GENDER AND URBAN NEOLIBERALIZATION

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Introduction

Feminist movements have been claiming public space and asserting rights through both strategic action and everyday practices in cities for over a century. In the Global North, feminist movements have been essential to the development of welfare societies and especially since the 1970s, feminist scholars, activists, architects and planners have supported egalitarian and gender equality ideals in urban development (Hayden and Wright 1976; Wekerle 1980). Based on a critique of male dominance in both the planning professions and academia, a feminist urban research agenda has emerged for a ‘non-sexist city’ (Hayden 1980). This field of research brings together disciplines from urban and architectural history, geography, sociology, ethnology, economics, political science, planning, architecture and the growing field of urban studies. Originally, much attention was given to rewriting the role of women in the history of cities (Hayden 1981; Spain 2001; Wilson 1992), the dichotomy between private (home) and public spheres under industrial capitalism (Bondi and Domosh 1998), gendered spaces (Domosh and Seager 2001) and women’s right to equal access to public services such as transportation, housing and social services (Fainstein and Servon 2005; Weisman 1994). The home as a site of resistance was articulated by Black feminists (hooks 1981), challenging the dominant idea of home as merely imprisoning women. In Sweden and Denmark, collective housing became an important technique for breaking up traditional domestic gender roles in the 1970s and 1980s (Vestbro 2010).

In the early 1990s, the gendered experiences of women in public spaces, from the scale of the street to the nation and beyond, gained recognition within geography and the growing research field of gender studies. Women’s fear of sexual assaults in public spaces emerged as a powerful statement on the ‘geography of fear’ (Pain 1991, 2001; Valentine 1989). As a result, safety planning was initiated by women’s groups (Wekerle and Whitzman 1995; Whitzman 1992). When social sustainability was introduced at the 1992 UN conference in Rio de Janeiro, participatory planning processes from a gender perspective became part of Agenda 21. Feminist scholars had been advocating for a more inclusive planning process, which suited this agenda
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(Sandercock 1998). Community-based work has always been a strong base within feminist urban research and activism, going back to Jane Addams Hull House in Chicago. Today, there is a strong focus on women as a category in both research and policy, while aspects of class, race and sexuality are much less articulated. Less attention still is paid to masculinity and urban space, even though different forms of masculinities are formed in relation to public spaces (Kimmel 2008).

Integrating a feminist perspective in academia, policy and planning is not without challenges. Feminist theory and policy development draw on political traditions from both the left and the social liberals, which leads to different understanding of power relations in society. Feminist interventions have been fundamental to public planning in welfare societies, and today gender equality and gender mainstreaming in planning have become integral to the process, though to various degrees in different places. At the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, and at Habitat II in Istanbul 1996, women’s rights in relation to housing, transport and safe cities were put on the agenda. In Europe, the Council of Europe (1998) was central to the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming, which is defined as the process of changing policy routines to promote equality between women and men and to combat discrimination. Today, several municipalities have signed the EU charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), which is a tool for integrating a gender perspective into political decision-making and practical activities. The impact on policymaking by such tools, of course, varies. The Nordic countries are often reported to be the most gender equal in Europe (see, for example, European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE 2013). Rankings on gender equality are commonly used in branding strategies, and gender mainstreaming tools are given much attention by governments and authorities. Gender mainstreaming is meant to advance women’s interests yet has difficulties in offering radical transformations of gendered power relations in urban spaces.

The concept of gender mainstreaming is not unproblematic, either in terms of the utility of the mainstreaming strategy or in the meaning of ‘gender’ (Eveline and Bacchi 2005), and raises questions about what is included in or excluded from the strategy. Its consensualist approach, leaving out the oppositional politics and the feminist movement, and its technocratic understanding of knowledge and tools risk hindering actual empowerment. If gender equality is reduced to ‘inclusion of women’ in a continuation of previous policies, without transforming or challenging existing hierarchies, it risks being an empty signifier (Verloo 2005). Officials possessing gender expertise develop courses and checklists, turning gender equality into an administrative and profit-making task, following the logic of neoliberal new public management.

