



## Gendered Cities: Built and Physical Environments

by Prabha Khosla

### Introduction

This paper briefly explores the current form and structure of urban centres as mostly men have shaped them. It demonstrates how a gender-sensitive built environment would integrate the economies of unpaid work in the home with paid work outside the home. Speaking to transportation, economic development, mobility and safety, and the interface of the natural and built environment, the paper illustrates how these key functions of urban centres fail the many diverse women residents of cities. City planning whether in terms of physical planning, provision of social services, or economic development, has often failed to understand the intersection of the multiple forces of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, religion, language, disability, etc. on city residents. The inclusion of the excluded - poor women, women with disabilities, immigrant women, young and older women, racialized women, and Aboriginal women - in decision making and physical planning will create healthy cities for all.

### What Gender is Your City?

Are cities and towns in Canada designed for women and men of all ages, races, and incomes? Do principles of equity and environmental integrity inform city building? Or, are cities and towns primarily designed to suit the needs of a few? Many urban residents tend to view cities as gender-neutral and bias-free spaces.

Commercial and public spaces, office buildings, factories, residential neighbourhoods, shopping malls, roads and highways, parking lots, landfill sites, public transit, and parks are all gendered and often informed by a class bias. These spaces and structures are designed by mostly male planners and developers from their point of view and thus, to suit their daily lives and functions. Often they are designed to privilege the living and working conditions of richer residents at the disadvantage of poorer residents. Most cities and towns are planned and built to suit the needs of a particular gender—the able-bodied, childless, working male.

### Transportation, Mobility, and Women

Many women are critical of the structure and organization of urban form because it often disadvantages them. Transportation and traffic policies, which in turn inform land-use planning and mobility, are key areas of concern because of their impact on disabled women and men, older women and men, low-income women, and new immigrants. An examination of the activity patterns of diverse women and men reveals that residents of cities have different life styles, and daily activities and needs, resulting in significantly different use, and time of use, of urban services and infrastructures.

Women, for example, are more likely to



work part-time, have responsibility for children and younger and older family members, need childcare, accompany children or older relatives and friends to health and other services, go shopping for food and other necessities, and participate in community organizing, support networks, and volunteer work. Women are the major users of public transit. However, in contrast to men's mono-dimensional journey to work defined by peak rush hour travel on major arteries, women are more likely to use public transit during off-peak hours and for journeys that are broken several times. For example, a woman is likely to go from her home to the daycare centre, or baby sitter's, to school to drop-off the older child, to work, to shop, to pick up the children, and to home again. Because the built form of the city is not compact and does not consist of a range of facilities and services within the same localized area, she spends much of her day traveling and waiting for buses at transfer points. Depending on the cost of a journey, a poor working mother earning part-time low wages may not find transit a cost-effective option.

For many immigrant, non-English and non-French speaking, and racialized working women, the only job opportunities are in shift or night work. For these women, whether cleaning office, hotel and bank towers, shopping malls and airports, or working in factories in the suburbs, public transit is the only way to keep the job. Buses to many areas do not operate 24-hours a day, forcing many immigrant and racialized women to wait hours at their work places until the transit is available to go home.

Women with disabilities and older women are often poorer and more dependent on

appropriate and affordable public transportation systems. Their journeys to shopping, work, health facilities, cultural activities, and family and friends, are greatly influenced by transit peak times and routes. Disabled women find it particularly difficult to travel in crowded buses and trains at rush hour, as do women in wheelchairs and women with walkers and strollers. Lack of mobility leads to social isolation, stress, and depression and contributes to ill-health. Older women and men, especially those in ill-health, and on rainy and snowy days, often need to use the bus to go only a few blocks. Transit geared to income is a key factor in enabling greater mobility for women surviving on limited incomes and in improving their health and well-being.

### **Urban Economic Development for Poverty Reduction**

Most municipal governments give priority to economic vitality and development, and support economic development departments. Too often, however, their economic imperatives override other public considerations. Growing poverty is localized among certain groups of women and their children. Local governments need to consider strategies of economic parity and poverty eradication in order to promote race and gender equality and equity. A key area to combat poverty amongst women is safe and affordable housing. The creation of affordable, safe, and green housing for low-income, disabled, under- and unemployed immigrant and racialized communities in major cities could be a key lever in spurring sustainable economic growth.

