

Citizenship and Public Space. A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this research project is to connect the exercise of citizenship with access to, and use of public space for women. The hypothesis that women's hindered access [1] to public space is influencing their exercise of substantive citizenship, and thus their career choices, their representation in public office, and the amount of freedom of movement they dispose of will be guiding the direction of our research. We want to establish the truth value of this statement through the intersection of urban and gender studies in order to generate strategies pertinent enough to deal with the issue. This study would mean another step taken into the direction of gender equity, which would directly improve the body of knowledge policy-makers, urbanists, sociologists, and human geographers would have at their disposal in elaborating studies, strategies, and in formulating advice; therewithal, it implies an indirect economic benefit, as safer cities are more prosperous. Our project is conceived as a comparison between the present status of women from different backgrounds in Bucharest and Vienna: a post-communist, relatively economically-challenged Eastern European capital and a Central European gender-mainstreaming oriented capital, considered to be one of the safest and most livable cities in Europe.

Keywords: urban planning, inclusive city, gender-mainstreaming, cities for women.

1. Introduction

The subject of our study is the influence of the urban environment on gender performance and gender discrimination of women. The study methods are both quantitative and qualitative data collection through interviews and focus groups in two European cities: Bucharest and Vienna, with emphasis on the gradient influence of urban forms have on each other (there are major functional differences between the two — e.g. Vienna is constituted of 50% equally distributed social housing in, whereas Bucharest tends to ghetto the public housing, if it exists at all). Given the extensive body of knowledge on Western cities and a lack thereof on the rest of Europe, our focus comes to adjust the balance with central and eastern case studies. There are important structural differences both between Eastern and Western cities, but similarities to be studied under the same lens.

The practical question we aim to answer is how do women perceive their hindered access to public space and how does that influence other aspects of their lives like exercising citizenship, access to public office, civic involvement, career choices? The question is to be tackled across class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and ethnicity with the aim of drawing intersectional conclusions, taking into consideration the particularities of each body. We aim to make contact in both cities with NGOs involved in urban communities and to thus gain permission and access to a relevant number of people who would then credibly inform our research. Vienna experienced a strong raise in gender mainstreaming practices, “the fair shared city”, while Bucharest is still reluctant to use the word ‘gender’.

2. Objectives

It has been widely debated [2] [3] [4] and proved [5] that women are usually the major transmitters of the public space [6]. Women also constitute the usual victims of street harassment in the public space [7] [8], which further generates defence mechanisms involving recalculating routes [8], avoiding certain areas, not looking men in the eyes, not

answering when catcalled, not stopping, walking fast, watching their body language, watching their attire, being aware of the time of the day [9]. The stress of so doing pushes women to avoid certain areas of the city altogether [10] to the point of moving out of their homes if the surroundings become hostile [9]; it restricts their access to public space, implicitly controlling their trajectories, thus the timetable of their entire day [10].

After Fenster's feminist analysis of Lefevbre's "right to the city", citizenship [11] evokes two fundamental rights of the citizen:

- The right to appropriate (the right to use) urban space;
- The right of participation.

In her comparative analysis of London and Jerusalem she finds that women are the second-class citizens who cannot fully exercise these rights. Lack of appropriation of the urban space and lack of participation in its making lead to women feeling alienated, having no means to create a sense of belonging [12].

Bondi and Rose [13] highlight Pratt and Hanson's work [14], arguing that "differences are always constructed through lived geographies of placement. This means that axes of identity such as those of race, class, sexuality, age and gender never operate a-spatially but are inextricably bound up with the particular spaces and places within which, and in relation to which, people live.", which makes for a strong case in the favour of a thorough comparative study between the western and eastern gendered urban practices.

Bondi and Rose [13] further quote Melissa Gilbert [15], Linda Peake [16], Valerie Preston and Guida Man [17], and Stuart Aitken [18], saying that "Qualifying feminist appeals to cities as spaces of fluidity and movement, they showed how locally many urban lives are still lived (...) although this does not necessarily apply to all groups of women [19],,, implying a need for an intersectional approach, which we aim to integrate in our study.

