

# Creating Safe and Inclusive Public Spaces for Women



**Women's Health East**  
Investing in Equality and Wellbeing for Women



# Acknowledgements

This report was produced by Women's Health East.

Women's Health East acknowledges the valuable contribution of Access Health and Community.

This report contributes to the key priority of Social Inclusion within the Inner East Integrated Health Promotion Plan, coordinated by the Inner East Primary Care Partnership. The report was also informed by consultations with Local Councils across the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. Women's Health East would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Sarah Osborne.

Intersectional feminism is a guiding principle of our work at Women's Health East. We are committed to prioritising the needs of all women, considering their diverse identities and experiences, and the intersecting forms of disadvantage and discrimination women may experience due to culture, Indigeneity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class or disability.

Suggested citation:

Women's Health East 2020, *Creating safe and inclusive public spaces for women*, WHE, Melbourne.

This document was updated in September 2021.

An electronic version of this publication can found at Women's Health East's website [www.whe.org.au](http://www.whe.org.au).

Women's Health East acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.



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# Introduction

Public spaces play a significant role in community life. They provide a space for people to foster social connections, engage in sport and physical activity and access green spaces. Being able to occupy public space can positively impact on social, mental and physical health. There is, however, inequality in who can access and use these spaces safely. The evidence shows that women are more likely than men to feel unsafe in public spaces, and can also feel as though a space is not designed with them in mind. This is particularly true for women who experience other intersecting forms of marginalisation, such as those who identify as LGBTIQ, women from migrant backgrounds, older women, Aboriginal women and women with a disability.

**“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody”**

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961.

Good design is key to creating public spaces that are inclusive, accessible and safe for everyone in the community. In order to create these spaces, design must acknowledge and accommodate the specific needs and experiences of all population groups within the community.

Women's experiences and perceptions of public spaces differ to men and it's important to take these differences into account when planning and designing spaces. By applying an intersectional gender lens, women's specific experiences, needs, and concerns can inform the development of safe and inclusive public spaces for everyone.

This discussion paper has been developed by Women's Health East. It gives an overview of the role that the design of public spaces plays in creating spaces that are safe, welcoming and accessible for women. It also looks at women's experience of public spaces, and highlights the importance of women's voices and expertise in creating spaces that are safe and inclusive for everyone. The paper will be of interest to those who have a role in urban design and planning.

To inform the discussion paper, local governments across the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne were consulted about their understanding of the topic, the role they play in creating safe and inclusive public spaces for everyone, and ideas and suggestions for future projects to integrate a gendered perspective into their urban planning.

## Supporting framework

Change the Story, the national framework for the prevention of violence against women and their children<sup>1</sup>, has identified public spaces, transport, infrastructure and facilities as key settings or environments for the prevention of violence against women. The framework draws attention to the significant role that local government, along with both community and organisations, play in planning and developing public spaces. It also notes that “consideration of equality and diversity during planning and development can have a significant bearing on the extent of women's economic, social and civic participation and also on access to facilities, transport and public spaces.”

## Urban Design and Open Space Design

Urban design as a discipline involves the planning and design of public spaces to create a local identity and sense of place. Urban design “achieves a high level of quality, comfort, safety, equity, beauty and cohesion in the overall, physical outcome of all the development, planning, engineering, architectural and landscape design decisions that contribute to urban change.”<sup>2</sup> Urban design involves a number of key design types. Open space design is one of these.





## The role of local government in Victoria

Local government deliver services to people who live in, work in and visit their municipality. They are responsible for implementing a range of programs, policies and regulations, and therefore have a significant impact on the lives of their community.<sup>3</sup> Every community is different, but each local government “enables the economic, social and cultural development of the municipal area it represents, supports individuals and groups, and provides a wide range of services for the wellbeing of the local community.”<sup>4</sup>

Local government run services that may be delivered to the community include maternal and child health centres, immunisations, roads and bridges, public and street lighting, parks and reserves, libraries, sporting and leisure facilities, waste collection, pet registration and the process of planning permits.<sup>4</sup>

Local government are responsible for providing and maintaining attractive, safe and friendly public spaces for the community including:

- > Public parks and gardens
- > Playgrounds and play spaces
- > Barbeque, picnic, rubbish and public toilet facilities
- > Tree preservation and urban greening
- > Conservation of bushland reserves and wetlands
- > Walking trails and shared bike paths<sup>5</sup>

**“Local government plays an important role in creating well designed environments that all members of the community can enjoy. Such places are accessible, environmentally sustainable, affordable and safe for everyone. They enhance the cultural, social, physical and environmental diversity of a region and help foster healthy, socially inclusive communities.”<sup>6</sup>**

Public space includes all areas that are accessible to the public, such as streets, town squares, parks, recreation reserves and trails. It can also include public or environmental art.<sup>2</sup> This discussion paper focusses on the outdoor environments, and will use the terminology ‘public spaces’ to encompass all of the aforementioned spaces.

## Current Design Guidelines

*Safer Design Guidelines Victoria*<sup>7</sup> is a comprehensive paper that provides practical suggestions for designing and developing spaces that “are safe and feel safer for the community using it”. The guidelines are not written with a gender lens, but they do provide guidelines that ensure that safety is taken into account when planning public spaces.

