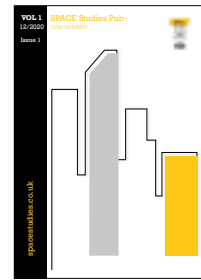


ISSN: 2977-3512 (online)

JOURNAL DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51596/sj.ijss1259>

Volume 3 Issue 1 <https://doi.org/10.51596/sj.ijss1259.v3i1>

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The Gendered City

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Published by Space Studies of Planning and Architecture Limited,
trading as SPACE Studies Publication

To cite this article:



Singha, S., Scaioli, A. (2022). The Gendered City. SPACE International Journal of Space Studies in Architecture and Urban Design, 3(1), 23-34.
<https://doi.org/10.51596/sjp2022.v3i1a3>



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51596/sjp2022.v3i1a3>



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The Gendered City

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Abstract

The design of cities and buildings affects women more than men because they were designed by and built for men. Design continues to favour the 'universal man', i.e., a white, able-bodied man of about 40 years. The traditionally male-dominated vision of cities produces and reproduces spaces according to reconceived gender roles. The design of external spaces and facilities such as streets, parks, transport and infrastructure, community, and workplace spaces – traditionally associated with the male sphere – all work in a way that women are unable to use them fully. So, the city is divided spatially and temporally by gender – spaces are not fully usable by 50 per cent of the population that women constitute. Failing to consider a gender perspective in design could deteriorate, increment, and catalyse an already gendered environment. At the same time, the city of the evening and night is violent and frightening for women, who have also been subjected to sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination in such spaces during the day. The fact that globally, women outnumber men has not given them the agency to change matters; the fact that the world has seen many women in positions of power, yet much remains to be done in advancing women's position in society; and the fact that women are heading design practices, yet women-friendly design remains uncommon. The number of women architects, urban planners, surveyors, and engineers still remains low, so gender mainstreaming of urban design is not commonplace. Are these a problem of those in power who do not yet consider the practical, political, and legacy issues arising from a gendered city? Or is this a long-standing problem of patriarchy and history that cannot be overcome so easily? Or can it be a matter of thinking differently, designing innovatively, and working inclusively? We will look at issues of urban design that affect women more, initiatives, and examples of inclusive urban design that empower women and girls from all over the world, reflecting on the relationships between spatial and social models and the role of design in these processes.

Article History:

Received May 20, 2022
Accepted June 12, 2022
Published December 30, 2022
Available online December 22, 2022

<https://doi.org/10.51596/sjp2022.v3i1a3>

Keywords: Inclusive urban design, gender mainstreaming, spatial justice, empowerment through design, women and architecture

1. Introduction

Gender equality is reflected in the spatial quality of our buildings and cities. The New European Bauhaus and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) drive the ambition of having a more inclusive, sustainable, safe, and delightful place to live (European Commission, 2021). Thus, gender equality can become one of the most crucial pillars on which to ground a spatial

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transformation, bridging the intersection between spatial and gender justice. In one sense, the New European Bauhaus and the SDGs generate a set of theoretical values from which to look at the transformation of the project from a multidisciplinary and creative perspective. Gender equality can be addressed in a multifaceted way, investigating the entanglement of cultural, spatial, and pedagogical domains.

In this paper, we will present some reflections from the elective course, 'Women in Architecture' taught at the Politecnico di Milano by Sumita Singha. A feminist perspective on architecture where it can engage with students and users with shared creativity and practical knowledge. The relevance of pedagogy is the first moment of empowerment, especially for young girls. Indeed, the creation of a safe and welcoming environment is crucial to setting up a discussion able to generate participation and new insights. The starting points have been the questions about how the city is gendered, which are the key issues in space considering women's perspective and how the use of space by women could lead to a change in the spatial configuration and safer places.

2. City and Gender: A Discussion Situated Within the Urban Environment

The design of cities and buildings affects women more than men, simply because they were designed by and built for men. As Jane Darke stated: 'Our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass and concrete' (Darke, 1996), correlating gender issues in the built environment and architectural production. Indeed, this spatial configuration continues to favour the 'universal man', i.e., a Caucasian, able-bodied male of about 40 (weighing about 70 kgs). The traditionally male-dominated vision of cities produces and reproduces spaces according to preconceived gender roles around the world. In this sense, the design of external spaces and facilities such as streets, parks, transport and infrastructure, community, and workplace spaces that are traditionally associated with the male sphere is unable to be used fully by women. As the city is divided spatially and temporally by gender, spaces are not fully usable during the 24 hours by 50 per cent of the population that women constitute. Designing a genderless city would mean designing a city for everyone, breaking down the traditional and pre-established roles.

