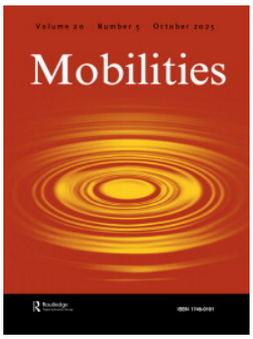

Mobilities

ISSN: 1745-0101 (Print) 1745-011X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rmob20

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To cite this article: Esma Geliş & Franziska X. Meinherz (13 Aug 2025): Intersectional (in)securities - multiply marginalised women's experiences of (un)safety on public transport, Mobilities, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2025.2532404

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2025.2532404

MOBILITIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2025.2532404

Intersectional (in)securities - multiply marginalised women's experiences of (un)safety on public transport

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, equitable access to safe and inclusive transport has become a policy priority. However, women's experiences in public transport are still shaped by gender-specific safety concerns, and studies on marginalisation reveal forms of exclusion based on age, class, queerness, and racialisation. To complement existing research that mainly analyses these dimensions in isolation, we take an intersectional approach and focus on mobility biographies to study how multiply marginalised women experience (un)safety on public transport in Munich. Through a qualitative, ethnographic research design, we identify key factors influencing their sense of (un)safety: the spatial and social environment, intersectional experiences of discrimination, and their specific socialisation as marginalised women. We found that despite experiences of harassment or violence, many women reported feeling relatively safe. This paradox is linked to them normalising harassment as something to expect as women on public transport. Participants' feelings of (un)safety were shaped by life-long socialisation, including cautionary tales from family and friends as well as past experiences. To navigate feelings of unsafety, participants developed strategies to minimise risks, which represented an additional mental load. Our study highlights the need for mobility policies that tackle the structural roots of transport-related unsafety through intersectional and proactive justice-oriented planning.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 18 February 2025
Revised 20 May 2025
Accepted 8 June 2025

KEYWORDS
Public transport; gender; intersectionality; marginalisation; safety; mobility justice; mobility biography

Introduction

In recent years, equitable access to safe and inclusive transport has become a policy priority, as illustrated, for instance, by the United Nations Guidelines for developing inclusive transport infrastructure (United Nations Office for Project Services 2023), the European Union's Public Transport Sector Priorities for the Legislative Term 2024 – 2029 (Union Internationale des Transports Publics 2024) or Munich's roadmap for urban mobility 2035 (Mobilitätsreferat München 2021). Guaranteeing universal access to safe public transport notably requires addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities and safety issues (Sheller 2014, 2018). This is based within broader feminist mobilities research that understands gendered mobility not only as physical movement,

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but as shaped by meanings, power relations, and embodied experiences; rooted in social norms and spatial structures that enable or restrict movement (Cresswell and Uteng 2008).

Around the globe, women's access to and experiences and practices of using public transport are shaped by gender-specific discriminations. First, (the fear of) being exposed to harassment and violence has been found to limit women's movement in public spaces and thus to contribute to transport-related forms of social exclusion (Church, Frost, and Sullivan 2000; Kawgan-Kagan and Popp 2018). Second, such fears or experiences of danger and vulnerability are associated with a higher mental load for women using public transport, because they have to identify and strategically choose routes and travel times that they consider safe (Farina, Boussauw, and Plyushteva 2021; Kash 2019; Stark and Meschik 2018). Those phenomena are exacerbated in the case of women who face additional forms of marginalisation, such as racism or ageism (Chowdhury et al. 2024; Chowdhury and Van Wee 2020; Eagle and Kwele 2021; Nash, Maguire, and Gorman-Murray 2018).

To date, most research on inequalities in the access to and experiences of mobility focuses on a single dimension of marginalisation, such as gender, age, or racialisation (Lubitow, Abelson, and Carpenter 2020). Thereby, such studies overlook the implications of people's situatedness at the intersection of such social categories for their mobility practices and experiences (Nash, Maguire, and Gorman-Murray 2018; Zhang and Yang 2024; Weintrob et al. 2021). Promoting equitable mobility environments that cater to the diverse needs of all requires an intersectional lens that reveals how overlapping systems of oppression amplify vulnerabilities and create distinct mobility challenges (Buhr and McGarrigle 2017; Enright 2019; Masoumi and Fastenmeier 2016; Nash, Maguire, and Gorman-Murray 2018; Nicholson and Sheller 2016). This intersectional lens contributes to broader debates on mobility justice, which foregrounds the unequal distribution of mobility opportunities and the ways in which movement and its restrictions reflect and reinforce broader social inequalities (Sheller 2018).

Furthermore, existing research on inclusivity and safety tends to either analyse experiences of mobility by focusing on the interactions between space and people, thus highlighting the situatedness of such experiences (Beebejaun 2017; Lewis, Saukko, and Lumsden 2021), or on aspects of socialisation, such as societal norms or upbringing (Jungnickel and Aldred 2014; Levy 2019; Murray 2024). Thereby, such studies overlook how situated experiences and socialisation interplay in shaping women's mobility practices and perceptions of safety in public transport.

To address this gap, in this article, we analyse how intersectional forms of marginalisation related to gender, racialisation, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation influence women's experiences of safety on public transport. To understand how situated elements interplay with life-long socialisation in shaping multiply marginalised women's experiences and practices of navigating public transport, we link Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality with the concept of mobility biographies (Lanzendorf 2003; Scheiner 2018). Intersectionality, as introduced by Crenshaw (1989), highlights how overlapping systems of oppression - such as sexism, racism, and classism - interact to produce distinct forms of marginalisation that cannot be understood by examining each axis separately. In line with this approach, we use the term women to refer to individuals who identify as women or identify with experiences commonly associated with womanhood, particularly in relation to public space and mobility. We ask two questions:

1. How do intersectional marginalisations related to gender, racialisation, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation shape women's experiences of safety on public transport?
2. How do multiply marginalised women's intersectional identities shape their mobility biographies?

