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**SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE
GENDER PERSPECTIVE OF THE RIGHT TO THE
CITY**

Abstract

The starting assumption is that the historical exclusion of women from the civil rights continues and is reflected on the city space through the domination of patriarchal relations. Although women today have more rights granted by the law than ever before, beyond the law, gender inequalities spill over into the daily life, which can be observed in the city space through various aspects. The paper shows some of these obstacles and types of inequalities, but also some possibilities to overcome them. It should also be emphasized that, regardless of ideological and political contexts or a dominant socio-economic system, seen from the perspective of gender, there are some basic common characteristics of the right to the city of women in all societies.

Keywords: right to the city, gender, city, citizenship, inequality

INTRODUCTION

The idea of *the right to the city* is a basic conceptual starting point for deliberating over gender relations and spatial matrices in this paper. The right to the city was introduced into sociology by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre with an intention to point first to fundamental social (class) inequalities, and then to the idea that by affirming cities as political communities (in contrast to state centralism), it is possible to reach equality in the right to make decisions, which has been seriously compromised in capitalism. According to the author, the issue of space production is of special importance, because space, once shaped by the dominant hierarchical, class structure, has a reverse effect on the reproduction of social relations, reinforcing the class system and the existent conditions of unequal power distribution in society.

Although Lefebvre's analysis allows expansion from class to other dimensions of the analysis of the right to the city, some criticize the author for not taking into consideration the patriarchal relation in space, treating space as a gender neutral category (Fenster 2006: 43). Contemporary approaches in urban sociology, as well as in other disciplines, however, do consider the reflection of patriarchal patterns onto space. There are no charters on the right to the city which are concerned with the gender dimension of cities in a serious manner.¹ Feminist critics indicate cities as places where most rights are given to a citizen that fits into the identity category of a white heterosexual male of the upper middle class, which implies that the gender is always to be considered in an intersection with class, race and other identities. As Shelley Buckingham emphasizes, neither gender nor space is a neutral category. Both are socially constructed concepts that need to be analyzed and considered in the context of different actors who participate in the creation of everyday life (Buckingham 2010: 58).

From a historical perspective, changes in the everyday life of women and, in general, their struggle for liberation from rigid patriarchal clutches, can be observed since the 19th century, alongside with the processes of urbanization and industrialization. Back then, women were deeply bound to the private sphere and, therefore, not acceptable participants of expanding urban spectacles. However there were certain women who were a part of a street scene along with flâneurs, urban dandies and urban outsiders

¹ Patriarchy, meaning the rule of fathers, i.e. men, has different definitions and its genesis is sought for in different factors. Even among feminist movements there is no unanimity in this regard, but what is certain is that such a system restricts aspirations of women and permeates all areas of society: "Our society is a patriarchy... military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance – in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police is entirely in male hands" (Kate Millett according to Houle 2000: 33).

(McDowell 1999: 154).² These were mostly widows, prostitutes, lesbians, masculine women, girls who posed as live models for artists, writers, and other “loose” persons, who were already excluded from the society, since they did not fit the standard Victorian values. However, public space, or some of its parts, became also a place of freedom for some women other than those mentioned above. Women of the middle class regarded shopping malls as some kind of an envisioned better world, a refuge from the traditional clutches of a patriarchal family, and it was there that they used to find a place *just for themselves*, at least for a short time during the day. But although they broke free from male domination for a moment, this still did not mean that this place of their relaxation was not pervaded by the same matrix of values. Besides being subject to the lurking danger of sexual assaults, the culture of consumerism, which was becoming rife, also pushed them into a subordinate position. In this world, women have remained passive consumers, not creators, while their bodies are used in commercials in order to attract visitors and shoppers, which confirms the hypothesis that capitalism and patriarchy are, in fact, compatible. Sylvia Walby also reaches this conclusion when she explains that capitalism does not also mean the advancement of women’s rights, emphasizing that by allowing women to “penetrate” the public sphere from the private one, patriarchal relations merely reflect the private onto the public sphere, thus leading to no essential changes. The difference is that women are no longer dominated only in households, but also in the spheres of work, politics and other areas of the public domain (Walby 1990: 185).

