

Play for All. Towards Inclusive Public Spaces for Young Women in Cairo

Salma Mohamed Mahmoud Elshafie

Independent researcher, Egypt
96salmamohamed@gmail.com

Anne-Sophie Lucrezia Spinaci

Independent researcher, Switzerland
asspinaci@gmail.com

Merham Keleg

Ain Shams University, Egypt
merhamkeleg@eng.asu.edu.eg

Abstract

The practice of play, encompassing physical activity and social connectedness, exerts a positive effect on communities' health and overall urban quality of life. Depending on design and social dynamics, public spaces in cities can be more or less welcoming for young women. Public spaces in Cairo, Egypt, lack playful elements that attract young women to partake in physical activities. This study seeks to identify and assess the current situation of physical activity and play in Cairo for young women. This shall be achieved through exploring their experiences with means of appropriation of public spaces and empowerment, according to the cultural norms, safety concerns and physical design elements. To do so, the study used digital ethnography to gain an understanding of the types of activities young women engage in public spaces and their modes of collective organisation. Observations across the city have then been conducted, and the three neighbourhoods of Al Rehab, Madinati and Zamalek have been selected to pursue more in-depth field observations and interviews. Doing so highlighted the challenges and the opportunities these young women face, shedding light on ways to strengthen their use of play-based urban forms and sports infrastructures in public spaces. The study finds that to pursue physical activity, young women tend to privilege certain safer urban spaces, such as Gated Communities and temporalities allowing for less risks of street harassment. Social media platforms have been understood as instruments for collective organisation, catalysing and multiplying female physical activity in Cairo's public spaces. The study suggests that the use of social media platforms can be instrumentalised for young women's empowerment in shaping diverse public spaces and placemaking processes. In the end, the research sheds light on the pathways forward to enhance young women's engagement in the design and use of playful and active public spaces in culturally sensitive contexts.

Keywords: placemaking, young women engagement, culturally sensitive design, physical activity, social norms

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I. Introduction

In 2018, articles from outlets such as Reuters and Global Citizen highlighted Egyptian women breaking social norms by practising parkour throughout the streets of Cairo, Egypt. This narrative carried significant weight as it intertwined issues of women's empowerment, reclaiming public spaces, and (re-)shaping urban environments. Play and sports are key in enhancing the physical and mental well-being of city-dwellers, particularly children and youth, contributing to the development of social skills, cognitive abilities, and physical prowess (Gil-Madrone et al., 2019). Physical activity, when viewed from the angle of playfulness, is not solely considered an act of exercise and physical performance because play enables more engaging forms of social connectedness, an important determinant of healthy urban life and communities (Wray et al., 2020). Urban play in youth contributes to the social capital of cities and quality placemaking. Play involves a wide spectrum of emotions and actions such as amusement, pleasure, movement, relaxation, recreation, leisure, learning and sensory experience. The desire for liveable and active urban environments isn't solely driven by some shortage of sports infrastructure; it also stems from the absence of opportunities to claim space through unexpected, unconventional, spontaneous, or informal activities. Gender studies and feminist geography, wherein authors such as Boys (1984) and Massey (1994) and practitioners such as Matrix, one of the first feminist design and architecture collective, have been analysing spaces and places from a gender perspective and have claimed the injustices emerging from male-dominated cities. Academic literature focusing on the dual vulnerability of age and gender, namely girls and young women in *playful activities* in public spaces, remains relatively understudied, especially in cities in the Global South. There are numerous emerging calls and practices for the integration and encouragement of teenage girls to take part in the playing opportunities in parks and public spaces, such as the 'Make Space for Girls' movement that emerged in the UK. Cairo, the capital of Egypt, faces multiple challenges in this area, morphologically and operationally. Open areas in Cairo constitute only 1.2% to 4.6% of the total city area (Thoraya, 2010). Green public spaces, which often attract various types of activities, are not only lacking (Aly and Dimitrijevic, 2022) but also unevenly distributed, primarily favouring high-income residential areas, leading to a disconnection from local and neighbourly relations (Hossameldin and Mohamed, 2021). As a result, according to Thoraya (2010), 40 to 50% of Egyptian children do not engage in outdoor play, perhaps emerging from a lack of quality placemaking in urban environments. The Egyptian government has recently acknowledged this deficiency and initiated projects such as the renovation of Abdeen Square to address the lack of safe recreational spaces; yet this research posits that activating public spaces for playfulness requires a more integrated approach, especially regarding the integration of young women. This article examines the forms of young women's participation and appropriation through physical activity in Cairo's public spaces from a social construction standpoint. Quality placemaking is rooted in gender, age, and geographical considerations and thus influences the way individuals experience and imagine public spaces. The realm of sports for girls remains stigmatised, hindering their participation due to concerns related to femininity and societal expectations (Mohamed, 2022). Fear of violence is another common factor determining women's engagement in public spaces (Navarrette-Hernandez et al., 2021). Societal norms, influenced by Egypt's cultural and religious values, segregate women from the urban realm and restrict their mobility and movement (Bassam, 2023). Thus, this article will add to the literature on playful placemaking and gender and provide evidence on the current

situation, which shall pave the way towards more studies and action areas in this arena. This study distinguishes planned and unplanned playful urban spaces, similarly based on Kostrzewska's (2017) analysis of physical activity in urban environments, which divides formal and informal activity spaces. Formal play-based interventions embody playful design elements and allow physical activity through forms, colours, and equipment such as swings and climbing walls. Informal playful spaces are spaces that have become playful through active re-appropriation processes, making use of playable basic infrastructure, urban typologies and open spaces. In this study, sports should not involve professional or club training to be considered as play; livelihoods do not depend on it, which is the criteria for our empirical part and fieldwork.

It is noteworthy to mention that this article won't delve into the voluptuous debate about different gender identities but will focus on the intersection between young females' place and experiences and Cairo's public spaces. Aiming for awareness of inclusivity-related issues, it is claimed that the reference of young women and gender dynamics throughout the paper refers to cis-gender women and the gender binary paradigm. This choice is based on the premise that the feminine character of bodies which is the important determinant in their behaviour and their perception. Even so, trans young women, for example, are not subjects of study. This paper considers the terms 'women' and 'female' semantically equivalent and thus are used interchangeably throughout.

1.1. Research objectives

This research aims to investigate whether young women engage in specific physically active play activities within the urban setting of Cairo. It then unveils the challenges and the forms of resilience experienced by young women who practise physical activity and play in Cairo's urban public space. These challenges can be categorised into a) the design and planning of public spaces and b) the socio-cultural atmosphere - namely, sexual harassment, safety issues, and the level of friendliness of spaces. The paper then seeks to detail how certain young women in Cairo reclaim (semi-)public spaces for play and physical activities, such as biking, skating, and walking.