To answer these questions, we analysed the mobility experiences of intersectionally marginalised women using public transport in Munich (Germany). We combined ethnographic methods (mobility diaries and walk-alongs) with semi-structured interviews to understand how multiply marginalised women's experiences of danger and vulnerability were shaped both by how their

intersectional identities affected their interactions with space and people, and by how they conditioned their socialisation.

Literature review

In the following, we first review existing literature on how gender-specific safety concerns shape women's mobility practices and experiences and how they are intertwined with gendered socialisation processes. We then summarise the scarcer body of literature on how different forms of marginalisation beyond gender shape experiences and practices of using public transport. Lastly, we present the two theoretical-conceptual approaches that guide our analysis: mobility biographies and intersectionality.

How gender-specific safety concerns shape women's mobility practices, experiences and socialisation

Most studies on gender-specific safety concerns analyse how they affect women's mobility practices. Women who experience frightening situations, such as harassment or assault, often adapt their mobility habits to avoid traveling alone at certain times (Stark and Meschik 2018). Studies conducted in different cities around the globe found that women frequently choose more expensive or longer routes perceived as safer, engage in defensive behaviours, or avoid travel altogether (Farina, Boussauw, and Plyushteva 2021; Kash 2019; Stark and Meschik 2018), leading to time-intensive and effortful 'safety work' for women as well as trans and non-binary people (Ison et al. 2024). The absence of witnesses to potential crimes, with social incivilities being a significant concern, further exacerbates women's sense of vulnerability (Yavuz and Welch 2010).

An aspect that is less studied is how gender-specific safety concerns affect the quality of women's mobility experiences. Gendered differences in mobility practices also concern comfort and ease-of-use and thus how women experience and attribute meaning to mobility (Meinherz and Fritz 2021). Accounting for such issues requires analysing not only mobility practices but also the quality of mobility, including safety and comfort.

Women's mobility practices and feelings of (un)safety are furthermore shaped by gendered differences in socialisation. Through familiarisation with social norms and expectations during upbringing, parental guidance, education, and media exposure, socialisation plays a key role in shaping people's mobility behaviour and preferences for different modes of transport (Jungnickel and Aldred 2014; Levy 2019; Murray 2024; Scheiner 2017). For instance, women have a higher affinity for passive participation in traffic, leading to a preference for public transportation. This preference is shaped during childhood and adolescence (Kawgan-Kagan, Schuppan, and Petersen 2020). For marginalised groups, these early socialisation processes often include notions of (un) safety. For instance, women's mobility practices and feelings of (un)safety are tied to baseline associations or interpretations (i.e., associating poorly lit or isolated underpasses with danger) that they have developed over time and in response to warnings received from family members (Farina ,Boussauw, and Plyushteva 2021). Girls tend to be educated to avoid the streets, while boys are encouraged to occupy them; a difference that negatively affects women's ability to assert their presence in public spaces (Bernheim 2024; Boys 2022). The socialisation into fear of victimisation and (sexual) harassment, especially in relation to public transport, can have long-term effects on women's mobility patterns (Law 1999; Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

Beyond gender: socialisation, experiences, and feelings of (un)safety on (public) transport at the intersection of age, racialisation, and queerness

Next to gender, age, racialisation, and queerness also result in specific mobility preferences and unique safety concerns that shape people's practices and experiences of using public transport.

Similarly to gender related differences, these factors are partially rooted in socialisation. Immigrants who have been socialised in an active travel context prefer to use a wide range of transport options in comparison with immigrants who have been socialised in less active travel cultures (Faber et al. 2023). Similarly, older adults' reliance on private vehicles has been found to root in perceived inadequacies of public transport formed through socialisation processes (Döring et al. 2014). In relation to (un)safety, Patil et al. (2024) analyse how past experiences with unsafety shape older adults' perception of safety during their day-to-day mobility, and elderly individuals were found to have distinct public transport needs that result from their higher vulnerability and their concerns for their safety (Zhang and Yang 2024). Anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination and violence in public transport has been found to limit queer individuals' ability to enter and navigate urban (mobility) spaces and thus their options for travel and participation (Nash, Maguire, and Gorman-Murray 2018; Weintrob et al. 2021). Lubitow, Abelson, and Carpenter (2020) found that gender minorities vastly experience harassment, discrimination, and violence while using public transport, often leading to (cis)gender performance as a coping strategy (Cubells et al. 2025). The public transport mobility of racialised individuals is influenced by unequal power dynamics, which may restrict their mobility due to structural exclusion, for instance in planning or lack of service provision (Enright 2019; Nicholson and Sheller 2016). Migrants also face unique challenges because upon relocating, they need to relearn and adapt their mobility practices to an unfamiliar setting (Buhr and McGarrigle 2017). These experiences reflect broader structural inequalities rooted in racism, classism, cisnormativity, and xenophobia, which are embedded in the design, regulation, and everyday functioning of mobility systems.

