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Feminist Urbanism: Reframing Urban Planning from a Gender Perspective

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Abstract

The planning and development of cities is generally understood as an impartial and neutral process unaffected by the social implications in society. Historically, the field of urban planning is defined by a goal of the 'common good' where cities were designed to foster economic productivity, consumerism, and an exclusive focus on constructing the building mass of a city. However, in reality, at the centre of this unbiased planning and design process was an able-bodied, upper-class, working male from whose standpoint urban planning processes were largely imagined and implemented. Feminist theorists have tried to bring forth how architectural design, planning, and the concept of space and the built environment impact political power, cultural and social experiences of individuals and communities in urban life.

Keywords: *Urban Planning, Design, Gender-Inclusive Cities, Urban Theory, Governance.*

Introduction

The environment surrounding us is shaped by urban planning and design, which influences how we conduct our lives, perform our jobs, travel around, and rest. The interrelationship between planning and design processes and the structures and practices that shape our societies is a

fundamental aspect to consider. It is worth noting that these processes often tend to mirror and perpetuate existing systemic disparities.

To properly understand the formation of a city, it is necessary to examine who owns, manages, and governs urban areas, for what goals, and how this is accomplished. These issues provide insight into the ways that contemporary cities have been formed and structured, as well as how they affect all kinds of people who live in and utilise them. Consequently, one's immediate surroundings are constantly constructed and defined by various social relationships. (Visakha, 2021).

The prevailing knowledge suggests that urban environments often exhibit a higher degree of efficiency and functionality for individuals who identify as heterosexual, possess physical fitness, conform to cisgender norms, and identify as men. Conversely, women, young girls, members of the LGBTQIA community, and individuals with disabilities tend to encounter more significant challenges and limitations within these urban settings. These challenges manifest in various forms, such as transportation systems that prioritise commuting over considerations for caregiving responsibilities, as well as the lack of adequate lighting and restroom facilities in public spaces.

Urban Planning Theory

Planning is the purposeful social or organisational activity of developing the most effective plan of action for the future to accomplish an intended set of objectives for resolving innovative challenges in complicated situations. Planning may be thought of as generating the most effective plan of action for the future to achieve an intended set of objectives. It comes with the ability and the will to allocate resources alongside the desire to carry out operations whenever required to put the chosen strategy into action. (Alexander, 1987). Urban planning can be conceptualised as a collection of administrative procedures that serve as intermediaries between development and economic actions. These processes are closely intertwined with policy strategies expressing ideas for future development patterns. (Beebeejaun, 2017).

World Bank report titled 'Handbook for Gender-Inclusive Urban Planning and Design' defines urban planning as "a multi-disciplinary approach to deciding where things get built and why. Urban planning is concerned with the relationship between people and the built environment and ensuring the protection of people's general health, safety, and welfare. Planning does this by creating and assessing plans for the preservation and development of commerce, the environment, transportation, housing, parks and public spaces, and urban design" (Terraza et al., 2020, p. 18).

Planning theory has primarily focused on creating development plans that operate within fixed boundaries of geography, despite acknowledging the significance of routine practices which are shaped by 'network economic players', such as those in the entertainment and media, financing, transport and logistics, and telecommunications industries, in shaping cities of the future (Adams et al., 2015). This territorial emphasis on regulatory planning contrasts with the widespread

understanding, at least among several social scientists, that wealth, goods, thoughts, and individuals 'flow' within a variety of transnational relations that resist attempts by planners to control them. As a result, some planning theorists have called for alternative planning that emphasises relational forms of place-making (Healey & Upton, 2010).

