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Mai Aboul-dahab

Gender and Body Resistances in Egyptian Women-only Spaces^{1*}

Abstract:

This research attempts to explore and interpret an emerging prototype of spaces in Cairo, Egypt, namely women-only health and leisure spaces. After a history of segregation, since the 19th – early 20th century, there has been a trajectory towards mixed spaces. However, with the start of the 21st century women-only spaces started to occur among upper middle and middle class women, particularly in health and leisure spaces. This research aims to question how women perceive women-only spaces, while focusing on what they can narrate about upper-middle class women acts of resistance and negotiations of space in the city of Cairo. The research follows

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feminist research aims by centering women's perceptions and experience to the fore. Through a four-month visit to a women-only health club, the research used a qualitative approach and deployed multiple data collection tools including 26 semi structured interviews with participants of the health club and observations for the space. This was accompanied by an interview with the owner and the architect who designed the building. The research identified three themes that show women reasons to visit the women-only health club, a) Resisting men judgments of the ideal woman in mixed health and leisure facilities, b) negotiating their right for a safe public space, c) comfort to perform sports and leisure activities in women-only environments. The research concludes that the health club displays acts of women resistance but it also reproduces and reflects a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Women-only spaces, Resistance, Gendered bodies, Cairo.

Introduction

With the start of the 21st century women-only spaces started to occur in Cairo. They occur significantly among upper and middle social classes where women of these classes target spaces like women-only gyms, beaches, and swimming pools. With the growing interest of these women in this typology of spaces, they started to proliferate in Cairo. One can notice this when passing by Cairo Streets where buildings for women-only health clubs and gymnasiums are found along the way (see figure 1-1). Moreover, on navigating through social media different advertisements for women-only facilities in Egypt pop up.



Figure 1-1: Women-only health and fitness facilities buildings and an advertisement on Social media.

Image Source: Researcher

In middle and upper middle class social clubs, it is becoming a normal routine to find a women-only swimming pool and gymnasium (see figure 1-2). Moreover, if they do not offer a designated space for women they turn the mixed gender space to run on particular hours for women-only, during which no male staff can enter. This phenomenon of women-only spaces is not only limited to Cairo but it is also expanding in other cities, in the north coast of Egypt there are private beaches specifically for women (see figure 1-3).



Figure 1-2: A women-only swimming pool and gymnasium signage's in a private sports club. Image Source:

Researcher



Figure 1-3: A women-only beach in the north coast advertisement on social media. Image Source: Researcher

This research aims at exploring these emerging spaces in Cairo. I am particularly interested in investigating how women perceive these spaces and how they can narrate upper-middle class women acts of resistance and negotiations in spaces in the city of Cairo. This research did not concern itself with the tensions and dynamics present among women in women-only spaces, although there were incidents where such tensions occurred, however the study was only limited to investigate why middle and upper middle class women prefer women-only spaces in particular and how they relate to mixed spaces. Further researches on women-only spaces can be performed to explore in depth what tensions occur among women themselves in such spaces.

Much Scholarly work with varying theoretical backgrounds was done on women-only gymnasiums or swimming pools outside Egypt. In non-western countries, the work of Pinar Öztürk and Canan Koca (2017) examined the factors that affect women experiences who participate in women-only gyms in Turkey arguing that these spaces provide women with the three basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness while they reproduce the relationship between exercise and femininity for these women. Other studies highlights how women-only

sports centers can display resistances, Sertaç Sehliskoğlu (2015) argued that Turkish women who visit women-only sports centers in Istanbul contribute to the existing patriarchy while these veiled women develop, at the same time, a sort of resistance to these patriarchies in such gender segregated spaces through building their bodies, in which they challenge preconceived assumptions about modern women. On the other hand, Koca et al. (2009) find that Turkish women of lower social class negotiate their need to be in safe space while participating in leisure time physical activities by going to women-only sports centers. Verena Lenneis and Sine Agergaard (2018) studied resistances of women but in a western country, in Denmark, they argued that Muslim women resisted the ban of women-only hours in swimming pools by forming an activist group that organized demonstrations and public debates with the city council in order to prevent such an action. Although there is a growing body of knowledge concerning women-only sports and leisure facilities and their relation to gender resistances, limited work was conducted in the Egyptian context. Therefore my research aims to study this relationship within Cairo.