Some studies analyse intersecting safety concerns. For instance, Masoumi and Fastenmeier (2016), focusing on Germany, suggested that the experiences of safety in public transport of people belonging to racial, religious, and sexual minorities might be different from those of the majority population. In this line, studies observed that while women overall report higher levels of fear and harassment in public transport, women of colour continuously feel unsafe during transit times and report higher levels of harassment and safety concerns than white women (Chowdhury et al. 2024; Chowdhury and Van Wee 2020; Nash, Maguire, and Gorman-Murray 2018). Eagle & Kwele (2021) analysed how gender, *racialisation*, and age intersect to influence young black women's experiences in public transport and found that these women face unique challenges resulting from their multifaceted marginalisation with many of them reporting poly-victimisation, including and not limited to dangerous driving, abuse and aggression by drivers, and sexual harassment. However, the specific safety needs of people being concerned by different forms of marginalisation and discrimination tend to be neglected in transportation planning, creating unsafe environments for multiply marginalised people (Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

Linking mobility biographies with an intersectional perspective

In our analysis, we follow Döring et al. (2014)'s suggestion to combine socialisation and mobility biographies to gain new perspectives for mobility research. Mobility biographies make it possible to contextualise socialisation processes by shedding light on how life course events and personal histories influence mobility choices and showing how formative experiences shape individuals' perceptions of safety, route choices, and travel behaviours (Lanzendorf 2003; Scheiner 2018). This makes mobility biographies a powerful analytical tool to understand how socialisation plays into how women experience and assess different situations and mobility options (Farina, Boussauw, and Plyushteva 2021; Levy 2019).

Mobility milestones are a concept within mobility biographies studies that capture the influence of key mobility-related life events on mobility practices (Rau and Manton 2016). While life events indirectly influence mobility by shaping practices through changes in personal or social circumstances, mobility milestones have a direct impact. The former includes examples of life events like experiencing upward social mobility (Aldred 2013), migration or childbirth (Scheiner

2018; Ziegler and Schwanen 2011), or shifts in adult responsibilities, such as caregiving, which are often shaped by gender and intergenerational dynamics (Plyushteva and Schwanen 2018). The latter includes aspects such as obtaining a driving license or experiencing a traffic accident (Rau and Manton 2016), as well as experiences of unsafety such as dangerous incidents in cycling that do not, however, amount to an actual accident or injury (Aldred 2016).

How such milestones affect a person's mobility practices and experiences depends on their social identity and intersects with broader social inequalities, such as class, racialisation, and gender (Lanzendorf 2003; Scheiner 2018; Sheller 2018).

Therefore, we apply an intersectional lens to understand how experiences of (un)safety, which we analyse as mobility milestones, together with socialisation regarding safe, responsible and appropriate behaviours in public spaces, shape multiply marginalised women's mobility biographies and, consequently, their practices and experiences of using public transport. Intersectional approaches emphasise that individuals' mobility experiences are shaped not by singular identities such as gender or racialisation, but by multiple, overlapping forms of marginalisation that intersect in complex ways (Crenshaw 1989; Hanson 2010; Sheller 2014). Adopting an intersectional perspective is therefore crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of mobility inequalities and to uncover the nuanced ways in which gender, racialisation, age, and class interact to produce unique mobility challenges (Sheller 2018). In summary, the literature highlights how gendered experiences of (un)safety are crucial in shaping women's mobility practices, with specific attention paid to the roles of socialisation and intersectionality. Beyond gender, other factors such as age, racialisation, and queerness create distinct mobility challenges. The combination of mobility biographies, socialisation and intersectionality offers a robust framework for understanding how these factors intersect to produce unique experiences of (un)safety and mobility. This literature informs the analysis in the following sections, where we apply these theoretical frameworks to explore the experiences of multiply marginalised women in Munich's public transport system.

Case study, research design and data

Case study

With its 1,5 million residents, Munich is the fourth largest German city and has the third largest GDP of all German cities. In 2021, the city of Munich adopted a new mobility strategy outlining its priorities until 2035, insisting, among others, on the need to promote social equity and inclusiveness in mobility (Mobilitätsreferat München 2021). Munich has a diverse population, with 30,1% of its population not having German citizenship, and another 18,5% being German citizens with a migration history (Statistisches Amt München 2022). This socio-demographic diversity makes it essential to examine how inclusive mobility is experienced by different population groups in practice.

Previous research showed that Munich is among the German cities with the safest public transport system in terms of prevalence of crime and passengers' safety perceptions (Hennen & Hohendorf 2020). Nonetheless, a study commissioned by the city of Munich on the prevalence of hate crimes found that public transportation was among the locations where hate crimes were most common, and that such crimes targeted mainly people from modest socio-economic backgrounds, people of colour, and people of Muslim faith (Fröhlich 2021). In addition, in European comparison, Germany scores poorly in terms of safety and equal rights for LGBTQ+ people and has experienced an increase in hate crimes targeting this community, especially in public spaces and transport (Strong! LGBTIQ* Fachstelle gegen Diskriminierung und Gewalt 2021). These contradictions underscore the need to go beyond aggregate safety indicators and consider how intersecting identities shape individuals' vulnerability and sense of (un)safety in public transport.

Research design

To account both for situational elements and for individual life experiences and socialisation, we developed a multi-method three-stage ethnographic research design. The study included (1) two-week mobility diaries; (2) go-along sessions about one week into the mobility diaries; and (3) post-diary semi structured interviews (Figure 1). The mobility diaries and go-along sessions allowed us to gain insights into the women's situational perceptions of safety in public transportation, focussing on experiences of (un)safety during their everyday travels. The post-diary semi-structured interviews allowed us to understand how participants' experiences and perspectives were embedded in and shaped by their socialisation and individual biographies as intersectionally marginalised women.

For the mobility diaries, following Latham's (2003) methodology to guide participants' reflections on their daily commuting experiences, we provided participants with questions prompting them to elaborate on their daily routes (e.g., What will I do today? Which means of transport will I use for it? What feeling arises in me when I think about my route today?), safety perceptions (e.g., Were there moments when I felt uncomfortable? Why? What distinguished those moments?), coping mechanisms (e.g., What strategies did I use on today's trip to ensure my safety when using public transportation? Did this make me feel safer?), and encounters (e.g., Did I have any particularly pleasant or unpleasant encounters? What feelings did these situations trigger in me?). Participants were given the choice to select their preferred mode of recording diary entries, either on a paper-based diary or using the provided PDF-template, both formatted identically.

