

Women, walking, and the need for change

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About the research

Many factors affect women's freedom to walk how, when and where they like. Walking is the "[nearest activity to perfect exercise](#)," and promoted as one of the most accessible ways to keep fit –via the 10,000 steps a day goal, for instance. Yet, many women report concerns about walking by night, alone, or in secluded green spaces. The tragic deaths of Sarah Everard, Zara Aleena and Sabina Nessa are only the latest in a long line of women murdered whilst walking alone. Public health discourse does not acknowledge the entrenched historical barriers that affect women and walking. Addressing the challenge of walking for women has policy implications for health, green travel, sustainability, as well as education and gender equality.

This briefing is based on ongoing research undertaken at the University of Bristol. Dr Eleanor Rycroft's research takes a long historical and performance-based view of this challenge in order to think through its contemporary impact on women today. Further evidence is needed to ensure future policy is informed by the lived experience of women. Dr Rycroft welcomes conversations with those working to shape policies and improve women's experiences of walking.

Policy implications

- The West of England Combined Authority has demonstrated a commitment to walking as a form of green travel in their [Transport Plan](#). Gender must form part of the discussion when implementing green travel policies.
- Context and environment matter when it comes to walking and safety. Efforts to advocate for pedestrianisation should draw on the public health benefits but with awareness of differing access to such benefits.
- Local campaigns around transport and safety should draw on qualitative and quantitative data. Stronger evidence will support their goal to make women's equality a reality in Bristol.
- School education should incorporate learning about behaviours/cultures that affect girls' and women's access to walking; in particular, the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education programme for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 should be adapted to consider walking in relation to core topics of health and wellbeing, relationships, and living in the wider world.

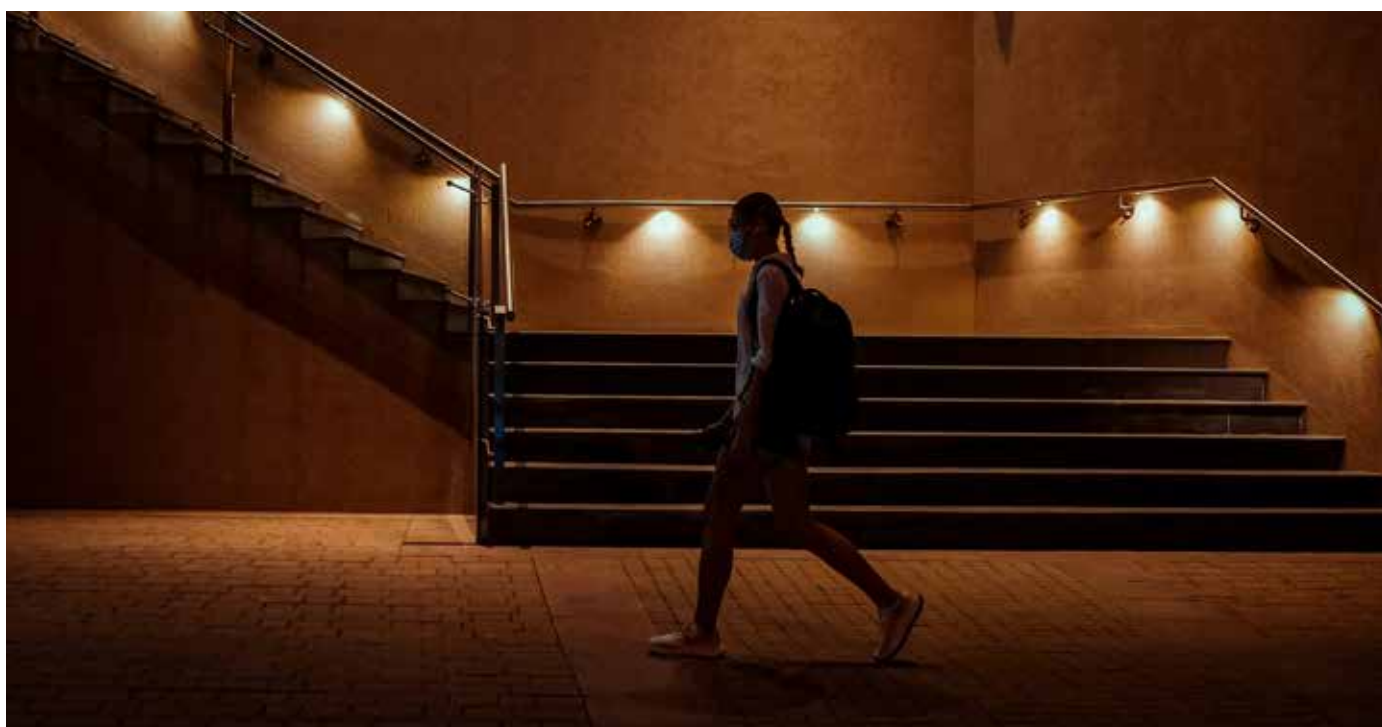


Image by [Jayana Rashintha on Unsplash](#)

Key findings

- The challenge of walking for women is a longstanding historical issue. When walking emerged as a more widely-advocated form of exercise during the Renaissance, society simultaneously clamped down on women's pedestrian freedom. By disentangling the long historical roots of the issue, we can begin to change entrenched ideas around walking and gender.
- The social performance of walking has been a missing element in the cultural conversation. Walking does not take place in a vacuum: its performance is influenced by factors such as gender, race, class, disability and age.
- Performance-based thinking also helps us to think about walking spaces. Judith Green has written that ["walking cannot be understood separately from its environmental context."](#) As a result we cannot separate women's walking from where it happens, and the safety of and access to such spaces.
- Drama workshops facilitated alongside Breathing Fire Theatre revealed that a behavioural change is needed to help women feel safe. An educational intervention with Key Stage 3 (KS3) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) children was identified as one possible way of achieving this. Dr Rycroft and her team are now developing an educational toolkit and workshop to talk about this challenge with KS3 and KS4 pupils. This project has implications for the content of the PSHE curriculum at a national level.
- We need to centre women's voices and experiences when it comes to walking, taking a ground-up rather than a top-down approach. Drama workshops provide a means of listening to women; of affirming and honouring their voices.



Image by [Peter Heymans on Unsplash](#)

Further information

Partners in this research include Breathing Fire Theatre Company, Professor Laura Howe, Dr Verity Jones, Professor Ute Leonards, Dr Jess McCormack, and Professor Sheena Vachhani.

We are piloting the educational workshop in two secondary schools in 2025, with a view to licensing it for use in schools the following year. The workshop uses material from Shakespeare along with children's own lived experiences to enact change.

Contact the researchers

Please contact Eleanor Rycroft to discuss this research further: e.rycroft@bristol.ac.uk

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