Tackling these issues in the built environment implies an understanding of how space is used throughout the day by women, considering different sets of activities at different times that they perform within the urban milieu. In research conducted in 2022, just before the lockdown, 23 per cent of the passengers, out of which 48 per cent were women, didn't travel at certain times due to safety concerns [1]. As two million people travel during rush hour in London, it would appear that there were many women who were unable to use it fully. Another point related to mobility is that it impacts women's education- research from Young Women's Trust found that 16 per cent of young women had been unable to apply for, turned down or left a job because it was unsafe to travel in London. According to the Women's Budget Group, older women also face similar problems in England while using public transport [2].

The lack of clean toilets is another issue preventing women from travelling outside the home. Movements such as 'Reclaim the Night' have spread to enable women to use the city 24 hours, but the fear and actual occurrence of sexual violence, as well as the lack of facilities for women, prevent many women from using the city entirely (Figure 1).

Failing to consider a gender perspective in design could deteriorate, increase, and catalyse an already gendered environment. At the same time, the city of the evening and night is violent and frightening for women, who have also been subjected to sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination in such spaces during the day. The fact that, globally, women outnumber men has not given them the agency to change matters; the fact that the world has seen many women in positions of power, yet much remains to be done in advancing women's position in society; and the fact that women are heading design practices, yet women-friendly design remains uncommon. The number of women architects, urban planners, surveyors, and engineers still remains low, so gender mainstreaming of urban design is not commonplace.



Figure 1. A little girl walks in Milano, Italy. During the early days of the war in Ukraine, a female reporter said that her idea of peace was to see a woman with a baby in a stroller walking down a street. (Credit: Sumita Singha)

Here, we consider four ways in which women are subjected to sexual discrimination and violence in the city. The aim is to unveil the complex system behind gender inequality in space, showing the entanglement of cultural, spatial, and social instances. In the first category are the external (and literally) 'man-made' factors such as war, civil unrest, and violence in the streets that happen outside the home and affect women disproportionately. These may not be targeted at particular women all the time but affect all women. Women are traditionally the nurturers in the family, looking after children and vulnerable adults and sourcing and cooking food. Women usually hide in times of external unrest because they could become victims of violence, rape, and crimes against them if they go out. They could also become victims of violence when the males in the family leave them to go to war or try to migrate to other countries, as seen in Syria, Iraq, and other countries.

The second in the category is the effect on women by nature- such as the Climate Crisis, droughts, famines, and extreme weather events. Climate crisis effects do not affect men and women proportionally. Women and children, especially in already fragile and marginalised contexts, undergo greater difficulties in times of crisis, reducing their capability to answer and cope with these emergencies over a long-term period (Hawken, 2017; GIZ, UN-Habitat & Gender CC, 2015; Women4Climate Report, 2019). This condition is mostly due to the lack of involvement of women in decision-making processes for communal facilities and infrastructure. Mainstreaming gender into architectural processes that aim to tackle the climate crisis offers the opportunity to re-examine gender relations in society, fostering women's empowerment and emancipation through their direct participation.

The third is the more subtle way in which sexual discrimination occurs through secondary means due to the patriarchal structure of society. This includes primary and secondary education, higher education, work choices, and the lack of facilities for women, such as toilets. Even the sexualised imagery of women in advertising gazing down from the billboards and in advertisements found in magazines and newspapers seems to acknowledge the status of women as secondary, mere decoration rather than substance. These images mirror the contrast in how a woman is brought up with restraints and modesty while boys are given confidence and choices - as well as the freedom to explore the city. These subtle reinforcements are then projected on the buildings and cities, which in turn shape the human psyche and reconfirm the patriarchy. Indeed, the symbolic dimension related to women's visibility in space has a strategic role in shaping the system of values behind space and architecture.

