Gendering gray space: Everyday challenges, strategies, and initiatives of women community leaders in East Jerusalem

Nufar Avni[a], Sarah Moser[b], and Gabrielle Gorgy[b]

[a]Department of Geography, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel
[b]Department of Geography, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Abstract

This article examines the gendered ways in which women community leaders in East Jerusalem experience and navigate their urban environment. We draw on the concept of 'gray space' as a way to think through how Palestinian women's everyday lives are shaped by East Jerusalem as a liminal space. Gray space conveys the spectrum that stretches between categories of legality and illegality, formality and informality—either in housing, economy, or polity. While gray space has mostly been used to understand the structural forces that shape cities, we connect the concept to feminist geography scholarship to investigate the quotidian, everyday gendered ways in which Palestinian women negotiate this unique and complex space. Our research demonstrates that far from being passive victims of their oppressive and challenging circumstances, Palestinian women leaders are agents of change in their communities through their development of various everyday strategies and initiatives. Within the patriarchal context of Palestinian society, the agency of women leaders can be partly attributed to the power vacuum in East Jerusalem caused by the occupation, demonstrating that grey space can be both a site of restriction and liberation for Palestinian women.

Key words: gray space; East Jerusalem; urban informality; gendered space; everyday space

Introduction

Feminist geography scholars have demonstrated that the way one experiences the urban environment is highly subject to gender (Deeb and Harb 2013; Dunckel Graglia 2016; Fenster 2005). While gender boundaries and norms exist to some degree in every space, in Jerusalem, they are particularly visible and acutely felt. The presence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim orthodox communities creates strict gender separations in many holy sites, streets, and neighbourhoods (Greenberg Raanan, 2017; Yiftachel, 2016), and women's mobility patterns and dress codes are affected by these religious and cultural practices, resulting in a wide range of ways in which the city is experienced (Greenberg Raanan & Avni, 2020; Singer & Bickel, 2015). While women of all religions and ethnicities in Jerusalem face challenges in navigating their

urban environment, in this paper we focus on the everyday challenges, strategies, and initiatives of Palestinian women in East Jerusalem.

In this research, we employ the concept of *gray space*, an approach developed to explain the rise of urban informality and its attendant forms of uneven and unequal governance (Yiftachel, 2009). The gray space terminology highlights that urban informality is a broad spectrum that includes diverse forms of housing, economies, polities, populations, and developments that are often produced by the state and purposefully left in a temporary, precarious status. We suggest that Palestinian women's everyday lives are influenced by East Jerusalem's status as a liminal space between the '"lightness" of legality/approval/safety and the "darkness" of eviction/destruction/death' (Avni & Yiftachel, 2014, p. 488). Moreover, we wish to demonstrate how gender is a powerful category that 'organizes' space in Jerusalem and exacerbates the already difficult reality that Palestinian people experience. Palestinian women encounter gray spaces in their mobility patterns, motherhood, family relations, and professional development. However, as our research in East Jerusalem demonstrates, the liminality that is inherent in gray space also provides some opportunities for women to claim greater agency and room for action that translates into leadership initiatives. While scholars have primarily used the concept of gray space as a way to understand the structural forces that shape cities, we believe the concept of gray space is a productive way for social and cultural geographers to think through the quotidian, everyday ways in which highly inequal power dynamics are lived and negotiated by the 'subjects' of this space and how gray space has the potential to both restrict and liberate.

Our research lies at the intersection of gender and geography, contested cities, and everyday life and agency of Palestinian women. Although each of these fields of study is individually rich in scholarship, the intersection has been largely unexplored. Several scholars have investigated the intersection of two of the topics above, such as gender in Jerusalem (Fenster, 2005; Greenberg Raanan, 2017), gender in divided cities (Smyth, 2009), space and everyday conflict in East Jerusalem (Selimovic 2019), and agency among Palestinian women in Israel (Abu-Rabia-Queder & Weiner-Levy, 2013). However, this scholarship provokes further questions about the unique situation of women in East Jerusalem, a group whose voices and experiences have been underexamined to date (for exceptions see Alayan & Shehadeh, 2021; Greenberg Raanan & Avni, 2020; Shalhoub-Kerkovian & Busbridge, 2014; Shalhoub-

Kevorkian, 2012). An intersectional perspective can shed new light on phenomena that are not typically explored from this lens, for example, the gendered spatiality of debt in Palestine (Harker et al., 2019). Empirically, the paper is based on 22 in-depth interviews with Palestinian Jerusalemite women who have taken leading roles in social, economic, and political initiatives in their communities.

The paper is structured as follows. We first lay out the theoretical foundation, elaborating on the concept of gray space, everyday life, and feminist geography. Second, we exemplify these concepts in East Jerusalem, highlighting social, political, and economic issues such as citizenship, infrastructure, and urban institutions. Third, we explain the methods we used in our research. Fourth, we explore the quotidian challenges that Palestinian women face in Jerusalem. We then outline some of the strategies that women community leaders employ to combat these issues. We conclude with a discussion and directions for future research. While Jerusalem may be an extreme case in terms of its geopolitical complexity and levels of religiosity, this research might prove useful for other contexts, given the role of gender as a powerful force in virtually every space and the ubiquity of contexts around the world that could be characterized as gray spaces. In this article, we suggest that gray space is a useful concept for social and cultural geographers to think through the power relations that shape everyday life, paying attention to both structural elements and their interaction with everyday life, and demonstrate how life in a gray space both restricts women in myriad ways while also liberating many women to take on leadership roles and function as agents of change in their communities.

Theoretical framing: Gendering gray space

'Gray space' as a theoretical concept was developed by the geographer and planner Oren Yiftachel and builds on the ubiquitous phenomenon of urban informality (AlSayyad & Roy, 2003; Bayat, 2004; Roy, 2005), which has become an inseparable part of urbanity, particularly in the Global Southeast. Seeking to deconstruct the binaries between formality and informality, Yiftachel (2009) conceptualizes the term to delineate the multiple logics, inconsistencies, and temporalities that shape the urban environment. Gray space:

> refers to developments, enclaves, populations and transactions positioned between the 'lightness' of legality/approval/safety and the 'darkness' of eviction/destruction/death. Gray spaces are neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of

> today's urban regions, which exist partially outside the gaze of state authorities and city plans. (Avni and Yiftachel 2014, 488)

Gray spaces are formed by structural forces, and their residents are excluded from full membership in the city. While the majority of gray spaces are created from 'below' by people who reside informally or semi-formally in the city and adopt diverse survival strategies, governments and policy-makers can also drive the creation of gray spaces from 'above' to promote spaces of exception that align with powerful interests. Tzfadia and Yiftachel (2015) exemplify how the state of Israel encourages gray spaces in the form of settlements and outposts in the West Bank to enhance its sovereignty there. These hegemonic spaces are different from unrecognized Bedouin villages in the south of Israel, whose residents fight for state recognition over the right to their land (Yiftachel 2009). This paper, however, focuses on gray space 'from below.'

