

Adela Alexandru

THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IN THE CITY OF PLOIEȘTI

Adela Alexandru

National University of
Political Science and Public
Administration, Bucharest

adela.alexandru.15@politice.ro

ABSTRACT

All components of the city influence the way we understand everyday realities. At the same time the city regulates attitudes, behaviors and urban relations. Thus, the city is a gendered space – an idea supported by theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, Tovi Fenster, Annette Gough, Sylvia Chant, Laura Grunberg, Diana Neaga. Academic studies, especially in Romania, have marginalized the relationship between space and gender, as well as the link between what is found in the urban landscape (for example streets, statues and monuments) and collective memory (being remembered/commemorated). This paper consists of a gender-sensitive toponymic analysis in order to see who is visible from a symbolic point of view in the public space in the city of Ploiești

KEYWORDS

- Gendered Space
- Gender-sensitive Public Policies
- (In)Equity
- Symbolic representation
- Public Space
- The Right to the City

Public space is not gender neutral. Let's take an imaginary walk through the city: we walk the streets named after men, we see statues and monuments of other men, we see local businesses, schools, museums, parks and various other institutions named after men. The city is filled with reminders of masculine power. The preference for men's names is further confirmation of this: women continue to face countless obstacles to finding their rightful place in official versions of history.

The inclusiveness of the city becomes apparent in the design of buildings (interior and exterior), the history of the city, its architecture, statues and monuments, the city squares, the streets we walk most of the time without wondering why they are called as they are, but which, at the same time, awaken in us a feeling of belonging in a space with a common history. As Lico states, a patriarchal framing of space, from an architectural point of view, unquestionably favors male power, in the representation of social order, hierarchical progression, polarities and stereotypical gender roles (2001: p. 30). The purpose of this paper is to see who is visible from a symbolic point of view in the public space in the city of Ploiesti.

The city through a “gender lens”

Gorsz defines the city as a complex and interactive network that connects, often in an unstructured and ad-hoc way, a series of social activities, processes with

a series of real or imaginary relationships, designed, geographical, civic or public. Thus, the city connects economic and information flows, power networks, forms of marginalization, management and political organization, family, extra-family and impersonal social relations, models of economic and aesthetic management of space and place to create a semi-permanent environment and dynamic (Grosz: 1995, p.103). The city as a structure and its inhabitants shape each other - norms, values are generated, there are expectations about how the inhabitants of a city manifest themselves. Everyday life is shaped by the way in which the city we live in represents to a greater or lesser extent a comfortable, maybe even emancipatory setting. The city as an institution has the ability to generate sets of norms, rules and values that shape people's behaviors and expectations. In other words, it is a gendered space that, most of the time, strengthens traditional gender roles (Gough: 2016, p.19).

Through the interior or exterior design of buildings, through planning and urban management, through the mental maps of fear¹, through the way people speak on the street, through the names of the streets, through the different manifestation of urban mobility, through the content of urban art, through the facilities existing in a city, through the way women as opposed to men engage in the so-called multiple economies related to formal and informal work in public and private space, the city is the expression of manifestations of stereotypes and prejudices about the role of women and men in society (Grunberg, Neaga: 2015, p. 9).

The city becomes a space where women are forced to destroy the (symbolic) barriers raised to keep them invisible, to integrate their needs into its construction, to assert their visibility as citizens – in other words, to fight for their right to the city (Flanagan, Valiulis: 2011, p. xiii). In this context, a gender-sensitive analysis contributes to the nuance of knowledge about the urban space, about the mutual influence between its daily realities and its inhabitants.

A feminist perspective on the right to the city

“The right to the city” is an idea that was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book “Le Droit à la ville” and which claims the city as a co-created (Purcell: 2002, p. 101). According to the Global Platform for the Right to the city, it is a collective right that highlights the territorial integrity and interdependence of all internationally recognized civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. At the heart of the right to the city is the vision of decentralized, inclusive and sustainable cities and human settlements that provide opportunities for employment, health, education, leisure and culture for all its inhabitants.

