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Gender-informed planning and urbanism: practitioner voices, reflective case-studies, and participatory approaches

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Abstract

Over the last six years, there has been an influx of gender-informed planning and urbanism research and resources owing to more public discourse on violence against women and women's safety during and after the global COVID-19 pandemic. While understanding the impacts of gender on planning and urbanism is becoming more commonplace, there is insufficient reflection on the lessons learned, particularly from planning practitioners. This article relies on case study analysis in which practitioners reflect and evaluate their work in gender-informed planning and urbanism and academics frame the topic by extending and contextualising the practitioners' voices. Although these studies operate at different scales – from international, municipal planning to grassroots – the critical role of participatory approaches is a common thread. The article highlights the need to bridge the divide between theory and practice within this topic and recognises the importance of situated knowledge and developing knowledge through action.

Introduction

An influx of valuable research and resources has been released over the past six years on gender informed planning and urbanism. While many were published at an international development level prior (UN Habitat, 2016; Cities Alliance, 2020; World Bank, 2020) there has been a noticeable re-engagement with the topic in the UK (Horwood & Morphet, 2023). Many of the resources, especially in the UK, are connected to the advent of the global pandemic where safety and violence against women became an even larger issue and increasingly discussed in the media.

Although gender informed planning approaches are becoming more commonplace, there is a lack of reflection on lessons learned including challenges, implementations and outcomes; and

therefore, a lack of understanding on their interconnection (Reeves, 2023). Horwood and Morphet (2023) note that, specifically in the UK, approaches range from comprehensive to performative. Without reflection and evaluation, those performative examples can lead to adverse consequences and repetition of exclusionary practice that further embeds gender inequality. Reflection is valued as a way of learning from doing in planning (Shon, 1983). In this article, practitioners have been given the space to reflect on recently completed projects at a range of scales, to start to understand feminist urbanism in practice.

The lack of reflective practice also has its roots in the long-standing lack of cohesive education and learning on gender in planning both within accredited programs as well as continuing education for those already working in the planning profession (Greed, 1996; Loevinger Rahder & O'Neill, 1998; Rorke-Wickins & Wilison, 2009). The limited provision is potentially indicative of the majority of contemporary gender initiatives that are still quite focused on women's safety (Horwood & Morphet, 2023) or women's descriptive representation in the profession (Horwood et al., 2022) rather than the broader systems of gender inequality in cities. The focus on descriptive representation, on the other hand, whilst important, often forgets the need for substantive action which can be undertaken by men or women (Greed, 1993). Specifically, through description of the three case studies in this article, we identify the importance of realizing gender informed planning and addressing systemic gender inequality by looking more broadly than safety and descriptive representation.

Through providing space for practitioners, the aim is to facilitate learning for everyone. Despite the case study authors all identifying as women, there is an important need for people of all genders to be the leaders and implementers of this work.

Conceptual Framework

The framework is based upon three interconnected perspectives: praxis, situated knowledge, and a multi-scalar understanding of feminist planning and urbanism. Praxis highlights the link between theory, practice, and reflection. Situated knowledge values practitioners' lived experiences, which are important because planning directly impacts daily life. A focus on scale recognises that the three examples operate at different levels of governance, influencing gender-informed planning in terms of content and approach. Together, these perspectives shape how practitioners' accounts are understood.

Praxis

Planning is a practice-oriented discipline where knowledge develops through action (Friedman, 2011). Praxis aligns well with planning because it treats theory and practice as an interdependent relationship in which each reshapes the other (Stanley, 1990; Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG, 1984) while also addressing the persistent problem of the undervaluation of practical knowledge. Although practitioners often struggle to articulate their knowledge because of this stigma (Shon, 1991), in a praxis approach knowledge is generated through doing, and practitioners are recognised as producers of knowledge where lived experience forms a legitimate basis for understanding (Stanley, 1990; hooks, 1994). Engagement between theory and practice is important because it improves outcomes and strengthens the usefulness of theory (Hurley et al., 2017; Denoon-Stevens et al., 2022). Practitioner experience exposes the limits of existing theories and supports the development of new ones (Hoch, 2011; Tasan-Kok et al., 2016). Therefore, Praxis helps explain how ideas in feminist urbanism develop through practitioners' day-to-day work.

Situated knowledge

Gender-informed planning is understood and practised in different contexts. Situated knowledge recognises that knowledge is shaped by people's positionality, lived experience, power relations, and broader context. However, knowledge is neither neutral nor universal (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1994). In feminist planning and urbanism, it recognises that decisions and interpretations stem from various contexts, including institutions and scales. It also emphasises how practitioners influence what they observe, prioritise, and implement. By including situated knowledge, practitioners' reflections are further validated as credible insights.