Our set-up of the go-along sessions was inspired by Duedahl & Stilling Blichfeldt's (2020) approach of being along. We accompanied participants on a route they chose, engaging in conversations to understand their perceptions and feelings during the journey as well as potential safety precautions they took and their route choice. We documented the go-along sessions through field notes, primarily written right after the go-along sessions.

Finally, following Latham's (2003) method of diary-interviews, we conducted post-mobility diary interviews. We asked participants about their experiences during the mobility diary period, allowing them to clarify their diary entries and contextualise their narrations. Additional questions addressed general perceptions of safety, coping strategies, interactions with fellow passengers and staff, and suggestions for improvement of the public transport system. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ten participants used German for participating in our study, and two participants used English (Table 1). We translated the quotes used in this article.

We conducted a thematic analysis to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Through an iterative coding process, we identified the following key themes: perceived safety during different times of day and in different locations, interactions with fellow passengers and staff, incidents of harassment and assault, coping strategies and defensive behaviours, impact of transport infrastructure and design, and recommendations for improvement.

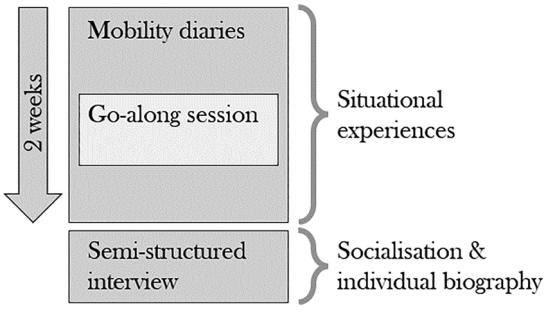

Figure 1. Research Design.

Sample and data collection

We strived for a sample that comprised women who were regularly using public transport and who were situated at the intersection of different forms of marginalisation (racialisation, ethnicity, sexual orientation). To recruit participants, we first reached out to organisations and platforms catering to elderly individuals, those with low incomes, LGBTQ+ communities, ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees, and used their communication channels to promote our study. As this strategy did not produce sufficient responses, we then developed an alternative recruitment strategy that relied on student networks and online platforms such as the student app Jodel. Ultimately, our sample consisted of nine women participating in all three research stages, two women participating only in semi-structured interviews, and one woman submitting only a mobility diary (Table 1). The names are pseudonyms.

We adapted the data collection period to participants' schedules. Data collection took place between mid-July and late August 2023. The first author conducted the interviews and go-along sessions. Being herself visibly Muslim and with a Turkish background, the first author's identity influenced the dynamics of the go-along sessions and interviews, potentially impacting participants' openness and comfort levels during data collection. This identity may have helped build rapport with participants who shared similar backgrounds, fostering openness and trust. As Weintrob et al. (2021) note, the disclosure of personal or visible identity markers can play a role in establishing rapport in qualitative research, particularly on sensitive topics. Some participants may recognise aspects of their own experiences reflected in the first author's (perceived) identity - while other participants may perceive the first author's identity through lenses of 'othering'.

To account for the sensitivity of the topic and to mitigate potential re-traumatisation (Alessi and Kahn 2023), we empowered participants to limit their engagement to comfortable levels and stayed attentive to ensuring their emotional well-being throughout the study, drawing on Pascoe Leahy's (2022) emphasis on leaving narrators' feelings respected and valued. Our strategies in this regard included allowing participants to take breaks during the interviews, the use of empathetic listening techniques that focus on validating participants' experiences without retriggering trauma (Alessi and Kahn 2023) and providing participants with resources for mental health support.

Throughout the study, we adhered to strict ethical protocols. Participants were extensively briefed on the study's purpose, data usage, and anonymisation process. Their explicit consent to participate in the study was obtained in written form and they were explicitly informed that they could retract their consent at any time.

Table 1. Description of the sample (N = 12).

Name	Age	Nationality	Racialisation	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Participated in study phases
Adelina	24	Brazilian	*Black*	Cis woman	heterosexual	all
Anna	32	German	White	Cis woman	lesbian	all
Caroline	23	German	White	Cis woman	bisexual	all
Chereena	25	Italian	North African, visibly Muslim	Cis woman	heterosexual	all
Daha	33	Egyptian	North African, visibly Muslim	Cis woman	heterosexual	all
Sabitha	24	German	South Asian	Cis woman	heterosexual	all
Salima	18	German	North African	Cis woman	heterosexual	all
Sophie	50	German	White	Trans woman	lesbian	all
Xiulan	25	Chinese	East Asian, Chinese	Cis woman	asexual	all
Era	18	German	South-east European, White	Cis woman	heterosexual	only semi-structured interview
Carmen	73	German	White	Cis woman	heterosexual	only semi-structured interview
Ahali	25	German	South Asian	Cis woman	heterosexual	only mobility diary

Findings

In the following, we present our findings on the elements that play into and shape participants' sense of safety on public transportation. First, we show how gender, racialisation, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality intersect both in producing unique experiences of vulnerability in public transport, as well as in shaping how participants make sense of them. Second, we show how the composition of the crowd in public transport plays into participants' feelings of insecurity. Third, we show the role of socialisation and cautionary tales in shaping participants' interpretation and assessment of different situations on public transport, including early-life experiences and societal narratives, and how they influence long-term mobility practices. Finally, we present participants' strategies to improve their perceived and actual safety during their travels, illustrating the cognitive and emotional labour involved in adaption behaviours.

