
Women and leisure: how much has changed in a quarter of a century?

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Introduction

There is no entry for 'leisure' in the index of *Geography and Gender: An Introduction to Feminist Geography* (1984). Those of us who met in the early 1980s to decide on the subject content of the first feminist geography textbook agreed to focus primarily on employment and urban spatial structure, together with development issues, despite the fact that leisure is inherently geographical, in that it takes place within specific locational contexts and creates specific 'leisure places' (for example, heritage sites, race parameters, and community theatres, as considered in the case studies later in this paper) and despite the fact that leisure is strongly gendered, in both expectations and experiences.

There is a reference to constraints on access to leisure facilities in Chapter 5 of *Geography and Gender* (pages 90-93), where the importance of low-cost, local provision is stressed, especially for those who have the care of young children. This section of the chapter was based on my study of women with young children, carried out in the London borough of Merton in 1977 (published as *Women Attached: The Daily Lives of Women with Young Children*, Tivers 1985, and in a shortened form in *Women in Cities: Gender and the Urban Environment* in 1988). As I have described elsewhere (Women and Geography Study Group, 1997, page 36), the initial ideas for this research study focused on leisure and recreation behaviour, and a strong emphasis on this area remained in the final version of my doctoral thesis, despite broadening the scope of the study to cover wider aspects of gender in everyday life.

Women's leisure, a quarter of a century ago

In Tivers (1988), based on research with women with young children undertaken in 1977, I argued that:

In considering the constraints operating on the activity patterns of women with young children, it is necessary to look critically at the ways in which society is structured. Physical constraints (mobility and provision constraints) may have an immediate impact on behaviour patterns but they are themselves, with activities, simply the spatial patterns produced by the social processes at work within society. It is argued here that the dominant constraint on women's activities is the gender role constraint, the outward face of the ideology that assigns child-caring responsibility to women (pages 85-86).

... when asked to consider a range of potential daytime activities, no fewer than 227 respondents (57 per cent) listed constraints relating to child-care commitments as determining their inability to take part in desired activities - especially in the area of adult education and sport (page 94).

Similar findings, linking low participation rates in leisure activities by heterosexual women with their child-care and other domestic responsibilities, arose from other studies undertaken in the decade following the Merton study (Willis, 1982; Deem, 1986; Lenskyj, 1988; Wearing and Wearing, 1988; Wimbush and Talbot, 1988; Wimbush, 1989; Green *et al.*, 1990). I should like to quote one particularly apt comment, made by a respondent to Rosemary Deem's survey in Milton Keynes:

Well first of all I tried going [jogging] early in the mornings but then everyone complained I was making them late by enjoying myself rather than getting on with breakfast. Then I thought I'd go at lunchtime – but the girls at work laughed at me and anyway I have to shop most days – so finally I decided I'd try the evenings – after we'd eaten I'd wait an hour or so and then go – that was OK in the summer but of course now it's dark I don't feel safe – also Ron [husband] doesn't much like me running anyway – he says I'm getting leg muscles and that feminine women don't get all sweaty (Deem, 1986, page 74).

The above comment reminds us that the constraints on women's leisure activities in the 80s were not only 'practical', in terms of opportunities and the amount of time free from other responsibilities, but also ideological, in that expectations were highly gendered. My study of women with young children in Merton (in 1977) showed that visiting parks, and visiting friends and relatives, were by far the most important 'leisure' activities undertaken by respondents during weekdays. This was clearly because children could be taken along too – indeed the activity often centred more on the child than on the woman herself, and in many cases could barely be considered 'leisure' at all for the woman. The expectations of partners were also a key consideration.

However, it was not only women with children whose leisure activities were proscribed by gendered norms. As Willis (1982) said, referring to female athletes:

To know why it is that women can muster only 90 per cent of a man's strength cannot help us to comprehend, explain, or change the massive feeling in our society that a woman has no business flexing her muscles anyway.

