

What Happens When Empowerment Becomes Visible?

Women, Skateboarding, and the Politics of Gendered Space in Greece and France

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Abstract

This article examines how empowerment is transformed when it becomes publicly visible within gendered urban environments. Focusing on women's skateboarding communities in Greece and France, it analyzes empowerment as both a process and a state, shaped by socio-cultural context, access to space, institutional structures, and symbolic recognition. Drawing on feminist theory and sociology including the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, and Nancy Fraser the study argues that visibility reconfigures empowerment by altering symbolic capital, legitimacy, and vulnerability.

Through a comparative qualitative methodology, this research demonstrates that visible empowerment produces both expanded recognition and new constraints. Rather than representing the culmination of feminist struggle, visibility marks the beginning of a new phase of negotiation among autonomy, institutionalization, and commodification. The comparison between Greece and France is analytically grounded in their divergent economic histories, institutional capacities, and socio-political frameworks: Greece experienced severe economic disruption following its 2008 financial crisis, while France underwent institutional expansion in skate culture following the 2024 Paris Olympics, creating structurally distinct conditions for empowerment to emerge. The central question is whether and how economic development, cultural context, and institutional environment shape the trajectory of women's empowerment. Analysis draws on data from sociology, anthropology, political science, gender studies, economics, and social inclusion research, using women's skateboarding as a

case study to illustrate how religion, culture, and capital interact with empowerment movements.

Research Questions

This paper is organized around three interconnected questions. The first concerns structure: to what extent do a country's level of economic development and institutional environment shape the conditions under which women's empowerment emerges and becomes visible? The second concerns appropriation: how do brands and commercial actors mobilize empowerment as a strategy, and does this engagement strengthen or ultimately constrain the movements it claims to support? The third concerns method: what makes skateboarding a particularly revealing site for examining the relationship between gender, power, and the politics of public space?

These questions are not independent. The structural conditions of a given context shape how vulnerable empowerment movements are to commercial capture, and skateboarding is the empirical terrain on which both dynamics become legible.

1. Introduction

Empowerment is frequently celebrated as a marker of social progress. Yet its conceptual complexity is often underestimated. The term originally emerged in the 19th century to describe power conferred by an authority : legal, religious, or institutional. In this early usage, empowerment was granted, not claimed.

Empowerment combines two key dimensions: power, its conceptual root, and the learning process required to acquire, exercise, and sustain it. It therefore refers simultaneously to a state being empowered and to a process becoming empowered. This duality is crucial: empowerment cannot be reduced to an outcome. It is inherently dynamic and relational, unfolding across individual, collective, social, and political dimensions.

The theoretical foundation for understanding empowerment rests on debates about the nature of power itself. Steven Lukes, in *Power: A Radical View* (1974), argues that power operates not only through observable conflict and decision-making, but also through the shaping of preferences and desires, such that a person's wants "may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests." This third dimension of power is particularly significant

for empowerment theory, as it explains how subordination can be internalized and rendered invisible. Michel Foucault, in *The Subject and Power* (1982) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), offers a complementary but distinct perspective, arguing that subjectivities are produced within power relations rather than existing prior to them, and that power "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth." Together, these frameworks inform feminist approaches to empowerment by demonstrating that power is neither static nor simply possessed by one party over another, but operates across multiple levels, from the shaping of individual desires to the discursive production of subjectivity itself.

These theoretical debates extend beyond academia. In the United States, they were central to the Black Power movement, which articulated demands for recognition through political representation and autonomous economic development. Within this context, empowerment becomes inseparable from broader struggles over recognition, redistribution, and self-determination. In its more radical formulations, empowerment is understood as a process of both individual and collective emancipation aimed at transformative social change not merely access or participation, but the reconfiguration of power relations themselves.

The adoption of empowerment discourse in France reflects a broader response to hierarchical institutional structures and historically closed political systems. It emerges within an intellectual and political shift that foregrounds individuals as agents, a moment when subjectivity, identity, and lived experience have become central categories in both social theory and activist practice. This shift is closely associated with the rise of associative movements and community-based initiatives that challenge institutional monopolies over legitimacy and decision-making, moving away from centralized, top-down governance toward more decentralized and participatory forms of social action.

