

## Urban Development in Beirut: Gender and Space

Sandrine Melki

While tackling the gender/urban development approach is new, but widely spread in the western world, the subject is almost irrelevant to Middle-Eastern research. The case study of one neighborhood in the cosmopolitan and distinctive Beirut explores this approach while focus-

ing on women, either as recipients or as producers within their experience of space and their involvement with urban material.

**Keywords:** Space, Urban Planning, Gender, Women, Inequality.

The work encountered in this paper elaborates the intersection between space and gender and its link to urban development in Beirut, a unique setting within the Arab world, while tackling issues of spatial injustice that women have experienced in silence within the few last decades. We will be focusing here on the results of the field work organized in one neighborhood of the capital city Beirut: Sassine neighborhood in Ashrafiyye district.

Talking about gender requires the usage of many notions and concepts making the term “gender studies” often intriguing. Nevertheless, in the context of this paper, we will be discussing the experience of women only (rather than the female gender), their role and the consequences they encounter throughout urban space, while tackling urban planning matters. Women represent a category that is still considered an inferior or subaltern one compared to men, favored by heavy historical backgrounds, especially when it comes to dominance and the patriarchal mode operating legally, socially and psychologically (Di Méo 151). And throughout this reality, our research explores the power balance that patriarchy sets in society, while bringing attention to socio-spatial inequalities that women know primarily. Hence our choice, our interest in this category, the half of society.



Illustration 1: Panorama of Sassine square - Courtesy of the author - September 2018

The gender dimension is an important one within Arabic culture because of the impregnation of the confessional dimension dictating specific social practices, especially the attribution of a gendered connotation to spaces such as the feminine interior/masculine exterior duality (Baziz and Chabbi-Chemrouk 3; Dris 249). All throughout this paper, the term and the concept of gender is used in an interdisciplinary approach that proves the association between gender inequalities and space. Even if we majorly focus on women, it is still relevant to clarify the definition of gender used here. We stress out on two dimensions that stem from of the fact that gender is the social construct of the sexual identity: the concept of gender is at base of the social organization of differences (Denèfle 5) while participating in

the coding of interactions through the implementation of a social hierarchical structure (Goffman 301).

Today, the status of Lebanese women has certainly evolved. But the path that these women have experienced was a tumultuous one, especially at the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. Up until that time, Lebanon experienced large cultural influences from both the Western world and the Eastern bloc, resulting in the setting of an ascending path towards equality with men on all levels, especially in the social context. The 60's and 70's presented the peak with an importation process on many levels (architecture, fashion, art, music, way of living and socializing). All that revealed a major feminine mindset of liberation that defied social customs. The ideas of change and emancipation for

women were therefore already circulating for a while. We cannot deny that the social evolution didn't continue during the war and the direct post-war period. However, it is natural that any gender inequality issues were not the primary concern at that time.

For this study, we chose to focus our attention on the present timeline for field work, while searching for the residual inequalities that relate gender with the experience of space. Therefore, we wish to elaborate our analysis of the field work on two levels being the usage of space and the production of the latter.

Our interest in the neighborhood of Sassine is based on the fact that it does not present many internal social disparities. This allows us to have results that are not influenced by major social factors, as



Illustration 2: North-West view of Sassine square - Courtesy of the author - September 2018

this research is to our knowledge, the first of its kind in the Lebanese context, hence giving primary results to a new theme. As a first approach, our wish was therefore to study an emancipated neighborhood in order to show the effect that minimal social disparities have on such issue. We anticipated the best results for this neighborhood. However, some of them were still disappointing.

And while using the term gender is quite ambiguous, it is very relevant to explain and apprehend the context of this usage throughout the field work too. Gender is seen here as a sexual identity that distinguishes between the different individuals of the same society. We are seeking this identity as a way to prove its link with a differentiated type of interaction with space. This being said, the kind of interaction with space has its impact on the daily

life of every individual. Our observation in this area relies on the experience of the urban environment constituted by the city itself. And through that, we put the main focus on the common activities engaged throughout the different times of the day. These activities create in parallel, many paths and trajectories examined in the mobility factor, or feelings examined throughout the security and accessibility factors.

