

# Digital Counter-narratives for Inclusive Spaces

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Isabel Cristina Carvalho  
[isabel.carvalho@uab.pt](mailto:isabel.carvalho@uab.pt)  
Research Centre for Arts and  
Communication (CIAC-UAb),  
Universidade Aberta  
Lisboa, Portugal  
 [0000-0002-0499-7464](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0499-7464)

## Abstract

Many cities still reflect patriarchal logics that perpetuate gender inequalities in everyday socio-spatial appropriation and practices. These practices do not align with what is necessary to achieve the United Nations Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), pointing to the need to identify and address the conditions that limit inclusive urban experiences. This study explores the role of digital counter-narratives in identifying and challenging gendered power dynamics within urban spaces. The main objective is to investigate how digital activism and feminist counter-narratives challenge patriarchal spatial appropriations influenced by misogynistic norms, ultimately promoting more inclusive and equitable spaces. The theoretical discussion explores how digital counter-narratives challenge the exclusionary dynamics of urban spaces, crossing urban studies, gender studies, and digital activism. The research employs qualitative case study approaches to analyse two feminist activist movements, "Girls at Dhaba's" and "Chalk Back," and

their potential to promote critical analysis of spatial experiences to deconstruct norms that perpetuate the exclusion and harassment of women in public spaces. Both projects operate locally and use images and social networks to document as a form of resistance and resilience. The reflections point to counter-narratives as a way of documenting lived experiences and facilitating new forms of participation and expression of territorial citizenship in dialogue with digital citizenship in demanding an inclusive city. This study offers new perspectives on the contribution of digital counter-narratives to research and the production of situated knowledge for inclusive urban spaces and the need for more studies on feminist research methodologies at the intersection of technology and activism.

## Keywords

Digital Narratives • Counter-narratives • Feminism • Gender Equality • Inclusive Urban Spaces

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## 1. Introduction

Cities reflect and perpetuate patriarchal logic in their organisation and daily life and continue to exhibit significant gender inequalities. UNWomen<sup>1</sup> revealed in November 2024 that one in three women experiences gender-based violence. For International Women's Day on March 8, 2025<sup>2</sup>, which coincides with the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Women organised its efforts in three key areas: Advance women's and girls' rights (challenging all forms of violence, discrimination, and exploitation); Promote gender equality (Address systemic barriers, dismantle patriarchy, transform entrenched inequities, and elevate the voices of marginalised women and girls) and Foster empowerment (redefine power structures by ensuring inclusive access to education, employment, leadership, and decision-making spaces).

These circumstances affect women's and girls' freedom of movement on a daily basis, as well as their ability to participate in daily and public life, whether in simple moments such as choosing their route to school, work, or even where to go in their free time. Symbolic representations and street signs in urban spaces also reflect gender disparities. Feminist collective GeoChicas has been developing maps from a gender perspective since 2016. Their project entitled "Las calles de las mujeres" aimed to highlight the historical gap in the representation of women in the streets of the city. This collective mapped the street names of 12 cities in Latin America and Spain, and their conclusions emphasised this discrepancy. In Barcelona, 16.3%, and in Buenos Aires, only 6.1% of the streets had women's names. Despite a smaller disparity, Havana remains without equity, with only 37.8% of the streets named in honour of women. Another study by Manuel Banza, a data scientist, confirmed this inequality in Lisbon; only 5% of toponyms honour women, a pattern repeated in many global cities.

These disparities in the use of urban spaces by gender, as well as in their representation and visibility, perpetuate institutional narratives and emphasise the need for critical spatial thinking that actively challenges patriarchal structures and advocates for more inclusive and equitable urban environments. This critical thinking offers new possibilities for action in the contemporary context, frequently characterised as the "Digital Age" or "Post-Digital Era", where digital media continuously permeate daily life. This context is even more relevant nowadays since the accelerated development of technolo-

gies and equipment, such as smartphones, has improved the production and dissemination of experiences and information in real-time.

