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# Challenges and Promises Related to Research on Women and Public Space in Tripoli, Libya

Research on women and public space in Libya is a fascinating and challenging task due to the unstable political environment and lack of accessibility to information related to these sensitive topics, to name a few. As part of my doctoral research, titled *Women's Use of Public Space in Tripoli, Libya between 1850 and 2014*, I conducted a field study in the period between May and November 2013.<sup>1</sup> While digging for the information and collecting the data, I came across a wealth of materials in some archival entities in Tripoli. I also went through an intriguing experience while investigating my case studies and interviewing the study participants.

## Research Context

To contextualize my research, it is vital to delineate main themes: the city, public space and women. I examined how these themes were intertwined throughout different historical periods in Libya that spanned between the 1850s and 1990s, a period that covered diverse political regimes and various economic and social conditions. While public space is the central theme linking urban change to women's presence in city spaces, the city of Tripoli can be regarded as the binding agent of the public spaces, where political, economic and social transformations can be traced. In addition to these factors, colonialism and modernization are also leading forces that triggered changes in both

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1 Fathia M. Elmenghawi, *Changes in Urban Design and Women's Use of Public Space: The Case of Tripoli, Libya 1835–2014*, PhD dissertation (New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University, 2016).

design and use of public spaces in Tripoli. With regard to women, they are among the key actors who have contributed to the meanings and the uses of the city's public spaces. The focus of my work has been on their increased visibility in public space and the forces that might have hindered or augmented their presence in these spaces.

The religious, socio-cultural, and socio-economic aspects of Libyan society during the chosen time periods are determining factors for my investigation into the historical background of women's use of public space in Tripoli. So far, no studies have been conducted to examine the way in which women of different religions, nationalities, and classes have used public space at any time in this historic city. I tried to problematize the term "public space" to explore how different actors perceive it. For example, in the period between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, the notion of public space was different for an Arab-Muslim Libyan woman than for a Berber Libyan woman, an Arab-Jewish Libyan woman, or a Christian Maltese or Italian woman. In addition, a Turkish or Libyan woman used public spaces differently than a Maltese working class woman or a female Italian farmer did. The heterogeneity of Tripolitanian society, particularly during Ottoman rule and the Italian colonial period, provides a fruitful case to examine how issues of religion, ethnicity, and class were intertwined in the use of public space. Among these interweaving factors it is important to consider the colonizer/colonized relationship, which adds to the complexity of this research. Thus, I include a research question that focuses on how women's use of public outdoor space in Tripoli has changed since 1850 and how these changes have varied by religion, nationality and class. Presently, this range of heterogeneity does not exist and has been replaced by one made up of mostly middle-class Muslim Libyans who come from different parts of the country to reside in Tripoli. Given the increase in women's education and employment, there has also been an increase in women's presence out of the home and into public spaces.

The research also sought to scrutinize women's current use of outdoor public spaces that resulted from transformations of the city center. I conducted observations and interviews in three sites specifically, including Martyr's Square, the Grand Park, and the Corniche. I chose these spaces because they have recently been frequented often by women, who were until recently not very visible in these urban recreational spaces. Because of recent and dramatic transformation of Tripoli Center, particularly in Martyr's Square and the area adjacent to

it during the late 1990s when the Grand Park and the Corniche next to it were opened, the area became an urban hub for recreational and commercial activities. These urban spaces experienced an immense increase in use, which I have examined for the presence of women (when, where and with whom), their behavior and way of dressing, and their activities in these spaces. In my interviews, I also examine women's current needs and preferences for specific spatial elements in outdoor public space.

### Research Methodology

The nature of this research necessitated incorporating methods relevant to urban and social history to understand and explain social life, especially of women, in several historical contexts. I focus on the historical period 1835–2014, which is divided into diverse political regimes: the Second Ottoman Period (1835–1911), Italian colonial rule followed by the British Mandate (1911–1952), the Libyan Monarchy (1952–1969), Gaddafi's regime (1969–2011), and the time since the 17th February Revolution of 2011. This periodization illuminates how specific political, economic, and social factors became driving forces for changes in urban design and in women's use of public space in Tripoli's Center during each period.

To investigate the history of Tripoli and the transformation of its center as well as women's past use of public space, I relied on historical and qualitative methods, specifically archival materials such as maps, publications, and court records, as well as interviews with older women aged 65 years and above. Through the historical research, I excavated archival documents to uncover the trends of women's uses of this space and identify factors that have shaped city's past, present, and future. During my fieldwork I consulted some of the main archival institutions in Tripoli, including the Center for Studies and Historical Archives (CSHA), the main governmental archive in the capital city. In particular, I examined internal affairs and court records, both of which were rich sources that provided me with information about women's social and economic status and their daily life struggles in Tripoli since the late nineteenth century. The CSHA also contains two libraries, one for rare publications and journals. I inspected hard copies of old Libyan publications and obtained digital copies of others. Examples of some of the publications I reviewed include newspapers such as *Trablusgarb* (*Tripoli in the West*), الليبي (The Libyan), العمران (*Urbanism*), اللواء الطرابلسي (*The Tripolitanian Banner*), and magazines such as ليبيا الحديثة (*Modern*

*Libya*), مجلة البيت (The Home Magazine), and المرأة (The Woman).

