

# **Girls in Kiel: Navigating Public Spaces**

## Exploring Cultural Dynamics and Spatial Needs in a Diverse Neighborhood

### **Research Plan**

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## Introduction

Kiel is one of the neighborhoods on the outskirts of the Belgian city of Antwerp, marked by its high density, economic challenges and diverse population. The population density in Kiel is almost 40 times higher than the Belgian national average, and it is one of Antwerp's most impoverished areas, with no part where the average income levels exceeds the average income of Antwerp as a whole.

Talking about the cultural diversity, in the entire city of Antwerp, almost half of the population has a migration background, but in Kiel this seems to be even higher. Walking around the neighborhood, many people seem to be non-Flemish, and I have encountered a good few people who do not even speak Dutch, which is the official language in Flanders. Despite the language barrier that I sometimes encountered, most people in Kiel, who are able to, are very open to speaking to me and are willing to answer any questions I have.

Most of them say they are either Moroccan or Turkish, which seem to be the largest cultural communities in Kiel. Through walking through the neighborhood and observing the people I talk to, I come to a surprising discovery: most people taking part in the public sphere in Kiel are men.

## Where are the girls?

In the cafe's tea houses and casual restaurants in Kiel it is usual to see only men and boys socializing. When visiting a snack bar in Kiel with my group during my group research, we were the only women eating there. In contrast, adult women seem to visit public places like stores or markets to do their daily shopping while also having small conversations with other women doing their daily errands. Occasionally, women can also be found in restaurants, but usually during daytime hours, presumably when their husbands are at work. However, there was one specific group that I could not find hanging around in the public space: adolescent girls. In my time walking around Kiel I rarely saw any girls aged around 12 to 18. Although I could see some teenage girls cycling around the neighborhood, likely to go to school, I did not see groups of friends casually hanging in the streets, parks, or cafes and gathering casually in public spaces. Even when visiting the community centers in Kiel, I observed no young girls enjoying the facilities they offered. These young girls seemed to me like a forgotten demographic in Kiel.

## Observations and Background

The absence of this particular group made me wonder: where do these girls spend their free time? And why do they not hang around other groups? Are they perhaps restricted by cultural norms, or do they feel unsafe in public spaces?

Young girls not taking part in the public sphere in Kiel can have several negative effects on them. A worldwide study has pointed out that over the age of 8, boys use public spaces such as parks four times as much as girls do<sup>1</sup>. And by the ages 13 to 15, only 8% of young girls reach the recommended activity guidelines<sup>2</sup>. This lack of participation in the public space might hold them back from forming flourishing relationships and creating new life experiences.

I tried to talk to people in Kiel about how and where this group went after school. There are many stories of people in Kiel acknowledging that adolescent girls did not really take part in the public space as visibly as boys did, but nobody seemed to have an answer for me on where they *did* hang out. Some teenage boys that I talked to behind the Blikfabriek in Hoboken, an adjacent equally diverse neighborhood, scoffed at the idea of taking their girlfriends to the same places they went with their friends. They thought that it would be “*very weird*” and “*inappropriate*” for their girlfriends to hang around their friends and that the spaces where they hung out, like the back of the blikfabriek, “*were no place for girls*”. A staff member in Cultural Center Nova told me that they struggled to get girls to be involved in their activities and events targeted at teens. Another youth center in Kiel called Scratch told me they organized special girls-only events for young girls, as they found out that a lot of girls are not comfortable hanging around boys their age, afraid that they will be judged and word of any “inappropriate” behavior might reach their family.

A similar phenomenon was described by Eda Ünlü Yücesoy in her book *Everyday Urban Public Space* about Turkish immigrant women in the neighborhood Deppenbroek in Enschede<sup>3</sup>. One of the women she interviewed described a situation from when she was a young teen. She wore make-up for the first time and was immediately questioned by a passing Turkish man from her neighborhood about why she was wearing make-up, where she was going, and what the occasion was. She did not and still does not know the man who questioned her, but she said that that was simply how it goes in Deppenbroek. The girls are constantly being watched by the people around them.

Kiel also has a high number of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants, so we can assume that in the immigrant community in Kiel there might be a similar amount of social control over their girls, and it might be one of the reasons why young girls do not feel comfortable and safe hanging around in the open space.

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1 Sara Candiracci and Kim Power, “Cities Alive Designing cities that work for women” (Arup, October 2022), accessed October 6, 2024.

2 Candiracci and Power, “Cities Alive Designing Cities That Work for Women.”

3 Eda Ünlü Yücesoy, *Everyday Urban Public Space: Turkish Immigrant Women’s Perspective*, 2006.

## **Aim**

The aim of my research is to explore where teenage girls in Kiel want to spend their free time in public, and what factors might currently discourage them from doing so currently. Specifically, I want to identify spaces where these girls feel comfortable spending time with their friends, and I want to find out what, perhaps spatial, qualities make these spaces good for this particular group.

Through identifying public spaces that teenage girls use, and also perhaps some unmet needs in the current public space of Kiel, I want to formulate a public space that would be inviting for young girls and make them visible in the public sphere again.

## **Methodology**

To achieve this, I plan to do extensive fieldwork in Kiel. Just like the method I used during the making of this research plan, my focus will be mainly on conducting interviews with the girls of Kiel, and perhaps with their families and youth workers who are involved in their lives. My approach will prioritize the tacit knowledge that the girls can offer, which are the insights that they have in their community, their needs, and the challenges they face in their neighborhood. By listening to their perspective in their own words I hope to gain an understanding on the different cultural and social dynamics influencing their relationship with the public space of Kiel. I am hoping to create a kind of network of contacts, where speaking to one person will lead me to another, and so on. In this way, I want to speak to many different girls and widen my scope. I want to use theoretical research to understand and confirm my findings from my fieldwork and put my findings into an academic perspective. My research will not only aim to identify spaces that young girls feel comfortable in but also to understand the underlying cultural and religious factors that might come into play. Through this, I want to be able to envision a public space that truly captures the spatial needs of the adolescent girls in Kiel.

## Annotated Library

Berry, Jess, Timothy Moore, Nicole Kalms, and Gene Bawden. *Contentious cities : design and the gendered production of space*, 2021. | Chapter 9 in this book gives some theory on how gender biases influence our urban design. This book might give a theoretical background to the findings in my interviews and might help explain why some public spaces are more or less inviting to women and girls.

Candiracci, Sara, and Kim Power. “Cities Alive Designing cities that work for women.” Arup, October 2022. | This paper by Arup gives a broad overview of issues women and girls face in the urban public sphere worldwide. This might be relevant in order to categorize and understand the issues girls in Kiel face as well.

Holt, William Grady. “Engendering Cities: Designing Sustainable Urban Spaces for All, Edited by I. Sánchez De Madariaga and M. Neuman.” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 46, no. 4 (May 18, 2023): 895–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2023.2198459>. | This book also looks at our gender biases in urban design. While this book has a focus on mobility and safety of women in the city, I hope it can still provide insights in the public space of Kiel as well.

Yücesoy, Eda Ünlü. *Everyday Urban Public Space: Turkish Immigrant Women’s Perspective*, 2006. | This paper looks at the lives of Turkish immigrant women in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the Dutch city of Enschede. Although the information in this book might have aged a bit, I hope it can help me better understand the worldview of the women in immigrant communities in Kiel.

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