3. Women and the Public Space. Factors of Influence

There are three interrelated factors which keep women alien to the urban space: street harassment, poor (or unilateral or generic) urban design, and a poor public transport system. Each of them generates certain behaviours (from the part of women) and has major consequences on women's lives (independently of their behaviour). Their consequences are detailed in what follows:

3.1. Street Harassment (men's control over women's movement and bodies)

Street harassment is a major issue, manifested to different degrees all the way from the western world to the east. In the west, women slowly gained access to the public space – first in the company of the husband, father, brother, then friends, colleagues, always needing an escort to shield their reputation, then on their own. However, although formally women acquired the right to use public space unescorted, a woman alone is for many men an invitation to intrude [20]. For some men still, the presence of women evokes sexual promise [21] embedding the idea that this is the reason women are there.

As women emancipated and began transiting the public space on their own, they remained targets in the eyes of men. When harassing, men reinforce their control on women's bodies, instilling fear of sexual violence which keeps them submissive and unresponsive [20]. Women's reaction to street harassment varies throughout the globe, with more conservative countries seeing a rise in women drivers specifically as a response [22]. In the West, however, we see an emancipatory movement reclaiming public space for women (Vienna, Amsterdam). The difference in response finds its answer in the Western tradition of using public space as a resource for citizenship [23], representation, and pure pleasure, while the East typically uses it as a transitory passage from one point to another [4].

Experiences and attempts at violence, and incidents of sexual harassment produce a space from which women are excluded on account of their gender. Social and emotional aspects, such as increased feelings of vulnerability, lack of social support, and a feeling of not having control over what is happening to oneself, have spatial consequences [24].

3.2. Urban Design

However subtle, the particularities of urban design have a massive impact on the well-being of urban inhabitants [25] [26] [27] [28]. Yet women, as one group not taken into consideration by "generic" design, face particular challenges generated by the morphology of the city.

First, disconnected urban wastelands are facilitating grounds for the unfolding of violence, as are blind walls or cul-de-sacs without natural surveillance [28] or streets without ground-floor activity [26]. They enable "turf wars" between gangs, thus confiscating urban land from all dwellers – and every unsafe place is more so for women, minorities, and the elderly, at the same time providing enabling grounds for sexual harassment.

Secondly, absence of urban facilities adapted to the female body and needs keeps women indoors (lack of public toilets – women need to urinate more often than men do [29] and their periods [2] require attendance). A myriad of football fields exclude women from certain areas, but their tax money is still used for financing them. The zonification of the modernist city that many American urban areas were modelled upon put a considerable distance between the points women have to reach in order to accomplish their routine tasks (caring for people, working, picking up children from school, taking them to the doctor, etc.), which considerably reduces their amount of free time. Furthermore, because of the common misconception that women prefer the indoors [30] public policies enter the vicious cycle of not even trying to provide suitable milieus for women to access public space.

Lack of representation in the public space throws women into a spiral of non-belonging, erasing them from the city's history as well as off its streets while need constantly brings them out of their homes, in a sense of illegitimacy.

However, Bondi and Rose emphasise that "these developments [focusing on the mutual construction of gendered identities and spaces] are fruitful and productive in helping to uncover pervasive assumptions about gender, in problematising a panoply of emotional

experiences of which fear is but one, and in overcoming a polarity between viewing urban space as either constraining or enabling for women.”

3.3. Public Transport

The third factor is strongly related to the previous two and it significantly impacts women’s possibility of disposing of their own time. Given the myriad network people involved in “care work” (overwhelmingly women) navigate daily [31], as opposed to the simple trajectory home – work – home, the proximity as well as transportation connectivity between key urban points are the two decisive components in the configuration of a typical day in a woman’s life.

Because strategies employed by women to avoid street harassment involve going around certain areas instead of through them when that would prove more efficient, public transport plays a key role in saving their time. However, especially in Eastern Europe, there is a considerable lack of strict regulation, which in certain cases makes using public transport a highly inefficient alternative.

Space and Time are two invaluable resources for access to substantive citizenship [32] [33]. Our premise is that street harassment, poor urban design and poor transport systems heavily impact women’s abilities to develop their full civic, urban and political persona, as well as their substantive citizenship.

Lack of women in public office often reiterates strategies unfit to their needs, which further takes away women’s access to public space, thus thwarting their access to public office. It’s a vicious circle that can only be broken through addressing street harassment, urban design and public transport integratively.

We argue that a “fair shared city” [31] is more welcoming to everyone without disadvantaging men in any way. We aim to focus our study on the different approaches to public space, transport and street harassment on a comparison between Vienna and Bucharest. This choice allows for enough similarities and differences to make for a savoury study of women’s urban life.

