

Amplify: The coming darkness puts a spotlight on women's safety

DOMINI CLARK

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This is the weekly Amplify newsletter, where you can be inspired and challenged by the voices, opinions and insights of women at The Globe and Mail.

Domini Clark is an editor at The Globe and Mail.

Spooky season officially ended on Halloween, but I would argue that for many women in urban areas, it's just about to begin in earnest.

It's clock-change weekend, which means that, as of Sunday, Hamilton (where I live), will receive around nine hours of daylight for the foreseeable future. On the shortest day of the year, the sun will rise at 7:48 and set at 4:46. That leaves us in the dark the rest of the time – and few things strike terror in a lone woman like a city walk cloaked in blackness.

I moved to Hamilton during the pandemic, and up until recently, I'd say there's nothing I miss about Toronto. But now that I have to go into the office twice a week – a commute that sees me getting home around 8:30 p.m. if I'm lucky – I'm realizing just how empty the streets here are at night in comparison. The walk from the train station takes less than 15 minutes, but much of it is through a commercial area, so the buildings are all shut and it feels rather deserted.

Yes, I explored the area at night before I bought my house; that doesn't mean I have to love every part of it. Also, even women on evening walks in “nice” areas can feel unease. A 2014 Statistics Canada report found that just 38 per cent of women reported feeling very safe when alone in their neighbourhood after dark. So many of us assess strangers, look for escape routes, fake cellphone conversations and grip our keys without a second thought. It's instinctive.

A shocking 31 per cent of women will go so far as to change their routine or avoid certain places if they feel unsafe, Statscan reports. And as uncomfortable as I feel at times as a cis, white woman, I know it's far worse for women who are racialized or transgender (or both).

Let's get one thing clear: This isn't just a problem for individual women. It's one that has repercussions for society as a whole. It stunts our economy, because it can limit jobs women are willing to take. It contributes to global warming, as women who can drive often will rather than walking or using public transit. It also affects our health care system. Consider that a Stanford study that analyzed 68 million days of smartphone data for 717,527 people worldwide found that, on average, women walk fewer steps than men. No doubt safety is a contributing factor.

Many things could be done to make women feel safer at night – No. 1, of course, being that men could stop committing violence against us. But that is wishful thinking, and I do not live in a fantasy land.

In practical terms, what we can do is address one of the fundamental problems of many modern Western cities: They are the product of men, built for men (specifically white ones) who commuted at standard hours, typically by car.

“They designed cities like there would be no other people than men going to work in the morning and coming back in the evening – everything else in between, they kind of had no idea,” Sabina Riss, an architect and lecturer at Vienna University, told The Guardian. (If you need evidence of this, please look at any crosswalk symbol.)

A great place to start on this front is by improving all aspects of public transit, which is more commonly used by women. (In 2016, census data showed that in Toronto 58.5 per cent of the people who commute by public transit are women, while 58.4 per cent of people who commute by car, truck, or van are men.)

Request-stop programs (which allow women travelling at night to get off buses between stops) need to be more common and heavily promoted. Transit shelters need to be better lit, maintained and kept clean. Stations need to be staffed during all operating hours.

A 2020 report out of Dublin found that 55 per cent of women in the city were unwilling to use public transport at night. Interestingly, while the figure was far less for men, it was higher than you might expect, at 35 per cent.

“If you were able to do something for women to improve their sense of safety, it's very likely that the same measures or similar measures would also improve the situation for men,” Léan Doody, who specializes in city planning for global collective Arup, told the BBC. “So, I think this idea of inclusive design is a lever, a tool for actually making things better for the population.”

My commute is an example of how things could be much improved. West Harbour Station, where I disembark from a train, is unstaffed. The front door that opens to the well-lit plaza is no longer in use. To catch a bus, the final leg of my commute, I need to walk almost halfway home to reach the closest stop, even though it's a busy route that could take a quick detour into the station area twice an hour to sync with arriving and departing trains.

Fellow city dweller Janet Hoy voiced similar complaints to The Hamilton Spectator back in July. “If I am coming home late at night alone, I won’t go there as it is not safe ...,” she said. “Metrolinx really needs to hire staff there to make it a safer space for people like me.”

As I walk along the commercial stretch, I try to stay on one side of the road because the other has no streetlights, not even at transit stops. (All the empty parking lots are brilliantly illuminated, mind you.)

This past Wednesday, an unusually thick fog blanketed the city, and as I made my way home in the dark I was a little more spooked than usual; it was even harder to see what was around the corner or up the street. Pity the fog hadn’t rolled in on Halloween, I thought, as the scene had a very Exorcist vibe.

Speaking of spooky tales, in his introduction to a book of ghost stories he compiled in the 1980s, Welsh author Roald Dahl expressed surprise that so many of the best ones were written by women. “What an extraordinary thing,” he wrote, with a little too much sense of wonder. (Perhaps he was a misogynist as well as an anti-Semite.)

But, really, who better to craft scary stories than women, who live much of our lives with some degree of fear, always bracing ourselves for the bogeyman.

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