Over the last decade, the concept of gray space has been applied to a variety of cases and places across the globe (Avni & Yiftachel, 2014; Jongh, 2020; Munro & Livingston, 2012). However, while gray space has been most commonly studied from a policy perspective, the question of how people experience it in their everyday lives has not been at the center of attention. Moreover, while the theorization of gray spaces calls for applying a wide range of lenses such as ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and gender (Yiftachel, 2016), gendered perspectives have been largely missing from the discussion. In this paper, we wish to contribute to the theorization of how gray spaces are experienced in everyday lives, and by women in particular, thus 'gendering' the concept and linking it to contemporary understandings of feminist geographies.

Feminist geography and everyday life

Feminist and queer geographers have examined ways in which dominant ideologies and cultural norms are embedded in quotidian landscapes and how everyday places and spaces are deliberately gendered and sexed for the purpose of exclusion and inclusion and to legitimize a dominant social 'norm' (Bondi & Rose, 2003; Greed, 1992; Jin & Whitson, 2014; Oswin, 2010; Visser, 2008)). Feminist scholars have also looked at the body as a scale at which power is inscribed, challenged, or strategically co-opted, paying particular attention to clothes and adornment as strategies used to legitimize the ideology of the dominant group or stigmatize and

marginalize minorities (Greenberg Raanan & Avni, 2020; Longhurst, 2004; McDowell & Court, 1994; Najib & Teeple Hopkins, 2020). The domestic sphere of the family and the home are also important sites of gendered geographies, as Harker (2010) demonstrates in the context of Palestine.

If everyday gendered identities are constructed and maintained through discourse, performance, and everyday actions, they must also be understood as being context-dependent. Shurmer-Smith (2001) points out that there are spatial politics in every action: in aggressively pushing or politely standing back in a shop; in considerately making oneself as small as possible or comfortably spreading one's legs in tourist class airplane seats; in covering one's window or displaying one's life to the world. The place-specificity of everyday actions has been studied by feminist and queer theorist geographers who argue that places are encoded with messages about who belongs, what behavior is expected, and what other axes of social division are made concrete in everyday space.

Gendered spatial practices are prevalent in all parts of Jerusalem, including its Ultra-Orthodox, Jewish-Secular, and Palestinian areas. Jewish and Muslim holy sites enforce strict gender separation rules, and women's presence in them is made marginal to men (Yiftachel, 2016). Scholars have documented how gendered norms are also enforced in the city's public and private spheres, subjecting the female body to certain 'proper' dress codes, mobility practices, and behaviours (Fenster, 2005; Greenberg Raanan & Avni, 2020; Kerzhner et al., 2018; Singer & Bickel, 2015). While these practices may be affiliated with the city's religious neighbourhoods, whether Israeli or Palestinian, women of different religious and ethnic backgrounds have experienced exclusion, restricted mobility, and lack of safety also in the city's secular areas (Greenberg Raanan 2017). At the same time, women also negotiate and traverse some gender boundaries, claiming their right to the city and asserting their presence in various ways (Alayan & Shehadeh, 2021; Greenberg Raanan & Avni, 2020).

East Jerusalem as a gray space

East Jerusalem is the popular name for Jerusalem's Palestinian neighbourhoods and is derived from the geography of the Green Line that divided the city into two separate parts: Jewish-Israeli (West) and Palestinian (East) (Figure 1). Since 1967, when Israel annexed Jordanian Al-Quds/Jerusalem and the villages surrounding the city, this area has been internationally considered occupied territory. Almost 400,000 Palestinians live in East Jerusalem, comprising

38% of Jerusalem's population. Several elements combine to make East Jerusalem a gray space, beyond its internationally contested status.

