

Fostering Gender Transformative Cities around the World

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Abstract

In the context of rapid urbanisation and the effects of climate change and conflicts, social inclusion and stakeholder engagements remain a low priority for most decision-makers in shaping the future of cities. The urban development initiative Her City intends to mainstream gender and age perspectives in urban planning and design decision-making processes. Her City offers a toolbox for municipal professionals, urban actors, and local decision-makers to involve girls and young women in urban planning and design processes and challenge exclusionary practices and social inequalities. This viewpoint asserts that integrating girls' perspectives leads to more responsive urban planning and the creation of inclusive and economically viable public spaces across the world. Applying an intersectional approach to urban planning, in a multitude of urban settings with different social, cultural, political and economic prerequisites, have proven to be an efficient shortcut to sustainable cities. Additionally, the initiative's success is underscored by its alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), delivering resilient cities for all. This viewpoint presents lessons learned from the application of Her City in Peru, Jamaica, Mozambique, Uganda, Palestine, Thailand, and Italy. These localised projects in various regions demonstrate how Her City can deliver tangible outcomes, such as the revitalisation of public spaces, community empowerment, and the promotion of gender equality, while fostering social cohesion, economic empowerment, and environmental sustainability. By championing gender-responsive urban development, Her City offers a blueprint for creating inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities globally.

Keywords: Her City, gender, intersectionality, participatory urban development, sustainable cities, community engagement

To cite this article:

Melin, T. and Levonen, T. (2024) "Fostering Gender Transformative Cities around the World", *The Journal of Public Space*, 9(1), pp. 125-136. doi: 10.32891/jps.v9i1.1816.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



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I. Introduction

Urban areas are facing challenges worldwide, with issues such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, and environmental degradation. One critical aspect of these challenges is the exclusion of women and girls from urban planning and decision-making processes. This exclusion often results in cities that do not provide for the needs of all residents as well as perpetuating gender inequality. By involving women and girls in the planning and design of cities, it is possible to create safer, more equitable, and resilient urban environments that benefit all residents (Kern, 2020).

Research shows that when consulted in urban planning and design processes, girls and young women express social responsibility and environmental concern, by addressing pressing urban planning issues such as crime prevention measures, ecosystem services, transport solutions, access to education, housing and healthcare (Escalante & Valdivia, 2024). Additionally, girls and young women, traditionally having the role of main care provider of patriarchal society, often integrate the needs of a variety of urban dwellers such as children, youth, elderly and disabled people among others. Since cities traditionally have been planned by and for white, car bound middle aged men, engaging this demographic in urban development processes provides new perspectives and enriched insights. In turn, enabling informed decision-making and fostering inclusive, economically viable public spaces catering to diverse stakeholder needs (UN-Habitat, 2010). Well-planned public spaces accessible for all regardless of ethnic origin, ability, sexual orientation, age or gender, have a community building effect as well as provide a democratic forum for citizens and society (Kern, 2020).

Digital solutions are beneficial for initiatives such as Her City since they offer innovative tools for inclusive and participatory urban development. These solutions enable broader engagement by providing platforms for women and girls to voice their needs and ideas into the planning processes. Digital tools such as mapping software and online surveys, facilitate data collection and analysis, helping to identify and address gender-specific urban challenges efficiently. Furthermore, digital platforms can enhance transparency and accountability, ensuring that urban development projects are responsive to the community's needs.

Her City was launched in 2021 as a joint initiative between the United Nations agency for Human Settlements, UN-Habitat, and Shared City Foundation. Financial support for its establishment was provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova), and the independent think tank Global Utmaning. Her City encourages urban actors to integrate the gender and age perspective into long-term strategies for building equal urban societies and accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Her City initiative applies an intersectional approach to civic engagement and public space development, and challenges exclusionary practices and unequal social structures.