This study explores the role of digital counter-narratives in identifying and challenging gendered power dynamics within urban spaces. The main objective is to explore how digital activism and feminist counter-narratives challenge patriarchal spatial appropriations influenced by misogynistic norms, ultimately promoting more inclusive and equitable spaces. This research aims to contribute to the discussion on feminist placemaking by analysing how digital counter-narratives can facilitate claiming inclusive urban spaces. It addresses the following central research questions:

1. How can digital counter-narratives that advocate for the right to the city challenge patriarchal narratives in urban spaces?
2. What potential do these counter-narratives hold for fostering more inclusive and equitable urban environments?

This analysis will initiate with a reflective overview highlighting the importance of examining urban spaces from a gender perspective. It then explores the pivotal role that digital technologies play in shaping narratives and counter-narratives within feminist activism. This is followed by the analyses of two feminist activism qualitative case study approaches (Mehan, 2024), "Girls at Dhaba's" and "Chalk Back", and their potential to promote critical analysis of spatial experiences to deconstruct norms that perpetuate the exclusion and harassment of women in public spaces. The study includes a relational overview of publicly available online publications, such as social media content and news related to the initiatives developed by these movements. This approach contributes to a broader understanding of digital counter-narratives role in questioning and connecting physical, digital, and social spaces as a strategy for feminist urban activism.

## 2. Urban Spaces and Gender

Social and cultural interactions influence urban spaces, which reciprocally influence them. The lived experiences and relationships that arise from these processes reinforce the need for inclusive participation in thinking and planning urban spaces. Such participation can take on diverse forms of action, representation, and expression, ensuring that inhabitants are actively involved in the design of their living spaces.

Lefebvre (2000 [1974]) distinguishes between "abstract space" and "absolute space", relating the "abstract" to the conceived space, while the "absolute" to the lived space,

1 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157046>

2 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/announcement/2024/12/international-womens-day-2025-for-all-women-and-girls-rights-equality-empowerment>

where social dynamics occur, such as interactions, emotions, and sensory experiences. Doreen Massey (1994) and Gillian Rose (1997) linked the social construction of space and place to questions of gender-related power dynamics. They stressed that spatial arrangements and the built environment are not neutral but are deeply intertwined with hierarchies and social inequalities. Gillian Rose's (1993) and Leslie Kern's (2020) studies also ground the notion that urban spaces often reflect patriarchal structures that do not consider women's experiences and needs. Judith Butler (2006) argues that gender is a performative social construction influenced by institutional norms and practices manifested in bodily practices.

This performative social construction of gender is also related to the exercise of everyday citizenship in urban spaces. The existence of differentiated citizenship in urban spaces manifests itself in everyday practice, where access is often conditioned by socioeconomic and cultural diversity (Larreche & Cobo Quintero, 2021).

The problem worsens when the lens of intersectionality is applied, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), when different social categories – such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and age – overlap, leading to higher levels of discrimination or disadvantage. These concepts, integrated with Harvey's concept of spatial justice (2009[1973]), reveal spatial inequalities that result from complex situations that combine gender, social, cultural, and economic factors that influence and limit women's access to participate in public life. The exercise of intersectional feminist critical spatial thinking, when combined with the concept of right to the city, enables the analysis of issues of power, exclusion, and social justice in urban spaces, highlighting how these spaces influence and limit women's access, safety, and well-being (Low, 2022).