Ambivalent experiences of the city space, as the space of freedom and a lack of it, is testified by studies conducted in societies that are predominantly traditional and patriarchal. Findings of Tovi Fenster show that most of female respondents in her interviews associate home with *prison*, and city with *freedom* (Fenster 2006: 44). However, this should not be taken as a rule.³ Women in all societies and ideological systems feel the city space as a location of unease, fear, a lack of freedom, and male dominance. To a large extent urbanism is responsible for this, since it is an activity that assumes planning and designing, which are never free from ideology and political influences, as Lefebvre wrote. Besides class, ideology and other aspects, gender-related aspects that reproduce the patriarchal relations

² Dandyism in a sociological sense represents a subcultural style within a culture of urban society. According to some interpretations, the first dandies were found in the antique times, but precisely speaking, it is a phenomenon associated with the socio-economic ascent of the citizens in the 19th and 20th century, primarily in England and France. Dandies are not singled out only by their perfect look and extravagant clothing, but also by their exceptional manners and sharp wit. He is an individual, a typical personage of an urban milieu. According to Scottish writer and essayist Thomas Carlyle, the dandy has developed a philosophy of dressing. And even more than that: “... as others dress to live, he lives to dress” (Carlyle, 2013: 11).

³ The study was conducted in Jerusalem between 1999 and 2002.

can also be recognized in it. Men are mostly in the position of power when it comes to urbanism, since planning is a technical discipline, regarded mostly as “manly” (Pajvančić Cizelj 2016: 67), and, consequently, the absence of women results in their interests being bypassed when creating a city ambient. One of the more significant factors of patriarchal space production is the urbanistic idea of La Corbusier which still dominates today. According to this architect, cities should be divided into four zones in relation to their functions: working, residential, recreational and traffic. Although this could seem to be a logical solution at first, sociologically speaking, it has more profound consequences. It is, namely, the case of separation between the public and the private sphere, whereby women are pushed back deeper into the private zone, while the public one, the working sphere, remains the space of male dominance. Even though the role of women changed during the second half of the 20th century into the direction of her emancipation and employment, this urbanistic plan has not corrected the separation of zones, which has, as a consequence, a more difficult functioning of all those women who simultaneously perform the duties of a business woman, on the one hand, and a mother and housewife, on the other.⁴

In the following, I will present some of the most common and universal manifestations of exclusion of women, which are a part of academic literature and all urban agendas and charters on the right to the city.

FEAR AND SAFETY

One of the most prominent issues concerning the women’s perspective on the right to the city is the question of safety in urban areas, or in other words, the fear that women experience when they walk through a city. Although laws both at the international and national level grant the right to a safe life without violence to women, the problem is unfortunately not solved in practice. Therefore, more concrete regulations need to be introduced at a local level. Although urban design and city planning do not have it in themselves to provoke violence, they are still not very sensitive to gender differences, and they make cities a place of male power and control (Buckingham, 2009). Different studies from around the world indicate certain shared characteristics, and that is the fact that women are scared of being attacked at night. When this does indeed happen, the public discourse is such that women are burdened with guilt more than offenders. It can be frequently heard that women themselves provoked an attack, because streets are no place for women at

⁴ Although it can be said for modern young generations that they improve this image, the household is still primarily women’s business, while men usually find excuses in a lack of competence for such a type of work (Houle 2000: 54).

night, which in fact denies them the right to use space freely. In order to change such attitudes and to stop cities being a place of reflection of patriarchal relations from the private into the public sphere, the women's collective right to safe and secure life in the city has to become a part of all urbanistic plans and activities, and women need to participate in them.

One of the attempts to create a policy for improving the living conditions of women in the city by means of their active participation in a project was conducted in 2007 in Warsaw by UN HABITAT-a (see: UN-Habitat's Safer Cities Program, A Women's Safety Audit Pilot Project). A paradoxical fact was established on this occasion, showing that large business buildings were better protected with security cameras, lighting and guards on duty, so that the city appeared more building-friendly than people-friendly (Buckingham, 2009). This confirmed once more that cities are designed in the interest of capital, i.e. *economic citizenship* (Sassen, 2004), and that private economic rights are protected instead of the collective right to the city of the citizens who reside in it.