Lefebvre was not a feminist theorist, but his approach to the social dynamics of space has clear implications for power and gender relations. The idea of alienating the citizens of the modern city emphasizes a growing disconnect between the inhabitants

1 Geographies of fear are often based on social perceptions of threat. Fear manifests itself in many ways, but for many people, fear often shapes their mental maps and, therefore, their daily geographies. These mental maps of fear, accumulated over a lifetime, are constructions that someone uses to make daily decisions. In other words, mind maps are a way to combine our objective knowledge of places in addition to our perceptions or subjective opinions about locations around the world (England & Simon: 2010, pp. 202-203).

of the city and their abilities to participate in the (re) production of space. The right to the city offers a series of perspectives on the political potential of claiming the urban experience (Beebeejaun: 2017, p. 325). The attention to everyday life emphasizes the idea of belonging to the city, of one's own perception of inequalities (social, economic, gender, ethnicity, class, etc.). These multifaceted problems could be solved through an urban planning strategy that integrates the specific experiences of the city's inhabitants, their needs in everyday life (Beebeejaun: 2017, p. 331).

The right to the city cannot be reduced to the right to live in an urban space, but also includes the right to take part in political debates, as well as inclusion in the social and cultural spheres of urban life. In other words, the right to "an urban life" as a series of social activities and reformulated identities (Porter: 2017). This right encompasses women's quality of life, as well as the safe use and enjoyment of urban spaces and common assets when moving about the city (Falú: 2009). Therefore, from a feminist perspective, women's right to the city should begin with the inclusion of urban planning policies in the process of ensuring participation, security and access in a male-dominated space.

Women in urban memory

Urban memory provides a means of accessing the way in which various strata of society and different communities construct the metropolitan world. Urban commemorative symbols have a "polyvocal" nature because, on the one hand, they are related to the intentions of the creator, on the other hand, they can acquire new references, neutralizing and even counteracting the original intention of the author. As many authors suggest, the city is the space for both symbolic control and symbolic resistance (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, Azaryahu: 2008, p. 162).

Although there have been women who have made history with men, women who have claimed equality in rights, who have been pioneers, history seems not to be herstory too. The urban landscape is both a form of preserving the past in the collective memory, but also a way of symbolic expression of the dominant ideology at a given time – a patriarchal one.

Women's lives, experiences and perceptions must not be different from men's in order to deserve social and historical attention, but their inclusion in history must be imposed by their very existence. However, history as we know it today is a history of the public sphere, of a space until recently, very difficult to access for women, so consequently a history of men. The work, life and experiences of women, reduced to the private sphere, have remained unrecorded in history and undervalued.

Research methodology

In this paper I aim to make an inventory of gender segregation, inequality and discrimination in the urban area of Ploiești, based on a gender-sensitive toponymic analysis of the names of streets and the representation of gender in statues and monuments. The design of this research was inspired by a book published in 2015: *The (non) sexist city. A gender-sensitive inventory of urban discrimination.*

Given that this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, I used only online resources to collect data: city maps, street nomenclature, a list of historical monuments, the website of the city hall. After creating the databases with the names of the streets and with busts/statues/monuments from Ploiești, for each category of data, I used a gender-sensitive filter/grid, completing the gender meaning of the names as well as the field of activity in the case of streets named after/statues representing a man or a woman.

A gender-sensitive toponymic inventory of Ploiești

Ploiești is the county seat of Prahova County, Romania. Part of the historical region of Muntenia, it is located 56 km north of Bucharest. The area of the city is around 60 km². According to the 2011 Romanian census, there were 201,226 people living within the city of Ploiești, making it the 9th most populous in the country. Also, Ploiești is an important transport hub, linking Bucharest with Transylvania and Moldavia (Encyclopedia Britannica). It has direct access to the Prahova Valley, one of the most important alpine tourism areas in Romania.

