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# Women trail runners' encounters with vulnerability to male harassment in rural off-road spaces

Laura Gubby <sup>a</sup> and J. Hill <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, Canterbury Christchurch University, Canterbury, UK; <sup>b</sup>Institute of Sport and Physical Activity Research, University of Bedfordshire, Bedford, UK

## ABSTRACT

The #metoo movement and high-profile coverage of murders of women in public spaces have reignited investigation of public harassment and women's actions as they make decisions where and how to engage in outdoor physical activity. This paper draws from the ideas of Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (1994) to understand women trail runners' spatial experiences in England. Sixteen women who trail run by themselves participated in go-along interviews in their usual running trails. This method allowed participants to recall moments in specific spaces or address spaces that generate particular feelings, and encouraged the researcher to gain a sensory understanding of the spaces which were important to participants. We analyse the production of the trail through runners' interactions with people and environment inside and outside the trail, and discuss enjoyment as well as perceptions of vulnerability to male harassment and 'risky' moments. Ultimately, despite runners regularly feeling vulnerable when running, they refused to stop. At a time when physical activity and natural environments are being promoted as key contributors to personal wellbeing and public health, this research provides evidence of how the production of spaces and safety negotiations affect women's running experiences.

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Running; violence against women and girls; VAWG; space/place; go-along interviews

## Introduction

In 2021, The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) UN Women reported that only 3% of 18–24-year-old women in their UK-based research had *not* experienced sexual harassment in public, and strongly argued that current systems to reduce violence and harassment are not effective. The 'Me Too' movement in 2017, and campaigns in the aftermath of the abduction of Sarah Everard in 2021 from a London street, raised awareness of the daily choices that many women make in relation to their safety. Women in the UK responded: #SarahEverard and #ReclaimtheStreets were widely posted on social media by women who shared previous experiences and strategic decisions related to violence or harassment. Public harassment can be both verbal (including negative comments, cat calls, and propositions) and non-verbal (such as whistling, winking, flashing, and physical contact) (Thompson 1994). Public or street harassment has been framed as a tactic to retain male power (Kern 2020), to remind women 'that they are not meant to be in certain spaces' (Koskela 1999, 11).

The 2022 murder of Ashling Murphy while she was running on a canal path in County Offaly, Ireland, underscored the severity of the violence women can encounter. This reignited discussions

**CONTACT** Laura Gubby  [laura.gubby@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:laura.gubby@canterbury.ac.uk)  Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, Canterbury Christchurch University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1QU, UK

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about women's rights to public spaces without fear, as seen in the hashtag #SheWasGoingForARun. Activist calls for legal support and changes to social attitudes are joined by crime reduction and education campaigns including UK regional and national examples #IsThisOK (Greater Manchester Combined Authority 2023), Enough (HM Government 2022) and That Guy (Police Scotland 2024). Violence against women and girls, including sexual assault and intimate partner violence, are recognised as having long-term health consequences (Lawn and Koenen 2021). In this climate of heightened awareness of harassment, we seek evidence of how vulnerability and risk of harassment or violence affect the physical activity experiences of women recreational runners, specifically in rural trails in England.

More women than men report fear in trails (Rosenkrantz et al. 2024). Feelings of vulnerability for women in outdoor activities such as running may be associated with fear of falls and injuries associated with the environment (Boniface 2006); but our focus will be on perceptions of trail running as a risky behaviour for women in relation to male violence and harassment (Clark 2015; Green and Singleton 2006). In parks, men are more likely than women to move in remote or less accessible areas while women prefer to run near other people but away from road traffic (Kilgour and Parker 2013; Sang et al. 2020). In a series of interviews with women recreational runners, Roper (2016) reported that all claimed to feel fear of being attacked and that this affected where or how they run. Density, arrangement, and maintenance of vegetation can have an impact on the visual openness of a space, which can influence women's perception of safety (Hashim et al. 2016). Women may employ coping strategies to avoid risk, such as ignoring harassers or changing their route (Thompson 1994). In spaces where they feel more vulnerable, women tend to run with more trepidation and increased awareness of their surroundings (Allen-Collinson 2022).

Trails, wilderness, and woodland are normatively constructed as masculine spaces (Lincoln 2021) that women should not be in on their own: being isolated, full of concealed hiding places, and/or having few escape routes (Kilgour 2007; Kilgour and Parker 2013; Roper 2016). Women may choose to run in trails anyway, even if they feel fear, because experiencing natural outdoor space and a range of embodied emotions and sensory characteristics (Allen-Collinson 2022; Boniface 2006; Little 2017; MacBride-Stewart 2019; Wesely and Gaarder 2004) is a bigger pull factor (Kilgour and Parker 2013; Roper 2016).