Her City Toolbox provides a digital and open-source platform with methods and tools for engaging groups at risk of marginalisation such as girls and young women while planning and designing public space. The toolbox was co-developed by a multi-stakeholder team, including representatives from the public, private sector, academia and civil society. Started in 2017, the team has studied tools and methods available that address public participation of girls and young women in urban design processes. Following, the team identified best practices and organised them into a step-by-step

methodology, articulated into nine incremental blocks that cover the three main phases of a traditional urban development process: assessment, design and implementation. In the first phase, assessment, a stakeholder mapping is conducted to identify relevant local actors and engage the primary target group. Once the multi-stakeholder team is mobilised, city wide and site-specific public space assessments are executed to gather qualitative and quantitative data using digital tools such as Kobo Collect¹ and Inhabit Place². During the phase two, design, the spaces and user needs are analysed and addressed into design proposals, using design thinking and visualisation tools such as MethodKit³ and Minecraft⁴. The third and last phase, implementation, provides guidelines on how to formulate recommendations for action, disseminate and validate the design proposals with the community at large, and implement it. Finally, after six months from the implementation the multi-stakeholder team evaluated the impact of the interventions.

The Her City initiative provides a theoretical framework for the implementation of local projects and catalyses positive change on a global scale, approaching systemic challenges in local settings by fully utilising the expertise of girls and minorities. As of March 2024, the toolbox registers 1250 users from 430 cities in 120 countries, forming 350 independent initiatives. Meanwhile, the Her City team has supported 25 partnership projects spanning five continents with 13 fully implemented project sites (Her City, 2023).

Her City has the ambition to contribute to a range of the development goals, including health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality (SDG5); reducing inequality (SDG10); sustainable cities and communities (SDG11); peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16); and partnerships (SDG17). Additionally, reports from projects carried out since 2021 have shown that the process also contributes to local implementations of the other SDGs.

In what follows, we present a few examples of the application of the Her City Toolbox in South America, Africa, Asia and Europe, to illustrate the importance of gender-focused urban development (UN-Habitat, 2024).

2. Peru - Her City Lima

“It is a sign of change, with benefits for both boys and girls”
Flor and Patricia, neighbours in Lima, Peru

The project "Female builders of an inclusive and resilient city-wide system of public spaces in Lima" aims to boost resilience and promote social cohesion in two marginalised neighbourhoods in Lima, Peru. The project addresses urban issues in the areas by revitalising public spaces working in close cooperation with partners Avina Foundation, Ocupa tu Calle, Mano a Mano, and the Block by Block Foundation. The major challenge is the vulnerability of pedestrian pathways located on hillsides, which are prone to both landslides and crime. Meanwhile, some of the public spaces remain

¹ <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>

² <https://www.inhabitplace.info/>

³ <https://methodkit.com/>

⁴ <https://www.minecraft.net/en-us>

underutilised due to issues like informal parking and drug-related activities. To address these problems, local women, particularly unemployed single mothers who lost their livelihood during the Covid-19 pandemic, are engaged as "Female Builders" to transform these spaces. Utilising their knowledge of the area and the experience of partner organisations on public space improvement, the multi-stakeholder team contribute to making Lima public spaces safer and more accessible. In collaboration with the Her City initiative, the project has empowered residents and transformed abandoned spaces. Digital tools like Minecraft and Inhabit Place facilitated the co-design process, allowing residents to reimagine and redesign the spaces according to their needs. The project has impacted over 5,500 people in the neighbourhoods that benefit from the revitalised spaces, a majority of whom are women and girls.



Figure 1. Children contributing to the public space design proposals in Lima, Perú © Ocupa tu Calle.

The project emphasises the importance of active community participation, especially from women and girls, in the design and construction of public spaces. The success of the project already serves as inspiration for further initiatives across Lima and has the potential of influencing public policy to prioritise inclusive urban development. Through collaboration and community engagement, the project demonstrates how gender-responsive approaches can transform urban spaces and improve quality of life for residents (UN-Habitat, 2024).

