

ASSESSING THE EFFECT OF WOMEN-ONLY PARKS IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S QUALITY OF LIFE IN IRAN

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Abstract. The current research investigates the role of women-only parks in improving the quality of women's life, in Iran. The impact of specific women-only parks on the physical and mental health of women, in Muslim countries is undeniable, where women are confronted with limitations. The main objective of this study was to examine the mutual relationship between environmental quality indicators and women's quality of life indicators by assessing the impact of women-only parks on women's health. The current research was conducted using the descriptive-analytical method and employing descriptive and inferential statistics. To achieve the objectives of the study, 150 women (in different ages) as users in the women-only park in district 15 of Tehran, were asked some questions through a questionnaire. The parametric test and regression analysis were applied to analyze the results. The results reveal that women-only parks have affected women's quality of life in the discussed society with a coefficient of 16.6 percent. In these parks, they feel higher levels of security and freedom for sports activities and social interactions. However are should be taken not to be gender-based in all areas of women's lives, and women should not be considered as minorities in need of support.

Key words: urban women-only park, quality of life.

1. Introduction

Urban spaces as a platform for living and doing activities should be able to meet the social and psychological needs of citizens in different age, social, and sexual groups. Although Spain (2014) believes that women's and gay rights movements, gentrification, and planning practices have shaped a more gender-neutral contemporary city (Spain, 2014), but the invisible hands of the females, that

contributes to the community's wealth and cohesion, creates a new public sphere, partly democratized, but still segregated (Ashery and Natapov, 2020).

In fact there are evidences that local gender norms are sustained through contextual effects where the experience of living in a particular environment shapes residents' attitudes and behaviors (Scarborough and Sin, 2020).

Despite several decades of feminist scholarship, dominant perspectives within the “the right to the city” literature pay little attention to how “rights” are gendered (Beebeejaun, 2017). That is why understandings of gendered spaces will need to consider in the future different understandings of masculinity and the changing nature of space itself with the increased use of technology (Andrews, 2016).

Urban gendered spaces are areas of a city identified by the predominance of one sex. Female gendered spaces are important for the public realm because they give women an identity outside the family (Dolan and Hansen, 2020).

Among the urban spaces, urban parks enhance a kind of vitality resulted of physical activities. Urban parks are places contributing to physical health, treating mental diseases, and providing an environment for social interaction. They are one of the main aspects of improving the quality of life. But are the urban parks equally used by men and women, or a sexist point of view is dominant on utilization of them?

This article tries to study the gendered spaces considering their restrictions and benefits especially in urban parks of the Islamic countries. In last decades, the discussion of gender in urban spaces not only in Iran but also in other countries including China, Pakistan, India has been taken into consideration more and more. Some spaces such as monasteries and bathes were segregated since past. Pray-rooms in public buildings in Islamic countries and toilets in all over the world are also separated. Authors have heard of women only taxis in UK which are driven by female drivers to serve only women passengers. Gyms and bathes are

also segregated spaces in Islamic countries and even non Islamic ones.

In a study about women only parks in Karachi, results indicate that typical CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) features (e.g., locks and gatekeepers) in women only parks seem to have a positive influence on park users’ perception of safety (Hazel and Kleyman, 2019).

Women-only parks in Iran are particularly important since they can provide valuable recreational opportunities beyond the usual limitations of women. These facilities are a relief for the many local women who actually prefer to walk and exercise out of the sights of men (Arjmand, 2016).

The present study aims to evaluate the women-only to examine the interrelationship between environmental quality indicators and women's quality of life indicators. Therefore, the main hypothesis of the research is: Women-only parks seem to have a positive impact in enhancing the quality of women's life in Muslim urban community.

According to Robert Cowan, public spaces are part of city with either public or private ownership that is publicly accessible, and people can use and enjoy them (Cowan, 2005). Meanwhile, urban public spaces are considered as a part of the public arena and its spatial representation (Vetich *et al.*, 2016) including areas such as parks and streets, which are used for the public community. These spaces as key elements of neighborhoods encourage a variety of physical activities (Koohsari *et al.*, 2015).

