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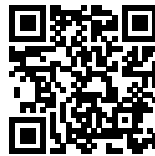**Sexism and the City**
Hagar Abiri

SEXISM AND THE CITY: LOOKING FOR POTENTIAL CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

Posted on September 3, 2021 by martabuges

Categories: And The City, Essay, expanding design practices, Hagar Abiri, No Density, Politics and economics

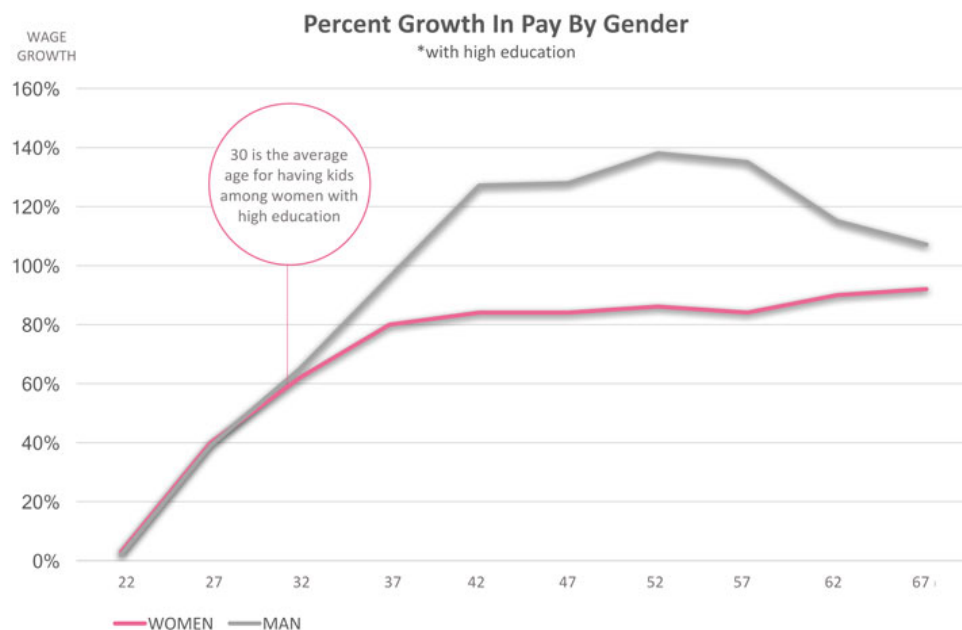**Tags:** Children, Cities, COVID-19, Cultural agitator, Culture, Data, Essay, Gender, Global Awareness, Housing, Identity, Ideology, Inequality, Labor, Lighting design, Politics, Population, Public Space, Social Inclusion, Space-body relationship, Street Culture, Transportation Systems, Urban infrastructure, Violence, Women

Authorship: Essay by Hagar Abiri. Listen to the related podcast: Sexism and the City by And the City.

50.8% of the world's population are women and girls but this number does not have the corresponding weight when it comes to public space planning, a discipline that is still dominated by men. Women are under-represented at all levels of government, with less than 15% of mayors worldwide and up to 36% of representatives on European councils and in regional assemblies. This article aims to review and articulate the problems, as well as the potential catalysts for change, while pointing out the advantages of equality for all public space users and suggesting ways to introduce equality into existing urban infrastructures.

Statistics show that the majority of victims of violence are men (victimized by other men). In cities where data is available, for example in the Netherlands, it shows that most violent crimes take place in the street. At the same time, the victims of sexual violence are mostly women. "In a multi-country study from the Middle East and North Africa, between 40 and 60 per cent of women said they had ever experienced street-based sexual harassment (mainly sexual comments, stalking/following, or staring/ogling), and 31 per cent to 64 per cent of men said they had ever carried out such acts."

Equality is not a woman-only problem. Looking broadly at the accompanying effects, the phenomenon of inequality in the city, and in general, affects society as a whole. Inequality in the city includes other minorities in society such as disabled people who struggle with physical infrastructure barriers and people facing cultural-based discrimination based on skin color or religious and sexual affiliations, about half of whom are also women. Equality also refers to a sense of security for all. When it comes to street violence, the chance that a member of the aforementioned minorities will be physically attacked by a woman is very low to non-existent. So, the base assumption is that a public space occupied by many/only women is a safer space for everyone.

