

*The Commercial- isation of Women's Fear of Crime*¹

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Over the past few years, women have come to occupy a central position in police discourse about public safety. In England and Wales, for example, concern about women's safety has spurred the Home Office, the police, and local authorities to issue safety advice to women. The recognition of the impact of fear of crime (Grade 1989) and the spotlight upon crime prevention combine to place women as prime consumers of targeted advice about personal safety (and indeed, as customers of gadgets and devices, such as rape alarms, personal telephones and so forth). Yet according to the Home Office's own data, young men are most at risk to personal violence in public. Despite this, women are considered the most important constituency for guidance about danger.

Reassuring the public, and particularly women, about crime and safety has been prompted by the concern of state officials to appear in control of (or at least serious about) rising crime. Targeting women in the 'fight against crime' comes from three powerfully influential sources. Firstly, the law and order debate, fed by escalating crime statistics (Loveday 1992), prompted a search for mitigation of this newly discovered bane of urban existence, 'fear of crime'. Secondly, waning confidence in police led to attempts to restore their legitimacy through service delivery and empathy to victims. Women officers are particularly useful here in exemplifying a new face of police: as the deliverers of sympathy to 'innocent, defenceless victims' and as the new face of front-line policing, demonstrating the progressive change within a largely male-dominated, macho force (Heidensohn 1992; Reiner 1992; Smith & Gray 1985; Soothill 1993). Finally, the rise of the discourse of the 'responsible citizen' in

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Thatcher and post-Thatcher Britain was gaining strength, culminating in the publication of the Citizens' Charter in March 1991 (Cooper 1993). Within law and order politics, citizens must take responsibility for protecting our own property and persons and women continue to be the targets of government rhetoric about responsibility and citizenship.

This paper explores how women's safety is narrowly focused by security companies, and other commercial enterprises, as a saleable commodity. I shall treat security products as a recognition of male violence to women, a recognition within which women are treated as subordinate and vulnerable to the arbitrary whims of dangerous male strangers, while at the same time assumed to be capable of avoiding such dangerous men. Such developments coincide with police safety advice, which additionally serve as popular narratives about the danger women face and about the skills women need to possess to challenge such dangers. I treat women's fear of crime as a signifier of gender and gendered structure, which privileges particular beliefs about women's risk to violence but ultimately denies our anxiety about its potential. Within this discourse, we are treated as 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel 1967), and in need of guidance about the 'true' context and environment within which we live.

Women and Fear of Crime

While there is no overall consensus among researchers about a definition of fear of crime, there are basic components of fear of crime upon which many researchers would agree. Generally, fear of crime is taken to represent individuals' diffuse sense of danger about being physically harmed by criminal violence. It is associated with concern about being outside the home, probably in an urban area, alone and potentially vulnerable to personal harm.

Typically, the classic fear of crime question which appears on victimisation surveys is: How safe do you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood [in this area] alone after dark [or at night]? (Hough & Mayhew 1983; 1985). In responding, interviewees are assumed to be thinking of their personal safety vis-a-vis criminal violence (*see* Garofalo 1979; 1981 for discussion of methodology and measurement). Most large scale victimisation surveys use this question. Individuals may be asked to assess their probability of encountering, say, a burglary, robbery or rape within the next twelve months. This line of questioning then is used to analyse respondents' evaluation of their risk to victimisation. Finally, information is collected about 'actual' (that is, reported to the researchers) victimisation.

While there have been a number of criticisms about how the concept of fear of crime is constructed (for example, *see* Crawford et al. 1990; Gibbs, Coyle & Hanrahan 1987; Shapland & Vagg 1988; Williams, McShane & Akers 1991), the concept itself and what it is presumed to represent, citizen anxiety about crime and disorder, is now treated as a social problem in its own right. This is precisely because those segments of the population who are found to be most fearful, women and the elderly, do not report (at least on large scale crime surveys) significant levels of this sort of criminal victimisation. The high levels of fear disclosed by so-called vulnerable groups have provided the impetus for government concern. I have argued elsewhere (Hanmer & Stanko 1985) that programs designed to reduce fear may well be a reflection of the state's worry that their image as public protectors is being undermined. After all, if the

public had confidence in the police's ability to protect them, then anxiety about encountering criminal violence should be low.

