

Review

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Review

# Gender Disparities in Urban Design: A Review of the Impact of Urban Design on Shaping Women's Social Challenges

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**Abstract:** Urban environments play a crucial role in shaping the lived experiences of women, yet traditional urban design practices often neglect the diverse needs and identities of women, perpetuating social barriers and gender inequalities. This review paper seeks to explore the existing research on how urban design influences women's social challenges in cities. By synthesizing literature from urban planning, architecture, gender studies, and sociology, this review provides a comprehensive overview of the impact of urban design on women's experiences and opportunities in urban spaces. The review highlights gender disparities in urban design, inclusivity in urban planning, and the need for gender-sensitive approaches to address these disparities. Key scholars, including *Susan S. Fainstein*, *Leslie Kern*, *Sharon Zukin*, *Daphne Spain*, and *Vandana Shiva*, have contributed significantly to understanding gender disparities in urban spaces and advocating for more inclusive and equitable urban environments. The discussion emphasizes the importance of community engagement, participatory planning processes, and an intersectional lens in urban design to ensure that women's voices and needs are effectively incorporated into decision-making processes. Future research directions include exploring the role of technology, smart city initiatives, and addressing the impacts of gentrification and urban redevelopment on women's access to housing and resources. By advancing research on gender equity in city planning, we can work towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban environments that benefit all residents.

**Keywords:** urban design; gender disparities; social challenges; inclusivity; gender-sensitive planning; intersectionality; gender equity; women in cities

## 1. Introduction

Urban environments play a critical role in shaping the lived experiences of women, yet traditional urban design practices often neglect the diverse needs and identities of women, perpetuating social barriers and gender inequalities (Fraser, 1990). As cities continue to grow and evolve, it is essential to examine how urban design practices impact women's social challenges and contribute to gender inequalities in urban spaces (Anderson et al., 2019). This study seeks to explore the existing literature on how urban design influences women's social challenges in cities. By synthesizing research from various disciplines, including urban planning, architecture, gender studies, and sociology, this review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of urban design on women's experiences and opportunities in urban spaces. In this regard, the main question which this study is going to answer is what are the barriers that women face in accessing urban services and amenities? And how do traditional urban planning and design practices perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce social barriers for women?

This review paper employs a systematic literature review approach to analyze and synthesize existing research on the impact of urban design on shaping women's social challenges. The search strategy includes academic databases, scholarly journals, books, and reports that address topics related to urban design, gender equity, and social inclusion in urban environments. The review focuses on identifying key themes, findings, and trends in the literature, as well as gaps and areas for

future research. Therefore, this study will be guided by an intersectional lens to explore the complex ways in which different dimensions of social identity intersect to shape women's experiences in cities.

## 2. Literature Review

Gender disparities in urban design refer to the unequal treatment, access, and representation of individuals based on their gender in the planning and design of urban spaces. This includes disparities in access to public transportation, safety concerns, the availability of services, and the prioritization of certain urban amenities that may disproportionately impact women and other marginalized gender identities (Miraftab, Faranak, 2006). On the other hand, inclusivity in urban planning involves designing cities and communities in a way that considers the diverse needs, experiences, and perspectives of all individuals, regardless of their gender, race, age, ability, or socioeconomic status. This approach aims to create cities that are accessible, welcoming, and equitable for all residents, and actively works to eliminate barriers and discrimination that can limit the full participation and empowerment of marginalized groups in urban life (Schreiber & Carius, 2016).

According to research conducted by the World Bank, women comprise over half of the global population but often face significant disparities in access to basic urban services and infrastructure. For example, women are more likely to rely on public transportation for commuting purposes but may face safety concerns and limited accessibility to transportation hubs. In many cities, women are also more likely to experience harassment or violence in public spaces, which can deter them from actively participating in urban life (Sideris & Ceccato, 2022). These disparities are often exacerbated by traditional urban design practices that prioritize the preferences and needs of male residents, leading to a lack of consideration for women's experiences and perspectives in city planning and development. Further statistics show that women are more likely to be living in poverty in urban areas compared to men, which can impact their access to quality housing, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. This highlights the need for gender-sensitive urban planning approaches that address these disparities and create more inclusive and equitable cities for all residents.