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Another archive that was central to my research was the Library of Antiquities, which is located in the historic edifice, *al-Sarāyā al-Ḥamrā* (the Red Castle) in Tripoli's center. It also houses old and new books and periodicals that cover a range of topics during the Ottoman and the Italian periods as well as the period after Independence. Among the sources I consulted were the Italian journal *Tripolitania* published in the 1930s, issues of which were selectively translated from the original Italian, and a number of travelogues, such as Todd's *Tripoli the Mysterious* (1912),<sup>2</sup> and Miss Tully's *Narrative of a Ten Years' Residence at Tripoli in Africa* (1817).<sup>3</sup> For maps and engineering drawings, old and new, I accessed The Engineering Office located in *al-Sarāyā al-Ḥamrā* to look at maps, and the Tripoli Municipal Council government for engineering drawings, including master plans for Tripoli and related documents.

For examining the contemporary use of public space, I employed a qualitative method, including observations of the use of the space and interviews with female users of public space and female architects who contributed to changes in the design of selected outdoor spaces. The qualitative approach in this study also allowed me to inductively change and refine my research questions as the study progressed. In addition to observations and interviews, I also distributed a questionnaire to a number of women in the three outdoor public spaces and in a café in Tripoli's Center. These questions asked respondents to offer information related to their reasons for utilizing public spaces as well as their preferences and attitudes regarding public spaces. The questionnaire also served as an invitation to elaborate further in the form of an interview, which I conducted with some women in the very public spaces they occupied. To supplement this data, I also conducted interviews with a several senior women to gather information about Libyan women's past use of public space.

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2 Mabel L. Todd, *Tripoli the Mysterious* (London: Grant Richards, 1912).

3 Miss Tully, *Narrative of a ten years' residence at Tripoli in Africa* (London: Henry Colburn, 1817).

## Research Challenges

It is important to highlight some difficulties related to the archival search in Libya. Firstly, ongoing renovations of the CSHA building interrupted data collection and the Center allowed researchers to obtain only nine copies of the court records on a CD and even taking digital photos is not permitted. Digitization was also one of the major concerns raised by one of the architects who works in the Engineering Office of *al-Sarāyā al-Ḥamrā*. Although some of maps have been digitized, many other significant Italian maps are still in a bad condition. The deteriorated quality of these engineering drawings made it difficult to scrutinize them because key missing parts contain important information.

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Secondly, numerous challenges ensued during site observations. The observation strategy employed in this research was driven by a desire to get a little closer to what women actually do in public space. I observed the presence of women in these spaces (when, where and with whom), their behavior and way of dressing, and their activities. I organized systematic site visits during the weekdays and the weekends at different times of the day. It was important to strategically think about how to carry out the observation in these huge outdoor spaces; Martyrs' Square was tripled in size during Gaddafi regime, from 2.7 acres to nearly 8 acres, the Grand Park is about 20 acres, and the Corniche is about 25 acres. In order to systematically observe these large areas, every site was divided into zones: Martyrs' Square into three zones, the Grand Park into six zones, and the Corniche into four zones. The zones were delineated in these ways based on the layout of the space and the functions associated with each zone. I followed certain patterns of movement through each space and when transiting from one site to another and making observations.

Rigorously documenting my observations also proved challenging owing to social and cultural norms around photographing people, especially women, in public. To engage in systematic data collection while respecting these norms, I recorded women's activities and locations as well as characteristics that are readily observable, such as approximate age and type of dress, on prepared tables. Additionally, I used behavioral maps, a systematic observation technique that tracks behavior over space and time. I created a series of symbols to indicate particular elements of my observations and placed them on each site's map. When one of the sites was very crowded or when I anticipated women might feel uncomfortable seeing someone observing them

and writing notes, I would audio-record my notes with my phone. To supplement my written observations, I photographed public spaces deliberately from a distance to make sure that women's features did not clearly appear in the photos. Given the sensitivity of photographing people, and women in particular in Libyan society, I often took pictures of a relative or friend who accompanied me in some of my site visits or I would ask them to take a photo for me at a site where I wanted to document an interesting observation.

As a non-participant observer, I encountered some additional challenges to occupying public spaces as a woman. I was subjected to catcalling numerous times; on one occasion, a man who was of relatively old age was so persistent in his harassment that I stopped my observations and I went home. In another incident, I was almost questioned by a man who appeared to be on a date and felt that I was taking note of him and his girlfriend. These experiences underscore how observations of public space, regardless of site, carry with them significant challenges, some of which are particular to women as researchers. This seems common to female researchers, particularly those who pursue ethnographic research. According to Hanson and Richards, stories from female graduate researchers depict such experiences of harassment and catcalling, in addition to feeling unsafe, while conducting their field studies.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all these challenges, there is always a promise in the future of research on topics related to women and public space in Libya. I discovered it in the willingness of the people with whom I encountered during my field study, who were eager to assist in many ways. The staff in the archives, the librarians, the architects as well as the interviewees, were collectively supportive in terms of providing data and information related to my research. The time I spent while interviewing the senior women was especially enjoyable and productive. The narratives about their past experiences in the domestic space and navigating public space were important to trace how, when and why women began to venture out in the city spaces. When it comes to the women I interviewed in the selected outdoor public spaces, many of them were as happy and surprised that someone was paying attention to their needs in such spaces. They were very open in their responses

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4 Rebecca Hanson & Patricia Richards, *Harassed: Gender, Bodies, and Ethnographic Research* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

to the survey and to my interview questions. As a result, I was able to articulate my study findings and draw significant conclusions which I hope will impact how we think about public space in Libya.





