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## Mobile Apps and Women In the City at Night

**A**nalyzing and occupying oneself with the social dynamics, the ups and downs of city dwellers at night is a research field that is expanding by leaps and bounds in academia. In 1978, Murray Melbin published the article “Night as Frontier,” in which he dealt with the “conquest” of the night as a temporal extension of human activities in industrialized societies. He based his idea on the hypothesis that, just like space, time can be occupied by human beings. Melbin showed that nocturnal social life in urban areas was similar to that of the pioneers in the old U.S. West. And, in effect, for four decades now, the conquest and colonization of the

night by traditional daytime activities have not stopped increasing.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, the 24-hour city also poses multiple challenges, such as the right to occupy it at night regardless of its users’ social, ethnic, or gender characteristics. In the case of women, the social group the majority of whom say they feel at risk or insecure as they move through public space at night, this is a factor of alert that continues on the rise.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the perception of insecurity and, above all, the rise in cases of gender violence have become the main argument for new tech products: cell phone apps. However, it is pertinent to look at the arguments that their creators use in terms of the image and representation of women *vis-à-vis* insecurity and the extent to which these tools can be of help.

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## A New Business Niche

If you do a simple Internet search in three languages (English, Spanish, and French) about digital security apps, you will find more than 60.<sup>3</sup> Most of them are similar: a list of possible contacts and geolocator broadcasting. In the first apps, the user had to push several buttons to activate and send an alarm, but the most recent versions activate with a simple shout or by vigorously shaking the cell phone. The latter are much more intuitive. Some even offer the possibility of recording video and sound, such as Bsafe and Noonlight.<sup>4 5</sup>

Some digital apps in Spanish (from Mexico, Argentina, and Chile) are proposed directly by local governments, such as, for example “Safe Woman Pink Alert” and “I’m Not Alone” in Ciudad Juárez,<sup>6 7</sup> just to mention two. Very few have been developed by associations or activists, such as the case of “You’re Not Alone,” a self-organized app in Argentina developed in collaboration with engineering students.<sup>8</sup> Other examples are the French apps “Elles,”<sup>9</sup> which is completely free, designed by an association and a group of activists and researchers, and “Flag,”<sup>10</sup> where an association and a research committee work to analyze and follow up on the data that its use provides for assessing and influencing the public policies that should be adopted.

Other apps put violence and the security crisis that affects mainly women in the foreground, but they have been created by start-ups. This is the case of “We Help,”<sup>11</sup> which is truly useful and effective, but a paying version. “Shake2Safety” is another, created by developers specializing in other kinds of apps.<sup>12</sup> Some security companies have also created their own products, such as the Asegurarte consulting firm, which has identified a niche by adapting its AST panic button to the #niunamenos (#Not-OneLess) movement in Argentina by adding the “protest function.”<sup>13</sup> This adaptation consists of changing the graphics and colors. However, it does not include any specific reflection about women and the use of urban space.

Certain apps can actually be counterproductive because they are based on the idea that they are collaborative: they create a help network for when a woman finds herself in danger; this is the case of “Women Safety Totem sos Help” and “Zeifie.”<sup>14</sup> The latter writes, “Hence, by downloading the Zeifie app, we create PeerSafety and thus form a community of Good Samaritans that wish to make the society a safer place for all. . . . If they respond to the

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alarm, they will then be able to see your position, your first name, photo, and any medical information that you may have included in the app.”<sup>15</sup>

The Zeifie app shares personal data with a community of “good Samaritans.” However, it provides no filter or control of the individuals that want to be a part of it. While the intention of creating a help network is generally the basis for collaborative tools, in the case of the many apps that are fighting against gender violence, it is dangerous because it shares personal data without knowing who is part of the “good Samaritan” community. In addition, different studies show that physical and verbal aggressions are generally inflicted by individuals close to the victim (friends, a partner, or an ex-partner). In that sense, how much could these tools put their users at risk?

## Discourse and Image

Eighty percent of the apps present the night as the stage *par excellence* for attacks, whether in a dark parking lot or any other urban space after the sun goes down. Equally, although some do not exclusively target women, they do use feminine images in their ads.

In effect, the night is the representation *par excellence* for danger, but above all, it underlines the supposed fragility of the female body. Without denying the violence and growing number of feminicides in Mexico, different studies show that women’s fear and the perception of insecurity in the public space are intimately linked with a social, sociological, and historical construction.<sup>16</sup> In that sense, the body with feminine traits is that which is frequently violated in the imaginary linked to the night in literature, cinema, and advertising.

The number of women who move through the city at night for enjoyment or for work continues to rise. Their presence in the nocturnal public space is much more common, but this does not guarantee them the right to the

city. If we take another look at the work of Henri Lefèvre about the right to the city, we can see that the night, as a practiced, inhabited space-time, is and continues to be the scene for new forms of exclusion and inequalities. This is due to the absence of clear regulations that limit and create a framework for night work, to the increased number of homeless people, among them more and more women, and to nocturnal public spaces destined exclusively to nocturnal tourism.

## Remembering the Real Debate

The team of urbanists who worked on renovating Paris's seven plazas used different methodologies to evaluate the degree of urbanness of public spaces. One of the parameters was how long a woman could remain alone in a place without being bothered or made to feel uncomfortable. The results showed that during the day, this happened without great difficulty, but that during the night, undesired solicitations and interactions with other users of the space could become complicated.<sup>17</sup>

At night, women's right to the city—or that of any person with a female body—must be justified even more than during the day, whether for work or entertainment reasons. As a result, feminist groups occupy the streets at night more and more, using as an example the first “Take Back the Night” marches in Montreal, which are now held in Paris, London, Buenos Aires, and, in 2017, in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico. The objective of these marches is to reclaim full rights to the nocturnal city, its use and enjoyment, but above all to protest sexual violence against women.<sup>18</sup> However, this right cannot be achieved without greater awareness about the image and social representations of the female body.

