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Moving along, stopping at: the gendering of the public spaces in Al Wehdat Camp in Amman, Jordan

Nama'a Qudah

ABSTRACT

In Al Wehdat Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, Jordan, women are usually seen in motion, attempting to navigate the camp space or move around it to complete their everyday errands within what is a highly male-dominated space. The spaces in which they stop, and stay, are limited. For this paper, I conduct an architectural investigation into the camp to understand the different ways architecture has contributed to the gendering of the public spaces in the camp, particularly in relation to two elements: streets and walls. Streets are fundamentally paths of activity and movement, paths along which women are usually seen moving, while walls are what construct interiors inside which activities take place, ones that women either visit or avoid, with both elements drawing lines of privacy, ownership, and safety. This investigation makes use of nine months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Al Wehdat Camp between 2019 and 2023, based on focus groups and interviews with women in the camp. I rely on the experience of the women to better understand the gendering of the camp space as a way of understanding the spatial production and transformation of the camp after six decades of its establishment. I also reflect on my own experience of researching the camp during the fieldwork, as a woman Palestinian and Jordanian scholar who stands at the threshold between being an insider and an outsider to the experiences of the women and the lived reality of Al Wehdat Camp.

Dans le camp de réfugiés palestiniens d'Al Wehdat à Amman, en Jordanie, les femmes sont généralement observées en mouvement, tandis qu'elles s'efforcent de naviguer dans l'espace du camp ou de s'y déplacer pour effectuer leurs courses quotidiennes dans ce qui est un espace fortement dominé par les hommes. Les espaces dans lesquels elles s'arrêtent et passent du temps sont limités. Aux fins de cet article, je mène une enquête architecturale dans le camp afin de comprendre les différentes façons dont l'architecture a contribué à genrer les espaces publics du camp, en particulier autour de deux éléments : les rues et les murs. Les rues sont fondamentalement des voies d'activité et de mouvement, des voies le long desquelles on voit généralement les femmes se déplacer, tandis que les murs construisent des intérieurs où se déroulent des activités, des intérieurs que les femmes visitent ou évitent ; ces deux éléments tracent des lignes d'intimité, de propriété et de sécurité. Cette enquête s'appuie

KEYWORDS
Palestinian refugee camps; gendering of space; walls; streets

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sur neuf mois de travail ethnographique que j'ai mené sur le terrain dans le camp d'Al Wehdat entre 2019 et 2023, en m'appuyant sur des groupes de réflexion et des entretiens avec les femmes du camp. Je m'appuie sur l'expérience des femmes pour mieux comprendre la « genrisation » de l'espace du camp comme moyen de comprendre la production et la transformation spatiales du camp six décennies après son établissement. Je réfléchis également à ma propre expérience de recherche dans le camp dans le cadre du travail de terrain, en tant qu'universitaire palestinienne et jordanienne qui se trouve à la frontière entre l'intérieur et l'extérieur des expériences des femmes et de la réalité vécue du camp d'Al Wehdat.

En el campo de refugiados palestinos de Al Wehdat, en Ammán (Jordania), suele verse a las mujeres en movimiento, intentando navegar el espacio del campo o desplazarse por él para completar sus mandados cotidianos dentro de un área muy dominada por los hombres. Los espacios en los que se detienen y permanecen son limitados. Para este trabajo, llevé a cabo una investigación arquitectónica en dicho campo, con la finalidad de comprender las diferentes formas en que la arquitectura contribuye a dividir los espacios públicos del campo por género, sobre todo en relación con dos elementos: las calles y los muros. Las calles son fundamentalmente vías de actividad y movimiento, caminos por los que se puede ver a las mujeres desplazarse, mientras que los muros construyen los interiores en los que tienen lugar las actividades, interiores que las mujeres visitan o evitan, toda vez que ambos elementos trazan líneas de privacidad, propiedad y seguridad. Esta investigación es el resultado del trabajo de campo etnográfico que realicé durante nueve meses en el campo de Al Wehdat entre 2019 y 2023, consistente en grupos de discusión y entrevistas con mujeres de este. Para comprender mejor la división por género del espacio del campo, me baso en la experiencia de las mujeres, en aras de entender la producción y la transformación espacial que ha experimentado tras seis décadas de haber sido establecido. Asimismo, reflexiono sobre mi propia experiencia de investigación en el lugar durante el trabajo de campo, como mujer palestina y estudiosa jordana que se encuentra en el umbral entre ser una oriunda y una extraña con respecto a las experiencias de las mujeres y a la realidad vivida en el campo de Al Wehdat.

Introduction

The ambivalent condition of Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan

Al Wehdat Camp is a dynamic and continually transforming territory, shaped by flows of movement and activity that continue to produce and reproduce its spaces over time. Al Wehdat Camp was established as a temporary space of shelter for Palestinian refugees after Al Nakba of 1948 which witnessed the ethnic cleansing of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their villages and hometowns in Palestine to establish the State of Israel, as documented by Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi (1992) and Israeli historian Illan Pappe (2007). Together, these events created the whole Palestinian refugee phenomenon and, in time, led to the establishment of several Palestinian refugee camps in Palestine's neighbouring countries (Khalidi 2020).

In Jordan, the number of registered Palestinian refugees exceeds two million, constituting 40 per cent of the five million officially registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in the agency's fields of operation, which includes Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip. Having predominantly arrived in Jordan through two waves of expulsion in 1948 and 1967 following what are commonly known as Al Nakba and Al Naksa, respectively, the infrastructure that was built to aid and service the Palestinian refugees included ten official camps, 171 schools, 25 primary health centres, ten community centres, and 14 women's centres. The ten official camps were established over two phases, with the first phase in response to Al Nakba in 1948 resulting in four official camps, and the second phase in response to Al Naksa of 1967 with six official camps known as emergency camps. Al Wehdat Camp was the fourth official camp to be established in Jordan during the first phase in 1955, and the second official camp in Amman, after Jabal Al Hussein Camp in 1952 (UNRWA 2019).