In this sense, we highlight the action of urban public policies relatively to gender, in order to understand the relationship between both parties. Urban services are analyzed while talking to concerned neighborhood encounters and evaluating the adaptation of women with daily urban life in the chosen study area. We realize that the issue of Lebanese women's needs in general (wherever they live, whatever their age or their social class), is never prioritized, yet not even considered. In fact, an Office of the Minister of State for Women Affairs was only launched for the first time in February 2017. Hence the historical delay into the consideration of women's affairs on a structured legal basis. In order to process our problematic, we rely on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted from May to August 2018, on a chosen sample of people who live, work or study in the neighborhood

(twenty-six males and forty-nine females, divided into three age groups: 15-20 years old, 21-30 years old and 31-50 years old). The sample is not statistically representative and not preliminarily prepared but rather chosen on the field capturing a better consistency of the neighborhood's dwellers. In fact, many benefits came out of this method, such as the live observation of the public spaces and the individuals who encounter them. Women were even more responsive to the interview proposal and to its theme mainly, making the female responses' percentage higher than the male one. That said, the fact that we intended to interview men and women is very relevant to the construction of a detailed image of the reality. Even if masculinities and femininities are separate entities, they cannot exist one without the other and consequently, they mutually influence each other.

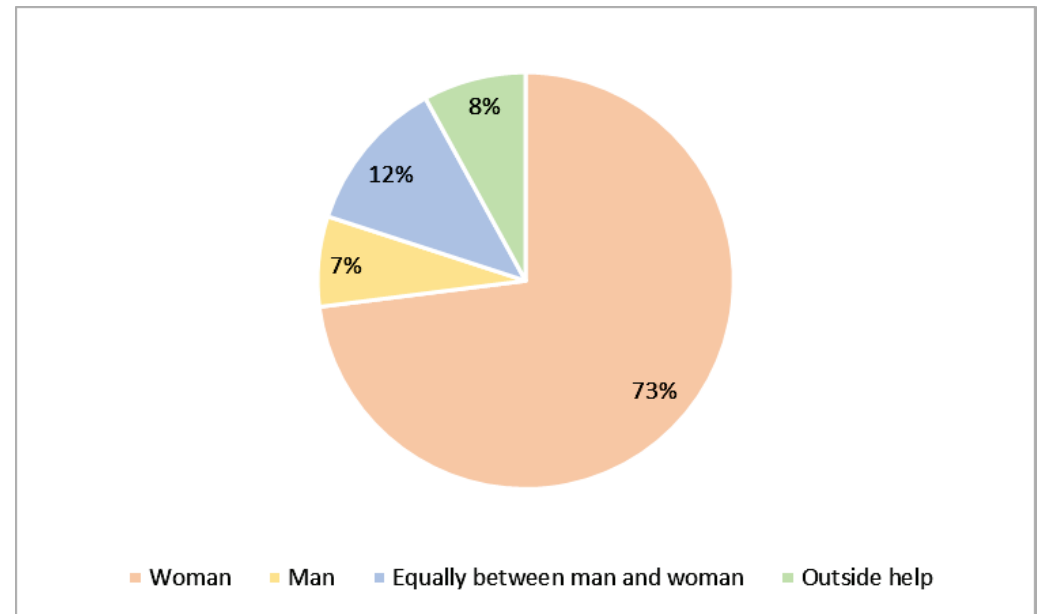
Most of the interviews were therefore realized on site, in different time settings capturing by that different ranges of people, because of different timed activities. The aim of these interviews was to reconstitute the trajectory of the concerned sample while understanding their practice of space, all through a thorough talk that allowed us the understanding of expressed emotions and feelings. The interview consisted of 29 questions

divided into several categories related to general information, mobility and security issues, evaluation of space and participation into household activities.

The neighborhood of Sassine is a socially mixed one where several classes cohabit. It is mainly considered a Christian neighborhood, the sectarian aspect being a major feature of Lebanese culture. A social contrast forms (with an upward gentrification), due to the rise of new buildings with high real estate value, showing a diversity in lifestyles. The area of study represented by Sassine is composed of a main square called Sassine square and of an environ-

ing radius where the same name applies. The aspect generated by the term "square" and the topology of the area make the space less accessible to pedestrians in certain ways.<sup>1</sup> However, the whole radius of Sassine neighborhood is walkable in terms of distance, hence our choice as a study material (diameter of the study area: 420 meters).

Analyzing the constitution of an urban context with its link to gender in it goes primarily through several checkpoints. Services and commercial functions present in the neighborhood are classified in

