

EDITORIAL

Urban Development Together with Girls and Young Women

Anna Barker

University of Leeds, United Kingdom

a.c.h.barker@leeds.ac.uk

Luisa Bravo

City Space Architecture, Italy

luisa.bravo@cityspacearchitecture.org

Laura Petrella

UN-Habitat, Kenya

laura.petrella@un.org

Abstract

Public spaces are crucial to everyday life, providing sites for community interaction, mobility, and recreation. Traditionally, however, urban planning has been shaped by a gendered perspective that privileges masculine assumptions that overlook intersectional needs and reinforce societal inequalities for women and girls. This thematic issue, 'Let Her Guide You', developed in partnership with UN-Habitat as part of the Her City initiative, underscores the imperative of incorporating gender and youth perspectives into urban planning and design. The Her City Initiative, a collaboration between UN-Habitat and the Shared City Foundation, advances this goal by equipping urban actors worldwide with tools to integrate the perspectives of girls and young women into urban development. Launched in 2021, the Her City Toolbox has supported over 350 independent initiatives with registered users in 120 countries, demonstrating its effectiveness in fostering inclusive urban environments. This special issue features papers by young academic scholars selected from the Her City Master students' alumni network, including case studies of feminist planning from Heerlen (The Netherlands), Nairobi (Kenya), Stockholm (Sweden), and Weimar (Germany). It also includes a diverse range of invited viewpoints advocating for collaborative approaches to urban development together with girls and young women, complemented by illustrative case studies from around the globe, including Belgium, Iran, Italy, Jamaica, Mozambique, Palestine, Peru, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. By centring gender and youth perspectives in the urban planning process, this thematic issue highlights the potential to transform public spaces into more equitable, engaging, and sustainable environments. It calls on city makers, researchers, and community leaders to ensure that contemporary cities are designed with and for everyone.

Keywords: gender equity, public space, inclusive design, urban planning, youth perspectives, innovation.

To cite this article:

Barker, A., Bravo, L. and Petrella, L. (2024) "Urban Development Together with Girls and Young Women", *The Journal of Public Space*, 9(1), pp. 1-10. doi: 10.32891/jps.v9i1.1824.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Introduction: The Gendered City

Public spaces are integral to urban life, facilitating community interaction, mobility, and recreation (Low, 2022). However, feminist research has highlighted the gendered barriers that women and girls face in these spaces, pointing to safety concerns, inadequate facilities, and societal constraints that undermine their rights to the city and everyday life (Fenster, 2005; Beebejaun, 2017). Traditionally, urban planning has been shaped by a gendered perspective that privileges masculine assumptions (Darke, 1996) that overlook intersectional needs and reinforce societal inequalities for women and girls (Kern, 2021). As a result, the needs of girls and young women have often been neglected or deemed insufficiently significant in the design of cities and urban spaces. The notion of the 'gendered city' highlights that urban space is far from neutral in its design, planning, development, management and use (Bassam, 2023), and that gender plays a crucial role shaping how cities are experienced and navigated. Gender power dynamics, particularly patriarchal structures, shape the design of urban environments and the spatial organisation of the city, embedding gendered inequalities in everything from parks to public transportation systems (England, 1991; Kern, 2021). Historically, urban planning has centred around the 'default male' user, treating other identities as variations of this assumed norm (Criado Perez, 2019). This male-centric bias results in urban environments that often differently impact upon the diverse needs and desires of women and girls and other underrepresented groups, particularly in relation to safety, accessibility, and care (Grech, 2024; London Legacy Development Corporation, 2024; Kern, 2021). For example, poorly lit or isolated areas exacerbate women's fear of harassment or sexual violence, restricting their freedom of movement, especially after dark (Koskela and Pain, 2000). Additionally, the lack of adequate facilities, such as toilets, social seating, and gender-sensitive play areas, further limits women and girls' ability to engage fully with urban life, often making them feel unwelcome in public spaces (Barker *et al.*, 2022b). Furthermore, neglecting the need for childcare and the safety of children in public spaces places additional burdens on the women who are responsible for children. Addressing this is crucial if the objective is to enable women's further emancipation and enjoyment of other rights.