In my research, I look at resistance, not in the form of large scale collective actions by members, but I examine those small and local resistances practiced in the everyday actions. I follow how James C. Scott (1989) defines resistance. Scott argues that political scientists read resistance as social movements, revolutionary groups or any other forms of publicly organized political opposition, this makes them ignore the subtle but powerful forms of everyday resistance. He argues that there is no requirement for resistance to take the form of a collective act. He explains how peasantry use everyday forms of resistance to defy the state and powerful class. For instance, they use techniques such as poaching to assert traditional claims to resources in the face of new property relations without threatening their safety. He finds that these small techniques constitute everyday forms of resistance.

Furthermore, I read resistance in my research also as actions of women negotiations to have safety, privacy and freedom in the city. I follow here Anouk Koning (2009a) research of Egyptian upper middle social class women, where she studies how they negotiate Cairo's city scape by following their footsteps in navigating the city. In my research I qualitatively examine women experiences of women-only spaces through interviewing women participating in a

women-only health club located in New Cairo. In the following sections, I will first elaborate more on the context where my research took place and the undertaken methodology of my research, then I will discuss the three themes that emerged from my study namely: Resisting men judgments of the ideal woman in mixed health and leisure facilities, negotiating their right for a safe public space, and comfort to perform sports and leisure activities in women-only environments.

Research Context

My research took place in a women-only health club established in 2007, located in the affluent suburb of new Cairo. It is a wellness facility consisting of different leisure and health activities like a spa, swimming pool, outdoor and indoor café, gymnasium and an aerobics hall, a beauty center and a children area (see figure 1-4). The women-only health club offers annual and monthly membership as well as day use visits.



Figure 1-4: The Health Club Zoning Diagram showing the different facilities in the building. Image source: Mada Architects and edited by the researcher.

I interviewed the owner of the health club where she stated that her project targets upper middle social class women, she defined her target group as follow “those who are highly educated

working women with a disposable income to spend on leisure activities”. This was also evident from the entry fees, 200 LE per day use, an amount that can only be afforded by such classes. Her target group rationalize her choice for the site to be located in new Cairo, according to Petra Kuppinger (2004) luxury residential communities are rapidly being planned around new towns of Cairo, referring to new Cairo as one of them. These new communities offer exclusivity and social distinction for upper middle and middle social classes. According to Eric Denis (2006) elite perceive Cairo as “a complex of unsustainable nuisances” (Denis 2006, 50) in which they have to escape and therefore these new communities around Cairo are marked by the flight of urban elite to them. The owner also referred her choice of the site was based on the fact the she is targeting women-only, whom would definitely require privacy and therefore she was searching for a site that is not dense with surrounding buildings (see figure 1-5 and 1-6). Her choice for the building to be women-only was based on the fact that there are European precedents of health clubs that are gender segregated due to the difference in gender needs. In the health club, all staff (except for a security guard sitting outside the building) and members are only women and men are not allowed to enter it. The owner further stated that her choice was not based on cultural or religious ideas.



Figure 1-5: The women-only health club layout. Image Source: Researcher



Figure 1-6: The women-only health club relation to the surrounding buildings. Image Source: Researcher