Gender mainstreaming is usually organized within the public sector, while private investments or public–private partnerships rarely engage in gender mainstreaming strategies. This means that large-scale urban development, renewal projects, event architecture and new residential areas often lack gender perspectives. The role of private construction companies and large property owners has been largely ignored by the feminist urban research agenda, with a few exceptions (see, for example, Fainstein 2001; Parker 2017).

Acknowledging the importance of early urban feminist research and activism, this chapter will now turn to the emerging contemporary feminist critique of neoliberal planning practices to illustrate that a feminist agenda for egalitarian urban life is in constant need of revisions in relation to new forms of gendered spatial relations. After an introduction of urban neoliberalization, two examples will be given of how a feminist agenda, gender equality and the category of women are being used to promote economic growth rather than to create a more just society.
Feminist urban research has only recently engaged with the vast research on urban neoliberalism (for example, Brenner, Peck and Theodore 2010; Hackworth 2007; Leitner et al. 2008). A gendered critique of urban neoliberalism, intersecting with class and race, highlights the reproduction of power relations in new spatial orders. Neoliberal policies reshape cities and seek to improve the economic effectiveness of urban spaces. Neoliberalism assumes that there is a ‘market’ as a solution to all problems (Peck and Tickell 2002), including social policies. Economic growth is supposed to solve social crises and, in this way, ‘economic growth is the state’s social policy’ (Brown 2015, 63–64). The state becomes more like a private company, and private companies start to act more like the public sector through, for example, adopting commitments to certain concepts of sustainability.

In many cities, the entry points for neoliberal policies have been times of crisis, unemployment and de-industrialization. In Western cities, by contrast, planning is located in the public sector and acts in regard to long-term public interests to organize land use, neoliberalism and market mechanisms (Baeten 2012). Sager (2015) describes neoliberal ideologies as a matter of how ‘the market should discipline politics’. This goes firmly against a traditional Social-Democratic view that ‘politics should discipline the market’. In the process, the role and influence of urban planning is effectively transformed into a process of neoliberalization, even in traditionally strong welfare societies (Listerborn 2017; Sager 2011). The anticipated economic boost is expected to ‘trickle down naturally’ and also be of benefit to the lower classes and be sufficient to maintain a welfare society. This seldom works (Holgersen and Baeten 2017). Today, private stakeholders are financing and building the majority of new housing and services, while the public sector remains responsible for public spaces, where democracy is given symbolic value. ‘Gender-equal’ spaces, or safety measures, are examples of such municipal investments. Brown’s (2015) thesis that the logics of economic growth has integrated democracy into capitalism in a way that has deprived democracy of its critical potential seems appropriate, in this context. Neoliberal planning and urban development risk intensifying and/or creating injustices and inequality, not least through the privatization of planning and dismantling the public sector, in which the majority of women are employed. New planning paradigms, like smart cities for example, are promoted by large private companies like IBM and Siemens, and are not particularly attentive to gender inequalities (Sangiuliano 2014).

Gendered, racialized and classed power relations existed before neoliberalization processes. Patriarchal, colonial, racist and capitalist practices and dominations follow historical paths. The feminist challenge is to follow and trace such paths and to be attentive to continuity, change, contradictions and contestations. In the process of a neoliberal urban development – from industrial to de-industrial, from a working city to a consumption and leisure city, for attracting visitors, businesses and the creative class – changing gender roles play a central role. In times when women are no longer primarily associated with the domestic sphere but have gained space in the labour market, gender will affect urban development. This should not be conflated with gender equality because, as I discuss in the remainder of this chapter, it can lead to women being used to gentrify the city and attract the creative class, and to women’s movements being co-opted in the name of urban safety.

Gender and urban renewal

Studies of urban neoliberalism have been surprisingly inattentive to gender, even though dominating urban agendas like attracting the ‘creative class’ feature gendered dimensions. In her
study of Milwaukee, Brenda Parker concludes that ‘creative-class discourses bolstered neoliberal rationalities and were embodied and embraced by the elite, in part because they aligned with and affirmed extant raced, gendered and classed power relations’ (Parker 2017, 167). The ideal creative type is a mobile, autonomous, flexible and hypercapitalist worker and, to conform with this ideal, men and women have to accept neoliberal ideals and new forms of insecurities. ‘The highest paying industries remained most easily occupied by white, male, elite heterosexual subjects with limited social reproduction responsibilities’ (Parker 2017, 168). Care work is seldom part of such ideologies of creativity, which indicates both a limited interpretation of the concept of creativity and the low appreciation of reproduction labour.

