

“The World Around Me”: The Environment and Single Women¹

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The “environment” has often been taken as a backdrop for feminist research and theory, as a setting within which issues of feminist concern are played out. This environment, however, is not a neutral setting; rather, research over the past 15 years has evidenced the assumptions about “a woman’s place” as a man’s wife literally built into women’s worlds. Space speaks, and the stories it tells center around particular and identifiable assumptions about gender and where a woman “should” be, when, and with whom. Unmarried women are in a unique position in this environment: they are subjected not only to the economic disadvantages and social subjugation of being a woman, but also to the social and economic drawbacks of being single in a couple-oriented society and in an environment they see as not built for them. Although research exists on the sexism in the physical environment, on women’s economic and social position, and on singlehood, a need exists to bridge these areas to explore how single women experience their singlehood, their womanhood, and the environment in their everyday lives and decision making. I conducted in-depth interviews with 25 single women, 23 white and 2 African-American women, about their experiences of living single. This article, based on the results of those interviews and a series of focus group discussions, examines how single women negotiate and respond to their necessary environmental decisions about housing, transportation, and leisure activities in an environment not likely to be conducive to their ways of life.

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The “environment” often assumes the position in feminist research and theory of a setting within which issues of feminist concern—economic inequality, sexual assault and harassment, and others—are played out. The physical surroundings (e.g., streets, roads, houses, and businesses) in and around which women live and work are considered just that: physical objects in space that women move in, to, and through. This environment, however, contains more than structures, as the structures themselves are bearers of meanings—of “appropriate” uses of space for particular people. Who should or should not be in a particular place at a given time is a message in the understandings about what objects in space “are.” Interstates, bike paths through the park, city buses, and alleyways hold different cultural notions of who “should” use them, with whom, and when. Likewise, libraries, movie houses, bars, and laundromats convey different expectations of who are the typical users. Cooperative houses, apartment buildings, and “single-family” houses also reflect divergent assumptions about who should live where and with whom. Space speaks, and it tells stories that are more than instrumental tales of how one gets from point A to point B; the stories told are embedded in and reflective of particular and identifiable notions of what real “women” and “men” do, where, and with whom.

When the symbolic meanings within the environment are taken into account, this environment is revealed as not a neutral setting for the lives of women. Rather, research over the past 15 years has evidenced the sexism literally built into women’s social worlds (Berkely, 1980; Darke, 1984; Lofland, 1975; Saegert, 1980; Spain, 1992; Wekerle, 1980). Lofland’s (1975) foundational article on the invisibility of women to planners and urban ecologists opened the investigation of the environment itself as an incident of the subjugation of women. Since that article, many others have addressed the assumptions on gender and family embedded in research and policies—the separation of work and home based on the traditional nuclear family; zoning laws that rely on the “family” as the basic unit; the dominance of the single-family home in both cultural mythology and housing development; the lack of public transportation in suburban areas; gender segregation in work environments; and discrimination in housing access for unmarried women (Berkely, 1980; Darke, 1984; Freeman, 1980; Hayden, 1980; Markusen, 1981; Spain, 1992). Increasingly, the decisions women make about where they go, where they live, when, how, and with whom have been revealed as embedded in an environment built on a foundation of traditional assumptions about gender and “a woman’s place” in “a man’s world.”

The experience of being a single woman locates women outside the traditional expectations of what “a woman’s place” should be (Bakos, 1985;

Chandler, 1991; Peterson, 1981; Stein, 1981). In making housing, transportation, and leisure activity choices, single women face an environment not designed with their needs or ideas in mind, shaped not around the individual women's life but around what the ideal (heterosexual) couple and woman are expected to need or want. Single women are in a double bind: they are subjected not only to the economic disadvantages and social subjugation of being a woman, but also to the social and economic drawbacks of being single in a couple-oriented society.

During the 1970s, the number of unmarried adults increased by 36%, with 25% of all adults living alone by the mid-1980s (Apgar, Brown, Masnick, & Pitikin, p. 13). Despite the demographic shifts to smaller households, the last four decades have been marked by the bulk of capital resources for housing being concentrated in the single-family detached house (Hayden, 1984, p. 13). The continued construction of these dwellings assumes a financial situation many single people cannot meet, particularly single women (Mulroy, 1988). Unmarried women's income averages 60% lower than husband and wife households, whereas unmarried men have incomes only 15% less than married couples (Klodawsky & Spector, 1988, p. 147). In addition, women are less likely than men to have regular access to a car, and the majority of people without driver's licenses are women, although women report traveling further distances for routine activities (e.g., work, errands) than men do (Michelson, 1988, p. 89).