By increasing awareness, planners can integrate gender-sensitive principles into their urban planning practices to promote inclusivity and address the diverse needs of all community members. In this regard, numerous studies have highlighted the gender disparities that exist in urban spaces, with women often facing unique social challenges that impact their mobility, safety, economic opportunities, and overall well-being. These studies have shed light on the unique challenges and experiences that women face in navigating and engaging with urban environments.

### *Key Scholars and Their Research Findings on Gender Disparities in Urban Spaces*

There are several activists and organizations that advocate for gender equity and inclusive urban design practices to address the social challenges faced by women in urban spaces. These scholars have contributed significantly to the field of urban studies by examining the impact of gender on urban planning, development, and social inequalities. Their study illustrates the difficulties faced by women and marginalized communities in accessing and navigating urban spaces, and advocates for more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban environments.

**Susan S. Fainstein**, is one of the prominent urban planners and scholars, who is well-known for her innovative studies in the fields of social justice, governance, and urban development. She has also written extensively on issues of gender and urban development (Fainstein, 2006). Fainstein has made significant contributions to the field of urban studies through her critical analysis of urban planning practices, policy-making processes, and the impact of globalization on cities (Fainstein, 2005). In her book "The Just City," Fainstein highlights how traditional urban planning practices have often overlooked the needs and experiences of women, resulting in gender inequalities in access to public spaces, transportation, and economic opportunities. She argues for a more inclusive and participatory approach to urban planning that considers the diverse needs of all residents, including women (Fainstein, 2010).

In her another book “Urban Political Movements,” Fainstein examines the role of political movements in shaping urban policy and governance. She analyzes the impact of grassroots activism, social movements, and community organizing on decision-making processes in cities, highlighting the power of collective action in advocating for social change and equity in urban spaces (Fainstein, 2014). In general, Susan Fainstein’s research and writings have influenced urban policy-making, academic discourse, and public debates on issues of inequality, diversity, and sustainability in urban spaces. Fainstein’s commitment to advocating for more just, inclusive, and sustainable cities continue to inspire scholars, practitioners, and activists working towards creating more equitable and resilient urban environments (Fainstein, 2010).

**Leslie Kern** is another feminist geographer and urban studies scholar known for her research on gender, space, and power in urban environments. She is currently an Associate Professor of Geography and Environment at Mount Allison University in Canada. Kern’s work focuses on exploring how gender shapes the ways in which people experience and navigate urban spaces, as well as the social inequalities and power dynamics embedded in the design and planning of cities. In her book “Feminist City: A Field Guide,” Kern examines the ways in which urban spaces are gendered and how this influences women’s experiences and safety in cities. She argues for a more inclusive and equitable approach to urban design and planning that addresses issues such as street harassment, access to public transportation, childcare facilities, and safe nighttime spaces. Kern advocates for creating cities that prioritize the needs and voices of women, marginalized communities, and other underrepresented groups (Kern, 2019).

Kern’s research on gender, space, and power explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class in shaping urban environments. She critically examines how societal norms, cultural values, and power structures influence the ways in which different groups of people experience and interact with urban spaces. Kern’s work highlights the importance of understanding these complex dynamics in order to foster more inclusive, diverse, and equitable cities. As a feminist geographer, Leslie Kern is part of a broader field of scholarship that seeks to uncover and challenge inequalities and injustices in spatial environments. Feminist geography examines how gender, sexuality, and other social identities intersect with space, place, and landscape, and how these dynamics shape individual experiences and social relations. Kern’s research contributes to feminist geography by offering critical insights into the gendered dimensions of urban planning, development, and everyday life (Kern, 2013).

Overall, her work pushes for a more inclusive and feminist approach to urban planning and design, advocating for cities that are safe, accessible, and welcoming for all residents, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social status. Kern’s contributions to the field of urban studies continue to inspire conversations and actions towards creating more equitable and gender-responsive cities.

