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# towards Habitat III a gender perspective

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**towards Habitat III  
a gender perspective**





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## The gendered dimension of leisure: the case of young women in Athens.

*Polina Prentou*

### *Abstract*

The use of urban public space by different groups of people is affected by the organisation of urban space and its regulations. The latest form different types of restrictions and controls of access to places into the city, based on various axes of differentiation and socially constructed hierarchies, such as the ones of gender, class or age of users.

Leisure is a field of socio-spatial practices that helps shed light into how city space is lived. This paper contends that seemingly neutral definitions of leisure as “time free from paid work” are often based on ideologies of the appropriate roles of men and women. For women, leisure is related to the chance of having a “time to be yourself”.



*Shopping in the center of Athens (source: google search)*

In exploring the issue of leisure, the paper aims to contribute to the aforementioned problematic and demonstrate how and why women's presence in public space is limited by various restrictions. The self-control and the fear of violence are present in women's practices in urban space, including practices related to leisure. But, on the other side, the confidence of some women to be present and use the urban space reconfigures and reproduces space available for other women.

The paper discusses everyday practices adopted by women for the use of urban space in Athens. It presents findings from 11 interviews of young women, aged 21-27 years old who live in Athens, about their leisure activities, the limitations they face on urban space and the strategies that they adopt to address them.

#### **KEY WORDS**

*leisure activities; young women; everyday practices; gender*

### **La dimensione di genere dello svago: il caso delle giovani ad Atene**

L'uso dello spazio pubblico urbano da parte dei diversi gruppi di persone è influenzata dalla organizzazione dello spazio urbano e dai suoi regolamenti. Questi ultimi forma determinano diversi tipi di restrizioni e di controlli di accesso ai luoghi in città, basati su vari assi di differenziazione e su gerarchie socialmente costruite, come quelli di genere, di classe o di età degli utenti.

Il tempo libero è un campo di pratiche socio-spaziali che aiuta a far luce sul modo in cui lo spazio urbano è vissuto. Questo articolo sostiene che le definizioni apparentemente neutre di svago come "tempo libero dal lavoro retribuito" sono spesso basate su ideologie dei ruoli definiti per gli uomini e le donne. Per le donne, il tempo libero è legato alla possibilità di avere un "tempo per sé".

Nell'esplorare la questione del tempo libero, l'articolo si propone di contribuire alla suddetta problematica e dimostrare come e perché la presenza delle donne nello spazio pubblico è limitato da varie restrizioni. L'auto-controllo e la paura della violenza sono presenti nelle pratiche delle donne nello spazio urbano, comprese le pratiche legate al tempo libero. Ma, dall'altro lato, la fiducia che mostrano alcune donne nell'utilizzare lo spazio urbano riconfigura e riproduce spazio disponibile per altre donne.

L'articolo analizza le pratiche quotidiane adottate dalle donne per l'uso dello spazio urbano di Atene. Presenta i risultati di 11 interviste di giovani donne, di età compresa tra i 21 e i 27 anni che vivono ad Atene, sulle loro attività nel tempo libero, le limitazioni che devono affrontare nello spazio urbano e le strategie che adottano per affrontarle.

#### **PAROLE CHIAVE**

*attività di svago, giovani donne, pratiche quotidiane, genere*



## The gendered dimension of leisure: The case of young women in Athens.

*Polina Prentou*

### 1. Introduction

The study of the urban space, in this paper, derives from the assumption that there is a co-construction of urban space and spatial bodies. Urban space is formed to a significant extent by the everyday practices of the citizens (Simonsen, 2003).

The term “gender,” as used to describe social constructed roles and behaviors of men and women, is a fundamental tool for feminist research and it is also adopted here. Issues like work, mobility and leisure also have a gender dimension. Women and men use and perceive urban city spaces differently. They use different formes of tactics, as their presence in the urban space is often controlled and limited. As de Certeau (1984) mentions, practitioners of the city follow the urban pathways, but at the same time they produce their own stories, shaped out of the fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces (cited in Simonsen, 2003). The city is becoming, in that way, a collection of stories. These stories are also treatments of space in that they suggest what to do, where and when. Different mental and symbolic mechanisms are involved in this weaving of spatial and signifying practices and they organise the invisible meanings of the urban space. They result in making places habitable or not (Simonsen, 2003).

