THESIS

Gender inclusiveness in public spaces – Women's perspective on spatial justice in the context of Amsterdam's urban parks

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Abstract

Gender differences in perception are often a neglected factor in the creation and shaping of urban parks. Consequently, park design often reproduces or reinforces gender inequalities. As a result, women encounter various barriers when using parks, leading to discomfort, insecurity, and ultimately exclusion. Using a comparative analysis of two parks in Amsterdam, Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, this thesis aims to explore the concept of spatial justice from women's perspective and to discover how urban parks' design can mitigate gender inequality and create public spaces that are inclusive for women. To achieve this, a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative insights from semi-structured interviews and participant observations is applied. The interviews included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, allowing for a deeper understanding of women's personal experiences while also gathering measurable data. The results of this thesis show that spatial justice is not equally distributed in Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, as differences in design lead to inequalities in women's experience of safety and inclusion. Furthermore, they reveal various elements that can enhance women's sense of inclusion, which, however, differ from one woman to another, indicating the importance of adopting an intersectional approach when designing urban parks.

However, while design can influence women's sense of inclusion, their fear is directly linked to the presence and behavior of men. Therefore, design alone is not enough to fully address the problem if the social factor is not also taken into consideration.

Keywords: women, women's rights, gender equality, inclusivity, intersectionality, spatial justice, Female Fear, urban parks

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Summary

The population living in urban areas is growing, threatening citizens' urban quality of life. Urban parks present vital benefits essential for well-being. The physical activity that is encouraged in these settings offers several benefits in turn. Specifically, physical activity can significantly prevent the onset of illness, such as heart disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes. In addition, physical activity can help prevent mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as improve cognitive abilities such as learning and thinking and overall well-being (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, in addition to the physical benefits, there are also social benefits, such as enhancing social cohesion (Carr et al., 1992). Public open spaces should be accessible to everyone so that everyone can enjoy and benefit from them. However, there are concerns about gender equality in park use. According to previously conducted studies, women, compared to men, are more likely to feel unsafe, which can limit their access to these areas and make them feel excluded. Comprehensive knowledge about what features may cause women to perceive the park as non-inclusive is vital for designing more inclusive urban parks. The aim of this research was to comprehensively identify and analyze the specific elements and infrastructural features that contribute to the creation of safer and more inclusive public spaces for women with diverse needs, as well as understand how being a woman affects the experience of women in public urban parks. The main research question following is: Do women perceive public parks of the Netherlands as inclusive? What factors influence their sense of safety?

First, a literature review was conducted, which provided insight on the wider debates in the literature on the topic of gender inclusiveness in urban park. It helped broaden the perspective and put the thesis in context. Subsequently, the key aspects affecting the use of public parks are described and ultimately the relationship between gender and space is examined. This informed the development of the theoretical framework applied in this thesis, which concerns spatial justice. Based on this information, an interview was designed. The interview consisted of a set of closed and open-ended questions that focused on understanding the factors that contribute to participants' feelings of participation, safety, or insecurity. The interviews were conducted in two different urban parks in Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Sarphatipark in de Pijp and Oosterpark in Oost. In addition to the interviews, participant observations were conducted to understand the way women navigate and occupy public spaces, but also to reflect on my own feelings and experiences as a woman.

The results indicated that women encounter several obstacles when using the two selected parks in Amsterdam. The main reason that prevents them from using these urban parks is related to safety aspects. Although the main reason that women fear is men, and how they use the space and interact with them, the design of the parks can either exacerbate these fears or alleviate them. The results revealed that these two urban parks aggravate their fears, yet they recommended ways in which their fears could be mitigated. They then delved further into further reasons why these parks limit their access and comfort. These reasons varied by age, status, such as motherhood and pregnancy, and identity, revealing the need for an intersectional approach when designing parks.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The social and scientific problems that this thesis addresses are described in the first two chapters. In this chapter, the theoretical context is presented, followed by the description of the problem. Finally, the aim of the research and a reading guide for the remaining research are presented in the next chapter.

1.1 Context

Cities are melting pots of different people and cultures, as well as crucial centers of innovation, production, and opportunity. Furthermore, the population living in urban areas is growing and cities are predicted to host 68% of the world population by 2050 (United Nations, 2018). A phenomenon known as urbanization (UN - HABITAT, 2022a). When cities are not planned with diversity and social equity in mind, urbanization can exacerbate inequalities between various social groups, including gender equality (UN-HABITAT, 2020b). Gender is commonly believed that it related to the body, with someone's biological and genitals aspects. Additionally, the way that someone moves is also coded as masculine or feminine (O'Brien & Stein, 2018). However, gender is not a binary variable but a self-defined identity (Lindqvist et al., 2021). So, gender includes the psychological, social, behavioral, and cultural aspects of being a woman, man, or other gender identity, therefore gender includes a number of identities and expressions. Gender inequalities refer to unequal treatment and different opportunities depending on their gender. These inequalities for instance can relate to economic opportunities, access to resources and social status. Gender inequalities arise from stereotypes which turn to social norms maintaining sexism (Gurieva et al., 2022). Overall, these inequalities often lead to differences in quality of life, perpetuating gender inequalities and discrimination. Due to gender inequalities, women around the world are among the most vulnerable, whether they live in affluent or socioeconomically deprived urban settings (ARUP, 2022). This vulnerability arises from aspects such as gender-based violence, limited mobility due to safety concerns and unequal access to resources (Condon et al., 2007). Therefore, it is important to consider inclusion and diversity when planning and designing cities in order to address these inequalities.

Public spaces are important for the urban environment as they provide communal areas for recreation, social interaction, and participation in a variety of activities (Qi et al., 2024). The advantages of public spaces have been revealed in many studies discussing for instance their influence on physical and mental health, among many others (Liu et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2017; Woolley, 2003). Among these public spaces, green spaces are particularly important as they enhance urban livability, offering psychological benefits and promoting greater physical activity (Amano et al., 2018). In addition, urban parks, as vital components of green spaces, serve as accessible retreats for communities, offering diverse recreational opportunities while fostering social connections (Ayala-Azcárraga et al., 2019). Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the focus will be on urban parks as public spaces that must be designed with spatial justice in mind. Spatial justice in public parks plays a crucial role as it assures inclusivity and equal accessibility in them (Jian et al., 2020), meaning that all residents regardless of their location and socioeconomic status, can benefit equally from public space. In addition, spatial justice contributes to inclusive participation as it incorporates diverse voices it involves citizen participation and engagement in the planning process (Rocco et al., 2022). Spatial justice also promotes social cohesion as it provides places for social interaction from different groups and fosters a sense of belonging. Finally, it has health implications as everyone has equal access to recreational and green spaces, which positively affects physical and mental wellbeing (Jian et

al., 2021). Overall, spatial justice is necessary in order to reach gender equality in public spaces and consequently in urban parks.

With this growth of population living in urban areas, the function of public spaces is becoming paramount for human well-being (Ode Sang et al., 2016). Despite the fact that women make up about half of the world's urban population (Ritchie & Roser, 2024), cities are not built with them in mind. One important factor influencing the situation and experiences of women is the built environment. The quality of life for women is impacted by the planning, construction, administration, and upkeep of cities (ARUP, 2022).

Women have different needs from men but also from each other as they differ in age, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic backgrounds, family status, and in some cases, disabilities. These diverse aspects shape the unique challenges women face in cities, as their needs can vary significantly based on these factors (UN-HABITAT, 2022a). Therefore, the design of public spaces, particularly urban parks as important parts of green spaces, should accommodate the diverse needs of women. Moreover, women participate less in public and private decision-making, and they exert less influence. Women's lives are restricted by failing urban systems, which contributes to already existing inequality and makes women vulnerable and neglected in ways that men hardly ever encounter (ARUP, 2022).

Green spaces, including parks, play a vital role in urban environments, offering opportunities for physical activity, mental-well-being, and social connection. However, concerns about gender equality arise when considering how accessible and inclusive parks are (Wang et al., 2015). Studies have shown that women tend to use the parks less and might encounter more barriers to accessibility compared to men (Derose et al., 2019; Wright Wendel et al., 2012).

Surveys have shown that in UK 71% of women of all ages have witnessed some form of sexual abuse in a public space. The percentage increases to 86% for those between the ages of 18 and 24, with only 3% of them saying they have never encountered any of the specified forms of harassment (UN-Women, 2021). Similarly, 55% of women in Ireland are afraid to use public transport at night (ARUP, 2020). Furthermore, according to research, women do not use public space as freely as men (Arup, 2022; Pereira & Rebelo, 2024). The design of public spaces can have an impact on this criminal behavior. For instance, the structure of parks, streets, and walkways, can either raise or decrease the likelihood of sexual assaults (Miranda & van Nes, 2020; Whitzman, 2007).

According to a study, urban parks in the Netherlands can play a catalytic role in the social cohesion of visitors, whether they are immigrants or native Dutch. All ethnic groups have a need to use urban parks to socialize with other people—whether they are people they already know, e.g. family, friends, or new acquaintances—and relax and enjoy the outdoors._Urban parks can be seen as favorable places for strengthening social cohesion because parks are spaces without exclusion (Peters et al., 2010). However, at this point the question arises: are urban parks really inclusive spaces? Do urban parks perhaps present exclusions for women?

From the perspective of urban planning, it is critical to look into whether the gender differences in public spaces usage that is observed in some locations also exist in in the Netherlands. Since women make up almost half of the population in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2022), it is important to understand which factors influence how often individuals utilize public spaces. This will help explain why women may use parks less than men. By understanding the factors that influence public space usage in both genders, policymakers and urban planners can design more optimal urban environments. With this information, public space may be fully utilized.

1.2 Problem description - Relevance

Public spaces sometimes fall short of the varied needs of their visitors, especially when it comes to safety and inclusiveness. According to research, societal needs cause men and women to use public spaces in different ways. In public places, women are more likely to feel unsafe, which can limit their access to these areas and make them feel excluded (Condon et al., 2007; Jalalkamali & Doratli, 2022; Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). Additionally, while recent studies emphasize the significance of gender-sensitive urban planning, these studies concentrate more on descriptive perceptions, i.e., how women view public spaces and their feelings of safety or insecurity, without looking into particulars about how these issues could be resolved through implemented changes in urban strategies (practical solutions or design recommendations) (Polko & Kimic, 2022; Robert et al., 2022). Hence, they often lack detailed guidelines on what specific elements should be included to make public spaces more welcoming for women. Furthermore, research focuses on women as a homogeneous group, which can result in overlooking the diverse experiences and needs of different types of women. Therefore, women are part of the design process, not a central element of it (Dorries & Harjo, 2020). This generalization can lead to conclusions and propositions that do not adequately address the needs of marginalized or intersectional groups and can also lead to the idea that public spaces are inclusive, even if they are not for all women in reality.

This report will examine the Netherlands, focusing specifically on two public urban parks in Amsterdam, Sarphatipark and Oosterpark. This includes identifying concrete and actionable characteristics and infrastructure that an urban park should have. Further investigation is required to develop detailed guidelines and best practices for implementing these elements effectively, ensuring that public urban parks are both safe and inclusive for every woman.

1.3 Reading guide

The structure of the research is in the following manner. The objective of this research as well as the research questions are presented in the following chapter (Chapter 2). Chapter four presents a theoretical framework outlining the way this thesis strengthens current studies on the subject of safety and inclusiveness in public space. Subsequently, chapter four continues with the methodology. This chapter explains the research design and explains how the data were collected and analyzed. In addition, an argumentation for the site collection is given and concludes with an explanation of the ethical considerations. The results gathered from the participant observations and semi-structured interviews are presented and analyzed in chapter five. A discussion giving an interpretation to these results structured along the sup-questions is presented in chapter six, and finally, in chapter seven, conclusions are drawn, and the main research question is answered.

Chapter 2: Objective & Research Questions

2.1 Objective

The objective of this research is to identify and analyze the specific elements and infrastructural features that contribute to the creation of safer and more inclusive public spaces for women in an intersectional approach. Moreover, the research aims to understand how being a woman affects the experience of women in public urban parks. This research is also looking at how these aspects meet the needs and experiences of various groups of women. By understanding these elements, the research seeks to propose policies and design recommendations that promote spatial justice and support, encourage, and enable women to use these areas more frequently, ultimately fostering more accessible, safe, and equal public urban parks.

2.2 Research questions

This study will attempt to answer the following main research question:

Do women perceive public parks of the Netherlands as inclusive? What factors influence their sense of safety?

With this question, I aim to define if and how being/identifying as women can affect the feeling of inclusiveness in public parks in Amsterdam and how feelings of safety can affect a woman's behavior in the park.

Three sub-questions have been developed to assist in collecting the required knowledge to accomplish the aim of the research and respond to the main research question.

Sub-Questions:

1. What are the specific elements that influence women's perceptions of safety in urban parks of the Netherlands?
2. In what ways do perceptions of safety in public parks differ among women of various social backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities?
3. What recommendations can be made to improve safety and, relatedly, the inclusiveness of Sarphatipark and Oosterpark based on women's feedback?

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Spatial Justice

The concept of justice originates from the Greek city-states (Nazari Adli & Donovan, 2018) and has been discussed and developed in the fields of sociology, philosophy and criminology of law, which emphasize human rights and social justice (Soja, 2010) and then extends to urban planning and geography (Pirie, 1983). According to David Harvey, it is difficult to give a universal definition of the term justice. The content of justice can be interpreted in various ways depending on the social, historical and geographical context. (Fainstein, 2011). Furthermore, it varies according to different perspectives and thematic areas (Cardoso & Breda-Vaquez, 2007; R. H. M. Pereira et al., 2017). Therefore, the lack of universal interpretation complicates identifying common features from various studies and the development of a theoretical foundation for policymaking to some level (R. H. M. Pereira et al., 2017).

Social justice and equality constitute one of the three main pillars of so-called sustainable development, along with economic development and environmental protection [see figure 1]. These three pillars should be in balance and not overlap with each other (Cambell, 1996).

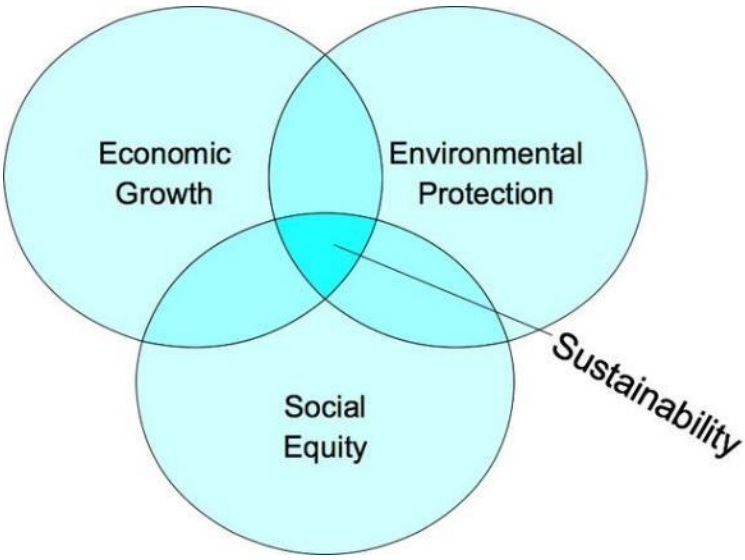


Figure 1 Sustainable Development (Morrow, 2008)

Sustainable development, territorial coherence, and social justice are all intimately related and overlap with the concept of spatial justice. The concept of spatial justice indicates equity in social space by integrating the five elements of justice: distributive, social, procedural, geographic, and temporal (Fritsch, 2024). Social justice reflects equitable treatment among society's members, and a society is considered unfair if there is significant persistent inequality among its people. Since society is inherently spatial, spatial processes play a crucial role in shaping social dynamics and influence the development of just or unfair social situations. Social processes find spatial expression, while spatial processes impact social outcomes; these two types of processes are mutually dependent. Thus, spatial justice is the spatial dimension of social justice, indicating the equitable development of social space (Fritsch, 2024).

Unequal access and use of public space still exists, and it is considered as spatial justice concern. One of the most important academics to highlight the rights of individuals in urban justice study was Henri Lefebvre (2008). He introduced the concept “The right to the city” through which people’s rights began to be repeatedly emphasized and clarified in urban justice research. This concept asserts that citizens have three distinct spatial rights; the right to access the benefits provided by built environments, the right to avoid spatial inequalities, and make use of public services (Lefebvre, 2008).

Physical space has consistently been regarded as the stable foundation that upholds and shapes the realization of social justice by its impact on social action. (Soja, 2010). In previous studies, the term "territorial justice" was used even if the research topic concerned space. David Harvey (1973) also used the term “Territorial justice" which was subsequently recognized as a basis for the development of the geographical perspective, or simpler "social justice in space" (Pirie, 1983).

The concept of justice was given a spatial dimension by Soja (2010) where he coined the term spatial justice in his book “Seeking Spatial Justice”. Spatial justice focuses on how concepts of social justice relate to space. In addition, it emphasizes the need to integrate the values of democracy and human rights. He explains that justice is connected to some very important values that define a fair society. These values are related to liberty, freedom, civil rights and democracy. The pursuit of reducing injustice or increasing justice is a fundamental principle for maximizing fairness and human dignity (ibid).

Edward Soja (2010) raises the issue of inequalities and specifically the spatial inequalities, explaining that they are the result of deeper processes of spatial discrimination. Spatial inequalities mean unequal distribution, and when this unequal distribution endures over time, they become a form of spatial injustice where some people are consistently disadvantaged. For instance, green space and urban green infrastructure may be unequally distributed along racial and income geographies. Urban green infrastructure are more likely to be found in neighborhoods with high-income residents than in neighborhoods with disadvantaged communities, including low-income residents (Nicoletti et al., 2023; Venter et al., 2020). Additionally, minorities such as people of color are often excluded from public spaces, as they are often designed for white middle- and upper-class communities, causing significant social and health inequalities (Madanipour, 2004; Project for Public Spaces, 2020).

These inequalities can also influence women’s experiences in public spaces as they are frequently designed and accessed in a way that often neglects women’s needs (Anneroth et al.,2024). Spatial justice entails the equitable and fair distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them. Therefore, a lack of spatial justice in urban planning results in public spaces that do not accommodate everyone’s needs leading to exclusion and inequality.

3.2 Gender Inclusiveness

Initially, inclusion means belonging to society with full rights, while exclusion on the other hand, means exactly the opposite and can be social, economic, political, and psychological (Howard & Vajda, 2017, p. 8). When a public place manages to accommodate diverse behaviors and users then it can be considered inclusive (Li et al., 2022). According to Perez (2019) in her book ‘Invisible Women’, we live in a world designed by and for men. The invisibility of women exposes the gender data gap, which reveals the gap in our knowledge that lies at the root of persistent discrimination against women. This has caused a pervasive yet invisible bias with a profound impact on women's lives. Discussions about humanity automatically refer to men, as they are always considered as the “default” to depict other humans’ lives (ibid). In addition, Leslie Kern (2020) in her book ‘Feminist City: Claiming space in a Man-Made world’ discusses that gender is the difference that matters in people’s experiences in public spaces. She also argues that cities are often built around men’s experiences, prioritizing their needs. Cities are usually designed with men’s safety concerns and routine in mind, considering them as standard. As a result, women’s needs are seen as special requests or unnecessary rather than essential, making it look like their concerns are secondary (Kern, 2020). Hence, this male-centric perspective impacts the accessibility and perception of women's inclusivity in public spaces.

This male ‘default’ is also discussed by Kern who contemplates the white-abled male 'default' in public space. Cities often generate a feeling of not belonging as they fail to address explicit needs such as mother’s mobility with baby strollers, public toilets for women, breastfeeding, and caregiving amenities, reinforcing traditional gender roles that assign caregiving to the private sphere. Besides this, colored people are unconsciously excluded from public spaces, evoking a feeling of not belonging as well. Additionally, Rothschild, (1999, p.7), in her book ‘Design and Feminism’: Re-visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things’, raise the issue of women’s exclusion by saying that architects, social scientists, and designers, looking back at women’s history, began to wonder why women had been excluded from urban design, both as users and designers. Furthermore, Kern, (2020) describes that women can face stigma and scrutiny in public spaces, which makes them feel vulnerable when they use the space alone and especially at night. Making them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Public spaces must embrace and normalize the presence of women alone rather than depicting women as vulnerable. Men create unsafe discomforts that women struggle to cope with on a daily basis. This is therefore recognized as ‘Female Fear’, and it brings up questions like why women have to walk more due to the dangerousness of the shortcut (Kern, 2020). Finally, women are more likely to receive unwanted comments about their bodies. In particular, people often want to touch a pregnant woman's belly or give diet or exercise advice to mothers or pregnant women (ibid). Women feel responsible for taking care of and protecting themselves, rather than cities undertaking the responsibility for creating safer environments for them. Consequently, cities and therefore public spaces should be designed with gender inclusivity in mind.

