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Gender-sensitive urban planning: Exploring the intersections of gender, environmental design, and the experience of safety in public spaces from the perspective of sustainability

Katharina A. C. Helgerth*, Astrid Schütz*

ABSTRACT

The United Nations (UN) Women's report from 2017 to 2020 indicates persistent gaps in achieving the UN's 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 11 (safe and sustainable urban environments). The safety and inclusion of women and gender-diverse individuals continue to be neglected, with current approaches to urban safety mostly focusing on objective risks and overlooking the impact of perceived safety on individual behaviour and quality of life. This narrative review is based on a comprehensive literature search and examines the relationships between environmental factors, subjective safety, and gender, and offers recommendations to promote subjective safety and advance the creation of gender-equitable urban spaces. Ensuring subjective safety in public spaces requires an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach. By promoting subjective safety for all genders as a central element of urban planning, quality of life can be improved for all citizens, and a significant contribution to the goals of sustainable development can be made.

Key words   Urban planning; subjective safety; gender equality; public spaces; quality of life; Sustainable Development Goals.

INTRODUCTION

Cities around the world are expanding their plans to align with the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have been incorporated into the 2030 Agenda with the objective of inspiring member states to act in a sustainable manner (United Nations, 2015). For instance, SDG 5 demands gender equality, specifically the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and SDG 11 calls for the safety, inclusivity, and sustainability of cities and human settlements. However, the United Nations Women's Global Results Report for the period of 2017–2020 holds that these objectives have not yet been achieved (United Nations Women, 2021). This failure is disappointing and impacts quality of life in urban regions.

Prior to the recent introduction of a gender equity approach to the planning and design of urban spaces, there was a prevailing tendency to prioritize the interests of men in the design of built environments and to neglect the needs of other genders, such as women (Sadeghi et al., 2023). However, public spaces should be accessible for all (Sadeghi et al., 2023). They reflect the identity, values, and culture of the community that they serve (Sadeghi et al., 2023) and are characterized by social interactions between various groups with different interests and needs (Carpio-Pinedo et al., 2019).

Consequently, recent endeavours have been undertaken to advance gender equity across all policy domains (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025). Urban planners are seeking to identify solutions that enhance the safety of women and gender-diverse individuals in public spaces – but the implementation of such novel approaches is still scarce (Carpio-Pinedo et al., 2019). One of the primary impediments encountered by planning institutions is the lack of tools that account for the specific needs of different genders, especially those that are not male. Yet, such tools could provide guidelines for technicians, practitioners, policymakers, and the

local community (Carpio-Pinedo et al., 2019). However, so far, there is still little research on subjective safety from a gendered perspective. This research gap pertains specifically to the identification of environmental characteristics in urban public spaces that are crucial for subjective safety.

The central question we pose in this article is as follows: How can the needs and perspectives of all genders, especially of non-males, be integrated into the planning and design of urban spaces in order to promote the experience of safety? This question structured our review and guided the analysis of the current state of research on subjective safety in public spaces, as well as the identification of gender-related challenges and deficits in urban planning. We also provide recommendations for sustainable urban development that attends to the needs of all genders. Given the importance of SDG 11, which calls for safe and sustainable cities, it is crucial to better understand the role of subjective safety – especially for vulnerable groups of citizens.

METHODS

To ensure scientific rigour, both the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (Baethge et al., 2019) and the recommendations for structured narrative reviews by Baumeister and Leary (1997) were applied. A structured search was conducted in Google Scholar up to October 2025. The following search terms and Boolean combinations were used:

- *"subjective safety" AND "urban planning" AND gender*
- *"perceived safety" AND "public space" AND gender*
- *"gender-sensitive urban planning" AND safety*
- *"fear of crime" AND "urban design" AND women*
- *"safety perceptions" AND "public spaces" AND gender diversity*

In addition, the reference lists of all included articles were manually screened to identify further relevant publications. Studies were included if they examined subjective safety or perceptions of safety in urban public spaces, if they explicitly addressed gender differences or gender-sensitive perspectives, and if they were published in peer-reviewed journals, edited volumes, or authoritative policy reports. Only studies published in English or German were considered. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on objective crime statistics without reference to subjective safety or if they lacked relevance to urban planning or environmental design.