The urban space has the capacity to bring to the surface hegemonic ideologies in the mundane space, in the ordinary life of its inhabitants. This fact is visible especially in the context of regime change and is achieved by restoring the language (introducing new words, changing the meaning of existing ones and eliminating the same words) that give new regimes a symbolic culture. To date, critical conceptualization of naming policies in urban space has focused on nationalist, socialist, and post-socialist revisions of names or on the role those spatial systems have played in rationalizing urban space (Vuolteenaho, Ainiala: 2009, p. 202).

Gender inequalities and power imbalances between social groups are observable at every level of cultural production, as well as in architectural and urban discourse. Different approaches to the symbolic order of urbanism and architectural narratives have developed as a form of imaginative resistance, opposing the traditional norm-dictating perspective. In this context, urban space as an ideology and toponymy as an urban form of power that qualifies the territory represented a critical commitment made by researchers, developed especially by political geography through critical studies of place names (Novas Ferradás: 2018, p. 110).

Mapping the sexism of street names in Ploiești

Street names are something visible, belonging to the mundane, something obvious, which is why researchers in the social sciences have hardly addressed this issue in their studies of authority structures and the legitimation of power. Azaryahu argues that street names, in addition to their fundamental role in the spatial organization and semiotic construction of the city, are “participants” in the cultural production of the (common) past. The names of commemorative streets represent a strong mechanism for legitimizing the socio-political order (Azaryahu: 1996, p. 311). Of course the way a city is planned, built, taught are defining factors for its history, but at the same time, who is visible is very important from a symbolic point of view. In the urban space, the

historical and cultural narratives promoted, materialized, for example, in the names of streets and public squares, can be subjected to a gender-sensitive analysis that offers a nuanced perspective on the urban landscape as an area of interrelation and mutual influence between its everyday realities and its inhabitants (Grunberg, Neaga: 2015, p.15).

According to the Ploiești city map there are 817 streets. Depending on the type of organization, streets are predominant (94.30%), followed in a significantly lower percentage by alleys (3.50%) and squares (1%). The highest percentage is represented by the streets whose names do not have a gender meaning, coming from plant names, from localities, from important historical events connected to the country's history, from geographical elements, objects and others. However, among the names of streets that have gender significance, the names of male personalities (such as Pann Anton, Racoviță Emil, Kogălniceanu Mihail etc.), the names with masculine significance and the names of men in general, prevail.

Out of 817 streets in Ploiești city, only 17 streets are names of female personalities/ women's names/ names with feminine meaning (7%) compared to 230 streets, alleys and squares having names of male personalities/ men's names/ names with masculine meaning (93%).

In addition, the male personalities who give the names of the streets of Ploiești are in a significant share historical figure (rulers, kings), politicians (prime ministers, mayors), writers, scientists (mathematicians, physicists, chemists, biologists and others), doctors, priests, historians and archaeologists, painters and sculptors, musicians, lawyers, architects and philosophers. The female personalities who give names to the streets of Ploiești, beyond the significantly reduced frequency, are the spouses/lovers of well-known male personalities (for example: Veronica Micle, Elena Doamna) or heroines (for example: Ana Ipătescu or Ecaterina Teodoroiu). Also, among the names that refer to various occupations, I noticed that the men who give the names of some streets are soldiers, teachers, aviators, cosmonauts, while the women are waitresses, muses or virgins.

The toponymic analysis of the streets in Ploiești reveals the imbalance of gender representation in the urban landscape, brought to the surface by the predominance of streets with masculine names, by reducing the importance of some women in history to the status of wives or lovers of famous men and by the difference in the fields of origin of names with masculine significance (more numerous, more diversified compared to those with feminine significance).

The visibility of men/women in the public space is an important part of the process of creating collective memory. Judging Ploiești by the name of the streets, it seems that this city belongs more to men. This practice is not limited to Ploiești or Romania, but reflects a patriarchal system based on the idea that the role of women is rather in the private space and of men in the public one.

