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**The Safety Paradox: An Analysis of Female Students' Safety Perceptions at  
Universities in Astana**

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## **Introduction**

Ensuring safety of female students at universities in Kazakhstan has become an increasingly important issue, encouraging authorities to take actions. For the past year, the Ministry of Education and Science has taken significant steps to enhance campus security (Tukusheva, 2024). All universities have been equipped with advanced security technologies that include surveillance cameras, panic buttons, facial recognition devices, turnstiles, and audio systems.

However, despite the implementation of these strategies, cases of harassment at universities in Kazakhstan indicate that they are not yet fully safe spaces for all students. In recent years, several harassment cases, a significant part of them occurring in the capital, have been covered by media outlets raising concerns of both citizens and authorities. In the wake of these events deputy of the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Karakat Abden, reports to receive more than 100 messages from female students about cases of harassment in universities (Kasymova, 2023). According to her, many female students are silent about such facts, fearing publicity and consequences. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Science recognized that harassment is “one of the problems affecting the academic environment and the psychological well-being of students and staff” (Moldagali, 2023). With such cases and facts being stated out loud by authorities, it is important to recognize that at this moment universities in Kazakhstan are likely to be perceived as unsafe by female students.

Findings of relevant studies suggest that female students are more likely to feel the risk of victimization than male students (Carr, 2005). As they attend university to pursue their education, female students are involuntarily exposed to various spaces at different times, where safety is shaped both actively and passively by many factors. Lacking full control over their safety at campuses, female students’ physical and emotional well-being are possibly at risk in the place they must attend to receive an education. Creation of safe spaces must be prioritized by universities to minimize this risk, and the assessment of female students’ perceptions of safety can help in achieving positive learning environments in universities.

The proposed research project is aimed to examine female students’ perceptions of safety and the ways in which they are constructed within the

university campuses in Astana. Recognizing the importance of safe spaces for the well-being of students, the study will focus on students' daily experiences within the spatial boundaries of university campuses, including dormitories. Framed by the understanding that safety is not merely described by the absence of danger, but is about a controlled environment that helps to preserve the health and well-being of individuals, the study will seek to uncover unique ways female students' perceptions are constructed (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, n.d.) Insights gained from the project will help to understand current feelings and experiences female students have and contribute to the creation of safe spaces in universities.

### *Research Questions*

The main research question of this study is: **What are the safety perceptions of female students at universities of Astana?** Additionally, this project also explores supporting questions, such as *What are the factors contributing to the creation of safe spaces for female students?* The goal of these questions is to obtain a comprehensive view of the feelings, experiences, and opinions of female students on campus safety in Astana.

Addressing safety from the physical perspective, this research investigates how factors such as lighting, building design, and social interactions with faculty, staff, and peers shape female students' sense of security. For example, well-lit pathways, secure entry points, and thoughtfully designed spaces can contribute to a safer environment, while poorly maintained infrastructure or secluded areas might foster feelings of vulnerability. From the social perspective, the research aims to explore how various university agents—including their peers, faculty and university staff—shape perceptions of safety among female students.

Additionally, the proposed research considers the importance of female students' own sense of responsibility for their safety, understanding that this can shape how secure they feel on campus. Even with safety measures in place, some students may still feel vulnerable or pressured to take extra precautions to protect themselves. This heightened sense of responsibility may reduce their sense of freedom and shift their focus away from academic pursuits, thus, exploring how female students regulate their own safety is crucial for capturing the full picture of students' experiences.

## Literature Review

### *Safety*

Safety is a complex concept that encompasses the majority of aspects influencing our daily lives. Abraham Maslow (1943) in his hierarchy of needs positioned safety as the second most fundamental human need just above the basic physiological requirements such as food, water, and shelter. According to Maslow, if individuals do not feel safe they will not be able to pursue needs that are higher in order like belonging, esteem or self-actualization. His perspective establishes safety as a prerequisite for growth and learning instead of a mere condition to survive.

Looking at the concept from the traditional perspective, safety is suggested to be a condition when individuals are protected from harm and experience a sense of security and well-being (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, n.d.). However, the conception of safety also extends beyond the physical dimension and includes psychological well-being. Scholars like Zinn (2008) argue that modern understanding of safety should include both objective and subjective risk experiences. He points out that two people can assess the safety of one place differently depending on their social identity, cultural background and history. For example, public spaces at night objectively might not pose danger, but they can still be perceived as dangerous to women, minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals because of their past experiences. Thus, his perspective shifts the perspective of safety from purely rational to a relational and emotional concept that can be both measured and perceived.

