



'Bold Walk and Breakings': women's spatial confidence versus fear of violence

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ABSTRACT *This article explores women's fear of urban violence from a spatial perspective. It is based on qualitative data collected in Finland. It shows first that women do not have to be fearful. Boldness is associated with freedom, equality, and a sense of control over, and possession of space. Secondly, the article considers how and why fear of violence undermines some women's confidence, restricting their access to, and activity within, public space. Fear of violence is a sensitive indicator of gendered but complex power relations which constitute society and space. Women's fear is generally regarded as 'normal' and their boldness thought to be risky; the conceptualisation of women as victims is unintentionally reproduced. However, a more critical view might regard fear as socially constructed and see how it is actually possible for women to be confident and take possession of space.*

We must cease to perceive the city as a dangerous and disorderly zone from which women—and others—must be largely excluded for their own protection.
Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* (1991)

Introduction

The purpose of my article is to analyse women's fear of urban violence in a spatial context. This field of interest has been widely studied in Anglo-American countries (see Merry, 1981; Smith, 1987; Gordon & Riger, 1989; Valentine, 1989; Pawson & Banks, 1993; Pain, 1994, to name but a few). Most studies agree that women's fear is partly a reflection of gendered power structures in the wider society. However, the empirical work on which this article is based was undertaken in Finland, mostly in the capital Helsinki, and my aims are complementary to Anglo-American studies. First, I would like to reflect on women's fear in a Scandinavian society, which has been regarded traditionally as having a good record on gender equality. This brings a new perspective to bear on the connections between women's fear of violence and *gendered power relations in society*. Secondly, I will raise the issue of *female boldness and defiance*. This means asking why some women are *not* afraid, and looking at what can be gained by analysing women's courage and their ability to take possession of space. Finally, since it is not always possible for women to avoid being fearful, I attempt to understand how previously courageous women lose the space of fearlessness by exploring what kind of experiences break their confidence.

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My purpose is also to challenge the view (sometimes held unconsciously) that fearfulness is an essentially female quality. By interpreting young women's descriptions of their boldness as well as fearfulness, I emphasise the emancipatory content of their stories. In other words, I seek to avoid participating in 'the rhetoric of limited competence' (Gardner, 1990, p. 316) and instead endeavour to respect women's own descriptions of their embodied urban knowledge. This by no means denies the facts of male domination and female victimisation (cf. Alcoff, 1996, p. 26: the limitation of women's mobility, in terms both of using space and constructing identity, has been a crucial means of subordination (Massey, 1994, p. 179). However, this issue must be understood in relation to particular cultural and geographical contexts.

Scandinavian Gender Equality and Urban Fear

Scandinavian women are often thought to have equality and independence. Accordingly Finland has a reputation for a high degree of gender equality so entrenched that it is hard to question. It must be noted, however, that many internationally well-known problems, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and heterosexism, as well as differences in salaries and domestic responsibilities, are also present in Finnish society (e.g. Rantalaiho & Heiskanen, 1997). Nevertheless there are, indeed, characteristics of Finnish society that affirm gender equality and women's independent mobility. If we look at the fields of political decision-making or labour-market participation, Finland seems to be ahead of many other countries. For example, at the beginning of 1997 35% of Members of Parliament and 39% of Ministers were women, and, according to 1993 statistics, 47% of the Finnish work force were women. Further, it is quite common for women to go out without male company, and stay out until the latest restaurants close at 4 a.m. and, as a consequence, the landscape of Finnish cities at night is not obviously gendered. Hence, in Finland, as in other Scandinavian countries, women are not tied to the private sphere and excluded from the public sphere to the same extent as is often claimed to be the case in the Anglo-American contexts.

If women's fear of male violence is regarded as a reflection of gendered power structures, it follows that in societies with a relatively high degree of gender equality women should feel confident in using public space and in having an influence on the development of their environment. Thus, spatial relations, including restricted access to public space and limited mobility because of fear of violence, can be seen as a test for equality – a parameter of empowerment. Below, therefore, I interpret fear of violence not only as a result of crime but also as an indicator of the power relations in which women are embedded. This article examines the presumption that Finnish women are strong and independent by exploring women's reactions to questions about their use of urban space. Are Finnish women actually bold in 'public space'?

The term 'public space' is used here to describe everyday publicly accessible spaces. This is not to deny that many of the so-called public spaces are increasingly privatised, and are not accessible for everyone but exclude some on the grounds of gender, age, race, sexuality, etc. (Valentine, 1996, p. 155). This implies that everyday spaces are not innocent, but are actively produced and bound into various and diverse dynamics of power and subjectivity (Rose, 1993, p. 37). Furthermore, public space can be understood as a medium for constructing identities and producing strategies for managing the self (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p. 156; Ruddick, 1996, p. 135). The issue of the conceptualisation of space is not merely a technical one but is related to how we experience and

conceptualise the world (Massey, 1994, p. 251). The question of fear and courage—women's ability to use public space—is a question of (re)defining and (re)producing space as well as managing the self.

In Finland, quantitative surveys about fear of violence (e.g. Karisto & Tuominen, 1993; Korander, 1994; Koskela & Tuominen, 1995) provide evidence about the percentages of women who experience fear. They do not, however, explain the deeper mental and social factors that cause fear. Further, the surveys are not able to grasp the fear-related production of space. So, I have taken the quantitative figures as background information, and used intensive qualitative research to get deeper into the questions on fear and courage, gendered power, and taking possession of space. The following discussion is based on in-depth interviews and written stories collected in 1996.