Single women also often find themselves in a social environment geared toward couples and men in general, in which social activities are built around a "couple culture," largely as seen through the eyes of men. "Men have been asked for their opinions on recreation resources...We might, in fact, be forgiven for thinking that *women* simply do not exist in the spatial world" (Women & Geography, 1984, p. 19). Women are often assumed to experience recreation facilities the same as men do and are simply not asked for their ideas or input; as such, the unique position of women in general and single women in particular can go unnoticed (Piche, 1988, p. 161). I do not mean to imply in saying this that all men are the same and all women experience activities differently than all men and the same as each other, but rather to recognize that women's economically disadvantaged position and lesser access to transportation point to a position that would require, more than their male counterparts, that economic and convenience considerations be taken seriously by planners.

Another critically important factor revealed in research as carrying significant weight in women's decision making about their environment is a concern for safety and fears of rape (Gardner, 1988, 1990; Gordon & Riger, 1989; Green, Hebron, & Woodward, 1987; Stanko, 1985, 1987, 1990). Women report a much higher level of fear than men, and this fear,

combined with a lack of consequential official attention given to these trepidations, foster a situation in which the typical woman greatly restricts the types of environments she sees as "suitable." Fears of men are a core part of the daily experience of being a woman in society today. The social constitution of "woman" embraces a variety of fears, part based in women's experiences and part reflective of mythologies, that teach women what is the "wrong" environment to be in at a "bad" time. Women are socialized to have a diffuse fear, connected to potential attacks by unknown men. This fear, if internalized, prohibits women from transgressing social norms of where a woman without a man "should" be.

Thus, single women often make less money than single men, have an assortment of time pressure and inflexible job hours, and must contend with additional safety concerns that single men do not experience to the same degree. These factors combine to prompt the question of how these issues converge in the lives of single women. Although research exists on the sexism in the physical environment, on women's economic position and fears about their safety, and on singlehood, a need exists to bridge these areas to explore how single women experience their singlehood, their womanhood, and the environment in their everyday lives and decision making. This article examines how single women negotiate and respond to their necessary environmental decisions about housing, transportation, and leisure activities in an environment not likely to be conducive to their ways of life.

METHODOLOGY

During 1991 I conducted an exploratory, qualitative study on single women's perceptions of and adaptation to a particular environment—a mid-sized city in the South (Chasteen, 1992). For this project, the "environment" was defined broadly to include both the physical constructs in space (e.g., houses, streets, business) and also the social and symbolic significance women give to these structures. Thus, the "environment" in which single women live and work was not just one of places to which and from which they went, but also the meanings these sites and paths had for them.

"Single" was broadly defined to include all women not married or involved in a relationship providing a similar economic and social situation (e.g., a woman living with another woman or a man in a "partnered" way would be excluded from sampling consideration). Thus, women who were divorced, widowed, and never married were all included in the sample; despite clear differences in life paths, all these women were now in similar economic and social positions as unmarried women.

To generate a sample, I employed several techniques. First, I sought volunteers in two ways: through public announcements and through letters to singles groups, both religious and secular. The announcements were posted in a variety of places, from grocery stores to exercise gyms to telephone poles and newspaper stands on major streets. These announcements briefly explained the project and requested unmarried women volunteers between the age of 25 and 55; it also stated that women of color and lesbian women were particularly encouraged to participate. The age range of 25–55 was selected because women in this age range have diversity in their life stages but also are old enough to be fairly settled (e.g., not likely to be living with parents or in school) yet young enough to eliminate many of the serious and separate problems of elderly women.

The letters were sent to 7 groups that I located through religious and community centers, magazine/newspaper ads, and word of mouth. These 7 groups were taken from a sample frame of 18 groups, seventeen of which were religiously affiliated. The 7 chosen were selected to represent a diversity in affiliation—religious denomination, for example. The letters were sent to group contact people (as identified by phone) and requested their help in locating participants; self-addressed, stamped envelopes with a statement of willingness to participate were enclosed. I followed up these letters with a phone call and request to speak and lead a discussion at one of the organization's meetings. The majority of groups agreed, and at each meeting where I spoke a focus group discussion was held about what it was like to be single for them.