Twenty-five years ago, a woman's place was not only in the home (in a traditional, domestic, 'female' role), but also in certain, heavily circumscribed leisure activities. As Deem (1986, page 40) said:

Where women are active in leisure pursuits outside the home it is usually within a range of 'suitable' and 'gender appropriate' activities – women's organizations, caring and community activities, evening classes, keep fit and yoga groups, bingo, which are enjoyable, but are also where women feel and are perceived by men to be 'safe' and 'women in their place'.

Bingo, as one important area of 'gender-appropriate' leisure activity, was studied by Rachael Dixey, who found that:

To the players, bingo is an unremarkable fact of life, a home from home, an invaluable source of companionship, a refuge which offers excitement. It is not surprising that 84 per cent of players are women, given the options bestowed on them by virtue of their gender (Dixey, 1988, page 131).

Women's leisure today

So, how much has changed in the last 25 years? Has there been a lessening of the 'gender role constraint'? Has the diversity of leisure experience between different groups of women increased?

With regard to the latter point, all the early studies cited noted 'large differences between women of different race, age, class, and employment status' (Mowl and Turner, 1994, page 105). In my own study, for example, I stressed the importance of 'socio-economic differences between respondents and differential personal mobility, as well as the availability of child care on a weekday basis' (Tivers, 1988, page 94), in helping to determine leisure (as well as work) activities. Recent studies, illustrating the wide differences in life experience between varying groups of women and men, are discussed by Roberts who, in particular, points to the growing numbers of 'self-confident and assertive females' in the younger age-groups (Roberts, 1999, page 105). Hargreaves (2000, page

152) notes the ways in which sport has provided '... a unique space for lesbian women ...' and suggests that there is probably a larger percentage of lesbian women in sport than in the rest of society, both because '[l]esbians may have more leisure flexibility than most heterosexual women ...' and also because they may use sport as a refuge from 'structured discrimination'. Forms of leisure practice may, thus, provide an opportunity for resistance to hegemonic discourses by individual, or groups of, women (Shaw, 2001).

Clearly, women's leisure experiences have always varied and continue to do so, perhaps even more widely, as stressed by many recent studies (for example, Aitchison, 2003; Henderson *et al.*, 2002). Henderson *et al.* (2002, page 257), for example, note the '... intersection of gender with other characteristics such as race and class ...' and state that '... just because an individual was female did not mean that other aspects of identity such as race, class, sexual orientation, or cultural background did not also influence leisure behavior [*sic*]'. The *similarities* between women's experiences have, however, always been notable too, and remain so. Scraton and Watson (1998, page 135), for example, say of their Leeds respondents that:

Many women share gendered experiences relating to safety, financial constraint, sexual divisions of labour (employment opportunities, domestic labour, caring responsibilities). But similarities are not only experienced in terms of constraints, they become obvious in relation to how many of these women (regardless of age, class, sexuality, ethnicity, gender), negotiate and develop adaptive strategies thus defining leisure around social networks, female friendships, shared meanings and local communities.

Henderson *et al.* (2002, page 259), reviewing a range of recent literature on women and leisure, state that:

... when women make choices about how to engage in leisure, their choices are steeped in cultural ideologies about what types of behaviors [*sic*] are appropriate for women and men in society.

In relation to what I referred to in Tivers (1977) as the 'gender role constraint' on the activities of women with young children, Scraton and Watson (1998, page 130) have this to say, twenty years later:

For the young mothers in the study the meanings they attach to the city and their leisure are derived from their identity as mothers and defined in relation to how they use the city with and/or for their children.

Green *et al.* (1995, pages 137-138) reinforce the point:

The enduring cultural stereotype of women as carers, which for many women is also a reality, has important repercussions. Women's leisure becomes a particularly low priority, both within households and also in society at large ... We were surprised as we uncovered more and more evidence of the extent to which women's behaviour is constrained, either by ourselves or by others, in response to norms about appropriate female (and male) behaviour. We were also made aware of the variety of strategies that men employ to restrict women's behaviour. Control by men, either individually or collectively, is not only widely practised; it is also widely held to be a normal feature of everydaylife.