A substantial portion of planning history studies has been criticised for generating a generally cohesive narrative of linearity and progress and concentrating on the grand plans of great historical planners—mostly male, middle-class, and Western. It has also been said that contemporary planning theory ignores the diversity of other histories and neglected perspectives. However, insightful micro-histories that are attentive to various local, cultural, and social histories are still developing in both Western and non-Western contexts, and in some cases, they support the dismantling of official narratives (Ward et al., 2011). However within the planning regime, due to continuous push from cultural geographers and postmodern urban planning theories, there has been a notable shift towards a participatory approach in fields of urban planning. This approach highlights the significance of actively involving citizens in decision-making processes. However, despite this participatory turn, it is essential to acknowledge that civic contribution statutorily binding planning processes continue to face certain limitations.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential drawback of excessively prioritising personalised and localised narratives of inequalities across various dimensions such as sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and aging within the context of geographically specific planning frameworks. By doing so, there is a possibility that we may inadvertently overlook the fundamental reality that we, as a collective, hold shared perspectives on prevailing and future global

challenges (Adams et al., 2015). Feminist urban theorists and geographers have called these ‘concerns’ superficial and perfunctory. Though feminist theorists have agreed that some concerns in planning and design are shared by all, like sustainability and climate change; however, feminists have pointed out that the pitfall of these concerns is borne mainly by women and people experiencing poverty.

Women are more susceptible to the effects of environmental catastrophes due to several underneath factors that interact with the physical environment. These include social and cultural expectations, a lack of resources to replace lost property, a lack of options for employment, limited opportunities for education, and essential services in many cases (Trohanis et al., 2011). Feminist planners have tried to establish a relationship between poverty and vulnerability to climate change, particularly in unauthorised neighbourhoods and other economically disadvantaged regions with inadequate basic infrastructure, where it disproportionately affects women, girls, and persons with disabilities.

Historical Perspective of Urban Planning in Global North and Global South

In recent years, scholars and historians have undertaken extensive efforts to uncover the underlying attitudes, values, and objectives that have shaped the planning field. The researchers have examined the cultural and social context in which planning concepts were formulated and developed. Additionally, they have investigated the broader political and financial relationships that provided support and influence to these ideas (Ward, 2013).

Before the introduction of modern planning and significant industrialisation, most income-generating activities took place within or near the house, along with reproductive work, private

interests, and commerce heavily influenced the growth of cities (Terraza et al., 2020). The Industrial Revolution led to enormous growth in the number and extent of cities, forming the general conditions needed for modern forms of urban planning in Europe and North America. The city was embraced by modern urban design as a vibrant, capitalistic hub of manufacturing, transportation, consumption, and regeneration. For cities to function effectively as economic and social entities, this new approach embraced the emerging technology of the industrial era (Ward et al., 2011).

Modern planning constituted a significant departure from the pre-industrialisation practice of putting up defensive structures and vast urban spaces or approaches. Modern planning is distinguished by contemporary functional concerns concerned with formalising the utilisation of land, infrastructure, optimal movement of products and services, and, increasingly, improving the welfare of society. The transition occurred gradually and incrementally in the latter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in Germany, France, Britain, and the US (Ward, 2013).

This overall trend was strengthened by serious initiatives to transform urban and regional planning into an increasingly quantifiable discipline starting in the late 1950s and particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Collectively, these changes enhanced the idea that a professional planner is an objective expert who is well-versed in the latest approaches and can assist society in finding the proper solutions. The professionalisation of urban planning had a significant cultural impact by more strongly defining a planner as someone with a masculine standpoint (Greed, 1994).

The Western planning regime and bureaucratic machinery were under intense pressure by the late 1960s to a higher standard of accountability and to offer citizens a stronger voice. Even in its thriving

core, by the 1970s, the outcomes of modern planning were overwhelmingly perceived as having fallen short of the expectations that had accompanied its conception. Cultural geographers and movements for social justice raised different concerns regarding capitalist planning ventures, which increasingly eroded democratic spaces, and environmental concerns and were mainly designed from the perspective of affluent classes.

The economic and political priorities of colonial powers in third-world countries introduced a distinct layer, trend, and form of Western influence to the process of urbanisation in the global south. The colonial masters introduced distinct layers and structures, notable among them being the establishment of exclusive civil lines. These civil lines were primarily intended for colonial officers, Europeans, and the local elite who collaborated with the colonial administration. These areas were equipped with amenities such as water pipelines, sewer systems, well-organized residential zones, paved roads, and restricted shopping areas (Mehra, 2019).

