

## **The Interplay of Space and Gender in the City of Mostaganem, Algeria**

**Fatima Zohra Benneghrouzi**

Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University, Mostaganem, Algeria  
benfati79@gmail.com

**Mimouna Zitouni**

University of Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Oran 2, Algeria  
zitouni\_mouna@hotmail.fr

**ABSTRACT:** This paper probes the following questions: 1) to what extent do the conceptualisation and implementation of space/place express and sustain certain hegemonic hierarchies that normalise socio-cultural divisions in Arab Algerian environment of Mostaganem City? 2) What tools are utilised as means of space exclusion? 3) Is there a possibility of recreating new spaces for women, by making them occupy existing men' spaces or revalorise unexploited spaces? (4) And ultimately, how much (dis)empowering space is for women? In relation to these questions, three postulations are advanced: (1) The Arab Algerian culture is drastically male-oriented and space appropriation only validates such culturally hammered circumstance. (2) Harassment by verbal violence is the main and most forceful tool of space exclusion. (3) Masculine hegemony has it that no possibility of space (re) valorisation is now opportune.

**KEYTERMS:** gender, culture, (dis)empowerment, Mostaganem, space/ place exclusion, hegemony, harassment

## 1. Introduction

A rising alertness to empower women over the past three decades has been felt in the measures undertaken around the globe to buttress social, economic and political gender equity. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) in 1995, for instance, accentuated the construction of a gender sensitive education system to «empower women & guarantee full and equal participation of women in educational administration and policy and decision making” (BPA, 1995, Chap. IV, Article 82 ). Along with factors such as race, class, and age comes the concept of gender as a critical socio cultural variable that has been sharpened by an awareness of the substandard status of women, more particularly in those patriarchal societies wherein hegemonic masculinity is dramatically normative. In recognition of the significance of establishing gender equality, my research paper is convened to position the question on space segregation as an illustration of women demotion within such ongoing debate on gender issues. My primary objective is to try to dismantle the gender construct underlying space management in the Arab Algerian context of the city of Mostaganem - by challenging societal understandings of it.

In this spirit, I attempt to explore the mutual entrenchment of culture and gendered symbols of power via male-controlled space attribution in the city of Mostaganem. The cultural artifacts of Mostaganem, indeed, have largely corroborated the multiple and convoluted ways whereby males have impinged on the structure of public and private environments. The space organisation of this town is, particularly, one main nonverbal practice wherein women disempowerment is couched. It follows that conceptions such as female space denial, negative or non-space, and space segregation are very much ingrained in males’ minds as they are key to maintaining their dominance. Worse still, a taboo is recognised against any female invasion of males’ self-proclaimed public spaces/ places as town squares, cafés, and stadiums. Whilst undertaking this research, I am essentially driven by an inner conviction that research conclusions should transcend the sphere of rugged academia and have impacts across and beyond cultural, political, and economic confines to the individual making enterprise. With these objectives in mind, I am, thereby, proposing concepts that are referentially key to the implementation of the present investigation. The first operational concept I attempt is that of women disempowerment in the Arab Algerian background. As it is much revealing of the manners women are culturally inured as second-class citizens. In relation to this, I, then, come to tackle the concepts of normative hegemonic patriarchy for it is blameable, so to speak, for this inurement. This is exacerbated by the use of harassment and verbal violence as methodical tools of space isolation; an idea that is underscored right through these pages.

Relevant to this, I engage in my practical part through gauging the first postulation of whether or not the Arab Algerian male centred culture upholds space discrimination. This is realised within a description of the core architecture of Mostaganem spaces. A questionnaire is eventually used with women to weigh up the cogency of the second and third assumptions that harassment is a vehement instrument of space shunning and that women space recreation is just intolerable.

## 2. Hegemonic Masculinity and Women Disempowerment in Arab Algerian Context

For a long time, there has been a continuing debate animating the issues of gender, dominance, and power. Much early gender research presupposed that there was more or less an entrenched correlation between males and power and females and powerlessness. As a matter of fact, such uneven parallel has the antagonistic function of maintaining the cohesiveness/ solidarity of the group in charge of the acquisition and use of particular patterns of power. Power echelon, the argument would run, is sustained high as long as the group in question mark out their borders, strengthen their partnership from inside, and ultimately disempower the other group by driving them out (Benneghrouzi & Abdelhay 2012). The valorisation of masculinity in Arab Algerian culture is substantial as it is nurtured by the socio-cultural force responsible for its maintenance and duration, hence elevating such value to the scale of the strong norms in charge of social order. This ascendance-based structure promptly conjures up the concept of hegemony that mainly refers to the idea of dominance as being “achieved by culture, institutions, and persuasions” (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Institutionalised dominance, however, may admittedly yield to women subordination being excused and, more desolating, violent behaviour being endured. In a context riddled by normative hegemonic masculinity and further aggravated by Islamic fanaticism, reductionist attitudes towards Algerian women are deliberate.

