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Where Gender Comes to the Fore

Mapping Gender Mix in Urban Public Spaces

NASTARAN PEIMANI AND HESAM KAMALIPOUR

COMMON GROUND

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Nastaran Peimani, University of Melbourne, Australia
Hesam Kamalipour, University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract: The study engages with the ways in which gender mix plays out in public spaces as a key issue in exploring social diversity and vitality of the urban public life. The paper introduces a mapping method to unravel how gender differences are spatially manifested in urban public spaces. Thus, urban mapping has been considered as a method for producing a kind of spatial knowledge that has the capacity to shed light on how different socio-spatial patterns play out in public open spaces. The proposed mapping method documents where and the extent to which female and male users appropriate urban public spaces. The database for developing and testing the proposed method emerges from two site areas in the city of Tehran. In doing so, the study draws upon direct observation, fieldwork notes, visual recording, and urban mapping as research methods. In this way, the paper raises questions about the importance of gender mix in public space and the ways in which mapping has the capacity to inform urban research.

Keywords: Urban Mapping, Gender Mix, Urban Public Space, Tehran

Introduction

Gender mix has been an issue of concern in public space where gender boundaries are often framed, contested, and negotiated. This study aims to explore the capacity of mapping to produce a kind of spatial knowledge illustrating where and the degree to which men and women appropriate open public spaces. The main research question concerns the ways in which gender mix plays out in urban public spaces: where and to what extent different parts of the urban public spaces are appropriated by different gender groups? Hence, the goal of the study is to develop a mapping method that can inform the ways in which gender differences are spatially manifested in different public spaces. The proposed method has been developed and tested using two site areas in the city of Tehran as a critical case study that incorporates different morphological properties and socio-economic conditions for investigating a diversity of gender mixes in urban public spaces. In this sense, mapping has been considered as a method to understand the ways in which cities and public spaces work. In this way, a multilayered database has become a tool for exploring the ways in which gender mix plays out in urban public spaces. The main concern of this paper is to introduce a fine-grained method to map the spatial distribution of gender differences in public open space.

Public Space, Gender, and Urban Mapping

It has been argued that needs and lived experiences of women have been neglected for more than five decades in urban design and planning (Day 2011). Hence, exploring the relations between built environment and women in public space has become a key line of research since 1990s to address the gap between designing urban public space and planning a more equitable city for women (Churchman and Altman 1994; Franck and Paxson 1989; Kallus 2003; McDowell 1983; Mozingo 1989). While a number of studies have focused on formation of gender identities in place and experiences of women in public space (Day 1999, 2000; Massey 1994), less research has been undertaken to understand the constraints to the female users of urban environments (Law 1999). In effect, urban design research has often focused on place conception and lived experiences of the users who appropriate urban public spaces. In this sense, such a focus is likely to overlook gender discourse that may disguise differences in perceptions, actions, needs, and

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everyday experiences of place (Day 2000; Rakodi 1991). As Mean and Tims (2005) argue, if public space aims to meet the needs of a specific group, the others who are not motivated by those needs are likely not to linger. For Darke (1996), while women can benefit from the chances offered by place diversity and heterogeneity, they are negatively affected not only by the ways in which male domination has been intensified in public space but also by how zoning is based on stereotyping gender identities and roles.

Spain (1992) argues that there is mutual relationship between daily activities and gendered spaces in the way that a gendered space can shape and be shaped by certain daily activities. Hence, activities in urban public spaces are related to the ways in which gender distribution plays out in public realm. It has been long discussed that the extent to which an urban public space allows different users to interact with strangers is a key condition for the vitality of public life (Carr et al. 2007; Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980). The possibilities offered by urban public space vary across different users and gender groups in different contexts. In this sense, women's use of urban public space and the offered opportunities may pose more challenges compared to men's use of urban public space (Day 2000; Lofland 1984). That is why Day (2011) argues that gender considerations in urban design can both complicate and enrich scholarship in urban studies. Feminist scholars have argued that the urban *flaneur*—a detached observer of urban life, wandering the streets—has never been a woman, meaning that city scenes have always been represented from a male viewpoint (Wilson 1992). Hence, women were arguably navigating the city as objects of observation.

