without considering the broader social and political structures through which space is experienced. As a result, CPTED provides only a partial explanation of perceived safety, as it tends to overlook social and gendered dimensions.

### 3.6.2 Visibility and lighting

Visibility and lighting are among the most widely studied spatial characteristics related to perceived safety (Boomsma & Steg, 2014; Cozens & Sun, 2019; Grohe, 2011). Well-lit environments are generally associated with increased feelings of safety because they improve visibility and reduce uncertainty about potential threats (Boyce, 2019; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025). Boyce (2019) found that improved lighting enhances the ability to recognise facial expressions and body language, thereby increasing perceived control over a situation. In contrast, poorly lit environments, blocked sightlines and tunnels are often associated with increased feelings of unsafety, particularly during the evening and nighttime hours (Boyce, 2019; Kern, 2020; Vrij & Winkel, 1991). These factors are considered to influence and limit the ability to anticipate and respond to potential risks.

At the same time, the relationship between visibility and safety is not straightforward. Increased visibility may also heighten exposure to unwanted attention, surveillance or harassment, particularly for women (Kern, 2020). Similar contradictions can be found in relation to lighting. Van Heemstra (2025) notes that standing under a lamppost may put the individual in the spotlight while simultaneously reducing their ability to see the surrounding environment, which indicates that more lightning actually increases exposure rather than reducing vulnerability. With Van Heemstra's (2025) statement that "*streetlights are not a logical answer to a murder*", she initiates the discussion conscious and custom adaptation to society, both physically and morally. Van Heemstra (2025) argues that lightning should not blind us in public spaces, instead it should be designed to minimize contrasts between spaces. Though, it's not only purely physical. Van Heemstra (2025) explains, the more the fear of darkness is fed, the greater the call for light becomes and the more lights added to our public spaces, the more extra light we need to eliminate the contrast between spaces. Other studies likewise emphasise that the effects of lighting depend on factors such as brightness, distribution and individual characteristics (Boomsma & Steg, 2014; Johansson et al., 2011; Van Rijswijk & Haans, 2018).

### 3.6.3 Mixed-use of space

A third spatial characteristic influencing perceived safety concerns mixed land use. Mixed-use environments combine functions such as housing, retail, hospitality and public space within the same area, creating more continuous patterns of activity throughout the day (Bahadure & Kotharkar, 2012, p. 726). In contrast, mono-functional environments such as office districts or

purely residential areas often experience periods of inactivity outside peak hours (Bennetts et al., 2017; Evans, 2014, p. 18-22).

Urban criminology identifies land use as an important factor shaping both crime opportunities and perceptions of safety (Zahnow, 2018, p. 4-5). Ceccato (2012, p. 13-14) argues that the built environment and the activities it accommodates influence when and how spaces are used, which subsequently affects how they are perceived. Mixed-use environments may therefore contribute to perceived safety by supporting visibility, accessibility and continuity of use (Bennetts et al., 2017, p. 16-17). At the same time, environments with limited functional diversity may feel disconnected, vulnerable or less socially controlled (Hinkle, 2014, p.2-3; Kelling & Wilson, 1982).

### 3.6.4 Openness and layout

Another frequently discussed characteristic concerns spatial openness and layout. Open environments with clear and open sightlines and multiple pathways are often associated with higher perceived safety. They allow individuals to see and be seen, orient themselves more easily and access alternative routes if needed (Cozens & Love, 2015; Cozens & Sun, 2019, p. 293; Grohe, 2011; Van Rijswijk & Haans, 2018). In contrast, Van Rijswijk and Haans (2018) and Cozens and Sun (2019, p. 293) argue narrow streets, closed off spaces or areas with limited escape routes may leave an individual feeling trapped or vulnerable. However, as with other spatial characteristics, openness does not have similar effects on everyone in every context. Environments in which an individual is exposed due to its openness or layout may increase one's feelings of vulnerability, particularly when an individual feels visible without being socially supported (Van Heemstra, 2025).

### 3.6.5 Isolation

Closely related to this are the spatial characteristics of isolation and connectedness of a space. Spaces that are perceived as isolated (e.g. quiet neighbourhood streets, parks or areas that are poorly connected) are often associated with lower perceived safety. Similar to social presence in a space, the absence of others in isolated spaces, together with the limited options for assistance or escape, affect the perception of safety (Day, 2001; Jacobs, 1961). This is in particular relevant in the context of urban green spaces. While parks and green areas are widely associated with environmental, health and well-being benefits, their role in shaping perceived

safety is a bit conflicted (Jennings et al., 2016; Kabisch et al., 2014; WHO, 2016). Features such as dense vegetation, limited visibility or isolation may contribute to feelings of unsafety among women, which contradicts with the positive framing of urban green spaces in previous research.

### 3.6.6 Maintenance and disorder

Finally, the condition and maintenance of public space also influence perceived safety. Cleanliness and sings of care contribute positively to the perception of safety, while neglected or poorly maintained environments may increase feelings of unsafety (Cozens & Love, 2015). Bennetts et al. (2017, p. 16) argue that maintenance of a place shape how individuals interpret space and influences whether a space is perceived as monitored, valued and socially regulated. In similar fashion, Kelling & Wilson (1982), key thinkers of the broken windows theory, argue that untended social and environmental disorder is the starting point for crime (Hinkle, 2014, p. 2-3). Untended disorder suggests that controls in the area have failed and therefore the area is unsafe (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). However, as Hinkle (2014, p. 3) argues, the broken windows thesis not only impacts objective crime rates but in fact also relates closely to the concept of fear of crime.

## 3.7 Gaps and contributions

Despite increasing attention to safety in urban research and policy, local approaches continue to prioritise objective indicators over the perception of safety. While these measures provide valuable insights, they offer only a partial understanding of how safety is experienced in everyday urban life. Feelings of comfort, unease and vulnerability are often subjective and shaped by daily interactions with urban environments. This is particularly relevant in relation to gender, as women consistently report lower levels of perceived safety in public space, even in relatively low-crime contexts (Erkan and Topçu, 2021, p. 89; Kern, 2020).

In Utrecht, this issue is especially relevant, yet somewhat paradoxical. Although the city is generally considered safe, municipal statistics show persistent gendered differences in the way safety is experienced. At the same time, recent cases of gender-based violence in the Netherlands have renewed attention to women's safety. Dutch municipalities, however, still struggle to incorporate perceptions of safety into long term urban planning policy (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.-a).

Existing literature shows that perceived unsafety shapes how public space is used and experienced, and the way in which this influences mobility, behaviour and participation in urban life (Day, 2001; Pain, 2001; Massey, 1994; Valentine, 1989; Ceccato, 2012). While municipal initiatives, such as *Vrouwen die Schouwen*, have provided input to incorporate women's experiences in urban planning, they often yield limited and straightforward input such as cues to increase lighting and visibility. In essence, qualitative research exploring the social, spatial and emotional dimensions of perceived unsafety and the way these factors shape women's use of urban space remains limited in the Netherlands, particularly in Utrecht.

This thesis therefore addresses this gap by examining how women in Utrecht experience and interpret unsafety in public space, focusing on the interplay between spatial, social and emotional factors and how perceptions of unsafety shape women's use of urban space. By prioritizing qualitative insights, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how gendered perceptions of unsafety are shaped in the local context of Utrecht and how these perceptions affect women's use and navigation of urban space.

# 4. Theoretical framework

Building on the literature review, this study responds to the identified need for more qualitative and experience-based research on women's perceptions of (un)safety in public space, particularly within the Dutch and Utrecht context. To examine how women in Utrecht experience and interpret unsafety in public space, and how these perceptions influence their everyday navigation through the city, this study adopts a theoretical framework that conceptualises safety as a lived and socially embedded experience. This perspective is particularly relevant given the persistent gendered differences in perceived safety documented globally, nationally and in Utrecht specifically, where women report significantly higher levels of unsafety and street intimidation in public spaces (Akkermans et al., 2024; CBS Statline, n.d.; Utrecht Monitor, 2025). While existing research and monitoring data provide important insights into the prevalence of these experiences, they offer more limited understanding of how women interpret, negotiate and make sense of safety and unsafety in their everyday lives. Addressing this gap requires theoretical approaches that can account for the ways in which perceptions of safety are shaped through gendered power relations, emotional experiences and everyday interactions with urban space.

The theoretical framework integrates feminist urban theory, emotional geographies, the concept of *eyes on the street*, and the *right to the city* to examine women's perceptions of unsafety in public space from complementary perspectives. Feminist urban theory, drawing on Kern (2020), Fenster (2005) and Massey (1994), provides the primary lens for understanding how gendered power relations shape women's experiences of and access to urban space. Emotional geographies, informed by Pain (2000; 2001; 2009), Valentine (1989) and Koskela (1999), complement this perspective by exploring how feelings of safety, fear, comfort and vulnerability are experienced, interpreted and negotiated in everyday life. Jacobs' (1961) concept of eyes on the street is used to analyse how spatial characteristics such as visibility, activity and the presence of others influence perceptions of safety within different urban environments. Finally, Lefebvre's (1967) concept of the right to the city, further developed by Harvey (2013), provides a broader normative perspective through which the implications of women's experiences for urban belonging, participation and spatial justice can be interpreted. Together, these perspectives address the identified gap in the literature by enabling an analysis of perceived safety as a gendered, emotional and spatially situated experience that is shaped through everyday interactions with the urban environment.

## 4.1 Feminist urban theory and gendered public space

Feminist urban theory forms the central analytical foundation of this study. The theoretical perspective in this study combines standpoints and aspects from both foundational thinkers (Massey, 1994) and contemporary theorists (Fenster, 2005; Kern, 2020). From the perspective of the feminist urban theory, public space is not simply a physical setting but a socially produced environment in which power relations are spatially embedded and continuously reproduced (Massey, 1994; Kern, 2020). Feminist urban scholars emphasise that not only women's experiences of a city, but also the spatial design of a city is shaped by gendered power relations, which results in unequal access, limited mobility and a gap in feelings of safety and belonging, depending on an individual's gender (Fenster, 2005, p. 218-222; Hayden, 1980; Kern, 2020).

Massey's (1994, p. 179-183) relational understanding of space determines the conceptualization of space as created through social relations and power dynamics. Through Massey's (1994, p. 179) lens, public spaces are not fixed or neutral containers but rather sites of endless interaction which are the foundation for the production of meanings, norms and exclusions. This relational view is crucial for interpreting why women may experience the same street, square or park differently depending on time, social context or the presence of

others. It also contributes to explaining why women's perceived safety cannot fully be understood through spatial characteristics alone but must be analysed in relation to social practices and power relations that shape who feels the right to occupy and use a public space (Lefebvre, 1967).

Building on the conceptual foundation of Massey, Kern's (2020) work and perspective on feminist urbanism is particularly relevant for understanding how gendered power relations unfold in everyday urban life. In Feminist City, Kern (2020) argues that women navigate public space through practices of caution, self-regulation and constant awareness of their vulnerability in particular spaces. In addition, Kern (2020) reasons that these practices are not expressions of individual fearfulness but more a response that the structural conditions in which harassment, intimidation and unwanted attention are a normalised aspect of a women's public life. Kern's (2020) take on feminist urban theory thus reframes perceived safety as a structural issue with roots in the (lack of) gendered organisation and regulation of urban space. According to Kern (2020) it is essential to consider how a city is socially experienced rather than understanding perceived safety as a personal or psychological concern.

The relevance of feminist urban theory is further illustrated by its translation into urban planning practices in cities such as Umeå (Sweden) which is considered a frontrunner in the use of a gender-equal approach to urban development (Groskop, 2024). Kern (2020) argues that, historically, cities are often designed through the male eye, neglecting possible differences between gender in the way public spaces are experiences. However, since the early 2010s, Umeå has integrated gender perspectives into planning processes (Groskop, 2024). Central to this approach is the recognition that urban space is in fact experiences differently by women and man, particularly in relation to safety, accessibility and daily practices. While Umeå is not examined as an empirical case in this thesis, its gender-sensitive planning approach demonstrates that feminist critiques of gender-neutral urbanism have practical relevance in contemporary urban planning and can influence how cities conceptualise safety and everyday use of public space.

Within this thesis, feminist urban theory is used as a primary analytical lens to interpret women's narratives of unsafety. It guides the analysis of how participants describe feelings of power, discomfort, exposure or belong in public space and how these experiences reflect on more general gendered structures in cities. Rather than evaluating solely urban design, the theory is used to connect everyday experiences to structural, spatial conditions, which allows the study to interpret perceived safety as an outcome of gendered urban organisation.

## 4.2 Emotional geographies and the experience of unsafety

While feminist urban theory addresses the structural conditions under which gendered experiences of unsafety emerge, it does not on its own account for how these conditions are felt, anticipated and embodies in everyday life. Emotional geographies, in particular the work of Pain (2000; 2001; 2009) and Koskela (1999) on fear of crime and Valentine (1989) on geography of women's fear, provide a complementary analytical framework that prioritises the role of emotions in shaping spatial experiences. Pain (2001, p. 900) critiques the framing of fear as irrational or overly emotional, instead arguing that fear is a rational, socially produced response to lived conditions of structural inequality and vulnerability. Similar to Kern's (2020) argument, for women in public space, fear is not just an individual emotion, but a reflection of broader power relations embedded in urban environments (Pain, 2001, p. 910-911).

Pain's (2009, p. 467) work is central to this thesis as it legitimises emotions such as fear as meaningful sources of knowledge about how public space is experiences. From an emotional geography perspective, feelings of unsafety are not individual irregularities, but emotional responses shaped by gender, social position, past experiences and place-based meanings. Pain (2009, p. 476) defines fear as "*an emotional reaction to a perceived threat that always has social meaning, and that may have a range of positive and negative effects on social and spatial relations*". In essence this means that fear emerges through specific environments, encounters with others and atmospheres and in turn can also have effect on those spaces and encounters. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding women's everyday experiences of public space, where avoidance of certain spaces, preparation and anticipation of risks and normalised, constant awareness often shape behaviour even in the absence of actual threats. Pain argues that these adaptive strategies are rooted in real and repeated exposer to insecurity (Pain, 2001, p. 910-911).

A key contribution of emotional geography is its emphasis on the relationship between emotion and practice. Valentine (1989, p. 386-387) demonstrates that perceived unsafety has tangible consequences for the way people move through the city, influencing route choice, timing, avoidance, etc. These adaptations are not at all logistical decisions but rather emotional practices through which individuals manage their perceptions of vulnerability. In this sense, emotions actively shape the use and meaning of public space and the feeling of belonging to it, rather than functioning just as passive reactions.

Alongside the feminist urban theory, emotional geographies are used as a primary analytical framework. Rather than treating feelings of safety as purely individual or psychological, this combined approach understands emotions as shaped through everyday interactions with space, social norms and gendered power relations. It aims to guide to the interpretations of participants' language, embodied responses and descriptions of anticipation, alertness and avoidance in relations to specific urban environments.

By considering emotions as socially and spatially produced the framework creates a bridge between these spatial factors that shape a public space and the subjective, relational dimensions of perception of safety. In other words, it connects spatial factors to how safety is emotionally experienced, allowing the study to analyse perceived safety as a lived, dynamic experience that unfolds through daily encounters with spaces and people.

## 4.3 Analysing through the concept of 'Eyes on the Street'

Jacobs' (1961, p. 35) widely cited concept of 'eyes on the street' offers a foundational but contestable view of urban safety. To engage with dominant assumptions about safety in urban planning and design, the theoretical framework considers some essential aspects of the Jacobs' concept. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* Jacobs explains that lively, mixed-use public spaces with high levels of visibility and informal surveillance foster safer environments through social cohesion and natural oversight (Jacobs, 1961). For Jacobs (1961, p. 35) a safe city has three main qualities: 1) Clear division between public and private space, 2) Eyes upon the street of those who naturally belong there, and 3) the street is designed for continuous users of the sidewalks to increase the number of eyes on the street. Ever since Jacobs (1961) established this view on urban design, her ideas have remained highly influential within the field of urban design, where visibility and activity are frequently promoted as conditions for perceived safety.

In this thesis, Jacobs' (1961) concept of *eyes on the street* is used as a guiding lens for understanding how visibility, activity and social presence may influence perceptions of safety in public space. The concept provides a useful framework for examining how characteristics such as openness, mixed use, crowding and the presence of others can contribute to informal social surveillance and shape feelings of safety. At the same time, feminist and experiential research suggests that the relationship between visibility and safety is not straightforward and may vary across individuals and contexts (Kalms, 2023; Kern, 2020). For women, being seen can be experienced as reassuring in some situations, while in others it may involve unwanted

attention, judgement or harassment. Therefore, while Jacobs' perspective helps analyse the role of spatial and social activity in shaping perceptions of safety, it is interpreted alongside feminist urban theory and emotional geographies, which allow these spatial characteristics to be understood through gendered and experiential lenses. Together, these perspectives enable the study to examine when visibility and social presence contribute to feelings of safety and when they may instead generate discomfort or vulnerability.

## 4.4 The right to the city as orienting perspective

Alongside the theories that guide the empirical analysis, the framework also draws on Lefebvre's (1967) concept of the *Right to the City* [*Le Droit à la Ville*] to position the findings within broader debates on gendered urban justice and belonging. Lefebvre conceptualises the city not merely as a physical environment but a space of participation, presence and belonging (Lefebvre, 1967). By including the right in inhabit, use and experience urban space meaningfully, the right to the city goes beyond only formal access.

Harvey's interpretation further emphasises that the right to the city essentially is about the right to shape urban space and feel at home in it (Harvey, 2013, p. 5-24). From this perspective, perceived safety becomes a foundational condition for urban citizenship. In relation, Fenster (2005), who takes a gendered perspective on the right to the city, argues if individuals must constantly adapt their behaviour, restrict their movement, or avoid certain spaces in order to feel safe and at home, their right to the city is not fully realised (Harvey, 2013; Lefebvre, 1967). The right to the city will not be used as an analytical framework for interpreting data. Instead, it serves as an interpretive lens that informs the discussion of what women's everyday adaptations to perceived unsafety mean in the light of urban inclusion and justice. It allows to critically assess the normalisation of behavioural adaptation in existing research and frame such adaptations as potential indicators of reduced belonging rather than successful coping.

## 4.5 Integrating the Framework

In essence, this framework provides a coherent and focused foundation for analysing women's perceived unsafety in public space. Feminist urban theory explains how gendered power relations structure access, entitlement and belonging in the city. Emotional geographies explain how these structures are felt and embodies in everyday urban life. Jacobs' concept of eyes on the street is used to analyse through how spatial characteristics and the presence of others

influence perceptions of safety within different urban environments, while the right the city situates findings in the broader question of urban justice.

Integrating these perspectives into one framework enables the thesis to move beyond only describing where women feel unsafe and move toward understating how and why particular public spaces in Utrecht are experienced in terms of safety in everyday urban life.

# 5. Methodology

## 5.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) to explore how women in Utrecht experience and interpret unsafety in public space. The research is exploratory in nature and does not aim to test causal relationships, measure safety through objective indicators or produce statistically generalisable findings. Instead, it seeks to develop deeper understanding of perceived unsafety as a lived, relational and context-dependent experience.

A qualitative approach forms the foundation of the study, as the research question focus on experience, meaning and interpretation, rather than measurable indicators. As Bryman (2016, p. 373-406) argues, qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring how individuals make sense of their social world. In the context of perceived unsafety, this is essential, as feelings of comfort, unease and vulnerability cannot only and fully be captured through objective indicators such as (crime) statistics.

At the same time, the study incorporates a complementary quantitative component in the form of a, partially image-based survey. Within the overall design, this survey does not function as an independent or equally weighted method, but rather as a supportive and contextualising tool. It contributes to the identification of broader patterns in how different spatial environments are perceived, while the qualitative interviews provide deeper insight into how these perceptions are experienced and interpreted in everyday life.

This design can therefore be understood as an integrated mixed-methods approach, in which quantitative data is integrated within a primarily qualitative framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Bryman, 2016, 639). The combination of methods and data sources contributes to the consistency of findings, which Bryman (2016, p. 386), explains as *triangulation*. In this case it is not in the sense of validating findings, but as a way of elevating the analysis by linking patterns to lived experiences.

The study follows a primarily inductive research approach, in which patterns and themes emerge from the data (Bryman, 2016, p. 20-24). At the same time, the analysis is informed by existing theories, particularly feminist urban theory and emotional geographies, which allows for a theoretical interpretation of the findings.