The messages from the social environment of the people about the role of each social group in urban space play an important role in the formation of these mechanisms. The aspect of access to public space is one of the more critical ones. An ideal public space open to all different social groups seems not to exist, it is denied in practice. What it is meant by public is constructed and controlled by dominant social groups. In other words, public space could be identified as sets of multiple and differentiated public arenas to which some groups have access but from which others are excluded (Mc Dowell, 1999). Dominant groups use urban public space as a means of power and control, excluding the more vulnerable social groups. The exclusion of social groups from public space could also be done on the grounds either of transgressive behaviour or, alternatively, on the grounds of their need for protection from the dangers of public arena (Mc Dowell, 1999).

For women, their presence in city space and leisure activities is not taken for granted. It is often questioned, shrugged off and it causes a social alarm to dominant social groups. For women, the “right to the city” includes the struggles to emerge from the obscurity of the city and to shift the boundaries that separate public from private, city space from home (Vaïou, 2000). Because of the strong associations between women and the home, the investigations of public spaces have often focused on the problems and dangers

<sup>1</sup> The paper has been based on the oral presentation at the “Colloque international Masculins/Féminins, Dialogues géographiques et au-delà”, Biennale scientifique, December 10-12, 2012, Grenoble, France

that women experience “outside home”, compared with an assumption that men may take for granted their freedom in and dominance of these spaces (Mc Dowell, 1999). However, city spaces where women might escape from the confines of domesticity and male presence and control do exist, even if this happens only for short and temporary periods. The public and semi-public arenas of cities form those paradoxical spaces for women, where danger but also relative freedom awaits them (Mc Dowell, 1999).

The research is based on 11 interviews of young women, aged 21-27 years old that live and study or work in Athens, that are conducted in 2008-2009. All of the women are white, native-Athenian and belong to middle-class or bourgeois families. The interviews are semi-structured. They follow a series of questions about the leisure activities of the interviewees, the limitations that they face and the strategies that they follow. Some questions go back to the childhood and adolescence of the interviewees, as a way to better understand the context in which their femininity was created and how that affects their everyday life strategies.

## 2. A working definition of leisure

The term of leisure is defined through ideologies of masculinity and femininity, through ideas about the appropriate male and female roles, concerns and behavior (Green, 1996). After World War II, cities, mainly in Northern Europe, are formed through the assumption that men are travelling back and forth to the city centre for work and women are responsible for house-keeping and they are linked to their neighbourhood. The formation of the city in that way set the women away from the city centre and leisure activities and linked them with the house and the private sphere (Vaious, 1994, 2000; Vrychea, 2003; Wearing 1998). The definition of leisure as “time free for paid work” is based on working-class men and assumes that everyone has access to periods of “free time” (Green, 1996).

However, the everyday life of other social groups, such as women and young people, could not fit in that model. Young women, in this research context, define leisure as the time that they decide to spend on themselves, on activities that they wish to do. Most of the times, leisure has no specific characteristics, such as duration and frequency. Their free time is the time that remains from study or work obligations or other regular activities.

Time for leisure does not always exist. Because you always have things to do... but you decide to stop them and give some time to yourself. You know you do not have time for leisure... but you are so stressed that you really need a small break, so you go out. It is up to you to decide what to do. (Eleni, 24, postgraduate student on bioinformatics)

Other regular activities often include home-related chores, as shopping and house cleaning. The gender division of housework is evident in all interviews. It is women, either the interviewees or their mothers or sisters, which are responsible for house caring.

The men of the families are mostly related to business or errands outside home, and that only when it is necessary.

My mum is responsible for housework, but I help her a lot. I actually do a large part of home-related chores. (Mariza, 23, undergraduate student on Mining Engineering)

The time needed for home-related chores is an important part of what is defined as leisure. As Mariza mentions, if she could, she would like to take that time for herself.