Public space is a conduit for accessing the assets, resources and opportunities of the city. However, the gender bias in urban space significantly hinders girls and young women's ability to participate equally and freely in work, leisure, and education. Fear of sexual violence, for example, often results in 'spatial exclusions' (Koskela, 1999), where women and girls avoid certain areas. Many women engage in 'safety work' (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020), altering their behaviour, routes, or schedules to navigate these risks. In turn, this negatively impacts mental and physical health, economic opportunities, and access to education. Hence, overlooking the needs of women and girls in urban planning and design can significantly hinder their rights to the city and participation in public life. A feminist city can be regarded as an action-orientated and inclusive approach to overcome the biases of the gendered city. It confronts these gendered exclusions by designing public spaces with the direct involvement of women and girls to ensure inclusivity (Kern, 2001). Feminist theorists advocate for incorporating women's lived experiences into the urban planning and design process (Beebejaun, 2009; Whitzman, 2013; Kern, 2021), emphasising the value of their knowledge and expertise in shaping urban spaces to foster safety, inclusivity, and belonging. When public spaces are designed to be appealing and welcoming to women and girls, it can create positive

feedback loops. The presence of women in public areas encourages the presence of more women, gradually shifting the dynamics of these spaces. Conversely, as Koskela (1999, p.113) notes, when women retreat indoors, they ‘unwittingly reproduce masculine domination over space’ and reliance on male protectors. Importantly, the presence of other women in public spaces can enhance feelings of security, making these areas more accessible for all women (Barker *et al.*, 2022a).

Addressing the material needs of girls and young women in urban space—such as better lighting, secure transportation, comfortable seating, and access to safe water—can significantly enhance their quality of life. However, feminist scholars like Moser (1993) emphasise that meeting these practical needs is only a starting point. Achieving gender equality in urban spaces requires addressing women’s strategic interests by challenging the unequal societal structures and norms that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality. Practical needs and strategic interests can however complement one another (Silvestre Cabrera *et al.*, 2023). Improvements in material conditions, such as better lighting and facilities, can enhance women’s independence and access to public spaces, potentially leading to broader transformations in their strategic interests. This opens up the possibility for systemic change, positioning feminist urban planning as capable of leading to advances in women’s social and economic standing.

Ultimately, creating a feminist city requires addressing the various physical, social, economic, and symbolic barriers that women and girls face (Kern, 2021) as well as facilitating a progressive shift in societal roles and responsibilities. This means recognising the intersectional needs of women and girls and other marginalised groups, ensuring that urban design serves everyone—not just the default male user, in its ‘masculine’ role, and that opportunities for transformation of roles and responsibilities are provided and supported. An intersectional perspective acknowledges the diverse experiences of women, shaped by factors such as age, race, and ableism (Crenshaw, 1991). It involves attending to the ways in which diverse forms of disadvantage and marginality compound and interact to constitute different experiences and needs. By centring girls and young women’s voices in the planning and design process, cities can foster environments that promote well-being, community cohesion, and resilience in the face of global challenges like climate change and inequality. In what follows, the editorial will introduce the key themes, the work of Her City, and the content and organisation of the thematic issue.

Focus of the Thematic Issue: Gender and Youth Perspectives

This thematic issue, ‘Let Her Guide You’, has been developed in collaboration with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme’s (UN-Habitat) Her City initiative. Dr Anna Barker at the University of Leeds served as the guest editor alongside Dr Luisa Bravo as editor-in-chief. The thematic issue aims to highlight the contributions of young scholars and illuminate the importance of gender and youth perspectives in urban development, particularly regarding public spaces.

This thematic issue features papers by young academic scholars selected from the Her City Master students alumni network, including case studies of feminist planning and design in Heerlen (The Netherlands), Nairobi (Kenya), Stockholm (Sweden), and Weimar (Germany). It also includes a diverse range of invited viewpoints from campaigners, professionals, and academics advocating for collaborative approaches to

urban development with girls and young women, complemented by illustrative case studies from around the globe, including Belgium, Iran, Italy, Jamaica, Mozambique, Palestine, Peru, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. The issue calls on city makers, researchers, and community leaders to ensure that contemporary cities are designed with and for everyone, and support societal transformation as far as gender roles and participation in decision making is concerned.