Gender-inclusive public spaces are fundamental to eradicating spatial injustice. Understanding spatial justice in a gendered context is paramount to understanding how urban environments can either exacerbate or eliminate the inequalities that women often encounter. By integrating gender into the design of public spaces, we can promote environments that promote participation, safety, and accessibility for all regardless of their identity, thereby addressing the inherent inequalities in urban settings.

An inclusive public area is frequently perceived as a "public space for everyone" (Project for Public Spaces, 2019). It is suggested that everyone should feel accepted, included, and free from discrimination based on their gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, socioeconomic level, and/or personal beliefs in public spaces. Inclusive public spaces are those that overcome the existing prejudices that shaped infrastructure. Incorporating elements of inclusive design can provide more enjoyable, accessible, safer, and welcomed public spaces (ibid). This report will focus on the perception and needs of women in the public parks.

3.2.1 Key aspects affecting the use of public parks

Accessibility

The term "accessibility" typically relates to a public space physical availability and proximity from someone’s home (Lanza et al., 2023; Nicholls, 2001; Silva et al., 2023). Many studies have shown that the proximity can increase parks’ usage (Giles-Corti et al., 2005; Kaczynski et al., 2008; Tu et al., 2020a). Hence, people are most likely to use a park in their close proximity than one that is further away from their residence (Tu et al., 2020b). Additionally, while shorter travel time correlates with higher use frequency of the park, it does not affect how much time people spend in the park (Pham et al., 2019).

However, nowadays perceived accessibility is becoming more and more important in the context of accessibility; it goes beyond a park's physical proximity, exploring whether individuals feel safe and free to visit it or not, considering both mental and physical obstacles

(Kronenberg et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022). Accessibility is also related to the way in which each person experiences public space. Characteristics such as gender affect accessibility (El Murr et al., 2023). A park is accessible when visitors constantly feel safe, welcome, and comfortable according to Biernacka and Kronenberg (2018) and Li et al. (2022).

Activities & functionality

Public spaces, in addition to being designed for people's needs, should be enhanced by promoting activities and diverse uses. Public places should be used to their fullest potential by all members of society, not simply members of particular groups. Multiple layers of activity should be present in public spaces to draw in both locals and visitors. Its fundamental components include things like welcoming social encounters, free public performances, local art exhibits, and more. Activities that take place in public areas also contribute to a place's vibrancy, individuality, and increased recognition (Ramlee et al., 2016). A number of organized activities can significantly increase the visitation of park (Cohen et al., 2010). Finally, the presence of sports and recreational facilities can contribute to the utilization of a park (Kaźmierczak, 2013; Wan et al., 2020).

Comfort

An essential requirement for optional and social activities in public spaces, including extended stays, is physical and psychological comfort. A basic aspect of physical comfort has to do with the weather; public areas should provide shelter from severe weather and the realization of good circumstances. Public areas should be planned such that as much of them as possible are inside users' "comfort zones," which are areas with sufficiently pleasant weather for people to feel comfortable dressing casually in the shade. Another environmental factor that significantly affects a space's general comfort, particularly for conversation and relaxation, is noise. An additional crucial element for comfort is space maintenance. Future maintenance should be considered when selecting materials based on available resources (Gomes, 2012). Finally, a well-designed public space that includes comfortable seating and maintained cleanliness, encourages more frequent and prolonged use (Akpinar, 2016).

Social and cultural factors

Sociability, the ability to be sociable and interact with other people, is a feature that is hard to measure but an arguable quality to be reached. Public spaces are typically provided with the intention of encouraging people to engage in leisure activities and fostering affection and social engagement that will result in beneficial interactions among societies. A successful public space should encourage social interactions by giving voice to individuals from all walks of life, removing barriers that prevent people from interacting, offering spaces for performances, exhibitions, and leisure activities that promote sociability, etc. People tend to feel more attached to their community and the location that encourages these types of social activities (Ramlee et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Ramos-Vidal & de la Ossa, (2024, p.635), social interaction strengthens a person's sense of belonging to their community and surroundings. The quality of life, social networks, and different social groups present during a day can all be used to quantify and assess this factor.

3.3 Gender and Space

Gender differences in perception are often neglected when constructing and reshaping public spaces. Women are generally more alert to the quality of urban space. In many contexts, women are more likely than men to use public spaces since they typically go to work, take their kids to extracurricular activities or school, go shopping, etc. (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021; Pereira & Rebelo, 2024). Although there has been significant progress in women's independence over

the years (Walby, 2005), deeply ingrained gender stereotypes still have an impact on how both men and women go about their daily lives (Pereira & Rebelo, 2024). As a result, while these tasks are not exclusively for women, societal expectations often place a greater burden of these responsibilities on them (Pereira & Rebelo, 2024; Tabassum & Shankar Nayak, 2021). Women consider a variety of factors when selecting public locations, such as the safety of the area and the condition of the concrete surfaces. The element of safety and the individual's perceived sense of security throughout the day are more crucial for women than men (Dubey et al., 2025). Hence, women interact with public space differently than men. But how do women interact with public space and how do they perceive safety?

3.3.1 Women in public space & perception of safety

The way that women engage with public places and how safe they feel are two interconnected factors that greatly influence how these areas are used and experienced by women. The experience and utilization of public spaces by women is directly impacted by a lack of safety. There are a number of elements that contribute to the feeling of risk, including inadequate lighting, sexual harassment, and the absence of other users in the area (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022a; Rahm et al., 2021). These factors enhance the feeling of danger. Women are also vulnerable since they frequently experience unwanted attention or violence in public places, usually of a sexual nature (Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). Women, in order to avoid inappropriate interactions, acquire and hone non-verbal indicators such as averting their eyes, appearing inattentive, crossing their arms or moving out of others pedestrians' way (Mozingo, 1989).

A person's perception of safety can take several forms, such as feelings of fear, isolation, and physical and social visibility. One major element affecting how women use public areas is their fear of crime and violence. Many women modify their behavior to stay out of risky circumstances by staying away from locations or situations that are not considered safe (Valentine, 1990). According to Pain (2001), perception of risk is a socially created experience that is impacted by factors such as age, gender, and social status.

Hence, concerns over their safety in public areas are common among women. Women often face sexual harassment and unwanted contact in public places (Walton & Pedersen, 2022 ; Kern, 2020). As a result, these cases shape discussions about women's safety and violence against them, as well as how they move in public spaces. Although public space design is not the cause of violence or the solution to women's safety, it can influence how women perceive their safety, which in turn affects how much they enjoy and use these spaces. Considering the needs of women when designing public areas would lead to a more equitable use and significantly change in how people interact with those spaces (Women's Health East, 2020.

However, women interact differently with public spaces not only compared to men, but also among themselves. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), clarifies different facets of identity. The ways in which women move through and interact with public space are influenced by a variety of factors, including ethnic and racial identification, aptitude, socioeconomic status, income, sexual orientation and cis- or transgender identities (Alizadeh et al., 2024). For instance, according to research, both white and women of color have concerns about sexual harassment and assault in public spaces, yet black women are also afraid of race-motivated violence in public spaces as well (Day, 1999a). Moreover, people who identify as non-binary or transgender and whose appearance does not cleanly fit into the male/female dichotomy can experience harassment in public spaces (Doan, 2010). Public spaces might be marginalizing for many women who do not fit the heteronormative mould. So, planning and design, in order to ensure equal access and use of public spaces for every woman,

must adopt an intersectional perspective when considering public spaces and the barriers and facilitators that affect women's participation in these areas.

Considering everything stated so far, it is evident that women are a disproportionately underrepresented user group, and using public places presents several challenges for them (Day, 1999b; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). In order to guarantee that all women can participate equally and safely, it is vital to address these issues by taking diversity and safety into account when designing public areas. Finally, the elements and infrastructure that contribute to the feeling of safety have to be investigated.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter explains what methods were used and how they helped reach the objective of this research. First, a description of the study's methodology is provided, accompanied by the site selection. After this, the data collection process is explained, and the research's validity and reliability are outlined. Finally, the chapter concludes with remarks on ethical concerns.

4.1 Research Design

This research uses comparative analysis to examine and contrast women's experiences in two different public urban parks. A comparative study is a type of methodology that analyzes phenomena separately and then combines them to identify areas of similarities and differentiation, strengthening the understanding of social issues (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). Comparative research or analysis is a broad term that encompasses both quantitative and qualitative comparison. It is important as it contributes to a better understanding of a phenomenon or case. This method can draw attention to aspects that might otherwise be missed or neglected. Furthermore, comparison can "de-familiarize the familiar" and can help with testing hypotheses and theories. In addition, this method helps with classification as it enables researchers to create, evaluate, and improve concepts and categories by arranging complicated data into a more comprehensible framework (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017).

For this research, the use of comparative analysis is aimed at discovering the impact of gender on women's experiences of safety and inclusion as well as park usage in different locations. Hence, how various elements influence their perceptions of inclusion and safety can be explored. A clear framework for finding the best practices in urban planning that support gender equity can be provided through comparative analysis. It is particularly relevant to this research since it makes it possible to compare the various experiences of women, revealing both the similarities and differences in how public settings affect their sense of safety and inclusion.

Moreover, a mixed method is used for this research, which employs aspects of both quantitative methods and qualitative procedures. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data in mixed methods research can offer a deeper understanding of complex societal issues, like gender and public space. The design's reasoning arises from its capacity to explore women's perceptions of inclusiveness in public parks in a way that provides both depth (by qualitative inquiry) and breadth (via quantitative analysis). Creswell (2014) claims that because each technique balances the weaknesses of the other, mixed methods enable a more comprehensive understanding of a study subject. For instance, although qualitative research offers deeper insights into individual experiences explaining such trends, quantitative data can provide generalized statistics regarding patterns and trends. Hence, the mixed method increases the validity and reliability of the findings.

This research uses semi-structured interviews and participant observation as a method. Interviews incorporate both quantitative and qualitative elements into this approach. The quantitative elements involve gathering and examining numerical data in order to provide answers to scientific research questions (Rana et al., 2021). This approach helps to measure and analyze the perception of safety and inclusivity on a larger scale. On the other hand, qualitative data aims to examine and offer a greater understanding of real-world issues. This helps with generating hypotheses to better explore and comprehend quantitative data. Participants' opinions, behaviors, and experiences are gathered in qualitative research. Rather than addressing the quantity or number, it addresses the "how" and "whys". Qualitative research can help generate the research hypothesis, which can be tested through quantitative methods (Tenny et al., 2024).

Through the implementation of a mixed methods approach, the research delves into both the "what" and the "why" of women's perceptions of safety in these public spaces. This allows for a more thorough analysis that will improve policy recommendations and urban planning & design.

4.2 Site selection

The site selection for this research focuses on two urban parks in Amsterdam, as the city's policy is focused on inclusion and ensuring everyone can participate equally without exclusion (Gemeente Amsterdam, n.d.). The two parks selected for this research are Oosterpark in Oost and Sarphatipark in De Pijp [see figures 2 & 3]. To provide a comparative comparison, these parks were chosen based on particular criteria. The most important factor in selecting the parks was the socio-demographics of both locations. As the main focus of the research is the physical elements of the park, it is important that both parks have the same socio-demographics to ensure that the responses focus on the park's physical elements instead of the demographics of its users. Another criterion behind choosing a location is the diversity of ethnicities in the parks. This diversity can help in understanding how different ethnicities interact with physical space (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024b) [see Annex 1].

Figure 3 Sarphatipark, Photo by author, 2024

Figure 2 Oosterpark, Photo by Author, 2024

Sarphatipark [see figure 4] is a public urban park of approximately 5 hectares (*Google Earth*, 2024), located in the Amsterdam Oud-Zuid. It is a verdant rest area amidst the bustling De Pijp district. Oud-Zuid has approximately 149,000 residents with a high household income and a highly educated population. In addition, the average age in De Pijp ranges between 27 and 65 years. (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024a).

Figure 4 Sarphatipark layout, Sarphatipark, 2024.

Accordingly, Oosterpark [see figure 5] is a city park of approximately 12 hectares (*Google Earth*, 2024), and it is located in the East (Oost) district of Amsterdam. Oost has 148,000 residents, a negligible difference from Oud-Zuid, and similarly high household incomes. Finally, residents have mostly high educational levels, and the average age in this neighborhood ranges between 27 and 65 years (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024a).

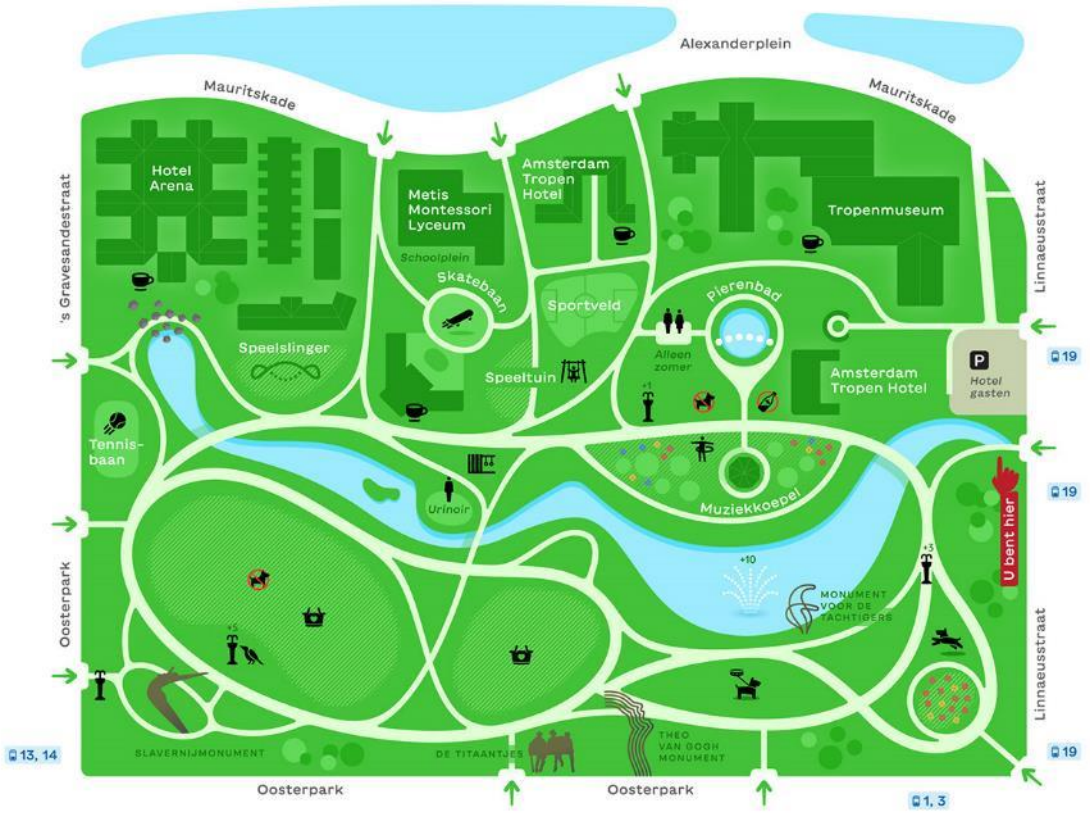


Figure 5 Oosterpark layout, Steblina, 2023

In terms of ethnicity, there is diversity in both Oud-Zuid and Oost; this information facilitates research into the perceptions and opinions of any woman of any ethnicity (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024b). Moreover, both locations are easily accessible by various forms of public transportation, including bus, tram, metro, and train [see figure 6]. As a result, it can be easier to assess accessibility, i.e., how safe and inclusive people feel when visiting these parks.

Figure 6 Location of public urban parks, Map by Author, 2024

These two parks are ideal for assessing how urban parks may become more inclusive and gender sensitive, as they offer a variety of ethnicities and are easily accessible to the public. This supports the study's objective, which is to comprehend how public parks can address gender inequalities that promote spatial justice.

4.2.1 Oosterpark's renovation

Oosterpark has recently been renovated. Initially, the Arena Hotel and the KIT, a museum and event venue located within the park, wanted to expand. So, Amsterdam recognized this as an opportunity to renew the park holistically. Therefore, they looked at the possibilities of changing Oosterpark. After analyzing the existing situation of the park, it was concluded that the southern part of the park is better utilized while the northern part is not exploited properly. The northern part of the park resembles a closed space and does not appear to be integrated with the rest of the park, making it less used by the visitors. Consequently, the municipality's objective was to expand the park without isolated areas. Hence, they developed a comprehensive vision where safety issues were considered, and thus many drastic changes were made to Oosterpark. Specifically, the paths were shaped in a way that they were placed in the middle of the northern part of the park, ensuring the park-facing sides of the buildings are accessible via this path. Moreover, the fences that hid the buildings were removed, as they were envisioned to create openings so that there is visibility throughout the depth between the buildings, and instead a single fence encompassing the whole park was designed. By removing the fences, the buildings finally seemed to be part of the park, contributing to a more open space. Ultimately, this change enabled the front door on Mauritskade to be reopened and the back door to be utilized as an entrance and exit to the park. Additionally, the anatomical laboratory, located in the park, was converted into a Tropentheater, which is oriented towards

the park so that the theater café can have an entrance and terrace in the park. Besides that, the music dome, a 19th-century element of the park, was maintained, as it had suffered severe damage, causing it to appear neglected and not particularly used by visitors. Finally, the municipality of Amsterdam, before implementing their vision, consulted the residents of the neighborhood so they could share their desires and their key considerations. Hence, residents raised the issue of safety and the social function of the park. Specifically, they referred to lighting, traffic flows, and shared their annoyance and fear with addicts (Beerhorst, 2016; Stadsdeel Oost-Watergraafsmeer & DS landschapsarchitecten, 2009). This research indicates whether Oosterpark is inclusive and therefore safe for women according to their perspectives and experiences.

However, a few incidents have occurred in the park, even after its redevelopment. In particular, in January 2018, a man was stabbed during a gay gathering held in the park (NOS Nieuws, 2018). Additionally, in October 2024, shootings were reported inside the park (At5 Nieuws, 2024). Consequently, these incidents raise some questions. Could the design of the park be responsible for these incidents? Does the design of the park facilitate these occurrences? And finally, could the design of the park have prevented these events?

4.3 Data collection

4.3.1 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews conducted with some women who use the parks. The interviews focused on understanding the factors that contribute to participants' feelings regarding inclusiveness, safety or insecurity. Participants were able to elaborate on their own experiences and perspectives by answering both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions covered topics such as elements that contribute or not to the sense of inclusion, and safety, intersectionality and different needs in public parks, behavior adjustments etc. Closed-ended questions and numerical rating scale measured women’s perceived safety and inclusion in public parks and focus on key variables like, frequency of the park use, perceived safety during different times of the day, specific safety concerns and preferences. Finally, I was able to interview 25 women, 15 of whom were in Sarphatipark and 10 in Oosterpark. However, some of these women were interviewed together as they were either friends or family. The selection of participants was random during my visits to the park and the duration of the interviews was approximately 15 minutes. This process lasted a month, from November 10 to December 10, 2024. The semi-structured interviews process was completed when participants' responses became repetitive, resulting in no new information being added to the research. Adverse weather conditions on several days affected both the space and the people using it, resulting in minimal park visitation and making those days unsuitable for fieldwork. Furthermore, a diverse sample of women were interviewed to ensure representation of a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and social groups [see table 1]. For privacy reasons, the names of interviewees remain anonymous.

