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Creating Safer Cities for Women

Introduction

In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs was one of the first to link fear of crime to urban design through the term “eyes on the street,” which refers to the need for creating natural surveillance through smart planning (Wekerle, 2000, p. 45). Jacobs’ vision for sustainable cities was radical in her time and may seem even more heretical nowadays in the overcrowded and overdeveloped urban centers that pay little to no attention to resident safety and quality of life. One study found that women are “twice as likely as men to report feeling unsafe, even though men are far more likely to be the victims of crime” (Wekerle, 2000, p. 47). Although women may not be victims of physical crime, their fear of public spaces has real consequences in the way women experience and use cities. Because “how safe a city is is directly related to how safe a city *feels*,” using planning strategies to increase the overall measured as well as perceived safety will benefit all residents but especially women (Gulati, 2015, p. 1). By engaging women in community planning and using smart planning strategies such as land use, transportation, and lighting regulations, cities can create safer and more welcoming environments for women.

Women in the United States, when compared to the male population, “disproportionately face poverty, are more likely to head a single-parent household, ... are responsible for the majority of housework and childcare, ... and have unique travel behavior related to their combination of work and household responsibilities” (Micklow, 2015, p. 1). By using a “gender lens, a tool for looking at the different experiences and needs of women and men in the development of local government plans, policies and programs,” the vulnerable position of

women in society can be remedied (City of Vancouver, 2005, p. 33). Although it may seem that focusing specifically on women is excluding the male population, “planning for women... is planning for everyone” because when cities plan for the most vulnerable citizens, it creates a safer environment for everyone (Micklow, 2015, p. 13). To do more than make women *feel* safe, planners can identify the weaknesses of a city and the ways it can be improved to provide a safe and beneficial environment for all residents by addressing the issues women face in their daily lives.

Women in Planning

The lack of women in the planning sector has led to the inattention to gender issues in city planning. In order to mitigate the insecurity of women in urban spaces, many cities have created committees with the goal of voicing women’s needs and unique perspectives to ultimately achieve gender equality. Incorporating “gender mainstreaming, ... the process of explicitly incorporating a consideration of gender into all stages of a project,” into planning decisions will ensure that “a gender equality perspective — an analysis of the effects on women and men, girls and boys — is considered at all levels of decision making” (City of Vancouver, 2005, p. 3).

One of the early efforts to include women in planning was the Women-Friendly City Project launched in 1997 in Montreal, Canada. The goal of this initiative was to achieve “equal participation in municipal position (50% each gender)” in order to boost the number of women who are participating in the planning process (Abada, 2013, p. 29). In 2003, the Vancouver City Council created a Women’s Task Force, consisting of 20 members and four subcommittees dedicated to engaging women in planning and ensuring the city successfully addressed issues of gender inequality (City of Vancouver, 2005, p. 18). On a larger scale, the UN Women Safe

Cities Leaders' Forum brought over 200 professionals together in New Delhi, India in 2015 to discuss solutions to create safer cities for women around the world (Gulati, 2015). Women around the world are taking their role in planning seriously to better their lives, generating supportive responses from global organizations. More worldwide communities are involving women in planning decisions to create safer environments that support people of all demographics.

Land Use

With women weighing in on city issues – particularly safety – many strategies for implementing safety measures have arisen. Optimizing land use to create “natural surveillance” and maintain Jacobs’ “eyes on the street” is an effective way to increase safety for pedestrians (Yellapragada, 2014, p. 9). By creating “mixed land use comprising both residential and non-residential activities, [cities] can increase the spread of business hours during which activities can occur” (Yellapragada, 2014, p. 11). Including uses that operate at varying hours and for different purposes increases the diversity of people who can act as natural surveillance. One city that implemented this strategy is East Perth, Claisebrook Village in Australia. The city converted a crime-ridden industrial wasteland to a flourishing mixed-use neighborhood in which safety and walkability are emphasized through a “connected street network and passive surveillance” (East Perth, 2009, p. 1). A city can create “eyes on the street” to increase overall safety by upgrading single-use lots to multi-use lots where there is activity at all hours of the day.

Transportation

A more measurable space where women feel unsafe is in the transportation sphere – using public transportation and on daily commutes. One study found that 62% of women feel unsafe walking in a parking garage at night, 60% feel unsafe using underground travel methods,

and 59% feel unsafe walking to and from bus or train stops (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2009, p. 10). By creating strategies to rid the public of traveling anxiety, “an extra 10.5% of journeys would be generated” (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2009, p. 7). In order to combat this fear of transit, cities have implemented regulations that go as far as creating specialized transportation for women.

Many cities already have plans in place that promote safe travel for women and combat sexual harassment on the streets. In 1984, the city of Toronto funded Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women (METRAC), which conducted “a women’s safety audit of the transit system” to address women’s safety concerns (Wekerle, 2000, p. 47). This commission developed tools to better observe and record public space activities, implemented training for sexual harassment response, and performed women’s safety audits (Wekerle, 2000). An organization called UrbaSpaces works with the European Union to address areas where women feel unsafe that relate to transportation by providing women-only . They addressed the issue of dark and isolated parking lots, disconnected transportation routes, and accessibility of public transit (Yellapragada, 2014, p. 12). A smaller-scale solution to safety issues in transportation is the creation of private women-only ride services. RightRides is a ride service, founded in New York in 2004, which is run by volunteers in donated cars and runs Saturday nights and early Sunday mornings (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2009). There are many other services like this such as the creation of women-only bus and subway cars in places like Mexico City, Tokyo, and London. Although this is a viable solution to transit safety, isolating women is not an ultimate solution, rather “women and girls should be able to circulate safely through their environs anywhere and anytime, independent of whether men are present or not” (UN Women, 2012, p. 2). However, these strategies are a good stopgap solution to tackle the dangerous and widespread fear of transit.

Lighting

Finally, addressing the lighting in all public spaces greatly increases how safe women feel when walking through a city. It is one of the most important planning decisions. Although “lighting is considered in all designs, ...the maintenance and operations of lighting equipment is usually neglected,” leading to a decrease in safety and an increase in crime over time (Yellapragada, 2014, p. 10). One community that greatly benefitted from improved street lighting is Richmond, California. The city replaced 30 streetlights in one neighborhood and found that 89% of residents felt safer in their community (Pacific Institute, 2009). The improved lighting only decreased crime rates by 7%, but created a huge increase in perceived safety (Pacific Institute, 2009). Addressing lighting placement and upkeep is key to improving citizens’ experience of their city by diminishing unnecessary fear in the community.

Conclusion

Cities around the world have found that including women in policy and planning can improve the community’s view of their surroundings. It is important to note that, “while many women tend to feel unsafe in certain environmental settings, fear is not inherent in women but rather socially constructed” by the lack of attention to the way women want to experience the world (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2009, p. 9). Women may feel like victims because of the way communities have been constructed, but including women in the planning sphere can allow cities to be built in harmony with women’s needs, thus creating safer cities for all. By addressing women’s fears that prevent them from experiencing the public spaces in the same way as men, cities can move toward gender equality and safe communities built for all.

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