Feeling safe despite experiences of unsafety: how participants' intersectional identities shape their experiences of vulnerability and how they make sense of them

All participants felt safe or very safe while travelling on public transportation in Munich. For instance, Chereena mentioned that she 'was surprised that Munich was so safe' (Chereena, interview). Xiulan wrote in her mobility diary that 'generally I do not really worry about my safety in Munich public transport' (Xiulan, mobility diary). Even Daha, the participant who was the wariest, stated that while her sense of safety was 'not the best thing', it was 'acceptable' - even though, due to her lack of German language skills, she was often feeling confused and stressed because she could not understand announcements regarding train cancellations or timetable changes and had to rely on other passengers to translate for her (Daha, interview). This finding is remarkable insofar as all participants had at least once experienced harassment, violence or a disrespect of their integrity or personhood while on the move in Munich's public transport. These experiences were directly related to their specific position as multiply marginalised women. In two cases, such experiences occurred during the study period. In the following three paragraphs, we give an explicit account of participants' experiences of harassment, violence and disrespect.

Xiulan, Anna and Adelina had experienced sexual harassment. Xiulan wrote about an instance from one of her commutes, when an old, male stranger in the tram kept talking to her and asking her whether she was from Thailand while coming closer and touching her, making her feel fetishised (Xiulan, mobility diary). Anna recounted how a man approached her and her girlfriend on the escalators of an underground station and made obscene gestures near his genitals. Based on past experiences she assumed that this was specifically related to them being a lesbian couple (Anna, interview). Adelina experienced an incident of sexual harassment during the data collection period which she recorded in her mobility diary. A man was staring at her, closely standing by her despite sufficient space in the underground and followed her into the connecting train (Adelina, mobility diary). Xiulan's and Anna's experiences highlight how different forms of marginalisation intersect in women's experiences; Xiulan experiencing sexual harassment in the form of fetishisation as an Asian woman, and Anna as a lesbian one.

Sabitha, Salima, Era, Adelina and Chereena had experienced racist discrimination related to their religious or ethnic appearance. Sabitha recounted how, while she was travelling on the underground with her mother who is a Hindu woman wearing a bindi[1], a woman started insulting them due to the bindi (Sabitha, interview). Salima and Era had both been insulted by men who yelled 'Scheiss Ausländer' ('fucking foreigners') at them (Era, interview, Salima, go-along). Chereena experienced an incident of racist aggression during the data collection period, which she addressed in her mobility diary and during the interview. A man started shouting at her on the bus in Munich while she was on the phone, insisting that cell phones were forbidden on public transport (which is not the case in Munich) and demanding she get off the bus to

make her call. Two women, likely Turkish, defended her. Gaining confidence from the women's intervention, Chereena told the man that he was the one causing a disturbance by shouting, after which he approached them in a threatening way, insulted them for being presumably Turkish, and continued aggressing them in a language she believed was Eastern European.

Caroline and Sophie both experienced queerphobia. Caroline mentioned what she called 'minor incidents', such as old people spitting in front of her when she was holding a pride flag (Caroline, interview). Sophie experienced transphobia during her transition, which she recounted in her mobility diary: 'During my transition in 2014, I often had to listen to odd comments about myself on buses and trains. Once, a group of young people (5) standing opposite me were discussing what [which gender] I was. At one point, one of them told another one that he could grab into my pants and then he would know […] I avoided public transport for several months after that' (Sophie, mobility diary).

In view of such experiences, the participants' high sense of safety is noteworthy. However, our findings show that they contextualised and rationalised their experiences based on what they considered to be 'normal experiences' for women in their situation or based on how safe they felt elsewhere. For instance, Sophie reported an instance during the data collection period when she felt watched by a man in the underground. She wrote that 'perhaps some people might feel disturbed by being constantly observed by a stranger, but such a situation is rather standard in every woman's life. So, it is nothing special'. Similarly, Xiulan, who experienced something that she described as 'terrible', wrote that it 'happened only once', which is why she still thought using public transport in Munich was 'ok' (Xiulan, mobility diary). This highlights how participants assessed (un)safety through normalised experiences. In addition, some compared their sense of safety in Munich to how they felt in other geographic contexts. Caroline mentioned that her sense of safety in Munich is 'quite high; in Germany in general it is' (Caroline, interview). Anna compared her experiences in Munich to her perceptions in other countries: 'I have also travelled a lot and been to countries where I felt very unsafe. […] I do feel safe [here]'. (Anna, interview).

Stranger danger versus finding safety in witnesses, allies and crowds

When relating instances of harassment, violence or disrespect, most participants also specified the reaction of people around them. Xiulan and Chereena reported not receiving the expected support from fellow passengers, though Xiulan observed that they may not have noticed what was going on. Chereena, who did get support from fellow non-white passengers who then also became targets of the aggressor, criticised the inaction of white passengers and the staff. Sabitha and Adelina, on the other hand, highlighted the support that they had gotten from fellow passengers who called their aggressors out for their racist behaviour.

