



<< < Thumbnails > >>

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Women Friendly Cities Challenge:...

At the local level such as the development and use of land to accommodate growth or revitalize areas. Planners have great influence in designing the urban environment, such as determining the location of transportation networks, parks and open spaces, as well as private buildings and community facilities. These urban elements directly affect women by either positively affecting or complicating their lives. The design and use of space greatly impacts how people function and feel when navigating a city. Women perceive and navigate space different than men; and the recognition of "intersectionality" reveals the complexity of the lived gendered experiences of race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and more. (Crenshaw, 1991 Crenshaw, K., 1991, Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43, 1241-1299). People's lives are multi-dimensional, complex and change over time. Each of us could identify with more than one category. It is this intersectionality framework of multiple identities of who we are that affects how we experience a city. An intersectional approach to planning and design can provide insights to the many layers that make up people, places, and power relations.

Women have historically been excluded from participating in city planning, building design and urban development. Urban design professionals tend to focus on the creation of the built environment. Institutions that have control over the development of urban spaces are able to represent space in particular ways that suit their vision and purposes. (Yasminah Beebeejaun, 2016, Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life, Journal of Urban Affairs, 39:3, 323-334) Often, urban plans and building designs on paper may create environments that may look pleasant but do not support the intimate functions of community members, in particular of women.

This is evident in many cities where little attention has been paid to adequate lighting and washrooms, good street and sidewalk design, as well as coherent land use plans that take into account family friendly facilities and human scale building designs.

In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, Project for Public Space (PPS) has found that to be successful, they generally share the following four qualities: spaces are accessible; people are engaged

WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLACE?



in activities there; the space is comfortable and has a good image; and finally, it is a sociable place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit. PPS developed The Place Diagram below as a tool to help people in judging any place, good or bad.

Planning and design practices need to evolve from the role of the expert technical professional to be a facilitator of positive social change. Celene Fung, Board member of Women Transforming Cities International notes that "We need to become open to co-creating spaces with community members, with particular focus on the diverse lives of women". Women and minorities are very aware of their personal safety as they are main targets for violence and sexual harassment. There needs to awareness of the complexity of the daily lived experience of women, as they often have multiple roles as paid and unpaid workers coupled with family care responsibilities. Women's daily lives must also consider the broader context of gender relations, societal power structures, culture and social norms. The gendered everyday experiences require closer scrutiny in order to develop a richer insight into planning the urban fabric of the city.

Planning and design should not be done in isolation of the community. In Celene Fung's urban

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planning practice, she focuses on the sentiment that planning is collaborative art and a community building exercise. She explains, "There are so many questions that need to be asked before changing the urban fabric of a community. For example, you need to know who is using the space, how is the space being used, how the space

is perceived, how can women's needs, barriers and opportunities be addressed, how are women engaged in planning and design processes and how could the space evolve so that different groups of people could better coexist and better support the functions of everyday life." Each community is unique in terms of its geography, social, cultural and economic context, community members and political leadership. Solutions to address the intersectionality of gender and urban space need to be relevant to the specific community. There are no quick solutions to achieve gender equity and inclusion. It is an ongoing process that needs continual work.

There are many cities around the world are taking actions to improve gender parity. For example, in December 2017, Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London's launched a year-long women's equality campaign "#BehindEveryGreatCity" that supports equality, opportunity and progress - regardless of a person's gender. He announced that "Over the next year, and beyond, we will highlight how women of all ages, ethnicities, faiths and backgrounds make London the great city it is. More importantly, we will redouble our efforts in the fight for gender equality. We must do all we can to remove any barriers to women's success and to unlock their full potential." Another current example is the City of Vancouver: a city for all women: the Gender Equality Strategy 2018 - 2018, that was approved unanimously by city council in January 2018. The strategy builds upon existing city policies and initiatives and outlines steps to promote gender equality and to challenge gender discrimination. The strategy will focus on five priority areas: safety, violence against women, accessible quality childcare, safe and affordable housing and women's leadership and representation. Both of these civic initiatives have dedicated political leaders and broad based support in their communities.

Making women friendly cities will improve quality of life for all. We should all want cities to be more women friendly. Let us collaborate together to accelerate gender parity here in Sri Lanka and to strengthen global efforts in achieving gender parity.

Article written by Celene Fung, Board Member, Women Transforming Cities International and Puvanesary Ponniah, Manager, Gender Equality & Social Inclusion, World University Service Canada, Sri Lanka.

"Build SL Housing & Construction Expo 2018 - 18th, 19th, 20th May 2018 @ BMICH"

01 - Page



02 - Page



03 - Page



04 - Page



05 - Page



06 - Page



07 - Page



08 - Page



09 - Page



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<< < Thumbnails > >>