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Navigating the Lines: Women-Only Gyms and the Paradox of the Right to the City

Yufei Shi

School of Marxism, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China
1930273547@qq.com

Abstract. The number of women-only gyms in China has surged from 1,231 at the end of 2024 to 1,782 in the first half of 2025, an increase of 44.8%. Brands such as X-GIRL report that 80% of their members had never entered a conventional gym before, citing discomfort with being watched in mixed-gender spaces. This raises a central question: do women-only gyms expand women's right to physical mobility, or do they simply offer a retreat? Drawing on Kotef and Amir's concept of the "imaginary line" and Harvey's "right to the city", this paper examines the dual nature of women-only gyms. Through case study and social media analysis, it can be concluded that these spaces create safe zones through "reverse line-drawing," enabling more women to initiate movement and reducing the frictional "weight" of mobility. On the other hand, they fail to challenge the deeper gender structures of public space and may inadvertently reinforce the perception of core spaces as male territory. Women-only gyms are simultaneously progressive and a compromise. True urban mobility justice does not consist of building segregated safe zones for each group, but rather of rendering public space itself inclusive.

Keywords: women-only gyms, right to the city, imaginary line, mobility justice, urban space

1. Introduction

Urban public spaces are not gender-neutral. Women frequently find themselves navigating not only physical environments but also the social expectation of being watched, which makes their experience of urban mobility "heavier" than that of men. Traditional gyms exemplify this: weight areas are coded masculine, mirrors occupied by men, and equipment designed for male bodies. Women are left to adjust awkwardly or abandon the equipment altogether. For decades, such experiences have been framed as personal discomfort rather than structural inequality, and consequently, they have received little scholarly attention.

In recent years, women-only gyms have emerged as a response. Industry data shows their numbers grew from 1,231 to 1,782 in six months [1]. X-GIRL reports that 80% of members had never entered a regular gym, citing discomfort with being watched [2]. Yet this development introduces a paradox: do these spaces genuinely expand women's mobility, or do they merely offer a retreat, leaving mainstream gyms as male-dominated territory?

This paper examines this question through the lens of mobility. It is divided into three parts. The first introduces Kotef and Amir's concept of the "imaginary line" [3] to analyse the invisible

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boundaries within traditional gyms, and draws on Sheller's notion of the unequal "weight" in mobility [4]. The second explores how women-only gyms attempt to redraw these boundaries through spatial and institutional design. The third draws on Harvey's "right to the city" [5] and Sassen's concept of "expulsion" [6] to assess whether these spaces are truly liberating or ultimately constitute a compromise.

2. The "imaginary line" and the gendered weight of mobility

Kotef and Amir developed the concept of the "imaginary line" through their study of checkpoints in Palestine [3]. They observed that soldiers would draw lines visible only to themselves. Those who crossed these lines faced punishment, despite the fact that the boundaries were imperceptible to them. The line exists only in the minds of those who enforce it, yet its transgression carries real consequences. This framework applies equally to urban space.

In traditional gyms, women encounter such invisible lines on a daily basis. The weight room is widely understood as male space, even in the absence of explicit signage. A woman who ventures into this area risks being stared at or judged. The spaces in front of the mirrors, ideal for checking form during exercises, are often occupied by men who do not yield. These dynamics exemplify Kotef's "imaginary line" in everyday form: invisible boundaries that carry real penalties for those who cross them [3].

Gym equipment design reinforces these boundaries in material ways. Handles are positioned for broader shoulders, and seats are set for longer legs. These design choices assume that a male body is the default user. Women who wish to use these machines must either adjust awkwardly or abandon the attempt. In either case, they pay the cost of transgression. On the one hand, they experience physical discomfort and awkwardness; on the other hand, they are excluded from core strength training.

No one draws these lines, yet every woman knows they exist. Crossing them carries a cost that can include discomfort, awkwardness, sometimes outright harassment.

Sheller contends that mobility is unequally distributed [4]. Some individuals move lightly, while others carry additional weight. This "weight" is not merely physical but social and psychological. In gyms, women bear this extra burden: they must simultaneously exercise and manage the awareness of being observed. This friction renders movement more arduous. On social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo (two major Chinese social media platforms), women frequently share such experiences. One user recounted abandoning her gym routine after being stared at while performing squats. Another described how she only feels comfortable using cardio machines in the corner, never venturing into the weight area. These testimonies demonstrate that the "imaginary line" is not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality for many women.

The persistence of these invisible boundaries has material consequences. When women are deterred from using certain spaces or equipment, their access to fitness is significantly curtailed. More fundamentally, their right to move freely through public space is compromised. This is not a matter of individual sensitivity but of structural exclusion. It is this pattern that women-only gyms have emerged to address.

3. How women-only gyms draw a reverse line

Women-only gyms seek to address these problems through deliberate spatial and institutional design. X-GIRL, for instance, employs all-female coaching staff, eliminating the male gaze from the instructional environment. The equipment is customised to better suit women's bodies. Handles are

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positioned closer, seats are adjusted lower, and weight increments are made smaller. The gym offers 35-day flexible memberships that accommodate menstrual cycles, recognising that women's bodies have rhythms that conventional 30-day billing cycles ignore [7]. The overall atmosphere is deliberately cultivated to foster a sense of belonging and to eliminate the feeling of being watched.

These design choices are not merely cosmetic. Crucially, 80% of X-GIRL's members have never before entered any gym [2]. Without this alternative space, they would likely remain immobile. The women-only gym thus functions as what we might call, adapting Kotef's framework, a "reverse line" [3]. Inside this boundary, women are safe and comfortable. Outside lies the male-dominated world they must navigate. Inside, they are freed from the dual task of exercising while managing the gaze. They can focus solely on their workout. As one member put it, "I do not have to worry about being watched. I can just focus on my squats."

