Understanding Women's Perception and Experience of Safety in Downtown Kuala Lumpur

by Lamija Perenda, Aishwariya Krishna Kumar, & Uta Dietrich

thinkCITY

thinkCITY

Content

Abstract

Malaysian cities do not support full and active participation of women in the public sphere, particularly as female perspectives and needs remain unaccounted for in the design and planning of urban space and infrastructure. Key barriers to women's inclusion are safety (real and perceived), with Downtown Kuala Lumpur being no exception. Recognising this, Think City's Safe Communities programme engages women as a key target group in formulating better strategies towards a safer city for all.

This study focuses on women's perception and lived experience of safety in Downtown Kuala Lumpur. It highlights and validates safety concerns and provides recommendations and inputs on design and programming interventions, from women's perspectives.

The study includes 16 participants, representing professionals, migrants, and youths from Downtown Kuala Lumpur. The study is a mixed-methods study with surveys, focus groups, site visits, and participatory design workshops to gain deeper understanding of emerging issues and co-create solutions. Results show that there is a low sense of safety among participants relating to people and community, maintenance, and design and infrastructure in Downtown Kuala Lumpur. Recommendations call for improvements to maintenance, cleanliness, design, and infrastructure, and especially for more active streets with a greater diversity of people throughout the day.

Participants exploring Downtown KL. (Source: Think City)

Introduction
1.1   Women's Safety in Public Space

One definition of safety imagines a place where daily activities can take place without fear, risk of harm, or injury (Pan Pacific Safe Communities Network, 2018). So, it follows that the simplest test of safety within a city would be to see if everyone could walk freely and safely on the streets, alone, at any time of the day. Unfortunately, this is not possible in many urban spaces, particularly for women.

History of women in public space

Historically, many urban public spaces were dominated by men for decision making, governance, commerce, and other activities. Meanwhile the private space within the borders of the home was often reserved for women and 'domestic' activities (Ekinsmyth, 2002) Mazey & Lee, 1983). Thus, many existing urban public spaces were built gendered, with little consideration for female perspectives and experiences (Laurie, et al., 2000).

As more women became active users of public space, challenges linked to gendered spaces (particularly safety), cultural norms, and economic factors interplayed, affecting women's choices related to work, mobility, recreation, and overall participation in public life (Sur, 2014). Where generally all citizens are given the same freedom to occupy the streets, the reality is that women must overcome greater barriers to enjoy the same public space (Paxson & Franck, 1989).

In a study in KL, 27.6% of female respondents perceived the public space negatively, compared to only 9.3% of male respondents.

Women's fear for safety in public space

Studies consistently find that women's use of urban public spaces is limited by fears for safety, more so than men's, resulting in very different experiences (Pain, 1997). In the United Kingdom, a study found that women are less likely to walk without purpose and are more likely to be concerned about safety, while men are less influenced by concerns related to safety (Foster, et al., 2004). Meanwhile in the US, more than half of women respondents of a survey experienced fear walking around their neighbourhood at night, whereas less than a quarter of male respondents felt the same (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). These gendered differences in experiencing public spaces were also found in a Kuala Lumpur study, with 12.1% female respondents indicating a 'very negative' perception of safety compared to none from male respondents, and 15.5% female respondents indicating 'negative' perception of safety as compared to 9.3% of male respondents (Hidayati, et al., 2020).

Women's lived experiences in public space

These perceptions and fears of women are backed by lived experiences. A survey conducted by ENGENDER Consultancy, SafeCity, and Sisterhood Alliance in August 2020 found that 58.6% of respondents experienced sexual harassment in Malaysian public spaces (80% of respondents were women) (ENGENDER Consultancy, Sisterhood Alliance, 2020). More importantly, 70.4% of these cases happened during the day, and took place in public transport, walkways, common areas of buildings, and other public areas.

In London, a 2012 poll found that 43% of young women experienced harassment on the streets within the past year, while in France, a study in 2013 found 1 in 4 women experienced fear when walking the streets and 1 in 5 experienced verbal harassment. Polls and surveys around the world return similar results, resulting in Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces being called an under-recognised global pandemic by UN Women in 2014 (UN WOMEN, 2014).

Woman waiting to head home after work, Downtown KL. (Source: Cheena Chopra)

Women's response to real and perceived threats in public space

As a result of feeling unsafe in public spaces, women have adopted certain behaviours as a defensive measure, captured in one Indian study (Sur, 2014):

- Women engage in a constant 'negotiation of risk', enduring a greater mental burden to safeguard safety when out and about. Each decision is weighed by its risk factors.

- Women engage in systemic self-regulation, imposing constraints on movement so internalised it is sometimes indiscernible to individuals as an added burden.

- The same study describes this as a non-acknowledgment of fear, such that: 'I am fine if I act sensibly / appropriately'.

- As actions, these 'sensible actions' may translate as follows, for example – being out with a purpose (to buy something, to see someone, to go somewhere), or choosing the longest route or more expensive transportation option to ensure safety.

- Women tend to display a lack of agency, relying on the presence of other people (colleagues, family member, etc) for safety and security within the public space

- More importantly, this perception of risk is not necessarily linked to actual experience of violence, but its possibility- a significant stressor.

Laws/legislation

In terms of legal recourse to protect women, there is a lack of strong legislation on sexual harassment globally (UN WOMEN, 2014). This is also true in Malaysia, where the Sexual Harassment Bill has yet to be tabled, even though 20 years has passed since the effort was first initiated (The Sun Daily, 2021).

Consequence and importance

Barriers to public space use need to be addressed because they affect women's quality of life; by widening inequalities, limiting opportunities, and ultimately impinging on democratic principles and basic human rights.

Consequences of this are important not just for women, but for a city and nation's growth and development. A lack of safety that prevents enjoyment of free movement and comfort in public space to all equally is a form of social exclusion, detrimental to the creation of an inclusive city (UNHabitat, Women in Cities International, SIDA, Huairou Commission, & CISCSA, 2008).

The United Nations too has recognised women's right to the city through two crucial Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In both 'SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', and 'SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, resilient, and sustainable' the UN supports the right for all, especially women, to feel safe and secure outside the home, as a basic right (UN WOMEN, 2016).

In 2012, 43% of young women polled in London experienced street harassment within the past year.

1.2 Perceived Safety and Urban Public Spaces

Defining public space and perceived safety

The term public space can be widely used for several types of spaces such as parks, plazas, streets and waterfronts as well as community centers, market places, libraries and religious buildings (Shehayeb, 2008). The discussion in this study focuses on the general spaces between buildings, mainly focusing on the streets of Downtown KL.

In relation to this, the term safety can also have different implications. The term can be divided into *actual safety* (sometimes referred to as security) and *perceived safety* (Halbur, 2010) (Litzén, 2006). The former is the actual risk of being a victim of crime and does not have an emotional dimension (Litzén, 2006). Meanwhile, the latter is an individual's experience of that risk (sometimes described as *fear of crime*) (Uittenbogaard, et al., 2018). Fear of crime is considered to be more widespread than actual crime, and affects people's behavior and decision to use or avoid public spaces (Shehayeb, 2008). A safety perception survey conducted by Think City in 2018 confirms that this difference exists in Downtown KL. Of the 552 people surveyed, 68% believed there was at least one key crime and safety issue in the area. However, 60% of respondents had not actually experienced any issues themselves (Think City, 2018).

In this study, the term *perceived safety* will be used to describe participants' subjective fear of crime and disorder.

Theories of perceived safety in urban public spaces

There are several studies that discuss safety issues in public spaces that relate to both *environmental* and *social* factors. Environmental factors include physical and external aspects of public space such as urban planning and design. Social factors include psychological and internal aspects such as previous experiences and socio-cultural norms. Both are needed to understand perceived safety in public spaces because spatial configurations in combination with socio-cultural constructs influence perceived safety (Hidayati, et al., 2020).

The Think City safety perception survey of Downtown KL confirms that both environmental and social factors contribute to perceptions of safety in the area. For example, there was a marked difference between day and night perception of safety, from 84% of respondents agreeing it was safe during the day down to 25% at night (Think City, 2018). This difference was also shown in a safety audit of the area conducted in 2018 (Think City, 2018), which showed a decrease in safety score in the area at night. Factors accounted for include perceptions on maintenance and cleanliness, lighting, connectivity, and types of people and activities. The Think City studies did not investigate gendered differences, but many other studies have.
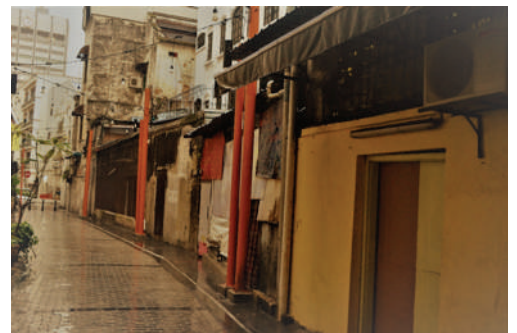
Laneways in Downtown KL, after 7pm. (Source: Cheena Chopra)

A consolidated list of factors that specifically affect women was compiled in the paper Women's Safety and Public Space: Lessons from the Sabarmati Riverfront, India (Mahadevia & Lathia, 2019). The factors, from various sources such as the United Nations and Jagori, hold true for both developing and developed countries, representing the universal experience of women in relation to safety in public spaces.

- **Lighting:** Dark, poorly lit areas, especially early in the morning or late in the evening cause anxiety, and lead to an increase in fear of violence. Dark street corners, car parks and entry or exit points are specifically mentioned. Women surveyed are willing to change or take longer routes to avoid these spots. In Delhi, safety audits show women felt unsafe in carparks due to poor lighting and low visibility of entryways and exits.

- **Quality of Public Space:** Maintenance is key. Broken pathways, potholes, overgrown shrubs blocking lighting, and cleanliness generate discomfort and fear of 'violence, accidents and health issues' in women. On the other hand, properly maintained, clean spaces make women feel safe.

- **Openness, Sightlines, Supervision:** Being seen and heard in public space makes women feel safer. This also means being able to call for help and have someone around when trouble is near. Having diverse groups of people like 'families' and 'older adults' in the space also contributes to women feeling more secure.

- **Empty/Dilapidated Buildings or areas:** Streets with empty, dilapidated buildings /plots, and being hemmed in by large blank walls trigger women's fear. The association that groups of men engaging in illicit activities in these spaces as well as the fear of not being able to get help if something happens creates this fear in women.