The Her City initiative: Transforming Urban Development with and for Girls

Her City responds to the pervasive feelings of insecurity faced by girls and young women in urban areas worldwide. Alarming, 80% of girls and young women in cities such as Delhi, Kampala, Lima, Madrid, and Sydney report feeling unsafe in their daily environments (Plan International, 2018). In six African cities, 90% of girls reported experiencing violence in the past year (Plan International, 2022), and in New Delhi, 88% of women faced sexual harassment on public transport, with only 1% reporting these incidents to the police (The World Bank, 2022). These conditions severely restrict women and girls' participation in public life and their ability to navigate freely within cities.

Her City is a joint initiative by UN-Habitat and the Shared City Foundation that empowers urban actors globally to include young women and girls in the urban planning and design process. It provides a comprehensive toolbox that supports the integration of girls' perspectives in creating sustainable and inclusive urban environments. This toolbox outlines a cost-effective, nine-step process for co-planning cities from a girl's perspective. The initiative began with a pre-study financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) in 2017, followed by further development and piloting funded by the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova) and the Block by Block Foundation. Since its public launch in 2021, the Her City Toolbox has 1,400 registered users across 430 cities, supporting 350 independent initiatives in 120 countries. The publication Her City – A Guide for Cities to Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Planning and Design together with Girls in Spanish and English has nearly 6,000 downloads. The digital Her City Toolbox platform has a total reach of 7 million, including outreach and social media, emphasising the global appetite for gender-transformative urban planning and design tools.

Projects under the Her City banner have included diverse applications from digital to analogue implementations. For instance, in Lima, the toolbox helped local girls and women engage in revitalising public spaces in low-income neighbourhoods. In Kampala, the analogue version of the toolbox was used in the dense informal settlement of Kamwanyi, where local girls and young women were empowered to assess their community and prioritise actions for safer and greener public spaces. These projects underscore the practical utility and transformative potential of the Her City approach discussed by the Shared City Foundation in their viewpoint.

"My dream for this place is to be a comfort for a lot of people in the community. For example, women and girls who are beaten at home, instead of running away from home and sleeping in trenches would rather come here and relax"

Shanice, young participant, Kampala



Figure 1 and 2. Hero images of the Her City initiative. Credit: UN-Habitat and Shared City Foundation.

Enhancing Safety and Inclusion for Women and Girls in Urban Parks

Dr Anna Barker serves as the guest editor for this thematic issue drawing on her expertise in gendered fear in public spaces, particularly parks. Her research has explored how women and girls often avoid or feel excluded from these urban spaces due to concerns about safety and experiences of harassment, but also in different ways by gendered assumptions within park design and management that overlook the specific needs and interests of teenage girls in play provision and safety, creating environments that fail to accommodate or protect them adequately (Barker *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b). Parks are distinct ‘spaces apart’ (Booth *et al.*, 2021) within cities that embody a complex interplay of gendered safety concerns and potential benefits, such as access to nature, leisure and recreation, and active travel routes. Her research illustrates how urban parks are historically constituted and gendered spaces of hidden labour where women and girls navigate safety concerns and engage in considerable ‘safety work’ to access and

enjoy their benefits (Barker and Cape-Davenhill, 2024; Booth *et al.*, 2021; Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). To address these challenges, she worked with West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Make Space for Girls, and Keep Britain Tidy to develop guidelines aimed at making parks safer and more welcoming for women and girls (Safer Parks Consortium, 2023).



Figure 3. Designing parks through the lens of gender and safety
Credit: Harper Perry and Josie Brooks.

The Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls guidance is rooted in women and girls views and experiences of safety in West Yorkshire's parks, alongside a review of wider evidence. The guidance was created with input from professionals in park management, urban planning, landscape design, policing, and women's safety organisations. It focuses on addressing gender disparities in park access, using ten principles organised around three core themes: *Eyes on the Park*, *Awareness*, and *Inclusion*. These principles emphasise the importance of activating parks, as the presence of others—especially women—enhances feelings of safety. They also highlight the need for design features that promote (feelings of) security and the involvement of a diverse group of women and girls in co-designing parks to address their intersectional needs. The guidelines provide practical examples of how to implement changes on different budgets and scales and have been incorporated into the Green Flag Award programme, which sets the standard for public parks and green spaces in the UK and globally. This guidance serves as a foundational step toward creating change. It underscores the need to involve teenage girls in park design, ensuring their perspectives and diverse needs are addressed through holistic, coordinated partnerships. Actively listening to their voices at every stage is essential for fostering their use and enjoyment of these community spaces. The additional advantage of empowering young women regarding their environment and quality of life should not be underestimated.

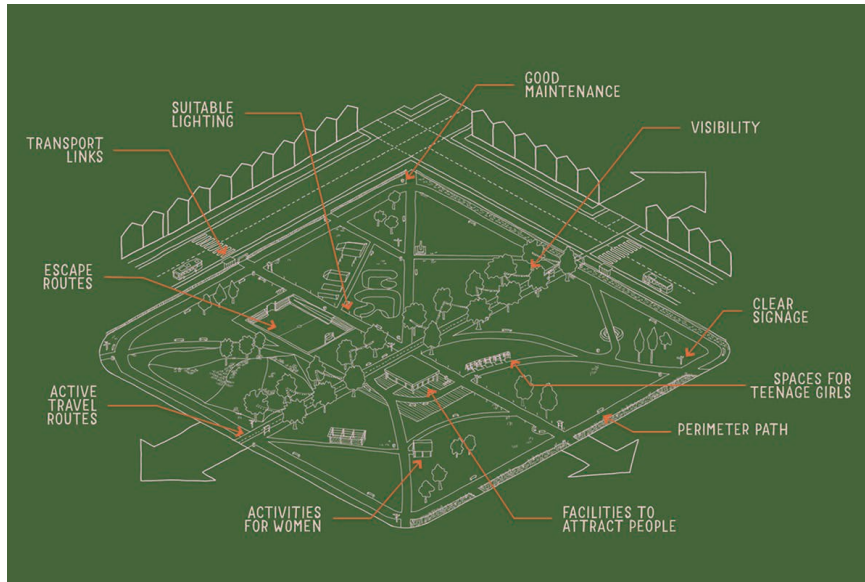


Figure 4. Principles of a safe and welcoming park for women and girls.
Credit: Harper Perry.

Overview of the Thematic Issue

The academic papers and viewpoints included are timely and important. At its core, this thematic issue seeks to explore the myriad ways in which urban public spaces can be transformed to better serve the needs of underserved community members, particularly girls and young women.

The first part includes papers from young academic scholars of the Her City Master student alumni network. **Emelie Anneroth**, Sweco, focuses on the #UrbanGirlsMovement project in Fittja, Stockholm, exploring how feminist urban planning empowered local girls by involving them in the redesign of a public square. It reframes urban planners as facilitators and underscores the transformative potential of intersectional planning tools. **Michelle Moonen**, Eindhoven University of Technology, develops and applies a framework of eight design principles aimed at making public spaces more gender-responsive, using Heerlen, Netherlands as a case study. It contends that feminist urban design can significantly enhance women's safety, comfort, and accessibility, though consideration is needed when adapting the principles to different contexts. **Lia Zinggrebe**, urbanista.ch, and **Lisa Maßel**, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, discuss the application of Her City Toolbox in Germany's first initiative in Weimar, and advocate for a gender-sensitive, data-driven, and participatory approach to identify key improvements needed in public spaces for women and girls. **Ángela Domínguez**, Universidad del País Vasco, develops a multidimensional framework to analyse how self-produced settlements, like Mathare in Nairobi, impact women's health, arguing that poor access to safe water and sanitation in public spaces exposes women to heightened health risks and violence, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. The second part includes five invited viewpoints from academics, campaigners and professionals working in this field. **Susannah Walker**, Make Space for Girls, argues that facilities in parks and recreation grounds are often geared towards boys, and calls for a paradigm shift in design processes that actively engage teenage girls to ensure their