My analysis is founded on stories of 43 women aged between 20 and 82. Eighteen take the form of in-depth interviews [1], and 25 are written stories. Of the women interviewed, four were interviewed alone and 14 in small groups of two or three, with sessions lasting for between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The purpose of the group interviews was to help women to remember, through discussion, minor violent or threatening experiences. Before coming to the interview all the women were asked some questions in a telephone conversation, which was designed to give them time to reflect in advance of the interviews. The interviews were not formal or strictly structured; rather the aim was to encourage informal discussion, covering all the research themes at some stage. Of the women I interviewed, some were outgoing, spending time in the city centre at night almost every weekend, whereas others had small children and lived much more privatised and spatially restricted lives. Thus, their relationships to urban space were very different: women did not participate in the research because of their levels of fear. This was particularly important given understanding boldness as well as fearfulness [2]. The written stories were collected by placing advertisements in magazines and asking people to write about how fear of violence in public space affects their lives [3]. In contrast to the interviews, the motive for collecting these stories was to analyse experiences of people who feel that fear is a particularly important issue in their lives. I hoped to receive personal accounts written by people who had experienced violence themselves. These two types of empirical material drew on respondents who differed in age and place of residence. The women interviewed were between 20 and 43 and lived Helsinki, whereas the written stories came from women between 26 and 82 living in different parts of Finland, although mostly in major cities.

The Ontology of Fear: 'women's sensible incongruence'

It is well known that, in Anglo-American countries, while men have more experience of violence in public space women are more fearful there (e.g. Warr, 1985; Smith, 1987). This pattern has also emerged in studies carried out in Scandinavian countries [4]. This phenomenon has been called 'the fear paradox'. However, it is a paradox only if fear is conceptualised as a direct response to actual violence (Stanko, 1987, p. 131). There are several ways in which it can be argued that this is not the case.

First, women's and men's relations to violence can be directly compared only if it is assumed that they experience violence equally and react similarly, which is often not the case (Tiby, 1991, p. 23). Secondly, women's experiences of violence, such as rape, often remain known only by women themselves (Stanko, 1990, p. 10), and thirdly, minor violence and threatening situations can work as a reminder of female vulnerability and

thus cause fear of more serious attacks (Stanko, 1990, p. 104). Fourthly, the high levels of fear attached particularly to rape stem from the fact that it is perceived to be both extremely serious and relatively likely (Warr, 1985, p. 238). Fifthly, fear can also be seen as reflecting the gendered power relations in society, that is as a product of systematic structural violence rather than actual attacks (Pain, 1994). Sixthly, if women restrict their mobility because of the fear, this may reduce the number of attacks on women but it does not reduce their *risk* of attack if they go out.

It has also been shown that there is a spatial mismatch in women's fear: while violence is most likely to occur in private space, women tend to be most fearful in public space (Pain, 1991, 1994). This occurs in Scandinavian societies as well as elsewhere [5]. This pattern can be seen as a result of the social production of fear: parental and other warnings (Valentine, 1992), rumours (Smith, 1986), the media (Smith, 1985; Valentine, 1992) and crime-prevention advice (Gardner, 1990) all reproduce the picture of public space as dangerous and private space as safe.

It has been demonstrated that fear is connected not only to the crime-rate but also to the degree to which people feel they have control over their life. A sense of danger is often linked to feelings of uncertainty, helplessness and vulnerability (Merry, 1981, p. 160). Thus, fear is closely connected to social well-being: the people who feel most vulnerable in society and have least faith in the future tend to be most afraid (Balvig, 1990). Further, criminal victimisation is often culturally channelled into existing racial and class conflicts (Merry, 1981, p. 15; Smith, 1986, p. 112). In this sense it can be claimed that the groups that suffer the most oppression are the ones that understandably are most afraid. Accordingly, feelings of safety and boldness are connected to feelings of strong community spirit and empowerment (Smith, 1986, pp. 129–130). When the sense of empowerment is strong, people may even feel safer in an area where they know the risk of violence is higher than in surrounding areas: this has been shown to be the case in some gay communities (Myslik, 1996, pp. 164–166).

Recapitulating, feelings are not a mathematical function of actual risks but rather highly complex products of each individual's experiences, memories and relations to space. Instead of trying to connect fear to the actual risks of being a victim of known violence – which is, from a perspective of daily life, actually an absurd idea – feelings of fear and boldness should be respected *as such* (Koskela, 1996, p. 71). It must be accepted that feelings are not measurable. Their origins sometimes seem to be irrational, and their essence can be internally contradictory, but even then resulting reactions and habits can be reasonable. Intuition and learned knowledge can be contradictory, and often women's feelings are based on both. In their everyday lives many women know perfectly well when and where to be careful or confident, although there is no measurable way to justify how. Thus, I would argue, what is characteristic of women's fear of violence is 'a sensible incongruence'.

'The Brave with Bold Walk': young women in Helsinki

I feel I have the right to walk where I want. I mean, this is my city. I own this city. And so do the hundreds of thousands of other people living here. Maria, 26 (in interview) [6]

Many women in my research were quite confident in relation to their daily environments. Of 43 women, 29 expressed courage in at least some situations and 11 said, either

directly or indirectly, that they were not afraid (which does not mean that they would not talk about situations where they had been careful). It could be claimed that this is related to culturally specific variations in the construction of gender relations: women's confidence can be seen as a reflection of gender equality in Finnish society. How can we speak about this boldness? It is so frequently said that women are afraid that it seems almost indecent to say that they are not. When some women in questionnaires say that they are not afraid, it is often interpreted by social scientists as if they just do not want to use the word and admit their fearfulness (see, e.g., Gordon & Riger, 1989) [7]. This might reflect the powerful influence of the psychoanalytic tradition, in which the unconscious is viewed as the source of 'true' feelings.

However, I would argue that a researcher who only uses explanations that focus on the denial of fear is her/himself unintentionally taking part in the social construction of fear. If the possibility of genuine courage is excluded, research can never be truly emancipatory. In contrast, I would claim that in research on fear and courage, a completely different attitude could be fruitful. An alternative interpretation of expressions of boldness does not 'colonise' them by claiming they are denials of fear. Although it is probably true that all women feel fear sometimes in some situations, the feelings are rarely either/or. Even if part of the boldness is denial of fear *the feeling of boldness can still be real*. It could be taken seriously and respected as such. For some women, boldness can be seen as an absence of fear, an indicator of confidence, and not an attitude defined in terms of standing-up to fear. What if we try to look at this side of the story: how does it feel not to be afraid? How do we describe women laughing when they meet drunken men in a dark alley? Can we speak about women saying that it has never occurred to them that they ought to be afraid? Can we talk about young women, such as Maria cited above, who say they feel that they own the city they live in?

