

# **Mind the Gender Gap**

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Feminist Developments in Violence and Abuse

# **Mind the Gender Gap: A Mobilities Perspective of Sexual Harassment on the London Underground**

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For Dad*

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: Arrhythmia and Egg Yolk

### Abstract

Using a mobilities framework, this book aims to tell the stories of sexual harassment on the London Underground not as a single, exceptional moment, but as part of women's wider urban experiences and movements through public urban life. The way this book is structured attempts to mirror and portray this. As such, the chapters that follow this one take such an approach: the before, the during and the after. Prior to this, two chapters are dedicated to the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings that are employed to make sense of women's experiences. In this introductory chapter, I overview the issue of sexual harassment on public transport more broadly. I situate the phenomenon in its social context of a global endemic of violence against women, before zooming in to 'set the scene' of the London Underground. I will briefly outline the conceptual framework I use to understand sexual harassment on the London Underground and summarise how situating the issue at the axis of mobilities, rhythms, space and time, allows new insights into how sexual harassment happens 'on the move'. I then summarise the methodological approach taken for the research that constitutes this book, including a consideration of researcher positionality and ethics. I also make a case for the value of 'messy' qualitative, reflexive approaches, and how this is essential for disrupting normative and 'taken for granted' conceptions of sexual harassment. I argue that, by giving space to the complexity of women's in-depth, kinetic stories, we are rewarded with a deeper understanding of the anticipation, manifestation and reaction to incidents of sexual harassment on public transport.

*Keywords:* Sexual harassment; public transport; London Underground; mobilities; qualitative methods

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**Mind the Gender Gap: A Mobilities Perspective of Sexual Harassment on the London Underground, 1–19**



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*Early Autumn 2013, Istanbul, Turkey*

The air on the Metrobus is dense and heavy. It's only 8am but the sun is unseasonably warm as it glares into the carriage in slow interludes through the dusty windows. As we're shuttled from the belly of the city towards its fringes, the intense smog seeps in through cracks and fuses with the odours of hasty bodies that occupy the early morning rush hours. The collective agitation on the carriage is palpable, as individual cadences are subsumed into the broader rhythms of the city. In a metropolis of over 15 million people, breathing space is a rare luxury, and, like every other working day, we're crammed in like rigid Tetris blocks – thigh to hip, elbow to back, shoulder to armpit. We don't know each other, we probably won't see each other again, and the only thing we have in common is the direction of our commute. Yet in this moment I'm physically closer to the strangers on this bus than I have been to most people I know. I still find it unsettling, but over the past few months, instead of occupying a state of constant vigilance towards my surroundings, I've gradually developed the knack of zoning out from the overwhelming urban stimulus bubbling around me. This has the added benefit of perceptually speeding up the hour-long journey and taking my mind off my aching feet. I breathe in deeply and close my eyes, one arm stretched above my head, fingers tense and clasping the handrail, while the rest of me groggily sways back and forth in keeping with the rhythm of the static bodies around me ....

Back and forth

    Back and forth

        Back and forth

            Back and forth

I'm dislodged from the metronomic motion, not suddenly, but gradually, like a morning alarm softly invading a dream before wrenching you from it. I become aware of a dull, hard, intermittent pressure against the small of my back, that feels...out of place somehow, even in the sardine crush of bodies. An inconsiderate elbow? Someone's bag? Even before I force myself to steal a cautious glance behind me, I *know* what's happening. My *body* knows what's happening. My heart flips into arrhythmia, my stomach churns, and my muscles freeze. But when I turn my head slowly, I see that the man pressed up behind me is looking off to the side distractedly, rather than directly at me. This confuses me enough to make me question whether this is *really* happening. Is he *really* pushing his erection into my back, or am I imagining it? I know with certainty what is happening, and yet I am unsure.

In this liminal state, I don't move. I don't react. I don't make a scene. I don't know how long I stand like this – time morphs, swells, and stretches until we pull into the next station and, amongst the flux of passengers alighting and arriving, I manage to shift my body away from him as the carriage reconfigures itself. He doesn't look at me once. The queasiness lingers in the pit of my stomach, but as the indifferent Metrobus shuttles us on, it's *almost* like nothing happened at all.