At the same time, this transformation is deeply ambivalent. The integration of empowerment into public policy often involves processes of normalization and institutional embedding that alter its original meaning. While empowerment carries critical and emancipatory potential rooted in collective mobilization, its incorporation into governance frameworks can reorient it toward managerial logics centered on individual responsibility and measurable outcomes. In this configuration, emphasis on agency may coexist with or even obscure persistent structural inequalities, contributing to a subtle depoliticization of social issues.

By the 1980s, the concept underwent significant reconfiguration within feminist and grassroots movements in the United States and South Asia. Empowerment came to designate

a bottom-up process involving the development of critical consciousness, agency, and collective capacity. This redefinition draws on Simone de Beauvoir's exposure of the social construction of gender, and was expanded by subsequent feminist waves linking individual experience to broader systems of power. Empowerment, therefore, cannot be reduced to psychological confidence or individual success: it is structurally embedded, operating within and through social norms, institutional arrangements, and material inequalities.

Skateboarding provides a particularly relevant empirical and analytical site for examining these dynamics. Historically, it has been culturally coded as a male-dominated practice, rooted in urban youth culture and associated with risk-taking, rebellion, and the appropriation of public space. Despite its countercultural ethos, skateboarding has reproduced gender hierarchies: media representation, sponsorship structures, and spatial practices have been largely centered on male participants. Women have always been present, yet their participation has been marginalized, underrepresented, or rendered invisible within dominant narratives.

In recent years, this configuration has undergone significant transformation. The increasing visibility of women in skateboarding through social media, international competitions, grassroots initiatives, and the Olympic Games has reconfigured the field, challenging entrenched gender norms while expanding the cultural and symbolic boundaries of the practice.

This thesis is structured around a central question: What happens when empowerment becomes visible? When empowerment is embodied, spatialized, and mediatized, it enters systems of symbolic exchange. It gains legitimacy but also becomes subject to evaluation, appropriation, normalization, and resistance. While increased visibility may foster inclusion and reshape skate spaces, it does not necessarily translate into structural equality. Visibility transforms empowerment from an internal or collective process into a publicly mediated phenomenon, reconfiguring how power is recognized, negotiated, and potentially commodified.

The choice of Greece and France as comparative cases is analytically significant. In Greece, approximately 80% of the population identifies with Orthodox Christianity, and the country has experienced profound economic disruption following its 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Unemployment declined from nearly 25% in January 2016 to 7.5% by December 2025, but the persistence of precarity continues to structure everyday life. In

contrast, France presents a largely secular context historically Catholic, with Islam as a significant minority and a more institutionalized state infrastructure. France did not experience a crisis of comparable magnitude, resulting in different institutional capacities, levels of public investment, and structures of support. These divergences create distinct conditions under which empowerment processes emerge, develop, and become visible.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gender as Social Construction and Performativity

From a semiotic perspective, gender can be understood as a discursive construction produced through systems of meaning, media representations, and social practices. As Simone de Beauvoir argued, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”: gender is not a biological destiny but a socially produced positioning shaped by norms, institutions, and everyday practices. Building on de Beauvoir while also critically departing from her, Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” For Butler, there is no prior gendered self that these acts express; rather, “the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body,” constituting “the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” Because gender identity has no essential foundation, “the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.”

Skateboarding, historically associated with aggression, risk-taking, and the occupation of urban space, has been coded as masculine. When women skateboard publicly, they disrupt these normative gender performances, exposing the instability and constructed nature of gender. Visibility amplifies this disruption, making gender norms more publicly negotiable and contested. Public spaces remain deeply gendered environments where women frequently experience surveillance, harassment, or doubt regarding their legitimacy. Feminist geography emphasizes that empowerment involves not only representation but the material and symbolic claiming of physical space; space itself is a site of power relations, not a neutral backdrop.