Perhaps not so much has changed after all?

My current leisure research and its relationship to gender and geography

In order to provide illustrations of the importance of gender differences in terms of constraints on leisure activities at the present time, I shall briefly discuss my current research, which lies in three areas of out-of-home leisure participation – heritage re-enactment, mass-participation running, and community arts participation. Each of these

could be described, in Stebbins' (1992) terms, as examples of 'serious leisure', as opposed to 'casual leisure' (Stebbins, 1997).

1. Heritage re-enactment

Heritage re-enactment (or 'performance') is a growing leisure interest. According to Milmo (2002), there are about 500 re-enactment societies in Britain alone, of which probably the best known is the 'Sealed Knot' who organise English Civil War battles. In addition to individual battle re-creations by groups representing specific historical periods, each year a major re-enactment event, organised by English heritage and called History in Action, is held at Kirby Hall in Northamptonshire, at which 'More than 3,000 knights, medieval archers, Victorian troopers and Allied squaddies ... clank, twang, rattle and boom their way through a series of military set-pieces ... in search of the perfect recreation of the past' (Milmo, 2002). At the end of each of the main days, all the participants line up in historical order and parade around the field, and after the visitors have gone on the last day a mighty free-for-all pitched battle is held. Apparently many of the re-enactors are more interested in fighting than in strict historical accuracy! (Tivers, 2003, page 7).

Holcomb (1998, page 41) notes (with some irony) that '...the growth industry of historical re-enactments - heritage in action - has more than its share of chaps dressed in period military costumes and playing with weird weapons, though there are, of course, serving wenches and dancing girls at medieval festivals'. At one Napoleonic battle re-creation (at Battle Abbey) I watched troops of (male) soldiers parading, while women slaved over open fires to cook historically-appropriate meals in historically-accurate conditions! As Hewison (1987, page 10) comments, heritage developments tend to involve 'the preservation, indeed reassertion, of social values that the democratic progress of the twentieth century seemed to be doing away with'. Issues of class, and indeed race, are now being addressed at heritage sites, such as museums and 'living history' sites, where once such important elements were routinely excluded (Mills, 1997, page 112), but:

...the gendered perspectives of such sites have gone unnoticed, even though merely incorporating women into the narrative often ensconces them within a family space defined in traditional male fashion. The male/public, female/private dichotomies are taken for granted. Whether such dichotomies are appropriate for any past period, expectations of an interior, domestic, female world can blind present day interpreters in terms of what they themselves see, and thus what they provide. (Mills and Tivers, 2000, page 4-5).

It is rare for stereotyped and idealised, historical gender roles to be problematised, so that visitors' perceptions and assumptions can be challenged - yet, this should be one of the strengths of 'living history' presentations (Tivers, 2002, page 193). In the course of my research at a number of heritage sites, I have observed (and discussed with participants) the varied roles of women and men in heritage re-creations. Predominantly, these are viewed along 'traditional' lines, simply because roles are seen as having been more clearly defined in the past. Thus, men typically make weapons while women spin and weave. As Henderson *et al.* (2002, page 267) suggest:

...leisure operates to create and reinforce gendered identities in ways that may be oppressive for both women and men.

2. Mass-participation running

My second example of gendered leisure expectations and experiences examines the phenomenon of mass-participation running. It is a well-attested (through General Household Survey data) and well-known fact that women's participation in sports activities is considerably lower than men's, although the gap has decreased to some extent in recent years. The 1996 GHS indicates that 4.4% of the adult population regularly takes part in 'jogging' (7.1% of men and 2.1% of women). In 2002 I celebrated 35 years as a runner and 20 years as a participant in half-marathon events, usually on an annual basis. My interest in the motivations of runners has arisen directly from my involvement in the activity and my observations of other runners over the years. When I started running (in 1967), for anyone other than schoolboys or elite athletes, it was considered by many as a

'lunatic fringe' activity, especially for women. Over the intervening years, running has become an accepted sport, benefiting from an increased general concern with health and fitness (Tivers, 2004), and in the case of women and older people, from a specific desire to reduce body fat (Abbas, 2004).

