



Revisiting the ‘gender agenda’ – from research to education and practice

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This article highlights key research on gender, cities, and planning. Despite some progress, recent research suggests that the ‘gender agenda’ remains incomplete, likely due to failures and inequalities in planning schools themselves.

Feminist researchers have long critiqued failures to consider gender in urban planning and design. Broadly speaking, this work highlights three concerns:

- How the spatial arrangement and design of cities, neighbourhoods and homes reflect and reinforce gender norms, impede women’s mobility, and limit economic opportunities;
- Physical safety / exposure to violence, particularly in public spaces; and
- Under-representation in political and leadership roles and or planning processes.

Although earlier writing focused on gender based differences, more recent work emphasises that gender intersects with other factors – such as race, class, age, ability – to mediate needs and experiences of the city.

Spatial divisions

Influenced by the wider waves of feminism that emerged in the 1970s, urban planning scholars such as Dolores Hayden called attention to the ways in which “dwellings, neighbourhoods and cities designed for homebound women constrain women physically, socially and economically”¹; by enforcing a spatial separation between home and work. This confined women as primary caregivers to the domestic sphere where they performed unpaid domestic chores and childcare in socially isolated, car dependent suburbs.

Others, such as Leonie Sandercock and Ann Forsyth, extended this analysis to explain how restrictive land use regulations and residential controls – for instance ‘single family’ zones – reduced housing opportunities for extended families, single people, and same sex couples.² In sketching ideas for the ‘non-sexist’ city, Dolores Hayden imagined collapsing the spatial divide by designing different housing typologies – from cooperatives where childcare and domestic tasks could be shared, to homes with spaces in which paid work could be carried out.

Today, diversifying the housing stock through zoning for higher density homes near jobs and services is ubiquitous across Australian metropolitan plans. Similarly, more flexible



work practices following the COVID-19 Pandemic suggest exciting possibilities for women and caregivers to better balance the demands of work and home. Yet, as a recent study points out, the needs and perspectives of women are often missing in residential and neighbourhood design.³

More broadly, economic consequences of the spatially divided city continue. A recent Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute (AHURI) study highlighted lower levels of workforce participation and higher rates of part time work amongst women living in outer metropolitan areas, reflecting the barriers in accessing employment near affordable homes and childcare.⁴

Safety and mobility

From a lack of public toilets to inadequate public transport services, women’s mobility in the city has been an enduring concern in planning research and practice. Yet, as Caryl Bosman, Deanna Grant-Smith and Natalie Osborne point out; the availability, reliability, affordability and safety of public transport continues to differentially impact women who

are more likely to have complex trips due to caring responsibilities and/or shift work.⁵

Similarly, poorly designed streets that are unsafe for pedestrians, differentially impact women, children, older people and those with a disability,⁶ while fears of gender based harassment and violence continue. Basic design principles – from lighting to landscaping – are known to impact on perceptions of safety – but the research literature suggests that deeper efforts to understand gender differences in the use of public spaces are needed.⁷

More widely, access to supportive accommodation for those fleeing domestic violence remains limited. Recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare highlights the over representation of women, and single parents (more likely to be women) seeking support from specialist homelessness services:

- Of those seeking assistance between 2020-2021, 60 per cent or 167,400 clients were female; while 1 in 6 were children under the age of 10, and 1 in 8 were aged 10–17;
- Around 13,300 women aged 55 or older sought assistance (compared to 10,600 men of the same age cohort); and
- A third were single parent families.⁸

These data reflect the increased vulnerability of women to risks of housing stress and homelessness exacerbated by lower paid work and remuneration over women’s careers and lifetimes. Further, many lower cost forms of rental accommodation – such as boarding houses or room rentals – are particularly unsuited to older women who are often physically vulnerable and need private, self-contained accommodation.

Representation

Early feminist histories sought to rectify the invisibility of women’s contributions to city making and the planning profession. Unfortunately, recent research suggests that, despite progress across planning education and the senior ranks of the profession, biases and inequalities persist. For instance, a recent study

involving female planners in Brisbane reported that the industry continued to “be perceived by those who work within it as an ‘old-boys-club’.”⁹ Another finds that the gender inequality across the tech sector has carried over into planning for the so called ‘smart city’, reinforcing gendered hierarchies, and “resulting in ‘smart cities’ designed for men.”¹⁰

Ensuring gender and diversity in decision making processes is a critical precondition for equality. Yet, in a study of gender inclusion on local planning panels in NSW, Amanda Thorpe and Sue Williamson find that men comprise two thirds of all panel chair positions and that a smaller pool of women experts are serving on multiple panels.¹¹ They conclude that factors such as “gender, age, ethnicity, cultural background, profession, and (dis)ability” appear to have been overlooked in criteria for panel appointments, which may limit the quality and legitimacy of their decisions. Similarly, reflecting wider under-representation in political life, women continue to be a “missing cohort” in local government.¹²

From research to education and practice

Earlier research has found that gender is rarely identified as a specific topic within planning subjects at Australian planning schools.¹³ This is unsurprising, given that significant gender disparities pervade Australian planning academia.¹⁴

If future planners are to address gender inequality in their work, their education must equip them to do so. Planning accreditation guidelines – currently silent on gender – will need to direct university planning curricula; which should address intersectional gender equality in the selection of key texts and cases, learning activities and assessment tasks.

The work featured in this special issue and ongoing efforts of groups such as the PIA's Women in Planning Network offers important material to inform practical learning about how planners can address and promote intersectional gender equality across their practice, organisations and profession.

Nicole is an urban planner and policy analyst whose research focuses on comparative urban planning systems and approaches to housing and ecological sustainability. She has led and collaborated on a series of research projects on aspects of urban policy, housing, sustainability and planning, funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Australian Urban and Housing Research Institute (AHURI), as well as state and local government. She is currently Chair of Urbanism and Director of the Henry Halloran Trust, The University of Sydney.

Endnotes

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