2. Methodology

The research is an exploratory study and uses a mixed-method approach, integrating primary and secondary data, including media articles and academic literature, as shown in Figure 1. The research was first prompted by the method of digital ethnography to map forms of physical activity and collective organisational processes taking place in public spaces in Cairo, Egypt. Then field observations were utilised in the three identified case studies followed by semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews with young women with pioneering experiences of practising play and sports in public spaces. Concurrently, an analytical descriptive survey was conducted to provide a more holistic understanding of the community's perspective on the subject of the study, as illustrated in Figure 1.

a. Digital ethnography via social media platforms such (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn)

This method was used to map physical activity and the organisational processes allowing it in public spaces, to map forms of physical activity and collective organisational processes taking place in public spaces. Because Cairo lacks quality placemaking for play and physical

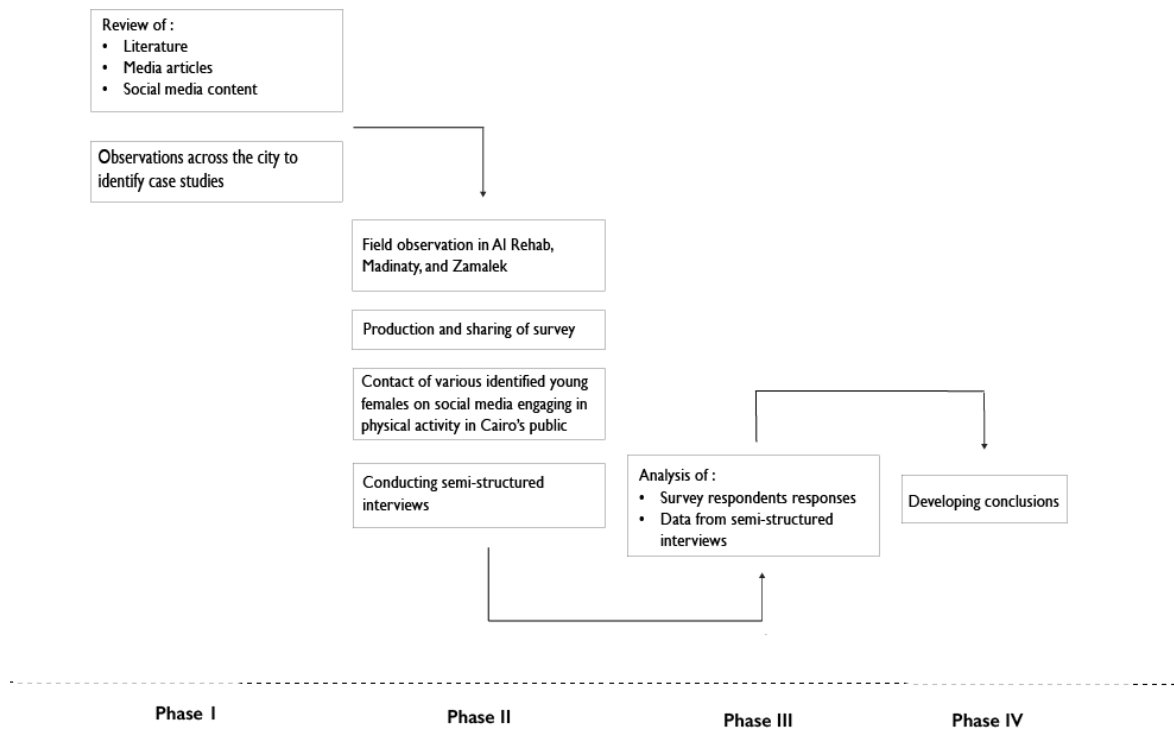


Figure I. Methodology flowchart

activities, the presence of informal behaviours and interactions through the exploration of social media posts, photos and videos becomes a useful angle of analysis to identify and map user-based urban activities.

b. Field observations

Field observations were conducted in Al Rehab, Madinaty, and Zamalek, focusing on the experiences of young females in male-dominated public spaces. These case studies were selected based on preliminary social media research, which indicated that most young females engaged in sports activities were concentrated in these areas. Their distinct urban environments and varying levels of public space use and access further justify their conclusion in the study.

3. The context of the three case studies

A sustainable environment not only enhances health and well-being but also offers comfort, satisfaction, and stress reduction. The standard of urban living is a primary concern in developing countries, often involving critical challenges such as poverty, lack of clean water, waste management, pollution, and congestion (Azab and Farahat, 2018). In Egypt, gated communities (GCs) are designed to attract residents seeking a better lifestyle, complete with various services, leisure options, and activities.

Al Rehab and Madinaty are gated communities noted for their organised and relatively secure settings. These communities integrate urban green spaces into their layouts, featuring squares, parks, and plazas that encourage residents to be active. Overall, these environments are safe for users, facilitating easy movement between different destinations



Figure 2. Map of the three neighbourhoods: Zamalek, Al Rehab, and Madinati. Source: Google Satellite.

during the day as seen in Figures 3 and 4.

In contrast, the more open and cosmopolitan area of Zamalek provides a different urban experience. Situated on Gezira Island in the middle of the Nile and connected to the mainland by bridges, Zamalek is a privileged neighbourhood due to its historical architectural and urban qualities, with nearby tourist attractions. However, it is currently facing many challenges. Its narrow streets, as shown in Figure 5, do not give the opportunity for diverse activities (ElSerafi, ElKerdany and Shalaby, 2017).

By examining these neighbourhoods, the study seeks to offer a small sample of Cairo's urban spaces. The study provides an in-depth rather than a wide perspective on how young females navigate and actively use urban spaces in Cairo.

a. Descriptive-analytical survey

A survey was conducted using Survey Monkey with 35 respondents, aged 18-44. The respondents' sample has a relative gender balance with 40% of the respondents being males and 60% females whilst 84% of the respondents are single. The survey targeted both males and females to include a range of insights and experiences. The questions aimed to uncover general perceptions and societal influences as well as personal experiences that shape girls and young women's social and physical interactions within the city of Cairo to provide an understanding of the factors determining the presence of the targeted demographic in urban public spaces. The survey has been shared on various social media platforms and, for simplicity of study, the survey questions and answers were in English.

b. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the three neighbourhoods of Al Rehab, Madinaty, and Zamalek with young women aged 22-30 engaged in sports in public spaces. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated to English. The interviews were pivotal in understanding the behavioural patterns of these women and their motives



Madinaty Master Plan

Figure 3. Master Plan of Madinaty City. Source: Talaat Moustafa Group Holding Company.



Figure 4. Master Plan of Al-Rehab City. Source: Elbayt.



Figure 5. Zamalek Master plan. Source: Google satellite.

for sports despite the discouraging atmosphere. The interviews began with inquiries about enjoyment and initiation of sports participation and then delved into the factors influencing comfort and safety while practising sports in public spaces. Subsequent questions targeted the spatial and social requirements for practising a specific sport, shedding light on the participants' expectations and desires. The interviews also sought to uncover the roles of familial support, disapproval or fears, and the impact of societal norms, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, motivations and adaptive strategies of girls and young women practising physical activity in Cairo's public spaces.

c. In-depth interviews

In parallel, in-depth interviews were conducted with young women between 22 and 30 years old engaged in sports practice in Cairo's public spaces. These interviews were essential to gain first-hand experience and understanding of the perceptions of young women already practising sports in public urban spaces in Cairo. After pinpointing relevant individuals on social media platforms such as Instagram, outreach efforts were initiated by sending text messages to gauge their willingness to participate in the study. The communication transitioned to exchanging phone numbers, and confirmation of interview details took place on WhatsApp. At the start of each interview, the study was described to the interviewees and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time from the process. All interview questions were about enjoyment, initiation, comfort, safety, spatial and social requirements, familial support, societal norms, and adaptive strategies.