4. Research Questions

Our main research question is „how do women perceive their hindered access to public space and how does that influence other aspects of their lives such as exercising citizenship, accessing public office, civic involvement, career choices?”

Hereafter a set of sub-questions derived from operating the concepts formerly implied.

1. How does access to public space or lack thereof influence women’s substantive citizenship?
2. What methods of women ghettoisation [8] are used and which are conscious, which unconscious?
3. How do poor urban design and generic urban planning reinforce women’s oppression in the public space?
4. What role does urban design play in street harassment and vice-versa?

5. What impact does representation or lack thereof have on women's sense of belonging in the city and how does that further shape their use of the public space?
6. Conscious and unconscious oppression of women in the public space: street harassment (with its consequences); urban design (with its consequences – surveillance, aesthetics, cleanliness, accessibility); public transportation (with its consequences).

5. Research Context

Given the strong similarities and massive migration phenomenon between Eastern and Western Europe, together with a powerful tendency to systematically compare them, the geographical coordinates of this study will mainly encompass these two cultural areas.

Western (and Central) Europe shows a strong tradition of both oppression (bourgeoisie, colonialism, empires) as well as individual freedom (the French revolution, Industrial Revolution, Civil Rights Movements, Feminism, etc.), while Eastern Europe is still subjugated to the supremacy of dictatorships (or shadows thereof) and is witness to an embryonic fight for civil rights. However, since entering the EU many Eastern-European ex-communist countries have actively been fighting for the same rights as the West has fifty years ago (abortion rights, political equality, equal pay, etc.), which would make for a highly compelling comparison. Moreover, part of Eastern Europe (especially the Balkans) was heavily influenced by Middle-Eastern practices, many of which are still visible to this day in law, urban design, mentality, traditions, etc., making it a fertile terrain for fruitful questioning likely to be useful to other parts of the world as well.

Scholarly debates, apparently antithetic, argue on one side that the prevalent sentiment women feel in the public space is fear, with high reported levels thereof in elderly women – while data suggests that young racialised males are the bodies most exposed to violence [13] – and on the other side, that the city is a place for women's liberation [34]. We argue that rather than being contradictory, the two perspectives are complementary and the debate cannot be carried in the absence of an intersectional perspective that would also account for age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and class. The interdependence of the two stances is endemic in many applied urban studies [10] [35] [36] Thus, these various studies elaborate how urban public space is 'purposely representational of certain societal ideals' (...) and how it is also shaped through routine everyday practices, and organised resistance to, and transgressions of, such regulation (...)." [13]

However progressive and inclusive the western part of the world becomes, there are important, neighbouring areas where women and minorities are prevented through deliberate or implicit tactics from the appropriation of public space. We want to study and emphasise the difference and similarities generated by culture and everyday practise of citizenship between the Western and Eastern (understood here as Eastern Europe) World in order to enable the development of actual urban tactics of inclusion.

Moreover, the communist dictatorial hegemony froze the civil rights movement, thus submitting the woman to a bi-layered patriarchy: husband and state, while completely erasing the voices of minorities and/or the minorities themselves. As Jenny Robinson

argued, urban studies are profoundly dependent on a “Western, developmentalist concept of modernity” [13] and impose a fictitious modernisation strategy for the poorer countries – a problem we wish to address.

Surprisingly, though, there are studies in feminist geography which explicitly evoke higher geographical inequality in more socially equal countries than in more unequal ones, like the United States and Sudan:”the pre-pubescent girl in Sudan experiences greater equity in spatial range with boys in her cohort than her counterpart in a large metropolis in the United States, and may have considerable freedom to explore the environment.” [37]

which calls for a thorough comparison between the East and the West that would challenge any canon, thus adding to the complex layers of the intersection between the environment and the gender variable.

The emerging research on gendered geography in Romania [38] is pointing towards a wide variety of issues ranging from sexual harassment, to lack of urban representation, sexist messages, and transportation issues. Even though living in a city is liberating for women comparing with their lives in the country side [34], there is much evidence of sexist oppression in Bucharest, the Romanian capital. Here, the two facets of the debate brought forth by Bondi and Rose [13] are irreparably intertwined making for a convoluted topic of discussion.

