

The 15-Minute City: A Feminist Utopia?

By: Melissa Bruntlett





To realize the positive intersection of feminism and the 15-minute city, concrete and inclusive land-use and mobility policies are necessary.

The explosion of interest in the concept of the 15-minute city among many urbanist planners and advocates can be explained in its more human-scale proposition for how cities should be planned.

The concept is based on four main principles:

- Ecology for a green and sustainable city;
- Proximity, or the ability to live with reduced distance to other activities;
- Solidarity, and creating links between people, and;
- Participation, where citizens should be actively involved in the planning process.

When examining these principles with a feminist city lens, cogent links with the principles of proximity, solidarity and participation can be made, wherein the concept of a more feminist city is one that more easily enables care trips, trip-chaining, and more social connection to one's community.

The question is, therefore, can the adoption of the 15-minute city help to simultaneously create more feminist cities?

A simple answer is, indeed, that one approach can unintentionally or intentionally lead to the outcome of the other. Digging deeper, however, it can be theorized that without concrete policies that set the goals of the 15-minute city concept into actionable planning processes that address areas like zoning, participatory engagement and equitable spatial development, such actions run the risk of benefiting some groups over others. In the past two decades, in the name of re-urbanisation of city centres and neighbourhoods, human-scale approaches to redesigning public spaces, the addition of cycle lanes and pedestrianization of the public realm have been implemented with the goal of attracting people back to the city from suburban neighbourhoods. In many cases, a lack of clear social policies and guardrails to ensure the accessibility and maintenance of social and rental housing, allow for meaningful mixed-use zoning, and provision of well-integrated and diverse transportation networks, such investments have often resulted in gentrification, often pushing out those who would benefit most from a walkable, cyclable community. This is particularly true for women living alone, single mothers, and those from marginalized communities. Therefore, in order for there to be a positive intersection between feminism and the 15-minute city concept, a truly inclusive and equitable approach, coupled with concrete policies, needs to be adopted.

Re-urbanisation, Gentrification and Gender

It has been well-documented that modernist planning policies of the early- and mid-20th century were predicated on the travel patterns of the economic man: a sole (male) breadwinner travelling from suburban residential neighbourhoods to industrial and economic centres, predominantly by car. The distinct separation of living, working, and consuming created a patriarchal urban structure that led to the dominance of automobiles in mobility. At the same time, groups that did not have the financial resources to flee urban centres—single mothers, women of colour, widowed women—were left with underfunded transport systems and an increasing lack of services as retailers and essential services followed more affluent populations to the suburbs. This of course has led to a legacy of challenges surrounding excessive land-use and lack of access that is not the focus of this paper.

The spike in the entry of women into the labour force starting in the late 1970s and progressively growing since then has seen a reversal of this trend. In her article, *The discursive uses of Jane Jacobs for the genderfying city: Understanding the productions of space for post-Fordist gender notions*, Dr. Marguerite van den Berg defines genderfication as the production of space for different gender relations (Vd Berg, 2018). Van der Berg theorizes that the ongoing gentrification of cities is in direct relations to women’s growing presence in the labour force and the need to balance care work with paid work through more fine-grained access to amenities and services. Referring to an argument from Manuel Castells (1993): ‘The larger the role women play in the household [sic], the more the proximity to jobs and urban services in the city makes central urban space attractive to the middle class, triggering the process of gentrification of the central city.’

Whereby the 15-minute concept helps to reinforce this need for proximity for dual-earner households, enabling greater share of care work, and therefore a more feminist city, it runs similar risk as previous efforts to attract affluent, middle-class households to urban centres while not addressing more systemic issues faced by marginalized and overlooked groups. While the genderfication project may help simultaneously overcome inequalities along gender lines, it simultaneous and inadvertently underlines those along class lines. Gender—femininity in particular—is discursively used to produce space for those more affluent, thereby reshaping inclusions and exclusions in post-[modernist] cities (Vd Berg, 2018).

The Mobility Donut: Basic mobility as a tool for greater inclusion

To address genderfication without sacrificing the positive outcomes of employing a 15-minute approach, municipalities need to ensure that policies are developed that examine understand the needs of all groups within a community, particularly as it relates to basic mobility. Basic mobility, as described by Mirjam de Bok, Netherland-based Mobility Advisor at Mobycon, is the basic level of mobility needed to participate in society, such as accessing employment, education, social activities, and essential services. De Bok recognises the importance for municipal organisations to understand these basic needs when planning for spatial allocation and transportation. Together with her colleagues, they developed the Mobility Donut: a concept and serious game that aims to help organisations address challenges around access to basic mobility and pave the way for comprehensive and inclusive policies.