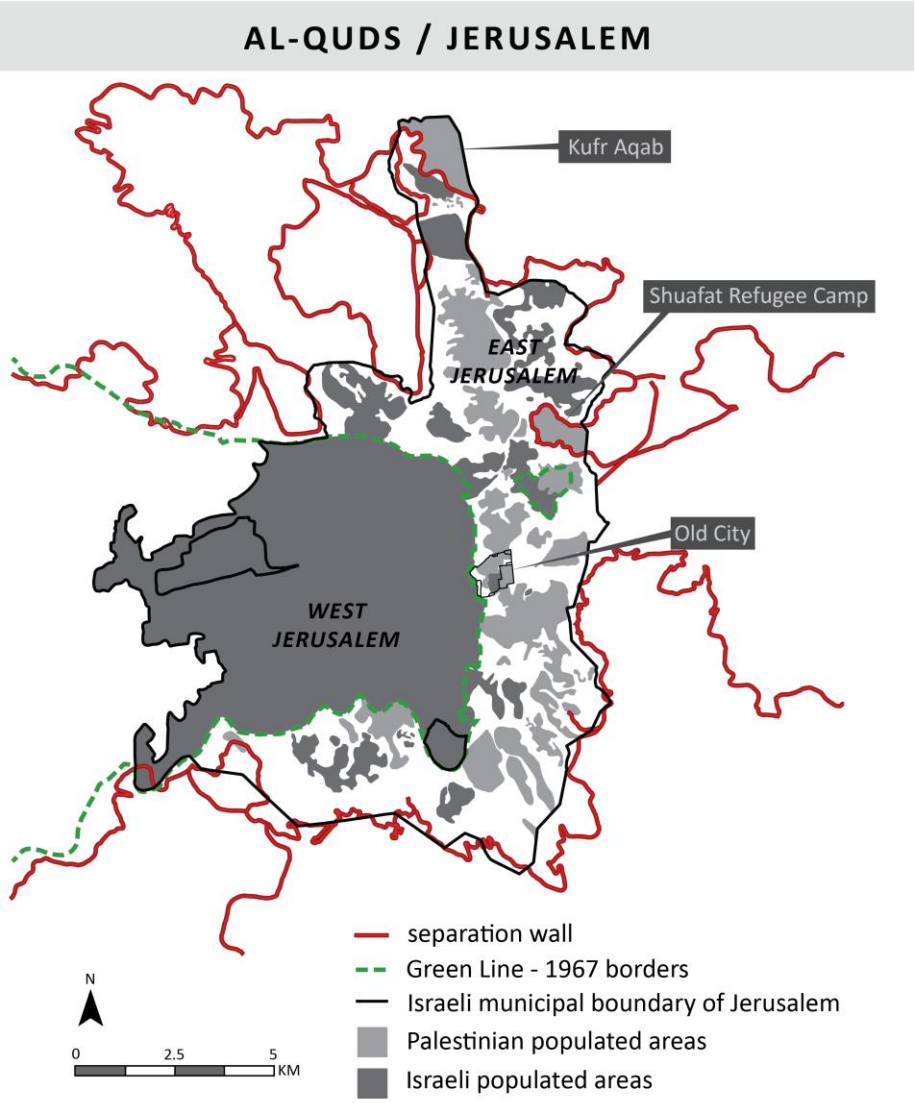

Figure 1 – East and West Jerusalem (Source: Authors)

First, citizenship status; for the most part, Palestinians living in Jerusalem are not citizens of Israel but permanent residents whose residency status is precarious and can be revoked. To maintain their residency, Palestinians must prove on an ongoing basis that Jerusalem is their center of life (Salem, 2018). Since the erection of the separation wall in the early 2000s, which severely hindered movement and connections between Jerusalem and the West Bank, thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank, many of whom are women, reside in Jerusalem without the

Jerusalem residency card issued by the Israeli government, and thus live under constant instability and fear (Ir Amim, 2015). Most of them live in the Palestinian areas outside of the separation wall yet within the municipal boundary of Jerusalem (Kufr Aqab and the Shuafat refugee camp), which can be considered a gray space within gray space. The municipality provides little to no services to these neighbourhoods and turns a blind eye to what it deems unauthorized construction, in contrast to other areas of East Jerusalem where unauthorized Palestinian construction is strictly enforced (Zugayar et al., 2021).

Second, urban planning, including housing and infrastructure; since 1967, very few master plans have been approved for East Jerusalem, despite the growing population, meaning that virtually all construction is informal, and thus to the Israeli state, a large percentage of East Jerusalem's building stock is considered illegal. This is while the Jewish-Israeli areas of Jerusalem have grown substantially, including east of the Green Line (UN-Habitat, 2015). Moreover, most of the land in East Jerusalem is not formally registered in the Israeli system, making future planning difficult (Braier, 2013). However, the lack of approval of new housing units is largely attributed to political reasons and the Israeli government's desire to maintain a Jewish majority in the city (UN-Habitat 2015). Infrastructure such as sewage, roads, and public space is also greatly deteriorated in East Jerusalem compared to the West.

Third, urban institutions; most East Jerusalemites do not vote in the municipal elections since they consider voting serves to 'normalize' the occupation. Political institutions in East Jerusalem have practically not existed since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (Avni et al., 2021; El Kurd, 2018). While in theory, the municipality and other institutions are supposed to represent and serve East Jerusalemites, East Jerusalem neighbourhoods are underserved and lack basic services and amenities. Those who do approach the municipality to request a service encounter language barriers and other difficulties. In recent years, the government produced a five-year plan to 'close the gap' between East and West Jerusalem (Ramon, 2021), yet its implementation is still partial and unlikely to solve many problems, given the political considerations that guide development in the city. Moreover, the implementation of some of these programs, for example, in education, is conditioned upon adopting the Israeli curriculum, which is unacceptable for many Palestinian institutions (Shlomo, 2017). All of these factors, among others, exemplify the situation of 'permanent temporality' where East Jerusalem is

neither fully included in Israel nor completely excluded from it and illustrates the condition of gray space.

Methods

The research was conducted using qualitative research methods. The majority of the data was collected through semi-structured interviews that took place during four months in late 2018. Follow-up interviews were conducted in 2019 and early 2020. Interviews were conducted with 22 female Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, all Muslim except for one Christian. The women interviewed for this research, all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms, are aged between 18 and mid-50s, are from different socio-economic backgrounds, and live in a variety of neighbourhoods of Jerusalem, from the most precarious and marginal to the more secure and affluent, on both sides of the separation wall. What they have in common is their leading position in their respective communities. We selected women willing to speak about their role as "agents of change," i.e., women who take an active role in fostering social change and work towards it in different capacities, whether through NGOs, the Jerusalem municipality, or the private sector. Interviews were held in multiple locations. Most took place at the Hebrew University, while others took place in interviewees' houses, offices, cafés, or places of work. All of these environments were safe and agreed upon by both parties involved in the interview.

Positionality played an important role in the fieldwork process. Most of the interviews were conducted by the third author, an American with Egyptian parents, in Arabic and English. Several aspects of the main interviewer's positionality were critical for establishing trust in an environment of extreme suspicion and broad fears about the normalization of relations between Palestinians and Israelis, which includes communication with Israeli individuals, universities, or other entities. The main interviewer's age (19) made her non-threatening to interviewees, and her fluency in Egyptian Arabic meant that the author was received well by the interviewees and was repeatedly told that her dialect reminded them of Egyptian cinema, which dominated popular culture across the Arab world throughout the 20th century. Still, some interviews were conducted in Hebrew and English by the first author, a Jewish-Israeli woman. The interviewees in this case work with Israeli organizations and collaborators and felt at ease to be interviewed for the purpose of academic research. The purpose of the study and its dissemination was made known to all women and they all consented to be interviewed. The information from the interviews was

complemented by the authors' familiarity with the city and various participant observations in community events, academic conferences, and informal gatherings around the city.

The manifestations of gray space in everyday life in East Jerusalem

This section elaborates on how living in East Jerusalem's gray space affects Palestinian women's everyday use of the city. Since women in Middle Eastern society generally bear the brunt of the responsibilities in the domestic sphere, including family safety, health, and child-rearing, they often experience some aspects of their urban environments in a much different way than their male counterparts. While most of the women interviewed for this research are highly educated, independent, and leaders in their communities, they still face many challenges in mobility, sense of security, and access to resources. Their stories also reveal the problematic status of many East Jerusalemite women from less privileged backgrounds. Many East Jerusalemite women have no more than high school education (often less), are unemployed (about 85% of Palestinian women do not participate in the workforce as waged labourers (ACRI, 2012), a reality that even worsened due to COVID-19), face language barriers due to low or nonexistent Hebrew competency, and are subject to patriarchal control. These difficulties join the other challenges described in the previous section, such as overcrowded neighbourhoods with depleted infrastructure, poor public transportation, lack of green spaces and amenities, and overall neglect–conditions that directly result from the Israeli occupation.