6. Methodology

We aim to research the questions through ethnomethodological qualitative methods in virtue of their subjective quality. Grünberg warns us of the tendency to superimpose the dichotomy reason-nature, science-experience, with the quantitative-qualitative methods [39]. Without wishing to make a quality distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods, given the phenomenological aspect of the urban lived experience, our study would extensively benefit from the predominant use of the former.

After Schultz, Husserl, and Wagner, the ethnomethodological approach primarily draws from the interpretation of certain subjective experiences felt in relationship with the city. The approach assumes that the lived experience is interpreted by an active consciousness, which plays a part in generating the perceived object of experience.

“Garfield and Sacks contest all the a priori bonds with an existing social structure and concentrate rather on the way individuals re-enact and manage the social structures, attributing meanings to them.” [40]

The quantitative method will be employed in order to identify specific problematic areas in all three categories of street harassment, urban design, and public transportation. Behavioural mapping will be used to determine the most problematic areas of chosen cities — we are to pay special attention to their common urban development, similar social composition and similar described urban “atmosphere”, revealing the mechanisms that seem to add up to what might pass as “free choice” but are in fact a series of unconscious constraints which manipulate the individual.

The people we will target for interviews are female, middle and lower class, and of different ethnicities with the aim of interviewing both representatives of the majority as well as the minority. For example, in Bucharest, Romania, we would choose Caucasian Romanian women as representative of the majority and Roma Romanian women representing the minority.

To relevantly conclude on the comparative study, we would use GIS methods as means to synthesise the information gathered. It would allow for further appropriation of the GIS methods by feminist study, thus further democratising the practice.

“Simultaneously, the humanities and social sciences experienced a 'spatial turn' expressed in the increased use of spatial and cartographic metaphors. (...) They have examined cartography's legacy in the production of authority through mapping people and territories from a position of power (e.g., colonial, state, surveillance, or military).” [41]

7. Relevance

Although the advantages of the city undoubtedly liberated women compared to the country side, as Wilson argues [21] and although some women (usually middle to upper class white women, especially who drive or have a driver) are not as exposed to the dangers of the city as are the other groups of women and minorities, the issue of the woman as alien in the city, along with blacks, other people of colour, sexual minorities and ethnic minorities is still prevalent in 2020.

See the debate summed-up by Vacchelli and Kofman: In her ground-breaking book *The Sphinx in the City* Elisabeth Wilson [21] argues that feminist scholarship concerned with cities was in danger of perpetuating anti-urbanism already prevalent in much mainstream urban theory and practice [13] where the city was depicted as a place that constrains, disadvantages and oppresses women. Wilson condemned much feminist writing as ‘hostile to the city’, and further argued that ‘recent feminist contributions to the discussion of urban problems have tended to restrict themselves narrowly to issues of safety, welfare and protection’ [13] instead of asserting women’s rights to the risks of the city recognising that the city has consistently emancipated women more than rural life or suburban domesticity ever has. On the contrary Wilson states that cities enable women to escape the constraints of normative expectations by widening their horizons. We see urban space as constructed by gender, class and race difference where minorities are disadvantaged and representationally excluded, as with Muslims in Paris or migrant women in many cities, such as Buenos Aires and Zurich [42].

In light of this we propose a comparative study of the gendered urban experience in Bucharest and Vienna which would serve as basis for a critical analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of both areas through listing morphological similarities and differences together with women’s perceptions thereof. Such an endeavour would allow for a parallel emphasis on success strategies (Vienna) [31] in contrast with sexist cities (Bucharest) [38]. The profound inequalities cities present the citizens with are generated by a series of mishaps and/or unconscious bias. We aim to diminish the possibility of mishap to a minimum in order to be able to deal with bias separately and without confusion, through

directed and efficient action. The dwellers of our cities, be they male, female, or other, deserve to live in equity – given that a “fair shared city” would be a rise in welfare for every citizen, we are firmly convinced that this study will be relevant to all.

Furthermore, as there is a growing pressure to design more sustainable cities, taking into account dimensions such as biodiversity and technology, we will inevitably replicate the discriminations already embedded in our cities should we leave them unchecked. Gender is, of course, only one of the dimensions worth researching, together with exclusions based on disability, the pressure of profit on our natural areas and of green spaces in the city, etc. However, we only stand a chance of mending the wrongs by deeply understanding the forces that make our cities and addressing them in an integrated, intersectional manner.

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