Most groups, including those I visited in person and those I did not, generated at least one volunteer. From this initial base of volunteers I employed a snowball sampling strategy, i.e., every woman interviewed was asked for the name of another woman whom I could call. Interviewees were specifically asked for names of women who did not attend singles groups and women of color, in an effort to broaden the diversity of the sample. A sample of 25 single women was generated.

The women sampled were between the age of 27 and 54—about one third (32%) between 25 and 34, one third (36%) in the middle range of 35–44, and a final third (32%) between 45 and 54. Most of these women had been married at least once, and most were from the southeast United States. The sample was largely white and heterosexual. Of the 25 women, 23 were white; the other two were African-American. Only 2 women openly said they were lesbian.

I interviewed each of these women in-depth about their perceptions and uses of housing, transportation, and leisure activities. Within each topic, women were asked general questions, such as, "What are some things you think about when looking for a place to live"? More specific questions on

cost, convenience, appearance, and safety were used to encourage women's explanation of their decisions. The series of open-ended questions were designed to elicit responses on the relative import of affordability, convenience and safety in their decision making. The interview results were analyzed for major themes and patterns, along with research on crime records, housing trends in the area, transit availability, and leisure activity resource and use.

These interviews were conducted in informal, comfortable settings, such as my home or the woman's, or a local restaurant. I did not take the position of the objective, outside observer posing questions and receiving data from the women involved; rather, I located myself in the interaction itself. In other words, the tone of the interviews were more conversational than "scientific," whether they were groups discussions with women in single's groups or in-person meetings with individual women. I explicitly stated my desire to learn from the women who participated, and I tried to create a relaxed atmosphere in which both I and the participants felt free to share our experiences with each other. As a single woman living and working in the same environment, I found the women talking to me with a "you know how it is" way of presentation. As both an "insider" and an "outsider," I found the women very willing to share with me their thoughts, fears, and experiences, and I found myself in a position to listen (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

All of the women interviewed lived and worked in the same general environment of one midsized city, thus faced with the same structural environment (e.g., streets, shopping areas, neighborhoods, entertainment facilities). The different ways in which each woman negotiated her decisions in this environment reflected her economic and social position, and the meanings the environment held for her. Despite differences among the women in lines of age, race, sexual preference, prior relationship history, and other factors, findings were remarkably homogenous, reflecting a similarity in the symbolic meaning of the different environments for women, as well as similar economic and logistic conditions.

Cost

It's terrible being poor...there's no way to cut back any more (Katie, 34, divorced)

The housing in the area often presented economic problems for the women interviewed. The majority of units authorized for building permits

in 1990 were detached houses; three times as many of these homes were authorized as were “multifamily” units [Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPV), 1991]. In addition, although nearly a third of county residents earned less than \$15,000 in 1989, few houses or rental properties existed that fit incomes of less than \$25,000 annually, according to city statistics (MPC, 1991). A local organization exists to aid people in locating affordable housing; this organization works with about 12,000 people a year, about 90% of whom are single women.

The 25 women interviewed reflected this economic situation, talking at length about how they set strict economic limits and have a difficult time finding places to live within their budget. Their budgets as well were largely consumed by necessary expenses, and most described how they only engaged in leisure activities that were free or low-cost and limited their transportation use as much as possible.

By far the biggest expense the women faced was in housing. They lived in a variety of housing types, although only 5 had sought and bought a house as a single woman. Of these 5, 2 had adult relatives living with them to share expenses. Virtually all of the women expressed frustration with their economic situation and difficulty “making ends meet.” Of the 25 women, 4 lived in critical conditions, like Kay, who was homeless at the time of the interview and had spent time living in a local park. Brenda, as well, lived off earnings from the sale of the house she and her ex-husband had owned; she did not know how she would pay rent when that money was spent. The majority of the women—14 more—lived in extremely restricted, inflexible price ranges with very few housing options from which to choose. Jean, 39, spent more than half her income on rent alone, and for Fran, 54, money was “the big question” and “affordability is prime.” Thus, 18 of the 25 women lived in very strictly controlled economic situations.

Of the other 7, 5 women reported a more flexible budget in which they could alter how much they spent on housing based on other factors (e.g., convenience) and “if it sounded good”; only 2 women considered housing price to be relatively unimportant, and these women were clearly the exception. One was recently divorced with a large settlement, and the other was a well-paid businesswoman.