Not only does the way in which others react to situations in which participants felt unsafe play an important role in how participants retell these experiences. The presence or absence of others also shape how (un)safe participants feel in specific situations related to using public transport. However, we observed great variation in how the presence or absence of others shaped participants' perceptions of (un)safety. For instance, most participants felt 'safe in the crowd of other passengers' (Sophie, mobility diary) but unsafe when they were alone, because 'you would not find many people to help you if anything occurred' (Daha, interview). Particularly during nighttime, the presence of others reassured participants, whereas they experienced solitude as a factor of unsafety. However, some participants associated crowdedness with a feeling of unsafety. How participants experienced the presence of others also depended on whether they were on public transport, waiting at the station, or walking to or from the station. For instance, Daha, Sabitha and Adelina felt safest at stations, because other people were further away from them, and because it was easier for them to quickly put distance to a potential aggressor. In contrast, Sophie felt safer in the vehicle because of video surveillance, even though

she could not run away there. Similarly, Caroline shared that 'on the suburban and underground trains, I usually do not pay much attention to who is around me, and when I am walking alone, I often check if anyone is behind me' (Caroline, interview). Just like her, most participants felt most threatened by the presence of others when walking to or from stations, especially at night. For instance, Sophie wrote in her mobility diary that what scares her most is the short walk from the nearby station to her home when she is returning late at night. Lighting played a major role in how safe participants felt at night, because, as Salima insisted, 'lighting is essential because, at the stop, it is also important to see something to know what is going on. And if something happens, you will see it. So, I think then you feel safe' (Salima, interview). For some, the consequence of how unsafe they felt in dark and deserted surroundings was to 'avoid certain places where you want to go in public' in the evenings (Ahali, mobility diary) or to avoid commuting in the dark altogether (Salima, go-along).

Furthermore, the composition of crowds or the characteristics of fellow passengers played an important role in how they affected participants' sense of safety. Caroline and Carmen reported feeling least safe in the presence of drunk people. The presence of people with whom participants could identify and who were similar to them reassured them most. For instance, Chereena explained that she feels safest in the area round the central station even though this is generally regarded as one of the less safe areas of Munich, because the many Arab shops and the presence of people of Arab origins make her 'feel a bit at home' (Chereena, interview), so that even at night, she feels comfortable walking there. Chereena mentioned that in general, she felt safe when there were other women and in particular hijabi[2] women present, and that she would always rely on getting support from other women or foreigners, revealing a nuanced approach to navigating gender roles and cultural expectations: 'I will go towards women and if there are no women, then if there are foreigners. I do not know why, but for example, if I choose an Arab or a Turk, then because I think that with us, they respect women and they have this idea, this macho idea, that the man should protect you. They should protect women. And yes, and then they think, she is like my sister, then I must support her' (Chereena, interview). Similarly, Adelina relied on shared experiences when seeking support: 'What happens to me has also happened to others, happened to female friends of mine. I also know that it is easier to get help from a woman, that my situation is more sensitive and understandable to us than a man' (Adelina, interview).

Lastly, the presence of public transport staff also played an important role in how safe participants felt. Most participants stated that they felt safer when there was easily reachable staff, such as bus or tramway drivers or train attendants, because they assumed that they could rely on them in cases of emergency. However, some participants had made negative experiences with public transport staff. For instance, Daha felt uncomfortable on busses as some bus drivers had previously treated her badly. Similarly, both Salima and Sophie had been poorly treated by ticket inspectors which made them feel less comfortable in their presence.

Cautionary tales and inherited knowledges shaping senses of safety

Our findings show that participants' feelings of unsafety or fear not only stemmed from specific experiences or the configuration of a given situation, but also from parental warnings, anecdotes from relatives and friends, and news stories. For instance, Adelina, who lives with her grandmother, recalled: 'My grandmother explained this to me at some point, or at some point we read a news item together that a mentally ill person had simply pushed a foreigner in front of the train' (Adelina, interview). Sabitha explained that while she feels generally safe in Munich, she feels wary about being out and about at night due to her mother's anxiety and past parental restrictions on going out late. Salima mentioned avoiding one of Munich's central interface stations because her mother had warned her of the drunk people there (Salima, interview). Similarly, Daha was generally wary in public transport as she repeatedly heard news about hijabi women being attacked in Munich (Daha, mobility diary). Also, Salima attributed her feeling

of insecurity to 'always hearing things like that at the central station, that things are being stolen, that someone attacks you' (Salima, interview).

Lastly, when talking about their sense of safety, participants often referred to situations they had observed during their commutes. Such observations notably contributed to a general weariness or feeling of insecurity when participants could identify with the victim due to shared characteristics. For instance, Adelina mentioned that she often witnessed black men or refugees being told that they did not belong in Germany and should 'go back home' (Adelina, interview). She felt very concerned by this, even though she had not experienced it herself thus far. Similarly, Daha related an incident that she had observed and where she feared that she and her husband may become victims too: 'There was that Turkish guy and a drunk man started attacking the man, calling him foreigner and I do not know, I was afraid that this drunk guy might turn to us and start attacking me because I am also a foreigner, and I am visibly a foreigner because of my hijab' (Daha, interview).

Navigating places, positions and positionality: participants' strategies to avoid danger

To navigate their feelings of unsafety, participants created strategies to feel safer, such as planning where and how to move with public transport and developing and adopting behaviours that made them feel less at risk. Such strategies encompassed exerting caution by remaining observant for potentially suspicious people around them (Adelina, interview; Chereena, interview; Daha, mobility diary); avoiding certain (groups of) people (Carmen, interview; Salima, interview; Sophie, interview); researching routes in advance and choosing safer routes (Adelina, interview; Caroline, interview, Salima, interview; Sophie, interview); strategically choosing where to sit in public transport vehicles (Sophie, interview; Xiulan, interview); or avoiding behaviours or clothes that are prone to result in harassment, for instance avoiding to appear very feminine (Sophie, interview) or 'as a super nice Asian woman' (Xiulan, mobility diary), or as being queer (Anna, interview;. Sophie, interview). Indeed, all queer participants insisted that their high sense of safety stemmed from the fact that they were not read as queer unless they were seen with a rainbow flag or with their respective partners. Both Anna and Sophie mentioned that they were conscious of how affectionate they were with their partners in certain situations on public transport (Anna, interview; Sophie, interview). Sophie also mentioned that passing[3] had substantially improved her sense of safety, because she was no longer automatically identified as transgender.