Michel de Certeau (2011) states that space is a practised place. However, public spaces are still more accessible to men than to women. Fear of crime and the resulting sense of insecurity are among the main factors limiting and constraining how women and girls move and act in their daily activities, thus affecting their freedom, mobility, and safety (Anushka, 2022). Valera & Casakin (2022) recently analysed three public spaces in Barcelona and revealed that traditional gender roles are still evident in public spaces. In this study, they identified the perpetuation of patterns of use that reflect traditional gender roles, where women occupy areas associated with care, and men dominate leisure and sports spaces. This informal segregation of public spaces perpetuates patriarchal roles and limits the inclusiveness and vitality of these places. Judith Butler (2011) defends the right to appear in relation to the ability of a body to exist in a public space without facing violence. This principle is fundamental to everyday practices that show

disagreement with the traditional dichotomy between public and private and encourage critical reflection on socio-cultural constructions that define and condition experiences in urban spaces. A critical feminist approach to spatial practices enables an understanding of social movements that form and resist exclusionary practices that shape urban spaces (Daskalak & Fotaki, 2023), exposing the dynamics of spatial oppression and exclusion. Analysing the urban environment through a gender lens (Haas, 2023) is essential to questioning and challenging established norms that often perpetuate inequalities. Telling the narrative in the first person is an act of resistance and empowerment that allows the oppressed to become subjects of their narrative (hooks, 2019), challenging dominant power structures.

Such practices often manifest as acts of dissent that break the historical dichotomy between public and private spaces enforced by patriarchal social practices and norms. By challenging dominant spatial narratives, these activist practices question the norms that condition the experience of urban spaces and promote new forms of social and civic interactions. Wright & Wright (2017) highlight the difficulty of self-reflexivity for those with oppressive social structures. This concept can be applied to analysing urban spaces where limiting and patriarchal forms and semiotics are often perpetuated intergenerationally. Examining the intersections between gender, space, and power critically from a feminist perspective allows a clearer understanding of the historical marginalisation of women's needs and perspectives in thinking about experienced urban spaces and spatial inequalities. This approach is fundamental for improving civic engagement in urban spaces (Carvalho, 2021) and empowering women to move around, challenge, and reconfigure urban environments through informal and transformative placemaking practices (Mehan, 2024). Recognising the interconnectedness of physical and virtual urban experiences, Brown & Mitchell (2020) highlight how digital platforms can serve as spaces for feminist expression and critique, enabling new forms of engagement and representation and challenging dominant narratives that often marginalise women and other minorities in urban spaces. In this sense, Catalina Ortiz (2022) added the importance of storytelling as a means of challenging epistemic injustice by promoting empathy and understanding complex urban experiences. Brown & Mitchell (2020) underline how digital platforms can serve as spaces for feminist expressions and critiques. These platforms enable new forms of engagement and representation and challenge dominant narratives that often marginalise women and other minorities in urban spaces. Carpenter and Horvath (2022) also noted that by using participatory visual methodologies, researchers can integrate and engage community members in urban studies and include diverse voices in the process, gua-

ranteing a higher degree of accuracy that the studies reflect real-life experiences. Creating safe spaces in the physical and digital worlds is essential for fostering inclusive participation, enriching democratic processes, and co-creating knowledge.

### 3. Digital narratives

Women's experiences, memories, and practices in public spaces are essential to understanding the cultural dynamics and socio-political processes (Harcourt, Bert & Dup, 2022) that shape our cities. Digital narratives are personal or collective stories shared through digital platforms, using multimedia elements such as videos, photographs, and text (De Fina & Perrino, 2019)

The counter-narratives presented here highlight women's experiences that challenge dominant cultural and spatial norms rooted in and perpetuated by the misogynistic practices of patriarchal societies. A growing awareness of these historical gender inequalities and exclusion in urban spaces, shaped by social norms, highlights the need to broaden and strengthen these counter-narratives through a feminist perspective.

The concept of public spaces, in its various dimensions – whether physical or digital – has become central to developing counter-narratives. The rise of social media platforms and accessible digital technologies have created new opportunities for feminist expression and mobilisation. The participatory culture present in many of these digital spaces encourages the creation and dissemination of these counter-narratives on platforms such as social networks, blogs, and online campaigns. These efforts aim to deconstruct the patriarchal norms that influence the organisation and use of these spaces.

