

Original Paper

Gendered Spaces in the Arab World

P. K. Baburajan¹

¹ Program Coordinator, General Studies and English Communication, Higher Colleges of Technology, Madinat Zayed Colleges, Abu Dhabi, UAE

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Abstract

Gender spacing is an important concept in sociology. It refers to the process of segregating individuals and the use of physical spaces based on gender. There are considerable variations in gender roles and the sphere of activities between societies. This research paper describes the gendered spaces in the Arab world. It explores the critical causes of gender-specific use of physical spaces and changing trends in Arab societies. Traditionally, in most societies in the Arab world, women are given only a supportive or submissive role. While men use and control spaces in public spheres, the home is the sphere of activities for women. Social structuring and religious values are important reasons for the spatial segregation of males and females. However, the sphere of activities of women and their roles are getting changed. Several Arab states put considerable efforts to diffuse gendered spaces. Palestinian territory, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Yemen, and the UAE are some of the examples where women are encouraged to occupy spaces in public spheres. Advanced education, changes in attitudes and perceptions, and women empowerment activities are significant reasons for diffusing gendered spaces in the Arab world.

Keywords

gendered spaces, patriarchal system, male domination, women empowerment, political rights, gender roles, the functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective

1. Introduction

Although men and women make up human societies, their sphere of activities is not the same across societies. There are considerable variations in gender roles and the sphere of activities between societies. Most of the societies in the past assigned a submissive role to women, and considered family is their sphere of activity. The supportive roles assigned to women restrict them to homes and prevent them from taking up occupations outside the household, doing business on their own, move freely, and enter politics. However, the situation has changed since long ago, especially in the Western world, where several changes occurred in favor of women. Large numbers of societies in the Western world, as well as in

many civilized and industrialized non-western societies, now do not segregate men and women in various human activities. Human rights are valued high, and equality has become a norm in these societies. Women take up the lead roles not only in their homes but also in the workplace, society, and politics. In fact, segregating people based on gender is a punishable offense in many developed societies. Traditionally, in most societies in the Arab world, women are given only supportive or submissive roles (Nydell, 2002). However, although certain societies like Saudi Arabia still follows a conservative approach towards women, the sphere of activities of women and their roles are getting changed in the Arab world. While gender-specific spatial differentiation still exists in the Arab world, the emerging trend is that many Arab women move independently in public places and cities. They drive cars, do businesses on their own, lead families, go abroad for studies, and enter politics. This research paper provides an overview of the gendered spaces in the Arab world.

2. Gendered Spaces

Gender and spatial distribution are interesting areas of sociological research. Gender is the sociological definition of sex generally expressed in terms of masculine gender and feminine gender (Inciardi & Rothman, 1990). Since gender is a social construct, societies' cultural practices and belief systems considerably influence the assignment of roles and responsibilities. The term gender spacing is an important concept in sociology. It referred to the process of segregating individuals and the use of physical spaces based on gender (Bird & Sokolofski, 2005; Townsend, 2000). There are specific areas of activities for men and women. Gendered use of physical space has existed throughout human history, although significant changes have occurred in modern times. Traditionally, homes are the spheres of activities of women, and the public or marketplace is meant for men (Bird & Sokolofski, 2005). Gendered spaces could provide a basis for understanding human behavior. A study on gendered spaces in the business contexts by Bird and Sokolofski (2005) revealed that males and female customers use their physical space differently. While the male customers used their spaces (in bars, pubs, and restaurants) in a relatively more individualistic and controlling manner, the female customers used it in a less dominating, and more conservative manner.

There are different viewpoints on gender differentials in space utilization. According to the evolutionary approach, gender differential in modern societies is the result of a legacy of male domination that had its origin in the preindustrial period. In the preindustrial societies, the physical strength of males and their supremacy were necessary for survival. Men needed to play an active role in the activities outside the homes and exert control over space outside the homes, as they needed to confront their enemies quite often for the survival of their groups. The biological difference has also justified the males' dominating role in space use. The members of preindustrial society recognized that the biological strength of men was suited for warfare. Moreover, men are not constrained by pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. Therefore, it was logical to socialize men to be dominant, aggressive, and control space outside the home more than women (Inciardi & Rothman, 1990). The functional perspective provides an explanation of