The most remarkable aspect that distinguishes Palestinian refugees in Jordan from Palestinian refugees elsewhere is an *ambivalence* in their legal status, as discussed by Jalal Al Husseini (2010) and Lucas Oesch (2017), given how a huge number of Palestinian refugees in Jordan hold Jordanian nationality alongside their UNRWA Identification cards, rendering them as not only internationally recognised refugees but also as Jordanian citizens. That ambivalence or undecidedness in the Palestinian camps in Jordan resulted in what Lucas Oesch (2017) termed 'multiple ambiguities and subjectivities', where a number of complex spatial dynamics have rendered the camp as a 'zone of indistinction' that is simultaneously included and excluded into the city (Achilli and Oesch 2016; Oesch 2017).

That ambivalence of legal status also created an ambivalence in governance over Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, putting them under a model of hybrid control of both the Jordanian state and UNRWA, which is the model through which Palestinian refugee camps have been governed since their establishment until today. Inside Al Wehdat Camp, The Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA) is the legislative and executive entity, acting as the legislature of the building regulations and the executive authority in shelter construction and infrastructure planning and upgrading (The Department of Palestinian Affairs 2019). UNRWA, on the other hand, is responsible for health care, education, and social services. In time, UNRWA shifted its scope of services from relief to empowerment, by introducing several social welfare programmes (UNRWA 2019).

The ambivalence in control and governance reflects in the everyday life in the camp and the camp spaces, particularly in relation to land ownership and land use, which in turn affect activity and movement.

Streets and walls: paths of activity and boundary demarcating elements

Originally established as a humanitarian space of refuge, the camp has evolved over decades to accommodate the diverse needs of four generations of Palestinian refugees. To examine the complex power dynamics shaping the camp's architecture, amidst uncertain governance, I delve into the micro-politics governing its spaces and the power dynamics of the institutional bodies managing the camp today. Within an intertwined web of

power dynamics, I focus on the gendering of the public spaces in the camp, by studying the implications of the political, economic, and social dimensions on the everyday life of the camp inhabitants on the patterns of activity and movement around the camp. I also conduct an architectural investigation into the streets and the walls of the camp, to understand how these elements in their delineation of lines of ownership, privacy, and safety also play a role in the demarcation and production of gendered public spaces. Streets in the camp serve as paths for movement and activity, acting as the backbone for its markets to grow and expand. Conversely, walls play a crucial role in defining spaces, creating interiors with distinct spatial characteristics that may either welcome or pose risks to women due to the potential threats they enclose.

Safety in the public spaces in Al Wehdat Camp

The definition of public spaces in the camp is ambiguous, as formally, they are limited if not non-existent. Figure 1 illustrates the layout of Al Wehdat Camp, highlighting the lack of formal public spaces.

Informally, inhabitants consider the streets, alleys, and markets as public spaces, evolving with the movement of people and activity. Al Wehdat Camp has also become a hub of commerce, notably with Al Wehdat Market emerging as one of the largest in southwest Amman, attracting shoppers from across the city. This market has expanded gradually since commercial activities were permitted in 1983, resulting in the shrinking of informal public spaces as market elements encroach upon narrow streets and alleys. Consequently, the most densely populated Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan has become even more congested and harder to navigate.

Along these lines, I ask: Can streets and alleys be considered public spaces if one cannot stay in them, if one needs to continue moving? Are public spaces ones that allow a person to decide whether they want to move or stay?

From there, I move on to ask: Are streets and alleys considered public spaces if they feel unsafe, particularly to women, and because of that feeling of unsafety, women feel the need to move quickly through them, or avoid them altogether?

Another type of public space in the camp is semi-public spaces that are bound with walls, managed and administered by specific institutions that indirectly control who enters them. Due to the presence of walls around these public spaces and a certain level of institutional control, these spaces are characterised by a limited accessibility that indirectly and informally denies the entry of members of a specific gender, producing highly segregated spaces in the camp. Additionally, those informal public spaces harbour spaces of certain characteristics inside, making them habitable for a certain gender and inhabitable for another, because of the way these spaces are perceived by members of the local community and the qualities ascribed to them. As such, I ask: What *roles do walls play in the gendering of spaces in Al Wehdat* Camp and what role do they play in demarcating safe and unsafe spaces in the camp?

To be able to arrive at an answer, I decided to investigate the issue of safety for women in the public spaces in the camp, both those that move along the streets and markets, and those demarcated by walls, using safety as a measure that contributes to the gendering of