Moreover, one of the other prominent sociologist and urban studies scholar known for her research on cities, culture, consumption, and social change is **Sharon Zukin**. Zukin’s work explores the intersection of urban development, globalization, and the cultural economy in contemporary cities. In her influential book “The Cultures of Cities,” Sharon Zukin examines the impact of globalization, gentrification, and cultural commodification on urban spaces and communities. She analyzes how cities transform as they become sites of consumption, creativity, and commercialization, and how these changes affect social relationships, cultural practices, and collective identities. Zukin’s work highlights the tensions between local authenticity and global homogenization in the context of urban development and cultural production (Zukin, 1995).

Sharon Zukin’s research contributes to urban studies and social theory by exploring the complex relationships between urban space, culture, and society. She critically examines how urban places are shaped by economic forces, political dynamics, and cultural practices, and how these processes influence social inequalities, power relations, and everyday experiences. Zukin’s work encourages us to rethink our understanding of cities as dynamic and contested sites of social struggle, creativity, and resilience. Zukin is known for her research on gentrification, a process of neighborhood transformation characterized by the influx of wealthier residents, rising property values, and displacement of lower-income communities. She explores the economic, political, and cultural

dimensions of gentrification, as well as its impacts on housing affordability, community diversity, and urban inequality. Zukin's work explores on the complex dynamics of urban change and the importance of addressing issues of social justice and inclusion in the context of gentrifying cities.

Another and sociologist and urban studies scholar known for her research on gender, race, and urban planning is **Daphne Spain**. She investigates how urban planning practices, transportation systems, housing developments, and public spaces are structured in ways that reflect and reinforce societal norms and expectations around gender roles. Her work highlights the importance of recognizing and challenging gender biases in urban design to create more inclusive and equitable cities for all residents. Spain also explores the intersections of race, ethnicity, and urban development in her scholarship (Spain,1992). In this way, she examines how historical patterns of segregation, discrimination, and disinvestment have shaped the spatial organization of cities and contributed to racial disparities in housing, employment, education, and access to services. Daphne Spain advocates for approaches to city design and development that prioritize social justice, community participation, and sustainability. She emphasizes the need for planners, policymakers, and practitioners to engage with diverse stakeholders, centering the voices and concerns of marginalized groups in decision-making processes (Spain,2000). All in all, Spain's work challenges conventional notions of urban planning and design, calling for more inclusive, responsive, and equitable approaches to creating cities that are livable, vibrant, and accessible for all residents. Spain's insights continue to inspire critical conversations and actions aimed at advancing gender and racial equality in urban environments and fostering more just and sustainable communities.

**Vandana Shiva** is an Indian scholar, environmental activist, and eco-feminist who is known for her work in promoting sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and social justice. Shiva has been a vocal critic of globalization, industrial agriculture, and the negative impacts of corporate control over natural resources on local communities, particularly in the Global South. As an eco-feminist, Vandana Shiva explores the intersections of feminism, ecology, and social justice, advocating for a more holistic and sustainable approach to development that takes into account the rights and well-being of women, indigenous peoples, and marginalized communities (Shiva, 2005). She highlights the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental issues and social inequalities, and emphasizes the need to challenge patriarchal systems of power that perpetuate environmental degradation and exploitation. Shiva's work often centers on the impact of globalization, industrial agriculture, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) on local communities, farmers, and the environment. She has critiqued corporate monopolies over seeds and agriculture, advocating for seed sovereignty and traditional farming practices that respect biodiversity, cultural diversity, and the rights of farmers to save and exchange seeds (Shiva, 1991).