Public spaces, in not only the neighborhood units but also the city, are

the key elements creating various opportunities and possibilities for citizens (Artopoulos *et al.*, 2019). Urban public space should provide a safe, healthy, sustainable and attractive environment given the individual and age, social, and sexual group's characteristics and satisfy all the needs of different social groups appropriately (Hsingchen, 2016).

In this regard, in most studies, urban parks and green spaces have been emphasized as a significant factor in enhancing the quality of social life. Urban green spaces improve general health by promoting physical activity and affect the treatment of diseases as well. They also enhance the quality of the environment and the life of citizens (Wolch, 2014).

Space and gender in a social system are mutually effective (Kiavar, 2011). In fact, space as it reflects the gender structure, is also an effective factor in its formation process. Space is shaped in accordance with social structures to realize them and play an active role in their reproduction (Rendell, 2000).

As feminist movements evolve, the subject of women and their role in the urban planning and design process came more into consideration (Barnes and Cordova, 2016). The application of the gender issue in urban planning and design means creating architectural and urban regulations that regulates the presence of women in urban spaces and increases their access to public spaces (Phadke, 2010).

The study of gender differences suggests that women and men benefit from urban spaces in different ways (Richardson and Mitchell, 2010). Paul believes although women and men understand space as a common concept, they experience public

spaces in particular and different ways (Paul, 2011). Easy to use areas for males are not very effective for females (Al-Masiifar and Ansari, 2010). Failure to take into account the needs of women in urban spaces will limit their participation in the community and will affect the family and community as well by bringing in mental harm to individuals (Day *et al.*, 2003). To accommodate urban spaces for women, security goals, liveliness of places, ease of access to services and amenities and enhancing the sense of belonging to the place are proposed (Serag El Din, 2013).

Meanwhile, the role of religion (restrictions for the clothes of women) and subcultures are also effective along with other factors such as verbal or physical harassments which the last factors are seen in many countries. Based on research in some countries, women are less likely to be present in parks and public spaces than men, and they have less freedom for sports and physical activity (Sang *et al.*, 2016). This is especially acute in deprived urban areas. Although the public open spaces in these areas are the integral part of everyday life of residents, factors such as low quality of space, low maintenance and cleanliness, and most importantly inadequate safety are the reasons that the parks and open spaces are not used enough by women even in Western countries (Abbasi *et al.*, 2016).

In the last decade, the issue of women-only park as a new approach has had its proponents and opponents. However, given the specific social conditions of the country, the need for women to have an appropriate space for enjoying recreational and sports facilities freely has been proposed and the construction of the women-only park has been on the

agenda of the municipalities of various cities. Interestingly, these parks have been well received (Habib *et al.*, 2011).

The construction of women-only parks with a realistic look at the social and cultural conditions in Iran is a way to eliminate or at least reduce the limitations and problems that women deal with in public spaces and urban parks (Hami and Faham, 2017). Of course, this is not the initiative of Iran and in Pakistan it has been deemed common and social normative for a while. The results show that most users of the parks feel safe and secure (Iqbal, 2018). Promoting environment security is one of the highly significant environmental management and design approaches that make it even more important for women-only park design. Although its importance for other public spaces is undeniable. To add security, factors and standards should be considered in the design (Bazregari and Ostovareh, 2016).

The studies have highlighted eight limiting factors (Fig. 1) in regard to the presence of women in public spaces.

The quality of each object is a set of properties that distinguishes each object from the other ones (Azad Khani *et al.*, 2015). Having a multidimensional structure, quality of life involves physical dimensions of residential environment and non-physical dimensions of it such as space justice and security for all people (Bakar *et al.*, 2016). Quality of life means enjoying a good life and a sense of satisfaction with it (Colachi, 2006). It can be also defined as the actual amount of well-being experienced by individuals and groups under the terms of the public, social, and economic quality of life (Barbosa, 2007). In this respect, some research demonstrates that people

recognize "health" as the most significant aspect of the quality of life (Nasution and Zahrah, 2018).

