

Feminist Urbanism: An International Comparative Study

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Abstract. Feminist urbanism is a concept in urban planning that opposes patriarchal principles and focuses on creating spaces that are more accessible for all genders, especially supporting women. However, its implementation diverges between the Global North and South. This paper compares Barcelona, Spain, and Mumbai, India, which adopt state-led and self-driven approaches respectively. Through policy analysis and case study review, this study discusses how each city redefines feminist urbanism in relation to state power, labour, and safety. Findings reveal that Barcelona's state-led policies risk neoliberal co-optation, while Mumbai's slum women practice Darwinist, survival-based urbanism. Not only is gender identified as a crucial factor that affects the maintenance of cities, but also the population's financial status. Although Barcelona and Mumbai have different economic and historical backgrounds, both cities strive to promote and plan for women, emphasising how gender planning can exist regardless of economic ability. This study suggests that feminist urbanism must consider economies, policies, and sociocultural norms to avoid further producing inequality.

Keywords: feminist urbanism, Barcelona, Mumbai, gender planning

1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of a city

Before discussing case studies, it is crucial that jargons and vague terms are defined. The common definition of a city is quite obscure, as the criteria for distinguishing cities from other settlements (e.g. towns) tends to vary between countries and region through population, size, technological advancements, etc. Archaeologist V. Gordon Childe proposed his 10 criteria for the identification of cities, which are: "increased settlement size, concentration of wealth, large-scale public works, writing, representational art, knowledge of science and engineering, foreign trade, full-time specialists in nonsubsistence activities, class-stratified society, and political organization based on residence rather than kinship [1]." However, Childe's criteria were proved to not apply across all existing cities.

In 2018, the United Nations launched an investigation on urban research in 288 countries and found that 104 of these countries use single criteria. In addition, these countries also differ by combining different aspects: "121 countries distinguish urban and rural areas by combining administrative function with other criteria, 108 combine population size/density with other

measures, 69 combine urban characteristics with other criteria and 38 combine economic function with other criteria. In 12 cases there was no definition or an unclear definition of what constitutes the urban environment and in 12 cases the entire population of a country or area was considered to be urban [2].” This suggests the absence of a universal definition and criteria for a city or urban area, because definitions are country-specific, and are dependent on comparisons within a country.

What is ironic is the lack of specifics in dictionaries, as the definitions of urban and rural settlements are mere comparisons of size with other settlements; a city is a settlement larger than a town, and a town is a settlement larger than a village, and so forth. Although dictionaries solely define cities based on their size compared to towns [2-4], the city should not only be recognised as a physical space, but also the sociopolitical and economic factors and policies within that space. As a result, urban planning, or the specialisation of designing sustainable cities in consideration of the communities’ needs, was born.

1.2. A clarification of feminism

The goals and focuses of feminism have often been confused with those of misandry, or female chauvinism [5]. Although the word 'feminism' is related to the word 'feminine,' it has nothing to do with women being superior and men being inferior. Instead, it is an advocate for gender equality, especially between the traditional sexes of male and female. Indeed, it focuses on making women’s rights equivalent to those of men, but simultaneously it aims to get rid of sexist methods. It should be recognised that feminism is not only adding concepts but also getting rid of the harmful, discriminatory factors of society [6].

1.3. Feminism and urban planning

In its premature eras, urban planning leaned closer to religious/spiritual focuses and industrial advancements instead of universal accessibility. For example, transportation and infrastructure were designed to prioritise commuter routes and not for trips to markets and other basic care services. During this premature era, women were faced with the gender norm of being submissive, care-taking housewives. Neglecting the need for routes that were more efficient for these stereotypical women’s responsibilities only worsens the imbalance in gender power structures. This industrial focus in urban planning was dubbed patriarchist, but still lurks in major cities today [7-8].

In contemporary urban planning, with the introduction of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the focus has turned to sustainability and accessibility in cities rather than capitalism and industrialism [9]. SDGs 5 (Gender Equality) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) are the specific goals connected to gender planning. The rise of gender mainstreaming, or a public policy concept that integrates a gender lens when deciding governmental actions, has contributed to the ideals of feminist urbanism; to create a feminist city is not only about its design, but about policies and social and economic factors [10-11]. Planning can be a tool to boost equality, but the connections between gender and planning is undervalued. The individual is always affected by their environment, and if it is shaped well, planning can shape the community. What makes a city is not exclusive to physical, tangible assets, but includes the relations of the citizens living in it [12].