Furthermore, while many women in cities are poor, this does not mean they are



incapable or unskilled. A gender lens could inform and strengthen cities' economic development by harnessing poor women's skills and creativity. Economic incubators, such as multi-use facilities in poor neighbourhoods, could focus on enhancing the skills of poor women. Developing women's existing skills into income generating businesses could provide services needed by many residents. These multi-use incubators would be places where women could access childcare, English and French language classes, common facilities with kitchens, computers and communication labs, hairdressing and tailoring facilities, business development classes and any other technical facilities as required, based on a skills assessment of women in the neighbourhood. Working with poor women's skills, interests, and creativity can help to elevate the quality of life in cities.

#### **Physical Spaces and Women in Decision Making**

Another key area of concern for women - young mothers, disabled women, older women, immigrant women, and working women - is access to, and safety of, public spaces such as parks, public squares, shopping malls, and community and recreation centres during the day and the evenings. Women Plan Toronto, a unique community-based organization of the 1980s and early 1990s, worked tirelessly to demonstrate the gendered nature of the city and to enable women's involvement and decision making in urban planning. It enabled extensive discussions by women about their neighbourhoods and opened the door to women's right to question the accessibility and equity of the built form. Its work focused on educating planners and councillors about women's lives in the City,

demonstrated how cities could look and be different if women also planned cities, and significantly, lobbied and won the right to bring women's voices into Toronto's Official Plans, and changed planning regulations and guidelines. Women Plan Toronto raised specific concerns regarding the height of curbs, the difficulty of negotiating stairs in public spaces with wheelchairs and strollers, the need for safe, clean, and accessible public toilets in parks and public spaces, accessibility for mobility in shopping areas, and the need for proper lighting for women's safety in the streets and in public spaces.

#### **Safer Cities**

Violence against women in or outside the home, threats and intimidation due to racial and sexual harassment, and sexual and physical assault are constant sources of fear for women living in cities. All women are targets of gender-based violence. This impacts their mobility in the city and their use of public spaces such as work places, parks, outdoor spaces, cultural and recreational facilities, and public transit. According to the *Women and Community Safety Guide* of the Women Against Violence Society of Cowichan Valley, B.C., 60 percent of Canadian women are worried about walking alone in their neighborhoods after dark; 76 percent are worried about waiting for or using public transit after dark; 83 percent are worried about walking alone to their car in a parking garage; and, 39 percent are worried about being home alone at night (Drusine, 2002).

Recognition of the many types of violence against women has led women in Montreal and Toronto to evolve a unique approach and methodology to foster safer cities. The



City of Montreal's *Femme et Villes* programme began in 1989, and led to: new metro stations being surrounded by glass with emergency telephones close at hand; night buses that let women off in-between stops; and, training of workers at nearly 200 small businesses to respond to a woman in danger with signs in the window saying, "Here You're in Good Hands. Your Safety is Important to Us." The city is also integrating a gendered perspective into local and national crime prevention policies. Placing women at the centre of thinking about safety in cities, and developing more coherent strategies for their safety in urban environments, increases the possibility of everyone living better lives.

Toronto was the first city to develop Women's Safety Audits (WSA). WSAs are a tool and a process for the evaluation of built environments from the standpoint of women who feel vulnerable. WSAs are based on participatory processes of working with women's knowledge of environments that are hostile or dangerous for women, and to make changes that reduce opportunities for assault. Women's Safety Audits increase local governments and communities' awareness of violence against women, children, racialized groups, and others. WSAs are based on the recognition that root causes of violence and safety should be linked to, and integrated with, economics, health, housing, and the interaction of different social groups in mutual tolerance. Safety for the most vulnerable makes everyone safer. Knowledge about existing resources can be the most important learning of any safety programme (Whitzman, 2002).

Safety Audits have been conducted in hundreds of neighbourhoods and cities

across Canada and the world. They have had significant impact in several ways. They have: validated the importance of women's participation in physical and land-use decision making; changed municipal urban design codes for buildings, underground parking, lanes and alleyways; informed planners about the relationship between the built environment and the safety of all residents; and, changed budgetary priorities at the municipal level.

### **Environmental Degradation and Urban Women's Health**

There is broad consensus that the natural and built environments are inextricably linked. The impact of urban planning *against* nature rather than *with* nature accompanies us in our daily lives. Canadian cities are landscapes of radical restructuring of nature. Rivers are driven underground to become storm water sewers; hills are removed to build highways; and, wetlands are drained to create subdivisions. There is perhaps less consensus with respect to the link between the degradation of the natural environment and the impact of pollution and contamination on women's bodies. There is growing evidence that the environmental degradation and chemical pollution that has impacted other species, is also taking a toll on the human species. For example, many toxic chemicals have entered natural systems and are changing the physiology of wildlife. Some alligators, Western Gulls, and Rainbow trout, are only developing rudimentary sexual organs. Frogs are born with missing limbs and eyes, and Beluga whales are dying from immune suppression and cancer (Khosla, 2003). This has begun to raise the question about the impact of toxic chemicals on humans, particularly



women because of their reproductive capacities.