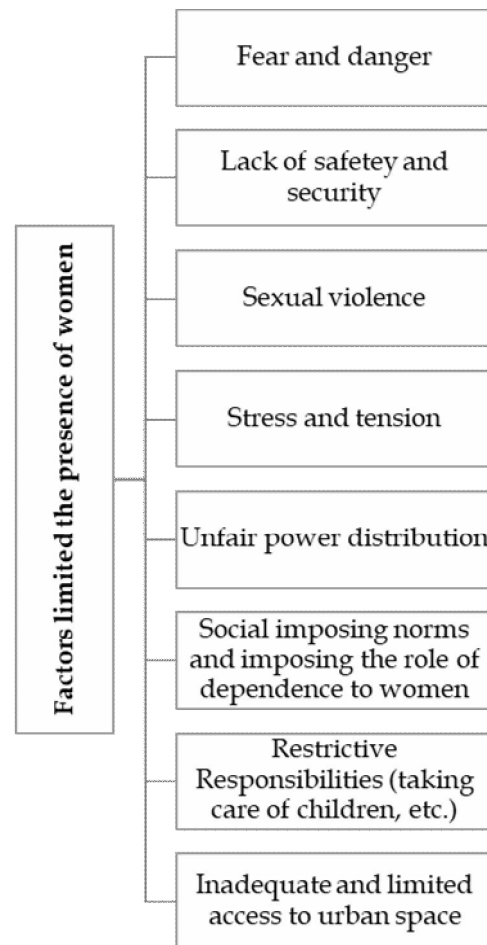


Fig. 1. Factors restricting the presence of women in public spaces (Hami and Faham, 2017).

Hornquist believes quality of life can be possibly measured by considering the following five dimensions of life:

- Physical: Includes physical health and no specific unemployment pressure
- Psychological and Emotional: Includes satisfaction with life, feeling good, and intellectual and rational performance as well as beliefs
- Social: Includes social contact and proper communication with others, i.e. the family in general, and the spouse in particular
- Behavioral Dynamic: Includes admission and self-care capacity, being active, and movement

- **Material:** Includes the material and economic status of a person and in general understanding personal satisfaction with life (Sharif Zadeh *et al.*, 2016).

Based on the concepts and approaches examined in the first section, the conceptual model of the research has been presented as follows (Fig. 2). In this model, urban parks specific to women are defined as the independent variable and women's quality of life as the dependent variable.

Bemanian and Zabetian, having a gender approach, studied the security of urban environments in the oldest park (Park-e-Shahr) of Tehran. The results of the research indicated a direct relationship between the perceived security of space and the amount of traffic and the use of space (Bemanian and Zabetian, 2009). Goli *et al.* evaluating the gender perspective in urban spaces design with an emphasis on Shams women-only park in Tabriz found that the proper inner space design of the park creates the highest level of satisfaction in women comparing to all other factors (Goli *et al.*, 2013). In a study of measuring women's satisfaction with the women-only park of Tabriz, it has been shown that increased attention to indicators such as sport facilities and playing of children, paying attention to the beauty of the environment, adding benches appropriate for communication as well as food stores increase the satisfaction of women (Hashemi Tilenoei *et al.*, 2014). Payami Khanqah in a research titled "Evaluating the Performance of Women-only parks of Ardebil in Promoting Gender Equality" has studied four indices (the motivation to go to the park, the reasons for choosing

each of these parks, the women's experienced feeling in the park, and the rate of observed gender equality indicators). Findings show that there is a significant relationship between the individual characteristics of women (especially the level of education) and the studied indicators (Payami Khanqah, 2015).

Krenichyn in his research in New York, mentioned parks and green spaces as a symbol of public spaces in the positive and negative experiences of women, and introduced security as a key factor in describing their experiences (Krenichyn, 2004). In 2007, a report released by the Women's Resource Center, examining the benefits of special services to women, concluded these services have a vast expanse of interests with the main benefit of mental and physical safety (Corry *et al.*, 2007). Another related research is the Women Friendly City project in Seoul. The goal of this program is to merge women's views into urban policies and constructions, thereby increasing their daily satisfaction with their lives. Seoul confronts various types of designed projects leading in dissatisfaction and anxiety or conflict with the urban life of women. The efforts of Seoul's Women Friendly City Project in this regard are evident in various areas, including care, culture, safety, and well-being in some women's support centers and in safe parks appropriate for women (Kalache and Plouffe, 2014). Iqbal (2018) reviewed the issue of security at the women-only parks in Karachi, Pakistan, through the CPTED approach. The findings of this study confirmed the increased safety as a result of allocating specific parks to women. On the other hand, women are less secure in public spaces where there is no gender segregation (Iqbal, 2018).