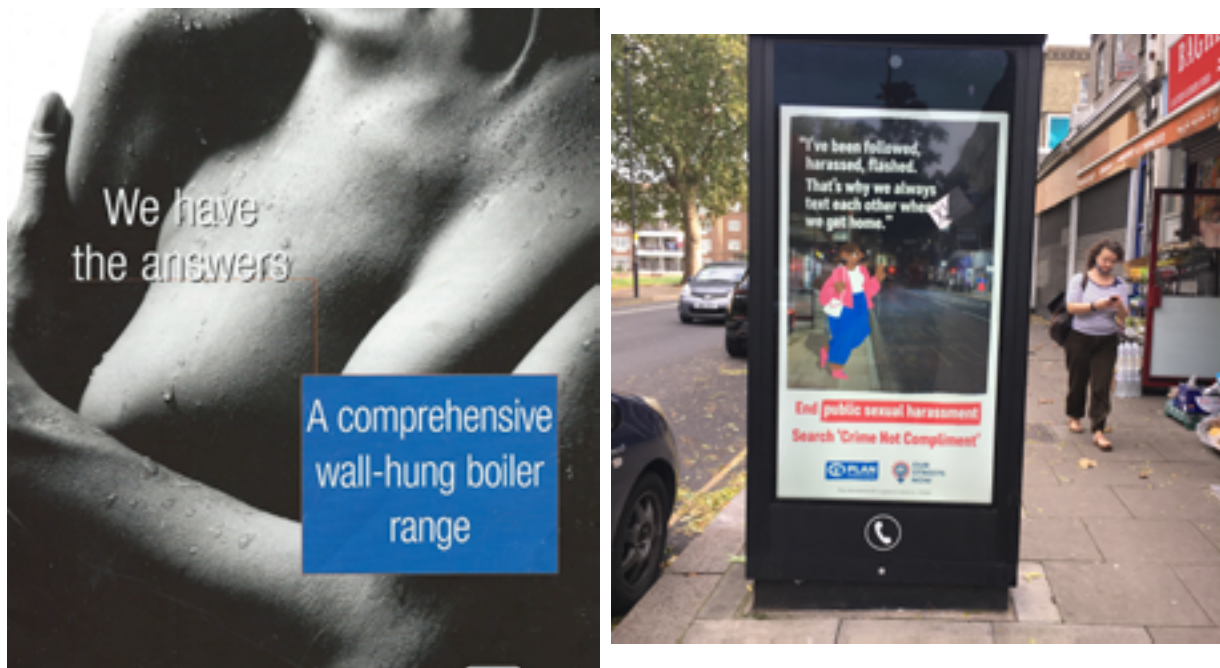


Figure 2. Public display of a woman's body with private restraints placed on women contrasts (left) and conflicts with the visibility of women in cities (right) (image from Building Magazine, February 2002 and advertisement calling women to use their mobile to track their movements after the murder of women in London, 2021)

One of the ways in which patriarchy functions and becomes explicit in space, influencing its composition and perception, is related to the symbolism associated with it: toponymy and monuments dedicated to important and famous men in history are examples of this attitude. The question of visibility and the right to be represented in space becomes relevant in the debate about gender equality in the city. By being recognised in public space, they become manifested as collective symbols, assuming a political role of resistance and advocacy for women and minorities (Andreola and Muzzonigro, 2022). The symbolism associated with places is significant. As we walk around cities, we see symbols of men- statues, names of streets or places (Figure 3). A survey carried out in 2015 on the streets of seven different cities across the world found that a mere 27.5 per cent of roads were named after women. Paris has only 2.6 per cent of streets named after a woman. This situation is rooted in architecture, planning, surveying, and construction, along with the education of these subjects, and as a result, patriarchy is reinforced in the visible city.



Figure 3. Patriarchy is reinforced with imagery and names that are masculine- the left showing the names of RIBA Presidents and the right from a car garage (credit: Sumita Singha)

Lastly, there is the internal violence directed specifically at a woman taking place- inside the home, in communal spaces or on their bodies. This could take the form of domestic violence, discrimination or abuse at the workplace, violence in the community and even at places of clinical care. Many incidents become hidden in the body and mind of the women, while some, like acid attacks on women's faces, are humiliations made visible. Most victims of domestic violence know the perpetrators- and one in three women have been subjected to violence, sexual or physical, at least once in their lifetime since the age of 15. Laws against domestic violence are lax in most countries, and some countries do not even have any laws against it (World Bank Group, 2018; Htun, Jensenius, 2020). In the UK, women have not only been sexually assaulted by clinical staff but also have had unnecessary procedures such as the insertion of meshes in their vagina. Acts such as Female Genital Mutilation and the aborting of female fetuses constitute extreme forms of violence against women- and are often undertaken by other women. India and China are leading on this trend with disproportionately more men because of 'missing women' from 1970 to 2015.