There are, nevertheless, positive examples as well, such as the Swedish municipality of Umeå. This local community took seriously the problem of vulnerability and fear that women feel in the city and with that in mind they undertook concrete studies and found concrete solutions. The local government organized walks with female citizens so as to identify the precise places that could be dangerous and that needed to be redesigned.⁵ An entire new tunnel in the city was built with a gender sensitive design, with more curved angles, better lighting, interesting Swedish literature quotes on the walls and pleasant music. The attractive design resulted in an increased flow of people, which also significantly contributed to the reduction of danger and the increase of subjective feeling of safety in women. This city, known for its gender oriented urban planning, organizes tourist city tours in order to acquaint foreigners with the specific kind of sensitive urban policy (More on this: <http://umea.se/download/18.2e9e2c2914ce7d186cf17c06/1431333187734/The+gendered+city.pdf>).

However, since there are not many examples of gender sensitive urban design, parks, dead end streets and dark or dim streets and passages, public transport, tunnels, large car parks, but also districts known for prostitution (*red light districts*), remain the riskiest places to wander about in the majority of cities. Parks, particularly at night, are perceived by women as the first on the list of hostile spaces. According to studies, men also do not feel completely safe there at night, but the fear is especially pronounced in women (Fenster 2006: 47), and feminists have reacted to this with campaigns under

⁵ Incidentally, the statistics in Sweden indicate that 29% of women up to 25 years of age are afraid of violence in the city area and that they choose their routes carefully, whereas this is the case for 5% of men (See: Gender Equality Through SKGO Action, 2015: 86).

the slogans: “Reclaim the Streets” and “Reclaim the Night” (McDowell 1999: 150). While both men and women are afraid of robbery, women suffer an additional fear of a sexual assault. Although it is known that raping occurs predominantly in private places, committed by someone who knows the victim, sexual comments, touching and other kinds of frequent street sexual harassment acts lead women to feel that, besides sexual harassment, a sexual assault could also occur in the street. In short, sexual harassment causes the fear of sexual assault (Rachel Pain according to Houle 2000: 62-3), which results in voluntary withdrawal of women from the space deemed unsafe.

Street harassment is an insufficiently studied topic in sociology, law and other disciplines, but it imposes itself as a significant problem. It is a specific kind of harassment that is not recognized by the law, but which has psychological consequences for women.⁶ This phenomenon appears to be the most common form of sexual harassment of women throughout the cities of the Western countries and other parts of the world (Thompson 1993: 314). It consists of overt observation, evaluation, remarks, wolf-whistles and other inappropriate, degrading, sexist comments and proposals coming from unknown men. Street harassment is not forbidden by the law, and since it is in the mentality of people, it is commonly believed that it is something natural, normal, and that it does not harm in any way those who are targeted. In this sense, it is expected from women to tolerate the rude behavior of men in the street. A lack of institutional recognition of this phenomenon as a social problem that demands reaction results in the ghettoization of women in the private sphere. This phenomenon is further swept under the rug by the reactions of women themselves, who in those moments withdraw and ignore the harasser, because it has been shown that stronger reactions lead to more intense attacks by men.⁷ It is an interesting finding of a research conducted with men who were identified as those who make inappropriate comments, which shows that these men do not perceive their behavior as inappropriate or violent, but they also do not have an explanation for it. They usually describe it as youthful or fun, saying that it comes out of boredom or amusement (Thompson 1993: 326).⁸

Charters on the right to the city make a broad review of the issue and emphasize as an imperative that the city space needs to be organized in the way that makes moral

⁶ In the academic literature concerned with this problem, street harassment is called spirit murder, because it assumes a psychological and spiritual undoing of a person due to the cumulative effect of micro-aggressions in the everyday life (Thompson 1993: 316).

⁷ An especially vulnerable category of women are those who work in the street, i.e. street vendors, who are exposed to comments of other male street vendors stating that their place is at home, and not in the street. This menaces these women by sending them the message that they cannot professionally fulfil themselves and causes their embarrassment or anger (Thompson 1993: 324).

⁸ This year France is implementing the law against sexist comments, shouting and other harassment on the street.

and physical integrity of women possible, regardless of class, race, ethnic or any other cultural differences. Incidentally, regarding class, it is believed that women from higher classes are less affected by this problem, because they less often go on foot or use public transport, but use cars, taxis or have drivers instead. By contrast, among the most exposed are elderly women, as well as women with disabilities, who move slowly and are a vulnerable part of female population in the physical sense. Therefore, when designing the city space, special attention has to be paid to their needs.⁹

In the 1994 *European Charter for Women in the City*, problems and needs of women in urban areas are analyzed in details, and suggestions and recommendations are formulated accordingly, indicating in what way the situation in cities is to be changed so as to make it more sensitive to women's needs. Nothing of the mentioned is completely new, but being insufficiently spread it requires additional attention to be drawn to the needs to expand such an infrastructure. Some of the suggestions are: to increase the number of phone booths with emergency call buttons, especially in critical zones; to install alarm devices in buses and other public transport vehicles, so that passengers could inform the driver if harassment is occurring during the ride; to improve street lighting, as well as traffic signs to make spatial orientation easier; to develop transport systems that offer greater sense of security at night, such as, for example, female taxi drivers; to redesign buildings and entrances so that they have, for instance, more transparent doors in elevators, automatic door locks and similar safety measures.

