

EDITORIAL: (Non) Sexist Cities - Mapping a New area of Research for Gender Studies in Romania

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Photo 1. Anniversary banner, University Square 2014



Photo 2. "The Countess", artist Ileana Oancea, University Square 2014

This summer at the University Square (one of the most important places in Bucharest) an ambiguous visual message was given to all those travelling in the area. On one side of the boulevard, a new unexpected statue was implanted overnight ("The Countess", Ileana Oancea -part of an urban art project, the statue travelled in many other places in the city). It was placed in between other four famous important male figures of the Romanian history and culture. Fragile - made up of porcelain (or at least suggesting this), stabbed, the Countess seems to demand 'the right to the city', the right to be part of the collective memory of Bucharest. At the same time, on the other side of the same boulevard, a huge banner celebrating 150 years of existence of the University of Bucharest was displayed presenting nine famous Romanian people that graduated over time this prestigious institution-among which there was no woman.

I simply started wondering – is Bucharest a European capital that pays due attention to issues of inclusion, diversity, equality? Is Bucharest a sexist, homophobic, transphobic or racist city? Is it a safe city for all? Why so few women are represented in urban art? Why so few streets have names of women personalities? Do we know enough about street harassment in the city? At that moment, I realized that in Romania,

although research in the area of Gender Studies is quite developed, the gender dimension of the city was not investigated at all.

I was not the only one observing this omission from the gender sensitive agenda of research especially in Romania. Together with a group of gender experts we decided to do something about it. Consequently, within our women NGO (the Romanian Society for Feminist Analysis AnA) we designed a project on “*Urban Discriminations. Gender Sensitive Active Citizenship Program*”, obtained support from SEE Grants and start looking, through gender lens, at Bucharest¹. The program offered: (i) a model of active informed online and offline citizenship - concrete instruments for people’s civic involvement in the spirit of tolerance, social equity and inclusive democracy (online platform, street actions, lobby for naming a street, park or building under construction with the name of a feminine personality, etc.); (ii) a model of integrated treatment of issues of gender segregation and discrimination, by an interdisciplinary approach to the issues and by implication in the activities (flash mob, art exhibition etc.) of diverse category of people. We collaborated closely with Front Association, an NGO with large experience in the area of feminist activism.

We also launched this special issue of our Journal for Gender and Feminist Studies -AnAlize dedicated to the topic of “*Genders, Diversity and Urban Space*”, hoping to increase awareness and knowledge on the importance of the way cities are talking about their citizens.

Each place corresponds and defines a certain cultural, political, economic and historical context. Any city, with its spaces, places, monuments, traditions, inherits a past - a collective memory about its people and builds up a future - a set of aspirations and values about what its inhabitants can and may do in their multidimensional existence.

Urban space is a social institution that defines and models human interactions, delineating each of us as individual and as citizen, as man and woman, as young or aged, minority or majority. Urban architecture, urban signalectics, urban language, the visual identity of a place, the organization of the city and its surveillance mechanisms, its outdoor publicity, its patterned relations among various social groups, are just a few mechanisms through which urban structures and practices regulate human relations

¹ For more details on the project please visit its online platform: www.discriminari-urbane.ro and the facebook <https://www.facebook.com/DiscriminariUrbane>

and interactions and take (or not) into consideration issues of diversity, inclusion, violence, freedom, human rights.

Urban space is also deeply gendered. The increasingly diverse and transnational character of urban landscapes invites a rethinking of the relation between gender, identity and urban space. The way it is thought, planned, built, organized, lived, who is symbolically visible and invisible within its premises and how one or the other is *made* by the city either important or anonymous, who has the power of decision over the city, all these aspects give important information about the gendered roles, relations and practices, about the explicit and implicit power negotiation between its women and men, about mentalities and equal opportunities policies.

Identifying what a **sexist** or **non-sexist city** (Greed, 1994) would mean and look like is a complex endeavor undertaken quite recently in the area of Gender Studies. It refers in fact to **women's right to the city**. It means, as Carolyn Whitzman thoroughly has analyzed, looking at the right to mobility - the right to belong anywhere in the city; at the fact the economically disadvantaged women are more likely to do more walking and use public transportation - so depending much more on the quality and safety of this kind of travelling. It means also looking, from a feminist intersectional perspective, at what is usually called "**inclusive cities**" and notice that in fact, many cities are not as inclusive as it seems because of the deliberate emphasis on an often paternalistic and extreme notion of 'safety' (increased policing, ubiquitous surveillance, and even total exclusion of certain groups of people from participating in public life), because the lack of clean and better lighting in train stations, bus shelters, and underpasses or because of not well-maintained public toilets for women. Inclusive cities should probably emphasize more an engagement with and even the embrace of risk. Women's right to the city means also **the right to undertake risk** - an experience that involves encounters with strangers, it means that women can sit alone in parks, can walk alone without fear but they are allowed to be serendipitous and be lost without fear or repercussion. Investigating a non-sexist city means also looking at **creative cities** - in terms of policies and practices undertaken and analyze how citizens, decision makers, activists, artists engage in performative interventions to "trouble", as J. Butler would say, the exclusionary production of urban spaces (Whitzman, 2013).