gender differential in the use of space in the context of family organization. The stability family requires two different forms of behavior. The behavior of husbands and wives must complement each other. It requires men to assume breadwinning and protective roles and occupying the space outside the homes more frequently than women. The women's role is to provide emotional support to men and child rearing. This type of division of labor ensured the family as a stable, functional unit (Inciardi & Rothman, 1990). The conflict viewpoint, on the other hand, explains the gender-specific space utilization as a mechanism used by men to exploit women and continue domination over them. While men control the space outside the home, women are restricted from using public spaces. Greater control of public space by men allowed them to work in paid jobs so that women would remain dependent on men (Inciardi & Rothman, 1990). Gendered use of spaces is found universally. Although in societies like the U.S, where women use the space outside the home as commonly as of men, the restricted use of it could still be seen in certain specific contexts. For instance, men and women do not use space in the same manner in pubs and bars in the U.S. Mostly, it is used and dominated by men. If at all women use it, they do it in a conservative way (Bird & Sokolofski, 2005). The gendered use of physical space might reflect at the cognitive level of people. The gender-specific practices of space use make people conscious of using the space in public spheres. A study on the gendered use of public spaces in China revealed that men and women use public spaces differently. Women are found to be quite apprehensive and needed more spaces in the elevators, stairs, underground garages, driving along walking places, and sideways parking slots (Yun, Xiaoyi, & Jie, 2007). It appears that the traditional restrictions on public space used by Chinese women cause them to feel dangerous that made them cautious in the use of spaces.

3. Gendered Spaces in the Arab World

Arab societies occupy a central position regarding the research on gendered spaces. A clearly identifiable pattern of space use could be seen in many Arab societies (Hale, 1987). The differential use of the physical space by males and females, in general, is recognized or favored in Arab culture. While it is considered appropriate for men to utilize public spaces actively, it is restricted for women. It is appropriate for women to stay away from public spheres. Such variations are necessary for the welfare of Muslim society to relieve Muslim men from disruptive behavior as free movement of women in public places tend to distract men and ignite their sexual urges that lead to many social dangers. However, it is impossible for women to be in their homes always. Therefore, they are expected to wear a hijab in order to ensure modesty when moving in public places (Briar, 2008). According to the Human Development report of 2002, women in the Arab world continue to suffer from several problems concerning their involvement in political, economic, and social life as well as access to employment. The Gender Empowerment Status (GES), an index (calculated based on the level of education and participation in the labor market) indicative of gender equality, for the Arab world is reported to be significantly low that is ranked to second to the last (Ilkkaracan, 2002; Sidani, 2005). It reveals that the gender-specific spatial use is dominant in this part of the world.

Traditionally in the Arab world, men occupy and dominate space outside the homes. The homes are considered to be the place for women. Generally, women accompany men when they use space outside their homes. It could be seen in the UAE as well that men and women occupy distinct spaces in public places as there are separate seats for men and women in public transport, and separate counters kept for women in banks, cinema halls, hospitals, emigration departments, and other government offices. In government schools, the classes for boys and girls are separate, although, in private universities, co-education is practiced. Gendered spaces are also evident in the workplace in the Arab world. The workplace is not a favorable space for women in the Arab world. It is reported that employers do not want to provide senior positions to women. In many cases, employers refuse to offer positions for women if it requires relocation (Essers & Benschop, 2009).

Gendered spatial segregation is reflected in the Arab architectural designs (Rosemary, 1993). The spatial division based on gender is evident in the design of homes in Arab societies. In most of the Arab households, there will be a hall called Majilis, which is mostly used by men. The male visitors to a household will be seated the Majlis. The Majlis is not an appropriate space for women and female visitors. There are separate spaces for men and women at various functions like marriages or parties (Nydell, 2002).

Similarly, a tall boundary wall is another characteristic of typical Arab houses. Gendered spacing is one of the reasons for building tall boundary walls for typical Arab houses. Since homes are the spheres of activities of women, in order to prevent public exposure of women and isolate their household activities, it is necessary to build tall boundary walls. Therefore, constructing a tall boundary wall became part of the traditional architectural designs of Arab houses (Osman & Suliman, 1996).

4. Causes of Gendered Spaces in the Arab World

A variety of reasons contributes to spatial utilization based on gender in the Arab world.

4.1 Religious Reasons

Probably religious factors are the more important considerations for gendered use of spaces in the Arab world. Religion is an integral part of day-to-day life of people in this part of the world. According to Islam, the role of males and females are different. While men are assigned dominating roles, women only have supporting roles. Men are required to devote their energies to Almighty Allah to prayer, work, and contribute to the management of society. The ability of women is expected to be utilized in the homes such as bearing and rearing children, managing the households, and satisfying men, all of which are essential to support the Muslim society. Similarly, women are also expected to be obedient to male members in the family (Briar, 2008; Nydel, 2002). Therefore, those Arab societies where the religious values detect social norms restrict women from taking up employment outside the home or move independently in public places. This explanation may fit well with the functional perspective as the supportive role of women and restricting their sphere of activities to the home environment ensures stability to family and society. However, the feminist-oriented women no longer recognize the religious

explanation of gendered use of space, and they consider it is a suppressive measure to restrict women from using the physical spaces in the home environment. Probably, the feminist viewpoints match with the conflict perspective. The dominating role of men and assigning women the activities within the household are mechanisms designed to exploit women. From the conflict perspective, it is apparent that powerful men use religion as a tool to suppress the less powerful women.

