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Feminist Cities: Democratising Urban Mobility

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From its outset, urban mobility has been built for and by men, mainly with one specific journey in mind: home to work and then back again. Not only does this design marginalise women and ignore their care-driven living patterns, but it also means their safety is endangered in the public space. Across the Balkans, grassroots organisations are mapping inequalities and reimagining urban mobility through a gender-responsive lens.

You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male.
– Mary Beard

The urban environment has never been gender-neutral. In critical discussions of gender inequality, the binary division of space into public and private spheres often emerges as a key theme. Public affairs – and, therefore, the public sphere and mobility – have been dominated by men since antiquity, whereas the private sphere has been viewed predominantly as the domain of women and family life. This understanding of space, according to feminist urban theory, both illustrates and reproduces traditional gender power relations.

Urban mobility dictates when and how people move and carry out their daily routines, as well as who gets to do what. As a system of transport infrastructure that enables movement throughout the urban environment, urban mobility has been conceived, designed, and built by – and for – those who govern the public sphere. As such, urban mobility often ends up preventing the free and safe movement of women. The various elements which make up this infrastructure – such as public transport, street layout, pavements, and lighting – are built according to the needs of men, forcing women daily to try and fit into a space and way of doing things that does not recognise them.

The infrastructure of movement in urban areas is governed by three principles that, throughout history, have been important parameters for the performance of daily tasks traditionally undertaken by men: speed, efficiency, and precision. These principles took the *pater familias* from point A to point B – from home to work – and back again. Analysing the movements that women make every day, we discovered a much more layered connection between locations and activities – something known as “trip chaining”. This phenomenon represents the practice of connecting the shorter distances that women cover during the day into one “branched” journey which is not linear; rather, it involves visiting additional important locations within an overall pattern of movement.

These points on the journey, where women stop for a short period, are part of a structural issue – namely, caring for the family and the community – involving tasks that are imposed on them, such as taking and collecting children to and from school, going to the gym, grocery shopping, paying bills, taking care of elderly family members, and other care-related and “emotional” work.

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Globally, women perform 76.2 per cent of unpaid work caring for others and typically choose to work near home so that they can combine paid work with unpaid caregiving responsibilities. Treating household chores and caring responsibilities as “women’s issues” is another mechanism by which gender inequality is reproduced within urban life and women’s spatial movement. Reclaiming their space and freedom of movement often begins in the family.

The gender gap is even visible when we talk about riding a bicycle: globally, women use this mode of transport up to four times less than men. In Europe, specifically, the difference between men and women’s use of cycling as a means of transport is 64 per cent in Spain, 54 per cent in France and the UK, and 42 per cent in Germany. This disparity is another result of the structural obstacles women face: they are more sensitive to traffic risks, fear violence by men, often carry groceries, and take children to and from school or nursery. All of these factors mean that their first choice of transport is usually not to ride a bicycle.

Women’s participation in urban life and their use of urban transport are strongly influenced by a sense of fear. Moreover, the paths and roadways they take every day are determined by which part of the city or which means of transport feels safe, and where there is the least likelihood of being attacked.

Fostering safety

Women shouldn’t have to choose between freedom of movement and safety, and this has been recognised by a number of initiatives in southeast Europe. In places where urban mobility is most risky for women due to a culture of violence or the lack of suitable infrastructure, organisations are working to provide fundamental protection for women. One organisation that has taken up this cause is Space SyntaKs, in Kosovo. It has created a safety map of Pristina based on the experiences of women, who have largely been marginalised in the planning of urban spaces and traffic.

Security in this research is not simply a technical concept, but rather an indicator of what women depend on for their well-being and ability to function. Security starts from the right to a safe environment as a basic human right, which demands that policymakers actively address the problems women face every day in moving around the city. This research pays particular attention to subjective indicators, including feelings such as fear of any type of harassment, theft, and physical threats. It also focuses on how diverse the users of a given public space perceive it to be, and unlike previous research in this area, matches this data with objective indicators. These factors include the presence of street lighting, security cameras, public institutions, and stray dogs.