Criticizing how most of gender studies in planning focus on experiences of middle-class white women, Miraftab (2007) argues that the experiences of women in the third-world societies are often structured by race, ethnicity, class, social hierarchies, and the ways in which informality works in these countries. However, the studies on gender issues in urban design and planning in the context of the Middle East and developing countries are still rather limited. For Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2001), religious conceptualisations play a critical role in the use and understanding of public/private space and the ways in which inclusion/exclusion has been experienced by men and women.

Drawing on the use of public space by men and women in a case study of participatory design and planning, Garcia-Ramon, Ortiz, and Prats (2004) argue that while design interventions cannot necessarily solve social inequalities, urban design and planning have the capacity to enable public interactions and mitigate social exclusion. Hence, built environment professions can benefit from a kind of spatial knowledge produced by mapping to illustrate how gender mix works in different public spaces.

It has been argued that urban mapping has a capacity to produce a kind of spatial knowledge that is not reducible to either words or numbers (Dovey and Ristic 2015). For Corner (1999), mapping has an agency to unfold potentials and uncover the unseen realities. In the same vein, Dovey and Ristic (2015) point out that urban mapping has the capacity to not only engage with differences in urban environments but also with the "possible city" to unravel what De Landa (2011) outlines as a "space of possibility." Drawing on what De Landa (2005) calls "real virtuality," Kamalipour and Peimani (2015) argue that mapping can be considered a kind of diagrammatic abstraction for unravelling the not-yet-actualised realities. This study aims to introduce a mapping method for illustrating the spatiality of different gender groups to unravel the ways in which urban public spaces are shared between men and women.

Case Study of Tehran

For the aim of this study, two site areas have been selected in the capital city of Tehran, which is a critical case study for the ways in which gender differences and representations play out in public space (Bayat 2010; Madanipour 1998; Kamalipour, Yeganeh, and Alalhesabi 2012). The history of Tehran creates spaces of contention over modernity as a legacy of two main

revolutions (Madanipour 1998). In the early twentieth century, the top-down project of "modernisation" imposed by Reza Shah (founder of the Pahlavi dynasty) resulted in a socio-spatial polarisation, while institutionalisation of the Islamic republic and enforcement of the Hijab law after the second revolution in 1979 have dramatically changed the ways that urban public spaces worked in relation to gender mix at the end of the twentieth century. Based on the Hijab law, people and women in particular, are required to observe the Islamic codes of dress in urban public spaces. While people have implemented the Islamic dress codes differently, the representation of gender differences in the public realm has dramatically changed in the capital city of Tehran. The last three decades have seen a surge of interest in exploring the socio-political aspects of the 1979 revolution by focusing on its sociocultural motives, impacts, and aftermath. However, this study focuses on the ways in which gender differences are spatially manifested in urban public space by proposing and applying a mapping method to unravel how gender mix plays out in different urban public spaces.

The selected site areas are located in proximity to the major nodes of public transport in the eastern (Sarsabz) and southern (Shoosh) parts of the city (Figure 1). The selected site areas offer a range of different urban morphologies and socio-economic conditions, which enables testing of the proposed method for mapping the spatiality of gender differences in public space. For the aim of this study, an area of 100ha (1km*1km) with a major transport node at the centre was explored to collect the required data for mapping. The selected site areas are specific because of how their different socio-spatial assemblages work in relation to gender distribution in public space. The study area of Sarsabz, which is located in the eastern part of the city, is specific for its standardised patterns of urban morphology as a result of a formal modernist planning. The site area of Shoosh, which is located in the southern part of the city, is specific for the ways in which urban morphologies include a mix of regular and irregular patterns emerged over time as a result of the state interventions and intercity migration in pursuit of opportunities and employment in the capital city. While the study area of Sarsabz generally accommodates middle-class people, the site area of Shoosh often accommodates the urban poor and lower-middle-class people. In this way, the selected study areas offer a range of different urban morphologies and socio-economic conditions for testing the limits and applicability of the proposed mapping method in different public spaces.