2.2 Field, Capital, and Symbolic Power

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields and capital clarifies how skateboarding operates as a structured social field in which actors compete for different forms of capital: economic capital (sponsorship and material resources), cultural capital (technical knowledge and subcultural fluency), social capital (networks and relationships), and symbolic capital

(recognition and legitimacy). Women entering skateboarding must accumulate multiple forms of capital to gain recognition, but symbolic capital is particularly unstable for marginalized groups, however, as legitimacy must be continuously demonstrated through visibility and performance. Skateboarding is therefore a space where legitimacy is constantly negotiated rather than fixed, and where visibility simultaneously produces recognition and intensified evaluation.

2.3 Recognition and Redistribution

Nancy Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution adds an essential analytical layer. Recognition refers to cultural and symbolic inclusion; redistribution concerns material equality and access to resources. Empowerment requires both dimensions to be fully realized. Recognition without redistribution risks producing superficial inclusion, while redistribution without recognition leaves cultural hierarchies intact. Women's skateboarding illustrates this tension clearly: increased visibility may enhance recognition without guaranteeing access to funding, infrastructure, or institutional power. This tension between recognition and redistribution constitutes the central structural contradiction underlying contemporary empowerment in skateboarding culture.

Contemporary democratic theory, particularly participatory and deliberative approaches, further enriches this framework. In contrast to liberal aggregative models that assume equal participation, participatory approaches create conditions for women's increased representation in decision-making, while deliberative theories emphasize that preferences are shaped and can be transformed through public discussion. Women's empowerment thus becomes both a democratic objective and an indicator of the inclusiveness of contemporary political systems.

The politics of anxiety further illuminates the structural stakes. Research has shown that negative emotions such as fear, worry, and anxiety affect everyday life in gendered ways. Feminist researchers have argued in particular that women's fear of violence and crime functions as a mechanism of social control, keeping women from achieving political and economic equality. Vulnerability, as Hollander demonstrates, is deeply associated with gender and operates as a key mechanism maintaining women in subordinated positions not only in private life but in public space and political participation.

3. Historical Marginalization and the Politics of Visibility in Skateboarding

The historical marginalization of women in skateboarding must be understood as the product of a long-standing configuration of skate culture as a gendered space, structured around masculine norms of risk, territoriality, visibility, and control over public environments. From its early development, skateboarding emerged as a practice centered on occupying and redefining urban space, where young men asserted presence, skill, and legitimacy through repeated performance in streets and skateparks. Despite its countercultural framing, this culture reproduced familiar gender hierarchies: skate spaces became environments where male dominance was normalized, and where legitimacy was continuously negotiated through visibility, technical ability, and peer recognition.

Women were not absent from this history, but their presence remained largely unrecognized, marginalized, or framed as exceptional. Entering these environments frequently meant confronting doubt, intimidation, or disbelief regarding their competence, and navigating implicit expectations about femininity in public space. Skateboarding thus functioned not only as a sport or subculture but as a gendered field in which access to space, recognition, and belonging was unevenly distributed.

This marginalization was reinforced structurally through the organization of skateboarding media, sponsorship, and professional competition. Male skaters dominated magazines, video productions, and early industry narratives, establishing a symbolic monopoly over what skateboarding represented and who it was for. Sponsorship opportunities and professional pathways overwhelmingly prioritized men, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which visibility generated further visibility. Women's participation, when acknowledged, was treated as peripheral or novel rather than integral. As a result, empowerment among women skateboarders remained largely invisible, confined to informal networks, local communities, and isolated individual trajectories socially real but institutionally unrecognized.

The question of space is central to this dynamic. Skateboarding has always been tied to the appropriation of public environments, yet public space itself is not neutral. Some bodies are immediately recognized as legitimate occupants; others must actively claim their place. For women, entering skate spaces involves negotiating not only physical obstacles but also social expectations, surveillance, and judgment. The skatepark, the street, or any urban spot

becomes both a site of practice and a site of contestation where presence must be justified and maintained.

Digital media has significantly accelerated recent transformation. In earlier periods, representation was controlled by a limited number of gatekeepers : skate magazines, video producers, and sponsors. Today, social media platforms allow skateboarders to produce and share their own content, bypassing traditional validation structures. Women skaters can document their progress, showcase their skills, and build global audiences without relying on industry approval. This democratization of visibility enables the formation of transnational communities built around encouragement, representation, and solidarity, while amplifying marginalized voices including queer skaters and those from non-Western contexts.