According to the research, not a single public space in Kosovo’s capital has attained even half of the maximum safety index score. Respondents expressed fear and identified threats such as verbal and physical violence by men, and these were mapped throughout the entire urban core of the city. The maps revealed that Pristina is not a safe place for women, and that the places they move in are virtually never completely safe from start to finish. Gender-responsive planning of urban areas and urban mobility begins with identifying important factors for the safe and free movement of women, as well as mapping locations where intervention can make movement safer.

Similar initiatives have taken place in Belgrade under the initiative “Don’t be afraid of the dark” by the collective Sestre, drugarice (“Sisters, friends”). This campaign is one of the responses to the question of security and the problem of violence by men against women in public spaces and transport, and it aims to map the city of Belgrade according to its “invisible boundaries” – places in which sexual attacks have taken place – and to make these places safer.

Sestre, drugarice has been effective in communicating important and alarming statistics, including that 64 per cent of women have been sexually harassed on the street, with 57.9 per cent of those being child victims aged between 13 and 17. It is particularly striking that 40.5 per cent of harassment took place on public transport. The results of an anonymous questionnaire created as part of this campaign show that public transport and bus stops are among the likeliest locations for sexual harassment incidents. Members of the collective organise women’s activist walks, advise them on how to feel safe in public spaces and on public transport, and call on women to actively help make their environment safer through “micro-actions”. One such initiative, called “Ada is ours”, saw members of the collective and the wider public take part in a feminist activist walk, tying bows around broken streetlights to get them repaired and to send the message that Belgrade belongs to women even after sunset.

According to the collective, and based on answers from respondents, the main forms of violence on public transport include verbal violence, unwanted physical contact, exhibitionism, secondary victimisation, and worse, stalking and attempted rape.[1] In order to map and recognise these types of violence, it is important to use all available platforms to inform and educate women about what they mean. Only when such violence becomes visible do we perceive it as systemic, and are thus able to challenge that system.

That said, the very act of creating a mental map of streets and ways of moving as a basis for safety, actively assessing risks, giving out advice on safety to other women, and organising movement based on assumed family obligations all fall under women’s “emotional work”. By recognising this as work, we raise awareness of women’s position, create the possibility of sharing caregiving more equally within the family, place responsibility on the institutions that create public policies related to urban mobility, and preserve women’s emotional and cognitive resources and, ultimately, their lives.

In the sphere of gender-responsive urban planning and urban mobility, there is an ongoing debate about how to create a safe environment for women. Devoting parts of public space and transport infrastructure exclusively to women is one of the short-term solutions adopted by some city administrations to address the issue of male violence against women. This institutional measure has been deemed necessary in social contexts where public transport is the only way for women to move around if they are economically or socially marginalised.

Women’s carriages have been introduced in many countries, from Brazil to Japan. In the latter, sexual violence against women on public transport is so common it even has a special term: *chikan*. Nevertheless, countries that have responded to the problem of violence on public transport by segregating men and women do not report a significant reduction in the number of attacks on women, indicating that this mechanism does not address the root cause of the problem.

This is precisely the basis for criticising segregation: if women-only train carriages become the norm without any other major changes in public policy – the enforcement of penalties, education, and media campaigns – segregation by gender will place additional pressure on victims, discriminate against non-binary individuals, and send a message to men that their violence will be tolerated and movement and daily life planned around it. Women-only cars and spaces must not be the sole or permanent solution;

instead, the city and public transport must be reclaimed, and safety for everyone established within shared spaces.

If we want to achieve the right to freedom of movement and safety for all, we must shine a light on how unsuitable the current urban mobility infrastructure is and how much it marginalises women. Women's lives and movement patterns show us what complete institutional neglect looks like.

In the case of Podgorica, Montenegro's capital, apart from the lack of adjustment to gender-sensitive indicators, we can see concrete examples of how unsuitable the transport system is for women with disabilities or mobility impairments. Despite committing more than a decade ago to ensure the accessibility of buildings and streets, Podgorica has utterly failed to do so. The city's poorly built and badly maintained streets and pavements render movement unsafe for women who predominantly shoulder the responsibility of childcare, push prams, or use wheelchairs to get around. Narrow, uneven pavements full of open manhole covers and drains; inaccessible public transport stops; steep, slippery ramps unsuited to wheelchair tyres; and tactile paving not designed for the variety of shoes women wear – these are just some of the daily obstacles women encounter when getting around. These barriers prevent access to social, healthcare, educational, and professional opportunities, further intensifying the discrimination faced by marginalised groups.