Moreover, Zinn (2008) introduces the concept of trust as a factor influencing safety perceptions. He highlights that individuals trusting institutions such as police, schools, and hospitals are more likely to feel safe than those who have historically experienced marginalization or institutional betrayal. This means addressing only objective risks is insufficient, and establishment of safety should also include emotional and cultural dimensions of safety.

Within safety in educational settings, Edmondson (1999) highlights that psychological safety is one of the critical factors needed for learning, inclusion and participation. She introduces the concept of psychological safety in an organizational context and defines it as a shared belief that it is safe to take risks like starting

conversations and admitting their mistakes without feeling threatened. In universities this state of safety means that students can contribute to class, express their thoughts and don't worry that they would be judged. Thus, even if no physical threat exists, according to this definition, students or staff who do not feel heard might experience the space as unsafe.

Similarly, according to Cornell and Mayer (2010), students' perceptions of safety are directly linked to their academic performance, emotional regulation and even relationships with teachers. And conversely, a lack of safety that occurs in the environment of bullying, discrimination and violence can impair students' concentration. Such emotional disruption not only limits students' ability to meet academic expectations, but also contributes to chronic stress and disengagement at school. Cohen et al. (2009) also emphasize that a positive school environment, which is both emotionally and physically safe for students, is among the strongest predictors of student success. They argue that schools must prioritize support for students so that schools are environments where students can thrive. Osher et al. (2010), likewise highlight that students are more likely to succeed in classes where they feel protected, and where teachers actively promote fairness and communication.

Another key point to note is that safety is not only defined by the absence of harm, but also by the absence of the fear of harm or violence. Brady (2005) points this out in her definition that safety is "the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or fear of violence)." She argues that fear, and particularly fear of assault or social judgement, can be as limiting as actual violence and restricts young women from public spaces. To reduce this burden of fearing violence, her work reinforces the idea that the absence of fear is a condition that needs to be intentionally cultivated through inclusive practices.

Public health scholars similarly argue that fear itself is a form of harm (Krug et al, 2002). The fear is recognized as a chronic stressor that can occur in the environment of prolonged structural issues, such as economic instability, racism, or gender inequality. Fear activates the body's stress response system leading to elevated cortisol levels which in turn can result in social and emotional impairments. Individuals might avoid certain spaces, limit their interactions or even decline opportunities because of the pervasive fear of violence. In this sense, fear contributes

to long term negative effects on groups who might already face structural barriers to safety. Therefore, safety must be understood not only as the absence of actual harm, but also as the absence of fear.

### ***Fear of Violence***

Current research on the relationship between women's fear of violence, particularly gender-based violence, and spatial dynamics reveals important insights into how women navigate, experience, and avoid certain environments. A key concept in understanding women's fear of violence in public spaces is spatial exclusion. Koskela (1999) argues that this fear is manifested through spatial behaviors that effectively exclude women from specific environments. Her research demonstrates that women frequently avoid poorly lit streets, isolated areas, and spaces with limited visibility, perceiving these locations as more dangerous. These findings reinforce Koskela's (1999) argument about spatial exclusion by highlighting how women's use and perception of space are shaped by male dominance in public environments. This shifts the understanding of women's fear from a mere reaction to violence to a critical aspect of how space is constructed and experienced within gendered power dynamics.

Pain (1997) similarly argues that women's fear in public spaces is shaped by broader patriarchal structures. This fear, according to the author, is rooted in socio-spatial relations, where the perception of public spaces as dangerous for women serves to reinforce traditional gender roles. Notably, this fear often stems not from direct experiences of violence but from the potential for violence. Pain's research reveals that 64% of women in the UK reported altering their daily routes due to concerns about safety (Pain, 1997). These traditional gender roles, culturally embedded in women, shape their perceptions of danger relative to their gender, prompting them to adjust their behaviors in anticipation of threats that have not yet materialized.

Moreover, the perception of danger in certain spaces does not always correspond with actual crime statistics. As Pain (1997) observes, women's fear of violence is not necessarily correlated with the actual risk of victimization. This fear often extends beyond the immediate threat of physical violence. Instead, subtler forms of harassment, such as catcalling or unwanted attention, act as continual

reminders that women are not fully welcome in public spaces, compelling them to alter their routes and behaviors.