The disabling power on Algerian women’s movements towards empowerment impinges on every aspect of their life and space is no exception. In view of that, the peculiarity of space distribution and recognition in Arab Algerian culture is, for the most part, the immediate corollary of a certain hierarchically masculine milieu, which emerges as critical in Mostaganem City, prompting a myriad of disparaging implications and applications. As it belongs to a larger patriarchal enterprise marked by normative hegemony, space conceptualisation instructs, and its practice supports, the dominant male-oriented perspective in Algeria. Surprisingly, numerous women are apathetic about space alienation, which becomes, thus, tacitly approved in a way that makes the disproportion seem expected by both the male disparager and the female disparaged.

### 3. Algerian Women As Second Class Citizens: a Cultural Conditioning

With men being understood as principal agents of women disempowerment, we tend to forget that it is the altogether cultural make up men and women belong to that hammers into them, during their socialisation process, the expectancies and ensuing conducts they must all fit into. Hence, the genesis of women devaluation is to be decoded at a collective level since it is the normative product of a formulaic network of beliefs and values. The Bangkok Statement (UNIFEM 2007) made at the UN Regional Conference on Man Partners to Eliminate Violence Against Women (EVAW), acknowledges the resolutely entrenched values and negative social attitudes towards women, which nurture violence and fail to bring out necessary alterations. Institutional Discourse on women has regularly unfolded condemnatory judgments that accentuate the argument of the auxiliary roles women take on. Rooney (1991, p. 91) expounds this idea by underlining that the theme on *rationality* as aligned with *maleness* and *irrationality* with *femaleness* emanates from ancient Greek philosophy, epitomised in the Pythagorean table opposites- the coupling of *one, rest, straight, light and good* with *male*, and *many, motion, curved, darkness and bad* with *female*.

Such outlook of Masculinity promotion is again obtrusively felt in the overall Arab culture and Algerian culture is no different. Thus, women relegation becomes a culturally conditioned conceptualisation fostered by verbal and non-verbal demeanors. Women, in such culture are seen as socially cut for particular jobs or tasks only and are, hence, unfit to undertake others. It is often said that their decisions are intuitionally arrived at, depending too little on rationality and cool reasoning. Women's task is boiled down to rearing and bringing up children; substantiated in the generically infamous metaphor *Woman As House "addaar"*. Note its metonymic content too. The vast majority of Algerians refer to women by the term house. The use of the term /Imra/, which is the right equivalent of the English word woman, is very much proscribed, as it would connote one's enshrined intimacy (Benneghrouzi & Abdelhay 2012 P. 5096). Algerian Women' mounting subordination to wear the veil and to live among autonomy receding extended families are other forms of endorsing this prejudiced cultural paradigm of intimacy. Even more, a tradition like undergoing a virginity test prior to marriage is incontestably fulfilled by Algerian women who have been nurtured to acknowledge it as a strong norm that stabilises a power divide with men as major regulators. In fact, the conception of women's bodies and sexuality is not fashioned by them but instead, is exclusively contained within the patriarch nucleus. Algerian proverbs, too, reflect assenting attitudes about men's omnipotence. Consider the following adage: /ʔarradzal hiiba w luukanah diiba/ ( a man is power / reverence even

if he is a wolf). Respect and obedience are always duly paid to men; however, women are always underprivileged in the group and henceforth are vulnerably disreputable. Having a man around is always good for shielding one's dignity in society, even if such dignity is molested between the four walls of one's home, by the *wolfish* husband (Ibid). Therefore, Algerian mainstream cultures has it that Algerian women embrace and tolerate a man focussed orthodoxy which legitimises their deterioration via the institutionalisation of masculine dominance which often yields to multiform violence.

#### 4. Verbal Violence as an Instrument of Space Alienation in Algerian Context

Violence with its multiform proportions might be convolutedly elusive, hence, escaping tagging. As a changeable construct, violence shifts in time and place and has been investigated from various approaches. Yet by being often boiled down to physical acts, many other forms of violence have been, intentionally or not, eclipsed. Subsequently, the World Report on Violence and Health Organisation (2002) offers a more inclusive delineation of violence seeing it as the deliberate use of physical and psychological force, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a community, that ensues either injury, death, psychological maltreatment, or deprivation. It follows that intention is key in marking out violence from other involuntarily accidental acts. Types of violence include self-directed violence like suicide and self-abuse, interpersonal violence like family/community violence, and collective violence like terrorist acts and wars.

