

## Making Spaces for Girls. Their Right to the Public Realm

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### Abstract

The paper explores the exclusion of teenage girls from public spaces, particularly parks and recreation grounds. It reveals the multiple challenges faced by teenage girls in accessing and utilising these spaces and the impact this has on their well-being and sense of inclusion in the community. The fundamental problem is that parks are not designed with the needs of teenage girls in mind. Facilities intended for teenagers, such as skate parks, Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs), and BMX tracks, predominantly cater to the interests of boys, contributing to inequality of opportunities. Moreover, the design and dominance of these facilities by boys can further discourage girls from participating in outdoor activities, impacting their physical health and mental well-being. Consequently, teenage girls perceive public spaces as unwelcoming and unsuitable for their use. Safety emerges as a critical concern, with teenage girls reporting feeling unsafe in public spaces due to various factors, including sexual harassment. The paper highlights the broader definition of safety for girls, encompassing not only physical security but also the sense of welcome and acceptance in a space. This is important not just because girls have a right to public space. The barriers they face also impact their physical and mental well-being to a significant degree. Drawing attention to the intersectionality of these challenges, the paper advocates for the active engagement of teenage girls in the design process, recognizing their diverse perspectives and needs. While the paper identifies emerging principles for effective engagement with teenage girls, it calls for further research and larger-scale practical projects and a need to evaluate the impact of inclusive design on the ground. Ultimately, the research contributes to a growing discourse on gender-inclusive urban planning, advocating for a paradigm shift that prioritises the needs and voices of teenage girls in shaping public spaces.

**Keywords:** teenage girls, public space, parks, inclusive design, engagement

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Make Space for Girls (MSFG) is a UK charity which campaigns for parks and public spaces to be designed with the needs of teenage girls in mind. This is a simple statement, but one which reveals a significant disadvantage which has been hiding in plain sight. For many years, girls and young women have been effectively designed out of parks and other public spaces. When we speak to teenage girls, they tell us that parks and public spaces are not for them and there is nothing provided that they want to use. This happens for a range of reasons which include safety, facilities and spaces dominated by boys, and the absence of provision like toilets and lighting. But most of all it happens because the voices of teenage girls are rarely heard at any stage in the commissioning, design or management of these places.

We know that this problem begins in adolescence, when children start to visit parks on their own. Beyond that, it's hard to quantify the extent of the issue as very little research has been done in the UK about how older children and adolescents use parks – or don't. Work in Europe has found that boys are more than twice as likely to play outdoors than girls and that boys dominated the play areas to the extent that in some parks in Sweden, the users were 80% boys (White Arkitekter 2017). American research has also demonstrated that while there is a general drop off in park usage in the teenage years, this is much more pronounced in girls (Baran et al., 2013). Girls are aware of the issue – one study shows that 72% of older girls think that boys use parks and other outdoor spaces the most (Yorkshire Sport 2022). What is also clear is that one of the problems for girls is the fact that the boys dominate. They will often avoid areas where boys are present and go at times when facilities are empty; their use of space is regulated by the absence or presence of boys. Research has also shown that girls are less active when there are groups of boys present<sup>1</sup>.

### **Facilities**

A significant factor is the facilities on offer. Where something has been provided 'for teenagers', this is usually either a skate park, a MUGA (aka fenced pitch or cage) or a BMX track. When Make Space for Girls surveyed 91 councils across the UK, these three types of equipment formed 90% of provision for teenagers<sup>2</sup>. And all of these are dominated by boys and young men. Data gathered via a citizen science project demonstrated that users of these three facilities were 90% boys and young men (MSFG 2023a).

These facilities are predominantly geared to the interests of teenage boys, who make up 90% of grassroots football teams and 85% of skateboarders (MSFG 2023a). Sports and leisure pursuits which tend to attract more girls, such as netball and roller skating, do not tend to be provided for at the same level, if at all. Again, girls have noticed this. 68% in one study said that there was nothing for them in parks and that the equipment was for boys (Yorkshire Sport, 2022).