Figure 1: Location of the Study Areas in the City of Tehran
Source: Peimani 2016

Research Methods

Gehl (1987) has long argued that urban public spaces accommodate a range of different actions including necessary, optional, and social. While most of the urban public spaces benefit from necessary activities that are often non-optional such as going to work at a specific time on a daily basis, one of the main characteristics of a vibrant public space is how it accommodates a range of non-instrumental actions, including optional and social activities (Gehl 2010). These are the activities that encourage people to stay in the urban public spaces and to consider public space as a place to be rather than a route to take in order to get to a destination. These activities are stationary in a way that can be considered a kind of temporal appropriation of public space for social and optional activities. Hence, mapping the spatiality of these stationary activities has the capacity to unravel the ways in which urban public spaces can enable or constrain a range of different non-instrumental activities and the extent to which such activities take place in the public realm. While exploring the non-instrumental activities in public space has been current in urban design research on public life (Carr et al. 2007; Gehl 2010; Stevens 2007; Whyte 1980), this study contributes to the current literature by introducing and testing a mapping method for investigating the spatiality of gender differences in the ways that stationary activities take place in urban public spaces. As Gehl and Svarre (2013) point out, a broad range of stationary actions and different users can be plotted in a map to envision how different public spaces are characterised by emergent behaviours throughout the day. The proposed mapping method addresses multiple qualitative and quantitative questions about "what" in terms of gender differences, "how many" in terms of the number of people, and "where" in term of the location of stationary activities in urban public space.

Fieldwork took place in the city of Tehran from September to December 2014. The main research methods were observation, fieldwork notes, visual recording, and mapping. Non-participatory observation has been used as a key method in order to document different patterns of gender mix in the selected site areas to explore the spatial manifestations of gender differences in relation to the built environment. A fixed category has been applied for documenting the observed patterns of gender mix, which includes two main groups of men and women in the studied urban public spaces. Fieldwork notes included a record of sketches, diagrams, and further socio-spatial details of the studied areas collected in a diary. Walking on site for a long cohesive period during the midday peaks was key to exploring the relationship between public spaces and patterns of gender mix. The midday rush hour (12pm–2pm) is one of the typical peak activity times in the case study of Tehran that incorporates different patterns of everyday public life and gender mix in urban spaces. Visual recording including urban photography and video recording has been used as a complementary method to fill the possible gaps of direct observation during the field survey (Peimani 2015). As Gehl and Svarre (2013) point out, such a method assists the researchers with going into further details where the situations are difficult to be fully documented and analysed with the naked eye.

The collected data has been further analysed and translated into a visual illustration on a base map using different colour codes for male and female user groups based on the field survey. To analyse the collected data from non-participant observation, fieldwork notes, and visual recording, the study uses different dots with different colour codes based on gender differences (women/men) and the number of users engaged in public space. The applied mapping method aims to unravel the ways in which different gender groups (women/men) are involved in public activities, where they emerge (location in the public space), and how intense their level of use is (individual, in pairs, in groups of more than three people). The diameter of the mapped dots varies from low (smallest ones) to high (largest ones) with a medium condition in-between. Smallest dots in this method indicate men and women engaging in actions individually. The users

who are more likely to perform activities in small groups (two or three people) are shown in the map in mid-sized dots. The largest dots refer to the men and women who have appropriated urban public spaces for their uses in larger groups. This categorisation seeks to elaborate on the ways in which women and men use urban public spaces to meet their needs. This method has the potential to unravel the capacity of some urban public spaces to enable or constrain the physical presence of different gender groups, especially women whose right to be present in public space is at stake (Whitzman 2013), which affects the ways we understand some public spaces as being gendered or face the challenge of gender hegemony.