There are differences between feminist urbanism in different cultures and countries though, especially when the level of sexism is either higher or lower in different societies. For example, in strict, religious countries, women’s rights are largely reduced compared to those that do not enforce

religious laws, where diversity is encouraged and discrimination is being reduced. In addition, the education system and social values also change the level of sexism the general population has.

Gender inequality is still undoubtedly unresolved, and marginalised communities are not uncommon [13-14]. Today, cities worldwide are increasingly adopting feminist urban planning principles, yet these approaches vary based on social, economic, and political contexts.

While Global North cities like Barcelona promote state-led "feminist municipalism," Global South cities such as Mumbai see marginalized women leading grassroots resistance against evictions and "infrastructural neglect" [15-16].

To what extent are people influenced by their surroundings? In this contemporary era or fourth wave of feminism, gender inequality still persists through sexual harassment, discrimination, violence, etc. With 58% of the global population residing in urban areas, there is an unpreventable future where urban areas must be improved and expanded. However, in order to develop cities that are sustainable, urban planners must not only consider environmental and economic factors, but also how to achieve peace between different social inequalities. In urban planning, the concept of incorporating feminist needs into design is often overlooked, while in feminist movements, the idea of reshaping gender structures through urban planning is underappreciated [17].

The reason for choosing Barcelona and Mumbai respectively is due to their colonial histories and major differences in geographical locations and political, social, and economic terms.

1.4. Research questions

- (1). How do cities in the Global North and South redefine feminist urbanism, and what do these differences reveal about power, inequality, and resistance in urban planning?
- (2). How do institutionalised and informal feminist urbanism differ from each other?
- (3). What methods did these types of feminist urbanism use?
- (4). How does informal feminist urbanism challenge the key urban theory of Lefebvre's Right to the City?
- (5). How does feminist urbanism relate to the right to the city?

2. Literature review

2.1. The Right to the City (1968) by Henri Lefebvre

The Right to the City (originally *Le Droit à la Ville*) is one of the most influential works of urban theory, introducing new concepts and critiquing traditional values in urban planning. There are five key shifts Lefebvre writes about: critiquing capitalist urbanisation, expanding collective rights, emphasising care infrastructure, recognising cities as sites of political activity, and refocusing on city development through social means [18].

Although the term 'feminist urbanism' was not coined during Lefebvre nor in his time, the eponymous concept 'right to the city' is strongly related to it. The ideals of the right to the city all work towards a slightly more collective and communal society and city, which relate to how feminist urbanism aims promote more accessible spaces.

In his book, Lefebvre lacks the perspective of how countries and cities differ in social, political and economic areas, which affect their sustainability and quality of living. Lefebvre wrote from a European-Marxist perspective without mentioning differences between cities of varying speeds and levels in development. He does not specify exact international locations because it is a framework, however, he ignores how women are doubly marginalized and excludes informal settlements.

Although Lefebvre may not have realised this, the right to the city was excluding lower-class women from his framework [19].

2.2. Flâneuse: women walk the city in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London (2016) by Lauren Elkin

Elkin reimagines the “flâneur”, which was a male wanderer traditionally, into a term for female urban walking. Through literary case studies, Elkin reveals how women navigate visibility and invisibility, or freedom and threat. She emphasises that in patriarchal cities, women are restricted from moving as freely as they like due to a fear of harassment [20]. However, her argument is slightly elitist and only focuses on white, literary, upper-middle class women. In feminist urbanism, a common trend in studies and texts is the exclusion of migrants and poor women.

2.3. Feminist city: claiming space in a man-made world (2020) by Leslie Kern

Kern takes a more thoughtful and technical approach on the subject and provides solutions. She focuses on an intersectional perspective [21]; not only does she recognise the role of gender, but also race, class, etc. Kern fills the gaps that Elkin has left out, and proposed using feminist zoning and participatory planning, where neighbourhoods have multiple uses and marginalised women are being focused upon.

In summary, there are still large gaps in feminist urbanism because gender planning is still in its evolving stage. The main limitation of these sources is that current feminist urban research is mostly focused on cities in the Global North, especially in Euro-American locations. There are limited studies on feminist urbanism in the Global South, as well as informal settlements within the city. This paper will focus on a comparative study between two cities that portray almost opposite conditions, and how feminist urbanism differs from one place to another.