Different people run for different reasons – increased stamina, more energy, weight loss, or simply that indefinable sense of well-being that follows naturally from it ... to start running is to make a positive statement both to yourself and the world around you that from now on you will be stronger, fitter, and more confident both physically and psychologically'. (Turnbull, 1986, foreword)

Turnbull's (1986) book was written as a polemic, to encourage women to run and keep on running. She says: 'Everyone who has done a marathon has their own memories, their own experiences, their own 'highs' (Turnbull, 1986, page 109). However, women were excluded from marathon events until relatively recently; it was only in 1984 that the women's marathon was included in the Olympic Games for the first time, although women had taken part unofficially since the 1960s (Blue, 1987, page 59) and had been permitted to compete in American Athletic Union (AAU) marathons since 1970. The first London Marathon in 1981 had 7,500 runners, of whom only 300 (4%) were women (Hargreaves, 1994, page 264). Three of these women became legends in their own time; Grete Waitz (who, amongst other triumphs, won the New York Marathon nine times) was the winner of the race; Joyce Smith, running in only her second marathon event, became the first British woman to complete a marathon in under two and a half hours, at the age of 43; Madge Sharples, competing in her first marathon, was aged 64, having only taken up running in her 60s. She went on to take part in over 50 marathons worldwide, well into her 80s, becoming one of the best known faces of running (Hargreaves, 1994, page 267). In 1992, there were 23,783 competitors in the London Marathon, of whom 3,000 (13%) were women. The 2003 London Marathon, with its 32,273 finishers, included 8,316 women amongst this number, or just over one-quarter of the total (although this proportion is probably influenced by the ballot system, which gives a priority to those raising money for charity – see Tivers, 2004).

The official exclusion of women from marathon running before 1970 is somewhat paradoxical, since, as Hargreaves (1994, page 264) says, trained female athletes experience more effective aerobic ventilation than trained male athletes, and they are able to avoid fatigue better. Blue (1987, page 126) makes the point that:

Women sweat less than men. Their bodies convert fat to energy faster too. The upshot seems to be that women who are trained as well as men finish a marathon in less discomfort than men do, as they are less dehydrated and less starved of nutrition.

Women, however, were considered to be 'out of place' in distance running (as also were black athletes – see Bale, 2000), due to stereotypes relating to body and culture. Abbas (2004, page 172) notes that this situation may still exist:

Members of groups defined as naturally inferior through their bodies probably find it harder to participate. There is already evidence that women and older people are more likely to be harassed on the street while running...

Polley (1998, page 104), however, asserts that now, '...women are openly and approvingly competing in events previously suppressed or marginalised, including long-distance running' Apart from the stimulus to raise money for charity, as previously mentioned, it is clear from my observations and discussions (as a participant observer) that a lot of women now take part because of the formation of women-only running clubs. The latter may be seen, in Bale's (2000) terms, as evidence of 'transgression' of norms, and the crossing of previously fixed boundaries. Many women, to whom I have spoken during half-marathon events, have stressed that their membership of such groups allows them to participate in a spirit of mutual encouragement and comradeship, rather than competition, and enables them to circumvent the traditional negative stereotyping of women runners as unfeminine, uncommitted and of poor quality. The stereotype has also recently been challenged by the tremendous successes of Paula Radcliffe, for example in achieving a new

world record in the 2003 London Marathon, and more recently of Tracey Morris (a former 'fun runner') in the 2004 event (Rowbottom, 2004).