I shall try to discuss this subject without dishonouring women who are, indeed, afraid; without saying, as when talking about the fear paradox, that one should not be afraid, or that fear is stupid or irrational. If I were to say that, there would be no point in discussing courage. Another way is to interpret courage as emancipatory; as examples of how women can take their space and enjoy it. Despite the facts of male oppression, women also have agency over their own lives (Alcoff, 1996, p. 26). Women are not merely objects in space where they experience restrictions and obligations; they also actively produce, define and reclaim space. The interpretation of boldness can be seen as evaluating and analysing women's capacities, abilities and strengths and using these as means for a potential transformation of power relations, in order to serve the emancipatory aims of feminist research (Hartsock, 1990).

By analysing and interpreting the empirical material I have collected in this way I have found several types of direct or indirect descriptions of boldness and bravery. These may be grouped conceptually into four main categories. First, there are descriptions of 'reasoning': in frightening situations or places, women try to convince themselves that they should not be afraid but should keep their courage. Secondly, there is courage gained through an awareness of the cultural relativity of danger, where experiences in different cultures make women feel confident in the culture they know. Thirdly, there are descriptions of multiple ways of being spatially confident, of taking possession of space by using it repeatedly, and feeling at home in one's environment. Fourthly, there are the illustrations of social skills: descriptions of events where women defend themselves or others, or show an ability to respond sensibly when facing a threat. It must be noted that these four types are not mutually exclusive but, rather, form a set of partly overlapping 'ideal types' of expressions of courage [8].

Reasoning

Reasoning can be seen as operating on the border between fear and courage. In a frightening situation some women try to reason their fear away: they try to convince themselves that there is no need to fear. This is often seen as one of the coping strategies that fearful women use. Traditionally, research has dealt with the coping strategies women use when they are afraid, or with what kind of protection mechanisms women have (e.g. Gordon & Riger, 1989; Valentine, 1989). Reasoning is thus defined in relation to fear rather than as an alternative to it. Gordon & Riger (1989, pp. 116–117), for example, exemplified different coping strategies in terms of how women estimated their risk of being raped. It is true that sometimes reasoning can be seen as a symptom of fear. However, this is not the whole story, and not much has been written about the courage that can be achieved through reasoning.

Reasoning can range from a very fearful woman's last hope to a bold woman's fleeting moment of hesitation. In a frightening moment women try, for example, to draw on the facts they have heard about real risks, or persuade themselves that they ought to walk towards the potential attacker and not to change their direction. A normally confident waitress tells about a moment when she was walking to her car at night after work:

For a moment I had that feeling, a doubt whether he is following me or just going somewhere, but then you tell yourself: hey, com'on, wake up! We are in Helsinki, and I am sober and I've got nothing to worry about. I can run away if something happens, so what am I afraid of. And of course he passed by me.
Veera, 24 (in interview)

Reasoning can be thought of as a strategy to contain fear, but also as a way of maintaining sufficient courage to avoid fear and, thus, to live without it. If a woman believes in her reasoning, then it can make her feel confident. Reasoning can improve the quality of life. It can help in a particular situation, as it did in a case above, or it can change one's whole attitude towards daily environment.

For me it's also a matter of not wanting to be afraid. Even if I sometimes feel uncertain I try to sweep the fear out of my mind, because it is exactly the restrictions like where you should walk and where not that limit your life so much. And if I submit to the case that I cannot walk somewhere, I am certain to suffer from it, whereas [if I go anyway] the risk that something happens is small. Maria, 26 (in interview)

This comment could be interpreted as if the woman speaking was afraid but did not want to admit it (even to herself), but it can also be read another way: by reasoning the fear out of her mind the woman can gain more confidence and reclaim space for herself.

Cultural Relativity

Danger is a cultural construct and strange environments are commonly perceived to be more dangerous than familiar ones (Merry, 1981; Valentine, 1989). Very often bold women in my research described having had various experiences which made them realise the cultural relativity of danger. They commonly associated women's independence and free mobility with Finnish culture. They reported having had a great deal of freedom in their youth. In their childhood, they had, for example, been allowed to play out with friends in the evenings, both in playgrounds and in dark forests, and to use buses alone to reach their hobbies; in their adolescence they were able to go abroad without

their parents when they were quite young, and to visit distant summer cottages or attend rock-festivals with friends [9].

Often experiences abroad had widened women's horizons. They had learned about cultural differences and about the relativity of danger. They described cultural differences in terms of freedom in physical and social mobility and liberal sex education, strengthened by a belief that Finnish women are independent and courageous and that their society supports their independent mobility and gender equality.

In the USA religion plays a prominent role in life, and everything is so family oriented and dating [of teenagers] is very much restricted. And especially in the big cities going out is different: you are taken to and fro by car because people are so afraid that something might happen. Veera, 24 (in interview)

There can be almost 'racist' beliefs about what other societies are like, which promote a sense of Finland as safe and familiar [10]. A young woman—who lived in the USA for a year when she was in high school—had formed a belief, from her experiences, that the conservative atmosphere and school uniforms are related to the likelihood of rape:

When we played some games [in Finland] it never occurred to me that this guy is going to rape me. It is so much more natural to be associated with boys when, since primary school, you have been used to having boys in the same spaces. And everything is natural and you can talk about anything, and nothing is like a taboo or forbidden. Whereas in England or the USA they have school uniforms, and everything is so conservative that you are bound to bring up perverted men that want to rape women. Minna, 22 (in interview)

In this case travel experiences were used to stigmatise other societies and by this process to gain confidence in a more familiar environment.