Discussion

In the following, first, we summarise our findings regarding how participants' intersectional identities shaped their perceptions and experiences of (un)safety and discuss them in light of existing research. Second, we discuss our findings by highlighting two aspects: i) the need to understand experiences and feelings of (un)safety as modulated by the built and social environment, and ii) the need to understand experiences of (un)safety as being both shaped by and shaping people's mobility biographies and consequently their practices and interpretations of specific mobility options and situations. Thereby, we stress the relevance of mobility biographies as a framework to understand the interplay between situational dynamics and lifelong socialisation processes in shaping mobility practices and experiences.

The role of intersectional identities in shaping experiences of (un)safety

Our findings show that participants' situatedness at the intersection of different forms of marginalisation played a major role in shaping their safety perceptions and mobility choices. For

instance, Xiulan's experience of being sexually fetishised as an Asian woman combined racialised *and* gendered harassment and resonates with Chowdhury and Van Wee (2020) finding that racialisation, ethnicity, and gender intersect to create unique mobility challenges, particularly for women of colour, and illustrates Crenshaw's (1989) foundational argument that overlapping systems of oppression amplify vulnerabilities for individuals with intersecting identities. Similarly, Sophie's experiences of harassment during her gender transition resonate with findings by Lubitow, Rainer, and Bassett (2017), who document how public spaces often become sites of compounded exclusion for individuals with non-normative gender identities. The specific mobility challenges resulting from intersecting forms of marginalisation were also highlighted by the experiences of the lesbian respectively bisexual and the Muslim participants. Therein, our findings illustrate how racialisation, ethnicity, and sexuality amplify vulnerability to harassment and discrimination in public spaces (Nash, Maguire, and Gorman-Murray 2018; Lubitow, Rainer, and Bassett 2017) and how intersecting spatial and social inequalities shape gendered experiences in urban mobility (Beebeejaun 2017).

The interplay of intersectional identities and mobility practices also shows in how participants adapted their behaviours in response to overlapping vulnerabilities. Many participants affirmed that following experiences of harassment, disrespect or violence, they temporarily or permanently adopted avoidance strategies. Therefore, participants' mobility choices are deeply connected to their intersecting identities and their cumulative experiences of marginalisation. Our findings align with Enright's (2019) analysis of defensive mobility behaviours, demonstrating how marginalised individuals adapt their practices to mitigate risks, and with Nicholson and Sheller (2016) observation that the responsibility for safety is shifted onto individuals rather than institutions. Moreover, participants' strategies illustrate the mental and emotional toll of navigating public transport as a marginalised individual. The constant vigilance, pre-planning, and self-modification described by participants align with Ison et al. (2024) concept of 'safety work' which underscores the disproportionate burden placed on marginalised groups to ensure their own safety. This burden is exacerbated by the structural inadequacies of public transport systems, which fail to adequately address the unique vulnerabilities of these individuals. In sum, our findings stress the importance of considering both individual identities and broader structural inequalities in mobility research.

Mobility biographies: understanding how situational dynamics and socialisation processes interlink in shaping experiences of (un)safety

Our findings further emphasise that perceptions of (un)safety were tightly linked to both the built and social environment in public transport as well as participants' past experiences and socialisation. Thereby, our findings stress the need to i) reflect on both lighting and surveillance and presence of (certain) groups of people; and ii) to analyse experiences of unsafety as mobility milestones with lasting implications for people's mobility behaviour, which are, in turn, shaped by people's socialisation and the embeddedness of the latter in their different social identities.

How situational elements modulate feelings and perceptions of (un)safety and vulnerability

First, our findings show that feelings of safety and mobility experiences are shaped by situational elements like lighting, surveillance infrastructure and the absence or presence of specific crowds. Participants highlighted that such situational elements mattered beyond the ride in itself and included the way to and from public transport.

Regarding the built environment, several participants stressed the importance of well-lit stations and paths as well as video surveillance in public transport. Our findings reflect those by Yavuz and Welch (2010), who discuss how features like lighting and surveillance mitigate feelings of vulnerability. Regarding the composition of fellow passengers or passersby, participants often felt safer when surrounded by people similar to them and they evaluated their surroundings based on the presence or absence of potential allies or threats. These observations align with findings by Beebeejaun (2017) and Gillot and Rérat (2022), who highlight the significance of social environments, particularly the presence of allies, in shaping marginalised individuals' mobility experiences. Based on our findings, we join Farina, Boussauw, and Plyushteva (2021) in emphasising the importance of inclusive infrastructure design to foster safety and accessibility.

How life-long socialisation influences contextualisation of (un)safe events

Second, going beyond this existing body of research, our findings emphasise the necessity to analyse feelings of (un)safety though mobility biographies and socialisation. We identify two key dimensions: (i) contextualisation based on cumulative experiences and (ii) contextualisation and action shaped by gendered and racialised socialisation processes. By highlighting these two aspects, our findings demonstrate that feeling (un)safe is not simply an immediate response to a situation but rather the result of an ongoing interplay between the current and past experiences and socialisation.

First, many participants framed their feelings of (un)safety through the lens of past experiences. Chereena, for instance, described feeling more at ease in spaces with visible Arab communities near Munich's central station. Her sense of (un)safety was shaped by a lifetime of navigating predominantly white urban spaces as a visibly Muslim woman. Her experience illustrates that how people make sense of, and experience specific infrastructural and social environments depends not only on their actual configuration but also on the cumulative experiences that build people's mobility biographies and is, thus, intertwined with their broader cultural and personal histories (Scheiner 2018).