In August 2012, the French Ministry of Labor published “Advice for Women” on its website. This text makes several recommendations like, “Avoid deserted places, bad-

ly lit streets, dark places where a possible attacker could hide.”<sup>19</sup> Many groups objected because, in effect, this deepens women's “confinement,” the fear of the night, and therefore reinforced ideas about the genders that limited daily space-times. The text was taken down in October of that year. Another example of the perception of women's safety can be found in the following paragraph of a paper presented by app designers: “In the present-day scenes women safety [sic] is considered to be the major problem in both urban and rural areas. It is quite difficult to change the mind-set of the entire society, but we can provide several security devices for the women who are facing sexual harassment, acid attacks, molestation.”<sup>20</sup>

As can be gleaned from the foregoing, it is difficult to change how society thinks, and therefore, women must be protected. But, more than protected, a way must be found so that they and individuals who do not fit into the female-male binary can occupy and appropriate urban spaces like any other user. In that sense, creating apps is useful and effective if their objective is not solely based on a business model and if they are accompanied by an assessment and follow-up that impact urban public policies. Until now, no analyses or studies exist that show who the users of these apps are or in what conditions and urban contexts they use them. For example, in the data I obtained from a brief survey of 98 people (80 women and 18 men), only 8 (7 women and 1 man) said they had an app to feel safer and only 2 said they used them every day.

## The Importance of Collaboration Between Groups and Researchers

Studies with a gender focus about daily mobility have shown that women's itineraries and planned activities are much more fragmented than those of men. This is due to the large number of women's activities that involve taking care of themselves. Equally, it has been shown that the way they enjoy the city and appropriate urban spaces is completely different.

We can conclude that inventing digital tools is not a definitive solution for gender violence in our societies. Undoubtedly, they help make visible the anomalies of a city that is non-inclusive and non-accessible for everyone, men and women. The use of “high-tech” solutions must continue, but associated with a “low-tech” solution that

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includes local actions on a neighborhood level, as has already been done: leaving a light on to create a safer environment on the street during the night; proposing more frequent public transportation—and why not? making it gender-friendly, too—; holding collective nighttime marches; and, above all, creating more interest in gender socialization from childhood on, since that is the stage of life in which sex and gender codes are forged. ■■■

## Further Reading

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- Ortiz Escalante, S., “El lado nocturno de la vida cotidiana: un análisis feminista de la planificación urbana nocturna,” in *Kultur, revista interdisciplinaria sobre la cultura de la ciutat* vol. 4, no. 7, 2017, pp. 55-78, <http://www.e-revistas.uji.es/index.php/kult-ur/article/view/2336/2135>.

## Notes

- 1 Murray Melbin, “Night as Frontier,” *Cultures & Conflicts* (2017), pp. 105-106, <http://conflicts.revues.org/19434>. Melbin was a professor of social sciences at the University of Boston. The empirical data he

used in his article refer mainly to Boston today and the U.S. West of a century ago.

- 2 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (Envipe)*, 2015 to 2019, <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/envipe/2019/>.
- 3 I did this search using Google between June 5 and June 20, 2020.
- 4 <https://getbsafe.com/bsafe-vouchers-for-parents/>.
- 5 <https://www.noonlight.com>.
- 6 “Mujer Segura Alerta Rosa,” <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=solucionenllave.alertarosa&hl=fr>.
- 7 It requires no Internet connection because it sends free text messages with the user’s location in real time to all the contacts selected, <https://www.elheraldodejuarez.com.mx/local/reactivan-app-no-estoy-sola-3230532.html>.
- 8 <https://www.anred.org/2019/06/03/no-estas-sola-la-app-autogestionada-contra-la-violencia-de-genero/>.
- 9 <https://www.app-elles.fr>.
- 10 [https://www.flagasso.com/2-uncategorised/51-app\\_presentation.html](https://www.flagasso.com/2-uncategorised/51-app_presentation.html).
- 11 <https://lovewehelp.com>.
- 12 <https://photonapps.wordpress.com>.
- 13 <https://www.botondepanicoast.com.ar/niunamenos>.
- 14 <https://women-safety-totem-sos-help.soft112.com>.
- 15 <http://zeifie.com/about/>, accessed June 1, 2020.
- 16 Pascale Lapalud and Chris Blache, “Le genre la nuit. Espace sensible,” *l’Observatoire* no. 53, pp. 25-28.
- 17 Jean-Christophe Choblet, Presentation at the international seminar “Los desplazamientos a pie ¿qué reconfiguraciones contemporáneas del espacio desde la calle al ámbito político?” Paris, November 27-29, 2017. Mr. Choblet heads the Paris municipality’s PAVEX Project about urban intervention, valuing, and experimentation in the public space.
- 18 C. Coderre, and S. M. Coderre, “La marche internationale. La rue, la nuit, femmes sans peur: ses origines et sa dynamique symbolique,” *Revue Reflets* vol. 23, no. 2, 2017, pp. 141- 180.
- 19 <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2013/10/18/actualite/actualite/les-conseils-aux-femmes-du-ministere-remplaces-enfin-vraies-solutions-pas-injonctions/>.
- 20 R. Ramachandiran, L. Dhanya, and M. Shalini, “A Survey on Women Safety Device Using IoT,” 2019 IEEE International Conference on System, Computation, Automation and Networking (ICSCAN), Pondicherry, India, 2019, pp. 1-6.

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