Drawing on the cultural background the owner mentioned, I have to indicate that the notion of gender segregation upon upper and middle social classes presented in women-only spaces is not a new phenomenon in Egypt. Till the early 19th century gender segregation was practiced in Upper class houses. The house hosted a *haramlik* zone, women's quarter and a *salamlik* zone, men's quarter.² When women started to get educated in schools, they had their own buildings that were gender segregated. For instance, with Muhammed Ali ruling Egypt, his modernization plans included the education of women thus opening the first public school for girls to become midwives in 1832 (Badran 1995; Sālim 1984). Mona Russell mentions the presence of gender segregation in the Opera house referring to Sir Samuel Selig De Kusel, a British official who had the chance to attend its opening in 1871. (De Kusel 1915; Russell 1997). Also Huda Sha'rawī in her memoirs describes her entry to the Opera House through a separate staircase for women to access the harem boxes. She also mentions her visits to a gallery that dedicated specific hours for women only (Sha'rawī 1987). Early forms of gender segregation represented in the harem in the early centuries in Egypt has been studied and analyzed by scholars (See for example, Fay 2012, Hatem 1986, Ahmed 1982), however, the form existing in the present women-only health and leisure facilities remain under studied.

²Badran, citing Edward Lane, mentions that for ordinary middle class women, it was hard to maintain such segregation of sexes in their houses due to less space and limited domestic help (Badran 1995; Lane 1836/2010).

Methodology

I visited the women-only health club for a period of four month, five days per week at different timings. During my visits it was common to see women of different dress types entering the women-only health club. Some wear veils while others are unveiled. Infrequently one can see women wearing *niqab* and *khimar*. Women of different age groups and marital status also visit the women-only health club. Some come for the leisure activities while others come for the beautification facilities the space offers.

Within the health club I used observations and conducted 26 semi structured interviews with women of different ages ranging from 18-55 years. My intention was to understand their perception of the women-only health club, their experience of it as a women-only space, their motivation for the visit, how they relate to mixed spaces and what forms of resistance can their answers display.

Half of my participants were veiled but did not specifically describe its degree except for one who described herself as half veiled and half not veiled. Six participants were members of the health club while the rest were day use visitors. All members were coming to the place without any companion. Day use visitors varied, some came accompanied by group of friends or relatives and others were coming without a company. Around half of my participants were married and the other half were singles. I had seven participants who were above 40 years old and the rest were of ages varying from 18-39. My participants' education and work status varied. Some of them were university students while there were also working and nonworking women. I informed my participants of the purpose of my study before inviting them to individual interviews, and had their verbal consent before I start. Interviews ranged from 25-40 minutes and were audio recorded. I used pseudonyms to protect the women's and health club identity.

I transcribed the recordings verbatim and then started a procedure of thematic analysis. I started by a process of coding the interviews followed by a card method to sort same codes together. This process resulted in the emerging of the themes that yield to women visiting such spaces. In the following section, I present the findings of the analysis with excerpts from the interviews that highlight each. I selected the most clarifying excerpts. I translated them and grammatically edited some for clarity.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis procedure conducted three main themes that deal with women resistance or negotiations in the women-only health club. They are as follow: Resisting men judgments of the ideal woman in mixed health and leisure facilities, negotiating their right for a safe public space, and comfort to perform sports and leisure activities in women-only environments. Each theme is presented with a discussion on what it manifests about resistance and negotiations of women.

Resisting men judgments of the ideal woman in mixed health and leisure facilities

My participants narrated how they usually find themselves under judgments of men on their perfect shape or behavior when they are in mixed gender health and leisure facilities. On the contrary, their experiences in the women only health club was a relief from these pressures, they come to resist such molds defined by men. Lamia, a non-veiled elderly women, who is a member in the health club, mentioned this experience as follow:

Here you are more at ease. You do not have to worry what is it you are wearing, how you look like when entering or leaving . . . in any other [mixed] gym or sports club you have to make sure that you are well looking, here you do not have to worry . . . in any other space after you finish you have to change what you are wearing, style your hair, makeup, but here no, you don't need this.

In addition, Asmaa, a working married 29 years old lady who has one child, commented on the body image constructed on women but one has to do with post pregnancy effect on women bodies. She explained how she feels more relaxed towards her body when she is in the women-only health club by saying: "It is an outlet for you, you can wear swim suit. We are all mothers, some have stretch marks, some are chubby, it does not matter at all, but if you are in a mixed space you feel a bit discomfort about it."