However, there are some criticisms of her activities and viewpoints. While Vandana Shiva is widely respected for her environmental activism and advocacy for sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and social justice, some criticisms have been made to her activities. For instance, Shiva's strong critique of globalization and multinational corporations has led some to argue that her opposition to certain aspects of global trade and economic development may hinder progress towards more inclusive and sustainable forms of development that benefit all people, including those in the Global South. Moreover, Shiva has been accused of oversimplifying complex issues related to food production, technology, and development, often framing them in a dichotomous "good vs. evil" narrative that may not fully capture the nuances and trade-offs involved in sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation. Beside that, Shiva has faced criticism for her alliances with certain political groups and movements that have been accused of promoting anti-scientific or regressive policies. Some have also raised questions about potential conflicts of interest, particularly in relation to her advocacy work and engagements with the agricultural industry (Held, and McGre,2007). Therefore, while Vandana Shiva's work has been instrumental in raising awareness about environmental issues, social justice, and sustainable agriculture, it is important to critically engage with her viewpoints and consider the diverse perspectives and complexities involved in debates around agriculture, technology, and development.

At the end, **Jane Jacobs**, a renowned urban theorist and activist, is best known for her groundbreaking work on urban planning and the social dynamics of cities. While Jacobs did not focus explicitly on gendered spaces in her work, her insights and observations have had a significant impact on our understanding of how gender influences urban spaces and city life. One of Jane Jacobs' key contributions to urban studies is her emphasis on the importance of diverse, vibrant, and mixed land uses in creating successful and livable cities. Jacobs argued that neighborhoods with a mix of uses, such as residential, commercial, and recreational, foster social interaction, economic vitality, and a sense of community (Jacobs, 1993). Her ideas on urban planning, community engagement, and place-making have important implications for understanding how gender shapes experiences of the city. Many contemporary urban theorists and activists have built upon Jacobs' legacy to explore issues of gender inclusivity, safety, accessibility, and representation in urban design and planning practices.

In general, the scholars highlight the importance of recognizing and challenging gender biases in urban design, advocating for cities that prioritize the needs and voices of all residents. Their work underscores the interconnectedness of environmental issues, social inequalities, and power dynamics in shaping urban spaces. By engaging with diverse perspectives and centering marginalized voices in urban planning and policy-making, these scholars are pushing for more just, inclusive, and responsive cities that promote gender equity and social justice. The findings from the research of these scholars provide valuable insights into the complexities of gender disparities in urban spaces and offer critical perspectives on how urban environments can be designed and managed to create more equitable and inclusive communities for all residents. Their work continues to inspire academic dialogues, policy discussions, and community actions aimed at fostering more gender-responsive, sustainable, and livable cities.

### 3. Discussion

The review of existing literature on the impact of urban design on shaping women's social challenges reveals a variety of factors that influence women's experiences in urban environments. These factors include access to transportation, safety in public spaces, economic opportunities, childcare facilities, and social inclusion. Studies indicate that traditional urban design practices often overlook the unique needs and experiences of women, resulting in gender inequalities and social barriers in cities. Traditional urban planning and design practices often prioritize the needs and preferences of men while neglecting those of women. This can lead to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and reinforce social barriers for women in several ways:

Firstly, **Lack of safe and accessible public spaces**, which can leave women feeling unsafe or unwelcome in these spaces, limiting their ability to participate in public life and engage in leisure activities (Kotsila et al., 2022b). Then, women may feel unsafe in public spaces that are **poorly lit or lack adequate security measures**, such as surveillance cameras and emergency call boxes. This can restrict their mobility and limit their access to essential services and resources, reinforcing social barriers that prevent them from fully participating in urban life (Lorenc et al., 2013). Moreover, **Limited access to transportation options** can limit women's access to essential services, education, and employment opportunities, further reinforcing social barriers that prevent them from fully participating in society. Furthermore, **neglecting the provision of childcare facilities in public spaces**, can make it difficult for women with children to participate in public life and engage in leisure activities. This can reinforce gender stereotypes that assign women the primary responsibility for caregiving and limit their ability to pursue personal and professional aspirations (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). Finally, **lack meaningful representation and participation** of women, in traditional urban design may lead to decision-making that does not adequately consider their needs and perspectives. This can perpetuate gender stereotypes that marginalize women and reinforce social barriers that prevent them from accessing resources and opportunities in urban environments (Akala & Sing, 2024).