By using digital platforms, these narratives document, amplify, and challenge the everyday harassment, exclusion, and discrimination that women face in public spaces. This can contribute to urban feminist activism, where women can use digital tools to document their experiences, share stories and mobilise support. By documenting and exposing their experiences, digital counter-narratives act as practices of resistance that deconstruct norms and practices that limit and exclude women from public spaces.

### 4. Digital counter-narratives as a form of protest – two examples of activist movements

This article addresses the production of digital counter-narratives in the context of feminist activism as a form of protest and expression for socio-spatial action.

Counter-narratives allow documenting lived experiences and creating different ways for people to express themselves and participate in shaping inclusive urban spaces.

The selection of the activist projects presented subsequently encompassed their approach to the intersection between urban space, gender, and social justice, utilising counter-narratives to question and subvert the dominant norms that condition spatial experiences. The selection focused on their relevance as counter-narratives highlighting gender experiences in urban spaces. These studies use visual narratives to expose, challenge, and transform power dynamics in urban environments. They leverage digital platforms to amplify activist actions, creating visibility and impact while fostering online and offline communities. Each selected project shares a common goal: to expose, criticise and transform gender norms in urban spaces by combining local and digital actions.

Another selection criterion was having a presence on Instagram, as this platform enjoys widespread daily usage, a global reach, and strong visual elements that effectively articulate messages and document experiences. A thematic analysis was conducted on social media posts (Mehan, 2024) on the Instagram platform, analyzing specific hashtags pertinent to urban space, public space, gender, and various social issues. The hashtags examined included #feministpublicspace, #safecity, #StopStreetHarassment, #stopCatcalling, #feminism, and #Inclusivitycity. The “Girls at Dhabas” and “Chalk Back” projects were selected. These projects offer different perspectives on accessibility, inclusion, and representation by questioning and subverting dominant spatial norms:

- “Girls At Dhabas” (2015–present) developed by a feminist collective document and celebrates the presence of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces in Pakistan and South Asia (<https://girlsatdhabas.tumblr.com/>);
- “Chalk Back” – An activist initiative that combines sidewalk chalk art and social media to document cases of street harassment in public spaces through messages written with chalk in the places where they occurred. This project demonstrates how activism and digital narratives can intersect to resist gender-based violence and advocate for spatial justice (<https://www.chalkback.org/>).

#### 4.1. “Girls At Dhabas” – Representativeness, social and spatial equity

In 2015, Sadia Khatri photographed herself in a “dhaba” – the name for traditionally male-dominated roadside restaurants, teahouses, and coffees – and posted the image online.

“Dhabas” were attended by men and often perceived as inappropriate or even unsafe for women. This male exclusivity reflects patriarchal norms that limit women’s presence in urban spaces, as these venues are viewed as challenging the idea of “respectability” associated with women.

The attention received from this publication made Sadia foresee an impact and expansion of the discussion of the challenge and questioning of the traditional role of women in public spaces. Subsequently, Sadia Khatri co-founded the feminist collective “Girls at Dhabas” (<https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/>), which had as its main objective to document and celebrate the presence of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces in Pakistan and South Asia.

The movement emphasises the concept of “loitering”, arguing that women have the right to occupy urban spaces without any specific reason. The “#GirlsAtDhabas” movement recognises that the mere presence of women in specific spaces can be seen as transgressive, challenging societal expectations which often confine women to the domestic sphere or restrict their public presence to certain activities, such as commuting, work, or shopping. By encouraging women to “loitering” – to occupy public spaces for no apparent purpose – the project directly confronts the notion that women’s movements and behaviour in public must have a purpose.

The activist actions began on Instagram with the hashtag “#GirlsAtDhabas”, where several images of women were shared located in various “dhabas” (Figure 1), considered male territories, as a form of claiming the right to the city.