Regardless of its actual outcomes, the celebration of diversity is a large part of the creative class discourse. To increase the role of diversity, Richard Florida, the main promoter of the creative class, made use of the Gay Index introduced by demographer Gary Gates in the early 2000s to tout the prediction of the regional success of high-tech industries. In contemporary urban development,

one can celebrate diversity and cast tolerance as a new investment strategy at the same time as one assails those very features by naming the acceptance of people of color, transgender women, and people of low income as ‘liabilities’ of a neighborhood.

Hanhardt 2013, 187

Women, overtly or implicitly functioning as a category representing the middle classes and family, can be part of such urban renewal strategies. Van den Berg (2017) introduces the concept of ‘genderfication’, resonating with gentrification, as the production of space for post-Fordist gender relations in which women and families with children are the new attractive urbanites for cities. Her case study from Rotterdam shows how the city has used femininity as its marketing strategy. In 2013, the city’s alderman stated that ‘Rotterdam needs tits’, building on the previous mayor’s 2008 plea for a more ‘round’ and ‘breasted’ city Rotterdam (Van den Berg 2017, 31). The urban transformation process focused on making the city more attractive to women and families, replacing the traditional (migrant) male working class. Through urban programmes like the City Lounge, women could join in public yoga, and at the same time a strict ‘ban on gathering’ was introduced to displace any loitering men. These strategies accompany plans to replace 20,000 affordable homes with 36,000 properties for middle- and upper-income households. In short, ‘women’ and the marketing of heterosexual, reproductive femininity were used to cleanse the city of its working-class history and reinforce a gentrification process.

Though rooted in places like Rotterdam, gentrification is a global urban process that produces an unequal city in relation to its resources. As Curran (2018) states, such processes are gendered yet largely under-researched, thus reinforce patriarchal practices. Historically, women were early urbanites and experienced the city as a site of freedom of expression that provided empowering employment opportunities (Wilson 1992). At the same time, women and single parents are often victims of poverty in these gentrifying urban processes, which increase the cost of living, narrow the housing choice, make social reproduction more expensive and limit the scope of democratic influence (Curran 2018). Consequences of gentrification, such as evictions and displacement or ‘pressure of displacement’ (Marcuse 1985) reinforce the existing power relations. The perspectives of tenants who stay put throughout urban renewal processes remain under-studied (Shaw and Hagemans 2015). The social cost of both displacement and remaining are high, not least for the elderly and single parents. Social networks, child support and friendships in the local communities are broken (Pull and Richard 2019).
The neglect, lack of maintenance, increased territorial stigmatization and threat of displacement due to increased rents have been part of a growing local movement of resistance among residents impacted by gentrification. bell hooks (1981) pinpointed the importance of understanding such sites of resistance by conceptualizing the ‘homeplaces’ as sources of self-dignity, agency and solidarity in which – and from which – resistance can be organized and theorized. In hooks’ writings, the private spheres transgresses into the public. Through private coordination and communication, resistance movements are formed. The concept of homeplaces indicates a site of comfort, safety and grounding, but also of dignity. The homeplace, in the case of housing, is the meaningful site of resistance and space appropriation, while the claims that the movements raise go beyond neighbourhood territories to create alliances between different areas and cities. To claim the right to dignity is a resistance to the territorial and bodily stigma that people experience in so-called ‘problem areas’.

Feminist urban research maintains that neoliberalization is reasserting masculinity, while women’s burdens of home, care and justice work have increased. Nonetheless, women and femininity may be used in changing a city’s branding. The processes of urban revanchism and gentrification are closely related to neoliberal safety work, the topic that I turn to next, and where a long-standing feminist claim has become a tool in the hand of urban developers.