However, increased visibility introduces new tensions. Token inclusion remains a persistent issue: companies and media sometimes feature a limited number of women to signal diversity without implementing deeper structural change. Representation can become symbolic rather than substantive, masking ongoing inequalities in access, resources, and decision-making. Women who gain recognition are often expected to represent more than themselves, carrying the weight of broader gender expectations. Visibility thus operates as both an opportunity and a constraint, enabling recognition while intensifying scrutiny.

Intersectional inequalities further complicate the relationship between visibility and empowerment. Access to skateboarding is shaped by socioeconomic conditions, geographic location, race, and broader social factors. Not all women benefit equally from increased visibility: some remain excluded due to lack of infrastructure, financial resources, or safe environments. Representation also tends to favor certain profiles, often privileging western or commercially marketable athletes.

Ultimately, the transition from historical marginalization to increased visibility represents a profound but incomplete transformation. The central challenge is not only to make women visible within skateboarding, but to translate that visibility into sustained structural inclusion ensuring that empowerment is embedded within the material and institutional organization of skate culture rather than remaining primarily symbolic.

4. Act I Greece: Claiming Space

4.1 Gendered Public Space Under Structural Constraint

To understand women's empowerment through skateboarding in Greece, it is necessary to begin not with skateboarding but with the street. Greek public space is not a neutral environment. It is shaped by overlapping structures of economic precarity, cultural conservatism, and religious normativity that together produce a social atmosphere in which women's visibility in non-traditional practices remains socially negotiated, monitored, and frequently contested.

The financial crisis that began in 2008 did not simply reshape economic indicators. It produced measurable transformations in social attitudes, institutional trust, and value systems that persist today. Empirical studies document a marked decline in institutional trust alongside rising polarization and a shift toward more conservative, certainty-seeking values under prolonged economic threat. Psychological research corroborates this: sustained uncertainty reduces openness, reinforces rigid belief structures, and fosters suspicion toward unfamiliar social configurations. In a society where approximately 80% of the population identifies with Orthodox Christianity and where gender norms remain deeply embedded in everyday spatial practices, these shifts contribute to a public sphere in which non-conforming femininity is subject to heightened scrutiny.

This context shapes the conditions under which women enter skate spaces. In Athens, where skateboarding has developed largely without institutional support, the practice is concentrated in urban spots: Monastiraki Square, around Omonia, dimotiko teatro, the marble expanses around the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre, and various informal street spots across Kallithea, Exarchia and Kypseli. These are environments shaped by male presence, informal territorial codes, and the implicit expectation that women who appear are spectators rather than participants. For a woman to drop into a bowl or land a trick in these spaces is not simply a physical act. It is a social one, requiring the continuous negotiation of legitimacy in an environment not designed to offer it.

Fear and perceived vulnerability function as mechanisms of informal social control in this context. Feminist research has demonstrated that women's fear of exposure and harassment in public space operates as a powerful constraint on movement and participation, maintaining gendered inequalities not only in private life but in urban environments and political

participation more broadly. In Greek skate culture, this dynamic is particularly acute: the absence of dedicated women's sessions, the scarcity of female role models within the local scene, and the persistence of gendered intimidation in shared spaces together produce conditions in which many women never begin, and others quietly stop.

4.2 Collective Formation Before Visibility

These constraints produce conditions in which empowerment takes on a specific form: spatial resistance. Women skateboarders do not simply integrate into existing structures; they actively reshape them through presence, repetition, and persistence. Their practices parallel other forms of urban expression such as graffiti and grassroots activism, through which marginalized groups assert visibility within environments that have historically excluded them. Empowerment emerges as primarily relational rather than institutional: through informal networks, small collectives, and shared experiences that transform individual acts of courage into collective forms of belonging.

This dynamic can be understood through the lens of postmodern anthropology and gender studies, which emphasize the constructed and performative nature of gender and sexuality. Women skateboarding in public space constitutes not only participation but a reconfiguration of gender norms through embodied action. Gender is not a static attribute but something enacted through visible practices, bodily performance, and spatial occupation.