In August 2015, the collective “Girls at Dhabas” created the Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/girlsatdhabas/>), and by March 2025, it had 760 publications and 8565 followers. The content posted here, mostly accompanied by images and comments, shares the experience in the first person, allowing us to visualize and humanize the problems of gender spatial exclusion. The hashtag #GirlsAtDhabas, associated with others such as #FeministMapathon, #WhyLoiter, #submission, #feminist, #reclaim, #publicspaces, #BlankNoise, has emerged as a link to the digital manifestation of territorial claims and to gathered new participants.

The symbolic act of a woman taking and sharing an image of herself in a urban space, where social norms have traditionally restricted her presence or where she may fear societal judgment, illustrates her position and claim of her right to participate in social-spatial urban practices. Every shared image of a woman in a “dhaba,” accompanied by her notes regarding her experience, represents a form of resistance against the prevailing societal norms and expectations. This interplay of image and personal narrative challenges the restrictive frame-

works that seek to define women’s roles within public as well as private places. A representative example can be found in the post dated January 27, 2017 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BPw-S-glfAO/>), with the following caption:

“Somedays the prospect of spending another hour sitting inside staring at a laptop is enough to make me cry and today was one of those days. So I decided to step out and search for a cup of chai. Today as I walk out and am greeted by the usual – stares, some smirking and jeering – I wonder if my lipstick is too dark or my jeans are too skinny. [...] As I approach a dhaba, I am made painfully aware that I am the only woman here looking for a cup of chai. [...] Loitering alone (sitting around for no good reason) in a commercial area definitely means I am making a spectacle of myself and this is a thought that makes me self conscious. But why should it? I remind myself that I also deserve to be here. In a small way, this is also an effort to be a part of the ordinary scene of the city.”

Most of the comments on the Instagram account send congratulations and reinforce the relevance and the necessity of the “Girls at Dhabas” movement. However, some are marked by misogynistic and hate speech, which replicate the harassment experienced on a physical level. The collective received several hostile comments that undermined their efforts, rooted in arguments of practices and social norms perpetuated by misogynistic and religious beliefs that restrict women’s daily actions. These comments are mostly from men and from profiles that do not disclose the user’s identity or gender. They express fear and concern about a threat to “traditional values” to the existing patriarchal structure of society. These comments often receive responses from the collective or other participants, highlighting the inconsistency in understanding the concept of feminism and its objectives. For example, this comment (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BQDWNolaTr/>), published on February 3, 2017, as a reply:

“[...] you have an apparent problem with feminism, going by what you’ve said as well, treating it as an insult. Why? The feminists I know – in Pakistan and overseas – work to bring about gender equality, fix unfair legislation and ensure fairness and equality. Does drinking chai at a dhaba solve the world’s problems? No. It starts a conversation and lets women and others in solidarity know that they don’t have to worry about harassment (Just because you’re a man doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist). That this small act angers you so much indicates just what @girlsatdhabas have to deal with.”

However, gender biases do not come exclusively from men; some women also express a lack of understanding of why women wish to occupy places like dhabas.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot from #girlsatdhabas Instagram (August 8, 2017). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BXhi-npB-oM>

The actions of this collective also pinpoint the necessity for public policies that protect women's rights and foster a comprehensive dialogue surrounding violence against women within broader contexts. For example, the protest action "Stand against rape" declares that "Women's safety and security is in a state of crisis in Pakistan, and we must come together to highlight the urgency of this issue and to hold our institutions accountable. This protest calls for immediate national action and aims to achieve immediate justice for all victims and their families.

Posting online quickly gained dimension and reach and became a means of collective expression and community building, both physically and digitally.

The collective "Girls at Dhabas" has inspired and evolved into feminist collective action in several cities across Pakistan, promoting debates about women's access to public spaces. The movement went viral in 2015 and gained the support of many inspired South Asian women. This sharing of situated experiences and situated knowledge reflects issues of representation and accessibility in a critical and activist way.

