

THE 24-HOUR CITY – IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMENS SAFETY

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Visions of a 24-hour city

If we think about a 24-hour city we may have an ideal in our minds. Perhaps visions from our holidays abroad of a bustling and lively street life, cafes and restaurants, a diverse range of people, families, young and old, men and women, wandering through the city centre enjoying the atmosphere. Here in this 24-hour city we can imagine feeling safer, protected by the numbers and range of people and premises around us.

There are already 24-hour cities in Britain. There are a number of areas around the country with a night time economy. Areas where there are 24-hour supermarkets, shops, restaurants and takeaways. There are the 'entertainment centres' – the West End, the city centres of Manchester, Leeds and Nottingham, among others. In the West End there are more people on the street between 4 and 5 am than there are in the morning rush hour.

Fear of crime

Where do women as a group fit into all this? We know women feel much less safe than men alone on the streets after dark and I think it's worth reminding ourselves just how much less safe women feel. Of course hard data is quite hard to come by but the British Crime Survey (BCS) does give us some indicators. Women are much, much more concerned about violent crime than men. This from the 1998 British Crime Survey:

- 31% of women as opposed to 6% of men are very worried about rape
- 27% of women as opposed to 8% of men are very worried about physical attack
- 18% of women as opposed to 3% of men feel very unsafe on the street

On the face of it this ideal of a 24 hour city centre may offer women and others who feel vulnerable to crime natural visibility and surveillance. There is no question that women's fear of crime affects our quality of life and limits our opportunities and that the fear of crime is based in experience. Again from the British Crime Survey

- 10% of women feel that their quality of life is greatly affected by fear of crime

In the light of the licensing reform bill now making it's way through parliament and due to be on the statute books this summer our 24-hour city is one where you can get a drink at any time of the night. As for public support a recent MORI poll found that 39% (which was 48% of men and 30 % of women) supported a relaxation in pub opening times and 39% did not.

Who will be involved in the 24-hour city?

Who are the women who will participate in this 24-hour city? Well, most obviously, women as workers: till operators in 24 hour shops and supermarkets, waitresses, bar staff, and cleaners. These are part of the army of people that will be needed to service our 24 hour lifestyle. In Westminster it is estimated that within the next ten years up to 90,000 people will be working

in the entertainment industry up to and beyond 11pm. For those women, travelling to and from work will be an issue, as well as any safety concerns at work. The manager of a 24-hour Sainsbury's in Haringey describes his store as being placed in an area where there is 24-hour activity. He identifies the vast majority of his customers during the night as being car users despite its proximity to other local 'services' and residential areas. Although he was unable to break his customer base down into men and women he acknowledged that at least a third of his night staff are women. Their shift runs from 9 pm to 7am precisely to avoid safe travel problems during the night.

Of course women will also be customers of the night time economy. Westminster again estimates that women, with greater earning power, will make up a greater proportion of the customer base over the next ten years whilst stating that concerns about safety will also increase, particularly for women. In the West End Entertainment Impact Study, 2001, Westminster states that:

Fear of sexual harassment and violence restricts women's choice of entertainment and leisure activities and spaces. Fear for safety is predicted to remain a growing social trend in the future as crime levels are projected to increase.

Getting to and from these 24 hours centres will continue to be a problem – safe transport for has always been a major issue, particularly for women.

Women will also make up a large proportion of the residents of these areas. How can they expect to benefit from this new economy?

24-hour entertainment centres – the story so far

Crime and disorder has always been associated with British drinking habits and one of the arguments put forward for supporting the abolition of pub closing times is that staggered closing hours will reduce crime and disorder. This is not an assertion that has widespread support, among those who disagree are the British Entertainment and Discotheque Association (BEDA) and Westminster Council who state that

Licensed premises in Westminster already have staggered closing hours. 40% of the licensed premises close between 11pm and midnight, a further 40% by 1am with the remaining 20% closing after 1am (which cause the police most concern).

This is not an argument against flexible opening hours in itself but rather for careful planning on the impact of deregulation. The Soho Society states

'..we believe that abolition of permitted hours should not be undertaken until a better system for dealing with nuisance and crime and disorder has been put into place.'

These entertainment centres with extended licensing hours have had real problems with crime and disorder and alcohol related issues. Disorder on the streets with, in Liverpool among other places, rising incidents of assaults throughout the night. Staggered closing times, far from reducing these problems, seems only to spread them over a longer period of time – putting more pressure on the police and adding to the nuisance caused to residents.

Litter and fouling of pavements and gardens also becomes a problem and, as the BCS, acknowledges these add to the concern about crime. In these centres market led licensing policies have allowed the areas to be saturated in high volume drinking venues, forcing out smaller business and reducing the range of entertainment service available. In order for an area like this not to exclude the vast majority of the population there must be a mixed use of the area and consequently local authorities must be able and allowed to plan for the range of uses for properties taking into account a wide range of interests and concerns.

An opportunity for planning inclusion and community safety?

The new licensing bill currently under report stage in the Lords has given rise to real worries in this respect. In a positive way it has transferred the administration of licensing away from the magistrates into the hands of the local authority, but it ties the hands of planners in those local authorities who will only be able to respond retroactively to residential and other concerns rather than proactively in terms of real planning that is 'joined up' with renewal, regeneration and crime and disorder strategies. The bill has been strongly criticised from a wide range of organisations and it is to be hoped the amendments to the bill, as well as the guidance that eventually accompanies, it will take these issues into account.

That, however, is not the whole story. Even with real powers to plan the development and use of entertainment areas, unless local authorities proactively disaggregate the concerns of men and women in relation to community safety issues then women's safety concerns will once again take a back seat. All planning must assess the impact on women and men, gender cutting through all the groups that have been recognised as being under-represented in the planning process. Until planning authorities positively commit to mainstreaming gender as a matter of policy and practice we can only expect the women's safety concerns will continue to deepen and crime and fear of crime will have an ever-increasing negative effect on women's opportunities and quality of life.

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