Perceived threats of violence not only modify women's routes but also heighten their mental alertness and precautionary behaviors. The study by Condon, Lieber, and Millochon (2007) on women's fears in France reveals that women's preparedness to navigate certain spaces begins well before they encounter them. The study found that 35% of women reported carrying self-defense tools, avoiding public transportation after dark, and traveling in groups to minimize perceived risks (Condon et al., 2007). Such precautions also lead to the idea that certain areas are deliberately socially constructed as masculine spaces, dominated by men and excluding women (Pain, 1997). This claim is supported by findings that show that 78% of women identify public parks, and parking garages, the most common areas in cities, as spaces they actively avoided due to fears of violence (Valentine, 1989). Koskela (1999) further asserts that these gendered exclusions in the usage of space reinforces the idea that men "own" certain public spaces, while women's presence is limited to areas deemed safe or acceptable by societal standards.

Furthermore, these dynamics are not confined to urban spaces but extend into institutional environments, such as universities, as demonstrated by Orchard's (2023) research. Her study revealed that similar patterns of avoidance and heightened alertness are present among female students in university settings. Orchard (2023) found that many female students completely avoided certain campus spaces, while others altered their behavior to feel safer. The research highlights that university campuses, traditionally seen as safe spaces for learning, can still evoke feelings of fear in female students, disrupting their educational experience.

To sum up, scholars propose two main ideas regarding the relationship between women's fear of violence and space: 1) Women's fears are shaped and influenced by traditional gender roles, and 2) Most urban spaces are deliberately socially constructed to reinforce gendered exclusion and inequality. As these findings resonate with the experiences of women globally, it is likely that female students in Astana experience similar patterns.

*Relevance of the research*

Globally, studies on women's fear of violence have been emphasizing the importance of the topic and revealing meaningful insights related to it. Research shows that women frequently avoid poorly lit areas, isolated spaces, and locations with limited visibility, perceiving these as dangerous (Valentine, 1989). Koskela (1999) and Pain (1997) also argue that fear often excludes women from certain public spaces, shaping their behavior and limiting their freedom. Notably, this fear often occurs not from direct experiences of violence but from the potential for violence. In university settings, similar patterns emerge. Research on campus safety often explores students' perceptions of safety focusing on environmental factors and the effectiveness of institutional security measures. For instance, Orchard (2023) found that female students often alter their routines or avoid specific campus areas to feel safer. This highlights that university campuses, traditionally seen as safe spaces for learning, can still evoke feelings of fear in female students, disrupting their educational experience.

Furthermore, while current research on fear in universities provides valuable insights, it falls short in addressing the psychological and academic consequences of fear for female students. The persistence of fear in universities can undermine the availability of safe spaces, affecting students' experiences in educational settings. Lewis et al. (2015) emphasize that women seek spaces that are not only "safe from" external threats but also "safe to" express themselves freely. Roestone (2014) similarly highlights that safe spaces, due to their non-static nature, must be continually negotiated in terms of inclusivity and exclusivity. Investigating how fears of violence impact students' ability to express themselves becomes critical for constructing truly safe spaces within universities. With this in mind, this study aims to explore how fear of violence manifests in female students' academic engagement and social participation.

In Kazakhstan, research related to female students' safety within educational settings is limited. Despite growing global interest in the topics of gender equality and women's safety, there remains a lack of empirical data in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, which poses certain challenges to giving a research context for the target population of this project. However, while there is limited direct research on women's safety at universities, critical context for understanding female students'

perceptions of safety was covered by scholars in broader studies on gender equality, public safety and harassment.

Research, such as UNDP's (n.d.) report on public's perception of gender equality in Kazakhstan, scholars emphasize that gender based violence and harassment remain prevalent issues in the country, which are underreported due to societal stigma and lack of legal protection. Studies on this matter reveal that 82% of women have acknowledged that harassment is prevalent among women in the country, which suggests serious safety issues (Saduova et al., 2023). Saduova et al. (2023) further argue that current legal measures in Kazakhstan often fail to effectively address harassment due to its subjective nature. Considering this difficulty in defining harassment in legal frameworks, authors advocate for moral interventions, such as developing educational programs aimed at preventing sexual harassment. Similarly, experts from UNDP suggest that harassment, both psychological and sexual harassment, often originates within educational institutions, and therefore must be addressed at this level.

While young female's safety in Kazakhstan still continues to be a pressing matter, scholars note positive trends in gender equality within the education sector. Notably, the percentage of women enrolled in all levels of education surpasses that of men. Specifically, 55.5% of women are enrolled in tertiary education compared to 43.9% of men (Rencz et al., 2020). Although challenges remain in providing equal access to education for girls, these statistics illustrate significant improvement in gender balance in education over the years. Additional findings by Kalyuzhnova and Kambhampati (2007) also suggest that women are encouraged or supported more in their educational pursuits compared to men in Kazakhstan, especially at the tertiary level. They attribute this to the Soviet Union's emphasis on high literacy rates for both genders, a legacy that continues to influence educational policies today (Kalyuzhnova&Kambhampati, 2007). These findings indicate that, unlike in many countries where men are often prioritized in education, women in Kazakhstan are more likely to pursue higher education.