The multi-layered character of violence immediately sends us to Galtung (1981) scheme of violence that he propounded as follows: (a) Direct violence refers to the acts of violence committed in an observable manner. It takes in acts of rape, torture, maiming, and killing as well as detention, repression and de-socialisation. Directive violence is often seen as the most patent among types of violence. (b) Structural violence is less obvious than the first, and is committed by social structures and institutions. Marginalisation, excommunication, and exploitation are examples of structural violence. (c) Cultural violence most drastically links the previous types of violence through a legitimisation attitude, and is the crux that gives them impetus and durability. Indeed, cultural, structural, and direct violence are the three edges of a violence triangle that fanatically breed each other in a number of ways.

Multiform violence reproduces itself across all dimensions in the peculiar context of Algerian cultural edifice. It is utilised as a vehement tool of gendered space shunning. Even though, violence perpetrators are the main agents prolonging it, both targets

and by standers' muteness contribute, without a doubt, into the sturdiness of these appalling circumstances. On that score, Bandura considers that violent behaviour is learnt through modelling, or the "observation and imitation" of behaviours that occur in the immediate contexts of the individual. Therefore, the imitation of violent behaviour hinges on whether or not the model observed gets positive judgement for their actions. This will, in effect, propagate or shrink the likelihood of imitation.

The next part of my paper is practical as it installs the research design of the study, namely, the space of investigation and sampling, the plan for data collection and analysis, and ultimately the findings and discussion of findings. These altogether arise in the light of the complex relations and interactions between gender and space and purport to gauge the tenability of the foregoing research hypotheses.

## 5. Space of Investigation and Sampling

My early drive while conducting this survey is to detect the occurrence and situate the scale of conjectured gendered space management in its natural environment. The city of Mostaganem is primarily the investigatory space of the present study. The first part of the selected sample embraces 26 photographs depicting Mostaganem space architecture. The second part of the sample includes 35 female partakers of the devised questionnaire. It is worth noting that the photographs and questionnaire are altogether appended.

## 6. Plan for Data Collection and Analysis

A sketch of an existing situation of the cultural artefacts, i.e. the social settings (inward and outward spaces) of Mostaganem City as regards the assumed gendered space running is necessary. It comes to be an intrinsic fragment of the first method designed for data collection and analysis that is a semi-structured observation. It, hence, consists of discerning circumstances and behaviours in there de facto natural sites. In view of that, I set out an agenda of what would be observed which I parted into two fields: public space and private space.

The core architecture of the City of Mostaganem is fashioned after three major styles. (1) The mixed Ottoman Islamic one, characterised by its scarcely present balconies and front villa expanse, and its walled gardens. (2) The French style largely opposes the first by its outstanding balconies, terraces, front villa expanses, and visible gardens. Note, however, that this style is waning due to the mounting number of modifications

spaces, falling under this range are subject to. (3) Contemporary Algerian style marked by its heavy fortress like walls.

Here are some prototypes that fall respectively into those three arrays:

Figure (1): The mixed Ottoman Islamic Architecture



Figure (2): The French Architecture



Figure (3): Contemporary Algerian Architecture



From the foregoing examples, we may notice that space is a troubling issue in Mostaganem. It produces and reproduces the normative cultural artefacts that maintain women be part of hedged space and men of unhedged, which, in turn, upholds the first postulation that gendered space is favoured and sustained by a hegemonic masculine culture. Below are samples of what is culturally considered men' self-proclaimed space circles:

Figure (4)



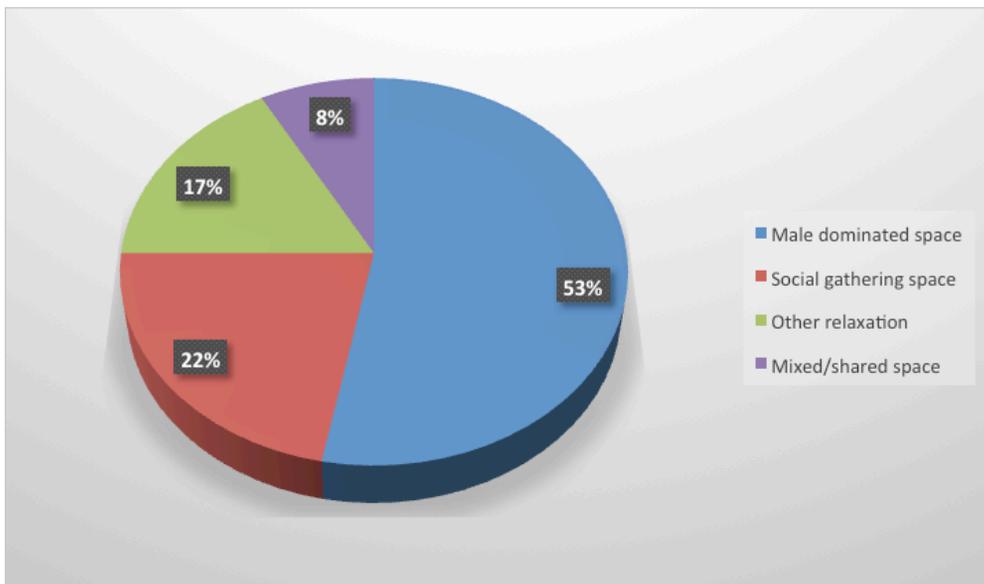
Men's approaches and conducts to women passers-by are unspeakably significant. Their conspicuous gazes and at times words, overall, indicate their unreceptive attitudes towards women who contest their sealed space circles. More importantly,