#### **Women's Home Environments and Health**

Evidence of the impact of toxic chemicals in the natural environment raises questions about the safety of women's everyday work environments - their homes. A growing awareness and documentation of health risks associated with several frequently-used chemicals indicates that the home is increasingly a toxic environment for women and their families. For example, much low-income and working class housing stock was built on previously-existing toxic waste sites or landfills, or next to transportation corridors, heavy industry, and contaminated soils. Children who grow up in these neighbourhoods playing on the lawns and in the parks are developing cancer at a young age. Despite this, co-op housing and/or social housing is still being sited along large transportation corridors with the attendant problems of extensive air pollution.

Many materials used in housing construction are toxic and can lead to cancer and early death of residents. Often families are exposed to low levels of toxic chemicals over many years. Pregnant women and their unborn babies are the most vulnerable to contamination, health risks, and birth defects. Most homes built in the 1970s or earlier used paint containing lead. Lead poisoning can result from drinking water that has been contaminated by lead pipes, faucets, and soldering. Other building materials causing health problems include solvents, glues, asbestos, as well as a range of insulation materials.

Women are exposed to chemicals daily while performing regular domestic chores in their homes and gardens. Women handle household cleaners, window cleansers, cleaning agents for carpets and stoves, soaps, detergents, as well as pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. These products include PCBs, dioxins, lead, chlorine, PVCs (vinyl plastics), phthalates, atrazine, lindane, and more. As a result of windows not being opened frequently in the winter, a kind of chemical soup may float about in the house becoming more toxic over time. Many of these chemicals are endocrine disrupters, and bio-accumulate in both our bodies and the bodies of other species. Unfortunately, little information is available regarding the health impact on humans resulting from long-term exposure to small quantities of these chemicals.

Both the natural and built environments impact directly on the health of women, men, and children. Increasingly, we are realizing that the nurturance of the planet and society requires common responses. A gender-sensitive lens inclusive of an intersectional analysis will go a long ways towards creating economically vibrant, environmentally sustainable, and equitable cities.



## **References**

Drusine, Helen. (2002). Claiming the Night. *Habitat Debate*, 8(4). Retrieved February 6, 2005, from the UNHabitat web site: <http://www.unhabitat.org/hd/hdv8n4/forum6.asp>

Khosla, Prabha. (2003). Women's Environments: The Struggle for a Healthy & Sustainable Planet. *Women and Environments International Magazine*, No. 60/61.

Whitzman, Carolyn. (2002) Women, Safety and Planning: The Story so Far. Retrieved February 6, 2005, from the Femmes et Villes web site: [http://www.femmesetvilles.org/seminar/english/pres\\_whitz\\_pres\\_en.htm](http://www.femmesetvilles.org/seminar/english/pres_whitz_pres_en.htm)



## **Acknowledgements**

This paper is the product of a partnership between the National Network on Environments and Women's Health (NNEWH) and Toronto Women's Call to Action (TWCA). Toronto Women's Call to Action is a feminist organization committed to engaging women in the City to inform and lobby City of Toronto politicians and staff to implement anti-racist, anti-poverty, gender mainstreaming of the City. To learn about this organization and its initiatives, please email the TWCA at: [info@twca](mailto:info@twca) or visit our website at [www.twca.ca](http://www.twca.ca).

The National Network on Environments and Women's Health is one of four Centres of Excellence for Women's Health that is supported by the Bureau of Women's Health and Gender Analysis, Health Canada to increase knowledge and understanding of women's health, and to ensure that the health system is responsive to women's needs and concerns. To learn about NNEWH's initiatives and its urban women's health program, please visit our website at [www.yorku.ca/nnewh](http://www.yorku.ca/nnewh) or contact Gail Lush by email at ([lushg@yorku.ca](mailto:lushg@yorku.ca)) or by telephone at (416 736-2100, ext 20713).

*NNEWH and its activities and products have been made possible through a financial contribution from the Bureau of Women's Health and Gender Analysis, Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of NNEWH or the official policy of Health Canada.*

*French translation by Intersigne*