Checkpoints and mobility

Crossing militarized checkpoints has become an aspect of daily life for many East Jerusalemites for several reasons, such as commuting or visiting family. Many Palestinians also live in Kufr Aqab, a neighborhood considered within the Jerusalem municipality but outside of the physical separation wall. For them, crossing a checkpoint is a daily act.

Some of the challenges posed by the separation wall and checkpoints include dividing families or preventing future partnerships, wasting time, inducing stress, and causing humiliation. In the scenario where one spouse has a Jerusalem ID, and the other does not, it becomes very challenging for the couple to live together, given that obtaining an Israeli ID is almost impossible. If they move to the West Bank, the partner with the Jerusalem ID will have it revoked, meaning that they can no longer enter Jerusalem without a permit, often resulting in no longer being able to see one's family on the other side of the wall. If the couple attempts to live

in Jerusalem, the non-ID holding partner can be arrested—if they can even make it across the border. A mother who maintains a Jerusalem residence to retain her family's Jerusalem IDs but lives in Ramallah said: 'Both of my sons are dating girls from the West Bank, and they are really sweet and pretty, and they even get my sons gifts, but I can never allow them to get married… It's a hard life.' For this woman, having sons married to women without a Jerusalem ID is simply not an option, while for others, it is a reality. While there is no official data on the number of women from the West Bank residing without permits in Jerusalem, estimates suggest that there are thousands and even tens of thousands of them. These women are highly restricted in their mobility and access to amenities and services and risk being arrested and banished, losing their Jerusalem residency. Their precarious status affects their wellbeing and relationships with family, friends, and neighbours (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2012).

One interviewee described how her sister's family was broken up due to the erection of the separation wall in 2002. When the wall was built, her sister and her children came from Bethlehem to live in Jerusalem at their father's home. The sister's husband continued living in Bethlehem as that is where he was employed, and returned from the West Bank to visit his family only on weekends and holidays. The women explained the negative consequences of this arrangement and the strain it placed on the family unit. They had to pay for two homes, it was challenging for the mother to work and care for the children without help, and the father was not there daily to watch the children grow. This situation is not uncommon.

One of the most obvious impacts of being forced to cross a checkpoint in one's journey is the time added from one destination to another. Oftentimes, when a checkpoint is factored into a commute, it can take two hours to travel from home to work and another two hours on the way back. This becomes a major consideration in employment and education opportunities, or even in running errands or receiving medical treatment. The physical act of crossing a checkpoint for many Palestinians can be humiliating. One interviewee described her experiences: 'we go through them and get checked, and sometimes it is very embarrassing because the wire of your bra beeps, and whenever you walk, sometimes people ask you to remove your veil, remove whatever, and this can be embarrassing for people who wear the hijab' (and Griffiths & Repo, 2018; Hammami, 2019 for more accounts on the gendered experience of crossing checkpoints; see also Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2012). The militarized nature of the checkpoints, combined with having commute times increase exponentially, can often cause stress and anxiety for those forced

to travel (in most cases, men). This stress is often transferred from one person in the household to another, ultimately resulting in severe family tension and even domestic violence. One interviewee described:

> When a man goes out to work, he finds many problems in his way such as the soldiers and even settlers stopping him on his way to work and then getting in trouble with his supervisor at work because he arrived late. These fights with the supervisor lead to fights with the other employees. This results in the man returning home in a very bad mood from his work and this causes many problems because he returns to his wife and tells her, you can't work, you can't go out, you can't do anything, don't get on my nerves!

Another interviewee added:

> Because their men have to leave the house very early in the morning to pass through the checkpoint, this puts a lot of pressure on the men, causing the women to suffer from domestic violence. The men cannot relieve their stress with others so they take it out on the wife, then the wife takes it out on the kids. … This is the biggest challenge that women face: domestic violence.

The issue of stress and domestic violence and its connection to the geopolitics of the city came up repeatedly in the interviews and are further elaborated on in the next section. Ultimately, Israel's use of the checkpoints as political control and as governing and sorting mechanism permeates to the most intimate Palestinian domestic sphere and everyday life (Griffiths & Repo, 2018).

Safety

For women from East Jerusalem, whether or not they feel safe is often a question of where they are and if they are wearing a *hijab* (Greenberg Raanan and Avni 2020; Alayan and Shehadeh 2021). Every single veiled woman who was interviewed responded that wearing her hijab made her feel unsafe in West Jerusalem. Whereas Muslim Arab men are able to blend in with Israeli society, Muslim Arab women wearing the hijab do not have the same privilege and are always a visible minority (Najib & Hopkins, 2019). One woman described her experience:

> Because I am not wearing the hijab sometimes I feel more safe, but if I wore it, I would feel seriously in danger in some Israeli neighborhoods. In the neighborhood across the street here they are very religious. I lost my way in my car there once and I asked a man in Hebrew and he thought because of my accent that I was American. He asked me if I speak English, so I said yes.

In this situation, not wearing a hijab enabled the woman to disguise herself. Another interviewee recounted:

> We get threats from the Israelis everywhere we go. Once I was walking with a friend on Jaffa Street. I think it was during the time of the Gaza War. We were just walking and two Israeli guys, settlers, were walking behind us, and we were speaking in Arabic, and they told us to "go to Gaza". They said this in Hebrew. So I told him, "you go to Gaza". He looked at us a certain way and I was like, oh my God, he is going to beat us or something, so we just walked quickly away, because they looked so violent! You cannot trust them, and if something happens, the police will not take my side… I will go to jail!