Interviewee in Sarphatipark	Resident	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Additional Information
1	Yes	33	German	Not mentioned	
2	From Resident to Living in Oost	28	Aruban	Not mentioned	Woman of color
3	No	24	Greek	Atheist	
4	Zuid	18	American	Not mentioned	
5	Noord	19	British	Not mentioned	
6	Yes	24	Dutch	Not mentioned	
7	Yes	22	Dutch	Not mentioned	
8	Haarlem	30	Turkish	Muslim	
9	Yes	58	Dutch	Christian	
10	Tourist	28	French	Christian	
11	Tourist	29	French	Christian	
12	Yes	32	Dutch	Atheist	Transgender
13	No	27	Dutch	Not mentioned	
14	No	27	Dutch	Not mentioned	
15	No	60	Romanian	Christian	Grandmother with a child
Interviewee in Oosterpark					
16	No	23	Spanish	Christian	
17	No	31	German	Not mentioned	Pregnant woman
18	Yes	24	Portuguese	Christian	
19	Yes	21	Moldovan	Christian	
20	Yes	28	Dutch	Not mentioned	
21	Not anymore	30	Spanish	Christian	
22	Noord	27	Turkish	Muslim	Headscarf/Hijab
23	Hoofddorp	30	Kurdish	Muslim	
24	Yes	35	Dutch	Not mentioned	Mother with a child
25	Yes	42	Moroccan	Muslim	

Table 1: Overview of the women who participated in this research, Table supplied by Author, 2024

An interview guide containing a number of questions based on the theories discussed in the previous section 4 was prepared prior to the interviews (see Anex 2). Consequently, these semi-structured interviews were based on this guide.

4.3.2 Participant Observations

Finally, another way of collecting data for this research was through participant observations. In this way, I observed not only the way in which women navigate and occupy public spaces, but I also reflected on my own feelings and experiences as I moved through these spaces, as a woman myself. Hence, participant observations took place in both the urban parks of Amsterdam and at different times of the day. It was important to observe the parks at different times of the day, as the presence of women can vary significantly during the day. For example, during the day, more women were observed, which could create the false impression that the parks are inclusive and widely used by women if they did not also visit the parks at night. It was acknowledged that at night there was a noticeable absence of women. Therefore, by observing at different times, I was able to capture these temporal variations and develop a more comprehensive conclusion of inclusiveness. In addition, through this method, the layout of space was captured as well.

4.4 Sampling

For the needs of this study, sampling was conducted by approaching women in both parks to give an interview. Participants who identify as women were asked to participate in the interview process. In addition, pictures and notes were collected during the observation process.

4.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. First, the audio recordings of the interviews had to be carefully transcribed in order to prepare the data. After the transcripts were finished, they were read carefully to become comfortable with the material and have a general idea of the responses. Following this, codes were created to organize the data. Subsequently, the interview data were organized by labeling important sections of each transcript with the codes that will have been created. When the data had been coded, links among the many themes that show up were searched. This provided a better understanding of how these themes relate to each other. Finally, the findings are reported, using direct quotes from the participants to illustrate and support them. In addition to qualitative data, the quantitative data gathered from the interviews were collected as well and descriptive analysis is conducted. In that way, valuable descriptive data that complements the qualitative insights gathered from the interviews are provided.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

As mentioned in section 5.2 (Data collection), participant observation and semi-structured interviews are the primary sources of data used in this study. For privacy reasons, none of the responders was asked for their address. However, they were asked if they are residents of the region. By asking this, it was impossible to determine the exact location of the respondents' residence. Interviews ensured anonymity by collecting responses without requesting personal identifying information. The interview results were only accessible to the researcher and the supervisor if needed.

Gender identity is a delicate subject these days. The fact that not everyone is identified as a man or woman is known to the researcher. So, no one assumed to be a woman. Therefore, they were first asked how they identify themselves. In addition, any pictures taken during the observation have been used with people's faces blurred to protect their privacy.

Chapter 5: Results: The time for women is now (Unops,2024)

This chapter presents the results of the findings. The first section presents the results of the participant observation in Sarphatipark. Continuing in the same vein, section 6.2 presents the results of the participant observations in Oosterpark. Subsequently, section 6.3 presents the findings of the semi-structured interviews in Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, as many similarities were found in the participants' responses. However, the differences between the two parks are discussed in the next chapter. Finally, the chapter concludes with design principles that present women's preferences regarding which elements and infrastructural features of a park make them feel more inclusive.

5.1 Participant observations in Sarphatipark

My first visit to Sarphatipark was on November 10th, 2024. I visited the park by public transport, and particularly the tram; my access to the park proved quite easy. My first impression when I arrived at the park was that it was a well-kept and lively park. The park was free of litter, the lawns were mowed, and the flowers and plants were healthy and well-maintained. The park felt indeed vibrant, as there were a lot of people. Several women were seen; most of them were either walking their dogs or jogging or relaxing in the park with someone else. Few to no women were observed alone in the park relaxing or walking. Entering the park from the west side, park users will have the option to follow a relatively narrow path with two benches placed next to each other on the right side. At the time of my observation, a group of men was occupying the benches, drinking an alcoholic drink and staring exclusively at women who were passing them by. Given that there were no alternative paths to follow [see figure 7], the placement of these benches provides women and other park users with no other options but to pass these benches. At the time of observation, this could have been a reason for women not to follow this path.

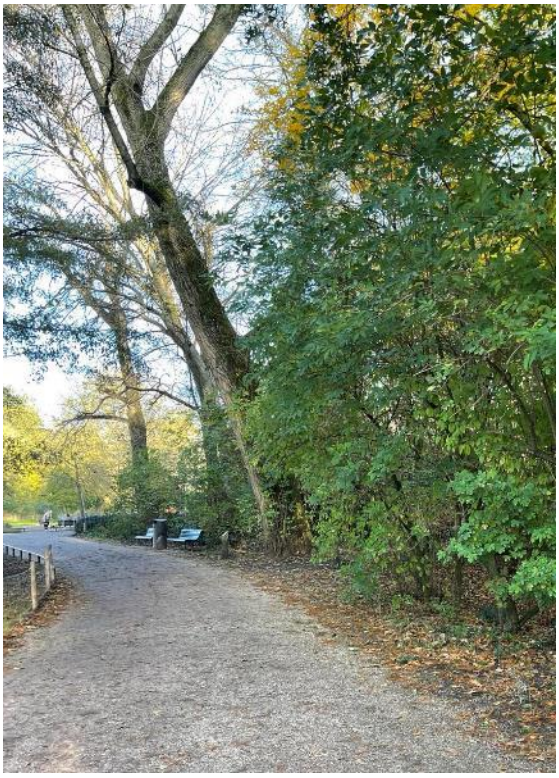


Figure 7 Narrow paths with some benches very close to each other, Photo by Author, 2024

In the park, several benches were placed directly next to each other [see figure 7], suggesting that these can be used by a larger number of users, or can encourage social interaction between different users of the two benches. However, for those who seek solitude in the park, the placement of another bench next to the other could be perceived as an impediment to their use since they can be used by others as well.

Other design features that characterized the park were dense vegetation and so-called ‘hidden spots. On the day of observation, a man was present in the dense vegetation on the west side of the park, talking on his phone. It was difficult to see his presence. Limited visibility and not being able to distinguish the presence of another person, particularly at night, could be perceived as a major source of insecurity among park-users and women in particular. [see figures 8 & 9].

Figure 8 Hidden Spot, Photo by Author, 2024

Figure 9 Hidden spot due to dense vegetation, Photo by Author, 2024

Such a hidden spot could be easily used as a hideout for someone who wanted to attack or sexually harass, with no possibility of being seen by others. Undoubtedly, vegetation is vital and necessary in the park. Vegetation by itself does not create unsafe conditions or constitute a feeling of insecurity or exclusion; however, the way someone might exploit the dense vegetation can contribute to feelings of insecurity. Additionally, the fact that men use the space is enough to make the dense vegetation seem unsafe. For instance, if there was a woman talking on her phone at that point, my feelings would be very different. Therefore, the fact that a man is using the space in combination with the high vegetation, hidden spots, can potentially create feelings of insecurity.

Moreover, something else I noticed during my visits to the park was that the outdoor gyms were used only by men, an observation that led me to reflect on various aspects. Perhaps the design of those sport activities does not correspond to women’s needs and preferences, or women avoid these places thinking that they do not belong in such places, or maybe the dynamics of the majority presence of men make women feel unsafe and uncomfortable, discouraging them from using the sport facilities.

In addition, the park had two areas for kids, which were full every day. Many caretakers, mostly women, were visiting them with children. Perhaps caretakers feel that they have a suitable place to enjoy their free time, enhancing the sense of security and intimacy in public space. Furthermore, the high presence of women in the playgrounds highlights their increasing participation in leisure and socializing activities outside the home, reinforcing the importance of public spaces for women's health and well-being. Moreover, the presence of playgrounds

seems extremely important, as this way caretakers, even when they are with their children, can go out, keep them creatively occupied, and spend quality time with them. Parents are looking for safe and accessible spaces for their children, which allow them to enjoy space without worrying about their safety. Therefore, it seems that the playgrounds in Sarphatipark have been successfully designed to attract mothers to use them. However, interviews with mother, grandmothers, or childcare women will indicate whether this is true or not.

Another feature of the park that made me enjoy the place was the presence of dogs. At Sarphatipark, there are areas where dogs are allowed and can play and run around without the restriction of a leash. In my opinion, this was a major reason why the park seemed so lively, as during my visits this area was undoubtedly the most used area. Every day there were people walking and playing with their dogs, which made the park busy and therefore mentally safer, and arguably, there was a bigger level of public social control, as having more people in the park can make you feel like something is less likely to happen. Hence, the presence of dogs in a park can enhance the feeling of vitality, socialization, and protection, creating a safer environment for women. Furthermore, during one of my visits to the park, it began to rain. What I realized was that all the people in the park were rushing to leave, as there was not any shelter to protect themselves. This could be a barrier for pregnant, elderly, or disabled women, for example, and prevent them from using them for various reasons. First, excessive exposure to heat or cold can negatively affect the health of pregnant women, as they tend to be vulnerable to colds. Therefore, shelters that offer shade, and protection from rain or wind are essential for their well-being. In addition, pregnant, women, and disabled or elderly people often face difficulties in walking long distances. The absence of shelters within a short distance can potentially make them feel more vulnerable and excluded if they have to walk a long distance to reach a protected area in case of severe weather conditions.

Finally, I visited the park in the early evening, around 19:00, where my experience was completely different. When I arrived at the park, I was confronted with a completely dark park, without any trace of light so that you could not see beyond a few meters. The street lighting didn't help at all to illuminate the inside of the park. I did not feel absolutely safe entering the park, so I decided to walk around the park, observing it from a distance and standing at the entrances to the park to observe who was entering and leaving. Unsurprisingly, many men were being seen entering and exiting the park, as well as several were observed spending time in the park. On the other hand, not a single woman visited the park. Many women were choosing to go around the park to either walk their dogs or exercise or walk, which is in direct contrast to the image of the park in the morning hours, when many women were entering the park for these purposes. This fact may lead to the conclusion that the park presents significant exclusions for women. Moreover, it confirms the results of previous studies that women are more likely to feel unsafe in public space compared to men. In this case, women are more likely to feel unsafe in a dark park than men do, as dark spaces and decreased visibility may significantly increase the risk of crime and sexual harassment (Alam & Cape-Davenhill, 2022). During my visit to the park, I decided not to enter the park since I felt vulnerable and unable to prevent any unwanted situation. Consequently, that made me reflect on that I would never feel comfortable visiting this park during the nighttime without the presence of a man with me. This caused a sense of dependency for personal safety, reducing my feeling of autonomy and freedom of movement, and ultimately contributing to a diminished sense of belonging in this park. The experience and utilization of public spaces by women is directly impacted by a lack of safety. Therefore, one major element affecting how women use public areas is their fear of crime and violence. The absence of lighting does not seem to affect men’s utilization of park, so it is fair to ask, is the park inclusive for women?

Overall, what emerges from the participant observations is that the park initially appeared to be a well-designed park, but it ultimately appears to present some inequalities in access and enjoyment of the park. Men seem to maintain greater freedom in choosing to visit the park regardless of time. Does this hold true for women visiting the park as well? Or do they feel that access is restricted by factors related to safety? Furthermore, the lack of basic infrastructure, such as lighting or the layout of the space, can potentially lead to the indirect exclusion of women from the park, limiting their access to spaces that theoretically should be accessible, inclusive, and safe for everyone, regardless of gender. However, interviews with women in the park will reinforce this view by saying that the absence of certain elements as well as the way the parks are designed often either deters them from visiting them or affects their experience in them.

5.2 Participant observations in Oosterpark

My first visit to Oosterpark took place on a sunny day during the week. The park was quite crowded, with liveliness and movement, which gave a pleasant atmosphere. The first impression was that the park consists of a very large, well-maintained open space, which encourages park users to spend time there [see figures 10 & 11]. While I was walking through the park, I encountered the same pattern regarding the sitting areas as in Sarphatipark; in one section of the park, benches were concentrated in a single area, whereas another section lacked any sitting option.

Figure 10 Well- maintained park, Photo by Author, 2024

Figure 11 Oosterpark open space, Photo by Author, 2024

Based on my fieldwork observations, it became evident that during off-peak hours, when the park was less crowded, women were more likely to leave a bench space between another man who was already sitting there. Conversely, no evidence of the opposite occurring was noted. Specifically, this behavior was observed primarily with women next to other men and not women, as in this case, they were choosing to sit next to them without keeping a distance. In the next section I will try to verify whether that women feel insecure, threatened, or in danger with the presence of a strange man so close to them. I will also try to validate whether this behavior reflects the different experiences that the genders may have in public spaces,

ultimately limiting women's freedom to use the space equally and whether they assess the situation they are in in order to choose accordingly what is best to ensure their protection. Another significant feature observed was the toilets. During the first visit to the park, no immediate toilet facilities were observed. Upon further inspection, a urinal surrounded by an enclosed structure was observed in the center of the park, visible and easily accessible for men [see figure 12]. However, there was no sign directing me to the women's restrooms; Therefore, women must either walk to the park entrance to find their location via the information map or navigate around to find them. The conclusions that can be drawn are initially the lack of equality. This design seems to not consider the needs of all users of the park, and specifically those of women. On the other hand, the needs of men are served directly, with the result that women may feel neglected or invisible. In addition, it can create feelings of exclusion and insecurity in women because their needs cannot be easily met, unlike men, who seem to have priority. This may affect the sense of safety and inclusiveness of public space. Finally, the lack of orientation for women's toilets, as well as the provocative placement of urinals in the middle of the park, indicates a design that does not sufficiently consider the comfort and needs of women in public spaces.

Figure 12 Urinal in Oosterpark, Photo by Author, 2024

Another observation on the day of the field work was that the garbage bins next to the seating areas seemed to affect the relaxation and experience of women in the park [see figure 13]. The placement of bins in urban parks is undoubtedly necessary for the cleanliness and good maintenance of the park. However, it was observed that there were often people experiencing poverty and trying to find food or valuable items to strive to secure their livelihood and endeavor to sustain themselves financially. These people needed to come very close, which could have been uncomfortable for both them and the people sitting there. One particular incident that occurred involved two young women sitting on benches who left when a man approached to look for trash. In contrast, in a similar incident, two men were not bothered by his presence. Could the presence of these people affect the safety and experience of women in the park? Is it their social class or gender that may be responsible for their leaving the place they were at? Interviews with the women will seek to clarify this situation.

Figure 13 Bins placed next to benches, Photo by author, 2024

Additionally, compared to Sarphatipark, this park had fewer women, or at least less women without the presence of men. Therefore, not many women were observed exercising or relaxing in the park, as in Sarphatipark. On the contrary, the presence of men in this park was dominant. This also hindered the field research as I had difficulty finding women to interview, resulting in me having to spend more hours in the park every day. This raises the question of whether that the park is perceived as safe for women and whether it lacks infrastructure that contributes to their sense of security and inclusiveness. Can the company of men with women be perceived as a protective factor in places that women might otherwise consider dangerous or unsafe?

Similarly to Sarphatipark, the outdoor sports facilities were dominated by men. This brings forth the possibility that the presence of men deters women from using them or that these spaces are not designed with women's needs in mind. Notably, only one woman was recorded using the outdoor sports facilities; however, this was with a male companion present. Perhaps she felt that the space was not safe enough to use without a male companion, who could potentially address an unwanted situation or prevent something from happening altogether. Besides the outdoor sports facilities, playgrounds were occupied by both genders, similar to Sarphatipark. Does this mean that women feel safe both for themselves and for their children? The interviewees will potentially provide more nuance in answering this question.

Finally, I visited the park in the evening, around 18:00. Although there was lightning, the park overall was still dark enough to not see what was happening inside and who was there. As mentioned above, the park was quite dark, and the most curious thing was that there was lighting only on the main paths. As a result, many hidden spots were created where various men were gathered, drinking and smoking. It was obvious that the absence of lighting in these spots attracts such gatherings, as they can easily hide. Given that alcohol consumption is prohibited in the park, these dark spots are the perfect hiding place for them to avoid being noticed and being fined. Even with the presence of a man with me, I felt unsafe, let alone under circumstances where I would be alone. There were women in the park, but they were always accompanied by someone else. However, the park was clearly dominated by more men than women. Visitors to the park only used the main paths, which were lit. Lighting in parks should have functional reasons rather than aesthetic ones. The absence of women at night might mean that the park does not offer equal access and safety to women as it does to men. Furthermore, it could indicate that women are more likely to feel insecure and avoid places, in this case, the park, where they may be exposed to danger and feel vulnerable. Overall, comparing women's visits to Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, lighting seems to increase visitation and women's sense of safety, as long as the lighting is functional. Nevertheless, lighting by itself is not enough for the park to be considered inclusive and completely safe for women (Alam & Cape-Davenhill, 2022).

5.3 Semi-structured interviews in both Sarphatipark & Oosterpark

5.3.1 Exploring women's interaction with the two parks: Usage patterns and safety feelings

As has been mentioned in previous sections, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 25 women in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark. In Sarphatipark only 33% approximately were residents of the neighborhood, however, 80% of participants stated that they visit the park quite often, ranging from several times a week to nearly every day. On the other hand, 50% of the participants in Oosterpark were residents of the neighborhood and all of them use the park almost every day.

The park serves multiple functions. The most frequently reported activities of women were relaxation, recreation, dog walking, fitness and specifically running and finally walking. Some women reported walking as their main activity, often using the park as a way to relax. This reveals that the park is valued as a place for mental relaxation. Running, on the other hand, was

for those seeking a more intense form of exercise. Therefore, the park can promote and reinforce an active lifestyle. In addition, a large number of women highlighted the park as a recreational space, either for socializing or for enjoying free time, thus giving great importance to its role as a shared space. Relaxation was also a key reason for visiting the park, with many women using the park to calm down and escape from everyday life. This function of the park highlights the role of the park in mental health and stress relief. Finally, walking dogs was another activity of the interviewees, demonstrating that the park does not only serve the needs of pets but is also connected to the social dimension of the park. Walking the dog can contribute to the owner's relaxation and the creation of social contacts, as many women spoke with other dog owners in the same space. The park can fulfill various functions and can offer many benefits to its users. Therefore, it is important that everyone has equal access to urban parks and can benefit equally from the opportunities they offer. Below are some indicative answers from the interviewees.

> "I like coming here for walks and to relax. I just think it's quiet, it's not very busy. Now I live near Vondelpark and there it's very busy, but here it is usually just people from the neighbourhood that are utilising the park, so I recognise a lot of faces, and I feel comfortable" [interviewee 2].