Housework is a significant part of my free time. I like doing some of the chores, but, mostly, I do them in order to help my mother. I do the chores that I know my mum does not like doing. (Mariza, 23)

In their leisure time, the majority of the women that I interviewed choose activities without a specific plan, such as to go out for a coffee, to go to a theatre or a cinema. They mention as significant and important the fact that they can choose where to go, when and with whom. Those activities allow them to “escape”, even for a while, from their daily program. Some of the interviewees also choose to participate in a scheduled activity, such as foreign language lessons or sports, or to be a member of a sign-language group. Tzeni, the young woman that is doing the sign-language courses, stresses the necessity of being useful to the society, even through leisure activities.

Doing sign-language courses is something special. Through such a leisure activity, you can be useful to the others and to the society. (Tzeni, 24, undergraduate student in Medicine)

Therefore, leisure activities can act as “heterotopias”, as Foucault uses this term. Foucault suggests that “heterotopias” are “those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even opposite of other” (Foucault, 1984: 252, cited in Wearing, 1998). In contrast to “utopias” which are fictional critiques of locality, without any locality, “heterotopias” could be real places of difference, which act as counter-sites or compensatory sites to everyday activity places (Wearing, 1998). Foucault uses the term “heterotopias” to describe spaces of resistance to dominant groups or ideologies, spaces for the renegotiation of the self. Leisure and leisure activities can act at that way. It could provide a personal space for resistance to domination, a space where there is room for the self to expand beyond what one is being told one should be. Leisure as “my space” could also include other people, relationships and group resistance. But it is the person that chooses how to use them in some way (Wearing, 1998).

Thus, spaces of leisure could be found everywhere, at home, at work or in city space. Young women in this sample, rarely mention time spent at home as leisure. However, when they choose to do home related chores, they have learned to enjoy them and consider them as part of their leisure. Open public spaces, like parks, squares and pedestrian ways, could be used as spaces of leisure. They could act as meeting spaces for people of different age, class and other social groupings. They are spaces where people could walk, meet friends, and get to know city space better.

### 3. The use of urban space through leisure

Examining the practices of leisure activities and spaces of leisure in the city, the differential types of restrictions of access and use of urban space faces among social groups cannot be ignored. Restrictions or limitations deriving from the family and wider social control, as well as from urban space, affect leisure and leisure activities. Issues of control from the family environment, self-control posed by the participants themselves and the concerns regarding matters of safety in city space are the main types of limitations that the interviewees mentioned.

#### 3.1. Messages from the social environment

Inside the family space, parents are used to ask details about the leisure activities of their daughters, in order to control time spend outside the home. In most of the cases, they make phone calls or they wait awake until their children return home. The interviewees note that even in cases that parents do not express their disagreement verbally, they make their daughters feel guilty of their leisure activities.

I may tell him (my father) that I will be back at 1 am at night, but I know he does not like it. My father is used to stay awake till I return home. So, that way, even he does not express verbally, he shows his disagreement. It is like saying, “come back home, it is time for me to sleep”. (Tzeni, 24)

If it is late at night, after 12 am, and I am still outside home, my parents make phone calls. If I do not return home, they do not go to sleep. Especially my mum does. (Efi, 23, undergraduate student on Architecture)

The attitude expressed by women's parents, focusing on the concern to know where their daughters are, is a result of their anxiety about safety in urban space. This concern is related to gender-based roles and stereotypes. The dominant rules for women relate them with the home, the private sphere, and present the public sphere as dangerous for them (Green, 1990).

The construction of women identities often focuses on women vulnerability and, thus, the dangers of public space. But, what is known through several examples of empirical feminist research, it is that the fear and the insecurity of women in public are significantly greater than the real risk that they may encounter (Morrell, 1996). This fear is also socially constructed through parental warnings, discussions among friends, daily warnings that are being expressed in discussions with various parties, and the overall cultural reproduction of ideologies about women and the family (Valentine, 1992, cited in Koskela, 1997).

The stereotypes than link women with home still exist and they are transferred through the social environment. The interviewees mentioned that the gendered division of home-related chores and the gendered characteristics of some leisure activities tend to lead children to learn acceptable behavior patterns from the older persons of the same gender, the girls from their mothers, and the boys from their fathers (Shannon



and Shaw, 2008).