## 5.2 Research philosophy

### 5.2.1 Ontological positioning

This study is grounded in a social constructionist ontology. According to Bryman (2016, p. 29, 625, 689), from a constructionist perspective, social reality is created and maintained though human perception and interaction and context-dependent, rather than fixed or objectively given. In this study, this means the concept of safety is not treated as an objective condition that exists independently of individuals, but as something that is shaped through social processes and given meaning in everyday interactions with space and others. In addition, women's perceptions of safety are therefore also understood as emerging through their interactions with urban environments, their interactions with others and broader gendered power relations.

### 5.2.2 Epistemological positioning

Complementing this social constructionist ontology, the study adopts an interpretivist epistemology. Bryman (2016, p. 26-27) explains that interpretivism emphasises the importance of understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their social world. Rather than seeking objective explanations, it focuses on the meanings people attach to their experiences (Bryman, 2016, p. 26-27). This is particularly relevant for this study, as perceptions of safety are inherently subjective and shaped by personal experiences, emotions and situational contexts. An interpretivist approach therefore allows for an in-depth exploration of how women experience, interpret and navigate unsafety in their everyday urban lives.

This philosophical positioning aligns closely with the study's theoretical framework. Massey's (1994) and Kern's (2020) *feminist urban theory* and Pain's (2000; 2001; 2009) and Koskela's (1999) *emotional geographies* both emphasise that urban space is not neutral, but shaped by gendered power relations, social norms and embodied experiences. Women's feelings of discomfort, alertness or avoidance are therefore treated as valid and meaningful forms of knowledge, rather than subjective misinterpretation of an objective reality.

As Wengraf (2001, p. 2-15) argues, qualitative research requires theoretical awareness and careful structuring to ensure that data collection remains both meaningful and systematic. In essence, the constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, together, make a solid philosophical foundation for this thesis to accommodate continuous reflection and structure throughout the research process and ensure meaning (Bryman, 2016, p. 388).

## 5.3 Data collection

The data collection consists of semi-structured interviews complemented by an image-based survey. Interviews form the central method, as they provide access to participants' own perceptions, interpretations and lived experiences of unsafety in public space. As discussed by Seidman (2013, 14-22) and Bryman (2016, 466-469) qualitative interviews are particularly valuable when the aim is to understand how individuals make sense of their social environment. The image-based survey serves as a complementary method, providing contextual insight into patterns of perceived unsafety across different spatial situations. By combining these methods, the study captures both the depth of individual experiences and recurring patterns in how public space is perceived, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of unsafety.

### 5.3.1 Qualitative data collection: Semi-structured interviews

As highlighted, the qualitative component of the study seeks to capture the depth of individual experiences in how public space is perceived, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of unsafety. Therefore, semi-structured interviews form the core method of this study. This method is particularly suitable for exploring lived experience, as it allows participants to describe their perceptions, emotions and everyday practices in their own words (Smyth et al., 2025, p. 219-235). As Seidman (2013, p. 13-22) highlights, qualitative interviews are a key tool for understanding how individuals experience and interpret their lives.

The interviews took place in April and May 2026 and followed a semi-structured format, to ensure both consistency in all interviews and individual flexibility per interview. Seidman's (2013, p. 7-13) principles for qualitative research interviews and Bryman's (2016, p. 460-471) approach on developing an interview guide were the foundation for the interview guide for this study. As suggested by Seidman (2013, p. 7-13), the interview guide is designed to not just collect factual information but get deep insights into a participant's experience and perception. The specific interview guide for the semi-structured interviews in Appendix C ensured that key themes (e.g. experiences of safety, spatial, social and emotional factors and behavioural

adaptations) were addressed across all interviews. The semi-structured nature of the interviews left space for participants to elaborate on issues that are meaningful to them on the one hand and space for the interviewer to be flexible in responding to the participant on the other hand (Bryman, 2016, p. 468-469).

In line with Wengraf (2001), the interviews were carefully structured to balance openness with analytical focus. Each interview started with a creative *dream city exercise*, in which participants are invited to design and describe an imaginary city in which they would always feel safe. This encourages a participant's open reflection on perceived unsafety in urban environments without any influences or existing constraints.

The interview then focused on participants' everyday experiences in Utrecht, including moments of unsafety, perceptions of specific places, the spatial and social layout of these places and the ways in which the participant's perceptions of safety influence their behaviour. This design of the interview allowed to get a deeper understanding of how perceived unsafety is constructed in practice.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants either digitally (via Zoom) or in-person, depending on the participant's preference and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The Dutch language was used as working language in interviews to ensure participants feel comfortable. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed literally, assigning pseudonyms to all participants and leaving out any other personal information. Transcripts were translated into English before starting the analysis to ensure compatibility and comparability with established concepts and theories from earlier sections. From a constructionist perspective and in line with Bryman (2016, p. 29), interviews were understood as co-constructed interaction, in which meaning emerges through interaction between researcher and participant.

### 5.3.2 Quantitative data collection: Image-based survey

As highlighted, the quantitative component of this study seeks to find patterns in how public space is perceived in Utrecht, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of unsafety. The study, therefore, incorporates an image-based online survey, found in Appendix D, as a complementary method to the semi-structured interviews. Within the research design, the survey serves three functions. First, it identifies patterns in perceived unsafety across spatial situations. Second, it provides descriptive statistical insights into how these perceptions are distributed across participants. Third, it supports the selection of interview participants,

allowing for the inclusion of diverse perspectives. A combination of closed- and open-ended questions also enables the survey to generate data for descriptive statistics on the one hand and qualitative data on the other hand, of which the latter is thematically analysed alongside the interview data.

The survey was distributed among women who work, study or live in Utrecht, or regularly use the city's public spaces. The survey instrument was formatted in Google Forms and has Dutch as working language, to ensure respondents feel comfortable.

The survey starts with various (demographical) background questions. Thereafter, in the core of the survey participants are presented with images of different public spaces accompanied by short situational descriptions. By presenting participants environments they might recognise, abstract perceptions of safety can more easily be connected to spatial contexts. In the close ended-questions after each picture the participants are asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale (very unsafe, unsafe, neutral/unsure, safe, very safe) how safe they would feel in each situation. In addition, the open-ended questions after each picture allow the participant to elaborate on their perspectives in a few key words.

The images used in the survey are taken by the researcher, which introduces an important methodological consideration. The selection and framing of images inevitably influence how participants interpret and evaluate the scenarios in the survey. To address this, the images were created with the aim of representing a diverse range of urban environments. This means they vary not only in spatial characteristics such as lighting, visibility, enclosure, presence of others and maintenance, but also in timing (e.g. daylight, darkness). These characteristics were informed by previous literature on perceived safety and urban environments (Boomsma & Steg, 2014; Boyce, 2019; Ceccato, 2012; Cozens & Love, 2015; Cozens & Sun, 2019; Day, 2001; Kern, 2020; Van Rijswijk & Haans, 2018).

Even with the efforts to take and use objective pictures, it is recognised that the selection of images remains subjective and shaped by the researcher's perspective. While efforts were made to systematically vary spatial conditions, the images cannot be considered as completely neutral representations. Instead, they function as stimuli that guide participants' interpretations. This limitation is acknowledged and taken into account during the analysis of the data.

Before analysing the survey responses, the data was transferred to a structured excel document, where all questions and answers will be translated into English, to ensure compatibility and comparability with established concepts and theories from earlier sections.

## 5.4 Sampling and participants

As highlighted this study focuses on women who work, study or live in Utrecht and thus make frequent use of the city's public spaces. The goal of study is not to achieve statistical representativeness. Therefore, rather than limiting the research to a specific age category, the study seeks to capture a broader range of everyday urban experiences across different life stages. Women who work, study and live in Utrecht or travel through Utrecht on a regular basis are particularly relevant to the research, as their repeated interaction with streets, squares, parks and transport areas provide insights into how perceived unsafety develops over time and through different routines. By including women with different daily patters and responsibilities, the study seeks to explore how safety is experiences in diverse urban situations such as commuting, leisure or evening activities.

### 5.4.1 Quantitative sampling strategy

For the survey, participants are recruited through a combination of open distribution and snowball sampling to reach the desired target group (Bryman, 2016, p. 188, 415-416). The survey was initially distributed via social media platforms (e.g. LinkedIn), the network of the partner organisation (the Municipality of Utrecht), online Dutch survey-respondent groups and personal networks. This initial distribution aimed to reach individuals who could further share the survey within their own networks, thereby facilitating access to participants who met the study's criteria.

This approach attempts to reach a diverse group of women with different experiences of public space in Utrecht. The sample size for the survey was 58 respondents, which yield sufficient data to identify patterns while remaining manageable within the research period. It is important to note that open-ended survey questions produce qualitative data rather than quantitative data and will therefore be analysed using qualitative methods. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the survey intended to provide a broader contextual understanding of perceived unsafety and to identify patterns that can be explored in more depth through interviews.

### 5.4.2 Qualitative sampling strategy

For the interviews, participants were selected using a non-random generic purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2016, p. 410-414). In this sampling methods, rather than selecting for

statistical representativeness, participants are selected based on their relevance to the research- and sub-questions, which for this study means the participant must be a woman of 18 years or older and work, study or live in Utrecht, or regularly use public spaces in Utrecht, to ensure their relation to the city. Recruitment of participants takes place partly through the survey, where participants can indicate their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview and leave their personal contact details for initial contact. This allows for the inclusion of participants with varied perceptions and experiences of safety.

11 interviews with women who live(d), study or work in Utrecht provided data for sufficient depth while remaining feasible within the limited scope of the study. Particular attention was given to variation in participants' daily routines and relationships to the city (e.g. residents, students, commuters), in order to capture different perspectives on perceived unsafety.

## 5.5 Data analysis

The data analysis combines descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis. Survey data are analysed using basic descriptive statistics to identify trends in perceived unsafety and in frequently mentioned spatial or social characteristics. Responses on open-ended questions and the full interview transcripts are analysed thematically. The data analysis draws on methodological insights from Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 77- 81) systemic six-step model and Bryman's (2016, p. 570-599). Through systematic coding, patterns related to spatial features, emotional responses, social interactions and behaviour adaptation are identified and then interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework.

### 5.5.1 Descriptive statistics

The structured survey responses are analysed in a descriptive way, showing the patterns and trends rather than performing detailed statistical tests (Bryman, 2016). Informed by Bryman (2016), this method is used since the sample size is too small for detailed statistical tests data and the data is seen as complementary to the qualitative data. The analysis provides an overview of key findings and patterns in perceived unsafety, such as the types of environments that are more frequently associated with feelings of safety or unsafety and how these may perceptions vary across different scenarios.

The survey results were initially analysed independently and later thematically alongside the qualitative themes to identify potential similarities or differences. This overlap aims to add contextual depth to the overall analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data together.

The purpose of this analysis is not to produce statistically generalisable findings, but to identify recurring patterns and contrasts in participants' responses. These patterns serve as a contextual foundation for the qualitative analysis and help to highlight which spatial characteristics or situations appear as most significant across the dataset.

### 5.5.2 Thematic analysis

The primary analytical approach of this study is a thematic analysis, guided by methodological insights from Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 77- 81) systemic six-step model and Bryman's (2016, p. 570-599). An inductive or data-driven thematic analysis is well suited to explore how participants make sense of their experiences, as it enables the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative data (Bryman, 2016; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p.81). The analysis draws separately on interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses, allowing for an interpretation of qualitative insights across methods.

The analytical process involves a structured yet flexible process from familiarisation with the data. Initial, open coding focuses on all specific elements relevant to the research- and sub-questions that emerge from the data, including spatial characteristics (e.g. lighting, visibility and layout), social dynamics (e.g. perceived risk and the presence and behaviour of others), emotional responses (e.g. fear, discomfort or ease) and behavioural adaptations (e.g. avoidance or route changes). Transcripts are coded inductively, meaning many specific codes arise from what is found in the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman 2016, p. 23, 581-584).

Subsequently, these codes are then examined for patterns and grouped into broader themes, which are continuously reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflect the dataset (Bryman 2016, p. 23, 581-584). Specific attention is given to how these themes relate to the study's analytical focus on spatial, social and emotional dimensions of perceived unsafety and to women's behavioural adaptations. To show the structure in the analysis and the division of categories and themes, the codebook in Appendix A was developed.

While the analysis is primarily inductive, it is also theoretically informed. Top-level codes present similar categories and topics as the study's theoretical framework. Furthermore, after the qualitative data has been analysed thematically, the resulting themes are interpreted in relation to key concepts from feminist urban theory (Massey, 1994; Kern, 2020), emotional geographies (Pain, 2000; 2001; 2009) and concept of *eyes on the street* (Jacobs, 1961) and *the right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1967). This theoretical lens gives space to make connections

between individual experiences and broader gendered and spatial dynamics. Through this approach, the analysis moves beyond description to provide a deeper understanding of how women experience, interpret and navigate unsafety in public space.

To ensure analytical rigor, the analysis is conducted systematically, transparently and well-justified. The mixed-methods design allows for a form of triangulation by combining qualitative and quantitative data, to be able to interpret the identified patterns from the quantitative data in relation to participants' lived experiences (Bryman, 2016, p. 386; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Miles et al. (2013) argues how qualitative data allows a researcher to provide *thick descriptions*. For this study it means that qualitative data, and thus thick descriptions, is used to be able to provide detailed contextual insight into participants' experiences. These detailed insights allow for a nuanced understanding of the data. Analytical rigor is further supported by the transparent documentation of analytical decisions, including coding processes, theme development and ongoing reflections during analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

## 5.6 Validity and reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are understood in terms of credibility, transparency and coherence, rather than statistical accuracy or replicability (Bryman, 2016, p. 383-386). This study adopts this perspective, focusing on whether the research design and methods provide a meaningful and well-founded understanding of women's lived experiences of unsafety in public space.

### 5.6.1 Validity

In context of this qualitative-dominated mixed-method study, validity refers to the extent to which the methods capture the studied phenomenon and the degree to which findings can be generalized across settings (Bryman, 2016, p. 383-384). In addition, validity relates to whether the research actually studies what it claims to study. In this research, this is supported through the alignment between the research question, data collection methods and analysis. The interview questions, image-based survey and thematic analysis are all centred around women's experiences of unsafety, the spatial, social and emotional factors influencing these experiences, and the ways in which perceived unsafety influences everyday navigation in public space.

Given the focus on perceived unsafety as a lived and interpretive experience, validity in this case is concerned with providing a rich and contextually supported representation of participants' perspectives. Generalisability in this study is limited, as the aim is not statistical generalisation but to provide context-specific insights into women's lived experiences of unsafety in public space in Utrecht.

Several aspects of the research design support this. The image-based survey links perceptions to concrete spatial situations, which allows participants to respond to recognisable environments. The semi-structured interviews provide depth, which is necessary for the exploration of meanings, emotions and everyday experiences. Together, these methods offer both range and depth.

At the same time, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Participants' responses are based on perception and interpretations of images, which might differ from real-time experiences. In addition, interpretations of images may vary between participants. However, this difference highlights the diversity of experiences. Here again, the goal is not to find one truth, but to understand the interpretation differences between individuals. These challenges are fundamental to research on perception and can only be addressed through careful interpretation and continuous reflexivity throughout the full process.

### 5.6.2 Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency and transparency of the research process (Bryman, 2016, p. 383-384). While full replicability is not the goal, it is important that the process is clearly structured and documented.

In this study, reliability is supported through the use of a standardised survey structure and a semi-structured interview guide, ensuring comparability while still leaving space for flexibility. In addition, the analysis is conducted systematically using thematic analysis applying Braun & Clarke's (2006, p. p. 77- 81) six-step model and Bryman's (2016) guidelines. All coding decisions and theme developments are documented throughout and shown in the codebook in Appendix A. This transparent and consistent approach enhances the overall credibility and traceability of the findings.

Despite these measures, it is important to recognise that qualitative research involves interpretation. Variations in interview dynamics, participant responses and the researcher's interpretive lens may influence the findings. Rather than being a limitation, this is

acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of qualitative research and is addressed through continuous reflexivity.

## 5.7 Researchers positionality

As a researcher, my position influences the research process, from data collection to interpretation. In line with a constructionist ontology, knowledge is understood as produced though human interaction, meaning that the researcher is not a neutral observer but an active participant in the research process.

Having lived in Utrecht for several years, I am familiar with the city's spatial layout and environments. This familiarity allows me to better understand the specific places and situations participants refer to, as well as the meanings and emotions they attach to them. It also facilitates communication during interviews, as participants can describe locations and experiences without needing extensive explanation.

Though, this proximity to the research context introduces a risk of bias. My own experiences and perceptions of safety may shape how I interpret participants' explanations or which aspects I consider significant. Rather than attempting to eliminate this influence, it is acknowledged as part of the research process.

In the context of a sensitive topic such as perceived unsafety, this positionality can also be considered a strength. Shared familiarity with the city and, in some cases, similar experiences of navigating public space as a woman, can create a sense of mutual understanding. This may encourage participants to speak more openly about their experiences and contribute to a more in-depth and nuanced dataset.

At the same time, it remains important to remain attentive to differences in experiences and perspectives. Participants' perceptions of safety are shaped by a range of factors, and it is essential not to assume shared or similar interpretations. Consequently, a reflexive and critical approach was applied during data analysis by questioning assumptions, considering alternative interpretations and revisiting earlier coding decisions to limit bias (Bryman, 2016). Reflexivity is practiced throughout all parts of the research process, involving continuous reflection on how my background, assumptions and interactions influence the production and interpretation of knowledge.

## 5.8 Ethical considerations

This research explores a sensitive and emotionally charged subject: women's perceptions of unsafety in public spaces. Ethical considerations are thus not just procedural but implemented in every stage of the research process. The study followed national, and European Union-level ethical frameworks, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the European Commission's guidelines for research ethics in social sciences and humanities (European Commission, 2021; KNAW et al. 2018). Moreover, ethical awareness is particularly important in this study because it involves women discussing experiences that may relate to fear and discomfort, topics that are emotionally sensitive and are sometimes shaped by structural gender inequalities. While women are not legally classified as a vulnerable group, they are frequently positioned as such in safety-related research due to the psychological and social impact of harassment and gendered spatial dynamics (Kern, 2020). In line with Fujii's (2012) emphasis, this study treats ethical responsibility as a continuous engagement rather than a checklist item, requiring sensitivity, reflexivity, and care throughout the research process.

### 5.8.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

Participants of the study received detailed, comprehensible information about the study's purpose, methods and intended use. Informed consent will be secured through digital consent forms for online surveys and verbal consent for interviews. This process will include the right to withdraw at any time without consequence and the option to skip questions. Consent will not be treated as a static or purely procedural act but as an ongoing ethical discussion. In relation, even though, the GDPR default age for independent consent for online services is set at 16, the minimum age to participate in this study is set at 18, due to the sensitive nature of the study (European Commission, 2021).

Fujii (2012) warns against assuming participants always feel free to say no. Therefore, efforts will be made to limit imbalanced in authority and emphasize the voluntary nature of participation at every stage. Interviewees will be selected from those who explicitly indicate their willingness to participate in the survey, ensuring an added layer of consent. Feminist research ethics will guide these interactions, prioritizing safety and autonomy of the female participants (Smyth et al., 2025).

### 5.8.2 Anonymity, confidentiality and data protection

In accordance with GDPR and institutional standards, all personal data will be handled with strict confidentiality (European Commission, 2021). A respondent's personal contact information is only collected in the survey if the respondent is willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Answering this question is completely voluntary and answers to this question are stored separately from the survey responses to ensure anonymity of the respondent. In addition, as Miles et al. (2013) propose, interviews transcripts and the analysis will use pseudonyms for every participant, any references that risk direct or indirect identification of participant will be generalized or removed. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on password-protected devices and university-approved platforms, accessible only to the researcher (Miles et al., 2013).

### 5.8.3 Emotional sensitivity and participant wellbeing

Since the topic touches on potential experiences of fear, inequality and harassment, interviews will be conducted with sensitivity to emotional well-being. Participants will be reminded that they need not reveal anything uncomfortable and can pause or stop the session at any time. Should distress arise, the participant will be cared for off-record and will be assisted in further actions. This practice reflects the European Commission's emphasis on *do no harm* and Fujii's insistence that ethical research involves caring for participants as individuals with complex lives, not merely as data sources (European Commission, 2021; Fujii, 2012).

### 5.8.4 Responsible conduct

Following Fujii (2012), ethical conduct will include ongoing reflection on the researcher's positionality and the power dynamics inherent in the research relationship. In case participants misinterpret the researcher's role or has false expectations, these expectations will be managed transparently. In this spirit, the researcher accepts responsibility for the ethical weight of representation, interpretation and distribution of collected data. The research aims to respect the dignity, autonomy and safety of all participants by being mindful of ethical considerations throughout the design, data collection and publication processes, while avoiding common ethical mistakes.