Trail running is reportedly associated with resilience and mental health benefits among women runners, linked to the physical challenge of trail running as well as being able to leave everyday stresses behind (Lincoln 2021). Likewise, if identity salience as a runner outweighs identity salience as a woman, then safety fears may be resisted (Skilton, McMahon, and Muldoon 2024). Yet, running identity exists not in isolation but alongside other identities: for women runners, running identity is associated with discipline to thin body norms and accepting being weaker than male runners (Carey 2022). Running is a morally good behaviour, but one in tension with responsibilities such as mothering (Bean and Wimbs 2021; Darroch and Hillsburg 2017; McGannon and McMahon 2022). These gendered identities need to be reconciled with the ideal of the 'disembodied runner' (Skinner 2015) who places running above all other concerns.

Belonging to a running community does not always mitigate risks or perceptions of vulnerability to harassment: in trail and ultrarunning communities, women report that sexual harassment and abuse are almost accepted within the community culture (Teranishi Martinez et al. 2023). Women's fear is not of physical space but of social relations that produce and take place in the space (Koskela 1999). These gendered discourses and social relations in public and physical activity spaces act as boundaries around women's movement (Ahmed 2017), denying them access to the benefits of the outdoors (Wesely and Gaarder 2004) and therefore having health implications (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2018).

In the current context, where harassment of women, and violence against women and girls is being highlighted through social media awareness, public campaigns, and academic research, but at the same time, exercise and outdoor spaces are promoted as highly beneficial for mental health, it is important to understand how women experience physical activity in outdoor spaces. Increasing

understanding of *how* women experience running in trails, and the impact that potential harassment may have on their decisions and enjoyment is key to gaining knowledge around women's exercise choices and the implications of broader social issues on their engagement and enjoyment. Based on 16 go-along interviews with women who choose to run off-road in remote areas, and applying theories of space and social relations, we analyse how trail running is framed within and against a discourse of vulnerability to male harassment that affects women runners' identities and their relationships with other actors inside and outside the trail. The research question for this paper was: how do women trail runners make sense of safety and risk when off-road running by themselves?

## Spatial perspectives on social relations in trail running

The ideas of Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith ([1974] 1991), and the later application of his work by Van Ingen (2003), are useful to analyse women trail runners' constructions of social relations and identities in and around the trail space. Space is socially constructed and is not neutral (van Ingen 2003); it influences and is influenced by social actors; it produces and is produced. Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith ([1974] 1991) explains the production of space through his triad of three spatial presentations that are interconnected in everyday life. The first of the triad is 'spatial practice' which can be seen as perceived space or material space. This includes the material of the bounded space plus the everyday routines and activities through which bodies interact with space, as perceived. Spatial practices include everyday activities, involving 'the use of an established spatial economy characteristic of each social formation (place) and demonstrate the ways in which bodies interact with material space' (van Ingen 2003, 203). These routines shape and are shaped by spaces. Social relations in this study are framed by the established use of trails as leisure spaces rather than routes to somewhere. The second spatial moment, 'representations of space', refers to conceived space where discourses inform understandings about the people and actions that occur in those spaces, this is informed by thoughts and understandings of the space; it is abstract (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith [1974] 1991). These 'conceptions of space' are 'condensed into communicable representations' lived in the mind but having control over physical activity and physically active bodies' (van Ingen 2003, 203). Finally, 'representational spaces' are spaces where spatial practice and representations of space are lived, it is in this space that bodies can be dominated but can also resist through actions and lived experiences (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith [1974] 1991). It is not just mappable space or space as a metaphorical construct, but one that generates local forms of knowing; spaces resistant to the dominant order. Lived space is the spatial 'moment' where discrimination and oppression happen, but it is also the site for critical spaces, for counterculture and resistance (Van Ingen 2003). The idea of spaces of representation (lived space) 'points to potentially new ways of experiencing space and how knowing how others might use a space can change its essence' (Ahson et al. 2023, 583). In relation to running, women (re)produce and challenge various spaces as safe, unsafe, masculine, risky, beautiful, *theirs*. Spatial experience is heterogeneous, and men and women may experience trails differently, but nevertheless, by using the space, women contribute to its production.

Massey (1994) extended Lefebvre's ideas of space as a site for the reproduction of power. Responding to the idea that space is fixed and stable, Massey (1994, 265) argued that 'space is not a "flat" surface in that sense because the social relations which create it are themselves dynamic by their very nature'. Space is formed from interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from micro interactions to macro structures. Massey argued for three considerations about space. The first is that places are defined by other spaces beyond their boundaries, by what they are not; they are relational to other spaces, such that there is 'a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces ... because the social relations of space are experienced differently, and variously interpreted by those holding different positions as part of it' (Massey 1994, 3). Attempts to establish the boundaries of a place, its identity, are attempts to stabilise the space. Secondly, Massey argues that places are always in continuous production over time, in a process of becoming; co-

produced among all the people who constitute the space as well as those outside the space. If places are in process of becoming, then investment is required to maintain them as they are. This leads to the third aspect: that there is nostalgia for an imagined 'longed-for and romanticised place' (Massey 1994, 10) that requires work to maintain. Places are contested and therefore may be different places at different times; the imagined ideal can still affect social relations in the present.