Multi-scalar

Feminist planning and urbanism operates across various scales, from international initiatives to municipal planning and grassroots activities. A recent encyclopaedia chapter on the topic (Dutton et al., 2021) emphasises that scale influences what is feasible and how outcomes differ depending on whether efforts are undertaken at the global, city, or neighbourhood level. The three practitioner reflections clearly demonstrate this through each case study description: Arup's work functions at an international level, focusing on technical frameworks; the LLDC

case reflects municipal policy and governance processes; and Kolkata's gender walks are rooted in everyday experiences at the community level. Each scale produces different types of gender insights, shaped by institutional structures, available resources, and local conditions, emphasising that gendered practices are not uniform but emerge from specific contexts. Insights gained at one scale cannot and should not, automatically be transferred to another; instead, they reflect situated forms of knowledge shaped by governance levels, organisational settings, and individual experiences.

Together, praxis, situated knowledge, and scale form the conceptual basis for interpreting the practitioners' accounts. These perspectives explain why gender-informed planning varies across contexts and how practitioners' actions, experiences, and positions influence the ways feminist planning and urbanism manifests in these three examples.

Methodology

The methodology centers on practitioners' experiences and reflections as key insights. It emphasizes linking theory and practice, amplifying practitioners' voices, and using reflective practice to understand professional knowledge, while acknowledging the authors own positionality as academics. Together, these elements offer a practice-oriented approach to examining gender-informed planning in real-world settings and apply them to the three selected case studies.

Bridging theory and practice

The gap between theory and practice, between academics and practitioners, is well documented in planning (Kuzmann & Koll-Schretzenmayr, 2015; Goodman et al., 2017; Denoon-Stevens et al., 2022; Durning, 2004; Schon, 1983). Much of this stems from academic institutions' privileging abstract knowledge over practical reasoning, thereby reinforcing the divide (Schon, 1983). Despite this, several authors highlight the desire for knowledge exchange and collaboration and its potential opportunities (Horwood et al., 2022; Hurley et al. 2017; Stead, 2016). The divide between research and practice highlights the need for methodological approaches that seek to bridge the two (Shon, 1983).

For gender-informed planning in particular, gender is operationalised through everyday processes, design choices, and institutional constraints, meaning that practice generates forms of situated knowledge that theory alone cannot reveal. In this context, practitioner-authored accounts are an appropriate and essential source of data. These accounts offer insights into how gender concepts are interpreted, adapted, and enacted within different contexts, organisations and governance structures. Positioning the article within this bridging approach thus aligns with the methodology, aiming to understand how feminist planning and urbanist principles transition from theory to practice and how practitioners influence that translation through their expertise and reflection.

Giving space for the practitioner voice

Practitioners' voices are valued as a form of knowledge, as they possess valuable tacit knowledge, distinct from but comparable to academic insights (Schon, 1983). Hurley et al. (2017) consider that academics should make concerted efforts to include practitioners in their research (Hurley et al., 2017); with Denoon-Stevens et al. (2022) stating that academics need to explain how theory is relevant and valuable in practice. The arguments for engagement across the sectoral divide are strengthened by perceptions of academics' detachment from practice (Durning, 2004; Schon, 1991). Schon (1991) notes that practitioners require a structured space for reflection and considers practitioners' reflections to be empirical material, thereby acknowledging their distinct epistemic contribution as a legitimate source of insight.

Some academics have provided space for practitioners to write in scholarly work (Tasan-Kok, 2016; Horwood et al., 2022). However, they are firm in stating that they are not reflecting on their work in this writing (Tasan Kok, 2016). Horwood et al. (2022), on the other hand, provides a collection of reflections by planning professionals engaged in applied research on women and planning. This approach makes the case for including practitioners' reflection, as it is necessary if they are to be involved in theory making (Denoon-Stevens et al., 2022)

The three practitioners in this article have been given space to reflect. Their narratives illustrate how gender-informed planning was interpreted, adapted, and implemented in particular contexts. Practitioner reflections are presented in their own words to ensure that practical expertise and localised insights that influence gender-informed planning remain central in the analysis, rather than being overshadowed by an academic perspective.

Academics Positionality

Jenna Dutton and Charlotte Morphet identify as being at the intersection of academia and practice. Both are experienced in both scholarly activity and planning practice. We recognise our position as leaders within the gender-informed planning arena as researchers and chairs of grassroots organisations focused on gender equity and broader inclusion in practice and in the profession.