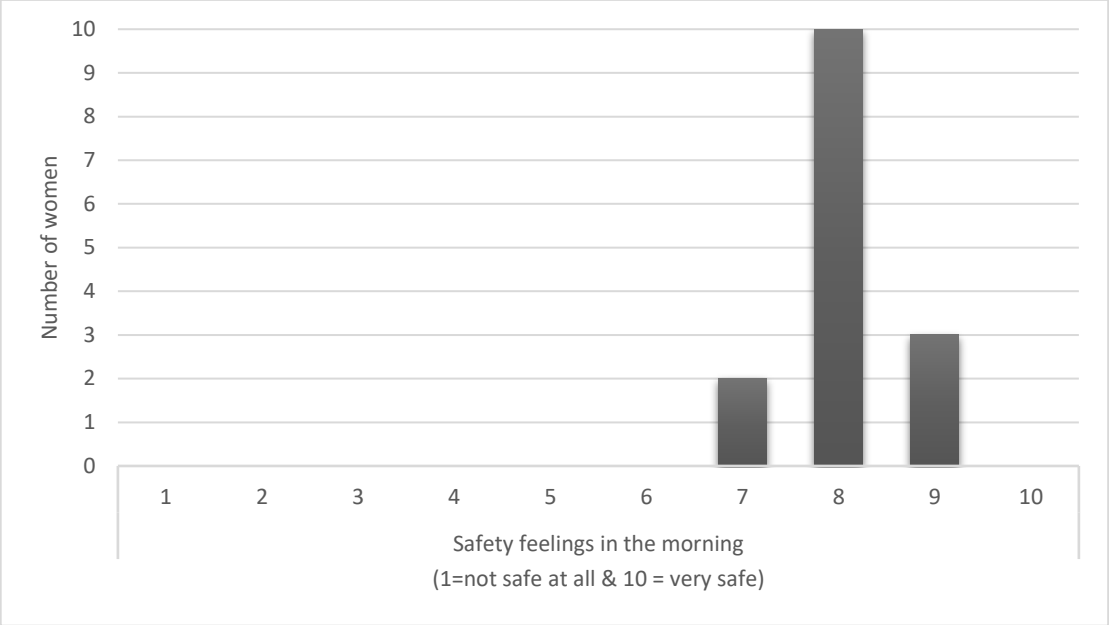
> "I prefer to go for a run in the park because there is more space compared to the sidewalk where you are more likely to encounter obstacles or crowds, but also on the road there are traffic lights at which I have to stop constantly. Therefore, the park is the best solution for me, and this one is also close to my house [interviewee 6]."

In Oosterpark, again, the purposes for visiting it were the same as those of Sarphatipark, such as relaxation, walking, exercise, and dog walking. Nevertheless, despite the different conditions of the two parks, visitors seem to seek the same functions from urban parks.

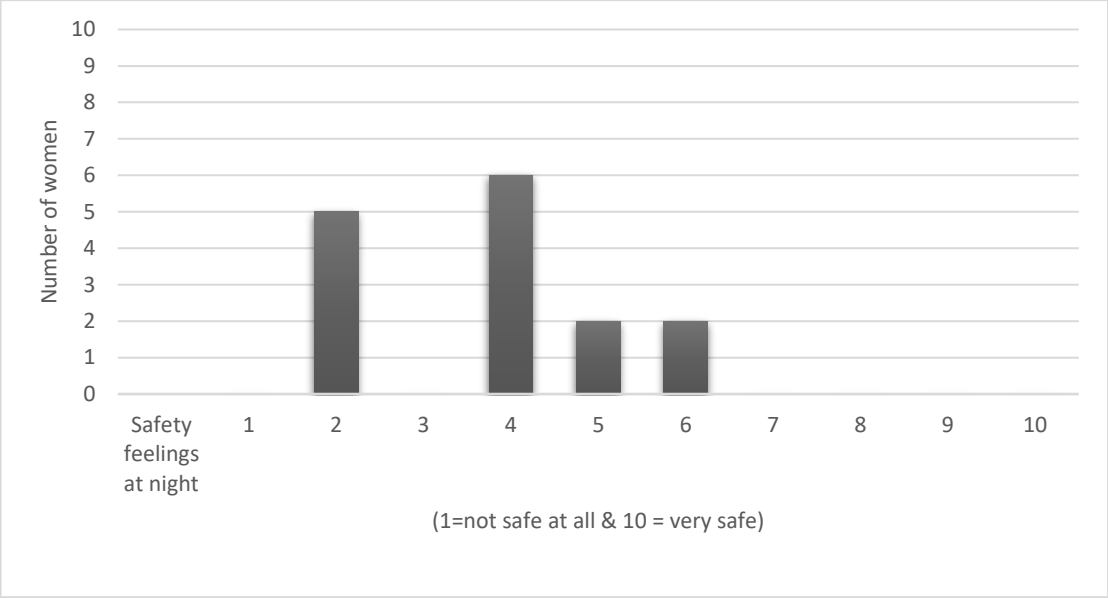
> "I can go jogging every day in the morning. But if I have a dog, then I usually go in the morning and evening" [interviewee 18].

> "It's always nice to have a park close to home, and this one is the closest to my house. So, I like coming here just to walk in the rare days. When it's sunny, it's nice to come, sunbathing for a little bit" [interviewee 20]

During the interview, participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 10 (1=not safe at all & 10 = very safe) how safe would you feel being alone during the day and night? The tables below indicate the results initially at Sarphatipark.



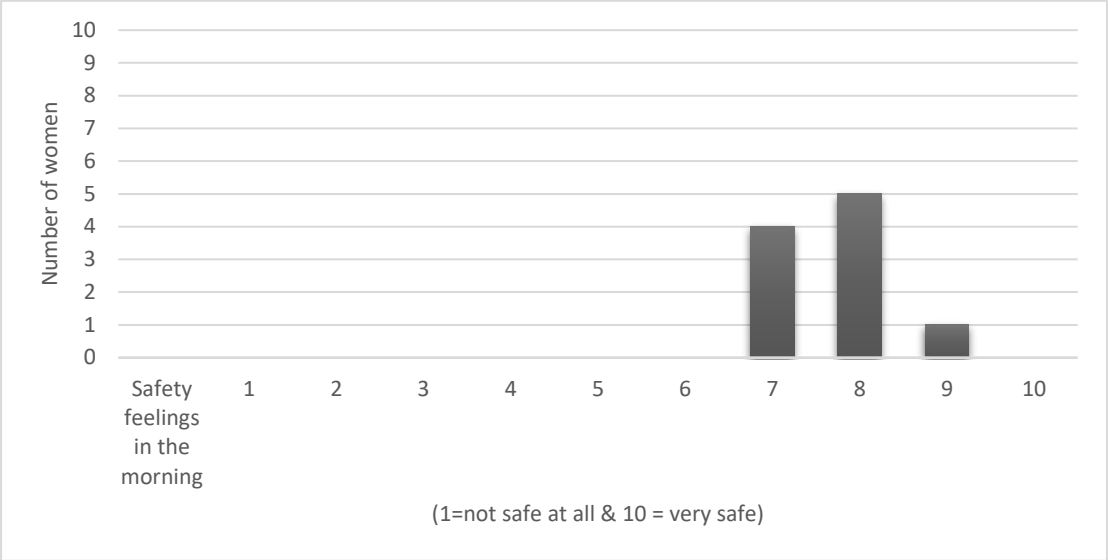
Graph 1 Safety feelings in the morning at Sarphatipark, Graph by author, 2025



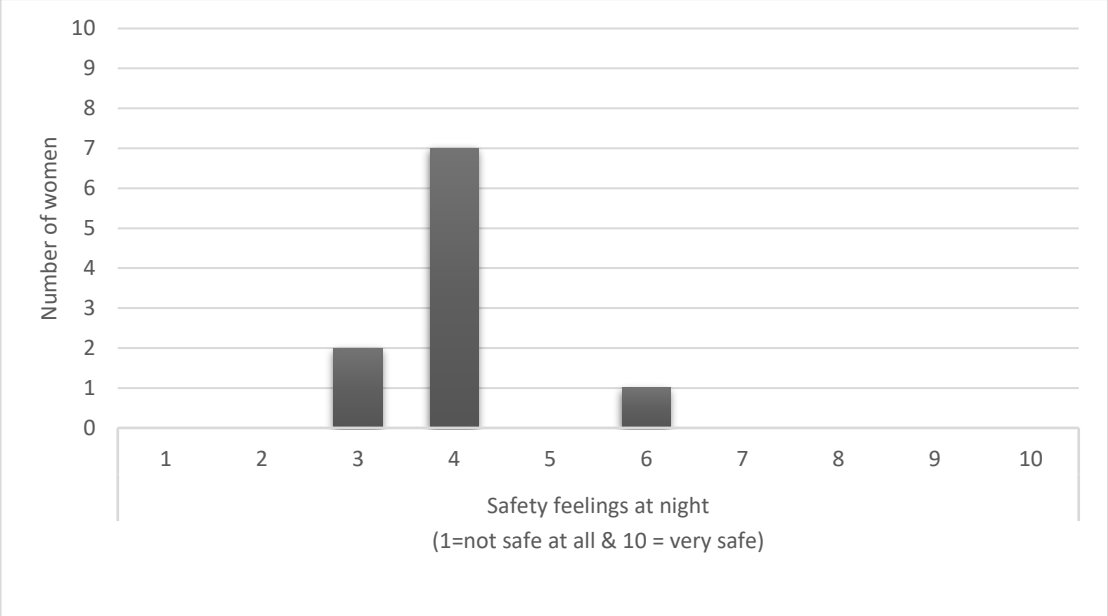
Graph 2 Safety feelings at night in Sarphatipark, Graph by author, 2025

As graph 1 illustrates, the participants in Sarphatipark feel quite safe during the day, as no one rated their sense of feeling below seven. However, it becomes evident that no one gave it a ten. This reveals that no woman feels absolutely safe, and they possibly have some concerns and misgivings. Uncertainty and fear seem to prevail, as well as the perception that something could always happen. In the ensuing, looking at graph 2, there is a significant drop in women's sense of safety at night, as the majority rated it with two or four. Consequently, it is clear that women feel severely unsafe at night compared to the day. Daylight and increased movement in the park seem to contribute significantly, while, on the contrary, the reduced visibility at night creates feelings of vulnerability and insecurity.

The graphs below demonstrate the sense of women's feelings at Oosterpark both during the day and at night. Similarly to Sarphatipark, although women feel quite safe during the day, some doubts keep them away from feeling completely safe. Finally, women appear to feel exceedingly unsafe at night.



Graph 3 Sense of safety in the morning at Oosterpark, Graph by author, 2025



Graph 4 Sense of safety at night in Oosterpark, Graph by author, 2025

Proceeding with the next question of the interview, participants were prompted to respond to what decision they would make if they had to go from A to B during the night, go through the park or around the park? Initially, if they had to walk and then if they were by bike and elaborate on their response.

All women interviewed in both parks expressed that even if the route was shorter, they would never choose to walk through the park; therefore, they would prefer to go around the park. The same opinion also prevailed for cycling in Sarphatipark, while in Oosterpark there were three women who stated that they would choose Oosterpark as a shortcut at night as long as they were with a bike. Most women indicated that anything could happen at night, which makes them afraid of being sexually harassed or attacked. The absence of lighting in Sarphatipark exacerbates their feelings of safety, discouraging them from utilizing the park in the evening. In addition, some other women pointed out that the presence of other people inside the park make them feel vulnerable, uncomfortable and unsafe, as they are unable to ascertain their

intentions. Besides that, past experiences previous experiences, either their own or from other people's stories of men hiding in the park and abusing or raping women. These experiences deter women from visiting the park, especially at night when visibility is limited, as they reinforce the feeling of insecurity and fear for their personal safety. The insecurity caused by such experiences deters women from visiting or staying in the park. This limits their inclusion in public spaces and their ability to benefit from the opportunities that the urban parks offer. Finally, some women revealed that no matter what park, no woman should go through it at night, indicating their concern for women's safety at night. The fact that they mentioned only women and not men shows that they often face different restrictions and dangers which highlights existing inequalities and fears related to gender. Furthermore, research has shown that women are more likely to receive sexually ambiguous comments and sexual harassment, compared to men (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022b; Hehman et al., 2022).

Some of the women expressed that they would not go through the park neither by bike nor on foot. They specifically stated:

> "I would definitely choose around the park, just like with the bike, because inside the park there are no lights, and even if it is an open space, at night, with these bushes and trees you never know what can happen and I have heard bad stories of people hiding and abusing women." [interviewee 5]

> "I would go around the park both on foot and by bike because there are people who hang out in the parks. And growing up I have heard about girls being raped in the parks and there are also guys who pull people off their bikes at night, while they're riding their bikes. So, no matter what I would go around the park." [interviewee 7]

> "I would never walk through the park and neither should you. Not in any park, to be honest, because I go to many parks near my place, but I'm not going to walk through the park at night." [interviewee 9]

On the other hand, there were some women, however limited, who said they would cycle through the Oosterpark opining that biking reducing the time they spend in the park and the risk of finding themselves in a vulnerable position. In addition, another justification given for their preference to cross the park by bike was the fact that it was less likely that someone would catch them and immobilize them. This choice reveals that women are looking for ways to feel safe and protect themselves, choosing to move in a way that will increase mobility and reduce the feeling of vulnerability in urban parks. This way of thinking underpins the perception of insecurity that prevails among women, especially when using the space at night. Finally, another woman mentioned that she would choose to go through the park using her bicycle, however this choice may be due to the presence of her dog, specifically saying:

> "I do cycle through the park. Although I did not use to do it in the past, I do it now; it might be because of the dog. I always have my dog with me. Nevertheless, I will always check before I enter, whether it's crowded or not, how I feel. If it's crowded, I will go through the park, but I'll still be careful." [interviewee 16]

Overall, avoiding the parks at night demonstrates that women do not feel sufficiently safe, regardless of the mode of transportation. This feeling limits women's access to the parks, resulting in a reduction in the park's inclusiveness for women at all hours of the day. The preference for an alternative route instead of the shortcut through the park indicates that these two parks are not considered safe routes at night. In addition, even with a bicycle, which offers greater speed and autonomy, the majority of women avoid crossing the park. Consequently, this reinforces the perception that the risks are high. These feelings and perceptions reveal inequality in the use and access to public spaces, highlighting the importance of adapting public

parks to women's needs and concerns in order to become more inclusive for them. The discussion below covers which elements and infrastructural features deteriorate women's sense of inclusiveness and therefore make them feel that their needs as women are not considered. Besides that, how parks can be designed differently to minimize these feelings is outlined.

5.3.2 Factors contributing to women's feelings of exclusion in Sarphatipark

The larger proportion of women expressed that the presence of men drinking and smoking as well as dealing or even using drugs inside the park makes them feel unsafe and uncomfortable, discouraging them from utilizing the park and therefore experience reduced access to the park's benefits. In addition, it was stated that men often make vulgar comments or try to approach them. It seems that women associate such behaviors with unpredictable behavior and aggression, especially when these activities come from men. In many cases, the image of a man drinking or using drugs is associated with the idea that he can sexually assault a woman and generally violate social norms. More precisely, a woman stated:

> "Sometimes there is a group of men drinking or smoking. This makes me feel uncomfortable, as most of the time when men drink, they can become more diffuse or even aggressive. In general, you cannot predict their reactions. Of course, not all men are like this; there are exceptions; however, I cannot ignore that such phenomena are common. For this reason, I prefer to avoid the park or visit it with at least one person with me." [interviewee 1]

Additionally, the spatial configuration of the park not only exacerbates women's feelings, but it also seems to facilitate these behaviors. All women reported that the absence of lighting deteriorate their sense of safety. More precisely, they claimed that poor lit areas in the park tend to act as a refuge for people who don't want the world to see them. A woman highlighted her concern by saying:

> "There is no lighting in this park as a result you sometimes see people sitting, listening to music, but you cannot see their faces and that is scary for me." [interviewee 8]

The eye contact factor is important for creating a sense of control and anticipating danger. When they can't distinguish faces, they feel vulnerable, as they can't assess the intent of others. Moreover, another woman specifically said:

> "There is a lack of adequate lighting in the park. This can make me feel excluded. In my mind, when there is someone in the park, which is completely dark, it is quite strange. What are you doing in the park? On a dark side. Darkness facilitates delinquent behavior; as no one sees you, you can hide very easily. For instance, no one will go to deal drugs in a bright park; it is not impossible, but it certainly makes it difficult. I do not understand why this park does not have lighting. It looks like it invites those who want to be invisible or commit some kind of delinquent behavior. Every night there are people drinking, who knows what they are doing? In the summer there are even more, probably because of the good weather. How can I feel that I belong in a park where safety issues are not considered?" [interviewee 10]

A dark park may indirectly allow some visitors to exploit reduced visibility in order to avoid recognition and social control. According to Oscar Newman (1972), who developed the theory of defensible space, natural surveillance, which allows residents to observe public spaces better and see what is happening, can reduce crime, as people are less likely to commit delinquent behavior in areas where they can easily be seen (Koskela & Pain, 2000). Besides lighting, hidden corners and decreased visibility were another recurring concern in the women's

responses. Interviewees expressed that they do not feel safe when they cannot see what is coming their way. Consequently, they cannot identify potential dangers, and they also cannot be seen in case they need help. As can be seen from figures 14 and 15, Sarphatipark contains such paths. The dense vegetation and the angle of the paths obstruct visual clarity. These two parts of the park were pointed out by all women in the question of whether there are specific areas within the park that make them feel uncomfortable. A woman mentioned:

> "When you turn this corner [see figure 14], you can barely see what's going on, and we cannot see what is going on at the moment either. Having vegetation all over the park is, of course, nice and lovely, but in terms of safety, anything can happen to you on this corner if someone comes or waits for you at the end of the corner." [interviewee 2]

While another one said:

> "I do not feel safe here [see figure 15] because I can hardly see anything, and all the guys drinking and smoking are always gathered here, probably because they are not easily visible. But since I have a dog and I am not allowed to walk him everywhere, I am forced to cross this path. In daylight it is doable, yet I still feel uncomfortable and vulnerable, and the darker it gets, the more unsafe I feel." [interviewee 3]

The possibility that they may be exposed to danger, as well as the possibility of not being noticed if they need help, increases their fear significantly. This design feature highlights the need for urban parks with good visibility and user relevance, to enhance the feeling of inclusion and safety and the possibility of communication.

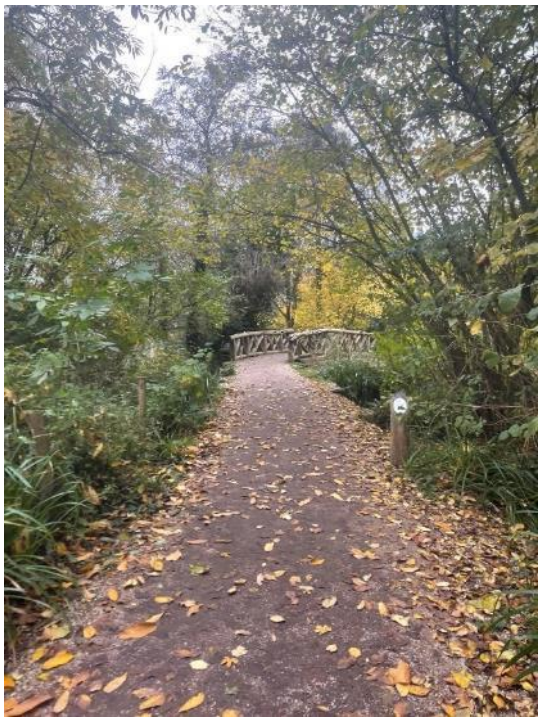


Figure 14 Paths with decreased visibility, Photo by author, 2024

Figure 15 Hidden corners, Photo by author, 2024

Finally, another factor that makes women feel excluded is the toilets. Although there is a toilet in Sarphatipark, most women do not feel comfortable using it, either because it is not well maintained or because they do not feel safe in it, given that there is one toilet for all genders.

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> “I can't use the toilet because it's not clean. It is hard to use it in a hygienic way. It is not as easy as for men, we have to sit somewhere, unlike them. I prefer to wait until I get home.” [interviewee 14]

> “I never visit the toilet in the park. You never know who might be waiting inside and what his intentions are. Besides that, the toilet is in a location that is a bit isolated, they cannot easily see you if something happens.” [interviewee 6]

> “I do not feel comfortable using the toilet here, as it is both for men and women. I do not know what a man can do if he goes before me. What if he hides a camera inside?” [interviewee 11]

The inability to use the toilet highlights the need for infrastructure that responds to the needs of women as well as the need to ensure their safety and privacy in the park. Shared toilets for both sexes as well as their isolated location may exacerbate feelings of insecurity, discomfort and vulnerability. Finally, the condition that prevails in the toilets, the lack of hygiene, further intensifies the feeling of insecurity and neglect of women's needs, reinforcing gender inequalities in the park.