Dovetailing with Lefebvre and Massey's ideas, that space is not inert but affects and is affected by power relations, Markula (2019) prompts us to consider material as well as verbal interactions in social relations with both human and non-human actors. This is useful to highlight how animals, trees, bushes, and nettles, and mud influence runners' experiences as they assess their interactions. Drawing from Massey's theories to analyse a physical activity space, Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson (2018) examine exercise practice in a gym and pay attention to how men and women inhabit the space because this is how gender difference is reproduced and challenged in that space. Gender power relations emerge from interactions in the place and shape the place; but the place is also shaped by the social relations in other places (Massey 1994). Within and against normative constructions of women's outdoor physical activity, women may resist negative associations with risk-taking and victim-blaming and instead build their own meanings for public space (Green and Singleton 2006; Krenichyn 2006). Writing of cities and built environments, Kern (2020, 23) says they continue to shape social relations: 'physical places like cities matter when we want to think about social change'.

Using these ideas of the social production of space, our focus extends beyond constructions of women's running identities and vulnerability to examine physical space, embodied identity, and gendered social relations in the trail space (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2018; Edmonds 2020; Massey 1994). We investigate how women shape their physical activity actions, and the relational influences on their actions before, during and after encounters in the trails. We demonstrate how lived experiences of women runners in trail spaces are affected by conceived and lived spaces, but they resist by claiming different patterns of social relations and challenging narratives of women's running, safety, and vulnerability to male harassment or violence.

## Methodology

### *Participant and trail contexts*

To explore women runners' experiences of trail running, individual, semi-structured go-along interviews took place with 16 women who run in trails by themselves. Trails were defined as rural off-road spaces with more woodland and fields, further away from roads, and with a lower density of people than urban parks. Participants ranged in age from 35 to 50 years of age. Their running lives were varied: most were recreational runners running for their own mental health or fitness, but some also enjoyed running events and competitions. The runners' years of experience also varied, with some having participated since childhood, some for 12–15 years, and others for only three to four years. Runners ran distances of five kilometres to more than 26 miles (Ultra Marathons), but most ran more than 10 kilometres regularly, with some frequently running much longer distances. Some runners would aim to run twice a week, whilst others would run six days a week. The trails that these women ran on were usually relatively unknown and quite secluded. Of the 16 interview locations, four had car parks nearby, others required parking on a country lane and entering woods or walking from a participant's house to the entrance of the trail. Some women then ran on the trails through the woods, whilst others would purposefully move off the trail paths and through thicker bush and woodland. Most women enjoyed more secluded areas where they felt that there would be fewer people. It is important to note that experiences in these spaces cannot be internationally generalised. For example, in England, there are no dangerous wild animals, which might be a key safety

concern in other countries. Instead, safety mainly relates to the presence of other people and the terrain of the trails.

Interviews took place in the summers of 2021 and 2022 when the murder of Sarah Everard and subsequent VAWG social media coverage and campaigns were prominent in the UK. There are few statistics available for specific counties in the Southeast of England where this research took place. Nationally, it has been acknowledged that it is difficult to collect data on the pervasiveness of VAWG due to under-reporting (Healthy Surrey 2023). The APPG (2021) stated that London, which is a city neighbouring two of the three counties where this research took place, has one of the highest rates of sexual harassment in the country. Healthy Surrey (2023) reported findings from Surrey's VAWG Police Report (2022) which stated that between March 2021 and March 2022 there were 15,874 reported VAWG offences in Surrey and there had been a continuous increase of VAWG in Surrey in the preceding 3 years. Surrey was the county where most of the interviews took place for this research.

### *Go-along interviews*

Go-along interviews are increasingly popular in physical activity research (e.g. Palmer 2016) and research about spaces (e.g. Bell et al. 2015). Ontologically, this method creates a reality experienced by the interviewee and interviewer, as memories are recalled through being in that space, and by enabling the demonstration of the experience and the sensory assessment of the space/people as encountered in that moment by the interviewee and interviewer. Epistemologically, the interview provides a way for women runners to position themselves amongst the discourses of running, safety, and trails, and to co-construct knowledge with the researcher (Smith and Sparkes 2019). Walking next to participants, and sometimes behind participants, meant that facial expressions were not always visible. This lack of consistent engagement with emotion and body language was a limitation of this type of interview method compared to more sedentary face-to-face interviewing.