Percent Growth In Pay By Gender
*with high education

WAGE GROWTH

30 is the average age for having kids among women with high education

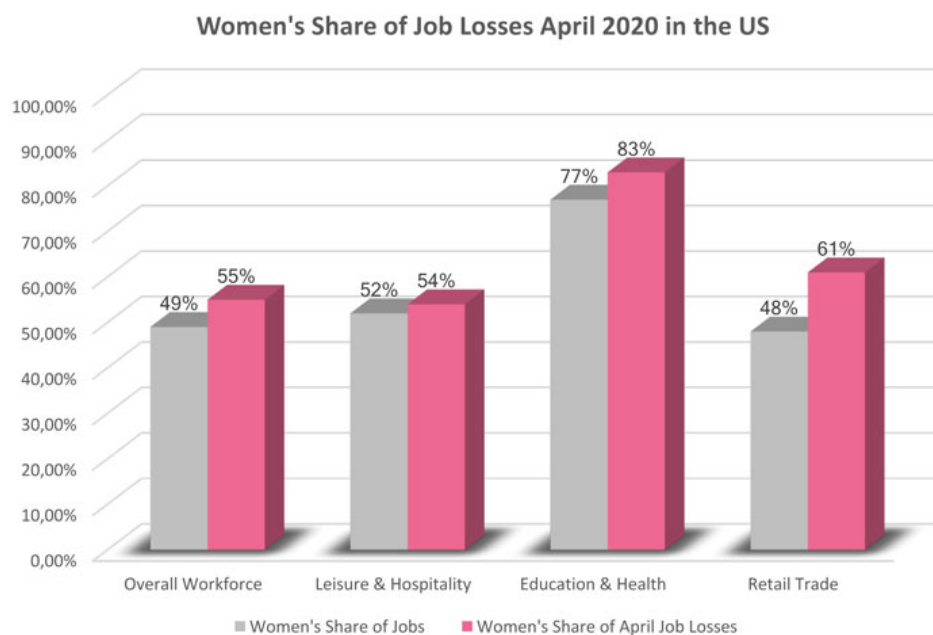Source: NWLC calculations based on BLS April 2020 Employment Situation Summary

Safe public space generates healthy street life for city-dwellers of all ages and also for tourists in general and for women travelers in particular. When, thanks to the diversity resulting from the attraction of people from all over the country and the world, the city becomes a creative hub, it improves the urban lifestyle in the city for all.

To generate safe and healthy public spaces, we must differentiate between two aspects: culture and infrastructure. While the former cannot be changed by physical modifications, the second allows for change if women are ready to adopt it. Because equality in culture today is very location- and/or tradition-based, the aim is not to change how women are perceived in one culture or another but simply to support their daily lives with the right infrastructure. This is where local adaptations of infrastructure are required, as there can be no 'one size fits all' in this case. We tend to believe that infrastructure is the problem, whereas, in fact, infrastructure is shaped by culture. What

we can do at this point as planners is to try to influence the culture by changing the infrastructure and thus the cultural references.

Culture

The year is 2020 and women are still largely responsible for the home and for childcare, even when working full time. Overall, women earn up to 40% less than men, which responds to a gender perception problem. Many women take positions that are paid less (teaching, healthcare, etc.). Moreover, their responsibilities in caring for the household and family sometimes limit them when choosing their training and career. With COVID 19, women were the first to suffer the effects in the workplace, and they are the majority among the unemployed recorded since April 2020.

Women's Share of Job Losses April 2020 in the US

Source: NWLC calculations based on BLS April 2020 Employment Situation Summary

The fact that women earn less money is a symptom with wider effects. Around the age of 30, women start having children; from that point on, the growth in their pay falls behind the growth in

pay of their male counterparts. When it comes to culture, there is a tricky problem with the national ideology setting the employment rules; they do not always mesh with people's individual ambitions, in the short or long term. The question of maternity leave, for example, is not an individual question but a question of the collective culture and how the national interest supports discrimination against mothers. In Germany for instance, with its 1.5% birth rate, the national goal is to encourage births, and this is reflected in the conditions of maternity leave, which can be extended to up to two years. For the short term and maybe for some women that might sound like a dream. However, Germany has one of the highest gander wage gaps, of 30%. So, for some women, whose specialization relies on continued work and who do not want to stay home so long, or for women who are not interested in having children, that can be a problem. When an employer wants to fill a position, one that requires an investment in training and that demands continuation, that will be a factor in choosing between a man or a woman. Most businesses are small businesses (fewer than 100 people) and would be more affected by the long absence of an employee. In other words, encouraging women to have more children, while assuming all of them will want to stay home does not help with the long-term inequality issue. A better solution might be to allow women to get back to work by improving the childcare infrastructure and have it be proximity-based rather than home-based in the early years. Examples of this kind of childcare exist and demonstrate a number of advantages in performance.