However, safety (or its lack thereof) is not only experienced vis-à-vis Israeli society. As mentioned, the Palestinian domestic environment can also be experienced as unsafe for some Palestinian women. Many women find themselves trapped: while they refrain from approaching the Israeli police due to their assumption that the police will be unwilling to act on their behalf or will mistreat them (Hannah Rought-Brooks et al., 2010) and also due to prevalent norms of anti-normalization, language barriers, mistrust, and fear, they find no one to turn to within Palestinian society during crises. One interviewee powerfully phrased this dilemma:

> If something happens to a woman who is being exposed to violence by a family member, she cannot go to an Israeli police officer and report it because at some point they will consider that inappropriate, and at the same time, they are not the ones who are going to protect you. Going to the Israeli police, you will be considered a collaborator, so really, *everyone is against you.* (authors' emphasis)

This state of liminality is a classic manifestation of gray space, subjecting women to fragility and insecurity. In this sense, East Jerusalemite women are a double-minority (Kretzmer, 2019) who exemplify the dual dilemma of the 'subaltern as female' and the 'subaltern of imperialism' (Spivak, 2003, p. 325). It is not only that these women are subjected to the occupation, but because of the male-dominated society in which they live, a situation exacerbated by the occupation, they are also excluded by the powerful patriarchy in East Jerusalem (Erez et al., 2022; Kretzmer, 2019). Many interviewees agreed that critical issues of domestic violence and sexual harassment are widespread yet do not receive much attention for 'cultural and religious reasons and because it is shameful and scandalous' (interview with Nadia).

The absence of formalized (Palestinian) authorities, the predominance of conservative practices of Islam, and restrictive cultural norms can be perceived by some Palestinian women as limiting and even intimidating. One interviewee exemplified this complexity with an anecdote about her daughter's work and mobility:

> My older daughter studied computer science and she works for a high-tech company [in West Jerusalem]. I am constantly worried because where she works there are settlers and Jews, and in our neighborhood, people may look at her and wonder, where are you going and what are you doing at this time of night out of the house? They would never consider that she is working. (...) I don't sleep until my daughters arrive home. (…) Two days ago she returned from work in Haifa at 2 or 2:30 AM. She could face problems from Jews or settlers, or she could face problems from the local gangsters. My constant fear 24 hours a day is that someone will stop my daughter in the street.

Another interviewee, a young, secular woman, explicitly said that she feels safer in the Jewish-Israeli parts of Jerusalem rather than in her own East Jerusalem neighbourhood:

> I like to go to Jaffa Road[1] just to walk. It's more comfortable to walk in Jaffa Road because nobody will ask you anything or watch you. The same guy walking in East Jerusalem will watch and comment but on Jaffa Road he won't say anything. Even if it's the same person and same situation, it's the place that's different… if I want to do sports, I can't do it in [the interviewee's neighbourhood]. I will take my car to French Hill [a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood], take a jog and then take my car back to my house.

A similar notion was expressed by another interview, who said:

> When I want to walk I drive my car to an area in Israel just to walk around. I pass the checkpoint for two hours just to walk. I can't walk in Kufr Aqab. I don't even know my neighbors and they don't know me. (Interview with Yasmeen)

We end this section with a quote from an interviewee who does not wear the hijab and also points out the duality of being a secular Palestinian in a deeply divided city. Walking in her own neighborhood, she said, feels safe because she grew up there and knows the people in the area, however, walking in 'any other area, especially if it is dark, no way! Especially because Palestinians might mistake me for an Israeli and Israelis might mistake me for a Palestinian.'

These excerpts from the women's everyday lives demonstrate that the experience of being a Palestinian woman in East Jerusalem is not homogeneous. Some areas are experienced

differently by different women, depending on their dress and perceived religiosity, background, and other factors.

Identity, motherhood, and cultural norms

The gendered sense of insecurity described in the previous sections is only amplified by motherhood, according to the interviewees. Many Palestinian families follow traditional gender roles, where mothers play a primary role in the decision-making associated with parenthood. One mother interviewed shared her dilemma when it comes to choosing an education system for her children. On the one hand, if she sends her children to an Israeli school, they will gain the Hebrew language skills needed to succeed in their environment and have a better quality of life but will be learning the Israeli narrative of history. On the other hand, putting her children through the Palestinian school system aligns with her cultural, social, and political views, but due to a lack of funding, it may not adequately prepare her children for the universities or workforce they aspire to enter. Even simple routine activities such as visiting family on the other side of the separation wall become more complicated when children are involved. One mother reported not knowing what to tell her young children when they asked why soldiers were very nice to her on the way to their cousins' house but were very mean to her on the way back home. Interviewees pointed out that navigating these conversations with young, impressionable children is highly challenging.

In Jerusalem's workforce, where Palestinian women are often the last to be considered for a job by both Palestinians and Israelis, the tradeoff that many women all around the world must take between staying at home and raising children or working a full-time job often results in the woman quitting her job and staying home with the children. With the responsibility of picking children up from school in the afternoon and crossing a checkpoint to do so, it becomes impossible for mothers to maintain particular jobs. One interviewee described her experience as a mother crossing the checkpoint:

> Qalandia checkpoint is horrible, it's the worst checkpoint in the West Bank. It took two hours to go and two hours to come back so you can imagine how it's hard for both males and females, but especially for women, because of the kids, because of the responsibilities, because even the lack of services and infrastructure in the area itself, because there is no sidewalk, because unfortunately, sometimes the sewage comes out and they walk on it.

Aside from the difficulties compounded by motherhood, interviewees reported other challenges, including the young age of marriage that is the norm among Palestinian women and how they are expected to manage all domestic responsibilities, preventing them from pursuing higher education. Traditional gender norms are strictly enforced, making it difficult for women who do not comply with them, as one interviewee explained:

> From the first minute I got divorced, people looked at me differently. They say, oh, she's divorced, oh she comes and goes… I go out to get bread and people will say, hmmm, where did she go? And they will say bad words about me… It is a cultural and a religious problem. Here, Islam creates so many problems, especially because we are not veiled. Even my "friends" at work still ask me when I will start to wear a veil. I tell them, I won't be wearing it, I will be wearing a bathing suit. It has been 20 years that I am working with this same group of women and some are still asking me when I will wear a veil!

Another interviewee commented on the complexity of being a Palestinian woman in Jerusalem. Whereas veiled women might encounter suspicion, stereotypes, and racism 'even in Montreal'[2], she said, in Jerusalem, 'the Palestinian woman suffers two or three times for it because she suffers from the occupation, she suffers as a woman in the Arab society, and as a traditional woman. She also suffers from religious discrimination' (Interview with Rasan). Indeed, the intersectional nature of the many forces that interact in East Jerusalem results in diverse outcomes for women, depending on their particular life circumstances.