Although studies indicate that currently young females in Kazakhstan are in an empowered position where most of them have greater access to education, the matter of gender equality, particularly in relation to gender based violence remains a significant concern. According to UNDP (n.d.), in the region relevant to this

research, Astana, studies show that the percentage of respondents who tolerate violence against women is significantly lower than in other areas, such as Shymkent. Given that gender stereotypes are prevalent in Kazakhstan and contribute to a lack of awareness regarding the nature of violent behaviors, it is likely that respondents from Astana may have provided answers without fully understanding what constitutes violence.

### *Cultural Context: Uyat and Perceptions of Safety*

A central concept for understanding the gender stereotypes in Kazakhstan is *uyat*, a term that refers to the cultural notion of what is considered shameful behavior. Research by Kudaibergenova (2019) and Kabatova (2022) demonstrates how traditional values reinforced through the cultural concept of *uyat*, place the burden of safety on young women themselves. Author highlights that messages communicated by parents such as “Don’t walk alone” or “Don’t wear your hair loose” place the burden of safety on young women’s behavior, reinforcing the idea that they are accountable for their own protection (Kabatova, 2022). Arystanbek (2020) further argues that these gendered expectations lead to young women being shamed for being subjected to harassment. These findings suggest that the possible factor influencing female students' perception is deeply rooted in societal roots. While the existing research discovers the nature of gendered messages that young women receive, the lack of empirical evidence on how these messages can be portrayed in perceptions of safety indicates a gap that this study is aiming to address.

### *Methodology*

One of the notable limitations of existing studies on women’s fear of violence and space is the lack of depth that quantitative research designs capture. While quantitative methods are valuable for providing representative data and identifying relationships between phenomena, such as fear and space, there is a clear need for approaches that allow female students to share their personal experiences and feelings about safety at universities. To address this, this research will adopt a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews for data collection.

DeVault’s (1990) work emphasizes the effectiveness of qualitative research, particularly interviews, in capturing the nuanced and often overlooked aspects of women’s experiences that may not fit into predefined categories. DeVault argues

that qualitative methods are essential when exploring complex issues like fear, safety, and space, as they allow women to express their experiences more openly and fully. Seidman (2013) reinforces this view, providing a comprehensive guide on conducting interviews as a method in qualitative research. His work covers every stage of the interview process, from selecting the appropriate sample to analyzing the data collected. Seidman's focus on empathetic listening, along with DeVault's insights, will be instrumental in shaping both the research design and the interview guide for this study.

Additionally, Reissman's (1987) contributions on constructing narrative structures in interviews to prevent misunderstandings related to cultural and class differences could further enhance the research design. Considering that the respondents in this project will likely share characteristics such as gender, class, and age with the researcher, there is a possibility that there will not be substantial ground for misunderstandings. However, since we never know beforehand what characteristics our respondents will have, it is better to be prepared and not fully rely on establishing understanding solely based on shared gender.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study draws upon safety as a multidimensional concept framework to analyse female students' perceptions of safety at universities. This framework was chosen because it offers complementary understanding on how safety is perceived, and negotiated in everyday life. It helps to capture the nuances of female students' experiences and guide the interpretation of findings in a way that reflects subjective meanings of safety perceptions.

### *Safety as a multidimensional concept*

First of all, this framework considers **physical safety**, it's the most measurable aspect, which refers to protection from bodily harm, injury and violence. Physical safety is concerned with preventing events such as physical assaults, accidents, and even natural disasters. Because of its tangible nature, physical safety has traditionally been the focus of safety planning, making it measurable through different variables such as incident reports and crime statistics. It is also possible to consider environmental and spatial safety as a part of this dimension as it relates to how physical spaces are designed and perceived. This includes elements such as

lightning, visibility and overall maintenance of public spaces, which can significantly affect how safe individuals feel even if the actual danger is minimal (Nasar & Fisher, 1993; Cozens et al., 2005).