3. Methodology

This study uses qualitative comparative analysis with quantitative data through:

- (1). City Council Reports
- (2). News reports
- (3). Literature Review

In order to assess whether this methodology is ethical and rigorous, we should prioritise clarity and relevance to the topic and the research questions. For this paper, the cities Barcelona and Mumbai have been chosen respectively to further acknowledge the contrast between urban areas in the Global North and South [22]. There are stark contrasts between Barcelona and Mumbai’s social, economic and political backgrounds.

Barcelona is the capital city of Catalonia province in Spain, and adopted a focus upon its urban structure before the 1992 Olympics. To prepare for the Olympics, Barcelona underwent adjustments to expand green spaces and other systems, which led to the city being awarded by the Royal Institute of British Architects [23]. As a post-industrial city in the Global North and funded by the EU, Barcelona is able to focus a section of its budget on gender mainstreaming. When cities are able to take care of basic needs, they are able to move on and improve their citizens’ quality of life.

Mumbai, however, suffers from religious discrimination and a strict caste system; people are denied access to basic necessities due to their religion, etc. The country was under Portuguese and British rule before, under different leaders. In colonised countries, the money that was made only

benefited the conquistadors and not the people of the country, who were forced into agricultural industries. What resulted were unskilled people and a rising population with low education and employment rates. Poverty is common even in Mumbai, which is a city. However, this has caused small revolutions of people who fight against the caste system, for their own right to the city. It is survivalist, but it congregates citizens to create better communities that are more suitable for Mumbai's own inhabitants.

The idea of gender planning is evident in Barcelona's plans, but not in Mumbai's. Now a tourist destination, Barcelona brands itself as a feminist city, and pushes its city council to advance in this sector. The issue is that it neglects the consequences of not considering more than just gender. Race, economic status and age all can change the demographics entirely. Indeed, the city has advancements in care infrastructure, transport [24], and safety, but it displaces lower income women through these improvements. Barcelona has the budget, but is unable to consider aspects from different people. Mumbai does not have this problem because the initiatives are run by the citizens, who are more aware of their situation than the government and are more homogenous. By building their own sense of security, Mumbai's slum-dwelling communities are able to work towards a more ideal lifestyle with their problems in mind [25].

Therefore, both of these cities have focuses in feminist urbanism and contrast each other in different ways.

However, there are limitations and restrictions that the methodology poses. Because the author of this paper is restricted to having a limited amount of books and sources from the internet, there is a lack of evidence and information that could be obtained through fieldwork. What is analysed is purely secondary sources, whose reliability may be sabotaged without the author's knowledge.

Feminist urbanism as a field itself is not only obscure in its definition, but also does not have sufficient sources that build up its philosophy. Without proper education in this subject, what it refers to may vary, as well as its ideals. This paper will use the broadly agreed upon definition: feminist urbanism is a term for approaching urban planning through a gendered lens, and has a pattern of focus in care facilities, transport [26], and safety [27].

3.1. Barcelona

Barcelona is considered to be a feminist city, as gender planning is one of its city council's main focuses. Under mayor Ada Colau (2015-2023) [28], the city institutionalised policies [29] that challenged patriarchal urban design and prioritised care, safety, and equity.

In traditional urban planning, cities were designed for male breadwinners, focusing upon commuter highways and commuter districts. In 2019, Barcelona conducted a survey on its transportation services and found that women composed up to 70% of all public transit users. In addition, 43% of women's trips involved multiple stops compared to those of 27% of men. An effective example of Barcelona's gender planning was the Line H12 bus route redesign, connecting it to more care services. As a result, there was a 22% increase in women passengers [30].

One trend in feminist urbanism was the incorporation of pedestrianism, where vehicles are restricted in places and outdoor areas have enhanced mobility. However, the construction of quality pedestrianised locations requires additional safety. Superrilles [31], or Superblocks was a project dedicated to repurposing roads with pedestrianised areas. From 2016 to 2023, 92 new playgrounds were built with gardens using these roads. Simultaneously, Barcelona reviewed streetlamps, benches, and bicycle lanes. Accompanying these changes were higher overall satisfaction rates amongst citizens. In particular, reports on street harassment were reduced by 18% in Superblocks areas, and all Superblocks areas met gender-sensitive lighting standards.