Earning less also depends on the occupation. Female-dominated occupations such administrative positions, teaching and nursing offer lower incomes in contrast with male-dominated occupations such software development, computer engineering and management positions in construction. One reason why women choose to work in such occupations in the first place, or why they go through professional transformations at some point, is they fit better with the reality of being the main caregivers in the household, which means they cannot commit to the time demands (set by men) of male-dominated occupations.

Less income also translates into fewer women owning or using a private car; therefore, they are more dependent on public transportation and cycling as a means of mobility. Not only do women take on more duties for less money, but while doing so, they are also more often users of public space. Consequently, safety in the public transportation system, or when walking in the street, riding bicycles or scooters at all times of day are essential for them to manage their daily tasks. Of course, culture is not an easy thing to change, nor is the notion that working hours should be the same for all a popular one. However, if cities could offer better infrastructure, it would improve conditions that would give women more leverage in their daily routine.

Religion also play a significant role in this question. The more traditional the society is, the deeper is the segregation of traditional gender roles, and the need for infrastructure modification is all the more necessary. If women are still expected to be the main care givers in the family (care for children and the elderly) while also being providers, they need the infrastructure to support their efforts by providing safe, efficient access that will allow them to manage their daily tasks using affordable means.

Infrastructure

In some cities in the world, there is gender separation in public transportation, with women-only carriages and buses. Although the idea is to give women a sense of safety and encourage them to use public transportation, it only perpetuates the problem and has been likened to treating the symptoms of the disease instead of curing the cause. Is the only way women can feel safe by avoiding men? By being segregated? This is an expression of 'victim blaming', marking women as the problem and highlighting them as potential victims.

An important aspect to highlight is that law enforcement and zero tolerance of violence must be implemented at all times. If men are the vast majority of perpetrators, they are the ones who should be afraid of the consequences of their actions as opposed to women being afraid for their lives, bodies and minds due to others interpreting their clothes, the way they walk, or their expressions as an invitation to attack them. When you put a bird in a cage, the intent is not to protect it but to own it, to restrict it – to deprive it of its freedom. Even if the cage is made of gold, it is still a cage. In this case, the cage is sometimes pink and has the text 'for women only'.

The importance of a city designed for equality with the adjusted infrastructure is to allow a cultural change to take place, to transform a struggle into an opportunity. The exclusion of women from public space by not suppling proper infrastructure could also push women to prefer one location over another, or it could exclude them altogether from public spaces, where their presence is essential to everyone. Following consultations with women who have experienced attacks in the street, asking them about real situations, regular as well as irregular, here are some main key elements that come to mind and immediate actions that could be implemented to promote the presence of women in urban public space, which, as a result, will generate more safety and a better quality of life for everyone.

Public toilets
This seems to be the number-one priority. Many times if not all time, women will consider whether

or not to use a public space based on the existence of public toilets. Women in general, pregnant women, people with children (mostly women but not exclusively), people who suffer from metabolic issues and the elderly will avoid public activities, public areas such parks and playgrounds, or engaging with the community if there are no public toilets they can rely on. The mall will often be preferred over the street for errands, shopping and entertainment because of the public toilet issue. In Victorian Britain, most public toilets were designed to be used by men. Women were expected to stay home and care for their husbands and children. The absence of public toilet deprives women of the freedom to move freely or far from home. This area defined by bladder capacity received the very appropriate name 'urinary leash'.

Two important elements when it comes to public toilets are visibility and inclusivity. Visibility is important to reduce vandalism and increase safety through natural public surveillance – however, some sense of discretion is obviously needed. Inclusivity refers to all types of potential users, facilitating use for disabled people, all genders, and also family booths allowing a parent help their children regardless of their gender.