- **Presence of familiar people/shops /vendors:** People, known vendors and shop operators increase informal surveillance in a space, leading to women feeling more secure. Their presence also ensures continuous activity throughout the day.

Women want bright, open, clean, and active spaces filled with people they do not fear.

- **Presence of functioning police booths and active surveillance:** Formal patrols, CCTVs, and proximity to emergency services like police booths help reassure women that help is near if needed.

- **Male dominated spaces:** Presence of large groups of men are intimidating and avoided by women. The presence of other women, and men with families make women feel safer.

The points above are validated further by a study done in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta (Hidayati, et al., 2020) as well which found that women feared empty streets, associating negative perceptions of safety to the absence of other pedestrians. And again, by data collected through the Safetipin app data in Nairobi and Bogota which showed that women are 29 times more likely to feel safe if the public space is brightly lit, compared to when it is poorly lit (Leao, et al., 2018). The same study shows women are 500 times less likely to feel safe if there are no people around. Similarly, another study noted that the presence of people and activities throughout the day influences a woman's degree of safety and security, particularly when not familiar with an area (Abdul Rahman, et al., 2019).

Naturally, some factors are of greater importance to women. In one study on urban laneway interventions, environmental interventions like improving cleanliness did little to help women feel safe. However, interventions that focused on increasing space use and social interactions helped improve perceived safety for both men and women (Jiang, et al., 2017).

These studies confirm that both environmental and social factors need to be addressed to improve women's perceived safety in public spaces. Overall, a common, and very clear theme emerges – women want bright, open, clean, and active spaces filled with people they do not fear.

1.3   Safe Communities Program

The real and practical implications of safety were observed firsthand by Think City in efforts to rejuvenate Downtown KL.

In **2017**, Think City began exploring a **Safe City** programme (later called **Safe Communities** to stress the people centric focus), as part of a larger effort to revitalise Downtown KL. The initiation of this programme came with the realisation that the success of Think City's activities and projects in Downtown KL such as physical façade and public realm upgrades, community building, space activation and placemaking hinged on core underlying factors like safety and perception of safety, cleanliness, inclusivity and community resilience.

The Safe Communities programme aimed to identify and address real and perceived safety issues in Downtown KL, using an inclusive and community-driven approach. Four target groups were identified through surveys, workshops, and other feedback. These include

1) General Community,
2) Migrant Communities,
3) **Women and Girls**,
4) Individuals experiencing homelessness.

A specific set of actions and strategies were devised for each group. The aim for the 'Women and Girls' target group was to make Downtown KL more female friendly. Early efforts are focusing on data gathering and understanding women's perceptions in the area.

1.4   Aim of the Project

This study, conducted in 2019, aims to build a greater understanding of and find new insights in planning for a safer city centre in Kuala Lumpur with women's active participation and co-production in mind.

The study explores the associations linked to women's perception of safety in the urban public spaces of Downtown KL. To fully understand both environmental and social reasons behind women's experiences, the study includes women's narratives and observations derived using a participatory approach, focusing on those who work, live, or study in the area. This study does not examine actual reported incidents of crime or related data.

Focus group workshop set-up.
(Source: Think City)

Case Studies

The study also looked at several local and global initiatives on safety for women, as case studies.

- **Subang Jaya City Council - Women-friendly cities plan:** Subang Jaya, a city in Malaysia is aiming to be a 'smart, safe, healthy, green, women-friendly city by 2030'. Subang Jaya City Council, headed by Mayor Noraini Roslan, released its action plan in early 2020 and will begin implementation in phases. The plan is anchored on four core values - equality, inclusion, empowerment, and empathy. It also has four strategies focusing on improvements to 1) a healthy lifestyle, 2) socio-economic conditions, 3) Safe City, and 4) infrastructure. In all four strategies, women's lived experiences and feedback are a key consideration. Examples of proposed interventions include providing spaces for women to breastfeed, supporting women entrepreneurs, addressing sexual harassment in public spaces and more (Majlis Bandaraya Subang Jaya , 2019).

Women-friendly cities planning process. (Source: Corporate and Strategic Management Department, Subang Jaya City Council (MBSJ)).

- **Safetipin - A data-driven approach:** An organisation helping to improve safety for all groups, but especially women in cities around the world. Based in New Delhi, India, Safetipin employs a data-driven methodology to build empirical evidence for research and interventions in cities like Bogota, Bhopal, Hanoi and Jakarta. Safetipin collects and analyses this information through its three mobile apps: MySafetipin (available for download on the app store), Safetipin Nite, and Safetipin Site. Through the MySafetipin app also, users can contribute to safety scores in their areas through a self-audit exercise. The information collected is analysed, synthesised, and presented to key stakeholders (including NGOs, local governments and other organisations) to form the basis of improvements (Safetipin, 2020).
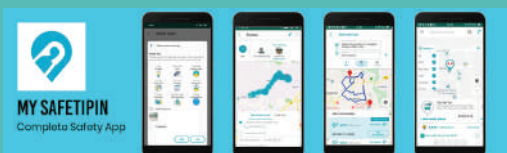
My Safetipin App features (Source: Safetipin on Google Play Store).

- **Universiti Malaya - Barriers to Women's Mobility study:** A study on women's mobility was undertaken by University Malaya and WEMOBILE in 2018, to understand barriers to women's mobility in Malaysia. A wide group of stakeholders were consulted, and the report also received the support of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. While primarily focused on public transport conditions, the study also outlines the dual burden of women (having to do both household chores and maintain a full time job), poor infrastructure hindering the walking experience, and a lack of data to provide strong evidence of the experiences and needs of women in getting around the city (Universiti Malaya, 2019).

Woman on public transport in Malaysia.

- **Vienna, Austria - Gender mainstreaming in action:** Vienna has led the world with 'gender mainstreaming' policies in city planning since 1992, quite simply considering and prioritising women's needs as they moved around the city. Since then, Vienna has started at least 60 gender-sensitive projects and assessed 1000 others. Some interesting revelations from the movement was that around two-thirds of car trips were made by men and the same number of trips were made on foot by women – proving that men and women travelled differently. Changes since then included the redesign of parks to accommodate women and girls, housing designed by female architects, and wider sidewalks and improved safety features. (Hunt, 2019)

Integration of more seating encourages girls to spend more time in parks (Source: City of Vienna, The Guardian).

Methodology
2.1   Participant and Site Selection

Participants were recruited using several methods to ensure balanced representation:
- A general call on Think City's social media
- Distribution of flyers and posters around the study area
- Targeted emails to key institutions and community leaders

Participants were promised a 'token of appreciation' for their time, which was later revealed to be a participation payment of RM100. Participants were divided into three focus groups representing (1) working Malaysian professionals, (2) migrant women, and (3) Malaysian youths.

Historic Downtown KL was selected as the study site, to inform our existing Safe Communities programme in the area.
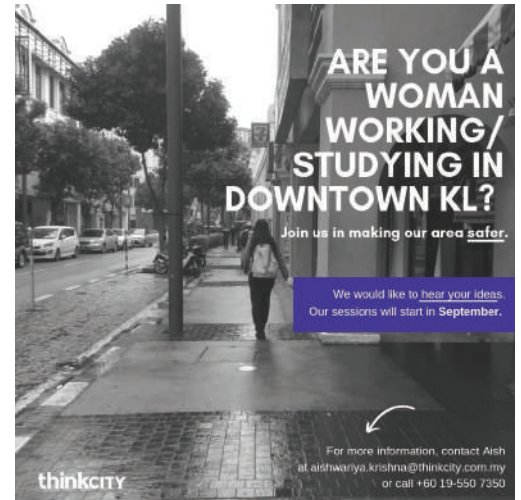
Participant recruitment poster. (Source: Think City)

2.2   Method

The study applied a mixed methods approach across three sessions:
- **Survey:** Administered in the beginning of session 1 to understand participants' perspectives on safety.
- **Initial discussion:** Discussion in small groups to deep-dive into key topics.
- **City walk:** An observational walk to gain an understanding of the area.
- **Workshop:** A final workshop held in small groups to get insights and discuss findings from the walk. Divided into two meetings.

G1: Survey + Initial Discussion →	G1: City-walk 1 →	G1: Workshop
G2: Survey + Initial Discussion →	G1: City-walk 2	G2+G3: Workshop
G3: Survey + Initial Discussion →	G1: City-walk 3	
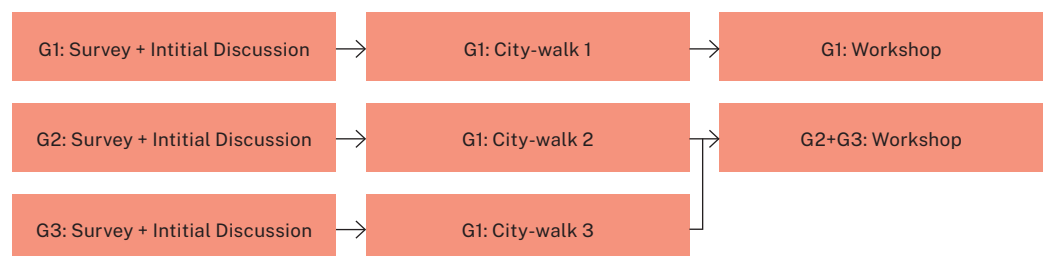
Figure 1: Components of study.

The mixture of small group discussions, large group discussion, and individual feedback allowed the participants to express themselves more freely.

It was important to create a relaxed environment where the participants felt comfortable talking and sharing their experiences. Each meeting was 2 hours long and started with a casual dinner. The meetings were from 6pm-8pm to accommodate for participants who had other obligations during the day.

City-walks were conducted after 7pm. The time was chosen as it was most convenient, and to experience the area after sunset.

2.2.1
Session 1: Survey and initial discussion

The aim for the first session was to get a general idea of the participants' experience of safety in the targeted area. The session started with a brief introduction about the project and an individual survey. In the survey the participants answered questions about their perception of safety in the area. The survey was derived from the Downtown KL Safety Perception Survey conducted in 2017. The participants were then divided into smaller groups with one facilitator for each group leading the discussions and taking notes.

Survey
The participants were asked to fill out a safety perception survey on Downtown KL (Appendix 1) at the beginning of the first session, to gauge their initial perspectives. The survey contained 17 questions, a mixture of multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions, to understand perception and lived experience related to safety in the area. Overview of findings are presented in the results section.

