

Designing cities for women and girls

Now is the time for all of us to work together to create cities that truly work for everyone, says Mei-Yee Man Oram

Recent statistics paint a concerning picture of women's safety in the UK. Just one in 20 girls feel completely safe in public places, and violence against women on UK trains has risen by 50% in just two years. It's clear that we, as a society, are not doing enough to protect women and girls in public spaces and to make spaces inclusive for all. Working on access and inclusive environments at Arup, I've spent nearly two decades evaluating the built environment's accessibility and inclusivity. These figures aren't just numbers; they represent real fears and experiences that limit women's freedom and access to public areas.

While improved policing and criminal justice responses are crucial as part of this problem, I believe we need to look beyond these measures alone. We need a holistic approach that addresses every possible aspect causing women (and other marginalised groups) to feel unsafe, including the way we design and plan our cities.

RIGHT: For too long, the role that the built environment plays in the safety and inclusion of women has been a secondary concern. Gender biases are deeply embedded in the traditional practice of urban design and planning (from the data informing design, to voices heard at decision making for projects). This has led to the creation of spaces that often fail to meet the needs of women and girls, who make up over half of our population.

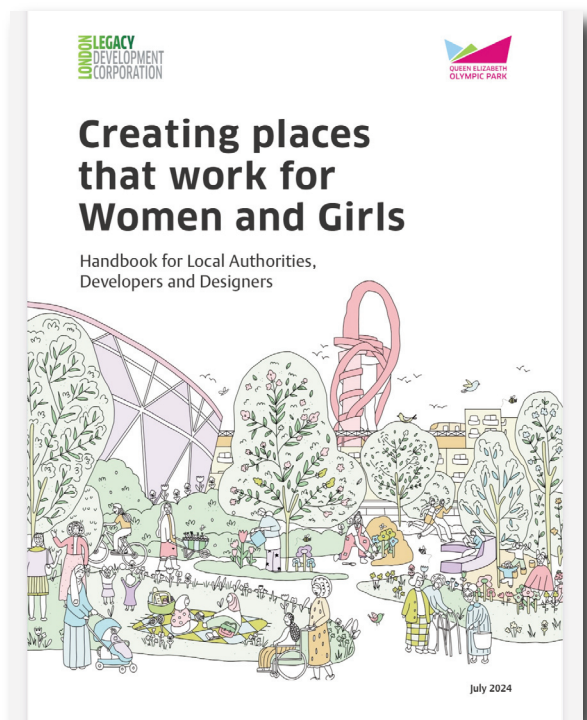
Across London, women are nearly twice as likely as men to list personal safety as a barrier to walking, cycling, and using public transport. Sexual harassment remains one of the most common concerns. These issues stem from a built environment that has been primarily designed with men in mind, exacerbating unequal power dynamics that lead to unequal societies.

The handbook: 'Creating Places That Work for Women and Girls'

To address this critical issue, the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) and Arup have launched a handbook to equip developers and planners to be more inclusive: "Creating Places That Work for Women and Girls." This comprehensive guide provides practical steps for urban planners, developers, architects, and other stakeholders to ensure a gender-informed approach in the planning, design, and decision-making process of urban development.

The handbook is the result of extensive research and consultation, directly informed by the lived experiences of local women and girls. It demonstrates how gender biases infiltrate traditional urban design practices and provides a framework for addressing these biases at every stage of the process – from the inception of a project through to its delivery and long-term management.

The handbook offers several key recommendations. These include:



1. Establishing clear organisational commitments for implementing gender-inclusive processes in all projects and decisions.
2. Adopting mechanisms and governance frameworks to ensure the continuity and effective delivery of these commitments.
3. Basing decisions, strategies, and designs on a genuine understanding of women's and girls' lived experiences through participatory-led approaches.
4. Adopting a holistic approach with cross-boundary and cross-sector collaboration.
5. Measuring impact and successes to identify lessons learned, patterns, emerging trends, and good precedents.

While implementing these changes in isolation cannot remove the threat of sexual harassment, they can work in tandem with the police force and community initiatives to build a world that is safer for, and therefore more accessible to, women and girls.

To create this handbook and list, the LLDC and Arup worked to ensure that those with lived experience were consulted and involved at every stage.

Participatory design

One of the most crucial aspects of this approach is the emphasis on participatory design. The handbook outlines planning processes that ensure the lived experiences of women and girls are directly incorporated into decision-making.



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Call for action

This could involve:

While this handbook was developed within the LLDC context, its principles are applicable to other local authorities and developers beyond the LLDC area. Therefore, we advocate for the broader adoption of the gender-informed processes outlined in this handbook.

We recommend that local authorities incorporate the handbook into local legislation and policy, leveraging feedback from live projects to refine legislation, policy, and approaches to gender-informed design relevant to local contexts.

Although the work is grounded in current available information and knowledge obtained through extensive research and engagement with women and girls, further research is necessary to address existing gaps. Refinement efforts are also required to ensure continued improvement.

We encourage stakeholders and those involved in design and planning to become *champions* of the handbook and advocate for the adoption of a gender-informed perspective in design and planning activities.

Break down silos and collaborate with organisations in intersecting sectors, as only by leveraging collective expertise and building partnerships can we address the multifaceted challenges faced by women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals in public spaces effectively.

Promoting male allyship.

Engaging with women, girls and gender diverse people.

Pledging to advocate for gender inclusion, including raising voices of women, girls and gender diverse people.

Fostering positive relationships between organisations and the community.