*The Urban Design Guidelines for Victoria*<sup>8</sup> have been created to guide the design and build of new development. One of the key guideline areas is public spaces, which lists key design principles and specific considerations when designing street spaces and plazas, local parks and communal open spaces.<sup>9</sup> The guidelines are comprehensive in ensuring that public spaces are designed with community safety in mind, and are accessible, attractive and functional. For example, to achieve attractive and vibrant public spaces, the guidelines recommend that public spaces enable a diverse range of activities that extend the hours of use, which is an important aspect of encouraging people to use a space. However, the guidelines fail to make any mention of taking the diversity of people into account when designing spaces, and make no mention of gender.

# Public spaces and health and wellbeing

Access to public spaces can have a significant positive effect on health and wellbeing. Safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces can act as a conduit for physical activity, social connection and recreation, and “public spaces that are much used can create a sense of community, belonging and identity”.<sup>10</sup>

**“Public spaces that are much used can create a sense of community, belonging and identity”.**

Designing spaces that are walkable and encourage physical activity can contribute to positive wellbeing. Walkability does not only correlate with positive physical health, but also mental health and wellbeing. Research has found that there is an increased sense of community connectedness when neighbourhoods are walkable.<sup>11</sup>

Unmaintained and debilitated urban environments can be seen as alienating and are associated with crime, vandalism and littering.<sup>12</sup> Flowers, trees and artwork can add to the aesthetics of a space and can promote ownership and pride in a neighbourhood. This in turn can encourage social connection and inclusion, both of which are key determinants of mental health.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of green public spaces on health and wellbeing has been well researched. A review by the Heart Foundation<sup>14</sup> found that there are numerous benefits to accessing public green spaces, including:

- > Physical health (increased physical activity, reduced risk of obesity and morbidity)
- > Mental health and wellbeing (stress reduction and relaxation, general mental health, concentration, reduced neighborhood aggression and crime and positive child development)
- > Social interaction and cohesion



# Historical context of the urban environment

Gender biases in the distribution of power, resource and entitlements, and long standing, engrained norms and values about the role of women in society, mean that public spaces have historically not been designed with women in mind. These biases and inequities continue to influence the way that spaces are designed.

Historically, public spaces were not deliberately planned, but created organically through the relative placement of buildings and homes. Cities were walkable and pedestrian focussed, and community activities and jobs were located close to home.

The rapid increase in car use from the 1950's saw cities beginning to transform to accommodate and prioritise them. Car centric infrastructure such as roads and freeways were implemented without prior planning, and the impact on pedestrians and public transport was largely ignored. Australian cities became car dependent; freeways and roads were major barriers for pedestrians; and services, employment and homes became segregated. This was the creation of suburbs.<sup>15</sup> As was the social norm of that era, most men would go out to work, and women would stay home. Home was seen as a refuge for men, so it was preferred that houses were separated by distance from work.<sup>16</sup> These pedestrian unfriendly neighbourhoods became 'prisons' for some women from the 1960s onwards. Socially isolated and physically unable to travel significant distances without access to a vehicle, car centric modern urban design had imposed the role of stay at home 'housewife' on many women, and increased dependency on their husbands. This was a barrier for women to take on other roles and responsibilities in society.<sup>17</sup>

While women's independence has come a long way since the 1950's, deeply ingrained gender roles continue to influence the way that women and men go about everyday life, and the urban environment still plays a large role in shaping people's lives.

Women are more likely to do more than their fair share of unpaid domestic work, and are more likely to be primary care givers for children and the elderly. They are also more likely to divide their time between a variety of activities such as part time employment, childcare, shops, services and the home. Figures for the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne show that compared to men, women are almost 1½ times more likely to provide

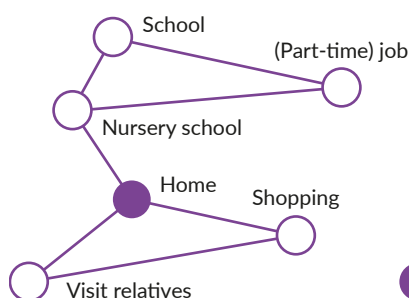
assistance to a person with a disability, long-term health condition or problems related to old age, over any given fortnight, and around 1½ times more likely than men to provide unpaid care to their own children or other children over any given fortnight.<sup>18</sup>

Research has shown that because of these responsibilities, women navigate urban space differently to men.<sup>19</sup> For example, while many men travel to and from work, women may go from home, to school drop off, to work, to school, to do the shopping, visit relatives and then home again. These needs or difference in 'mobility chains' must be taken into account when planning or redeveloping urban spaces (see Diagram. 1).<sup>19</sup> For an international example of how this has been addressed, please see the *Spotlight on: Vienna* example on page 16.

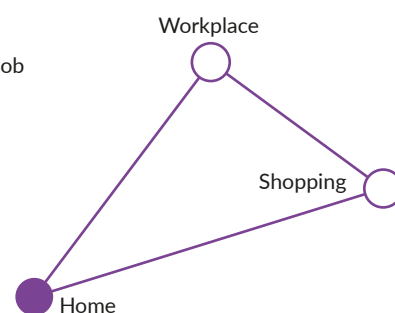
The 20 minute neighbourhood has been highlighted by the Victorian Government in Plan Melbourne 2017-2050. This concept is about "living locally" – giving people the ability to meet most of their everyday needs, such as shops, childcare, schools, parks and doctors, within a 20-minute walk, cycle or local public transport trip of their home.<sup>20</sup> In the East, Maroondah Council was one of three councils across Victoria to be involved in Stage One of the 20-Minute Neighbourhood Pilot Program for Croydon South, which involved collaboration with community to identify strategies to create more healthy, vibrant and inclusive neighbourhoods. Through the pilot, Maroondah Council identified a range of opportunities that reflect community ideas to improve liveability and support people to live locally in Croydon South.<sup>21</sup>

## Examples of mobility chains

Mobility chain of an everyday life involving a combination of paid employment, caring and homemaking.