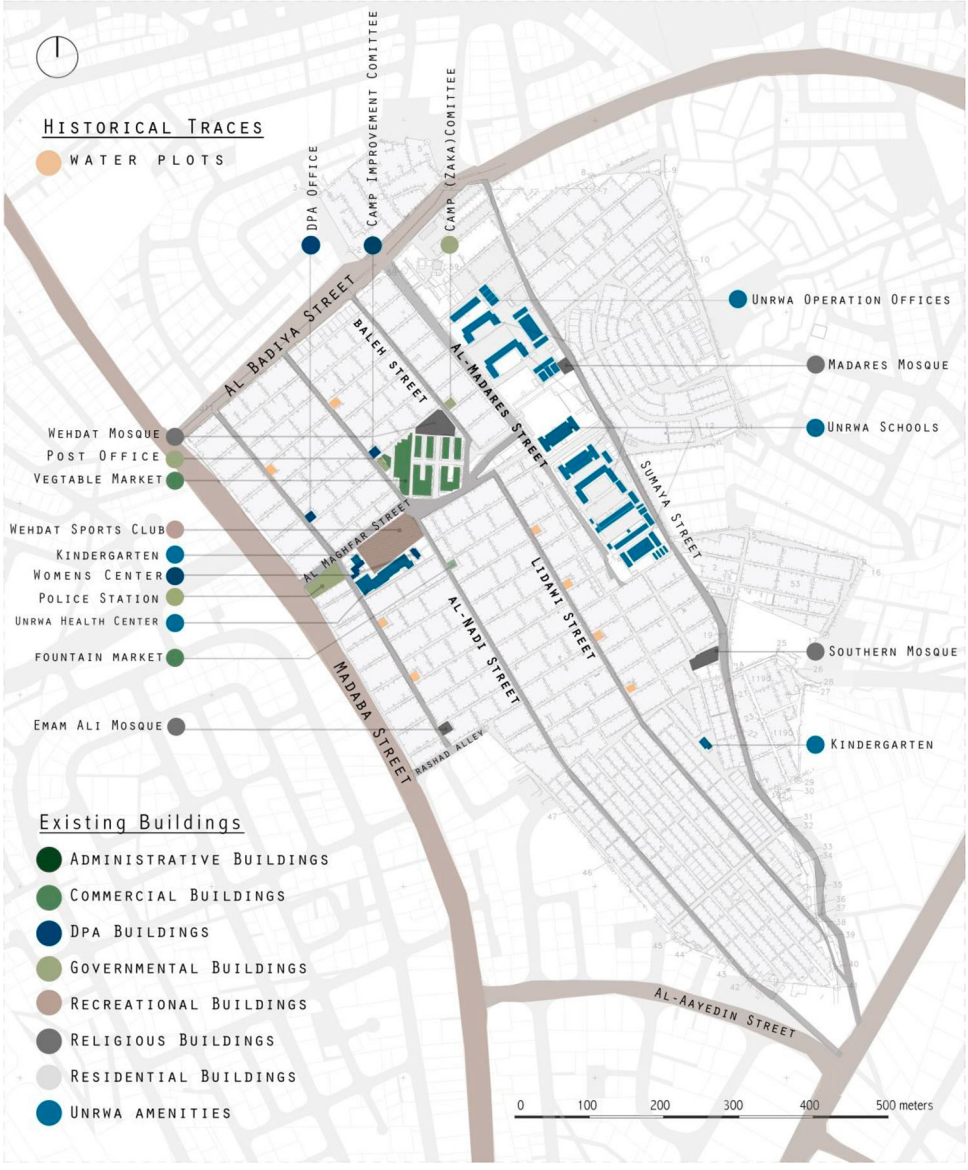

Figure 1. Al Wehdat Camp general overview showing the main streets, landmarks, and nodes, while highlighting the lack of formal public spaces. Map produced by the author, 2019.

spaces, to better understand where women spend their time in public in the camp and where they choose to go and where they do not.

Methodology

The outside/the inside: from where are you telling this story?

The discussions in this paper have developed in the space between the outside and the inside, to include the spaces out on the streets and those that are inside the walls. That

being said, the outside and the inside in this research are twofold. Firstly, they are related to positionality and the lived experiences of the camp inhabitants, and also, my own background and social relation to Al Wehdat Camp. *The inside* is the position from which this research is produced and the story is told by the women about their lives, in a manner that acknowledges the agency of the women I interviewed and the participative role in this research's buildup. Those lived experiences with all that they encompass – of feelings, thoughts, and perspectives – constitute an interior this paper will attempt to explore. By doing so, I want to centre the women at the heart of their lived experiences and centre those lived experiences at the heart of this paper.

The notion of lived experiences as interiors is one that Edward Said writes about in his book *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, in a chapter where he reflects on his mother's experience of displacement as a Palestinian woman during and after Al Nakba by saying, 'Yet because I am separated from those experiences by time, by gender, by distance – they are, after experiences of an interior I cannot inhabit – I am reconfirmed in my outsider's role' (Said 1999, 83–4).

Personally, I was aware that I too was an outsider to the experiences of the camp's women, because I have never lived in the camp myself nor has my family. It was crucial for me to acknowledge the limitations of my position and not try to claim that the knowledge that I have accumulated made me fully understand the lived experiences of the women with all the challenges they encompass. On the other hand, I was aware that I was not entirely an outsider, because I was a woman myself, with a Palestinian mother and grandmother who have intergenerationally transferred parts of their experiences to me in a manner that played a role in shaping my identity. My grandparents have never lived in a camp but considered themselves as refugees nevertheless, because as my late grandfather would say:

> We are refugees because we cannot return to Palestine. We will remain refugees until we return.

I was also a resident of the city of Amman, where Al Wehdat Camp is located, which made me relate to many experiences in a broader sense. I also spoke Arabic, which also made my communication with the women easier and helped me build bonds of trust with them. I also wore the hijab, which made it smoother for me to navigate the camp because the vast majority of the women there wore it.

That was a realisation I arrived at after visiting the camp with another Palestinian friend, who did not wear the hijab. We were surprised when the children started playfully following us, addressing her in English:

> 'Where are you from? Where are you from?', they asked her, repeating the question as we moved.
> 'I am Palestinian, just like you, why are you speaking to me in English?', she asked, laughing.

That encounter revealed to us that for the children in the camp, to be like them, to be Palestinian, a woman had to wear the hijab, because in their surroundings, the vast majority of the Palestinian women did. Another factor that created that link between not wearing the hijab and speaking English was the large number of English-speaking foreign humanitarian workers that worked in international organisations in Al Wehdat Camp and other camps in Jordan, whom the children often saw and interacted with.

For those reasons, I found myself standing at the *threshold*, not completely an outsider, nor entirely an insider, not entirely *outside* on the *streets*, in public, with everyone else, neither completely on *the inside*, behind the *walls*, as part of the interior life of the Palestinian women in Al Wehdat Camp. By bringing myself into the frame of inquiry and by acknowledging my presence within the process of producing this research, I was also making use of Donna Haraway's (Haraway 1988) writings on situated knowledge to better understand Al Wehdat Camp, relying on my partial perspective to produce knowledge that did not claim to be universal but was rather situated and grounded.