From the perspective developed by Emily Beerman in her analysis of 'caring capitalism,' the dynamics observed in Greek skateboarding can be situated within a broader transformation in which markets take on the role of addressing social problems. This perspective helps explain how initiatives supporting women's participation grassroots collectives, skate workshops, NGO-led programs, brand-supported projects can be understood as market-based responses to social inequality. Women skateboarders, marginalized within a male-dominated subculture, parallel other groups structurally excluded from standard forms of economic or social participation. Efforts to include them therefore resemble the logic of social enterprises, aiming to create opportunities for otherwise excluded groups.

However, as Beerman highlights, the increasing emphasis on measurement and standardization leads to indicators that translate social processes into quantifiable metrics of impact. While these indicators make empowerment legible to institutions and funders, they risk reducing it to simplified measurements that fail to capture its lived, relational, and context-specific dimensions. This is particularly significant in Greece, where empowerment

in skateboarding is closely tied to spatial negotiation, informal practices, and everyday forms of resistance that resist quantification.

In this sense, women's empowerment in Greek skateboarding is located at the intersection of grassroots practices and market-based governance. While spatial resistance, community formation, and everyday acts of visibility remain central, they are increasingly embedded within frameworks that seek to define, measure, and monetize empowerment raising critical questions about whether market-based approaches produce structural transformation or primarily repackaging social problems within economic logics.

5. Act II France: Structure and Institutionalization

5.1 Institutional Recognition

If Greece represents empowerment claimed from the margins, France represents empowerment negotiated from within institutions. The difference is not simply one of resources, though resources matter. It is a difference in the relationship between feminist practice and state power, shaped by decades of political history that have produced a distinctly French approach to gender equality: one that is formally ambitious, institutionally embedded, and, in its ambivalence, revealing of both the possibilities and the limits of top-down inclusion.

The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to embedding equality as a public and political objective in France, reflected today in state policies, municipal investment in sports facilities, and national action plans promoting what official documents describe as a culture of equality. The Plan interministériel pour l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes 2023-2027 commits public funding to increasing women's participation in sport, improving access to public space, and combating sexist behavior in recreational environments. This is a structural context that has no equivalent in Greece, and its effects on women's skateboarding are tangible.

In Paris, skateboarding infrastructure is comparatively dense. République and Palais de Tokyo, long ones of the world's most iconic skate spots, has hosted women skaters for decades. The skateparks of Vincennes, La Défense, and the renovated facilities of the banlieues have benefited from municipal investment that reflects, however imperfectly, a broader commitment to making urban sport accessible across demographics. The 2024

Olympics accelerated this investment significantly: new facilities were constructed, existing ones upgraded, and the profile of skateboarding as a legitimate sporting practice was institutionally confirmed in ways that had direct material consequences for women's access and visibility.

Within this environment, collectives such as SkateHer and RollingGirlyGang have emerged as central actors. SkateHer organizes regular women-only sessions across multiple Parisian skateparks, runs beginner workshops, maintains an active social media presence, and has established partnerships with both municipal bodies and commercial sponsors. RollingGirlyGang operates across a wider geographic area, combining skateboarding with broader feminist community-building and explicitly political messaging. These are not informal friendship networks. They are organizations with structures, programs, and public profiles, capable of negotiating with institutions and holding brands accountable in ways that their Greek counterparts currently cannot.

The results are visible. French women skateboarders have greater access to dedicated sessions, organized competitions, and sponsorship opportunities than their peers in most European countries. Athletes such as Carole Bossard have achieved professional recognition within a national ecosystem that provides, if imperfectly, the material conditions for sustained participation. Symbolic capital accumulates more readily here: women skateboarders appear in mainstream sports media, are featured in municipal communications, and are invited to participate in policy discussions about urban sport in ways that would be difficult to imagine in the Greek context.

5.2 Commodification Risk

Yet the institutionalization of empowerment carries its own contradictions, and France illustrates them with particular clarity. When empowerment is embedded within state policy, federation structures, and commercial partnerships, it gains resources and legitimacy but loses something harder to name: the autonomous, grassroots character that gave it political force in the first place.