Women were questioned whether they feel that the park is designed in a way that considers their needs. Interviewees mentioned that they do not believe anyone thinks about them when designing a public space, and if something in the park happens to include them, it is by chance and not because they were thought of. However, by omitting proper lighting, maintaining isolated areas and designing narrow paths, women expressed that their needs are disregarded. In addition, a remarkable statement is the perception of a woman on this question.

> “Even if the design considers our needs, as women we are still more vulnerable and likely to encounter a criminal, violent act than a man, simply because we are physically at a disadvantage.” [interviewee 4]

Women feel more likely to be harassed than men because they cannot easily defend themselves in case of danger, due to their physical build and physical strength, which men could exploit, making women feel vulnerable. This condition prevents women from using public spaces, especially at night when traffic is reduced, and therefore the possibility of someone seeing them and intervening is limited.

Overall, women face unique barriers in Sarphatipark which diminish its restorative benefits. The layout of the park does not meet the needs of women, as various parameters such as visibility, transparency and safety were not considered, thus leading to a lack of inclusion of their needs and concerns. All social groups should have equal access to public spaces, so that they are defined as inclusive, something that does not apply in this particular park. Consequently, the park reinforces spatial inequality and excludes women, who do not feel safe and welcome at all hours of the day and in all parts of the park.

5.3.3 Factors contributing to women's feelings of exclusion in Oosterpark

Oosterpark's visitors shared their concerns and how the park does not consider all their needs. Although the park has a different layout than Sarphatipark, the factors that make women feel excluded are identical. It therefore seems that the "mistakes" in the design of parks are repeated. All participants expressed that the presence of certain people who gather daily, at a specific part in the park and dealing or using drugs as well as having very loud music, makes them perceive the environment as highly unsafe and feel a heightened sense of vulnerability, resulting in them avoiding this side of the park. Throughout my visits to the park, this phenomenon was daily indeed. In fact, during an interview I conducted with a woman, passing by close to this part of the park [see figure 16], a man, obviously under the influence of drugs, interrupted us by coming into very close contact with us to ask for a lighter. This incident contributed to reorienting our direction, as the woman did not want to continue walking there, stating that she did not feel safe, but I also did not feel comfortable being there. This woman specifically shared:

> "Sketchy people like going around makes me feel unsafe here. They come to you with strange questions, especially at night, yet also during the day sometimes. And on top of that, paths can be really narrow so you cannot really avoid them." [interviewee 19]

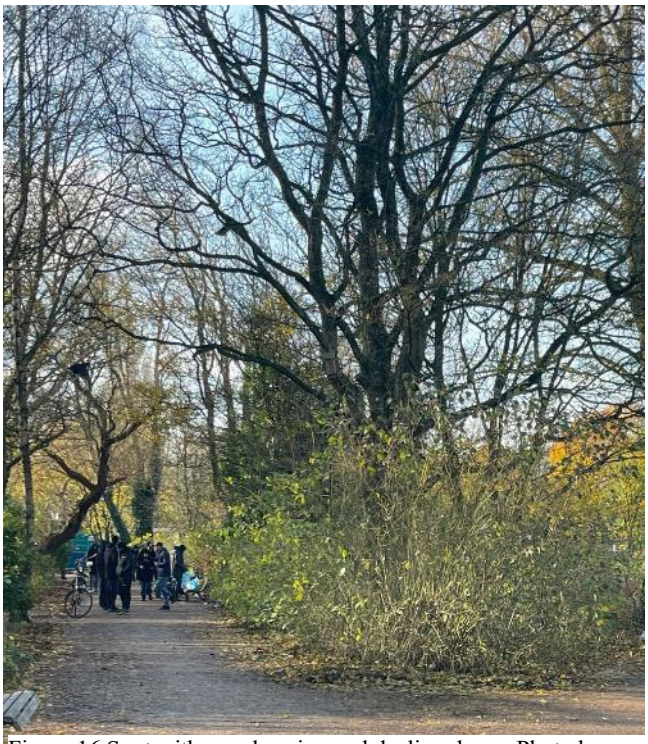

Figure 16 Spot with people using and dealing drugs, Photo by author, 2024

Indeed, during this incident I had to step on the putty and the mud and therefore get off the pavement in order to get away from this man. Upon being asked to provide an explanation about why she thinks they constantly gather at this point, she responded:

> "It is a like more hidden place here. But there you see it's more open, they cannot stand there but here they can really hide themselves." [interviewee 18]

Another woman similarly stated:

> "What makes me feel uncomfortable and unsafe in this park is a group of certain types of people that I imagine no woman would want to walk past them when they are alone, so do I, regardless of the time of day." [interviewee 23]

Furthermore, I also had an interesting conversation with two women who have been visiting the park since before its renovation, as they have been residents of the neighborhood for years. Both expressed that the park has now visibly improved over the past with the effect of visiting the park more often. However, they remarked that this particular group of people continues to frequent the park, just in a different spot. The spot where they used to congregate was next to the music dome, a space that prior to the renovation was quite closed and neglected. This space created a sense of isolation, making it an ideal place to hide. After the renovation, however, this space was opened up, providing full visibility to the rest of the park, which made visitors use it

more often. As a result, this group of people could no longer congregate there. Nevertheless, they moved to another part of the park, which is now more secluded and limits visibility to the rest of the park thus continuing the problem. In particular the one woman said:

> "They renovated it quite well a few years ago, it was a lot dodgier. But still, if you go through the middle of the park, the cluttering and that part is still quite bad because you have these bushy areas, which are scary. There is just a bunch of men that get concentrated in the middle drinking, any time of the day. In winter it is less, but in summer, you will get caught in one or the other way, or they will say something to you, and that is just like an uncomfortable and a bad experience, that makes it unsafe. It is uncomfortable, and, you know, when you are alone or when you are running, it is just annoying. But as I said, Oosterpark did change a lot, because before they used to always sit around the pavilion, but now they have completely renovated. They placed a lot of lights there, and it is way more sculpted. So, they kind of moved because people started using it, and then they kind of moved to the other side of the park, which now became the problem. They kind of choose these abandoned places where there is less lighting or less openness and they are less exposed. I think the fact that they are building so much on the side, and it is like this open view into the pavilion part, makes it less attractive for them to sit there as well." [interviewee 20]

The other woman agreed, saying:

> "Ten years ago, it was shady. It was a really bad park; it wasn't a good place. However, it has been a lot better now but like [interviewee 20] said there are still those men who gather in the park, drinking, smoking etc. keeping me away from this spot. This path is the perfect spot for them, as there is no lighting and it is surrounded by high vegetation, so you cannot see what they are doing. This path is like it belongs to them; they are there every day, and no one else but their group passes by this path. So how can I feel that this park is inclusive when it facilitates this kind of behavior and actions? And the municipality knows it; it is not something they are not aware of, so why do they not do something about it? Are they and their actions more important than our safety?" [interviewee 21]

The comparison of the two parks shows that the inappropriate design of a public space can reinforce the occurrence of delinquent behaviors, creating conditions that particularly affect women, as they are more likely to be receive unwanted comments (Kern, 2020) and be approached by other men. In particular, features such as narrow paths, poor lighting, and heavy vegetation create conditions of limited visibility and provide hiding places, making the space less safe and accessible for women. Improving these features through appropriate interventions can therefore enhance the safety and comfort of women, increasing their participation in the use of public spaces.

Finally, in Oosterpark, the toilets are again a factor of exclusion for women. No woman was aware about the presence of toilets in the park. However, they knew about the urinal in the middle of the park. Specifically, a woman mentioned:

> "Everywhere in the city, they have men's toilets. I always think it is annoying. I even think it is provocative" [interviewee 20],

While another one said:

> "It is weird that they do not have toilets for us, but they have this urine thing. If I visit the park for a short time, to walk my dog, for instance, I don't mind, but if I

> come here with friends, let's say, where we usually spend a lot of time, especially in the summer when we usually have picnics here, it's more difficult. There's this café though that I can go to, but it is still uncomfortable to go inside the café just to use their toilet when you are not even sitting there." [interviewee 19]

The circumstance in which women have to visit private places to find toilets, where in most cases they are a paid service, exacerbates gender-related disadvantages as men's needs can be met within urban parks and without any extra charge.

The absence of signs indicating where women can find the toilets, while there is a visible urinal for men, can lead to the conclusion that women's needs have not been taken into account in the design of the park. This can create feelings of lack of care and priority for female park users, as well as concern about where they can be served, especially if they are in the area for a long time. In addition, it can lead to feelings of insecurity, as the assumption of the absence of women's toilets can make the park seem less safe or welcoming. Finally, it reinforces gender inequalities in public space, showing that men have easier access to basic infrastructure.

Overall, there are significant factors that make women feel unsafe, unwelcome, vulnerable and therefore excluded in a public space that everyone should benefit from equally. The park should not have barriers that make it difficult for some groups of users to access it, while facilitating access for others. All of the concerns mentioned above should be considered in order for women to perceive this public space as inclusive. The next section presents further recommendations aimed at making parks more inclusive for women.

5.3.4 From exclusion to inclusion: Rethinking Park design for women

The women were prompted to reflect on how the park could be designed differently to make them feel more included and therefore give recommendations on how the ideal park would look like for them. The majority of women directly linked the recommendations for ameliorating the inclusion of parks to safety issues. However, recommendations beyond safety were also proposed.

5.3.4.1 Recommendations related to safety

Open space and clear visibility

Open space with an open view was the most popular response from women in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark. All women appreciate openness in both parks and would like it to be a main feature in all parks. Clear sightlines allow park visitors to verify the presence of people who may pose a threat. Open space allows women to see a lot ahead, even on the other side of the park. In addition, open space enables them to observe who is getting in and out of the park, but they can also have a look in case anything happens. Consequently, openness strengthens women's sense of security, making them move in space with greater liberation and at ease, with reduced concern about the possibility of something occurring and therefore enjoying the space with greater pleasure. Initially, women in Sarphatipark shared:

> "The first thing I look at is my safety. So, if the place is open and I can see what's going on around me, I'm more likely to visit it and stay longer." [interviewee 12]

> "I think my recommendation is open space with no hidden corners. I always stay away from this path, for example [see figure 17]. In the morning, I am not afraid that something will happen to me because the park is crowded, but still I have happened to walk there, where guys often gather, and they will try to talk to you, or even the way they will stare at you, it's just uncomfortable; I don't like it, so I avoid it. So yeah, maybe they could avoid creating corners like that. Open space is always better and safer." [interviewee 2]

Figure 17 Spot in Sarphatipark that is recommended for change, Photo by author, 2024

Regarding visibility, visitors to Sarphatipark stated that they particularly appreciate the visibility to the outside of the park, as they can see beyond its boundaries, such as the surrounding houses and cafes. This connection to the wider urban fabric seems to enhance the sense of familiarity and safety, making the park more accessible and welcoming. More precisely, women pointed out:

> "Having clear visibility to the houses that are around is safer because there's probably someone that can hear you by their windows if anything happens" [interviewee 10]

> "Seeing the houses outside the park is important because if something happens, I can scream. And I think maybe someone could see me from the window, or hear me, so I would feel safer. I can see them, and they can see me. But if the edges are too close, I think I would feel less comfortable." [interviewee 1]

> "I like that in this park I can see the houses, the people on the street, and everything, so I think it is important to not have long trees that can cover the visibility from the outside. So, you can see easily the other people, like now, we can see the two men passing here, passing by. So, if I can see them, they can see me. So, like this, I feel comfortable." [interviewee 14]

An open space with a clear view is usually linked with high levels of prospect, which is a paramount element for assessing a situation and the ability to feel safe (Polko & Kmic, 2022; Struyf, 2020). In addition, places that are not visible, either because they are isolated or because visual cues are obstructed, are thought to increase the risk of attack and, consequently, fear. Such obstacles also create the feeling of being "trapped" (Lorenc et al., 2013).

Proceeding to Oosterpark, the open space was again one of the most frequent recommendations with visitors saying:

> "I think open space in a park is very important because people are more exposed that way, they can't hide so the park gives you a greater feeling." [interviewee 21]

> "I like that the park is so open. However, there are still some hidden paths like this one there [see figure 18]. Maybe if they maintain the greenery better so that these paths were not so closed and therefore there was better visibility, I would feel safer and more comfortable walking there. Also, I think that if this part was more open, fewer people would gather there to deal drugs or drink alcohol." [interviewee 24]

Figure 18 Hidden spot in Oosterpark that women would like to change, Photo by author, 2024

Unlike Sarphatipark, Oosterpark has no visibility to the outside of the park, something the women highlighted as something they would like to see changed. The possibility of seeing the houses around the park is an intervention that possibly all the parks should consider, as the houses can function as a mean of security, as anyone can hear at any moment a cry or a search for help. Houses can function both as an interventionist and a deterrent factor. Specifically, women indicated:

> "I think it is important to maintain visual connectivity with the surroundings with the outside of the park, especially the street can make you feel a bit safer. The more people you feel around you and the more visible you are, the safer you feel." [interviewee 17]

> "Even when I'm alone in the park, if I can see the houses and the people passing by outside, I feel safer and that I'm not alone. Also, if something happens, there are people who can see and hear me." [interviewee 20]

Overall, the recurring response regarding openness and visibility reveals that these features play a dominant role in women's experience of parks. Enhancing visual connections both inside and outside the park can significantly contribute to reducing the feeling of isolation. Consequently, this will enhance spatial justice and equal access to public space, promoting coherence towards women.

Lighting

Inadequately lit parks are a significant factor in women's feelings of insecurity. Initially, in Sarphatipark, the lack of lighting caused intense insecurity among women, discouraging them from visiting it when it is getting dark and therefore limiting their inclusion and freedom. Women prioritize the ability to see who is around them and what is happening in the park. In addition, at night, there are fewer people around, who are not easily visible. Women believe that at night, parks attract different users and different activities in a park. Lighting in parks can significantly help eliminate such situations and therefore improve women's sense of safety. However, lighting should be adequate and properly positioned, as this can significantly affect women's perceptions and feelings. Finally, it was discussed that lighting should not be limited only to the interior of the park but also to the exterior as well as to the exits. Consequently, adequate lighting was one more of women's most frequent recommendations, saying:

> “If there is light, and people can see me, and I can see them as well then, I might be willing to come. It would make it more comfortable for me to walk around. But if there is no lighting then I will definitely not come.” [interviewee 8]

Similarly, women interviewed in Oosterpark expressed that while there is lighting in the park, it is not sufficient enough, as the lighting is limited only to the perimeter of the park and not in the middle of the park, creating hiding spots and facilitating delinquent behavior. This further reinforces that proper lighting placement is important, as elaborated in the following quotes.

> "The lighting makes me feel safer. But here you have lighting on the main road, all around, so you feel a bit safer. However, once you enter the park, like in the middle one, there is no light, and you always have people hanging out. As a woman in general, when I see a group of people standing somewhere at night, I don't feel like taking a risk. So, I would like the park to be treated the same way. Especially on these hidden paths it is important to install lighting so that people stop gathering there." [interviewee 20]

> “I think lighting helps a lot. When you can see from far away, what you're going to encounter, that makes it feel safer, I guess. Even if you're cycling or walking at night, lighting makes a difference. With the right lighting, I can see things clearly, like observing a group of people in the area. If I do see them, I'm less likely to feel an immediate threat because you know what's going on around me, and since I know it before I even get to that point, I'll just change my direction and move away. This allows me to move around the park more comfortably without worrying about surprise encounters.” [interviewee 18]

Overall, despite the fact that lighting holds significance for them and can significantly contribute to their feelings of safety, it is not enough for the park to be considered safe and inclusive for women.

> “I think, that is most Dutch women, I would say, have the common sense of not going in a park at dark. We are raised like this, to avoid the parks at nighttime.” [interviewee 7]

> “I think as women we should never visit a park at night. I think it's a bit in our system, this way of thinking. If it was a park that was like a straight line, a long path from one entrance to the other, and there were lots of lights and lots of bikes going by, then maybe I would visit it just because I feel like it's really an integral part of that street structure. But then it stops being a park. So, no matter how much light there is, I wouldn't. I wouldn't walk alone in any city park at night, no matter how well-designed it was to include me, I try to avoid it unless it's only for women.” [interviewee 17]

It can therefore be argued that the subjective sense of safety is intertwined with the broader social context since women do not feel comfortable visiting the park at night, even if it is carefully designed, with adequate lighting. The presence of other people, and even more so, men, can make women question their intentions or feel helpless if a problem arises. An interplay of multiple factors is required for women to feel safe in the evening.

Security & cameras

Lighting plays a significant role in women’s feeling of safety, however, in isolation, it does not fully address the issue. Consequently, women proposed the presence of security guards and the installation of cameras as an additional measure, which, when combined with lighting, can significantly enhance their overall sense of safety and experience in the park as well as increase

the visits to the park. Specifically, they expressed the need to install cameras in the 'hidden spots' where visibility is limited due to vegetation or the slope of the path, making it easier for people to hide there, as discussed earlier. Women claimed that the presence of security guards would enhance their sense of safety as they would be reassured by the presence of someone in the park whose role is to intervene in case of emergency and generally keep the area safe. According to the interviewees, by implementing these measures, crimes and delinquent behaviors can be prevented to a significant extent. Finally, aside from preventing, cameras can also serve a purpose after a crime has occurred, as they allow for the analysis of events that took place. The women specifically mentioned:

> "I would visit the park at night if there were cameras, because I think it is less likely something to happen if people know they are recorded. I would love cameras; I would feel safer. But they also have to be placed correctly. In places that people can easily hide for instance. If there was a camera in the street, I would feel safer too. In a park you can meet more easily some weirdos. So, I would feel good with camera." [interviewee 11]

> "It would be nice to have "handhaving[1]" because they are just looking around, not necessarily talking to people or doing anything, but just in case something happens they can intervene. So, this can make me feel safe because I know someone is here in case something happens, and they're just doing a walk, maybe like one every hour or something. And it is good that they don't look like a policeman, but more like mediators that you can talk to. It feels safer with these people than with the police, because the police are often associated with danger, like why are there police? But if it's just these people, I feel more secure." [interviewee 7]

Taking together these recommendations reveal that security is a central factor in women's sense of safety and belonging in the park. The presence of security guards and the installation of cameras can enhance the feeling that the park is a place that offers safety. In addition, these measures indicate that their fears are being considered, and therefore the park corresponds to women's need to feel welcome at all hours of the day. Women seek to feel completely safe, with no possibility of harm or threat from others.

Multiple paths and their dimensions

Multiple and wide paths were suggested by the women to perceive the park as more inclusive, as this would make them feel safer and more comfortable moving around the park. The reasoning behind these recommendations was the same, as in both cases it was to avoid potential unwanted behavior or contact with other people. Women, by avoiding groups of people or spots that increase feelings of vulnerability, feel more in control of how they use the park. The flexibility in their movements makes them feel that space takes their concerns and preferences into account. Specifically, they suggested multiple paths as a solution in specific areas of the park where many men congregate. Women feel uncomfortable and unsafe walking past them, fearing unwanted attention, so they appreciate the presence of another path that can prevent them from experiencing such a circumstance. Moreover, women have learned to be afraid of strangers in public spaces (Valentine, 1990), therefore, avoiding strangers in the park can significantly enhance their sense of safety and therefore their participation in the parks.

[1] Municipal security staff who are visibly and actively present in the public space contributing to a safer and more liveable city.

"I want the park to have multiple paths and wider paths because that way I can avoid unwanted attention. For example, some paths can be very narrow, so you have to like share that small space with a stranger." [interviewee 13]

“I would like multiple paths in the park but only if they're all treated the same way, because you clearly see that this one [see figure 19] is really lighted and wide, and there's a lot of people passing. While the other ones [see figure 20], they are narrow, without any light so, there are more people just go to stay and hang out there, so they are re more hidden, and then it feels like you're entering somebody’s space, if someone is hanging out there.” [interviewee 17]

“I think multiple paths is a good solution because here we are [see figure 20], personally, I don’t want to walk through all these people. Path is so narrow that I almost must touch them. So, I am glad that I can choose another way.” [interviewee 19]

Figure 19 Well treated path in Oosterpark, Photo by author, 2024

Figure 20 Paths that are not treated in the same way in Oosterpark, Photo by author, 2024

When women feel they can move around a place without any restrictions and without feeling uncomfortable due to the presence of others, the space becomes more welcome and accessible. Thus, this recommendation can contribute to the overall inclusiveness of the park.