Where women win

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Vienna boasts a long tradition of gender-responsive urban mobility. Since 2000, gender equality has been a priority in the Austrian capital's urban planning. By integrating gender perspectives in all of its policies, the city has implemented projects to improve public lighting; widened pavements to accommodate wheelchairs; enhanced visibility in streets and passageways by installing street mirrors; and added benches and seating at bus stops, along pedestrian routes, and on public transport. This strategy stems from a recognition that women rely more frequently on these ways of moving around and spend more time waiting between short-distance trips.

Vienna's response to "trip chaining" has been to build housing units as part of the "Women-Work-City" project, designed by women for women. In these units, women who provide care within the family and community can find kindergartens, doctors, and pharmacies all in one place, thereby reducing the time spent on these caregiving tasks. The goal of this project was to facilitate the caregiving work women perform.

Meanwhile, the city of Umeå in Sweden has taken even bolder steps. Widely known as "the most feminist city" in the world, Umeå includes a gender-responsive dimension in all its urban planning. In 2019, a prototype gender-sensitive bus stop was built in the city, designed to address women's concerns about safety on public transport. Audible and visual signals indicate that the bus is approaching the stop, while rotating wooden booths enhance visibility, allow for monitoring of surroundings, provide shelter

from the wind and other weather conditions, and create a sense of security within the public space.

In addition, Umeå has undertaken other feminist-inspired spatial interventions, including benches created for play and socialisation in collaboration with and catered towards teenage girls; constructing well-lit underground pedestrian tunnels featuring large central entrances and exits, as well as rounded wall corners to enhance visibility; prioritising snow removal services based on gender, taking into account that women walk and use public transport more frequently; and clearing pavements and public transport stops before roadways. In addition, the city organises a "Gendered Landscape" tour that connects existing feminist spatial interventions with those still needed to make the city truly a place for everyone. All of this has been reinforced by education, research, the integration of gender perspectives into urban mobility data, advocacy for the equal participation of men and women in caregiving, and women's active involvement in decision-making.

In the UK, one factor that has improved women's safety and strengthened a culture of zero tolerance for sexual harassment on public transport is the cooperation among the British Transport Police, the Metropolitan Police, the City of London Police, and Transport for London (TfL). After a 2013 TfL survey showed that 15 per cent of women using public transport had experienced sexual harassment in the previous year, and that about 90 per cent of cases were not reported, training was organised for 2,000 police officers on the public transport network with the support of feminist organisations. Only half a year after the launch of this initiative, the percentage of reported sexual harassment cases increased by 20 per cent, and the number of cases going to trial increased by 32 per cent.

As UN Women has noted, aside from improvements to the public transportation system, the active participation of men is a crucial step in the struggle to eliminate male violence against women in public transport. To that end, in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City, the organisation has also opened so-called Male Advocacy Clubs, which bring men together for the purpose of educating and promoting gender equality in various spheres. One of the media campaigns by the club targeted the problem of sexual harassment of women in public spaces. The campaign's message about preventing this type of violence reached as many as 8.5 million people.

Mobility for all

To build truly inclusive mobility, we must reclaim our parks, streets, and public transport. Moreover, to liberate women and make their movement safer, we must begin collecting gendered statistics and mapping the intersectional female experience of living in cities. Let's react to systemic discrimination and violence, shout, write, unite, build a network of solidarity for each other, and create systemic solutions.

As women's right to free movement is under threat, it is important to imagine a future of equal urban mobility – one where this right is guaranteed and respected, the provision of care is shared equally, and women participate actively in spatial planning and the creation of mobility policies. In such a future, women are healthy and safe, and they can freely socialise, create, educate, and improve their lives.

"What would transportation look like if it were designed by mothers? How would streets be different if they were made for women with disabilities? Which social groups are not represented in our infrastructure, and how can we change that?" – these questions can be the start of constructive conversations about building a fairer city. In addition to marginalised social groups, men must also take responsibility and be active participants in such discussions.

At the centre of these conversations should be a gender-responsive and intersectional understanding of

women's mobility issues. After all, it is from gender studies and feminist urban theory that the criticisms of male-centred urban mobility emerged. Women's path to reclaiming common spaces passes from there, too.

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