Patriarchy is a system under which we all live, and unfortunately, patriarchy is ingrained in every culture. Being rooted in traditions, cultures, and society for a long period of time has led to the impossibility of detecting, acknowledging, and extracting it, becoming the core of our system. Also, the problem is that it has been ingrained for so long that it has become part of the system- impossible to detect, acknowledge, and extract. It is ingrained in many religious teachings as part of a daily practice for many people. Patriarchy is part of the social norm that undermines all women, particularly women of colour. As the historical scholar Mary Beard says, 'You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently' (Beard, 2017, p. 86-87).

The overall impact that women are able to make can also be influenced by accepted policies and laws. However, women themselves have little impact on formulating these. In some ways, the status of women is demonstrated by the late Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, who was expected to say things that the male politicians had already approved. As a result of patriarchy, women are not the decision-makers for their own rights. Statistics show that women represent just over a quarter of national parliaments. Female policymakers and lobbyists are rare. According to UN Women, women's leadership and political participation are essential to achieving the goals of the 2030 SDG. However, data show that women are still underrepresented in societal power, leading to increasing difficulties in achieving gender equality at all levels.

Occasionally, the impact of policies and goals on women is not taken into consideration. For example, all the goals of the SDGs impact women, although there is only one goal specifically about gender parity. From healthcare to the availability of water and food, all the SDGs have an impact on women, but gender equality, even though it is a transversal goal, is not encompassed in each of them. The concept of 'Gender mainstreaming', first proposed in 1985 at the Third World Conference on Women, was enshrined as the UN global strategy for gender equality in 1995 and eventually was incorporated in the SDGs in 2015, but remains to be activated in many sectors. While the concept implies that women and men are to be accounted for equally in policy, legislation and resource allocation, mere policies, reports, and slogans do not affect change. The practicalities of embodying gender mainstreaming at every level of action and ensuring they work are difficult and complex to realise.

3. Designing for Safety

As people encircled, limited, and entrapped by patriarchy, women have found different ways to exist, define and protect themselves in the city. From self-defence classes in Nairobi to sex education, women are acting in pragmatic ways to assert their existence. International movements such as Reclaim the Night, 'Enough is Enough' and 'No Means No' movements, as well as campaign videos and advertising that highlight the harassment of women in the built environment, are being promoted in cities around the world.

The concept of 'Prospect and Refuge', first proposed by, was a theory or sub-theory of landscape aesthetics proposed by the human geographer Jay Appleton in 1975, within his broader thesis called 'Habitat Theory'. These theories have been further widened by environmental psychologists

Rachael Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan. Their theory identifies the Prospect as an area or a point from which you can look at what is ahead of you, while a refuge is a point where you can shelter and from where you're not visible. From research, it was found that men value Prospects, while women are more refuge-focused. Research has also found that people like complexity in a landscape. They also like to have a focal point from a prospect. Also, the depth of the landscape and the defined area that can be seen are appreciated. More people find an equal amount of Prospect and Refuge and remove shared dislikes such as disorder, chaos, no line of sight to focus, rough ground, barriers, and lack of light. Finally, people like certain natural features- water is welcomed by everyone, but also smooth terrain. So, this concept of Prospect and Refuge can be used to create a more gender-inclusive outdoor space (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The entrance to Building 11 at the Politecnico Di Milano shows vividly what the entrance lacks in focus: Prospect and Refuge. Further, the presence of a cigarette seller right at the entrance may send an alarming message about the University's concern for health, particularly women's health (Image: Gerardo Sempliano)

Another theory called 'defensible and indefensible spaces' came in 1972 from Oscar Newman, a US architect and city planner. In the research presented in his book "Defensible Space", Newman found that higher crime rates existed in high-rise housing projects than in low-rise ones. He concluded that this was because residents felt no control or personal responsibility. The defensible space theory arose as a result of trying to prevent crime and increase neighbourhood safety through architectural and environmental design. This concept has similarities to the prospect and refuge theory in that an area you can see and have control of is also what you can 'defend'. Once very popular, the concept of dead ends or the cul-de-sac, which was widespread in the new towns and housing estates built in the 70s and 80s, has been recognised as not being particularly safe for people and women, although it prevents through traffic (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A Cul-de-sac or Close becomes an unsafe place with vandalism, rubbish dumping, and crime. Seen in a holistic way, the concept of defensible and indefensible space should apply to all genders, so why are we not using this concept more in our designs? A plan of Village Homes in Davis, California, showing the street and path network with connected culs-de-sac (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The idea of the 'Eyes on the Street' came from Jane Jacobs, an American Canadian journalist, author, theorist, and activist. She wrote and campaigned for pedestrianised streets because as long as there were people, there were eyes on the street; therefore, there would be less crime committed, and streets would feel safer. So, she was advocating for reasonable use of the streets. Crimes can still be committed in an open space and on the streets, but because of the 'eye on the street', there is the possibility that someone will see something or even catch the criminal. Today, with smartphones and cameras, people can record crimes, such as the woman who recorded the murder of George Floyd in the US.

