

Public Spaces are Failing Girls and Women. How Feminist Planning Can Learn from Social Innovation

Emelie Anneroth

Sweco, Sweden

emelie.anneroth@sweco.se

Sara Ferlander

Mälardalen University, Sweden

sara.ferlander@mdu.se

Tanya Jukkala

Mälardalen University, Sweden

tanya.jukkala@mdu.se

Abstract

Public spaces are often failing girls and women, with male dominance and a lack of representation being prevalent issues. The 2030 Agenda emphasises the need for safe and accessible public spaces for women, children and other disadvantaged or marginalised groups. Nevertheless, women and girls tend to be neglected in the development of urban areas, and their specific needs and risks are not fully considered. Hence, there is a need for feminist urban planning. Feminist planning aims to understand, challenge, and change power relations in public spaces, by involving the experiences, needs, and desires of marginalised groups in the planning process in order to create more equal cities. This approach recognises the individual and collective power that women and other disadvantaged groups already possess. Social innovation is an innovative practice for meeting social needs and shares a common goal with feminist planning of promoting social change and increasing power for disadvantaged groups. However, whereas feminist urban planning – and urban planning in general – tend to end when a project has been planned and executed, social innovation has a stronger and more explicit focus on results or impact of the process or project. This is an aspect where feminist planning can learn from social innovation. By addressing the specific needs of marginalised groups and focusing on results and actual change, feminist planning can contribute to positive social change and empower women and girls in urban development processes. This viewpoint argues that feminist planning can learn from the focus of social innovation on results (i.e. output, outcome and impact of the planning), which has the potential to change planning practices and challenge gendered social norms in order to create more equal, just and socially sustainable public spaces and cities.

Keywords: feminist planning, intersectionality, marginalised groups, social innovation, social sustainability

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1. Public spaces are failing girls and women

“What makes me not want to hang out in Fittja centre is because I don't see other girls doing that, so I don't feel represented. Why would I go there if only guys are there?”
(18-year-old girl from Fittja, cited in Anneroth, 2019, p. 44)

This quote illustrates why many girls avoid the public square in Fittja centre, a marginalised suburban area in Stockholm. Local girls have described that specific space as “a grey transit-area mainly dominated by boys” (Wrangsten, Ferlander and Borgström, 2022, p.11). Male dominance, including a general lack of children and women, has also been observed in other public spaces in Sweden and elsewhere (e.g. Andersson et al., 2020; Haas, 2023).

Despite – or because of – that situation, the 2030 Agenda is calling on us to create cities for everyone and to leave no one behind. Women and girls constitute a disadvantaged group at risk of being left behind in the development of more sustainable cities and communities. According to a recent UN report (Luchsinger, 2023), the world is failing girls and women in relation to many of the sustainability goals of the 2030 Agenda. It is argued that their needs and specific risks are not considered enough or fully in the rapid growth and development of urban areas. In Sweden, for example, it has been emphasised that the risk to be left behind is particularly high for girls with various vulnerabilities that overlap and intersect (Statistics Sweden, 2020). The importance of using intersectional feminist approaches (Crenshaw, 1991) in urban planning to combat inequalities and segregation have therefore been stressed in the literature (e.g. Beebeejaun, 2017; Listerborn, 2020). One of which is feminist planning.

This viewpoint argues that feminist planning can learn from the focus of social innovation on results (i.e., output, outcome, and impact of the planning), which has the potential to change planning practices and challenge gendered social norms to create more inclusive, just and socially sustainable cities and public spaces.

2. The need for feminist planning

Many cities worldwide are becoming increasingly segregated. Van Ham and colleagues (2021) describe a global trend of urban segregation caused by rising levels of income inequality. The most severe and persistent inequalities in cities appear where different inequalities intersect, and these intersections require most attention. For example, many women in marginalised urban areas face multiple layers of discrimination as gender intersects with age, ethnicity, class and space (Anneroth et al., 2022; Anneroth, 2024).

Urban segregation, to some extent, is also a consequence of how our cities have been planned. As early as the Middle Ages, cities were divided into different quarters. The wealthy lived in the city's core and the poor in the city's periphery. Different parts of the city were thus accessible to different groups. Some researchers argue that today's segregation and inequalities are partly a result of cities primarily being planned based upon men's needs. This has for instance been expressed in terms of “patriarchal urban planning” (Molina, 2018) and “the unsustainable male city” (Greed, 2019), concepts used to emphasise patriarchal structures in urban planning and their consequences in urban and public space.

Patriarchal structures are characterised by male dominance. According to bell hooks (2004), a patriarchy is characterised by male dominance and power over oppressed groups, especially women, both outside and within the family sphere. The patriarchy is held together through language, codes of conduct, and legislations, which, in terms of gender, determine what activities and behaviours are desirable. The city is, in many ways, an expression of these dominant gendered social norms and values. Due to the patriarchal system, urban planning has traditionally been grounded in masculine norms that prioritise men's needs, especially white, cis, educated males, while the needs of women, and other disadvantaged groups, have been overlooked (Dutton et al., 2022). Leslie Kern (2020) argues that we live in a man-made world and that our public spaces are not made for women, which for instance lead to young women struggling to find places to 'hang'. Women often perceive public spaces as places of threat rather than places of social cohesion. When the design of cities and public spaces does not consider a diversity of needs, it often leads to domination by men's needs, and those of other privileged groups. That is why we need feminist planning.