The risk is normalization. As skateboarding becomes increasingly incorporated into official sport culture, the subcultural values that made it a site of resistance become harder to sustain. The practice that was once defined by its refusal of institutional validation is now funded, regulated, and promoted by institutions. Women who enter this environment benefit from its

resources, but they also inherit its constraints: the expectation of performance, the pressure of representation, and the subtle requirement to embody empowerment in forms that are legible and marketable to the institutions supporting them.

National surveys illustrate the gap between formal equality and lived experience. Some 17% of women in France report limiting their mobility due to safety concerns, compared to only 4% of men. Recent reports on sexism document that discriminatory attitudes remain deeply rooted, with younger women showing particularly acute awareness of ongoing inequalities. Formal institutional commitment to equality does not automatically dissolve the everyday social dynamics that make public space feel unsafe or unwelcoming for women. A woman skating alone at night in a Parisian skatepark operates within a context of formal rights and a context of informal risk simultaneously, and the distance between the two is not easily closed by policy.

Within the commercial sphere, the tensions are sharper still. French women skateboarders with public profiles are frequently approached by brands seeking to associate themselves with empowerment narratives. These partnerships can provide genuine material support: equipment, travel funding, media exposure. But they also introduce expectations about how empowerment should look, sound, and be performed. The skater becomes a brand ambassador before she becomes an athlete, and the terms of that ambassadorship are rarely written by her. Decathlon's recent expansion into skateboarding, marketed heavily around accessibility and inclusion, exemplifies this dynamic: the language of empowerment is present throughout, while the structural decisions about product design, pricing, and community investment remain entirely within the company's control.

SkateHer and RollingGirlyGang are aware of these tensions and navigate them with varying degrees of success. Both organizations have developed explicit policies around brand partnerships, refusing collaborations that require surrendering editorial control over their messaging or that treat their members primarily as marketing assets. This resistance is significant. It represents an attempt to maintain the political content of empowerment within an institutional environment that consistently tends to dissolve it. Whether such resistance is sustainable as these organizations grow, professionalize, and become more deeply integrated into the institutional landscape they currently negotiate from within is a question that neither organization can yet answer.

The contrast with Greece is illuminating precisely because it refuses simple hierarchy. French women skateboarders have more resources, more visibility, and more institutional support than their Greek counterparts. They also face a more sophisticated set of pressures: the normalization of their practice, the commodification of their identity, and the risk that the empowerment they have built becomes, in institutional hands, a symbol of progress rather than its substance. Greece's grassroots model is fragile and difficult to scale. France's institutional model is resourced and visible, but increasingly required to justify itself in terms that institutions and markets find legible. Neither has resolved the central tension this paper has traced throughout: the gap between recognition and redistribution, between being seen and being free.

6. Act III Brand and Marketing Responsibility in Visibility

Commercialization and sponsorship do not simply accompany women's skateboarding from the outside. They actively shape the conditions under which empowerment is experienced, represented, and ultimately constrained. When Vans launched its decades-long support of women's skateboarding through the Vans Girls Combi Pool Classic, or when Nike SB began sponsoring professional women skaters such as Leticia Bufoni, Nora Vasconcellos or Lizzie Armanto, these were not acts of pure generosity. They were strategic decisions made within a competitive market logic in which moral and social values, including gender equality, have become instruments of brand differentiation and audience expansion.

This dynamic is not incidental to contemporary capitalism but structural within it. Corporations seek to control, measure, optimize, and publicly display their engagement with social causes, producing symbolic outputs through which corporate identity is constructed and circulated. Supporting women in a historically male-dominated subculture allows brands to signal progressiveness, reach younger and more diverse demographics, and accumulate reputational capital that translates directly into economic value. Engagement with gender equality becomes part of competitive strategy rather than a purely moral stance.

The ambivalence of this process becomes visible when scrutiny replaces celebration. Thrasher Magazine, long considered the authoritative voice of skate culture, took decades to meaningfully feature women on its covers, and its belated inclusion of women skaters arrived alongside a broader commercial opening of the sport rather than preceding it. This timing is not coincidental. Organizational research consistently shows that diversity and inclusion

initiatives tend to follow market incentives rather than lead them, with companies publicly affirming commitment to equality while leaving underlying power structures largely unchanged. In skateboarding, this pattern manifests through persistent gaps in sponsorship value, shorter contract durations for women athletes, and the near-total exclusion of women from positions of editorial and institutional influence within the industry.