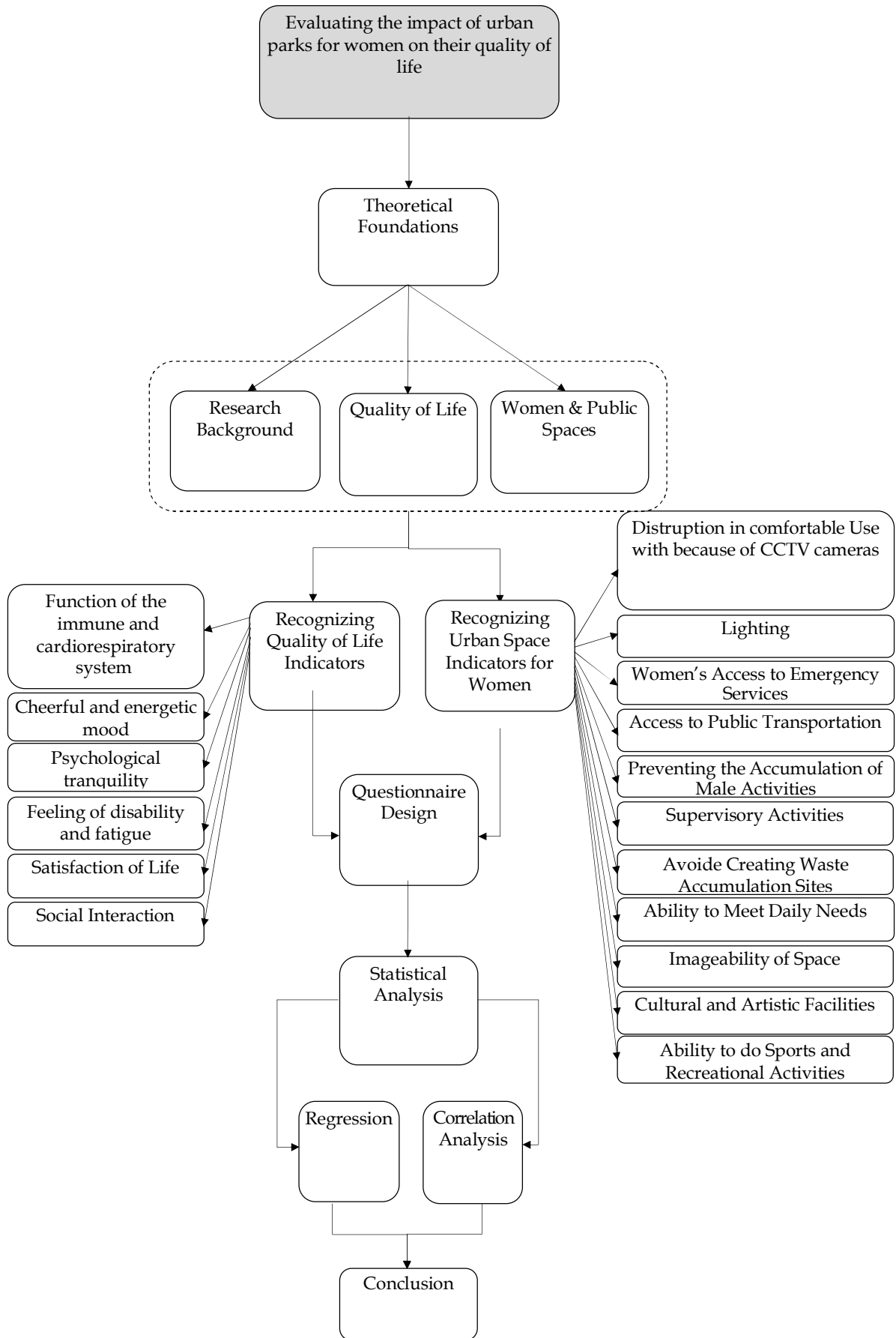


Fig. 2. Conceptual model of research.