Mobility chain of an everyday life involving paid employment.



# Gendered experience of public spaces

Women and men have different experiences when it comes to public space, including their perceptions of safety. The OECD Better Life Index found that only 61% of Australian women reported feeling safe when walking alone at night in the area where they live, compared to 77% of men.<sup>22</sup> The feeling of being safe in public space is determined by physical (e.g. infrastructure, such as lighting), social (e.g. presence of different groups of people) and personal factors (e.g. personal experience).<sup>19</sup> Perceptions of a lack of safety in public spaces can make women feel anxious and less likely to occupy these spaces. This results in inequitable use of public space and means that women miss out on the positive effects of public space on their health and wellbeing. Thoughtful design can help to address the barriers to women's participation in public spaces, and assist in transforming a space into one that is used by women, girls and families.

**“Thoughtful design can help to address the barriers to women’s participation in public spaces.”**

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Sitting alongside perceptions of safety is the very real public health issue of violence against women. One in three Australian women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, one in five sexual violence. At least one woman a week is murdered by a current or former partner, one in six Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former partner, and one in four emotional abuse.<sup>23</sup> Despite the fact that women are more likely to experience violence in the home by a person they trust, many women are concerned about their safety in public spaces as well. In recent years, there have been a number of high profile cases of women being murdered by men in public spaces. These cases have dominated public conversations around violence against women and women's safety, and have impacted on how women navigate public spaces.

While the design of public spaces are not the cause of violence nor the answer for keeping women safe, they do have the capacity to address women's perceptions of safety and therefore impact on the enjoyment and use of public spaces. Designing public spaces with consideration of women's needs will result in more equitable use, and will drastically change the experiences of those interacting within those spaces.

## INTERSECTIONALITY

When analysing public spaces and the barriers and enablers for women to engage in this space, planning and design must take an intersectional approach. This approach recognises that women's identities are made up of multiple interrelated attributes (such as race, gender identity, disability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and socio-economic status) and that when these intersect, women can experience compounding cultural and structural oppression, discrimination, violence and disadvantage.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore vital that targeted and specific approaches are taken to engage diverse groups of women to ensure equitable access to and use of public spaces.







### Inclusivity

"Services not known to be accessible are assumed to be inaccessible. In order to become truly accessible, organisations must make their position known."<sup>24</sup>

Public spaces can be marginalising to migrant women, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, and those who do not fit the heteronormative mould. These spaces need to be purposefully designed to be inclusive and welcoming for all people. Something as simple as stencilling the LGBTIQ rainbow flag or the Aboriginal flag onto pavements, or on the side of play equipment can indicate that the area is welcoming of all communities, and can feel more inclusive for everyone. Other visual confirmation can include public art or murals that depicts a diversity of women, including women from different cultural backgrounds, gender non-conforming people and women with disabilities.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

For many Aboriginal people, public space is an important aspect of their history and culture. Wurundjeri Stories at Pound Bend is an interpretive signage trail at Warrandyte State Park in Manningham. The trail comprises a series of six interpretive signs that follow the Yarra River along the walking track. The trail signage was developed through the leadership of the Wurundjeri Elders, with each sign providing information relating to the Wurundjeri history, culture, traditional life and people associated with this sacred site. The trail also includes 'Bunjil's Challenge' at each sign, which offers activities for children.<sup>25</sup> Wittons Reserve at Wonga Park, which is sacred Wurundjeri Women's Country, has similar interpretive signage. Women gathered at this place for ceremony, where the ritual of 'Welcome Baby to Country' was performed as newborns were daubed with ochre and passed through fire smoke to connect them to their Country. In 2014 Wurundjeri women performed a rare public re-enactment of a traditional Women's Ceremony at this site. They also planted a commemorative garden representing the river and to mark this site as Traditional Women's Country.<sup>25</sup>

# Creating safe and inclusive public spaces

**“Experience shows that when a space is occupied by women and girls, it is also occupied by more people in general”.**

Soraganvi 2017, Safe Public Places: Rethinking Design for Women's Safety<sup>(26)</sup>

The following section summarises important considerations for creating safe and inclusive public spaces for women, and is drawn from both Australian and international resources and evidence.

## Listen to women's voices

Urban planners must listen to, and work with, women in the design of public spaces that are safe and inclusive. In order to design spaces that will be for the whole community, women's voices must be front and centre.

Listening to the voices of women within a community is key to gathering rich qualitative data that can be used to guide the design and development of useable, inclusive and accessible public spaces. Use of co-design processes that include women not just in consultation, but through the whole planning and design process is recommended. This involves a collaborative approach with both individuals and organisations.

## WOMEN IN URBAN DESIGN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

**A better democracy “is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect, but to be elected.”**

**Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile**

American activist Marian Wright Edelman said “You can't be what you can't see”. The first and most vital step in creating gender equitable spaces and cities for women is to have women making the decisions on the design of public spaces. Women need to be leading the charge and bringing their voices, perspectives and experiences to the table.