Tokenism operates as the dominant mechanism. The inclusion of one or two women in a brand roster, a campaign, or a competition lineup allows companies to signal inclusivity and deflect critique without implementing structural transformation. Dickies, for instance, has featured women skaters in lifestyle campaigns while the broader architecture of its sponsorship budget has remained weighted toward men. The woman skater becomes a symbol of the brand's progressiveness rather than a beneficiary of genuine material investment.

At the level of representation, commercialization introduces further contradictions. Increased visibility can play a decisive role in encouraging participation, particularly for younger women who lack existing role models within the sport. Yet this visibility is not neutral. It is shaped by market logics that determine which women are made visible, through which narratives, and toward which audiences. Research on sports media consistently shows that women athletes are framed through aesthetic or lifestyle narratives rather than recognition of athletic performance, and skateboarding is no exception. Women are photographed in ways that emphasize style and accessibility over technical difficulty. Their tricks are described in terms of grace rather than complexity. The athlete is present, but her athleticism is quietly subordinated to her marketability.

This process contributes to a broader depoliticization of empowerment. Gender inequality, fundamentally structural and political, is reframed within corporate discourse as a managerial issue addressed through branding strategies, diversity metrics, and communication campaigns. As Laure Bereni demonstrates, diversity initiatives in large firms are primarily justified through their contribution to performance and profit rather than ethical imperatives. What appears as moral commitment is embedded within a logic she describes as the symbiosis between profit and virtue. The political content of empowerment is not simply ignored but actively dissolved, translated into measurable outcomes and return on investment calculations that align diversity with business objectives while distancing the enterprise from feminist critique.

The 2024 Paris Olympics crystallized these tensions at scale. The inclusion of women's skateboarding as an Olympic discipline generated enormous commercial interest, with brands competing to associate themselves with athletes like Maité Steenhoudt and Rayssa Leal. Yet the Olympic frame simultaneously imposed new norms of performance, presentation, and national representation onto a subculture historically defined by its resistance to exactly such institutionalization. The visibility was unprecedented. The terms on which it arrived were not chosen by the women who had built the scene.

None of this is to argue that commercialization is without value. Sponsorship and brand involvement can provide material resources, training access, and legitimacy that are otherwise inaccessible, particularly for women in contexts with limited public infrastructure. The question is not whether brands should be involved, but on whose terms that involvement is negotiated, and whether the women who receive visibility also receive the structural support, decision-making power, and long-term investment that genuine inclusion requires. When they do not, visibility functions as a substitute for redistribution rather than a path toward it.

7. When Empowerment Becomes Visible

From a sociological perspective, developments in women's skateboarding can be understood as a combination of symbolic progress and partial structural change. Increased visibility, representation, and inclusion discourse signal important cultural shifts, yet they do not automatically dismantle the deeper systems that shape access, resources, and power. Structural change would imply durable transformations in who controls space, how opportunities are distributed, and how norms are reproduced whereas much current progress remains uneven and contingent.

The comparison between Greece and France makes this tension concrete. In Greece, empowerment emerges primarily as spatial resistance: a grassroots, community-based process shaped by economic precarity, cultural conservatism, and limited institutional infrastructure. Women skateboarders claim space actively, building collective forms of belonging outside formal structures. Even though this form of empowerment is authentic and politically significant, it remains fragile, localized, and difficult to scale. In France, by contrast, institutional infrastructure provides women with clearer pathways to participation and

professionalization but at the cost of embedding empowerment within market and institutional logics that may dilute its political content.

These two trajectories are not simply better or worse versions of the same process: they are structurally different responses to structurally different conditions and environments. What works in France organized collectives, federation partnerships, brand sponsorship cannot be mechanically transplanted to Greece without significant adaptation. Conversely, the autonomous, grassroots character of Greek women's skateboarding contains forms of political and communal agency that risk being lost in more institutionalized contexts.