Even after the independence, there has been a long history of imposing the models of designs, procedures, practices, and urban planning rules and regulations from the imperial heartlands of the U.K., Europe, and the U.S.A. throughout nations of the global South (Watson, 2009). Master planning, zoning, and ideas of urban modernity remain the standard in much of the global South. Tools and standards for planning practice have been developed, notably in the Global South, to assist the market and the motivation behind development: maximising investment from abroad and economic production (Speak, 2012).

Planning theorists developed the concept of informal urbanism to understand the global south's urban planning regime. The informal urbanism is not a “marginalised form of places and practices; rather, they are central to understanding the logic of

urbanism because they constitute debates about what is legal and illegal in the city, what is legitimate and illegitimate, and with what effects” (Inam, 2022, p. 178). The transactional conditions of uncertainty between what is acceptable and what is objectionable in cities could be characterised as informal urbanism.

According to Yiftachel & Yakobi (2004), governments in ethnocratic states and other contexts may tolerate or even support urban informality. This is done to create an image of openness and democracy while simultaneously employing it as a strategic planning approach to restrict certain groups from accessing their rights and services.

Postcolonial urban theorists have argued that conventional methods of urban planning borrowed from imperial countries work as a double-edged sword. Foremost, the hierarchical and rigid approach towards planning, zoning laws, and land-use patterns has severely hindered the development of a participatory planning system that focuses on a localised understanding of urban planning rather than on uniformity and an outdated development model exclusively based on economic productivity and construction of build-mass. Moreover, conventional planning methods have also been criticised for supporting capitalised developmental patterns where the statutory framework is manipulated opportunistically by those in positions of political and economic power to support the greed of the real estate industry to push the urban poor on the city’s margins.

India's Urban Planning: A Hierarchical System

In the Indian context, it is noteworthy that the responsibility for planning predominantly rests with the government, which primarily focuses on formulating macro-development plans or master plans. The assumption of user neutrality is

commonly accepted, with limited emphasis on active participation from individuals. The enforcement of rules lacks additional guidelines. Special demographic groups such as older individuals, children, and women are often overlooked regarding their unique needs and perspectives. Their experiences and viewpoints are not given the necessary attention or recognition they deserve.

In India, urban planning cannot be equated with anticipating and controlling urban expansion. Ananya Roy, an expert on urban theory and planning, believed that “urban planning in India has to be understood as the management of resources, particularly land, through dynamic processes of informality”, where informality has to be understood as a “state of deregulation, one where the ownership, use, and purpose of land cannot be fixed and mapped according to any prescribed set of regulations or the law” (Roy, 2009, p. 80).

Roy (2009) defines two critical ways in which informality comes to be actualised in the processes of urbanisation and planning. First, informality is “inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorised and unauthorised. This relationship is both arbitrary and fickle and yet is the site of considerable state power and violence. Second, while it has been often assumed that the modern state governs its subjects and conducts planning through technologies of visibility, counting, mapping, and enumerating”. However, it is through the 'unmapping' of cities and other forms of deregulation that urban governance is carried out. This informality gives the state much territorial freedom to change how land is used, exercise authority through eminent domain, and procure more land (Roy, 2009, pp. 80-81).

Mehra (2019) enumerated several reasons for the failure of India’s urban planning policy. According to him, disregarding the aspect of regional

governance since achieving independence, advancing populism through various centralised initiatives has resulted in the depletion of resources and capabilities of local authorities, rendering them incapable of fulfilling even their fundamental responsibilities. Furthermore, the lack of consideration for the unique requirements of urban centres of varying sizes and capabilities, the influence of the push factor from rural areas with unfavourable economic and demographic conditions, and the failure to consistently implement effective planning measures have collectively contributed to the persistent disorderliness of urban areas in India.

Moreover, in the 1990s, characterised by free market-driven economic restructuring, the central objective of decentralisation in India was to safeguard urban local bodies from political interference. This is based on the assumption that political involvement impedes the efficient functioning of free markets.

