

Towards a Sustainable Future: Design as a Protective Factor against Gender-Based Violence

By Raven E. Brown, MA, MPH
Doctoral Student in Public and Urban Policy
Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy
The New School for Public Engagement

This paper was one of 21 semi-finalists in the 2015 Urban Poverty Graduate Student Paper Competition, an annual competition sponsored by USAID, International Housing Coalition (IHC), World Bank, the Wilson Center, and Cities Alliance. The views in this paper represent Ms. Brown's alone and do not reflect the views of Cities Alliance.

Abstract

Urbanization presents opportunities for the emancipation of women and girls, but its potential gains can be threatened by exposure to gender-based violence. A literature review of risk factors related to gender and urbanization identified gender-sensitive planning as a protective factor against gender-based violence. Findings show that incorporating social surveillance and community participation in community and urban planning has the potential to reduce the likelihood of gender-based violence. South Africa makes an interesting case study to examine the relationship between urban planning and gender-based violence, as participatory planning is written into the national policy structure and it experiences extreme problems with gender-based violence.

Introduction: Women in the Changing City

The current population transfer from rural to urban is one of the most massive demographic shifts in human history. Currently more than half of the world's population lives in an urban area (Muggah, 2013). There are at least 500 cities worldwide that have populations of more than one million residents, and over 28 megacities with ten million or more residents (Muggah, 2013). Urbanization on this scale creates new and unique development challenges for communities, planners, and policy practitioners to address in order to ensure peaceful and sustainable futures. Building safe living environments, inclusive economies, socially equitable

development, and reducing violence are all crucial components of social progress that must be addressed as the world becomes more urban, the climate changes, and resources may become scarce.

Urbanization also presents unique opportunities for the emancipation of women and girls, as urban centers can ease the enforcement of traditional cultural norms which may restrict their potential and create the space (both figuratively and literally) for liberation. The city provides access to income generation, education, freedom of expression, healthcare and other social services, as well as increased freedom of movement. Women and girls may find themselves in positions where they are able to define their own social and economic destinies.

Increased social and economic freedoms, however, have the potential to be accompanied by increased gender-based violence. Greater freedom of movement can place women and girls in environments where they are more likely to be at risk of experiencing physical violence and sexual assault in the public sphere. Gender-based violence can undermine the social and economic gains that the city presents and create an atmosphere of fear around accessing new opportunities. Moreover, when patriarchal power structures are challenged – as in the case of increased freedoms for women – there is the potential for backlash (McIlwaine, 2013). The chances of a patriarchal backlash against women’s emancipation can be mitigated through socially equitable development, gender-oriented policy, and gender sensitivity education for both men and women.

Gender-based violence – which occurs frequently in the public sphere because of impunity, which is related to patriarchy – can also be reduced with effective, gender-sensitive urban planning which takes the needs of women and girls into consideration (McIlwaine, 2013). Through participatory planning and collaborative policy processes, cities can be designed to incorporate protective factors against gender-based violence in public space. This can include increasing social surveillance by incorporating gender-sensitivity into spatial design and using local participation to foster a sense of community ownership.

This paper discusses the importance of social surveillance and Jane Jacobs’ theory of “eyes on the street” in regard to preventing crime and violence. It also looks at policy mechanisms used in post-Apartheid South Africa to engage citizens and undertake spatial planning, and how such planning can be a protective factor against gender-based violence using an example from Johannesburg.

South Africa provides an interesting lens through which to view these issues for three main reasons:

- Freedom of movement experienced by black South Africans in post-Apartheid South Africa fueled urbanization;
- South Africa experiences a severe problem with gender-based violence in the public sphere; and
- Post-Apartheid policy structures are designed to include participatory mechanisms as a means of realizing democracy.

Including communities in spatial planning not only has the potential to turn urban design into a protective factor against gender-based violence, but it can also strengthen the relationship between communities and the state – which can be viewed as a means of strengthening democracy, and thus has the potential to facilitate a more peaceful and sustainable future.

The Connection Between Space and Violence

Urbanization includes two main patterns: the development of new cities; and the growth of existing cities, suburban, and peri-urban areas. Cities experiencing rapid growth and change in the global South are dealing with many of the same issues faced by communities, policy practitioners, and planners in industrialized and post industrialized countries over the last century as populations shifted and economies changed.

