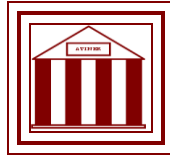


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**Women's Strategic Needs in
Outdoor Recreational Spaces, the
Case of Nablus, Palestine**

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Women's Strategic Needs in Outdoor Recreational Spaces, the Case of Nablus, Palestine

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Abstract

Most women in Nablus city are showing a passive engagement with outdoor public spaces. The main challenge is to create urban spaces that meet not only the practical needs of women, but also their strategic needs. The paper explores the effects of cultural and social values on women's spatiality in public, and the ways that women use to strategize their urban lives so as to meet social expectations. The city of Nablus in Palestine was the site of the empirical research. Based on Caroline Moser approach to gender planning analysis, I have investigated outdoor recreational spaces, namely *mutanazahat*, in the light of various socio-spatial aspects. A special attention was given to the influence of men on women's behaviors, their spatial choices, and their spatial perception. Based on the observations, women's spatiality are more flexible and diverse in *mutanazahat* when women are the dominant group, where the present men have no direct impact on women's social lives, and where the present men are behaving properly. In conclusion, semi-public spaces are strategic -planning interventions that may reverse power relations to the favor of women, and facilitate accordingly their active engagement with the built environment.

Keywords: strategic needs, women's spatiality, semi-public spaces, recreational spaces

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Introduction

In this paper, the aim is to develop an understanding of women's strategic needs in outdoor recreational spaces, and the specific mechanisms and strategies would be used to achieve a satisfactory spatial organization for women. The main objectives of this work are twofold: (1) to investigate the effects of the embedded culture and social values on the spatial behaviors, options, and interactions of Nablusi women; (2) and to explore potential spatial solutions that may facilitate women's active engagement with outdoor recreational spaces. Based on Caroline Moser's approach to gender planning analysis (1993), the analytical framework of this paper has been developed. Empirically, the research is based on the analysis of women's spatiality in relation to gender power relations in the city of Nablus- Palestine, focusing on one type of spaces: the so-called *mutanazahat*. The word *mutanazahat* is the Arabic term for outdoor spaces that are designed for recreation and entertainment. The design features of *mutanazahat* include soft and hard landscape elements, playgrounds for children, seating areas, passages, cafeterias and public toilets.

The city of Nablus

Nablus city is one of the largest Palestinian cities in the Northern governorates. It is located to the north of Jerusalem, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. In the 2011 census by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the city had a population of 348,000. It occupies an important intellectual, commercial, cultural, and political position within the Palestinian territories. The current urban fabric consists of three different districts, related to three different scales of time and urbanity: the city's ancient core whose history stretches back more than 4000 years; the modern city which has been developing since the British Mandate(1922-1948); and finally three major refugee camps (built after the 1948 Nakba and 1967 Naksa). The majority of the populations are Muslims, but there is a small but well-integrated minority of Palestinian Christians and Arabic-speaking Samaritans (Dumper and Stanley 2007, 265-267).

There are two reasons why Nablus was selected as the site for fieldwork. Firstly, the author is deeply familiar with both the infrastructural and social structures of the city and this was very helpful in designing and conducting the fieldwork. Secondly, and more importantly, Nablusi residents are well known for holding conservative attitudes towards women and their position in society (Taraki and Giacaman 2006, 49).The hypothesis was that this local culture would be visible and tangible in the analysis of women's spatiality in public and this indeed was the case.

Women's strategic needs in public spaces between theory and practice

Moser (1989, 1993) has established one of the basic tools of 'gender planning' analysis. She based her notion of *strategic gender needs* and *practical gender needs* on the distinction made by Maxin Molyneux (1985) between *strategic gender interests* and *practical gender interests*. Molyneux (1985) has argued that *women's interests* don't rely only on the biological likeness, but also on their social positioning which determined through a variety of different means-among them class, ethnicity and gender. It is hard though to generalize about the interests of women. Nevertheless, women do have at a certain level of abstraction some interests in common, which should be referred to as *gender interests*. Gender interests can be either practical or strategic. Molyneux (1985 ,232,233) has defined strategic gender interests as those concerns

'... [a]re derived from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist. These ethical and theoretical criteria assist in the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination, such as ... the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, ... and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women'

While practical gender interest are those concerns that

'... [a]rise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor... Practical interests are usually a response to an immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality. For example (women who are responsible for their household) have a special interest in domestic provision and public welfare.'