In institutional and educational contexts, physical safety is maintained through visible and tangible mechanisms, such as surveillance cameras, building safety codes, and urban design strategies aimed at preventing crime (Jacobs, 1961; Cozens et al., 2005). Physical safety in such settings is particularly important due to the responsibility schools and universities have in protecting its students. According to Cornell and Mayer (2010), physical safety in schools include secure buildings, the presence of trained staff, anti-violence policies, and emergency response protocols. These measures often constitute the first layer of safety interventions, and are needed to deal with incidents such as physical fights, fire outbreaks. Importantly, physical safety is not sufficient to ensure a fully safe environment. For example, schools that focus solely on physical safety measures and do not balance it with attention to students' emotional and psychological well-being might accidentally create climates of suspicion or fear (e.g., Osher et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, physical safety remains to be a baseline in a conceptual framework of multidimensional safety and will guide this research by focusing on several elements of the dimension. The study will analyze participants' perceptions of safety in relation to design and maintenance of university buildings. Interview questions addressed features like lightning, visibility, and secluded spaces. The research will also investigate how security guards, surveillance cameras foster a sense of safety in students. These elements are especially relevant considering recent investments in improving campus security, which, while intended to improve safety can also have different effects.

Next, this framework also incorporates the dimensions of **psychological and emotional safety**, which are crucial to understanding how individuals internalize feelings of protection and vulnerability. Psychological safety defined by Edmondson (1999) refers to the belief that a person can express themselves openly, take risks, and participate fully in a social environment without fear or punishment. This dimension of safety is fundamental for active learning, collaboration, and personal development. When students feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to contribute ideas and engage in behaviors that are crucial to academic and social

success. And in contrast, the lack of psychological safety can lead to anxiety, self-censorship, especially among marginalized students.

Similar to psychological safety, emotional and mental safety refers to the freedom from fear, distress, and emotional trauma. Sustained fear, whether because of past experiences of violence or systemic discrimination can lead to long term emotional and psychological consequences such as anxiety or depression. Looking at safety from this perspective, a truly safe environment must address not only external risks but also emotional burdens students might carry inside. Thus, together psychological and emotional safety in this framework are considered as subjective components of the concept of multidimensional safety.

In this study, the dimension of psychological and emotional safety will be used to explore how female students experience internal feelings of safety or fear while navigating in their universities. Psychological safety will be examined by studying if students feel free to express themselves, ask questions, or seek help without fear. In addition, emotional and mental safety will be analysed focusing on the presence of fear or stress resulting from students' daily experiences. By studying such often invisible experiences, the analysis of this study aims to uncover to what extent university environments support students' emotional well-being. The findings from this dimension will be crucial in revealing the gaps between institutional safety policies and female students' experiences.

Thirdly, **social and relational safety** is the last component of the framework of multidimensional safety. It refers to the sense of belonging, inclusion, mutual respect and trust that individuals experience within their communities. Unlike physical safety, which is concerned with the absence of harm, and psychological safety, which focuses on internal feelings, social safety centers on the quality of interpersonal interactions and the broader cultural climate. In the context of universities, this includes peer relationships, student-faculty relationships, and the general inclusivity of the campus environment. A university might be free from overt violence, but still have unsafe social conditions, when students face microaggressions or bullying.

Using the dimension of social and relational safety, this study will focus on female students' perceived sense of belonging with the universities. This

dimension recognizes that students' experiences of safety are also shaped by the quality of their relationships and the broader social environment in which they study and live. Therefore, it is important in identifying the subtle forms of harm, such as whether students feel socially supported by peers, heard and acknowledged by faculty and staff. Including social and relational safety in this study, the research will analyse how safety is produced by both relationships and culture.

### *Research Design*

This research project employs qualitative research methods to gather in-depth insights into the safety perceptions of female university students. Considering the research questions of this research, giving participants space for sharing their experiences and thoughts through qualitative research design would be the most effective. Therefore, as a primary research method in-depth interviews are implemented in this study. This method will help to gather the data about participants' experiences, complex feelings and possibly fears.

### *Sample*

The study will focus on three universities in Astana, each representing a different type of institution: public, private, and autonomous. Students from Astana are specifically chosen in accordance with recent cases of harassment in universities of Astana gaining attention and raising concerns about safety of female students there. Furthermore, the exploration of exactly this sample will help us complete a picture of female students' well-being at leading universities located in the capital. Hence, female students aged 18-27, including both undergraduates and graduates, were selected for in-depth interviews to capture a range of perspectives on campus safety.

### *Data collection*

Data was collected through face to face interviews, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. Answering the first research question of this study, participants will be asked about their feelings, experiences, and opinions about their safety on campus. The interviews will explore both general feelings of safety within the university and specific perceptions of which places are considered safe or unsafe. Elaborating further the second research question, participants were asked about

various factors related to their perception of safety. Physical factors were explored in the interviews through questions about infrastructure and institutional measures. Social factors that include interactions with peers and staff, personal responsibility were also examined to understand how interpersonal dynamics affect safety perceptions. Additionally, the questions also addressed the temporal aspects of safety, such as the influence of the time of the day as previous research points out the importance of these factors. Altogether the interview questions are aimed to complete the whole picture about what are the female students' safety perceptions and ways in which they are constructed.