2018, London, UK

I'm riding on the top deck of the 176 bus to meet a friend on Lower Marsh, a market street nestled down to the side of Waterloo station. It's a late spring morning and the bus is relatively empty, hosting only a scattering of people and an unusually calm ambiance that is entirely removed from the chaotic and jumbled medley of London rush hours. The 40-minute journey is a route I know like the back of my hand and a distracted glance out of the window is all I need to get my bearings. The pleasure in this is that I can daydream, read my book and actually enjoy the journey. In moments like these, travel becomes not time wasted and hurried along, but a time-space in which doing *nothing* is perfectly acceptable because, by travelling, you are already doing *something*.

In this relaxed state, I distantly register someone in my periphery moving from further back on the bus and sitting behind me. Strange, on an almost empty bus, but I don't really think much of it. I check my phone absently for messages and get back to my book. Minutes later, I'm pulled back to the bus again when I sense shuffling behind me. The man who had moved from the back has changed seats again to sit directly across the aisle from me. My skin prickles and I feel myself shift from relaxed to wary and cautious. I can sense something's not *quite* right. He's looking at me. With my head down, I glance across to my left and as I do, he turns to look ahead, avoiding my gaze. But ... I can see he's touching himself, slowly, over the top of his khaki trousers, making no real attempt to disguise it. My stomach somersaults theatrically, as I quickly look away. As I do, I feel his gaze burn back towards me. When I look again, he's staring straight forwards. Caught in a bizarre back and forth, I try to meet his eye, to give him a look that says, I see you, I'm furious and this is not ok. My heart thuds in my chest, my blood feels thick like egg yolk, whilst my brain whirs at a hundred miles an hour. I know that in a few minutes we'll arrive at my stop. I'll press the red square that will ping loudly, telling the driver in his booth that someone needs to get off the bus, and I'll balance my way down the stairs, grabbing the handrail as

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it jerks forward, as if this stop is unexpected. I'll alight through the middle doors. I'll get on with my day... Or, I can say something now, confront him, express my inner outrage directly, an outrage that is not just about him, but built from an accumulation of experiences of men causing my skin to crawl and making me feel like my safety is precarious and my freedom restricted. This is what I want to do, I think. But in the moment, vocalising seems impossible, outside the realm of my options. I don't feel scared, but stifled, restrained by the social norms of public transport (which is funny, I think, when a man is masturbating at me in broad daylight on the 176). I could point my phone at him, take a photo and say I'm going to report him to the police, scare him, so he doesn't do this to another woman or girl. In a split second, I play out every possible chain of events triggered by every possible action I can take. It's not reactive, it's calculated. But at the same time, it's automatic, enmeshed in my psyche and entangled in a web of experience, both personal and vicarious, that culminate in the ability (and necessity?) to instantaneously measure and weigh up how to react to unwanted sexual attention from men. Out of my window to the right, I notice The Old Vic theatre up ahead. It's my stop. I press the red button, close my book and lift myself from my seat. As I leave, I try to catch his eye again, to win this game he's forced me to play, but his avoidance is obstinate, and I pull my gaze away from him like stubborn blue tack, giving into the fact that I have chosen to 'do nothing'.

\*

In a biographical catalogue of experiences of unwanted, intrusive behaviour from men, these incidents have occupied a disproportionate amount of headspace and scrutiny. I felt guilty and confused by my lack of overt resistance, defiance or confrontation; things I had displayed many times in response to incidents of street harassment. I struggled to make sense of my own reactions, knowing only that labelling them as simple, carnal 'fear' responses felt like a reductive untruth. Confusion and apathy felt more fitting, but this jarred with my internalised script of how I should feel or act. Through the gradual development of a feminist, academic lens, I began to recognise that these incidents and my reactions could, *in part*, be understood within the broader context of fear and anxieties around gender-based violence in public space. Women are often told that our level of fear of sexual violence has no logical basis in the modern western world; that we are afforded equal rights, freedoms and security. And yet we are simultaneously subject to repeated interpersonal experiences and bombarded with prolific media reporting of gendered violence around the globe and across social contexts. Additionally, violence against women is commodified and 'enjoyed' through the avid consumption of crime dramas and true crime (Havas & Horeck, 2021; Slakoff, 2022). This imperceptible merging of fact and fiction, visceral and

vicarious, culminates in a ubiquitous sense of danger, running like an electric current under a thin veneer of freedom, safety and security. Subsequently, in our unwanted interactions with men, we often fear the worst and act accordingly. Our underlying objective when negotiating experiences of sexual harassment and assault is often driven by the perceived need to avoid an escalation into violence (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). As such, it's no surprise that the impact of fear dominates academic discussion around sexual harassment.