As a result, boys dominate these spaces. This has been demonstrated particularly in the case of skateboarding. Here, academic research is clear that skate parks are territorialised by boys (Stoodley et.al, 2024; Paecheter et al 2024; Carr 2017; Backström, 2013). An informal survey in a park in York found that 90% of girls who

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<sup>1</sup> A fuller review of the literature on this subject is provided in our Research Report (MSFG, 2023b).

<sup>2</sup> 1060 MUGAs, 366 skate parks, 89 BMX tracks, 112 shelters and 53 other facilities. (MSFG, 2023a).

liked skateboarding did not feel comfortable in the skate park. This is borne out by engagement with teenage girls who talk about physical and verbal abuse, and who often choose to use the skate park at inconvenient or less optimal times (e.g. after rain) to avoid the boys.

The impact of this dominance goes beyond just the skateboarders. The presence of a 'male space' can actually deter girls from using the park at all, as demonstrated by research in the US which found that while girls were generally more active the closer, they lived to a park, but this was not the case if that was a skate park. Then their activity levels were below average, suggesting that they preferred to avoid the space (Cohen, 2006).



Figure 1. MUGA ©MSFG.

MUGAs can also be territorialised by boys, but their enclosed design also deters girls who do not feel that the space is safe. The vast majority of facilities have high fences and a small number of narrow entrances, which are usually either chicaned or obstructed by the goal. In addition, they tend to contain large groups of boys, who were 92% of users in our survey (MSFG 2023a). As a result, teenage girls see them as potentially unsafe spaces which they are very reluctant to enter.

The design of both MUGAs and skateparks can also be problematic in that they tend to be organised as one single large area. If this ends up being monopolised by boys, the girls end up with nowhere else to go. Design work in Europe, specifically Vienna and Malmö, has demonstrated that, where space is broken up, girls are more active and feel more able to participate (Chambaudy and Jing, 2014; Hellgren, 2019).

A further issue for girls in parks and recreation grounds in the UK is the preponderance of pitches, which are often stipulated in planning regulations. Yet a survey of council documents reveals that on average only 10% of users are girls and young women (MSFG, forthcoming) but this inequality is not acknowledged, nor are alternative facilities provided. Our engagement work with girls has also found that they see pitch lines as a form of exclusion and so perceive these spaces as not for them (Walker et al., 2023).

Together, these facilities can often combine to create a landscape in parks and other recreational areas which not only offers little to teenage girls but can also feel off-puttingly male, and so one where teenage girls end up feeling that they are not wanted.

## **Safety**

As the discussion of MUGAs reveals, safety is a particularly important consideration for teenage girls and can be a key reason why they do not use parks and other public spaces (Barker et al., 2022). As this is being considered elsewhere in the issue, this article will simply note some specific findings for teenage girls.

At present teenage girls do not feel safe in public space. Over 80% of girls and young women feel unsafe when they are out on their own (Girlguiding UK, 2020) and young women under 21 are three times more likely to feel vulnerable when out on their own than boys (Marshalls, 2022).

Teenage girls describe the ideas of safety and security more broadly than adults: this is not just freedom from being attacked or assaulted, it is about feeling safe and welcome in a space. The issue comes up repeatedly in engagement work (King, et al. 2022b), and research during the pandemic found that only 20% of girls in Glasgow felt comfortable in the park they had chosen to use (YWCA Scotland, 2021).

Girls can often feel judged for what they are doing. In the absence of any play facilities meant for them, they use swings and other equipment designed for younger children, resulting in the disapproval of parents. And their desire to talk to their friends can be contrasted negatively with active male activities such as football (R.E.s.P.I.R.E, 2022). Sexual harassment is also a particular barrier for teenage girls – and one of the reasons why they prefer to avoid spaces such as the skate park and MUGA. 86% of 18–24 year-olds have experienced sexual harassment in a public space (UN Women, 2021) while a recent report also concluded that teenage girls under 18 suffered more harm from violence against women and girls than adult women (Knight, 2023).