For example, in Spain many streets are still linked to the time of General Franco, while very few are named after female personalities (10%). Only in 2007 when the law of historical memory officially condemned the fascist regime and recorded the elimination of all ties with it, some streets were renamed after female personalities such as Rosa Parks, Frida Kahlo, Ángela Ruiz Robles. An analysis by H-Alter reveals

that in the toponymy of Croatian cities (64 cities included in the analysis) only in 9 of them the percentage of streets named after women is $\leq 5\%$. In almost half of the cities analyzed, less than 2% of the streets are named after women, and in 11 cities in Croatia there is not a single street named after women (Worley: 2016). Another toponymic analysis reveals that out of a total of 16,550 streets in Rome only 3.5% are named after women compared to 45.7% which are named after men (Bosworth: 2012). An interactive map created in 2015 shows that on average, only 27.5% of the streets in major cities around the world (such as London, Paris, San Francisco, New Delhi and others) are named after women (Poon: 2020).

Mapping the gap between male and female statues in Ploiești

Grunberg claims that the city is a social institution that can on the one hand allow certain social categories to remain in the collective memory of the city and on the other hand to constrain the marginalized, to leave them no space to affirmation (Grunberg, Neaga: 2015, p. 26). Buildings, monuments, statues are components of the urban landscape that carry over time a whole system of beliefs, values and norms that can create and perpetuate certain gender roles.

The body of the city through its symbols can generate the feeling of belonging to space or can inhibit, discriminate against certain social categories, denying them the right to the city (for example through racist, classist, sexist messages/symbols, etc.). Statues and monuments of a city create a certain vision of the world, say something about who built them, to whom they were dedicated, what they represent.

The inventory of statues in the city of Ploiești includes 37 busts, 4 statues (full character) and 2 monuments. Only 2 of them represent women: one is a representation of freedom, the other is a representation of motherhood. The Statue of Liberty represents the goddess Minerva/Athena (goddess of wisdom), who carries in her right hand a spear and in her left hand a parchment inscribed with a message regarding the electoral law (Vasile: 2020). The Statue of Maternity portrays a woman holding a child. All that is known about this statue from the website of the architectural heritage of Prahova County is that it dates from 1960 and that it was made by the sculptor Ion Irimescu.

The gender imbalance also persists regarding the authors of the sculptures. Only two busts in Ploiești are made by female sculptors: the first bust of Ion Luca Caragiale made by Laetiția Ignat and criticized by the press of the time for having represented him too young (Mihai: 2015) and the bust of actor Toma Caragiu made by his sister Geta Caragiu.

Referring to the occupations of male personalities that we find represented in busts, statues, monuments, the most common are historical figures (especially rulers), as well as politicians and in much smaller percentage architects, historians, writers, doctors or composers. The two statues representing women are archetypes, symbols, muses.

The analysis reveals, as in the case of the streets, a city with male identity. This type of space sends a clear message: men are the ones who matter in the history and culture of the city/country/world.

Conclusions

Finally, I resume the idea I started with: the urban space reflects the present socio-political order. The symbolic load of the urban space resides in all the elements that are part of it, and the meanings/messages transmitted influence the way we understand everyday reality (Grunberg, Neaga: 2015, p. 62). The exclusion of women from the urban landscape is a gender inequality.

Since urban toponymy is the main exponent of collective memory in public space, the commemoration process gives legitimacy and a hegemonic understanding of history through the spatial narratives of power. The toponymy of the streets, together with the statues and monuments are part of a system of validation of a socio-political order in which the interests of a privileged minority (white men, bourgeois, intellectuals) are favored while women's interests are penalized, limited, restricted together with their visibility. The names of places are more than "innocent", passive spatial references, they are incorporated in the relations of social power and in the struggles for the identities of places and people (Novas Ferradás: 2018, pp. 114-116).