The research methodology integrated qualitative and exploratory characteristics and was fed by the thoughts, perceptions and experiences of the interviewees and the survey respondents. The research peers all identify as young women and have feminine bodies, creating thus an intimate and legitimate link with and understanding of the subjects and dynamics analysed. Two out of three of the research peers are Cairenes thus familiar with

the local context. The combination of insider and outsider outlooks enriched the study by bringing diverse viewpoints and minimising potential biases associated with both statuses.

3.1. Study limitations

The survey's results are tied to the perspectives and experiences of a small group of the Cairene population because of the linguistic bias arising from the use of English, a language that is primarily understood by the country's younger and nearly all educated citizens. As discussed in Section 3, education and international experiences influence perceptions and behaviours, as well as about urban public life and attitudes. Additionally, a tight schedule of less than two months limited the study's research and analysis and the number of interviewers.

4. Findings

4.1. The dominance of boys in playful spaces

Cairo lacks public spaces that encourage physical activities and playfulness especially for age sectors other than kids. Yet, various urban forms such as sidewalks, public green spaces, and streets have often been appropriated by boys and young males for playing football since the 20th century. The current physical and social atmosphere does not allow girls and young women to pursue similar activities, consequently excluding them from early age in public spaces resulting in a significant gap in spaces dedicated for youth/teenagers. It was crucial to map the typologies of spaces, as far as possible, within the city of Cairo used for sports and playfulness in general and the ones that encourage or allow the presence of women specifically, illustrated in Figure 6. The mapping was achieved relying on data collected through digital ethnography, observations, interviews, and the survey. As previously mentioned, streets and sidewalks have been an arena for physical activities in Cairo. These spaces have been appropriated for football and cycling for many years. However, new activities like parkour and inline skating are emerging on the streets (Figure 6). Public green spaces are usually fenced in in Cairo and those that are free to access are not equally distributed in the city. These spaces are predominantly used by boys for their daily football matches or sometimes, for cycling. Recently, other activities emerged such as skateboarding and yoga classes, but these remain less significant than other sports. In addition, public parks in Cairo that are fenced and have entry tickets integrate larger areas allowing users to practise a wider range of sports and play, such as inline skating, cycling, and ball games. Another space within the city that welcomes amateur sports activities is the sports playgrounds that are open for rental to anyone. These are usually football playgrounds that attract boys and young male adults, as shown in Figure 6. Most sports playgrounds are male-dominated. Girls and young women are rarely witnessed practising any physical activities. They are, however, more present and visible in public parks and green spaces, and they are able to practise in a more relaxed environment. Another shift in spaces that allow an encouraging environment for girls and young women are within the walls of gated communities like Al Rehab and Madinaty in New Cairo, as highlighted by the interviewees. From this analysis, it is evident that girls and young women have been trying to reclaim and appropriate the public spaces more and more in their favour, as seen in the cases of sidewalks, streets, and public green spaces for physical activities like running, cycling, inline skating, parkour, and yoga classes.

4.2. Changing social norms on female practising physical activity in public spaces

The survey was answered by 35 people, 60% of whom were female respondents. This ratio is important because we regard women as having a less biased judgment due to the closer relationship and intimacy to the subject of study. Most respondents agreed that people, including girls and young women, are encouraged to practise sports. However, this doesn't involve practice in public spaces. 76% of the respondents view public spaces in Cairo as unwelcoming and unfriendly for girls and young women to practise physical

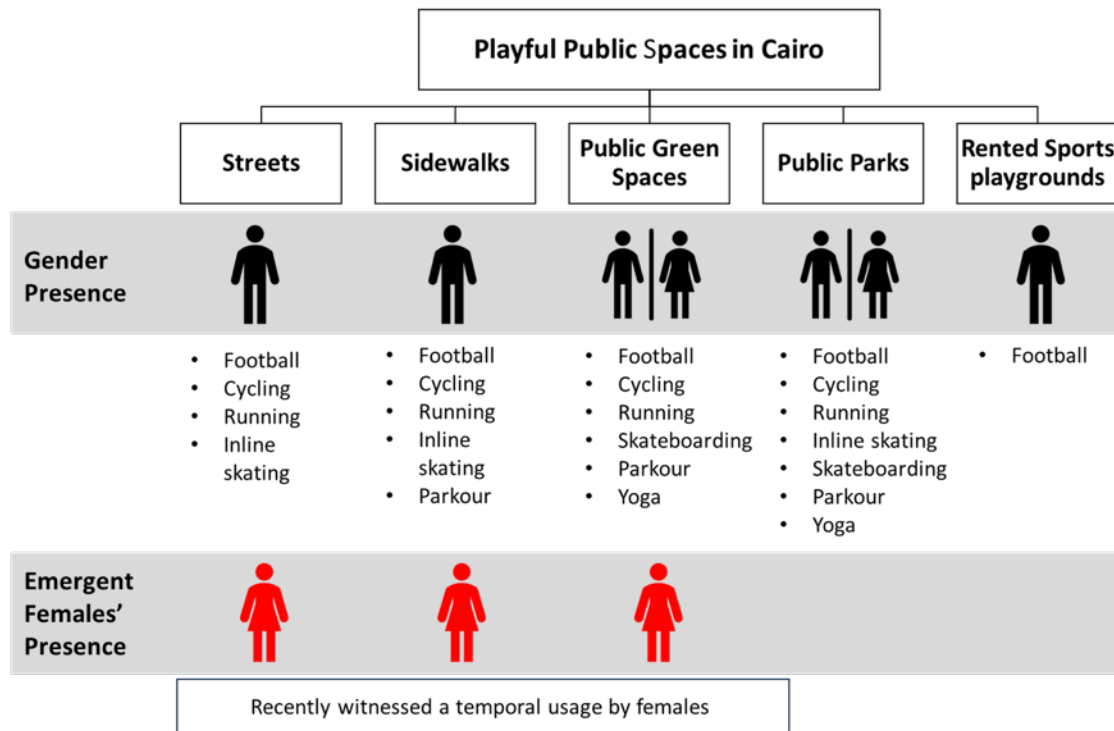


Figure 6. Various types of public spaces in Cairo that people use for sports and physical activities.