These initiatives challenge spatial hierarchies and break norms that marginalise women by occupying traditionally male-dominated spaces – whether walking, dining in roadside cafes, or public sidewalks. In this way, this feminist activist's actions identify and challenge exclusionary spatial norms, document them, and inspire other women to occupy and transform these spaces in order to achieve social and spatial equity and justice. The project has continued to expand and has organised several online and offline meetings and events, such as street cricket matches and bike rides in different cities.

In 2017, "Girls at Dhabas" members created the podcast "Behanchara Diaries", consisting of five episodes, exploring topics such as feminism, intersectionality, and the politics of public spaces, thus complementing and strengthening the movement's counter-narrative.

#### 4.2. "Chalk Back"

The Chalk Back project started in March 2016 in New York by Sophie Sandberg, then at 19 years old (<https://www.chalkback.org/ourstory>). Sophie Sandberg reproduced harassment messages received in public spaces on the pavements with chalk as a creative and accessible way to confront the normalised culture of street harassment and the lack of safe and accessible spaces for people, especially women, LGBTQIA+, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour). The choice of the New York City context to give visibility to often ignored narratives was particularly important as it is considered a metropolis represented by its multiculturalism and diversity.

Over time, this movement has grown into a global non-profit organisation. In April 2019, the Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/chalkbackorg/>) was created, and by March 2025, it had 732 publications and 8865 followers. The project's expansion to more than 150 cities in 49 countries demonstrates its resonance in diverse cultural contexts such as New York, Paris, London, and São Paulo. Chalk Back has become a decentralised global movement, bringing together stories from various communities and fostering a sense of transnational solidarity. This community shares messages and experiences on social media platforms, using hashtags such as #StopStreetHarassment and #ChalkBack. The shared messages of street harassment – such as shouts, insults, and threats – are written in chalk as close as possible to the local places where the incidents occurred and shared digitally.

Chalk was chosen due to its ephemeral nature, thus referring to the analogy of the ephemeral nature of verbal harassment. At the same time, the act of writing it down gives it temporary permanence and visibility, allowing participants to visibilise the attacks and reclaim secure public spaces without permanent disfigurement or legal repercussions.

Each message transcribed onto the pavements and streets, urban public spaces, is accompanied by an anonymous narrative shared on social media, contextualising the harassment and articulating its impact on the victim. The messages written on the ground replicate the catcalling heard, such as "Hey, beautiful, smile" or "I'll follow you home".

By highlighting the socio-spatial dimensions of gender-based violence, the project visually confronts aggressors and passers-by with the lived realities of many women.

Although a temporary physical marker of these experiences, the chalk medium transforms verbal assaults into tangible reminders. This visual representation, shared digitally as a visual archive of harassment incidents, extends the impact beyond the physical location.

The combination of representation of oral aggression and the socio-spatial context in which it occurs makes girls' experiences visible and shocking. Several stories reveal cases of street harassment directed at very young girls, as illustrated in Figure 2 with the message, "I was 13. A man asked me the time. I turned to answer, and he exposed himself." and in Figure 3 with the message "Nice legs for a schoolgirl. What else is under that dress?"

Using platforms such as Instagram, the project creates a digital space to share experiences, promote a global community of activists and supporters with common goals, and amplify individual stories that feed into a collective counter-narrative of feminist activism.

In 2023, the "Chalk Back" movement reported 3,556 incidents of gender-based street harassment<sup>3</sup>. An anonymous narrative accompanies each message written on the ground and shared on social media. It contextualises the harassment, highlights its impact on the victim, and reveals the shocking level of aggression of the language used.

By making harassment visible, "Chalk Back" contributes to raising public awareness and discourse about gender-based violence. It is also a form of public education that can influence viewers' behaviour and challenge the social norms that normalise harassment.