When asked to describe their financial situation, many women compared theirs to that of what they perceived single men to experience economically. Charlotte, 42, explained her view of single women:

Single women don't make as much as men. And I don't think they're taken as seriously in the workplace as men. Single women don't have the status of single men. It's totally different,

Others agreed with Fran, 54, that men have “many more options”:

They've got more money and less responsibility. They've got it easier, a lot easier.
(Marie, 44)

They have more money, so they can have better cars and houses (Heather, 41)

Men just have more money to spend. (Donna, 35)

Women who were divorced typically commented about the plunge in their income experienced after the divorce and the sharp change in their housing options and activities as a result, commenting, like Barbara, that they lived a "cramped style" since the divorce:

When I was married, we used to be members of things and do a lot more, but now I don't have as much money. (Sue, 54)

The biggest change is the financial. You go from a big income to a zip income and you still have all the expenses. (Elaine, 44)

Transportation expenses were much less critical for the women interviewed than housing. The range of money spent for transportation was from \$25 to \$70 a month, and although most women commented on wanting to reduce the amount they spent on transit, most saw it as impossible. Beth, 28, said she saved money "every way I can, but there really isn't much way to." Few women used any transit other than their own car, commenting that public transportation was no cheaper and much less convenient. All women but one owned their own car. The transportation situation that the women described was one of necessity: going where they had to when they needed to. The women therefore portrayed economic considerations as important but not very relevant to their decisions, since they could not cut back on activities or reasonably change transit options.

When asked about leisure activities, women typically described low-cost activities like dinner with friends, talking, reading, playing music, and going to singles groups. The modal amount reported as the leisure budget was 50 dollars a month. About half of the women painted a picture of their leisure activities as minimal, expressing a desire for more money to travel, go out to eat, and to movies with friends. These women fell into what I call a "restricted" leisure category and explicitly stated frustration with these limitations; they actively and consciously limited their free time activities for monetary reasons.

The other half, however, did not feel as constrained by economic problems; they had what I call "flexible" leisure budgets. Two of these women did not experience financial strain because they rarely went out; they enjoyed what Ruth, 52, called the "simple things," such as watching television or reading. The rest of these women felt that, like Kristine, 28, "most things here I can do." The women in this latter group reported spending about twice as much as the women in the "restricted" group on

leisure activities. Overall, only a few single women felt completely unrestricted financially, and a large group of women interviewed described serious monetary restrictions on their leisure activities, although the financial worries were not overbearing or the primary factor in making decisions about their leisure activities.

In summary, then, the overall picture economically of the women interviewed is one of difficulty and stress, particularly around necessities like housing. The environment in which these women live and work is one often out of the budget of a single-income family; housing is frequently predicated on a larger household income. Women who were previously involved with someone commented about the harsh shift they were forced to make economically when the relationship ended, and a clear picture of single men emerged in which these men were seen as living a much more financially comfortable life than women. Most single women in the sample were in difficult economic situations, reflecting the economic situations of both women in general and one-income households as well. Despite this picture, almost all the women ranked their concern over money as less than their worries about safety.

Convenience

Convenience emerged as, though important, much less of a concern than economic constraints, though differences existed among the women, particularly between those with children and those without. For single women with children, time was a critical commodity and saving time by selecting convenient housing, transportation, and leisure activities was crucial. For all women interviewed, however, convenience was a non-negligible consideration.

When single women talked about housing convenience, they focused on three main points: proximity to work, accessibility to errands, and distance to friends and relatives; among these factors, proximity to work was the top convenience concern. Several women mentioned that being close to their workplace was a "prime factor" in their housing choice, but those women who had longer commutes had no serious complaints, viewing the drive as inevitable and as "quite time" to relax.

Women with children, however, all expressed a need to find housing close to work as they could not afford to lose any time they could spend caring for their children. Single mothers often, like Jennifer, 32, described running all their errands during their lunch hour so as to be home as early as possible. Pat, 29, commented that the city was "spread all over the place. I think people were antisocial when they built it." She also said that

I used to laugh at my sister for saving up errands and trying to do them all at once, but I understand it now.

Heather, 41, agreed with Pat, saying "I'm very much of a lost person—try to do it all at one time." Errands were described as a "Saturday thing" or as being "arranged around my work schedule." Making time to run errands was an "impossibility" for Elaine, 44, and other single mothers. Brenda, 46, said "I find it hard to do anything. I feel like I'm going all the time." For single women, finding time was difficult, for single mothers, sacrifices were made—in money, sleep, or other activities.