Based on Molyneux's definition of gender interests, Moser (1989, 1802; 1993, 37,38) has argued that planning for women must be derived from their 'prioritized concerns'. She has translated *gender interests* into *gender needs*. This clarification, she made, was vital to translate gender needs into *planning needs*. In result, the tools and techniques for implementing them can be clarified and thus women's concerns would be satisfied. In respect to that, Moser (1989 ,1806) has raised another significant point. She argued that meeting women's practical needs in planning policies does not necessarily satisfy women's strategic needs. For example, in most countries, the transport sector provides a high frequency running hours in peak periods. This policy meets the needs of a male-dominated workforce, while ignoring the multiple roles of those women who use the transportation in different times of the day and for different reasons. Improving the timetable of public transportation to fit the urban journeys of most women and men may have women's practical needs been fulfilled. But, it does not necessarily recognize their strategic needs; because it neither relieves women from their domestic responsibilities, nor assures their safety while using the public transportation at night.

Despite the growing body of feminist research on planning to fulfill women's practical needs in the physical environment as in: housing,

transportation, leisure facilities, and shopping areas (OECD 1995; Greed 1996; Greed and Roberts 1998; Coleman 2000; Greed 2006; Day 2011), there are still a few proposed tools on translating women's strategic needs into planning interventions. In my opinion, the following two points are the main gender planning toolson meeting women's strategic needs: (1) challanging the dichotomy between public and private zones which was developed in the modern planning policies. For feminists, it is 'one of the most oppressive aspects of the everyday spaces' (Rose 1993, 17) and the barrier that isolates women from public life and locks them in a substandard position (Madanipour 2003, 98,232; Fainstein and Servon 2005, 5,6). In response, many feminists' writers tend to encourage dissolving spatial boundaries and interlinking areas of activities rather than separating these areas. This planning approach would transmit equality and resist the prevailing spatial advantages men have over women (Greed 1994, 97,173; Fainstein and Servon 2005, 5,6; Sandercock and Forsyth 2005, 75).Mixed land uses policy, proposed by Greed and Roberts (1998), reflects debates on dissolving spatial boundaries. On the one hand, it assures the same area includes residential, commercial, and recreational functions, which would reduce time and space constraints. On the other hand, it will increase the sense of safety for women. When the area is being designed to function through night and daytime, the presence of people will be enhanced and thus the chances for women to be attacked or harassed will be reduced. (2) Proposing women-only facilities to overcome religious or ethnic objections to mixed-gender facilities (Greed 1996, 261).

This latest point, however, is a controversial subject in feminist literature. As McDowell (1999, 119 in Jarvis, Kantor and Cloke 2009, 19) has noted: 'there is disagreement whether women-only provision and spaces empower women or trap them in a ghetto of special needs'. Based on Moser (1989 ,1803), the socio-cultural context shapes the strategic needs of women. In other words, women's strategic needs in public spaces are not universal, let alone the strategic planning interventions are needed to fulfill these needs. In my opinion, female spaces, which have been increasing in modern Arab cities, are strategic spatial options that fulfill social and religious requirements. Female spaces- which are semi-public spaces for the restriction of a select circle- are provided to those women who are not interested in using modern spaces as envisioned. Gyms offer women's hours, cafes and restaurants offer family sections, upscale hotels, restaurants, cinemas, and health clubs offer 'class *hijab*'. Some upscale restaurants even refuse the entry of parties without women. 'The private feel of these public spaces renders them particularly attractive to and acceptable for women' (Joseph and Najmabadi 2007, 531).

