Study visually captures a hard truth: Walking home at night is not the same for women

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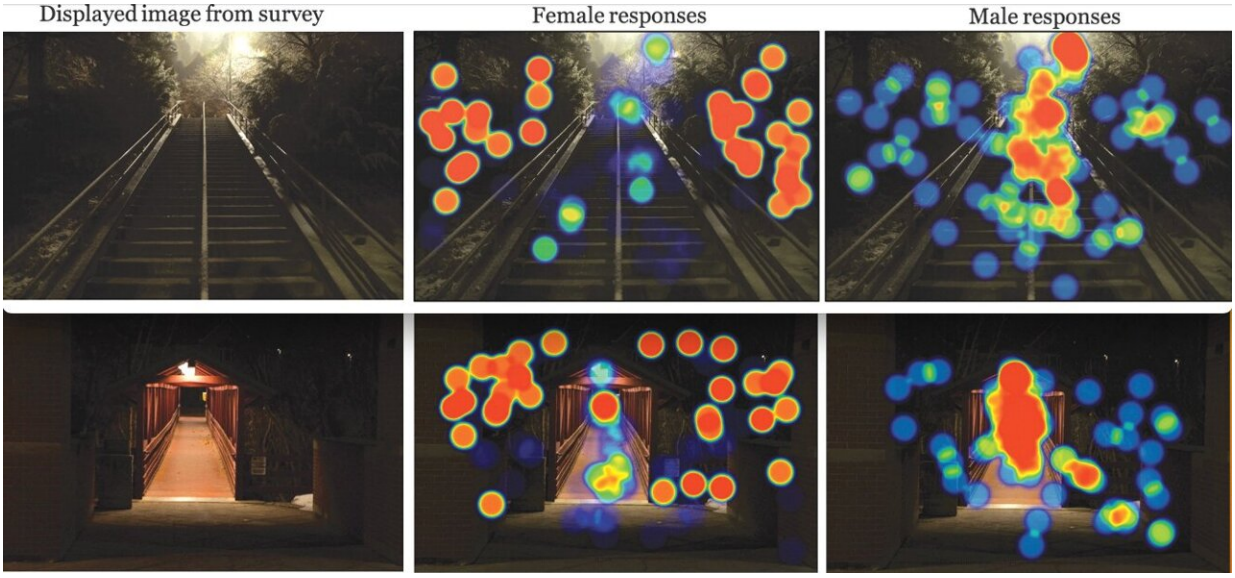

Gender-based heat map images show where men tend to look and where women tend to look on a path at night. Women focused significantly more on potential safety hazards—the periphery of the images—while men looked directly at focal points or their intended destination. Credit: *Violence and Gender* (2023). DOI: 10.1089/vio.2023.0027

An eye-catching new study shows just how different the experience of walking home at night is for women versus men.

The study, led by Brigham Young University public health professor Robbie Chaney, provides clear visual evidence of the constant environmental scanning women conduct as they walk in the dark, a safety consideration the study shows is unique to their experience.

Chaney and co-authors Alyssa Baer and Ida Tovar showed pictures of campus areas at four Utah universities—Utah Valley University, Westminster, Brigham Young University and University of Utah—to participants and asked them to click on areas in the photos that caught their attention. Women focused significantly more on potential safety hazards—the periphery of the images—while men looked directly at focal points or their intended destination.

"The resulting heat maps represent perhaps what people are thinking or feeling or doing as they are moving through these spaces," Chaney said. "Before we started the study, we expected to see some differences, but we didn't expect to see them so contrasting. It's really visually striking."

Nearly 600 individuals took part in the study, published recently in the journal *Violence and Gender*, with 56% of participants being female and 44% being male. Each participant looked at 16 images and were told to imagine themselves walking through those areas. They used a Qualtrics heat map tool to click on the areas of the image that stood out the most to them.

While men tended to focus on the path or a fixed object (like a light, the walking path or a garbage can), the women's visual pattern represented a scanning of the perimeter (bushes, dark areas next to a path).

Chaney, along with Baer and Tovar—both BYU undergrads at the time of the study's inception—say the findings provide some insight into what it is like to walk home as a woman, which could be multiplied through years or a lifetime of experiences.

"This project has been a fantastic conversation starter to bring awareness to lived experiences, particularly of women in this case," said Baer, who recently finished graduate school at George Washington University and now works in Washington, D.C. "My hope is that in having concrete data we are able to start conversations that lead to meaningful action."

Authors said the data suggests that because environment is perceived and experienced differently by women and men, decision-makers in building campus and community environments should consider the varied experiences, perceptions and safety of both.

"Why can't we live in a world where women don't have to think about these things? It's heartbreaking to hear of things women close to me have dealt with," Chaney said. "It would be nice to work towards a world where there is no difference between the heat maps in these sets of images. That is the hope of the public health discipline."

More information: Robert A. Chaney et al, Gender-Based Heat Map Images of Campus Walking Settings: A Reflection of Lived Experience, *Violence and Gender* (2023). DOI: 10.1089/vio.2023.0027

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