2. Methodology

The main data collection instrument in this research is a questionnaire. It includes targeted questions) regarding the environmental quality indicators and women's quality of life), which was approved by a survey and consulted with university professors and experts. The questionnaire is asked from the women in different ages and classes, using the women-only park.

After considering the normal or abnormal data, it is decided to use parametric or nonparametric tests for inferential statistics analysis. Then it is checked if the variables are significantly correlated and the possible linearity or non-linearity. Finally, regression is applied to determine the impact of women-only parks on the women's quality of life.

2.1 Spatial Domain of Research

The spatial domain of this research is the women-only park in the south-east of Tehran and within the district 15 of metropolitan municipality of Tehran. The park with the total area of 27 hectares has two separate paths for walking (pavement) and cycling (asphalt) as well as a sports complex.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, research findings are presented using descriptive statistics. Firstly, findings and respondents' opinions about park's spatial quality indicators are described and secondly, findings on respondents' quality of life indicators are explained.

In this study, 11 indicators were selected and the status of each of them was evaluated from the view point of the women attending park as the participants of the study. The results of this section of the study are presented in Table 1.

Among the 11 indices studied, "the possibility of comfortable use due to the presence of CCTV cameras" received a score of 3.42 and ranked first. Therefore, despite the presence of CCTV cameras, there is no particular restriction for women to use parks. In fact these cameras guaranty the security of the park. The index "the possibility to meet daily needs" with an average score of 3.37 has the second rank. In fact, from the respondents' point of view, this index in the spatial domain of the research is in the medium to high level. The third is the "imageability" index. Imageability feature makes it easy to identify and remember the environment and urban space. This index on the women-only park in district 15, in Tehran has an average score of 3.36. Another indicator of women-only park is the "possibility of sports and recreational activities". This index raises the charm of women-only parks and makes more women to enter them. Based on the results, this index in the study area has an average score of 3.34 and the fourth rank. One of the important points is the "lighting" index. This indicator has a great influence on the security of women-only park. The study reveals the lighting in the women-only parks is not in a good condition and achieved a mean score of 2.87 in the eleventh rank. Also, "the cultural and artistic facilities" has a relatively similar situation, with a mean score of 2.88 and the tenth rank. On the whole, it seems the average score for the quality of the women-only park is estimated to be 3.10. This means that the quality of the women-only park is medium to low.

In the second step, the findings of the study examined the status of women's quality of life. In this regard, 6 indicators are selected and the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Review of Respondents' Comments on Women-only park Spatial Quality Indices.

Index	Very Low	Little	Medium	A Lot	Very Much	Mean	Rank
Comfortable use due to the presence of CCTV cameras	44	36	28	23	19	3.42	1
Possibility to meet daily needs	21	23	28	36	42	3.37	2
Imageability of space	22	22	27	38	41	3.36	3
Possibility to do sports and recreational activities	21	23	28	40	38	3.34	4
Access to public transport	23	24	28	32	43	3.32	5
Providing social interactions	22	24	31	33	40	3.3	6
Supervisory Activities enhancing security	22	23	32	35	38	3.29	7
Preventing the accumulation of male activities (disturbing ones)	30	31	31	30	28	2.97	8
Women's access to emergency services	25	28	50	26	21	2.93	9
Cultural and artistic facilities	34	30	30	32	24	2.88	10
Lighting	27	30	48	26	19	2.87	11
Average spatial quality indices: 3.10							

Table 2. Review of Respondents' Comments on Women's Quality of Life Indicators.

Index	Very low	Little	Medium	A Lot	Very Much	Mean	Rank
The immune and cardiorespiratory system function	23	23	32	37	35	3.25	1
Cheerful and energetic mood	26	25	30	33	36	3.19	2
Social interactions	24	28	30	33	35	3.18	3
Life satisfaction	28	24	30	32	36	3.16	4
Feeling of disability and fatigue	35	30	29	31	25	3.13	5
Psychological tranquility	27	28	29	32	34	3.12	6
Mean quality of life indicators: 3.17							

According to studies, the index of “immune and cardiorespiratory system function” among respondents during the last month has been the best. In fact, this index with an average score of 3.25 ranked first. The second place is the “cheerful and energetic mood”, which gained an average score of 3.19. As shown in Table 2, all indicators of quality of life are above average. Based on the information in this table, the lowest average score for the female “psychological tranquility” index is estimated at 3.12.

