

It's not enough for women to 'feel' safe in parks | Eva Wiseman

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5–6 minutes

Last week I wrote about parks. I've been feeling uncommonly agitated recently, a new kind of rage bubbling in the pit of me, increasingly politicised perhaps – it's come upon me as I approach middle age, like acid reflux or gout. And that day the sun was out and the news was thick and I focused on parks, because that was where my lividity landed. It was inevitable, perhaps, because these are the places, as a parent of young children, that I spend much of my time, cheering from the bench, bending down to look at snails. And they're the places, too, that as a migraine-haver and reluctant runner, I circle quickly in leggings on alternate mornings, listening to podcasts about such things as miscarriages of justice or the truth about sugar.

And as in life, so in news – I'm back in the park this week, and so are the papers, to report on a conference called [Women and Girls' Safety in Parks](#). The takeaway is: women should be involved in the design of the UK's parks to tackle "unfair and unequal" safety fears. Research commissioned by Tracy Brabin, the mayor of West Yorkshire, involved interviews with more than 100 women and girls, with most reporting they felt parks were unsafe. "The girls in particular," said Brabin, "were wonderfully individual and brutally honest, challenging us to 'change society' as well as reworking parks." The conclusions were that changes to the design of parks like better lighting, lower hedges and "escape routes" could reduce the risks of harassment and assault. Environmental charity Keep

Britain Tidy's Allison Ogden-Newton said: "It's critical that we understand what makes women and girls feel safe or unsafe across our green spaces and what needs to change to make them feel able to use their local park."

I read this expecting to be cheered, but instead I felt a familiar bleakness, and my mind immediately went to a bar in Brighton in the early 2000s where, upon entry, I was offered an anti-rape lid for my glass. It was a good night; it was a weird night, overshadowed by this grand and well-meant idea that we could prevent "date-rapists" simply by sticking something over the top of our drinks. These little lids joined a long tradition of anti-rape devices, from nail varnish that changes colour when dipped into a drink laced with [Rohypnol](#) to anti-rape underwear that is resistant to attempts at cutting, or has a siren built in. One issue with all of these devices (and there are a few issues) is that they ask potential victims to assume responsibility for their own safety and attempt only to deter individual strangers, rather than address, say, the high level of sexual violence enacted by partners. They're not solutions, they're distractions.

It was the suggestion, I think, that the aim of the project was to make women "feel safe" in parks that took me back to that Brighton bar. "Feel" safe, as opposed to actually "be" safe. I know, I sound dickish and ungrateful, and it's not that I want to minimise the intentions of this project, the attempts to make things better, but God, "escape routes"? This conference and this research is a noble step towards safer parks, but it seems grimly limited by ambition and imagination. Yes, women should probably have more of a say in building our public spaces, not so they can point out the high hedges where men might hide, but because diversity in design benefits everyone. Yes, better designed parks would be welcome, but not if it means quickly cycling past the interviewed girls' real solution, to "change society".

Because, while the bright lights and shortcuts out to the street might make a handful of women feel safer, they are unlikely to actually

prevent men's violence. And not only that, but these adjustments to the places where we play, the places where we exercise and socialise and drink after work, these plans for escape routes, in fact, seem to suggest that this violence is something we should be prepared to live within, to live beside, to accommodate and be vigilant for every time we leave the house. The only real way to make women feel safer is to make sure they are safe.

And while it is far harder and far more complex a task to try to prevent violence by educating around gender equality, funding long-term public campaigns to shift misogynistic beliefs and counter stereotypes, giving men and boys the responsibility to actively stop male violence against women, offering positive ideas about what it means to be a man, and socialising our sons without aggression, shame or emotional repression than it is to cut down a hedge, it is surely worth a go.

There's a reason I'm increasingly obsessed with parks, beyond the fact I'm forced to spend so much time in them. They're the only urban public space, I think, dedicated to freedom. And the effort to uphold that freedom is vital – but only if it focuses on the fact that it's not a dark park that makes women feel unsafe, it's the few violent men that lurk there.

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