For the special issue of our journal we invited articles from a variety of fields such as sociology, architecture, urbanism, arts, history, anthropology, political sciences,

feminism etc., asking potential authors to reflect, from interdisciplinary perspectives, on themes such as¹:

- How the concepts of gender and space have been conceptualized so far within the feminist thought?
- What signs of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism can be identified in public spaces?
- The dynamics (in time and space) of gender discourses of the cities.
- How marginalizing or even exclusion of women or men from the public space takes place at the level of daily practices (e.g.: street sexual harassment or hate speech).
- How gender unfriendly planning of the urban space (e.g.: lack of facilities for old and disabled people, of accessible/properly equipped toilets for parents with babies or insufficient green areas and parks) increase/decrease the quality of life for some.
- What do outdoor/urban advertisements say about women and men ?
- What are the gendered messages of urban art (stencils, graffiti etc.)?
- What historical and cultural narratives are promoted by the public space (street denominations, building/ monuments/metro stations/market places names, urban art etc.) and how they contribute (or not) to the empowerment of women.
- What kind of urban physical, functional and symbolic oppressive elements can be identified, elements that obstruct women's self-esteem (which women in particular?), and how these barriers can be removed for offering alternative narratives to the dominant ones.
- Is public space friendly towards women' activism?
- How friendly is the city in relation to "other" genders?
- Who is visible, important or on the contrary marginalized, ignored, anonymous in the city? Why?
- How would a gender friendly city look like?
- What is an inclusive city, a democratic city, a creative city, a non-sexist city?

Although we did not succeed in having a true interdisciplinary perspective, we consider we are able to offer a set of interesting approaches to the topic. We are most grateful for the invited paper prepared and offered to us by Professor **Helen Jarvis** from New Castle University, U.K., a well-known expert in the area of urban social geography and gender studies. She offers a substantial overview on theoretical approaches in the

¹ For developing the list of themes proposed for reflections we took inspiration initially from (Lada, 2009).

field and argues that “the sexist city should be reconceived as a ‘place to think with’: to do this, discussion turns first to a scale of inter-personal imagination associated with intentional egalitarian communities of practice; then to the transformative role of feminist teaching and learning. In this sense, the topic in question is as much about the nature of transformation, as a paradigmatic *process of thinking differently*, ..., as it is about the phenomenon of urban space being constructed and segregated by gendered bodies and power relations of domination and subordination” (*Transforming the Sexist City: Non-sexist communities of practice*).

As a follow up of her involvement in the research component of the project that focused on urban discriminations in Bucharest (briefly introduced in the beginning of this article), **Diana Neaga** presents an in depth gender sensitive case study focused on one of the major Square area in Bucharest - Piața Universității (*Doing and Undoing Gender in Urban Spaces. The University Square Bucharest*).

Manta Adina Tatiana focuses in her article on bicycle ridding, pinpointing to various interesting gender specificities within this activity (*Ridding the city -Gender and mobility practices in urban context*).

Oana Crusmac proposes a pertinent discussion about deliberation concerning civil partnership (*Exclusion and Deliberative Democracy. A Brief Case Study on Romanian Deliberation regarding the Civil Partnership*).

Gender analysis of the streets is developed in two other articles. **Bruno Puccineli** from Sao Paolo, offers a discussion from the perspective of the masculine characteristics of streets (*Masculine bent street: sexualities, real estate market and masculinities*) and **Ana Mizil**, investigates streets in an area of Bucharest by looking at toponymy-at street naming mechanisms and also to the importance and relevance of subjective biography [*(Re)Naming Streets in Contemporary Bucharest: From Power Distribution to Subjective Biography*].

Taking an intersectional perspective and approaching cities from the multiperspectives of genders, **Elena Stanciu** talks about the complex relation of queer identities with the urban spaces (*Urban Space and Queer Identities*) and **Gabriela Ghinea and Elena Manea** analyse some of the constrains and practices encountered in the process of space appropriation for the LGBT community in Bucharest (*LGBT Community - Constraints and Practices of Space Appropriation in Bucharest*).

I believe that, beyond differences, between all articles, there is mutual agreement: the city is the actual expression of its makers' values, hopes, and worries. Maybe for a long period of time women of various ages, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations have not been true makers of their cities. But isn't the case today anymore. Today our cities should permanently recreate and reinvent themselves in order to better reflect the needs, aspirations, and fulfilments of its inhabitants – including women. We live in a new era - so we urgently need new urban stories reflecting these new realities. That means stories framed by gender too!

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