Discussion
The questions formulated and asked were:

1. **What does safety mean to you?**
2. **Do you think that this area is safe for women?**
   a. Do you use these amenities and facilities, or do you just move through them?
   b. Do you feel comfortable using existing amenities e.g. seating/public furniture?
   c. Are there any personal experiences you would like to share?
3. **Do you take any precautions when moving around in Downtown KL?**
   Eg. choosing specific routes, carrying pepper spray etc..
   a. Are there certain times when you choose to travel?
   b. Do you choose not to take certain public transport options out of fear for your safety?
   c. Do you wear or carry with you certain items to help increase your safety?
   d. What are the things you avoid doing because of not feeling safe?
   e. Do you know where the closest police station is located?
4. **Who is responsible for women's safety in public space?**
   a. How does the community contribute to the safety of the place?

Group 1:
9 participants divided into 3 groups with 1 facilitator each.

Group 2:
3 participants with 2 facilitators.

Group 3:
4 participants with 2 facilitators.

Each question was discussed for 10 minutes in the smaller groups and later discussed in a large group discussion. The group discussion was recorded, and notes were taken by the facilitator.

Group 3 was additionally given two marker pens of different colors and asked to mark safe and unsafe routes they personally used on the map. The maps were then collected and used when creating the route for the walk in the Petaling Street area.

2.2.2
Session 2: City walk

The three city walk routes covered areas familiar to participants and aimed to get participants to jointly experience the area, after 7pm at night.

On the walk, participants had clipboards with a map of the route and a reflection paper to write notes. Participants were asked to take pictures using their phones of things and places they liked or did not like, and that made them feel safe or unsafe.

The walk was planned to take 1 hour with a stop in the middle for a reflection of the walk. The questions that were asked by the facilitators were:
• What did the participants think of the walk so far?
• Was there anything they saw/experienced that they wanted to share with the group?

After the walk, the participants were asked to send 10-15 pictures that they had taken and that they found most important. The pictures were printed to be used in session 3.

Group 1:
Medan Pasar area, 5 participants, 3 facilitators, 1 photographer.

Group 2:
Masjid Jamek area, 4 participants, 2 facilitators.

Group 3:
Petaling Street area, 4 participants, 2 facilitators, 1 photographer.

Maps are shown in Appendix 2.

Participants on a city-walk. (Source: Think City)

2.2.3
Session 3: Workshop

The aim of the workshop was to create a better understanding of the experiences and associations that the participants had during the city walk.

During the workshop, participants were each given their printed pictures and were asked to choose five images that they thought were most significant. It could be pictures that made them feel both safe and unsafe, and could represent a specific place, situation or feeling. They were given a few minutes alone to do so. They were then asked to describe why they chose each picture and rate the picture from 1 to 10, where 1 meant 'I would not go there' and 10 meant 'I would go there at any time'. They were then asked to describe or sketch improvements on the picture – to show how the picture could attain a 10.
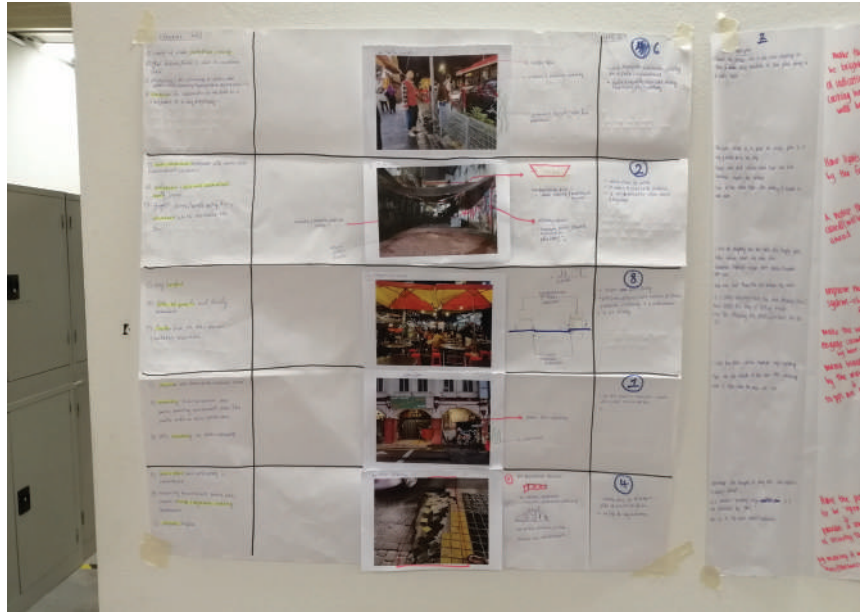
Example of participants' picture descriptions. (Source: Think City)

After the individual assignments, participants were asked to present their picture choices and top 3 suggested solutions with the group. The solutions mentioned during the presentations were noted down on a board. The participants were then given 3-5 stickers (depending on the size of the group) to stick on the solutions that they consider most important. The exercise was followed by a group discussion where participants were asked what could be done to implement the solutions in the short-term and long-term.

Group 1:
5 participants, 3 facilitators

Group 2:
5 participants, 2 facilitators.

Workshop sessions. (Source: Think City)

2.3 Data Analysis

Survey

The survey analysis provides basic descriptive data on participants' demographics and broad opinions on safety in the area. Only frequencies are reported.

Sessions

The data collected from the sessions are analysed through a thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method uses a six-phase approach towards analysing the data, starting with

1) familiarisation of the data, followed by
2) generating initial codes,
3) searching for themes,
4) reviewing potential themes,
5) defining and naming themes, and finally
6) writing the results.

The results are compiled in a table showing the number of positive and negative associations for each theme followed by a description of each theme with examples of analysed pictures which are presented in the result section.

WORKSHOP RESULTS			ANALYSIS		
Picture description	Score	Reason for given score	Codes/Analysed statements	Association and analysis	Theme
I liked the alleyway but the trash (especially the empty glass bottles) weren't ideal to walk here. My assumptions from this would be that I might meet addicts or homeless people here. The smell was bad from the water and from the trash. It is a pretty walkway but the smell and the trash around creates this sense of feeling unsafe. I couldn't see the exit of the alleyway because of the way it was structured.	2	Would avoid this place because I was unsure about what would be at the end of the walkway, feels unsanitary, smells bad.	Trash, feels unsanitary	Negative association because of bad maintenance	Maintenance
			My assumptions from this would be that I might meet addicts or homeless people here	Negative association because of crowd type	People and community
			The smell was bad from the water and from the trash	Negative association because of bad sensory experience, smell	Sensory experience
			I couldn't see the exit of the alleyway because of the way it was structured.	Negative association because of the design of the space	Urban design and infrastructure
I felt quite unsafe as its quite an empty place in a busy pocket in the city. Hanging wires and electric boxes that has been vandalised makes me uneasy. Even with the present street light I felt uneasy and wanted to walk quickly.	4.5	Worried for my physical safety (rain + hanging wires), empty frontage gives me a sense of feeling unsafe, strong lighting focused on certain areas makes the rest of the place look dim.	I felt quite unsafe as its quite an empty place in a busy pocket in the city	Negative association because of lack of people	People and community
			Hanging wires and electric boxes that has been vandalised makes me uneasy, worried about physicas safety	Negative association because of lack of maintenance	Maintenance
			Empty frontage gives me a sense of feeling unsafe	Negative association because of lack of active street	Attractions
			Strong lighting focused on certain areas makes the rest of the place look dim	Negative association because of badly designed lightning	Urban design and infrastructure
Colourful mural next to eatery open at night makes me feel safe.	10	Gave a 10 because I feel safe and would visit this place regularly on my own as it is brightly lit, has a crowd and attractive features (famous noodles and mural).	Colourful mural next to eatery open at night, attractive features	Positive association because of art and active street life	Attractions
			Brightly lit	Positive association because of well lit space	Urban design and infrastructure
			Has a crowd	Positive association because of large crowd size	People and community

Table 1: Example of analysis method.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the results are presented and discussed for each method.

3.1 Demographics

16 female participants were recruited, with 10 completing all sessions. Characteristics:

- 13 Malaysian women, 3 non-Malaysian women
- Aged between 19-41 years old, with seven aged between 26-30
- At least 10 employed in the professional sector, 4 in services, 1 in administration

Participants were divided into three distinct groups for sessions:

- Malaysians/ working
- Malaysians/ students/ living and working part time in the area
- Migrant women/ working

3.2 Survey

These are the broad findings from the survey administered at the beginning of Session 1.

PERCEPTION OF DOWNTOWN KL

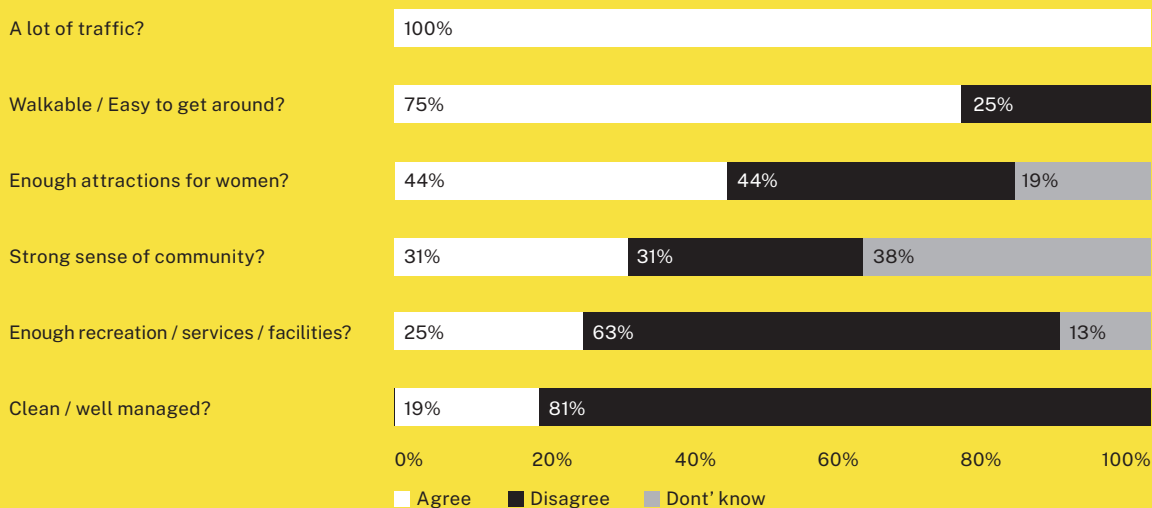|	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
A lot of traffic?	100%		
Walkable / Easy to get around?	75%	25%	
Enough attractions for women?	44%	44%	19%
Strong sense of community?	31%	31%	38%
Enough recreation / services / facilities?	25%	63%	13%
Clean / well managed?	19%	81%	

Figure 2: Participants' Perception of Downtown KL.