Secondly, as physical positions, the outside and the inside will be studied in relation to the two architectural elements guiding this paper, which are the streets and the walls. The outside is what exists outside the walls in public, particularly along the streets and the markets, with all the activities that take place there and the patterns of movement, which one studied, could help explain the camp's transformation in relation to the economic, social, and political dimensions. The inside is what exists inside the walls in private, away from the streets and markets, with higher levels of control, which when studied, help understand an interplay of power relations of several entities who, in their ambivalent governance over the camp space, have also played a role in the camp's transformation and the use of its different amenities.

The focus group discussions: where do women not go?

During the nine months of fieldwork that I conducted in Al Wehdat Camp between 2019 and 2023, I noticed that whenever women were out in public, they were usually on the move. Except for the occasional elderly women sitting at the steps in front of their houses, women were usually moving, either walking to get from one place or another, or out doing errands.

With time, after a number of interviews with women in the camp and after a number of ethnographic visits to the camp, I started to associate movement with the feeling of safety. From my observations, I began to think that women were moving when they felt unsafe, women stayed when they found safety. The speed and duration of each activity also gave an indication of the level of safety. What that means is that women moved faster when they felt the level of danger was higher, women moved slower when they felt the level of danger was lower. Women stayed longer when they felt safer, women stayed shorter when they felt more at risk. Shilpa Phadke (2013) echoes similar sentiments, contending that loitering – being present in public spaces without a specific purpose – has the potential to transform public spaces into more inclusive, diverse, and enjoyable environments. *Loitering* in that sense is what I refer to as the act of staying in one place, not moving, which comes as a reflection of a feeling of safety, testifying to a place's qualities. To increase women's accessibility to public places, Phadke argues for the right of all, including those who are perceived as unfriendly bodies – to cohabit these spaces and take risks. Instead of asking women to avoid those risks, more focus should be put on women's right to public spaces and ways to make public spaces more accessible for everyone.

In Al Wehdat Camp, what areas did the women quickly move along, and what spots felt safe enough for them to stop at, stay, and even loiter? What produced that fear in the women, and how did it relate to the wider patriarchal system that shaped women's lives in the camp?

Pumla Dineo Gqola (2021) argues that female fear is manufactured as part of the patriarchal system with the aim of policing women's behaviour, movement, and every aspect of women's lives. To make women afraid, the hands operating the female fear factory rely on visible and recognisable cues that are performed regularly in the public space, communicating that one group or person has the power, while the other does not. Fear in that sense is used to prevent women from engaging in certain behaviours, going to certain places, fearing stigma, verbal, and physical harassment, or any other consequences of their actions.

Theorisation of fear through that lens will be used to understand the logic behind some spaces being perceived as unsafe on an immaterial level, while also inspecting the physical qualities of a space, whether on the street or behind a wall, to understand the material factors that manufactured those perceptions.

In an attempt to map the unsafe areas in the camp, I conducted two focus group discussions in July 2019, in the women's centre in the camp, with the centre's director present, helping me oversee the sessions while also participating in the discussions. In each session, eight women from different age groups were present, sampled through the centre's director from the different classes that were given at the centre, which ranged in scope between cooking, tailoring, and beauty, aiming to build the women's capacity and develop skills to improve their economic status. I chose to conduct the sessions at the centre because it was where women took a variety of classes, which made the process of assembling the sessions easier. Also, due to the women's familiarity with the place and the director, they did not feel worried about going to a new place they did not know. More broadly, I conducted the sessions at the centre because it was one of the few limited public places in which women could gather.

By using the focus group discussions, I aimed to observe the interplay of the power dynamics between the participants, taking note of factors such as age and status to reflect on how they influenced the interactions between the women and whether they produced any points of conflict or resulted in any othering practices (Smithson 2000). I also aimed to gain insights into the interplay of power relations within the broader camp context, recognising the significance of micro-dynamics in shaping macro-dynamics – a conclusion echoed by Rachel Ayrton (2019).

During each session, I asked a set of questions as a part of a group discussion among the participants. The questions were centred around the issue of safety and space, and the factors that contributed to the women's feelings of unsafety in the camp's different parts and neighbourhoods.

Where did you go/where did you not go, and why?

Framing the questions as such helped me link the practice of movement, of going somewhere, of accessing a space, with the feeling of safety or unsafety, and use the issue of inaccessibility as an indication of its unsafety and presence of potential risks.

Because I also wanted to situate these feelings of unsafety in space and relate them to the camp's built environment, I prepared a basic map that contained some of the camp's main nodes, landmarks, and streets, and distributed it between the participants during the sessions, asking them to reflect their thoughts and perceptions on the map.

My approach sought to facilitate the mapping of what Gill Valentine (1989) describes as 'The geography of women's fear.' This concept explores how women's perceptions of public space, along with their decisions regarding routes and destinations, are influenced by their fear of male violence and its repercussions. These considerations often result in the adoption of coping mechanisms that helped women navigate their daily environments, relying on the mental maps they had developed of their environments that helped them avoid potentially dangerous locations during dangerous times of the day.

In Figure 2, I show a sample of six maps from the focus groups, highlighting the spaces the women perceived as unsafe, giving them a legend also shown on the same map.

Discussion

From the focus group discussions, I was able to conclude that the public spaces that most women felt unsafe in were Al Wehdat Sports Club and the vegetable market, being the spots that were highlighted the highest number of times in the participants' maps of the unsafe areas. The only safe public space that was mentioned was the women's centre. In this section, I will relate these findings to the two architecture elements that structure this paper – the streets and the walls – to understand the role of these architectural elements in producing the unsafe spaces in the Al Wehdat Camp and they role they play in producing a safe space for the women in the women's centre.

On the streets and in markets: moving along

During the focus group discussions, I was told that the vegetable market was among the public spaces that most women chose to avoid, perceived as an unsafe public space because of verbal and physical harassment. The vegetable market was a small square-shaped lot, covered with a network of makeshift shading elements, lined up with rows of tables that showcased produce. In its physical setup, the vegetable market resembled a maze, with narrow pathways crammed with shoppers, vendors, and metallic carts that were used to transport items, shown in Figure 3.