We understand the importance of recognising our power across this spectrum, but specifically as academics when collaborating with practitioners. We acknowledge the potential for academic authority to overshadow practitioners' perspectives, in particular through editorial control. To address this, we aim to synthesise, analyse, and situate practitioners' work within broader debates in both theory and practice, whilst ensuring minimal editorial intervention and focus on creating space for the practitioner's unique voices.

We both have extensive experience in this area of research but consider our positions bridging practice and academia give us a unique understanding of the practical realities, constraints, and decision-making processes that shape planning work, and how this relates to theory.

The methodological choices outlined above position practitioners' accounts as the primary source of insight, with our analysis used to extend rather than override their interpretations. Bringing together feminist praxis, reflective practice, and attention to scale creates an approach grounded in lived experience while still able to identify wider patterns across broader contexts. Together, these elements offer a clear basis for understanding how feminist planning and urbanism and gender informed planning are implemented and how practitioners make sense of the work.

Methods

The three practitioners' reflections are the primary data. Practitioners who had presented at the Women and Planning Conference 2024 and the Commonwealth Women in Planning Network Gender Inclusion in Urban Planning webinar series were invited to contribute short reflective accounts of feminist planning and urbanism projects from practice. Contributors represent three different scales of planning: international, municipal, and grassroots. Their accounts document

practice from their own standpoint, drawing on project documentation, lived experience, and professional judgement.

Academic contributions focused on curating, organising, and synthesising the practitioner accounts. Where there is interpretation, it is strictly focused on drawing out themes, tensions, and patterns that the practitioners may not explicitly articulate, but without overriding their voice or reframing their experiences. The aim is to contextualise the reflections within existing knowledge and ongoing trends in feminist urbanism, ensuring that their practitioners' standpoint remains central.

To support the practitioners, the academics provided prompts on word count, critical engagement, and clarity about decision-making. Engagement with academic literature, while encouraged, was not forced, recognising that practitioners often face barriers through paywalled journals. Together, the three reflective accounts provide situated, practice-led insights into how gender-informed planning is implemented at different scales. They offer a basis for understanding the practical conditions, constraints, and forms of innovation that emerge across the cases, without overriding the practitioners' standpoint or voice.

Case studies

Arup: Cities Alive- Designing cities that work for women

Dr Sara Candiracci is an Associate Director at Arup and the Global Business Leader for Social Value. She specialises in inclusive and gender-responsive cities, focusing on how urban planning, design, and governance can better serve women, children, and other often overlooked groups. Sara led Arup's "Cities Alive: Designing Cities that Work for Women" publication, the Gender-Responsive Nature-Based Solutions Toolkit and the Her4Climate toolkit, which support cities and practitioners to integrate gender equality and climate resilience in projects.

Kim Power is an Associate Town Planner at Arup, and Inclusive Cities Lead for the UK. Her specialism is in intersectional gender-informed placemaking and is passionate about how inclusive placemaking can support socio-economic growth of communities. She was the instigator and Project Manager for the research publication Designing cities that work for Women.

In 2022, Arup published 'Cities Alive – Designing Cities that Work for Women', with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the University of Liverpool. The report set out with a clear aim to understand the lived experiences of women across different age groups and backgrounds, across cities worldwide, identifying challenges, opportunities and practical solutions for safer, more inclusive urban environments.

To ensure academic rigor and ethical integrity, Arup partnered with the University of Liverpool, leveraging its expertise in complex stakeholder engagement and ethical research practices. Collaboration with UNDP was sought to provide global scope and knowledge on urban inclusion. Both partnerships stemmed from existing relationships and were formalised through internal discussions. A nine-member project team, managed by Arup and spanning the UK, India, Mongolia, India and the US, brought together intersectionality through the participation of men and women from the three organisations. Managing a globally distributed team posed logistical challenges, particularly in managing time zone differences which required flexible working arrangements. However, this diversity enriched the project by bringing varied perspectives and cross-cultural insights.

Arup has a long history of research on inclusive placemaking, including work on child-friendly cities, ageing populations, and queering public spaces. These studies were funded by Arup University, which reinvests profits into global research and innovation. The 'Designing cities that work for women' project emerged in response to global debates on women's safety in public spaces following the 2021 murder of Sarah Everard. It also built on Arup's Inclusive Cities themed research portfolio as gender was a pre-existing gap. Internal discussions among Arup planners shaped the project's aims and led to a successful funding application to Arup University. The resulting report, now freely available online, was initially shaped through insights from these early consultations.

The report followed a phased process of desk research and global stakeholder consultations, guided by two core questions: What challenges and opportunities do women face in cities worldwide? And what strategies and spatial interventions can make urban environments safer, more inclusive, and equitable for women? A global literature review established the evidence base and defined the project scope, drawing on over 70 sources including academic articles,

reports, and blogs. Four recurring themes emerged, and the review concluded when no new findings appeared. A noted limitation was that only English-language sources were included.