The perceptions of the participants reflect the perceptions of the general Downtown KL public surveyed by Think City through the Safety Perception Survey in 2017 (Think City, 2018). However, one question was rephrased to be more specific to women – asking if there were enough attractions for women. *Note: *Walkable* merely indicates that the area is easy to get around, not necessarily that the infrastructure is pedestrian friendly.

PERCEPTION OF SAFETY IN DOWNTOWN KL

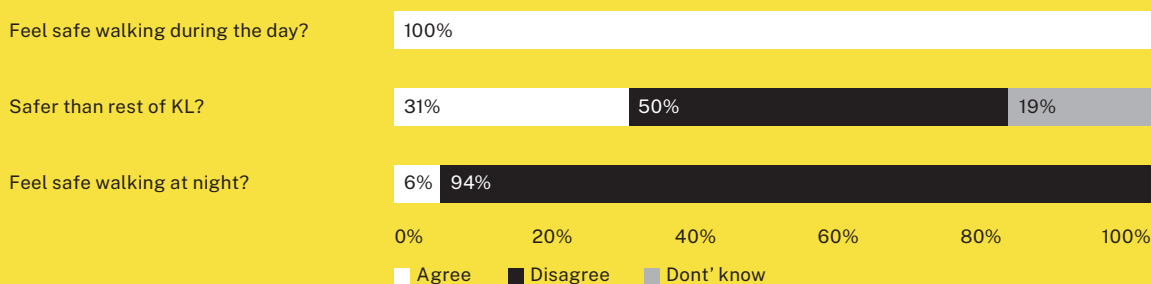|	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Feel safe walking during the day?	100%		
Safer than rest of KL?	31%	50%	19%
Feel safe walking at night?	6%	94%	

Figure 3: Participants perception on safety in Downtown KL.

On a scale of 1-10 (1-very unsafe, 10-very safe), 13 out of 16 participants selected 5 or less, with six participants selecting a score of 5.
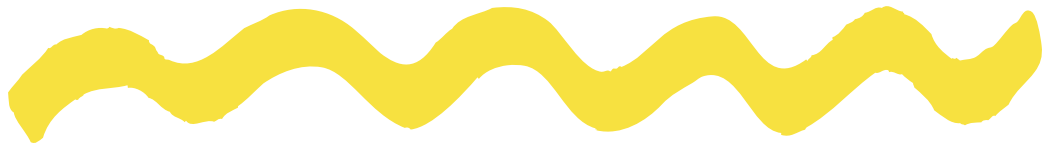
Summarised other findings:

1) Access, centrality, diversity, and history are the area's strengths (what participants liked the most about the area).
2) A clean, walkable area is what participants thought was most lacking.
3) The presence of people is important, but not all groups of people are perceived as being safe to be around.
4) All respondents felt safe in the area during the day, and all but one said they did not feel safe at night. The general safety score in the area was rated low (5 and below).
5) Masjid Jamek and Petaling Street were noted as areas where participants did not feel safe.
6) Half the participants had changed their behaviour or routine out of concern for their safety.
7) Participants believed improvements to lighting, security, and walkability would make the area safer and more comfortable for women.

The survey confirms that participants did have negative perceptions of safety relating to Downtown KL, prior to the start of the focus group sessions. These are attributable to a combination of environmental and social aspects of the public space such as poor lighting and walkability, presence of certain groups of people perceived to be threatening, lack of people at certain times, and having experienced or knowing people who have experienced threats to personal safety in some form.

"There is a bus stop near Masjid Jamek that has a group of drunk people who are always shouting at people. It puts you on high alert." – Focus Group participant

3.3   Group discussions

Findings from the separate discussions are summarised below. Common themes emerged among all three groups, though migrant women specifically expressed a very strong lack of trust of authorities.

Question 1: What does safety mean to you?

The discussion on safety touched on three key topics: 1) specific groups of people, 2) the physical environment, and 3) society's perception of women. Participants are generally tense while walking on the street, always on the lookout for unknown threats both caused by **people** as well as the **physical environment**. Underlying these feelings there also exists social conditioning, based on **perception/ norms and expectations of society**. Notably, these themes were consistent across all three groups.

1) **People**: Real and perceived threats from groups of people were mentioned by the participants as determinants of safety. These perceptions were informed by lived experiences, anecdotes from friends/ colleagues, and acknowledged biases. The groups of people mentioned include individuals experiencing homelessness, individuals using drugs, and primarily male crowds in certain pockets of Downtown KL. While in most cases, these groups did not directly interact with our female participants, the perception of fear was heightened by other conditions:

   · When Downtown KL is deserted in the late evening / night
   · When the participant is walking alone
   · When there is the presence of 'undesirable groups' or conversely the absence of 'desirable groups' like other women, figures of authority, and children. Note: Which groups are considered 'desirable' is highly subjective. For some participants, such as migrant women, the presence of police officers and other authority figures

induce fear stemming from lack of trust. One migrant woman also expressed feeling secure when encountering groups of men of her own ethnicity, as it reinforced her feeling safe.

2) **Physical environment**: Real and perceived threats from the environment could include a broken pavement tile, a speeding car, or a dark, narrow alleyway. Working amenities and wide pedestrian paths, clear sight lines (with no blind spots), bright lights, and manageable traffic conditions where pedestrians are prioritised over cars are critical. Hygiene and sanitation are also important determinants of walking comfort for the participants.

3) **Society's perception of women:** Participants felt that women may be viewed as 'vulnerable', thus making for easy targets. This is also coupled with a tendency to 'victim-blame'. Many women may have instilled the sentiment that they have 'more to lose' and so avoid high risk situations. Participants expressed a sense of disempowerment, with safety strategies focusing more on avoidance rather than tackling root cause and placing a greater burden on women.

"When you come out at 9pm and try walking around, you see some grown men just sitting by the corner and I'm wondering, 'Are you a shop owner? Why are you just hanging out there?' I have all these questions in my head so of course, we as humans tend to think the absolute worst things like 'I think that person is scouting around for the next victim'. Or that person could just be innocently waiting."
— Focus Group participant

Overall, this constant vigilance adopted by our participants creates a stressful walking experience and deters participants from spending more time in the area. From these discussions, a broad definition of safety emerged: **The freedom to walk around the city in peace, without feeling alert or tense in anticipation of unknown dangers.**

Question 2: Do you think the area is safe for women?

"I have witnessed a snatch theft in front of the Islamic Arts Museum. I was just leaving the museum and I saw this motorist who snatched a bag from a lady and she got dragged but she held on to her bag and I saw the security guards running and caring for her so I chased the motorcyclist to this area and I saw him attempt another snatch theft. So, I am paranoid."
— Focus Group participant

Overwhelmingly - 'no'. The discussion is closely linked to the categories in section 1 – the **physical environment**, the **people**, and **perception (broadly)**. An added consideration is if this is based on any form of **harassment** personally experienced by the participant or close acquaintances. Most categories overlap. Overall, participants did not feel welcome in the space, or comfortable. The spaces did not feel like they were designed or maintained with women in mind.

Here we list the participants' experience in Downtown KL:
1) Examples of **harassment by people** experienced by participants or close acquaintances in Downtown KL:
   · Break-in
   · Cat-called
   · Assault
   · Harassed by two men sitting on her motorbike, who refused to move. No one else was around to help.
   · Indecent exposure (flashing)

2) Example of experiences in the **physical environment**
- Poor pedestrian design
- Bike lanes not respected
- Public transport stops (like bus stops) don't **feel** safe
- Poor or non-existent lighting
- **Note**: one area they do feel safe is the Pasar Seni MRT station with clean benches and operational CCTVs, signaling the area is looked after and 'watched'.

3) Examples of other experiences, **primarily linked to perception**. These signals link to 'fear of possible threats'
- Male-dominated areas
- A bleeding person on the street
- Intoxicated individuals
- Individuals using drugs in laneway at night
- Empty bottles of alcohol and syringes lying around
- Lack of police presence
- Bystander effect – people not stepping in to help when needed

> Question 3: Do you take any precautions when moving around in Downtown KL?

"I feel like, just as women we tend to be in situations where if I see a parked van, I walk on the other side of the street." — Focus Group participant

"I don't take public transportation at night, I take Grab. I feel like it's okay to spend that extra money as long as I know I'm making it from one point to another point safely." — Focus Group participant

DO	DON'T
Be alert always	Carry too many things
Dress modestly	Eat at restaurants where getting home will be difficult
Have a 'weapon' for self-defense E.g. umbrella, sharp key, pepper spray	Have phone or valuables in hand unnecessarily
Have emergency contact ready to dial	Leave office late
Identify safe havens (e.g. 7-eleven)	Listen to music/ have earphones in
Inform family/ colleagues when leaving or arriving (Turn on location tracker when going out)	Take public transport at night (take Grab if possible)
Keep items safe by keeping them out of sight	Walk alone
Look confident	Walk past groups of men
Plan transport ahead of time	Walk slow
Pretend to talk on phone (if scared)	Walk the same route daily
Spread out valuables (don't keep everything in handbag)	Walk through construction areas (dangerous pedestrian set-up)
Walk behind others	Walk through laneways

Table 2: Precautions Taken around Downtown KL.

> Question 4: Who is responsible for women's safety in public spaces?

"I think you need regulations to sanction what behaviour is allowed and what is not." - Focus Group participant

The individual has to exercise constant vigilance. Women must also help women, speak out and empower one another. Women must demand the right to walk safely around the city. But it's not womens' responsibility alone. Many parties must come together, including:

- **Men**: Men must respect women and act as an ally.
- **Community**: The community must step-in, look out for each other, avoid victim-blaming, and hold others accountable. Women's safety has implications for everyone's safety – ensuring the most vulnerable are protected will secure a better quality of life for all city dwellers.
- **City Council and Authorities**: Those in power can affect change by first understanding the unique perspectives and needs of women, especially when it comes to design of public spaces and amenities. Infrastructure and public realm upgrades must be urgently undertaken to make the city women friendly. Improved communication (especially in various languages) and enforcement is key. Additionally, promotion of more diverse economic and cultural activities will also attract a more diverse crowd, especially women in the area.