The physical setting of the space made women vulnerable to harassment because of the way people were tightly pushed together along narrow pathways with a high volume of people, making the bodies of women accessible to the hands of harassers who saw the lack of personal space as an invitation to act.

These factors also made it easy for a harasser to get away with his actions, due to the high levels of noise that swallowed verbal harassment or verbal responses from the women, in addition to the possibility of slipping into the crowd to escape punishment

Figure 2. Where is the danger? Six maps from the focus group sessions.

Figure 3. The vegetable market at Al Wehdat Camp. Photos taken by the author, 2020.

or confrontation when needed. Stigmatisation, which is a tactic that is used to manufacture female fear, also played a role in rendering the vegetable market as unsafe, as explained by a young woman during the focus group discussion in July 2019, at the women's centre: 'My husband told me not to go to the vegetable market because women had no business being there. He would go there after work and get me what I needed. It has been like that since we got married.'

Going to the vegetable market was not acceptable for younger women but more tolerated the older the women got, as explained to me by an elderly woman during that same session: 'I do not face any issues when I go to the vegetable market, but that's because I am an elderly woman.' 'What about your daughters, do you allow them to accompany you?', I asked her. 'Of course not, my daughters stay at home. Why would they? I get us all that we need', she answered.

The rules of conduct were communicated in the market and the women understood them and acted accordingly. Elderly women helped the fear factory sustain its operations by practising policing over the younger women, using social conditioning to keep women's mobility in check.

When I visited the vegetable market myself, I understood what the participants were talking about. The space was indeed very compact and people were tightly pushed together. In the vegetable market, however, I did not face harassment, which was something that made me wonder about why I was spared, when the other young women were not. I got my answer during another conversation with a young man in the camp in a later visit. He explained to me that I was easily spotted as an outsider to the camp inhabitants, they knew that I was *not* from the camp, and therefore did not harass me because of fear of the consequences. When I asked him what it was about my appearance that revealed that I was an outsider, he told me that it was not easy to explain, having to do with the way I moved, the fact that I observed my surroundings when I walked,

and stopped to take photos and look at things, in a manner that suggested that I was either a reporter or a journalist.

That kind of position rendered me as someone important, someone the camp inhabitants would not want to be caught harassing, because the consequences would be unknown, potentially bigger, and therefore were better avoided. In his explanation of what rendered me as an outsider, the young man drew a link between my patterns of movement and my distinction as an outsider.

That was not something I had considered before, having relied on my appearance and language skills in relating myself to the camp inhabitants. From that, it would be concluded that young women from the camp were taught and disciplined to move in a certain way, to keep their interactions with their surroundings to the minimum, and to walk quickly. More generally, being from the camp meant that a person knew their surroundings better and moved around them with more confidence.

In the discussions, a number of streets were distinctly identified as unsafe zones, especially the commercial streets that were also compact and crowded, with the participants telling me that the narrower and more isolated the street, the more dangerous it was. The feelings of unsafety were also linked to certain times of the day and certain times of the year, as explained by a group of young women during the focus group discussions, also in July 2019 in the women's centre:

> If you walk in the camp during Eid, or the last days of Ramadan, God only knows what will happen to you between these huge crowds! The chances of you getting harrassed will drastically increase.

'Always avoid the narrow alleys, listen to me, especially after dark, there, you will be groped and harassed', added another young woman, anxiously advising me. 'What do you mean? This happens here? In our camp? Impossible', interrupted an elderly woman. 'We have well behaved sons that would not do that, stop exaggerating', added another.

The act of policing younger women was obvious in many encounters in the camp, including this one that happened during that discussion, where the older woman tried to not only police the younger women but also the conversation, by using conventional tactics of intimidation and denial, assuring me that their sons would not behave that way, that men in the camp were not like *that*.

Other elderly women in that session blamed the harassment on the street vendors that came from *outside* the camp, assuring me that the people from the camp would not behave that way:

> Ever since the street vendors came to the camp, quickly occupying the streets and using up every metre available of pavement, the situation dramatically got worse. They made the experience of walking on the streets uncomfortable for everyone! Some even sell drugs and God knows what!

The complaints about the street vendors were numerous, blaming them for a variety of things including harassment and also chaos, as they continued to swallow up the public space of the camp.

A number of shop owners also complained about the way they negatively affected their sales, with the number of their women clients decreasing because of the street vendors and their behaviour. In Figure 4, I show one example that shows the spread of the street vendors along a main commercial street.

During the discussions, it was repeatedly mentioned how the architecture of the camp played a role in making the camp more dangerous to the participants. Whether it was the narrow alleys, the many deadends, the lack of streetlights at night, the shading elements that isolated some dark streets, the compactness of the camp's layout, these factors worked together in increasing the risk of harassment and the feelings of unsafety for the women participants. For those reasons, the participants agreed that the presence of commercial shops in any residential neighbourhood made it relatively safer, because of the way it lit up the street and increased pedestrian activity, which in turn increased feelings of safety.

That discussion brought to my mind Jane Jacobs (2016) and her concept of 'eyes *on the* street' and the role mixed-use streets play in ensuring higher levels of safety in urban neighbourhoods, especially when considering the way a community works on ensuring the safety of their neighbourhoods by keeping a close eye on their streets.

In conversations with the camp inhabitants, it was continually mentioned how the social fabric of the camp had changed over time, with many of the 'original' inhabitants moving out, replaced by new inhabitants that hardly knew each other. This weakened social ties that had previously contributed to adding more 'eyes on the street', thus increasing safety. Because of the many families that moved out, for a variety of social and economic reasons that included the deteriorating living conditions in the camp and the spread of drugs and harassment, as highlighted in this paper, there were also many vacant houses that left the streets unattended, decreasing levels of surveillance and with it the levels of safety for women.

Figure 4. The street vendors and the spread of the market. Photo taken by the author, 2020.