However, women still make up a relatively small proportion of participants in mass-running events (see Tivers, 2004) and the majority of women who run are young and childless. While this participation is by no means unimportant, either to the participants themselves or to women (and society) as a whole, it is nevertheless unfortunately true that participation rates decline markedly with age, as shown in GHS data. Participation in long distance running demands a commitment to time for training, which does not fit easily with other household and domestic commitments. Barrell *et al.* (1989) have shown how unlikely it is that married women will become 'serious runners' unless their partners also take part and actively encourage them; in contrast:

... males can claim, and ... women can endorse, that men have a 'right' to leisure and that they have physical and sporting needs to fulfil simply by virtue of being male. (Barrell *et al.*, 1989, page 262).

My discussions with older women runners have supported this male-centred view and have stressed the importance of partner 'support', in both child care and general 'encouragement', in enabling participation in running. This is particularly true for participation in mass-running events, which very often mean travelling some distance away from home (hundreds of miles, in some cases).

3. Community arts participation

My research in this area has only recently commenced and therefore very little conclusive information can be given at this stage. Unlike the leisure areas of heritage re-enactment and mass-participation running, already briefly considered, arts participation has long been seen as a 'gender-appropriate' activity for women; indeed, in most clubs and societies within this general field, women tend to out-number men quite considerably. As a participant observer, I am currently investigating the motivations of participants in three amateur arts organisations in Cambridge, a city with a strong arts and cultural heritage – a musical theatre group, a choral society, and a drama group. I have been personally involved in amateur music and drama groups (in a number of locations) all my life, and my research is informed by more than 40 years of experience.

Preliminary survey results (from the musical theatre, and drama, groups) indicate that motivations for membership are little different for women and men, centring on friendship, an interest in performance, teamwork and 'professionalism'. Many participants would like to take part in more arts activities, but are prevented from doing so by time commitments, mainly relating to employment. It is, however, important to note that no woman respondent from the musical theatre group has very young children, and only one has school-aged children (and, despite having a supportive partner, she cited 'time constraints' as a reason for not doing more in the arts area); all the remaining female respondents are either young and single (or with a partner but childless) or middle-aged with no, or else grown-up, children.

It is therefore likely that the apparent bias towards women in such community arts groups masks the non-participation of women with child-care and other household commitments. Certainly, in my long experience of performance groups, I have often seen evidence of women 'dropping out' for a number of years, during their children's childhood, while no such influence is obvious in the case of the majority of men. In the drama group, only two respondents have dependent children (both women), and these two were noticeably less regular in attendance at rehearsals than other cast members, usually citing problems with child care (including child illness). One of them, however, commented that she enjoyed being in a play because it allowed her 'not to be a Mum' for a while.

Conclusion

The studies cited above have mainly investigated the leisure situations of heterosexual women. The results of such studies, including my own, indicate that women remain subject to gender role differentiation in the area of leisure, as in other areas of life. Times

may be 'a-changing' (and gendered expectations, to some extent), but heterosexual women still face huge practical, and ideological, obstacles in ensuring a fair division, with men, of time and resources for out-of-home leisure. In addition, women are still channelled into 'gender-appropriate' activities, unless they are a) young and childless, b) actively supported and encouraged by their partners, and/or c) part of a supportive female network (heterosexual or lesbian). Finally, while there are great differences in leisure expectations and experiences between individual, and groups of, women (in terms of such variables as social class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality), the *similarities* continue to strike (and perhaps surprise) those of us who do leisure research, at least insofar as heterosexual women are concerned. (Lesbian women may have different leisure experiences, as suggested, for example, by Hargreaves (2000), Aitchison (2003) and Henderson *et al.* (2002), but these have not been the focus of my research up to the present time.) In fact, a great deal has *not* changed in the last quarter of a century, and there remains a need for feminist scholarship in leisure studies, as in other areas of geographical and sociological research.

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