Beyond any doubt, the gender differential is the most consistent finding in the literature on fear of crime (for example, *see* Baumer 1978; Clemente & Kleiman 1977; Bowker 1981; Crawford et al. 1990; Gordon & Riger 1989; Hindelang et al. 1978; Lewis & Maxfield 1980; Maxfield 1984, 1988; Skogan & Maxfield 1981; Stanko 1987; 1990; La Grange & Ferraro 1989; Warr 1984; 1985). Women report fear at levels that are three times that of men, yet their recorded risk of personal violence, especially assault, is, by all official sources, lower than men's. Indeed, there is a mismatch between women's and men's reported risk of violent criminal victimisation and their fear of falling victim to such violence. Those who admit feeling safest, young men, reveal the greatest proportion of personally violent victimisations.

In comparison to the volume of literature exploring 'fear of crime', the gender differential, especially the high levels of anxiety expressed by women, did not produce a great deal of researchers' interest (for exceptions, *see* Hanmer & Stanko 1985; Ortega & Myles 1987; Stanko 1987). Concern about the elderly took precedence (the fact that the elderly are mostly women seemed to be overlooked). Gender, if addressed at all, is commonsensically linked with how individuals report fear: men mask fear because the image and language of masculinity does not include acknowledging it (Clemente & Kleiman 1977); women easily disclose fear in recognition of greater social and physical vulnerability (Skogan & Maxfield 1981; Maxfield 1984). The gender differential did lead to the quest for alternative explanations for why individuals fear being victimised by crime they do not seem to encounter. The victimisation perspective, that victims fear crime more than non-victims, does not account for the worry and concern from those people surveys indicate are not victims, women. Since reported victimisation did not seem to predict fear, criminologists looked elsewhere to explain anxiety about public space. Researchers have explored how fear is fostered by urban decay and blight (Conklin 1975; Wilson & Kelling 1982), by community powerlessness (Lewis & Salem 1986), by lack of adequate police-public contact (Pate et al. 1986), or by exposure to crime news (Heath 1984; Liska & Baccaglini 1990).

There have been some attempts to explain why women might especially harbour anxiety about their personal safety. Skogan and Maxfield (1981) suggest that women's fear of crime is fostered by greater physical and social vulnerability. Maxfield, analysing the 1982 British Crime Survey, finds some evidence to suggest it is women's fear of sexual assault that 'reduces feelings of safety among young women' (1984, p. 14). Warr (1984) argues that 'it may well be that [for women] . . . fear of crime is fear of rape.' Gordon and Riger (1988), extending their earlier work (Riger et al. 1978), go farther by naming women's fear of rape as 'the female fear.' If women's fear of crime is related to women's fear of rape, how are we to explain such widespread fear in the context of the low number of recorded rapes? Is it, as Maxfield (1984) speculates, that women are more concerned about the consequences of rape, but that this concern is merely a perception?

What is generally agreed by conventional criminologists is that women feel at greater risk of rape, but that this concern is not founded in actual experience. Crime against women, most criminologists now agree, is seriously underreported and underrecorded. The findings of oft-cited government-conducted crime surveys have

no way of estimating a 'dark figure' of women's victimisation (Stanko 1988). Despite the shortcomings of crime surveys for capturing 'family' crime, the crime survey frames the contemporary debate about violence and the fear of violence in a way that fails to take into account what women themselves say about the dangers they face throughout their lives, and in particular the danger associated with violence within the home. One attempt to use the crime survey method to explore how violence by intimates affects women's fear of crime is that by Smith (1988). He found that women who experienced severe forms of violence at the hands of intimates were significantly more fearful than women who had experienced minor violence and those who were not victimised.