It is emphasized through both participants words how they resist men judgments of the perfect body shape, they should adhere to. Those participants come to feel free with their body and to resist men judgments of women image. This image becomes a burden in which they feel trapped.

This corroborates with (Craig and Liberti 2007) their study on a women-only gym, where they found that women find the place is free of judgments due to men absence.

Other participants related that as a consequence of the obsession to reach a perfect body, mixed gendered leisure and health facilities are becoming arenas to exhibit more the perfect body shapes. That is why they feel more at ease in this women-only health club, as Noura a non-veiled 26 years single lady said: “I do not like going to a place where I do not feel at ease. The north coast now, you find everyone going in full makeup, they go to the beach with heels, they are over dressed, and males are showing off their body building. Everyone is showing off, they are not going to enjoy the beach.”

It is not only exhibiting the perfect body which happens in mixed gender leisure and health facilities but also they type of dress. Hajar, was accompanying her sister to the gym, she commented on this by saying: “people are showy in mixed gymnasiums, like the girl is wearing what specifically and the man is wearing what, it is not comfortable after all”. Such words display that when they come to the women-only health club they defy these exhibiting acts and as such it also constitutes as another form of resistance.

Moreover, some women come to defy behaviors that are rejected by the society in mixed spaces. For instance, Hend stated: “I smoke but I do not smoke in any place. If it is a women-only gathering or a women-only place it is ok for me. In the street or in any [mixed] restaurant, you will be judged as misbehaving”. Accordingly, in the women-only health club, women have the freedom to perform actions that would be judged against their moral behaviors if performed in mixed spaces, as such women do not only resist the imposed women perfect body shape but also the ideal moral women behavior.³

Negotiating their right for a safe public space

The women-only health club is a medium in which my participants feel safe without male presence who breach their privacy. Sara for instance, describes it as follow: “In women only spaces I feel more at ease, [it is about] privacy. You can dress whatever you want . . . So

³ Some of my participants stated that they smoke normally in mixed-spaces as well. As the Egyptian society is starting to accept it.

women-only is better. The problem is in harassment, the idea of someone looking at me and I would feel confused about it. So I prefer Gyms or pools to be like here [Women-Only].” Jasmine, a 25 year old working lady who is unveiled also mentions harassment as the driving factor to bring her to the women only health club, as she says: “I stopped going to mixed swimming pools at the age of 16, when people made me feel like I am an alien, at first it was like men gazing then it started to be not only gazing but also physical touch in other situations so I decided to stop”.

Sexual Harassment is becoming a major concern for women living in Cairo and other regions in the country. In a study conducted by Harass map in 2014, 95 percent of three hundred female respondents in Greater Cairo reported they were subject to a form of harassment (Fahmy et al. 2014). Forms of women sexual harassment include gestures, verbal remarks, and physical harassment. This issue is even more problematic with examples of incidents where women, the victims, were to be blamed for being harassed by men as Hind Zaki and Dalia AbdAlhamid (2014) states: " survivors of these attacks are blamed for their clothing, conduct, or reactions during the assault" (Zaki & Abd Alhamid 2014:1).

Harassment in Egypt is not a matter of dress. Both, veiled and unveiled women are subjected to harassment. The issue of clothing and harassment was raised by Mona a 26 years old veiled woman who is completing her post graduate studies, she said:

Mixed gender [leisure] spaces are overcrowded, I do not feel at ease. I would not say male physical harassment but it is like the verbal harassment. You are like in the water and a man passes by you and he keeps gazing on you, then he winks to you and so on. . . Even though I am wearing a burkini but it does not matter. Here in our country it does not matter wearing veiled swim-suit, wearing bikini, completely covering yourself, it doesn't matter let's be honest about it.

As such women visit the women-only health club to feel safe and to resist men gazes which causes them anxiety in mixed leisure and health facilities. My above participant's statements on the effect of harassment conforms to Koning (2009b) discussion of upper middle class women in

Cairo. She states that the undeserving male gaze acts as an active defiling agent that physically impacts the female body. It is difficult to reconcile their intense self-awareness when they move through Cairo's public space. The findings here also parallels Koca et al. (2009) study where they found that some women visit women-only sports centers in turkey as to negotiate to have a safe public space without men gazes.