The Charter also states that the safe urban environment from the women's perspective is the one which allows them to know where they are and where they are going, to see and to be seen, to hear and to be able to be heard by others, so that they can escape and find help nearby (ECFWITC, 1994). The importance of spreading awareness of gender dimensions of cities through the educational system and the media is emphasized, but it is also highly important for men to get involved, because complex problems can be solved only with the full capacity and solidarity of a local community.

MOBILITY AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The issue of the city transport builds on the previous problem. Women are still persons who are associated with housework, which means also providing care for children and elderly in the household. However, they are also engaged in their

⁹ Pregnant women are also an especially vulnerable category, because they fear twice as much, not only for their life, but also for the life of their baby. For that reason, they choose to avoid certain parts of a city, and it appears as if they are now punished for their reproductive role by the feeling of the public space not being completely friendly to them (Koskela 1999: 120).

professions and careers, so it is very important that parts of a city are well connected. The spatial dispersion of home, work, shopping malls, social institutions, schools, kindergartens makes the adequate performance of daily chores more difficult for women. In that sense, it is important for urban planning to reduce spatial distances so as to allow the performance of all roles of women with the least possible difficulties.¹⁰ Although, due to the size of a city, it is sometimes impossible to expect that all establishments could be located in the direct vicinity, and that it is possible to reach them on foot, one should strive to provide all parts of a city with as many services and institutions as possible or, at least, make public transport so efficient that it connects all parts of a city. An adequate and frequent public transport is important since women possess cars to a lesser extent than men, but class differences should also be taken into account, because they dictate the means of transport. Those on positions of power usually do not come from vulnerable and lower social strata, so they often do not have an insight into their needs and their daily life, which does not assume automobiles, but public transport and other cheaper options.

Some of the suggestions for improving the situation that are mentioned in gender oriented charters on the right to the city are related to recommendations to local authorities to additionally promote the so-called flexible forms of transport, such as small electric cars or bicycles, which serve the common good. There should be a sufficient number of them, as well as sufficient parking spaces. A good example of such an urban organization are cities in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, i.e. in countries with developed ecological awareness. It is perfectly clear that the use of such means of transport has an ecological benefit for the city, and besides, it reduces crowdedness in motorized traffic. As one of the recommendations, it is also mentioned that more women need to be employed in the positions of city planners and public transport drivers (ECFWITC, 1994), because it is assumed that they would have more understanding when it comes to other women's needs.

CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

Discrimination of women in space appears in other spheres as well, such as politics of raising and naming squares, memorials, streets. Monuments are raised in remembrance of people and events in order to praise their role in history, establishing thereby the system of values in a society. Numerous studies have been conducted in Serbia and the world, showing that, even though we

¹⁰ It should be emphasized that composing a space by reducing spatial distances and introducing better connections between important institutions would improve the functioning of the private-public relation not only for women, but also for men, who are found in roles located in both spheres.

differ in ideological, economic and other codes, what appears the same is the near invisibility of women in history. This gender discriminatory culture of remembrance is recognized primarily in the fact that there is a significantly smaller percentage of streets, parks, monuments and other sights dedicated to famous women. In addition, even when streets are named after a woman, they are usually small, located on the outskirts or dead end. By contrast, boulevards, well-known buildings and central streets are dedicated to men. As well as in other areas of the right to the city which have been previously discussed, class inequality can be found here as well, so names of women from the upper social strata are found more often (for instance, queens, female rulers, etc.), less often names of female artists, and the least often women from the lowest classes who have left a trace in history (Sekulić, 2014).

