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Women refugees, leisure space and the city

Sarah Linn

Research with refugee women in Amman and Beirut shows the importance of access to safe urban leisure space for well-being and integration.

For self-settled refugees who lack access to resources and are often suffering the effects of traumatic experiences, affordable and accessible green spaces can be instrumental to their well-being. The use of such spaces for relaxation and reflection or for exercise, socialising and play can also assist refugees to build stronger links with their host community and lead to a deeper spatial understanding of the cities in which they live.

However, typical refugee-receiving neighbourhoods in cities of the Majority World suffer from informal development and planning, poor housing stock and high population densities. As a result, accessible public leisure spaces are rare and often neglected. Such spaces may also be appropriated by particular groups or individuals, which can isolate or intimidate others, or may be closely monitored by the State.

My research in 2016–17 focused on Syrian refugees' gendered experiences of mobility, security and public space in neighbourhoods in the cities of Amman and Beirut.¹ These neighbourhoods had been chosen by refugees for their perceived affordability and proximity to (informal) work opportunities and, often, because of kinship links. However, women living in these areas typically did not have access to public green leisure spaces. This was not only because these cities lacked such spaces but was also the result of a number of intersecting structural and identity issues which combined to create a multitude of obstacles to women's access to public spaces and enjoyment of leisure opportunities.

Obstacles to access

Women highlighted societal and cultural norms governing their presence and mobility in public spaces. Vulnerability to verbal, sexual and physical harassment because of both their gender and their

refugee status also shaped their experiences. Women also highlighted their precarity and lack of money, and the impact this has on their mobility. Spaces of leisure such as the Corniche in Beirut or King Hussein Sport City in Amman were too far away – and too expensive – to access.

Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds often had little knowledge of their host city beyond their immediate neighbourhoods, citing fear and confusion. In particular, those who were illiterate felt unable to move beyond the confines of their neighbourhoods as they felt 'blind' – unable to read signs and road names and often frightened of approaching others for assistance.

Leisure spaces within refugees' immediate neighbourhoods were seen as neglected and unsafe. For example, refugee women in East Amman described their aversion to using a park in close proximity to their community as it was 'ugly', had a poor reputation with regard to personal safety and was often characterised as frequented by groups of 'loitering' men. Similarly, women in Beirut felt that some local spaces, including a playground and a park, were breeding grounds for conflict and tension between refugees and the local community. Many recounted playground tensions escalating into verbal altercations and threats between parents.

While women emphasised that in Syria they had a varied social life, enjoying the sociability of the streets at different times of day, most stated that in their host cities they felt compelled to stay indoors after sunset, often expressing frustration at being prevented from enjoying the sociability of their neighbourhoods in the evening because their family's anxieties had led to restrictions on their mobility. Refugee women living in Beirut expressed greater concern than

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women in Amman about being outside their homes at night. This was directly linked to their lack of refugee status and legitimacy in Lebanon and the complex security framework operating in Beirut. These women feared having their papers checked (most were residing in Beirut with an expired legal permit or had been smuggled into Lebanon) and wished to remain unnoticed. In contrast, although Syrian women living in Amman did express some discomfort and fear while in public spaces, their greater sense of legitimacy and protection led them to experience significantly less restriction on their personal mobility in their host city.

Impact on women's well-being

As a consequence of these challenges, many women spent their leisure time in seclusion. If women had extended family ties in their neighbourhoods, or had built relationships with neighbours, they tended to spend their leisure time paying social visits. These relationships were vital to women's well-being. Those who did not enjoy these relationships described highly immobile, disconnected and isolated lives; they also expressed feeling like 'strangers' in their host city, which exacerbated their sense of fear when in public.

Classes run by religious institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also provided women with opportunities to socialise, relax, learn new skills and do activities such as sewing and cookery and offered escape from the confines of the house. However, skill-building classes run by NGOs could be dominated by certain groups, particularly those from more middle-class backgrounds. Representatives from NGOs explained that often women who were educated and bored would dominate cookery or sewing classes and

manage to get themselves repeatedly readmitted as they understood how the system worked. Thus, NGO offices emerged as spaces of leisure for some refugee women, to the exclusion of others.

Many long-term residents of both cities also lament the lack of safe and welcoming public spaces for leisure. Planners should prioritise those areas of the city that are under intense social change, highly resource-compromised and suffering environmental pollution. People need spaces that are green and accessible, in close proximity to their neighbourhoods, well lit and, if required, monitored to ensure petty vandalism and sexual harassment are discouraged. Women emphasised that they do not mind the presence of security or authority figures if it means that neighbourhood frictions are kept in check and general order is maintained.

Spatial mapping – to discover the way in which refugees access various spaces in the city – can help planners and NGOs consider the ways and means by which women use space, how they feel when navigating public spaces and why they avoid certain spaces. Mapping has its own social and cultural challenges, and indeed raises wider ethical issues with regard to sharing information about refugees' movements.

However, some NGOs in Lebanon have used it effectively. An NGO in Beirut successfully mapped the routes that women took when visiting their drop-in centres, which facilitated open discussion of places/people/checkpoints to avoid and so on. The mapping was carried out in order to actively share information and ensure women felt safe and would continue to use the centres. Mapping methods like this could be further utilised to improve understanding of neighbourhoods and the use of leisure facilities and spaces.



Playground in Beirut, 2016.

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Planners can work alongside NGOs and communities to prioritise the development of green public spaces which allow for wider community interaction. Spaces can be conceptualised and developed in partnership with various stakeholders, including host communities and refugees, to enhance a sense of shared ownership

and responsibility to ensure the upkeep of spaces despite limited resources.

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