Addressing these issues requires a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to urban planning and design that considers the diverse needs and experiences of all residents and research in

this area is essential for advancing the goals of social justice and equity within the field of architecture and ensuring that the built environment is inclusive and accessible to all members of society.

#### 4. Results

To address women's social challenges in cities, researchers and practitioners have proposed a range of inclusive and gender-sensitive design strategies that prioritize women's safety, accessibility, and well-being in urban spaces. These strategies include designing well-lit and well-maintained public spaces, enhancing access to public transportation options, creating mixed-use developments that support work-life balance, and promoting community engagement and social inclusion. However, research has shown that implementing such design strategies can not only improve women's experiences in cities but also contribute to creating more vibrant, sustainable, and equitable urban environments for all residents (Czischke et al., 2023). Therefore, an important aspect of understanding women's social challenges in urban environments is recognizing the intersectional nature of gender inequalities, which highlights how different dimensions of social identity, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities (Chua et al., 2024). In the context of urban design, this means acknowledging that women's experiences are shaped by a combination of factors, including their gender identity and other aspects of social identity. Studies have emphasized the importance of adopting an intersectional lens in urban planning and design to create more inclusive and equitable urban environments that address the diverse needs and challenges faced by women with different social identities (Chigbu et al., 2019).

In this way, community engagement and participatory planning processes are crucial for ensuring that women's voices and needs are effectively incorporated into urban design decisions. By actively involving women and other marginalized groups in the planning and design process, planners can better understand the unique challenges and priorities that these groups face in urban environments, and develop solutions that are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to their needs. One key advantage of community engagement is that it allows planners to tap into local knowledge and expertise that may not be readily apparent through traditional data collection methods. By listening to and engaging with women in the community, planners can gain valuable insights into their daily experiences, concerns, and aspirations, which can inform the development of more targeted and effective urban design solutions. Moreover, involving women in participatory planning processes can help to challenge gender stereotypes, address power imbalances, and promote greater gender equality in urban spaces. By ensuring that women's perspectives and priorities are central to decision-making processes, planners can create more gender-sensitive and responsive urban designs that promote safety, inclusivity, and accessibility for all individuals (Khalatbari Limaki, 2024).

#### 5. Gaps and Future Directions

While significant progress has been made in understanding the impact of urban design on shaping women's social challenges, there are still gaps in the existing literature that warrant further investigation. Future research could explore the role of technology and smart city initiatives in addressing women's social challenges, examine the impact of gentrification and urban redevelopment on women's access to affordable housing and community resources, and investigate the intersectionality of gender inequalities in different cultural and geographical contexts. By expanding the scope of research on women's experiences in urban environments and employing a more intersectional approach to urban design, we can work towards creating cities that are truly inclusive, equitable, and supportive for all residents, regardless of gender or social identity.

#### 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the review of existing literature on the impact of urban design on shaping women's social challenges highlights the significant disparities and barriers that women face in accessing and navigating urban spaces. Traditional urban planning practices often prioritize the

needs of men and neglect the unique experiences and perspectives of women, leading to gender inequalities and social barriers in cities. Scholars and practitioners have proposed inclusive and gender-sensitive design strategies to address these challenges, including creating well-lit public spaces, enhancing transportation options, and promoting community engagement. However, there are still gaps in the existing literature, such as the role of technology in addressing women's social challenges, the impact of gentrification, and the intersectionality of gender inequalities in different contexts.

Moving forward, future research directions should focus on expanding the scope of studies on women's experiences in urban environments, employing an intersectional approach to urban design, and integrating women's voices and needs into decision-making processes through participatory planning. By addressing these gaps and advancing research on gender equity in city planning, we can work towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and supportive urban environments for all residents, regardless of gender or social identity. Ultimately, advocating for gender-responsive urban design practices is essential in creating cities that promote safety, inclusivity, and accessibility for everyone, and contribute to building more vibrant, sustainable, and just communities.

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