# 6. Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the study and examines how women in Utrecht experience and interpret safety and unsafety in public space in their everyday urban lives. Drawing on data from both 58 image-based survey respondents and 11 semi-structured interviews, the analysis explores the spatial, social and emotional factors that shape these perceptions. The findings are analysed through the theoretical lenses of *feminist urban theory* (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994) and *emotional geographies* (Pain 2000; 2001, 2009), which describe safety not simply as an objective condition, but as a lived, relational and gendered experience. In addition, Jacobs' (1961, p. 35) concept of *eyes on the street* is used to analyse the role of visibility, activity and social presence in shaping perceived safety. Lefebvre's (1967) concept of the *right to the city* helps interpret how behavioural adaptations and restricted mobility influence women's sense of freedom, belonging and participation in urban space.

## 6.1 Perceptions of safety in Utrecht

### 6.1.1 Relatively safe yet conditional

Similar as noted in the municipal safety survey, across both the survey and interview data, Utrecht was generally described as a relatively safe city, particularly when compared to larger cities or international urban environments (Akkermans et al., 2024; Utrecht Monitor, 2025). Participants mention: "*I experience Utrecht overall as a very pleasant* city "(I5) [1], "*I experience Utrecht as safe, actually*" (I11), and *"[I]n Utrecht I almost never feel unsafe*" [2](I3). Many participants emphasised that they often feel comfortable moving through the city during daytime and in familiar or socially active areas (I3; I5; I10; I11). However, participants discuss that feelings of safety were not experienced constantly. Instead, participants framed safety as conditional and dependent on factors such as time of day, familiarity with the environment, social presence and the spatial characteristics of a place. This suggests that the perception of Utrecht as a 'safe city' does not necessarily translate into an equal and uniform experience of safety for ever woman, reflecting a similar pattern as the results from annual safety survey's (Akkermans et al., 2024; Utrecht Monitor, 2025).

[1] Quotes from interviews are referenced as I[number]. Quotes from open ended survey questions are references as R[number].

[2] Full record of original quotes and their translation to English can be found in Appendix B

Several interview participants explicitly started describing Utrecht as generally safe but then continued discussing situations in which their feelings of safety quickly changed. For example, one participant explained:

> *"I actually feel quite safe in Utrecht. Because I often take the routes that I know. So, I know that those are usually busy places. Where many people are always cycling through. So that you are never really alone there." (I2)*

This quote illustrates how the participant unconsciously connects feelings of safety to familiarity, predictability and the presence of other people rather than to the city itself as an objectively safe environment. Similar patterns were found in the survey findings, where respondents repeatedly described residential streets, busy cycling routes and active urban environments as safer because they combined visibility, familiarity and social presence.

At the same time, participants frequently described how the same place in Utrecht could be perceived differently depending on context. Time of day emerged as one of the strongest factors influencing perceived safety. Spaces that felt "*fine*" (R49) or "*normal*" (R50) during daytime were often avoided at night due to darkness, reduced visibility and fewer people present. Survey respondents repeatedly distinguished between feelings of comfort at daytime and avoidance at night-time, particularly in relation to parks, tunnels, canal paths and station environments (R21; R28; R29; R54). These findings therefore indicate that safety is not experienced as a fixed characteristic of urban space, but as relational and situational.

This conditional nature of safety was also strongly connected to social presence. Participants generally felt safer in places where other people were nearby and where help or intervention seemed possible (I3; I4; I9; I10) However, the findings demonstrate that safety was not simply linked to the number of people present, but in particular to the informal social control that comes with the presence of others. As one participant explained:

> *"Yes, I think the city centre […] because there are also many cafés there, residential houses […]. I have the idea that you are never really alone there. And if something would happen, that there would indeed be people who hear you or who are quickly there." (I2)*

This reflects broader patterns throughout the data in which socially active and mixed-use environments in Utrecht, such as the city centre, Utrecht central station and neighbourhoods with transportation and shop facilities, were often associated with feelings of safety because they increased the possibility of informal social control. The importance of being seen, heard or helped by others was highlighted in both the interviews and survey responses. In this sense,

participants' experiences partly align with Jacobs' (1961) concept of *eyes on the street*, which also suggests that lively, mixed-use public spaces with high levels of visibility and informal surveillance foster safer environments through social cohesion and natural oversight.

The findings furthermore demonstrate that women's perceptions of safety in Utrecht were shaped by continuously negotiating and interpreting situations and urban environments. Participants often described to actively evaluate spaces in terms of predictability, atmosphere and possible vulnerability to increase their sense of control, and therefore also their feeling of safety (I5, I9, I11). This evaluation of the space included assessing lighting, openness, escape possibilities and the behaviour of others. Consequently, even within a city that was generally perceived as safe, women still described constant alertness and adaptation in their everyday mobility. This supports Valentine's (1989, p. 388-390) argument that perceptions of safety are deeply relational and emotionally negotiated rather than solely determined by objective indicators such as crime statistics.

### 6.1.2 Gendered experiences

Across both the interviews and survey findings, experiences of safety and unsafety were strongly connected to gender. Interview participants repeatedly described how their perceptions of public space were shaped by the presence of men, harassment and the fear of sexual violence. While participants often acknowledged that not all men pose a threat, men nevertheless were repeatedly mentioned in relation to perceived source of discomfort, alertness and fear throughout the data (I4; I5; I7; I11). This reflects feminist urban theory's argument that public space is not experienced equally but is shaped by broader gendered power relations and unequal experiences of vulnerability and belonging (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994).

The gendered nature of perceived safety became in first instance visible during the dream city exercise at the start of the interviews. Several participants immediately referred to men when describing a city in which they would feel fully safe, saying for example:

> *"Short answer: without men." (I7), "What also actually immediately came to mind was no men." (I8), "No men […] that might be nice in some way." (I9), and "No men." (I11).*

Although often expressed somewhat jokingly, these responses do reflect some deeper frustrations and experiences of how women navigate public space daily. In relation, participants repeatedly explained that fear in public space was not random but closely tied to

previous experiences and their awareness of violence against women. About knowledge of cases of rape or harassment in Utrecht, one participant said for instance:

> *"I would rather not know. Because it does not go wrong every time you are afraid. […] we are also often afraid more often than necessary." (I1)*

Another participant explicitly linked her fear to statistics about gender in relation to harassment and violence on the street:

> *"I think because of course the statistics also don't lie. That violence against women on the street often just happens by a man. So, then it is also a bit realistic." (I7)*

This shows how perceptions of safety and fear were not only shaped by direct experiences, but also by media influence, other women's experiences and general social understandings of gender-based violence. Participants therefore often described fear as rational rather than irrational and exaggerated, which aligns with Pain's (2001) argument that women's fear in public space reflects structural inequalities rather than just individual insecurity.

At the same time, the findings reveal important contradictions in how men were discussed. Men were frequently associated with unpredictability and danger, particularly at night or in isolated spaces. Yet participants sometimes also described men as sources of protection. One participant explained how she would intentionally cycle close behind a man or trustworthy-looking group when travelling home alone:

> *"I also did that often, when I cycled home and I saw a group ahead of me that looked trustworthy or a man who looked trustworthy, then I would just cycle very close behind them and try to follow that person as long as possible until I really had to go another direction." (I1)*

It shows how fear was not simply attached to 'other people' or men in general, but heavily depended on who the others where, what their behaviour was like and how participants perceived this. Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly emphasised that safety depended not only on the presence of others, but on whether those people appeared predictable, familiar or "*out of place*" (I3).

The survey findings strongly reinforced the patterns that safety is not solely spatial. Respondents referred to "*groups of men*" (R12; R13; R24), "*young men*" (R19; R39), "*drunk men*" (R47), and "*nuisance-causing groups*" (R4) as important triggers of discomfort and increased alertness, especially during the evening and night. In relation, crowdedness on itself was experienced in contradicting ways. Busy places could feel reassuring because help or

intervention seemed possible (I3; I4; I9; I10), but they could simultaneously feel unsafe when dominated by intoxication, unpredictability or groups perceived as threatening (I5; I7).
Another important finding throughout the data was the normalization of fear and behavioural adaptation among women. Participants frequently described safety routines and alertness as normal, unconscious parts of everyday life rather than exceptional behaviour. As a response to the question if they ever adapt their behaviour on how safe she feels, participants stated:

> *"Yes, one hundred percent [100%]. Both consciously and unconsciously, I think. […] I consciously look around me much more. And especially in the evening I very often call people when I have to move from A to B." (I1), "Taking another route for sure." (I10), and "[D]efinitely walking faster […] or taking my earphones out sometimes if I already feel unsafe." (I8)*

Another participant stated the following about behavioural adaptations:

> *"I think you no longer consciously think about it […] because […] you have been doing it this way for years." (I2)*

The fact that these behaviours were often described as automatic or habitual demonstrates how deeply they are embedded in women's everyday lives. Participants frequently contrasted this with their perception that men are generally less aware of safety concerns in public space (I4; I5; I9). This further illustrates how public space is experienced differently depending on gender and how women often carry an additional emotional load while moving through the city.

## 6.2 Spatial factors influencing perceived unsafety

### 6.2.1 Reassurance and exposure due to visibility, openness and overview

Across both the interviews and survey responses, visibility, openness and spatial overview were mentioned as some of the most important factors shaping women's perceptions of safety in public space. Also, in line with previous research, participants consistently described feeling safer in environments where they could clearly see and evaluate their surroundings, recognise approaching people and maintain a sense of orientation and control (Boyce, 2019; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025, p. 6). Open streets, wide pathways and clear sightlines were repeatedly associated with predictability and reassurance. One participant explained the importance of openness and visibility as follows:

> *"[T]he feeling of spaciousness, that you have in front of you, left, right, next to you, the idea, it sounds strange, but maybe that you have many possibilities to move away, so you can see people coming, you notice when people pass you." (I1)*

This quote demonstrates that visibility was not only valued because it allowed the participant to physically see their environment, but also because it created feelings of preparedness and control

However, as Kern (2020) also argues, the positive connection to visibility, openness and clear sightlines is not necessarily universal and still context dependent. One participant mentioned for instance:

> *"[B]ecause I live on such a very long straight road. Then I sometimes have the feeling, if someone is also walking fifty meters behind me now, he just sees me go inside there." (I8)*

Her response on the question how the street design could change in favour of her feeling of safety she said:

> *"A few more little bends or something, yes, or interruptions or something in the street […] that you can kind of slalom through it. That not someone from the straight line can just see where I then walk." (I8)*

These quotes show that, for this particular participant, visibility can also create vulnerability, open sightlines may increase the feeling of being visible to people with harmful intentions. However, this negative association with visibility mainly emerged in situations related to spaces close to her home or scenarios in which someone could intrude into her personal space. In this sense, the findings suggest that visibility works two directions. On the one hand, being able to see and anticipate surroundings increases the feeling of safety and control. On the other hand, the possibility of being watched or followed can simultaneously decreases one's sense of safety.

Though, the majority of the participants explain that enclosed or visually obstructed environments often actually increased uncertainty and emotional discomfort. A participant mentioned:

> *"With a narrower street, if someone is in that street, then it's always just a bit less chill, I experience myself. I prefer that you can just walk around it. Or that you can at least clearly see what is going on. And you have some of those roads where there are always a lot of bushes. […] anything and everything could be in there." (I6)*

Not being able to "*see what is going on*" (I6) increased uncertainty and could reduce the participant's ability to anticipate situations and respond if necessary. Other participants also described overview and openness as essential for understanding what is happening around them and assessing whether a space feels predictable or safe. This corresponds to Boyce's (2019) argument that lightning and visibility contributes to individual's ability to identify facial expressions and body language of others, which increases their feeling of safety.

Survey findings strongly complement these observations. Respondents consistently preferred environments that were "*open*" (R5; R21; R33: R40; R46;), "*spacious"* (R34; R55) and had good "*visibility*" (R32; R37; R47). Wide streets, clear sightlines and unobstructed routes were associated with feelings of comfort. Tunnels, alleys, dense vegetation and narrow passages often created feelings of unsafety because they reduced visibility and limited overview of the environment. The ability of an individual to maintain visual control over their surroundings therefore appeared to be central to perceived safety.

Important to note, participants often connected visibility to predictability. Several participants described safety as strongly dependent on recognisability and understanding why people were present in a space. As reflected in this quote as a response to the question to design a dream city:

> *"[T]he fewer potential danger spots there are, like dark corners where someone can hide, the less I have to pay attention to it and the more I can see in one glance what is happening. Because I will still stay alert, even if there are escape routes and no dark corners. But then I do not have the feeling that I need to get through as quickly as possible because there is a dark corner and maybe someone is there." (I9)*

This idea of spatial readability repeatedly arose throughout the data. Participants often described discomfort in environments where visual barriers, hidden corners or unclear social situations reduced their ability to anticipate interactions or judge other people's intentions (I1; I7; I8).

Alongside visibility and openness, lighting is an important factor that contributes to the interpretability of the environment. Both interview participants and survey respondent frequently mention the importance of lighting in their ability to interpret their surroundings, and therefor also in their perception of safety. In relation to previous research that argues the quality of lightning is just as important as the quantity, interview participants described how different types of lighting can shape different atmospheres and emotional experiences in a place

(Boomsma and Steg, 2014; Johansson et al., 2011; van Rijswijk and Haans, 2018). One participant explained:

> *"I think that the type of light is really very important for me. Whether it is a bit like yellow light for example and that it is kind of nice light or cozy is maybe the right word. I feel much more comfortable with that than for example those green lampposts or those little bridges with those green lights. […] And white, fluorescent light I also find terrible, I do not like that at all. What exactly the difference is between those I cannot really say because it is of course all light and in both cases you can in principle see what you need to see, but it is more about the atmosphere it gives off I think." (I1)*

This quote shows that warm lighting was associated with comfort and a positive atmosphere. Even though harsh or fluorescent lighting provide just as much visibility, it was perceived as less comforting and as cold atmosphere of the place.

### 6.2.2 Isolation, enclosure and limited escape possibilities increase vulnerability

While openness and overview were generally associated with safety, environments characterised by isolation, enclosure and limited escape possibilities were repeatedly described as unsafe and uncomfortable. Across both the interviews and survey findings, participants frequently associated tunnels, underpasses, isolated cycling routes, parks and canal paths with feelings of vulnerability. Enclosed spaces often reduce an individual's opportunities for visibility, help of others and free movement, which, as discussed in the previous section, are important aspects in feelings of safety. The possibility of becoming trapped or unable to escape emerged as a particularly important dimension of perceived unsafety.

To illustrate, R23 explains she feels unsafe in "*places where I have heard women have been harassed under a bridge, in a forest, a long deserted road*", R47 mentions that at night she *consciously choosing routes with fewer isolated areas",* R48 feels unsafe in a place because "*it is sheltered and you do not really have an escape if something happens*", and an interview participant describes her dream city as one where *"you don't have a lot of alleys or something like that. Or tunnels or those kinds of things"* (I10).

Survey respondents repeatedly described enclosed spaces such as tunnels and narrow passages as "*grim*" (R29; R42; R48; R49), "*claustrophobic*" (R8), "*cramped*" (R25), "*trapped feeling*" (R1) or uncomfortable, especially during the evening or night. These spaces often combined multiple factors that accumulated and contributed to feelings of unsafety, including darkness,

limited visibility, isolation, little to none escape possibilities and uncertainty about who they might encounter in the place. Both survey respondents and interview participants frequently imagined situations in which something could happen without others noticing or being able to intervene.

When talking about places where participant felt unsafe in Utrecht, one participant said the following:

> *"If I cycle from my place to Lunetten, […] there is a little bridge along the water. Without lighting. Then I really think, if I get pulled off my bike somewhere, it would be here. There is also no street lighting. There are no other people." (I3)*

The importance of escape possibilities came up throughout the interviews as well. Participants repeatedly emphasised that feeling safe was also connected to the ability to leave, change direction or quickly distance themselves from a situation if necessary. One participant described this directly when explaining why biking home in the evening to a town near Utrecht felt unsafe to her:

> *"Because the bike path is poorly lit. Next to the bike path there is just a kind of meadow or something. So, there aren't really people. And there is only a kind of highway next to it. So, you also can't quickly wave at a car. It's just one very long road. So, you also can't really quickly take another road." (I10)*

In relation to this quote and other interview insights it was highlighted that isolated cycling paths and water-side routes, are particular places in which feelings of being trapped and isolation increased. As a response to Figure 1, survey respondents also described they were hesitant about walking alongside water or through routes with limited exits because these environments restricted movement and escape possibilities (R12; R32; R42; R48). Some respondents specifically preferred walking on nearby roads rather than along isolated canal paths because roads felt more socially visible and easier to leave if necessary (R9; R24; R26; R33; R35). Similar concerns appeared in data of both the interviews and the survey in relation to tunnels, forest areas and quiet parks, where participants described discomfort caused by enclosure, lack of escape possibilities and the extent to which a place facilitates for presence of others.

*Figure 1: Path alongside canal, shown in survey*

In addition, survey respondents said the following about the enclosed construction passage in Figure 2 that was shown to them: "*Very enclosed, nowhere to go if something goes wrong" (R12), "You can only go two ways if you are harassed" (R14), "Very narrow, easy to get cornered" (R17), "Hidden from others and only one way to go" (R18), "It is an unpleasant idea that if something happens, you cannot go anywhere" (R33), and "There is light, but you cannot avoid people" (R35).*

*Figure 2: Enclosed construction path by night, shown in survey*

These comments show that openness is not only valued because it improves visibility and interpretability of surroundings, but also because it increased participants' control about their freedom of movement. In contrast, enclosed or isolated spaces often reduced this sense of control and increased awareness of vulnerability, as shown in both the survey responses and the interview insights. One participant for instance mentioned:

> *"If it's remote it is scarier than if it's not remote. Like, if there are still a lot of people there. Then I think, they've all passed there as well, for example" (I4)*

The findings also reveal that isolation itself was often interpreted relationally rather than only spatially. Participants did not just fear empty spaces or spaces far away from activity but feared situations in which they would be alone without access to help or witnesses. As reflected throughout the findings, survey respondents and interview participants repeatedly associated unsafety with places where others outside the tunnel or alley may not be able to see or help if something happens. Similarly, a participant felt unsafe in an enclosed bike parking, to which she said the following:

> *"[M]aybe if you made that completely open and just had one big descent, then maybe that would be different. Because then the bike parking would also still be visible to people outside." (I9)*

At the same time, the findings suggest that isolation increased emotional vulnerability because participants felt less able to interpret or predict situations. Several participants described isolated environments as spaces where intentions of others became harder to assess and where uncertainty increased, because participants felt unable to act or lacked control over movement.

Relationally, to isolated bike parking, participants perceived car parking garages as uncomfortable as well. One participant discussed that "*in parking garages if you are by yourself, you also do not feel completely happy*" (I6). From her own experience, the participant mentioned she felt safer in parking garages with designated 'women only' parking spots, which were located closer to an exit and surrounded by better lightning. Though she had not yet experienced such a layout in parking garages in Utrecht.

### 6.2.3 Feeling comfortable around urban green spaces and (street)art

Throughout the interviews and survey, urban green spaces and greenery were perceived and discussed in somewhat contradicting ways. In relation to the ideal of Jennings et al (2016) and Kabisch et al (2014) that parks and green areas are often associated with environmental, health and well-being benefits, participants associated greenery, parks and natural elements during the day with nice aesthetics, calmness and comfort. On the other hand, these same environments often generated feelings of vulnerability and unsafety, particularly during the evening or night and in isolated places. Green space was therefore not experienced as inherently safe or unsafe, but as highly context dependent. Several participants described greenery as aesthetically valuable, while simultaneously emphasising that dense vegetation could reduce visibility and create hidden spaces. A participant said for instance:

> *"I do think that during the day, for example, greenery would be positive […] the atmosphere, the environment would be nice. […] But it's also difficult, because when I think of a dark forest, I also wouldn't want to walk there." (I4)*

Another participant mentioned she preferred "*trees instead of bushes*" (I6), which she continues to connect to spatial factors such as visibility and openness, as she stated:

> *"You just want to be able to see well. With a tree you can look past it or look through it". (I6)*

In relation to this, while discussing what spatial factors made her feel unsafe, yet another participant said:

> *"I also think dense vegetation. That that also has an influence on how I feel. For example, if you are on a bike path and on the right and left you have bushes or a lot of vegetation. You of course do not know who can suddenly jump out from there." (I2)*

These statements show how an individual's perception of safety in a green space, actually depends on factors such as daylight, layout of a park, density of vegetation and placement of vegetation. Correspondingly, in describing her dream city, another participant mentions:

> *"I do think parks are very good for how a city looks and how nice it is to live in a city. But a park is actually only nice if you walk there with someone else. So, I would like there to be green, but in such a way that it also feels safe to go there alone". (I9)*

This implies that current green spaces in the city might not feel safe enough to the participant to go there alone. In the interview, she mentioned the feeling of unsafety is mostly about the layout and isolated feeling of specific parks in Utrecht (I9). The enclosed layout with many hidden, dark corners makes it unpredictable, especially with the presence of loitering (homeless) people in parks (I9). Participant strongly connect unpredictable social encounters or reduced informal social control to green spaces that feel isolated and have dense vegetation such as bushes or hidden corners.