3. Jamaica - Her City Montego Bay

The Canterbury Community Center and Public Space project in Montego Bay, Jamaica, led by UN-Habitat and funded primarily by the Sandals Foundation represents a transformative approach to urban development. Montego Bay grapples with the consequences of rapid urbanisation, with more than half of its population residing in informal settlements characterised by inadequate infrastructure, environmental hazards, and limited access to basic services. Despite its strategic location, Canterbury faces challenges, including violent crime, high unemployment rates, flooding and waste management issues that further intensify the community's vulnerabilities. In response,

the Canterbury project aims to strengthen community resilience by transforming the area into a vibrant social hub, fostering social cohesion, skills development, and entrepreneurship.



Figure 2. Young women analysing public space challenges using MethodKit in Montego Bay, Jamaica © UN-Habitat.

Through inclusive decision-making processes, residents, particularly women, youth, and children, are actively involved in all stages of the project, from design to implementation. This participatory approach not only creates a sense of ownership and pride but also ensures that the project addresses the unique needs and aspirations of the community. The outcomes of the Canterbury project are multifaceted, spanning through the social, economic, and environmental domains. The establishment of the community centre and the public space serves as a catalyst for social and economic development, creating sustainable livelihoods, enhancing employment opportunities, and contributing to the local economy. Moreover, the project focuses also on environmental improvements, such as drainage enhancements and green space creation, which promote ecological resilience and improves overall quality of life. (UN-Habitat, 2024).

4. Mozambique - Her City Pemba

The Her City Project in Pemba, Mozambique represents a clear example of transformative urban development, addressing the complex challenges faced by internally displaced groups and host communities, with a particular focus on empowering women and girls. Partnering with local stakeholders and supported by UN-Habitat, the project seeks to strengthen the resilience of displaced and host communities, particularly women and girls, through participatory planning, infrastructure improvements, and capacity building. Through a collaborative effort involving local activists, residents, and municipal authorities, the project has initiated a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.



Figure 3. Validating GIS spatial maps with youth and women in Pemba, Mozambique © UN-Habitat.

Situated in the Mahate neighbourhood, the project confronts a myriad of challenges stemming from rapid urbanisation, including limited access to basic services, environmental degradation, and safety concerns. The project's participatory approach has given valuable insights into the lived experiences of residents, as well as their aspirations for a more inclusive and resilient urban environment. By engaging community members in Gender-Focused Walks of Active Observation of Public Spaces Diagnosis, the project has identified priority areas for intervention, ranging from road safety improvements to sanitation initiatives and environmental conservation efforts. In addition to tangible interventions, the project is instrumental in building institutional capacities and fostering community empowerment. Through collaborative planning processes and capacity-building initiatives, local authorities and community members are equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to advocate for their needs and shape the future development of their neighbourhoods. The project aims to leave a lasting impact on Pemba's urban landscape, with outcomes ranging from improved living conditions and increased community engagement to strengthened institutional capacities and enhanced resilience. (UN-Habitat, 2024).

5. Uganda - Her City Kampala

The Her City Project in Kampala, spearheaded by the women-led organisation HADE (Holistic Actions for Development and Empowerment) with support from Dreamtown and DANIDA, focused on transforming urban spaces in the informal settlement of Kamwanyi. With the Her City Toolbox, a rooftop in Kamwanyi was designed together with young women and girls from the community, aiming to address unequal access to urban space and promote inclusive urban planning and design. Despite challenges such as land ownership disputes and illiteracy among participants, HADE successfully empowered women and girls through training and workshops, leading to the creation of a green space with amenities like seating areas, water taps, and a library.



Figure 4. Young women sketching their design ideas for inclusive public spaces in Kampala, Uganda © HADE.