Navigating Jerusalem's gray space: Women as agents of change

While the women interviewed for this research face many challenges living in a gray space, the power vacuum and under-governed nature of gray space also provides opportunities for them to be active agents in creating change and combatting the quotidian challenges associated with life in contested Jerusalem. As a method of self-empowerment, some women have decided to work with the Jerusalem municipality to improve the daily lives of Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Unique to this choice is its occurrence within the confines of the Israeli society and local government framework. By working within the Israeli authorities, these women believe they can produce tangible results and changes for their communities. For example, Mina is in charge of coordinating vocational programs for unemployed people, as well as developing professional courses. She works mainly with women, among them new mothers. As an East Jerusalemite who

is working in the municipality, Mina takes it as her responsibility to encourage them to hire people from East Jerusalem. She says,

> I think the one who is working in the municipality has to knock on the table and say what we need. At least in my department, they now understand that we have to hire from East Jerusalem because when you do that, your picture of what is going on in that area becomes clearer.

Leila works in the field of urban planning and community development. She develops programs with the municipality and other organizations, some of which are specifically designed for women. While she believes that place-making projects are a good method for letting the community speak, she is not sure if these types of projects should be the municipality's first priority:

> When you don't even have good, clean running water or accessibility to transportation, you don't really care about a bench… You see this as a luxury! I do believe that public space is very important, and the core of the structure of building a city, but they don't need it as urgently as they need more housing, or for houses to be saved from demolition, or to be safe from being kicked out of their houses.

Nonetheless, she reported that after overcoming trust issues, people were thrilled with the projects they did. As a Palestinian woman, she said, 'people feel they can talk to [me] very easily. Even the men would come and talk to me and ask me what I think about things. (…) I think it was a benefit.' Leila uses her job with the municipality to make direct changes to her built environment and improve the poor infrastructure of East Jerusalem where she can.

Other women have started change-making initiatives beyond those funded by the municipality. One interviewee, along with a partner, had launched an educational program to supplement the high school education system in East Jerusalem, which is often overloaded with students and not equipped for different learning styles or preparing students for university. According to Ir Amim (2017, p. 3), East Jerusalem has been 'coping with a continued shortage of classrooms as well as the highest dropout rates recorded in data collected by Israel.' The program they developed provides training and learning skills to help Palestinian students get accepted to colleges and successfully graduate from them.

Yasmeen started her own program to teach business skills to and empower East Jerusalemite women living in one of the neighborhoods outside of the separation wall. She

started off by renting a center and inviting women to speak in their free time. She felt this activity allowed them to relieve pressure and occasionally find solutions. After four years of informal meetings, she got a grant that enabled her to open a professional center where she offered some free sessions in five subject areas. The first, and in her opinion, the most important, is a women's empowerment session. After that, they can attend sessions in marketing, accounting, legal help, and IT, and are provided with laptops. She also provides a daycare service to attract women with young children and a meal. She follows up with the women to see how their entrepreneurial projects are progressing. She also helps them to make connections with institutions such as banks that can provide them with grants and loans. Through her work, Yasmeen has also encountered cases of husbands who were apprehensive about their wives' participation, but she managed to persuade them that the added income would be valuable. By empowering the women and providing them with some skills and resources, many were able to start their own small businesses. This extra income has improved some of the women's lives.

Another notable project initiated and managed by two interviewees encourages women to be active in their communities and address environmental dangers that put their children at risk. The kind of dangers they face daily are infrastructural in nature, for example, poorly paved roads with uncovered ditches or sewage problems. At first, the women did not know how to ask for what they wanted. As the founder explained:

> I began to explain that we have certain rights because we pay [property tax] and electricity and water, and it is our right to take advantage and to claim what we deserve. From another point of view, as a mother, I want my children to live in a good environment. I will both teach my sons not to litter, and I will call the municipality and request garbage bins from them and request them to fix the streets. I will ask them to fill the pit in the road so my son does not fall, and will ask for lights on my street.

At first, for reasons of mistrust, people felt uneasy when they saw the municipality coming to make improvements, worrying the authorities came in order to demolish houses. It also took time to convince the municipality to take the complaints seriously. Improvement started to happen when an East Jerusalemite began to work at the municipality's call center because he could communicate with the women in Arabic. The project started in one neighborhood and expanded to 14 neighborhoods within East Jerusalem, each with its own women's group, totaling nearly a

thousand women. From one East Jerusalemite working in the call center, four more were employed, and the East Jerusalem call rate has risen significantly.

These are only some examples of the initiatives undertaken by the women we interviewed. Others are entrepreneurs taking a leading role in the emerging high-tech scene in East Jerusalem, are active in various peace initiatives, or are leading environmental activism groups and economic development initiatives. They help thousands of other women receive training, vocational skills, education and language skills while facing significant challenges both from Palestinian and Israeli societies. The women interviewed demonstrate that living in a gray space has, at least in some ways, enabled them to challenge or reimagine conventional roles within their patriarchal society and be agents of change in their communities.

Discussion and conclusion: A gendered gray space

In this paper, we suggest that East Jerusalem can be productively conceptualized as a gray space, neither fully integrated nor completely eliminated from Jerusalem/Israel. The framework of gray space highlights the unique and fragile status of East Jerusalemite Palestinians, who are residents of a highly segregated city with contested boundaries, institutions, and sovereignty (Avni et al. 2021; El Kurd 2018). Their lives are marked by structural inequalities created by the occupation and by the fact that they are not Israeli citizens. We further suggest a gendered reading of this space, through an examination of the unique embodied challenges that Palestinian women routinely face as well as their coping mechanisms. Palestinian women face significant constraints in their everyday lives, which have clear geographic manifestations. Their sense of safety in different parts of the city, their mobility in and around Jerusalem, and the type of institutions with which they interact—or not—are examples of how everyday life is affected by spatial considerations and the reality of life in an extremely divided, non-democratic city (Greenberg Raanan and Avni 2020; Shalhoub-Kerkovian and Busbridge 2014).