Study Area of Shoosh

Mapping the spatial distribution of different gender groups in the study area shows that gender bias is a major issue in the public realms of Shoosh since the area is male-dominated (Figure 2). According to the census statistics of 2006, the ratio between male and female residents has been estimated to be fairly higher than the average in Tehran (Tehran Municipality Information & Communication Technology Organisation and Tehran University 2011). However, direct observations and visual recordings indicate that urban public spaces are generally male-dominated so that it seems almost impossible to occasionally encounter women in many public spaces of Shoosh (Figure 3). This may suggest that women residing in Shoosh do not often engage in public actions, and are more associated with the home and private space. Hence, while the census statistics indicates the overall male/female ratio in the area, it does not show the ways this ratio is distributed in relation to public and private territories.

●●● Female ●●● Male   1km
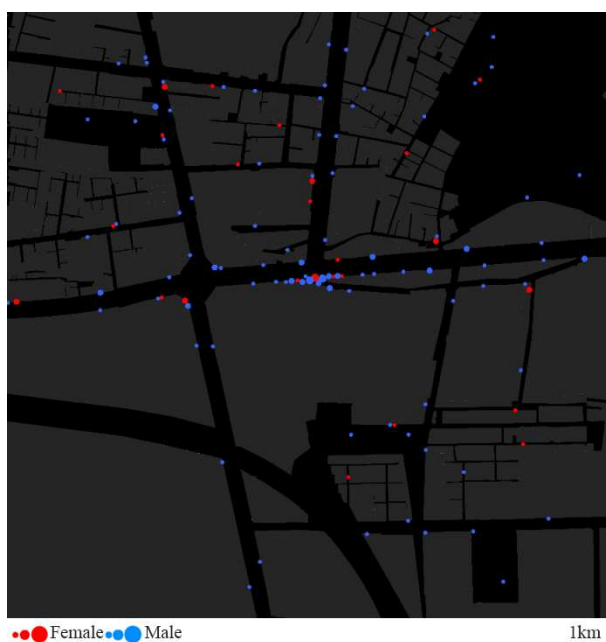
Figure 2: Mapping Gender Differences in the Public Spaces of Shoosh
Source: Peimani 2016

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Figure 3: The study area of Shoosh is generally male-dominated.
Source: Peimani 2016

The results of the study show that while most of the women living in the study area of Shoosh are not often visible in the public realm, those who occasionally come to the public space are generally attracted to areas with a high volume of pedestrian flows such as the areas located in proximity to the major public transport stations. These areas are often among the key public nodes of activities where, as Jacobs (1961) and Hillier (1996) argue, the possibility of social encounter has been mediated through the built environment. They generally come into contact with strangers in the areas close to the entrance of the Shoosh metro station (centre of the site area) where they wait to catch different formal and informal transport services. Figure 4 shows the presence of women in the areas other than the metro station. As observations and visual recordings indicate, most of these women are attracted to informal trading in residential clusters where conducting short conversations with neighbours has been enabled due to the presence of the vendors in the area (Figure 4). Informal traders often pass through the residential clusters since it is more likely for them to find the possible customers in these areas rather than the main public streets of Shoosh. That is probably why everyday a number of mobile vendors appropriate specific spots in these areas to temporarily set up their informal businesses. They often use trolleys to bring their wares, and extol them in a loud voice to attract attention of the residents, especially housewives (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Women and Informal Trading in Residential Clusters
Source: Peimani 2016