Interviews lasted 45–70 minutes and were audio-recorded. Three participants known to the researcher were initially recruited by convenience sampling. Snowball sampling followed and resulted in 16 participants, who lived in three counties in Southeast England. Convenience and snowball sampling were appropriate considering the use of go-along interviews in remote spaces where few people were present; some knowledge of, or connection to each other helped to safeguard both researcher and participant and build trust. Rapport was also enhanced as the researcher's own experience as a woman who trail runs meant that experiences could be shared before and during interviews which helped to nurture familiarity. This insider perspective allowed me (the first author) to build rapport and to some extent, my own previous experiences allowed me to feel that I understood some of the runners' concerns and could consider some of my own experiences similarly to theirs. Despite this, many of the specific experiences of these women were very different to mine. The places they ran, the times they ran, their histories of running were usually different. I encountered moments where I felt shocked, empowered, inspired, and even sad that these women felt certain ways or had experienced certain events. My position was partially as an insider, but in relation to their experiences I was a researcher unfamiliar with the specifics of their running lives and this gave me an outsider perspective too. This perspective encouraged me to never become complacent with my understanding of their encounters and probe and clarify through our conversations to try to understand runners' perspectives. Nevertheless, the interpretivist epistemology allowed me to co-construct knowledge through conversations with participants, acknowledging that my presence has informed the knowledge that has been generated.

The project was approved by the Faculty of Science, Engineering and Social Sciences Ethics Panel, Canterbury Christ Church University (ethics application: ETH2021–0327). After initial conversations with the researcher, the researcher's acquaintances, or existing participants, runners that showed interest in the research were emailed an information form and consent form to sign. The researcher and participant walked through a typical running space chosen by the participant. Participants led



the walk and made choices in relation to direction of travel, type of landscape and terrain, rendering them more in control (Lynch and Mannion 2016). This situated method of data collection allowed the researcher to gain a sense of the participants' running spaces as they talked about their thoughts and experiences. At times, specific locations would prompt participants to remember events, or to signpost how the environment of a particular space might elicit specific feelings. The researcher chose to walk the routes rather than run, so that there was time to survey the environment and remember moments. Part of the focus was on the space, and walking allowed for more time moving through the spaces. The researcher recorded the conversation with a Dictaphone and made additional verbal comments about the terrain, number of people encountered, and location throughout the interview to serve as memory prompts for analysis. The observation of these spaces alongside discussion with participants added another layer to the understanding of the researcher.

## Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to analyse data, adopting a qualitative approach which allows for flexibility during coding and theme generation as well as researcher subjectivity (Terry et al. 2017). As described by Terry et al. (2017, 20), analysis is creative as opposed to technical: 'a result of the researcher's engagement with the dataset and the application of their analytic skills and experiences, and personal and conceptual standpoints'.

The process involved familiarisation with the data, with both authors reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the data and writing informal notes (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). A process of inductive coding then took place by the first author, where codes were developed from the data (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016) without a pre-existing coding framework. The first author bracketed data as she interpreted codes (Braun and Clarke 2022) and wrote notes in the margins on hardcopy transcripts, ensuring that coded data related to the research question (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). Through a subjective and reflexive researcher process, codes were then grouped together by the first author to create candidate themes (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). When coding the data, the first author intentionally retained longer narrative where moments were described in detail by participants to avoid losing depth of meaning. Therefore, 'encounters' are presented as longer narratives of risky situations.

Once a table of candidate themes were presented, the first and second author collectively followed an iterative process, reviewing the candidate themes by returning to the coded data and re-considering the entire data set to question whether the data was presented sufficiently and related to the research question (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016). During this stage, themes were reviewed to confirm that they presented patterns of shared meaning, rather than domain summaries which would have involved themes about a shared topic, but without shared meaning (Braun and Clarke 2019). Within the themes, higher-level patterns are presented, meaning that they go beyond the presentation of a very specific coding idea, and instead, present layers within the theme (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016).

When revising and defining the themes, we agreed that four themes demonstrated patterns of shared meaning related to our research question: how do women trail runners make sense of safety and risk when off-road running by themselves?

## Results

The four themes generated from coded data for this paper were: suspicious male trail users; the trail environment: negotiating enjoyment and vulnerability; adopting running habits in response to people outside of the trail; and, lived experiences of risky encounters and feelings of guilt. Underpinning runners' experiences was their negotiation of gendered discourses of risk and vulnerability to male violence and harassment. Despite most not having had direct experiences of harassment in trails, they understood their vulnerability to attack from an imagined or

unknown man perceived as an attacker or hunter (whether opportunistic and/or 'lying in wait'). This was a powerful and repeated discourse that was constructed by the runners and their significant others (for instance as they were planning to go for a run). The solo woman runner in this discourse is sometimes safe and sometimes at risk, but always vulnerable, which shapes her actions and interactions. The runners assessed their place in the environment in the face of specific encounters with men in the trails; some of these encounters that may not have been defined as harassment per se but shaped women's belonging and identity in those spaces. The space itself was shaped by the actions of men who engaged in violence and harassment; their actions and motives are irrational and unknowable, and they are visually indistinct from other male users of the trail. Using Lefebvre's and Massey's spatial theories, we view the trail runners in complex relationships with human and non-human actors within the lived and imagined spaces of the trail, and beyond its boundaries. These discussions help to understand both the in-the-moment and longer-term effects of the gendered social relations of the trail space.