The neoliberalization of safety work

The fear of sexual assault is an important issue for women’s groups around the world, which also has had an impact on authorities at all levels. Safety work is organized on supra-national levels, like the Safe Cities global initiative, which is a partnership of municipal governments, local communities, organisations and United Nations (UN) focused on the situation for women and girls. Several cities around the world are setting up safety work through conducting diagnostic data studies, engaging community members and improving the lighting and design of streets and buildings, training and sensitizing police, and recruiting more women police officers. UN Women is partnering Microsoft, for example, to find ways to use mobile technology to stop sexual harassment and violence in public spaces by training women to use their smartphones to map safety risks, such as ‘faulty infrastructure or services, obscured walking routes, and lack of lighting’ (‘Making Safe Cities for Women and Girls’, 2013). In many cities, safety work is part of gender mainstreaming planning.

When safety work becomes a part of the mainstream agenda, it also risks being depoliticized. In a neoliberal urban context, safety and freedom from violence may become a commodity when issues of fear and safety are co-opted by authorities, property companies and other stakeholders. Political and activist history is replaced by technocratic solutions that do not unsettle any gendered power relations. Feminist groups have organized marches in Western cities to ‘Take Back the Night’ in protests against sexual threats in public spaces since the 1970s. Inspired by the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, the first march was initiated in 1978 in the US, and similar marches are still being organized all around the world, representing women’s claims to space and their assertions of a right to the city. Global estimates published by the World Health Organization indicate that about one in three (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. The #metoo movement confirms such statistics. But, transformed from an issue of freedom from sexual harassment and a cry for empowerment, safety is now a tool for business (not the least for smart-city related businesses) or a way to increase social control, surveillance and security. Within this new ‘safety discourse’ that has gained an important status in planning and urban renewal, women and their fear of sexual violence are used as an argument.
for urban renewal projects. The category of ‘women’ is limited to White middle-class women living in urban areas, excluding the fear of violence experienced by women outside of this privileged category (Listerborn 2016).

One example of how safety work has been transformed from a feminist intervention to a neoliberal branding strategy is the case of Toronto, which in the early 1980s enhanced its status by focusing on urban safety from a gender perspective. A committed women’s movement, including feminist researchers, put the issue of fear of sexual violence on the political agenda. In the aftermath of the killing of 14 female engineering students in Montreal in 1989, a debate arose on the lack of a gender perspective in contemporary crime prevention. This galvanized the safety work already initiated, further boosting public support (Whitzman 1992) and spurring the analysis and rethinking of urban design, transport systems, public spaces and education programmes for the police. Safety audits were introduced, an example of a grassroots-based planning tool (Wekerle and Whitzman 1995). The ambition of the women’s groups was to empower women and to engage the most vulnerable groups for safety efforts, and the activists and the researchers involved were experienced in community development work. In the run-up to elections, the women’s group organized hearings where, for example, sexual violence was discussed with politicians (Whitzman 1992). This ambitious and strategic work was undoubtedly based on an understanding of gendered power relations, and it inspired other women’s groups, including in Europe. Overall, safety issues acquired a political resonance and became a marketing tool for the City of Toronto.

In the early 2000s, safety work was evident in the urban design and transport system in Toronto, based on the work by feminist activists and researchers, but the new municipal government had cut its budget for work against sexual violence, reduced the women’s groups’ influence on safety work and developed a parallel strategy focusing on traditional situational crime prevention and a ‘hard-target’ approach (Listerborn 2002). Embedded in these new political and economic programmes, the gender aspects had become merely cosmetic. In the following year, surveillance and hard-target security were strengthened in most Western countries. In the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks in 2001 and in the context of the ‘War on Terrorism’, ‘the local level, the focus on community crime prevention in urban areas that emerged in the 1990s … has also been appropriated for the antiterrorism project’ (Wekerle and Jackson 2005, 43). Safety also became a convenient tool to upgrade areas and market new developments. With the turnaround of New York City from its criminal reputation in the 1980s to a tourist attraction today, such safety work was essential. The format of BIDs (Business Improvement Districts) and police measures reshaped the social fabric of the city, leading to gentrification (Smith 1996).