In Warsaw, Poland the urban activist group Miasto Jest Nasze (The City Is Ours) executed a stunt to highlight the lack of public toilets. They created a fake app called "Airpnp", which called on people to offer their private toilets for public use for a fee. This action taken by The City Is Ours, highlighted the need for public toilets while emphasizing the City Council's responsibility towards all residents, since some things cannot be lent out by the private sector through sharing culture.

In our research we tried to determine whether the 'urinary leash' still exists and to examine its relationship with the safety level of a city. We looked at the first few cities ranked at the top and a few cities from the bottom of the list according to the Mercer quality of life ranking (www.mercer.de) and marked the locations of public toilets according to the information from Google. Despite the difficulty of finding a reliable source to detect public toilets (sometimes the toilets marked on the map do not exist or are not for public use), we realized that there could be a link between quality of life/ safety and the presence of well-distributed public toilets. Although we cannot pinpoint the cause, we can say that the public toilet system is a reflection of society in a given city. In the experiment, we found that in the higher ranked cities there are more public toilets with better distribution, which encourages women to use public space. In contrast, in the lower ranked cities, there are few public toilets if any at all. In those cities, the number of cases of violence against women is higher or/and the status of women is not equal to men's status. The required response is better systems of public toilets and good, reliable sources to find those public toilets and share

information regarding their maintenance.

ZURICH,
SWITZERLAND

INHABITANTS
428,700

PUBLIC TOILETS*
19

SAFETY RANKING*
2

10 MINUTES WALK TO TOILET

* MERCER
* GOOGLE MAPS

CARACAS,
VENEZUELA

INHABITANTS
28, 455,200

PUBLIC TOILETS *
1

SAFETY RANKING*
222
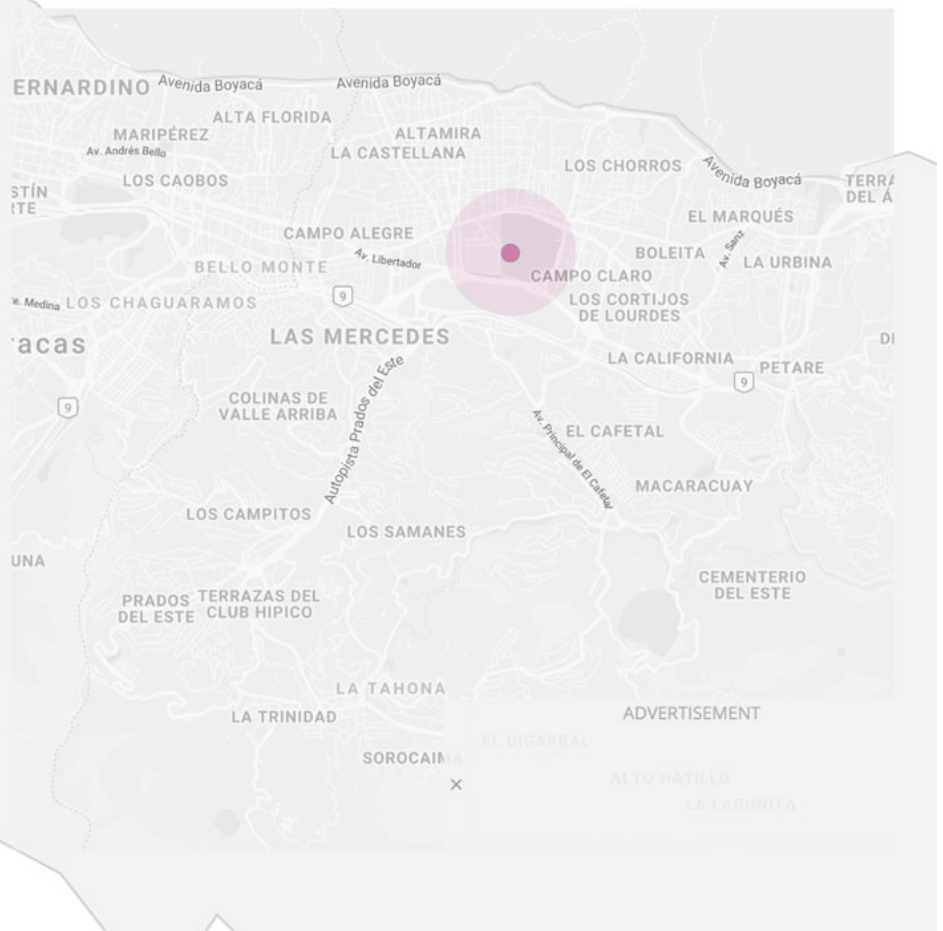
10 MINUTES WALK TO TOILET