Hashtags like #ChalkBack allow us to link the posts of street catcalling as a collective repository of experiences, amplifying marginalized voices and creating a counter-narrative to the dominant culture of silence and victim-blaming. This sharing is accompanied by hashtags related to the activist movement, such as #ChalkBack, #StopStreetHarassment, #catcalling, #NoExcuse.

More recently, this feminist activist movement has expanded its efforts beyond chalking on sidewalks to include interviews and reports exploring women's experiences with street catcalling. Women share their experiences with street catcalling, detailing the comments they encounter, their reactions, whether if they respond or not, and what they respond to. These shares also have a large pedagogical component, the creation of a counter-narrative based on thousands of shared experiences, also allowing different approaches and reactions to be shared.

The "Chalk Back" movement demonstrates how local interventions can contribute to global narratives and vice versa by combining tangible, located actions with global digital connectivity. On the Instagram platform, the sha-

3 <https://www.chalkback.org/impact>

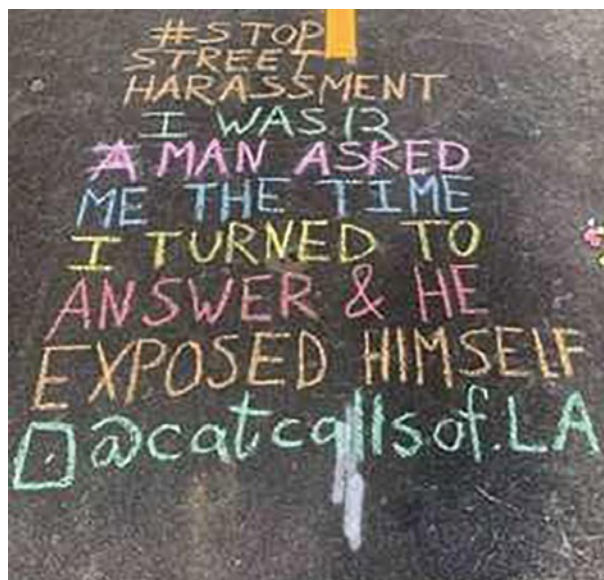


Figure 2. Screenshot from #girlsatdhabas Instagram (April 3, 2023). Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CqJZGNKrNLS/>



Figure 3. Screenshot from #girlsatdhabas Instagram (October 2, 2023). Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx6CICMP59d/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx6CICMP59d/?img_index=1)

ring of stories has also been increasing with other media, such as videos with testimonies, memes, and images about the catcalling experience.

## 5. Discussion

Women's experiences, memories and practices in public spaces are essential to understanding cultural dynamics

and socio-political processes (Harcourt, Berg, & Dup, 2022) that shape our cities.

The two activist movements, “Girls at Dhabas” and “Chalk Back,” created counter-narratives that document the lived experiences of women, challenging dominant patriarchal and misogynistic practices and norms that restrict women’s movement and presence in urban spaces. These issues are deeply rooted in and perpetuated by the misogynistic practices of patriarchal societies, which contribute to gender inequalities in urban environments. Both projects critically address widespread issues of harassment and violence while exploring the social constraints that confine women to specific public spaces in their daily lives. By documenting these experiences, they give women the opportunity to share their narratives in a socio-spatial context.

Although the two examples presented come from different geographical and cultural contexts, “Girls at Dhabas” in South Asia and “Chalk Back,” which originated in New York, USA. Both projects use digital narratives to challenge traditional gender norms and spatial segregation while defending women’s right to safety and promoting participation in public life.