### *Data analysis*

For this study, thematic analysis is utilized to interpret the qualitative data gathered from interviews, focusing on identifying key patterns and themes that reveal how female students perceive safety on campus. Using thematic analysis as a method for analyzing, data will be particularly valuable in capturing the nuanced and varied experiences of students, allowing for a detailed exploration of both common concerns and unique perspectives across different university settings. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis will be done through a six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. At the end of the analysis, this research will have fully developed themes about what are the true perceptions of safety that students have and what are the factors influencing them.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The IREC approval for this research was received on November 22nd, 2024. Participants in this study may face only minimal risks, including potential emotional discomfort when discussing safety experiences. There are no financial, physical or employment related risks, as the study only involves interviews in safe, chosen locations. This research does not mention any sensitive topics that could produce harm for participants. All data will be coded and stored in my personal laptop, and no identifying information will be used in the final report. Participants can skip questions or pause the interview if they feel uncomfortable at any time.

### **Findings**

### ***What are the safety perceptions of female students in universities of Astana?***

The participants of this research conceptualized safety as a multidimensional experience, aligning with how this research framed the concept. Many shared in their answers that physical protection is not enough to fully feel protected from various threats. Rather than describing safety in terms of control or visible security, female students have highlighted the importance of comfort and the absence of fear. For example, Participant 2 described safety as “*when I’m not thinking about safety,*” noting that true safety for her is when it is not even a conscious concern to her. This suggests that environments that can be considered safe allows individuals to not be burdened by self-monitoring or even by thoughts of self-regulation.

Similarly, Participant 5 explained that safety for her is “*It’s when there is nothing to be afraid of,*” noting that safety is also about the absence of fear and not merely about the absence of violence. Such description aligns with public health and feminist frameworks that conceptualize fear as a form of harm itself (Krug et al., 2002; Pain, 1997). Absence of fear of violence is not just a psychological state, but for participants it is an indicator of safety that shows how secure their environment feels to them. As Participant 8 put it, “*I constantly watch out if I feel that something is wrong.*” So, when there is “nothing wrong” and the space is truly safe, female students are not in the state of hyper-awareness and do not feel fear.

This reflects that the fear female students’ might experience is a complex issue, which includes different aspects of their daily lives. Conducted studies on this topic, similarly, argue that perceived safety is often shaped by cultural and social norms rather than objective risk factors (Pain, 1997; Koskela, 1999). However, despite not being aligned to actual safety risks, it is important to recognize that having negative perceptions of safety is still harmful to female students. Thus, the factors contributing to their negative experiences need to be explored and become a subject of discussion.

### **What are the factors contributing to the creation of safe spaces for female students?**

#### *Physical factors*

While most of the participants noted the good qualities of infrastructures of their universities, there are also some factors they pointed out as dangerous. Poor lighting was a common concern for female students. As Participant 5 stated, *“I can’t avoid dark places, but I really wish I could,”* some areas in universities are difficult to avoid. These poorly lit areas include pathways in dormitory halls, halls to lecture cabinets in universities, and parking lots. Several participants expressed anxiety when having to go through certain halls. Participant 9 mentioned, *“Everyday I have to go through that kinda dark hall on the second floor to get to university.”* This comment shows how lighting issues cause certain inconveniences in the lives of female students and needs to be addressed as a source of fear.

Another recurring physical factor was the presence of isolated areas on campus. Even though the spaces are not inherently dangerous, they are still disturbing for female students. Participant 9 shared her feelings that, *“When no one’s around, even normal places start to feel kinda creepy.”* For female students, absence of people in isolated areas can serve as a social cue about the actual risk of the space. This perception of safety linked to the presence of people highlights the importance of “constant surveillance”, the reassurance that others are watching. Unused study rooms, basement rooms in dormitories were mentioned as such “creepy” places where female students might feel uncomfortable. However, the disturbance they caused did not lead to modification of participants’ routines. Instead, participants often chose to tolerate the discomfort since those spaces were not mandatory for them to attend to.

Lastly, participants pointed to the lack of visible security personnel as a contributing factor to their discomfort. While security offices or guards technically exist in universities, where participants study, their visibility was minimal. Participant 7 remarked, *“You know they’re there, somewhere, but, somehow I’ve never actually seen anyone doing rounds”*. Others questioned the effectiveness of security personnel, noting that the presence of guards seemed to them as more symbolic. As Participant 2 shared her concerns, *“It feels like they just sit in one spot. If something happened in a different corner of campus, I don’t know how fast they’d get there.”* These observations show that the visibility of campus security in the form of guards sends strong signals about safety to female students.