The literature review informed the identification of 64 case studies from different socio-economic and global urban contexts. These identified best practices and served as inspiration to illustrate how the strategies identified in the report could be implemented in practice. Additional insights were derived from a global survey of 770 respondents, expert interviews, and co-creation workshops with diverse women from 20 countries across six continents. Participation was self-selecting, but widely advertised through Arup, the UNDP and University of Liverpool, to try and ensure as broad a participation as possible. For interviews, individuals were identified through the literature review process as prominent professionals in their fields. An initial interview stakeholder list was created and then ranked based on relevance to the emerging research themes. Activities were both conducted in English presenting a linguistic limitation, which may have restricted participation. For example, the global survey yielded a low response rate, limiting firsthand insights on lived experiences. To address this gap, the team conducted further targeted primary and secondary research, which extended the duration of this project phase. This ensured the research was an iterative process and upon reflection although this was a time-consuming process, it provided more comprehensive results. Ethical considerations were also paramount, with rigorous protocols required by the Arup University funding guiding the study. This was underpinned by principles designed to protect participants well-being and prevent psychological harm.

To further ensure the research had global relevance Arup appointed 10 urban planning and inclusion experts as Global Champions and formed a Technical Review Committee comprising senior representatives from Arup, UNDP, the University of Liverpool and an independent collaborator. Both groups were intersectionally diverse, and included specialists in town planning, transport planning, architecture and global development, providing critical feedback and global perspectives. The Technical Review Committee provided valuable insight, and in hindsight the project would have benefitted further from engaging them at an earlier stage.

Drawing on research, consultations and global case studies, the report outlines physical, social and institutional barriers women face in urban settings. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, it identified four key intervention areas: health and wellbeing, safety and security, justice and equity, and enrichment and fulfilment. It advocates for a gender-responsive

approach to planning and design, with actionable recommendations for city authorities, planners, developers, and community groups. The gender-responsive approach was selected as the research showed that the commonly used (and assumed) gender-neutral approach did not prioritise the needs of women and girls, and indeed in many cases contributed to the challenges and barriers they experience in urban spaces. Such an approach is essential for creating cities where all people can live, work and thrive.

The report serves as both a guide and a call to action. For women, it offers recognition and a framework for change; for men and urban decision-makers, an opportunity to listen, reflect, and respond. Male allyship is critical for addressing what is seen as a ‘women’s only’ issue but is indeed a societal issue. Reversing historic gender bias in urban spaces (Dutton et al., 2020) is achievable. The report envisions cities that welcome all women, urging stakeholders to adopt inclusive approaches at every stage of project planning, delivery and monitoring. By integrating women’s needs and increasing their participation in governance and design, cities can become safer, healthier, equitable and more enriching for all.

Since its launch at the UN General Assembly, the report has featured in over 60 global articles, including El Pais and Cities Today, and received coverage in Forbes, Wired and Dezeen. Media engagement generated over 200 mentions and 1.32 million impressions on X. The project team has presented at major events such as UN RE:Think Conference in China, which had an audience of over 1 million, the UK Academy of Urbanism Conference and forums including the Global Parliament of Mayors, MIPIM, UKREiiF, with further events across cities in the UK and Europe. Team members also deliver guest lectures nationally and internationally to future built environment professionals. The report’s uptake underscores its global relevance, and Arup is now applying its recommendations across client projects to embed gender-informed design.

London Legacy Development Corporation: Creating Places that Work for Women and Girls

Marina is a landscape architect and urban planner with 15 years of professional experience. She previously served as the Team Lead for Planning Policy at the LLDC, where she was responsible for preparing and implementing planning policies for the regeneration of the London Olympic site. Marina led LLDC’s research and development of planning frameworks on gender-

transformative urban planning. She has since worked as a consultant expert on gender equality and is currently working with UN-Habitat in Ukraine.

The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) is a unique UK body established by the Mayor of London to manage the former 2012 Olympic Games site with powers similar to a local authority, including statutory planning. In 2021, in response to rising media coverage of violence against women and girls in public spaces, the LLDC Board, under a female Chair, made gender equality in urban development a priority.