Inside the walls: stopping at

Al Wehdat Sports Club

Among the unsafe spots, Al Wehdat Sports Club was the most recurring spot, especially among the younger participants, who described it as a highly male-dominated space with hardly any women present. When I asked the women why they felt the club was unsafe, they told me that they felt unwelcome there and that they avoided the club because it had a huge number of young men inside who, in their large number, posed a threat to them. In that sense, the walls of the sports club played a role in harbouring danger inside, clearly demarcating that space as a danger zone. To the women, entering the building was rather stigmatised, adding to the feelings of unsafety and their perception of potential risks.

When I visited Al Wehdat Sports Club, what stood out about that visit was the fact that I was the only woman in that huge building, surrounded by only male employees. Everyone was polite and helpful, but it was quite clear that the sports club, both as a building, as a sport, and also as a phenomenon, was highly male dominated, with no female employees in the staff, nor in the building, nor in the team, nor in the stadiums. Remarkably, the first director of what was Al Wehdat Youth Club was a woman, appointed by UNRWA at the time, seen in Figure 5. It was striking to see how much has changed, from a club that was first managed by a woman, to a club with hardly any space for women.

The change could be attributed to the fact that when Al Wehdat club was first established by UNRWA in 1956, it was established as a Youth Club, offering a number of recreational and sports activities to the young boys and girls in the camp. In 1974, with the rising fame and success of the club's soccer team, the name of the club changed to

Figure 5. Picture of Ameena Al Issawi, the first director of Al Wehdat's Youth Club, in an office inside the club building. Photo taken by the author, 2020.

officially become Al Wehdat Sports Club, as it got registered as an official national sports club under the Ministry of Youth. When the club became predominantly focused on soccer, the nature of things changed, gradually increasing male dominance and prescence in the building and the club. Women, on the other hand, would engage with soccer from their homes, watching games on television, not in the club, nor in the stadiums. The gendering of soccer as a sport was not specific to this club in particular, but rather to soccer in general in Jordan, the region, and also arguably the world.

The women's centre: a safe space produced between the walls and the streets

When I asked women in the sessions about the public spaces they felt were safe for them in the camp, outside their domestic spaces, a good number of them mentioned the women's centre, where we were holding the focus group discussions.

The first time I visited the women's centre, prior to the focus group discussions, I was amazed by the presence of such a space within the highly compact and busy camp setting. I entered the centre through a green door, shown in Figure 6, that gave no indication of what was behind it.

Once I stepped inside, the space opened up to reveal a huge courtyard with big trees and a lot of sky. In that courtyard, there was also a children's playground, seating areas, shading tents, a variety of plants, and a tiled path that connected the different outdoor areas with a small building, where we would later hold the focus group discussions. The courtyard gained its definition from the high four walls that bound its edges, separating the open space on the inside from the heavily built environment outside. Because of the high concrete walls around the women's centre, it was almost impossible for anyone

Figure 6. The green door at the entrance of the women's centre. Photo taken by the author, 2019.

walking around it to imagine that such an open place existed across the walls. It felt like a *secret garden* amidst a sea of concrete.

Across from them was a group of women under an umbrella talking and socialising. The fact that they felt comfortable enough to be sitting was an indication of the qualities of that space, most important of which was the level of safety women experienced there, safe enough to sit and relax.

In Figure 7, one of the four walls of the centre is shown, with a mural with drawings of children.

In my conversation with the women's centre director that day, she reaffirmed what was previously said to me about the camp's gendering of space, with very limited psychological and physical room for women. To help support and empower the women in the camp and allow them to find their space within the camp's and their own everyday lives, specific programmes were designed and implemented in the centre, in co-ordination with a number of local and international organisations that worked with women and children. After a number of visits to the women's centre, I realised that the four walls that demarcated the space of the centre played a role in creating a safe space for women and children, sheltering them against harassment and exploitation, supported by the programmes that empowered them and built their skills.

In addition to the focus group discussions that I had scheduled at the centre, I also interviewed a number of women at the women's centre also in July 2019, during the literacy classes that were conducted outside in the courtyard. I would wait until the class was over to approach the women.

In one encounter with a friendly old woman, she shared with me her life story:

> As a mother, I was very protective of my daughters and did not allow them to leave the house except for school because I did not feel that the camp was safe. The boys, on the other hand, had more freedom to go out with their friends. I have five sons and five daughters. My husband passed away when I was young and I raised my children on my own.

Figure 7. Inside the women's centre, inside the secret garden. Photo taken by the author, 2019.

Her notebook was sitting in front of her on the table; she opened it and showed me her handwritten letters and words:

> I have recently enrolled in the literacy classes, I have finally learnt to read and write on my own! I feel very proud of myself. Sometimes while sitting with my family in the car, we pass by a shop whose name I manage to read. I cannot tell you how happy I feel when I do.

In another encounter with a middle-aged woman, I asked her about her daughter and the literacy class:

> My daughter never went to school. I was always afraid to let her leave the house. It is not safe. When I learnt about these classes, I signed her up. I would drop her off here in the morning for the class and sometimes leave her here all day knowing how safe it was. She would study and socialise with other girls.

In a third encounter with another middle-aged woman after her class, she enthusiastically approached me and asked me who I was and what I was doing there. After telling her about my research and study of the gendering of spaces, she commented on the issue by saying:

> One of the biggest challenges in the camp is overcrowding. You can hardly sleep sometimes. Buildings are so close to one another, you can hear everything. The reason the boys are always outside is because there is no space for them inside. We are of course very protective of our daughters though; we rarely let them out because it is dangerous.

The space of the women's centre, which included both the courtyard and the small building, was the subject of continuous dispute between a number of entities that strove for control over the centre's funds and the land on which the centre was located, as explained by the centre director. Seen as an attractive and spacious plot of land with a prime location within the camp's context, a number of entities were trying to take over the land and change its function, striving to push the women's centre out. The land was neighboured by the sports club from one side and several markets from the other three sides, as shown in Figure 1, which rendered it as a suitable plot for the club to expand and also a suitable plot for another commercial complex such as the ones around it.