### *Suspicious male trail users*

During interviews, participants established the legitimacy of different people (including themselves) to engage in leisure in the trails. For example, dog-walkers perceived to pose no safety concerns for the runners and were generally accepted as legitimate users of the space, because they had a clear purpose in the trail.

Particularly suspicious was a man without a dog, who consistently came up as most likely to provoke anxiety and fear in solo women runners. van Ingen (2003) argues for the consideration of the interconnectedness of dominant ideologies and identity politics with space and spatial experiences. As Lola explains:

Lola: I'd definitely be suspicious of men who don't have a dog.

Interviewer: Yes, groups or a single man by themselves?

Lola: Single, I think, yes. Much more anxious about a guy on his own.

Interviewer: Yes. Do you know why you think that?

Lola: Yes, I don't know. I suppose it's generalising that these people tend to be on their own, the ones that are going to do damage.

Abby further describes the embodied response she had to men without a dog and compares it to the feeling when she sees a man with a dog.

Even worse, if they've not got a dog and they're walking, I start to, not panic, but I, kind of, come to the side, I won't look at them. I'll look like I run really fast. I just, kind of, keep going. If they've got a dog, I, sort of, relax and say hello or whatever, it's fine (Abby)

Abby deflects attention while also performing an identity as a fast runner. These performances align with Goffman's (1959) ideas of the presentation of the self, where people perform different versions of themselves to different audiences to manage the impressions they make. In this case, the conscious decision to perform an identity as a fast runner has the intention of showing a male whom she is concerned about that she is fast and able to run away (Skilton, McMahon, and Muldoon 2024).

In addition to not having a dog, men wearing inappropriate clothing for the trail were seen as suspicious trail users:

Helen: There's been a guy who was – my local woods are really muddy – and he had a torch. I thought he was coming towards me but he wasn't. I couldn't work out whether he was coming towards me or going away from me. It turned out he was going away from me, but he was struggling to walk because he had basic trainers on and it was really muddy and slippery. So he was like this [mimes wobbling], so I couldn't judge the light properly.



Interviewer: Because he was moving so funnily basically?

Helen: And even going past him knowing that he could barely walk, I was still scared that he would come and get me. It just seemed odd, like why are you in the middle of the woods with inappropriate trainers on at 5:00am? There's a path like this, just walk on that path.

Recalling Lefebvre's and Nicholson-Smith ([1974] 1991) second spatial moment, representations of space shape perceptions of who should and should not be in certain locations and in what circumstances. Discourses around women's vulnerability suggest that women should not be alone in these spaces, especially not in the dark. Blame aimed at women who have encountered harm implies their decisions to be in public spaces alone or in the dark were unwise. Campaigns (e.g. Police Scotland 2024) rightly shift blame to the perpetrator rather than the victim or survivor (e.g. Police Scotland 2024). The women in this study questioned the legitimacy of men whose clothing and movements disoriented them. Their conceived space was divided into safe individuals who would have less impact on their movement choices and those who were concerning. The runners indicated that they had to guess men's intentions and did not have the privilege to ignore them. Lived social practices are affected by the normative construct of public space, even remote trails, as a masculine domain (Lincoln 2021). Power relations in social spaces contribute to sport and physical activity spaces being gendered spaces (van Ingen 2003).

### *The trail environment: negotiating enjoyment and vulnerability*

Runners shared a profound relationship with the trail, the physical terrain including bushes, flowers, mud, and wildlife gave them happiness. They found joy in 'a sense of freedom' (Zoe) because 'the scenery is beautiful. It's quiet. There's no traffic' (Becky). Temperature, patterns of light, and birdsong also heightened the experience: 'if you're running in the morning, hear the birds and that cool, nice temperature and running through the woods and the dappled light; it's lovely' (Gemma). Previous research has shown how running in nature has a positive impact on health and wellbeing (MacBride-Stewart 2019). Although trails are mapped (e.g. as routes through woods and fields), the interactions between bodies and the materiality of the space contribute to the lived experiences of runners through their enjoyment of nature and sense of positive wellbeing (van Ingen 2003).

Despite this enjoyment runners gained from the natural trail environment, the terrain and surrounding noises also informed runners' perceptions around safety and vulnerability to male violence. The presence of animals, unidentifiable in wooded areas, could prompt worry:

Some animals have orange eyes, some have blue and you don't know if it's a man in there, like is he hiding in the woods? Yeah, I've had that thought before . . . I can try and be as brave as I want but there's always moments that are going to scare me to death (Helen)

However, we can see that it is not the animals that Helen is fearful of, but that she might misidentify a man hiding in the woods and assume it is a harmless animal. The materiality of the physical landscape shaped perceptions of safety (Markula 2019). These understandings were informed by the level of possibility that someone could be hiding in the vegetation (Hashim et al. 2016). Stinging nettles were constructed as safe, because the likelihood of someone lying in wait there was considered low. Less safe were bushes, which would offer concealment: 'all I can see is bushes, and you just think someone can drag me into that' (Rachel). Considering Lefebvre's and Nicholson-Smith ([1974] 1991) first spatial moment, spatial practices, the routines that took place in the trail spaces were primarily for leisure, hence, there were fewer people than if the spaces were travel routes to an end location.