*As a planning authority and development organisation, LLDC undertook three years of research engaging over 1,000 women and girls to establish a gender-transformative framework and mainstream it across all organisational structures. This three-year initiative resulted in a comprehensive approach to inform the three main remits of LLDC: urban planning, development process and design, culminating in the publication of a handbook LLDC (2024) *Creating Places that Work for Women and Girls*. The work was done using a participatory and integrated methods as best practice (SDG 11.7 goal), engaging multiple LLDC departments and national and international experts, and was co-created with local women and girls.*

*This method ensured robustness and leveraged best practices while being informed by current global knowledge. Key sources included the World Bank (2020) *Handbook for Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning and Design*, Cities Alliance (2020) *Women-Friendly Urban Planning Toolkit*, UN-HABITAT (2021) *Her City Toolkit*, and ARUP (2022) *Designing Cities for Women*. These sources were chosen as they represent the leading international guidance on gender-transformative urban planning and closely responded to the LLDC area of work. Inspiration was also drawn from other cities such as Umeå, Vienna, and Barcelona (Perez-Tejera et al., 2018; Cosgrave and GLA, 2022, 71). Vienna has been a pioneer of gender in planning since the early 1990's with the first noted use of gender mainstreaming in planning and consideration of the everyday experience of women through inclusive consultation and engagement (Palit, 2020). Umeå has similarly long worked to create a gender-equal city with attention given to women's fear of violence due to a specific repeat offender at the turn of the century and a focus on 'fixing the image of Umeå' (Sandberg and Ronnblom, 2016). Barcelona also has a focus on urban planning with a gendered perspective as they developed this as a new government measure in 2017 to put daily life and an inclusive approach at the heart of its policies to respond the needs of all residents (C40 Cities, 2020). Critically, they noted that urban planning with a gendered*

perspective focuses on all people and that local people are the experts and consulted to build a bottom-up collective (C40 Cities, 2024). All three of these cities were important to consider in LLDC's work as they developed gender-informed planning approaches which prioritize inclusive participatory approaches.

Drawing on these key sources and city examples, LLDC also worked with ARUP, its planning consultant, which was then one of the few organisations in the UK taking a comprehensive approach to gender equality in the built environment, extending beyond a focus on women's safety. To oversee the project, LLDC established a cross-departmental Women and Girls Project Board, facilitating collaboration across departments such as planning, development, design and procurement. This approach was essential as gender inequality is a systemic issue that cannot be resolved through planning alone. Without this alignment, efforts in one area are easily undermined by inconsistencies elsewhere. The board gathered data, identified key issues, directed research, and ensured delivery while building internal and external capacity.

The processes needed to be adapted to the local context, for the English planning system, and informed by the local voices of women and girls, LLDC conducted an evidence-gathering consultation in late 2021, engaging over 500 women and girls. To gather area-wide data, LLDC launched an online survey using a platform that hosted the UN Women UK Safe Spaces Now campaign. The survey, lightly adapted for the LLDC context, included expert-designed questions on women's and girls' perceptions of safety in public spaces.

As responses came in, real-time demographic monitoring showed clear gaps, with groups such as older women, young women and women from Global Majority backgrounds participating in much lower numbers. This reflected broader challenges around digital exclusion, varying levels of trust in institutional surveys, and the personal nature of discussing experiences and perceptions of safety online. It became evident that the online tool alone was not sufficient to reach the full diversity, and that many required more relational and culturally sensitive forms of engagement. In response, LLDC shifted to targeted outreach through use of trusted community centres, creating safe, familiar and comfortable environments where participants could speak openly. Paying participants helped to remove practical barriers to taking part, while vouchers were offered as an alternative for those who preferred not to receive direct payments.

All this work resulted in the Safety of Women and Girls Consultation Report (LLDC & Arup, 2022). The report highlights factors such as public lighting, land use, security measures, and surveillance and sets an Action Plan of targeted interventions that includes public objectives and commitments for LLDC. The data was also used to establish a clear baseline against which improvements would be measured. The Action Plan also committed to developing a technical guide for authorities, developers, and designers. This aimed to mainstream gender-informed principles within existing planning processes, including setting planning policies, infrastructure planning, and design considerations to support the implementation of gender-equality objectives.

Given the lack of contemporary UK examples, a multifaceted and innovative approach was adopted to develop the guidance. This involved piloting methods in real-world settings and adapting them based on feedback from women, girls, and technical stakeholders including neighbouring boroughs, police, landowners, and developers. The collaborative engagement also led to the establishment of an external Stakeholder Group and the signing of the Women's Safety Charter (Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, 2023). The group has been meeting on a regular basis, and their collaboration has resulted in signing a mutual action plan demonstrating buy-ins and shared responsibility for and commitment to delivering change.

Engagement with women and girls was central to defining these processes due to their persistent under-representation in urban planning and design. The corresponding failure to reflect their needs in the built environment stems from the systematic exclusion of their lived experiences. This experiential knowledge is rarely captured or integrated into mainstream planning practice, resulting in data gaps that reinforce gender-biases.