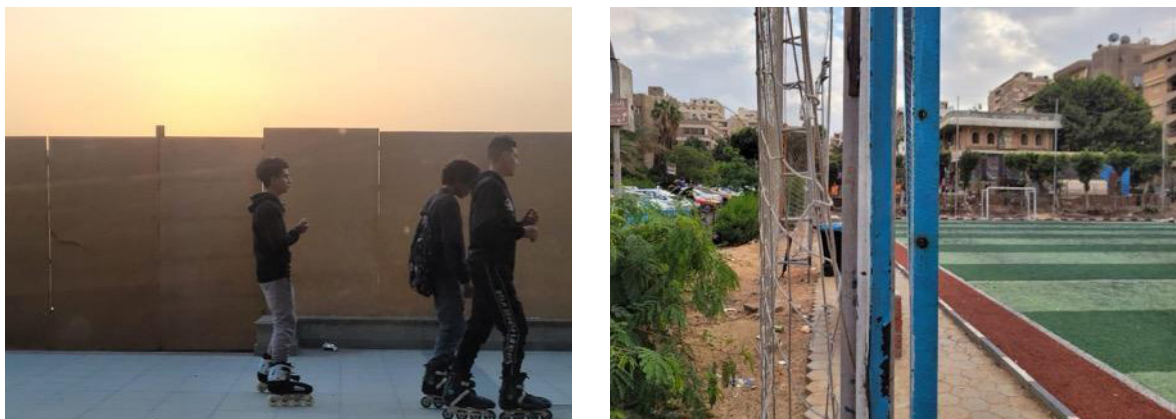


Figure 7. Teenagers skate along the Nile waterfront in Cairo (sidewalks) The right picture illustrates a playground open for rental to the public in Nasr City, Cairo . Source: the authors.

activity. Sixty percent of respondents report having faced or know girls and young women who faced challenges in practising physical activity in public spaces. They listed issues such as stereotyping, negative language, following, and feelings of insecurity due to drunk men in the streets in the early hours of the morning. Such issues touch upon forms of harassment and perceptions of safety.

“I was running in a public space when I was younger, a man was watching me, tried to talk to me when I was done, and when I refused to talk he followed me to my house.”

Such phenomena are, however, not generalised across the city of Cairo; they depend on location. One respondent wrote that *“women in Egypt suffer from street harassment, but it will depend on the district, there are some districts where women can freely practise whatever they want, while in other districts they can’t even walk freely.”* Another respondent highlighted the fact that the city of Cairo is large and diverse; therefore, some areas have better infrastructure for physical activity than others. Such perspectives are also shared by interviewees, showing findings that intersect coming from different research tools.

One respondent mentioned that the education of people coming from all social classes should be an important approach to integrate in the quest of creating more welcoming public spaces for girls and young women to practise physical activity. Some interviewees have expressed a certain level of socio-cultural openness due to international experiences and contacts, usually regarded as symbolic of higher education and social classes.

The respondents were then asked, according to their own point of view, to select priority actions which could help alleviate such shortcomings and create more welcoming environments. The respondents were presented with various actions and strategies to choose from which are physical improvements, cultural norms, safety, regulations and law, or other where they can specify. The results show that improving cultural norms and safety should be the main focal point. Nevertheless, 68% of the respondents believe that the community tends to support girls and young women active in sports, regardless of the place of practice. This defies the widely held belief that men should play a more patriarchal role in society (Bassam, 2023).

4.3. Breaking cultural norms in the practice of physical activity

The results obtained from the conducted interviews validate the significant gap within Cairo’s public spaces, confirming a lack of dedicated areas for girls’ and young women’s sports and physical activities. This absence not only results in feelings of exclusion but also raises valid safety concerns among the female youth. Instances of parkour, showcasing females venturing outside the city, exemplify the lengths to which women are willing to go to pursue their passion in the face of spatial and societal restrictions, exemplified in Figure 8. A 2017 Thomson Reuters Foundation’s study on how women are treated in the world’s biggest cities rated Cairo as the world’s most dangerous “megacity” for women (Abdallah, 2018).

Yara, 25 years old, began her sports journey in Saudi Arabia and faced initial challenges upon bringing her passion for inline skating to Egypt. Beyond the comments she received, Yara encountered hurdles that highlighted the cultural gap surrounding skating in Cairo. Car and transportation drivers often expressed anger, shouting at skaters as they believed the activity posed a danger and obstructed the roads. To navigate these challenges, Yara initially preferred skating in groups, often with a male companion, for additional feeling of safety, as shown in Figure 9.

In her firm commitment to inline skating, Yara used social media, joining Facebook groups dedicated to skating. The virtual community was important for her to connect with like-minded individuals. One of her most favourite connections, is her current best friend from one of these online skating gatherings. This highlights the transformative role of social media in bringing together individuals to overcome certain challenges.

Salma Bahgat, 23 years old, the visionary founder of Solys Space, has become a pivotal figure in reshaping the image of female inline skating in Egypt. Her creation of a dedicated space for women and girls, designed to accommodate skaters of all ages, addresses a critical void in public spaces. Salma's insights also bring to the forefront the key elements skaters seek in public spaces. Egyptian skaters, in their quest for suitable spaces, face a scarcity of areas that encompass the desired design elements essential for an enriching inline skating experience, illustrated in Figure 10. The search for the ideal spot involves identifying locations with stairs and handrails, offering challenges to enhance technique

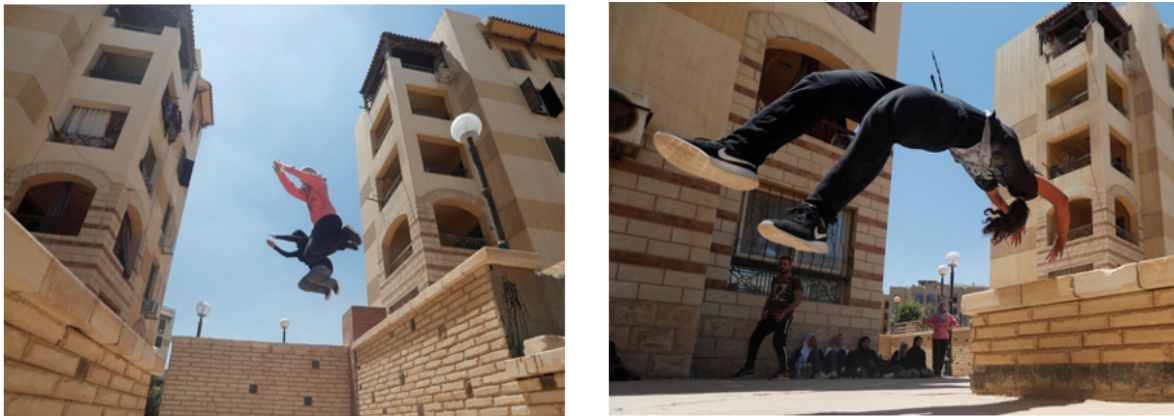


Figure 8. Egyptian women practising Parkour around their buildings on the outskirts of Cairo.
Source: Reuters, Amr Abdallah Dalsh.

and skills development. Moreover, skaters seek well-paved, spacious streets that allow for unrestricted movement. Soft flooring is also a crucial consideration, ensuring smooth and safe manoeuvres. Notably, specific areas in Egypt, such as Rehab and Madinaty City, have emerged as havens for skaters due to the presence of these desired elements, emphasising the need for a broader integration of such features in public spaces to foster a thriving skating community. Salma's initiative and these insights collectively highlight the imperative for creating inclusive, well-designed spaces that cater to the diverse needs of skaters, fostering a more supportive environment for skaters in Egypt in general and female skaters specifically

Salma's impactful journey extended beyond the streets of Cairo as she ventured into the realm of social media, creating an Instagram page where she shared videos and images depicting her skating pursuits. A defining moment emerged when one of her videos unexpectedly went viral, garnering a viewership of 1.3 million individuals. This surge in visibility transcended geographical boundaries, capturing the attention of a German skating shoe brand, illustrated in Figure 11. Notably, the brand featured one of Salma's photos from her Instagram page on their official website, marking her as the first hijabi Egyptian girl to be showcased by a German skating brand. Salma's vision re-echoed not only within the local Egyptian community but also with Western audiences. Her Instagram profile became a hub of inspiration for females of all ages, motivating them to join the skating community.