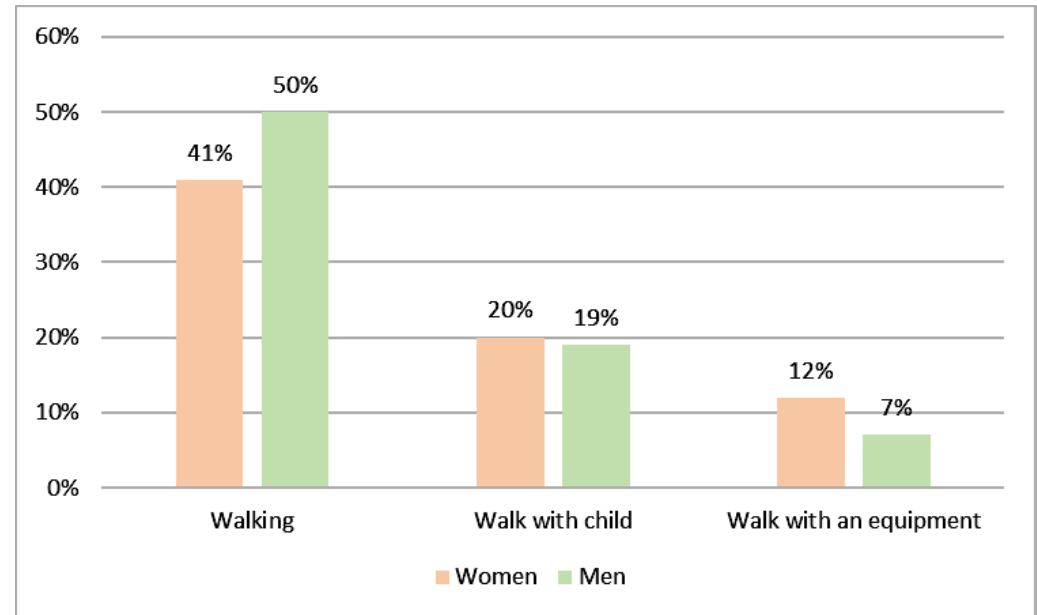


Graph 1: Main person in charge of daily household activities - Courtesy of the author

categories that mark their diversity.<sup>2</sup> An increase in services allows the satisfaction of basic daily needs, on a walking perimeter. Two main road arteries cross the neighborhood making them the busiest, especially at their intersection, Sassine square.<sup>3</sup> The west quarter (newest part of the neighborhood) is the calmest area, making it a little less interesting for commercial investments, besides a shopping street cluster on the west end.

A noticeable cluster divides the neighborhood in a west “shopping cluster” and north “restaurants/café cluster”, with an intersection among the north-west area being a shopping mall (“ABC” mall) where the public space is extended into it. Grocery shops are almost well distributed in the whole area. In terms of daycare and education, three nurseries and a school are present on the north hemisphere only. Given the analysis that occurred out of our interviews, we noticed that the main person in charge of the daily household activities and tasks in the concerned homes is the mother figure (graph 1).

This puts the woman upfront and in a main interaction with the services offered in the neighborhood. Any lack would be reflected on her comfort. This said, few of the interviewed women (quarter of the sample), find the services offered in the



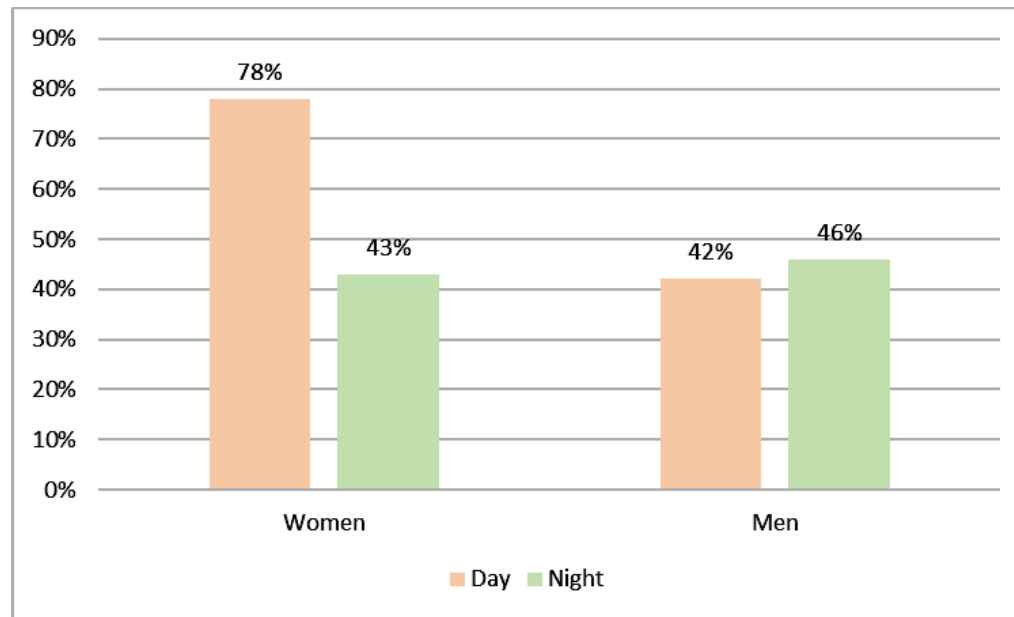
Graph 2: Pedestrian accessibility in the neighborhood - Courtesy of the author

area of focus good enough to fulfill the daily tasks and activities, which compromises their relationship to the public space.