This review was limited to Google Scholar and English and German publications, which may have excluded relevant studies in other databases or languages. Despite these limitations, the structured search process combined with manual screening increases the robustness and transparency of the present review.

SUBJECTIVE SAFETY

Municipalities and other governmental entities tend to focus on managing the objective risks that individuals encounter. However, being safe does not necessarily equate to feeling safe (van Rijswijk et al., 2016). Achieving sustainability necessitates a comprehensive approach that goes beyond objective safety and encompasses feelings of safety (Paydar et al., 2017). The experience of safety is significant, as low

subjective safety impacts individuals in ways that are similar to actual exposure to risk (van Rijswijk et al., 2016). The concept of *subjective safety* was introduced to acknowledge that feeling safe requires more than crime prevention and law enforcement (Van den Herrewegen, 2010).

Safety can be regarded as an essential aspect of life (Sarriera et al., 2021) and, indeed, as one of the basic human needs (van Rijswijk et al., 2016). The significance of experienced safety was emphasized by Maslow (1943), who conceptualized subjective safety as not only encompassing more than the absence of crime or threatening weather conditions but also pertaining to the presence of predictability and order. This argument builds on the acknowledgement of a basic human desire for protection and certainty.

There is no consensus on the terminology used to describe subjective safety, and it is sometimes labelled subjective security (Lucchesi et al., 2021; Maroun et al., 2024), perceived safety (Pérez-Tejera et al., 2022), personal safety (Syropoulos, 2020), or personal security (Badiora et al., 2020). Additionally, the terms "subjective safety" and "fear of crime" are frequently used as antonyms due to their conceptual overlap (Franc et al., 2012). However, there are notable differences (Camacho Doyle et al., 2021; Etopio & Berthelot, 2022; Swatt et al., 2013) because subjective safety encompasses more than not being afraid of crime. It also includes various issues regarding the flourishing versus the breakdown of local communities. Moreover, socially disorganized neighbourhoods or loss of control over one's own neighbourhood lead to reduced subjective safety (Glas, 2023; Schewe, 2006). This lack of clarity calls for the establishment of a comprehensive definition and a framework for the factors that matter for subjective safety.

We adopted van Rijswijk and Haans' (2018) *subjective safety* definition, which refers to an individual's assessment of an environment as being safe by using immediate, site-specific, and safety-related information from that environment. A distinction between subjective and objective safety is important, as objective safety is related to objective threats and can be assessed on the basis of statistics, but subjective safety does not necessarily rely on such factors (Syropoulos et al., 2024). Whereas subjective factors vary between individuals, objective factors do not depend on an individual's perception (Putrik et al., 2019), and subjective safety is not directly correlated with objective safety (Sadeghi et al., 2023). For instance, levels of subjective safety are only weakly correlated with changes in the level of crime (Glas, 2023). Given that subjective safety has a considerable influence on citizens' well-being, it is essential to analyze the role of subjective safety in urban quality of life.

SUBJECTIVE SAFETY AND URBAN QUALITY OF LIFE

Subjective safety is an important predictor of urban quality of life (Hanslmaier, 2013). The term "quality of life" is typically understood to encompass both external circumstances and an individual's perception and evaluation of these circumstances, including the bidirectional relationships between these aspects (von Wirth et al., 2014). Urban quality of life is a specific aspect of quality of life and is affected by both the overall quality of life and the sustainable development of urban areas (Wesz et al., 2023). In this regard, the charac-

teristics of the built environment have been demonstrated to exert a significant influence on both the sustainability of societies and the quality of life of individuals (Wesz et al., 2023), for instance, in terms of subjective safety.