However, reflecting on my experiences on the Istanbul and London buses, I realised it wasn't fear that entirely, or even predominantly dictated my reactions. It was more understated. Subtle. I felt uneasy and awkward speaking out on the quiet bus. I didn't want to make a fuss or draw attention to myself. I also just wanted to get to where I was going. I didn't want to be disrupted. I didn't want these actions to leak into the day and beyond, inflate in prominence and consume my time and headspace. I wanted to keep it contained and get on with my journey and my day. As I began the research that constitutes this book and started speaking to women about their experiences of unwanted male attention on public transport, specifically the London Underground network, I heard versions of my own stories mirrored back to me time and time again. I found myself subconsciously nodding in understanding as the women I spoke to grappled to articulate the complexities and contradictions that seem to dominate these moments and their subsequent impact. This was particularly true when they deviated from the normative scripts of feisty, feminist responses, or inaction caused by a sense of female vulnerability and fear.

We spoke about incidents of harassment and assault on the London Underground that were various and multitudinous in form and perceived severity. In each of the stories I heard, it became clear that there was something particular about the way these incidents were perpetrated, experienced and reacted to that was unmistakably linked with their taking place in a public transport environment and the social norms and regulations bound up in these spaces. Being 'on the move' was the thread of similarity that weaved lucidly through these stories, moulding how these behaviours were enacted, and warping women's reactions and responses to them.

It bred the uncertainty, even as a hand moved between her legs, as to whether she was really being assaulted.

It meant he could put both of his hands on her hips from behind, squeezing her tightly as he moved her to the side so he could pass, innocuous and unnoticed by other passengers.

It allowed the man next her to lean forward and subtly place his smart phone to take a photo up her skirt.

It facilitated the man who, on a packed city tube, cupped his hand between her legs, moving back and forth on the outside of her trousers.

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It meant that, when she got to the bottom of the escalator and realised the man who had been standing a bit too close behind her had ejaculated on her coat, he had already disappeared into the crowd.

It allowed the strange man next to her on an evening tube to silently take her hand from her lap and put it on his, holding it tightly, as she froze in shock.

It meant that on a packed morning rush hour tube, the businessman standing behind her could put both of his hands firmly on her bum and when confronted, simply remove them and act like it was an accident.

It impacted on why, when she rejected a man who was flirting with her on the night tube and he stood over her calling her a fucking bitch, no one else in the carriage said a word.

It meant the man wearing a thick coat on a hot day, who squeezed behind her on a busy carriage, could rub his erection against her leg, causing enough confusion that she didn't speak out.

It permitted the man who masturbated at her in an empty carriage when she was on her way home from after school club, to do so for over five minutes, without her being able to leave.

These examples illustrate the variety of experiences of sexual harassment and assault on the London Underground that happened to some of the women I spoke to. Situated in a broader culture endemic of sexual and gender-based violence, these incidents on public transport deserve their own critique and understandings. The space, its physicality and design, its purpose, its rhythms and the social interactions and norms that occur within it, all coalesce to create an atmosphere and social space in which sexual harassment is perpetrated, experienced, negotiated and remembered in ways that are uniquely mitigated by the very nature of this mobile environment. It is these experiences and the specificity of the transport environment that are the focus of this book. In an attempt to portray the complexities of women's subjective experiences of sexual harassment and assault within the context of the London Underground, I take a 'whole journey' approach (discussed further below in notes on methodology). In Chapter 4, I focus on the '*before*' and explore how women experience and negotiate London and the Underground in everyday life. Chapter 5 addresses the '*during*', going into detail about the incident of harassment or assault to understand the key features of women's experiences in a transport environment. Chapter 6 looks at '*after*' the event to understand how women negotiate the memory of sexual harassment, and how it impacts their mobilities over time.