In addition, survey respondents often associated parks, green paths and green cycling routes with unsafety when they became dark, isolated or visually enclosed. Here again, green spaces were rarely described as unsafe during daytime, but rather connected greenery to calmness and safety. This was particular visible in the responses to Figure 3, as they reacted:

> *"During the day it looks fine. I would not walk here in the evening" (R22), "During the day I feel safe in the park" (R25), "Daylight, green environment, nothing suspicious visible" (R36) and "It is a nice park and light outside". (R58)*

*Figure 3: Picture of park by day, shown in survey*

Furthermore, one participant addressed both greenery and (street)art as factors that contribute to the aesthetics of a place, and therefore also to the feeling of safety. She mentioned:

> *"There should be a lot of art and a lot of greenery. But not big bushes where things can hide behind them. Just trees or flowers and things like that." (I5)*

She continued by saying:

> *"I think that if I had beautiful things to look at while cycling home or walking on the street, I would be less focused on my own feeling of unsafety. And more on*

*appreciating the art. And maybe others would also be inspired, so they are less bored and don't start bothering people." (I5).*

With this, she suggests that creating aesthetically pleasing spaces that are well-maintained, creates a positive feeling when using the place, which in turn corresponds with perspectives of Kelling & Wilson (1982), key thinkers in the broken window theory. Further along in the interview, the participant mentioned it is not just about the presence of art, but maybe also about the possibility to co-create art, to inspire loitering youth that would normally bother by-passers.

### 6.2.4 Feeling safe in active and lived-in environments

Different types of urban environments were associated with different feelings of safety throughout the findings. In general, residential neighbourhoods or streets and lively mixed-use environments were perceived as safer because they combined visibility and constant social activity, which meant the place often facilitated presence of people and informal social control. In contrast, isolated or mono-functional environments, where social activity was not present or limited, were more often associated with uncertainty and vulnerability.

Residential streets, with family homes or low-rise buildings in particular, were consistently associated with feelings of comfort. As a response to Figure 4, survey respondents reacted to feel safe because:

*Figure 4: Residential street by day, shown in survey*

*"Quiet residential area, expect nothing strange, daylight" (R2), "Residential area, many people who can see and hear you" (R5), "It looks like a safe residential area" (R23), "Close to houses where you could ring a doorbell if needed" (R30), and "Light, many houses where you could ring a doorbell" (R47)*

These responses show that respondents feel comfortable because nearby houses and residents created a sense that help or intervention would be possible if needed. In similar fashion, a participant explained:

*"[C]ertain residential neighbourhoods where there is always a light on inside people's houses. Where there are benches and plant pots in front of the house.*

*Where there are children's bikes outside. […] in a neighbourhood where windows are broken there are also people who wouldn't hurt a fly. But still, residential neighbourhoods are where I feel the safest." (I5)*

Even though, the participant mentions she feels safest in residential neighbourhoods, she also explains how it is influenced by aesthetics and perceived (dis)order. This aligns with Bennetts et al. (2017, p. 16) argument that maintenance of a place influences whether a space is perceived as monitored, valued and socially regulated. In relation, to this participant well-maintained neighbourhoods feel safer than less maintained places, despite the rational knowledge that people in less maintained neighbourhoods don't necessarily have harmful intentions.

In addition, participants also attached different meanings to housing types and neighbourhood design. Lower-rise residential areas with family homes were often associated with familiarity and informal social control. Large high-rise apartment blocks, on the other hand, sometimes generated feelings of anonymity. A participant first mentioned:

*"For a while I lived near Kanaleneiland, well there were a lot of those flat buildings […] that really appealed to me less than something with more low-rise for example and something that feels more like a house." (I1)*

To explain why she felt that way she said:

*"If you have a house and you see that there is light on downstairs then you know oh there are just people at home or you can more easily form an image of what is happening there. And with such a flat building I have no idea. The people on the 14th floor really have no view of what is happening on the street. And the other way around I also have no idea who lives there. So, then I have this feeling that everyone in such a building can actually not mean anything for the people on the street. And people in a house can do that more in my opinion." (I1)*

For another participant the construction material of specific buildings had more influence:

*"I also associate concrete blocks with unsafety. Just garages, vacant office buildings […] I find that again radiates much more coldness, and therefore a bit grim. And I think lower buildings also feel less scary than very tall buildings, because you feel less enclosed." (I9)*

As a response to what she would change for high-rise buildings to make them feel safer, she said:

*"[M]aybe using a lot of greenery. […] I find wood for example also radiates much more warmth, so that gives me a safer feeling too."*

These insights show that high-rise buildings not only influence the extent of anonymity and weakened informal social control in a neighbourhood but also radiate a cold atmosphere due to the frequently used concrete material.

In addition, as also argued by Bennetts et al. (2017, p. 18-19), lively mixed-use environments were often experienced positively because cafés, terraces, shops and active mobility generated social activity throughout most parts of the day and night. Interview participants and survey respondents generally felt safer in environments where a space was designed for constant activity and where people were visibly present.

## 6.3 Social factors influencing perceived unsafety

### 6.3.1 Increased informal social control due to presence of others

Similar to statements in previous research, the presence of other people appeared to be the most important social factors shaping perceived unsafety throughout both the interviews and survey findings (Bennetts et al. 2017, p. 16; Te Braak & Van Tienhoven, 2025, p. 6). Correspondingly, participants frequently described feeling safer in environments where other people were nearby, both when visible and invisible, particularly when these people could potentially see, hear or help if something happened. Three participants explicitly stated why the presence of others made them feel safer:

*"I feel safer when I know there are other people. Because if something happens, yes, you have people around you who can help you." (I3)*

*"I actually also feel safe when there is just a lot of activity somewhere. Often in the city centre. If you of course have all the light from shops and such. […] I think because there are just a lot of people around you. When you have the feeling that you are alone, that is when you are of course also most vulnerable" (I6)*

*"[T]hat you have the feeling that there are other people as well. That you're not alone. That's the main thing, I think. […] Because then you have the feeling that if something happens, someone can hear you or that you can go somewhere." (I10)*

For other participants the presence of people was also still important for informal social control, but not in the way that they feel more protected in case something happened. In relation to Cozen and Love's (2015) argument that socially active places are perceived as safer due to

presence of potential witnesses and sense of collective oversight, these participants actually emphasize that in their opinion people with harmful intentions are less likely to act when there are others present.

One participant explained

> *"I don't necessarily rely on other people to help me. But I do trust that people themselves then have less courage to do something." (I6)*

Similarly, another participant said:

> *"I do have the feeling that fewer things happen if there are more people around. […] I always feel that if someone is seen doing something. That someone is less likely to do it." (I11)*

Relationally, these findings partly align with Jacobs' (1961) concept of *eyes on the street*, which argues that the presence of people and social activity in urban spaces can contribute to feelings of safety through informal social control. Participants repeatedly described feeling safer in environments where others could potentially see, hear or intervene if something happened. Residential streets, mixed-use environments and socially active public spaces like the city centre were often perceived positively because they created the sense that participants were not alone or isolated.

Similarly, as a response to Figure 5, survey respondents repeatedly described the socially active space around Utrecht Central Station as feeling quite safe. Reponses to the figure where for instance: "*Many people, cameras, facilities*" (R3), "*Many people, so safe*" (R25), and "*Many people, so safer*" (R40). These findings also imply that more people present, directly means enhanced feelings of safety.

*Figure 5: Busy square in front of Utrecht central station, shown in survey*

At the same time, interview participants and survey respondents highlighted that the type of social presence mattered. Busy places did not automatically feel safe when individuals, groups or the atmosphere became unpredictable. In addition, when the atmosphere of a place was dominated by intoxication, nuisance-causing behaviour or groups perceived as threatening, a place directly felt less safe. This built on previous research of for instance Lupton (1999, p. 12-14) and Hinkle (2014, p. 146-150), who also suggest that signs of social disorder or

unpredictability, such as intoxication, impulsive behaviour or visible confusion, can increase an individual's feelings of discomfort even in crowded spaces.

As an illustration, various participants positively associate the presence of students in a city often to constant activity on the street throughout the day and therefore also increased perceived safety (I1; I9; I11). Though, one of these participants said the following:

> *"Maybe it is also less safe with students. Because they can get drunk. And that's also something that you don't feel comfortable with. But then, they actually make it busier in the evenings. And if you only live with older people, then they are just in bed." (I11)*

It is important here to distinguish between the presence of others and behaviour of others. These two aspects are both relevant for the perception of safety of an individual, but also relational to a place. An individual only feels safe when both the presence of others and the behaviour of others are predictable in a place.

In addition to the behaviour of others, the extent to which the presence of people is experienced as positive by participants, also depends on whether the others are individuals or groups. Opinions about groups or individuals were quite contradicting.

One participant said:

> *"If you walk down a street and there is a group of people. Like twenty people. And you have to walk past them alone. Then I don't like that again." (I10)*

While another participant stated that she "*actually find[s] individuals scarier than groups." (I1)*

In relation, the responses in the survey to Figure 5 also clearly showed this nuance between presence of others and behaviour of others. Some other respondents namely said:

> *"It is so crowded that it becomes unclear. People can come from all directions." (R6), "Depends on what kind of people are there" (R16), and "Many people, people hanging around, unclear environment" (R37)*

In this sense, the findings also nuance Jacobs' perspective by showing that the presence of people alone does not automatically mean increased safety. Rather, perceived safety depends strongly on who is present, how their behaviour was interpreted and whether the social atmosphere felt predictable.

### 6.3.2 Perceptions shaped by familiarity, belonging and stereotypes

Familiarity and recognisability were also highlighted as important factors that influence women's perceptions of safety in public space. Participants repeatedly described feeling more comfortable in places they knew well or places they frequently used. Familiar environments often reduced uncertainty because participants felt better able to anticipate situations, recognise patterns of activity within the space and understand how a place works.

One participant explained this when she compared the feeling of safety of when she just moved to Utrecht to the feeling of safety now:

> *"Now I think I feel safer than when I had just moved there […] I also just didn't know the city very well then, so that didn't help either, because then you also don't really know where you are." (I7)*

Another participant said:

> *"I also just feel safe actually […] it is also not such a big city. So, I always know where I am. And how I have to get somewhere. So that also helps. That I just know where I am going. And because of that I also felt safe." (I8)*

Both quotes show how familiarity of the city increased feelings of safety and control. Knowing which routes are usually busy or well-lit reduced uncertainty and made participants feel more comfortable while moving through the city.

One of the interview participants mentioned that for her familiarity was not necessarily about knowing the place, but rather about knowing or being able to recognise the people she encounters in a space. She explains:

> *"When you can't see their face, then people are scary. If they hide themselves. So, if they keep walking behind you. Or if they wear a hood. Or if they sit in a big car. Then they are scary." (I5)*

Then she concludes:

> *"[B]asically people are not scary. They are just unknown." (I5)*

These insights demonstrate that feelings of safety are not only shaped by recognizing places, but also by being able to recognize others in a place. She argues if you are able to see a face, recognize a person, they become already less scary.

In addition, survey respondents similarly rated and described places safer when they recognised a street or place in the picture. They responded for instance: "*Familiar, trusted place nearby*" (R25), "*Clear overview, daytime and familiar street*" (R31), and "*Familiar place, there are*

*often other people on the street*" (R42). Considering these findings. Familiarity is therefore not only spatial, but also a social and emotional connection to a place or to people. At the same time, the findings show that familiarity did not completely remove feelings of unsafety and were still context dependent. Familiar places could still become uncomfortable when they were dark, isolated or unpredictable.

Importantly, familiarity was also connected to feelings of belonging within urban space. Participants generally felt safer in environments where they felt they fit socially and where it made sense for them to be there. As an illustration, a participant said:

> *"I do feel safe here. Actually. In general. I think it is because there are just many students. So, I just feel at home here. As if I fit here. I do not stand out or anything. In my feeling." (I8)*

Another participant mentioned something similar when talking about different neighbourhoods in Utrecht:

> *"I also think that maybe one of the reasons I feel less safe there is that I am just out of place there. And that is not necessarily a bad thing, that can be said. But they would maybe feel the same here. Just different people." (I3)*

Yet another participant thinks "*in general it feels safer if you already know what the place looks like. Because then you know what to expect."* (I10)

This suggests that perceived safety also considers whether an individual feels emotionally comfortable in a place and whether an individual fits in or not. Some participants argue this also works the other way around. If they felt like someone they encountered was out of place, it also led to increased feelings of alertness and discomfort. One participant specifically mentioned:

> *"In every place you sometimes encountered people where you thought what are you doing here and with what intentions are you here. […] so that made that I sometimes also felt unsafe in Utrecht." (I1)*

In relation to this, findings revealed that perceptions of safety were also shaped by stereotypes regarding particular people, behaviours and neighbourhoods. Participants associated feelings of discomfort with people that were loitering, hanging around in groups, intoxicated individuals, homeless people. In addition, the reputation of a place, and its people, influenced how alert a participant moved through a particular space. Combining this with insights from previous research, it indicates that intoxicated or loitering groups or homeless people are often

seen as a source of unpredictability (Hinkle, 2014, p. 146-150; Kinsella, 2012, p. 122-123; Lupton, 1999, p. 12-14).

Survey respondents similarly associated unsafety with nuisance-causing behaviour, homelessness, intoxication and groups that were hanging around without a clear purpose. In both the interviews and the survey, places around Utrecht central station, Park Lepelenburg and the pedestrian path along the 'Singel' were repeatedly named as examples of places with a certain reputation. The reputation of the places became especially clear in the survey responses to Figure 1 and Figure 5.

About Figure 1 respondents said:

> *"There are often strange people sitting on the benches along the canal" (R15), "There are often men hanging around and I prefer to avoid that" (R29), "This path feels less safe because there are often shady people in the evening" (R35), and "Because of the benches there are often people hanging around" (R56)*

The reputation of the place shown in Figure 5 was mentioned in the following way:

> *"I know there are often unpleasant people here" (R12), "The place is also known as unsafe" (R23), and "I often walk through quickly because I know it is not the safest place. There are sometimes types of people I don't feel comfortable with" (R33).*

A combination of an individual's own past experiences and those from others both shape the reputation of place, and therefore also how individuals perceive the space in terms of safety.

Participants also sometimes linked neighbourhood appearance and socio-economic characteristics to perceived safety. As discussed before, cleaner, calmer residential areas with low-rise family houses were often associated with comfort and trust. One participant also explicitly mentioned she "*associate[s] flats with problem neighbourhoods*" (I9).

Another participant explained:

> *"I think regular houses are definitely nicer. I have the idea that when you cycle past an apartment building, there are people hanging around near a stairwell or something. That there are also some shady things happening, like with some drugs and such." (I7)*

In essence, the findings showcase that it is a combination of past experiences, reputation of a place and feelings of belonging that influence how participants perceived specific places or neighbourhoods.

### 6.3.3 Men and unpredictability as key sources of vulnerability

Across both the interviews and survey findings, men emerged as the most recurring source of discomfort and fear in public space. Participants frequently connected feelings of unsafety to the presence of (unfamiliar) men, groups of men or situations in which men appeared unexpectedly or intoxicated. These findings demonstrate that perceptions of safety are strongly gendered but also shaped by men's awareness of gender-based violence and harassment. All most all participants explicitly described men as central to their feelings of vulnerability while moving through the city. Some statements about the presence of men in public spaces were:

> *"In general, I feel more comfortable if I see a woman on the street in the dark than a man. Now I don't know if I would exclude all men, because that's also a bit generalising. But it is true that if I encounter a man, I'm more likely to think about how I should be on my guard than if I just see, for example, a middle-aged woman." (I4)*
>
> *"If I'm walking on the street and I see a man or a woman. Yes, men are scary. […] With women I think, okay, we are allies." (I5)*
>
> *"I have never felt unsafe on the street because of a woman." (I7)*
>
> *"I feel like it just happens less often that men are harassed on the street. I mean, it also already comes from the fact that I am catcalled […] That when you walk on the street, you stand out as a woman to men simply as a kind of object. And that is just not the other way around. […] I would never catcall a man." (I8)*

These quotes reflect how participants' feeling of unsafety is often connected to broader gendered dynamics within public space. Participants described how they continuously assessed men's behaviour, intentions and level of unpredictability while navigating the city. On the other hand, participants mention they never feel the same way around women in public spaces. In addition, when participants talked about situations in which they would feel unsafe they unconsciously filled in it would be because of a man. For example, a participant describes the following situation:

> *"I think for me it also really matters whether I am just on my way to a bar or a restaurant or something. Or to my house. That when I am on my way home, then I do not like the idea if someone maybe comes after me. Then **he** really comes into my space. And then **he** also sees where I go inside." (I8)*

In contrast, findings also show that fear was not attached to all men equally and "*men also don't want to be scary […] they just sometimes don't realise that they are*." (I5)
Correspondingly, alcohol and drug use increased these feelings of fear and uncertainty. Participants frequently described intoxicated individuals as more difficult to read or predict, which increased feelings of discomfort. One participant explained:

> *"People I feel less comfortable with or who might approach you or who are sitting there using [substances] or causing nuisance. I prefer not to pass by them." (I2)*

In similar fashion, participants also used terms like confused people and weird people to explain individuals who are drunk or on drugs. About these people in particular they said the following:

> *"People who are confused are the scariest. […] They are unpredictable. You do not know what they are going to do." (I5)*
>
> *"I think 'weird people' cause the biggest feeling of unsafety. And then maybe a group of men. And with men and women in general… I think I do feel safer with women." (I10)*

Important to note, participants often described increased alertness to interpret surroundings as normal parts of everyday mobility. Many women continuously monitored social situations, adjusted routes or stayed alert in response to perceived unpredictability.
These findings therefore reflect similar ideas as the feminist urban theory, which argues that public space is not experienced equally. Rather public space is shaped by gendered power relations and unequal experiences of vulnerability and belonging (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994). The recurring fear of men throughout the findings does not suggest that men do not belong in public space but highlights how women's experiences of the city are shaped by awareness of potential harassment. In essence, both men and women should have an equal right to access and use public space. However, these findings show that women often experience this right differently in practice. Their movement through the city is frequently shaped by increased alertness, fear and anticipation. From the perspective of the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1967), and Fenster's (2005, p. 219-220) perspective of *the right to gendered use in the city*, this suggests that unequal experiences of perceived safety can also lead to unequal experiences of freedom and belonging. A women's *right to appropriate use of the urban space* and the *right to participation* are, according to Fenster (2005, p. 219), inherent to feelings of belonging and feelings of comfort and safety in a space.

## 6.4 Emotional factors influencing perceived unsafety

### 6.4.1 Fear shaped by anticipation and experiences

A central finding throughout both the interviews and survey responses was that perceptions of unsafety were often based on anticipation rather than based on direct experiences. Participants often described fear in terms of what could happen rather than what had already happened. This reflects Pain's (2000; 2001) emotional geography perspective, which argues that fear should not be understood as irrational. According to Pain (2000; 2001) fear is shaped by anticipation, memory and awareness of vulnerability. Emotions are therefore shaped through atmospheres of places, social relations and everyday interactions rather than only through direct events of harassment.