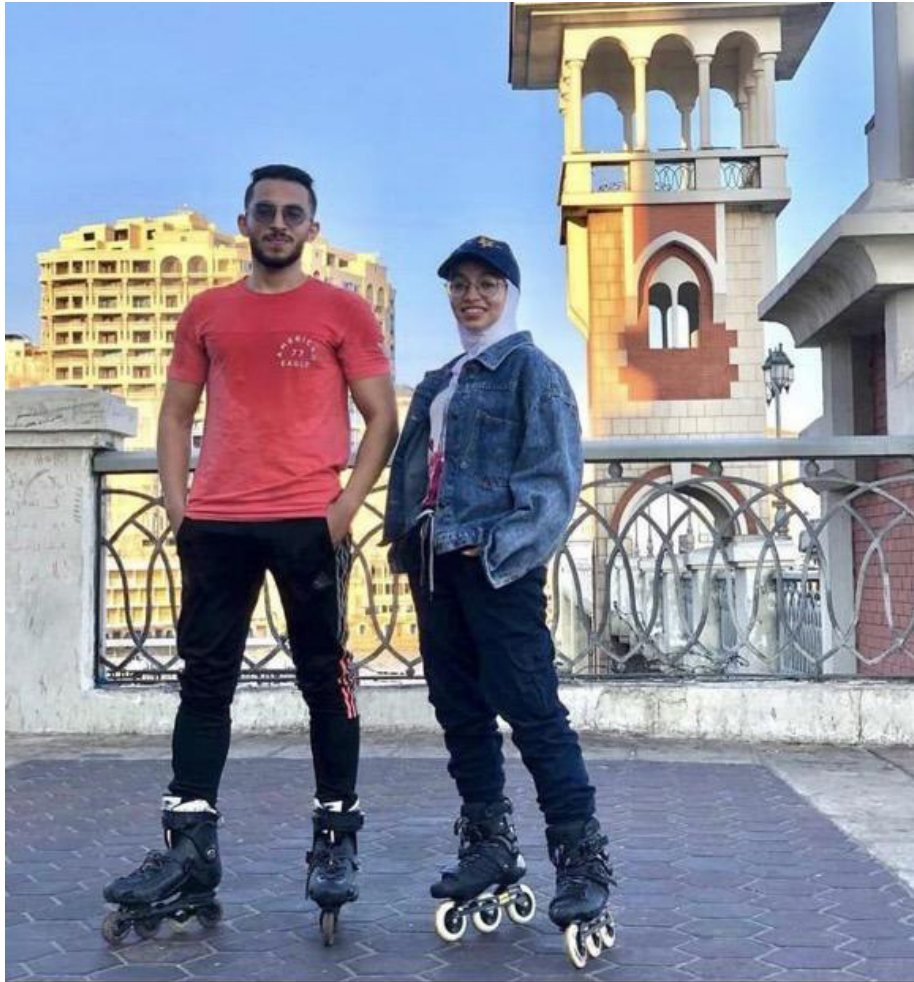


Figure 9. Yara enjoys skating with her brother in Alexandria, Egypt, during her winter break. Source: Yara shared it with the authors.

Figure 10 shows how an influential video of a 56-year-old woman skating at her school further persuaded this inspiration and inspired many women to express their newfound interest in skating. In a remarkable proof to breaking societal norms, Salma proudly mentioned that she now conducts her grocery shopping adorned in her skating shoes, embodying a fusion of personal style and passion that transcends conventional expectations. Despite the negative comments and the numerous challenges, Yara and Salma both remained steadfast and persistent in pursuing their passion, unwavering in their belief in the transformative power of skating. Over time, as Yara and Salma continued to navigate the streets on their skates, a remarkable transformation occurred. Initially faced with scepticism and disapproval, they became recognisable figures in the community. The shift in public perception became evident as cheers and support replaced the earlier derision. Moreover, the community stepped in to address instances of harassment, taking a collective stand against verbal abuse.

“Women are now training and more women are starting to come” (Salma, 2024).

“As the skating sport spreads, the acceptance of women training increases and it is not unusual for women to have a team and train,” she added.

Nour Taha, a 30-year-old runner making her way through Cairo’s busy streets, revealed



Figure 10. On the left, despite the unsafe conditions with many cars blocking her way, Salma breaks cultural norms and fears by skating in the street. On the right, Salma showcased her impressive skating skills in a well-designed pedestrian lane with smooth flooring, perfect for effortless manoeuvring. Source: Salma shared it with the authors.

her inspiring journey. Her running journey began with a unique birthday wish on her 28th birthday – a commitment to run 28 miles. Surprisingly, this single desire provoked a passion that has lasted ever since. Every day, Nour would exercise before heading to work; Nour found that starting the day with a run had unexpected rejuvenating effects, contrary to the anticipated fatigue. She stressed the critical need of bringing sports into the early hours of the day.

Nour's story describes the unconventional concept of street running in Egypt, recounting the inception of "Cairo Runners" in 2012, illustrated in Figure 13. Cairo Runners was started by Ibrahim, a visionary who drew inspiration from international practices. It started off as a Facebook page inviting followers to join. The first event witnessed the participation of 90 individuals, setting the stage for the widespread adoption of running initiatives across Egypt, a typical example by platforms like Alexandria Runners. Nour discussed the early societal challenges female runners had to overcome, relating stories of being met with scepticism, exemplified by a doorman questioning her motives.

"Why are you running... anyone following you?", Nour quotes.

Moreover, she highlighted the infrastructural limitations of Cairo's streets, underscoring the narrow pavements cluttered with obstacles, making running a logistical challenge. Despite these hurdles, the booming popularity of initiatives like Cairo Runners has transformed the running landscape. Recognising their impact, governments now support these events, implementing street closures during running hours to ensure the safety of the participants, a testament to the transformative influence of collective passion and perseverance.

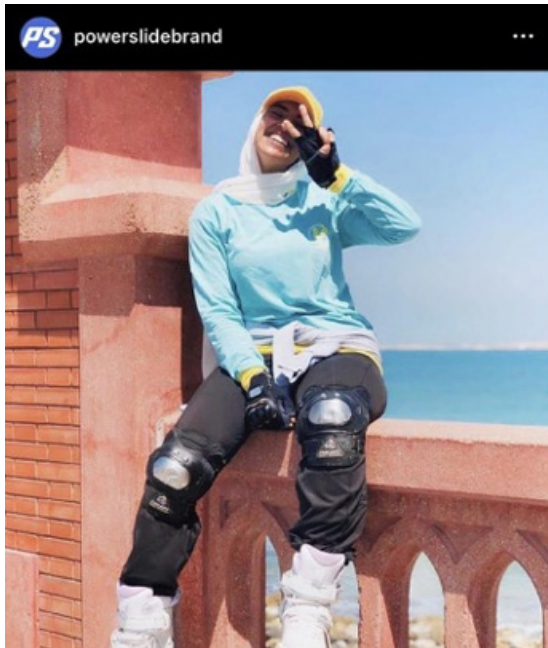


Figure 11. (Left) Yara's picture as the first hijabi and Egyptian girl. Source: Powerslide brand.