Implementing gender informed design solutions at all project stages.

Improving awareness of gender related challenges.

Training to further people's understanding of gender inclusion.

Keeping informed about latest legislation, policy and schemes impacting on gender inclusion.

Sharing good practice and lessons learnt to continue to evolve gender inclusion.



Creating places that work for Women and Girls / Handbook for Local Authorities, Developers and Designers

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ing and development. This includes methods such as exploratory walks, co-design, and 'co-clienting' - a new technique developed to address issues where traditional co-design methods were insufficient. This meant that LLDC team members worked with a 'co-client team' comprised of seven young women aged 17-23 years old to develop a design brief. As the project progressed through design development, the co-client team continued to influence the project and test the implementation of the design brief.

This participatory approach is not without its challenges. Our engagement highlighted key barriers preventing women from participating, such as time poverty, the sensitivity of the topic, financial limitations, and childcare responsibilities. To address these, we've recommended improvements to the participation process, including financial compensation, working with professionals like sociologists, allowing significant time for recruitment, and addressing common conditioning issues.

Implementing change at scale

A crucial insight from our work is that real change won't happen until gender-informed design becomes mandatory through planning policy. If it's not a planning policy requirement, the incentive to include it into project briefs may not be there, and it's unlikely to become mainstream.

Local authorities are often responsive, with a strong desire to improve safety for their constituents, but can resist change due to a presumption that it will place a significant burden on cost or

resources. However, the primary need to implement these changes is not necessarily funding, but rather giving priority to this issue and taking the time to set up internal processes to ensure that safety considerations are built into the design of urban areas from the get-go.

The LLDC has done the heavy lifting in terms of research, and has now made the report public to allow other councils to replicate these processes and successes. The main cost to making changes is the human resource needed in taking the time to implement these approaches at scale.

Wider impact

By adopting gender-inclusive urban design principles, built environment professionals can play a crucial role in addressing gender inequality. This approach can help to instate fair access to services and opportunities, advancing the socio-economic mobility of women and girls. Moreover, it reveals the full potential of our cities and individual developments to creatively address other critical issues in the future, such as climate change mitigation, sustainable development and economic growth.

Designing spaces that work for women and girls will lead to a safer public realm for everyone. It's important to note, however, that we're not claiming to create completely safe places, as human behaviour can't be entirely controlled through design. Instead, this work must be viewed as part of a wider effort to address gender inequalities, including educational initiatives on >>>

>>> societal behaviour and effective policing.

An excellent example of putting these principles into practice is the Red Path project. Red Path is an important pedestrian and cycling path in Hackney Wick, which has been neglected and under-maintained for decades. By putting local young people at the centre of planning its improvement, the Red Path project aims to show what community-led urban transformation can achieve.

This initiative provided an opportunity to pilot some of the recommendations and methodologies outlined in the handbook with local communities, exploring the intersectionality between different protected characteristics, such as people from a global ethnic majority background, and how these experiences impact design needs.

Arup provided pro-bono support to this project, bringing together various stakeholders to make it a success. This initiative demonstrates that solutions do exist, and that implementing gender-informed design is not an insurmountable challenge.

The way forward

The LLDC has set an example by forming a Women and Girls Safety Project Board, a cross-departmental group that holds the organisation accountable for progressing these initiatives. This approach, which includes male allyship, has proven effective

and could serve as a model for other local authorities.

As we move forward, it's crucial that these principles are embedded at council and government level to enforce the recommendations. However, in the interim, forward-thinking developers and designers can start integrating these recommendations into their work.

To that effect, the handbook provides a framework not just for local authorities but also for developers, allowing stakeholders to take concrete steps towards gender-informed design while keeping in line with policy requirements. At Arup, we're seeing an increased appetite from clients to integrate these recommendations, demonstrating a willingness to be involved and showcase that solutions do exist.

The systemic violence and inequality faced by women and girls will not be fixed overnight. A safe and inclusive built environment, an effective policing and justice system, as well as comprehensive training and education are all crucial parts of the puzzle. If we take a holistic approach, we have the power to shift the dial towards making safer public spaces for all. While this handbook represents a significant step forward, it's merely the beginning. Now is the time for all of us - planners, developers, policymakers, and citizens - to work together to create cities that truly work for everyone. Only then can we hope to build a more equal, safer and ultimately better world for all. ■

Diagrams are from the report

Five aims to guide you when taking action



To achieve gender-informed places, we encourage you to use the following five aims, that have been identified through our collaboration with women and girls, whilst thinking about actions and solutions in this handbook. The aims define the attributes of a 'positive space' as identified by women and girls in research and consultation for this project.

The Five Aims

- 1) Sense of ownership, belonging and identity**
I can identify with the space and feel able to be myself. I quickly and easily know what the space is about. I have a sense of belonging and inclusion here. I care about the space.
- 2) Health and hygiene, comfort and safety**
It is safe and comfortable for me to be here. I am happy to stay as long as I want. The space supports my physical and mental health and well-being.
- 3) Empowered and enriched**
I can make choices and have influence over the space. I am aware of the location of appropriate facilities, information and activities. I can make informed decisions about where I want to go and where I want to be.
- 4) Accessibility and access to public realm and services**
There is action being taken to include people like me in this space. There are suitable communication methods to support my hearing and visual requirements. I can access the services and facilities I need.
- 5) Mobility and connectedness**
For me, the space is well connected to the wider context and there is a social presence. I have a choice of active travel and public transport options. My journeys feel seamless and efficient.