Women are underrepresented in local government leadership positions. In 2017, 16.45% of local government CEO's were women and 34% of Level 2 management positions were held by women.<sup>27</sup> Worldwide, women make up less than 5% of mayors and 20% of city councillors.<sup>28</sup> Urban design, planning and architecture departments show similar trends. Research from the advocacy group Parlour: women, equity, architecture shows the disparity between male and female architects.<sup>29</sup> The research shows that while the number of female architects has grown over the years, there is gap between the number of women who have graduated in architecture and the number of women registered as architects – in Australia women registered as architects was half that of those who graduated. The number for women registered as architects also drops off after 29 years of age. The reasons for this have been identified as low pay rates, a lack of meaningful part time and flexible work options and an entrenched culture of long hours in many practices.

In order to effectively advance gender equality, and to create public spaces that truly reflect the needs and wants of all women, we need a gender balance in this area. “If you have the same people around the table who have been trying to solve the same challenges for 50 years, nothing will change... I think it's important to have women not only at the table, but women running the meeting, setting the table, bringing voices in and leading. She has a variety of perspectives, as a caretaker, as a mother, as a sister, but also — she's an urbanist — and she has something to say about cities and how they work” (Lynn Ross, Community and National Initiatives).<sup>30</sup>

For everyone to equitably enjoy and participate in the community, women must have a say in how public spaces are designed.

## CROWD MAPPING

A number of initiatives from Australia and internationally are discussed below. They have been developed to ensure that women's self-reported experiences are collected and analysed, and are used to shape the way that spaces are planned to make them safer and more inclusive.

Using crowd mapping tools to make cities safer and to promote gender equity is a relatively new concept, and there are a number of technology based, geo-mapping applications that have been developed so that women can report their experiences of cities as they happen. This data is then analysed, and the information is used by councils to plan urban spaces and cities with women in mind.

Developed by Plan International Australia in collaboration with Crowdsplot and Monash University XYX Lab, Free to Be is an online digital mapping tool which has collected real stories from women and girls as to how they explore cities.<sup>31</sup> It enables young girls and women to 'drop' a pin on public spaces – such as universities, streets and public transport – that make them feel happy (which indicates a safe space) or sad (to indicate an unsafe space).<sup>32</sup> The data is then used to advocate to key decision-makers at the planning level, using these stories from women and girls to help to create a safer and more inclusive city for everyone.

The tool was piloted in Melbourne in 2016 and has since been rolled out in five other global cities – Sydney, Lima, Madrid, Kampala and Delhi. Common themes around public spaces identified as 'happy' often contained shops or cafes with positive messages and attractive graphics, and key words to describe safe spaces included the descriptors 'open', 'spacious' or 'welcoming'.<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that some 'sad' spaces featured restaurants or cafes dominated by masculine names (such as Duncan's, Mr Burger, Hungry Jack's), and subliminal and gendered messages, such as logos that resembled large breasts and names linked to transgressive behaviour (The Joint Bar, Dangerfield, High Voltage City).<sup>34</sup>

In 2018, XYX Lab and Plan International Australia held workshops with young women to refine the Free to Be tool to make it more relevant for young women. Pins were able to be dropped on 'good' or 'bad' places, a small number of questions were asked about their experiences in the spaces, and there was room to leave comments. An analysis of Sydney's Free to Be app from April-May 2018 produced 2,883 valid pins dropped around Sydney, of which 75% were bad and 25% good experiences.<sup>35</sup> Good places were those described as busy or full of working people, and having a good 'community environment'. The threat of sexual harassment was a common theme associated with over two-thirds of 'bad' pins, and 63% identified gender based discrimination as a factor.

**Recommendations by young women in Sydney via the Free To Be App were that firstly, behaviour needs to change – blame must not be laid at the feet of women, and society must listen to and believe the voices of women. This encompasses challenging toxic masculinity, and empowering bystanders to call out harassment and discrimination. Secondly, it was identified that women and girls being involved in decision making about their cities by working with them in co-design is vital. Lastly, building enforcement and accountability through stronger reporting measures, improving police responsiveness and clarification of laws related to street harassment was suggested.**





Similar to the Free to Be map, the Gender Equality Map<sup>36</sup> (an early action from "Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy"<sup>37</sup> in partnership with the XYX Lab) has a slightly different emphasis. Rather than a sole focus on areas that women feel safe or unsafe, the map allows users to drop a 'pin' on locations where they have had positive or negative experiences of gender equality. For example, access to baby change facilities, the presence of sexist advertising or pram accessibility. The map allows users to pin point both place spots (eg. infrastructure, public facilities, public transport) and story spots, where users share their own experience in a place, or something they witnessed (eg. sexist or discriminatory behaviour). The free map was piloted in the local government areas of Darebin and Melton over a four month period from November 2018 to February 2019. The data will be used to inform the Victorian Government and Darebin and Melton City Council's direction in promoting gender equality in policy and service provision.

The Right to the Night<sup>38</sup> project was developed by the City of Ballarat to gather data and perspectives from local women and girls to inform decision-making around public safety and urban design. Similar to the Free to Be project, over a three month period, the City of Ballarat invited women and girls to add locations they considered 'safe' or 'unsafe' to an interactive online map. Facilitated urban walks were also offered for community groups and individuals who may encounter difficulty engaging with the online platforms or participating without support. They included disadvantaged young women, newly arrived migrants and community members from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.