Runners admitted that trails were risky spaces because they would see fewer people than in more public running spaces (such as streets or parks), suggesting a lack of help if something were to happen:

Then, obviously, I've got the rape alarms, but that's not going to do anything here, is it? No one is going to hear (Nicki)

If you got attacked in the middle of nowhere, you've got a long slog to find someone to help you (Becky)

Runners referred to trails as having more places for people to conceal themselves than other, more public running locations. For example, trees or bushes might provide a discrete place for a person to hide, or an invisible space to be dragged into:

As you can see, we're on a nice path but the woods go far out both sides so there could be anyone lurking in the bush (Tasha)

The material environment of the woodland trail could be pleasant while also being a representation of fear of others (men) who could use the environment against women (Kilgour 2007; Koskela 1999), demonstrating how public spaces interlink broader power politics with lived experience (Van Ingen 2003).

### *Adopting running habits in response to people outside of the trail*

Those in close relationships with women runners (e.g. partners, children, or mothers) exist outside the trail but offer an example of how relations outside the boundary impact on the trail space (Massey 1994). The following examples show how social relations with family, and the identity of mother or partner, affected runners in the trail space. The first example considers this participant's awareness of her responsibility as a mother:

Yeah, and I think if I didn't have kids I'd be like, 'Oh well, sod it' but [...] there's so many implications if something does happen to me. It affects so many people. It's not fair, it's not fair on my family to have to then start looking after my kids. (Helen)

The second example demonstrates the role that partners might play in informing runners' decisions about when and how they run:

Sometimes, I've got home late from work, and he'll go, 'You're not going out. It's too dark', because he's concerned, or, 'You have to wear something bright', or, 'Just go around...', or, 'Let me know the route you're going', or something like that. I think there's only once when he's come out to find me (Michelle)

By the assertions that they make, close relations have an impact on runners from outside the trail, but runners also have identities related to those outside of the trail which inform their own thinking. For example, a 'good mother' prioritises her children and should therefore feel guilty about running (Bean and Wimbs 2021; McGannon and McMahon 2022). These relations also inform how the runners assessed their vulnerability and made decisions about where and when to run. They are not able to be just runners but are simultaneously mothers, daughters, and partners, aligning with Lefebvre's assertion that identity, politics, and space are interconnected (van Ingen 2003).

Nevertheless, positive experiences of trail running contrasted with negative experiences elsewhere, for instance road running in built up areas, where many participants had experienced heckling from men in vans: 'windows rolled down, "Alright darling?"' (Charlotte). These encounters with people outside of trail environments also informed participants' decisions to run in trails rather than other locations. Lola suggested that 'people must just get bored and find it fun to beep or yell something out the window at you'. Brockschmidt and Wadey (2021) note that these microaggressions towards runners might be considered permissible – not breaches of a civil code regarding public encounters. In contrast to research on road-running and women who choose to run in more populated parks (Brockschmidt and Wadey 2021; Roper 2016), in our interviews remoteness and darkness were sometimes appealing because the runners would not meet hecklers and harassers:

Ironically, I find it safer which is probably not what you're expecting [...] when there's not a lot of people, I find that safer (Jane)

If you lived in the middle of nowhere and went running on your own, if you're that far away from everybody, then, really, who's going to find you to attack you? (Becky)

The trail experience is formed in part by who is *outside* the boundary and the social relations that have led women to choose remote running locations (Massey 1994).

### *Lived experiences of risky encounters and feelings of guilt*

We have established the social relations and identities produced by, and producing, the trail space within and against a discourse of vulnerability. During the interviews, the runners described past encounters on the trails that were examples of moments that helped to better illustrate what they constituted as being unsafe or harmful to them. During these longer narratives, the runners express their thought processes when they met others in the trail space, and their assessment of them as legitimate users of the space or not. When moments were described, they all related to concerning encounters with lone men. Helen recounted seeing a man wielding a baseball bat in the woods:

Helen: So, yeah, I was in my local woods in the morning and for some reason I was going to go a different way. I've never gone this way before and was just going to go that way. And as I started on this path there was a guy swinging a bat.

Interviewer: What, like a baseball bat or something?