Compared to the situation experienced in other cultures, for the Finnish women I interviewed the home environment was seen as relatively safe. Part of it is, of course, the fact that Helsinki (with slightly fewer than a million inhabitants in the whole metropolitan area), is a relatively small city. So, a visit to a big American metropolis, for example, reveals a clear difference in the risk of violence. However, regardless of where one goes, visiting other countries is a matter of interpreting cultures: in a familiar environment it is easier to interpret the signs of danger, both the verbal and non-verbal ones. As I shall argue further in the following sub-section, the women in my research indicated that this ease is associated with a sense of confidence.

Taking Possession of Space

An important aspect of being bold is 'at-homeness'. As mentioned above, people often perceive their own neighbourhood to be safer than the surrounding city; it has 'the aura of safety' (Merry, 1981, p. 8). Further, a sense of being part of an empowering community, can be strongly encouraging (Myslik, 1996, pp. 164–166). Often women in my research describe their courage as a product of knowing their environment and feeling at home there. They move a lot and thus use their space. They go out in the evenings and at nights, visit the city centre regularly and choose not to use a taxi, but to walk or use public transport instead. When walking, they often choose the shortest route instead of a longer one presumed to be safer. In this space they know well, they feel confident:

It means a lot [to how much you are afraid] how familiar the place is. In the city where I have lived in and spent my youth I know the place. It is different. You kind of feel like having strength in relation to others. Sari, 25 (in interview)

Women also actively work to reclaim space and gain confidence. A summer cottage—a very ‘Finnish’ place—seemed to be good indicator of spatial confidence: timid women were afraid to go there alone, in contrast to the bold ones who really enjoyed the feelings of peace and privacy of a remote place. Making oneself reclaim that space was seen as a symbolic event, a way of expelling fear:

Once I was about to go there [to a summer cottage] with my friend ... And then my friend couldn't make it ... I thought, yes, I will go there [alone]. And in the first night I took a Bible and a wine bottle to the table, and thought that if I don't cope with this, I'll never cope with anything. I didn't read the Bible that night, but I drank the bottle of wine, and ever since that I had enough courage to stay in that cottage. Nadja, 39 (in interview)

This story was told with pride: the woman had hesitated to go but in the end did not let fear take over. It was a pleasure to be able to take possession of space.

In an urban environment part of the feeling of taking possession of space is ‘an urban mentality’. Women in my research described ‘the urban’ as a matter of course: as being at home in the city and having roots there and being able to accept differences. In classic sociology the urban has been associated with anxiety and anonymity (e.g. Wirth, 1938; Simmel, 1950). However, it can be seen as an ambivalent identity, a mixture of indifference and acceptance of differences. The city is constructed by multiple contrasts and ambiguities (Wilson, 1991, p. 9). The urban environment has often been described as hostile and dangerous for women, but it can also be seen as a precondition of female emancipation, fostering a positive urban womanhood with fascinating freedoms and numerous possibilities (Wilson, 1991, p. 25). In my research women described fascinating and even risky urban environments as exciting when contrasted to the quiet of the countryside. While the riskiness is sometimes seen as a positive element of the city, real danger and fear is only described as a negative element. The women indicated that even if they loved ‘the action’ of an urban environment they found nothing glamorous in being afraid: moments of dread are by no means fascinating.

Positive personal relations to the city are expressed in spatial terms. Part of urban action is to enjoy the spatial experience: the pleasure of gliding fluently and confidently across the city.

It is that you are able to move around in the city and if someone comes to ask you something you can advise and you know the pubs and bars around and can tell where the action is going on ... A girl I gave a lift to told me I was very good at driving in Helsinki. So it is these little things. That you are used to and belong to this environment. Veera, 24 (in interview)

Crucial to a strong feeling of belonging to an urban environment is often the fact that one uses the space a great deal. Women who said they are not afraid of walking at night in the city centre also said that they go there quite often. Using space can be a way of *de-mystifying* it. If one does not use the space, if for example one very rarely goes to the city centre, ‘the mental map’ of the place is filled with indirect descriptions the image of it is constructed through media and the stories heard. Typically such stories are sensational and focus on newsworthy issues, such as violence and deviance (Smith, 1985; Valentine, 1992; Karisto & Tuominen, 1993). Indirect sources produce *the rhetoric of danger*

and threat. They do not say that thousands of people walk safely through the city centre every day and every night.

The map of everyday experiences is in sharp contrast to the maps of the media. If a picture of a place is made by one's own experiences it is more likely to be perceived as a safe ordinary place. Even if you are told that it is a dangerous place, you can think how you just walked past it and nothing happened. Thus, it is understandable that women who have considerable experience of a certain place are themselves less afraid. Making use of space a part of one's daily routine erases the myth of danger from it. So, by *routinising space*, women are 'taming' it for themselves. However, in order to work, this process of routinisation needs to be purposeful and active, a means of taking possession of space, rather than just going somewhere because you cannot help it.

For example, Kallio, the area in Helsinki where street prostitution has recently been a common phenomenon, was thought to be frightening by those who had not been there lately. Since prostitution in the area has only just developed, there is no evidence (yet) of rising crime rates, but the public image of the area has been changing. Women who lived there might have been annoyed by the increased harassment but they were rarely afraid. They feel that it is, at least partly, their own space:

Yes, I think it is important [that you know the place] ... I mean, I have friends who say they cannot move alone at night in Kallio because it is so dangerous, and I can do nothing but laugh at them. Maria, 26 (in interview)

Making the space feel your own is also done through mode and style. Bold women's mode of being in space can be described as 'the bold walk'. This means that their appearance constantly projects the message that they are not afraid. They walk determinedly with confident steps and keep their head up when meeting someone. This is in contrast to fearful women, who describe how they avoid eye-contact with anyone in the street and pull their head down if they meet someone. Bold women make a point keeping their appearance confident:

If I think about how I walk there, I go quite determinedly, I don't stay standing around and wondering or walk around looking lost, I go where I'm going to. And I look around me but I don't keep on glancing sideways. Susanna, 20 (in interview)