Meanwhile, in order to be in touch with the services offered, mobility is a crucial aspect that engages a special connection with space, reflected on several levels. In fact, woman present a unique experimentation of it. Valentine talks about strategies that women adopt to avoid “dangerous places” at “dangerous times” all through the creation of personal mental maps based on their own experiences or on

additional data heard (386). Women also experience a ban or restriction of use throughout public space, as a consequence of an education encouraging that as early as childhood. Girls therefore comprehend and internalize a different treatment from boys regarding the “spatial range of their activities” and the way their parents express their fear for them (Hart 63).

First, the experience of space in terms of ease of accessibility. The slower main road artery (Independence Street) accounts for the only pedestrian crosses (17 in total,



Graph 3: Walking as a mean of transportation within the neighborhood - Courtesy of the author

even if some of them are barely visible anymore), and 16 out of 35 curb cuts in total (map 1). As for the sidewalks, the older urban fabric (east part), has uncomfortable sidewalks. Either they are non-existent or they are less than 1 meter in width (map 1), which makes it hard to walk as a pedestrian alone, yet even with children or elderly.

Relatively, this accessibility is almost felt in the same way through the eyes of men and of women. Nearly half of the men and women find it somehow easy to walk alone through this neighborhood. This

percentage drops down when we ask about walking with a child, and even more for the walk with any equipment such as a stroller or a wheelchair (graph 2). In addition, very few think it's easy to cross a street in Sassine. Therefore, the mental image of the mobility is somehow compromised, making the experience of the street space inaccessible to a large range of people.

Second, there is the act of mobility itself and the means of transportation that it engages. Interestingly, the numbers reveal

a gendered experience: men and women have a different approach while moving throughout the different times of the day. Most women choose walking as a mean of transport during the day; which is not the same case at night. Men however show a steady average between day and night. Men and women have consequently the same approach to walking at night in the neighborhood. However, women who are initially very comfortable to the idea of walking during the day time, become less enthusiastic to that same idea at night (graph 3). Two salient features come out of this: women embrace mobility on foot in the public space in a healthy way only through certain hours of the days where they probably find the presence of a form of security, therefore many of them choose to change this mean of transport depending on the time of the day. Men however don't make a differentiation between day and night time, therefore they don't link this mean of transport with any time phase.

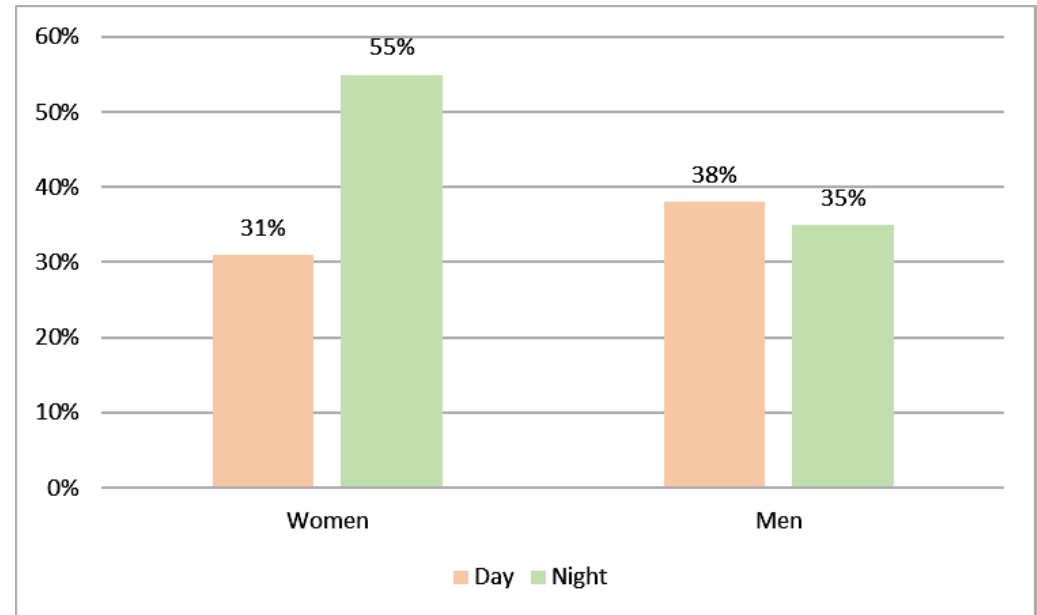
The same goes for the choice of the car as a mean of transport. Between day and night times, the choice of the car increases for women, while keeping a steady low percentage for men (graph 4).