The project has raised awareness and empowered participants, resulting in spin-off initiatives such as the Her City Market Corner, “Juice-preneur” ventures, and savings groups, showcasing the catalytic effect of engaging young women in urban development. The project also shined a light on how difficult the negotiation process for land access can be, especially in a context where land is scarce and privately owned. The team had to get creative and get access to a rooftop that was then re-designed and re-purposed into a public space. Creating layers to the cityscape. This initiative has significant effects beyond the project itself, fostering economic opportunities, social cohesion, and community resilience. By investing in the potential of women and girls, the project creates a foundation for sustainable urban development and inclusive growth (UN-Habitat, 2024).

6. Palestine - Haya joint programme

(Note: the project referred to as Her City Gaza was implemented before the situation escalated October 2023)

The Haya joint programme, a collaborative effort led by UN-Habitat and UN Women in Palestine, represents a comprehensive aspiration to prevent the pervasive issue of violence against women and girls in public spaces across the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Embracing a holistic approach, the initiative employs participatory planning methodologies and robust community engagement strategies, harnessing the collective expertise of local authorities, architects, and marginalised communities, with a particular emphasis on empowering women and girls. The challenges faced in Palestine regarding violence against women and girls in public spaces are multifaceted. They stem from social, cultural, and political factors, creating barriers to women's participation in public

life and hindering their access to safe and inclusive spaces. The Haya programme acknowledges these complexities and addresses them through innovative initiatives and partnerships. One of the key objectives of the programme is to improve the quality and safety of public spaces for women and girls.



Figure 5. Girls and boys utilising the videogame Minecraft to co-design public spaces in Khan Younis, Palestine © UN-Habitat.

This involves redesigning urban areas to make them more accessible, welcoming, and secure. By engaging with local authorities, architects, and community members, the programme identifies areas in need of intervention and develops specific solutions to address them in five cities of Palestine, Bethlehem, Jenin, Jericho, Khan Younis and Nablus. The project endeavours to not only improve the quality and safety of public spaces but also cultivating youth leadership and fostering inclusive urban development practices that honour cultural heritage and promote social cohesion. By amplifying voices, advocating for gender-responsive policies, and facilitating capacity building efforts, the Haya project aims to pave the way for sustainable transformation, ensuring that safe and inclusive public spaces become a cornerstone of resilient and equitable urban environments throughout Palestine. (UN-Habitat, 2024).

7. Thailand - Her City Chiang Khong

The project in the Chiang Khong district of Thailand aims to assess and analyse public spaces, focusing on gender equality, human rights, and inclusive urban environments. This project, titled "Neighborhood Assessment and Analysis on Community's Views On Gender Equality," was a joint effort between UN-Habitat and UNFPA Thailand. The participants comprised a diverse group, including local adolescents, youth from ethnic minority backgrounds, women across different age groups, local administrators, NGO

representatives, municipal officers, architects, urban designers and Chief Security leaders. In Chiang Kong District, women encountered significant barriers, ranging from limited access to basic services to gender-based violence and underrepresentation in decision-making processes. The initiative aimed to tackle these issues through a comprehensive neighbourhood assessment, delving into themes such as climate change, safety, and social inclusion. By amplifying the voices of marginalised groups and fostering partnerships, the project sought to lay the groundwork for sustainable urban development. It included a public space mapping phase to identify deficiencies in infrastructure and green areas, proposing solutions for creating safer, more inclusive spaces.



Figure 6. Girls presenting their public space ideas to local authorities and urban practitioners in Chiang Khong, Thailand © UNFPA.

“The girls and women in turn get to acknowledge that people from other parts of the world are interested in importance of them. Some have never experienced it before.”

Thitipa Lamsri, Wiang Chiang Khong municipal public relations

Moving forward, Her City Thailand plans to expand its impact by partnering with UNFPA Thailand, developing online curricula, conducting demographic data training, and regenerating public spaces using innovative design approaches. Through collaboration and collective action, Chiang Kong has the potential to become a model for inclusive urban development, inspiring positive change in other communities in Thailand facing similar challenges (UN-Habitat, 2024).