Acknowledging that traditional consultation methods often fail due to systemic barriers such as time poverty, the gender pay gap, and caregiving responsibilities (LLDC, 2024, p.21), as well as a lack of reference points for articulating spatial needs, LLDC refined its engagement strategies through a reiterative process of testing on real-world projects. One such example was the design of a play space for teenagers at Waterden Green, where LLDC appointed local young women and teenage girls as co-clients rather than engagement participants, fundamentally shifting power dynamics (LLDC, 2024, 83). This approach gave them real influence in defining priorities, shaping the design brief, and selecting the design team. Insights from these engagements shaped the gender-informed principles, highlighting the importance of appointing

a gender champion, providing financial compensation, and using appropriate participatory engagement methods such as co-clienting and exploratory walks.

The Practice of Gender Community Walks as a means of Reimagining Cities from a Feminist Perspective – Case of Kolkata

Srestha Chatterjee is an independent researcher based in Kolkata, India who is interested in the aspect of gendered understanding of public spaces while navigating the aspect of ‘ungendering’ them through community engagement and research. She is a master’s graduate in Sociology but loves the field of Feminist Geography and interdisciplinary studying of cities. She intends to navigate throughout Indian cities at a micro scale to not only reimagine the built environment from a decolonial feminist lens but also look at the possibility of constructing feminist cities in India. She conducts Gender Community Walks and is currently self-employed under an organization which she intends to establish, named Urban Re- Visioning.

The following case study is based upon local grassroots efforts of an independent researcher who is also a local community member in Kolkata, India. This project originally started while the researcher was studying urban governance and policy and led to the creation of a more engaged community through exploratory walks and a creative paradigm. Immense amount of inspiration was also taken from the field of feminist geography and participatory placemaking practices – this includes examples of Community Design Agency in Mumbai (Community Design Agency, 2025), Social Design Collaborative in Delhi (Social Design Collaborative, 2020), Mahila Housing Trust in Ahmedabad (Jhabvala & Brahmabhatt, 2022) to name a few. The aim of the gendered walks is to establish an ‘ungendered’ built environment through increased participation from a diversity of community members. The walks were started as an open call to come together and know the city once again, to shape a ‘New’ Kolkata. So far it has been an iterative process and has included various participatory tools such as infrastructure audit, photo stories, and body mapping.

These walks began with this simple idea of auditing spaces through an intersectional gendered lens to realize how to assure accessibility, affordability and approachability for everyone within a city, specifically the historically sidelined communities. Co-creating cities with help of all citizens can seem daunting but if we come together and put theory to practice, such as by applying the concept of Verstehen to put ourselves in the shoes of others, cities might start looking different. This idea surfaced while facilitating a participatory workshop on designing safe and sustainable

play spaces for girls. An infrastructural audit with the participants as a casual walk through the neighborhood created a chance to slow down and assess the difficulties which a child of any gender might face on the streets. Walking itself creates the opportunity to think slowly, finding common harmony amongst participants and simultaneously stimulating engagement with our senses and the environment (Springgay & Truman, 2019). Taking inspiration from Neera Adarkar's activity of simulation of infrastructures and spaces (Adarkar, 2007), participants intended to re-visualize city spaces while challenging their perception which can be pre-determined by our gender, class, race and ethnicity and related experiences.

While conducting research within a municipal-ward to understand gendered-disparities of using public infrastructure, an interrogation towards respondents' reimagination led to formulating a method to voice the concerns of citizens through an alternate creative medium. This resulted in the idea of using photo-narratives as a means of depicting the everyday 'overlooked' stories (Leon-Quijano, 2019). Photo-stories have been used as a tool by several participants to highlight concerns around walkability, safety and approachability of public spaces. This method showed how pictures can be used as a tool to portray potentially sensitive narratives of experiencing urban infrastructure for diverse sections of the society. A lot of ethical issues were navigated including when and how to approach people which allowed the participants to challenge their positionality while listening to people, reading places and shaping intersectional perspectives. Embodied experiences within public places could convey multi-faceted experiences for men, women and queer individuals. This connects to Escalante and Sweet's work on using expressive art to communicate corporeal experiences within planning practices (Sweet & Escalante, 2014).