3.4   City Walk

Despite some negative aspects observed, participants generally enjoyed the opportunity to walk around the city at night with a group of people. They found it peaceful and beautiful in some areas, particularly by the river, observing art and activities they normally would not have. One participant stopped to buy flowers from a road-side stall in Lebuh Ampang. Participants also suggested the continuation of walking groups at night, to be able to experience the city in a relaxed way. Overall, the participants expressed that it was a very liberating and empowering experience to step into places they would normally avoid due to fear.

The observations and pictures taken during the walks are described in section 3.5.

3.5   Workshop

The table below shows six themes identified from the analysed pictures. For each theme, the number of positive and negative associations derived from the pictures are summarised in the table.

Most pictures fit into more than one theme, highlighting several important issues. The following sections discuss selected pictures , which are presented alongside participants descriptions.

Participants were also tasked with identifying solutions, as individuals and in groups. These solutions are also presented in section 3.5.7.

> "It is also up to men to call out that behaviour of other men."
> - Focus Group participant

> "After work, I want to go for a walk but I'm afraid to go outside…"

THEME	SUB-CATEGORY	NUMBER OF POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS	RATIO POS/ NEG%	NUMBER OF NEGATIVE ASSOCIATIONS	TOTAL NUMBER OF ASSOCIATIONS
Maintenance		4	15-85	23	27 (19%)
Sensory Experience	Smell, sound	2	20-80	9	11 (8%)
People and community	Crowd size, crowd type, Privatisation of public space, civic mindedness, belonging to place	21	51-49	20	41(28%)
Attractions	Art, Active street life and street frontage	17	77-23	5	22 (15%)
Urban Design and infrastructure	Design, light, accessibility, information	13	33-66	27	40 (27%)
Surveillance		5	100-0	0	5 (3%)
Total		62		84	146

Table 3: Summary of results.

3.5.1 Maintenance

The theme maintenance had 4 positive and 23 negative associations, accounting for 19% of all associations recorded. The primary focus relates to cleanliness and maintenance of a space. Most negative associations are linked to lack of hygiene or improper waste management, leading to bad smell. Poorly maintained streets and amenities resulting in unclean, and littered public spaces are cited as issues.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT	POSITIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT
Negative association because of poor/lack of maintenance, unclean	23	Positive association because of good maintenance, clean	4

Table 4: Number of associations related to maintenance.

Figure 4 shows four pictures related to maintenance. Pictures 26 and 36 are taken of the same overflowing rubbish bin, that has not been properly maintained. However, different associations are related to the pictures. In picture 26, the negative association is linked to people's disregard and lack of consideration for others. The problem is described to be due to the lack of civic mindedness which makes the participant feel unsafe and not respected. In picture 36 the negative association is described from another perspective; the insufficient and poorly designed bin which requires one to touch it results in the garbage piling up making the participant feel uncomfortable.

Picture 12 shows a walkway which is described as dirty and smelly. The negative association made is that the lack of maintenance creates a feeling of abandonment and lack of community ownership, which consequently makes the participant feel unsafe. Likewise, picture 29 describes a public square as poorly maintained with malfunctioning streetlights, closed shops and an out of order clock tower which makes the participant feel unsafe.

Picture 26: Overspilling trash, with the stench of trash and human waste. Triggers feelings of blatant disregard for hygiene, civic mindedness and consideration to other people's comfort. Due to such lack of concern I feel unsafe and not respected.

Picture 12: The floor level is not same so someone can fall and hurt themselves. This place is dark and there are less people around. There is a bad smell and it is dirty and not safe. This means nobody cares about this place.

Picture 36: An overflowing dustbin that is badly designed, requiring people to touch it to dispose of rubbish properly. Makes me feel uncomfortable as it is messy and dirty. The bin isn't sufficient as there is too much rubbish around it.

Picture 29: Poorly maintained public space (dim, malfunctioning streetlights, clock not working) makes me feel unsafe. Darkness and lack of shops that open at night make this place unattractive to spend time at.

Figure 4: Pictures related to the theme maintenance (Source: Think City)

3.5.2 Sensory Experience
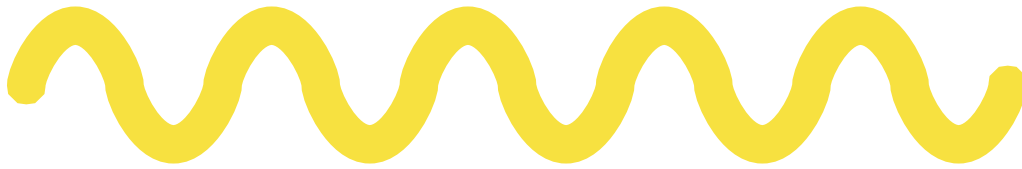
The theme *sensory experience* had 2 positive associations and 9 negative associations, accounting for 9% of all associations recorded. The theme includes the sub-categories smell and sound.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT	POSITIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT
Negative association because of bad smell	6	Positive association because of good smell	1
Negative association because of honk sound	2	Positive association because of music	1
Negative association because of lack of sound	1		

Table 5: Number of associations related to sensory experience.

Figure 5 shows three pictures related to sensory experience. Picture 4 describes the smell of jasmine flowers, ghee, and visually bright colours positively associated with the temple. The temple and its surrounding area bring an association of peace, comfort and security. The additional presence of food shops, a bank, CCTV, and college security guards help reinforce the perception of safety. Here we see how sensory experience plays a positive role in the formation of perceptions of safety.

In the same way, bad sensory experience creates negative perceptions and experiences, as seen in picture 43. Bad smell from stagnant water and trash drives negative association and a poor perception of safety, despite the laneway having been recently upgraded.

Besides smell, sounds also play an important role. Picture 27 describes a negative association to the sound of motorcycles. The motorcycles seen in the picture drove through the pedestrian area at a high speed, and the sound is associated with a fear of being run down or becoming a victim of snatch theft. Other pictures have shown negative associations linked to car horn sounds and related traffic sounds. Conversely, secluded places that have little to no noise also can bring perceptions of fear.

Picture 4: Temples are peaceful places and smell so good (jasmine flower & ghee). They are colorful and there are flowers. It's a very calm place with people around. I feel very comfortable here. This area and the temple is safe. There are food shops, public bank, CCTV, and college security guards.

Picture 43: I liked the alleyway but the trash (especially the empty glass bottles) made it less ideal to walk here. My assumptions from this would be that I might meet addicts or homeless people here. The smell was bad from the water and from the trash. It is a pretty walkway but the smell and the trash around creates this sense of feeling unsafe. I couldn't see the exit of the alleyway because of the way it was structured. Would avoid this place because I was unsure about what would be at the end of the walkway, feels unsanitary, smells bad.

Picture 27: Bikes traveling on pedestrian area makes me feel unsafe. Anxious whenever sound of bike approaches for fear of being run down or becoming victim of snatch theft. Birds/ crows sounds creates anxiety over unwanted bird droppings on hair/ clothes.

Figure 5: Pictures related to the theme sensory experience. (Source: Think City)

3.5.2 Attractions

The theme *attractions* had 17 positive and 5 negative associations, accounting for 15% of all associations recorded. The theme highlights how attractions in the public space affect how we associate with it. The theme includes the sub-categories art, food and active street frontage.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT	POSITIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT
Negative association because of lack of active street	4	Positive association because of art	9
Negative association because of graffiti	1	Positive association because of active street	7
		Positive association because of flowers	1

Table 6: Number of associations related to attractions.

The results show that different types of art (eg. murals, installations) in public space are associated with positive feelings of safety. The exception being art or installations that have been vandalised or not properly maintained. Figure 6 shows five pictures related to attractions. Picture 28 describes the mural as an attractive feature that is worth visiting. Picture 3 shows a mural of food and the description associates the picture to food and eating as something that makes the participant calm and happy.

Food is often associated with active streets and people gathering to eat. Picture 8 shows a busy restaurant that has seating outside in the public space which becomes part of the walkway. Passing by busy streets with many people and activities is associated with a positive feeling of safety.

Street frontages are mentioned several times, both in positive and negative terms. In picture 42 we see a crossing with a building in the foreground. The ground floor of the building seems to be empty as there is no activity. The empty frontage is described as making the participant feel unsafe.

In picture 44, the frontage is positively experienced as welcoming. In this picture we also have the aspect of presence of people, positive association to music (sound) and light.

Picture 3: My favourite part, I love arts and food because it makes me calm and happy. It makes the place more beautiful so that I can take nice pictures. It invites people to eat because Malaysia is a food paradise. Food places are always safe because people will be eating.
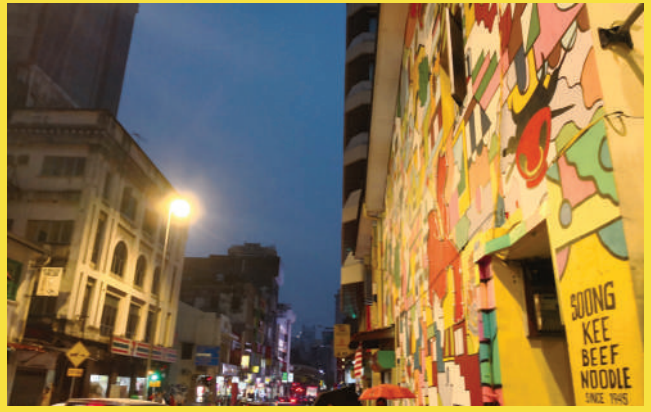
Picture 28: Colourful mural next to eatery open at night makes me feel safe. I feel safe and would visit this place regularly on my own as it is brightly lit, has a crowd and attractive features (famous noodles and mural).

Picture 8: These are food courts, particularly it's Fat One Steamboat. To me this place feels safe as it is bright and surrounded with people. The crowded and busy area makes it cheerful, friendly and welcoming. This place also gives a safe vibe.

Picture 42: I felt quite unsafe as it's quite an empty place in a busy pocket in the city. Hanging wires and electric boxes that have been vandalised makes me uneasy. Even with the presence of streetlights I felt uneasy and wanted to walk quickly. Worried for my physical safety (rain + hanging wires). Empty frontage gives me a sense of feeling unsafe. Strong lighting focused on certain areas makes the rest of the place look dim.

