

On being a woman in Amsterdam: the sequel

From the moment I landed in Amsterdam in January 2012 I totally embraced my new life over here. I found myself being a sort of ambassador of the happy life in this city. It was an interesting phenomenon given how most expats and immigrants long for their roots and the ways of their culture. For me it was quite the opposite. And it took me some time to figure out *the whys*.

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Image: Andra Stefan

I realized there was a critical factor to me feeling comfortable in my new home, a factor that outweighed the initial unfamiliarity with the local language and culture. That led me to write an article named "On being a woman in Amsterdam". It was a story originally published on my blog but soon shared by other publications, and also by people who didn't know me personally, on social media. This massive feedback got me by surprise, especially because my blog was still very modest, in its numbers and reach. It also surprised me that I got almost no backlash but expressions of support and recognition from men and women, mostly expats living in The Netherlands, coming from countries where a patriarchal mentality is still dominant.

Decent women

My story started like this: 'in Portugal, where I grew up, there was an unwritten code of conduct for "decent women": whatever you do, *never. make. the. first. move.* with a specimen of the opposite sex. (...) The experience of having attempted the first move in the past (or giving the impression you were making one) had been powerful enough to teach any girl that, in such a situation, whatever could go wrong, would. (...) Let me give you a bit of the context I grew up in. In Portugal, it is commonplace to name a woman a slut. You hear it at home, you hear it at school, you hear it on the streets. Slut – or puta – is a commonly used word, not only applied to prostitutes, but to women in general, in different circumstances, which can vary from wearing a specific sort of clothing to expressing sexual desire. Although it is an extremely scary word for a female, women are not shy at using it either. This word translates into a whole concept which might prevent you from simple things like biking to work, walking a specific street, wearing a mini skirt, or from dancing freely in a social circum-



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stance because, if you are unlucky – or do the wrong thing – you might become the slut (pardon my French). In Amsterdam naming a woman – slut – is showing yourself in a very bad light (to say the least), even if the woman in question is a sex worker. Also, people aren't really interested in whom a given woman is sharing her bed with, or if she is going out every night to party.'

Woman in Amsterdam

When I heard that happiness was the theme of this issue of The Heart of the City I knew right there what I wanted to talk about. You might be wondering how the whole gender conversation relates to the topic of happiness. Consider this: in my adoptive city I needn't be afraid of being sexually harassed on the streets or at my work, or feeling uneasy if I have my short skirt on – nobody will give it a second look. What's more, I bike everywhere wearing one and no one assumes I am asking for attention. Here my boss doesn't care about who I share my bed with, or what I do in my private life, as long as I perform my duties at my job. Here I never had a male advising me not

to swear because "it doesn't look good on a woman" or male friends offering to walk me home at night (because as a woman walking alone late at night, *you never know*). Here, little girls are encouraged to engage in physical and risky activities as much as boys; to be independent, take the lead, be outspo-

Magic formula

This isn't about glorifying a country or city in favor of the other. The comparison I made is aimed at stressing a healthier example in terms of gender issues, and this might be important for those men and women who might not be aware that *there is another way*. Discrimination doesn't happen because of some evil people with horns who intentionally walk around harming others. It's about socially accepted behavior that people unconsciously internalize which, in its turn, helps perpetuate injustice. It's about the seemingly little everyday life occurrences like having a man hissing at a female on a given corner of the street, something that, in my eyes, helps to form the ground in which more extreme situations of division, disparity, and violence flourish. In this city, I feel as safe in my womanhood as I ever felt before. I feel treated as an equal. Equality might not be a magic formula for happiness – no such thing, right? – but, for me, it goes a long way.



ken as much as boys; to get dirty, climb trees, play with cars as much as them. Here women are expected to have as much initiative as men. In short, being a woman in Amsterdam is a liberating experience.