Figure 12. (Right) Breaking cultural norms, a 56-year-old woman practices skating at Salma's studio, living her dream. Source: Solyspace.

In expressing her love for street running, Nour Taha spoke about the beauty of her experiences, particularly in the enchanting district of Zamalek. Running through this area offers glimpses of breathtaking old palaces and the majestic Nile, creating a picturesque backdrop for her daily pursuits. However, Nour candidly addressed the hurdles encountered during the early morning hours, particularly as a female runner. The presence of inebriated individuals becomes an unfortunate reality, resulting in unwarranted attention and verbal harassment. The discomforting encounters, marked by inappropriate comments and intrusive stares, prompted Nour and fellow female runners to seek refuge in semi-public spaces like Cairo Festival City, Rehab, and Madinaty (gated communities in Cairo that allow outsiders to enter). Despite the respite offered by these areas, characterised by a lack of shading and uneven topography due to varied elevations, running becomes a formidable challenge. The pursuit of a safe and enjoyable running experience thus continues to be marred by the need for alternative spaces that balance security and convenience for female runners in the diverse landscapes of Cairo.

The interviews provided insights into a spectrum of health and well-being issues that have transformed the lives of these young women. A key element of achieving mental balance was emphasised through various outlets, such as physical activity and social interactions. Embracing a more sociable lifestyle not only fostered meaningful connections but also induced a feeling of flying—elevating spirits and cultivating a profound sense of happiness. Many embarked on fitness journeys, incorporating gym workouts for body maintenance and strength. Time management, consistency, and discipline emerged as foundational pillars. Notably, these transformations also correlated with higher levels of academic achievement, reflecting the holistic impact of prioritising health and well-being.

4.4. Discussion: Reclaiming public spaces for physical activity: Young women's manoeuvres for resilience and re-appropriation

The perceptions collected through the survey and the stories shared by Salma, Yara and Nour collide in significance. The fear of violence and the inadequacy of the physical environment to pursue physical activities and play are common sentiments and judgements amongst the observers and the users. This study suggests that the participation of girls and young women in physical activity and playfulness in Cairo is still limited and faces several challenges. Yet, the results we found from studying the overall context via digital ethnography, the interviews, and the surveys signify resilience of motivated females to claim their space in such a bustling city. We argue that the young women we interviewed have developed practical strategies to diminish the risk of negative experiences emerging from the social and physical constraints inherent to the city's socio-cultural and urban environment. We view these strategies as adaptive and as material manifestations of resilience through the use of social media platforms. In the context of Islamic education and tradition, wherein public space behaviour should be modest and even more so restricted for women (Jalalkamali and Doratli, 2022), still making the decision to be public and active in the urban is *per se* a small act of subversion. For instance, the lifting of the

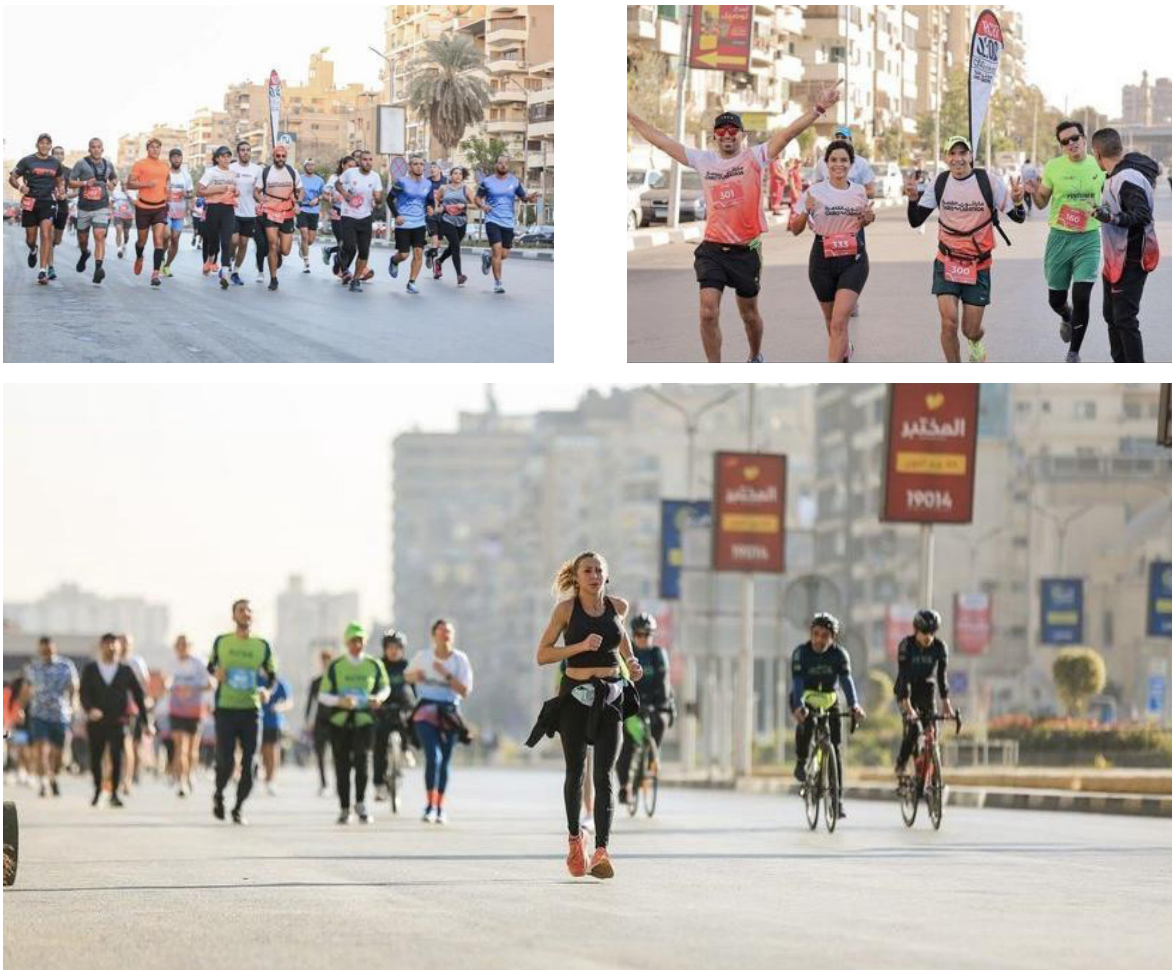


Figure 13. The various running events organised by Cairo Runners are depicted in the figure, indicating street closures for the safety of runners. Women are seen running freely alongside their peers.

Source: Cairo Runners.

ban on sports for women in Saudi Arabia in 2017 stems from both the negative effects of gender segregation and the emerging trend of creating women-only spaces as a response to discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Therefore, limited access or restrictions to traditional public spaces can lead to the creation of alternate forums by women.

