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**Homelessness and the
Masculinization of
Spaces**

Literature Review

Literature Review: Homelessness and the Masculinization of Spaces

Feminism has come a long way in claiming public spaces and services, from being relegated to only those spaces assigned by gender norms to having the ability to unquestioningly access spaces previously known as men only spaces. To understand gender inequalities, we need to take a closer look at the relationship between gender identities in various social and economic contexts; therefore, as we ponder over women and gender diverse people's access to spaces, we should delve into the geographical aspect of feminism and the use of space.

Dating back to the 1800s, space has been designed by men for men. Siwach, 2020; Kern, 2020) observe that the distinction between public and private space is the most visible manifestation of space gendering. Gender norms dating back from the 1800s ascribe males' access to public space—the realms of transcendence, production, politics, and power—while females were relegated to private productive space, which is the realm of reproduction. Siwach, (2020) recognises the complexities of patriarchal cultures and how they determine gender roles, which aids in the preservation of gender stratification in physical space. Women's mobility is influenced by the nature of their work; as a result, a woman's access to space is determined by the nature of her work and the gender roles she assumes. This categorising of space into masculine and feminine spaces has resulted in the aforementioned gendering of space (Staheli, & Martin, 2000). It is the social stratification that manifests itself in the form of social rigid structures in geographic space. This is true of any culture and space, regardless of where they are located (Kern,2020). While the nature of a woman's profession determines her access to diverse venues, her mobility is limited to those areas in which her labour is necessary (Siwach, 2020).

Regardless of whether one is homeless or not, violations towards women, such as unsolicited sexual comments, sexual assault, physical violence, catcalls and so on continue to be

rife. Women's perceptions and use of public spaces are formed primarily by gender limitations, which is typically linked to the heightened danger that being in public settings poses for women, (Casey, Goudie and Reeve, 2008; Kern, 2020 Siwach, 2020). Much of this 'geographies of dread' literature is based on the idea that women are physically endangered in the public arena because of their gender (Casey, Goudie and Reeve, 2008; Kern, 2020). The danger that violence poses to women are claimed to promote diverse interpretations of what constitutes a safe environment for men and women, resulting in distinct gendered uses of public space.

This brings us to homelessness among women, along with the various vulnerabilities they face (sexual exploitation/human trafficking, violence, and mental health problems), which is a global ongoing problem, (Huey, & Berndt, 2008; Li & Urada, 2020, Menih, 2020). Although homelessness does not only affect women and gender diverse individuals, it is more complex for this population than it is for males. Numerous researchers agree that women and children are turned away from domestic abuse shelters almost every day and that shelters for women who are homeless are typically overcrowded, leaving homeless women to either live on the streets or couch surf from one friend or family to another. We note that although many women and girls fail to access shelters specific to domestic violence (DV), most of them become homeless as a result of domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence (IPV). Because of this homelessness, many experience drugs, alcohol and mental health issues all of which then categorize them as unfit or unwelcome to shelters specific to IPV or DV.

As research indicates, women and gender diverse individuals have different pathways to homelessness, different experiences on the streets, different struggles navigating public systems and seeking emergency shelter, and different consequences and hardships as a result of their homeless experiences, (Van Berkum, Oudshoorn, 2015; Schwan, et. al., 2021). Because of this

inequity and discrimination, countless women, girls and gender diverse people globally endure insecure and hazardous living conditions, (Schwan, et. al., 2021). In Canada, this population face disproportionately high levels of critical housing needs and poverty, (Schwan, et. al., 2021). Canadian streets have been deemed to have a high rate of street victimization of Indigenous and Metis women (Huey, & Berndt, 2008). In addition, Huey, & Berndt, (2008) describe stories ranging from random beatings, threats of killings over drug debt or beatings just for being on the street. To exacerbate the situation, the choices for this group to access shelter is limited as a result of male dominated spaces. Li and Urada, (2020) observe that these populations are a minority in traditionally homeless spaces, making them vulnerable to violent victimisation or sexual assault. For homeless individuals, it is unavoidable to be in public places; more so for women and gender diverse populations whose feelings of susceptibility increase, (Jasinski, et. al., 2010). According to Schwan, et. al., (2021), Canada's shelter system consists of more co-ed than women-only emergency shelter beds. This makes it more difficult for women and gender diverse people to access shelter space. Because many women will avoid co-ed shelters owing to violence they have experienced there, men end up having access to more than double the number of emergency shelter beds as women do, (Schwan, et. al., 2021). Due to these feelings of insecurity, Schwan, et. al., (2021) indicate that women and gender diverse populations are less likely than males to seek help from mainstream shelters, drop-in centres, public spaces, or other homeless-specific services, and more likely to rely on relational, fragile, and risky resources to live. Li and Urada, (2020) echo this adding that women face a "cycle of perpetual vulnerability" with three relational pathways: firstly, trauma from chronic abuse/violence iterated (Menih, 2020), secondly, a lack of supportive services, shelters, and mental health resources to cover all

homeless women causing a state of paralysis; and thirdly, rendering women defenceless from predators.