'Bold walk' is also a matter of style. Women are extremely aware of what they wear but not only in relation to restricted female roles. They express courage by the way they dress. On one hand, dressing can be seen as a means of reproducing power relations; in Foucaultian terms, it is a way of being one's own overseer, and regulating even the most intimate spheres. In other words, women can be seen as (unwittingly) reproducing gendered power relations by policing their own dress. Women are advised to manipulate their dress for the sake of preventing crime as well as reproducing heterosexual images (Gardner, 1990; McDowell, 1995; Munt, 1995). On the other hand, interpreted in another way, dressing up can also be seen as a form of resistance against the male gaze, as an opposition to the visual mastery over women, achieved not by being invisible or absent, but by dressing up proudly. Fashion's role in urban life is a communicative one (Wilson, 1995, p. 66). Fashion is also a statement about identity (Bondi, 1992, p. 167) and even a manner of restructuring space (Valentine, 1996, p. 150). If women dress up to be part of the urban spectacle, like the 19th century flâneurs, and also to mediate their confidence, they oppose their erasure and reclaim urban space. 'The carnival' that works as a place for recontextualising bodily images of gender (Lewis & Pile, 1996), the carnivalesque aspects of life, can be symbolically present in everyday life (Wilson, 1991,

p. 7). Thus, the bold walk as body language, by movement and style, can be seen as a means of taking possession of space.

Social Skills

The feeling of boldness is also connected to social abilities either as personal characteristics or in relation to others (Koskela & Tuominen, 1995, p. 72). Many women in my research revealed that they have confidence in other people. Even if they say that one cannot count on help, they believe that crowded places in the night are less frightening than empty ones. This feeling that someone will help you if needed can make you confident whenever other people are around. Also being less fearful than a friend you walk with, or an obviously helpless outsider, can turn into courage. Even women who do not regard themselves as especially courageous told stories about situations where they had taken the responsibility to defend somebody or to try to ease a frightening situation by humour. The more confident ones said they purposefully interrupt any violent or threatening situation they see, either by themselves or by calling the police. One woman I interviewed had, with her friend, gone to walk with an unknown woman who was harassed in a park, to give the offender the impression that the woman had company.

Many women showed that they are well able to cope with potentially threatening men. They seemed to be very self-confident and filled with a belief that they can solve most unpleasant or threatening situations they meet:

Yes, actually quite often [I meet unpleasant situations] like in a bus somebody makes suggestions ... but they are really harmless, you just say 'go on' and rise your voice a little bit and they'll leave. Jenni, 20 (in interview)

This is connected to the ability to interpret who is dangerous and who is not. As I argued when discussing taking possession of space, if women have the feeling of being able to interpret the environment they walk in, and of making it their own, they can feel spatially confident. Even if they sometimes meet frightening situations, if they have a feeling of being able to distinguish really dangerous moments from the everyday harassment and other unpleasant situations, they feel more secure:

Upstairs there lives this drunkard, and I'm never afraid of him, you kind of know that although he is like that, he is not threatening. Helena, 31 (in interview)

An ability to interpret the signs of danger means that one does not need to be afraid all the time and everywhere, but that one can identify situations that should be avoided or that one should be careful in. Of course, this is not say that *all* violent situations can be identified beforehand: research shows that it is not always possible to distinguish safe from unsafe men, and that 'date-rapes' frequently occur (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Stanko, 1987, 1996). However, many women in my research appeared to be good 'experts in urban semiotics'. It can be claimed that women are perhaps more qualified in this than men because they have often grown up with an alertness in the city because of harassment. Thus, I would argue that what is characteristic for women's relations to risky urban environment is their 'spatial expertise'.

Part of this expertise is intuitive. It can be seen as part of their 'sensible incongruence'. Women are not able to tell exactly how they know that something is dangerous. It is seen from the eyes and looks of other people, from movements of their bodies and from their fashion and style. Similarly, safe situations are interpreted by intuition. Afterwards women describe these events in a way which made me call these 'you just go' situations.

When a woman meets a man and looks at his eyes and interprets the situation to be safe, it is very difficult to explain afterwards how she knew that there was no danger. Yet her interpretation may have been right. Of course, this does not mean that it is impossible to get it wrong.

Nevertheless, many of these 'you just go'—situations were later told with a certain remorse, despite the fact that women had actually handled the events very well. Descriptions of situations where women had had the courage to do something that is normally seen as daring were often followed by an explanation which betrays a belief that they actually should not have done that:

Oh, I have done very reckless things, taken a taxi with a strange man and so, you know ... But nowadays I couldn't imagine ... I have afterwards even myself wondered how could I do that. Petra, 30 (in interview)

A possible explanation of this is that women are so socialised into being afraid that even when they are not, they tend to regard the action in retrospect as daring or stupid. It appears that they cannot admit to themselves that they might have made the right interpretation of the situation and acted accordingly. In the light of the social production of fear this is not surprising: there is a strong tradition of persuading women that they are helpless victims requiring male protection, which can be seen as a part of women's oppression rather than a means of making them safe (e.g. Walkowitz, 1992). In addition, the tradition of victim-blaming, reproduced by media images and discourse on violence against women, supports the notion that women should blame themselves if something happens when they enter a situation normally regarded as not suitable for women (Gardner, 1990; Walkowitz, 1992). Because of all this, I would claim, it is so strongly expected that women are afraid that their boldness and social and spatial confidence is a *taboo*. This is maintained by the social production of carefulness and restraints. It is just not decent for women truly to be bold.