4.5. Finding the right space

Another crucial aspect of physical activity is the robustness of the built environment for such activities. Playful aspects of public spaces should be prioritised by designers and decision-makers. The significance of well-designed public spaces for physical activities is emphasised by Salma's and Nour's insights in section 3.3. The current status of infrastructure provided within the various types of public spaces is illustrated in Figure 14. Desirable features of public spaces that encourage physical activities and play include: (1) proximity to the place of residence is key for the elderly, children, and families with young children, and busy adults who do not want to spend extra time commuting, as highlighted by Nour who preferred running around her residence before work; (2) a network of public spaces linked into a cohesive system enabling active commute between different urban services and facilities, allowing for the creation of trails for activities like walking, running, and skating; (3) multifunctionality and diversity of architecture and facilities to encourage the widest range of users of all ages and fitness levels to undertake physical activity, also in a manner not necessarily foreseen by the designers, this was captured and portrayed by Nour who emphasised the impact of the beautiful scenery and built environment in creating a more lovable experience for her daily run; (4) climate sensitive designs incorporating natural elements with various enclosure ratios that are easily accessible, especially in arid regions like Cairo where shade is essential for enhancing the microclimate of the urban areas and hence provide a better atmosphere for sports; (5) equal access: ensuring equal access to public spaces is not only a matter of fundamental rights but also plays a crucial role in the context of cultural and gender inclusivity. As Salma's insights reveal, women skaters in Egypt face challenges in finding suitable public spaces catering to their specific needs. The quest for well-designed spaces for physical activity intersects with the broader issue of equal access for women. Salma's observations align with the notion that exclusion from public spaces can manifest through various means, such as dress codes, behavioural expectations, and spatial constraints. This exclusion is not limited to recreational activities such as skating but extends across different spheres of sports; (6) Immersion in play: the concept of immersion in play extends beyond childhood and holds significant implications for adults within public spaces. This immersive play experience may signal a departure from traditional spaces, particularly for women who seek to assert agency and challenge societal norms. Incorporating elements like greenery, multifunctionality, and diverse architecture contributes to the creation of physically active and inclusive public spaces. Just as traditional art materials are manipulated to create artistic expressions, public spaces become a creative material in the context of playable cities as mentioned by Nour in section 3.3. Finally, Salma's and Ibrahim Cairo Runner's initiative and these insights collectively underscore the need for collaborative efforts in creating urban spaces that not only accommodate, but actively promote a variety of physical activities, contributing to the overall well-being of the community.

4.6. Finding the right time

One of the clear manifestations of the adaptive strategies is the creative utilisation of time and place in the cityscape. According to the interviews, women in Cairo modified their daily routines in order to avoid harassment or feeling uncomfortable. As such, they either practise in the early hours of the mornings or seek remote areas to enable their freedom of public spaces usage away from the eyes of the usual crowds during the day. Yet some do both, seeking remote areas and heading there in the very early hours of the mornings especially on the weekends. This situation challenges Jane Jacobs' 'eyes on the street' theory (Jacobs, 1960). In this case, girls and young women preferred to seek haven out of the sights of the crowds to ensure more freedom. During the early morning hours,

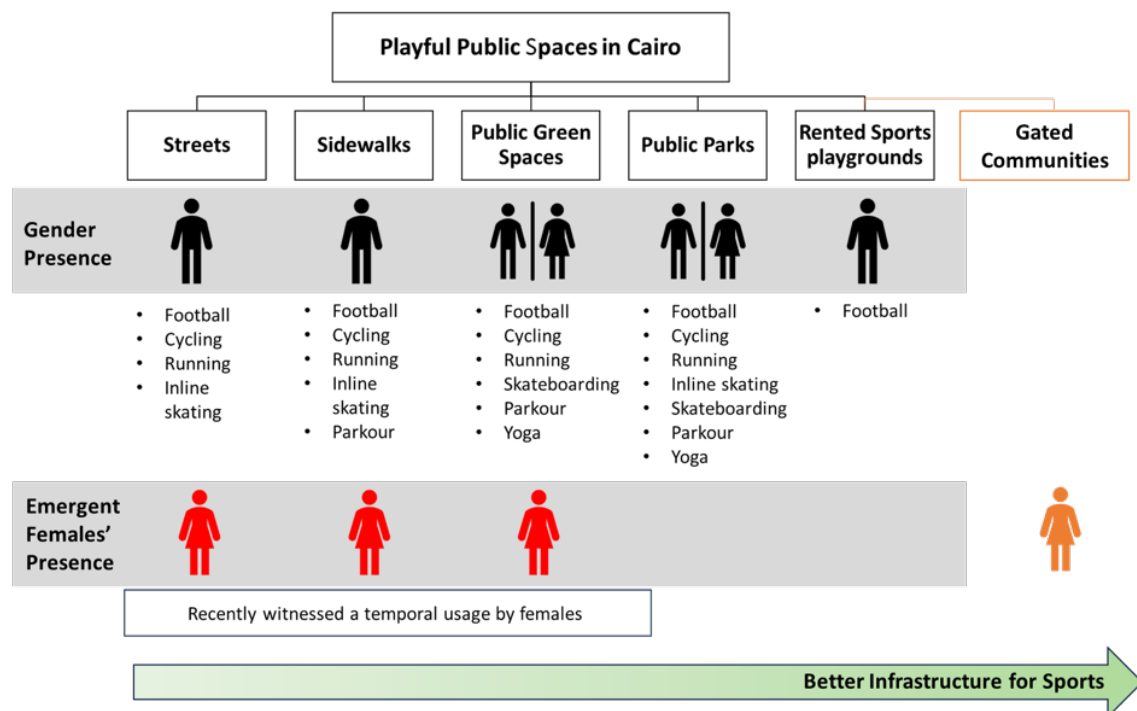


Figure 14. The relation between the various types of public spaces and the provided infrastructure within that encourages sports and physical activities. As you move to the right, the spaces provide better infrastructure for sports and physical activities. GCs emerged as a new typology according to the interviewees.

public spaces are almost empty, which adds to the women's freedom of re-appropriate such places in any way needed, such as parkour activities. The temporality of public spaces usage for physical activities and sports was mapped concerning the types of public spaces in Cairo, as illustrated in Figure 15 below.

Yet, further evidence from the girls who chose not to change their daily routines like Salma and Yara, who practised during the day and evenings, shed the light on another crucial aspect - the importance of public awareness and familiarisation of such activities in the cityscape. It was evident that familiarisation and elevated awareness of sports for girls added to the community's acceptance and the overall feeling of safety for the girls and young women practising physical activities in public spaces, as emphasised by Yara. Thus, it is crucial to increase the awareness about the importance of sports and physical activities for all city dwellers equally. Improving the safety of women in public spaces involves

addressing issues such as improper lighting, narrow areas, and the lack of designated pedestrian pathways.