Several participants reflected in their interview on the anticipatory nature of fear. One participant explained:

> *"If you don't know [who or what is out there], then I think it is more the fear of what could be there than that there actually is someone. […] Because when you really have never seen someone come out of the bushes, but you know what could be there, then you are still a bit anxious on your bike." (I7)*

This quote shows that participants recognise that fear is partly imagined, while simultaneously understanding that their fear is also legitimate and even protective. Fear was often not only connected to personal experiences, but mainly to high-profiled cases of violence against women. When discussing the case of Anne Faber, a local high-profiled gender-based violence case from a couple year back, a participant mentioned:

> *"That Anne Faber case […] because of that, I think now like I'm not just going to walk alone through the forest. Not even during the day." (I10)*

Similar to a statement from Whitzman (1996, p. 91), that rape is the type of crime women fear most, compared to robbery for men, the majority of the participants also explained the fear they experienced, was actually the fear of gender based (sexual) violence, harassment or rape. Participants for instance said:

> *"I do have to say that as a woman, my biggest fear is being raped. I'm so afraid of that. […] I don't think men have the same existential fear of being raped. […] Not the humiliation that we are afraid of." (I5)*

*"I am afraid that I will be pulled off a bike. And what happens after that I don't know […]. My fear is really that someone physically touches me, in whatever way. It can be a stabbing. It can be rape." (I6)*

*"I am actually not that afraid that things will be stolen. But more indeed that you are either just hit or something. […] That could then indeed also continue into rape. Also, a little bit, I think, that they follow you home." (I11)*

When discussing fear of gender based (sexual) violence or rape, participants frequently added that they assume men rarely experience this type of fear. One participant stated:

*"Maybe men are more afraid of being robbed or beaten up. I think as a man you are much less likely to be afraid of being raped. Or even less afraid of being murdered." (I10)*

This insight was not only expressed by this particular participant, but similar insights arose across all interviews.

In relation to the anticipatory nature of fear, participants regularly mentioned media reports and stories shared online as factors that increased awareness of possible threat. This influence of media therefore shaped how certain places or situations were interpreted. In this sense, fear was socially produced through both direct and indirect experiences of participants.

### 6.4.2 Normalised vigilance and hyper alertness

Another important finding in relation to emotional factors was the normalization of vigilance and increased alertness in women's everyday mobility through the city. Participants frequently described continuously checking their surroundings, evaluating social situations and preparing for unexpected encounters, particularly during the evening or night. These practices were sometimes described as conscious, but often mentioned when describing experiences, indicating the unconscious nature of the behaviour.

This connects to emotional geography perspectives, which emphasise that emotions actively shape how people move through and experience space (Pain, 2000; 2001). As a result, fear is no longer only an internal feeling but becomes expressed in practice through behavioural adaptations such as hyper alertness and awareness of surroundings. Multiple participants discussed this adaptation as a result of fear:

*"I consciously look around me much more […] and especially in the evening I very often call people." (I1)*

*"That I just become very aware of my surroundings and think okay, who is cycling behind me? Who is sitting there? And that I actually keep doing the same thing I was doing, but I just become more alert." (I11)*

*"For example, myself, I am always quite aware if someone is walking closely behind me." (I2)*

Survey findings showed respondents similarly adjust their behaviour, such as turning music off (R57) and increase awareness to surroundings (R13; R20; R46, R58), as a reaction to fear.
In line with Pain's (2000; 2001) argument about emotional geographies, throughout the findings vigilance and hyper alertness did not emerge as exceptional behaviour, but rather as a normalized aspect of women's movement throughout the city.

### 6.4.3 Role of atmosphere in shaping perceived safety

The findings further show that perceived safety was not only connected to the absence of danger, but also to emotional comfort and perceived atmosphere of a place. Participants frequently described spaces using emotional language to indicate atmosphere such as "*cozy*" (I1), "*pleasant*" (I2; I4; I7), "*grim*" (I9) or "*uncomfortable*" (I3), even when they could not fully explain where these feeling exactly came from.
Relationally, Pain (2000; 2009) argues that emotions emerge through interactions between space, atmosphere, material surroundings and social meaning. From this perspective, public spaces are not experienced and assessed in terms of function, but also emotionally. Feelings of comfort or discomfort therefore become important feelings in how urban environments experienced.
In terms of atmosphere, participant mentioned a couple importance aspects. One participant explained that "*the type of light is really very important for [her]. Whether it is a bit like yellow light for example and that it is kind of nice light or cozy*" (I1). She continued explaining that for her it is "*about the atmosphere it gives off*" (I1).
Another participant mentioned, as discussed in a previous section, that concrete makes the atmosphere in a place feel cold, while wood radiates warmth (I9). Furthermore, she adds:

*"They do use red bricks, and I think that already makes a difference compared to the more grayish brick, […] I find that again radiates much more coldness and feels therefore a bit grim" (I9)*

Atmosphere as discussed in these quotes was mainly determined through spatial design. However, participants also mentioned they feel more comfortable in a place with a nice social atmosphere. In that case the main aspect contributing to feelings of comfort is informal social control and presence of others.

Survey findings similarly showed that participants often referred to the "*feeling*" (R31, R37, R57) or "*atmosphere*" (R27, R32, R42) of a place when discussing safety. These findings therefore show that safety was not only experienced as the absence of crime or security, but as a feeling of emotional comfort within a space.

## 6.5 Behavioural adaptations and gendered urban freedom

### 6.5.1 Everyday safety routines and behavioural adaptations

Across both the interviews and survey findings, behavioural adaptation was consciously and unconsciously mentioned by participant as a way of increasing the feeling of safety. Behavioural adaptations that participants frequently described were for instance adjusting routes, travel times, calling someone or going somewhere together, in particular during the evening or in isolated environments. The statements about behavioural adaptation said the following:

> *"In any case that I sometimes for example turn off my noise-cancelling on my earphones. Or that I call someone. So that because of that noise-cancelling I am more aware of what I can hear around me. I always keep my phone in my pocket, close by. And in terms of route, even if I have to cycle five minutes longer, I often choose the more pleasant route." (I2)*

> *"If I feel unsafe, then I know that I will cycle a bit faster. Or for example cycle a bit more in the middle of the road instead of directly along the sidewalk. […] Because, imagine there is someone standing on the sidewalk who wants to pull you off or something." (I3)*

> *"Sometimes walk with my keys between my fingers." (I6)*

In relation, participants explained that these practices had become automatic and often happened without consciously thinking about it.

To the question if she ever adapted her behaviour when moving through the city, the participant stated:

> *"Also sometimes calling while cycling, but also sometimes taking another route. Sometimes leaving earlier or later so that someone could cycle with me. […] In the evening, so when it is dark, I do notice that I would actually rather choose the main road." (I9)*

About calling a friend she continues:

> *"It makes no sense at all. Because if I am calling a friend while I am cycling, it essentially does not make me less of a prey for anyone." (I9)*

These findings show that behaviour adaptation, for instance calling someone, does not actually increase your safety. Though the idea that there is someone else on the other side of the line that would hear something is happening to you, gives participants an increased feeling of control and safety. In addition, another participant mentions that for her calling a friend is also about distracting herself from the fear (I1). Survey respondents similarly referred to behaviour adaptations such as walking faster (R18; R24; R55; R57), sharing locations with friends (R47), taking detours (R4; R7; R19; R42; R58) and staying close to other people (R27; R54).
A recurring pattern in taking a different route, was to choose routes with better or more lighting and more social activity or presence of others (I3; I10: R11; R22; R41; R47).
In relation, the feminist urban theory argues that women's use of public space is shaped by continuous anticipation and compromises to increase their feeling of safety (Kern, 2020). Public spaces are therefore not experienced neutrally or equally and seems actually dependent on gender. Throughout the interviews, behavioural adaptations were rarely described by women as exceptional measures, but rather as regular and normal parts of their daily life. Participants discuss that for them they feel like small, automatic adaptations rather than feeling restricted by them.

### 6.5.2 Restricted mobility and the gendered right to the city

Although many participants described behavioural adaptation as normal, the findings also show that these adjustments did shape women's freedom of movement in Utrecht. Participants frequently avoided particular routes, parks or areas at night, changed travel times or limited certain activities because environments felt unsafe or uncomfortable. To the question is she ever adapted her behaviour, a participant responded:

> *"Cycling around things. Or just not doing it. If I know it's a shitty route at night. Or indeed asking people to cycle together. Or if I see people standing somewhere,*

*then I don't really want to pass them. Then I go around them or take another route." (I4)*

Another participant mentioned:

*"If I'm somewhere and you have to go through a not very nice part… then I just wait until someone else is also leaving. Then you either stay longer or shorter." (I10)*

These statements illustrate the constant compromises participants make to feel comfortable on the route home and to get home safely. As one participant discussed explicitly, for her there was also a limit to behavioural adaptations:

*"But there is a certain limit to it, I think. […] If I have to walk home for fifteen minutes and I can walk more safely in twenty minutes, then I would do that. But if I have to walk home for five minutes and the detour is twenty minutes, then I might just run on that five-minute route." (I10)*

Similarly, other participants showed resistance against allowing unsafety to fully dominate their movement through the city:

*"On the other hand, you also cannot suddenly decide, I think, to just never go outside in the evening again or something." (I11)*

*"But sometimes I adjust my behaviour to it, and sometimes I also just do not feel like adjusting my behaviour to it." (I9)*

These findings relate closely to the concept of the right to the city, which essentially argues it is not only about formal access to urban space, but also the ability to freely use and feel comfortable within it (Lefebvre, 1967). While the participants technically had access to the city and the public spaces, their mobility was often shaped by anticipation, compromises and vulnerability. In this sense, feelings of unsafety not only influenced how women moved through the city, but also how freely and spontaneously they could move. This insight also reflects feminist urban theory, as Kern (2020) and Massey (1994) argue that gendered experiences of public space can produce unequal experiences of urban freedom and belonging. Combining this perspective, the women's right to the city is not necessarily rejected but can become constrained by the normalization of fear, vigilance and behavioural adaptation in women's lives.

### 6.5.3 Women's negotiation between caution, freedom and resistance

Continuing on the previous section, many women described finding a balance between awareness and caution, while remaining independent, socially active and free within the city. At the same time, several participants reflected critically on the general societal normalization of gender-based violence and on the role men play in shaping women's experiences of public space.

Participants frequently emphasised that their behavioural adaptations were not just their own anxiety but were influence by realities of harassment and gender-based violence. One participant stated:

> *"I hope that men are aware of their role towards women on the street." (I1)*

> *"But I actually think it is mainly about the image that certain men have of women. […] And that they have framed women in their heads, consciously or unconsciously, as something they have a right to, or something that is worth less, or low. […] We differ from each other in certain things, but we do not differ in how many rights we have, so to speak. Or we should not differ in that." (I9)*

Especially the latter quote, shows that in order for women to feel safer, there is need for awareness and a shift in how men see women. In relation to this, Kern (2020) also mentions that experiences such as catcalling reinforce the constant sexualisation and objectification of women that increase feelings of uncomforted in public spaces. Building on this, another participant used catcalling as an example of how men objectify women on the street, and said the following about it:

> *"Because I actually think that if catcalling, for example, would no longer happen, I would already feel much safer. Because then I would not be constantly reminded that I am being looked at that way." (I8)*

This also corresponds to Koskela (1999, p. 111) who discusses that recurring and daily experiences of (sexual) harassment constantly remind women that they are not welcome in certain spaces.

Furthermore, participants repeatedly mentioned that increased awareness about the topic in the media, could contribute to the awareness of the topic among men.

> *"Just like with […] Femicide. That is so often just made smaller. Or that the new says: "Woman dead". And then you click on the article and then it says, man has*

*been arrested. And then I think, why is the main text not just, woman murdered by man." (I8)*

This illustrates that it not only matters whether or not the topic is discussed on media platforms, but also how gender-based violence is framed in media.

In relation to the influence of media, participants mention that increased awareness among men, together with small behavioural adjustments, would already make a significant difference in women's perception of safety in the city. One participant mentioned:

*"I still think there remains a bit of defensiveness [among men]. Like yes, but I do not do that. […] But then you have to realize that it is still caused by men as a group. So, if you can contribute something to make someone feel safer, then you would always do that, I think." (I7)*

Though according to some participants, men are already much more aware of women's feelings of unsafety and have already seen some adjustments in behaviour among men, as one participant stated:

*"I've also had conversations with men who actually do that consciously. That if they feel they are walking behind a woman at night, they make themselves visible by walking on the other side of the street." (I5)*

To repeat a quote from this participant, in the end "*men also don't want to be scary […] they just sometimes don't realise that they are*" (I5).

Though, in line with feminist urban theory, the findings suggest that for now public space does remain influenced by unequal gendered power relations (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994, p. 186-190). In these gendered power relations women often carry the responsibility of adapting their behaviour while behaviour of men is less frequently questioned or adjusted (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994, p. 177-180).

# 7. Discussion

The findings from this study, building on previous research, demonstrate that perceived safety cannot be understood or explained only through objective measures such as crime statistics or safety indicators on its own (Ceccato, 2012; Glas, 2021; Hinkle, 2014). Instead, the study discovered that a complex interplay between spatial design, social interaction, emotional experiences and gendered power relations shaped women's experiences of safety in and around

Utrecht. Even though, in general Utrecht is considered a relatively safe city, the findings of the study reveal that women's everyday experiences of public space in Utrecht continue to be shaped by anticipation, caution and continuous awareness of their vulnerability. In this sense, the study confirms broader feminist urban perspectives from scholars such as Kern (2020), Fenster (2005, p. 219-220) and Massey (1994, p. 179-183), that women's experiences of the city are influences by unequal distribution of comfort, belonging and freedom in urban space. This insight contradicts traditional criminological perspectives which argue that one's experience of a city is only structured around actual risks and potential dangers (Skogan, 1987).

## 7.1 Spatial safety beyond physical design

The first main finding when analysing the results of the study was the importance of spatial characteristics in how safe women feel in a particular place. Participants consistently associated lighting, openness, visibility and environmental overview and interpretability with feelings of comfort and control. Darkness, enclosed spaces, narrow paths, tunnels and poor visibility, on the contrary, were frequently linked to discomfort, unpredictability and vulnerability. In correspondence with previous research on perceived safety in urban spaces, the findings demonstrates that visibility and predictability significantly influence how people experience and interpret urban environments (Cozens & Love, 2015; Day, 2001, Kern, 2020) However, in line with feminist urban research perspectives (Kern, 2020) and emotional geographies perspectives (Koskela, 1999; Pain, 2001), the findings also reveal that these spatial elements cannot be understood as purely technical or functional aspects of urban design. Participants often described lighting and openness not only as a practical spatial aspect to increase visibility and predictability but also attached emotional and atmospheric meanings to it. In that sense, spatial characteristics were rarely mentioned as only spatially important. Similar to arguments of Boyce (2019) and Te Braak & Van Tienhoven (2025, p. 6), participants often explained lightning was important for their feeling of safety, as it increases visibility and therefore also predictability and interpretability of their surroundings. However, multiple participants argued it is not solely the presence of light that influences their perception of safety in a space, but mainly the quantity and quality of light that determine the atmosphere of a place, which connects to Van Heemstra's (2025) statement that more streetlights alone, is not an answer to gender-based violence. Whereas Kern discusses (2020) that visibility can also increase feelings of discomfort and unsafety due to heightened exposure, Van Heemstra (2025) argues, in similar fashion, that harsher streetlighting puts a spotlight on possible victims, while reducing the

visibility around beyond the lit area (Van Heemstra, 2025). This perspective was not once considered by participants or respondents in the study, which indicates women may have false expectations of what lightning does to visibility in an environment. In relation to the quality or type of lightning, the findings highlighted atmosphere, determined by an interplay of spatial, social and emotional factors, as an important indicator of perception of safety throughout the study. In addition, residential surroundings and a spatial design that facilitated social activity created feelings of comfort among participants, while isolated or obstructed spaces with hidden, neglected corners produced uncertainty and increased alertness. These findings correspond with Zahnow's (2018, p. 4-5) and Ceccato's (2012, p. 13-14) arguments that mixed-land use is essential for continuous social activity and therefore increases feelings of safety.

The findings centred around the influence of spatial characteristics on women's perception of safety, also demonstrate the value of emotional geographies as a theoretical lens. Following Pain (2001, p. 899-900), participants inevitably have emotional associations of fear and unsafety with spatial characteristics and environments, which therefore influence the relation between space and feelings of safety. In this sense and aligned with Pain's (2000; 2001) and Koskela's (1999) emotional geographies perspective, fear and perceived unsafety are not irrational emotional reactions, but in many cases relative to socially and spatially produced experiences. Even without the presence of direct visible threats, women in this study continuously interpreted and emotionally assessed their surroundings. The findings therefore support the argument that perceived safety is relational and anticipatory rather than only based on actual incidents. Correspondingly, participants rarely connected feelings of unsafety to direct experiences of violence, but rather to atmospheres, uncertainty and narratives of others or media. This became particularly visible in participants' descriptions of parks, underpasses and isolated spaces in Utrecht. Spaces as such were not necessarily objectively dangerous, but were perceived as unsafe due to emotional unpredictability, grim or cold atmosphere and knowledge about high-profiled gender based (sexual) violence in similar places.

## 7.2 Nuancing the concept of Eyes on the Street

At the same time, the findings provide a more nuanced understanding of urban theories that emphasise the importance of visibility, social activity and informal surveillance in shaping perceptions of safety. The findings partly support Jacobs' (1961) concept of *eyes on the street*, as participants frequently described feeling safer in spaces characterised by social activity,

nearby housing and the presence of other people. However, similarly to the perspectives of Wirth (1938) and Zeng et al. (2023, p. 4), the findings also demonstrate that the presence of others does not automatically create feelings of safety. Rather, perceptions of safety depended largely on who was present and how their behaviour was interpreted. In many cases, participants described the social composition of public space and the behaviour of others as more important than the mere presence of people. Similar to Lupton's (1999, p. 12-13) findings, groups of men, intoxicated individuals and socially unpredictable behaviour were associated with feelings of discomfort and fear, particularly during evening and nighttime hours. In contrast, participants described families, elderly people, women and predictable behaviour as factors that increased their feelings of safety. These findings therefore suggest that social presence contributes to perceived safety not simply through numbers or visibility, but through the meanings, expectations and social relations attached to those present in a space.

## 7.3 Gendered vulnerability and normalised adaptation

The findings that who is present is a space and how they behave is important for women's feelings of safety strongly reflect Kern's (2020) argument that women navigate cities through practices of alertness and constant risk assessment. It highlights the importance of feminist urban theory in how these gendered power relations shape experiences of public space. Participants described avoiding certain routes, changing behaviour, staying alert, sharing locations with friends, increasing walking or cycling speed or strategically selecting routes based on lighting and social activity. These practices, as also discussed by Valentine (1989, p. 386-387) and Kern (2020), are often normalized and described as part of daily life.

The normalization of these adaptations among women is a significant finding of the study. Participants frequently described these strategies almost automatically, sometimes even not aware whether their behaviour is normal or safety related. This reflects feminist critiques that women's restriction of movement has become socially normalized and individualized rather than recognized as a structural urban issue (Fenster, 2005; Kern, 2020). The findings therefore suggest that women's perceived safety should be assessed through both experiences of fear and the adjustments women make to anticipation potential vulnerability. In this sense, questions of freedom, spontaneity and belonging in life in the city are perceived safety is closely connected to questions of freedom, spontaneity and belonging in urban life.

## 7.4 Women's right to the city

This becomes particularly relevant when the findings were interpreted through Lefebvre's (1967) and Harvey's (2013) concept of the right to the city and Fenster's (2005, p. 219-223) discussion of gendered right to the city. While participants technically had access to public spaces in Utrecht, many described to limit their use of public space by avoiding certain spaces and specifically timing their use. Certain parks, routes or public environments became only accessible depending on time of day, presence of others or social atmosphere of the place. The findings suggest that unequal perceptions of safety can reduce women's ability to use urban space freely and to full extent. In similar fashion, Fenster (2005, p. 219) reviewed women's *right to appropriate use of the urban space* and *the right to participation*, which are according to Purcell (2003, p. 576-583) the two main rights evolving from the right to the city. From this perspective, perceived safety becomes also an issue of urban injustice and unequal spatial freedom, rather than just an individual concern.

## 7.5 A relational understanding of urban safety

An important contribution of this study is that it demonstrates how experiences of safety are shaped not only by physical urban design or social dynamics on its own. Rather perceptions of safety are shaped through an interplay between physical design, social dynamics and emotional experiences and relations to a place. In this sense, perception of unsafety is inherently context-dependent and different for every individual. This explains possible contradicting statements or opinions from participants throughout the study. As an illustration, where one participant felt safe in open spaces with clear sightlines to interpret her surrounding, another participant felt unsafe because of these spatial characteristics due to the possibility of being watched and followed from a distance. Though, even in these contradicting opinions, nuances and contexts are important to consider. The participant who felt unsafe in open, exposed places, only experiences this feeling of unsafety when she was close to her home. With this in mind, and similar to perspective from Pain (2000; 2001) and Koskela (1999), the insights and findings of the study are shaped by personal experiences of participants and nuanced insights into their daily lives in the city. In addition, participants without direct experiences of severe violence often described to be generally aware of the likelihood to become victim of violence against women. Media coverage, stories shared by friends and broader societal discussions about the topic appeared to heavily influence how emotional perceptions of risk and vulnerability were

shaped among participants. This also supports Pain's (2001, p. 899-900) argument that fear is produced through social and cultural influences rather than simply from isolated events.
Furthermore, the findings also show a tension between Utrecht's image as a safe and progressive city and how women experience public space. Even though both municipal statistics and participants consider Utrecht as a relatively safe city, participants still frequently described situations or events in which feelings of unsafety, discomfort and vulnerability were present (Akkermans et al., 2024; CBS Statline, n.d.; Utrecht Monitor, 2025). It, again, shows the relational and relative nature of perception of safety. In line with feminist urban scholars, this perspective of perceived unsafety is important to consider when designing a city and addressing its citizens' safety (Fenster, 2005; Kern, 2020).

