

Creating inclusive public space and why it matters: Citizenship, children, women, and that elusive question of safety.

This essay will attempt to discuss the issue of women's presence in public space, and the societal understanding of the risk involved, through the lens of recent theoretical developments on children's independent mobility. The perceived danger of violence, particularly sexual violence, is frequently stated as the main reason women and children keep off the streets. While feminist literature asserts women's political stakes in claiming the street, both for themselves and other marginalised groups, of particular interest for this essay is the way in which children's street presence has been defined as important for their mental and social well-being. While it has been argued that women's safety fears reflect not so much the likelihood of crime, but the potential gravity of offence (Whitzman, 1995), feminist work on children has focused more on the harm children suffer by having their mobility constrained. In other words, while women's absence from public space is justified by the reiteration of the frequency of violence, children's absence is questioned and contested. It will be argued that both women and children express the need for unstructured, free space to play in, explore and reclaim as theirs. The argument will be two-fold: on one side, limiting spatial claims of women and children means limiting their participation in the community and thus their citizenship; on the other, safety claims of middle-class women, children and men are instrumental in limiting spatial claims, thus citizenship, of other marginalised people. The argument for inclusive space needs to focus on creating (subjective) comfort for everyone, rather than (objective) safety for some, that may be both exclusionary and undesirable.

The problem

The recent Reclaim the Night protest in Melbourne reminds us that the issue of women and children's presence in public space is still pertinent. Even within the context of rising fear of crime across the board, women regularly profess feeling more unsafe than men, particularly in public space after dark, with fear of sexual assault featured relatively high, and limit their movement accordingly (Grabosky, 1995; NCAVC, 1998; ACCSA; Women's Safety Australia, 1996). Although statistics on women's independent nocturnal mobility have not yet been collected, observation confirms that a lone woman is not a regular feature on Australia's night-time streets. More recently, however, harsh reduction of children's spatial claims has been noted in western countries. In a landmark study, Hillman et al (1990) reveal that the median age at which any particular spatial freedom is granted to a child has increased by 2 ½ years since 1970s. Fuelled by their parents' perception that children's safety has markedly deteriorated (Söderlind and Engwall, 2004; Valentine, 2004), children's play is becoming more home-centred, removed from public space into supervised interiors (Valentine, 2004). In one survey 45 per cent identify their children at serious risk of abduction, primarily by strangers (kidnappers and paedophiles), and 34 per cent at risk of traffic accidents (Valentine, 2004); these findings are replicated by research in the UK, North America and Australia (Blakeley, 1994; Hood et al, 1996; Kelley et al, 1997).

The question of risk

Statistically, however, all crime rates have been falling over the last century, while the incidence of child abuse deaths has always been comparatively rare (Valentine, 2004). While children, and particularly women, are victims of unreported domestic violence, physical, emotional and sexual, they overwhelmingly experience it in their

homes, from people they know (ACCSA; NCAVC, 1998; Women's Safety Australia, 1996). Research consistently shows no separation between the public and private realm when it comes to violence and fear for both men and women (Valentine, 2004; Whitzman, 2007): indeed, some consider the crude public/private divide greatly unhelpful in developing safety policies (see Whitzman, 2007). So why does the society reiterate the danger of public space for both women and children so strongly, when the statistics point to a much more diffuse geography of violence?

Elizabeth Wilson (1991) notes that the presence of women in cities, particularly on the streets, has been limited both in western and non-western cities. In a variety of national, cultural and temporal contexts, women's movement is regulated by binarily categorising both women and spaces into 'private' and 'public', 'respectable' and 'fallen', 'controlled' and 'uncontrolled' (Pain, 2000; Walkowitz, 1992; Phadke, 2005). Phadke's work shows how safety concerns easily translate into effective surveillance: Mumbai women limit their movement out of fear for their respectability as much as for their safety (2005; 2007). The street is not a place for respectable women, the message goes. If they choose to frequent it, women forego any right to safety. It is still not uncommon to hear that "any woman walking alone after dark invites trouble", nor are court decisions that blame the victim unusual (Kanes-Weisman, 1992). Societal role in production of fear is well-documented: from exaggerated media coverage labelled 'terror talk' (Katz, 1995), to the simplistic messages fed to young people through the combined efforts of parents, schools, the police (Valentine, 2004). With the incidence of danger statistically low, but the danger constantly re-asserted, 'men control space' not through violence (Kanes-Weisman, 1992), but through relentless production of fear of violence.