The question of visibility is central to both cases. Visibility is not a neutral or inherently progressive force: it reconfigures the conditions of empowerment rather than simply amplifying it. When empowerment becomes visible, it enters systems of evaluation, appropriation, normalization, and potential commodification. Recognition without redistribution remains partial. Symbolic progress without structural change may produce the appearance of transformation while leaving underlying inequalities intact.

Women-only sessions, mentorship programs, and beginner-friendly environments create conditions in which new participants can learn without fear of judgment or harassment and their continued necessity reflects the persistence of structural inequalities. Organizations such as RollingGirlzGang and SkateHer emerge specifically because the dominant mixed-gender scene remains insufficient: existing environments reproduce exclusionary norms, informal hierarchies, and gendered intimidation. Their ultimate goal may be to render themselves obsolete through systemic change, but current conditions suggest that this point remains distant.

8. Conclusion

In examining women's skateboarding in Greece and France, this paper has argued that visibility is not a simple marker of empowerment but a contested and politically charged condition. While the increasing presence of women in skate spaces signals real shifts in gender norms, it also exposes the persistence of exclusionary dynamics embedded in urban environments. Skateboarding, as a practice rooted in the appropriation of public space, reveals how gendered power relations are both reproduced and challenged through everyday spatial interactions.

Rather than treating empowerment as an endpoint achieved through participation or representation alone, this analysis has shown that it must be understood as an ongoing negotiation. Women skateboarders do not merely enter pre-existing spaces; they actively reshape them, often in the face of scrutiny, marginalization, or conditional acceptance. In this sense, visibility operates ambivalently: it can open possibilities for recognition and community, while simultaneously reinforcing the boundaries it appears to disrupt.

The comparison between Greece and France makes this ambivalence concrete and allows for partial, situated answers rather than open-ended provocation. In Greece, being seen has produced community and relational belonging, collective forms of spatial resistance built from the ground up in the absence of institutional support. What it has not produced is durable structural change: access to resources, infrastructure, and formal recognition remains limited, and the empowerment that exists is fragile precisely because it depends on continuous individual and collective effort rather than embedded institutional conditions. In France, being seen has produced institutional recognition, professional pathways, and organized collectives capable of negotiating with both the state and commercial actors. What it has introduced in return is the risk of normalization, the gradual absorption of empowerment into market and institutional logics that preserve its language while evacuating its political content. These are not simply different speeds along the same road. They are structurally distinct trajectories, shaped by divergent histories, and neither is complete.

Something has genuinely changed. The normative illegitimacy of excluding women from skate spaces is harder to sustain publicly than it was twenty years ago. Grassroots collectives, social media visibility, Olympic inclusion, and organized feminist skateboarding networks have shifted the terms of what is culturally sayable and spatially permissible. That is not nothing. But what has not changed is the distribution of resources, decision-making power, and structural access. Sponsorship budgets remain weighted toward men. Women are made visible on terms largely set by institutions and brands rather than by themselves. The mechanisms that amplify empowerment, including commercial partnerships, media platforms, and federation structures, are also the mechanisms most likely to hollow it out, translating a political process into a marketable aesthetic.

This is the central contradiction the paper has traced throughout. Visibility is necessary but insufficient. It is necessary because without it, exclusion remains naturalized and unchallenged, because role models matter, and because collective identity requires some form

of public recognition to sustain itself. It is insufficient because recognition without redistribution leaves the underlying architecture of inequality intact, and because the very institutions that confer recognition have a structural interest in managing rather than transforming the inequalities they claim to address.

The skatepark, the street, the urban spot: these are not neutral backdrops but contested spaces where the terms of belonging are continuously written and rewritten. If women's growing visibility in skateboarding is to mean anything durable, it will not be because brands have discovered the profitability of empowerment, or because federations have added women's categories to their competition schedules. It will be because the women building these communities have insisted, as the collectives examined here have begun to insist, on controlling the terms of their own visibility rather than simply appearing within terms set by others. That is a harder and slower project than representation. It is also the only one that leads somewhere the paper's theoretical framework would recognize as genuine empowerment.

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