The findings can also be translated into broader implications for local urban planning and policy. Current urban safety interventions often focus mainly on tangible spatial interventions such as increasing lightning or formal surveillance. While the findings confirm that in some cases these interventions would matter or make a change, they also suggest that perceived safety cannot be addressed only by physical design of a space. In addition, even physical design interventions are context dependent and will not have the same impact across all spaces. Interventions around emotional atmosphere, social dynamics and behaviour, gender norms and general cultural understandings of vulnerability could make similar impact on the perception of safety as physical design interventions. As a result, this indicates the need for more gender-sensitive, socially and emotionally informed approached to urban planning, as for example has been developed throughout the years in Umeå (Groskop, 2024). Correspondingly, future urban planning practices would benefit from moving beyond a solely technical and spatial understanding of safety and towards an interconnected perspective in which perceptions of safety are assessed in relation to specific characteristics and contextual factors of a place.
Additionally, the findings of the study reinforce feminist critiques that cities have historically been designed around male experiences and assumptions of urban mobility (Kern, 2020). The finding that women constantly adapt their behaviour as a response to feelings of unsafety and vulnerability shows that public space is still experiences unequally for different genders, even in a relatively progressive urban context like Utrecht. Rather than framing women's adaptations as development of successful coping mechanism, the findings suggest that this should be understood as unequal urban freedom and questions around belonging and the right to the city (Fenster, 2005, p. 219-223; Lefebvre, 1967).

Overall, the findings contribute to an existing debate on gender, urban space and perceived safety, by showing that women's experiences of safety are simultaneously spatial, social, emotional and relational. The combination of feminist urban theory (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994) and emotional geographies (Koskela, 1999; Pain, 2000; 2001; 2009; Valentine, 1989) perspectives were particularly valuable in capturing the structural dimension of perceived safety on the one hand and the dimensions of lived experiences on the other hand. Moreover, the combination of interviews and surveys enhanced the analysis by offering depth and breadth. This triangulation ensured that the interpretations were grounded in individual experiences, but at the same time reflect broader patterns of perceived unsafety in Utrecht. While spatial characteristics undeniably shape an individual's feeling of safety, the findings ultimately highlight that women's experiences of public space in terms of safety and vulnerability cannot be separated from gendered power relations and the emotional realities of moving through the city in everyday life.

## 7.6 Limitations

Despite these important findings of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged as well. First, the research adopted partly a qualitative and exploratory approach focused on understanding women's lived experiences of perceived unsafety in Utrecht. This approach allowed the study to find in-depth insights into the emotional, spatial and relational dimensions of safety. However, as a result of this approach, the findings are context-specific and can therefore not be generalised to all women or all urban contexts. Participant's experiences of unsafety are in essence subjective and shaped by their individual backgrounds, identities and routines. As a result, other women, individuals, groups or genders may experience public space differently and may connect different characteristics to what shaped their feeling of safety.

Secondly, the study relied on a relatively small and non-representative sample. The combination of interviews and survey data provided both depth and broader patterns. However, the survey only functioned as an exploratory tool rather than a statistically representative measurement. In addition, participants were largely connected to similar social and educational environments, which may have limited the diversity of perspectives included in the study. In particular, intersectional differences related to ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion or socioeconomic position could not be explored specifically and in sufficient depth, despite their possible influence on experiences of public space and perceived safety. In relation to this, the study mainly reached participants and respondents in the age range 18-35, while only a few

respondents aged 35 or older. This possibly limited the perspectives of older women on the relation between space and their perception of safety.

Another limitation concerns the women-only perspective of the research. This focus was intentionally chosen in line with the research aim and feminist theoretical framework. Though, it means that the study does not examine how men or other gender identities perceive, negotiate or contribute to dynamics of safety and unsafety in public space. As a result, broader social and gender relations that shape perceived safety could only be addressed from a women's perspective, while other gender perspectives may have yielded different insights.

Finally, the interpretive nature of this study means that the analysis was inevitably shaped by the positionality and interpretations of the researcher. At the same time, familiarity with the local context, personal experiences and prior knowledge related to the topic simplified understanding of contexts and strengthened sensitivity during both data collection and analysis. To minimise potential bias, reflexivity as described in section *5.7 research positionality*, remained an important consideration throughout the research process.

# 8. Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer how women in Utrecht experience and interpret unsafety in public space in their everyday urban lives. The study explored which spatial, social and emotional factors shape these perceptions and how experiences of unsafety influence women's everyday navigation through urban space. By combining an image-based survey with semi-structured interviews, the research moved beyond objective understandings of safety and instead examined how safety and unsafety are experienced and negotiated in everyday life. While the study focused on women in Utrecht more broadly, the findings primarily reflect the experiences of participants and respondents between approximately 18 and 35 years old.

The findings demonstrate that experiences of unsafety are relational, context-dependent and shaped through interactions between people, places and social situations. Participants described safety not as a fixed characteristic of a space, but as a feeling connected to visibility, predictability, social atmosphere and emotional comfort. Spatial characteristics such as lighting, openness, maintenance, environmental legibility and the availability of escape routes played an important role in shaping how places were interpreted. Well-lit and socially active environments were generally associated with comfort and control, whereas dark, enclosed or isolated spaces often generated feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. At the same time,

these factors were not experienced universally. Visibility and the presence of others, for example, could increase feelings of safety but also create feelings of exposure, vulnerability or unwanted attention depending on the context and social composition of a space.

Social dynamics were equally important in shaping perceptions of unsafety. The presence, behaviour and perceived intentions of others strongly influenced whether environments felt comfortable or threatening. In particular, participants frequently associated feelings of unsafety with unknown men, groups of men, loitering individuals and experiences of harassment or intimidation. These experiences were rarely described as exceptional events but rather as part of everyday life. Emotions such as fear, discomfort and vulnerability were often anticipatory in nature and shaped by previous experiences, media narratives and broader societal understandings of gender-based violence. As a result, participants continuously evaluated their surroundings and negotiated feelings of safety in relation to both physical and social characteristics of urban space.

These experiences directly influenced everyday mobility. Many participants described behavioural adaptations such as avoiding certain routes, changing travel times, remaining alert, contacting others while travelling or limiting movement during the evening and night. Importantly, these adaptations were often described as routine rather than exceptional responses to danger. The findings therefore suggest that perceived unsafety is reflected not only in experiences of fear but also in the everyday strategies women employ to manage vulnerability. In this sense, perceptions of unsafety shape not only how women experience public space but also how they access and use the city.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support feminist urban theory (Kern, 2020; Massey, 1994) and emotional geography perspectives (Koskela, 1999; Pain, 2000; 2001; 2009; Valentine, 1989), which conceptualise safety as socially, emotionally and spatially produced rather than solely determined by objective risks or technical interventions. Women's experiences in Utrecht reflected broader gendered power relations that shape feelings of vulnerability, belonging and comfort within public space. Through Lefebvre's (1967) concept of the right to the city and Fenster's (2005) discussion of the gendered right to the city, the behavioural adaptations described by participants can be understood as indicators of unequal experiences of urban freedom. While women formally have access to public space, their use of the city is often shaped by anticipation, caution and negotiation, affecting their ability to move through and participate in urban life on equal terms.

From a Global Studies perspective, this thesis highlights that questions of perceived unsafety are closely connected to debates on gender equality, social sustainability and inclusive urban development. Although Utrecht is generally considered a relatively safe city, the findings demonstrate that experiences of unsafety remain unevenly distributed and strongly influenced by gender. The findings connect particularly to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), which emphasise the importance of creating inclusive, accessible and safe public spaces. The study therefore contributes to broader discussions regarding whose experiences are prioritised in urban planning and how cities can become more socially sustainable, just and inclusive. At the same time, these findings should be interpreted primarily as reflecting the experiences of a relatively young group of women and do not necessarily capture the diverse ways in which safety may be experienced across different age groups, ethnic backgrounds or other social identities.

Finally, this study opens several directions for future research. First, it would be valuable to study how public spaces designed by women or through gender-sensitive planning approaches are experienced in terms of safety and belonging. Secondly, future studies could explore how men and people with different gender identities perceive safety in public space and how these experiences compare or overlap. In particular, intersectional research considering ethnicity, sexuality, disability and age would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how safety is experienced differently across whole urban populations.

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# Appendix

## A. Coding scheme

Appendix A provides the coding framework used in the qualitative thematic analysis. Open inductive coding led the analysis, which allowed themes and patterns to emerge from the empirical material. Subsequently, these initial open codes were grouped into broader top-level categories. While coding remained primarily data-driven, the development of the majority of the top-level codes was partially informed by the theoretical framework as well, making the process slightly deductive. In particular, the levels codes that relate to spatial, social emotional and behaviour dimensions of perceived safety in public spaces.

| **Initial open coding** | **Top-level code** | **Definition/determination** |
|---|---|---|
| Lighting, visibility, openness, enclosed spaces, escape possibilities, isolation, parks, vegetation, maintenance, cleanliness, residential environments, crowdedness, infrastructure | Spatial factors | References to physical and environmental characteristics of public space that shape women's perceived safety and feelings of comfort in urban environments. |
| Presence of others, absence of others, groups of men, harassment, informal social control, behaviour of others, loitering people, surveillance, gendered power relations, perceived threat | Social factors | References to the presence, behaviours, gender and social dynamics of people in public space that influence perceptions of safety or unsafety. |
| Fear, discomfort, comfort, vulnerability, anticipation, uncertainty, familiarity, predictability, feeling safe, feeling unsafe | Emotional experiences | Emotional responses connected to navigating public space and interpreting urban space. |
| Avoidance, route change, increased alertness, going together, calling someone, choosing lit areas, changing travel time, increasing speed, safety strategies | Behavioural adaptations | Behavioural changes and coping strategies women use to manage or negotiate perceived unsafety in everyday urban life. |
| Nighttime, darkness, evening travel, quiet moments, time of day | Temporal factors | References to how perceptions of safety change depending on time-related conditions or routines. |
| Past experiences, media influence, reputation of places, real-life examples, location-specific references | Contextual factors | Broader contextual influences shaping perceptions of safety including place-specific, societal and experiential influences. |
| Policy suggestions, participatory approaches, experiential approaches, campaign: reclaim the night | Policy and urban interventions | Suggestions, reflections or critiques related to urban planning, safety policy and spatial interventions. |
| Age, living in Utrecht, studying in Utrecht, working in Utrecht | Participant background | Demographic or contextual information about participants relevant to interpreting experiences. |

## B. Translation of original quotes

| | **English quote** | **Original Dutch quote** |
|---|---|---|
| **6.1.1** | *"I experience Utrecht overall as a very pleasant* city" (I5) | Ik ervaar Utrecht over het algemeen als een hele prettige stad |
| | *"I experience Utrecht as safe, actually" (I11)* | Ik ervaar Utrecht als veilig. Eigenlijk. |
| | *"[I]n Utrecht I almost never feel unsafe" (I3)* | in Utrecht voel ik me dus bijna niet onveilig. |
| | "*I actually feel quite safe in Utrecht. Because I often take the routes that I know. So, I know that those are usually busy places. Where many people are always cycling through. So that you are never really alone there*." | Ik voel me eigenlijk best wel veilig in Utrecht. Omdat ik vaak wel de routes neem die ik ken. Dus ik weet wel dat dat meestal wel drukke plekken zijn. Waar veel mensen altijd doorheen fietsen. Dus dat je nooit echt alleen bent daar. |
| | "*Yes, I think the city centre […] because there are also many cafés there, residential houses […]. I have the idea that you are never really alone there. And if something would happen, that there would indeed be people who hear you or who are quickly there*." (I2) | Ja, ik denk wel echt de binnenstad […] omdat daar ook natuurlijk heel veel cafeetjes zitten, woonhuizen. […] Ik heb het idee dat je daar wel een soort van nooit echt alleen bent. En als er iets zou gebeuren, dat er dan wel of inderdaad mensen zijn die je horen of snel ter plaatsen zijn. |
| **6.1.2** | "*Short answer: without men*." (I7) | Kort antwoord: zonder mannen |
| | "*What also actually immediately came to mind was no men*." (I8) | Wat ook eigenlijk gelijk in me opkwam was geen mannen. |
| | "*No men […] that might be nice in some way*." (I9) | Geen mannen. […] zou wel leuk zijn ergens |
| | "*No men*." (I11). | Geen mannen |
| | "*I would rather not know. Because it does not go wrong every time you are afraid. […] we are also often afraid more often than necessary." (I1)* | Dan weet ik het gewoon liever niet. Want het gaat natuurlijk ook niet iedere keer mis als je bang bent. […] We zijn ook wel veel vaker bang dan nodig. |
| | "*I think because of course the statistics also don't lie. That violence against women on the street often just happens by a man. So, then it is also a bit realistic*." (I7) | Dus ik denk omdat natuurlijk ook gewoon de cijfers, die liggen er ook niet om. Dat geweld tegen vrouwen op straat ook wel vaak gewoon door een man gebeurt. Dus dat het ook een beetje realistisch is. |
| | *"out of place*" (I3). | out of place |
| | *"groups of men*" (R12; R13; R24) | groepen mannen |
| | "*young men*" (R19; R39) | jonge mannen |
| | "*drunk men*" (R47) | dronken mannen |
| | "*nuisance-causing groups*" (R4) | groepen die overlast veroorzaken |
| | "*Yes, one hundred percent (100%). Both consciously and unconsciously, I think. […] I consciously look around me much more. End especially in the evening I* | Ja, honderd procent (100%). Zowel bewust als onbewust denk ik. […] Dat ik bewust veel meer om me heen ga kijken zeg maar. En zeker 's avonds bel ik |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *very often call people when I have to move from A to B*." (I1) | gewoon heel vaak mensen dan als ik me van A naar B moet verplaatsen. |
| | *"Taking another route for sure*." (I10) | Een andere route nemen sowieso wel. |
| | "*[D]efinitely walking faster […] or taking my earphones out sometimes if I already feel unsafe*." (I8) | Sowieso sneller wandelen […] Of m'n oortjes uit als ik me soms als ik me al onveilig voel. |
| | "*I think you no longer consciously think about it […] because […] you have been doing it this way for years."* (I2) | ik denk dat je er niet meer bewust over nadenkt […] omdat […] doet het al jaren zo op deze manier. |
| **6.2.1** | *"[T]he feeling of spaciousness, that you have in front of you, left, right, next to you, the idea, it sounds strange, but maybe that you have many possibilities to move away, so you can see people coming, you notice when people pass you."* (I2) | Ik denk omdat ik het gevoel van ruimtelijkheid, dat je over, dat je voor, links, rechts, naast je hebt voor jouw gevoel het idee, het klinkt gek, maar misschien dat je, je hebt veel uitwijkmogelijkheden dus je kan de mensen zien aankomen, je hebt het door als mensen je passeren. Het is gewoon een, ik weet niet, als je het voor je hebt, het is gewoon een prettig gevoel. |
| | *"[B]ecause I live on such a very long straight road. Then I sometimes have the feeling, if someone is also walking fifty meters behind me now, he just sees me go inside there.*" (I8) | [O]mdat ik dus aan zo'n hele lange rechte weg woon. Dan heb ik soms het gevoel van als er nu iemand ook al loopt die vijftig meter achter me, hij ziet mij gewoon dan daar naar binnen gaan. |
| | *"A few more little bends or something, yes, or interruptions or something in the street […] that you can kind of slalom through it. That not someone from the straight line can just see where I then walk." (I8)* | Iets meer soort bochtjes of zo, Ja, of onderbrekingen of zo in de straat. […] dat je een beetje daardoorheen kan slalommen. Dat niet iemand van de rechte lijn gewoon kan zien waar ik dan heen loop. |
| | "*With a narrower street, if someone is in that street, then it's always just a bit less chill, I experience myself. I prefer that you can just walk around it. Or that you can at least clearly see what is going on. And you have some of those roads where there are always a lot of bushes. […] anything and everything could be in there."* (I6) | Bij een smaller straatje, als er iemand in dat straatje is, dan is het net altijd minder chill, ervaar ik zelf. Ikheb liever dat je er gewoon omheen kan lopen. Of dat je gewoon in elk geval goed kan zien wat er gaande is. En je hebt sommige van die wegen waar altijd heel veel bosjes zijn. […] daar kan echt van alles en nog wat in zitten |
| | "*open*" (R5; R21; R33; R40; R46) | Open |
| | "*spacious"* (R34; R55) | Ruimtelijk |
| | "*visibility*" (R32; R37; R47). | Overzichtelijk |
| | *"[T]he fewer potential danger spots there are, like dark corners where someone can hide, the less I have to pay attention to it and the more I can see in one glance what is happening. Because I will still stay alert, even if there are escape routes and no dark corners. But then I do not have the feeling that I need* | Dus hoe minder potentiële gevaar dingen er zijn, zoals donkerhoekjes, waar iemand zich kan verstoppen, hoe minder ik op dingen hoef te letten en hoe meer ik in één oogopslag kan zien wat er gebeurt. Ik denk vooral dat dat het is, want ik blijf wel alert, ook al zijn er vluchtroutes en ook al zijn er geen |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *to get through as quickly as possible because there is a dark corner and maybe someone is there."* (I9) | donkerhoekjes. Maar dan heb ik niet minder het gevoel van, ik moet hier nu zelf zo snel mogelijk doorheen fietsen, want daar is een donkerhoekje en misschien zit daar iemand. |
| | "*I think that the type of light is really very important for me. Whether it is a bit like yellow light for example and that it is kind of nice light or cozy is maybe the right word. I feel much more comfortable with that than for example those green lampposts or those little bridges with those green lights. […] And white, fluorescent light I also find terrible, I do not like that at all. What exactly the difference is between those I cannot really say because it is of course all light and in both cases you can in principle see what you need to see, but it is more about the atmosphere it gives off I think."* (I1) | Ik denk dat het type licht voor mij echt heel belangrijk is. Of dat een beetje ja geel licht is bijvoorbeeld en dat dat dan een beetje mooi licht is ofzo knus is misschien het goeie woord. Daar voel ik me dan veel lekkerder bij dan bij bijvoorbeeld van die groene lantaarnpalen of van die bruggetjes met van die groene lichten […] En wit TL licht vind ik ook vreselijk, hou ik ook helemaal niet van. Wat dan het verschil precies is daartussen kan ik niet echt zeggen want het is natuurlijk allebei licht en allebei zie je in principe wat je moet zien, maar het gaat meer om de sfeer toch die dat uitstraalt denk ik. |
| **6.2.2** | "*places where I have heard women have been harassed under a bridge, in a forest, a long deserted road*" (R23) | In de nacht op donkere, rustige plekken en plekken waarvan ik heb gehoord dat vrouwen er zijn lastiggevallen, onder een brug, in een bos, een lange verlaten weg |
| | *"she consciously choosing routes with fewer isolated areas" (R47)* | bewust routes met minder afgelegen plekken nemen |
| | "*it is sheltered and you do not really have an escape if something happens*" (R48) | het voelt beschut en niemand kan je zien als er iets vervelends zou gebeuren |
| | *"you don't have a lot of alleys or something like that. Or tunnels or those kinds of things."* (I10) | je niet veel van die steegjes of zo hebt. Of tunnels of dat soort dingen. |
| | "*grim*" (R29; R42; R48; R49) | grimmig |
| | "*claustrophobic*" (R8) | claustrofobisch |
| | "*cramped*" (R25) | benauwd |
| | "*trapped feeling*" (R1) | opgesloten gevoel |
| | "*If I cycle from my place to Lunetten, […] there is a little bridge along the water. Without lighting. Then I really think, if I get pulled off my bike somewhere, it would be here. There is also no street lighting. There are no other people."* (I3) | Als ik vanuit mijn na Lunette fiets […] daar is een bruggetje langs het water. Zonder verlichting. Dan denk ik echt, als ik ergens van mijn fiets word getrokken, dan is het hier. Daar is ook geen straatverlichting. Er zijn geen andere mensen. |
| | *"Because the bike path is poorly lit. Next to the bike path there is just a kind of meadow or something. So there aren't really people. And there is only a kind of highway next to it. So you also can't* | Omdat het fietspad is gewoon slecht verlicht. Er zit daar naast het fietspad gewoon een soort weiland of zo. Dus er zijn niet echt mensen. En er is alleen maar een soort snelweg daarnaast. Dus |