The main issue generated from this project is economic. When only specific parts of the city have been urbanised or improved with better qualities of life, the housing prices and rent soar. Indeed, the combination of pedestrianism and high levels of safety do lead to better communities, but it neglects lower-class people and forces them to move somewhere else.

3.2. Mumbai

Because the definition of feminist urbanism is broad, it should not exclude coloured, lower-class women. In the past few years, rape and sexual assault were common in India [32], which caused an imbalance in the country's gender hierarchy. However, this did not prevent women from establishing their own sense of community [33].

Mumbai's feminist urbanism is a grassroots movement that challenges patriarchal and neoliberal urban planning through the leadership of women in informal settlements [34]. Instead of policy initiatives seen in cities like Barcelona, Mumbai's feminist urbanism is self-created as a response to injustice; women in the slums resist evictions, fight for basic amenities, and reclaim public space [35]. These women are often organized through organisations like Mahila Milan (Women Together) and SPARC [1], and have developed their own methods to protect their right to the city. For example, they conduct 'community mapping to document their homes', which changed land use and countered government efforts to erase informal settlements [36]. In Dharavi, surveys of over 5,000 households stopped a highway project that would have displaced thousands of people [37].

Similarly, the Rajiv Indira Housing Cooperative in Mankhurd—designed by female architects and residents—displays self-built, low-cost housing with shared kitchens and childcare spaces, that addresses the needs of women who are excluded from formal urban planning conferences.

The feminist urbanism of Mumbai also focuses on care infrastructure, recognizing that women face the issues of inadequate water and sanitation systems. In slums like Shivaji Nagar, there is an organisation called Pani Haq Samiti (Water Rights Committee), which installed community taps. As a result, they reduced the time spent fetching water by 70% [38]. There was also the problem of having safe, public toilets, but were solved with initiatives like the Toilet Warriors in Dharavi [39-40], who built and maintain these services with lighting and sanitary pads, which helped lower harassment rates.

Another example are Anganwadis (community childcare hubs) [41], which were run by slum women. They serve three times more children than government centers, and allowed mothers to pursue paid work instead of staying home [42]. These efforts highlight how feminist urbanism in Mumbai is not just about demanding rights but creating tangible alternatives where the government fails to meet their needs.

Safety is a key aim Mumbai's feminist urbanism. The Nirbhaya Squad (Fearless Women) in Dharavi [43] organizes night patrols to take women home, reducing harassment reports by 40% [44]. In Govandi, women crowdfunded solar streetlights to be constructed in dark alleys, cutting assault rates by over a third.

Despite the achievements it already accomplished, Mumbai's feminist urbanism faces significant challenges, including caste and religious discrimination, state co-optation of grassroots demands, and underfunding due to being in lower-class regions [45-46]. However, by focusing on marginalized women, Mumbai's movement is an example of how feminist urbanism is able to not be similar to Barcelona's government-reliant methods and focus on the lower classes as well.

4. Conclusion

Lefebvre's right to the city shares views with feminist urbanism: reject neoliberalist urbanism and a capitalist focus in planning. Lefebvre was a Marxist, and aimed to challenge privatisation, especially through the right to the city. He introduced the focus upon improving the quality of the everyday and fostering connections within a community. However, the right to the city discussed class and government without mentioning gender, race, etc. in detail, and was Eurocentric. Feminist urbanism can be seen as a method that subtly uses the right to the city, but has weaknesses in its institutionalised form. The major risk is co-optation due to increasing expenses in an area while improving it, forcing people to move to another area. If the right to the city and feminist urbanism were combined with a more diverse and collective view, it may lead to a better solution for current cities.

Undoubtedly, the social factor of gender is interlinked with other factors as well. The main correlation is the economic factor, where Barcelona and Mumbai contrast the most. If Barcelona's City Council did not provide the budget for gender mainstreaming or if Mumbai were able to rebuild its slums, the cities' situations would be largely different than what they currently are. A branch of feminism is womanism, or gender equality for coloured women. Often, a movement has different waves or branches out to another principle because it excludes people who should be included within the movement. This should not be the case. Segregating Mumbai's survivalist urbanism from Barcelona's will only cause conflict between the different movements. Feminism does not have racial nor economic boundaries; therefore, there should be no womanist urbanism, just feminist urbanism. Exclusion is discrimination, and even though feminist urbanism is currently dominated by the European and North American Global North, it does not mean that coloured or poor people should be ignored.

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