Study Area of Sarsabz

Mapping the spatiality of gender differences in the site area of Sarsabz provides insights to the ways in which different gender groups use and appropriate the urban public space. According to the census statistics of 2006, the ratio between male and female residents has been estimated to be fairly lower than the city average (Tehran Municipality Information & Communication Technology Organisation and Tehran University 2011). However, as Figure 5 shows, women are the dominant users of the main north-south street, which is a shopping strip. This is one of the busiest streets of Sarsabz where a range of different optional and social activities coexist with a mix of formal retailers and a number of informal traders offering goods and products. Most of the women visiting this particular part of the site area do so in groups and may initiate conversations with strangers while investigating the goods that are on display on the sidewalks (Figure 6). This relates to what Whyte (1980) calls "triangulation" as a process through which an external stimulus provides the possibility for strangers to get into contact with each other in public space. A number of chairs and tables with umbrellas have been located along the edges of the footpaths, which allow different users to sit and socialise. Some parts of the sidewalks have also been appropriated by a number of temporary food stalls where the urban furniture provides the possibility of siting and consuming the purchased food.

One of the observed patterns of use incorporates the ways in which informal trading relates to gender differences in public space. This relationship is manifested not only in how informal trading attracts women users in specific parts of the public space, but also in the ways in which the products offered by street vendors target the dominant gender group and dismiss the others. This is in part the story of Sarsabz where informal traders are quite visible in the areas with the dominance of the female users in the public space and exclusively attuned to provide those kinds of goods and products that are in demand by most of the women. Informal traders in Sarsabz are not just men. Women traders also sit on the ground along the main shopping strip and sell their handmade products. Most of the women who are involved in informal trading are generally concentrated in the areas where women are the dominant users of space. This can be considered a process of escalation through which women as informal traders are often attracted not only to the areas with high flows of pedestrians such as a shopping strip, but also to those parts of the public space that benefit from a considerable number of female users. In other words, the presence of women in an urban public space is related to the prevalence of informal traders, the gender of the street vendors, and the products offered by them.
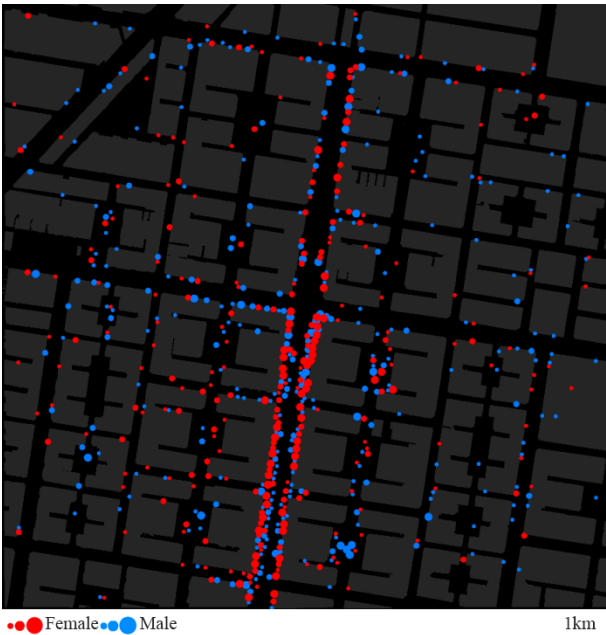
Figure 5: Mapping Gender Differences in the Public Spaces of Sarsabz
Source: Peimani 2016

Figure 6: Presence of Women along the Main Shopping Street of Sarsabz
Source: Peimani 2016

While the study area of Sarsabz benefits from a mix of different gender groups with a relative dominance of female users along the main north-south shopping strip, it does not accommodate a range of different activities along its main east-west street, which is predominantly an area of office buildings with low levels of pedestrian flows and high levels of through vehicular traffic. Figure 5 shows a relative dominance of the male users along this street to the west. During the working hours, motorcycles are usually parked along the sidewalks. Some visitors use the motorcycles as a place to sit and talk to the nearby people. Figure 7 shows sidewalks of this street where the stationary public actions are limited to a few street vendors who are mostly men.