'The Breakings': where the fear starts

It was like a kind of turning point. Before that I used to walk at any time of the night in the streets. Of course I was not quite relaxed, but I couldn't believe that anything could happen to me ... After that I lost the night streets ... [The fear] bothers me enormously and it is present almost every day in my life. Every time I go out in the evening it's there. I'm really annoyed about it. Hanna, 33 (in interview)

As the last section showed, it is not an inborn quality of women to be fearful. The purpose of this section is to show how the social construction of fear, as it appears to all of us, can be seen in women's lives as something that is 'constantly trying to break the courage'. Fear is socially constructed through, for example, parental warnings, discussions among friends, daily warnings that are faced in discussions with anybody and, further, the cultural reproduction of ideologies about women and the family (Valentine 1992). Additionally, an ideology of fear is supported by crime news and other warnings in the media, violence in films and other fiction, and by security education and crime-prevention advice reminding you that you should be prepared for something violent to happen (Gardner, 1990). Women are also indirectly reminded of their vulnerability by how the structures of power are represented in the construction of contemporary urban forms (Bondi, 1992; Winchester, 1992), as well as in the social landscapes of gender roles and sexualities (Namaste, 1996; Valentine, 1996). As argued

above, sometimes even research can take part to this reproduction of fear, by restricting itself narrowly to issues of safety and protection, and circulating 'the cultural script' of male violence and female victimisation (Wilson, 1991, p. 10; Walkowitz, 1992, p. 244). All this is a constant reminder that it is normal to be afraid, that it is not normal to have the courage to walk where ever you want, and even that women are *meant* to be afraid.

Although the section on boldness suggests that in Finland many women are, indeed, courageous and independent, there is also evidence of fearfulness. A survey completed in 1994 showed that 44% of women were afraid of walking on Friday or Saturday nights in the centre of the city they lived in; 32% of them felt unsafe and 12% did not dare to go to the centre alone (Korander, 1994, p. 15). Further, 'the Safety of Finns' studies conducted in 1988 and 1993 showed that there has been some increase in this kind of worry [11]. In Helsinki, according to the Safety of Finns 1993 survey, the most frightening places are (1) forests, parks and recreation areas, (2) stations and shopping centres and (3) underpasses, tunnels and bridges (Koskela & Tuominen, 1995, p. 70). More broadly defined areas that are perceived to be unsafe are the city centre and the surroundings of the main railway station. Other frightening parts of the city were Kallio and the eastern suburbs, which have a reputation for being low income residential areas. This image of the city actually reflects the police crime statistics quite well, although the topography of fear seems to be sharper than the topography of crime (Koskela & Tuominen, 1995, pp. 85-86). In Kallio fear is likely to be due to street prostitution, which has recently become an issue of wide public debate.

The results of these surveys suggest that there are not very significant differences between Finnish women's fear and that of British or American women. The number of women who express fear is slightly smaller, but the types of places in which they experience fear are quite similar (c.f. Gordon & Riger, 1989; Valentine, 1989; Trench *et al.*, 1992). Despite the evidence that Finnish women can be courageous and feel that they belong to their environment, there are also many who are fearful. This article draws on their experience in order to discuss how women who have previously been courageous become fearful, if all Finnish women are not equally fearful, what makes the difference, and what kind of events undermine women's spatial confidence?

Of the 43 women in my research, 25 described situations that had transformed their attitudes towards their environment. These occasions are here called 'the breakings'. Of course, this is not to say that fear only emerges through major changes or specific happenings in women's lives. What I shall not discuss here is the feeling of unsafety that is bound into the structurally subordinate positions of some women, for example ethnic or sexual minorities. My decision to focus on specific events and changes as causes of fear is not meant to deny the importance of structural vulnerability and differences among women, but rather have I chosen to use these occasions here to trace out the complex and multiple origins of fear.

Violent and Threatening Experiences

Understandably, most dramatic changes happen when a woman has a violent experience. In my research every woman who had experienced violence in the street was more afraid than before the attack, at least for a period of time, and many 'lost the night streets' permanently. It may appear natural that the experience of violence engenders fear of violence, but it is important also to note that explicit threats (of rape, for example) or attempts at violence have the same effect (cf. Stanko, 1990). Attempted violence, of course, varies a great deal. Sometimes the offender does not even touch the victim, but

still the feeling of attempted rape can be very real. Sometimes the victim manages to escape before the rape goes ahead but is bruised and has ripped clothes. What is common to these experiences is the moment of sheer dread, and the feeling that 'this can actually happen to me'. For a moment the existence of violence is not just the distant phenomenon that we have all heard about, but a real experience here and now. This is hard to forget. Further, very often women blame themselves for what happened, and the dreadful experience is followed by a sense of shame. Most often there is no conceivable reason for this; rather, it is a consequence of the tradition of victim-blaming that women experience (e.g. Allison & Wrightsman, 1993).

Suddenly I came to realise how frightening a bus-stop near a dark forest can be, even for a woman moving around at a reasonable hour. How defenceless it feels to be dragged by a strange man so near big inhabited houses and yet still be out of reach of help. How hopeless it feels to scream for help when no-one seems to be hearing. But the worst was however the feeling of shame: can this happen to me? Sylvi, 67 (in writing)

Furthermore, it is not only violence in public spaces that causes fear. Also experiences in private spaces, like abuse in childhood, domestic violence, or rape by someone you know, can cause (among other mental damage) fear of public space. Violence in the street, even far from home, can make one be more careful with locking the door, etc. and vice versa, private violence can make one more fearful in public space (Pain, 1991, p. 417). Feelings of vulnerability cannot be expected to be spatially divided; in women's minds there is often no opposition between private and public dimensions of fear.

A woman who has been abused as a child and later beaten by her (now former) husband tells about her relationship to public space:

I feel like an animal which has been chased into a cage ... I am a mental prisoner of these experiences of mine. I don't dare to move anywhere after dark. Linda, 44 (in writing)

The feeling of not having control over what is happening comes as a consequence of any violent experience, not only street violence. Further, a threatening situation, without actual violence, for example flashing (McNeill, 1987), burglary (Merry, 1981) or harassment (Wise & Stanley, 1987), can also work as a turning point in a woman's life. Various forms of violence have been argued to be 'a continuum' in women's lives from childhood to old age (Kelly, 1987). Like violence itself, threats can work as a reminder of one's vulnerability. When facing a threat, the feeling of dread can be quite strong. To any of the unforgettable situations described above women easily react by limiting their mobility. Thus, social experiences turn out to have spatial consequences.