The existing literature suggests the presence of a reciprocal relationship between urban quality of life and subjective safety, rather than a unidirectional relationship. Thus, it is assumed that high levels of subjective safety will lead to high levels of urban quality of life, and high levels of urban quality of life will lead to high levels of subjective safety. The latter pathway has hitherto been neglected. One example of this reciprocal relationship can be seen in a vibrant neighbourhood with a variety of shops, cafés, and cultural activities. If residents feel safe when using these facilities, their quality of life may increase. The high quality of life in turn may attract more people, further increasing subjective safety, as lively places are often perceived as safer. By contrast, in areas with limited amenities and poor infrastructure, residents may feel unsafe due to poorly maintained public spaces. This feeling may in turn lead to reduced public presence in these spaces and reduced use of local shops and cafés. Thus, the perceived lack of safety and limited social interaction can decrease the overall quality of life and make the neighbourhood less attractive to present and potential residents, subsequently leading to a cycle of decline. To our knowledge, only Austin et al. (2002) reported that residents who were more satisfied with the physical environment in their neighbourhood tended to experience higher levels of subjective safety. The authors attributed their findings to a neighbourhood's physical and social characteristics, which, according to their argument, affect both the behavioural and emotional outcomes of the residents. In their study, residents' satisfaction was measured both with respect to their satisfaction with the people in their neighbourhood and with the physical environment, including appearance, litter, noise, and trust. The close link between subjective safety and urban quality of life underscores the need to take subjective safety into consideration during urban planning. However, the factors that influence subjective safety are not yet fully understood. In order to develop a better understanding of this feeling, we next summarize how environmental influences shape this perception.

SUBJECTIVE SAFETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Social and physical environmental factors affect subjective safety (Gargiulo et al., 2020; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2006).

In accordance with the "eyes on the street" principle, the experience of safety in an area is positively correlated with the number of people present, as they may provide informal surveillance (Gargiulo et al., 2020). However, this effect does not occur in the presence of individuals who violate social norms (Gargiulo et al., 2020). The disorder model further posits that elevated crime rates, social incivilities (e.g., "catcalling," public drinking), and physical incivilities (e.g., deteriorating infrastructure, graffiti) are perceived as markers of low concern for public order and lead to the perception that authorities do not possess the necessary means to deal with these issues (Steele et al., 2022). Thus, such features have a negative impact on subjective safety. We reviewed and compiled the available literature to extract environmental factors that impact subjective safety and present a summary in Table I.

Observers may attribute the factors listed in Table I as stemming from a deficiency in the city administration's level of care and attention and inability to deal with problems as well as ruthless and uncivilized behaviour by fellow citizens and potential conflicts or violence. The impact of perceptions of the subjective safety of the physical environment underscores the necessity to incorporate relevant environmental aspects into urban planning to increase perceived safety and accessibility for all. To foster a genuinely inclusive and safe urban environment for all, it is imperative to include vulnerable groups in these analyses and to thoroughly examine gender-typical aspects of subjective safety in public spaces, in alignment with SDG 5.

SUBJECTIVE SAFETY, ENVIRONMENT, AND GENDER

Subjective safety is also linked to the societal structure and the specifics of daily life. In conservative societies where traditional gender roles prevail, the emphasis on subjective safety for women is often taken less seriously, and gender equity is not a general concern. In such contexts, the emotional gender stereotypes hypothesis posits that, whereas women are encouraged to express their emotions, men are expected to suppress such feelings, including fear (Sutton & Farrall, 2005). Men are socialized into assuming a protective role and are taught to believe that physical strength can prevent them from becoming victims of crime. Boys are raised to be brave and adventurous (Ruhne, 2011). This socialization process can result in men's tendency to minimize perceptions of a

