

Original Article

Fear of Crime Victimization among Females in Public Spaces

Syeda Samar Zahra¹, Sidra Hameed², Ukhra Baig³, Dr Rubina Muzaffar⁴, Tayyaba Shahid⁵, Saqib Raza^{5*}

¹Lecturer, Government Graduate College for Women, Vehari, Pakistan.

²Visiting Lecturer, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan Sub-Campus Vehari, Pakistan.

³Govt Associate College for Women Safdarabad, Pakistan.

⁴Government Graduate College for Women, Vehari, Pakistan.

⁵Alumni University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author: Saqib Raza; Email: socsaqibraza@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Fear of crime significantly undermines community cohesion, transforming public spaces into perceived no-go areas due to heightened insecurity. This social issue notably affects women, limiting their engagement in public life and escalating safety-related expenditures and avoidance behaviors.

Objective: The study aims to explore the fear of crime victimization among females in public spaces, focusing on the intensity of their fear, the factors contributing to it, and the resultant consequences on their personal and social lives.

Methods: This qualitative study utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty female residents of the hostels at the University of Punjab, Lahore. Participants were selected until saturation was achieved, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. The interview data were thematically analyzed to extract pertinent themes related to the research objectives.

Results: The findings reveal that females feel significantly more vulnerable to crime victimization compared to males, with reported feelings of insecurity affecting 90% of the participants. This heightened vulnerability leads to behavioral changes, with 85% of respondents avoiding certain public spaces at night and 75% experiencing induced personality disorders such as anxiety and heightened stress.

Conclusion: The pervasive fear of crime among women restricts their participation in urban life and exacerbates dependency and psychological distress. Addressing these concerns requires targeted interventions to enhance public space security and foster a supportive community environment.

Keywords: Crime victimization, Fear of crime, Gender differences, Public spaces, Women's safety.

INTRODUCTION

Research into the pervasive issue of crime victimization reveals its significant effects on individuals and communities, limiting social cohesion and community development worldwide. Despite the profound consequences, fear of victimization continues to deter the public from utilizing spaces that foster community interaction, which is pivotal for establishing trust and social capital. This fear significantly impacts people's willingness to engage in social activities, affecting urban planning, community development, and personal well-being. Studies have indicated that factors such as population density, cultural and social differences, and perceived threats compel individuals to restrict their movements, forfeit opportunities, and suffer a diminished quality of life(1, 2).

In Pakistan, the increasing crime rate has contributed to a widespread climate of fear, significantly influencing societal dynamics and impeding community cohesion. The fear of crime victimization, particularly among women, has become a considerable psychological burden. This pervasive fear exacerbates vulnerabilities, impacting mental health and well-being. It leads to decreased community participation, social marginalization, and a generalized sense of powerlessness. The restriction on mobility not only hinders individual's social engagement but also curtails their ability to enjoy public spaces and lead fulfilling lives, fostering social isolation, diminished performance, and a loss of control. This cascading effect of fear compromises community development and social progress, highlighting the need for effective crime prevention strategies and community-based initiatives to mitigate its adverse effects(3, 4).

The loss of social interaction, ensuing from fear, degrades community cohesion and disconnects individuals from societal engagement, an issue that is notably prevalent among working adults in Pakistan. The implications extend beyond personal distress,

influencing broader societal functions including increased governmental expenditure, socialization challenges, and an inert society. Thus, addressing the impacts of fear on this demographic is essential(5, 6).

Public spaces are essential components of urban areas, having evolved from medieval marketplaces. These spaces, which include streets, plazas, parks, and waterways, are accessible to all and crucial for social interaction. However, travelling to unfamiliar areas often poses risks due to potential street crime, particularly where local knowledge is lacking. The routine activities perspective explains that crime occurs when motivated offenders find suitable targets in the absence of capable guardians, often during everyday activities. Understanding these dynamics is key to addressing crime in public spaces, especially in developing countries with higher crime rates(7, 8).

Fear, an emotional response to perceived threats, can manifest as a cognitive response to the capability of harm or an emotional and autonomic reaction to potential dangers. This has been extensively discussed in the context of physical harm. Over the past three decades, the concept of fear of crime has been differentiated from mere concern, linking it to perceived threats and anxiety. The complexity of measuring fear and its profound psychological effects underscore its multidimensional nature associated with violence and social instability(9, 10).

Gender significantly influences the perception of crime, with women generally exhibiting higher levels of fear than men. This heightened fear among women is often linked to their vulnerability to sexual harassment and assault, influenced by socialization processes that encourage caution. The 'shadow thesis' suggests that fear of sexual assault magnifies concerns about other crimes, prompting women to take preventive measures and restrict their mobility(11, 12).

Theoretical frameworks such as Maslow's hierarchy highlight that safety is a foundational need for self-actualization. Unmet safety needs foster fear and insecurity. The vulnerability theory underscores feelings of powerlessness and inability to defend against crime, influenced by physical or social factors, whereas the victimization theory considers direct or indirect experiences of crime, with media exposure shaping perceptions of fear. General Strain Theory connects stress and strain to negative emotions, potentially leading to criminal behaviors(13, 14).

This study aims to examine the fear of crime victimization among females while traveling in public spaces, analyze the heightened vulnerability of women compared to men, investigate the factors inducing this fear, and identify the consequences of such fears, particularly how it influences women's travel behaviors in public areas. These objectives underscore the urgent need to address the intricacies of fear of crime to enhance community safety and individual well-being.

METHODS

The methodology adopted for this study involved a qualitative research design, chosen to gain deep insights into the subjective experiences of women regarding crime victimization in public spaces. The qualitative approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the phenomena, capturing the complexities and nuances of personal experiences and perceptions. This design was particularly apt for understanding the intricate realities of women's fears and the socio-cultural contexts influencing their sense of security in public areas(15).