8. Italy - Her City Corvetto

The Her City project in Corvetto, Milan, Italy, launched in April 2023 promotes gender equality by revitalising public spaces in multicultural neighbourhoods. Led by Dare.ngo and supported by UN-Habitat, this initiative seeks to address longstanding urban challenges in Corvetto, a neighbourhood plagued by neglect, discrimination, and insecurity. With a population of 35,900, Corvetto has struggled with its reputation for distress and degradation, compounded by a lack of adequate lighting, maintenance, and cleanliness. The project aims to empower multi-ethnic residents, particularly women and girls, by involving them in decision-making processes and urban transformations. Through a series of participatory workshops and activities, residents have identified Gabriel Rosa Square as a priority intervention area due to safety concerns, especially for women. Proposed solutions include the installation of surveillance cameras, solar lamps, and road emergency buttons to enhance security, as well as the introduction of green spaces and amenities to improve liveability. Additionally, community-led initiatives such as chess games and physical activity courses aim to foster social inclusion and repopulate the square. By actively engaging citizens in urban planning and design, the Her City project promotes active citizenship and participatory democracy. Through dialogue and exchange, residents from diverse backgrounds learn about each other, reducing discrimination and fostering a sense of belonging.



Figure 7. Dare.ngo presenting the Her City Toolbox to residents of Corvetto in Milano, Italy © Dare.ngo.

The project's goal is to transform Corvetto into a vibrant, inclusive hub that connects the city centre with nearby parks. By empowering the community and enhancing public spaces, Her City aims to create a safe, welcoming environment free from violence and discrimination. Lessons learned from the project emphasise the importance of community engagement and inclusion in urban development. By realising their ideas and

proposals, residents develop a sense of ownership and pride in their neighbourhood, contributing to its long-term sustainability and resilience. The Her City project in Corvetto exemplifies the transformative potential of grassroots initiatives in creating more inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable urban environments. Through collaboration and collective action, communities can reclaim and revitalise public spaces, fostering social cohesion and empowerment for all residents (UN-Habitat, 2024).

9. Conclusion: Driving gender transformative development

Gender-transformative urban development serves as an important tool in the quest for gender equality within urban landscapes. As cities expand and evolve, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that the benefits of urbanisation are equitably distributed, without leaving any community behind. This mindset lies at the heart of the Her City initiative. Embedding gender considerations, as well as intersecting dimensions of identity such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status, into planning and design processes, cities can proactively address systemic inequalities and promote social inclusion. Her City provides the opportunity for urban stakeholders to integrate youth, gender, and socioeconomic perspectives into the development processes. Her City, with its multifaceted projects set in a variety of contexts, have endorsed innovation in urban planning and design, thereby challenging conventional paradigms and fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation.

The first five years of Her City has shown the values of including underrepresented perspectives in local decision-making processes and physical planning and design of urban spaces. Each partnership project showcases the variety and complexity of urban issues that can be addressed when applying a gendered lens to planning and design (UN-Habitat, 2024). The Her City process itself is scalable and applicable in all urban contexts due to its community centred approach. The project teams often face similar challenges independent of where their project is set –lack of funding and political hesitancy. However, when given the opportunity, community driven local initiatives play a role in driving new-thinking and much needed change in the development process to obtain inclusive and resilient cities. A bottom up and community centred approach builds trust and foster engagement while navigating complex social structures and norms with cultural understanding. Leveraging the deep knowledge of local contexts, such projects pinpoint specific community needs, advocating for tailored solutions that resonate with residents and gain broad acceptance. Local champions foster a sense of ownership and accountability within the community, promoting the long-term sustainability of projects as well as bridging the gap between communities and decision-makers, and driving positive transformations towards more inclusive, resilient, and vibrant urban environments (Koleth et al, (2021).

As urban landscapes evolve, Her City remains at the forefront, driving the transition towards a more sustainable and inclusive urban world. By embracing underrepresented perspectives and amplifying marginalised voices, Her City paves the way for more inclusive and resilient urban environments, where the needs and aspirations of all residents are recognized and valued.

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