*Social factors*

## **Violence awareness and safety perceptions**

The analysis shows that safety perceptions among female students vary across universities based on their awareness of violence. Students from universities, where discussions on violence are more prevalent due to various safety campaigns or public discourse tend to experience heightened fear of victimization. One of the reasons for this is that when students become aware of violent incidents at their university, they start to believe they could be affected as well. Since universities are generally seen as places of higher education with a low risk of danger, students who are unaware of such incidents are less likely to expect them to happen. Respondents mentioned hearing about harassment incidents at universities from other students, which led them to worry about the possibility of becoming victims themselves.

Similarly, studies suggest that women who know victims of sexual assault personally exhibit higher levels of fear (Gordon & Riger, 1989). The analysis of this project indicates that not only personal relationships with victims but also mere awareness of their experiences can heighten fear among women. The heightened fear might also occur from a shift in a perceived vulnerability, as students started viewing themselves as potential targets, rather than bystanders that are not affected by the incidents.

Another reason could be their definition of what is dangerous, which isn't only about immediate physical harm but also includes situations that cause unease feelings, such as unwanted attention or being watched. In contrast, students from universities where the topic of safety rarely occurs as a concern, link their feelings of safety to the physical danger and especially to the more violent forms. A clear pattern emerges from the responses that students who are used to conversations about violence are more aware of its various forms. In everyday settings, they are more perceptive to subtler forms of violence and more likely to recognize them as harmful behavior.

As a result, they experience a higher fear of victimization, being cautious to a wider range of situations. However, it is important to note that increased awareness does not necessarily make them more fearful; rather, it allows them to recognize everyday violence and understand that they may be subjected to it. This aligns with the emotional dimension of safety, where exposure to conversations and knowledge

about violent situations serve as mediators in shaping female students' cognitive interpretations of safety. Participant 3 have mentioned that, "*When I used to think of violence only as rape or beating, I was never expected to get catcalled or something, but now I think it might happen to me especially in crowded places*". This insight sheds light on the factors shaping female students' safety perceptions and the influences affecting them.

### **Institutional response to violence**

The level of institutional response is another factor that seems to have a great influence on female students' feelings of safety. The visible trend emerges of interviewees talking about the importance of the authorities in maintaining safety at university. Especially, what is crucial to them is an existence of clear procedures on reporting violent cases and provision of effective support. If students know that there is an accessible and structured system, which has concrete steps to deal with harmful situations, they will feel more confident about their safety. With such a system, students would not only feel assured that their cases would be taken seriously if something were to happen to them, but perpetrators would also be deterred from committing violent acts, knowing that they would face certain consequences. As Participant 6 shared, "*It's like there are no rules and they (authorities) do whatever they want with reports*". Unfortunately, lack of clear procedures negatively affect students' safety perceptions, making them feel that their rights are not adequately protected.

Besides clear procedures, the institution's ability to handle violent cases significantly impacts female students' perceptions of safety on campus. All students during the interview shared their concerns about the way university administration responds to situations imposing danger to students. According to respondents, authorities in their universities don't punish perpetrators with enough severeness, don't provide adequate support to victims and even insinuate victim-blaming in their responses. From the words of the Participant 1: "*Of course, harassment situations happen here every year! People are not afraid that they will be actually seriously punished.*" Such unreliability of institutional measures produce different feelings in students, including anger, fear, and bitterness. Although not all respondents feel more fearful, they all agree that the campus security could be improved by more effective responses from administrators. Additionally, existing research on this

matter revealed that victims who perceived university' response to sexual misconduct as inadequate were even more emotionally distressed and developed heightened fear (Freyd, 2013).

The importance of institutional response in shaping female students' safety perceptions becomes especially clear when compared to other influencing factors. While infrastructure is recognized as important, students do not associate poor infrastructure with violent situations as strongly as they do with the university's response to incidents. In addition, participants have expressed that their feelings of safety were more associated with social and cultural factors, such as the societal opinion on institutional measures. This aligns with Orchard's (2023) findings that formal security measures are insufficient in ensuring the safe space for students, if the broader narratives around gender and safety are not addressed.

Applying social and relational dimensions of safety, the effectiveness of the institutional measures can be understood in terms of how they are actually institutionally communicated. For instance, the mere presence of security cameras does not guarantee the emergence of a sense of safety among students, if students do not perceive them as efficiently working security measures. This is seen from how respondents reported physical security measures as surveillance cameras to be so embedded to their feelings about safety, that they do not even pay attention to them. Hence, there will not be any positive effect from institutional responses, if they are not socially internalized to the point where female students are confident in university's ability to protect their rights.