Second, participants rationalised their vigilance based on both individual experiences and societal narratives. Sophie, for example, described instances of street harassment as something to 'expect' as a woman - internalising a lifetime of warnings and experiences that reinforce defensive mobility behaviours while Caroline attributed her relatively relaxed attitude toward using public transport to her mother's laissez-faire approach during her teenage years. Thereby, our findings reflect research on intergenerational socialisation and mobility biographies (Döring et al. 2014; Scheiner 2018). As a result of gendered and racialised socialisation processes, learned caution becomes part of women's everyday mobility practices (Levy 2019; Loukaitou-Sideris 2014). Cautionary tales, often passed down intergenerationally, shape these narratives, leading to restrictive mobility patterns (Beebejaun 2017).

Taken together, these findings underline the necessity of analysing perceptions of (un) safety as shaped by both socialisation and situational experiences. Analysing multiply marginalised women's experiences of (un)safety on public transport through the lens of mobility biographies allowed us to operationalise Farina, Boussauw, and Plyushteva et al. (2021)'s suggestion to bridge situational concerns with long-term social conditioning. Situational experiences of unsafety cannot be understood if analysed in isolation; they gain meaning through individuals' upbringings, past mobility encounters, and social identities. Recognising this interplay is critical for developing mobility justice frameworks that go beyond simplistic safety measures and instead account for the ways in which structural inequalities and socialisation processes shape mobility choices.

Policy recommendations

To address these structural barriers, public transport systems must prioritise policy interventions that go beyond infrastructure. Well-lit stations, surveillance cameras, and visible staff presence are essential but insufficient if not paired with comprehensive staff training. This includes (1) ensuring staff do not contribute to passengers' feelings of unsafety through inaction or discrimination and (2) equipping them with skills to intervene effectively in cases of harassment. Additionally, standard safety evaluations need to move away from binary assessments of 'safe' vs. 'unsafe' and instead adopt an approach that accounts for personal histories, social context, and intersectional vulnerabilities. A Vision Zero approach to harassment and discrimination could provide a framework for proactive, rather than reactive, safety strategies, prioritising equitable and comfortable mobility experiences.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of marginalised women on public transport, it also presents some limitations. First, being limited to one specific urban context, the empirical observations of our study may not be generalisable to other cities or regions with different cultural, infrastructural, or social dynamics. Future studies could expand the scope of analysis to explore how experiences and feelings of (un)safety are modulated by and embedded in specific sociocultural and geographic contexts. Comparative studies across different cities or countries could help identify how local norms, governance structures, and public transport systems shape safety perceptions and mobility behaviours in context-specific ways. Second, the sample size, though sufficient for an in-depth exploration, may not encompass the full diversity of perspectives within the analysed groups. More empirical research is needed on how specific social identities, characterised by marginalisation, shape mobility experiences, to complement the existing but still scarce and disparate body of literature in this field. This includes paying closer attention to intra-group differences on how age, migration history, or sexual orientation intersect with gendered experiences of mobility. Lastly, we deliberately decided to focus on individuals who have been and are still using public transport. This choice allowed us to understand people's strategies and acts of sense-making that enable them to use public transport despite their vulnerabilities. However, as a result, we did not account for the experiences of all those who decide to abandon public transport following experiences or perceptions of unsafety, as well as of those who never used public transport due to worries for their safety. Furthermore, our study does not account for the experiences of those who cannot use public transport due to structural and systemic barriers not directly related to safety, such as insufficient financial or universal accessibility. Future research could aim to include these voices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of mobility justice via targeted outreach to individuals who have opted out of using public transport, as well as participatory methods that engage those facing structural exclusion, to better understand the full spectrum of mobility constraints and needs.

Conclusion

We analysed i) how different and intersecting forms of marginalisation related to gender, racialisation, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation shape women's experiences of safety and unsafety on public transport, and ii) how women's social identities at the intersection of such different forms of marginalisation influence their mobility biographies. To understand not only how intersectional forms of marginalisation shape the actual experiences people make, but also how they ascribe meaning to and make sense of these experiences, we integrated the analytical

lenses of intersectionality and mobility biographies and used a multi-method ethnographic research approach.

Our findings show the ways in which women's experiences of (un)safety on public transport are deeply shaped by their intersectional identities, with gender, racialisation, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation influencing both how they perceive risk and how they navigate mobility. They experienced public transport not just as a means of transport but as a space where broader social inequalities were reproduced. Participants navigated their specific vulnerabilities as multiply marginalised women by developing adaptation strategies to feel as safe as possible on public transport. Therefore, participants' perceived and actual vulnerabilities did not prevent them from using public transport altogether, which would severely restrict their access to mobility. Nonetheless, participants were severely limited in their possibilities to comfortably use public transport. The normalisation of precautionary behaviours, particularly among women who had experienced repeated instances of harassment or racialised surveillance, not only constitutes a mental burden and limits their mobility options. It also underscores how safety perceptions are not just situational but embedded in long-term patterns of exclusion and adaptation. In this way, mobility biographies reveal not only how intersecting social positions create different risk perceptions but also how individuals internalise and respond to systemic inequalities, sometimes even rationalising their own unsafety as an unavoidable aspect of mobility. Thus, this study demonstrates how integrating intersectionality with mobility biographies offers a framework for uncovering how systemic inequalities are lived and navigated in everyday mobility and urges towards a shift away from individualised safety solutions to collective, systemic transformations.

Notes

1. *Bindi* refers to a forehead mark in South Asian cultures, traditionally symbolizing wisdom, spirituality, or marital status.
2. Hijab refers to the head coverings worn by many Muslim women.
3. Passing refers to the ability to be perceived as part of a different social group, often linked to gender, sexual orientation or racialisation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research received no specific funding.

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