My mum prompted us, my sister and me, to learn and practice with embroidery act, to learn skills. She also does embroidery art and she likes it. (Tzeni, 24)

At the age of 8, my mum started asking me to do some chores. It was a motive to be more creative and gain a sense of duty inside home. (Mariza, 23)

As I. M. Young (1990) points out, women learn from a young age what is considered to be an appropriate spatial behavior code. They are encouraged to be less exploratory, more fearful and less physically active than men (see also Franck and Paxson, 1989).

Women do not use full capacities of their bodies: they rarely use whole body in physical effort, but just in parts; they usually hold their hands close to the body and legs close together, which make them more immobile; they often hesitate and are insecure in the abilities of their bodies; they experience their bodies as fragile and they are afraid of being hurt. (p. 33)

The female participants of the research, as they have been raised in a family environment with such limitations, they have also learned to follow what is considered to be the appropriate spatial code even in cases that there are no limitations from their families.

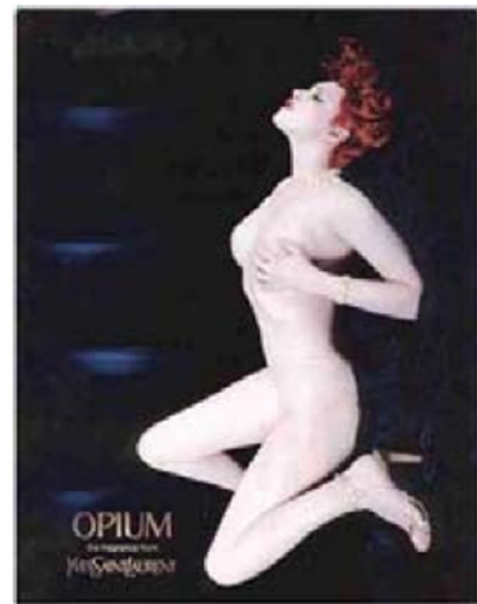
If, when I was 18, I would like to be out till 3 am, I would have limitations from my parents. But, I am used to be at home early; I do not like to be out till midnight. So, I do not have any limitations. (Eleni, 24)

Thus, they have learnt to return home early at night and inform their families about their leisure activities.

### **3.2. Messages from the urban environment**

The urban city space is also gendered. It is full of images and messages about the proper roles and behaviors of women and men. Public monuments often represent sexual stereotyping images and roles. When men are portrayed, they are heroes, politicians or, more generally, prominent persons, who are shown strong and brave after a victory. In cases in which women are portrayed, it is primarily to symbolize justice, liberty, or some other impersonal concept (Franck and Paxson, 1989). Also, posters and advertisements show the accepted characteristics of men and women, the “macho” man and the “sexually available” woman (Weisman, 1994).

In contrary to the use of the female body to advertisements, which typically aims at showing pleasure and sexuality through leisure, the behavior of real women in spaces of leisure is controlled by the attitude of men (Green, 1990). While for men the fear of public space is based mainly on thefts or attempts of thefts, for women there are also small everyday incidents, such as teasing or signals from men on the street, which cause insecurity or fear. As surveys have shown, few of the women manage to escape from teasing, laughing, whistling or obscene gestures when they are in public. As one of the



interviewees describes:

It was about 5 or 6 pm and I was at the bus stop near my place. A strange man, probably immigrant, started asking me questions. At first he asked me about time, then he asked me if I speak English and, at last, that he loves me. He has grabbed also my hand. I managed to escape from his hand and I run to another bus stop. (Efi, 23)

The behavior of men sends the message that men are dominant in public space. Thus, this behavior discourages women to be active in public sphere. Also, it violates the female personality and it causes anger and uncertainty about what may happen (Franck and Paxson, 1989).

Moreover, the ideologies about the appropriate female behavior in the public sphere, allow women to be there only if they are accompanied by men. As research that focuses on everyday life and leisure indicates, women need an observable reason or “excuse” for being in public. Not only this may render their presence more justifiable, but it may also signal that they are not open to overtures (Franck and Paxson, 1989).

#### 4. Strategies for the use of urban space

As it is already mentioned, women are more likely to feel unsafe in city space from messages that come from the others and from the lived environment. Those messages tend to discourage them from the use of city space through leisure activities.