With regard to their leisure activities, the initial reaction from women was typically a laugh. The first question women were asked was, "Where do you go in your free time"? These responses reflect the usual comments of women:

I don't have any free time. (Jennifer, 32)

Oh. Yeah. That would be wonderful! (Sue, 55)

Free time? Surely you jest! (Marie, 34)

You're assuming I have free time. (Beth, 28)

I usually collapse. (Donna, 35)

The overwhelming majority of women interviewed felt the notion of "free time" did not apply to their lives. These single women, particularly the single mothers, often worked two jobs or more than 40 hours a week, and they spent much of their other time working in the yard or house; the idea of free time was luxurious to many of the women.

Most of the women, however, did explain that they found time to socialize, frequently by making a necessary activity like cooking dinner into a social occasion with friends. Most women said they always stayed within a few miles of their home, and only a few women described any activities as "inconvenient" to get to. If they had the money and the event was perceived as safe for them to do, women typically could "find time" for it, as Pat, 29, described: "If I have something I want to do I get around to it." Convenience had less to do with distance or access than with time and energy, as Charlotte, 42, explained: "It's a question of time and deciding priorities. I have to plan to do something."

To summarize, as a whole, convenience concerns emerged as less significant than economic pressures, and many of the worries about convenience stemmed from economic constraints. For example, because of their financially difficult position, many women worked more and therefore had less time to afford to spend in transit or on leisure activities. Single mothers were noticeably more pressured about time and issues of convenience, not

different from many married mothers. The main divergence between the lives of single and married mothers, however, is the typical requirement in the former to work at least full time to generate enough income and the lower likelihood of having anyone in the house to take care of children even for a short period of time while the mother runs errands. Despite these pressures, even single mothers typically ranked convenience concerns as less critical in their housing, transportation, and leisure activity decisions than economic or safety pressures.

Safety

My habits are very ingrained. I try to look straight ahead because I don't want to encourage anyone. I walk like I know where I'm going. I try not to look like a victim. (Lisa, 27)

In housing, transportation, and leisure activity decisions, safety considerations were the most salient determining factor influencing the single women interviewed. Women will pay more, drive further, work longer hours, and sacrifice their aesthetic preferences to be able to live in a place they consider safe. These single women reported only going to certain areas of the city when alone, especially at night, and they will rarely engage in any leisure activity (e.g., seeing a movie) alone because of their fear.

With regard to housing, the single women interviewed considered safety according to specific criteria: neighborhood quality, physical layout/possible alteration of the housing, and potential social relationships. Single women placed great importance on the "quality of the neighborhood" where they selected housing. Women often drove through potential areas during both the day and the night to see how the neighborhood looks and "feels"—whether people were outside, bars were on any windows, or vandalism could be seen were all factors women reported. If the neighborhood "seemed" dangerous or had a reputation as unsafe, women said they did not take the housing if at all economically possible.

The physical layout of the housing was also very important. Katie, 34, for example, moved from one house to another because the first home was against a woody area and far from neighbors; she wanted a house with close neighbors, better lighting, and less hidden areas. Many women interviewed mentioned looking for housing with no areas hidden by trees or bushes, and virtually all women interviewed described looking specifically for windows high off the ground and storm windows. Several women also described housing with doors that could be seen from another point in the house, allowing them to see from inside who is at the door without being seen.

Women who could not afford housing with all the safety features they wanted often made alterations to the housing they chose. Pat, for example, nailed an outside door adjacent to her bedroom shut, then placed a heavy plant against it. Seventeen of the twenty-five single women interviewed altered their homes in some way for safety reasons; those who did not often commented that the house had the features they wanted already; "The house already had dead bolts, storm windows, and locks on the windows, so I felt pretty safe." The women who could afford to do so added alarm systems or security lights; others with lesser resources described various self-defense measures. Over half the women had dogs, and several spoke of keeping weapons in their bedrooms. Theresa stated, "I keep a kind of weapon near the bed, a trowel." Others spoke of guns and baseball bats. None of the women had ever been forced to use a weapon against an intruder, but all of them said that they, like Maude, "wouldn't hesitate a moment to use them."

Single women's judgment of the security of potential housing was influenced by their relationships with those in the neighborhood. Although, as Ruth, 52, said, "neighbors are not the same as having someone in the house," they help. Often women stayed in the same neighborhood after a divorce because of the safety they felt from knowing that neighbors had said, "Come and get us if you have trouble." Some single women, like Katie, 34, reported introducing themselves to their neighbors *as a single woman* when they moved in, exchanging phone numbers. Most women interviewed knew their neighbors and considered them a safety benefit.

