

# The sexualization of public space

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PHOTO 1 Banner advertising Tripla shopping mall. Pasila Train Station, 2017. Photo M.Galanakis.

*“They get you if you’re careful – if you try to protect yourself – and they get you if you’re reckless. Or refuse to take responsibility for their action. Either way they’re going to get you. And that is pretty dark.” (Sudjic 2019)*

The snippet above expresses the realization that violence against women has not changed much since the mid-nineties. In the era of #MeToo it is time to demand an end to the continuing violence against women and to openly and publicly unravel it. Let’s engage in a discussion that may just make ourselves civic bodies open to the pain of others (Sennett 2002, 376). Such a discussion cannot but be painful if we consider that antifeminist rhetoric and white supremacism go hand in hand, even in peaceful Finland (Keskinen 2013). It is in this climate that

the urban economy of fears flourishes, taking every opportunity to intimidate us, while supposedly protecting our sovereignty (Sandercock 2003, 115). Regardless, this discussion is worthwhile because the mistreatment of women by men and other women persists (Salvatore 2004).

This is how I started thinking, talking, reading and writing about women and public space: having delved into the ways we design and manage urban public space to discriminate against certain groups of users, and realizing how intersectional this problematic is (Galanakis 2008). My stance has hardened since then; I am now convinced that there are supremacist tendencies according to which we design and manage public spaces, all bundled up together within a felted yarn ball. And one neither needs to be a woman nor a feminist to be distraught by the immensity of the effects of still knitting our fluffy habitus from this yarn ball.

Sociologist Jeff Weintraub (1997) concedes that the public and private is a grand dichotomy, a dichotomy so pervasive that we hardly notice it. Historically a gender-based distribution allowed men almost free rein of public sphere and space (Arendt 1998). A more recent hypothesis hints at public space as *meta-space*; a continuum between public and private wherein, despite hindrances, women have managed to be agents of change (see Kaartinen 2002). This hypothesis acknowledges women through history as active, not submissive, though their participation in the public sphere and in consequence in public space was admittedly limited<sup>1</sup>. It is no surprise that women in all their diversity have had every reason to challenge this oppressive dichotomy between public and private, rendering Kaartinen's point valid. Political scientist Nancy Fraser demonstrates how women more than men suffer sexual harassment in the public sphere of work. Sexual harassment is an effective way of suppressing women. This then is a paradox women face: while they are active participants in the public sphere and space, they need to constantly negotiate "the gender hierarchy that gives men more power than women to draw the line between public and private" (Fraser 1997, 115). This effectively pushes women back to the private sphere of intimacy and, in the case of sexual harassment, abuse.

The privatization of women in public sphere and space threatens social progress, as their contribution to public life can be undermined at any given moment. The privatization of Katie Hill's public role as a democratic congresswoman through her sexualisation, i.e. intentional distribution of intimate photos to shame and humiliate her, may at least partly explain her resignation in November 2019.

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1 For a comprehensive discussion on public sphere, domain, and space see Hajer & Reijndorp (2001).

The privatization of women takes place in many covert and overt ways and a major one is the sexualization of public sphere and space. Communication scholar Anja Hirdman (2004, 9–10) writes:

*“Sexualisation refers to a process whereby a cultural and historic meaning interpreted as sexual, or that which symbolizes sexuality, be it by means of gesture, pose, clothes, gaze, or colour, is applied to somebody or something. This sexual fetishism is often symbolized by a certain gender, a certain body and a certain age, and connected to a certain purpose: consumption.”*

Representations of the predominantly female body as aesthetically pleasing and young, flood the privacy of our homes and are endorsed in the officialdom of public space. Overlaying Hirdman’s and Fraser’s perspectives, we may realize that the female body has long been sexualized and objectified in the name of consuming material goods as well as immaterial values. This process seems unidirectional, imposed by a singular perspective.

According to political scientist Susan Bickford (2000, 362), the “singular perspective” public space succumbs to is an obscured reduction. Following Bickford’s line of thought I argue that the public sphere and space are infused with a singular masculinist perspective that is normalized and internalized by both men *and* women. Such singular perspective could justify an urban planner saying that within planning violence against women is not a concern<sup>2</sup>. Conversely, the examples of the Centre of Women of Quebec; the Women Plan Toronto; the Argentine collective of “Ephemeral Maps” that maps harassment and abuse of women in public spaces in Latin American cities; the FEMMA Planning consultancy that works for the advancement of women and inclusion in Finnish cities; the Women Transforming Cities (WTC) International Society, and many more, testify to the opposite.

Sociologist Anna Gruszczynska (2009, 315–316) talks about heteronormative public space, the production of which:

*“[...] is a performative act naturalized through repetition [...] from heterosexual couples kissing and holding hands in the streets and on public transport, [...] these acts produce ‘a host of assumptions embedded in the practices of public life about what constitutes proper behaviour’ and which congeal over time to give the appearance of ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ space [...]”*

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to a real informal communication I had through a third party. However, I *do not* argue that urban planning is a panacea for the violence against women.



PHOTOS 2 & 3 Inside the metro. Helsinki, November 2019. Photo M.Galanakis.

The infamous “manspreading” was originally called out in reference to the New York City subway (Holpuch 2014); however, it is not exclusive to North-America. Finnish men practice it as well, and male youths learn fast how to assume their dominance in public space. The privatization of women through the sexualization of public space is also a performative act naturalized through repetition; from normalizing representations of women in public space as sexualized bodies, to abiding to misogynist fashion trends<sup>3</sup>. The fact that we keep on performing gender stereotypes is a thorny issue worth unravelling.

Referring to geographer Hille Koskela (1997, 309) I had argued that “women claim space with their choice of appearance [...] They may choose to fight against the male gaze by either covering themselves, registering themselves as invisible and safe, or by dressing up, and celebrating their presence in defiance of the male gaze” (Galanakis 2008, 79). In the face of the sexualization of public space, and the privatization of female bodies, I have come to a reconsideration: *the male gaze is so pervasive that defying it is vain; we need to dismantle it*. Sexualization and heteronormativity harm everyone, not only women. Education scholar Kathy Bickmore (2002, 4) demonstrates that heterosexist harassment territorializes a singular hegemonic version of masculinity which is homophobic and misogynist. It is no surprise that after police personnel made sexist remarks during a university briefing about campus safety in Toronto in 2011 the Slutwalk movement was born by women and LGBTQ communities protesting against their victimization due to their appearance. One of their mottos was: “Whatever

<sup>3</sup> See *Beauty and Misogyny* by Sheila Jeffreys (2014).

we wear... yes means yes, and no means no.” One cannot disagree with such a common-sensical principle that still, however, evades the common-sense of many.

It is undoubtable that women have made huge strides in moving the political apparatus towards socio-spatial inclusion. Without forgetting past waves and projects, new ways of seeing future feminist projects are in demand (Stratigakos 2017, 350). Seeing public space through feminist eyes is not a gimmick; cross pollination and transdisciplinarity give rise to new urban metaphors that generate alternative imaginings and practices (Larsen 2004, 30–31). New urban metaphors develop by telling and retelling stories that, as de Lauretis (1986, 11) writes, “[...] were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, ‘impossible’)”. It is important in this storytelling, imagining, and practising to include our sisters and brothers who do not have the power leverage needed to demand their right to the city.

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