Helen: A baseball bat and he was like this, 'whoomph' [mimics rotating her arm around holding a bat]. And I was like, 'It's a bat, that's a bat'. [...] And I was like, 'Okay, maybe he needs a bat to feel safe walking in the woods'. And I was trying to be nice about [...] I was waiting for the dog to react. The dog did nothing which is also a thing, if the crunch comes to it, he probably wouldn't protect me. He'd hide behind me. So he did nothing. I was like, 'Oh, I don't want this man to ruin my run, why should I be scared?' I just started walking at that point, I was like, 'Shall I just run past him? He looks quite fat, maybe he can't catch me' and then I was like, 'Oh, what if he goes for the dog? What if he hits the dog?' And all this stuff was going through my head. I was like, 'Oh do you know what, don't be so bloody stupid. Running past someone with a bat is putting yourself in danger' and I just ended up taking a left and going off and doing-

Interviewer: Oh, you detoured a bit, did you?

Helen: Yeah, I just went on, but I spent the whole time like this [looks behind herself].

Interviewer: Looking behind you?

Helen: Yeah, just checking. And you're just like, 'Oh, I don't want to be scared, I don't want to feel like that'.

Helen indicates the tensions she feels between concern for her own safety and trying to understand the man's motives for carrying a bat. She questions her instincts and goes through several thoughts before deciding to change her route. The detailed considerations that she undertook before changing direction and avoiding the potential threat demonstrates the ongoing negotiation that runners go through when deciding to stick with or change their planned actions in what they perceive to be a risky situation, informed by previous experiences and her understandings of normative and abnormal behaviour in that space.

In another encounter, Jane recalls a flashing incident:

Jane: I've had one when I was running around Tawny Lake which [has] a lot of people walking there – a guy stopped. He'd gone past me, stopped, and he just had his back – he was just standing there with his back to me and I didn't think anything of it. And I just carried on running, and as I came past him, he had his willy out [...] And I thought he was having a wee, and I said, 'Oh, I'm sorry'. And ran past, and as I got past, I thought, 'That was set up deliberately for me'. [...] Because why would – there was loads of people. You don't need to do that there. It was a path.

Interviewer: No. Oh, gosh. How horrible.

Jane: And it was that stillness, in hindsight now, the man just standing there still, waiting for me to come past. I should have-

Interviewer: How did you feel after? Once you had that moment.

Jane: I felt angry. Because I was annoyed that I said sorry. (Laughter) [...] Because it's always a shock. It always takes you off guard, and you don't react the way you would do if you were talking to someone else. You'd be like, you'd shout at them. You don't, you don't at all.

The second moment details a sexual offence as experienced by a runner. Jane remembers the stillness of the man which illustrates her memory of this incident. She emphasises her initial disbelief, her first response to apologise to him, and subsequent realisation of the intentional nature of the man's actions. Once she realised the situation, she acknowledges that she ignored it and kept on running, she did not shout or scream; she met the moment with silence (Thompson 1994). Like Helen, Jane directs anger at herself for her own response, rather than at the perpetrator. The memory of this encounter and the lack of control in the moment, demonstrates how these encounters impact women at the time and remain present with them afterwards too. Power relations such as these, serve to produce and reproduce these types of spaces as gendered spaces (van Ingen 2003).

Lefebvre's and Nicholson-Smith ([1974] 1991) third moment, spaces of representation, helps us to understand how women live in these spaces. As a direct impact of spatial practice (the material construction of space) and representations of space (the abstract and imaginatively constructed space), women act, think, and feel as they interact and *live* in the space. Women's lived experiences in spaces are informed by their surroundings and their understandings of safety and vulnerability to male violence or harassment in each moment. They feel and react based on what they see and hear in a space, or who they encounter in a space.

Despite past threats, after initially constructing a man as a threat, runners felt a sense of guilt, using language such as 'poor guy . . . he was just walking on the [hills]' (Tasha). As Michelle put it, 'sometimes, I think you are not right to judge in that situation, and I feel bad sometimes to be suspicious, but [there is] also the "what if?" mind as well'. Helen reflected on her narrative about the man wielding a baseball bat:

That guy, he might have been getting bullied and he might have been attacked and he had that bat for safety. Or he might just really like his bat and wanted to take it for a walk, I don't know [...] You just don't know, and you just feel awful for judging him. (Helen)

Others reflected that they had distinctly gendered worries about encounters with others:

I do annoy myself by thinking, 'I shouldn't think that just because they're male'. Like I said earlier, I don't think I'd be as concerned if it was a female and that's really sexist of me (Natalia)

These examples demonstrate how women consider their vulnerability to male harassment when trail running by themselves but feel bad for doing so. It is a complex negotiation between empathy for others and care for themselves. Responses to male violence against women, represented by the '#NotAllMen' social media tag, indicate the difficulties for women in having their concerns about systemic misogyny taken seriously, and how they can be affected by dominant voices criticising women's suspicion of men (Jones et al. 2022). Here, we see identities and material bodies being produced and reproduced as powerful and in control (the men in these experiences) or feeling powerless and lacking control (the women in these experiences); this illustrates the lived experience of socially produced space (Van Ingen 2003).