* MERCER
* GOOGLE MAPS

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TRIPOLI, LIBYA

INHABITANTS
1, 165,100

PUBLIC TOILETS *
3

SAFETY RANKING*
225
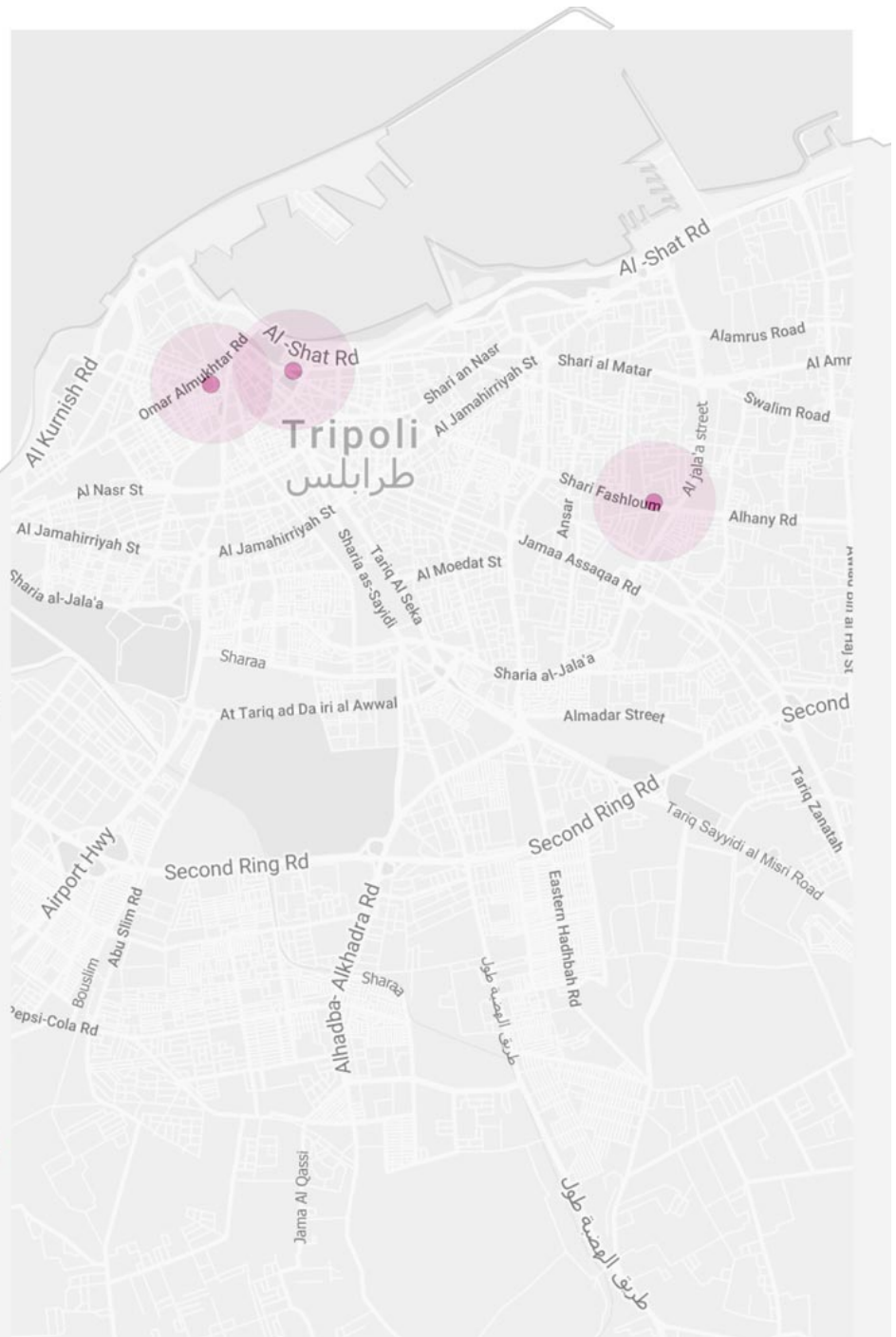
10 MINUTES WALK TO TOILET