Spatial exclusion of children replicates the discourse of paternalistic need for protection of the most precious and infantile family members from the ominous world;

(...) an adult space where children are at risk from 'deviant' others; a space in which the male body in particular is saturated with threat and danger (Valentine, 2004);

down to the dictate of respectability: parents who grant greater freedom to their children are criticized as 'bad parents' (Valentine, 2004). The overlap is considerable: discourse of women's sexual vulnerability in 'public' space and a woman's 'place' in the home also shapes young girls' use of space (Saegert and Hart, 1978). In Valentine's work (2004), girls report a lower level of confidence in negotiating their safety in public space, and a greater fear of strangers. Boys are usually allowed to range further from home unsupervised, and spend more time outdoors, than girls (Hart, 1979; Katz, 1993). Katz (1993) concludes that the girls in New York may be more restricted in their ability to explore and engage with their own local environment than girls in the seemingly more restrictive Islamic Sudan.

It is important, however, to recognise the dangers inherent in this wide production of fear. Phadke recognises the instrumentalisation of the middle-class, 'respectable' woman in spatial control of marginalised groups. Women are socially conditioned to feel unsafe in 'male' space, but their presence is simultaneously desired, either as consumers (of a revitalised city centre or new shopping district) or as consumed (part of the big city spectacle) (Phadke, 2005; Wilson, 1991). This brings to the fore people's anxieties about both women's proper place, and the presence of other marginal citizens (Phadke, 2007) – not unlike the hotly debated 'public woman' of Victorian England (Hayden, 1984; Weisman, 1992; Wilson, 1991). The need to protect the middle-class woman's respectability is utilised to articulate 'risk' posed by marginalised groups (lower-class men, homeless, sex workers) and limit *their* claims to space. Growing fear of crime has been credited for an increase in private security and gated communities, discriminatory laws against marginalised groups,

from itinerants to the homeless, and a growing disregard for civil liberties, from Los Angeles to Mumbai, in the past twenty years (Jayne et al, 2006; Mitchell 2003; Pain, 2000; Phadke, 2007).

Citizenship and well-being

Feminist research emphasizes the close relationship between citizenship, access to the public sphere, and the right to speak for oneself (Soderlind and Engwall, 2004). Public space should be viewed not as static, but as brought into being through iterative performance of power and norms, unstable in meaning, and subject to redefinition and disruption (Valentine, 2002). According to Lefebvre (1996), the full right to the city would entail a continual and active process of appropriation (in the sense of use rather than ownership) of city spaces, the right to claim presence in the city. Queer activists have often adopted this strategy by 'doing public space' differently, asserting their presence, and disrupting the heterosexuality of space through the proliferation of queer behaviour in bars, districts, and main street parades (Hubbard, 2001; Valentine, 2002). Their civil rights were rightly understood not as the right to privacy, but the freedom to be public (Berlant and Freeman, 1993).