While some authors argued that homeless men equally experienced insecurity in public spaces, more argued that there is a specificity around the way women and gender diverse individuals experience it. For these groups, 'the streets,' as a masculinist domain, pose a number of threats including, but not limited to, sexual exploitation, harassment and physical assaults, (Huey & Berndt, 2008; Li & Urada, 2020). Some members of these groups have mastered techniques helpful to keep themselves safe while navigating the streets. Scholars including Casey, Goudie & Reeve, (2008) and Menih, (2020) coin them invisibility techniques which help homeless women and gender diverse groups to stay safe. These researchers agree that the streets can be deemed safe for homeless women depending on the different techniques applied. Menih's article describes homeless women in Australia whose coping techniques include invisibility and transiency among others. In her study, Menih, (2020) describes how one woman uses this technique by sitting at different bus-stops, appearing as though she is waiting for a bus ride. After a while she moves to another bus-stop. This technique works well because for anyone passing by this woman does not seem to be homeless but rather any other ordinary person waiting for the bus. The woman also mingles in the mall or shopping centres, where it is deemed safe and secure, but at night-time these places get closed and the bus stops are no longer safe. In order to live in the male-dominated realm of the streets, women and gender diverse groups often become invisible, whilst men might seek security in numbers and claim 'ownership' of public spaces (Sakamoto et. al., 2010). To add to that, Menih, (2020) indicates that spaces and the interactions that take place within them become a way of expressing social identity, and space is given specific features by the act of 'doing.' Violence, sexual harassment, and other potential

risks or threats that increase women's perception of vulnerability, for example, reinforce the space's masculinity, (Menih, 2020).

Huey & Berndt, (2008), in their research explored four strategies used by women and gender diverse groups which utilize gender-based performances as methods of protecting themselves while utilizing public spaces. The femininity simulacrum is described as a technique which consists of 'female' behaviours such as passivity, emotionalism, tenderness, flirtatiousness, and/or maternalism (Huey & Berndt, 2008). This strategy is deemed beneficial in attracting men who will serve as protectors for vulnerable women. The masculinity simulacrum, on the other hand, defines behaviours associated with masculinity. This is taken on by women who assume aggressiveness, mental and physical toughness, emotionlessness and fearlessness as a means to avert abuse (Huey & Berndt, 2008). A third strategy is taking on a genderless identity in which women disguise themselves or make themselves invisible by self-isolating. The fourth tactic, passing, is when a heterosexual woman passes themselves off as lesbian when approached by men. This tactic is deemed beneficial in avoiding sexual harassment (Huey & Berndt, 2008). However, the researchers contend that each of these approaches are not free of problems. They emphasize that the femininity simulacrum as a self-defence mechanism has the potential to be problematic in that in the masculinist realm of the streets, the 'feminine' woman is seen as fragile, and those without male guardians are more likely to attract the attention of would-be perpetrators. Additionally, the genderless tactic poses a threat to one's mental being as self-isolation can be very lonely. As for passing, 'the streets' are both a masculinist and a hetero-normative area; as a result, this technique may expose the actor to the risk of physical and sexual assaults driven by hatred for their perceived sexual identity (Huey & Berndt, 2008).

The above are only a smidgen of examples of the masculinization of public spaces. There are multiple other examples which contribute to this debate. Only a scant number of the homeless women can be found at public soup kitchens, co-ed shelters or tent cities as those are deemed unsafe.

Kern, (2020) suggests that from advocating for simple changes to urban architectural features like lighting and walkways to advocating for an overhaul of the entire field of urban planning, feminist geographers, planners, and anti-violence workers have made significant, if incomplete, progress toward creating safer, less fearful cities. Women's everyday restrictions in the city, along with sexist beliefs, are a reminder that women are expected to limit their freedom to walk, work, have fun, and take up space (Kern, 2020). Managing these additional responsibilities adds yet another change to already hectic days (Kern, 2020) for women, homeless or not.

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