The issue of adhering to women privacy so they will not be subjected to male gazes was a concern for the architect who designed the building. He designed it as an introvert L-shaped building enclosing the swimming pool, while all other facilities rotate around it and open towards it as to assure that no one could see women who are inside (Figure 1-7 and 1-8).



Figure 1-7: Health club entrance façade displaying how it conceals the inside facilities. Image Source: https://archnet.org/sites/6709/media_contents/73782 (assessed February 13, 2019). Image edited by researcher.



Figure 1-8: L-shaped health club from the inside is transparent and opens up to the swimming pool. Image Source: https://archnet.org/sites/6709/media_contents/73790 (assessed February 13, 2019).

Salma mentioned privacy when she was describing her preference to the health club by saying: “I go to mixed gender leisure and health facilities but I feel women-only spaces have more privacy for us as women.. I can sit at ease wearing whatever I want and no one looks at me”. Privacy is used here as a synonym for the safety and security they find in these spaces. In parallel Heba who was coming for the cavitation facility in the health club mentioned: “I came for this health club as it is women-only, you feel the space is more guaranteed. All who work here are women so it gives you security”. When women pay a visit to a women-only health club, it is a way they are negotiating having a safe space to dwell in without male presence that can cause them insecurities and lack of privacy through their different acts.

One has to mention here that other participants related they can go to mixed gender leisure and health facilities if they belong to specific social class which will assure them their safety from gazes that breach their need for privacy. Jasmine who mentioned first that she stopped visiting mixed gender swimming pools, narrated the effect of class in changing this by saying: “if I will go to pool I will either go to women-only or a very fancy place where most of the people are either foreigners or from a specific social standard like hotels, where no one looks at the other”.

This means that how women mark safe spaces is also related to class, they can accept male presence in spaces where their social class will assure them that their security is maintained. This again corroborates with Koning (2009a) who studied upper middle class women movement through the city and mentioned: “The trajectories of these women were invariably based on class maps: places that were safe for women were classy places” (Koning 2009a, 541).

Moreover, spaces that were marked as unsafe or ambiguous, have specific strategies that women maintain so they would visit them. Soha commented on how she changes the way she dress in mixed gender spaces: “I can go to mixed beaches but the difference will be on the dress I wear. Dress differs according to the place you are in, if it is mixed or a women-only space. In women-only, I dress freely. I can lay over the sun bed while I am at ease”. It is not only dress which women may change when they are in mixed gender spaces but also their behavior, Suhair mentions: “if we are sitting like this and there are males, and a woman dance, they will call her with a bad name, and you do not want to be stereotyped, I do not want to be stereotyped that I am a loose girl”. Thus women changing their way of clothing or adhering to certain behaviors is a strategy they follow in order to keep themselves safe and at the same time to avoid threatening their respectability.

Comfort to perform sports and leisure activities in women-only environments

Some constraints face my participants who want to practice sports that are related to the dress, specifically women who are veiled. In addition to the constraints of body movements required to correctly perform sports activities. My participants mentioned how the space gives them comfort to perform leisure and sports activities, as it removes constraints they occasionally meet when they want to practice sports.

Lamia mentioned this when she said: “I feel at ease here, I can dress a swimsuit, in a mixed swimming pool I will have to wear a burkini, if in a mixed gym I will have to wear a full training suit while I am putting a veil so I will not feel at ease, the veiled woman feels she is restricted with her clothes.”

The Islamic tradition of the veil makes women feel restricted to wear a specific type of dress that can become a constraint for them to perform leisure or sports activities, as such the health club

also helps these women to break such a constraint and to enjoy something that may not be available otherwise, Dina one of my participants who is above 40 years narrated this experience by saying: “I am veiled since a long time, in college time there was nothing to be done, there are things you want to do but you can’t, there were no women only spaces when I was young, there was nothing to do. I am happy at that age that there are those spaces.”