4.2 Sociological Reasons

The sociologists consider that culture and social organization shape differential use of space by men and women. Social and family structuring and norms are significant factors that influence the gendered use of spaces in the Arab world.

Traditionally, men play a dominant role in Arab societies. The typical Arab family organization assigns men with the task of providing material wellbeing as well as ensuring protection to members of the family. At the same time, it is the expectation that women to provide emotional support to children and family members (Nydell, 2002). Moreover, it is recognized and favored that men to assume decision making and leadership roles and inherit family wealth, all of which contribute a distinct and superior role to men than women (Nydell, 2002).

The patriarchal system is another crucial sociological cause of gendered spaces in the Arab world. Arab societies are male-dominated societies where patriarchy is a norm. The patriarchy is a pattern of social structuring in families in which male members are dominant, and they take all decisions, generally the eldest male member of the family (Quader & Oplatka, 2008). Patriarchy contributes to restricting women into the home environment. Since men are powerful, it is the male guardians of women who decide whether a woman to study, work, or travel, and whom they might marry. The conservative patriarchal attitude prevents women from actively participating in public places such as in society and the workplace (Al-Jenaibi, 2010; Sakr, 2002). It is apparent that the power of people determines their control over physical space use. A cross-cultural study on space use by Rosemary (1993) found that spatial segregation is one of the essential social means by which groups can maintain and exercise their authority over weaker sections. This explanation is appeared to be true in the Arab world, where women only have a subordinate role. By limiting women from public spaces, the powerful men could continue their authority and domination over females.

Many of the perspectives on gendered spaces are applicable in the Arab world. Religious reasons come in line with the functionalist explanation. The restriction of women from public places could be interpreted in terms of a functional arrangement to ensure protection to the less strong women. This arrangement is also functional for the stability of the family. Traditionally, the Arab world culturally values high on the socialization of children and emotional support for men (Nydell, 2002). By assigning women the tasks at home, they will be able to devote entirely to the socialization of children and providing emotional support for men. However, these explanations do not match with the feminists' viewpoints. The feminists' stance tends to embrace the conflict approach as they consider gendered spaces are oppressive for women. The gendered spacing is a measure used by men to suppress women and continue dominating over them in

society.

Although women, in general, are not seen controlling space outside homes in Arab societies, there are some exceptions. In certain Arab communities, women could be seen controlling public spaces extensively. Though women are generally secluded from the public sphere in Sudan, the situation is quite different among Nubians in the country. Large numbers of Nubian households are headed by women, and they are the economic pillars of society. They are the primary food producers and domestic laborers. More than 60% of men migrate to other countries who make only a short visit or do not return at all. These factors contributed to developing a dominant role in Nubian women and offer the opportunity to use public spaces (Hale, 1987). It reveals that economic participation and role in the family are important factors that determine gender-specific space use even in conservative societies.

5. Current Trends in Gendered Spaces in the Arab World

The spatial norms are getting changed in the Arab world. More women are seen as active and independently using public spaces across Arab societies (Briar, 2008).

Progressively more women are working outside their homes and invading the public spheres. They drive cars, go out to the internet cafes, and travel abroad independently. It is reported that the issue of gendered spaces is fast disappearing from urban areas, though it is still prevalent in rural areas in the Arab world. In urban areas, increasingly large numbers of women are achieving higher levels of education, enter employment, and participate in social activities (El-Ghannam, 2002). The variation of gendered spacing in urban, rural areas indicates that positive changes in favor of women are beginning to take place in urban areas where the level of education of women is quite high as their exposure to media.

6. Reasons for Changes in Gender Roles of Women in the Arab World

Several factors contributed to changes in the gendered use of spaces in the Arab world. Advances in education, changing attitudes and perceptions of women, the influence of mass media, and women empowerment efforts are some of the critical factors that helped to diffuse males favored use of public spaces in the Arab world.

6.1 Advanced Education

Although traditionally Arab societies are highly conservative and restrict the activities of women in public spheres, great changes are taking place since the 1980s. It is reported that gendered space use is getting faded from many Arab societies, the major factor for which is the motivation of societies to create a knowledge economy and knowledge workers rather than employees of a particular sex (Al-Jenaibi, 2010). Many Arab states are making considerable efforts to improve the educational level of women to achieve the above objective. Notably, investment in education by the GCC countries is very high, and great emphasis is given to enhance the level of higher education (Al-Jenaibi, 2010; Sidani, 2005). Education not only improves the skills of women, but it is also serving as a force for them to participate actively in public spheres. Educated women tend to develop a strong desire to use public spaces actively

in order to be employed in the job market. In short, the efforts of societies to improve education have contributed significantly to promote the active use of public spaces by women. It has been found that improved employment opportunities and the introduction of laborsaving technology enhanced the opportunity for Arab women to contribute effectively in the workplace, all of which made way for Arab women to use public places extensively (El-Ghannam, 2002).