Methodology

The empirical research of this work involved qualitative research methods: observations, and informal interviews .The field work took place in Nablus, during March and April 2010. The field work data presented in this paper is

part of a larger research project that investigates the wider urban context of Nablus and involved conducting 105 semi-structured interviews. Based on the larger fieldwork results, two *mutanazahat* were observed in different days of the week (working days and weekends), and different times of the day (ranging from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.). The main observing goal was to map gender density of use and the spatial activities, interactions and behaviors of women. However, there were some moments where I had the chance to talk to women onsite and to explore their socio-spatial needs. This resulted in eleven informal interviews distributed on eight observation sessions. The resulted sample covered women from different age groups and with different social roles and education levels.

The case of mutanazahat

The reason for focusing on *mutanazahat* is because they turned out to be the favorite outdoor recreational spaces for women in Nablus (based on the larger research project conducted by the author). I initially observed four *mutanazahat* that were mentioned most often by the interviewees, but it was decided to focus on two of these spaces in order to enable more detailed qualitative research: Jamal Abdel Nasser *mutanazah*, and Children's Happiness centre¹. The former is located in the western side of the city, in a high density residential area, and directly next to the commercial city centre of Nablus. The latter is located in the eastern side of the city in a medium-density residential area. Both places are: publicly owned and supervised by Nablus Municipality; offer the same spatial options (playgrounds for children, seats, passages); contain similar soft and hard landscape design features; offer public toilets, drinking fountains, and a cafeteria; and are located near the main public transport route and are thus easily accessible. There are however three major differences: the spatial arrangement, the *mutanazah* area itself, and the administrative rules imposed by Nablus Municipality.

Strategies- Overcoming the male domination of space

In the early stages of observation, Jamal Abdel Nasser *mutanazah* was characterized by high male presence and limited female activities. The observed area is too large to be mapped at once and therefore I decided to divide the area into observation Area 1 and Area 2: Area1 includes playground A and Area 2 includes playground B (Figure 1a). The overall behavior of women consisted of sitting in groups or in pairs, walking around, having snacks and drinks, playing with children, or using the swings in the children's

¹Children's happiness centre was designed and constructed by Nablus Municipality and acknowledged as a centre for children ever since opening in 1998 (as listed on the official website of Nablus Municipality, 2008). However, the local people refer to the Centre as *mutanazah*, because the area has the same landscape design elements as other *mutanazahat* in Nablus and because families are also using the space.

playgrounds. It was possible to notice, however, the invisible and spatially shifting boundaries between women and men in this *mutanazah*. On working days, female parochial spaces¹ were mainly next to playground A, while the male parochial spaces were mainly next to: the kiosks (which serve coffee, tea, and water pipes); the entrance to the south; and the area for renting children's cars. Women and men were thus using the same space, while still observing avoidance norms. The only female-male interaction observed was by the couples that tended to sit or walk around together (Figure 1c).

In my opinion, female parochial spaces in this *mutanazah* were created as a response to gender power relations where men are the dominant group. Women were moving and sitting together as a strategy for protection. For example, while observing Area 2, a group of young women (college students) came in and started using the swings in playground B. The young women moved to playground A after one of them had spotted a man she knew. I myself heard him criticizing their behaviors as of being 'childish'. When I conveyed to the young women what the young man said, they explained that using the swings in public is socially unaccepted, and since one of them knew the young man (the one who criticized their behaviors) she was embarrassed to keep violating the conventional social code. However, some of them supported using the swings regardless men's criticism. In my opinion, making the choice to move to playground A (a female parochial space) and to start using the swings again is raising two points: first, the effect of social values and spatial users (namely men) on the spatial behaviors and options of women. Especially if some spatial users are part of the social circles of women and thus may have a social influence on their lives. Second, the young women felt more comfortable to use the swings in a space occupied mainly by women.

Following this, I started a conversation with two women in their thirties who were sitting in Playground A. During an informal interview and while exploring their needs in the area; one of them laughed and said:

I wish for a place for women to smoke privately [...] at first, I hesitated to smoke here (she was smoking when I interviewed her); especially that smoking in public is socially unaccepted for women and with all this men around. But after sunset, I encouraged myself to have a cigarette

Moreover, the two women had referred to the inappropriate behaviors of some men in the area. They wished for a defined place for women in this *mutanazah* where they can feel more comfortable and safe. In their opinion, the female place would help to avoid men's inappropriate comments, and their critical views on women's behaviors.