Safety concerns about transportation were also similarly experienced by all the women interviewed. By far the most important consideration in transportation was lighting and time of day. Women often changed their routes or method of transit after dark. For example, although almost all women reported riding a bike or walking sometimes during the day, two thirds of them said they would not walk or ride a bike "anywhere" alone after dark. Pat, 29, rode her bike to work on Sundays, but drove her car during the week because she worked later and would have to ride alone home after dark. As one woman said, "riding a bike is inappropriate" because you "look" as though you are "asking for trouble."

Those women who were willing to walk after dark or had to do so often commented, like Sarah, 44, that they were "always conscious" and "alert" to their surroundings. Beth, 28, stated that if she had to walk to her car after dark she would "pick up a stick or a rock or something...I don't obsess, but in some situations you're more aware." Once in the car, however, fears did not disappear; most women found driving after dark to be a fear-provoking experience.

About half of the women limited their driving to the daytime or changed their driving routes after dark. Ruth, 52, when out after dark, took a longer route home because it was better lit and more heavily populated. She commented: "I tell you, a woman alone nowadays...it's very dangerous. It really is. And, after dark, well, it's a lot worse." Lisa, 27, said "I try not to go out at night," and she scheduled work, classes, and errands so she arrived home by dark. Like her, Jennifer, 32, said she limited her activities to daytime hours "six nights out of seven" for safety reasons.

Other women, like Sarah, 44, had to go out at night: "I don't limit myself to the daytime because I don't have that option." Due to time pressures or strict work schedules, women like her were forced to drive alone at night sometimes; these women reported taking particular and uniform precautions, like considering lighting of their path and destination before leaving home, locking all doors, and being "extremely" alert to their surroundings. Only 3 women said they did not avoid any areas completely when driving alone, and one of them, Charlotte, had a car phone, explaining,

If I have to go somewhere, I'll go. If I go somewhere I'm not familiar with, I lock the doors and all that. I'm not really afraid, mostly because I have a phone in the car. It's a very big factor in my feeling of safety.

Another of these 3 women, Rose, said she had only lived in the area for a short period of time and did not "know what areas of the city to avoid."

Lighting of an area was a critical factor for the women interviewed; many of them described their thoughts as being "ingrained," part of their perception of the world:

Lighting is always in my head. I guess it comes from living in Houston. I'm always staying alert. My mind works like that (Charlotte, 42)

I don't go places without good lighting, so I don't think about it much. I guess if I arrived and the lights were out somewhere, I'd leave. (Beth, 28)

I try to avoid going to the mall at night because the lighting is bad. If I went and couldn't find a close parking place I wouldn't go. (Theresa, 45)

I'm real conscious of things around me...is anyone walking close? Are there dark places near my truck where someone could be? (Alice, 29)

When the women interviewed described traveling with others, either male or female, they said they felt less afraid, because they did not look as "vulnerable" and people were less likely to perceive them as targets for attack. Lisa, 27, typified the reactions of women who felt safer with a man around by saying, "That's too bad, but it's reality." Importantly, this lesser fear stemmed not from men's perceived ability to defend the women, but

from their symbolic value; a woman with a man was described as “looking” less “out of place” to others.

The same safety concerns emerged in women’s discussions about their leisure activities. Twenty-three of the twenty-five women said they avoided leisure activities they enjoyed when they were alone because of safety concerns. Several of the women, for example, liked to go hiking but avoided doing so because it was perceived as too isolated to be safe. Sue, 54, said, “I read horror stories of what happens on trails.” Cheryl, 31, said hiking alone made her “paranoid,” and Jean, 39, agreed, saying that being alone hiking “puts you in a vulnerable position.”

Other less isolated activities, however, generated a similar response—going to movies, to nightclubs, to eat dinner, shopping, to the laundromat, and to the bank machine all were reported as activities to avoid. As Elaine, 44, explained, being alone sometimes produces “an awesome, overpowering fear.” Women rarely said that they would go alone to a place they had not been before, and when they went to a familiar place they often described techniques like Jean, 39, used, of looking “for groups of women to sit with” to “make sure no one gets the wrong idea.” For those who did do things alone, they, like Sarah, 44, were always “conscious of the fact that I’m alone.” Again these concerns emerged around wanting to appear “normal” and appropriate, to fit into the expected uses of spaces where they were.