These numbers reinforce our highlights for the mobility captured from the walking

choice as a mean of transport. Men still didn't make any link between the choice of mean of transport and the time phase, while women engaged in a higher choice for the car at night in comparison with the day. This percentage is directly linked to the feeling of security that the car represents for women, as discussed with many of those who were interviewed.

The security checkpoint is the main indication to the nature of an individual's relationship with a space. When asked about the safety of the neighborhood, the general outcome of the responses showed Sassine to be a safe place. Nonetheless, street-level harassment does exist. We categorized the latter into three types: verbal harassment, sexual harassment and sexual assault, while quantifying it according to time. The gap noticed between women and men is large: a quarter of the women are victims, and in comparison almost no men are.

This being said, the nature of the harassment is mainly verbal. However, the frequency of it is relative to the age group of the chosen sample (graph 5). Between the ages of 15 and 20 years old, the different women experience this type of harassment on a daily basis. The older women are, the less the frequency is, resulting in harassment once a month for women between 31 and 50 years old.



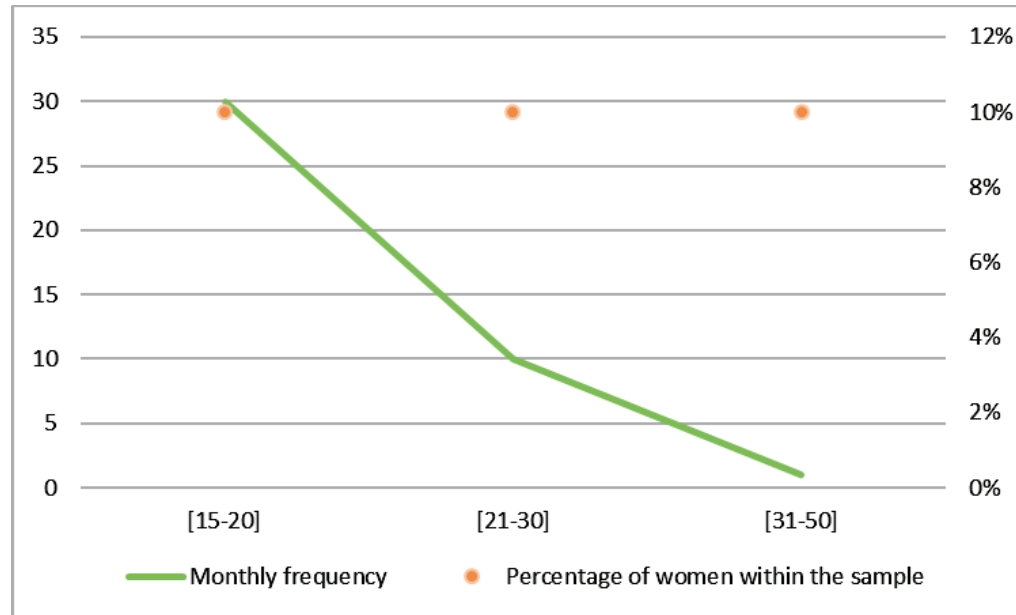
Graph 4: Car choice as a mean of transportation within the neighborhood - Courtesy of the author

This helps us to understand the fact that women also experience space through and according to their age. Every age category of women is subject to different kinds of feelings while in the public space. This is mostly due to the fact that the age category is linked to a certain physical appearance. And it is this physical appearance that is quite mistaken for a sexual one for most of the harassers, even if women don't offer any interaction. They are subject to offensive invasions of personal space on many levels. However, the older women got, the lower the tendency to

harassment was, which is probably due to the fact that the physical appearance is less appealing for harassers, with the aging process.

Even though Sassine is qualified by the majority as safe, there are certainly several spots avoided because they seem uncomfortable or at risk (map 1).

Urban furniture is also an important asset that helps create a comfortable and inclusive environment for everyone experiencing the space. In general, the equipment offered in the neighborhood is valued average by the whole sample, in terms of



Graph 5: Evolution of the frequency of verbal harassment in relation to the age of women - Courtesy of the author

comfort, security and access, even though the standards are not high (graph 6).

Lighting for example, is an essential aspect that enhances urban security as well. A well-lit street makes visibility much more available, hence the fact that everyone can see and be seen. That is why in the case of any kind of vulnerability, the harassed is reassured that help can be provided by others. Women have a tendency to feel uncomfortable and even threatened in a dark space, because they assume that they are prone to vulnerabilities such as

being attacked, being considered physically weaker than men (Valentine 385).

Independence Street is the most lit with 39 out of 82 lamp posts in total (map 2). Similar numbers are noticed for women and men in terms of lighting assessment (graph 6).