rights to the public realm are recognised. **Olivia Theocharides-Feldman and Julia King**, LSE, propose a feminist spatial researcher-in-residence methodology to involve young women in design and planning processes through peer research. **Sara Ferlander**, Mälardalen University, **Emilie Anneroth**, Sweco, and **Tanya Jukkala**, Mälardalen University, propose that feminist planning can learn from social innovation approaches, incorporating a focus on outcomes and impacts to drive positive social change and create more equitable cities. Empowering Women, Public Space and Climate Change brings together four case studies by **Rozina Spinnoy** (BIDs Belgium), **Tiisetso Mofokeng** (Vega School), **Atousa Sarmast** (University of Tehran) and **Romina Rodela** (Södertörn University), from cities in Belgium, South Africa, Iran and Sweden to illustrate how young women are using an intersectional lens to reshape public spaces, promoting inclusivity and sustainability. Drawing on lessons learned from the application of Her City Toolbox in Peru, Jamaica, Mozambique, Uganda, Palestine, Thailand and Italy, **Thomas Melin** and **Tove Levonen**, Shared City Foundation, highlight the global impact of Her City, showing how integrating intersectional female perspectives can address systemic inequalities, transform public spaces and foster community empowerment.

Additional Material: Imagining Public Space With/For Her

Additional material to this special issue is provided by the exhibition 'Imagining Public Space with/for Her'. Organised by City Space Architecture and curated by **Carolina Anderson**, **Beatrice Ricci**, and **Luisa Bravo**, this exhibition opened on 20 April 2023 at Museo Spazio Pubblico and outdoors at the adjacent public garden, Il Giardino, in Bologna.

The exhibition focused on the urgency of reimagining of public spaces from a gender perspective, particularly with and for women. It emphasised that public spaces have traditionally been designed by and for men, and it sought to challenge this through co-created materials and the display of research projects and initiatives across the globe, giving visibility to leading professionals working at the heart of this topic selected and invited by City Space Architecture.

Interviews with many of these project leads provide supplementary material to this thematic issue, including: **Anabella Roitman** (Urbanismo Feminista, Argentina); **Anna Barker** (Safer Parks Project, UK); **Elin Andersdotter Fabre** (Her City, UN-Habitat, Kenya); **Florencia Andreola** and **Azzurra Muzzonigro** (Milan Gender Atlas, Italy); **J. Antonio Lara-Hernandez** (Universidad Marista de Merida, Mexico); **Nathalie Boucher** and **Sarah-Maude Cossette** (ADOES Project, Canada); **Nourhan Bassam** (Gaming X, Egypt); **Ricardo Klein** (University of Valencia, Spain); **Rozina Spinnoy** (Empowering Women, Public Space and Climate Change, Belgium); **Sara Ortiz Escalante** (Collectiu.6, Spain); and **Silvia Gullino** (Birmingham City University, UK).

The exhibition materials and interviews will be collated online and form educational content for a new mini-course by the Public Space Academy to spark a crucial debate on the inclusiveness and accessibility of urban environments for women.



Figure 5 and 6. Exhibition 'Imagining Public Space with/for Her', Museo Spazio Pubblico, Bologna, 2023. Credit: Luisa Bravo.

Urban Development Together with Women and Girls

The future of urban planning must be co-designed with the voices of women, girls, and marginalised communities at its core. By letting Her guide us, we can work towards urban environments that are inclusive, safe, and vibrant for everyone. This approach is essential for dismantling the gendered exclusions that persist in our cities. Feminist urban planning does more than change the physical environment; it challenges the societal norms that shape how we experience our cities. As this initiative moves towards a next phase, Her City focuses on long-term sustainability and global capacity building. By fostering a global network and a joint community of practice, Her City aims to advocate for gender-transformative cities, ensuring no one is left behind.