## SEXISM IN THE CITY

It is not just design and infrastructure that can contribute to spaces that are not meeting the needs of women. Plan International Australia's Podcast 'Sexism and the City',<sup>39</sup> hosted by journalist Jan Fran, looks at the different issues that arise for women living in cities, and how to end sexism in cities all together. In one of her podcasts, she asks the question: Can public spaces be sexist? Fran and her guests talk about how a range of gender inequitable displays, many of which the public consume subconsciously, can contribute to a public space that feels uncomfortable for women to inhabit. Her interview with XYX Lab member Dr Pamela Salen highlights the prevalence and impact of subliminal sexist messaging: male named businesses, streets named after famous men, statues and artwork by men, and sexist and provocative ads featuring women that can border on soft core pornography make women feel excluded and unsafe. Designing spaces that privilege men in this way can reinforce an imbalance of power between men and women, which we know can have broad reaching social implications, and contributes to gender inequality.

This is also consistent with the findings from Nicole Kalms (Associate Professor in the Department of Design at Monash University, and Director of the XYX Lab). In her book *The Hypersexual City: The Provocation of Soft Core Urbanism*, Kalms talks about how public hypersexualised spaces shape gender stereotypes, which in turn can shape gendered behaviour and lead to heteronormative (and sexist) cities. "When a woman at a bus stop stands next to an advertisement of another woman sexualised in lacey lingerie, the juxtaposition between her and the advertising may mean that she is also viewed in a sexualised way".<sup>40</sup>

In Barcelona, Spain, a cooperative of feminist architects, sociologists and urban planners have been trying to design female positive public spaces.<sup>41</sup> Along with addressing lighting, accessibility and safety, another key aspect to the redesign of public spaces is how women are represented and recognised in public spaces. Spain has pushed for a positive representation of women through naming streets after women and encouraging public art and murals to remember the contribution that women have made to Spain.

## PARTICIPATORY WALKS

By engaging a diverse group of local women in participatory walks, local governments are in a good position to gather rich qualitative data directly from women about their experience of a public space. Participatory walks, or gender walks, involve inviting local women from diverse backgrounds to walk an area/public space. They are asked to identify what makes them like or dislike a space, with the aim of using this information to collaboratively improve public spaces for everyone.

Womenability is a global organization who have held participatory walks, and they have some recommendations how to respectfully and successfully go about this. A toolkit, which includes a participant and group leader questionnaire to undertake a walk, can be found on their website.<sup>42</sup>

## XYX LAB – GENDER + PLACE

Monash University's XYX Lab<sup>44</sup> brings together a team of experienced design researchers, along with planners, policy makers, local government and stakeholders to explore gender-sensitive design practices and theory. Their work is grounded in feminist theory and queer theory, and much of their work is around gathering the lived experiences of groups of people, in many cases women, to generate a deeper understanding of the issues they face and how this can inform design. The XYX Lab regularly runs practical, community driven workshops looking at different design topics and gathering qualitative data.

## WOMEN'S VOICES INFORMING PRACTICE - LIGHTING AND SAFETY

Brighter lighting is often suggested as a way to make a space feel 'safer'. However research shows that this does not always translate to positively affect perceptions of safety for women.

Plan International Australia along with the XYX Lab and Arup lighting researchers used the data collected from Free to Be App to analyse places identified as both safe and unsafe.<sup>43</sup> They found that bright over lit spaces do not correlate young women's perceptions of safety. In fact, spaces with higher light levels were actually more likely to be perceived as unsafe.

Furthermore "the analysis showed that consistent and layered lighting – where there are multiple light sources and where surfaces with different reflective values are taken into consideration – makes women feel most safe. This kind of lighting reduces the 'floodlit effect', the sharp drop-off of light beyond the path, and the potential for glare and contrast to blind and disorientate. This is important information as planners often light spaces to a high 'P' Category (a measure used in urban place-making guidelines) of lighting, as it's assumed that this will reduce the risk of crime and increase the feeling of safety."<sup>43</sup>

This case study demonstrates the benefit of working with women and taking into consideration their lived experience in order to co-design a safer public space.









# Case Study

## Women's Health East Gender Equity Walks

In the research for this paper, the idea of gathering the voices of women to hear firsthand their experience of public spaces was unearthed and discussed (see section on participatory walks). Women's Health East saw an opportunity to pilot a project which elevated the voices and expertise of local women to create safe and inclusive public spaces.

Women's Health East successfully applied for funding from the State Government 'Gender Equality Capacity Building Micro Grants Program' to run a pilot gender equity walk in both Maroondah City Council and Monash City Council, which involved women walking their local area.

By engaging with local women across the Monash and Maroondah local government areas, the Gender Equity Walk project placed women's voices front and centre and facilitated a space for women to provide their perspective and experience on public spaces in their local area. A diverse range of participant voices were heard, including older women, younger women, women from the LGBTIQ community, and women who identified as having a disability. The walks enabled women to collaborate with council in a meaningful way, on an issue that impacts on their day to day lives.

The project engaged 37 women across the two walks, and they were able to share their experiences of spaces in a public forum. This pilot project was unique in its delivery; due to the COVID-19 outbreak, one walk was delivered virtually, and one face to face. Although this was not the original plan, the virtual walk worked exceptionally well, and was a key success of the project.

### WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE WALKS SPOKE ABOUT THE BENEFIT OF LOCAL GENDER EQUITY WALKS:

"I feel really happy that this walk occurred, and it is a true way forward to making our public spaces safer and more inviting to all genders and concentrating extra for women and girls as this is much needed. I would love to see a few more of these types of walks to hear more from the locals who access these spaces. It is also imperative that the walks were not in vein and that those with the relevant authority and resources actually take note of the comments and make some of the changes."

Monash Gender Equity Walk participant, age 62

"I think the walk was really great and very beneficial... It is very important to involve women and girls in the community as we are the ones using these public spaces the most and we are the ones who are effected by change."

Maroondah online walk participant, age 16

The gender equity walks demonstrate the need for a gendered approach to the planning and design of public places, and the importance of listening to women's lived experience in order create spaces that are safe and inclusive for the whole community.



Women's Health East acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

# Design spaces that are safe, accessible and diverse

## DIVERSE PEOPLE, ACTIVITIES AND TIMES

Public spaces that are used by a diverse range of people, participating in different activities at different times of the day can make women feel safer.<sup>7,26,45</sup> As stated earlier, the more women use a public space, the more likely others are to also use it. To engage women in public space, urban planners play a key role in designing well used spaces that encourage social interaction by all members of the community. Mixed use areas where people can walk, play, eat and exercise at different times of the day ensure that the area is used at all times. For example, a playground area that also incorporates fitness equipment can be used by early morning walkers, by parents with small children during the day, by teenagers doing sport after school and in the early evening. Dynamic spaces where community members feel comfortable and happy to linger, increase women's perceptions of safety and their time spent there. The more people there are using an area, the safer they feel. This also contributes to the wellbeing and liveability of a space and encourages community ownership.

## SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Specific characteristics are important to consider in planning to make a space engaging, usable and safe for women, including:

- > Good accessibility to and from the location, and safe route options
- > Clear, well-kept paths

- > Easy to read signs and directions
- > Easy movement within the location
- > Ample seating
- > Some play areas adjacent to housing to permit informal surveillance
- > Provisions for young children and the elderly (because women are often caretakers), e.g. this could mean low, wide footpaths for strollers, wheelchairs, and walkers
- > CCTV cameras and heightened security measures - there is evidence for and against the use of CCTV, as they can make some women feel that an area is more unsafe.<sup>46</sup>
- > A well maintained public space
- > Cutting back vegetation in overgrown areas
- > Multi gender, stand-alone accessible toilets with baby change facilities
- > Good visibility of all areas of a public spaces free from shadows and obstacles
- > Sufficient lighting
- > Spacious design<sup>26,47</sup>

## UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Universal Design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.<sup>48</sup> Accessible Design is focused on the needs of people with disabilities; Universal Design considers the wide spectrum of human abilities.

The principles of universal design can be used when designing public spaces to make them accessible to everyone. Universal design means that rather than designing your facility and services for the average user, you design them for people with a broad range of abilities, ages, reading levels, learning styles, languages, cultures, and other characteristics. For example, the widening footpaths/walking trails, designed to make sidewalks and streets accessible to those using wheelchairs, are more often used by kids on skateboards and parents with prams.<sup>49</sup>



## SPOTLIGHT ON: GENDER EQUITY IN DESIGN GUIDELINES – WHITTLESEA COUNCIL

“Design can either facilitate or impede equitable access which can reinforce or break down gender stereotypes”.<sup>50</sup>

The City of Whittlesea has developed *Gender Equity in Design Guidelines*<sup>50</sup> that can be used in a range of settings. They have provided specific examples for community centres, maternal and child health, youth facilities, community pavilions and aquatic and major leisure facilities. They provide direction on creating gender equitable urban design in three areas: site planning, concept design and detailed design and documentation. These principles can be used when planning new design, or the redevelopment or refurbishment of existing areas.

These design guidelines can be used as a template for public spaces. Here are some of the transferable recommendations that have been proposed:

### Site Planning

- > Playground facilities should be within a reasonable distance and visible from all playing fields. Consider including clear lines of sight to social / multipurpose spaces in the pavilion to assist with passive surveillance and supervision.
- > Where there are multiple playing fields, all users and spectators should have ease of access to change facilities, social / multipurpose space and other amenities.
- > The location [of the pavilion] must be accessible by different modes of transport.

### Concept Design

- > Baby changing facilities must be accessible by all genders. Consider the incorporation of a family change room and provision of baby change tables in all unisex accessible toilets.
- > Consider the inclusion of an informal gathering/ social space that attracts young people of all genders to meet and relax.

### Detailed Design and Documentation

- > Paths and doorways should be of sufficient width and appropriate surfacing to accommodate prams (including double-width prams) and mobility aids. Where stand-alone toilet cubicles are provided, they should be designated as unisex.
- > The lighting design must ensure that the area is easily navigable at night with signage clearly visible and safe connections between places clearly defined. Provide a well-lit connection between playing fields, the facility and the car park.
- > The landscaping of the site should allow for clear sightlines for all users. Landscape design should consider relative heights and viewing angles – avoid mid-height shrubbery that allows concealment.



After



Before



After



Before





# Case Study

## Raising the Visibility, Inclusion and Safety of Women through Public Art

Those involved in the design and delivery of public spaces have a responsibility to create environments that encourage local identity, increase safety and are accessible to all the community. This can only be achieved if the voices of a diverse range of community members, including women, are heard throughout consultation, planning and implementation of all urban design projects.