Benches are available mainly on Siufi road with 15 benches out of the 24 spotted in general (map 2), instead of being placed in the central square where the sidewalks are mostly developed (as displayed on both maps). The square hosts the concept of public bicycle rental membership (not

yet activated for over a year now), which is still a foreign concept in Lebanon, as very few people use bicycles as a transportation mean. Also, the shopping mall offers bike racks for private bicycles (map 2). The same goes for the urban furniture with similar but rather low numbers for women and men, qualifying it as good enough (graph 6).

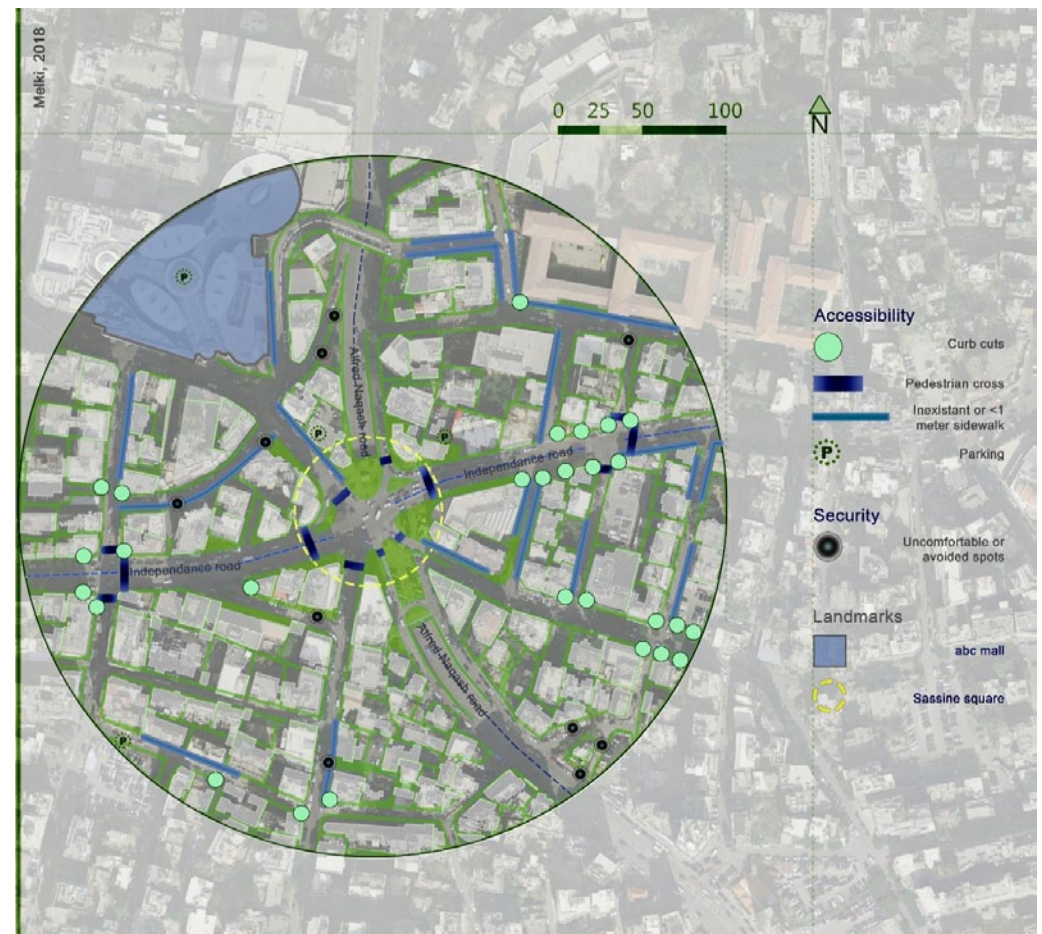
It is true that we find some focus on certain roads, both because they're important and they're the main exposure. In consequence, the secondary roads are neglected and the result affects how people make use of space, with women being targets unintentionally. Also, the public policies that are supposed to be engaged are barely present. However, and despite that, all subjects learn to live and adapt with what is available, especially women who encounter greater obstacles in the public space due to the heavy social backgrounds. The lack of knowledge in the needs of women regarding the public space, makes it harder to realize that they even exist. Many of the interviewed people were surprised by the theme of the questions: the subject was in fact unheard of for most of them. The link between the presence of women in space and the impact it has on their lives was a totally new matter, especially when some ques-



tions reminded the interviewed about life experiences.

To sum up the analysis carried out in this neighborhood, the space experience seems to take on a gendered dimension on many levels. Women having a bigger necessity or obligation to interact with this space while fulfilling daily tasks, find themselves making a bigger effort for the matter. They are also not reconciled with its public space on a full basis when it comes to the pedestrian experience and the different phases of the day. Meanwhile, the major urban planning features that affect the street level and allow comfort in space, don't seem to be differentiated by men or women, as they already are rated on low standards. In addition, the security aspect seems to be present in the neighborhood for everyone alike.

