



2 WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Public transport plays an important role in daily mobility. In the Paris region, more than one in five journeys every day are made using public transport modes^a. Women and men both use them to a similar degree. However, more than half of the women state that they do not feel safe. Researchers are studying the reasons for their apprehension which tends to limit their participation in social life.

A social space to be shared

In public transport, the social relations between strangers are regulated by social control. A principle of polite inattentiveness reigns, meaning that everyone can discreetly respect the presence of others^b.

But, as gender studies have been pointing out since the 1980s, such social control depends on norms which still attribute different social roles and positions to men and women.

Extreme situations of harassment and aggression aside, day-to-day experience can cause unease and have an impact on public transit practices.

Unease in day-to-day experience

A research project that employed a number of qualitative techniques (observations, individual and group interviews) has captured the experience of female students who use public transport in the Paris region.

This study^c highlights several categories of male attitudes: invasion of territory, staring, verbal comments on women's physical appearance,

or physical contact. The sociologist Erving Goffman^d used the term "modes of violation", to describe the fact that these attitudes cause personal offence. Among the surveyed women they lead to unease at the very least, combined with varying degrees of anxiety.

Some of these attitudes are perceived as natural or irrelevant by the young women in the survey, during this period when they are learning to be independent. They may link their reactions to a kind of guilt, putting their fears down to their personal « paranoia ».

Implementing strategies

Women do react to these affronts, but often more preventively or defensively than offensively. They admit to usually showing discretion and employing avoidance tactics (looking away, wearing headphones, etc.). More direct responses, in which they confront the disturbing attitude, are reserved for situations and times where they feel the most at ease. They change their behaviours in the evenings and in situations which they consider to be the most risky.

They can implement various tactics and strategies, from changing their behaviour in situ (greater vigilance, care in choosing a seat) to avoiding situations they deem problematic (by taking a taxi, going home earlier than they would have liked, changing their route or appearance, or not travelling home on their own).

The role of "socialisation"

Although all the respondents expressed their anxiety about some male attitudes, the level of this varies. Two socialisation situations seem to affect the differences in their perceptions. First, being used to a highly urban residential environment and early use of public transport result in lower levels of anxiety. Also, the young women who are the most worried described a family environment which made them very aware of their vulnerability.

“ Ultimately, while apprehension in public transport is not confined to women, their ordinary experience shows that the issue of the place of individuals in society and in physical space remains an important determinant of their mobility, and consequently their ability to take part in social life. ”



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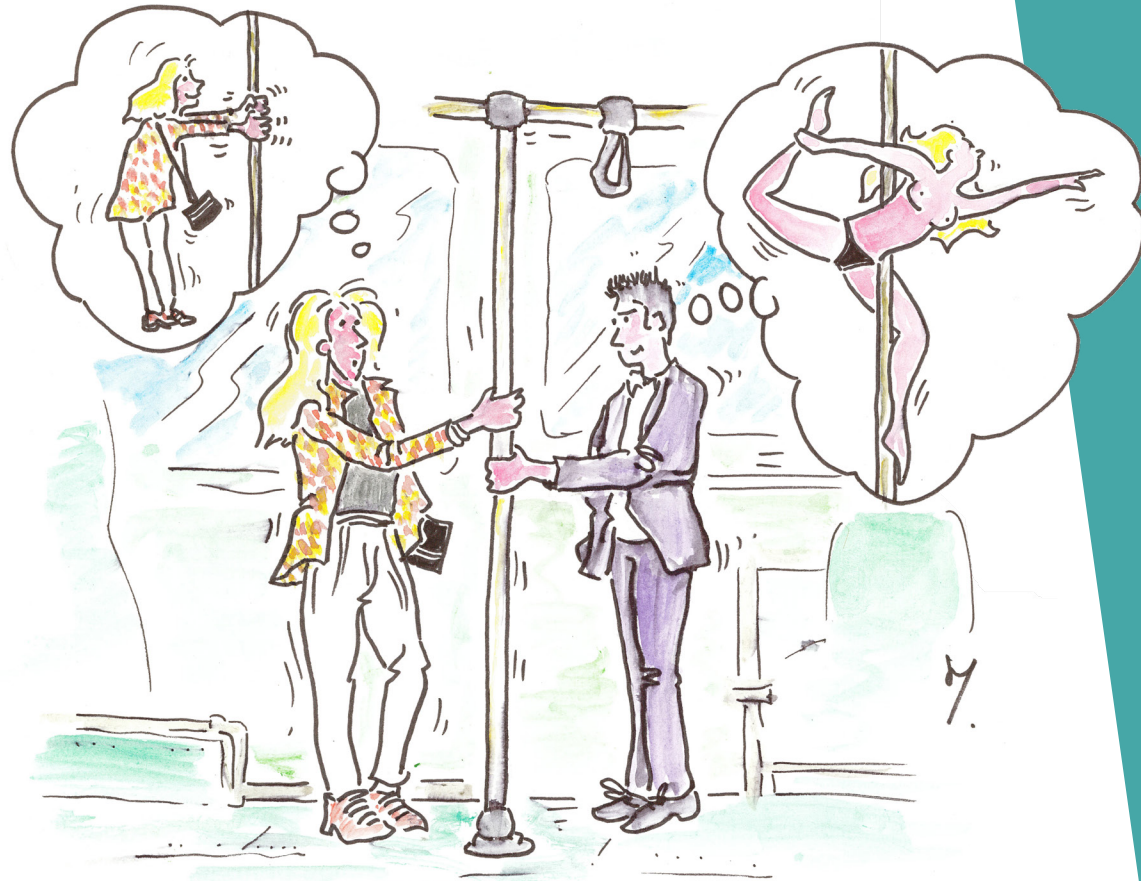
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