This level of fear in housing selection, transportation use, and leisure activities varied only somewhat among the women interviewed, and the only clear factor influencing level of reported fear was length of time single; the longer a woman had been single, the less her fears restricted her behaviors. Although all the women talked about being afraid when alone, several of them described a process of learning to be less afraid, of unlearning patterns of fear of being alone in public. Elaine, 44, explained: “At first I didn’t do things alone, but the more I got secure about myself the more I did things.” This process was described in more detail by others:

I used to be very afraid when I first got divorced. I wouldn’t go anywhere. My husband had put fear in me...I got out of it just by doing it. I used to never think of going out, then I did. And nothing happened. (Charlotte, 42)

I’m much less afraid now than immediately after my divorce. I moved right into this third floor walk-up apartment, and the stairwell was long and dark. I remember being really terrified of going up those stairs...My generation was taught that women are more like victims that I’m willing to agree with. Women are taught so many ‘don’ts’ that it’s hard for them to realize that they have any strength...It’s a long process. We’re taught that everyone knows better than you do—that engenders a lot of fear. (Sue, 54)

The women in this sample who were recently divorced or widowed were the most fearful, those never married were the most likely to engage in activities alone, and those long-divorced usually described a process of learning not to be constantly scared. Despite these differences, great commonality existed in women's perceptions of their environments as threatening, of dark spaces and hidden areas as representing potential hiding places, and "bad" areas as meaning places they should avoid.

Living single

After discussion of their housing, transportation, and leisure activities, the women were asked to describe what it was like to be single for them; the results were that living single was difficult for many of the women, who felt "outside" the society and discouraged by others. Katie, 34, commented on her experience:

Society has an image of single women, a double standard. We're looked down on if we go to bars. We're not expected to do what the men do. We're supposed to be 'ladies'...the perception people have of you is strange. You've got people on the one hand who admire what you've done and others who look down on you. It's a catch-22. You're in the middle.

Others agreed with her, commenting that "being single was the pits" or that they felt "like a sitting duck," standing out "like a sore thumb" for criticism. Many women talked about what they saw as government and social ineptitude in helping single women:

Single women often have just enough not to get money [from the government], but not enough income to live. That's where our government fails. It's really tough, especially on women because they don't pay women what they pay men. You can't live to a standard that's expected. (Ruth, 52)

What are we doing for single women? Not one damn thing as far as I can see. There's a lot of lip-service—day care and all that—but nothing real. (Barbara, 52)

It's a real bad problem with society and how they help us. Women with kids on welfare aren't supported. As a single parent, I have to pay 'family' insurance. The government does not understand what single people need. They don't encourage us or offer us the opportunities to make the best of our situation. We're really in it on our own. If you're lucky and can make it, well, good for you, people are proud. But if you can't, well, that's the breaks. (Katie, 34)

Women talked also about the difficulty of "plugging in" to social networks of singles in a "couple culture" in which most social activities are built around couples:

The biggest shock of my life was after my divorce finding out how much socializing is two by two...with friends I was always the fifth wheel and they were uncomfortable with me. When I was married, I never thought to invite my single

women friends to dinner...A woman alone is out of it. No social life. The woman who lives across the street used to be single, and everyone watched who came over to see if they stayed the night...She didn't have much of a social life, then she got married. Now they have parties and all. (Barbara, 52)

It seems like at my age, everyone is married. Makes everyone feel a little weird to have a single woman there. They don't know whether to include you or not. (Jennifer, 32)

Some women sought out other singles in singles groups and found such groups to be a solution to their "outsider" status. Other found the groups less satisfying:

Singles groups are like the island of misfits from 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.' They're all waiting for Santa to come save them. (Jennifer, 32)

Thus, the women interviewed described themselves in the larger society as deviants, as standing out in some way, particularly in public places and social functions that they saw as "for" couples. These women typically saw their social position as worse than that of single men; because of economics or issues of safety concerns and mobility, single men were described as having it "a lot easier." Lori discussed the different meanings she believed were attributed to single men and women by those who see them in public, describing how a man eating alone in a restaurant in the evening is assumed to be a businessman, out of town for business, whereas a single woman is just seen as alone. Lori described the discomfort she felt when she did go alone to restaurants, particularly in the evenings, when the host/hostess would ask her, "just one for dinner?," which she perceived as saying "you are abnormal"; Lori believed single men, as a whole, experience this sort of assumption about their "deviance" much less often than women and, as a result, they have much more flexible lives. Marie, 44, similarly felt that "...Just being a man affords them more possibilities." Others echoed this sentiment:

It seems like men can go on [when single], but women, especially when they have kids, well, I don't see how they do it. It's really, really hard. I guess society thinks everyone's wealthy. It's just a merry-round. (Ruth, 52)

Single men can live just about anywhere. They have more opportunities for living areas and can feel safer than women. In general, they can go more places and feel safer, while we need to be aware...When I walk my dog, I see guys alone, but I hardly ever see women. When I do see them walking, women are always in the middle of the road or other lighted places and men aren't...they have much more general social freedom...Men can go to a bar, watch TV, and drink beer. Women can't without worrying. (Alice, 29)

Single men...don't expect to be yelled at by some dumb fuck in a pick-up truck. I don't think they're subjected to that kind of pressure...To me, there's a continuum between the dork at the movie theater, the guy trying to pick you up in a bar, and

the guy in the pick-up yelling—because you're a woman alone, they think you're "asking for it." (Beth, 28)

Thus, although single men were seen as dealing with some of the same issues as single women, such as being out of the social loop, their resources for dealing with it were seen as greater, and their likelihood of dealing with additional stress over safety concerns was less than women. Despite the difficulties being single, few women said they wanted to get married or seriously involved or were "trying" to do so. The typical attitude was that if someone came along and was a clear life improvement, she would consider it but that remaining single was better than a bad relationship. Barbara, 52, was the exception to this pattern:

Given a choice, I'd get married in a shot...[when single] you're odd man out. Safety and security reasons. Economic reasons. Social reasons. Everything. Some women say they won't, but I don't believe them.

To summarize, then, the single women interviewed in this project found themselves economically, socially, and symbolically pushed out of mainstream culture. When describing how they saw themselves, they often painted a picture of someone transgressing the norms of a woman's place by being alone in public, violating the assumptions of where a woman without a man should be.

Conclusions

The results of this study point to the uniquely disadvantaged position of single women, not only structurally in the economic and social system, but also symbolically, in the environment in which they live and work. This research project, first, reveals the economic problems single women face, particularly with acquiring housing, and the time pressures often resulting from working long hours or several jobs. Unlike married women or women otherwise involved with someone, single women typically rely not just only on one income, but no one *woman's* income, which is significantly less than that of the average man. Single women also find themselves more often than coupled women in a social situation as what they describe as "the fifth wheel," the only single person at a social gathering.

Unlike single men, single women must operate from an economically disadvantaged position and negotiate their housing, transportation, and leisure activity decisions in an environmental landscape marred by their fears of assault from men. More than money or convenience, the women in this sample seek safety. The women in the sample report a way of seeing the world around them that is shared and related to the need to protect themselves spatially from attacks from unknown men in public places. The women

here do not report a constant high state of anxiety, but rather a distinct worldview in which fears of men are a core part of everyday life and understandings of their surroundings. The women did not speak of dwelling on their fear, but rather of adapting to it: selecting routes that are well lit, housing in familiar areas with security measures, and leisure activities that do not replicate the image of what they see as "a vulnerable woman."

The environment in which women live and work is one seen through what I would call a socialized fear perspective. Importantly, these fears women have are not the result of assaults they experience but of dominant cultural mythologies of where a woman's place should be when she is alone. In other words, women do not restrict their movements, their housing options, and their leisure activities because they are assaulted when they do not do so, but rather because engaging in certain activities in "the wrong place" at a "bad" time so violates standards of "appropriate" behavior for a woman alone that they are afraid of what could happen as a result. Thus, women see the world around them through the lens of socialized fear, and women alone, as single women often necessarily are, find themselves feeling afraid and "out of place."

Clearly, a great need exists for economic changes and environmental shifts to housing and facilities geared to individuals as well as couples. Women's fears of assault, however, are in equal need of address. The reduction of the risk of assault on women is obviously a necessity, albeit one not likely to happen overnight. I would argue, however, that equally important as the reduction of rate of assault on women is the reduction of women's fears of assault; what keeps women inside the house and limits their movements in the environment is not actual attack, most of which occurs within the home from an acquaintance and not outside from a stranger, but the *fears* of assault. Both institutionally and ideologically, this socialized fear perspective functions as a tool of social control that encourages traditional definitions of a woman's place. Feminist research should recognize the power in the environment itself and what it symbolizes about where a woman without a man should be. The "environment" cannot be reduced to physical surroundings; research must include questions on the symbolic significance of the environment, the presumed social roles of women and men, and the ideological implications of the dominant cultural messages that are part of the environment itself.

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