3. What is feminist planning?

To challenge the gendered norms that have determined what characterises a "good" city, feminist planning processes enable the contribution from women and other disadvantaged groups. It aims to understand, challenge and change the power relations that characterise cities and their planning processes (Andersdotter Fabre, Anneroth and Wrangsten, 2019).

In feminist planning, everyday experiences, needs, and desires of marginalised groups are considered an important source of knowledge in the planning process. Feminist planning furthermore involves considerations of the systematic impacts of urban development on different groups of people (Dutton et al., 2022). Rooted in feminist theory (Snyder, 1995), feminist planning includes an intersectional understanding of urban planning. For example, a group of adolescents in a public space is not homogeneous from an intersectional understanding, but needs to be broken down into subgroups, such as girls; girls of non-national origin; girls of non-national origin who are wheelchair users, and so on. The more norm-breaking characteristics a person has, the greater are the risks of being subjected to exclusion, discrimination and reduced life chances. Feminist planning thus moves beyond the gender power order, towards the inclusion of more power structures related to, for example, place of origin, ability, age, religion, etc., to answer the question of whose needs are most urgent to address. An issue, however, is how this is realised in practice. We argue that social innovation theory is important for understanding and monitoring the results of feminist planning processes, in terms of actual changes in the built environment, as well as for the different social groups involved in the process of planning and designing public space.

4. Learning from social innovation – through a focus on results

Social innovation can be defined as "new ideas that work to meet pressing unmet needs and improve people's lives" (Mulgan 2007, p. 7). Similarly to feminist planning, it deals with a theoretical tradition and practices within innovation that have systematically obscured the specific needs of women and other marginalised groups (Cornwall, 2003).

However, within the field of social innovation, there is a strong emphasis on results and actual change. The primary purpose of social innovation is a change in behaviour due to the innovation itself (Franz, Hochgerner and Howaldt, 2012). Researchers also argue that social innovation strives for inclusion and well-being through improved social relations and increased empowerment (Moulaert et al., 2013). Empowerment involves the ability, knowledge and confidence to influence one's own everyday life and access to societal resources, both as an individual and together with others (Ravazzoli and Valero Lopez, 2020). In this context, it does not mean that someone should be given power, but rather to be aware of, and acknowledge, the individual and collective power that women, and other disadvantaged groups, already possess (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015).

Common to both social innovation and feminist planning is thus a pursuit of social change towards more equal relations through increased power for marginalised groups. In practice, however, the questions of when or whether social change has occurred are not necessarily self-evident. Here, looking at the field of social innovation with its tradition of analysing development processes based on their consequences and results (Howaldt et al., 2017), is helpful. The results, both short- and long-term, of social innovations (and feminist planning in our point of view) can be analysed through three parameters (Millard, Holtgrewe and Hochgerner, 2017):

- *output* is what is created in connection with the activities carried out within the framework of the social innovation, in the form of a new product, service, working method, or other.
- *outcome* is the benefits or changes that occur for the participants during or after the activities.
- *impact* is the long-term consequences that arise as a result of the innovation's implementation.

Research shows that the success of social innovations depends on how user involvement and collaborative structures enable co-creation and empowerment, as well as how innovations change societal structures through influence on institutions, cultural values, behavioural patterns and social awareness (Howaldt et al., 2017). In our view, this is also important to incorporate into planning processes, as they tend to end when a project has been planned and executed, with small considerations of how the new infrastructure then impacted the place socially and spatially. A stronger focus on the effects or results when planning and launching feminist planning processes would create more sustainable solutions.

Let us now return to the young woman who did not want to hang out in the centre of her living area because there were only guys there. This young woman was part of a feminist planning project – #UrbanGirlsMovement – in relation to which the importance of actual change and impact became evident (Anneroth, 2024). The young women who participated in the project used Minecraft to design a public square in their living area (i.e. output). From interviews with the participants, we learned that while they described an increased empowerment as a result of their participation in the project (i.e. outcome), they also clearly indicated that this increased empowerment was conditioned by whether the project would lead to any actual change in the physical environment of their living area (i.e. impact).

5. Closing reflection

Focusing on results and actual change is an important learning from social innovation that can strengthen feminist planning in the quest of more inclusive, just and sustainable cities. Needs and ideas identified in feminist planning processes should be translated into practical and real change in the built environment. It is important to consider how needs identified in feminist planning initiatives can be addressed in practice. This requires user involvement, collaborative structures, and a consideration of both short- and long-term results of a project's implementation. When the results are utilised, they can ensure that the effects have an impact in the form of positive social change. Such a driving vision can strengthen the implementation of feminist planning practices to create more socially sustainable cities.

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