Growing Up and Ageing

It has been argued that adult fear arises as the culmination of a process beginning in childhood (Goodey, 1995). However, there are phases in life when the experience of fear is especially acute. In my research, many women described their adolescence as a turning point. It marked either a bold moment of defiance against parental warnings or a phase of accumulating uncertainty and fear:

When I was sixteen I moved away and I think I just had to take too much responsibility, of using money and everything, and then I was afraid of the outside world ... Somehow then you grew up to the feeling that you could be

on your own, so by the time I was 18 my anxieties disappeared. Elisa, 37 (in interview)

Also, ageing has often been connected to becoming more fearful. In much research older women are found to be the ones that are most afraid (e.g. Smith, 1987; Gordon & Riger, 1989; in Scandinavian countries e.g. Tiby, 1991; Korander, 1994), although research on fear among older people has been criticised for reproducing a negative image of old age (Pain, 1995). Older women's fear is related to their feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. Getting old often means a weakening of physical strength. Sometimes it also means that life is getting quieter and that one is less used to going out and about:

I don't dare to move alone in the city in the evenings or when it is dark or when it grows dusky ... When I was young I didn't understand how to be afraid of anything. Senni, 72 (in writing)

It is clear that an old person, even a person who enjoys an outdoor life, stays at home when it is dark. Olga, 69 (in writing)

As the last quotation shows, fear and the restrictions associated with it are often regarded as socially 'normal' for older people, especially women. Here again, the belief of female timidity is reproducing itself.

Changes in Life Situations

As getting old makes one physically weaker and less capable of self-defence or escape, so do disabilities (Pain, 1994). Disabilities sometimes come more suddenly than ageing and can change a woman's life dramatically and immediately. Moreover, it does not necessarily need to be a major degree of disability – even weak-sightedness or a tendency to faint can create a sense of defencelessness and thus cause fear. Further, it is not only physical abilities that matter but also mental condition. Some problems, such as agoraphobia, can change one's spatial experience radically (Gardner, 1995). Additionally, mental illness can make one feel deprived, an outsider in a society, and cause fear of violence and bullying:

I have a mental illness and I'm afraid of moving out, especially in the dark seasons ... And I avoid the streets in the centre, where the youths meet. Youngsters have thrown stones at me ... Once they took dog's poop from the ground and swept it to my arms ... After that my fear was very strong for a long time. Kirsi, 32 (in writing)

Other big changes in women's lives are often followed by a weakening of the sense of control and confidence and an increase in fear. Such changes include moving to another place, especially to a bigger city, where the physical and social environment is new and unfamiliar. They may include a major change in one's social relationships, such as bereavement:

When after my husband died there was no car lift available I gave up ALL the evening outings. Olga, 69 (in writing)

Further, one of the biggest changes in many women's lives is getting pregnant and having children. Responsibility for others sometimes means that women are not so much afraid for themselves but for the others, including children and husbands. Feelings of responsibility that come with the nurturing role are sometimes followed by spatial restrictions on one's lifestyle:

Earlier I used to move a lot in the city centre, and I was kind of more courageous when I was with friends. But now, when I have a child, I move less frequently ... I've got like a threshold, so that I can't go or dare not go, or what if something happens. Petra, 30 (in interview)

When they are pregnant women are easily alienated from public space. There is not much going on in the city that would be fascinating for a pregnant woman, and thus women almost unconsciously abandon the space.

When you get pregnant it kind of automatically leaves out ... I think it came quite suddenly. It was such a long time since you had been anywhere in the city at night, you suddenly felt that you don't have the courage any more. Manta, 24 (in interview)

This comment suggests that there is no room for pregnancy in the urban sphere: pregnant women are 'put back' into the domestic sphere and excluded from public space. When pregnant women do occupy public space their behaviours are often policed, especially if they contest, both ideologically and bodily, what they are 'allowed' to do when they are pregnant (Longhurst, 1996:146). If cities were to contain more activities suitable for pregnant women it would make the urban gender structure more female. In addition it would make reproduction, which in present Western societies (in Scandinavian as well as in Anglo-American, I would claim) tends to be privatised, more visible in urban space. By not submitting to this privatisation of pregnancy and motherhood, women would also feel less alienated in public space, and thus they might feel less fearful.

As the multiple origins of fear show, many occasions and events can break women's confidence or remind them of their vulnerability. There is no single female experience (McDowell, 1993).

Conclusions

It might be argued that the subject of women's fear and mobility is a 'micro-scale' one. It means analysing people meeting and passing by on a street corner, taking or not taking paths across a park, and so on. It might be just part of the practical spatial questions we all meet in our daily life. It is, of course, in the sense that feminists have argued for the unseen, local, feminine, private and everyday life and personal experiences and feelings, to be as important as anything else in academic discourse (e.g. Harding, 1986; Smith, 1988). On the subject of fear, however, this is not all there is. Being too afraid to take a path across a dark park is a practical question of everyday life, and it is a matter of personal feelings. However, it is also about the power structures that shape space; about defining, controlling and producing social space. When some women, often voluntarily, take the longer route around a park, change to another side of the street or stay home at night, it is a question of power in space (or lack of it).

A question of power-related emotions and space is a complicated one. The streets of fear and boldness are 'elastic': different by length according to the time of the day, to whom is passing by and to how you feel at that moment. The space shaped by fear is internally contradictory. Being afraid in the city is like being in 'paradoxical space', in the centre and in the margins at the same time (Rose, 1993, pp. 143, 146). The negotiation between fearfulness and 'carefulness' is also a process of managing the self in everyday spaces (cf. Bell & Valentine, 1995). The space shaped by fear and boldness is the space of female embodied knowledge; the space beyond the mind-body split. It is simultaneously subjective and intersubjective. The subjective

dilemma of being bold or being 'wise' (and submitting to the fearful role) is a reflection of gendered power.