Multiple entrances & exits

In addition to multiple paths, multiple entrances and exits appear to hold significance for them as well. They strengthen the feeling of security as alternative routes are provided, enabling them to enter and exit from different places. By doing so, they can choose the route they consider safe or convenient as well as leave the park easily and quickly, from wherever they are at that particular moment, in case they feel danger/insecurity or simply feel the need for any reason. This reduces the feeling of being trapped and enhances the sense of freedom and autonomy. The women explicitly mentioned:

> “Having one exit is really bad, I would feel straight away unsafe and trapped. So multiple exits and entrances can make me feel more secure because if anything happens then I don’t have to go all the way to the other side of the park to leave.” [interviewee 10]

> “I like multiple entrances and exits because then we can just start our walk from wherever we want. Also, if we need something from a shop, we can quickly get it without making rounds or in case we want to avoid a part of the park, we can enter from another entrance and walk there. It is convenient and practical I would say.” [interviewee 24]

> “Multiple exits are necessary, in case someone is following me for example, I can exit really quick. Or in case there is an exit and near it there are people who I doubt about their intensions, I can at least choose another one.” [interviewee 18]

However, multiple exits can serve other functions for other park users, not necessarily related to safety issues. A pregnant woman specifically stated:

> "Multiple exits are important to me because I get tired quite easily. So, if I'm at one point in the park and I want to leave, it would be very tiring to walk to the other end of the park to get out. So, I would like to have an exit as close as possible to wherever I am. I think the opposite would cause me discomfort." [interviewee 17]

Signage

Although multiple exits and entrances are indispensable, they cannot be considered effective if it necessitates a deliberate search to find it, especially at night. Therefore, clear signage is crucial so that someone can find the exit easily and quickly.

> “Multiple exits are important because if I happen to meet someone very strange, and I need to run I want it to be easy to leave the park. But I don’t want to look for the exits. Maybe something like direction, for instance, and you can see the exit is in this way, you can follow and just go and not look for the exit. But also lighted exits so they can easily be found at night. Maybe some kind of light with reflects. Not like electric lights, but maybe something that the moonlight can reflect, and you can see the exit.” [interviewee 11]

In a general sense, signage and direction are essential, not only to the exits but also to other park activities so that visitors can easily navigate. In particular, a mother mentioned:

> “It would be nice if there were signs that would easily lead you to the restrooms. When I'm with my daughter, we come to the park to play. If she or I need to use the restroom I would like to be able to find it easily and no, we spend time going around to find the restrooms. Plus, if you have to look for a restroom for five minutes, the kids start to whine, they want to go back to play." [interviewee 24]

Overall, the absence of signage creates a feeling of disorientation, as people cannot easily navigate to the point they are looking for. In addition, it reinforces the feeling of insecurity as well as the difficulty in case of an emergency since it makes it difficult to immediately find the exit, making them feel vulnerable, especially at night when visibility is limited.

Dog’s Park

Interviewees in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark value that the park permits dogs, especially Sarphatipark is commonly associated with being a dog park. This aspect was highlighted by both owners of dogs and those without dogs alike. The presence of dogs in the park enhances

the sense of communal surveillance and oversight, as the park is frequented by many owners walking their dogs on a daily basis and at various times throughout the day, contributing to its consistently active and lively atmosphere. In particular, women mentioned:

> "I really like the dogs. I also think that makes me feel safe, maybe. All the time people are here walking with them. When dogs are allowed in the park, there will always be someone walking there. So, I like that." [interviewee 14]

> "I find it nice when it is also a dog's park. There are people out there walking their dogs at all hours of the day. The more people there are, the better. It definitely makes you feel safer. And in my mind, when someone has the intention to harm you, it's not as easy when there are a lot of people. So, I think parks should have elements that attract people at different times of the day. So, allowing dogs in the park and creating an environment that's appropriate for them is a way to attract people." [interviewee 2]

More women gave similar responses, indicating that dogs can serve as a catalyst for bringing people to the park, encouraging greater use and social engagement and therefore mitigating safety concerns.

Benches

The way that benches are placed and also the type of benches were two aspects that were raised during the interview sessions. Oosterpark's visitors in particular mentioned that they would favor the benches being placed within a distance between them, thus not being forced to sit next to people unfamiliar with them and therefore providing a sense of limited personal space and privacy. This aspect would make them feel more comfortable and free.

Figure 21 Benches placed in very close proximity in Oosterpark, Photo by author, 2024

> "I think these benches here [see figure 21] are too close to each other. I just don't feel comfortable sitting so close to a stranger. I just want my privacy and my peace. I think it would be better if there was a bigger distance between them." [interviewee 22]

> "I would prefer a bigger space between the benches. Not all the benches in the park are like that, that's why I prefer the ones with a larger distance. It's not that I don't feel safe, I just don't prefer it, I don't feel particularly comfortable. To be honest, though, it also depends on the person sitting on the bench. Maybe if it's a woman, or father or dad with their child, I wouldn't have the same problem. Honestly, I think I would assess the situation based on the demeanor of the person, and this would influence my decision on whether I feel comfortable sitting at such a close distance."

Looking back at the observations regarding the close placement of benches, it seems that they do not particularly enhance social interaction between different users as is intended to happen. On the contrary, it prevents them from using them. However, it makes them feel more uncomfortable than unsafe.

Additionally, elderly and pregnant women indicated benches as an essential element of the park. Specifically, they mentioned that they would like to have several benches in different parts of the park so that they could always find one nearby to rest. As a result, they feel that the park meets their needs, encouraging them to visit it. An elderly woman mentioned:

> "I think benches are necessary. But not just one here and there. Especially when the park is large, it is important to have benches every few meters. I don't have the stamina to walk for long hours. So, when I feel like I need to sit down, wherever I am, I would like to find an available bench." [interviewee 15]

While a pregnant woman stated:

> "Due to my pregnancy, I get tired a lot more than usual, and I need to take some breaks to rest. So, I would say that benches in close distance are quite important. When I feel like I want to sit, I want to sit right then, I don't want to walk any further to find a bench." [interviewee 17]

Such an arrangement could benefit not only the elderly and pregnant women but also disabled women in terms of mobility.

Aside from the arrangement of the benches, some women said that they would like to see different type of benches at the park without explicitly specifying what they would like them to look like. The women talked about the shape of the benches, that they would like them to be designed in such a way that you can see around you and at the same time be spacious. They stated that classic benches force you to sit in a specific way that blocks visibility from behind, resulting in a diminished ability to notice who is coming from behind you. who is coming from behind you. However, they noted that in no case do they mean removing these benches completely. Furthermore, they expressed that they would like to also find single-person benches in addition to the group seating benches. Finally, the pregnant woman as well as the elderly women highlighted the importance of adding armrests to the benches, as it provides ease for sitting.

5.3.4.2 Recommendations related to inclusivity

Playground

Approaching women at the playground proved challenging since they wanted to stay focused on their children without being distracted. Only one grandmother in Sarphatipark and a mother in Oosterpark were willing to participate.

> Grandmother: "I like when the playground has a fence around it but not isolated from the rest of the park. So, I can still see what is happening outside of the park while the kid is playing. Seating areas are also important so we can rest while looking at our children. I think it is necessary for the playground to have diverse play equipment for various age groups but also greenery so children can engage with nature as well as shaded areas to make it easy for us to look at them and spend more time in the park, especially in the summer." [interviewee 15]

> Mother: "I think the park has first to be designed to be inclusive for children and then it will be inclusive also for us because we just want the best for our children. I will choose a playground which is safe for my child, and he can have fun. If I

> think of me, I just need a bench. And maybe now that I am thinking about it, it would be nice to have some signage depicting parents of both sexes to convey the message that caring for children is the role of both parents." [interviewee 24]

Overall, it is important that playgrounds do not reinforce stereotypes that turn into social norms that childcare is the exclusive role of mothers. They should convey messages that it is the responsibility of both parents. It would also be important to communicate through signs or murals that parents can be either of the opposite sex or of the same sex and that everyone is welcome regardless of their preferences and choices.

Caregiving amenities

Caregiving amenities, including well-designed facilities for breastfeeding as well as baby-changing facilities, were highlighted by mothers, grandmothers, and expectant mothers alike. The presence of these facilities facilitates their privacy, comfort, and stay in the park for a longer period of time, as they can address these essential needs. The scarcity of well-designed facilities for breastfeeding or changing a baby, may cause anxiety for women, initially due to a lack of privacy or because finding a suitable spot can be time-consuming or because they are forced to use non-hygiene surfaces to serve their children's needs. Distinctly these women mentioned:

> "I think it's important to have a breastfeeding space that's closed and out of sight. It's a necessity that needs to be done right away, you can't postpone it. And it would be nice to support a mother in this effort. Personally, I don't feel comfortable when people stare at me sometimes, I would like some privacy. But even if I didn't have a problem with people staring at me, I think it's necessary because in winter, for example, it's cold, it's not easy. Yes, I think it's very important, because that way I know I can go out to get some fresh air and walk without being restricted." [interviewee 17]

> "Baby changing facilities are essential in the park. It is important to have a safe and clean place to change your children. If such facilities do not appear at the park, it means we have to leave or look for a temporary solution, which is often not ideal." [interviewee 24]

However, as previously mentioned, no bias or stereotype should be reinforced that suggests that women are solely responsible for childcare. For this reason, it is essential that baby-changing facilities are also placed at the men's toilets as well, disrupting the social norms and normalizing and encouraging the involvement of men in taking on these responsibilities. Alternatively, there should be a separate space exclusively with caregiving amenities, accessible to all genders. Consequently, the park can enhance equal participation. The existence of such spaces makes the park more family-friendly, without restrictions and exclusions, thus increasing its use by different groups of people.

Artwork

Artwork was proposed by a couple of women at Sarphatipark as a feature that could enhance the inclusivity of the park by demonstrating that everyone is accepted and that the uniqueness and diversity of each individual is respected. A woman of color specifically articulated:

> "I think the artwork would definitely make the park more welcoming to the people. I think that always makes the place you are in more inclusive. In general, I have seen a lot of graffiti with a diverse range of people in the city and I always thought that it is a really smart way to communicate to the people that everyone is different and that is normal and acceptable. I think Amsterdam is a really good place for that, especially because of the many ethnicities and diversity in the city. And definitely, in other areas compared to all the other countries." [interviewee 5]

While a woman with a headscarf mentioned:

> "I would like some graffiti maybe that depicts diversity, but no, just that everyone can go and paint whatever they want on the walls vandalizing the space. A graffiti that municipality will initiate it with a clear goal of highlighting diversity showing that everyone is welcome, reinforcing the feeling of belonging and therefore contributing to park's inclusiveness." [interviewee 22]

Overall, it seems that there is a need to showcase the distinctiveness and diversity of people, whether it concerns culture, religion, or even lifestyle. In addition, through graffiti, the image of women could be empowered and strengthened by either showing dynamic and strong female figures or by depicting that women can overcome adversity, that they are strong, and that they can have powerful roles. Furthermore, through murals, women's rights and non-tolerance of sexual harassment could be highlighted as well. Such a feature can significantly contribute to the inclusiveness of a park, as it can enhance the sense of belonging while at the same time cultivating a sense of empowerment, self-confidence, optimism, and respect.

Signs of LGBTQ+

Beyond artwork, signs of inclusivity can also contribute to highlighting diversity, promoting the importance of respect. A transgender woman interviewed at Sarphatipark expressed her preference for LGBTQ+ community signs as well as messages stating that discrimination has no place in this park and will not be tolerated. Such an initiative will not only show that the park is open and welcoming to everyone regardless of their identity and preferences, but it will also raise awareness. Consequently, women from the LGBTQ community will perceive the park as more inclusive and will feel more comfortable visiting and moving around the space. This can also become evident through the woman's statement:

> "I generally think that Amsterdam is progressive compared to other cities and countries when it comes to the LGBTQ community. However, I think that some [LGBTQ+] flags in the park would definitely make me feel better and that the park is acceptable and therefore safer. I also think I would feel freer to be myself without pretending to be someone I'm not to please others." [interviewee 12]

Women's only area

A women's only area inside the park was recommended by a Turkish girl with a headscarf. A women-only space aims to provide security, as women will not have to worry about unwanted attention and sexual harassment. Additionally, the limited contact with men, which is usually a reason for feelings of insecurity and fear, will create a more comfortable space for them, allowing them to express themselves freely and relax without any concerns. Finally, such a space can contribute to enhancing socialization, as it may act as a meeting place where women can get to know each other, have fun, and exchange thoughts and ideas with each other. Socializing can become increasingly difficult as people get older. This space can contribute to and facilitate this effort. The woman specifically underlined:

> "It would be nice to have a women's only area in the park, something like a safe zone where we can go in case you feel uncomfortable or unsafe in the park, and not only. I think that in a women's only area, you can socialize easier, and hang out with other women, feeling comfortable without men staring at you or bothering you. Or there will just be women who are just hanging out and be busy with themselves without paying attention to you." [interviewee 22]

Toilets

Women indicated the toilets as a necessary element for the park to be perceived as inclusive for women. Women should initially have easy and equal access to toilets as men, to avoid gender

discrimination and therefore gender inequalities. Women initially highlighted the importance of having women's toilets to cater to their different needs that differ from those of men, such as menstruation. The availability of toilets is one of the determining factors for women's visitation to the park. Furthermore, hygiene and cleanliness in the toilets was also highlighted, with many women reporting that they avoid using the toilets if they do not follow the hygiene rules. Furthermore, the provision of amenities such as sanitary pads and tampons is a way to enhance the park's inclusiveness towards women as it considers their needs. Attention to such details can make women feel more comfortable and therefore increase the participation of the park. The location and visibility of the toilets was also highlighted by several women as an important factor in their sense of safety. Toilets located in isolated areas or not sufficiently, affect the sense of safety, as they are afraid that such circumstances can easily provide shelter for inappropriate or disturbing behavior, suggesting therefore well-lit and visible toilets in order not to avoid using them. Finally, the separation of women's toilets from men's was pointed out as an aspect that can make them feel more comfortable and safe but can also reduce the risk of harassment. As mentioned earlier, in the 5.3.3 section, women are afraid that someone can potentially hide inside the toilets, or someone might have placed a camera waiting for a girl to enter. To provide more clarity, some of the women's opinions are provided below:

> "With restrooms there are always places for men. But honestly, I think women need them more. We can for instance be on our menstrual cycle and then a restroom is necessary. It is also important to have well maintained restrooms, it is about hygiene. I won't use a restroom which is gross obviously. And apart from cleanliness I think the provision of products such as pads and tampons would make the park more inclusive for us. I would just think "ah nice that they thought about us and our needs". The park becomes more welcoming that way. I think it's something that wouldn't go unnoticed, it would be appreciated." [interviewee 21]

> "I would say that toilets are important, but most of the time they are placed in places that are a bit isolated and dark, so I don't feel comfortable using them. So, I would say that for them to be usable it would be better if they were placed in plain view where everyone can see who is coming in and out and generally be able to see what is going on around them. The surrounding of the toilet should also be well lit." [interviewee 9]

> "I would prefer there to be separate toilets for women. I feel more comfortable and safer because it can reduce the risk of harassment." And ideally, I would prefer the women's toilets to be placed in a different location from the men's so that if a man is standing nearby, a girl might suspect that he may not be there for a good reason and move away, avoiding using the toilet." [interviewee 23]

Overall, the mere existence of a toilet in a park does not necessarily enhance the park's inclusiveness towards women. According to women, the toilets should meet some important criteria as described above, for them to use them and therefore contribute to the inclusivity of the park.

Variety of activities

Finally, the variety of activities was another proposal from the participants. Different women have different interests and needs, so the variety of activities ensures that everyone can find something that suits them best. Additionally, it can promote safety, as more activities attract more people, which means more movement in the park, making it more alive. Finally, in this manner, the sense of belonging can be strengthened for all social groups. In finer detail, women mentioned:

> Elderly woman in Sarphatipark: “I would like a ping pong table or card table in the park, that way you can have fun without spending money.” [interviewee 15]
>
> Elderly woman in Sarphatipark: "It would be nice if the municipality organized some events once in a while because it would be a nice way to entertain people and it would also attract and encourage more people to visit the park, increasing traffic and therefore making it safer.” [interviewee 9]
>
> Younger girl in Oosterpark: “I like to play tennis, so I like the court here, when the weather allows it, I visit the park mainly for this reason.” [interviewee 16]
>
> Middle-aged woman in Oosterpark: “I like it when the park has a variety of activities that can cater to different age groups and interests, I think it makes it more inclusive. But in general, I would like there to be compartments in the park that include both activities and quieter spots for relaxation and contemplation without the various activities disturbing that tranquility.” [interviewee 25]

During the interview, no women mentioned the outdoor sports facilities, so I couldn't help but ask if they use them and if not, if there is a justification for this. Therefore, women explained:

> “I don’t use the sport facilities, I don’t think there is anything wrong with the way they are designed but normally they are utilized by men, and I personally don’t like to be watched, and they may also come and talk to you or try to show you how to do an exercise, I just don’t feel comfortable.” [interviewee 20]
>
> “I just don't like that everyone can see you, both those who use it and those who don't, I just feel too exposed.” [interviewee 21]

More women clarified that the non-use of the outdoor sports facilities is related to not feeling comfortable with the exposure and the fact that it is mostly used by men. Ultimately, it can be inferred that the dynamics of the majority presence of men make women feel uncomfortable, discouraging them from using the sports facilities.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The results of this research are discussed in this chapter. It delves into the significance, meaning, and relevance of the results. The discussion is formatted around the sub-research questions (6.1, 6.2 and 6.3). Besides that, there is a discussion around the aspect of spatial justice and the spatial inequalities that women encounter in their daily lives when visiting urban parks (6.4). In addition, practical limitations encountered during the research as well as the implications of these limitations for the validity of the results are discussed at the end of this section (6.5).

6.1 Elements affecting women's perception of safety

The first sub-question presented in chapter two is: What are the specific elements that influence women's perceptions of safety in public parks of the Netherlands?

The element of safety and the individual's perceived sense of security throughout the day are more crucial for women than men (Kraus, 2021). In public places, women are more likely to feel unsafe, which can limit their access to these areas, and make them feel excluded (Condon et al., 2007; Jalalkamali & Doratli, 2022; Rampaul & Magidimisha-Chipungu, 2022). This is something that is also demonstrated through the findings of this research, as women indeed seem to experience a higher level of fear, especially in the evening hours.

The feeling of fear acts as a deterrent for women when it comes to visiting the park, creating exclusion for women. A gender-neutral perspective is often adopted in public spaces by urban planners, which neglects the specific needs and safety concerns of women and often fails to consider the unique issues of gender in urban settings, making urban environments feel unwelcoming or unsafe (Miranda & Van Nes, 2020; Roberts & Madariaga, 2016; Kern, 2020; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020a). This was observed in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, where respondents reported that their needs were not accounted for in the parks' designs, enhancing their sense of vulnerability and insecurity. The fears expressed by respondents were mainly related to interactions with other people, including unwanted comments, sexual harassment, or any form of violence. This is a point that is substantiated through studies that report that these are the dominant fears commonly shared by women, regardless of their age, nationality, and educational level (Gupta & Wadwekar, 2018; Moreno et al., 2022). The feeling of fear functions as an informal mechanism of social control, resulting in limiting women's freedom to access and fully utilize public spaces (Tandogan &Ilhan, 2016).

The exclusion of women from these spaces is directly related to their vulnerability, making safety one of the most critical issues when discussing gender inequality in the public space (Ceccato, 2012; Koskela 1999; The World Bank, 2020). In both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, women avoided utilizing specific areas where they felt unsafe, to avoid any adverse situations. Their fear also limited their access to the park to specific times of day, contributing to the reproduction of gender inequality, since it limits women's ability to access and utilize urban parks equally. According to other studies, this feeling of insecurity among women significantly affects their comfort and prevents them from full participation, essentially affecting the way women utilize the space they are in (A. Pereira & Rebelo, 2024).