These underappreciated roles of women and their significance for society create psychological barriers for women and send them a message that their social engagement, devotion and work will never be recognized in an adequate way. Not only are women excluded from the historical memory, there are also other marginalized groups such as ethnic and racial minorities, members of the working class and members of the gay and lesbian population. In Los Angeles, for instance, half of the population are women, whereas almost 60% are Latin-Americans, Afro-Americans and Asian-Americans. However, 97.5% of cultural sights remember only the Anglo-history dominated by males of the Caucasian background. Miami is in the lead among the USA cities with eight monuments in remembrance of women in history, while Boston has none (Houle 2000: 66).

CONCLUSION

Even today, after they have won many liberties in comparison to previous historical periods, women are still not citizens of countries and cities with equal rights. Feminist organizations succeeded in winning various civil rights for women in the second half of the 20th century. However, when it comes to the right to the city and the need to take their needs into consideration when making urbanistic plans, there are no significant improvements, even though it is an irrefutable fact that they have made a significant contribution to the construction of the very same cities (CFWRITC, 2004). Society still perceives them primarily as mothers, wives, and housewives, but not in any other way beyond that. Additionally, poverty, gender-related division of labor, inequality and discrimination according to class, race, religious, and other aspects, as well as violence against women (both in private and public space), are the basic social problems that create an unavoidable context for

understanding the complexity of consideration of civil rights of women and their right to the city (Falu 2014: 59).

Today, the neoclassical liberal ideology (neoliberalism) especially supports this state of affairs and it is an important contributor to the creation and the reproduction of gender inequality in space. Harvey writes that in neoliberalism, laws are oriented towards individual rights, especially to the rights of capital, i.e. of corporations (oriented towards the maximal economic profit), and this is done at the expense of collective rights, so that many categories of city dwellers become “second class citizens”, and women are certainly among them. Furthermore, the neoliberal economy increases the already existing polarizations. The poor become poorer, and those underprivileged are pushed further down. Such logics certainly affects women as well, and they become a cheap labor power of the global economy. A historically assigned role of performing unpaid or volunteer work still falls on their shoulders, even after the emancipation and the freedoms won during the 20th century. An increasing privatization and the reduction of social services, i.e. the weakening of the welfare state, have caused women to accept the role of those who take care of others, as something that is understood and self-explanatory. For instance, it is a well-known fact that, in the 1980s, during the rule of Margaret Thatcher, when class inequality became deeper than before, women replaced the institutional care for the elderly and other groups that could not take care of themselves (*community care*) (McDowell 1999: 115-116).

In order for cities to live as democratic communities, not only on paper, but in practice as well, what is necessary is inclusive decision-making, which assumes a multi-actor approach of the central and local authorities, non-governmental organizations, social movements, private sector and various civil organizations. Only in this way, the needs of different social groups that live in cities will not be neglected. But in order to achieve this, it is necessary to increase the number of women in political bodies in cities.¹¹ One of the suggestions is affirmative action, which would determine quotas that would guarantee women’s participation in local bodies, but it is also recommended to increase the participation of feminist organizations that would be appreciated as an equal partner when it comes to defining problems and finding solutions (CFWRTTC, 2004). It would be wrong to infer that all these charters and academic papers dealing with this issue demand women’s dominance. On the contrary, equality is highlighted everywhere, and it is

¹¹ One of the examples in practice, which was beneficial for the so-called municipal feminism or femocracy, was founding an institution which dealt exclusively with the needs of female residents of London, regardless of their background and class; this was a result of a concern that the city is accessible to women in every way (The Greater London Council Woman’s Committee). This institution was founded in 1982, but it was shut down four years later, due to a lack of political will to maintain it (More in: Bashevkin, 2005).

emphasized that a gender balanced approach is needed when it comes to planning cities, starting from their material form and physical environment, to the cultural, social and other contents, and to forming political local institutions.

What is certainly not encouraging, but makes a dominant impression when examining the literature on the gender perspective of the right to the city, is the fact that women are concerned with this issue in the highest percentage. Here it becomes clear that concrete changes are possible only if their local political participation is increased. It appears that men do not have enough sense or will to change things in order to balance the needs and power. Solidarity and understanding of the position of others are lacking in this case, so the general conclusion is that the local political participation of women, i.e. their greater participation in centers of power and decision-making, is one of the crucial conditions for a step forward towards asserting their right to the city. The precondition for this is to increase the awareness of women for their common interest, which, obviously, only they alone can generate. Although there are numerous feminist organizations, it will be necessary to work on providing more information and better education through the educational system and the media regarding their position and the endangered collective rights.

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