Figure 7: Stationary activities are often limited to informal trading along the east-west street.
Source: Peimani 2016

The existing urban morphology of this site area is a result of a standardised layout that includes a number of neighbourhood parks surrounded by some residential clusters. As observations and visual recordings show, patterns of gender mix are relatively different in the main streets, residential clusters, and neighbourhood parks. As illustrated in the Figure 5, most of the residential clusters accommodate a mix of different groups distributed unevenly across the site area. Exceptions to this pattern are neighbourhood parks with designed seats and some sport furniture surrounded by residential buildings. Some of these local parks, specifically the ones adjacent to the work and visit areas, are temporarily appropriated by different user groups. Observations show that every morning from 6am to 9am, some male and female users are attracted to the parks to do sports, while during the midday peak these open spaces are often appropriated by the elderly meeting their peers or school children playing while their parents are talking to each other. In the evening, young groups are the dominant users of the space.

Discussion

While the ratio between the female and male inhabitants in both of the study areas is statistically close to the average of the city, a comparative mapping of gender differences in public space indicates that the ratio is quite different in the studied public open spaces. Hence, it can be argued that different forms of knowledge are required to inform the discussions on gender issues, inclusive public spaces, and socio-spatial inequities in urban studies. In this way, a spatial knowledge produced through mapping is required to understand how gender differences are spatially played out in urban public spaces. This relates to the fact that gender statistics do not necessarily predict gender differences in urban public spaces.

Applying the proposed mapping method to the studied site areas in the city of Tehran indicates how urban mapping can inform further studies on gender issues by drawing on spatial manifestations of gender differences in urban public spaces. While most of the studies on gender issues do not go beyond a verbal logic that as Warf and Arias (2008) argue dominates most of the academic discourses on space, the study considers urban mapping as a key to produce a kind of spatial knowledge that does not remain contained within either a numerical or a verbal logic. In this way, the results of the study suggest that urban mapping can inform not only the socio-spatial critique of public space, but also how built environment professionals can address issues of gendered public spaces and gender differences by through interventions at different scales.

Mapping gender differences in public open spaces has the capacity to provide a better understanding of the actual condition of the city in terms of the ways in which gender mix is currently played out in public spaces. It can also unfold the possible conditions that can be or could have been actualised. This is what De Landa (2005) calls "real virtuality" that refers to

those parts of "reality" that have not been actualised yet. In a sense, the proposed method for mapping gender differences in public space can be beneficial for explorative and diagnostic purposes since it provides insights on actual and possible conditions of an urban public space. Hence, this kind of urban mapping can inform urban designers and planners by developing a better understanding of how the city currently works and how it can possibly be transformed through socio-spatial interventions.

The proposed mapping method unravels the ways in which particular gender groups, especially women, use or do not use some specific parts of a city or an urban public space. In a way, the method offers a dialectical image that enables the confrontation of the absent/present narratives of different gender groups in different parts of the city. While some of the research in urban design may draw on the ways in which the presence narrative works in a public space, some of the other lines of inquiry can benefit from focusing on the ways that certain gender groups, especially women, are absent in some specific parts of an urban public space. In this way, the method can also contribute to the studies on gendered urban spaces by providing a micro-scale understanding of how different patterns of gender mix play out in public domains of the city.

The proposed method of urban mapping has the capacity to unfold the ways in which social divisions are spatially manifested in urban public spaces. This may shed light on how gender differences are not only socially stratified, but also spatially manifested throughout the city. However, while the proposed mapping method provides insights to the ways in which spatial manifestations of gender differences are related to urban morphology, loose parts, and informal activities at the micro scale, its capacity for addressing the broader socio-political context and the ways in which practices of power work at macro scale is rather limited.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nastaran Peimani: PhD Candidate, Melbourne School of Design (MSD), University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Hesam Kamalipour: PhD Candidate, Melbourne School of Design (MSD); Doctoral Academy Member, Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI), University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

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