THINKING PUBLIC SPACES THROUGH THE SPATIALITY OF ARAB WOMEN

The case of Nablus, Palestine

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Dissertation Summary

This dissertation provides a deep insight on the urban feminist scholarship. The aim is to pave the way towards a more coherent and nuanced picture of the urban experiences of women in Arab societies. To do so, the gender conceptualization of public spaces has first been situated within the larger socio-spatial perspective of public spaces. The interrelations between spatial configurations and social processes thus have been articulated. This gender-based approach to public spaces has helped to zoom in more on the interrelations between spatial arrangements and the construction of gender inequality, differences, and power relations. The perception of public space as a place where women’s oppression or freedom is constructed, fixed, and contested has created the base ground for feminist contribution to planning theory. Accordingly, the critical interventions and planning approaches by the feminist scholars have been mapped and explained thoroughly.

However, by the course of the research, it is noted that the spatiality of Arab women is not largely examined in the urban feminist literature. Indeed, a tangible gap of knowledge that needs to be filled. Accordingly, the dissertation provides an overview of the feminist argumentations on the spatiality of Arab women. These arguments, to a large extent, discuss the social constraints believed to hinder Arab women’s participation in public life (namely Islam, cultural values and social structure). This dissertation, however, goes beyond that and also provides an analysis of the physical constraints generated by the spatial configurations of Arab cities, and the effect thus the physical environment has on the spatiality of Arab women. Based on these readings on the socio-spatial aspects of the urban lives of Arab women, I was able to develop a critical perspective towards the urban feminist theory by highlighting the limitations of its application in Arab contexts. The logical sequence of this critical perspective confirms that gender-based planning approaches are highly influenced by spatial arrangements and gender stratification. Accordingly, the planning interventions, which are needed to create gender-sensitive urban spaces, are not universal and differ between cultures and societies. The previous theoretical arguments were underpinned by empirical research conducted in Nablus, Palestine. The field work aims to analyze the spatiality of women in Nablus. A set of observations and semi-structured interviews were designed to examine the social and physical constraints affecting the everyday lives of more than 100 women in five urban case studies: two neighborhoods, two outdoor recreational spaces and the commercial city center of Nablus. Most women in Nablus have demonstrated passive engagements with the examined public
spaces—mainly for two reasons: (1) the lack of spatial opportunities that meet their socio-spatial needs; and (2) that they are sensitive to societal criticism and observation.

In conclusion, three strategic planning interventions are recommended to increase women's active engagement in the built environment. First, in residential and recreational urban areas, semi-public spaces are perceived as strategic tools that would contribute to 'empowerment' and 'spatial justice', in the sense that women in these spaces find a temporary retreat from the social constraints and gendered power relations. In other words, semi-public spaces internalize long-term strategic objective: which is providing a large number of women in Nablus with more friendly environments till they claim their position in fully public spaces. Second, in the commercial city center, it is advised to provide more spatial opportunities that respond to the needs and expectations of women. The aim is to attract women in Nablus to spend more time in the city center, and thus encouraging them to appropriate the space, as effectively as men in Nablus do. Third, the concept of ‘shared spaces’ is introduced. As there is a pressure on land in Nablus because of the Israeli occupation policies, public schools’ yards could be regulated within the planning system to be used by the inhabitants in weekends and public holidays. This would provide alternative social outdoor semi-public spaces for the inhabitants. Women would be the most benefit from this policy, as these spaces would encourage them to organize their social activities outside ‘indoor’ spaces.