The land on which the Al Wehdat Camp was built is rented by the Jordanian Government, through the DPA, for 99 years from its private owners. In that sense, none of the plots that fell within the official boundary of the camp are owned by the Jordanian State nor the camp inhabitants themselves because the land was used through a temporary framework of ownership. Control over the plots and determining their function, on the other hand, was under the control of the DPA, with the exception of the UNRWA complex, which fell under the control of UNRWA, which was also bound by a wall that demarcated the plot and identified its boundaries and the space of the agency's control and administration. The centre director explained to me that some employees at the DPA believed that there could be a better use of that land which housed the women's centre, most likely through building a commercial complex that could generate income for the department, with the centre easily relocated elsewhere.

Wanting to observe the space of the women's centre from the top, I climbed to the roof of the neighbouring shopping centre, Souq Al Defatayn, enjoying the view shown in Figure 8.

On the inside, women felt safe and were able to experience a certain dimension of public life in the camp. That feeling of *safety* in the space was both material and immaterial, produced through the architecture of the women's centre and the walls that bound the spacious and green courtyard, keeping danger out, and also through the different empowerment and educational programmes offered by the centre and the networks of support that brought the women closer together.

To better understand the spatial setting of the women's centre, which I had perceived as a moment of quiet amidst chaos, I produced a diagram of the women's centre as seen from the top, shown in Figure 9. In the diagram, I tried to highlight the qualities of the women's centre that distinguish it from its surrounding context, primarily the ones that were produced by the walls. The first quality is the feeling of safety, coming as the result of both the material and immaterial structures of the women's centre, as discussed in this section. The second quality is the feeling of a garden, due to the presence of vegetation, which is quite uncommon in a camp that is heavily built and lacks much greenery. That garden tends to take the characteristics of a secret garden, emphasised by the four walls that isolate the space from the rest of the camp and informally control who gets to access it, informally limiting the users to women only. The third quality is the spaciousness of the space, coming as one of the few rare open spaces in the camp, in what is otherwise a very dense urban setting. The walls in the women's centre seemed to be protecting that space from the expansion of the market strictly designating that space for the education, recreation, and empowerment of women.

In February 2023, I visited the women's centre again only to learn that its former building and garden had been demolished. As shown in Figure 10, they had cut down most of

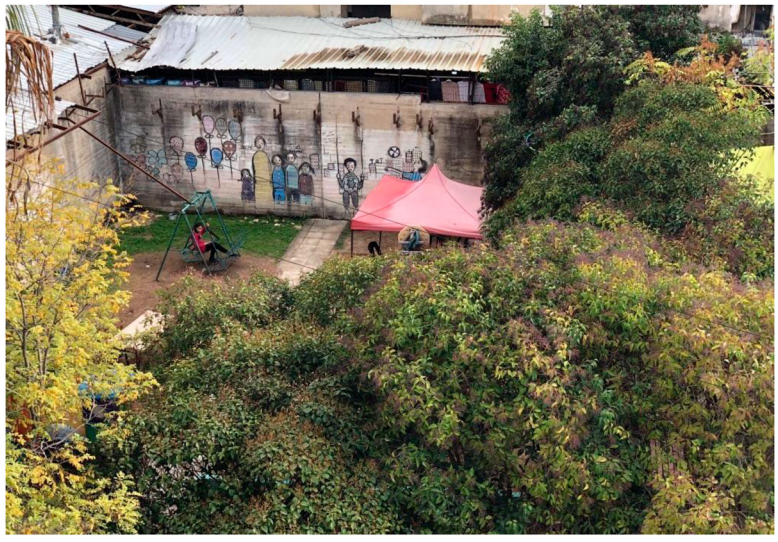

Figure 8. The secret garden: the women's centre as seen from above. Photo taken by the author, 2019.