The phenomenon is not limited to X-GIRL. Industry reports indicate that women now account for more than 50% of gym memberships nationwide, and over 60% of personal training clients are female [2]. The growth of women-only facilities reflects a broader demand for spaces where women can exercise without the frictional "weight" of being observed [4]. In this sense, these gyms represent a significant expansion of women's mobility. They offer a tangible response to an otherwise neglected problem.

However, the question remains. Do these spaces simply accommodate the existing structure of inequality, or do they challenge it?

4. The problem with safe spaces

When we apply Harvey's concept of the "right to the city," the picture becomes more complicated [5]. Harvey insists that the right to the city is not merely the right to access urban resources, but the right to transform them. It is a collective right to shape the city according to the needs and desires of its inhabitants. Women-only gyms grant women access to a space. For those who had never entered a gym before, this is a real gain. But the question remains: do they alter the underlying gender structure of public space?

The evidence suggests they do not. Traditional gyms remain male-dominated. The weight room is still coded as masculine. The spaces in front of the mirrors are still occupied by men. The existence of women-only spaces has not pushed mainstream facilities to rethink their design in any meaningful way. Mainstream gyms continue to operate as if the problem does not exist, or as if it has already been solved by the creation of separate spaces. This leads to a troubling dynamic. As one critic observed, "If we create women-only gyms, we are effectively ceding mixed-gender spaces. When women are treated poorly in regular gyms, the response becomes: 'Why don't you just go to a women-only gym instead?'" [7]. This logic does not challenge inequality but accommodates it. The existence of separate spaces becomes an excuse for leaving mainstream spaces unchanged. It shifts the burden back to women: if you are uncomfortable, it is your responsibility to remove yourself, not the gym's responsibility to change.

Sassen's notion of "expulsion" helps illuminate this paradox [6]. Sassen argues that contemporary capitalism increasingly operates by expelling people from systems that no longer need them—from labour markets, from housing, from social protections. Those expelled are not simply excluded; they are rendered surplus to the system. In a more modest sense, women who find traditional gyms unwelcoming are expelled from those spaces. Women-only gyms provide a temporary shelter for those expelled, but the expelling system itself remains intact. The shelter is a refuge, not a transformation.

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This raises a deeper concern. When women retreat into separate spaces, does it reduce the pressure on mainstream spaces to change? If more and more women choose women-only gyms, traditional gyms lose a key constituency that might otherwise demand reform. The industry can say: "Women have their own gyms now. The problem is solved." But the problem is not solved. It is simply moved elsewhere. The underlying assumption that gyms are by default male spaces persists, unchallenged.

We can see similar dynamics in other areas. Women-only subway cars, for instance, were introduced in some cities as a response to harassment. They provide a safer space for women who fear being groped or stared at. But they also normalize the idea that harassment is inevitable in mixed spaces. The solution becomes segregation, not safety. The same logic applies to women-only gyms. They solve the immediate problem of discomfort, but they leave the deeper structure untouched.

This is not to dismiss the value of such spaces. For the women who use them, they are undeniably liberating. The 80% of X-GIRL's members who had never entered a gym before are not wrong to feel that these spaces have changed their lives [2]. The question is whether this liberation is individual or collective, temporary or structural. Does it enable women to move, or does it enable the system to remain unchanged?

Thus, women-only gyms embody a duality. They represent genuine progress by enabling women who otherwise would not move to do so. They reduce the frictional weight of mobility and offer an immediate, practical response to an urgent problem [4]. But they also constitute a compromise. By creating separate spaces, they may inadvertently reinforce the idea that core spaces belong to men by default. The weight rooms, the prime mirror positions, the zones of maximum visibility continue to be seen as male territory. These spaces accommodate inequality without dismantling it.

To sum up, women-only gyms are neither pure liberation nor pure segregation. They are a complex response to a real problem, and like all such responses, they come with trade-offs. Recognizing this complexity is the first step toward thinking about what a more just urban space might actually look like.

5. Conclusion

This paper has employed Kotef and Amir's "imaginary line" and Harvey's "right to the city" to examine the dual nature of women-only gyms. On the one hand, these spaces enable women to initiate movement, reduce the frictional weight of mobility, and offer an immediate response to existing inequalities. On the other, they fail to challenge deeper gender structures and may inadvertently reinforce the perception of core spaces as male territory. Women-only gyms are simultaneously progressive and a compromise.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its synthesis of these two frameworks. Kotef's concept allows us to see the invisible boundaries that structure women's everyday mobility. Harvey's concept provides a normative standard against which to measure the liberatory potential of spatial interventions. Together, they reveal a paradox: a space can be genuinely liberating for individuals while leaving larger structures of inequality untouched.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The analysis relies primarily on secondary data, including industry reports, media coverage, and social media posts. Future research could incorporate in-depth interviews with gym users across diverse facilities to capture a fuller range of experiences. Comparative studies between types of women-only spaces could also illuminate which design features best foster genuine inclusion.

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A further question for future research concerns the role of digital space. As fitness increasingly moves online, through workout apps, live-streamed classes, and virtual communities, how do these digital environments interact with physical gyms to shape women's mobility? Do they offer new forms of escape from the gaze, or do they reproduce the same dynamics in different media?

Ultimately, this paper suggests that true urban mobility justice does not consist of building segregated "safe zones" for each group, but of rendering public space itself inclusive. Separate spaces may be necessary as a temporary measure, a refuge for those who have been expelled. But they are not a substitute for transformation. Only when women can move freely through any gym, any street, any public space without needing to retreat, will the city realize Harvey's right to change it.

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