## Sexual Harassment ‘On the Move’: A Mobilities Perspective

Whilst this book focusses on how public transport shapes experiences of sexual harassment, it does not presume or intend to insinuate that the way transport is structured is the primary, underlying cause of this form of sexual violence. Underpinning this work is the acknowledgement and understanding that this harmful behaviour is located within a global endemic of gender-based violence (WHO, 2021), with an estimated one in three women experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Predominantly perpetrated by men against women, feminist work has extensively theorised sexual harassment as a pervasive part of everyday gendered life, or as Liz Kelly (1987) suggests, as part of the continuum of sexual violence. A 2021 investigation by the United Nations Women UK found that in the UK, 97% of women aged 18–24 have experienced sexual harassment. Acknowledged in this way, sexual harassment can be understood as a widely normalised behaviour that exists on a continuum that connects these intrusions with intimate partner violence and ‘stranger’ rape. In this way, rather than focussing on and isolating experiences of extreme sexual violence as episodic and deviant, they can be understood as part of the everyday, normative context of women’s lives, located in patriarchal structures that permit their occurrence within society. The perpetration of sexual harassment across various social arenas has been widely explored: including private and public spaces such as the workplace (Spiliopoulou & Whitcomb, 2023), the streets (Fileborn & O’Neill, 2023), the night-time economy (Gunby et al., 2020) and music festivals (Bows et al., 2024). Research has identified that the extent and type of sexual harassment are significantly shaped by the context in which it occurs (Madan & Nalla, 2016) and that the way in which women react to harassment is, in part, influenced by the distinct nature of the environment in which it is experienced (Krasas & Henson, 1997).

Unsurprisingly, the perpetration and experience of sexual harassment on transport differ from other arenas, and yet, until relatively recently, had received little academic attention, particularly in the global West. Consequently, the uniqueness of experiences within these spaces has often been obfuscated by conflating them with public spaces such as the streets. As with other spaces, patriarchal socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes underpin women’s use of transport systems and interactions that occur within them. Therefore, whilst sexual harassment occurs on transport around the globe, the scope and frequency of the issue varies, and is particularly prevalent in countries where gender equality remains disparate, and whose transport environments therefore remain hostile and less gender-responsive to the needs and experiences of women and girls (Noor & Iamtrakul, 2023). Exploring the specific nature of sexual harassment in different contexts exposes how the normative social interactions within that space impact how incidents of sexual violence are perpetrated and experienced. However, whilst *space* is important here, I contend that there are other aspects that have a significant influence, including *mobility*, *temporality* and *rhythm*. Significantly, by viewing this phenomenon through the lens of movement or *mobility*, new insights and deeper understandings of the experiences of sexual harassment on public transport can

be established. Previously overlooked as a ‘neutral set of technologies and processes’ (Larsen et al., 2006, p. 3), encounters that occurred within a travel environment were omitted from analysis. As such, the ‘mobilities turn’ (Urry, 2000) connected social sciences with transport approaches, and through a focus on the collisions of time and space, drew attention to the complexity of the movement of people and things in the social world. Mobilities studies have focussed on the social interactions that are implicated by various forms of travel, including public transport in urban spaces (Bissell, 2018; Urry, 2007). A mobilities perspective urges us to acknowledge and confront the complexities of transport environments and the role they play in social interactions (including sexual harassment), rather than view them as an inert and neutral backdrop.

Forming part of the ontological fabric and functioning of a city, public transportation systems enable the movement of people and connect the various social spheres of urban life. And yet they are also liminal spaces, existing beyond the domains of work, leisure and home and the static streets. This liminality is at least in part due to their abundant mobility and ‘unfixed’ nature. Understanding the way in which these systems are perceived and experienced is fundamental to a deeper, clearer comprehension of instances of sexual violence that occur within them. As well as taking a mobilities approach to understand gendered experience, this also means it is essential to *take a gendered approach to understanding mobilities*, or in other words, to consider how mobility and the use of transport are gendered.

These dynamics will be further explored in Chapter 3, which outlines a mobilities perspective and its value. It also overviews the conceptual framework used to make sense of sexual harassment in a public transport environment. This framework consists of space, mobilities, rhythms and temporalities and throughout this book these concepts will be applied to understand women’s experiences of sexual harassment in transport: how they pre-empt these acts of gendered violence, experience and react to them ‘in the moment’, how they are remembered and negotiated over time, and how this impacts their urban mobilities. A mobilities perspective helps theorise and analyse the obvious (yet neglected) fact that these experiences are occurring in a transitory space and that this significantly influences how they are anticipated, perpetrated, experienced and responded to. This subsequently impacts women’s use of transport and broader urban mobilities. In short, this book aims to offer a much-needed explanation of the particularities and impact of sexual harassment happening *on the move*.

## **Setting the Scene: London and the London Underground**

This book focusses on experiences of sexual harassment on the London Underground. The decision to focus on this city and network arose from a number of reasons. Academically, very few studies of sexual harassment on transport have focussed on Western cities. As highlighted below in more detail, Transport for London (TfL), the Underground’s governing body, and the British Transport Police had recently begun to show significant interest in the gendered experiences on their services, particularly the prevalence of unwanted sexual attention in the