Picture 44: I liked this place because of the active frontage which was very welcoming. There were people outside of the cafe which also felt welcoming. There was also music and light from the area which was nice.

Figure 6: Pictures related to the theme attractions. (Source: Think City)

3.5.4 People and community

The theme *people and community* had 21 positive associations and 20 negative associations accounting for 28% of the total number of associations recorded. The theme is the only one that had the associations evenly distributed between positive and negative. The theme divides into the sub-categories: crowd size, crowd type, privatisation of public space, civic mindedness and belonging to place.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT	POSITIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT
Negative association because of crowd type	7	Positive association because of large crowd size, presence of people	13
Negative association because of small crowd size, lack of people	6	Positive association because of crowd type	6
Negative association because of lack of civic mindedness	3	Positive association because of a familiar place/feeling belonging	2
Negative association because of privatisation of public space	3		
Negative association because of lack of ownership	1		

Table 7: Number of associations related to people and community.

Crowd size

Both presence of people as well as the lack of people was mentioned or described several times. A negative association because of a lack of people was mentioned 6 times and a positive association because of the presence of people was mentioned 13 times. In Figure 6, picture 8 describes how a place that is crowded and busy makes it cheerful, friendly and welcoming and also gives a safe vibe while in Figure 7, picture 18 shows a backstreet described as dark and unsafe because there were no people.

Crowd type

The type of people present in a certain place was mentioned 13 times of which 7 were negative and 6 were positive associations. Some of the different crowd types mentioned were individuals experiencing homelessness, groups of men, individuals using drugs, tourists, office workers, and so on.

Privatisation of public space

A negative association because of privatisation of public space was described 3 times in pictures 24, 33 and 45 (Figure 7). The three pictures are related to situations of homelessness, resulting in a privatisation of public space by these individuals. Participants feel this creates feelings of intrusion in others' private space and are hesitant to intrude or traverse the space.

Civic mindedness

Negative associations because of lack of civic mindedness were mentioned 3 times and was related to lack of consideration for other pedestrians and road-users. Some examples are disregard towards traffic rules and leaving trash on the street as mentioned in picture 26 (Figure 4).

Belonging to a place

The aspect of community and belonging was mentioned a few times as for example in picture 4 (Figure 5), where a positive association towards a temple is described.

Picture 33: The pavement looks safe to walk on, but seeing the man sleeping on the pavement makes me scared to walk past. I feel like I will intrude his space and peace. Although the main road is full of cars, if anything would happen here, I don't know if anyone would help. The graffiti on the wall also implies a negative feeling as if it is a marking of territory. I don't feel safe walking here alone due to the person sleeping there and he might harm me.

Picture 45: This was interesting and it made me think of why the cart with boxes is laying around. Is it someone's property? Why is it not discarded by DBKL? Also, it is in the public space/walkway. I would avoid this place because it feels like I am invading someone's personal space.

Picture 24: The informal and temporary home by a squatter is unclean and claims the public space as a private space.
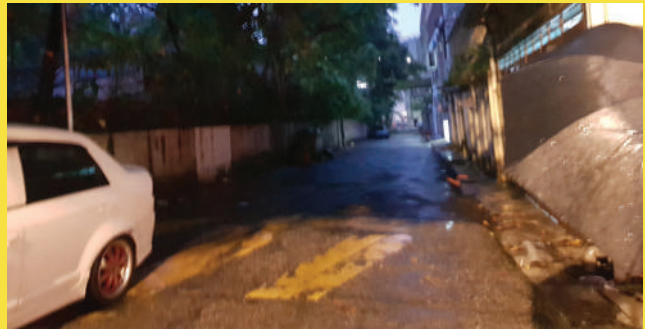
Picture 18: The passage is dark and I felt unsafe to walk there because I didn't see any people. The street is closed and there are no activities. I would not feel safe walking here.

Figure 7: Pictures related to the theme people and community. (Source: Think City)

3.5.5 Urban design & infrastructure

The theme *design and infrastructure* had 13 positive and 27 negative associations, accounting for 27% of the total number of associations recorded. The theme shows how design and infrastructure affect associations the participants have in the public spaces. The theme includes the sub-categories design, light, accessibility, and information.

NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT	POSITIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT
Negative association because of lack of lights and badly designed light	11	Positive association because of well-lit space and well-designed light	7
Negative association because of bad design and amenities	8	Positive association because of space design and amenities, organised space, design, spacious	5
Negative association because of poor accessibility/walkability	6	Positive association because of information and being able to find your way	1
Negative association because of close-ended alley, not being able to see the exit	2		

Table 8: Number of associations related to urban design and infrastructure.

Design

Design of spaces and amenities was mentioned 15 times. 10 were negative associations and 7 were positive associations. The negative associations had to do with different aspects of urban design such as design of specific places, roads, amenities and street furniture.

Picture 21 shows a lack of proper pedestrian crossing, where the gap between fences becomes the crossing area. This is perceived to be very unsafe and shows the importance of proper urban and traffic planning. Picture 10/15 shows a bench that is placed too close to the road, creating a risk of getting splashed by water as cars drive past. It is also uncovered and considered useless if it rains or when it is too hot.

Additionally, 2 negative associations arose due to close-ended lanes or laneways where the exits were not visible. 5 positive associations were noted due to well-designed spaces, described as spacious, comfortable, and organised, with good weather protection.

Light

Lighting is mentioned 18 times where 11 are negative associations because of lack of lights or badly designed lights and 7 are positive associations because of well-lit spaces or well-designed lighting.

Picture 29, in Figure 4 shows the Medan Pasar square at night, with poor lighting that affects the experience of the space. There is also picture 42 (Figure 6) that describes how strong lighting focused on certain areas makes the rest of the place look dim, creating an uneasy feeling. Picture 37 (Figure 8), however, describes a positive experience and association toward the River of Life area that is well-lit.

Accessibility

Negative associations because of poor accessibility or walkability is mentioned 6 times and has mostly to do with uneven and badly maintained pavements or temporary public works as described in picture 25 (Figure 8).
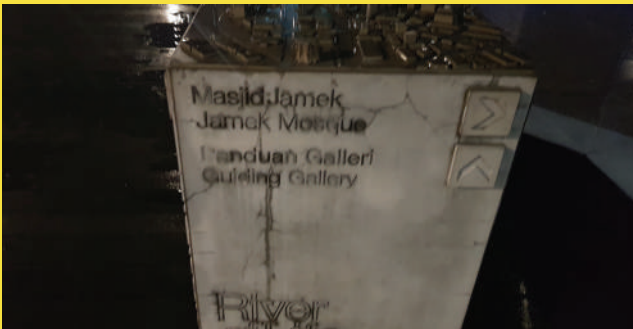
Information

Picture 17 (Figure 8) shows that information about a place is important to be able to orient and know where you are, especially in a new and unfamiliar place. Having this information helps improve perceptions of safety.

Picture 10/15: The seat along the walkway is too near the road. It doesn't have a roof to shelter people so I find it useless during rainy days. The cars can also splash water from the puddles on anyone sitting there. I find it too near the road, it's quite pointless to have a bench there as I wouldn't sit there. The bench is wet and it should be covered as there are elderly people that will need to sit on it. If it is wet all the time the bench won't be useful. It must be kept clean and dry so anyone who feels tired or is elderly can sit at any time.

Picture 21: There is a lack of proper pedestrian crossing and the fencing is misplaced. The gap between the fences becomes the place to cross, which is dangerous because it is adjacent a busy motorway. There is poor planning by city council.


Picture 17: The picture is important because it gives information about the place. We can know where we are and that is important for my safety. If I know where I am I will be alert. If we are in a new place that we know nothing about we will feel unsafe.

Picture 25: Temporary public works makes the surface unstable and unsafe, compromising walkability and public access.

Picture 37: The best attraction in this area. Makes me feel comfortable as I can see there is no littering, and the place is well maintained. Good lighting and crowd, which makes me feel safe.
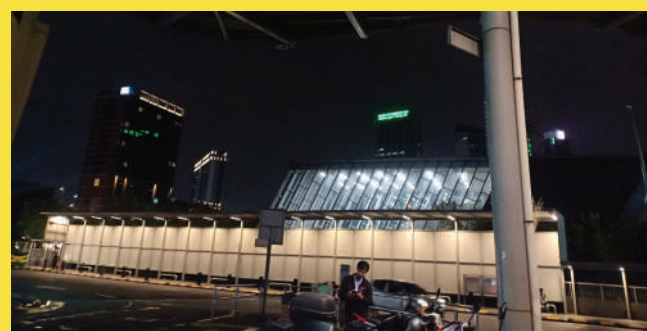
Picture 5: The Pasar Seni MRT is bright and there are people walking. There are proper benches to sit comfortably on. The area is clean, spacious, there are CCTVs and it's easy to walk without any fears.

Figure 8: Pictures related to the theme urban design and infrastructure. (Source: Think City)

3.5.6 Surveillance

The theme *surveillance* had 5 positive associations, accounting for 3% of the total number of associations recorded. Participants described feeling safe, either due the presence of a security camera or security guard. Picture 16 in Figure 9 shows a picture taken by a participant who observed the security camera.

POSITIVE ASSOCIATION	COUNT
Feeling safe because of surveillance	5

Table 9: Number of associations related to surveillance.
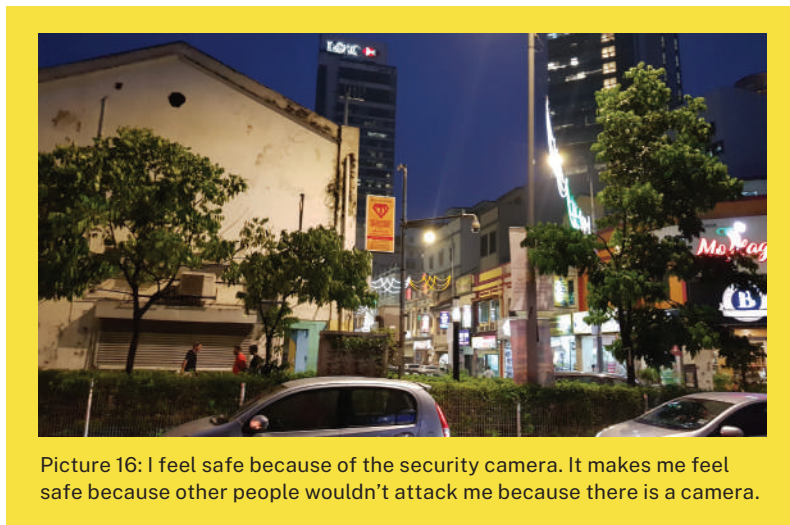
Picture 16: I feel safe because of the security camera. It makes me feel safe because other people wouldn't attack me because there is a camera.