To use statistical techniques, first of all, we must examine and test the normality of the data. The results of the normalization test of variables are presented in Table 3.

According to the results of Table 3, the data has been normally distributed and as a result parametric tests are used for inferential analysis. To test the research hypothesis, first of all, the Pearson correlation was used to check any correlation and relationship among variables. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. The Result of the Normalization Test of the Variables of the Research.

Factor	Level of Significance	Error value	Conclusion
Women-only park	0.465	0.05	NORMAL
Women's Quality of Life	0.344	0.05	NORMAL

Table 4. The Results of Correlation Analysis of Spaces for Women.

Dependent variable / Independent variable		Women's Quality of Life
Women-only park	Intensity	0.408
	Level of Significance	0.000
	Number	150

Table 4 shows that there is a significant relationship between women-only park and women's quality of life. The type of correlation between the two variables is linear, that is, both increase or decrease together.

In Table 5 given that the value obtained for the Durbin-Watson's data is 1.579 and at a standard range of 1.5 to 2.5, it can be claimed that the independence of the errors assumption is confirmed and regression can be used.

As the table above shows, the results of the regression model of the hypothesis show that women-only park affect the quality of life of women in the society with a coefficient of 16.6 percent.

Table 6 shows the significance level of the obtained coefficients of the regression model is less than the error level of 5 percent. On the other hand, the coefficient of women-only park is positive, which shows the positive impact of women-only park on the quality of life of women.

This research was conducted to test the main hypothesis: "women-only park seem to have a positive impact in improving the quality of life of women in urban society". The results of the investigation and the aforementioned hypothesis test indicated that the index of the spatial quality of the women-only park and women's quality of life in %95 confidence level are significantly and directly related and the hypothesis is proven.

The type of correlation between the two variables is linear, that is, both increase or decrease together. The results of the regression model of the hypothesis show that women-only park affect the women's quality of life in the discussed society with a coefficient of 16.6 percent. So it can be concluded that the women-only parks positively impact the quality of women's lives. Also according to the coefficient of determination of the obtained regression model, it can be concluded that the variance (the changes) or the information obtained to express women's quality of life by urban parks factor is 16.6 percent.

4. Conclusions

The results of the studies indicate a direct relationship between the quality of life of individuals and the spatial quality indicators. This means that the urban space has not only physical dimensions, but also cultural and social dimensions that the gender relations play an important role in it. The purpose of creating appropriate public spaces (in this case public parks) for women is improving the quality of their life to make this group of society more active. So that women and men can achieve equal opportunities regardless of gender in public urban space.

Table 5. Summary of Determination Coefficient in Regression Model.

Input variables in the model	The coefficient of determination (R Square)	Adjusted coefficient of determination	Durbin-Watson
Women-only park	0.166	0.159	1.579

Table 6. Estimation of Coefficients Obtained from Regression Analysis and Their Levels of Significance.

Coefficients	Non-standard coefficients		Standard coefficients	t	Sig.
	Estimated (B)	Standard deviation	Beta		
constant	2.678	0.266	-	10.071	0.000
Women-only park	0.363	0.076	0.408	4.808	0.000

Women-only parks provide opportunities for exercise, rest, and improving physical and mental health of women, enhance social interaction and thus have a positive impact on women's quality of life. Although in these parks women can freely exercise and enjoy the benefits of sunbathing on their skin, an important point remains. It is, the construction of specific spaces for women can be seen as an approach that calls women as a minority in need of support. From this point of view, this approach is not an appropriate response to the needs of women in today's society and ultimately leads to the creation of women's islands on a men's sea, which in turn helps to separate the sexes more and more.

It should be considered that the creation of such a facility that in the first place seems positive do not lead to sex segregation in all areas and the goal of creating women-only park do not get affected by a radical sexist look existed in the society. The look which should be gradually removed by enhancing the culture. The goal of the construction of women-only parks is to create a semi-public arena that encourages women's physical activities in a carefully protected environment that not only raises physical health but also improves mental health

and provides them with more social interactions.

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