For example, many of the issues that residents of Johannesburg and its surrounding townships have been dealing with around adequate housing, crime, and public safety since the legal end of Apartheid in 1994 are similar to those experienced by residents of the South Bronx in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. After a negotiated political settlement ended the Apartheid regime, many white South Africans fled the city at the same time as black South Africans with a new-found freedom of movement came into the city. Similar to the “white flight” experienced in urban America beginning in the 1960s, South Africa’s “white flight” left commercial and residential space fallow in urban areas. This created a physical atmosphere of desolate urban space; unoccupied indoor space, streets which lacked foot traffic, and vacant residential real estate. Fear of violent crime, including murder, rape, armed robbery, and kidnapping caused an explosion in the private security industry, particularly in urban areas. To protect themselves, South Africans felt it necessary to build walls around their communities and barbed wire and electrical fences around their homes in order to separate themselves from public spaces and from other South Africans of disparate class and racial backgrounds. These actions all increase the likelihood of violent crime: building walls as a means of protection can undermine a sense of community, foster isolation and fear, and create empty and isolated public spaces in which crime is more likely to occur (McIlwaine, 2013).

Jane Jacobs' groundbreaking book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) remains an important text, especially considering that newly urbanizing cities are experiencing many similarities to the American cities Jacobs discusses. One of Jacobs' central arguments in regards to communities and public safety is particularly relevant to South Africa, where isolation can fuel crime and violence, particularly gender-based violence. The more eyes there are on the street, the less likely it is for violence to occur. In this case, eyes are a euphemism – eyes can mean community members watching their street, pedestrians in the process of commuting, or local businesses, among other definitions. Thus, the word eyes essentially means social surveillance: are community members willing and able to observe what occurs on their street.

The ways in which cities are planned impacts how many eyes there are on the street. Healthy Spaces and Places, an urban planning-focused non-governmental organization in Australia, takes eyes on the street a step further. It argues that empty and desolate spaces not only have the potential to increase the likelihood of crime, but that poorly designed urban areas and communities can also be an underlying factor of crime (Healthy Spaces and Places, 2009).

Highlighting the importance of social surveillance and/or the perception of social surveillance, Healthy Spaces and Places cites key components of healthy design, which can also be viewed through the lens of gender-sensitive urban planning. These include, but are not limited to:

- Design that increases the presence of people of the street, with adjoining buildings designed so that citizens have a solid view of the street (Jacobs, 1961, p. 46)
- Buildings designed to provide natural surveillance of the street
- Facilities with designated, lit footpaths that are well maintained
- Parks and open public spaces in areas which are visible from houses, schools, and other community-oriented facilities
- Artificial lighting in public spaces and routes that can be utilized at night to ensure that they are visible
- Parking lots and pathways that are well lit at night
- Street crossings on busy thoroughfares
- Mixed use of land to ensure that there is social surveillance at different times of day
- Spatial designs that promote natural surveillance
- Public transportation depots located in places with natural surveillance (Healthy and Places, 2009)

Case Studies: India and South Africa

New Delhi, India provides a good example of the importance of eyes on the street and the concept of social surveillance. The city has expanded and changed due to massive urbanization which began in the latter part of the 20th century. The way the city has been effected spatially by poor urban planning has increased the likelihood of gender-based violence occurring in the public sphere. One example is the way roads are designed to intersect and divide the city. New thoroughfares have been built to extend access to different areas of the city, and most are very isolated; as a result, women who commute on these new roads to access employment and income-generation opportunities are increasingly at risk of gender-based violence. New Delhi's Ring Road, a massive road which encircles the city, runs through desolate areas including neighborhoods with no shops or residential areas, purely industrial sections, and stretches of the city where there are no street lights (Farooquee, 2013). Ring Road is an example of poor urban planning which did not take community advocacy in favor of gender-sensitive planning into consideration. In India, the majority of gender-based violence which occurs in the public sphere happens on roads or during a woman's commute. A more gender-sensitive approach to planning would feature well-lit roads and avoid isolated parts of the city.

“Creating exclusionary urban spaces tends to develop an atmosphere of deprivation and violence among the excluded.” (Farooquee, 2013).

South Africa has a culturally and historically specific problem with violence in general, and gender-based violence in particular. According to the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, based in Johannesburg, 25% of rapes which have occurred in the city were perpetrated in the public space (Vetter, 1998). The neighborhoods where it more likely that violence has taken place have experienced urban decay or are naturally isolated, including Hillbrow in Johannesburg's Central Business District, Yeoville, Berea, Zoo Lake, and Barnato Park. The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation cites the Safer Cities Project¹, which advocates that eyes on the street and accessibility of social surveillance mechanisms are important components of spatial planning that have the potential to reduce incidences of gender-based violence (Vetter, 1998). One way to increase eyes on the street and social surveillance is to include communities in spatial planning processes. This is especially important in preventing gender-based violence, which has a substantial negative social and economic impact on individuals, communities, and society as a whole in regard to positive social and economic outcomes. The negative effects of gender-based violence have increased significance

¹ The Safer Cities Project is a collaboration between the United Nations Centre for Human Settlement, the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime and the Public Safety, and the Emergency Services cluster at the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council.

in South Africa, where 18.2% of the population was HIV positive as of 2011 (Avert, 2015). In many Western countries HIV is considered a manageable disease, but in countries like South Africa – where the communities most affected experience extreme challenges related to social and economic development – HIV can severely affect an individual’s quality of life or ability to generate income, which in turn can have negative economic consequences for entire communities.