4. Accessibility, Transport, And Walking

Accessibility to a public space is critical. If you cannot enter a place easily, for example, women with buggies and disabled people, it becomes an exclusive place and even a hotspot for crime. Although designing landscapes with many slopes and steps creates architectural interest, it also makes it difficult for people with mobility issues to access a space. Ramps, automatic doors, entrance portico or shade, and clearly identifiable entrances enable diverse users to enter a space. The identity, value, and scale of spaces are essential. What is this space about? Is this a space to meet? Is this a space where you gather and have fun? Is it at a human scale? Many modern housing estates contain open spaces with no sense of scale or focus, where one could feel terrified. Sometimes, the building is very tall, and the entrance is narrow, small, and hardly visible.

The Garden City concept and now the '15 or 20-minute' cities connect people using walkable streets and public transport. But are the streets walkable? Are there places to rest? Are there public toilets? Public transport frequency is also vital- waiting at a bus stop for a long time, especially at night, could be distressing. Many public transport facilities are under maintenance during the weekends when a woman might be out. So, the frequency and maintenance of public

transport that considers a diverse range of users is essential. How public transport is used by different genders is also important. Men tend to go straight to their destination, but women tend to make multiple stops on the same journey. For instance, they might do some shopping, collect their children from school and then go home. In London, 'hopper fares', which allow one to make as many bus journeys as needed within one hour, were introduced in London by the Mayor. It works well for women, particularly those on low incomes (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Women with buggies waiting to board a bus in central London. One of these in the foreground is for a disabled child (Credit: Sumita Singha)



Figure 7. : Safetipin map, first started in India, now used in other countries. Safetipin is a social organisation working with a wide range of urban stakeholders, including governments, to make public spaces safer and more inclusive for women. They collect data using mobile phone applications and generate a safety score based on the data collected and provide it in the My Safetipin app for users to make safe and informed decisions about their mobility (Copyright: Safetipin)

Walkability is an important issue, not just for women with prams and small children but also for disabled and older people. It is crucial that streets are designed for all kinds of pedestrians and enable walkability. These should also enable wheelchair and buggy use. Directional signage is

also fundamental to ensuring walkability. Also, seating at different points is essential for women, who tend to use seats more than men. This is because women might use the seat in different ways- to rest and talk to a friend; they might have small children who need to sit, or they might want to breastfeed. So, seating in a protected, well-lit, and visible place becomes a Refuge as well as a Prospect. Many cities have started creating 'safety mapping' for women. In Delhi, a live and open-source map called 'Safetipin', marking zones and areas which are unsafe, is being used. In Cairo, the 'Harassmap' marks out where women have been harassed. These maps help women avoid crime spots, but they do not prevent crime. However, they do highlight areas where urban planners and policing should look into (Figure 7).

5. Designing for Women: Some Examples

Many cities are coming up with women-friendly housing and urban design. As women increase their share of economic and political power, planners and developers are realising that they cannot be ignored. Women also live longer and are working longer than men. In Vienna, a housing complex designed by a woman architect considers different stages of a woman's life by designing a flexible space for women to live in. They incorporate the concept of the 'eyes on the streets', using balconies and windows that look out on the main street, thereby increasing a sense of protection. In Barcelona, Col·lectiu Punt 6 [5], a women's collective, is redesigning its famous squares - closing some to cars and adding seating and play areas. These interventions also include looking at the more subtle ways in which cities induce discrimination, such as removing sexist advertising. In Iceland, for example, strip clubs have been banned by law since 2010. Women live longer than men but could find themselves homeless. In North London, a woman-only co-housing scheme, 'New Ground' for women above the age of 50, has been very popular. As the founders say, 'The senior cohousing community could enrich the lives of many, and reduce pressures on health and care services, if local authorities, planners, policymakers and housing developers helped to remove the many obstacles society puts in its way. [3]' These initiatives are happening together, and it's not just only about physical planning; it's about looking at the whole urban system that supports patriarchy.