As I have shown, not all women in Finland are fearless but there is still a tradition of independence for women: it is accepted for women to be self-reliant. The women with a 'bold walk' decide to go somewhere despite risks of which they are aware, and they remain alert about their environments not only in order to escape but also in order to defend themselves and others if needed. This shows that women work as active agents in public space. However, although some women are courageous and confident, fear is present in the lives of many others. If fear of violence is regarded, as suggested, as an indicator of inequality, my research would indicate that the gender equality in Finnish society is partly a myth. In Finland, too, power over space is gendered.

What is meant by gendered power here is not only the power relationships between a woman and a potential attacker, not even between men and women in public space in general. What is in question here is not 'personalised' power, but in power, as Foucault (e.g. 1975, 1980) has conceptualised it, as a *relational category*. Power is not something that works 'above' us but is, rather, present in all scales of social life. Further, power is not always negative, it is not only about 'oppressed women' and 'powerful men'; it also includes a possibility of resistance.

What can be said in the light of my research is that it is conceptually and theoretically useful to focus on courage as well as fear. The fact that some women are bold and confident shows that women are not only passively experiencing space but actively take part in producing it. They reclaim space for themselves, not only through single occasions such as 'take back the night' marches, but through everyday practices and routinised uses of space. Their everyday spatial practices can be seen as practices of resistance. By daring to go out—by their very presence in urban sphere—women produce space that is more available for other women. Spatial confidence is a manifestation of power. Walking in the street can be seen as a political act: women 'write themselves onto the street'.

Perhaps, as Elizabeth Wilson (1995) argues, (at least some) feminist researchers have been too busy studying the forms of oppression to realise how women work as active producers of space. Luckily, in the 1990s this tendency has frequently been challenged (see Walkowitz, 1992; Rose, 1993; Alcoff, 1996; Valentine, 1996 among others). As I have shown above, women actively take possession of space in various ways, and actively shape their social space. What should be emphasised is that women's (or even *a woman's*) relations to public space are *not stagnant*. Women can reclaim space. Just as women can learn to restrict their mobility in order to avoid danger or fear, they can learn (or re-learn) to be spatially confident. Further, they can learn to raise their daughters to take possession of space rather than to be intimidated by endless warnings and restrictions. Today women's confidence is very rarely supported by others: certainly not by the mass media or public opinion, quite rarely by parents and unfortunately still quite rarely (at least directly) by feminist researchers; but we must challenge the (re)production of women's limited competence. As Amanda puts it:

I sometimes take my grandmother for a walk to the Central Park. She seems to be afraid of nothing and no-one ... I hope that at her age I'm above fears, too. Amanda, 27 (in writing)

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NOTES

- [1] The women were chosen with help of the Centre for Consumer Research, which had collected 'a panel', a group of citizens representing different ages and social classes willing to take part in such research projects. My letters of invitation were sent to female members of the Consumer Panel (aged between 20 and 30, living in Helsinki) asking them to come to interview. Most of the women I interviewed came through this route, and a few came through personal contacts.
- [2] This was made possible by the Consumer Panel: taking part was voluntary, but women who came did not come especially because they would be fearful.
- [3] The advertisements were placed in a popular women's magazine (*Anna*) and in a magazine received for free by all pensioners and social security claimants (*Kelan Sanomat*). Of 30 stories 25 were written by women and five by men. The women's stories have been analysed here.
- [4] In Scandinavia, as well as in Anglo-American countries, women are less likely than men to be victims of violence public space. This is the case in Finland and also in Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Leva i Norden, 1990 cited in Karisto & Tuominen 1993, p. 33). In Sweden, for example, in 86% of violent outdoor crimes committed by strangers, the victims were men (Tiby 1990, p. 122).
- [5] Violence against women is most likely to occur in private space by a person known by the victim. In Finland 44% of violent crime against women have been committed by an acquaintance (Karisto & Tuominen, 1993, p. 26, in Sweden as much as 80% (Tiby, 1991, p. 22).
- [6] It should be noted that all the quotations from interviews have been translated from tapes transcribed in Finnish. Hence, the 'atmosphere' of spoken language and women's ways of explaining has been difficult to sustain. Interpreting the feelings women expressed in interviews means translating them to 'the language of science': when I have done this in English I have made 'double-translations' and re-interpreted everything once more. However, I have tried to keep the tone as much as possible, for example, by sustaining changes of active and passive voice.
- [7] Gordon and Riger use expressions such as: 'Some women *deny* fear, but take precautions which would seem to *belie* their words', p. 3; '[E]very woman in our society *must consider the possibility of being raped and decide how she is going to respond* to the threat of it', p. 117; '*Every woman* grows up fearing it [i.e. rape] and most learn to take precautions to avoid it', p. 123 (my emphasis).
- [8] Although some women are clearly timid and others give a picture of being very brave, it is not possible to divide women into two well-defined groups. Rather, I would claim, most women, no matter how bold they are, have had at least some moments of dread in their lives, and vice versa. Hence, when analysing my material I have not divided women into a fearful group and a courageous group. Instead, my interpretations are structured around descriptions of feelings and situations. Accordingly, it is possible to have quotations from the same women in both this section and the next.
- [9] This point is not based merely on women's perceptions. The differences in children's freedom of mobility between countries are significant: Finnish children (both the ones who live in the cities and the ones who live in rural environments) are allowed to use space much more independently than, for example, children in Germany or England (Kytta, 1995).
- [10] The notion that Finland is a particularly safe country is partly a myth. Rates of violent crime, such as battery and assault, are above the West-European average. However, the rates of sexual violence are below the average (Aromaa & Heiskanen 1992, cit. Karisto & Tuominen, 1993, p. 20).
- [11] The national Safety of Finns 1988 and 1993 victimological surveys were based on telephone interviews. The questions considered accidents, crime and fear of crime. Several reports and articles have been written based on the results of these surveys, and some of those (Karisto & Tuominen, 1993; Koskela & Tuominen, 1995) have been used here.

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