### **Institutional segregation**

There is a particular trend that can be noticed between participants from different universities. All three universities were found to foster a sense of belonging at three different levels. Students who feel a strong sense of university community are more cautious around outsiders, who visit the campus but are not part of it. This fear of outsiders is mainly based on the trust for other students', staff's, professors' moral values rather than on certain university regulations under which all of them operate. Thus, the concern is not just that outsiders might escape punishment for harming a student, but rather the belief that they are more likely to do so because they do not share the same values.

Several respondents gave an example of them leaving their valuable belongings at any place inside the campus because of the trust they have for the internal to the community. Perceptions of safety, in this case, are not only about certain codes of conduct, but also about collective responsibility and shared unwritten norms. However, since this collective responsibility is applied only to the community inside the university, participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable and even unsettled while being outside of the campus. As Participant 2 noted, “Lately, when there are a lot of random people (outsiders) here, I don’t even want to go to the main building ”. Therefore, it is possible to say that their feelings of safety is tightly associated with the sense of predictability fostered by the communal trust, which when diminished, leads to unpleasant experiences of heightened fear.

Related findings were discovered by a study exploring students' perceptions of on-campus safety. It was revealed that female students viewed outsiders as potential threats, which led to the increased feeling of vulnerability (Roberts, 2023). This research has also discovered that the strong sense of trust in a community can lead to psychological divisions, where female students' safety is dependent on the familiar environment, while spaces outside of the community's usual presence are deemed to be potentially dangerous. This trust is a manifestation of a heightened sense of safety, which is

## **Discussion**

One of the central findings of this research is the significant role harassment plays in shaping safety perceptions of safety on university campuses in Astana. Participants expressed a clear awareness that harassment is a common, ongoing threat in their universities. However, despite the widespread recognition of harassment as an issue, there is a troubling absence of effective institutional actions both preventative and responsive. Such a gap between students’ awareness and institutional accountability has profound implications for how female students interpret spaces in their universities. It is aligned with global patterns of institutional neglect highlighted in a study by Naylor (2021), who argues that higher education institutions frequently fail to respond adequately to gender-based harassment.

The lack of formal legislation addressing harassment in Kazakhstan places the burden of action in situations happening within universities on university

administration. As it stands, there is no comprehensive framework that defines harassment in higher education settings. The absence of legal framework and the desire to maintain their reputation allows institutions to treat incidents informally or completely ignore them. Participants described an environment where harassment is acknowledged but not addressed, so that harm feels normalized and even unchallenged. Similar, campus environments have been described by Ahmed (2017), who describes how universities often protect their reputations over their students perpetuating what she calls “non-performative” responses to complaints.

Such context directly undermines female students’ sense of safety. As findings of the project show, safety for female students is about absence of fear of violence and the freedom from having to constantly watch-out. These results are consistent with Pain’s (1997) findings that fear of violence is a significant factor influencing women’s daily lives. Harassment, when unaddressed forces female students feel fearful in universities. It reshapes their relationship with space, routes, and even community trust. As Participant 3 noted, becoming aware of subtle forms of harassment, such as catcalling or being watched, expanded her definition of vulnerability. In this way, awareness without action does not empower students, it heightens their fear even more, reinforcing the belief that they are ultimately responsible for their own protection.

The responsibility of addressing harassment and fear it causes in female students currently lies with university administration. Institutional responses must go beyond surface level campaigns. As discussed in the literature, visible security structures are often perceived as inefficient when they are not paired with clear, consistent actions (Fisher & Sloan, 2013). Participants repeatedly expressed frustration with the absence of consequences for perpetrators. When institutions fail to communicate their procedures or handle cases seriously, students perceive this as a sign that their well-being is not a priority. Therefore, universities in Astana must recognize that addressing harassment is not optional, but is a must to create safe, inclusive and functional learning environments. Universities have both the opportunity to and the responsibility to implement transparent systems, offer real support to victims, and encourage open dialogue. As this research demonstrates, failing to do so compels female students to internalize responsibility for their own protection and it is something that no student should carry on themselves.

## **Conclusion**

This research highlights the multifaceted nature of the safety perceptions of female students. There are many factors besides physical, such as social and cultural factors that affect how safety is experienced in universities. Hence, looking at the intersections of these aspects, there are several insights that can be drawn about how female students experience safety in their universities. One of such insights is the role of institutional shifts in fostering a greater sense of security. Since universities in Kazakhstan have made great improvements in improving these physical factors, female students' perceptions are affected more by social factors. Therefore, universities that have enhanced their physical security, should further focus on improving institutional accountability, support systems and ensure transparent procedures.

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