Thus, for the use of urban space through leisure, women develop tactics or strategies in order to eliminate the possibilities of encountering an unpleasant situation. Many of women’s choices about leisure places and activities are the product of these “coping strategies”, which they adopt in order to feel that they stay as safe as possible. They pre-

*Fig. 1 - The use of male and female bodies at advertisements. (Source: The Gender Ads Project, [www.genderads.com](http://www.genderads.com))*



*Fig. 2 - "Dangerous places": a park, an underground passage, an empty metro station.  
(Source: personal archive)*

fer to go out in large groups and they take care of their clothes. They also construct mental maps of the places that they access as places to avoid.

One of the predominant strategies is the avoidance of perceived "dangerous places" of the city at "dangerous times". The types of places in which women do not feel safe are those where the behavior of others, mostly men, could be unregulated. Spaces of this type are large open spaces that are frequently deserted, such as parks. Another type of such spaces consists of spaces with limited exits where men may be able to attack women out of the visual range of others, like subways, alleyways and empty railway carriages. Such opportunities for concealed attacks are often reinforced by the bad lighting and the building and open space design (Valentine, 1989; Weisman, 1994).

If it is daytime, I do not mind. But, when at night, I avoid going from narrow, dark roads. It is preferable to walk more on a main road than to choose the shortest way through narrow streets. (Tzeni, 24)

Also, as Weisman (1994) points out, a woman walking alone in public is often considered as "open" to men, she could not protect her privacy. The presence of a man, even imaginary, helps at times women feel safer.

When I return home alone, I am calling my boyfriend. Just to show others that I am in contact with someone. (Eleni, 24)

However, some of the interviewees do have the courage to be active in public space; they take their place and enjoy it. Women are not merely objects in space in which they experience restrictions. They also do actively produce and reclaim space (Koskela, 1997). Contrary to descriptions of the media and the stories heard, when people have personal experience of a "dangerous" place, it is likely that they tend to come to perceive it as an ordinary place. Making use of space as part of everyday life can erase the myth of danger from it (Koskela, 1997).

I go to the city centre for the offices of "Medicines of the Word". The area is often described as dangerous, as migrants and low-income people live there. I am aware of the dangers, but I do not feel afraid going there. (Tzeni, 24)

## 5. Conclusions

Leisure, and activities through leisure, acts for women as a way to escape from everyday life, even for a short period of time. It is an "excuse" for them to explore city space, to learn new roles and behaviors and (re) construct their personal identities (Wearing, 1998). These identities and roles have a gender perspective, as the messages from city space control

proper behavior codes.

The presence of women in city space is controlled by fear or insecurity and the warning of not going out at “dangerous” times. It is a constant reminder that it is normal for women to be afraid, that it is not normal to have the courage to walk wherever she might want to walk, and even the women are meant to be afraid (Koskela, 1997). The behaviors of male users of city space and the messages from family and the lived environment put also limitations to women.

What is socially constructed and promoted as a proper gender-based behavior code affects leisure activities significantly. Women, often without recognizing it, impose restrictions and obstacles on leisure upon themselves. They avoid going out alone at night, for example, as a perceived precondition for feeling safe.

But women not only experience city space passively. Rather, they also take active part in its production (Koskela, 1997; Simonsen, 2003). They reclaim space for themselves through their everyday practices. Thus, women’s everyday practices and actions in city space can be seen as acts of resistance. “Walking in the street” or, just, “being there” can be seen as a political act (Koskela, 1997; Simonsen, 2003). It produces space that it is also available to other women. It is a motive for more women to do the same. The constant presence of women in city spaces of leisure could contribute to a contestation of women’s predefined and nearly exclusive relations to private space and proceed towards the (re)appropriation of urban space.



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## Polina Prentou

*Msc Architect-Urban Planner, PhD Candidate School of Architecture*

*Researcher at Urban Environment Laboratory, National Technical University of Athens*

*p.prentou@gmail.com    ntua.academia.edu/PolinaPrentou*

Polina Prentou is an architect, MSc Urban Planner and PhD Candidate School of Architecture NTUA (Greece) on the field of gendered approaches of urban social movements in Athens. Research associate of Urban Environment Lab NTUA with participation on the projects "Hellinikon Metropolitan Park", "Network of Day Nursery in Athens" etc. Her research interests combine the gendered approaches to the conception and use of urban spaces with the social and environment aspects of urban (mega) projects.