For Wilson (1991), the unstructured freedom of city empowers, offering women space to escape from rigid social roles, play with identity. Notably, children often prefer to play in flexible, open landscapes they can appropriate in imaginative ways, claiming their citizen presence in a way similar to queer activists (Moore, 1986). Phadke (2007) argues that the level of safety one feels is directly linked to the level of claim one feels to a space, by legitimising one's presence: it certainly appears that children who spend more time in public space are better equipped to deal with danger, because they have greater place knowledge and local social capital

(Valentine, 2004). Buchner (1990; in Valentine, 2004) bemoans children's street world, formed independently from adults and composed of children from a variety of backgrounds and age groups, increasingly replaced by integration into various peer-group social sets, often chosen and supervised by parents for particular purposes. Giving (young) people access to free, risky, unsupervised space, it is argued, is giving them the opportunity for developing physical, mental and social capabilities, self-reliance and creativity, providing them with privacy to experiment with their identities and develop their own notions of morality and empathy (Aitken, 2001). In the sense in which citizenship entails full membership in the community, not merely political but multilayered, and located in many spheres, (Wekerle, 2004), being granted full and free access to the street is a prerequisite for full citizenship.

Spatial solutions

Current shift in children's mobility may result in a generation of fearful public people, male and female, demanding ever stricter protection from 'deviant' populations. There are certainly indications that young Australians are more fearful than the elderly (Kelley, 1992, in Grabosky, 1995). However, the preservation of free, unstructured social space for all should remain the goal of social justice movements (Mitchell, 2003). So how do we, to paraphrase Phadke (2005), legitimise the presence of women and children without it being used to control and restrict access to other marginal groups? How do we argue for improved access, yet defend the legitimacy of the desire to court 'risk', and insist that 'risk' should be a matter of choice?

Although welcome, we should not limit ourselves to improvements in urban design that create greater safety for everyone: better lighting, signage and visibility, elimination of dead ends, passive surveillance afforded by active street frontages,

better public transportation (Kanes-Weisman, 1992). We should work to reduce general fear of crime, but also aim to legitimise the presence of women and children in all space, at all times, and reduce the underlying reasons for selective fear-mongering. Efforts such as the Non-Crime Hotline campaign (Port Phillip Online) go a long way to address the underlying fear of crime that inhibits free movement. We should consider improving accessibility and comfort to children, parents with small children, elderly, disabled, non-English speakers, but also the homeless, and sex workers. Political gestures like Reclaim the Night should be supported and extended: in its current incarnation as an annual protest that actively excludes men, RTN does not stabilise a space and time in which the presence of women and children is legitimate. Bianchini (1995), discussing the rich tradition of inclusive night-life in Italy, proposes to extend passive surveillance throughout the night by committing to a '24-hour-city': extending the opening hours of shops, cultural and civic institutions, provision of evening childcare facilities and public transport, as well as use of parks for family-oriented activities (with music, food stalls and appropriate lighting). Simple actions such as all-night provision of visible and safe public toilets for women would assert their right to the city stronger than all-night visible police presence (Phadke, 2005). Since children are equally excluded from the night-city and the daytime-city, every effort should be made to legitimise children's public play without necessarily structuring them in separate children areas (Katz, 1993; 1995). Diffusely extending inclusive time and space is more beneficial to the quality of our public space temporarily opening safety ghettos (such as the RTN march) that exclude large parts of the population. Implicit in this list is the claim that everyone across community, class and gender should assume the same risks when they access public space.

Conclusion

Fear of the male stranger is successfully utilised to limit both women and children's full participation in the society. While the perceived dangers are often complementary for the two groups (particularly the employment of sexualised stranger-danger), so is the articulation of importance of independent mobility. Research on women stresses their political rights and questions the power structures behind their confinement, while research on children focuses on the psychological damage and strongly advocates against fear. Both address the need for claim to unsupervised, uncontrolled space, and a dose of risk, noting that safety will be most effectively achieved through reclamation of public space. Simultaneously, however, both groups have the power to exclude other people through their own fear, if national and societal anxieties are played out through their protection; this adversely affects the very public space we need to preserve. As Gardner (1990) says:

(..) women's fear of crime in public places does not spoil public places for women alone, but it also spoils, in some larger sense, men for women and women for men and public places for everyone.

Any effort to legitimise and increase the presence of women and children in public must not work to exclude marginalised groups. Public space which excludes segments of society cannot be truly 'public'.

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