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Is it time to build feminist cities?

From woeful public transportation to dimly lighted streets, urban areas consistently fail women. As we rethink the safety of cities, could we rebuild them with women more in mind?

By Leslie Kern | Updated Jun 12, 2020, 10:30am EDT

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If you've ever been pregnant, you know that the geography gets real strange, fast. Suddenly, you're in someone else's environment. And everything about how your body moves through the world and is perceived by others is about to change.

I was pregnant with my daughter Maddy over a typically dreary London winter and through what felt like an unusually warm spring and summer. I had a part-time office job only five Tube stops from my home, but most days, it still felt interminable. When I worked a morning shift, my nausea would force me off the train long before my destination where I'd stumble to a bench and try to calm my stomach before gingerly reboarding. Before I was visibly pregnant, there was no chance of being offered a seat, no matter how waxy and green my face. This lack of hospitality didn't improve much even after my belly expanded.

I hadn't yet heard of "feminist geography," but I was certainly a feminist, and my feminist self was bristling at every turn. My new shape had taken away my sense of anonymity and invisibility in the city. I could no longer blend in, become part of the crowd, people watch. I was the one being watched.

I didn't know how much I valued that invisibility until it was gone. It didn't magically reappear after my daughter was born, either. Pregnancy and motherhood made the gendered city visible to me in high definition. I'd rarely been so aware of my embodiment, and the connection between this and my experience of the city became much more visceral. While I'd experienced street harassment and fear, I had little sense of how deep, how systemic, and how geographical it all was.

In a world where everything from medication to crash test dummies, bullet-proof vests to kitchen counters, smartphones to office temperatures, are designed, tested, and **set to standards determined by men's bodies and needs**, it shouldn't come as a surprise that cities are also designed with men's lives as the basis for the blueprint. What sometimes seems less obvious is the inverse: that once built, our cities continue to shape and influence us.

Right now, as the **coronavirus** pandemic sweeps the world, our cities — dense, reliant on crowded public spaces, and losing wealthier residents to weekend homes and the suburbs — are fundamentally changing. It's worth it, as we rebuild our urban centers with an eye towards safety, to rethink who these places are designed for. What would a city look like if it was built with the everyday life of a single mother in mind? A minimum-wage worker? A disabled person? If we want our cities to change for the better, we need to start from someplace different.

Cities or the suburbs: Neither feels like a woman's place

Although women often experience comments on our bodies and uninvited physical contact, pregnancy and motherhood elevate these intrusions to a new level. If the urbanite's blasé attitude toward others is what allows each of us to maintain some sense of privacy in the crowd, the loss of that ability to blend in made me feel very public. I was embarrassed by my belly's showy-ness, and how it tackily thrust my intimate biology into the civilized public sphere.

It didn't get much better once Maddy was born. I would strap her into a baby carrier, snug against my chest, plot a route to a newly opened Starbucks with my trusted London A-Z map book and head out for a simple treat: a latté and fresh scenery. Sometimes these outings went well, sometimes not, my attempts to be the mommy flâneuse continually interrupted by the messy biology of a newborn. Places that used to feel welcoming and comfortable now made me feel like an outsider, an alien with leaking breasts and a loud, smelly baby.

As I tried to navigate an unfamiliar set of everyday routines as a new mom, the city was a physical force I constantly struggled against. Wasn't it supposed to be the place where women could best juggle the demands of their double and triple days of paid work, unpaid domestic work, school, and myriad other roles? If that was true, why did every day feel like a fight against an enemy that was invisible yet all around me?

Relative to the suburbs, cities seemed to offer much better prospects. In the early 1960s, urban planning critic Jane Jacobs challenged the prevailing idea that the suburbs were good places for women and children. She noted isolation, a lack of people on the streets, and car dependency as suburban concerns that particularly affected women while also contributing to the decline of the **public realm in general**.

The city, however, isn't a magic fix for these concerns. Cities are based around the same kinds of assumed social norms as the suburbs. All forms of urban planning draw on a cluster of assumptions about the "typical" urban citizen: a breadwinning husband and father, able-bodied, heterosexual, white, and cis-gender. This has meant that even though cities have a lot of advantages relative to the suburbs, they're certainly not built with the aim of making women's "double shifts" of paid and unpaid work easier to manage.

Most urban public transportation systems, for example, are designed to accommodate the typical rush hour commute of a 9-to-5 office worker. What little transit that does exist in the suburbs is designed to carry this commuter in a specific direction at a specific time, a

linear trip without detours or multiple stops. And this has worked pretty well for the usual male commuter.