such masculine outlooks have been normalised in society in such a way as to make them powerfully established and anticipated. The ensuing violence of men against women in public spaces becomes of alarming proportions.

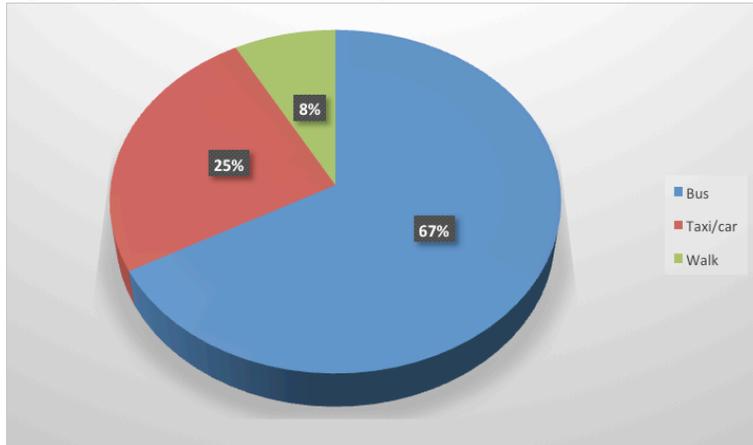
In this connection, the second devised method of data collection is a 13questionnaire survey handed to the sociolinguistics and gender studies master group in the Department of English at Mostaganem University. The participants consist of 20 (10 M1& 10 M2) female students and 10 female teachers. It takes approximately 20 minutes to answer the questionnaire 13 questions. This population is chosen because it is considered well qualified to express opinions on the subject. The questions put together are coded relative to two core junctures. The first is the conceptualisation part; this is socio cognitive in character, and aims at defining and situating incidents of harassment in public spaces. The second is the occurrence/post occurrence part; this is socio cultural and aims at looking into the problem and acting upon it. Beneath lie the findings of the questions presented in graphs.

### Part one

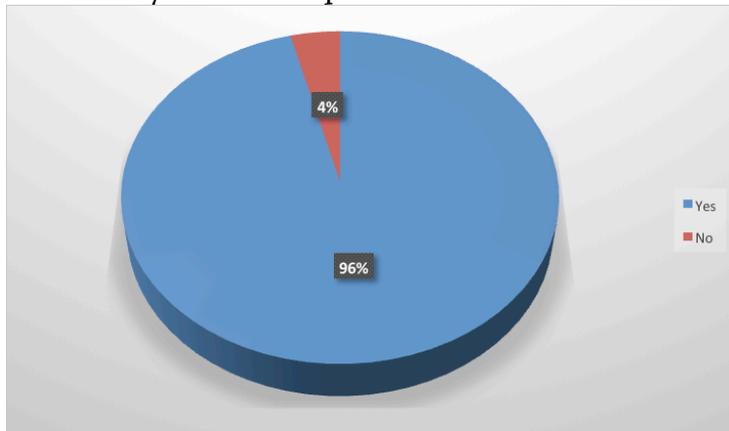
Graph to question (1): What do you consider as public/ open space?



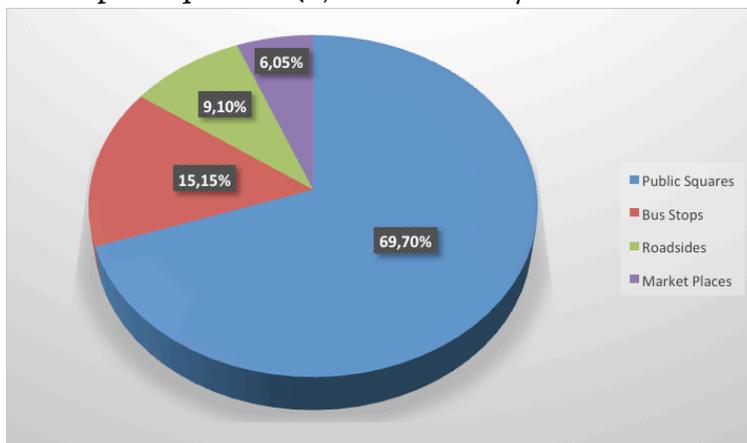
Graph to question (2): How do you move between districts/ spaces?