6.2 Changing Attitudes and Perceptions

The attitudes and perceptions of women in the GCC countries are also getting changed. Many educated and progressive thinking Arab women are no longer willing to accept the conservative male favored pattern of space use (Fernea, 2000). They wanted equality in the use of physical spaces. For instance, in Jordanian, women are highly committed to taking up formal employment and are venturing to public spheres (Al Kharouf & Weir, 2008). Arab women are also increasingly aware of their rights and beginning to stage organized efforts to fight for their rights, including political rights. The women in Syria, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, and Yemen seek affirmative steps to ensure quota for women in parliament (Bonino, 2005). The advanced education of women is an important factor that contributed to a change in attitudes and perceptions among Arab women (Al-Jenaibi, 2010; Sidani, 2005). Improved education not only enhances the skills of women, but it also helps to improve their rationality as well as awareness of freedom, independence, and human rights. Essentially, advances in education are changing the mindset of women.

6.3 Influence of Mass Media

Influence mass media is tremendous on people. It helps to spread a culture of freedom and is an important cause for occupying public spaces more frequently by women in the Arab world (Briar, 2008). The Arabs societies now are exposed to a variety of satellite television channels. These television services tend to broadcast programs of other cultures that favor freedom and equality between genders. The entertainment media is also instrumental in diffusing gendered spaces in the region. It tends to convey a more active role of women. Many Arab women are emerging as musicians and dancers and organize programs in public places. These activities are a strong motivation for Arab women to seek more active use of public spheres. Television serials are also depicting women violating the traditional spatial boundaries for good causes such as for personal growth, career fulfillment, and maintaining families. In short, modern media tends to justify the active use of public spaces by women (Briar, 2008).

6.4 Women Empowerment Activities

Many Arab societies are committed to empowering women through advanced education, encouraging them to enter the labor market, and introducing laborsaving technology in the workplace (El-Ghannam, 2002). The proactive measures adopted by societies to empower women are proved highly favorable to diffuse gendered spacing. Egypt is one of the countries where great improvement is taking place to empower women. It encourages the work participation of women. It also tries to remove the pay disparity between genders. A study by Arabsheibani (2000) on wage differentials revealed that men and women employees in Egypt do not have any significant disparity in terms of their earnings. Equality in earning is

an important factor that encouraged more women to enter the labor force.

Encouraging political participation is the other significant aspect of empowering women. The democratic process and political participation of women are key factors that helped to remove the constraints of women using public spaces. The democratic process is on the rise in the Middle Eastern countries. Many Arab societies have started encouraging women to enter politics and assume leadership roles. Palestinian territory, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Yemen, and the UAE are some of the examples (Bonino, 2005). The UAE regime has made an important achievement in this regard. One of the pioneering and notable steps in this direction was the appointment of Sheikha Lubna Al-Qasimi, to a key portfolio in the ministry, the Minister of Economy in 2006 (“Yet another problem in the Middle East”, 2006). The country is now encouraging the increased participation of women in the government. The UAE government’s efforts provide great impetus to the women empowering efforts of other societies elsewhere in the Arab region in particular. It will do much to enhancing the overall status of women in society.

There exist variations in gendered spaces in rural-urban settings. While spatial segregation is getting disappeared from urban places, it is still practiced actively in rural settings. These changes could be explained in the functional perspective. Probably, women in the urban areas consider that their participation in the formal employment sector is functional to contribute family economy and stability of their family. Therefore, the disappearance of gendered spaces in urban areas is only a functional arrangement. It might take some more time for the rural women in the Arab world to come out of the conservative system and recognize the functional nature of their participation in the spaces outside the homes. The rural and urban differentials in gendered spaces could also be explained from the conflict perspective. It looks like the urban women in the Arab world are gaining the power to fight against domination and exploitation by men. Their advanced education helped them developing rationality and increased awareness of gender equality and human rights that motivated them to resist male-dominated customs and practices. Nevertheless, rural women remain weak, so that male-dominated practices continue to prevail.

7. Conclusion

Gender-specific use of physical space is an interesting area of sociological investigation. Traditionally, the Arab societies practice gender-specific use of physical spaces. While men use and control spaces in public spheres, the home is the sphere of activities for Arab women. Social structuring and religious values are important reasons for the spatial segregation of males and females. However, significant changes are occurring in many Arab societies to diffuse gendered spaces. Increasingly, large numbers of women are occupying spaces in public spheres. Advanced education, changes in attitudes and perceptions, and women empowerment activities are essential reasons for diffusing gendered spaces in the Arab world.

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