Participatory planning can be used to reduce the likelihood of gender-based violence in the public sphere. Examples from New Delhi and from Johannesburg clearly point to the types of urban areas where gender-based violence might occur. Planners can work with communities to continue to identify spaces where social surveillance is difficult.

In South Africa, participatory planning processes are written into planning policy schemes and structures as well as in development plans. Involving communities in design serves two purposes. First, it straightens the potential for effective policy planning and development. Second, South Africa is a country that is still grappling with the gross social and economic inequalities perpetrated and maintained by the Apartheid regime, of which one of the main purposes was the separation of different class and racial groups and the exclusion of non-white South Africans from decision making processes and equal participation in the economy. Within this context, using participatory policy structures goes a long way towards strengthening the state and creating social buy-in; using the tools of participation strengthens democracy.

Since participatory mechanisms are already a part of South Africa’s policy structure, more energy should be devoted to ensuring that communities can participate in planning processes in a meaningful way that is not in name only. Using the participation structures that are outlined in the Integrated Development Plan is one way to do this. The Integrated Development Plan is designed so that community members at the local level are able to feed information up the political food chain, from their ward counselors to members of Parliament. One of the characteristics of urban planning policy in post-Apartheid South Africa is embodied in the critique that the emphasis placed on civic participation in decision making is merely rhetoric, and that communities have been excluded from any actual decision-making processes (Sihlongonyane, 2015). The main urban policy tools, such as the Integrated Development Plan and the Multiple Systems Act, have mechanisms which include “participation,” but their implementation has not actually manifested in increased participation at the local level. The post-Apartheid policy mechanism meant to incorporate women’s participation in planning, namely South Africa’s National Policy Framework on Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality, have also fallen short of producing tangible citizen participation in planning. Sihlongonyane argues that “while there have been calls for participatory processes... the thread

emphasis has been placed on transforming the city through the neoliberal tenets of being entrepreneurial, globally competitive, efficient, and productive in the midst of a public rhetoric that highlights participatory development” (Sihlongonyane, P.52). Communities and citizens are best able to identify those places where crime and gender-based violence are likely to occur, so it is crucial to involve communities in urban planning to minimize the risks.

Conclusion

When the author of this paper pursued a Master’s of Arts Degree from The New School in International Affairs and participated in The New School’s International Field Program in Johannesburg, South Africa, a woman was raped on the street outside of the student accommodations. Students were housed on the outskirts of Johannesburg’s Central Business District in the neighborhood of Beria. This part of Johannesburg heavily experienced “white flight” after end of Apartheid, which left it with a large percentage of vacant commercial and residential space. Because the neighborhood’s residents occupy a lower socio-economic strata and because it experiences high levels of crime, many residents have secured their homes with walls, barbed wired and electrical fencing, and few businesses remain open after dark.

These characteristics of Beria mean that it is unlikely for eyes to be on the street. This factor, combined with the high prevalence of gender-based violence in the public sphere that South Africa experiences, makes it unsurprising that a woman was raped there. It does not, however, mean that the victim of the attack or the community are helpless. Urban planning which focuses on spatial design, that is gender sensitive, and utilizes the concepts of safe design with its emphasis on social surveillance can reduce the likelihood of gender-based violence and other violent crime. By incorporating communities into spatial design processes, with specific attention paid to gender, planners and policy practitioners can rebuild and design communities to reduce the likelihood of violence. South Africa is in a unique position to be able to support and further develop participatory planning processes because those processes are already key components of its post-Apartheid planning and policy structures.

There are several possible approaches to facilitating increased community participation in spatial and urban planning in South Africa, such as community pressure on businesses local level policies that support gender-sensitive urban planning, and planning focused on social surveillance as a means of crime prevention. Community pressure on businesses that wish to be part of the revitalization process of South African cities has the potential to be especially effective because of the capitalist nature of urban revitalization. People are willing to invest in communities that are able to offer access to shopping and other services.

Another is UN-Habitat's multi-dimensional and holistic approach, which focuses on enhanced urban safety and security through planning, design, community participation, and local-level urban governance, all through a gendered lens (UN-Habitat, 2007). This approach can involve upgrading urban infrastructure to reduce gender-based violence risk factors, such as isolated and dimly lit spaces. Finally, in order for South Africa to reduce gender-based violence – which in turn has the potential to increase the economic productivity of women and girls, thus increasing the wellbeing of communities and reducing overall inequality – it is crucial that individuals and communities exercise their right to be a part of policy and development planning processes.

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