As for the production of space, the case of Sassine's neighborhood is not to be singled out of the whole entity that is the city of Beirut. In fact, we cannot restrain such an issue to only one neighborhood of the city, because the mechanisms of any space making are applicable to the entire city in a general way. Nevertheless, the current municipal council for the city of Beirut (therefore in charge of Ashrafiyye district and Sassine neighborhood within), seems to apply a policy of decentralization regarding the decisions to be taken for

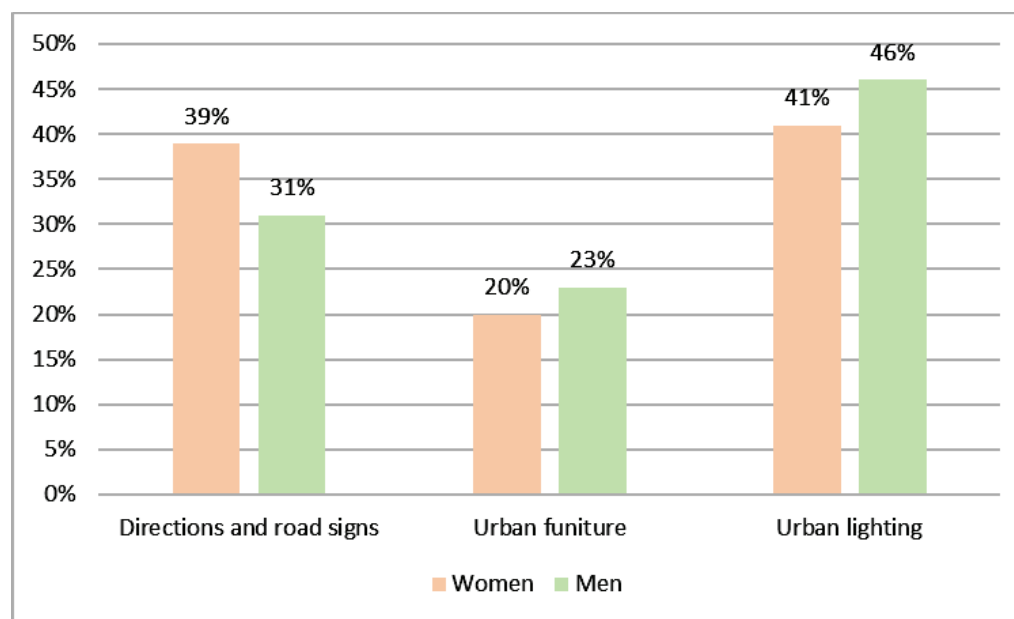


**Map 1 - Accessibility and Security map of Sassine neighborhood. Base map: 2014 aerial picture provided by the Directory of Geographical Affairs - Lebanese Army. Map courtesy of the author**

each of its districts, through the members that originate from them respectively. Unfortunately, the council - which consists of 24 members - counts only 3 women (UNDP-LEAP, *Women*), hence the low par-

ticipation of women into any decision making.

The participation into the production of space for Lebanese women has actually slightly improved in the recent decades,



Graph 6: Satisfaction regarding the equipment offered in the neighborhood in terms of comfort, security and access - Courtesy of the author

but the path remains largely incomplete. Participation in political empowerment, for example, at all scales, whether at the legislative level ensuring the implementation of new laws, or at the municipal level ensuring local governance and a more tactile approach to small-scale needs, is for the moment very minimal. From 12 female candidates (out of 702)<sup>5</sup> in the 2009 legislatures to 113 (effectively 86 after withdrawals out of 976, which makes the final count to 14%) in the consecutive legislatures of 2018 (UNDP-LEAP, *Parliamentary Elections*), the number of

female candidates certainly rose (the highest number ever reached in Lebanon)<sup>6</sup>; unfortunately, the number of elected female MP's remains quite the same.<sup>7</sup> As for the municipal councils, one great achievement was noted right after the 2016 elections took place. The Lebanese law dictated that running for a municipal council is only permitted in one's original hometown. However, for the next elections, this law is evolving and women will be allowed to run for their hometown's council even if they get married to an outsider. A milestone that encourages women and especially the

empowered and dynamic youth to seek action at any point of their lives. Previously, many women were actually highly discouraged or even banned from running to councils because it would be useless for them, had they been obliged to back down in the middle of a 6-year mandate in the case of marriage.