Children's Happiness Center, in contrast to the former *mutanazah*, was characterized by high female presence and varied female spatial activities. One could observe a variety of women's behaviors. Some were more passively engaged with the surroundings by sitting, chatting, watching, reading or having

¹ Lofland (1998, 14) argues that 'a parochial realm exists when the dominating relational form found in some physical spaces is communal'. Accordingly, in this paper, female parochial spaces refer to spaces where the dominant users are women.

lunch or dinner. Others were more actively engaged and played badminton, basketball or football with their children or with each other. Others walked around in pairs or used the children's swings. There were no male or female parochial spaces as in Jamal Abdel Nasser *mutanazah* (Figure 2).

The regulations of the space by Nablus Municipality are the main reason why this particular *mutanazah* is occupied mainly by women. Following the 2005 Palestinian Municipal Elections that were won by Hamas, the municipal council decided to call the place a women- space. This resulted in transforming the place from being a public space to becoming a semi-public space. According to the Center's manager, the municipal council wished to provide a place for women where they can feel more free and comfortable. Fridays are for families, working days and Saturdays are restricted to women and children. No men are allowed to enter the place (except for the guards and cleaners). These regulations, however, were not strictly enforced. On the basis of the observational sessions, which took place on two working days and two weekends (the weekends being on Friday and Saturday), men were present. As became clear during the observations, any man in company with a woman seemed to be allowed to enter the area.

It seems therefore that the entry strategy of this *mutanazah* (limiting the access of men) has created a situation in which women are the dominant group and in which men are under the surveillance of women and not the other way around. Most women I interviewed didn't object to the presence of men. Men are tolerated as long as their behaviors do not disturb the dominant users of the space, namely women. As one illiterate housewife in her thirties explained: 'I'm not bothered because every man is in company with his family... and the door keepers and the employees are very respectful people' [referring to the male employees]. Not all women however agreed and some wished to keep the Children's Happiness Centre a women-only space: '... in this way', a 30-year old housewife explained, 'we'll feel free and be more active... instead of watching our moves and laughs just because men are around'. The same previous comment was given by two other housewives in their twenties.

In addition to the previous social reasons why women like this *mutanazah*, some interviewees have mentioned another significant point. They claimed that the place generates a private feel because of its spatial feature of being *msatter*. The word *msattar* is an Arabic term refers to the absence of visual corridor with people outside the Centre as: (1) the area is surrounded by walls and high, thick trees, and (2) the surrounding area lacks high buildings from which one would be able to observe the Centre area. This has created a sense of visual privacy that caused women to feel protected from the outside male-gaze.

Results

Clearly, the Children's Happiness Centre differs from Jamal Abdel Nasser *mutanazah* in that women are the subordinate group in the latter and dominant group in the former space. The empirical illustrations supported by the

interviews' material suggest a number of aspects that are important to understand Nablusi women's spatiality and their strategic needs in outdoor recreational spaces-namely *mutanazahat*. First of all, the data points out the continuing role of both social norms and the space audience in structuring women's behaviors in public. In the case of Jamal Abdel Nasser *mutanazahat* it seems that the presence of men as a social group directly affects the presence and the spatial behaviors of women. Men's inappropriate behaviors (such as lewd stares, obscene words, sexual harassment, acting as if they own the space) cause women to feel 'out of place' – uncomfortable, and thus claiming a female provision inside the place. Women have partially escape the gaze of men and their inappropriate comments by grouping together as women, and thus by creating invisible defensive boundaries that demarcate their territory of actions. In the case of children's happiness center, the majority of women didn't object to the presence of men as long as they are behaving properly. The government regulations contribute to a reversal of power relations in the sense that women can achieve more freedom in a context of a family-oriented and children's space – a classic female space

Secondly, the importance of the private feel in *mutanazahat* has repeatedly emphasized. In both cases, female provisions play a key role with women indicating the need for spaces in which they are not subjected to the gaze of men. The organization and design of space -in which design techniques enable or limit visual corridor between women and men – plays an important role in either expanding or limiting women's patterns of activities. In the case of Children's Happiness Center, having the spatial feature of being *msatter* is helping women to actively engage with the surroundings. The effects of this spatial distinction based on gender is ambivalent: to an extent this reproduces a patriarchal structure in which women are positioned in a subordinate role, but at the same time it is this very extension that enables women to participate in outdoor recreational spaces.