Figure 9: Picture related to the theme surveillance. (Source: Think City)

3.5.7 Solutions

Individual Solutions

SOLUTION	TIMES MENTIONED
add lights	20
add activities/attractive shops/add people	15
better urban design/amenities design	15
improve waste management/design of waste bins/frequency of cleaning	9
fix broken walkways/improve infrastructure	8
add security guards/CCTV	7
improve maintenance/cleanliness	7
better traffic/street planning	6
add information/orientation/signs	4
make it accessible	4
remove privatisation of public space, relocate individuals experiencing homelessness	4
add more art to identify the place/create identity of place	2
add greenery	2
walk in groups	2
Total	**105**

Table 10: Individual solutions proposed by participants.

Group solutions

Group 1: 5 participants, 5 votes each
Group 2: 3 participants, 3 votes each
Group 3: 2 participants, 3 votes each

	SOLUTION	DETAILS	VOTES
Maintenance			
1	Waste management	• Add well-designed bins in greater numbers • Enforce regular waste collection • Keep large rubbish bins on the streets	4
2	Improve cleanliness	• Keep streets clean	2
3	Exposed wires	• Remove sharp wires	-
4	Maintain/fix pavements	• Add anti-slip surface	-
5	Fix and maintain deteriorated building facades	-	-
Sensory experience			
6	Music/nice sounds	-	-
People and community			
7	Remove privatisation of public space	• Rethink location of individuals experiencing homelessness	5
8	Walk in groups (city walks)	-	-
Attractions			
9	Activation of space to attract a diverse crowd throughout the day	• Open shops • Enforce regular waste collection • Add hawker stalls	3
10	Greenery	• Acts as a protective barrier • For beautification • For continuous planning of trees	-
11	Art, murals	• Murals can be educational and inspiring • Gives a place character and identity • Add art • Well curated and highlighted	-
12	Activation of streets to attract diverse crowd	• Add diverse shop activity	-
Urban design and infrastructure			
13	Lighting	• Add more lighting • Add focused and appropriate lighting	9
14	Safety for pedestrians /Better pedestrian pathways	• Safer pedestrian crossings • Add signage • Create safe accessways during construction • Provide alternative routes • Maintain walkways/ paths • No potholes • Wider walkways • Add pedestrian crossings • Enforce rules for car/bikes	4
15	Signage/wayfinding	• For warning and emergencies • Provides directions • Add clear signs, especially to control traffic	4
16	Clear, open, visible walkways/sightlines	-	3
17	Separation between car/bikes and pedestrians	• Use bollards • Use fencing • Clear separation from food stalls	1

	SOLUTION	DETAILS	VOTES
18	Universal access (everyone can access)	-	1
19	Barrier between roads and pedestrians /seating areas	• Prevents snatch theft, risk of road accidents, and splashing from puddles	1
20	Covered walkways/shading	-	-
21	Designated seating for shopfront	• Add regulated temporary seating	-
22	Sheltered seating/covered walkways	-	-
23	Open building frontage	-	-
Surveillance			
24	CCTV	-	1
25	Presence of security guard	-	1

Table 11: Identified and Prioritised Solution in the groups (condensed)

Short-term and long-term solutions

	ISSUE	SHORT-TERM SOLUTION	LONG-TERM SOLUTION
1	Lighting	• Torchlights • Dress brightly, wear reflective clothing • Identify where lights are malfunctioning or where dark spots are and inform council	• Add and fix the lights (city council) • Light-sensitive lighting, that turns on when dark • Add permanent decorative lighting, or around art installations • Identify dark spots • Improve responsiveness of council • Engage in dialogue with authorities
2	Activation of spaces	• Walk in groups • Encourage more hawker stalls or other vendors to operate throughout the day • Organise events like blockparties, farmers' markets, and exhibitions	• Curate exhibitions, anchor businesses and stalls, 24-hour shops, food offerings, tourist attractions and long-term community events
3	Removing privatisation of public space	• Identify businesses and individuals occupying pavements and other public locations to work out a win-win solution • Write to local council	• Design space to prevent privatisation • Stronger enforcement • Regulation of shops taking up public space • Designated parking for restaurant visitors • Designated places for restaurants /food trucks
4	Waste management	• Document issue with pictures • Call out people not putting trash in the trash can • Write to the local council with evidence • Set-up community/whatsapp group, council watch	-
5	Clear/visible/open sightlines	• Remove tarps and other items obstructing sightlines • Put up mirrors • Increase alertness	-

Table 12: Short-term and long-term solutions by participants for top issues (condensed from two different group discussions)

3.6 Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges were encountered, as listed below:

- **Promoting diverse participation**:
  A diverse group of participants was recruited and efforts were made to accommodate those who could not communicate in English/ Malay. However, it has to be acknowledged that not all vulnerable groups could be reached. For example, women working at stalls until 10pm at night were unable to participate.

- **Poor weather conditions**:
  Group walkabout sessions held outside were affected by the rainy conditions.

- **Walking group set-up (Session 2)**:
  Participants walked around the area in groups of 4 to 5 people, with clipboards to take notes. On the one hand, there was safety in numbers which provided a more comfortable walking experience. On the other hand, at times participants felt uncomfortable, as if intruding on someone's space. This was especially true, for example, when participants walked through areas with a high number of individuals experiencing homelessness.

- **Discussion set-up**:
  To ensure the discussion would be as effective and open as possible, several break-out groups were set-up. Participants were also seated in a circle, with the facilitators, with clear visibility of presentation slides.

- **Language**:
  Discussions were held in both English and Malay, though one participant could not speak either. In this case, another participant acted as the translator.

- **Picture taking limitations**:
  To respect privacy, some observations were noted, without pictures taken. This is especially true for groups of people who were on the streets, such as individuals experiencing homelessness.

Conclusion and recommendations

The previous sections show that safety and perceptions of safety are extremely nuanced topics, striking a delicate balance between social and environmental factors. This study focuses on the experience of a handful of women in Downtown KL, but the answers likely validate the experiences of most women who go about their daily lives in the city.

A recap of the top three themes with the most associations are:

People and Community(28%)

The close to even split between negative and positive associations linked to people makes it clear that people have a very strong capacity to shape the experience of others in a space, in both good and bad ways. Importantly what matters to our women participants is who is in the space, how they behave, and how they are perceived. Our own backgrounds and cultural experiences also play a role in how we perceive others. For example, Malaysian participants viewed the presence of authority figures such as police, favorably, and conversely viewed the presence of large groups of migrant men with fear. On the other hand, our migrant women participants viewed police with fear and suspicion, based on the community's experience, but viewed groups of men of their own ethnicity favorably, as they felt safe. It is important to unpack and understand these nuanced experiences as we try to improve safety for all in public space.

Design and Infrastructure(27%)

Thoughtful design of spaces and infrastructure is sorely needed. Besides ensuring full functionality, participants felt that design and infrastructure must consider adequate lighting, open sightlines, ease of walking, clear exits and help orient people in a place.

Maintenance(19%)

Maintenance has the highest proportion of negative associations, indicating addressing this would drastically improve a public space. Keeping things working and keeping the area clean is of utmost importance to participants.

Overall, we can see the very real consequences resulting from the continued ignoring of women's rights to experience the city safely and their input and perspective in urban planning. We see that our female participants are indeed engaging in the constant 'negotiation of risk' highlighted by the Kolkata study (Sur, 2014), relying on tactics of avoidance and self-regulation when it comes to personal safety. We have heard that harassment of women in public space happens frequently, as shown through participants experience, as well as through surveys done locally and globally. We also note a high degree of frustration and fear for women navigating public spaces in Downtown KL, both due to real and perceived threats to safety.

Solutions proposed by participants supports general findings in other studies, showing that our female participants want bright, active, walkable, clean spaces full of diverse groups of people. These themes crop up in various studies such as those in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Bogota, and Nairobi (Hidayati, et al., 2020), (Safetipin, 2020).

Recommendations

Downtown KL's strengths are its history, centrality, accessibility, and walkability. Many participants' fear of the space and negative perceptions were balanced by some positive experiences when they were given the chance to explore the area in a safe manner. The group city walk was noted by some as the first time they had been in Downtown KL at night.

The potential of the space was appreciated by participants, though many improvements were suggested. Key requests were for **maintenance** to ensure everything was in working order, improved **cleanliness**, **better design**, **more lighting**, and especially for **more active streets** with **diverse people**. The last point can be met by simultaneously increasing crowd size and diversity and improving the gender balance to make the space women friendly.

Other solutions that should be considered are:

· Employing several gender mainstreaming experts in the city council.
· Prioritising women's voices in city planning and design, through participatory planning.
· Using evidence-based planning to make decisions.
· Engaging in regular safety audits to measure safety and perceptions of safety.
· Utilising visually-engaging media on multiple platforms to stimulate discussion, increase awareness and build a movement on women's safety.
· Organising and curating activities for women in the city to increase their presence in public space, build confidence and ownership. For example, group city walks organised at night help women explore the city in a safe environment.

Solutions and efforts to improve safety cannot be undertaken in silos or without coordination. Many responsible and interested parties must work together, with strong commitment, coherent objectives, and clear indicators to reach the goal of creating a safer city for women.

A note on the methodology:

The methodology used was a mixed-methods, participatory approach. It incorporated a brief survey, large and small group discussions, a group city-walk, and a final workshop. The different methods were employed to collectively gain understanding, share perspectives, and develop insights through analysis of gathered data. The variety of activities and tone used created an open and informal environment, conducive for discussions.

Were we to do things differently, we would:

1) Increase cross-group interactions to foster empathy and understanding of different experiences.
2) Employ a translator for easier communication with migrant women.
3) Increase diversity of participants. For example, elderly women, women with children, differently abled women, and women who were working late (who could not attend the sessions in the evening due to work).

Key requests were for maintenance to ensure everything was in working order, improved cleanliness, better design, more lighting, and especially for more active streets with diverse people.