The visual language of the projects differs. “Girls at Dhabas” positions the female presence in a predominantly male-dominated territory. The strategic positioning and visibility convey a message of resilience as “I am ‘here’” since their actions challenge the exclusionary norms of the “Dhabas”. The collective challenges female invisibility in public spaces by sharing their photos and localized counter-narratives. This initiative identifies specific urban areas that require attention to ensure women’s safety. Through its counter-narrative, the collective presents a critical and personal experienced viewpoint on the sexist, misogynistic, and exclusionary practices and norms that have persisted over time. In this process, the collective fosters a sense of community. It stimulates dialogues and connections among those who share similar experiences. It reinforces the idea that participants are not isolated in their struggles and can draw strength from their solidarity.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored how activist movements create and share counter-narratives that challenge dominant patriarchal norms and practices and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of urban spaces. The analysis focuses on two case studies, “Girls at Dhabas” and “Chalk Back”. It employs digital research methods, including analyses of social media content and the study of protest on the specific themes present in narratives, such as resistance and claim of safe urban space.

The activist movement “Girls at Dhabas” uses the presence of the female body as a strategic medium for political action and social advocacy. Similarly, the “Chalk Back” movement pinpointed disturbing and shocking experiences of gender-based street harassment, taking into account that many testimonies are from girls between the ages of 13 and 18. This activist initiative transcribes expressions of gender-based street harassment in chalk, marking the locations where the harassment occurred and sharing it by posting photos online.

Both projects adopted distinct strategies for resistance, yet they share a common approach centred on sharing personal experiences, documenting those experiences, and increasing visibility. Using different media formats (text, photography, and videos), the posts and interactions shared on social media documented real experiences to identify misogynistic practices. By employing specific hashtags and sharing personal experiences, participants link the personal to the political in the form of resistance. This cycle of action and documentation represents a form of active citizenship in which citizens actively engage with their urban environments.

Participants spotlight hegemonic narratives about space and power, exposing the inequalities and injustices embedded in urban places. This approach is particularly important for feminist activism, as it inspires women to use digital tools to document their experiences, share their stories, build communities, and mobilize support. By questioning, documenting, and actively denouncing exclusionary practices, these activist movements collaboratively promote a vision of inclusive and safe urban environments everyone can inhabit and appreciate safely.

One of the most significant contributions of these digital counter-narratives through a feminist lens is their ability to reshape perceptions of life in urban spaces. This form of active, and personal intervention allows us to make the problem visible. It calls attention to the structural inequalities embedded within these spaces, challenges dominant and hegemonic narratives, and questions the myth of public spaces as neutral and universally accessible. It promotes reflection, thus contributing to producing fundamental socio-spatial knowledge to co-create more inclusive cities.

The counter-narratives explored showed potential for fostering more inclusive and equitable urban environments by incorporating diverse voices and exploring alternative forms of feminist resistance and resilience. Yaka and Çakır Kılınçoğlu (2024) pointed out the necessity for an intersectional feminist perspective to identify and analyze the effects of power dynamics and gender relations on activism, thereby enabling a more accurate characterization of women’s experiences.

More research is needed from diverse backgrounds, contexts, practices, and norms to analyze how these

counter-narratives can reflect women's experiences in an intersectional way. Future research should explore this potential by incorporating a variety of perspectives and proposing alternative forms and methods of resistance, resilience, and civic participation, fostering the co-creation of safe environments for everyone.

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**Bio**

**Isabel Cristina Carvalho** holds a degree in Architecture, a postgraduate degree in Town Planning, Environment, and Urban Design, a postgraduate degree in Town Management, and a PhD in Digital Media Arts. She was a post-doctoral researcher in computer animation at the National Centre for Computer Animation, Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, UK. She is currently an integrated researcher at the Research Centre for Arts and Communication (CIAC-UAb), Universidade Aberta, where she focuses

on locative media art, digital activism, digital storytelling, and feminist urban studies. Her research explores the interaction between people, urban space and technology, incorporating individual voices and experiences into community (counter)narratives. Participates in several international projects that promote innovative thinking skills, creative artistic entrepreneurship, and digital skills supported by digital pedagogical strategies. Responsible for the research project “Gender in Map – Women’s Empowerment in Planning and Urban Development,” funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) [CEECIND/04642/2017].