In my (Sumita) projects, I found that women come forward to work and find time to volunteer and do things beyond their personal interests. Although I invite both men and women to work in my community, I find that more women join. In Caracas, Venezuela, I (Sumita) worked with women to clear the space used for drug dealing, and we grew native plants there. We also found bits of broken brick and tiles left on the site after building a Metro station, so we created planters with those. In a project in Delhi, women and girls got involved in improving sanitation in a slum. I mapped the women's daily journeys, and they pointed out the crucial aspects they would like to see improved on that route. They then campaigned and worked with others to improve those spaces. They cleaned the school play areas and installed more toilets for women. Women are natural collaborators, and given the facilitation by professionals, they come together to improve their spaces and lives.



Figure 8. Women working together in barrio San Agustin, Caracas, 2010 (credit: Sumita Singha)

Another project in London was in a housing estate with a featureless green lawn which was used for criminal activities. The lawn was also locked up during weekends when it could be used properly. So, we created these seats so people could use the open space, particularly women, older people, and children. Only recycled or reclaimed materials were used to make the seats, and local people were trained in stone carving. The seats have been used a lot by residents of the nearby estate and people who work locally. People used the outdoor gym in that space and enjoyed a picnic while littering, and crime decreased because now there were 'eyes' on the space. After our intervention, the local council installed better street lighting, which enabled the CCTV to work better. Keys were given to the residents so that they could use the space during the evenings and weekends. So, a simple intervention has made space accessible and safe for everyone.



Figure 9. Seating made of recycled brick pavers, reclaimed stone and ceramic work, Hoxton, East London (credit: Charushila/Sumita Singha)

6. Conclusion

We conclude that making cities liveable, safe, and accessible for women does not take massive interventions or money. It is rather the case of having a will to implement such changes. Ignoring the difficulties of half of the population cannot be seen as progressive or enlightened. That this is happening in both rich and poor nations, and amongst so-called liberal professions such as architecture and design, is a sign of the patriarchal nature of our urban spaces. One lesson has been that in order to be inclusive, we need to include everyone in the design of our cities, even men. Gender parity or mainstreaming cannot be achieved in isolation from men or other groups. Men can become useful allies in this advancement as they are already in positions of power.

The involvement of women also includes the participation of women architects, planners, and engineers in the redesign of our cities and buildings. The lived experience of women should contribute to shaping our world- whether built or natural. The education and engagement of women in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects or STEAM (science, technology, architecture, engineering, and mathematics) subjects also contribute to their visibility, voice, and values in society. While at present, women architects number around 30 percent in the UK and other parts of the world, the percentages of women engineers and surveyors are even less. Their inclusion in the mainstream will enable the image, influence, and inclusion of women in everyday conversations about city planning and design. This should be standard practice, not something that happens through the enforcement of laws and regulations.

Further, the advantage of having women's involvement in the city ensures that many other minoritised groups are included in the planning and design of the city. When the Women's March on January 21, 2017, was held globally, it included five million people. Although the march was mobilised in protest against the US President, Donald Trump, who was sworn in the day before, it came to represent broader interests than just women's issues, such as immigration, healthcare, reproductive rights, the environment, LGBTQ rights, racism, freedom of religion, and workers' rights. Indeed, the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved without involving women in all seventeen of those. In today's world, where the climate crisis is becoming

a rapid global disaster, and inequalities and violence are spreading, the upliftment of women can only serve to make lives better for everyone and the planet.

Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Biographical notes on authors

Sumita Singha OBE RIBA is an architect, teacher, and writer with awards including UIA: UNESCO, Women In Business, Atkins Inspire and an OBE for services to architecture. She set up Architects For Change, the Equality forum for architects, and is past Chair of Women In Architecture, UK. She taught the course 'Women in Architecture' at Politecnico Di Milano and is the author of *Thrive: A Field Guide for Women in Architecture*, 2024.

Arianna Scaioli is an architect and PhD candidate at Politecnico di Milano, DASTU, Italy. Her research explores the spatialisation of gender equality and understanding how this notion can shape the morphology of the built environment. She is collaborating with Sumita Singha on the research project, 'Feminist by Design' which investigates urban design from a feminist perspective.

Endnotes

This paper was presented as a keynote speech by Sumita Singha at the SPACE International Conference 2022 on Gender, Space and Architecture and selected for publication in this Journal.

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