TABLE I Environmental components that affect subjective safety

Component	Reference
Dilapidated and dirty infrastructure including vandalism	Carpio-Pinedo et al. (2019); Federici et al. (2012); Gargiulo et al. (2020); Glas (2023); Putrik et al. (2019); Steele et al. (2022); Zysk (2024)
Public alcohol and drug consumption	Federici et al. (2012); Steele et al. (2022)
Verbal sexual harassment	Anushka (2022); Roberts et al. (2020); Steele et al. (2022)
Poor lighting	Carpio-Pinedo et al. (2019); Federici et al. (2012); Gargiulo et al. (2020); Zysk (2024)
Low visibility along walking routes	Carpio-Pinedo et al. (2019); Gargiulo et al. (2020)
Low presence of others	Anushka (2022); Carpio-Pinedo et al. (2019)

lack of safety (Tulloch, 2000). That is, men visit areas that are considered to be unsafe because they assume that they have the capacity to manage potential threats. Thus, men may underestimate or disregard warning signs. Moreover, they may suppress feelings of fear or vulnerability, as the expression of such emotions is often perceived as a sign of weakness. Conversely, on the one hand, women experience actual threats, but on the other, they are typically raised in a way that makes them feel vulnerable. Girls are socialized to be cautious and defensive. They learn that it is important to protect themselves from perceived threats (Ruhne, 2011). Consequently, they may tend to maximize perceptions of a lack of safety (Ruhne, 2011). They may tend to avoid specific locations, avoid certain times of day, or opt for safer routes. They may adopt a vigilant stance, constantly assessing their surroundings for potential threats. Their heightened sense of vulnerability may result in increased anxiety and stress, which can in turn impact their quality of life and limit their freedom to engage fully in public life. In other words, a patriarchal society and the related gender stereotypes contribute to inequalities with respect to the gender-typical utilization of public spaces (García-Carpintero et al., 2022). That is, whereas men often meet in public spaces, women tend to utilize such areas differently due to the aforementioned reasons, which tends to limit their presence and activities in public areas.

With regard to safety assessments, individuals differ in how they evaluate safety-related environmental cues (van Rijswijk et al., 2016). Non-male individuals typically experience limited subjective safety (Anushka, 2022), leading to gender-typical inequity in relation to safety in urban areas (Rodriguez-Garcia & Donati, 2021). But such concerns are often overlooked in planning processes (Hidayati et al., 2020). Specifically, the impact of environmental factors differs by gender (Møller, 2005; Sadeghi et al., 2023). In other words, public spaces and their perception are gendered (Anushka, 2022).

Various studies support these arguments. Van Rijswijk et al. (2016) demonstrated that environmental factors play a significant role in the experience of subjective safety. They found that subjective safety varies by gender and is contingent on environmental characteristics such as concealment and entrapment: Men typically perceive a given environment as safer than women do. To our knowledge, the study by van Rijswijk et al. is the only one to date to investigate gender differences in subjective safety in relation to environmental characteristics. However, they focused on environments as a whole and did not analyze gender differences in subjective safety in relation to specific environmental components as listed in Table I.

Most research has focused on the experiences of women in comparison with men. For example, van Rijswijk et al. (2016) found that women experience lower subjective safety in public spaces than men do and that this perception has a significant impact on women's behaviour, such as a tendency to avoid certain places (García-Carpintero et al., 2022; Hidayati et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2020). As a consequence, the physical characteristics of the built environment have an impact on the presence of women in urban public spaces (Sadeghi & Jangjoo, 2022). In other words, reduced subjective safety results in both voluntary and involuntary physical and social exclusion and thus also restricts equitable socioeconomic opportunities (Hidayati et al., 2020). There is evidence

that women's daily mobility is more sensitive to temporal and spatial factors than men's mobility is (García-Carpintero et al., 2022). These findings show that differences in subjective safety can be attributed to external factors, for example, sociocultural constructs such as patriarchal societies with traditional gender roles and spatial configurations, as well as individual factors, including gender, sexuality, age, and previous experience (Hidayati et al., 2020).