* MERCER
* GOOGLE MAPS

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WELLINGTON,
NEW ZEALAND

INHABITANTS
414,500

PUBLIC TOILETS *
19
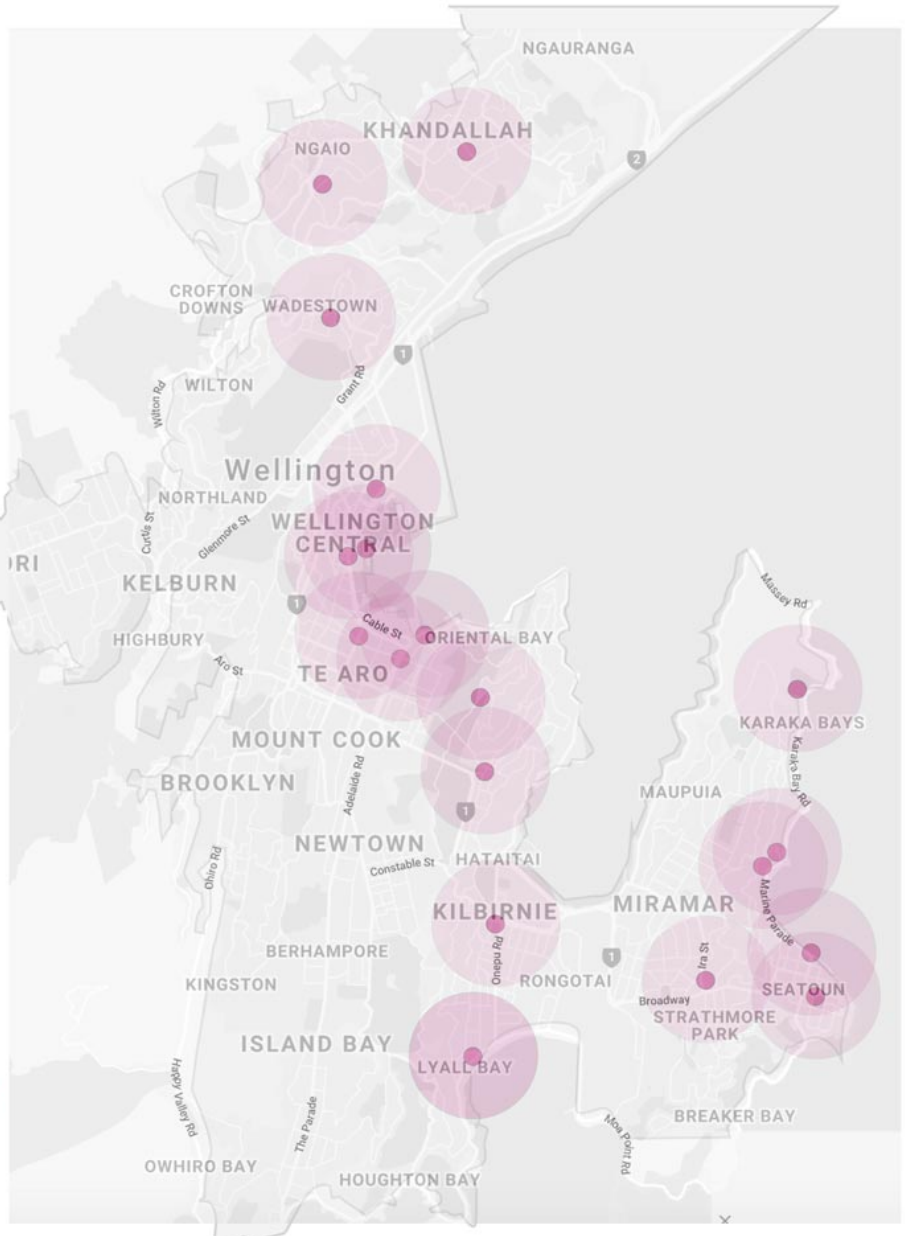
SAFETY RANKING*
9

10 MINUTES WALK TO TOILET

* MERCER
* GOOGLE MAPS

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DAMASCUS, SYRIA

INHABITANTS
2,080,00

PUBLIC TOILETS*
6

SAFETY RANKING*
231

10 MINUTES WALK TO TOILET

* MERCER
* GOOGLE MAPS
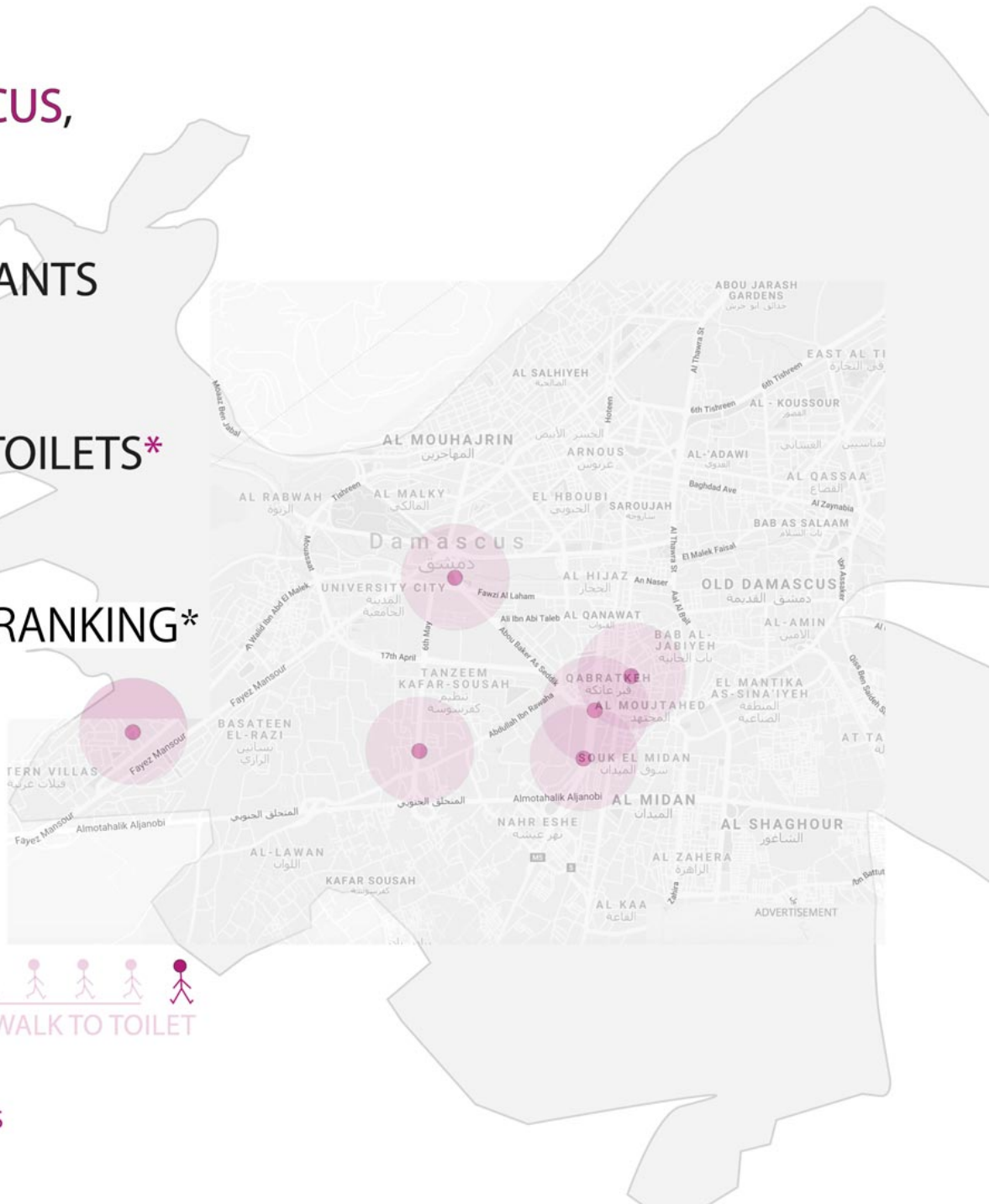
Seating arrangements in public space
In parks, on street and in plazas, seating is usually arranged along paths and oriented towards the passing crowd. It offers encouragement to look, examine and judge everyone who passes by. Because men sometimes shout comments at passing women, they must often be aware and alert, perhaps looking down or away, or trying to avoid passing a group of men to avoid the possibility of being shouted at or feeling observed. Walking is never simply walking, like it is for men. Even if nothing happens, the fear still exists, and women should not feel as though they have been forced to be part of a show for the pleasure of the people sitting on the street or in the park.