4.7. Practising collectively

The experiences of Yara, Salma, and Nour practising physical activity in Cairo show that being part of a virtual group that is also connected to a physical group, can be empowering. This group dynamic helps alleviate insecurity and fear, fostering a greater sense of self-confidence (Bynner and Hammond, 2004). This newfound confidence can encourage independent practice, as seen with these three young women. All interviewees agreed on the pivotal role of social media in their pursuit of sports in Cairo’s public streets. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram transcend boundaries and foster a global community. Witnessing females engaged in sports through online platforms serves as a powerful source of inspiration, encouraging them to challenge societal norms and embark on their own athletic journeys. Social media positively impacted their participation in urban spaces. Gatti and Procentese (2021) suggest that social media community-related practices can give new social meanings and livability to urban spaces. Instagram’s reels revolutionised content creation, providing a dynamic space for individuals like Salma to share their passions and talents. Social media connected like-

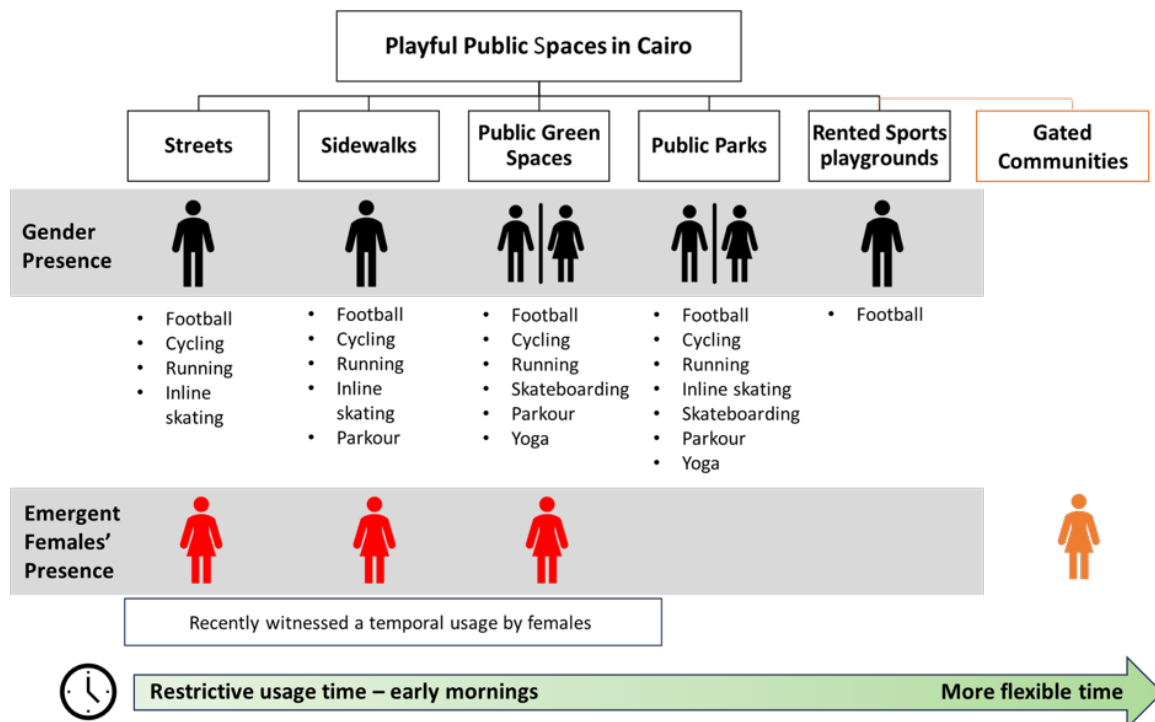


Figure 15. Illustration of the temporality of young women using public spaces for physical activities and sports. Through the findings analysis, it appeared that young women are more cautious in selecting the right time when using the types of public spaces on the left and it gets more flexible as you transcend to the spaces on the right.

mindful individuals and enabled the organisation of group events, overcoming geographical limitations. This digital connectivity has been instrumental in spreading the concept of sports within Egyptian culture, challenging stereotypes, and reshaping societal perceptions. Social media's transformative force is evident in breaking cultural barriers, and fostering inclusivity, ultimately contributing to the positive cultural shift towards embracing diverse sports and creating a more open-minded society in Cairo. These young women are playing key roles in creating safer urban spaces. By normalising females' physical activity in public spaces, they shift social representations of these spaces, challenging male-dominated spaces, and perhaps even incentivise other young women to follow their lead.

Despite these positive enablers, such mechanisms of resilience and re-appropriation should not be seen as panacea for the fundamental urban problems related to safety, social exclusion and physicality. They are initial steps for women's emancipation and not justifications for inaction by public and institutional actors. Stakeholders can leverage social media to activate inclusive public spaces use and female physical activity. Cairo's local governance actors, such as councils and community organisations, can legitimise and enhance this system of collective organisation. Participatory methods can be used to include young women 'norm-breakers' such as Yara, Nour, and Salma, as 'flagships' for empowerment and appropriation. Furthermore, local actors can conduct pilot studies to identify replicable design measures for scaling up. Cities' policies should focus on providing opportunities for public spaces appropriation by communities, especially young women. Policies should acknowledge the needs of the various age and gender groups, allowing for a continuous process of appropriation and evolution.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the perceptions and experiences of young women participating in physical activities and play within public spaces in Cairo. It highlights the fundamental connection between the conservative culture of Egypt and the lack of safe urban public spaces for female users. Through a contextual analysis, this study adds to the understanding of the socio-cultural and urban physical constraints on the gendered access and use of urban public spaces in Egyptian cities. Young women's engagement in physical activity and play in public spaces is influenced by fear of violence, perception of safety, and urban design aspects that discourage certain behaviours. Interviewees and survey participants shared stories of their initial struggles encountered amidst societal expectations. The Cairo Runners project and Yara and Salma's passion for inline skating are examples of the increased acceptability of female participation in the urban realm which the research also highlights as positive development. These shifts, such as Solys Space's use of social media to build communities and Salma's viral success that encourage women to take up line skating, are viewed as forms of resilience and re-appropriation. They likewise build inclusive communities with the shared interest of health and well-being, improving spaces while also acting as proof of the importance of visibility and community support. There are ways to reduce the likelihood of unpleasant social interactions and increase the safety and enjoyment of play, including group support and site selection. The rise of female physical activity normalisation and the development of stronger, healthier communities are both directly due to social media platforms.

Expanding on the identified themes, the paper makes practical recommendations for developing Cairo public spaces for more inclusivity:

- *Placemaking and Urban Design Enhancements* that include well-designed walkways, improved pedestrian infrastructure, more greenery and enhanced accessibility in public spaces. To attract different sport communities, particular emphasis can be placed on certain sports areas like skateparks and running tracks;
- *Prioritising Street Design* including wider sidewalks, proper lighting, and smooth pavements, are essential to enhancing the safety and accessibility of public spaces for informal play activities. It is agreed as the survey results that Cairo public spaces are not friendly to women engaging in physical activity. The personal stories of Yara, Salma, and Nour provide a deeper understanding of the struggles and triumphs of young women pursuing physical activities in Cairo;
- *Cultural and Educational Shifts* that address the cultural and educational factors that contribute to girls and young women exclusion from public spaces is essential. Campaigns for education and awareness can shift societal norms and create a more welcoming environment for female physical activities.

More research could help define and map safety indicators and hotspots as seen by girls and young women and examine contextually relevant social variables. These efforts could act as a roadmap for Cairo's placemaking projects and aid in the contribution of safer and more accessible urban environments that encourage women to actively participate in urban public areas.

A statement acknowledging the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

During the preparation of this work the authors used DeepL, ChatGpt and Grammarly in order to partly translate interviews from Arabic to English, rephrasing comments of survey respondents, rephrasing basic syntax of sentences when necessary. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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