There is a complex interplay of gendered experiences with other factors of diversity such as ethnicity, age, and sexuality (Frisch, 2015) that further impacts subjective safety (Held, 2015). When talking about gender and subjective safety, it is thus important to also consider the findings that apply to both women and gender-diverse individuals. However, there is a paucity of findings on gender-diverse people in this context. The same applies to sexuality in the context of subjective safety. Space is typically heterosexually produced (Goh, 2018). For instance, queer women report low levels of subjective safety in urban public spaces (Khuzwayo, 2023). For example, it has been shown that individuals who do not conform to traditional heteronormative orientations experience higher levels of fear in night-time environments than their heterosexual counterparts (Meyer & Grollman, 2014), and transgender individuals experience even lower levels of subjective safety in public urban spaces than lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Doan, 2007). Moreover, Goh (2018) demonstrates how queer youth of colour experience urban spaces as unsafe due to intersecting forms of discrimination, including racism, homophobia, and policing practices. Young Black heterosexual women seem to experience similar problems. The dangers that these women highlight in regard to subjective safety are serious bodily violations and threats to their lives, rather than incivilities such as catcalling or structural inequities (Fike & Mattis, 2024). Together, age, the built environment, and social environment factors also influence older women's subjective safety, as physical activity, especially in older women, is negatively associated with fear of violence – which in turn limits their participation in public space – especially in neighbourhoods that are characterized by violence (Piro et al., 2006). By contrast, a significant factor that appears to influence the subjective safety of female adolescents in urban public spaces seems to be sexual harassment by gangs of adolescent boys (Johansson et al., 2012). In terms of socioeconomic background, there is also an issue of intersectionality as low subjective safety among women seems particularly prevalent in low- and middle-class neighbourhoods due to the absence of basic infrastructure, such as proper lighting systems, and the presence of criminals and drug addicts (Wrigley-Asante, 2016).

All in all, the intersection of gender with age, ethnicity, economic background, disability, and other minority features intensifies challenges encountered by the respective individuals in public spaces (e.g., Ortiz et al., 2025). Considering the needs of all genders in urban planning is crucial if one aims to create an equitable and inclusive society. This also includes intersectionality in terms of overlapping social identities: Integrating factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, class, and disability into urban design provides an opportunity to account for the complex and interconnected facets of social justice and inclusivity in public spaces (Bernroider et al., 2025; Ortiz et al., 2025). Recognizing these dynamics,

as reviewed here, is essential for developing fair policy and design recommendations regarding subjective safety and gender-equitable urban spaces as outlined below.

RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations translate the insights from our review into practical strategies to assist urban planners, authorities, and political decision-makers in promoting subjective safety and the creation of gender-equitable public urban spaces, thereby directly addressing the research question of how gendered perspectives can be systematically integrated into urban planning.

In addition to improving the physical environment by taking into account the factors listed in Table I, women and gender-diverse people should be actively involved in all phases of urban planning from need assessment to implementation. A potential avenue for a participatory approach is the utilization of contemporary technological advancements, particularly the incorporation of interactive maps, to identify locations that are perceived as unsafe by some genders. These locations could then be subjected to an analysis that examines their characteristics and attributes through a gender-sensitive lens.

Moreover, the promotion of safety applications is to be incentivized. The development and support of mobile applications that facilitate the reporting of safety issues or requests for assistance in emergency situations is encouraged. The design of such applications should be carried out by incorporating insights from women and gender-diverse people. Including such insights will ensure that the applications are in line with the specific requirements of these groups. Another potential solution to perceived lack of safety is the use of cameras to monitor high-risk areas or the use of smart infrastructures such as intelligent lighting systems to monitor high-risk areas. However, these technologies should be implemented in a manner that respects privacy and fosters a sense of security without creating an atmosphere of surveillance. Reliance on technological surveillance should, however, be critically assessed, as marginalized groups, such as migrants, queer communities, and racialized individuals, may perceive monitoring as a form of social control rather than as protection. Therefore, technology should complement inclusive spatial and social designs instead of replacing them.