The male-centric approach in city design highlighted by Kern (2020), explaining that women's needs are often not considered or prioritized, was observed in both parks, with women stating that their needs are not perceived and that the design of the parks aggravates their feelings of insecurity. Moreover, female fear in urban environments is shaped to a large extent by the behavior of men, leading to restricted mobility and exclusion from certain spaces, as they cannot easily avoid men. This "City of Fear" concept reflects how urban settings, including urban parks, often fail to accommodate women's safety concerns. A characteristic of women's

experience in urban spaces is the fear shaped by feelings of insecurity caused by the behavior of men. For instance, women are more likely to receive unwanted comments about their bodies. This fear limits and excludes women from fully participating in city life. As Leslie Kern (2020) describes, this fear can be complex, as it is not just an individual experience but a socially constructed one, reinforced by urban design, social norms, and narratives about safety. Regarding the narratives, negative experiences of a woman may be disseminated through word of mouth, which increases the perceived danger of the park in itself, which in return will make others feel unsafe too. During the interviews, several women referred to incidents they had heard, influencing their perception of the safety of the park. In addition, research has shown that when women mention physical aspects, they frequently mention social aspects as well, explaining why some physical places are scary (Koskela & Pain, 2000). Therefore, design alone will not easily overcome the feelings of fear as the physical design is not going to abolish the patriarchy. The results of this thesis also reflect this, as women's main fears were linked to men and their perceived intentions. If, in a hypothetical scenario, parks were used only by women, it raises the question of whether these spaces would feel safer and more accessible, suggesting that the issue lies not in the spaces themselves but in how they are shaped by gendered power dynamics. The findings of this study align with Kern's argument, as respondents consistently cited men's behavior as the main source of their fears. If parks were used exclusively by women, they would not pose a threat; yet, in a public shared space, it is crucial that park designs address women's safety concerns in a realistic manner. Parks should be accessible to all while incorporating design strategies that mitigate the risks associated with harassment and unsafe interactions, where women are proven to be the bigger targets than men. (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022b; Hehman et al., 2022).

Urban design plays a crucial role in either reducing or exacerbating women's fears. Urban parks should not facilitate or accommodate delinquent behavior but should instead integrate features that enhance women's sense of security.

The results of this thesis identified several elements that influence women's sense of safety. Initially, enclosed areas in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark can deteriorate women's feelings of safety. The decreased visibility, due to isolated spots or obstructed sightlines, can heighten women's fears of entrapment and potential harassment. Research supports this finding that such elements can evoke feelings of vulnerability and entrapment (Lorenc et al., 2013, p.5). Similarly, while vegetation is a paramount component for the creation of a natural and attractive environment, it can also contribute to women's insecurity when it serves as a hiding place. The findings of this study indicate that enclosed spaces with dense vegetation were more likely to attract groups gathering there to smoke, use drugs, or even deal drugs, while in the open spaces there was a flow, making people feel more comfortable utilizing them. This supports existing literature highlighting that dense vegetation and spatial enclosure can facilitate illegal activities and provide space for people to hide, influencing women's perceptions of safety in urban spaces (Lis et al., 2021; Lis, Pardela, et al., 2019; Lis, Zalewska, et al., 2019; Sezavar et al., 2023).

Besides the enclosed and isolated areas, narrow paths can also influence women's comfort and feelings. Many women expressed that they feel vulnerable and uncomfortable walking near a stranger, especially a man. As Valentine (1990) explains, women have learned to be afraid of strangers in public spaces, hence, walking near strangers can deteriorate their experience in the park. Therefore, women have the need for personal space and to avoid potential threats, yet this option is essentially eliminated when paths do not provide the required space to do so.

Additionally, poor lighting unsurprisingly influences women's perceptions of safety. Inadequate lighting is also associated with visibility, as it hinders the ability to perceive potential risks and the people around them. The fact that women have an increased fear of

sexual harassment, the absence of lighting can intensify feelings of fear and makes women feel more exposed to danger, with the result that it constitutes an obstacle and makes them avoid using the park in the afternoon hours. According to the women, the absence of lighting prevents users not only from seeing but also from being seen, thus facilitating delinquent behaviors. Moreover, the absence of clear signage indicating either the exits or the location of the toilets can cause feelings of disorientation, discomfort, and insecurity, creating a less welcoming and safe environment and therefore leading to exclusions. This finding is supported by other studies that show that inadequate signage can discourage women from visiting urban public spaces. (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021) The absence of signage in larger-scale parks like Oosterpark can further affect the feeling of safety due to the longer distances in the park as well as its division into different areas, constraining the ability to find exits and restrooms. Finally, based on the finding of this thesis, benches in close proximity may not make women feel unsafe as much as uncomfortable. Both during observations and interviews, it was acknowledged that women do not prefer to sit at close distances with people they do not know, especially if they are men. Women seek to prevent a stranger from initiating a discussion with them. Seating areas can be useful for elderly, disabled or pregnant women who need regular resting points, but for other women, they may lead to feelings of exposure to comments or conversations when they are there.

Ultimately, the physical design of urban parks can contribute to women's fears, yet it is not a catalyst aspect, as fear of crime is closely related to the wider aspects of social life; therefore, "fear can never simply be "designed out" if the social aspects are not addressed at the same time." (Kern, 2020, p. 158). Urban parks are places where certain concerns are expressed and women's fears are projected into specific urban environments, however, this does not mean that they also provoke fear. While considering women's fear when designing urban parks is paramount, it is only an immediate and visible solution to the problem of urban fear (Koskela &Pain, 2000).

6.2 Intersectionality

The second sub-question developed for the purpose of this thesis is: In what ways do perceptions of safety in public parks differ among women of various social backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities?

The term "woman" encompasses a large number of different identities. These differences are related to ethnicity, age, identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, disability, or caregiving responsibilities, indicating that intersectionality is crucial in shaping experiences. Therefore, women cannot be considered as one social group (Barbera et al., 2023). An intersectional approach attempts to understand different forms of advantage and discrimination (Kern, 2020). According to Crenshaw (2016), these aspects of identity often create experiences of discrimination and privilege, and therefore social inequalities. Kern (2020) supports this perspective by saying that women's experiences in the cities and therefore in public spaces such as urban parks are shaped by more than just gender; other dimensions of identity significantly impact how women navigate and perceive public spaces. Therefore, they might be suffering from discrimination based on identity, age, etc., alongside the fact that they are women (Barbera et al., 2023).

This aligns with the findings of this thesis, as women from different backgrounds and life circumstances expressed varied needs and concerns. For instance, mothers prioritized infrastructure such as caregiving facilities, while a woman of the same age without children did not share this need. Similarly, elderly and pregnant women expressed the necessity of convenience through short walking distances and multiple exits in order to avoid walking long distances, as fatigue is greater. Although non-pregnant or young women also seek multiple exits

in the parks, the reason for this difference lies in different factors. The rationale for escaping, in case of danger, prevails over the rationale for convenience.

Additionally, according to studies, transgender women experience harassment more often in public spaces than other people since their appearance does not represent the men and women dichotomous category (Evje et al., n.d.; Hawkey et al., 2021). Although in the present study the transgender woman did not report similar experiences, she did seek the need for inclusion in public spaces, seeking the acceptance and acknowledgment of identity, through more inclusive signage. That was not sought by cisgender[2] women who do not escape the heterotypical expectations and may not have faced acceptance problems.

Furthermore, cultural and religious identity influenced women's spatial preferences. A woman wearing a hijab emphasized the importance of women-only spaces, a preference rooted in cultural and religious norms common in some Muslim communities where women either want or are expected to spend time mainly with other women. Therefore, a women-only space in the park can facilitate the creation of social bonds for these women. However, this preference was not shared by all participants with different cultures and ethnicities.

Alizadeh et al. (2024) discuss how intersectionality affects women's inclusion in public space, particularly through the lens of religion. The research concerns the empowerment of Kurdish women in public spaces and specifically addresses how public spaces can either reinforce or challenge gender norms. The presence of inclusive, culturally sensitive elements in urban parks may facilitate greater social participation for marginalized groups, demonstrating how intersectional factors must be considered in urban planning.

Although the thesis applied an intersectional approach by including a sample of women with diverse forms of identity, further research can be conducted with a larger and more varied sample of women with more diverse factors such as race, social class, and disabilities, thus providing a deeper insight.

Overall, public spaces must acknowledge how people with different identities, such as race, class, gender, or sexuality, interact and experience the space they are in. The voices of the marginalized people need to be actively included, as their needs are often overlooked, to create public spaces that address multiple forms of inequalities. Taking into account women's diverse identities and therefore adopting an intersectional approach, urban spaces will better serve their needs (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). Only by adopting an intersectional approach will the complex and diverse ways in which gender inequalities and discrimination operate be fully understood and addressed, and strategies that advance gender equality will be developed (Charafi, 2023).

6.3 Improvements in Sarphatipark and Oosterpark

Finally, the third sub-question of this thesis is: What recommendations can be made to improve safety and, relatedly, the inclusivity of Sarphatipark and Oosterpark based on women's feedback?

There are many changes that can be made to improve the safety and inclusiveness of the two parks. Although the comparative method can identify areas of similarities and differentiations, strengthening the understanding of social issues (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017), in this study it demonstrated more similarities than differences. Undoubtedly, as discussed in the 6.1 section, safety issues concern all women who visit the park and are one of the most important factors for parks to be perceived as inclusive by them. Nevertheless, the safety aspect alone is not

[2] People who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (Hawkey et al., 2021)

enough for women to perceive parks as inclusive and to stop encountering barriers that will lead to exclusions. Women's recommendations are elements that aim to strengthen the inclusivity of the parks. However, the implementation of these elements individually will likely not contribute to the overall inclusivity of the parks. Consequently, it is important to take all the recommendations into account.

6.3.1 Visibility

Visibility is an essential element for women. Visibility refers to the ability to see and be seen by others. All the women expressed the importance of seeing what is happening around them and being seen in case they themselves find themselves in danger. It is important for everyone to know what is happening in the park. Clear open view within the park and outside of the park, lighting, and vegetation density can play a determinant role in a person's visibility. The open view allows women to assess the people and the space they are in; therefore, the open view can be associated with high levels of prospect, which is very important in assessing a situation (Polko & Kmic, 2022; Struyf, 2020). Additionally, exposure simultaneously can increase the perception of visibility. As a result, people cannot use these spaces as hiding places to commit any unlawful acts since they are very exposed, and they can be seen easily. Besides that, dense vegetation, as discussed in the 6.1 section, often obstructs the view, offering hiding places away from public scrutiny to potential attackers. Greater visibility allows more 'eyes on the street', which serve as a form of surveillance, according to Jane Jacobs (Van Asten et al., 2023, p. 6). In this regard, the intervention of visitors and witnesses increases, contributing significantly to the reduction of crime and the increase in the sense of security (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). Similarly, adequate lighting can increase feelings of safety for the same reasons, as women can see and be seen while acting as a deterrent for users who may commit any form of offense, from dealing drugs to sexual harassment. Nevertheless, lighting by itself seemed to be insufficient to make the park perceived as safe and inclusive for women. Increasing the amount of lighting will not necessarily make a park perceived as safe (Lis et al., 2023; Koskela & Pain, 2000). Based on the study of Herbert and Davidson (1994), the presence of lighting improved the feeling of safety up to 54% among women, indicating that lighting can have an indirect effect on perceived safety. Similarly, in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, adequate lighting can contribute to the reduction of fear (Vrij & Winkel, 1991). However, there are more factors contributing to women's feelings of insecurity. As discussed in more detail earlier, enclosed and isolated areas with reduced visibility, dense vegetation, narrow paths, and a lack of signage can also reinforce feelings of fear. Therefore, examining lighting without considering the rest of these factors will likely not make the park perceived as inclusive. Although lighting can enhance feelings of security, women doubt its effectiveness. They believe that if someone wants to harm them, lighting may not prevent this act. The thought that something might occur, especially at night, is dominant. Painter (1996) is also doubting whether lightning can play a catalyst role in changing social behaviors, contributing to a suppression in crime and disorder.

Ultimately, visibility not only enhances women's ability to perceive and identify potential dangers but also mitigates the anxiety of being caught off guard and therefore finding themselves unprepared in a space that feels isolated and out of sight, where they can find themselves in an undesirable situation, creating feelings of discomfort and fear.

6.3.2 Social control

Public social control can contribute significantly to women's perception of safety. As mentioned above, women have the need to see and be seen. The more people there are present in the park, the more comfortable and secure women might feel. Based on women's voices, the presence of people not only acts as a deterrent to delinquent acts but also as an interventionist factor. Furthermore, lighting at night arguably can contribute to women's sense of safety, yet a well-lit park without the presence of people cannot fully make them feel comfortable. By fostering

engagement and community involvement, natural surveillance can be greatly amplified (Roy et al., 2024). This is also corroborated by the findings of this thesis. Sarphatipark, which can also be considered a dog park, can also function as a control. According to the women, they particularly appreciate that dogs are allowed in the park, as this signifies that there will be people walking their dogs constantly, at different times of the day, making them feel like something is less likely to happen. Additionally, women indicated their interest in a variety of activities as a factor that can influence their sense of safety and therefore their interaction with urban parks, as activities can considerably raise park's visitation (Cohen et al., 2010). Therefore, these preferences indicate women's need for a constant flow of people and that isolated parks can make them feel particularly vulnerable and insecure.

Valentine (1990) explicitly describes that the design of public space does not guarantee social control. However, women believe that the presence of others will discourage offenders, thinking that people will intervene. This helps to empower women to use the space with greater self-confidence and trust. Therefore, there is a significant difference between perceived social control and the actual interventions that may be carried out in the event of an attack.

Finally, CCTV cameras and the presence of security guards have the potential to improve women's sense of safety, creating a more welcoming environment. Both of these elements can increase transparency and can reduce unsafe behaviors or crimes (Piza et al., 2019). By doing so, urban parks can be perceived as more secure by women, encouraging utilization and avoiding exclusions. Nevertheless, this contrasts the findings of another research conducted by Zurawski (2010). He found that cameras have no strong impact on people's feelings of safety (Brands et al., 2013, p. 3). Women's preference for the presence of security systems may be linked to their need for mechanisms of protection and transparency that are visible, even if their effectiveness in making them feel safe is controversial. This reveals that their insecurity leads them to seek out any measure that might make them feel even slightly safer.

6.3.3 Accessibility

The accessibility of a public space is related not only to its physical availability and proximity to the starting point but also to the perceived accessibility based on several factors (Murr & Boisjoly & Waygood, 2023). Through this research, park visitation was not examined through proximity but based on their perception. Therefore, accessibility can go beyond physical proximity. Accessibility can explore whether an individual feels safe and free and welcome to visit it without encountering any mental and physical barriers (Biernacka & Kronenberg, 2018; Kronenberg et al., 2020). Women indicated multiple paths, entrances & exits, and clear signage to perceive the park as more mentally accessible. Women have the need to escape from adverse conditions at any time, whether it is to leave the park from wherever they are or to change paths in situations where they don't feel comfortable. Multiple entrances and exits can significantly reduce the feeling of being trapped, while multiple and wide paths can reinforce the feeling of control and autonomy, as women can choose to avoid people who do not convey trustworthiness or paths that feel isolated and less safe. However, as discussed in the section on intersectionality, multiple entrances and exits can go beyond the feeling of fear, as elderly or pregnant women indicated this feature not so much for reasons of fear, as for reasons of convenience. Clear signage to exits as well as well-lit exits, can reduce the sense of vulnerability, especially when women might feel uncomfortable or in danger. Ultimately, clear signage is not just about practicality; it is also about psychological safety. Women who can easily navigate the space and find the exit or restrooms may feel safer and more confident visiting the urban park. This also aligns with existing literature, indicating that the opportunity to escape has the highest effect on the sense of safety, especially at night. Limited escape options may significantly increase feelings of insecurity and anxiety and therefore diminish women's sense of safety (Dubey et al., 2025; van Rijswijk & Haans, 2018).

However, for a park to be considered inclusive, it must foster a sense of belonging, be welcoming, accessible, enjoyable, and comfortable for everyone, including women. Therefore, the recommendations go beyond aspects of fear and safety concerns.

Women in both parks highlighted the importance of toilets. However, the mere presence of public toilets in an urban park is not enough for women to feel comfortable using them. Existing literature also discusses that public facilities must be accessible to everyone (Lewkowitz & Gilliland, 2024). However, toilets in both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark are not accessible for women, as there are several barriers that discourage them from utilizing them, causing discomfort, vulnerability, and therefore exclusion. Specifically, women avoid using the toilets in both parks because they are in isolated, dark areas, they lack hygiene, and they are also afraid of how they can be exploited by men since there are no separate toilets for women. Lighting, location, and distance of toilets can have an impact on women's feelings of safety (Hartigan et al., 2020). Both in this study and in existing research, cleanliness is a significant reason why many women avoid using public toilets, as it can impact bladder health. Cleanliness can affect the genders differently, given that men do not have to sit or crouch like women do to use the toilets (Lewkowitz & Gilliland, 2024). Additionally, women tend to use the toilet more frequently than men and this may be related to pregnancy, menstruation, and menopause (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). According to Sommer et al., 2020, the absence of toilets hinders menstrual management, affecting the dignity of women experiencing menstruation. This is in line with the findings of this study, as most women not only identified toilets as a necessity for their menstrual cycle but also the provision of amenities such as sanitary pads and tampons. When toilets in urban parks do not provide such amenities, it is suggested that women's needs are not being considered, resulting in increased inequalities and marginalization of women. Therefore, when women have to use dark, unsafe, and unsuitable toilets, they are vulnerable to gender-based violence (UNOPS, 2020). Consequently, good-quality toilets are crucial for them to feel comfortable when visiting the park. The lack of public toilets can significantly affect women's movement in public spaces and discourage them from visiting them (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). Toilets are often neglected spaces in urban planning, which reproduces inequalities in public space (Moreira et al., 2021), especially when there are easily accessible toilets for men and not for women in the case of Oosterpark. Therefore, basic infrastructure such as toilets is important for women, as it can affect their sense of comfort and safety, and their absence can limit women's use of parks. However, a combination of factors is vital to be perceived as accessible and therefore enhance women's experience in the park. The lack of accessible toilet facilities for all, thus excluding some groups while facilitating others, constitutes a salient example of unequal distribution and therefore spatial injustice.

Additionally, urban parks are places where families with children often congregate. Caregiving amenities appeared to be a vital component of both urban parks. Both mothers and fathers, as well as other caregivers, should be able to change their baby while being in a park. Although the suggestion for baby changing facilities in parks was indicated by women, given that the research referred exclusively to women, infrastructures related to childcare should be addressed to both genders to avoid promoting and reinforcing inequalities and stereotypes that the care of a child is the exclusive responsibility of women. The scarcity of caregiving amenities can make women feel stressed and uncomfortable and therefore lead to exclusion, as if they cannot provide the basic needs of their child, they will avoid using the space. Beyond the caregiving amenities, early mothers may breastfeed, thus leading to the search for appropriately designed parks to serve this need. Nevertheless, women and consequently children are affected by various barriers. A significant percentage of women have experienced discrimination at some point in their lives due to public breastfeeding (Cook. A. B., 2016). Women breastfeeding may not only encounter several social barriers, such as negative attitudes or disapproving looks (Mathews, 2019; Sheehan et al., 2019) but also physical barriers, influencing the perceived

inclusiveness of urban parks. Both Sarphatipark and Oosterpark are exposed to heat and cold, hindering breastfeeding, lacking privacy in case women do not feel comfortable being seen, as well as changing facilities in the toilets. By implementing such facilities, a more welcoming public space can be created while simultaneously supporting the healthy development and care of children, as well as ameliorating gender equality and the inclusiveness of the urban park.

Arguably, parks should offer safety and comfort to women, but they can also convey messages to the world at the same time, messages that will target the empowerment of women, the acceptance of diversity, and the exclusive needs of women. This can be achieved through artistic interventions and signage, which represent, for example, feminist symbols, important female figures who left their mark on history, encourage public breastfeeding, or highlight the beauty of diversity, referring to the LGBTQ+ community and women with different cultural and social backgrounds. Through public art, stereotypes can be debunked, and the voices of marginalized people who are usually ignored or excluded can be heard in public spaces (Sharp et al., 2005).