The allocation of power to municipalities in India is not substantial according to the constitutional framework, as it necessitates the delegation of authority from individual states through state legislative acts. In recent years, there has been a discernible trend of specialised agencies under state governments gradually assuming the roles and financial responsibilities that were originally designated for Urban Local Bodies. In the field of urban planning, it is not uncommon for states to enact legislation that pertains to specific and localised contexts. However, it is arguable that such matters should ideally fall under the purview of city governments. Urban planning is a multifaceted process often executed through various schemes and plans. In numerous instances, these initiatives are implemented by highly trained semi-public agencies that function within the purview of the state administration. However, it has been observed that such arrangements can potentially undermine the authority and autonomy of local governments

(Ashok, 2022; Visakha, 2021). As a result, the legislative framework governing planning appears ineffectual in planning urban centres in India.

Feminist Urbanism: A New Approach Towards Urban Planning

Men and women use and experience cities differently, often in ways planners did not intend. The work performed for monetary exchange in the public realm is prioritised during the creation of the built environment over the activities done at home. According to Elizabeth Wilson (1991), historically, gender stereotypes have significantly impacted urban design and organisations. As a result, the needs of women in urban settings are frequently overlooked. However, it is not only women's gender roles that must be considered while planning for a city or a space. As Healey & Williams (1993) contend, we must also incorporate the concept of social diversity into public policy to make the built environment less like a landscape of exclusion or a place of risk and into a more accessible, secure, and enjoyable space for everyone — men and women, the poor and the rich, healthy and disabled, and as well as people at various stages of their life cycle.

The design and planning of public spaces, such as buildings, transit networks, residential areas, and dwellings, significantly impact women's everyday lives. However, women are perceived as having very little knowledge and ability to contribute to the urban planning regime (Weisman, 1994). Feminist scholars in urban planning have critically examined the prevailing assumption that urban planning should adhere to a neutral stance and prioritise collective welfare, as advocated within architecture, engineering, and urban planning. Despite its purported neutrality, the field of urban planning has exhibited a lack of inclusivity by neglecting to incorporate the experiences and needs of women in its design processes (Escalante & Valdivia, 2015).

The emergence of the feminist critique of urban theory and planning can be traced back to the 1970s. During this period, scholars and activists began to critically analyse how city-making and planning practices perpetuated social inequalities and highlighted how these practices reflected and reinforced these inequalities, effectively solidifying them within the physical structures of cities (Hayden, 1980). Feminist urban theorists and planners have effectively showcased how contemporary post-industrial urban planning ideology has been constructed around promoting commerce and industry, primarily through an automobile-centric urban design approach. This approach prioritises the facilitation of vehicular movement and convenience, often at the expense of creating cities that prioritise the needs and well-being of human beings. Consequently, feminist scholars and practitioners advocate for a shift towards a pedestrian-centric design philosophy that places human beings at the core of urban planning considerations.

Feminist urban planning is a theoretical framework encompassing a critical urban planning approach. Its primary objective is to effectively address various social groups' diverse needs and concerns within urban development. Specifically, feminist urban planning emphasises the experiences and perspectives of women and young girls. This approach seeks to rectify historical inequities and create more inclusive and equitable urban spaces by centring these marginalised groups (Visakha, 2021).

Feminist urban planning and gender analysis of cities would reveal how modern cities are planned and designed from an androcentric perspective. However, Feminist urban planning also challenges the prevailing notion that gender inclusion is narrowly confined to matters concerning women, disregarding the intricate interplay between genders and the collective consequences arising from the intersectionality of sexual orientation,

gender, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, disability, and age.