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| | *quickly wave at a car. It's just one very long road. So you also can't really quickly take another road." (I10)* | dan kan je ook niet even snel naar een auto zwaaien. Het is gewoon één hele lange weg. Dus je kan ook niet echt snel een andere weg op. |
| | "*Very enclosed, nowhere to go if something goes wrong*" (R12) | Erg afgeschermd, geen plek om naartoe te gaan als iets niet goed gaat |
| | "*You can only go two ways if you are harassed*" (R14) | Je kan maar twee kanten op als je wordt lastiggevallen |
| | "*Very narrow, easy to get cornered*" (R17) | Heel smal, kan makkelijk ingesloten worden |
| | "*Hidden from others and only one way to go*" (R18) | Verscholen van de rest en maar 1 kant om op te gaan |
| | "*It is an unpleasant idea that if something happens, you cannot go anywhere*" (R33) | Het is wel een naar idee dat stel er gebeurd hier iets, dat je geen kant op kunt. |
| | "*There is light, but you cannot avoid people*" (R35) | Wel licht, maar je kan niet uitwijken voor mensen |
| | *"If it's remote it is scarier than if it's not remote. Like, if there are still a lot of people there. Then I think, they've all passed there as well, for example" (I4)* | Als het afgelegen is is het wel enger dan als het niet afgelegen is. Zeg maar als er nog heel veel mensen daar zijn. Dan denk ik, die zijn er ook allemaal langs gegaan bijvoorbeeld. |
| | *"[M]aybe if you made that completely open and just had one big descent, then maybe that would be different. Because then the bike parking would also still be visible to people outside." (I9)* | [M]isschien als je dat helemaal open zou maken en gewoon één grote afdaling zou hebben dan dat misschien wel anders is. Omdat dan de fietsenstalling ook nog wel zichtbaar is voor mensen buitenaf. |
| | "*in parking garages if you are by yourself, you also do not feel completely happy*" (I6). | in parkeergarages voel je je natuurlijk als je eentje bent zelf ook niet helemaal blij. |
| **6.2.3** | *"I do think that during the day, for example, greenery would be positive […] the atmosphere, the environment would be nice. […] But it's also difficult, because when I think of a dark forest, I also wouldn't want to walk there." (I4)* | Ik denk wel dat overdag bijvoorbeeld groen positief zou zijn. […] de sfeer, omgeving zou zijn. […] Maar het is ook lastig, want als ik dan denk aan een donker bos zou ik ook niet graag willen lopen. |
| | *"trees instead of bushes" (I6)* | Bomen in plaats van bosjes |
| | *"You just want to be able to see well. With a tree you can look past it or look through it". (I6)* | Je wilt gewoon goed kunnen kijken.Met een boom kijk je er langs of kijk je er doorheen. |
| | *"I also think dense vegetation. That that also has an influence on how I feel. For example if you are on a bike path and on the right and left you have bushes or a lot of vegetation. You of course do not know who can suddenly jump out from there." (I2)* | Ik denk ook wel dichte begroeiing. Dat dat ook wel invloed heeft op hoe ik mij voel. Dan stel je de fietspad en rechts en links heb je struiken of veel begroeiing. Je weet natuurlijk niet wie daar ineens uit kan komen springen. |

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| | *"I do think parks are very good for how a city looks and how nice it is to live in a city. But a park is actually only nice if you walk there with someone else. So, I would like there to be green, but in such a way that it also feels safe to go there alone". (I9)* | En ik vind parken wel heel goed voor hoe een stad oogt en hoe fijn het is om in een stad te wonen. Maar een park is eigenlijk alleen chill als je met iemand anders in loopt. Dus ik zou graag willen dat er wel groen is, maar op zo'n manier dat het wel ook veilig voelt om daar alleen in te gaan. |
| | *"During the day it looks fine. I would not walk here in the evening" (R22)* | Overdag ziet het er prima uit. Ik zou hier savonds niet lopen. |
| | *"During the day I feel safe in the park" (R25)* | Overdag voel ik me veilig in het park |
| | *"Daylight, green environment, nothing suspicious visible" (R36)* | Daglicht, groene omgeving, geen gekke dingen te zien |
| | *"It is a nice park and light outside". (R58)* | Het is een mooi parkje en het is ook licht buiten. |
| | *"There should be a lot of art and a lot of greenery. But not big bushes where things can hide behind them. Just trees or flowers and things like that." (I5)* | En veel kunst en veel groen. Maar niet grote bosjes waar niks achter zit. Gewoon bomen of bloemen en zoiets. |
| | *"I think that if I had beautiful things to look at while cycling home or walking on the street, I would be less focused on my own feeling of unsafety. And more on appreciating the art. And maybe others would also be inspired, so they are less bored and don't start bothering people." (I5).* | Ik denk dat ik sowieso, als ik mooie dingen te zien zou hebben. Als ik naar huis zou fietsen of over straat zou lopen. Dan zou ik minder bezig zijn met mijn eigen onveiligheid. Maar meer met de bewondering van de kunst. En misschien raken anderen ook geïnspireerd doordat ze minder verveeld zijn. En mensen gaan lastigvallen. |
| **6.2.4** | *"Quiet residential area, expect nothing strange, daylight" (R2)* | Rustige woonwijk, verwacht geen gekke dingen, daglicht |
| | *"Residential area, many people who can see and hear you" (R5)* | Woonwijk, veel mensen die je kunnen zien en horen |
| | *"It looks like a safe residential area" (R23)* | Het ziet eruit als een veilige woonwijk |
| | *"Close to houses where you could ring a doorbell if needed" (R30)* | Dichtbij huizen waar je kan aanbellen indien dat nodig is. |
| | *"Light, many houses where you could ring a doorbell" (R47)* | Licht, veel huizen waar je zou kunnen aanbellen |
| | *"[C]ertain residential neighbourhoods where there is always a light on inside people's houses. Where there are benches and plant pots in front of the house. Where there are children's bikes outside. Those kinds of things always make me feel safe. […] in a neighbourhood where windows are broken there are also people who wouldn't hurt a fly. But still, residential* | [B]epaalde woonwijken waar gewoon altijd een lichtje aan is. In huis bij mensen in huis bij mensen. Waar bankjes en plantenbakken voor de deur staan. Waar kinderfietsjes voor de deur staan. Dat soort dingen voelt me altijd wel veilig bij. […] in een wijk waar inderdaad die ruiten zijn ingegooid wonen ook mensen die geen vlieg kwaad zouden doen. Maar het is in ieder |

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| | *neighbourhoods are where I feel the safest." (I5)* | geval in woonwijken waar ik me het allerveiligst voel. |
| | *"For a while I lived near Kanaleneiland, well there were a lot of those flat buildings […] that really appealed to me less than something with more low-rise for example and something that feels more like a house." (I1)* | Een tijdje woonde ik tegen Kanaleneiland aan, nou daar stonden heel veel van die flatgebouwen […] dat sprak me wel echt minder aan dan iets meer laagbouw bijvoorbeeld en wat meer echt van een soort huis aan voelde. |
| | *"If you have a house and you see that there is light on downstairs then you know oh there are just people at home or you can more easily form an image of what is happening there. And with such a flat building I have no idea. The people on the 14th floor really have no view of what is happening on the street. And the other way around I also have no idea who lives there. So then I have this feeling that everyone in such a building can actually not mean anything for the people on the street. And people in a house can do that more in my opinion." (I1)* | Als je dan een huis hebt en je ziet dat er beneden licht brand dan weet je oh daar zijn gewoon mensen thuis of na ja daar kan je sneller een plaatje van vormen wat daar gebeurt. En met zo'n flatgebouw heb ik geen idee. Ja de mensen op de 14e verdieping die hebben echt geen zich op wat er op straat gebeurt. En andersom weet ik ook helemaal niet wie daar wonen. Dus dan heb ik zo'n gevoel dat iedereen in zo'n gebouw kan eigenlijk niks betekenen voor de mensen op straat. En mensen in een huis die kunnen dat voor mijn gevoel wel meer. |
| | *"I also associate concrete blocks with unsafety. Just garages, vacant office buildings […] I find that again radiates much more coldness, and therefore a bit grim. And I think lower buildings also feel less scary than very tall buildings, because you feel less enclosed." (I9)* | Ik associeer betonblokken ook met onveiligheid. Gewoon garages, leegstaande kantoorpanden […] en dat vind ik dan weer heel veel killheid uit te stralen, en dus een beetje grimmig. En ik denk dat lagere gebouwen ook minder eng voelen dan hele hoge gebouwen, omdat je je aan een minder ingesloten voelt. |
| | *"[M]aybe using a lot of greenery. […] I find wood for example also radiates much more warmth, so that gives me a safer feeling too."* | [M]isschien wel veel groen gebruiken. […] En ik vind hout bijvoorbeeld ook veel meer warmte uitstralen, dus dat geeft me ook een veiliger gevoel. |
| **6.3.1** | *"I feel safer when I know there are other people. Because if something happens, yes, you have people around you who can help you." (I3)* | Ik voel me dan wel echt veiliger als ik weet dat er andere mensen zijn. Want stel er gebeurt iets, ja, je hebt mensen om je heen die jou kunnen helpen. |
| | *"I actually also feel safe when there is just a lot of activity somewhere. Often in the city centre. If you of course have all the light from shops and such. […] I think because there are just a lot of people around you. When you have the feeling that you are alone, that is when you are of course also most vulnerable" (I6)* | ik voel me dus ook veilig als er gewoon ergens heel veel reuring is. Vaak in de binnenstad wel. Als je natuurlijk al het licht hebt vanuit winkels en zo. […] Ik denk omdat er dan gewoon heel veel mensen om je heen zijn. Waar je het gevoel hebt dat je alleen bent. Dat je dan op die momenten ook natuurlijk het meest kwetsbaar bent. |

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| | *"[T]hat you have the feeling that there are other people as well. That you're not alone. That's the main thing, I think. […] Because then you have the feeling that if something happens, someone can hear you or that you can go somewhere." (I10)* | Zodat je het gevoel hebt dat er ook andere mensen zijn. Dat je niet alleen bent. Dat denk ik vooral […] Omdat je dan het gevoel hebt dat stel er gebeurt is dat iemand je kan horen of dat je ergens naartoe kan. |
| | *"I don't necessarily rely on other people to help me. But I do trust that people themselves then have less courage to do something." (I6)* | Ik vertrouw niet perse op andere mensen om mij te helpen. Maar ik vertrouw er wel op dat mensen gewoon zelf dan minder lef hebben om iets te doen. |
| | *"I do have the feeling that fewer things happen if there are more people around. […] I always feel that if someone is seen doing something. That someone is less likely to do it." (I11)* | En ik heb toch wel het gevoel dat er minder dingen gebeuren als er meer mensen bij zijn. […] Maar ik heb altijd het gevoel dat als iemand dan gezien worden wat iemand doet. Dat iemand dan minder snel dat doet. |
| | *"Many people, cameras, facilities" (R3)* | Meer mensen, camera's, faciliteiten |
| | *"Many people, so safe" (R25)* | Meer mensen, dus veilig |
| | *"Many people, so safer" (R40)* | Meer mensen, dus veiliger |
| | *"Maybe it is also less safe with students. Because they can get drunk. And that's also something that you don't feel comfortable with. But then, they actually make it busier in the evenings. And if you only live with older people, then they are just in bed." (I11)* | Misschien is het minder veilig met studenten. Omdat die juist dan dronken kunnen worden. En ook een soort van waar je je niet fijn bij kan voelen. Alleen ik heb wel dat zij er juist voor zorgen dat het juist drukker is avonds. En als je alleen maar met oudere mensen woont. Dat je dan die gewoon op bed liggen. |
| | *"If you walk down a street and there is a group of people. Like twenty people. And you have to walk past them alone. Then I don't like that again." (I10)* | Stel je loopt door een straat en er staat een groep aan mensen. Van twintig mensen of zo. En je moet daar in je eentje langs. Dan vind ik het weer niet chill. |
| | *"actually, find[s] individuals scarier than groups." (I1)* | vind[t] individuen eigenlijk enger dan groepen. |
| | *"It is so crowded that it becomes unclear. People can come from all directions." (R6)* | Het is er zo druk dat het onoverzichtelijk wordt. Ook omdat overal stromen mensen vandaan kunnen komen. Daarnaast ben ik wel eens nageroepen en lastiggevallen in het donker op deze plek |
| | *"Depends on what kind of people are there" (R16),* | Hangt er vanaf wat voor mensen er zijn |
| | *"Many people, people hanging around, unclear environment" (R37)* | Veel mensen, rondhangende mensen, onoverzichtelijk |
| **6.3.2** | *"Now I think I feel safer than when I had just moved there […] I also just didn't know the city very well then, so that didn't help either, because then you also don't really know where you are." (I7)* | Nu voel ik me denk ik wel veiliger dan toen ik er net woonde […] En ik kende toen de stad ook gewoon niet zo goed, dus dat hielp ook niet, want dan weet je ook niet helemaal van waar je bent. |

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| | *"I also just feel safe actually […] it is also not such a big city. So, I always know where I am. And how I have to get somewhere. So that also helps. That I just know where I am going. And because of that I also felt safe." (I8)* | Dat ik me hier gewoon fijn voelde. […] het is ook niet zo'n grote stad. Dus ik weet ook altijd waar ik ben. En hoe ik ergens moet komen. Dus dat helpt ook wel. Dat ik gewoon weet waar ik heen ga. En daardoor voelde ik me ook veilig. |
| | *"When you can't see their face, then people are scary. If they hide themselves. So, if they keep walking behind you. Or if they wear a hood. Or if they sit in a big car. Then they are scary." (I5)* | Als je niet het gezicht kan zien, dan zijn mensen eng. Als ze zich verborgen houden. Dus als ze achter je blijven lopen. Of als ze een capuchon op hebben. Of als ze in een hele grote auto zitten. Dan zijn ze eng. |
| | *"[B]asically people are not scary. They are just unknown." (I5)* | [I]n de basis zijn mensen gewoon ook niet eng. Ze zijn alleen onbekend. |
| | *"Familiar, trusted place nearby" (R25)* | Bekende veetrouwde plek in de buurt |
| | *"Clear overview, daytime and familiar street" (R31)* | Overzichtelijk, overdag, en bekende straat. |
| | *"Familiar place, there are often other people on the street" (R42)* | Bekende plek, zijn vaak andere mensen op straat, wel donker |
| | *"I do feel safe here. Actually. In general. I think it is because there are just many students. So, I just feel at home here. As if I fit here. I do not stand out or anything. In my feeling." (I8)* | Ik voel me hier wel veilig. Eigenlijk. Over het algemeen. Ik denk dat het komt omdat er zijn gewoon veel studenten. Dus ik voel me hier gewoon thuis. Alsof ik hier pas. Ik val hier niet op of zo. Voor mijn gevoel. |
| | *"I also think that maybe one of the reasons I feel less safe there is that I am just out of place there. And that is not necessarily a bad thing, that can be said. But they would maybe feel the same here. Just different people." (I3)* | Ik denk ook wel dat misschien een van de redenen dat ik me daar ook iets minder veilig voel is dat ik gewoon out of place daar. En dat is op zich niet erg, dat mag ook wel gezegd worden. Maar zij zouden dat hier bijvoorbeeld ook sneller zijn. Gewoon andere mensen |
| | *"in general it feels safer if you already know what the place looks like. Because then you know what to expect." (I10)* | Maar ik denk, het lijkt me in het algemeen veiliger als je al weet hoe het eruit ziet waar je bent. Want dan weet je wat je kan verwachten. |
| | *"In every place you sometimes encountered people where you thought what are you doing here and with what intentions are you here. […] so that made that I sometimes also felt unsafe in Utrecht." (I1)* | Op elke plek kwam je af en toe wel plekken tegen waarvan je dacht wat doe je hier en met welke intenties ben je hier […] dus dat maakte dat ik me toch ook in Utrecht wel soms onveilig voelde. |
| | *"There are often strange people sitting on the benches along the canal" (R15)* | Er zitten vaak rare mensen op die bankjes langs de singel |
| | *"There are often men hanging around and I prefer to avoid that" (R29)* | Er hangen vaak mannen als het donker is en dan loop ik liever om |
| | *"This path feels less safe because there are often shady people in the evening" (R35)* | Wandelpad voelt onveiliger omdat er vaker ongure types zitten in de avond. |

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| | *"Because of the benches there are often people hanging around" (R56)* | Door de bankjes hangen er vaken mensen |
| | *"I know there are often unpleasant people here" (R12)* | Ik weet dat hier vaak geen fijne personen rondlopen |
| | *"The place is also known as unsafe" (R23)* | De plek staat ook bekend als onveilige plek. |
| | *"I often walk through quickly because I know it is not the safest place. There are sometimes types of people I don't feel comfortable with" (R33)* | Ik loop er vaak redelijk snel doorheen omdat ik weet dat het niet de meest veilige plek is. er lopen soms naar mijn idee ook bepaalde types rond die ik niet heel chill vind. |
| | *"I think regular houses are definitely nicer. I have the idea that when you cycle past an apartment building, there are people hanging around near a stairwell or something. That there are also some shady things happening, like with some drugs and such." (I7)* | Ik denk sowieso fijner wel woonhuizen. Ik heb het idee als je langs een flat fietst dat er een beetje mensen zich ophouden dan in de buurt van zo'n trappenhuis of zo. Dat er ook een beetje vage dingen gebeuren met een beetje drugs en zo. |
| | *"In general, I feel more comfortable if I see a woman on the street in the dark than a man. Now I don't know if I would exclude all men, because that's also a bit generalising. But it is true that if I encounter a man, I'm more likely to think about how I should be on my guard than if I just see, for example, a middle-aged woman." (I4)* | Maar algemeen voel ik me fijner als ik een vrouw in het donker op straat zie dan een man. Nou weet ik niet of ik dan alle mannen zou uitsluiten, want dat is ook wel een beetje generaliserend. Het is wel als ik een man tegenkom dat ik eerder denk hoe moet ik op m'n hoede zijn dan als ik gewoon een vrouw van middelbare leeftijd ofzo zie. |
| | *"If I'm walking on the street and I see a man or a woman. Yes, men are scary. […] With women I think, okay, we are allies." (I5)* | Als ik zelf op straat loop en ik zie een man of een vrouw. Ja, mannen zijn eng. […] Bij vrouwen denk ik, oké, wij zijn bondgenoten. |
| | *"I have never felt unsafe on the street because of a woman." (I7)* | Ik heb me denk ik nog nooit onveiliger gevoeld op straat door een vrouw. |
| | *"I feel like it just happens less often that men are harassed on the street. I mean, it also already comes from the fact that I am catcalled […] That when you walk on the street, you stand out as a woman to men simply as a kind of object. And that is just not the other way around. […] I would never catcall a man." (I8)* | Ik bedoel voor mijn gevoel gebeurt het gewoon minder vaak dat mannen op straat dan worden lastgevallen. Ik bedoel, het komt ook al doordat ik gewoon ook word gecatcalled […] Dat als je op straat loopt, dat je dus opvalt als vrouw voor mannen gewoon als een soort object. En dat is gewoon niet andersom. […] Ik zou nooit een man catcallen. |
| | *"I think for me it also really matters whether I am just on my way to a bar or a restaurant or something. Or to my house. That when I am on my way home, then I do not like the idea if someone maybe comes after me. Then **he** really* | Ik denk dat het bij mij ook heel erg uitmaakt of ik gewoon onderweg ben naar dus een bar of een restaurant of iets. Of naar mijn huis. Dat als ik onderweg naar huis ben... Dat ik het dan geen fijn idee vind als er iemand achter me aan misschien komt. Dan komt hij echt in |