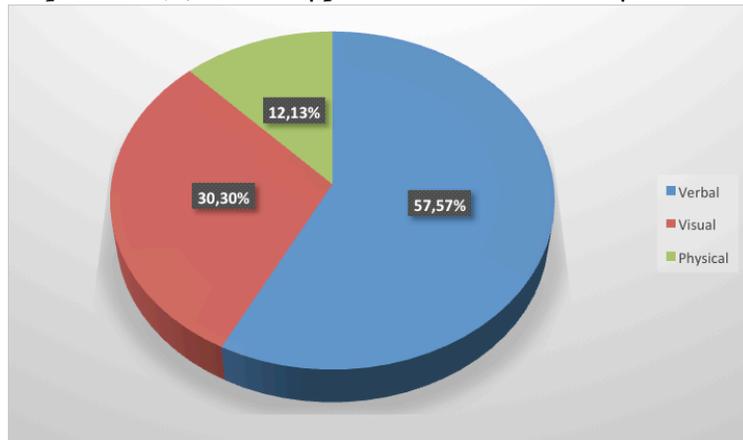
Graph to question (3): Have you ever been harassed by men in public spaces?  
If yes, move to questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 11& 13.



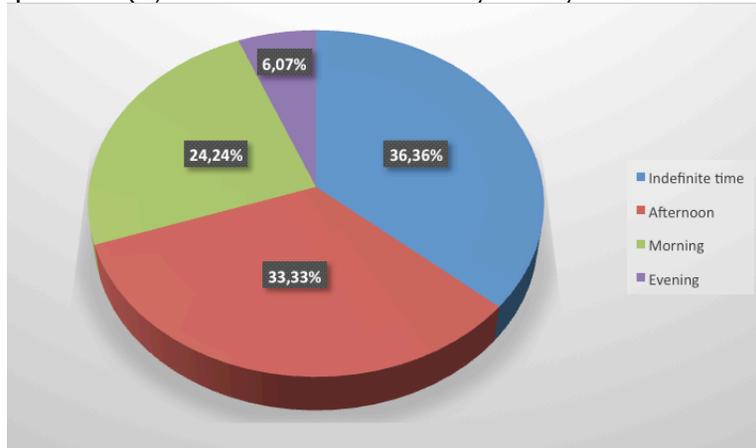
Graph to question (4): Where have you been harassed?



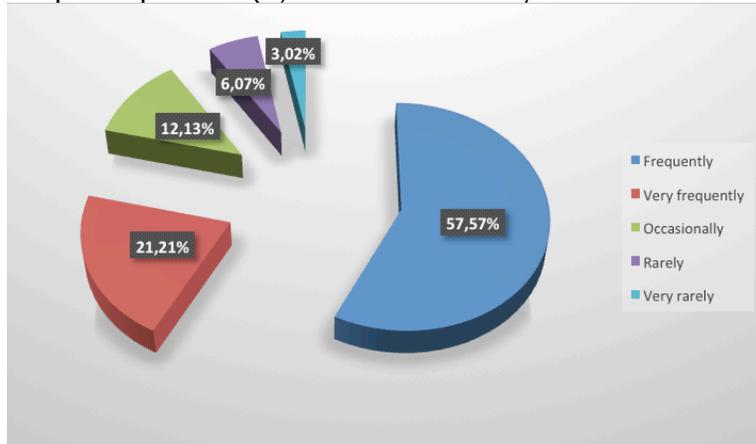
Graph to question (5): What type of harassment have you encountered?



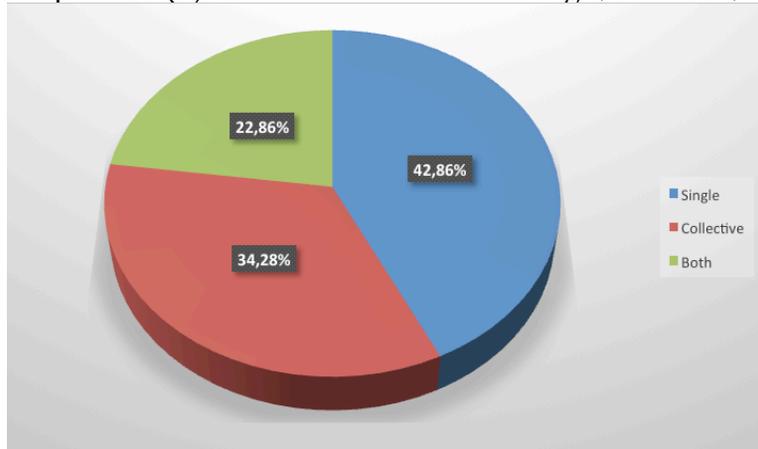
Graph to question (6): At what time of the day have you endured harassment?