Women's Health East delivered the Yarra Ranges Council funded *Beyond the Studio: Advocating for Women's Visibility, Inclusion and Safety through Public Art* project. This project provided an opportunity to hear from local women, through taking photographs of spaces where they believed the addition of artwork could create a more welcoming and inclusive environment. Simultaneously, local women artists were invited to participate in the project, through providing photographs of their existing artwork. Artwork was superimposed on the submitted photographs by a graphic designer, to create a set of six concept images that showcased how these identified spaces could look if more women artist were commissioned for public display by their local council and community. A social media campaign was delivered to showcase the images and gather feedback from the community to advocate for the further inclusion of women's artwork in the Yarra Ranges.

This project gathered rich qualitative data that could be used to advocate and guide the design and development of public spaces that promote usage, are inclusive and accessible for women. It also allowed for the promotion and further visibility of local women artist, as they continue to be underrepresented within the art industry.

### FROM THIS PROJECT, THIS IS WHAT WOMEN TOLD US:

...this little park situated in a main street of Yarra Junction was not a safe space to sit or even walk past'. Although acknowledged that the Yarra Ranges Council has recently completed a 'make-over' of this public space by painting its walls and planting more greenery, Marilyn feels 'the addition of female commissioned artwork would make this space an even more inviting place for all of the Yarra Ranges community members and will help increase people using this space, as well as making it more welcoming and safe'.

Marilyn H, Yarra Ranges Community Member

'Public art needs to be a part of every budget for new buildings and public spaces, and equally within budgets of the different levels of government to create spaces that are dynamic, thought provoking, safe and crime preventing'

Suzanne Phoenix, Yarra Ranges Artist

Artwork commissioned by women can help women to be reminded that 'this is our space too'

Lucy Hawkins, Yarra Ranges Artist

This case study demonstrates the continued need and benefit of working with the community, supporting them to have a platform where they have a voice that can be used to advocate for more accessible, welcoming and inclusive public spaces within their community.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to acknowledge those that collaborated to the creation of the displayed images on page 18: Jennifer Trott, Suzanne Phoenix, Marilyn H, Lucy Hawkins & Shlomit Moria.

We would also like to thank all those that were involved and contributed to the *Beyond the Studio* project. This project would not have been possible without them.



This project was proudly funded by



## SPOTLIGHT ON: VIENNA

In Vienna, Austria, city planners have been prioritising gender equality in the public realm for almost three decades. In 1991 a group of city planners analysed women's everyday life in the city, and tracked their routes throughout the city.<sup>51</sup> The common theme for all was that safety and ease of movement were a priority. From then, a number of gender mainstreaming projects were rolled out across the city. In 1993, a project called Frauen-Werk-Stadt (Women-Work-City) was implemented. An apartment complex designed for and by women in the city's 21st district, Frauen-Werk-Stadt took women's lives and their mobility chains seriously. The apartment buildings built were surrounded by circular, grassy areas and courtyards. The complexes included kindergarten schools, pharmacies, and doctors' offices, and ensured that it was close to public transport to make transit much easier for women.<sup>51</sup>

Other initiatives include additional public lighting, widened sidewalks and redesigning public parks to encourage equal space use by boys and girls.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, a massive staircase with a ramp running through the middle was installed near a major intersection to make crossing easier for people with prams and individuals using a walker or a wheelchair.



# Embed gender equity within organisations

Applying a gender lens on public spaces must complement other gender equity work happening within an organisation. Gender equity should be embedded within organisational processes and procedures and should inform the way that both internal and external practices are run. In order to be effective, gender equity in public spaces is an extension of commitment to gender equity across the organisation.

It's also important that gender equity practices are documented and embedded with policies and practices to make real, sustainable change.

The following are two examples of how organisations can begin to gain a deeper understanding of gender equity, and embed it into their organisation.

## GENDER EQUITY AUDIT

A gender equity audit is a useful way of identifying challenges and opportunities for increasing internal organisational equality, and for ensuring that women in the community are represented in the development of public spaces. Gender equity audits can be as simple or complex as needed. Together for Equality and Respect, the regional prevention of violence against women partnership, provides a comprehensive Workplace Gender Equality – Guide to auditing and action planning<sup>52</sup> to support organisations to:

- > Understand how gender is considered in internal and external policies, procedures and practices;
- > Collect baseline data for analysis;
- > Identify areas for improvement and action; and
- > Encourage a participatory process that builds ownership of action on gender equality.

Both internal (internal operations and managerial structure) and external (delivery of services, project or programs within the community, consultation) policies, procedures and practices are audited.

Auditing internal practise is a good place to start. We know, for example, that women are often underrepresented in urban design decision making positions, and looking at organisational practices may uncover bias that is leading to the exclusion of women from these positions. Asking questions like 'Are there proactive strategies implemented to recruit or promote women into senior management positions?' and 'Has there been an increase in the representation of women in senior management positions in the past 1-2 years?' can assist in this.

The TFER Gender Equity Audit Guide is aligned with Our Watch's Workplace Equality and Respect Standards.<sup>53</sup> The Standards support workplaces in navigating organisational change to promote gender equality and to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace and violence against women more broadly. Harassment in the workplace has serious implications for women's health, wellbeing, productivity and career progression, and is a major barrier to women's success, particularly in male-dominated industries.

## SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA AND GENDER ANALYSIS

Gathering disaggregated data allows for the planning and implementation of programs and services (which can include the design of public spaces) that cater for the different needs of people of different sexes. From the evidence presented in this paper, we know that women have different experiences of public spaces. Gathering and analysing disaggregated data can mean that the development and design of these spaces will more effectively meet their needs.

Consultation with community around the development and re-development of public spaces needs to be inclusive and capture the experiences of all groups of people. It is recommended that, when collecting data in surveys and internal consultations, demographic data regarding sex, as well as other considerations such as, but not limited to, gender identity, age, disability and cultural background, is collected from participants and separately analysed. This will enable exploration of the experiences of all people, and enable a focus on women with intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage.

Using inclusive language can show that an organisation is taking gender diversity seriously. For example, collecting demographic data and having options that allow people to nominate preferred title and preferred name can assist. Many databases use sex and gender-restricted fields that make it difficult for intersex or trans and gender diverse people to participate or contribute, such as when a system requires all people to select either male or female or when a system restricts the selection of item codes by gender.<sup>24</sup>

Undertaking a gender analysis of data will highlight the distinct experiences of people of different sex and gender identities, and how Council policies and programs can impact on their health and wellbeing. By examining these differences, this knowledge can then be applied to decision making, policy, planning and service delivery to ensure that these differences are taken into account.<sup>46</sup>



### SPOTLIGHT ON: GENDER EQUITY TRAINING

Gender equity training can be a good start to truly integrating this into an organisations work. Women's Health East, and other Women's Health Services, provide gender equity training that can be tailored to a specific area of work and provides a good grasp of how to build gender equity into internal and external practices. Training explores gender and gender stereotypes, and includes discussion of gender analysis and planning. Organisations are also provided with support and guidance on developing and implementing gender equity audits and plans for their organisation.



# Conclusion

Engaging with public space can positively impact on social, mental and physical health. Public spaces foster social connections and encourage physical activity and recreational pursuits, and play a significant role in community life and neighbourhood cohesiveness.

Public spaces are experienced and perceived differently by women and men, and the design of a space can have a significant impact on women's safety and wellbeing. Women are more likely to feel unsafe and unwelcome in public spaces due to both personal, social and physical factors, which influences whether or not they engage with public spaces. This is particularly true for women who experience other intersecting forms of discrimination, such as those who identify as LGBTIQ, women from migrant backgrounds, older women and women with a disability.

Physical infrastructure, such as lighting and accessibility, can influence women's decision to engage in spaces; however it is also subjective elements of the urban environment that can impact on women's experience of these spaces. Male named businesses, streets named after famous men, statues and artwork by men, and sexist and provocative ads were all found to make women and girls feel excluded and unsafe.

Women experience and perceive public spaces in ways that are unique and specific to their lived experience. In order to create safe and inclusive public spaces for all women, their voices and expertise must be front and centre in every stage of planning through a co-design approach. Listening to the voices of women to ensure that their experiences are shaping the way the public spaces are designed includes not only consultation with community, but ensuring that women are in urban design leadership positions so that they are able to bring their voices, perspectives and experiences to the table.

Local governments play a central role in shaping what our urban environment looks like, and they therefore also have a responsibility of ensuring it is one that is designed for everyone to enjoy. In order to create public spaces that are safe and inclusive for women, and used by all members of the community, local governments must consider the impact of gender in all of their planning. Organisational commitment to gender equity is vital to ensure that it is embedded across the processes and policies of all departments, including urban design, in order to create an environment that fosters gender equality.

**“In order to create safe and inclusive public spaces for all women, their voices and expertise must be front and centre...”**

Creating public spaces that women and girls will engage in and use means creating spaces that are attractive, active, healthy, and inclusive, and where people can connect.







THE INAUGURAL CITY OF KNOX  
COMMUNITY FAIR  
AT THE ARBORETUM  
DEC 1991

Melanie J.



# Glossary

## GENDER EQUALITY

Gender Equality represents the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women, men and Trans and gender-diverse people. Equality does not mean that women, men and trans and gender-non binary people will become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on their gender.<sup>37</sup>

## GENDER EQUITY

Gender equity entails the provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities on the basis of gender. The concept recognises that people may have different needs and power related to their gender and that these differences should be identified and addressed in a manner that rectifies gender related imbalances.<sup>37</sup>

## INTERSECTIONALITY

A theory and approach which recognises and respects that our identities are made up of multiple interrelated attributes (such as race, gender, ability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and socio-economic status) and understands the intersections at which women, experience compounding cultural and structural oppression, discrimination, violence and disadvantage.<sup>1</sup>

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.<sup>54</sup>

## GENDER ANALYSIS

Gender analysis is a process of considering gender and gender inequalities when analysing data and in program planning. It informs action to address inequalities that arise from the different roles of women and men, the unequal power relationships between them and the consequences of these inequalities on their lives, their health and wellbeing.<sup>55</sup>

## URBAN DESIGN

Urban design is the creation of useful, attractive, safe, environmentally sustainable, economically successful and socially equitable places. It involves a number of key design areas, one being open space design, the general as well as detailed design of squares, sidewalks, promenades, courtyards and other open spaces. This may include spatially significant forms of public or environmental art.<sup>2</sup>



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Women's Health East acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