The conventional approach to urban development, zoning, and land utilisation policies and practices establishes legal boundaries that separate manufacturing and economic regions, which are primarily dedicated to the production, trade, income generation, and public activities, from residential areas, which are primarily designated for domestic activities, reproduction, care, and private life. The spatial divisions observed in society are intricately connected to gendered divisions of labour. These divisions are characterised by the differentiation between productive work, which is commonly associated with men and is aimed at generating income, and unpaid reproductive work, which is predominantly associated with women and pertains to activities related to the care and maintenance of the household and family. The spatial demarcation between public and private domains imposes an additional strain on women's material and physical resources. For women and girls residing in informal settlements, typically situated on the outskirts of urban areas, the insufficiency of infrastructure and the considerable distance between essential resources and residential areas contribute to an increased allocation of time towards caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, this directly hampers their ability to access employment and educational prospects. The current state of the built environment often presents challenges for women and girls rather than actively addressing and meeting their specific needs (Beall, 1996; Desai, 2007; Phadke et al., 2011; Terraza et al., 2020).

However, the government of India, to some extent, has departed from this conventional understanding of urban planning. In its Smart City Mission (2014), while defining a 'smart city', the plan acknowledges that "there is no universally

accepted definition of a Smart City. It means different things to different people. The conceptualisation of Smart City, therefore, varies from city to city and country to country, depending on the level of development, willingness to change and reform, resources, and aspirations of the city residents" (Ministry of Urban Development, 2015, p. 5). However, implementing this plan espouses the creation of specialised agencies like Special Purpose Vehicles or SPVs at the city level, which undermines democratic institutions at the local level.

The pivotal determinant governing the correlation between women and urban environments is safety. The absence of safety, or more precisely, the absence of perceived safety within city spaces, significantly impacts women's ability to access and utilise these areas. It is imperative to recognise that safety is not solely a matter of traditional notions of security and law enforcement but rather a multifaceted social and political concern that necessitates broader consideration (Visakha, 2021).

According to Shilpa Phadke, a prominent feminist urban theorist, the prevailing discourse surrounding women's safety can be more accurately characterised as a discourse centred on sexual safety (Phadke, 2007). Urban planning projects such as Smart City Mission focus on the safety and security of women, children, and the elderly. However, cities' mechanisms to ensure it relies on a paternalistic surveillance approach. The paternalistic approach towards safety can be mapped to conservative class and community structures, precisely, those characterised by sexual endogamy. The concept of safety in this context extends beyond instances of sexual assault to include instances of undesired sexual encounters, even when they are consensual, particularly within the dynamics of middle-class women and lower-class men (Phadke, 2007).

Planning policies design urban environments to ensure safety based on the 'opportunistic' understanding of crime and violence against women. However, feminist scholars have long argued that systemic and ingrained socioeconomic inequities significantly contribute to the prevalence of violence against women (Trench et al., 1992). Integrating social and economic planning is imperative to bolster physical planning measures within the built environment. The phenomenon of women's fear is not solely influenced by the physical attributes of public spaces but also by their social position within a context that continues to exhibit gender-based discrimination against women (Sweet & Escalante, 2010).

Conclusion

Urban Planning cannot be done in isolation without understanding how it intersects with gender inequality and other forms of discrimination and exclusion in society. Challenges in urban environments, like access to resources, mobility, and safety, etc., are not separated from each other; instead, these challenges tend to accumulate and exacerbate, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of systematic economic and social disparities.

The notion of "good governance," often emphasised in discussions surrounding democracy, necessitates a broader examination beyond mere considerations of financial responsibility and operational effectiveness. It is imperative to delve deeper into the political dimensions associated with democratic systems, civil rights, and citizen participation.

Analysing urbanisation demands a thorough understanding of its complexities at the micro level, with a specific focus on local urban fabrics and institutional settings. Macro-level approaches are beneficial when addressing questions about the pace of urban expansion and the underlying structural characteristics of urban areas. However, micro-level approaches are essential for comprehending the power of choice. Specifically, the actions and decisions individuals make within urban environments as they navigate and shape the ever-evolving urban structures. Both macro-level structural factors and micro-level actions of city dwellers have a daily impact on cities. The potential for effective urbanisation in India hinges on the convergence of these two distinct levels while also recognising the unique experiences and challenges faced by women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalised groups in shaping urban spaces and policies.

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