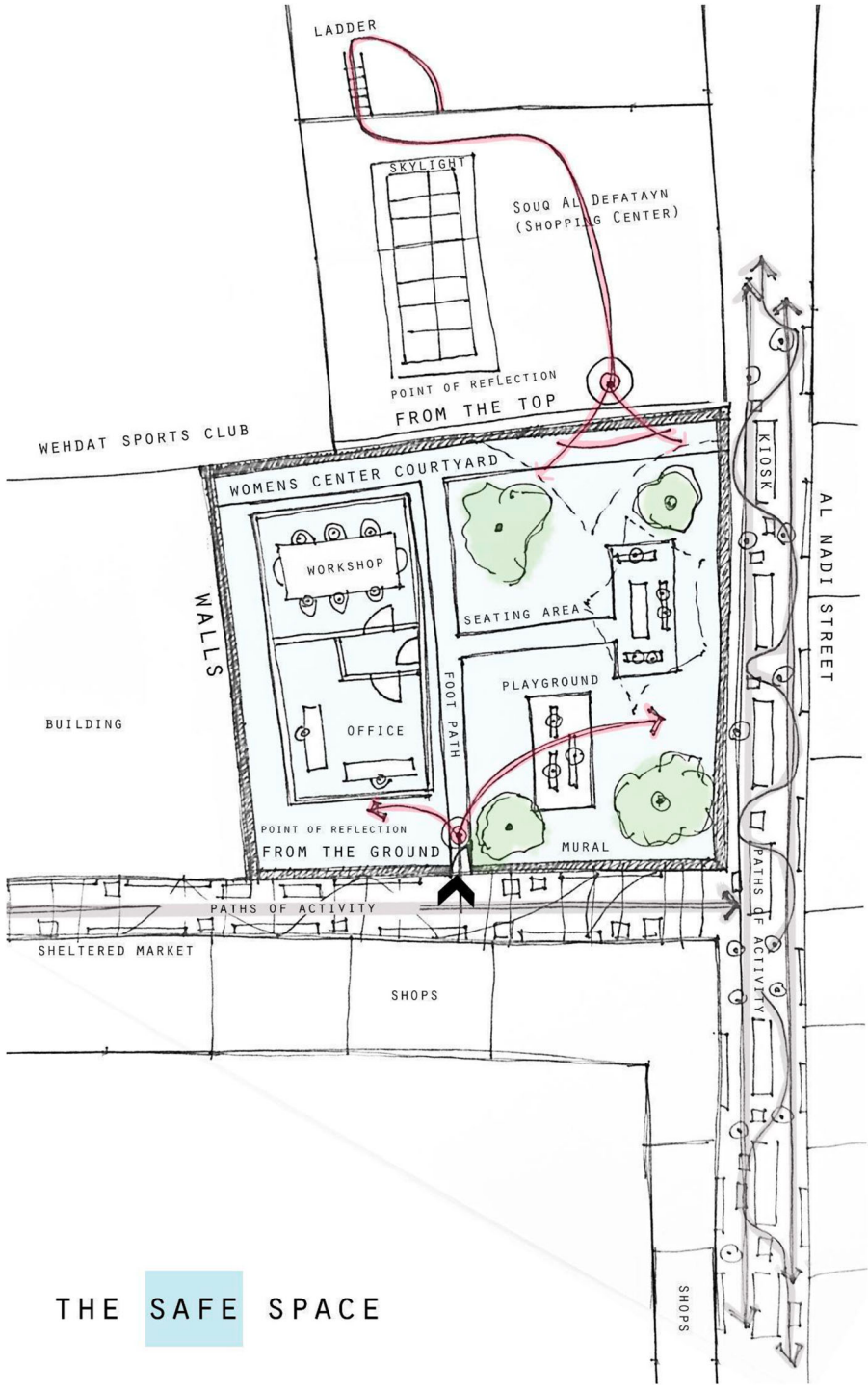

Figure 9. A diagram of the women's centre from the top. Diagram produced by the author, 2020.

Figure 10. The women's centre after the demolition. Photo taken by the author, 2023.

the trees, removed the playground, the seating areas, the grass, and the shading elements. The small building of the women's centre was also demolished. In a melancholic scene that resembled the aftermath of a storm, the kids drawn in the mural stood there, as witnesses to all that happened.

There was so much that was taken from the women of the camp with that demolition, not only physical space which they enjoyed and sat in, but also a safe space that had offered them support and safety.

When I asked about the demolition, a shop owner at Souq Al Defatayn said to me in an interview also in 2023, 'I heard many stories. Some said it was because the space had turned into a dangerous hotspot, frequented by drug addicts that came here at night to use drugs, hiding behind the walls.'

The irony behind that sentence did not escape me. The same walls that had kept danger out, were now what invited danger in? What was a safe space for women, was now a safe space for drug addicts, who as the new users of the space, scared women off?

I walked outside the mall to the opposite side of the site, to examine the newly erected women's centre, the one the shop owner directed me to. It was still under construction. The centre's sign was hung up on the main facade, confirming it was indeed the centre's new location.

Shown in Figure 11, the building typology of the new centre resembled that of all the other commercial buildings in the camp. The demolition reminded me of how much influence certain entities had in the camp, making decisions that changed the social, economic, and physical landscapes of the camp, in what was a considerably short period of time, within an ambivalent system of governance that made it more ambiguous to

Figure 11. The new women's centre building, under construction. Photo taken by the author, 2023.

understand who was responsible for what, which in turn produced a reality where things could just happen, outside the limits of conventional models of city planning and management.

By observing what had happened to the women's centre, I learnt a few things about how things were run in the camp and the influence the DPA had on the camp space such as deciding which buildings to demolish, relocate, and transform, and how to use every plot of land in the camp, whom to lease it to, and from whom to take space. I also saw an example of how a community space that offered support and relief to women was swallowed up by practices of power guided by the forces of capital.

I looked at the tall concrete building again. How were they going to run the programmes inside that stuffy concrete box, with the spaces stretched vertically instead of horizontally? Will they be able to reconstruct that safe space, both socially and spatially, inside all that concrete? Was it still a public space? Were they still outside in public, if they were inside a room, with no sky?

Conclusion

What this article discussed were the processes and the elements that resulted in the gendering of the public spaces in Al Wehdat Camp, which limits women from entering some spaces due to the feelings of unsafety ascribed to these spaces, within a camp context that is highly patriarchal and worked on manufacturing female fear. Are spaces public if they are inaccessible by women, due to feelings of unsafety that are produced by both the architecture of the camp and the fear factory that stigmatises some places and negatively reputes women who enter them?

On the streets, the rising levels of activity and growing chaos have reproduced the spaces of the commercial streets, such as that of the vegetable market, and transformed them into unsafe spaces where anything could potentially happen, in a manner that included them in the women's geography of fear and places they were better off avoiding. The testimonies of the women about their feelings of unsafety also highlights how the

growth of the market was at the expense of the camp inhabitants, who were losing more of their camp space to the street vendors and the commercial activity. On the inside, walls also played a role in the gendering of the spaces in the camp, demarcating some spaces as highly male dominated and others as highly female dominated, rendering the first as unsafe for the women and the second as safe for women. The walls that demarcated the space of Al Wehdat Sports Club also demarcated an unsafe space for women and emphasised the highly gendered nature of the sports club, both as a sport, as a team, and as a building. As for the women's centre, the four walls worked on materially constructing a safe space for women, both in a physical and metaphorical sense, with the centre described as one of the few spaces where women felt safe to be out in public. That safe space also allowed women to build a community and networks of support.

The question of who controls what in the camp remains vague and ambiguous, within an ambivalent system of governance, with a number of institutions collaborating to manage the camp space through a number of legislative frameworks that leave room for certain entities to take over and guide the camp's spatial transformation in a manner was usually guided by capital and not always considerate of women.

In Al Wehdat Camp, life is hard on everyone, but those challenges seem to rest more heavily on the bodies of women, who among other things need to be extremely aware of their environments and produce intricate mental maps of their everyday settings, highlighting the paths they should take, the places they can go to and those they should not, to stay safe and to avoid danger.

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