Body mapping is also used as a method to perceive the multi-layered gendered experiences through a corporeal-sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009) while challenging the heteropatriarchal urban order. Counter-mapping is another such tool for representing interventions and re-imaginings gathered from the people on the field, inspired from the radical practice of counter-publics by Nancy Fraser (Narayan, 2023) and Linda Peake's idea of creating a grounded praxis of counter-geographies through a feminist lens (Peake, 2020). Using this counter-mapping tool, participants re-visualized a 'New-Kolkata' on a map which is more diverse, gender-inclusive, less judgmental and community driven. Exploring diverse themes while navigating throughout intricate parts of Kolkata collectively inspired the participants to walk through under explored city-crevices while also recognizing the need for acknowledging distinctive everyday lived experience of others. This method of experiencing difficult places and having difficult conversations in our mother-

tongue can create a more positive citizen intervention in active changemaking within cities, while expanding local accountability and harmony. This has the potential to create more of a decolonized city that resists a homogenized, top-down dominant order (Koleth, et.al, 2023).

The goal of the gendered walks and participatory processes is to create policy-level impact through consistent interventions combined with activism and academic intent. An active and tolerant pedagogy bridging academia and policy making is an intended outcome through the three exercises of infrastructure audit, photo stories, and body mapping which manifests into a reflective citizenship by highlighting the interdependency between the 'public' and 'private'. The participation of youth in these exercises has been a major driving force in using creative methods that could foster positive reception from communities regarding sensitive social issues. The youth participants had a more empathetic and grounded range of solutions for placemaking and planning, rooted in sustainability, which emphasizes the need of valuing and prioritizing the inclusion of their voices in framing cities.

As the gendered walks have occurred as an iterative process there are various learnings from the experience so far that would be beneficial for replicating in different local contexts. Our participants have only consisted of students, doctoral researchers, professors and social workers. This has been one of our drawbacks as our platforms where the call for our walks were advertised included spaces that reach to certain audiences, making the whole process limited to those in a place of privilege. The selection of participants is still highly dependent on social media networking which might also limit the reach and diversity of representation and is therefore currently being revised.

These practices highlight the importance of disseminating power within local communities to ensure active reimagination of spaces, vocalizing demands and becoming equipped about sustainably constructing cities (Jhabvala & Brahmhatt, 2020). This research never intends to breach the ethical boundaries of local historical significance, and the association and attachment of people to places. Rather it attempts to use these reflective participatory approaches as part of a responsible research project that focuses on people's user experience of community infrastructure. It does this by working with them to generate temporary to long-term solutions through participatory sessions with grassroots organizations, students or researchers and applying their thoughts into action. Moreover, the intent is to achieve a gendered right to the city

(Fenster, 2005) through a visual, visceral and radical scope of co-creating cities with those who genuinely want a more liveable habitat.

Putting the Reflections in Context: Gender informed public engagement and participatory approaches

Public engagement is critical in planning to ensure communities are adequately considered in decisions that impact them in a short to long term basis. Numerous reports on gender inclusive planning have highlighted that public consultation and engagement is one of the key places to achieve social inclusion and equality in the planning process (RTPI, 2003; ARUP et al., 2022; Cities Alliance, 2022).

In their work on women-friendly urban planning, Cities Alliance define inclusive participatory processes as the: “inclusion of women, girls and sexual and gender minorities of all ages and abilities in planning and designing decision-making processes” (2022). They also add that these participatory approaches help to “combat the gendered imbalances in the built environment that prevent their full social and economic inclusion” (Cities Alliance, 2022). Inclusive and gender informed public participation is important because women are historically not as involved and engaged in planning efforts. To ensure that places are designed for women and girls, they must be engaged in the decision-making and design processes (Edgar, 2024).

In their *Handbook for Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning and Design* (2020), the World Bank includes a menu of seven gender- inclusive engagement activities that will enable project teams to garner community buy-in, gather qualitative and quantitative data, and co-design solutions with project beneficiaries. These include step-up, star diagram, walk audit, day in the life, public space checklist, challenge and solution, and design your own (World Bank, 2002, p.63). While these are useful tools, they are specific activities that could occur in an engagement process to allow for more gender inclusion, rather than considerations of how an existing process is gender inclusive. The Women-Friendly Urban Planning Toolkit from Cities Alliance, while targeted more specifically at the Global South, also provides similar considerations. As an appendix the toolkit they also provide a Checklist for Mainstreaming Gender in Urban Projects based on a Participatory Approach (Cities Alliance, 2022).

The UK has a long legacy in pursuing gender informed planning (Horwood & Morphet, 2023; Morphet & Nisancioglu, 2022; Little, 1994). Greater London Council introduced a range of measures including a Women's Committee in 1981 and The London Women Handbook with a chapter on planning; *Changing Places: positive action on women and planning* (Morphet & Nisancioglu, 2022). In addition, the Royal Town Planning Institute in the UK has produced a range of guidance including Planning Advice Note 12 Planning for Women (RTPI, 1995); the Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit (Greed et al., 2003) and Good Practice Note 7 Gender and Spatial Planning (RTPI & Oxfam, 2007). These all emphasise the importance of participatory processes and provide examples of how gender inclusion could be implemented within the UK planning systems. Good Practice Note 7 was prepared to support planners in meeting a duty to promote gender equality, however, this was superseded by the 2010 Equality Act and the Public Sector Equality Duty which requires public sector organisations to have 'due regard' toward discrimination, harassment, victimisation, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations.