Conclusion

The empirical data supported the assumption that semi-public spaces give women the opportunity to act in more diverse ways than is normally recognized in public spaces. Semi-public spaces are potential strategic planning interventions that contribute to overcome the male-domination of space. In this research cases, women's spatiality in Children's Happiness center (a semi-public space restricted to a select group of people) was more diverse and vivid than in Jamal Abdel Nasser (a public space dominated mainly by men). Women only spaces (or at the very least spaces in which women are dominant) can indeed contribute to empowerment in the sense that Nablusi women in *mutanazahat* find a temporary retreat from social constraints and gendered power relations. Clearly, it may take decades to restructure gendered socio-spatial relations (Fainstein and Servon 2005, 7; Fraser 1997 in Barnett and Low

2004, 100) and to create truly 'non-sexist' spaces. But as a first step these semi-public spaces that prioritize the needs of women are important.

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Appendices

Figure 1. *Jamal Abdel Nasser mutanazah: mapping gender density of use and gender spatial activities on a Thursday at 10h30 a.m.*

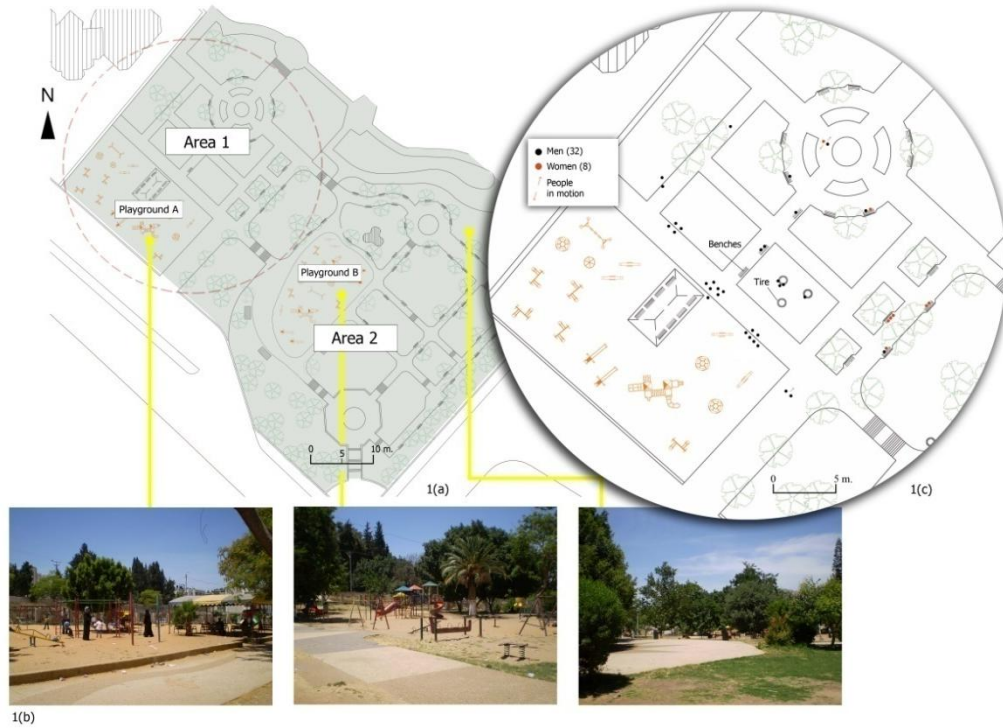


Figure 2. Children's Happiness Centre: mapping gender density of use and gender spatial activities, on Saturday between 16:30-16:45 and Wednesday between 16:20-16:40