Graph to question (7): How often have you been harassed?

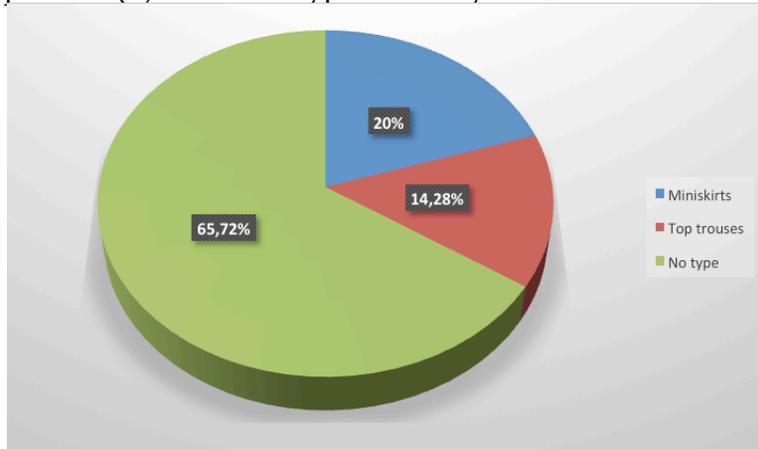


Graph to question (8): Is harassment as an act single, collective, or both?

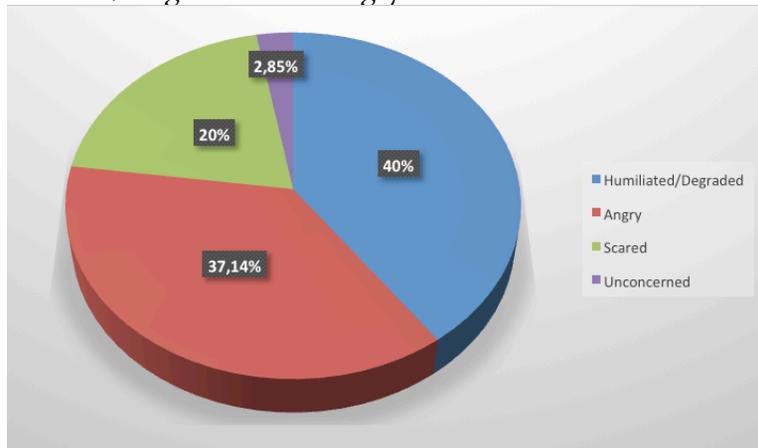


**Part 2**

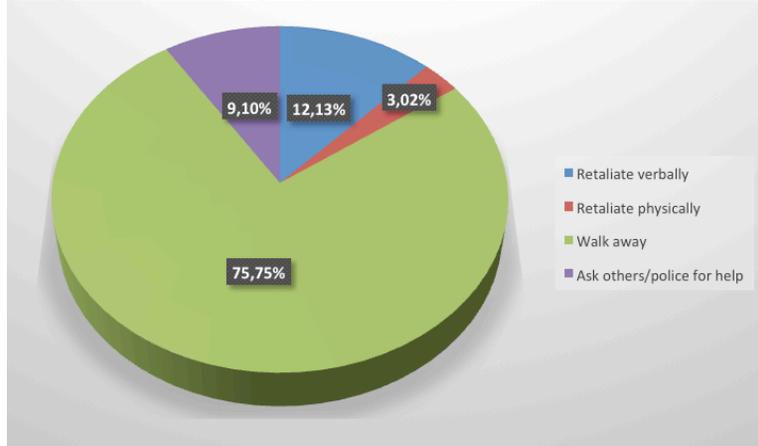
Graph to question (9): Is there a type of dress you think is harassment enticing?