While highlighting the various and considerable challenges these women tackle on an ongoing basis, we have also demonstrated the capacity of some women to serve as agents of change. Far from being silent and passive in their oppression, many Palestinian women in East Jerusalem are leading meaningful initiatives to improve their lives and are creating robust networks in their environments, which is at least partially facilitated by the power vacuum that exists in the gray space of East Jerusalem. The women interviewed for this research come from different backgrounds in terms of age, marital status, family history, and socio-economic status,

yet they all share a desire to change their lives and those around them for the better. Their acts are not necessarily in the form of direct resistance or collective action since the political situation in Jerusalem makes such resistance a risky endeavor (Avni, 2021; Yiftachel, 2016). Yet women find ways to subvert the dominant power relations and find joy and meaning in their lives, even if their resistance strategies are tacit, ambivalent, and may only change reality temporarily and modestly (Richter-Devroe, 2012, 2018). The women we interviewed are strategic and persistent in their quest to claim agency and authority over their lives (Shalhoub-Kerkovian and Busbridge 2014). As Hammani (2019, p. S95) argues regarding the checkpoints, 'human agency cannot be completely automated out of the system.'

The power vacuum and unique circumstances of the occupation has allowed many of them to take on leadership roles in their communities and challenge entrenched patriarchal cultural norms (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2012). Their actions should not be romanticized as fully transformative but understood as a form of subjectivity and agency that contest the Israeli control but may also be directed against 'internal Palestinian power structures' (Richter-Devroe, 2012, p. 41). Despite the limited scope of these women's resistance acts, and the implicit manner in which they are articulated, they are nonetheless political acts. Understanding and recognizing them as such requires 'a shift in scholarly focus to the everyday' (Richter-Devroe, 2018, p. 2). Utilizing gray space, gender, and everyday life jointly as analytical frameworks helps to capture the rich array of factors that play a role in the lives of Palestinian women in East Jerusalem.

The intersectionality of the various structures that influence the lives of Palestinian women in a contested city such as Jerusalem is evident in their stories. First, they are women in a city with clear gendered boundaries and patriarchal norms and belong to a largely conservative society. As such, some of their experiences are shared by women of other ethnic and racial identities in Jerusalem, particularly those from orthodox Jewish communities (Greenberg Raanan and Avni 2020). Second, they are a minority in an occupied city, which adds unique challenges and difficulties to their everyday lives (Shalhoub-Kerkovian and Busbridge 2014). As noted by Shalhoub-Kerkovian (2012, p. 20), women who take a more active stand in society may also experience 'further margnizaliation within the Palestinian community in Jerusalem,' supported by the local leadership. However, it is also important to note that some women explicitly said that interacting with institutions, people, and spaces in West Jerusalem had provided them with

some freedom and opportunities. Therefore, their experiences cannot be sorted into a neat binary. This 'messiness' is partly a result of living in a gray space, belonging neither here nor there.

In conclusion, by thinking about East Jerusalemite women's everyday experiences through the framework of gray space we demonstrate how informality, particularly in the context of occupation, is a broad umbrella that is also shaped by factors such as gender and ethnicity. Being a Palestinian woman in East Jerusalem entails certain dilemmas, limitations, and practices. While some scholarship examines the links between gender and space in Jerusalem (Fenster, 2004; Greenberg Raanan, 2017; Shalhoub-Kerkovian & Busbridge, 2014; Singer & Bickel, 2015), it has been fairly limited in scope and has generally not investigated informality and gray space. Combining these two lenses provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of the multi-scalar structures that shape everyday life in Jerusalem, from the private home to the city level. Future social and cultural geographic research could productively use the concept of gray space to investigate the everyday gendered nature of liminal spaces, such as East Jerusalem, and the constraints and liberations experienced by people with different positionalities. Since gender might affect how people experience their (informal) urban environment, this undertaking could further illuminate everyday life in large parts of the world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Additional information

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 792762 and Mitacs Globalink Research Award (Canada).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the referees for their kind and helpful feedback

References

Abu-Rabia-Queder, S., & Weiner-Levy, N. (2013). Between local and foreign structures: Exploring the agency of Palestinian women in Israel. *Social Politics*, *20*(1), 88–108. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxs029

ACRI. (2012). *Neglect and Suppression in East Jerusalem The Policies behind Widespread Poverty and Unemployment*. https://law.acri.org.il/en/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/EastJlem-Poverty-ENG-web.pdf

Alayan, S., & Shehadeh, L. (2021). Religious symbolism and politics: hijab and resistance in Palestine. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *44*(6), 1051–1067. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1883699

AlSayyad, N., & Roy, A. (2003). Urban informality as a "new" way of life. In *Urban informality: transnational perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia*. Lexington Books.

Avni, N. (2021). Viewpoint: Between the national and the urban in East Jerusalem/ al-Quds. *Political Geography*, *86*. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102314

Avni, N., Brenner, N., Miodownik, D., & Rosen, G. (2021). Limited urban citizenship: the case of community councils in East Jerusalem. *Urban Geography*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1878430

Avni, N., & Yiftachel, O. (2014). The New Divided CIty? Planning and "gray space" between global north-west and south-east. In S. Parnell & S. Oldfield (Eds.), *A Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South* (pp. 487–505). Routledge.

Bayat, A. (2004). The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary. *Tamass 2: Contemporary Arab Representations: Cairo*, 40–52.

Bondi, L., & Rose, D. (2003). Constructing gender, constructing the urban: A review of Anglo-American feminist urban geography. *Gender, Place and Culture*, *10*(3), 229–245. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369032000114000

Braier, M. (2013). Zones of Transformation? Informal Construction and Independent Zoning Plans in East Jerusalem. *Environment and Planning A*, *45*(11), 2700–2716. https://doi.org/10.1068/a46250

El Kurd, D. (2018). Palestinian Protests. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, *11*(4), 19–40.

https://doi.org/10.1525/CAA.2018.114002

Erez, E., Sela-Shayovitz, R., & Ibarra, P. R. (2022). Patriarchy, political enmity, and domestic violence: Exploring abusive mixed intimate partnerships in a conflict zone. *International Review of Victimology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580221079961

Fenster, T. (2004). *The Global City and the Holy City*. The Global City and the Holy City (Pearson Education.