Appendix 1

Women's Safety Focus Group
Individual Survey

Name:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Occupation:

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following best describes you in this neighbourhood (pick all that is applicable)?

    ○ I work and live here

    ○ I commute to work here

    ○ I live here and work elsewhere

    ○ I study and live here

    ○ I commute to study

    ○ I am an international visitor

    ○ I am a domestic visitor

2. Amenities. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	1- Strongly agree	2- Agree	3- Disagree	4- Strongly disagree	5- No opinion/ Don't know
This area is very walkable/easy to get around.					
This area is clean and well managed.					
This area has enough recreational facilities e.g. parks & places to relax.					
This area has a lot of traffic.					
This area has a strong sense of community.					
This area has enough attractions for women.					

What do you like about the area?

_____

What do you not like about the area?

_____

3. How safe do you feel in the area in general? (Circle your answer)

Very unsafe   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Very safe

4. Your feelings about this neighbourhood. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	1- Strongly agree	2- Agree	3- Disagree	4- Strongly disagree	5- No opinion/ Don't know
This area is safer than the rest of KL.					
I feel safe walking around the area during the day.					
I feel safe walking around the area at night.					

5. Are there any specific places in the area that you feel is unsafe?

_____

6. Thinking about the responses to the previous questions, what do you think is the main issue in this area regarding safety for women? Please tick one box only.

○ Assault

○ Theft – Business

○ Theft – Personal

○ Fire

○ Graffiti/Vandalism

○ Drugs

○ Public nuisance

○ Other, please specify: _____

○ No issues

Please elaborate on your chosen issue.

_____

7. In the past 12 months have you or someone close to you been affected by these issues? If yes, please select the relevant type(s).

   ○ Neither, I nor someone I know have been affected by crime in the past 12 months

   ○ Assault

   ○ Theft – Business

   ○ Theft – Personal

   ○ Fire

   ○ Graffiti/Vandalism

   ○ Drugs

   ○ Public nuisance

   ○ Other, please specify: _____

8. Have you recently changed any of your usual routines/behaviours because of concerns for your safety? This could include things like avoiding certain parts of the area or staying at home.

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

   If yes, please elaborate (optional): _____

9. If you could change one thing today to make the area safer and more comfortable for women, what would it be?

<u>CONSENT</u>

☐ Ticking this box indicates that I consent and agree that the focus group organisers have the right to take photographs, videotape, or digital recordings of me during the focus group sessions, and to use them in any media, now or hereafter known, and exclusively for the purpose of Think City. I further consent that my name and identity may be revealed therein or by descriptive text or commentary.

☐ Ticking this box indicates that I allow for the photos you take during my participation in the walkability session to be used in the final report.

<u>CONFIDENTIALITY</u>

Your responses to the survey and discussion will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers.

Appendix 2

Masjid Jamek of Kuala Lumpur

HSBC

Leboh Ampang

Cosmo Hotel Kuala Lumpur

Jalan Tun Perak

SEGi College Kuala Lumpur

Medan Pasar

Klang River

Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin

RHB Bank Tun HS Lee
Image Source: opencity.my

Junk Book Store

Jalan Hang Lekiu

Jalan Pintas

Lebuh Pudu

Soong Kee's beef ball noodle

RUANG by ThinkCity

Kota Raya bus terminal

Jalan Hang Kasturi

Jalan Tun HS Lee

Bangkok Bank
Image Source: skyscrappercity.com

Lorong Pudu

Kota Raya Complex

Jalan Benteng

100m

N

Map 1

Legend:
- ---- path
- ⭐ start / end point
- ★ other key areas/ attractions

N

Lat Cartoon Series @ Masjid Jamek Station
Image Source: opencity.my

Masjid Jamek

Jalan Ampang

Allianz General Insurance

Oriental Building (Heritage Building)

Leboh Ampang

Jalan Raja Chulan

Pucuk Rebung Gallery Museum

River of Life Lookout Point
Image Source: Creative Commons, Wikipedia

HSBC

SEGi College Kuala Lumpur

AmBank

MEDAN PASAR

RHB Bank

Jalan Tun Perak

Maybank

Jalan Hang Kasturi

Medan Pasar

RUANG by Think City

Map 2

Legend:

- - - - path

★ start / end point

★ other key areas/ attractions

100m

Kotaraya Complex

Jalan Petaling

Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock

Petaling Street Market

Jalan Tun Sambanthan

Wisma Hang Sam

Wisma Kwong Siew

Jalan Sultan

Komp Selang

Bangunan Pak Peng

Sri Mahamariamman Temple

Jalan Tun H S Lee

Ming Host Kual Lum

Hotel Mandarin Pacific Kuala Lumpur

LRT Pasar Seni

MRT PASAR SENI

Kwo Foo Win

Pasar Seni LRT Station
Image Source: Creative Commons, Wikipedia

Lorong Panggung

Jalan Petaling

100m

Map 3

Jalan Pudu

Ancasa Hotel &
Spa Kuala Lumpur

Lorong Hang Jebat

Lorong Sultan

Methodist Boys'
Secondary School

Plaza
Rakyat

Sekolah Kebangsaan
Methodist (L) (MBS)

Malaysia
Basketball
Association

Persekutuan
Pengakap
Malaysia

Merdeka
MRT Station
Image Source:
Creative Commons,
Wikipedia

YWCA

Wisma OCM

Gospel Hall
Kuala Lumpur

Jalan Hang Jebat

Warisan Merdeka
KL118 Tower

Legend:

- - - path

★ start /
end point

★ other key areas/
attractions

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Abdul Rahman, N., Ali, M. & Ghani, I., 2019. Street Design and Human Behaviour Factors towards a Safe Urban Environment for Women. *Asian Journal of Behavioural Studies*, 4(17), pp. 53-64.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology.. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101.

Bureau of Justice Statistics , U.S. Department of Justice, 2000. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*. [Online] [Accessed 10 January 2021].

Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020. *Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia, 2019,* s.l.: Department of Statistics Malaysia.

Ekinsmyth, C., 2002. Feminist methodology. In: P. Shurmer-Smith, ed. *Doing Cultural Geography*. s.l.:Sage Publications, p. 177.

ENGENDER Consultancy, Sisterhood Alliance, 2020. *Nationwide Survey on Sexual Harassment,* Kuala Lumpur: s.n.

Foster, C., Hillsdon, M. & Thorogood, M., 2004. Environmental perceptions and walking in English adults. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health,* Volume 58, pp. 924-928.

Halbur, T., 2010. Women, Transit, and the Perception of Safety. *Planetizen*.

Hidayati, I., Tan, W. & Yamu , C., 2020. How gender differences and perceptions of safety shape urban mobility in Southeast Asia. *Elsevier Transportation Research,* Volume Part F, pp. 155-173.

Hunt, E., 2019. *City with a female face: how modern Vienna was shaped by women.* [Online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/may/14/city-with-a-female-face-how-modern-vienna-was-shaped-by-women [Accessed 3 January 2021].

Jiang, B., Mak, S. N., Larsen, L. & Zhong, H., 2017. Minimizing the gender difference in perceived safety: Comparing the effects of urban back alley interventions. *Journal of Environmental Psychology.*, 51(4), pp. 117-131.

Laurie, N., Claire, D., Holloway S. L. & Smith , F., 2000. *Geographies of new femininities.* Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.

Leao, S. Z., Izadpanahi, P. & Hawken, S., 2018. *How urban design can make cities safer for women?: A statistical analysis of Safetipin.* Hong Kong, PLEA 2018 Hong Kong.

Litzén, S., 2006. *Concerns about crime in urban environments. Safety surveys related to Stockholm. Academic licentiate thesis.,* Stockholm: Stockholm University: Department of Criminology.

Mahadevia, D. & Lathia, S., 2019. Women's Safety and Public Spaces: Lessons from the Sabarmati Riverfront, India. *Urban Planning,* 4(2), pp. 154-168.

Majlis Bandaraya Subang Jaya , 2019. *Pelan Tindakan Bandar Hijau Mesra Wanita,* Subang Jaya: MPSJ.

Mazey, M. E. & Lee, D. R., 1983. *Her space, her place: A geography of women.* Washington D.C.: Association of American Geographers.

Pain, R. H., 1997. Social geographies of women's fear of crime.. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 22(2),* pp. 231-244.

Pan Pacific Safe Communities Network, 2018. *What is a Safe Community?*. [Online] Available at: http://www.ppscn. org/#:~:text=A%20safe%20community%20 is%20a,risk%20of%20harm%20or%20 injury.&text=Community%20safety%20 is%20not%20only%20about%20 reducing%20and%20preventing%20 injury%20and%20violence. [Accessed December 2020].

Paxson, L. & Franck, K. A., 1989. Public Spaces and Places. In: I. Altman & E. H. Zube, eds. *Women and Urban Public Space: Research, design and policy Issues*. New York: s.n., pp. 121-146.

Safetipin, 2020. *Safetipin*. [Online] Available at: https://safetipin.com/ [Accessed 30 December 2020].

Shehayeb, D., 2008. *Safety and Security in Public Space. In ICPC International Report on Crime Prevention and Community Safety: Trends and Perspectives,* Montreal: ICPC.

Sur, P., 2014. Safety in the Urban Outdoors: Women Negotiating Fear of Crime in the City of Kolkata. *Journal of International Women's Studies,* 15(2), pp. 212-216.

The Sun Daily, 2021. *The Sun Daily*. [Online] Available at: https://www.thesundaily.my/ home/fresh-push-for-sexual-harassment-bill-updated-BH7018131 [Accessed 10 May 2021].

Think City, 2018. *Downtown KL Safety Perception Report,* Kuala Lumpur: Think City.

Uittenbogaard, C., Ahlskog, T. & Grönlund, B., 2018. *Security in Society. Stiftelsen tryggare Sverige (Safer Sweden Foundation),* Stockholm: Jure Förlag AB.

UN WOMEN, 2014. *Ending Violence Against Women*. [Online] Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/ en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/creating-safe-public-spaces

UN WOMEN, 2016. *Women and Sustainable Development Goals,* s.l.: UN Women.

UNHabitat, Women in Cities International, SIDA, Huairou Commission, & CISCSA, 2008. *The Global Assessment on Women's Safety,* Nairobi: UN Habitat.

Universiti Malaya, 2019. *Barriers to Women's Mobility,* Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya.

thinkCITY