6.4 Spatial Justice

According to Lefebvre (2008), people should be able to access the benefits of urban parks, avoid spatial inequalities, and make use of public services, giving them that way the right to the city. Considering women's experiences and statements during the interviews, none of these three aspects are met, raising the question and concern, "Do women have the right to city?" Specifically, their accessibility is limited to specific times of day and specific locations within the park. Women also encounter spatial inequalities in both parks, such as the lack of appropriate maternity facilities and the inability to use public services such as toilets. Spatial inequalities were also raised by Soja (2010), explaining that they can lead to spatial injustice where some people are consistently disadvantaged. On the other hand, spatial justice, where some people are consistently disadvantaged, and the lack of it, the failure of accommodating everyone's needs, can lead to exclusion and inequality. These inequalities can significantly influence individuals' experiences in public spaces, especially marginalized groups such as, women, as they are frequently designed and accessed in a way that often neglects their needs (Anneroth, E., Ferlander, S., & Jukkala, T. ,2024). This aligns with the findings of this research, as many of the fears and needs of women seem to be neglected, affecting their overall experience in the urban park and ultimately leading to exclusions. The constant fear of harm that prevails as well as the concern to satisfy their needs as women can be interpreted as a lack of spatial justice in both Oosterpark and Sarphatipark. As early mentioned, spatial justice refers to the equitable distribution of space benefiting and meeting the needs of everyone, avoiding any form of discrimination and fear regardless of their identity or background. Urban parks must be designed with awareness of how different identities interact with space to meet the demands of spatial justice. Urban parks should be designed to serve the diverse needs of marginalized groups, such as the elderly, mothers, and pregnant women, as well as the LGBTQ+ community; it is not enough to simply be universally accessible. Thinking of these marginalized groups in Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, it can be concluded that they both fail to consider their exclusive needs, leading to spatial inequalities and therefore exclusions.

Edward Soja (2010) explains the spaces we live in, the time we experience, and our social interactions shape our lives, and they are not one-way relationships. Social processes shape the way that spaces are structured, designed, and used, and at the same time, spatiality affects social processes. In the specific case researched, the failure to include women's fears and needs in the design of urban parks influences and shapes the way women interact with them. Consequently, social structure shapes design and vice versa. Therefore, attention should be drawn to how space influences social interactions alongside how social interactions shape space. Spaces are not neutral; instead, they can hurt us by enhancing and sustaining social problems, such as

inequalities, discrimination, and exploitation based on gender, race, and nationality, or help us. Ultimately, spatial justice's objective is to provide equal space but also to dismantle unjust distributions and the unjust ways in which some people experience space

To achieve spatial justice, participatory planning of public parks is essential, so that the voices of diverse groups are considered and thus the parks become places where everyone, regardless of identity, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., has equal access without any obstructions and exclusion.

6.5 Limitations

This research encounters some limitations. First, due to the limited timeline of the thesis, the data collection period was within December and January, which are among the coldest months in the Netherlands. It was expected from the beginning that cold temperatures and rain would affect the use of the park. Indeed, during the interviews, several women reported that they visit the park more often when the weather starts to get warmer. Women's feelings may change depending on the season, as in the summer, attendance is expected to be higher, or perhaps the way they use the park is different. Their answers in this case may have differed. It would be interesting to investigate how different weather conditions affect women's experiences in parks.

Another limitation of this research is the diversity of the sample. Although there was considerable diversity in the identities of the participants, women of different social classes, races, or physical disabilities were not surveyed. Different social classes, racial differences, and mobility difficulties are likely to shape different needs and experiences in the park. These needs may be related to safety, accessibility, or their ability to participate in different activities within the urban park. In addition, the participation of transgender women in the research was limited. Specifically, only one trans woman was interviewed. This limits the drawing of generalizable conclusions, as it does not reflect the different needs and experiences that trans women may have. A single trans woman cannot cover the full range of experiences, as these are multidimensional and can be influenced by various factors.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The last chapter recapitulates the research's initial objective and responds to the main research question. In the following, recommendations for urban planners and policymakers as well as for future research are provided.

7.1 Answer main research question

Designing cities without social equity in mind can lead to various inequalities, such as gender. These inequalities can be perceived in public spaces such as parks, questioning their accessibility and inclusiveness to all genders. Hence, the aim of this research was initially to find out whether there are gender differences in park usages in the Netherlands, as the city's policy focuses on equal participation and inclusion (Gemeente Amsterdam, n.d.). Additionally, it aimed to identify which infrastructural features and elements can affect women's perceptions of safety and inclusiveness. Finally, it wanted to have an intersectional approach, looking at the different needs that various groups might have based on their ethnicity, age, racial, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and identity.

The primary research question of this research was: Do women perceive urban parks of the Netherlands as inclusive? What factors influence their sense of safety?

Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were conducted in order to answer the main research question by providing personal accounts of women's experiences in urban parks in the Netherlands, specifically in two parks in Amsterdam, Sarphatipark and Oosterpark.

Consequently, the answer that emerges from this research is that women do not perceive Sarphatipark and Oosterpark as inclusive. Gender appears to affect the way that women interact with urban parks. It seems that urban parks often intensify women's fears, rather than reducing them, thus reinforcing their feelings of vulnerability and anxiety and ultimately resulting in exclusion. Therefore, women face many barriers when using the parks, excluding them either from using certain areas of the parks or from the entire park, especially after dark. However, while there are many features in parks that affect women's perceived safety, such as lack of visibility and quickly accessible exits to escape in case of emergency, social aspects are the reason behind why these physical aspects increase the sense of safety. More specifically, it is not the park itself that creates fear but rather the way people behave within it. However, it is the way in which these features can be exploited by others, specifically men, and can affect social interactions that creates feelings of insecurity. In addition, experiences or stories come to reinforce these fears. Although the reason for choosing these two parks was based on the existence of the same socio-economic demographics of the areas, in order for the responses to be focused on the physical elements of the parks and not on its users, it turned out to be an unavoidable part, and it is directly linked to the fears of the women.

Nevertheless, the decisions that are made behind the planning and design of a public space such as a park can significantly affect the sense of belonging. In order for a park to achieve spatial justice, it must be safe, accessible, and designed to meet women's exclusive needs.

Ultimately, although Amsterdam is known as a liberal city and its policies focus on inclusion, ensuring that no one is excluded regardless of their background and identity, it is clear that parks are far from being inclusive when it comes to gender.

7.3 Scientific recommendations

This research also aims to suggest future studies that could be conducted regarding urban park utilization and gender inequalities.

As mentioned earlier in the discussion section, this research attempted to have an intersectional approach; however, due to limited time, it was not as diverse as it aimed to cover a wide range of women with mobility issues, different socio-economic backgrounds, and trans women. Further research could examine how trans women, in combination with other parameters such as ethnicity and socio-economic status, affect their sense of safety and inclusion in public spaces. Future research could also further focus on the experiences and fears of transgender women in their everyday lives and the strategies and behaviors they develop to mitigate or address these fears. In addition, this research was limited to adult women; hence, it did not include young girls under the age of eighteen. Teenage girls are at a sensitive age and form their own characters and perceptions. It is possible that adolescent girls face different discrimination and different needs than adult women. Furthermore, this research has focused exclusively on urban parks, and in particular, parks that are centrally located and have a high number of visitors. For this reason, further research could be conducted on how other places, potentially suburban areas, can be made safer and more inclusive. Additionally, it can be investigated how different seasons may affect how women perceive and interact with parks. The present study was conducted in winter; hence, it would be interesting to investigate whether, for example, their sense of safety differs in summer from winter. Finally, the relationship between gender and climate change can be investigated, how it affects the way parks are used, and whether it affects women and men in the same way. Could the way parks are designed affect women and men differently during periods of heatwaves or extreme weather events and therefore lead to gender inequalities?

7.4 Societal recommendations

The findings of this research can be consulted by those involved in the design process of public urban parks, such as urban planners, landscape architects, policy makers, and stakeholders. Specifically, the findings can serve as guidelines and criteria for evaluating gender inclusion in the design of both parks and other public spaces, as women's recommendations can be taken into account and applied to the various built spaces they utilize, in order to make them safer and more accessible to them. The social phenomenon highlighted through this research was gender inequalities in urban parks and the factors that influence their use. The research confirms that women experience exclusion in the spaces and that insecurity is one of their most prevalent feelings. However, this research further expands on practical solutions and design proposals that can contribute to the elimination or mitigation of the factors that lead to the exclusion of women. Furthermore, women are the central element of the research and are examined separately and not as a homogeneous group; thus, focusing on their diverse needs, proposing solutions that include everyone regardless of background. Additionally, this study raises awareness and knowledge about issues related to gendered experiences in urban parks. These issues may potentially lead to a societal shift to recognize and prioritize inclusivity in public spaces. It is undoubtedly of paramount importance to improve infrastructure in urban parks in order to strengthen gender equality. However, given that social aspects, such as the presence of men in public spaces, are the main reason for women's reluctance to use urban parks, it is equally important to be considered. Therefore, it is essential to create policies that ensure that men and women have equal opportunities in public spaces, breaking down stereotypes and promoting acceptance, as well as to raise awareness about gender-based violence and sexual harassment in public spaces in order to alleviate women's fear and increase participation.

7.5 Recommendations for urban planners and policy makers

The findings of this research can provide valuable information for both policymakers and urban planners in Amsterdam and in other cities as well.

It is fundamental for designers to understand that women do not perceive space in the same way as men. Women are more likely to feel afraid and to be harassed in public spaces. Therefore, it is the duty of designers to design urban parks with their opinion on the concerns and needs of women so that they do not encounter obstacles and exclusions. Regarding the feeling of fear, it is important to know that it is directly linked to social factors. This means that women are often afraid of strangers and especially unknown men and how they may behave towards them. Although the fear experienced by women is not easy to design, it can nevertheless be mitigated through various interventions, thus increasing their participation in public space. More specifically, to alleviate their fear, spaces should not only be designed in a way that does not facilitate delinquent behaviors but also provide escape routes. To achieve this, park design should avoid creating closed areas where visibility is blocked. Women have the need to see and be seen. There are various aspects that can be taken into account to achieve this. For example, vegetation should be taken seriously because it can easily limit visibility and act as a hiding place. Vegetation should therefore be well maintained and not create enclosures. In addition, open views and the correct and strategic placement of lighting also play an important role in shaping the feeling of security. Additionally, as previously mentioned, women may feel discomfort when they are unable to avoid unwanted behaviors or when they encounter people they do not trust. It is essential that the parks have multiple routes with wide paths so that women can avoid contact with strangers if they wish. In addition, the existence of many well-lit and easily accessible exits can significantly contribute to enhancing the sense of safety within the parks, as they can escape quickly in case they feel they are in danger. Furthermore, the close placement of benches, although aimed at socializing visitors, on the contrary, seems to create discomfort as they do not feel comfortable sitting close to strangers who may catch them in conversation. Women need personal space; therefore, it is of great importance to be placed with some distance between them. Finally, social control can also significantly enhance the feeling of safety. Therefore, it is important to have eyes in the park. Allowing dogs, for example, can contribute to this, as there are people who walk their dogs throughout the day. Beyond this, it is important for the park to have clear visibility to the outside of the park and to the surrounding houses because this gives the feeling that the space is controlled and that it is less likely that something will happen, or if it does happen, it is easier for someone to notice it and possibly intervene. Finally, it is important to know that designing a park to alleviate women's fears is only one of the solutions, as, if the social aspect and existing social structures do not change, design alone cannot contribute substantially to improving the situation. The social aspect can be changed by adopting and implementing laws that promote women's rights and equal access and use of public space, but also by strengthening women's voices in decision-making. Finally, stricter laws that punish, for example, sexual harassment and any other form of violence are necessary to be implemented. However, inclusivity goes beyond safety. Women seek a sense of belonging; they want to feel welcome, to perceive the park as an accessible space, and to feel free to be themselves. In order to achieve this, various aspects must be taken into consideration. Centrally located and well-lit accessible toilets are essential. In addition, it is important that toilets provide amenities for women's specific needs, such as the menstrual cycle. This will show that women's comfort and access to urban parks are taken seriously. In addition, park care facilities for parents are equally essential in order for them to be able to enjoy the park without exclusions, which may force them to leave the park. As necessary as these amenities are in women's toilets, they are also important in men's toilets. It is important not to reinforce stereotypes that women are solely responsible for childcare. Access to toilets should not be easier or more privileged for men than for women. This means that placing urinals

for men in parks, while women have to pay to use the toilets, represents a significant example of gender inequality. Finally, parks should be welcoming to everyone regardless of identity, ethnicity, race, and background. Art and signage can play an important role in inclusiveness, showing that everyone is welcome, avoiding discrimination. Ultimately, the most important factor in making parks inclusive for women is to involve them throughout the design process so that their voices are heard while at the same time having an intersectional perspective. Not all women are the same, and therefore their needs differ. For this reason, participatory design should aim to include women from different backgrounds.

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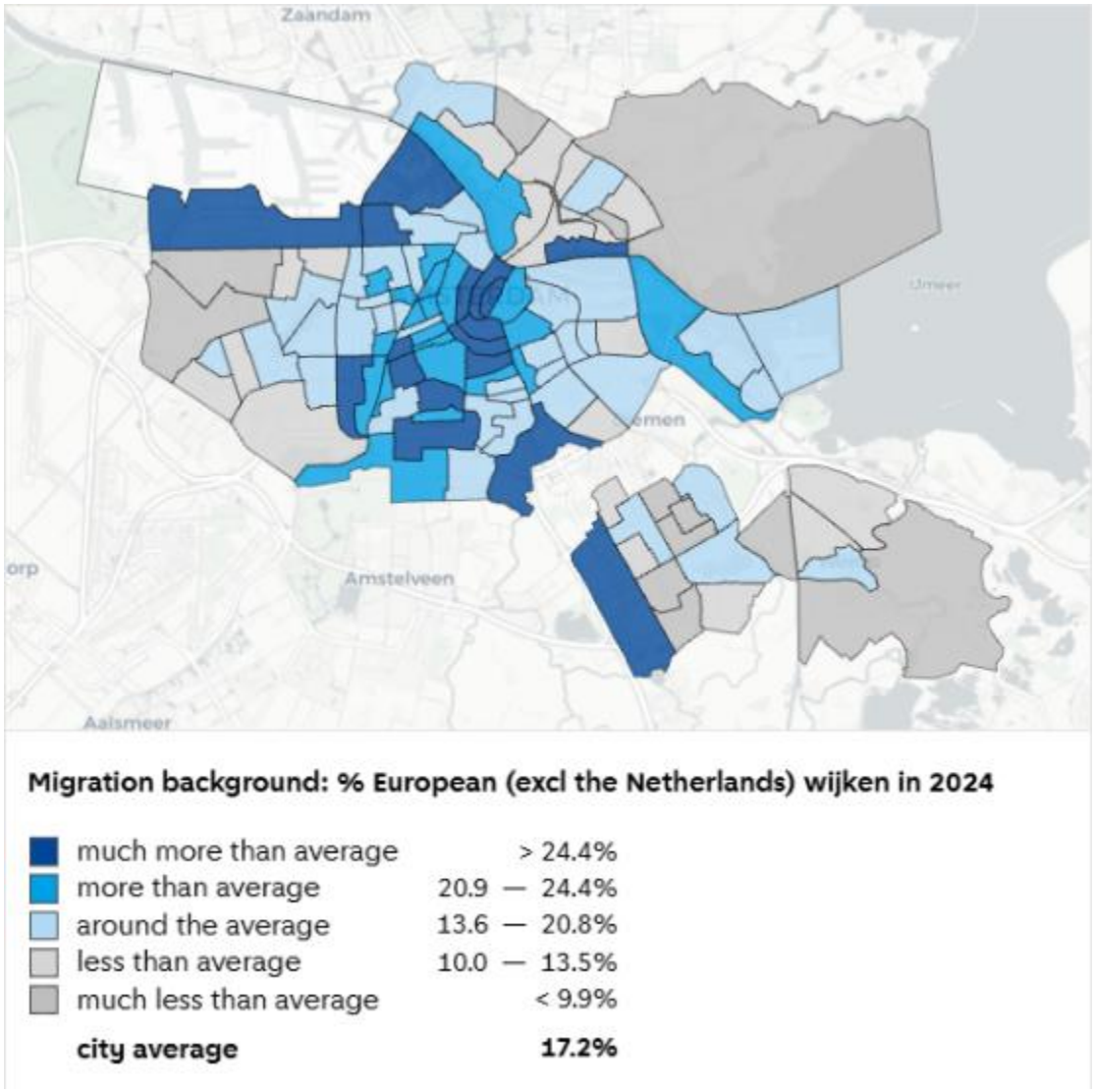
Anex 1

Diversity in ethnicities in Amsterdam



Migration background (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2024b)

Anex 2

Interview structure

In both parks, Sarphatipark and Oosterpark, I approached people by introducing myself by saying, my name is Vaia, and I am a master's student at Wageningen University. I am currently working on my thesis, so I would like to have a conversation with you to help me gain insights for my study. Would you like to participate? When the answer was affirmative, I continued by introducing my research topic by saying, my research focuses on making parks more inclusive for women. By "inclusiveness," I mean that parks are designed in a way that considers women's needs, makes them feel safe and welcome, ensures fair access, and removes any barriers to their enjoyment, as well as does not feel discriminated against in any way. As my research involves people who identify as women, they were asked how they identify themselves so that I know whether I will proceed with the interview or not. Furthermore, all participants were aware that by completing the interview, they were giving me permission to process the results anonymously for my research. Their participation is completely voluntary, and they can decide to skip any question they prefer not to answer or even stop the interview at any time. Furthermore, they were aware that the results would be treated confidentially by me and would not be shared with third parties. Before starting the interview, I asked for their permission to record our conversation and assured them that the file would only be used for the analysis of my data. Finally, I provided my email address in case they had any questions, comments, or wanted to know the results of the research.

1. What do you think is important for me to know about your social identity?
2. Are you a resident of the neighborhood? If not, from where?
3. How often do you visit the park?
4. What is the purpose of your visits to this park?
5. On a scale 1-10 (1=not safe at all & 10 = very safe) how safe would you feel being alone during the day?
6. On a scale 1-10 (1=not safe at all & 10 = very safe) how safe would you feel being alone during the night?
7. If you had to go from A to B during the night, alone, and you had the option to go around the park or through the park, what would you choose a) if you had to walk b) if you had to bike and why?

1. Are there any specific characteristics of this park that make you feel safe or unsafe?
    - → Unwanted behaviors
    - → Environmental conditions
    - → Access
    - → Visibility
    - → Amenities
    - → Everything you can think of

2. Are there specific areas within the park where you feel safer or less safe? What factors contribute to these feelings?

3. Do you feel the park is designed in a way that considers the needs of women? Why or why not?

4. Are there any physical features, design elements, or the absence of certain features in the park that make you feel excluded or make you face barriers? Does this feeling change because of your gender, age, or background?
5. How could the design and layout of the park (the way it is structured) help reduce your feelings of unsafety or exclusion? Can you think of specific elements or infrastructural features that would contribute to this?

6. Which of the following elements would increase
   a) your sense of safety
   - Wider paths
   - Multiple paths
   - Open space
   - More Lighting
   - Dense vegetation
   - Less vegetation
   - Multiple Entrances/Exits
   - Visibility
   - Seating areas
   - Shade
   - Other?

b) your sense of inclusivity

(By inclusivity I mean that you feel you belong here, all your needs as a woman are considered, you feel welcome, and you do not feel discriminated)

   - Toilets
   - Giving care amenities
   - Art
   - Other?

Park-Specific Questions

8. In Sarphatipark you can't bike, how do they feel about that?
9. In Sarphatipark you can see the houses. How does this make them feel?
10. In Sarphatipark there is no lighting. Does this affect you? Or are the streetlights enough?
11. In Sarphatipark alcohol is forbidden. Does this add to your sense of safety?
12. Sarphatipark does not have CCTV surveillance (Cameras). How does this make you feel? Would you prefer the park to have security cameras?
13. Oosterpark is surrounded by vegetation, so you don't have visibility of the houses. How does this affect you?
14. In Oosterpark alcohol is forbidden. Does this add to your sense of safety? And why?
15. Oosterpark has CCTV surveillance (Cameras). Does this add to your sense of safety and why?