Fenster, T. (2005). The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *14*(3), 217–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230500264109

Greed, C. H. (1992). The reproduction of gender relations over space: A model applied to the case of chartered surveyors. *Antipode*, *24*(1), 16–28. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1992.tb00426.x

Greenberg Raanan, M. (2017). *Space, Power Relations and Identities in Jerusalem: An Investigation Using Mental Maps and GPS*. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Greenberg Raanan, M., & Avni, N. (2020). (Ad)dressing belonging in a contested space: Embodied spatial practices of Palestinian and Israeli women in Jerusalem. *Political Geography*, *76*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102090

Griffiths, M., & Repo, J. (2018). Biopolitics and checkpoint 300 in occupied Palestine: Bodies, affect, discipline. *Political Geography*, *65*, 17–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.POLGEO.2018.04.004

Hammami, R. (2019). Destabilizing Mastery and the Machine: Palestinian Agency and Gendered Embodiment at Israeli Military Checkpoints. *Current Anthropology*, *60*(S19), S87–S97. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/699906

Hannah Rought-Brooks, Salwa Duaibis, & Soraida Hussein. (2010). Palestinian Women: Caught in the Cross Fire Between Occupation and Patriarchy. *Feminist Formations*, *22*(3), 124–145. https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2010.0018

Harker, C. (2010). On (not) forgetting families: Family spaces and spacings in Birzeit, Palestine. *Environment and Planning A*, *42*(11), 2624–2639. https://doi.org/10.1068/a4338

Harker, C., Sayyad, D., & Shebeitah, R. (2019). The gender of debt and space: Notes from Ramallah-Al Bireh, Palestine. *Geoforum*, *98*, 277–285. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.GEOFORUM.2018.04.018

Ir Amim. (2015). *Jerusalem: The Rising Cost of Peace*. http://www.ir-amim.org.il/sites/default/files/2.17 Rising Cost of Peace.pdf

Ir Amim. (2017). *Education Report 2017: Fifty Years of Neglect*. https://www.ir-amim.org.il/sites/default/files/Education_Report_2017-Fifty_Years_of_Neglect.pdf.

Jin, X., & Whitson, R. (2014). Young women and public leisure spaces in contemporary Beijing: Recreating (with) gender, tradition, and place. *Social and Cultural Geography*, *15*(4), 449–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.894115

Jongh, L. (2020). The "Gray Spacing" of Market Vendors and Their Associations and Vendors' Collective Agency in the Zambian City of Kitwe. *Urban Forum*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12132-020-09413-5

Kerzhner, T., Kaplan, S., & Silverman, E. (2018). Physical walls, invisible barriers: Palestinian women's mobility in Jerusalem. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, *10*(4), 299–314.

Kretzmer, D. (2019). *The Legal Status of the Arabs in Israel*. Routledg.

Longhurst, R. (2004). *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. Routledge.

McDowell, L., & Court, G. (1994). Performing work: bodily representations in merchant banks. *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*, *12*(6), 727–750. https://doi.org/10.1068/d120727

Munro, M., & Livingston, M. (2012). Student impacts on urban neighbourhoods: policy approaches, discourses and dilemmas. *Urban Studies*, *49*(8), 1679–1694.

Najib, K., & Hopkins, P. (2019). Veiled Muslim women's strategies in response to Islamophobia in Paris. *Political Geography*, *73*, 103–111. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.POLGEO.2019.05.005

Najib, K., & Teeple Hopkins, C. (2020). Geographies of Islamophobia. In *Social and Cultural Geography* (Vol. 21, Issue 4, pp. 449–457). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1705993

Oswin, N. (2010). Sexual tensions in modernizing Singapore: The postcolonial and the intimate. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *28*(1), 128–141. https://doi.org/10.1068/d15308

Ramon, A. (2021). *Discovering East Jerusalem - the processes that led to a change in Israeli policy and Government Decision 3790.* Jerusalem Institue for Policy Reaserch (Hebrew).

Richter-Devroe, S. (2012). Palestinian Women's Everyday Resistance: Between Normality and Normalisation - ProQuest. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *12*, 32–46.

https://www.proquest.com/docview/867410762?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true

Richter-Devroe, S. (2018). *Women's Political Activism in Palestine: Peacebuilding, Resistance, and Survival*. University of Illinois Press.

Roy, A. (2005). Urban informality: toward an epistemology of planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *71*(2), 147–158.

Salem, W. (2018). Jerusalemites and the issue of citizenship in the context of Israeli settler-colonialism. *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, *17*(1), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2018.0177

Shalhoub-Kerkovian, N., & Busbridge, R. (2014). (En)gendering De-development in East Jerusalem: Thinking Through the 'Everyday.' In M. Turner & O. Shweiki (Eds.), *Decolonizing Palestinian Political Economy* (pp. 77–94). Palgrave Macmillan.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2012). Trapped: The Violence of Exclusion in Jerusalem. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, *49*(49), 6–25.

Shlomo, O. (2017). The governmentalities of infrastructure and services amid urban conflict: East Jerusalem in the post Oslo era. *Political Geography*, *61*, 224–236.

Shurmer-Smith, P. (2001). *Doing cultural geography*. Sage.

Singer, R., & Bickel, R. (2015). Which way to go? Women's walking decisions and Ultra-Orthodox enclaves in Jerusalem. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *22*(7), 987–1006.

Smyth, L. (2009). Gender and Public Space in Divided Cities: dynamics of everyday urban life. In *ESRC Research Project on Conflict in Cities and the Contested State*. Universities of Cambridge, Exeter, and Queen's Belfast.

Spivak, G. C. (2003). Can the subaltern speak? In L. Cahoone (Ed.), *In from modernism to postmodernism: An Anthology*. Blackwell Publishing.

Tzfadia, E., & Yiftachel, O. (2015). The Gray City of Tomorrow. In T. Fenster & O. Shlomo (Eds.), *Cities of Tomorrow: Planning, Justice and Sustainability Today?* (pp. 176–192). Hakibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).

UN-Habitat. (2015). *Right to Develop: Planning Palestinian Communities in East Jerusalem*. UN-Habitat.

Visser, G. (2008). The homonormalisation of white heterosexual leisure spaces in Bloemfontein, South Africa. *Geoforum*, *39*(3), 1347–1361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2007.11.004

Yiftachel, O. (2009). Theoretical Notes On Gray Cities': the Coming of Urban Apartheid?

Planning Theory, *8*(1), 88–100.

Yiftachel, O. (2016). The Aleph—Jerusalem as critical learning. *City*, *20*(3), 483–494.

Zugayar, M., Avni, N., & Silverman, E. (2021). Vertical informality: The case of Kufr Aqab in East Jerusalem. *Land Use Policy*, *105*, 105395. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105395

[1] One of the main shopping streets in Jerusalem.
[2] In reference to where the interviewer studied.