## Impact

All these barriers have a significant impact on the lives, health and well-being of teenage girls and young women. Being able to use public space is a right and is crucial in establishing a sense of belonging to the community (Vargas and Merino, 2012). At present the message that girls get from these spaces is that they are not part of public life and that they should stay at home. It's also worth noting that Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes a right to play for everyone under the age of 18.

The lack of provision also has implications for the health of teenage girls. Their activity levels relative to boys have been an area of concern for health authorities for some time. At the onset of adolescence, activity levels drop significantly in girls (Women in Sport, 2018; Corder et al., 2016). This is particularly important because this is a time when the pattern of exercise in adult years is usually set, so the decline can have lifetime impact (Telema et al., 2005; Tammelin et al., 2003). However, the connection is rarely made between this and the lack of free-to-use, outdoor provision for teenage girls.

It is also becoming clear that there is a significant impact on mental health. A recent literature review found a link between young people's use of green spaces and improved mental wellbeing, including a reduction in depressive symptoms (Bray et al., 2022). This is particularly important for girls, who are much more likely than boys to suffer from anxiety and poor mental well-being. This is clearly an area of much potential interest, and one where more sex-disaggregated data would be helpful.

## Engagement

The first stage in addressing the inequality has to be engaging with teenage girls and centring their voices in any process of change. Young people in general are not considered in the overall development process, with 89% of young adults aged 16-18 saying that they had never been consulted about their neighbourhood (King, et al. 2022b), and the situation is even more pronounced for girls. But they want to be asked – 82% of girls said that they wanted to be more involved in designing parks and open spaces (Girlguiding UK, 2019).

At present, there is only a small amount of academic research in this area<sup>3</sup> but an increasing amount of engagement work is taking place in the UK in order to discover both what successful methodologies would look like and what specific interventions would encourage teenage girls to use parks and other public spaces<sup>4</sup>.

Some clear principles are emerging for what good engagement with teenage girls might look like.

- It should be a two-way, ongoing process which creates a sense of shared ownership of the project. Co-design is ideal wherever possible.
- It's important to seek out a diverse group of girls, not just focussing on current users of the space.
- Engagement needs to happen from the start of the project, and should also be considered as part of shaping the initial brief.

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<sup>3</sup> See Seims et al., 2022 for a summary

<sup>4</sup> Examples include King et al, 2022; King and Theocharides-Feldman 2022; Walker 2023; Barker et al., 2022.

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- Because girls have not in the past been provided for in public spaces, they need sufficient time and support to develop their own ideas of what they want to see.
- The value of the participants' time and input needs to be recognised.
- Providing facilitators who are relatable role models for the participants enhances their sense of agency.
- Consider giving participants input into the engagement process as well as the design.



Figure 2. Engagement work here ©MSF.

In terms of what teenage girls want to see in public spaces, the results are quite consistent across a diverse range of groups and also correlate quite strongly with previous work in Europe. Some common themes include:

- Dividing up spaces so that they can be used by more than one group simultaneously.
- Better lighting.
- Circular paths.
- Social seating which allows girls to face each other and talk
- Swings and hammocks.
- Gym bars.
- Performance spaces.

- Access to nature and wildlife.
- Good quality toilets.

### **Intersectionality**

The disadvantages that girls face in the public realm are affected by a range of other factors including ethnic background, religion, disability, socio-economic status and gender identity among others.

These factors have a significant effect on both access to parks and activity levels, and how usage changes in adolescence. Girls from non-white background are also more likely to be the victims of sexual harassment and more general racial discrimination, which in turn affects their use of public space (MSFG 2023b).

These experiences mean that it is very important that engagement with a representative and diverse group of teenage girls takes place for every individual location. While their desires and wants may be very similar, their experiences and how these impact on their use of space may vary enormously, and this will determine what changes need to be made.



Figure 3. Image of ideal park © MSFG/Isabel Fox/Harry Groom.

## Next steps

While it is becoming clear how to engage with teenage girls and what they want to see in parks and other public spaces, what is not currently known is what interventions are most effective and what change looks like on the ground.

A few co-designed interventions have now been built, but these are mostly small scale. The next stage needs to be a wider range of built projects and other interventions, and for their impact to be systematically evaluated.

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