As part of the feminist strategy of naming sexual violence as a form of oppression, feminist researchers set out to document women's experiences of sexual and physical violence. More importantly, these researchers include a wide range of women's experiences of men's violence that are rarely classified as criminal offences: obscene phone calls, being followed on the street, being touched up on public transport, and sexual harassment on the street. Feminist researchers exposing men's violence to women explain women's fear of crime as a realistic appraisal of endemic abuse (Kelly 1988; Hanmer & Saunders 1984; McNeill 1987; Radford 1987; Russell 1982, 1984, 1985; Stanko 1985; 1990). These studies have also uncovered significant incidence of serious sexual violence among adult women. Russell's (1982) detailed study of 930 California women, for instance, reports that 44 per cent of the interviewed women had experienced rape or attempted rape in their lifetimes, with one in seven women reporting a rape by a husband. Painter (1991) in a survey of English married women found that one in seven experienced coercive sexual intercourse.

What feminist studies indicate is that the reality of sexual violence is a core component of 'being' female and is experienced through a wide range of everyday, mundane situations. What women define as sexually violating and threatening, moreover, is not confined to what is statutorily defined as rape (*see also* Warshaw 1987). As Bart and O'Brien (1986) show, even some women who were 'legally' raped define their experience as attempted rape. Limiting the explanation of women's fear to the fear of rape, as some criminologists have, directs our attention to the worst scenario of sexual violence, the violent invasion of rape. By categorising rape as the only understandable, abhorrent sexual intrusion that could reasonably frighten women, ordinary events, such as receiving sexual comments on the street or from co-workers, experienced as threatening, often private encounters, are overlooked by most crime surveys (*see* Crawford et al. 1990 as an exception) because they are not 'serious' enough events (that is, not crime) and therefore do not contribute to women's fear of crime (Kelly & Radford 1990).

Consistently documented by crime surveys, women's fear of crime has become part of the agenda when thinking about fear of crime. As I have argued here and elsewhere, women's fear of crime is a reflection of our sexual integrity at risk. As Rachel Pain (1993) has suggested, women's fear of crime is a consequence of being at the 'sharp end' of patriarchy.

This point of view is contentious, even in the so-called feminist debate. Women's fear of crime, some claim, is merely the result of feminists' propaganda about male violence. Katie Roiphe, for instance, accuses some feminists of fabricating the

incidence of rape and sexual assault, and scaring young women along the way. Naomi Wolf, though criticising the simplistic arguments of Roiphe, none the less criticises some feminists for emphasising an 'identity of powerlessness' of women. But the research about women's coping strategies suggests that rather than act as powerless, women are quite creative about precautionary strategies and violence avoidance. The fact that women encounter the criminal justice system mostly as victims suggests that we try to use it as some form of redress for harm, and in the case of domestic violence, immediate crisis intervention. Women may also fear that when we do ask the criminal justice system for assistance, it will not be useful, able or forthcoming in a way which both protects women's safety and autonomy. The fact that we are not always successful in our avoidance strategies is a commentary on men's violence, not our failures.

Will we consign women's fear to the category of feminist (or women's) hysteria—a position which had some airing in the not too distant past? Or will we characterise women's fear of crime as much wider than that which can be reduced to 'women' and 'crime'?

It might be helpful here to speculate what an article exploring men's fear of crime could contribute to this collection. Despite all official data indicating that men, particularly young men, report the larger proportion of personal crime against them, by and large, men report feeling safer than women in public. To what could we contribute such misplaced confidence? Naivete? Stupidity? Perhaps we should issue similar risk-management advice to men, suggesting that they avoid dark alleys, make sure they have gas in their car when embarking on journeys, stay away from pubs and bars, or carry personal alarms? Why are personal alarms being sold or distributed to women?

If we are to take women's fear of crime seriously, and if we agree that it is more a reflection of our social location within intersections of gender-class-race-ability structures, then we must reconsider what we mean by crime prevention and fear reduction. The fact is that many of us still place what endangers us the most—familial and familiar violence—on an agenda often separate from that of crime reduction. Others may suggest that better lighting, repairing 'broken windows' or cleaning graffiti is sufficient for creating an environment which is woman-friendly, and thus less fear-producing.

The social context of women's fear of crime is such that unless women's autonomy is promoted—which, I advocate, must address women's freedom from sexual danger, then it is unlikely that our fear will be reduced. Good lighting, good transport, adequate child care, decent education, safe houses and safe relationships—one without the others is inadequate to address women's needs, and, by extension, our fear of crime.

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