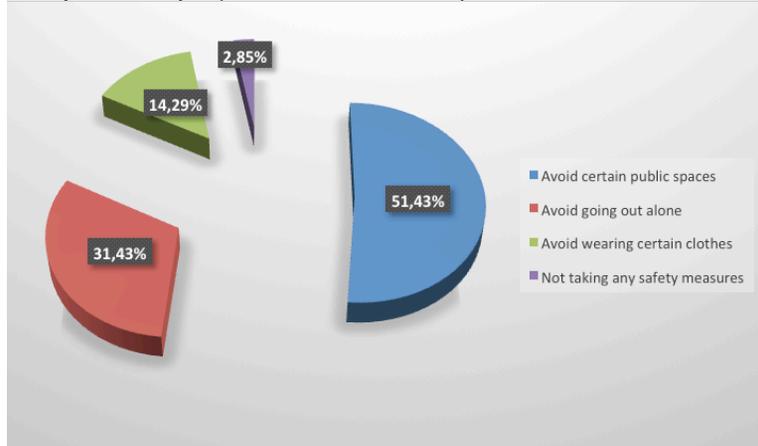
Graph to question (10): How does harassment make you feel?  
Humiliated/ degraded    Angry    Scared    Unconcerned



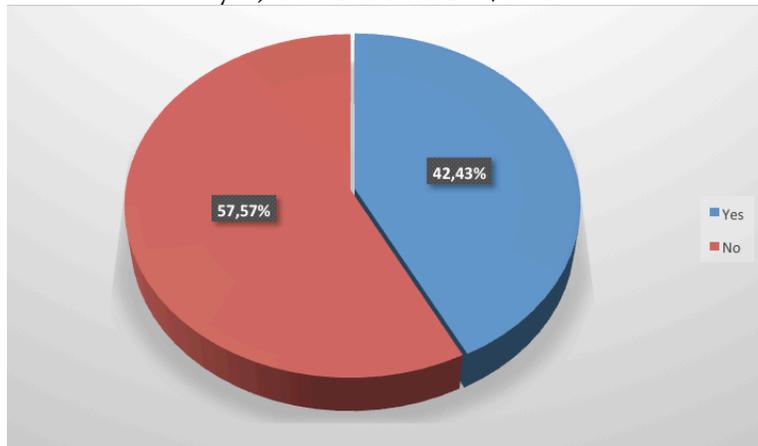
Graph to question (11): How do you react to harassment?

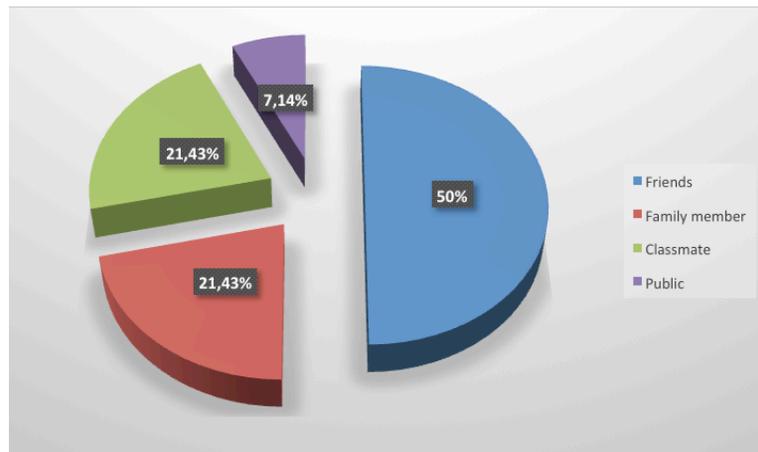


Graph to question (12): What measures you take to avoid harassment?

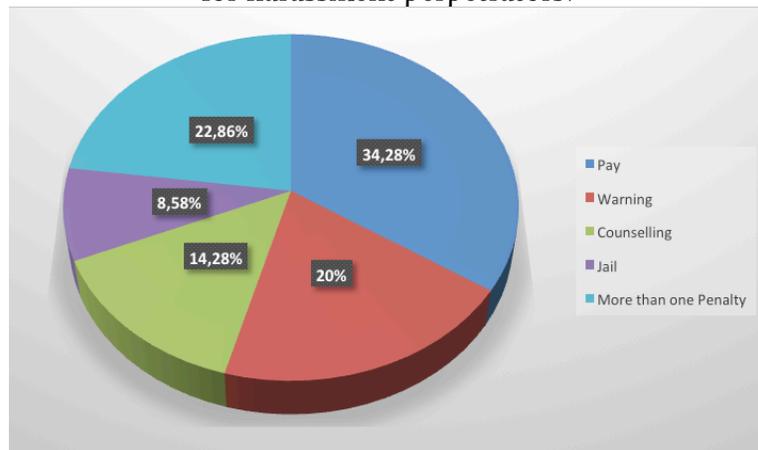


Graph to question (13): Are you willing to voice out your experience of harassment? If yes, whom with? Yes / No





Graph to question (14): What type of penalties you think relatively fair for harassment perpetrators?