It has been acknowledged that in the UK, despite this legacy and internationally recognised work, there has been little progress (Reeves, 2023; Divine & Biquelet-Lock, 2021). Reeves (2023) reflects that the Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit has been used more outside of the UK than within it. Divine & Biquelet-Lock (2021) reflect that there has potentially been a shift to a broad focus on equalities as set out by the 2010 Equality Act (Little, 1994; Greed et al., 2003 & 2005). Roberts (2022) explains that the lack of progress in the UK is due to a neo-liberalistic approach to planning. She also argues that an important broader contextual dynamic is that neoliberalism as a political philosophy has on face value, adopted some feminist principles; and that this leads many to consider that progress has been made.

In the UK, there has been a re-engagement with gender informed planning (Horwood, 2022; Horwood et al., 2022), as in part demonstrated by the case-study example from the LLDC. This contemporary engagement with gender and planning has been mostly conducted through the prism of safety, which differentiates it from the previous legacy that focused on broader issues of gender equity (Horwood & Morphet, 2023). For the most part, contemporary work has emphasised the importance of participatory approaches. The Mayor of London's 'Safety in Public Space: Women, Girls & Gender Diverse People' (Cosgrave, 2024) discusses participatory approaches including use of focus groups, co-clienting, co-design and global examples. In their 2022 report, ARUP set out the importance of participation being included

from the outset in project briefs, stressing a range of formats to be inclusive (p.117). Starting with participatory methods is also echoed in the West Yorkshire Safer Parks guidance, although it cautions that this may not be possible, as well as stating that approaches should focus specifically on the use of co-design methods to achieve this (West Yorkshire, 2023, 57). The Young Women's Movement (2021, 25) work highlights that while participation undertaken in Glasgow is reported as gender neutral, with no sex disaggregated data, there is no understanding of any impacts of approaches on different genders.

Reflections

The following is a summary of reflections from the two non-case study authors of this article based on reviewing the three case study authors writing and reflections and connecting to broader resources, themes and trends.

Despite efforts increasing globally, research and data show that gender inequality remains a pressing social issue, and the need for gender-informed planning and urbanism is critical (UN Women, 2025). The three selected case studies presented at three different levels of scale provide distinct approaches. However, due to the framework intertwining these three perspectives they provide a multi-scalar understanding of feminist planning and urbanism that can similarly be applicable at various scales and contexts.

Through explanation of the case studies using practitioners' insights rather than external perspectives we emphasized the importance of amplifying professional knowledge to bridge the needed gap of linking theory and practice. We highlighted that gendered practices are not uniform, and contemporary initiatives are still quite focused on women's safety and their descriptive representation rather than systemic issues of gender inequality. However, as part of this method of amplifying a diversity of voices, we also explored the critical role of participatory approaches in achieving inclusive processes and outcomes. All these case studies benefited from the extensive research and existing resources on gender informed planning and urbanism to create their own more locally specific context appropriate approach.

Insights provided from the case study practitioners in their own voices included many critical reflections. While working on the report on Designing Cities for Women (Arup et al., 2022) both authors shared the limitations of English language sources and linguistic limitations in

conducting interviews as well as the importance of extending project phases and using an iterative process to derive more comprehensive results. The reflections from the practitioner lead of the LLDC Handbook (2024) shared the limitations of online surveys and digital exclusion, the importance of relational and culturally sensitive forms of engagement, and the critical decision to provide remuneration to participants to value their time and lived experience. Finally, in their explanation of gendered walks in Kolkata, India, the project founder spoke to the integral role of navigating ethical issues and reflecting on positionality, the need to acknowledge the distinct experience of others by exploring difficult places, and the importance of valuing and prioritising youth voices. While these are only a selection of some of the overall reflections from each case study, they emphasize the importance of practitioner voices and reflections that may not have been derived in writing about their work from an outsider perspective.

It is clear that only by listening to local communities including women and gender diverse individuals can planning truly be equitable, sustainable and reflect the everyday lived experience of everyone in cities. By magnifying these important approaches from the voices of practitioners while collaborating with local communities to global stakeholders, this article provides a valuable resource to highlight the important ongoing work that is occurring across the UK, and globally on making cities and places more gender-informed.

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