To return to Toronto, Leslie Kearn and Beverly Mullings (2013) analysed a wave of apartment block development in the mid-1990s that lasted until 2008. Based on the global, all-encompassing idea of inevitable progress towards a culture- and knowledge-based economy, the City of Toronto sought to boost urban density through high-rise buildings and investment in ‘disinvested’ areas to include them in ‘better’ use. Apartment blocks in this project were ‘aggressively marketed towards women, particularly young and single women’ (Kearn and Mullings 2013, 32), framed within a discourse of women’s liberation and urban space as affording emancipation for women. Safety aspects were highlighted as selling points, as some of the new buildings were located in low-income and racially stigmatized neighbourhoods. Their locations were presented as attractive financial investments that would increase in value over the years, and the new buildings were lent a sense of urban authenticity through the presence of marginalized people. Fear and danger were mitigated by private security mechanisms and potential wealth accumulation. For the property companies:
the extensive marketing of security features is not simply a way to attract women buyers; it is also a way for developers to colonise areas of the city that would have been deemed too risky for such investment because of social stigma and fear of crime. Kearn and Mullings 2013, 33

Borrowing the rhetoric from earlier feminist work on women’s fear and independent access to the city, property companies earned new credentials yet simultaneously contributed to the displacement of marginalized groups from various city zones to the periphery. Low-income women, single mothers, recent immigrants and people with disabilities do not belong to this group of young and mobile urban professionals.

Safety work, initiated by women’s groups, was transformed from a feminist strategy that challenged gendered power relations to a marketing and branding tool for real estate companies and the city. The underlying power relations of fear identified by feminists are still relevant but are used for purposes of capital investments. The claim for safety and security; that is, freedom from sexual and racist violence, has been repackaged and has entered the urban development market to become a central selling point, and sold to women as a market group. Comparable investments in transit, services and safety are not made in the districts where the marginalized people live; poverty-stricken residents of marginalized neighbourhoods both are exposed to more crime and experience more fear in their everyday lives than others (Estrada and Nilsson 2011). In addition, social movements and urban activists working against violence and fear are themselves subjected to violence and fear (Wekerle and Jackson 2005). When pronounced inequality is based on gender, race or religion, activists are often subjected to violent threats from antagonists, and anti-feminist agendas act upon notions of safety and connect these to a nationalist and racist agenda (Sager and Mulinari 2017). Pinpointing the unequal spatial distribution of fear and sexist and racist violence must be part of an overall notion of the right to the city and radical equality, but this needs to be revitalized and redefined in times of neoliberal urban development.

Conclusion

Feminist urbanites, activists, politicians, planners, architects and researchers have made progress, at the same time recurrently facing comparable challenges. Gender mainstreaming has been important to gain gender awareness in policy development, while contributing to depoliticize and incorporate gender issues into an agenda of technocratic new public management. As such, an increased gender awareness and focus on women in urban development may have negative long-term consequences. As Van den Berg writes:

genderfication may seem to be cause for celebration. After decades of feminist urban studies, Jane Jacobs is the hero of the day in planning discourse, planners are thinking about more gender-equal cities and child-friendly cities are increasingly a popular adagio in public policy circles.

But instead of leading to a less sexist and ageist city, Van den Berg wants to shed light on the risk of the use of gender equality and femininity as an instrument for class upgrading and the creation of profit. When gender equality and women’s safety become a non-threatening entity, they are easily co-opted by commercial interests and there is a risk of reinforcing the existing power relations of class, ethnicity and ability. A radical transformation to a more gender-equal city cannot be attentive only to White middle-class women.
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For contemporary feminist urban scholars, this is a highly important warning and at the same time a call for more research to understand more deeply how gender (both femininities and masculinities) is manifested in planning and urban development at different times and in different spaces of urban restructuring. Gendered issues, like safety, are being highlighted, while female poverty and racialized issues are being downplayed. The visions for the good city, based on a capitalist, patriarchal and colonial ground, will not be able to include the feminist call for a non-sexist and non-racist city. Remember the words of Audre Lord: ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde 2001).

Note


Key readings


References

Gender and urban neoliberalization