Furthermore, the body movements that are required to be done in sports and leisure facilities also become a constraint for women when they are not in a women-only space, as they maybe coded as sexual and display immodesty. Many of my interviews commented on this. Lamia for instance said: “In aerobics there are moves that I can’t do while there are males in the space”. Sahar also commented on body movements while she added the factor of her age by stating: I choose women-only because I can't sit and raise my legs and put them down (in mixed gendered spaces), I am not young, you know.” This goes in parallel with (Sehlikoğlu 2015) study of women-only sports center in Istanbul, although her study was mainly concerned with veiled women, the results are in parallel that women prefer going to these spaces as the movements they do while practicing sports may defy the expected women behavior to stay in the modesty realm. It also corroborates with (Öztürk & Koca 2017) that women feel at ease in women-only sports facilities as they do not have to control their bodies or what they dress.

The nature of sports activities required women to prefer the space as women-only so they can visit it. My participants mentioned that there are other activities they do not wish that it becomes women-only, for instance, coffee shops or malls. Other participants even commented that they do not like women-only metro cars. This means that participants of the study do not require or ask that all spaces become women-only, it depends on the activity taking place.

Discussion:

In this study resistance was tackled as ‘non-conforming to’, hence, women not conforming to men’s judgment of their ideal shape or behavior, or women not conforming to their gazes in mixed health and leisure facilities is seen as a way of resistance. As a result women who visit women-only health and leisure facilities create their own spaces for resistance. Although these actions might be understood as escaping but in a society where women is blamed for wearing a

swimsuit and accused for being harassed, spaces like these become a means of resistance while keeping their dignity. This shows that resistance does not necessarily require confrontation to the opposite side. This parallels Scott (1989) argument that resistance can be an everyday practice in which it does not have to be a rebellious act. One can argue here that this resistance is limited to their belonging to an upper middle and upper social class which enabled them to afford such facilities. However, more research can be conducted to examine this argument. Since in youth clubs in Cairo which are operated by the ministry of youth and are largely used by working classes, also started to dedicate specific hours in health and leisure facilities for women-only.

Furthermore the research displayed how these women had agency. They had the capacity to act and change or challenge the subordinate order in mixed health and leisure facilities. Participants highlighted that they willingly visit this space. They are not obliged to it. They are not denied access to other similar mixed spaces. Even in the accounts presented above, many participants reflected on their visits to similar mixed spaces. The space being an option conforms to the idea that it displays they are agents and this is their choice. These spaces as such empower those women. Leslie Weisman (1981) states: “spaces we have, don’t have, or are denied access to can empower us or render us powerless” (Weisman, 1981:7). As such, the relation of the women-only health club, as a women-only space, to other mixed spaces was an important aspect to address as it clarifies how the presence of the space empowers women.

Conclusion:

This research examined women perception of a women-only health club located in new Cairo and the patterns of resistance which occur in this space. The women-only health club unfolded narratives about the space itself and at the same time about mixed gender leisure and sports facilities.

The analysis shows how women find the health club an option which allows them to feel free about their body from the molds constructed by men of the perfect women body and behavior. The health club gives them the opportunity to resist this.

Men harassment and lack of privacy women face in mixed sports and leisure facilities also shape part of their preference to the women-only health club. Male harassment targets both veiled and

unveiled women. In order to avoid such actions, women use strategies like changing how they dress or their behavior in mixed spaces they mark as unsafe or ambiguous.

The women-only health club offered women the comfort to engage in sports and leisure activities by breaking some of the constraints they may face to practice them. The space being only for women allowed veiled women to wear clothes that facilitate practicing sports. It also helped women to perform specific sports body motions that can appear immodest if done in the presence of men.

In the end, the research argued that resistance of women appeared not as a confrontation to men in mixed leisure and sports facilities. Women resistance was in the form of creating spaces for resistance which are represented in women-only health and leisure facilities. These spaces empower women and give them agency.

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