In addition to these technological and participatory measures, the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, a multidisciplinary approach to designing and managing environments to enhance public safety and livability (Cozens & Love, 2015), and Situational Crime Prevention, an approach to reduce specific crimes by identifying and manipulating environmental factors that facilitate their occurrence (Freilich & Newman, 2017), should be incorporated. These approaches emphasize factors such as natural surveillance and visibility (Brantingham et al., 2005; Orlandi et al., 2025; Senna et al., 2025) – features that could ultimately enhance subjective safety.

We further recommend that subjective safety and gender equity be embedded as integral components of urban development plans and legal guidelines. This includes establishing explicit objectives and quantifiable benchmarks for achieving gender equity in urban planning, as well as implementing systematic monitoring procedures to assess progress over time. To this end, further training for urban planners and relevant authorities on gender equity and subjective safety is recommended, with a view to raising awareness of gender-related issues. Training programs should encompass subjects such as gender-sensitive design principles and the impact of urban environments on different genders. Intersectional perspectives should also be integrated into training and guidelines, recognizing how age, disability, ethnicity, and sexuality intersect with gender to shape the diverse experiences of subjective safety in urban public spaces. To ensure the currency of guidelines and training, research on subjective safety and gender-sensitive urban planning should be supported, with the aim of addressing knowledge gaps and promoting data-based decision-making. Additionally, public awareness campaigns can play a crucial role in the promotion of gender equity and subjective safety. These campaigns should aim to educate the public about the importance of inclusive urban spaces and encourage community members to participate in safety initiatives. Collaboration with local organizations and advocacy groups can enhance the effectiveness of these campaigns.

All in all, the implementation of these recommendations necessitates an interdisciplinary and cooperative approach in which political actors, planning institutions, and the local population should collaborate on sustainable and equitable urban design. By establishing subjective safety as a central element in urban planning, it is possible to enhance the quality of life of all citizens and make a significant contribution to the goals of sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

There is little research on subjective safety in cities and its gender-specific aspects. Reports on perceived lack of safety emphasize the need for further research in this area. The current approach to urban development is characterized by the absence of a holistic vision that incorporates the objective of gender equity. However, the absence of safety for all genders is incompatible with achieving sustainable urban living. Achieving the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, specifically SDGs 5 and 11, is crucial in this context (2015). Ensuring that urban spaces are safe and inclusive for all genders is not only aligned with these goals, but it also fosters a more cohesive and resilient community. It is thus imperative to enhance our understanding of the needs and perspectives of non-male citizens with regard to urban planning and design.

The gender dimension of experiencing public spaces is a critical aspect that cannot be overlooked. Women and gender-diverse individuals often face unique challenges in urban environments. A participatory and interdisciplinary approach that takes into account the needs of all genders and builds on evidence-based interventions is required to achieve significant progress in gender-equitable subjective safety and thus quality of life in urban spaces. The present review was aimed at providing a foundation for future research in this area by summarizing general and gender-related factors in the built environment that contribute to the experience of safety. By integrating research and recommendations, it responds to the central research question and provides specific pathways for gender-sensitive urban planning.

The enhancement of subjective safety in public spaces is a multifaceted undertaking, though by no means is it an insurmountable one. There are encouraging signs that the importance of subjective safety, especially in the context of gender-equitable and sustainable urban development, is gaining worldwide recognition. To achieve this goal, we need bold leadership, innovative thinking, and unwavering dedication. The opportunity to create a safe, inclusive, and livable city for all genders is a compelling incentive to pursue this endeavour.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DETAILS OF POSSIBLE PREVIOUS OR DUPLICATE PUBLICATION

None.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

*Department of Psychology, University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany.

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