Women still struggle to find a place in the male dominated political world (Roux 195). The negative effects of these findings are reflected in non-inclusive, gender-blind results. For this, gender auditing is a powerful tool that is used nowadays to assess gender inequalities in specific social contexts. The concept of such auditing brings together many aspects that rate the percentage and nature of gender participation into any activity. Surprisingly, this foreign concept is being introduced in Lebanon through several municipalities that accepted the proposal.<sup>8</sup> The National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) teamed up with Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) who funded the project in 2018, while allowing five designated people from the personnel to acquire an international gender auditing certificate. The basis of their work takes its guidelines from the International Labor Organization (ILO) standards which are readapted to fit the local context. The process being at its start at the time of writ-

ing this article, it is quite difficult to apprehend any results so far. However, the service which is classified as a “participatory audit” is an analytical approach that groups a number of points. For starters, the municipalities’ law is revisited for text editing given the fact that the Arabic language uses a masculine (non-inclusive) plural. The analysis goes through all the circulars generated by the municipality, the organized events and activities with the corresponding sponsors, the spent budgets, the relationship between the different employees, the distribution of the types of jobs and tasks and the needs of the audience, all of that in a gender inclusive mentality that shows any inequality and the solutions to fix it (El Khoury).

### Conclusion

We chose the neighborhood of Sassine as the first exposure to this thematic with some predicted results, given the nature of its social aspect. The analysis conducted in this paper opens however the path to different analysis in other neighborhoods of the city. The projection of Sassine into other neighborhoods will surely allow a richness in the research and many windows opened, as different criteria apply to them, such as the religious aspects, the socio-economic diversity, etc.



Map 2 - Urban furniture map of Sassine neighborhood. Base map: 2014 aerial picture provided by the Directory of Geographical Affairs - Lebanese Army. Map courtesy of the author

The urban development that Beirut should have had in general is always thought of as the victim of the war. And the journey of Lebanese women discussed throughout this paper is the victim of a failed urban

development, due to the degradation of the societal constitution. The war period was a definite setback to any evolution in the country, and for that it failed to keep up with the international development on

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is an architect who has gained experience working with issues related to the urban fabric, especially in Lebanon. She is currently a PhD candidate at Sorbonne - Paris IV, finishing up her research while planning for a thesis defense in December 2019. Being a strong advocate of social justice and gender related issues, the cultural geography themed research she is leading focuses on women's perspectives and experiences of the city itself, while negotiating the existence of gendered identities in the urban spaces of the Greater Beirut area.

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many issues, including women's emancipation and rights. What consoles us in this local context is the similarity in the presence of gendered needs and inequalities, even in the most advanced societies worldwide. However, the lack of awareness concerning the crossover between gender and space making in Lebanon remains a major challenge. In all of our field work, any discussion based on the theme of our research was a totally new subject to most of the people we talked to and to any administrative instance. The local NGO's are the only exception to that. We somehow still find a masculine culture that circulates in the society, affecting the relationship between women and space. However, we believe that men are not a direct obstacle to the integration of women in space. The main problem does not reside in women's usage of space, but rather, and most importantly, in the fact that women are not included in the production process. The production process was an implicit one in the past, with a female emancipation being on the rise up until the war. However nowadays, it has become more explicit: women have started taking part in this production, but the outcome is still minimal. That said, it would be quite difficult to foresee the development of the process now. Despite that, we are optimistic about such a state.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sassine square is the highest point in Ashrafiyye area, from which all the roads go downhill. The square hosts a tunnel underneath it, with high speed lanes. It is considered as a traffic node, and even with an advanced public planning (higher than its environment), it is hardly accessible for pedestrians.

<sup>2</sup> Medical, groceries, stationery and IT, restaurants and cafés, shopping, beauty care and sports, nursery, schools and universities, laundry, banks, parking and car services.

<sup>3</sup> One of them (Alfred Naqash road) being a faster lane and presenting a tunnel, accounts for almost no services on the side roads.

<sup>4</sup> Parking lots are mainly present on the square. The whole neighborhood has a park meter system, especially on the square and on all the sidewalks; in addition, the "ABC" shopping mall has an extensive private parking area (map 1).

<sup>5</sup> According to the official listing of candidates for the

2009 legislative elections (UNDP-LEAP, *Women and Elections in Lebanon*).

<sup>6</sup> 6 candidates in 1992 (1.47%), 11 candidates in 1997 (1.84%), 18 candidates in 2000 (3.3%), 14 candidates in 2004 (2.89%) and 12 candidates in 2009 (1.71%) (Abaad).

<sup>7</sup> 6 women in 2018 vs. 4 women in 2009 (UNDP-LEAP, *Milestones; Parliamentary Elections*).

<sup>8</sup> According to the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), Jezzín, Şayda, Niha, Hammana, Zouk Mikael, Kfar Nabrahk and Amyoun municipalities (Bou Akl; GIZ).

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