

# CITY OF MEN CITY OF WOMEN

Cities, whether by chance or choice, often contribute to gender disparities. The city, and thus, its mobility, becomes the ground on which to negotiate the pulls between public and private values, with traditional notions of masculinity and feminism fuelling patriarchal norms. What are cities doing around the world, and how can we ignite change? Join us as we decode the complexities of the **gendered city**.

Cities are anything but neutral landscapes; they are intricate ecosystems that, among other things, mirror and sustain the diverse disparities present at different levels of everyday life. Women from diverse backgrounds face a myriad of challenges, from safety concerns to missed opportunities. Moreover, as Sara Candiracci, Associate Director at Arup, explains:

‘When cities are largely designed without considering the diverse needs and insights of women of all ages and identities, it restricts their opportunities and negatively impacts the overall sustainable development of societies.’



FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH  
ROMIT CHOWDHURY  
SARA CANDIRACCI

ELABORATED BY  
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Indeed, cities usually fall short in catering to women's needs, leaving billions underserved and at-risk. These urban shortcomings deepen gender disparities, placing women in situations men rarely encounter.

To fully decode the gendered city, we must recognize how traditional masculinity influences urban life, restricting access to public spaces for women and gender-nonconforming individuals.



## Romit Chowdhury

Senior Lecturer in Sociology  
Erasmus University College

A good start? Understanding the notion of 'masculinities', as explained by Romit Chowdhury, Senior lecturer in Sociology at the Erasmus University College in Rotterdam and author of 'City of Men: Masculinities and Everyday Morality on Public Transport':

"'Masculinities' are those practices and speech acts through which people of all genders signify maleness. Much of what men do in the urban outdoors is related to what is expected from them as men in the private domain; men's morality sustains the patriarchal city.'

## The (gender) mobility gap

Despite the common belief that mobility is gender-neutral and benefits everyone equally, the reality is far more complex. Transport is not exempt from the gender disparities ingrained in our society; it is fuelled by the same outdated notions, morals, and practices that perpetuate inequality.

'Mobility continues to be associated with men and masculinity while being place-bound is seen as a feminine attribute. This association is itself closely connected to publicness being related to men and the private domain being linked to women. Hence, women's mobility and presence in the public are seen as an anomaly,' continues Romit Chowdhury.

Women and men navigate transport differently, with distinct needs, expectations, and challenges. Women often juggle more intricate travel patterns, marked by multitasking and caregiving responsibilities. Safety is a top concern globally, and, as Sara Candiracci explains:

'Globally, personal safety is the most widespread concern for women when travelling. Women worry about their safety when travelling alone, at night, waiting in or moving through empty or isolated locations and in poorly lit or overcrowded transport spaces.'

Public transport creates a distinct landscape for understanding gender-based violence and harassment on a global scale. This issue is intertwined with diverse local perceptions of masculinity and femininity, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of each nation, shaping the way people interact during their journeys. For instance, Romit Chowdhury sheds light on Japan and India, two countries he has extensively researched:

'Cultural ideas about good Japanese femininity make it difficult for them to protest when they face sexual assault on commuter trains. In Indian cities, conservative notions of the good Indian woman conditions respectability; those women who are seen by men as deserving of protection will be guarded; while those who go against societal expectations will be confronted with male rage.'

## A glocal perspective

While gender equality remains an elusive goal worldwide, cities and citizens around the world are pushing for change via different initiatives. On Tokyo's commuter trains, Romit Chowdhury mentions:

'There is a growing trend among younger men to markedly hold on to the railings above with both hands while standing next to women; the idea is to signal to women that they have no intention of groping them. Women passengers notice these signs and allow themselves to relax.'

Also in Japan, where women face a higher risk of railway suicides, 11 train stations introduced calming blue lighting, resulting in an 84% decrease in suicides between 2000 and 2010. This innovative 'nudge technique' not only saved lives but also made cities more welcoming for women, highlighting the power of simple interventions.

In Europe, Vienna has been a trailblazer in 'gender mainstreaming' for almost





three decades. Back in 1992, Vienna's Aspern neighbourhood was meticulously designed around women's needs. These principles are now ingrained in policy, backed by penalties for non-compliance. This is one of the future applications that Andrew is most enthusiastic about: 'Digital infrastructure can help AVs, which are essentially driving computers, to access all information on curb rules and regulations, even around things like dedicated curb space for AVs for pick-up and drop-off. Thinking about the future, AVs are certainly one of the areas of focus for both the MDS and the CDS,' he told POLIS.

However, gender data gaps in transport act as roadblocks to effective, targeted solutions. Biased designs, shaped by male-dominated leadership, disproportionately impact women. This inequity calls for research investment, illuminating the daily challenges women encounter. Diverse perspectives and enriched, gender-focused data are crucial assets for the future of travel behaviour. In Ireland, Sara Candiracci explains:

'We (Arup) undertook a study commissioned by Transport Infrastructure Ireland ([Travelling in a Woman's Shoes](#)); it helps identify the patterns, constraints and issues associated with women's mobility and the resultant social, societal, and economic repercussions of gender bias within the transport system.'

## Time to act!

The goal is clear: create inclusive spaces where everyone can thrive, regardless of gender. To do this, we need to broaden the conversation and follow a holistic approach. Sara Candiracci says:

'The focus of interventions or debates on gender equity is normally on women's safety; this is extremely important, but it needs to be considered along with other topics to enhance their opportunities to thrive in life.'

Romit Chowdhury further adds:

'Safety is a tricky issue; it is often a form of protectionism. We need to talk about freedom! To do this, the role of pedagogy and the space of the classroom in inspiring progressive social change need to be enhanced.'

To create thriving, inclusive cities, we must prioritize accessible mobility, inclusive public spaces, and women's leadership. Men's support in empowering women is essential for success.

As we navigate the gendered city, remember: collaboration, knowledge exchange, and inclusivity are our main tools. Break down barriers and weave gender responsiveness into city planning; together, we can create cities where every single voice matters.



**Sara Candiracci**

Associate Director  
Arup