But research shows that women's commutes are often more complex, reflecting the layered and sometimes conflicting duties of **paid and unpaid work**. A mother with two small children might use the local bus to drop off one child at daycare when it opens at 8, then double back on her journey to leave the other child at school at 8:30. She then might get on the train, rushing to work at 9. Imagine that on the way home, the journey is reversed, with an extra stop to pick up missing ingredients for dinner and a pack of diapers. Now laden with packages, a stroller, and a child, she fights her way back onto the crowded bus to finally head home. Many transit systems will force her to pay multiple times for this trip and for the children, too.

When I became a mom, I quickly realized that using public transit with a baby stroller in London was a joke. Although a lot of Tube stations have elevators because the stations are so deep underground, only **50 out of 270 stations are accessible**. Curved staircases, random steps, steep escalators, sharp turns, narrow tunnels, and of course thousands of commuters and tourists make navigating the system an adventure.

Women and the source of urban problems

Women have always been seen as a problem for the modern city. During the Industrial Revolution, strict boundaries between classes and a firm etiquette designed to protect the purity of high-status white women were fractured by the increased urban contact between women and men, and between women and the city's great seething masses.

This chaotic transition time meant that it was increasingly difficult to discern status, and a lady on the streets was at risk of the ultimate insult: being mistaken for a "public woman." Women's gradually expanding freedoms were thus met with moral panic over everything from sex work to bicycles.

While some women needed to be protected from the city's messy disorder, other women were in need of control, reeducation, and perhaps even banishment. Growing attention to city life made the dire condition of the working class more visible. Who better to blame than women, who had come to cities to find work in factories and domestic service? Poor women were cast as domestic failures whose inability to keep clean homes was to blame for the "demoralization" of the working class.

Fast forward to today: Efforts to control women's bodies to advance certain kinds of city improvement agendas are far from over. In very recent history, we've seen the forced or coerced sterilization of women of color and Indigenous women who receive social assistance or are seen as dependent on the state in some way.

The racist stereotype of the black "welfare queen" was circulated as part of the narrative of failing cities in the 1970s and 1980s. This has been connected to moral panics over teen pregnancy with their assumptions that teen moms will join the rolls of said welfare queens and produce criminally disposed children. Anti-obesity campaigns target women as individuals and as mothers, with their bodies and their children's bodies viewed as symptoms of modern urban issues such as car dependency and fast food.

In short, women's bodies are still often seen as the source or sign of urban problems. Yet the reality is that women are much more likely to suffer from the structure of the city than their male counterparts. The constant, low-grade threat of violence mixed with daily harassment shapes women's urban lives in countless ways. Just as workplace harassment chases women out of positions of power and erases their contributions to science, politics, art, and culture, the specter of urban violence limits women's choices, power, and economic opportunities.

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The rape myths uncovered as part of the cultural landscape by the Me Too movement include the idea that women are asking for sexual assault — "What were you wearing?" and "why didn't you report it?" are two classic rape myth questions that survivors face. But rape myths also have a geography. This gets embedded into the mental map of safety and danger that every woman carries in her mind. "What were you doing in that neighborhood? At that bar? Waiting alone for a bus?" "Why were you walking alone at night?" "Why did you take a shortcut?" We anticipate these questions and they shape our mental maps as much as any actual threat.

In the Guardian a couple of years ago, architect and mother Christine Murray **asked**, "What would cities look like if they were designed by mothers?" Murray recalled crying when her

nearest Tube station was revamped without an elevator. She also lamented the lack of space on buses for wheelchairs, connecting lack of accessibility for mothers to issues facing seniors and disabled people.

Stairs, revolving doors, turnstiles, no space for strollers, broken elevators and escalators, rude comments, glares: I sheepishly realized that until I faced these barriers, I'd rarely considered the experiences of disabled people or seniors who are even more poorly accommodated. It's almost as though we're all presumed to want or need no access to work, public space, or city services. Best to remain in our homes and institutions, where we belong.

Feminist geographers, planners, and anti-violence workers have made substantial, if incomplete, progress toward creating safer, less fearful, cities, from pushing for simple changes to urban architectural features like lighting and walkways, to advocating for an overhaul of the entire field of urban planning.

Rape myths, though, are rooted in deeper systems than the physical environment. The question is, what can cities do differently to support women's independence, equality, and empowerment? Safe and affordable public transit and housing, eliminating the gendered and racialized wage gap, and universal child care would be great places to start.

Sexist myths combined with the everyday barriers that women face in the city remind us that we're expected to limit our freedom to walk, work, have fun, and take up space. Managing these extra burdens adds yet another shift to our already overburdened days. Every time I got off the bus at a distant stop or took a long and winding route home because I worried I was being followed stole my valuable time and energy. Questioning whether my route to work was safe or whether I could make it back to my kid before child care closed threatened my economic survival.

In short, the message is: The city isn't really for you.

Excerpted from **Feminist City** *by Leslie Kern. Kern is an associate professor of geography and environment and director of women's and gender studies at Mount Allison University.*

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