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| | *comes into my space. And then **he** also sees where I go inside." (I8)* | mijn space. En dan ziet hij ook waar ik naar binnen ga. |
| | *"men also don't want to be scary […] they just sometimes don't realise that they are." (I5)* | Mannen willen ook niet eng zijn, hè? Ze weten het gewoon soms niet. |
| | *"People I feel less comfortable with or who might approach you or who are sitting there using [substances] or causing nuisance. I prefer not to pass by them." (I2)* | Mensen waar ik me minder prettig bij voel of die misschien kunnen aanspreken of die daar zitten te gebruiken of overlast veroorzaken. Daar loop ik dan liever niet langs. |
| | *"People who are confused are the scariest. […] They are unpredictable. You do not know what they are going to do." (I5)* | Mensen die in de war zijn, die zijn het allerengst. […] Ze zijn onvoorspelbaar. Je weet niet wat ze gaan doen. |
| | *"I think "weird people" cause the biggest feeling of unsafety. And then maybe a group of men. And with men and women in general… I think I do feel safer with women." (I10)* | Ik denk dat gekkies wel het grootste onveiligheidsgevolg geeft. En daarna misschien een groep mannen. En bij gewoon mannen en vrouwen in het algemeen denk ik, dat ik wel sowieso een veiliger gevoel heb bij vrouwen. |
| **6.4.1** | *"If you don't know [who or what is out there], then I think it is more the fear of what could be there than that there actually is someone. Because when you really have never seen someone come out of the bushes, but you know what could be there, then you are still a bit anxious on your bike." (I7)* | En als je dat niet weet, dan is het meer denk ik de angst van wat er kan zijn dan dat het daadwerkelijk iemand is. Want wanneer je nou echt iemand hebt die je nog nooit uit de bosjes hebt gezien, maar je weet wat er kan zijn, dat je dan toch een beetje angstig op de fiets zit. |
| | *"That Anne Faber case […] because of that, I think now like I'm not just going to walk alone through the forest. Not even during the day." (I10)* | Die Anne Faber trouwens […] Dus daardoor denk ik nou niet hier van ik ga lekker m'n eentje door het bos lopen. Ook niet overdag |
| | *"I do have to say that as a woman, my biggest fear is being raped. I'm so afraid of that. […] I don't think men have the same existential fear of being raped. […] Not the humiliation that we are afraid of." (I5)* | Ik moet wel zeggen dat als vrouw mijn allergrootste angst is om verkracht te worden. Ik ben daar zo bang voor. […] Maar ik denk niet dat mannen dezelfde existentiële angst hebben. Om verkracht te worden. […] Niet voor de vernedering waar wij bang voor zijn. |
| | *"I am afraid that I will be pulled off a bike. And what happens after that I don't know […]. My fear is really that someone physically touches me, in whatever way. It can be a stabbing. It can be rape." (I6)* | Ik ben bang dat ik van een fiets wordt getrokken. En wat er daarna gebeurt weet ik niet. […] Mijn angst is echt fat iemand fysiek aan me komt, op wat voor manier dan ook. Het kan een messteek zijn. Het kan verkrachting zijn. |
| | *"I am actually not that afraid that things will be stolen. But more indeed that you are either just hit or something. […] That could then indeed also continue* | Ik ben eigenlijk niet zo bang dat er dingen worden gestolen. Maar meer inderdaad dat je toch of gewoon wordt geslagen of zo. […] Maar dat dan ook inderdaad zo kunnen doorlopen in |

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| | *into rape. Also, a little bit, I think, that they follow you home." (I11)* | verkrachting. Toch ook een beetje denk ik dat ze je achtervolgen naar huis is. |
| | *"Maybe men are more afraid of being robbed or beaten up. I think as a man you are much less likely to be afraid of being raped. Or even less afraid of being murdered." (I10)* | Misschien zijn mannen eerder bang om bijvoorbeeld beroofd of zo te worden of in elkaar geslagen. Ik denk dat je als man wel echt minder snel bang bent om verkracht te worden of zo. Je bent zelfs gewoon minder snel bang dat je vermoord wordt. |
| **6.4.2** | *"I consciously look around me much more […] and especially in the evening I very often call people." (I1)* | Dat ik bewust veel meer om me heen ga kijken zeg maar […] en zeker 's avonds bel ik gewoon heel vaak mensen. |
| | *"That I just become very aware of my surroundings and think okay, who is cycling behind me? Who is sitting there? And that I actually keep doing the same thing I was doing, but I just become more alert." (I11)* | Dat ik gewoon heel bewust word van mijn omgeving en denk oké, wie fietst er achter me? Wie zit er daar? En dat ik dan wel eigenlijk hetzelfde blijf doen wat ik deed maar dat ik gewoon meer alerter word. |
| | *"For example, myself, I am always quite aware if someone is walking closely behind me." (I2)* | Maar zelf bijvoorbeeld, dat ik daar best wel mee bezig ben of er iemand achter me loopt, dichtbij. |
| **6.4.3** | "*cozy*" (I1), "*pleasant*" (I2; I4; I7), "*grim*" (I9) or "*uncomfortable*" (I3), | "gezellig", "fijn", "grimmig", "oncomfortabel" |
| | *"the type of light is really very important for [her]. Whether it is a bit like yellow light for example and that it is kind of nice light or cozy" (I1).* | dat het type licht voor mij echt heel belangrijk is. Of dat een beetje geel licht is bijvoorbeeld en dat dat dan een beetje mooi licht is of knus |
| | *"about the atmosphere it gives off" (I1).* | om de sfeer toch die dat uitstraalt denk ik |
| | *"They do use red bricks, and I think that already makes a difference compared to the more grayish brick, […] I find that again radiates much more coldness and feels therefore a bit grim" (I9)* | Ze maken wel gebruik van rode stenen, en ik vind dat dus wel al een verschil maken met meer die grijzige baksteen, […] en dat vind ik dan weer heel veel killheid uit te stralen, en dus een beetje grimmig. |
| | *"feeling" (R31, R37, R57) or "atmosphere" (R27, R32, R42)* | "Gevoel" of "Sfeer" |
| **6.5.1** | *"In any case that I sometimes for example turn off my noise-cancelling on my earphones. Or that I call someone. So that because of that noise-cancelling I am more aware of what I can hear around me. I always keep my phone in my pocket, close by. And in terms of route, even if I have to cycle five minutes longer, I often choose the more pleasant route." (I2)* | Sowieso dat ik soms juist bijvoorbeeld m'n noise-canceling uitdoe op m'n oortjes. Of met iemand inderdaad ga bellen. Dus dat ik inderdaad door die noise-canceling meer bewust ben van wat er om me heen kan horen. M'n telefoon houd ik altijd wel in m'n zak wel dichtbij. En qua route, ik neem wel meestal, ook al moet ik vijf minuten langer fietsen, kies ik wel vaak dan gewoon de prettige route. |
| | *"If I feel unsafe, then I know that I will cycle a bit faster. Or for example cycle a* | als ik me onveilig voel, dan weet ik wel ook, ga wat sneller fietsen. Of |

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| | *bit more in the middle of the road instead of directly along the sidewalk. […] Because, imagine there is someone standing on the sidewalk who wants to pull you off or something." (I3)* | bijvoorbeeld iets meer midden op de weg in plaats van direct langs een stoep […] Nou stel, er staat toch iemand op de stoep die je zo eraf wil trekken of zo. |
| | *"Sometimes walk with my keys between my fingers." (I6)* | En ik loop weleens met mijn sleutels tussen mijn hand. |
| | *"Also sometimes calling while cycling, but also sometimes taking another route. Sometimes leaving earlier or later so that someone could cycle with me. […] In the evening, so when it is dark, I do notice that I would actually rather choose the main road." (I9)* | Ook weleens gebeld tijdens fietsen, maar ook weleens een andere route genomen. Weleens eerder of later weggegaan, zodat er iemand mee kon fietsen. […] Maar in de avond, dus als het donker is, merk ik wel dat ik eigenlijk dan liever voor de hoofdweg zou kiezen. |
| | *"It makes no sense at all. Because if I am calling a friend while I am cycling, it essentially does not make me less of a prey for anyone." (I9)* | Want het slaat helemaal nergens op. Want als ik met een vriendin aan het bellen ben, tijdens dat ik aan het fietsen ben, maakt het me in essentie niet minder een prooi voor wie dan ook. |
| **6.5.2** | *"Cycling around things. Or just not doing it. If I know it's a shitty route at night. Or indeed asking people to cycle together. Or if I see people standing somewhere, then I don't really want to pass them. Then I go around them or take another route." (I4)* | Ook wel om fietsen. Of gewoon niet doen. Als ik weet dat het s'nachts een kutte route is. Of inderdaad mensen vragen om samen te fietsen. Ja. Of als ik inderdaad mensen zie staan. Dan denk ik dan ga ik niet heel graag langs. Dan ook eromheen of een andere route. |
| | *"If I'm somewhere and you have to go through a not very nice part… then I just wait until someone else is also leaving. Then you either stay longer or shorter." (I10)* | Dat ik dan ergens ben en je moetdoor niet zo'n chill stuk… dan ga ik gewoon wachten tot er iemand ook gaat. Dan blijf je of langer of korter. |
| | *"But there is a certain limit to it, I think. […] If I have to walk home for fifteen minutes and I can walk more safely in twenty minutes, then I would do that. But if I have to walk home for five minutes and the detour is twenty minutes, then I might just run on that five-minute route." (I10)* | Er zit wel een bepaalde grens denk ik aan. […] Als ik naar huis moet lopen voor een kwartier en ik kan veiliger lopen voor twintig minuten dan zou ik dat wel doen. Maar als je naar huis moet lopen voor vijf minuten en de omweg is twintig minuten dan zou ik misschien wel rennen op de weg van vijf minuten. |
| | *"On the other hand, you also cannot suddenly decide, I think, to just never go outside in the evening again or something." (I11)* | Maar ja, aan de andere kant je kan ook niet opeens beslissen, denk ik om gewoon nooit meer naar buiten te gaan s'avonds of zo. |
| | *"But sometimes I adjust my behaviour to it, and sometimes I also just do not feel like adjusting my behaviour to it." (I9)* | Maar soms mij gedrag erop aanpassen, en soms heb ik ook gewoon dat ik geen zin heb om mijn gedrag erop aan te passen. |

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| **6.5.3** | *"I hope that men are aware of their role towards women on the street." (I1)* | Ik hoop dat mannen zichzelf bewust zijn van hun rol ten overstaande van vrouwen op straat. |
| | *"But I actually think it is mainly about the image that certain men have of women. […] And that they have framed women in their heads, consciously or unconsciously, as something they have a right to, or something that is worth less, or low. […] We differ from each other in certain things, but we do not differ in how many rights we have, so to speak. Or we should not differ in that." (I9)* | Maar ik denk eigenlijk wel dat het vooral is dat het gaat over het beeld dat bepaalde mannen van vrouwen hebben. […] En dat zij vrouwen eigenlijk in hun hoofd hebben geregisseerd, bewust of onbewust, of iets waar zij recht op hebben, of wel iets wat minder waard is, of wel laag. […] We verschillen van elkaar in bepaalde dingen, maar we verschillen niet in hoeveel rechten we hebben, zeg maar. Of daar zouden we niet in moeten verschillen. |
| | *"Because I actually think that if catcalling, for example, would no longer happen, I would already feel much safer. Because then I would not be constantly reminded that I am being looked at that way." (I8)* | Want ik denk eigenlijk dat als catcallen bijvoorbeeld al niet meer zou gebeuren, dat ik me dan al veel veiliger zou voelen. Omdat ik er dan niet zo steeds aan wordt herinnerd dat ik zo wordt bekeken, zeg maar. |
| | *"Just like with […] Femicide. That is so often just made smaller. Or that the new says: "Woman dead". And then you click on the article and then it says, man has been arrested. And then I think, why is the main text not just, woman murdered by man." (I8)* | Net zoals met […] Femicide. Dat wordt zo vaak gewoon kleiner gemaakt. Of dat het nieuws zegt: Vrouw dood. En dan klik je op artikel en dan staat er, man is aangehouden. En dan denk ik, waarom is niet de hoofd tekst gewoon, vrouw vermoord door man. |
| | *"I still think there remains a bit of defensiveness [among men]. Like yes, but I do not do that. […] But then you have to realize that it is still caused by men as a group. So, if you can contribute something to make someone feel safer, then you would always do that, I think." (I7)* | Ik denk toch dat daar blijft ook een beetje een soort defensiveness in. Van ja, maar ik doe het toch niet. […]Maar dan moet je wel eens beseffen dat het wel gewoon door mannen als groep. Dus als jij dan iets kan bijdragen om iemand veiliger te laten voelen, dan zou je dat wel altijd doen, lijkt mij. |
| | *"I've also had conversations with men who actually do that consciously. That if they feel they are walking behind a woman at night, they make themselves visible by walking on the other side of the street." (I5)* | Maar ik heb ook gesprek gehad met mannen die dat ook wel echt doen. Die expres, als ze voelen dat ze 's nachts, dan laten ze zich zien door aan de andere kant van de straat te lopen. |

## C. Guide for semi-structured interview

Thank you for being willing to participate in this interview.
For my master's thesis, I am conducting research on how women experience safety and unsafety in public space in Utrecht, and how this relates to the physical and social design of the city. I am particularly interested in your personal experiences and perspectives, how you experience certain places, and where you see opportunities for improvement. I would also like to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers. It is really about your own perspective. I expect the interview to take approximately 30 minutes. With your permission, I would like to record the conversation so that I can properly analyse the responses later on. The data will be processed completely anonymously, and the recordings will be deleted after the research has been completed. Is that okay?

If anything is unclear, or if you would prefer not to answer a question, that is completely fine.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Part 1**
Imagine you could design a city in which you would always feel safe in public space. Could you describe what that city would look like for you?

**Possible follow-up questions**
What would the streets and public spaces look like?
What kind of people would be present in the city (e.g. men, groups, age groups)?
How would the city feel in the evening or at night?
What would be different compared to cities you know now?
Are there things that would no longer exist in your ideal city?

What makes [*mentioned element*] so important for your feeling of safety?

**Part 2**
What is your relationship to the city of Utrecht? And what is your age?

When you think specifically about Utrecht: how do you generally experience safety or unsafety when moving through the city? Which aspects of the city contribute to that feeling for you?

If you feel comfortable doing so, could you describe a moment when you felt unsafe or uncomfortable in public space in Utrecht?

Are there also places in Utrecht where you feel particularly safe or comfortable?
And what makes those places different?

**Part 3**
What characteristics of a place, in general, influence whether you feel safe or unsafe there?

**List of possible spatial characteristics**
Lighting
Visibility / overview
Open vs enclosed spaces
Busy vs quiet environments (city centre vs. residential area)
Parks vs green spaces
Narrow streets or alleyways
Narrow or wide sidewalks
Sense of isolation
Shape of buildings or streets (organic/rounded vs. angular)
High-rise vs low-rise
Cleanliness / how clean or well-maintained a place is
Mixed-use spaces (housing, shops, hospitality)
Possible escape routes
Tunnels or underpasses

**Part 4**
Do you ever consciously or unconsciously adapt your behaviour when moving through the city depending on how safe you feel? Can you give an example?

**Possible follow-up questions**
Do you ever change your route because a place feels unsafe?
Do you avoid certain places or areas in the city? Why?
Do you sometimes adjust the time at which you travel?
Do you use certain strategies to feel safer? (e.g. taking a different route, walking faster, calling someone or pretending to, waiting until more people are around)
Are these adjustments something you actively think about, or do they happen automatically?

**Reflection question**
Do you think your experiences of safety in public space are similar to those of men? Why or why not?

**Closing**
Before I conclude the interview, is there anything else you would like to add about how you experience safety and unsafety in Utrecht or is there anything specific that you think cities, or Utrecht in particular, should take into account more when designing public spaces?

If you would like to add anything later or share something else, you are always welcome to contact me. I will now stop the recordin

## D. Survey questions

*Only questions indicated with * where mandatory to answer*

You are invited to participate in a survey about **women's experiences of safety in public spaces in Utrecht.** This survey is part of a master's thesis in the programme Global Studies: Sustainable Societies and Social Change.

The purpose of the research is to better understand how women experience feelings of safety and unsafety in everyday public spaces in Utrecht. The survey includes a few general questions and several images of public spaces throughout the city. For each image, you will be asked how safe you would feel in the situation that is sketched and to briefly explain your answer. Completing the survey will take approximately **5-10 minutes**.

Participation is completely **voluntary** and your responses will be **anonymous.** The data will only be used for the purpose of the master's thesis. The results from this survey will only be presented in summary form, so individual responses cannot be identified.

At the end of the survey, you will get a question whether you would be willing to participate in a short follow-up interview about your personal experiences and perspectives. Providing contact details for this is entirely **optional**. If you choose to leave contact information, it will be stored separately from your survey responses and used only for the purpose of arranging the interview.

By continuing with the survey, you confirm that you are **18 years or older and that you consent to participate in this research.**
Thank you very much for contributing to this study.

**Background questions**
What is your age? *

- 18-25
- 26-49
- 50-65
- 65 +

What is your relationship to the city of Utrecht? *

- I live in Utrecht
- I study in Utrecht
- I work in Utrecht
- I regularly commute to Utrecht
- Other (please specify)

How often do you feel unsafe in public spaces in Utrecht? *
Scale: 1-5 (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

If you have every felt unsafe in publics space in Utrecht, at what time do you most commonly experience this feeling? (multiple answers possible)

- *During the day (approx.. 6 am – 6 pm)*
- *In the evening (approx. 6 pm – 10 pm)*
- *At night (after approx.. 10 pm)*
- *It depends on the situation*

In what kinds of situations or places do you most often experience a feeling of unsafety? * (short open answer)

Do you every adapt your behaviour or routes in Utrecht because of safety concerns? *

- Yes
- No

If answered yes, could you briefly describe how you adapt your behaviour or routes? *(Short open answer)*

How often do you walk or bike alone in public spaces in Utrecht after dark? *
Same scaling (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

**Image-based questions**
You will be shown several images of public spaces in Utrecht, each accompanied by a short description of a situation. For each image, you will be asked to indicate how safe you would feel in that situation and briefly explain why.

Situation description: It's Sunday afternoon and you are taking a long walk through this park.

How safe would you feel walking in the place shown in the picture, considering the situation described above? Scale 1-5 (Very unsafe, unsafe, neutral/unsure, safe, very safe) *

What makes this place feel safe or unsafe to you? Please describe in a few keywords *
Would you feel different in terms of safety if you would walk in the same place during the evening when its dark?

- I would feel much safer

- I would feel somewhat safer
- It would not change my feeling of safety
- I would feel somewhat less safe
- I would feel much less safe
- Not sure

Situation description: It's 2:00, you just went to a party, and you are biking home alone.

How safe would you feel walking in the place shown in the picture, considering the situation described above? Scale 1-5 (Very unsafe, unsafe, neutral/unsure, safe, very safe) *

What makes this place feel safe or unsafe to you? Please describe in a few keywords *

If you were cycling here together with a friend instead of alone, would your feeling of safety change? *

- I would feel much safer
- I would feel somewhat safer
- It would not change my feeling of safety
- I would feel somewhat less safe
- I would feel much less safe
- Not sure

Situation description: You finished working in Utrecht and are catching the train to go home.

How safe would you feel walking in the place shown in the picture, considering the situation described above? Scale 1-5 (Very unsafe, unsafe, neutral/unsure, safe, very safe) *

What makes this place feel safe or unsafe to you? Please describe in a few keywords *

Situation description: The street to your friend's house is under construction.

How safe would you feel walking in the place shown in the picture, considering the situation described above? Scale 1-5 (Very unsafe, unsafe, neutral/unsure, safe, very safe) *

What makes this place feel safe or unsafe to you? Please describe in a few keywords *

If you indicated that you experience this place as unsafe: would you prefer to take a detour to avoid this street? *

- Yes, even if that route is longer
- Yes, but only if that route is just as fast
- No

Situation description: It's Tuesday morning and you are biking to your work.

How safe would you feel walking in the place shown in the picture, considering the situation described above? Scale 1-5 (Very unsafe, unsafe, neutral/unsure, safe, very safe) *

What makes this place feel safe or unsafe to you? Please describe in a few keywords *

Situation description: It’s 21:00 you still have to walk your dog.

Would you take this path or rather go somewhere else? Why or why not? Please describe in a few keywords *

If there were more people present in this space, would your feeling of safety change? *

- I would feel much safer
- I would feel somewhat safer
- It would not change my feeling of safety
- I would feel somewhat less safe
- I would feel much less safe
- Not sure

**Follow-up on interview**

Would you be willing to participate in a short follow-up interview about your experiences of safety in public spaces in Utrecht? *

*The interview would take approx. 20-30 minutes and can take place online or in Utrecht, depending on your preference. Participation is completely voluntary.*

- Yes
- Maybe, I would like to receive some more information first
- No

If selected yes or maybe, please leave your email or phone number below
(Open answer)