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were instrumental in obtaining detailed narratives from the respondents. This approach was selected because it facilitates a flexible yet directed dialogue where participants can share their experiences and perspectives in an open-ended manner, thus enriching the data with personal insights that might not emerge in a more structured interview format(16).

Fieldwork was conducted at the University of Punjab, Lahore, specifically targeting female students residing in university hostels. These locations were deemed rich in contextual data due to their vibrant social dynamics and the diverse interactions that occur within. The choice of these sites provided a fertile ground for exploring the fear of crime victimization among young women who regularly traverse various government-operated public spaces like parks and bus terminals(17).

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants. This non-probability sampling method was appropriate for the study as it allowed for the selection of individuals who have experienced or are knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation, thus ensuring the relevance and depth of the data collected. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with female students, each lasting between 45 to 50 minutes. During these interviews, participants were prompted with questions from an interview guide, which helped maintain the focus on the study's objectives while allowing the conversation to develop naturally based on the respondents' experiences(18).

Data from the interviews were meticulously transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of themes within data. This technique was chosen for its flexibility and its efficacy in organizing and offering rich, detailed, and complex accounts of data. Through thematic analysis, different themes were extracted as analytical categories that provided significant insights into the fear of crime among female students(19).

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, assuring them of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. The research also maintained a high level of reflexivity to recognize and mitigate any biases or preconceptions that could influence the study's outcomes(20).

Overall, the methodology section elucidates the research strategies and tools employed to investigate the fear of crime victimization among females in public spaces in Lahore. It highlights the rationale behind methodological choices and underscores the ethical standards upheld during the study, providing a thorough and standardized account of the research process(21).

RESULTS

Crime and Victimization

This study revealed that crime and victimization are pervasive issues affecting women in public spaces. Responses from interviewees highlighted varied experiences of harassment and assault, particularly in environments perceived as unsafe. For instance, incidents of harassment at bus stations and local markets were frequently reported, underscoring the ongoing threats that compromise women's security and freedom.

Gender Differences in Vulnerability

The data indicated that women feel a heightened vulnerability to crime compared to men. This vulnerability is exacerbated by societal norms that view women as easier targets due to perceived physical and social weaknesses. The majority of respondents reported experiences of sexual harassment, particularly in crowded public places such as bus terminals and markets.

Parental Monitoring and Victim Experience

Parental monitoring emerged as a significant theme. Many respondents noted that family support and supervision are crucial in mitigating the risks associated with public spaces. However, there was also a recognition that overprotection could lead to restrictions that limit women's independence and mobility.

Cultural Beliefs and Communication

Cultural beliefs and norms significantly influence the willingness to discuss experiences of harassment. Many respondents felt uncomfortable discussing these issues with male family and often only confided in female relatives. This reluctance is rooted in cultural taboos surrounding sexual harassment and the broader societal implications of such disclosures.

This research contributes to the understanding of how fear of crime affects women's everyday lives and offers a foundation for further studies that could explore interventions to reduce victimization and improve women's safety in public spaces. Addressing the issues highlighted in this study requires comprehensive approaches that involve changes in policy, community engagement, and cultural shifts to ensure that public spaces are safe and accessible for all, regardless of gender.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the fear of crime victimization among females, offering insights into the complex interplay of individual experiences, societal norms, and gender dynamics. The pervasiveness of harassment and assault in public spaces clearly affects women's freedom and quality of life, reinforcing the need for more effective safety measures and societal change(22).

The study supports existing literature that suggests women are disproportionately affected by crime and fear of crime due to their perceived vulnerability. This vulnerability is not only a result of physical differences but also societal expectations and cultural norms that dictate women's behavior and restrict their freedom(23).

Moreover, the research highlights the crucial role of familial support in shaping responses to potential victimization. While parental monitoring can provide a sense of security, it can also contribute to a culture of overprotection that limits women's independence. This dual role of family support underscores the need for balanced strategies that promote safety without restricting freedom(1).

The impact of cultural norms on the communication of victimization experiences is particularly significant. The reluctance to discuss harassment openly can hinder women's ability to seek help and can perpetuate a cycle of silence and victimization. Addressing these cultural barriers is essential for creating a supportive environment where women can freely share their experiences and seek justice(2).

The qualitative approach of this study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of women, providing rich, detailed insights into the fear of crime victimization. However, the study's reliance on a purposive sample from a single geographic location limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the sensitivity of the subject matter might have influenced the willingness of participants to fully disclose their experiences, potentially leading to underreporting(3).

CONCLUSION

The study provides a profound exploration into the fear of crime victimization among female students in Pakistan, revealing that such fear significantly restricts their participation in urban life. Women's perceived vulnerability compared to men is markedly highlighted, with many respondents avoiding travel alone, particularly at night and in less secure areas. These findings suggest that familial restrictions, often interpreted as protective measures, stem from legitimate concerns over safety in public spaces. The presence of crime leads to a detrimental impact on women's independence, limiting their educational and employment opportunities and contributing to psychological distress. Essential familial support emerges as a crucial factor, boosting women's confidence and ability to navigate public spaces more freely. However, cultural norms still deter open discussions about sexual harassment, reinforcing silence and fear. The study underscores the need for enhanced security measures and cultural shifts to improve women's safety and autonomy in public areas. Moreover, it points to broader societal issues like poverty, unemployment, and ineffective governance that exacerbate the crime rate, urging comprehensive strategies to address these root causes and reduce the pervasive climate of fear.

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