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'Women's World' in Damascus
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Syria

HEIKE ROGGENTHIN

In Damascus there are a number of different places where women are active, when they jointly occupy part of their normal day, where they communicate intensely with one another, and where they attempt to cope together with their problems. Temporary exclusive women's domains exist within the women's public domain and form one element of women's culture in Syria. Access to these social areas is permitted exclusively to women. Only female staff are employed in such establishments.

The construction of a female public space and male public space serves as a basic model to understand the necessity of women's domains. The strict spatial separation of female and male spheres and spaces characterizes the segregated and segmentary social order of the Middle East. Western academics, both female and male, associate the living domain of Muslims today directly with privacy and isolation. This description has proved to be Eurocentrist and obstructs the view of the differences in social and cultural reality.

► **Gamaiya niswan meeting.**

The construction of social reality, as undertaken by women in Damascus, indicates two publics: a female one and a male one. Inside the female public sphere women's spaces arise as an integral part of society. This definition differs from Western culture, and deviates from the common definition of the public domain as being accessible to everybody on an unrestricted basis.

The so-called public domains in Damascus cannot be chosen freely or exchanged by both genders. They co-exist. I am therefore turning away from the previous concept that private sphere = women's domain and public sphere = men's domain, since it puts the men's domain at the forefront and highlights women's domains only under the aspect of exclusiveness. Clear instructions on roles and tasks exist for both public domains. Male claims to power and space, which are displayed in the repressive mechanisms against women from the male public domain, allow the emergence of a likewise isolated female public domain.

In the women's world, the opportunity exists for women to free themselves for a limited period of time from imposed social obligations, and to rid themselves from patriarchal mechanisms. A common positive feeling of self-confidence can be developed here. Women act according to their own ideas and express their needs without any hindrances. Differences can be made between domestic informal women's domains, formal out-of-house women's domains and formal out-of-house charitable organization forms.

Domestic domains

Domestic informal women's domains exist temporarily in the apartments and houses of those involved. The groups which are close to the family are formed out of the necessity at certain times to do something only for oneself. According to their life cycle, women of similar ages come together to talk to one another, to support each other, to give themselves strength and to improve their own economic situation. The mobile interior of Arabian apartments can be adapted for various purposes without any problems: a living room becomes a meeting room, a reception room becomes a dance floor.

The *sabhiya*, the daily morning meeting, indicates the regular coming together of female inhabitants of a traditional house, or of a block of houses, or of women from the immediate neighbourhood. The drinking of coffee at about 10 o'clock is essentially a part of the every day routine. The content of the conversations covers the normal day of the

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PHOTO: HEIKE ROGGENTHIN, 1998

women – basically just gossip! *Istiqlal*, women's receptions in the afternoon, are a kind of small party with friends and acquaintances, organized by female family members. Larger women's receptions are only held by prosperous women. The parties are held at alternating locations, generally at larger homes or at restaurants, which are agreed upon beforehand. The hostesses and the guests are always the same women. Good food and relaxed celebrating are main aspects of such gatherings. The entire afternoon and evening is taken up by heated discussions, jokes, dancing, games and singing. The *gamaiya niswan*, the women's savings and credit association, also takes place in the afternoon. The basic idea behind the informal associations is the coming together of several individuals, in order to tie up a rare factor of production, e.g. capital, and with a rotation process to always make available one member of the group. All members should profit within a fixed time frame. The money is used to create accruals to secure the family in the case of financial crisis. The sum of money saved is also partially used as up-front financing for small companies and in particular to realize the wishes of the consumers: for buying items such as a television set, new furniture, etc.

Health, beauty and fitness

Formal out-of-house women's domains are formed in areas which are conceived for specific purposes, such as hairdressing, bathing, fitness training, etc. Architecturally, the buildings are designed in line with the women's needs and activities. The hammam, a public bath, was – together with holy graves and the cemeteries – once the only permitted place for women outside of their homes. Due to the fact that today almost every home has its own bath, this establishment is increasingly diminishing and almost completely losing its importance for the cities' inhabitants. Out of a total of 12 hammams, today only seven have opening hours for women. The women's hairdressing salon is an important establishment, where women can keep up with the demands on their looks because they (usually) are appreciated less for their intellectual capabilities than for their beauty and capacities as housewives. As well as beauty care, they use the visit to the hairdresser as a social event and look for contact with female staff and

customers. The women's open-air swimming pools are a relatively new phenomenon within the city of Damascus. The first opened at the beginning of the 1970s. The current ten existing women's swimming pools are social places for women of all social/economic backgrounds, religions and ages. The level of admission fees, the type of building and the accessibility using public transport are the decisive factors as regards the customers in the pools. *Nadi riyada*, fitness clubs for women, of which 26 exist today, have formed part of the infrastructure in many parts of the city since the 1990s. Going to aerobics classes is currently very popular amongst women between the ages of 18 and 40, and amongst all social classes. The main motivation of the participants attending aerobics classes is mainly weight reduction. They want to lose as much weight as possible in a short period of time, while overcoming their dislike for sports. Contact with other women is also important.

Charity organizations

Through the honorary work in state-owned, private or church charity organization forms, formal out-of-house women's domains have appeared in which women find the place and time for social togetherness and communication, in addition of course to their activities which express their social commitment. During group activities there is sufficient time for social conversation. Group excursions, journeys and celebrations are also extremely popular. At such events there is a strengthening of the community spirit and motivation to carry out charitable work.

Concluding remarks

The use of and participation in informal and formal women's domains creates set points in the daily, weekly and yearly schedule of the women. In domestic informal women's domains the women are welfare workers, therapeutics, advisers and aid workers to each other. Handed down patterns are reproduced and opportunities are created to make a contribution towards helping the family to survive. Women's domains provide social security. The communicative and personal aspect of gatherings in informal women's domains creates a power potential which could regulate or

guide the social togetherness. Formal out-of-house women's domains help women, on one hand, to keep up with social norms and demands on their looks and, on the other hand, to establish their presence in more extensive communication systems. Women create this female public to correspond to their demands for modernness or conservatism.

The dynamic expansion of formal women's domains in the centre of Damascus at the end of the 1990s allows one to focus on four aspects regarding the women's motives: obtaining better health and greater attractiveness, social care, keeping tradition in the sense of 'back to the roots', and adapting American/European norms in their use of leisure time.

Observing and maintaining emotional satisfaction of all concerned is the main objective of coming together. In this way, informal and formal women's domains contribute to gender separation and help to stabilize the existing social order. As the patriarchal supremacy is not being questioned, and the women's increased overall satisfaction has a positive effect on men; most household leaders approve of the expansion of different women's domains. For this reason as well, the number of institutionalized women's domains is currently on the rise.

The description of the living situation of women in Damascus society which is portrayed as un-free and repressed from a European point of view, often neglects the positive qualities of women's domains. A lived out women's community offers security and certainty to its members. If the lack of orientation or the loneliness of the individual is being denounced in Western European society, the female public space of the Damascus women offers assistance and support in coping with everyday life.

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