## Conclusion

Studies have shown how women's running is often diminished by safety concerns in public outdoor spaces (Allen-Collinson 2022; Brockschmidt and Wadey 2021; Kilgour and Parker 2013; Roper 2016;

Wesely and Gaarder 2004). Women's trail running challenges normative assumptions about who should access and have a right to a space (Lincoln 2021); power dynamics are enacted, produced, and resisted in the trail space (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith [1974] 1991). This paper uniquely analyses women's assessments of the lived spaces of the trails (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith [1974] 1991), considering social relations and identity constructions amid discourses of vulnerability. We have explored how the trail space is produced through social relations with human and non-human actors. Our findings demonstrate that the trail is a contested space; at different times, trails are perceived and experienced as safe or risky for women.

During go-along interviews, we have drawn from specific recollections of interactions with suspicious and legitimate trail users as women assess their safety. Our analysis adds to existing understandings of women trail runners' identities (Lincoln 2021; Skilton, McMahon, and Muldoon 2024; Skinner 2015; Teranishi Martinez et al. 2023), where spatially located practices contribute to shaping what it means to be a trail runner in terms of actions and interactions. Women runners' identities and routines are affected by the running spaces women choose, and the meanings and materiality of the spaces. The trail as spatial practice, lived space, and represented space (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith [1974] 1991) is tied to broader associations of women's safety in public space and attempts to maintain ownership of that space. The trail environment can materially and discursively contribute to feelings of safety or vulnerability and hence to the gender regimes of physical activity and leisure spaces (Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2018; Massey 1994; van Ingen 2003).

The runners actively chose trails as desirable and rewarding running spaces. The women's attempts to position themselves as legitimate users of the trail act as resistance to ideas of male domination of both off-road running and rural places (Bean and Wimbs 2021; Lincoln 2021; Skinner 2015).

Few runners in this study had actual experiences of violence or harassment on the trail, marking a difference between these participants and those in studies of urban street harassment (Brockschmidt and Wadey 2021). Despite their experiences, they were in constant negotiation with other people (present or absent) who contributed to their understanding of the trail. The runners aimed to create a positive running environment, in tension with others who actively or passively made it negative. Although resisting normative gender is an individual act, it can have collective consequences in challenging gendered assumptions about physical activity behaviours (Bialeschki 2002; Green and Singleton 2006).

We do not claim the universality of women's experiences. Most of the women in the study were mothers and had a partner at home; they had access (including transport) to areas of the countryside. Spaces are experienced in complex and heterogeneous ways, encouraging research to investigate diverse positionalities in specific social spaces (van Ingen 2003) especially where ethnicity and socio-economic status contribute to the questioning of women's legitimacy in certain places (Ahmed 2017; Green and Singleton 2006).

Currently, concerns about violence, harassment, risk, and safety of women are prominent in government crime reduction campaigns. Women's perspectives and outdoor physical activity experiences should guide relevant organisations that can influence meaningful change. At a time when physical activity and being outdoors are promoted as key contributors to personal wellbeing and public health, it is timely to gain evidence of how the production of spaces and safety negotiations variously affect women's running. Women's perceived inaccessibility and conscious decisions not to use certain places needs to be considered when designing and maintaining inclusive public spaces, as do gender regimes within and around physical activity spaces (Bialeschki 2002; Coen, Rosenberg, and Davidson 2018). Findings also demonstrate that women trail runners who feel concerned about male harassment should not feel alone in relation to these concerns or the decisions they make when running. There is solidarity in knowing that these concerns go beyond an individual concern for safety or feeling of vulnerability in certain spaces. Additionally, a raised public

awareness of how the presence of others may make a woman trail runner feel, could encourage trail users to act in ways that could help women feel safer. For example, avoiding running up behind women with no warning, or moving further away from women runners when passing them on the trails.

Further research on the material and discursive construction of public and leisure spaces and the impact on women's decisions and routines when running, should compare solo and group running and different national/regional cultures. This would aid understanding of the nuances in the interplay between material, discursive, and spatial social practices.

## Disclosure statement

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

## Notes on contributors

**Laura Gubby** is a senior lecturer in the sociology of physical education, physical activity and sport at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. Her research interests primarily relate to the experiences of women and children in physical activity and sport. She values the use of innovative and ethical qualitative research methods which are appropriate to the research environments being investigated.

**J. Hill** is a senior lecturer in physical education and sport sociology at the University of Bedfordshire, UK, where she is also Co-Deputy Director for the Institute of Sport and Physical Activity Research. She researches the impact of the social construction of the body, gender and ethnicity on physical activity and sport engagement; and critical pedagogies/social justice in physical education and higher education, using participatory and creative methods.

## ORCID

Laura Gubby  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8145-4009>

J. Hill  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5107-5043>

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