## 7. General discussion

Within the precincts of the present questionnaire findings, we can notice that the substantial number of 53 percent represents the female respondents' recognition of public space as being a male dominated one while only eight percent consider it as a mixed/ shared space. Therefore, the issue of public space as male subjugated space is present in Mostaganem Algerian context. That solely eight percent of the female participants resort to walk when moving between districts and public places only corroborates the argument that space exclusion is implemented in such environment. With 96 percent of female respondents acknowledging having been victims of harassment, this resolutely validates it as a social concern. Furthermore, the systematic (re)occurrence of harassment in public squares with approximately 70 percent of

the harassed participants affirming it, makes of it a methodical instrument of space alienation, more specifically the verbal and visual. The respondents also assert that harassment is a communal act with nearly 34 percent referring to it as collective and about 23 percent as both single and collective. This group legitimisation of harassment contributes into its normalisation and promises its perpetuity. The unfortunate outcome of such condition is that approximately 76 percent of the participants assert that they just walk away when being harassed for they are resolved that the failure of the police to take a serious action towards the harassers and their customary connivance aggravates those circumstances by authorising the victimisers and charging the victims as harassment enticers. This makes of the measures the harassed are willing to take some sort of escape route measures with nearly 51 percent avoiding certain public spaces, 31 percent avoiding going out alone, 14 avoiding wearing certain clothes, and three percent not taking any safety measures. In the same vein, about 42 percent of the participants are disinclined to voice out their experience with harassment. This shows that even if all of the respondents think that harassers should be penalised, an edge of taboo is cripplingly hammered as regards harassment in Mostaganem Algerian mind-set. It is worth noting at this particular juncture that as opposed to place, time is not a pivotal in piloting harassment merely due to women's abstinence from going out at evening.

## 8. Conclusion

The embracing of harassment as a tool of gendered space seclusion is of worrisome scales in the Algerian city of Mostaganem. It is a deliberate behaviour generating serious ramifications on any women enablement enterprise. The nonexistence of an Algerian law that would label verbal violence as a form of harassment over and above women's reticence at such condition undoubtedly aggravates it. Women's passiveness towards harassment is, actually, largely because most of the prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination are directed to them, as they are members of the group with less societal power to strike back at such gendered space sequestration policy, which implements harassment as a stratagem, and further normalise it. As standards of normative behaviour derive from the behaviour of members of the group with more societal power, i.e. men, the stigmatised group choose, among the few options left to them, leaving space alienation, more often than not, more of unopposed than unidentified. Therefore, women in this context need to be educated about stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination to deploy a scheme whereby they could combat their sentiment of self-guilt that is the repercussion of an internalisation of males' established cultural patterns, and contest expressions and actions of bigoted acts among groups



- (3): *Have you ever been harassed by men in public spaces? If yes, move to questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 11& 13.*  
Yes / No
- (4): *Where have you been harassed?*  
Public square / Roadside / Bus stop / Park / Market place / Others
- (5): *What type of harassment have you encountered?*  
Verbal (comments, whistling, etc.) / Visual (staring, gesticulating, etc.) / Physical  
(touching, shoving, etc.)
- (6): *At what time of the day have you endured harassment?*  
Morning / Afternoon / Evening / Indefinite time
- (7): *How often have you been harassed?*  
Very rarely / Rarely / Occasionally / Frequently / Very Frequently
- (8): *Is harassment as an act a single, collective, or both?*  
Single / Collective / Both
- (9): *Is there a type of dress you think is harassment enticing? If yes, specify the dress type.*  
Yes / No
- (10): *How does harassment make you feel?*  
Humiliated or degraded / Angry / Scared / Traumatized / Unconcerned
- (11): *How do you react to harassment?*  
Retaliate verbally / Retaliate physically / Walk away / Ask others/ police for help
- (12): *What measures you take to avoid harassment?*  
Avoid certain public space / Avoid going alone / Avoid wearing certain clothes / Not taking any safety measures
- (13): *Are you willing to voice out your experience of harassment? If yes, whom with?*  
Yes / No  
Friend / Classmate / Family member / Public
- (14): *What type of penalties you think relatively fair for harassment perpetrators?*  
Compensatory payment for emotional pain and anguish / Warning / Counselling / Jail More than one of the above penalties / Others

**Appendix 2: Figures**  
**Ottoman Islamic Architecture**

*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*



*Figure 7*



*Figure 8*



**The French Style**

*Figure 9*



*Figure 10*



*Figure 11*



*Figure 12*



*Figure 13*



*Figure 14*



### Contemporary Algerian Style

*Figure 15*



*Figure 16*



*Figure 17*



### Public Spaces

*Figure 18*



*Figure 19*



*Figure 20*



*Figure 21*



*Figure 22*



*Figure 23*