The results of the gender-sensitive toponymic analysis of the streets and statues / monuments in Ploiești illustrate a society in which the woman is not only historically marginalized, but is neglected. Women are hardly represented in the current urban space and therefore are not very much found in the collective memory of the city. Thus, the message that Ploiești sends to its inhabitants about their history and cultural heritage, intentionally or not, is that the city was designed by men, for men and to commemorate the history of other men.

The purpose of my research was to reveal the stereotypes and power relations between women and men. I consider that the absence of women from the architectural heritage and from urban toponymy is a form of sexism. In order for women to feel included in the city, they must find themselves in the city. This historical neglect imposes actions to claim a collective memory of women.

References

Beebejaun, Y. (2017), „Gender, Urban Space, and the Right to Everyday Life”, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, nr. 3, pp. 323-334;

Bosworth, M. (2012, April 11). Are our street names sexist? BBC News, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Encyclopaedia Britannica. Ploiești, accessed 9th of November 2020;

England, M. R., Simon, S. (2010), “Scary cities: urban geographies of fear, difference and belonging”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11:3, 201-207, DOI: 10.1080/14649361003650722;

Flanagan, M.A., Valiulis, M.G. (2011), „Gender and the City: The Awful Being of Invisibility”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* (Vol. 32, Issue 1), University of Nebraska Press;

Global Platform for the Right to the city, „Women's Right to the City Manifesto”, <https://www.right2city.org/news/womens-right-to-the-city-manifesto/>,

accessed 9th of November 2020;

Gough, A. (2016), „The Gendered City” in R. Horne, J. Fien, B.B. Beza and A.Nelson (eds.), „Sustainability Citizenship in Cities: Theory and practice”, Routledge (Earthscan);

Grosz, E. (1995), „Space, Time and Perversion”, Routledge, New York;

Grunberg, L., Neaga D. (eds.) (2015), „Orasul (non)sexist. Inventar al discriminatorilor urbane sensibil la gen”, Pro Universitaria, București;

Kuzmanić, A., Perić I. (2018, December 11). Croatia, where the streets have no (women’s) names. H-ALTER, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Lico, G.R. (2001), „Architecture and Sexuality: The Politics of Gendered Space”, *Humanities Diliman*, 2(1), pp. 30-44;

Mihai, D. (2015, July 29). Epopeea primului bust al lui Caragiale din Ploiești - autoritățile s-au chinuit 23 de ani să facă statuia, iar presa vremii relatează că „nu prea seamănă” cu scriitorul. *Adevarul.ro*, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Novas Ferradás, M. (2018), „Commemorative Urban Practices and Gender Equality: The Case of Santiago de Compostela City’s Urban Toponymy”, *Hábitat y Sociedad*, nr. 11, pp. 109-129;

Patrimoniul arhitectonic din județul Prahova (n.d.). Statuia “Maternitate”, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Ploiești City Map: <https://ploiesti-city.map2web.eu/>, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Poon, L. (2015, November). Mapping the Sexism of Street Names in Major Cities. *CityLab*, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Porter, C. (2017, March 8). Cities are designed by men, for men: why local government needs more female leadership. *CityMetric*, accessed 9th of November 2020;

Purcell, M. (2002), „Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant”, *GeoJournal* 58, nr. 2/3, pp. 99-108;

Rose-Redwood, R., Alderman, D. and Azaryahu M. (2008), „Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space: An Introduction”, *GeoJournal* 73, nr. 3, pp. 161-164;

Vasile, L. (2010, July). Statuia Libertății. *Republica Ploiești - Povești Despre Vechiul Ploiești* (blog), accessed 9th of November 2020;

Vuolteenaho, J., Terhi A. (2009), „Planning and Revamping Urban Toponymy: Ideological Alterations in the Linguistic Landscaping of Vuosaari Suburb, Eastern Helsinki” in Berg, L. and Vuolteenaho, J., „Critical Toponymies: Contested Politics of Place Naming”, Ashgate Publishing;

Worley, W. (2016, December 4). Spain Will No Longer Name Streets after Fascists. It’s Naming Them after Women Instead”. *The Independent*, accessed 9th of November 2020.