Lighting
Lighting streets and passages increases visibility and can deter attackers because they can be identified and/or seen by the public. The use of sensors may allow for a more accurate and effective use of lighting by use. Therefore, there is not necessarily a larger financial burden or significant environmental pollution compared to today when streets are lit for a fixed hour rather than by use.

Transportation
Women in the city are more likely to use public transportation and bicycles over private cars, as they make multiple journeys per day and they earn less than men. In contrast, men are more likely to use a car for one destination a day. A study conducted at Stanford University in 2012 reveals that women use public transportation differently than men do due to the "mobility of care" factor: "unpaid labor performed by adults for children or other dependents, including labor related to the upkeep of a household". A study conducted in 2018 by the International Transport Forum explains that "women have more complicated travel patterns, they tend to prefer more flexible modes." The study highlights that although women are the main users of the public transportation, most women still find it unsafe. Women are more likely to use shared mobility and give up driving altogether. In that sense, if cities want to increase the use of public transportation, they should place a higher priority on women's safety. Travel from the station to the destination is often completed by other means such as bicycles and shared means like motor scooters.
In Sweden, the administration realized that women use bikes more to get to work and manage their other care-related tasks, so they invested in bike lanes. A study conducted at the University of Colorado Boulder found that the reason why women in the US are using scooters and bikes less has to do with safety. The vehicle is not the issue so much as the lack of safe infrastructure to ride on. A survey in Germany of 2,000 smartphone users and an examination of 228,000 social media mentions relating to e-scooters revealed that only 10% of the surveyed people use e-scooters, 20% are

planning to use them, and 70% do not use nor plan to use an e-scooter. What is interesting is that among the e-scooter users, 14% are men while only 4.4% are women. The discussion found online around the electric scooters revolved around safety issues, regulations, economic and environmental influences but seemed to lack a discussion of women's safety. The e-scooter concept fits in with the flexibility women require and can offer a link between public transportation stations and home, especially after dark. That brings us to the road safety issue again and the claim that proper infrastructure will make the city more accessible for women.

Childcare
There is no one system to relate, as each city is different. The common factor, however, should be that there are enough childcare solutions to match the demographic demands and to guarantee that each family will have a place for their children within walking distance of their place of residence or workplace. The authorities can, at a minimum, encourage (ranging from economic incentives to offering permits) hi-tech and industry hubs to include childcare facilities – not only for the benefit of working mothers but to convey a message that childcare is not a woman's task that should be managed by women only.

Lifestyle follows safety, which follows women's welfare and starts with change COVID-19 seems to have pushed the status of women back, erasing the achievements made over an entire decade. Today, more than ever it is necessary to improve women's lives. In April 2020, women made up 49% of the overall workforce but accounted for 55% of job losses. Women lost 54% of positions in the hospitality and leisure sector. Women in the retail and trade sector who lost their jobs make up 61% of the total, although women were only 48% of the workforce. In the education and health sector, 83% of job losses corresponded to women. That teaches us how society deals with the subject matter today. The numbers demonstrate that there has been no significant extensive change. We can offer a foundation for this change by applying it to public spaces, where it might help to change the narrative by making the discussion about women and equality visible and tangible.

An important lesson is that, despite the social perception of development over the years, the gloomy numbers and facts collected for this paper demonstrate the need to have more women representatives in key positions in public space planning and in the authorities in general. Only then can the change be fundamental, from the bottom up, as opposed to a cynical use of women designed to appease the conscience of the patriarchy. It goes without saying that changing the infrastructure is not the only solution, as the misogynist culture (at most) and indifference (at least) must also change. However, the physical changes that will shape how we move around and use

public space will influence that perception as it does two main things: first, admitting there is a real problem and second, showing that there is a real evident effort at fixing it.

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