This special issue will be launched at the Urban Library of the 12th World Urban Forum (WUF12) on sustainable urbanisation, convened by UN-Habitat that will take place 4-8 November 2024 in Cairo, Egypt.

References

- Barker, A. and Cape-Davenport, L. (2024) 'I don't like walking in empty parks, so when I go to a park, I need timing': Exploring women and girls' safety work in urban parks. *Past Present and Future of Public Space International Academic Conference*, Conference Proceedings. Available at: <https://www.cityspacearchitecture.org/?p=past-present-and-future-of-public-space>
- Barker, A. Holmes, G. Alam, R. Cape-Davenport, L. Osei-Appiah, S. and Warrington Brown, S. (2022a) *What Makes a Park Feel Safe or Unsafe?* Leeds: University of Leeds. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/108>

- Barker, A. Holmes, G. Cape-Davenhill, L. and Warrington Brown, S. (2022b) *What do teenage girls like and dislike about park play spaces and multi-use games areas?* Leeds: University of Leeds. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/122>
- Bassam, N. (2023) *The Gendered City: How Cities Keep Failing Women*, Independently published.
- Beebeejaun, Y. (2009) 'Making safer places: Gender and the right to the city', *Security Journal*, 22, pp.219–229.
- Beebeejaun, Y. (2017) 'Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 39(3), pp.323–334.
- Booth, N., Churchill, D., Barker, A. and Crawford, A. (2021) 'Spaces apart: public parks and the differentiation of space in Leeds, 1850–1914.' *Urban History*, 48(3), pp.552–571.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Race, gender and sexual harassment', *Southern California Law Review*, 65:1467–76.
- Criado Perez, C. (2020) *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, London: Vintage.
- Darke, J. (1996) 'The Man-Shaped City', in Booth, C., Darke, J. and Yeadle, S. (eds) *Changing Places: Women's Lives in the City*. London: Sage, pp.75–88.
- England, K. (1991) 'Gender relations and the spatial structure of the city', *Geoforum*, 22(2), pp.135–147.
- Fenster, T. (2005) 'The right to the gendered city: Different formations of belonging in everyday life', *Journal of gender studies*, 14(3), pp.217–231.
- Grech, E. (2024) *How to Design Better Cities for Women and Girls through Urban Planning and Design*. Churchill Fellowship report. Available at: <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au>
- Kern, L. (2021) *Feminist City*. Verso.
- Koskela, H. (1999) "'Gendered exclusions": Women's fear of violence and changing relations to space', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 81(2), pp.111–124.
- Koskela, H. and Pain, R. (2000) 'Revisiting fear and place: women's fear of attack and the built environment', *Geoforum*, 31(2), pp. 269–280.
- London Legacy Development Corporation (2024) *Creating places that work for Women and Girls*. Available at: <https://www.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk/about-us/how-we-work/handbook-creating-places-work-women-and-girls>
- Low, S. (2022) *Why public space matters*. Oxford Academic.
- Moser, C. (1993) *Gender Planning and Development*. London: Routledge.
- Plan International (2018) *State of the World's Girls 2018: Unsafe in the City*. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/>
- Plan International (2022) *Violence in the City: Insights from Young People Across Six Cities*. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/>
- Safer Parks Consortium (2023) *Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.48785/100/151>
- Silvestre Cabrera, M., Aristegui Fradua, I. and Royo Prieto, R. (2023) 'An Analysis of Responses to Sexual Assault against Women in Public Space: Practical Gender Needs or Strategic Gender Interests?', *Social Sciences*, 12(2), pp.101–118.
- The World Bank (2022) *Streamlining Grievance Redressal Mechanisms: Detering sexual harassment on public transport and urban spaces*. Available at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports>
- Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020) 'Contested gendered space: public sexual harassment and women's safety work', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 44(4), pp.265–275.
- Whitzman, C. (2013) 'Women's safety and everyday mobility', in Whitzman, C. et al. (eds) *Building Inclusive Cities: Women's Safety and the Right to the City*. London and New York: Routledge, pp.35–52.