Based on Doughnut Economics, the work and research of Kate Raworth, the Mobility Donut focuses on three key principles. **Basic mobility**, as described earlier, is represented as the inner circle of a donut, the base at which all cities should be striving. “If you fall below that level, so in the inner circle of the donut, and cannot reach those essential services, we say that you are experiencing **mobility poverty**,” says De Bok. She also sees the correlations between the 15-minute city concept and the mobility donut, whereby both focus on the accessibility of nearby goods and services.

Essentially, we need to move less, and for that we need to promote more local trips, which often are the care trips made predominantly by women. Therefore a 15-minute city can be a feminist city.





However, examined through the lens of genderfication, who benefits most in this approach to mobility? De Bok argues that often overlooked is the fact that one can also have too much mobility, represented in the Mobility Donut at **excessive mobility**. Affluent families and dual-earner households moving back to urban centres are benefitting from greater investment in mobility choices that are aimed at attracting them to invest in re-urbanisation: pedestrianized centres, rapid transit, and light rail systems, bike-, scooter- and car-sharing schemes. At the same time, we continue to invest in widening highways to get people to go further and faster. “The money invested in that has to come from somewhere,” states De Bok, “and could often be better invested in providing options for those individuals experiencing mobility poverty to allow them achieve basic mobility.”

Higher quality and accessible, universal design walking and cycling networks in historically under-served and low-income communities that connect to all areas of the city, and not just those deemed the ‘most attractive’ for middle-class interests, and frequent and reliable public transport are all tangible ways to ensure accessibility to all users.

It similarly supports those who most commonly use these networks, particularly women, who statistically use public transport at greater rates than their male counterparts, and often for the purpose of reaching part-time and shift work,

outside of traditional peak hours. In their 2016 research based in Spain, M. Isabel Olmo Sánchez and Elvira Maeso González found that women use public transport for over 13% of their commutes whereas men use it for less than 3% of their trips, the gender gap being over 50% (Olmo and Maeso, 2016: 68).

Where the goal of the 15-minute city concept is to have amenities accessible within short, human-scale trips, that of the mobility donut is mobility happiness: finding an equitable balance of all elements so the greatest number of people have access to basic mobility without going outside the environmental, financial, and spatial boundaries of our planet. Where the two approaches diverge is that while the mobility donut recognizes the importance of enabling more trips in shorter distances, the vital link of walking and cycling networks with reliable public transport allow those living outside a 15-minute range the same access. “It is a challenge in smaller rural areas where services are leaving, and with them mobility options, leads to downward spiral to mobility poverty,” explains De Bok. Transport networks also need to offer the choice whether one lives in a dense urban centre, suburban community, or small rural town. Linking sustainable transport travelling – walking, cycling, public transport – allows for traveling further distances without relying on car ownership, and potentially removing the subsequent financial burden for those on limited incomes.



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For De Bok, the key ingredients of the successful implementation of the mobility donut principles are:

Mixed-use zoning policies:

It is important to enable land-use beyond just residential, commercial, and industrial in one space. In doing so, employment, education, social activities, and essential services become more accessible.

Comprehensive social housing and transportation policies:

Access to housing and transport needs to be affordable so some groups aren't left out in favour of others when providing for community focused development and transportation options.

Social Safety Policy development:

Often forgotten is that you need to have the freedom to move, which can be more of a female issue. I may be able and capable of biking at night, I may have the bike and skills to use it, but I may not feel the freedom to do so at night because I may not feel safe, so for that reason, I may make the choice to not travel during certain times.

Perhaps one way to begin addressing how a 15-minute city concept can be applied to create a feminist city is by first addressing the differences in how men and women move in a city. De Bok notes that in her personal experience, planning and research, the focus is still not gender specific in order to understand travel behaviour. The assumption can then be made that while the 15-minute city can benefit women's travel patterns and behaviour, if achieved without proper understanding and engagement with women, it could run the risk of not meeting the needs of all women. The challenge is that the 15-minute city and principles of the mobility donut require long-term planning, where election cycles are often more focused on short term goals/planning. We need policies that build these approaches into the planning process, not just as nice ideas in short term.

Participatory planning and the feminist city

As stated in the introduction, solidarity and participation are principles of the 15-minute city concept. A diversity of voices participating in the planning process brings a broader perspective to the outcomes. It can be summarized, therefore, that for the 15-minute city concept to be applied to enable a more feminist city, while also ensuring equity across class and background, a variety of demographics should be invited to the process for feedback and to inform decision-making of their needs and behaviours. As such, the outcomes can hope to better ensure equitable policies and practices around spatial, public realm and transportation planning.

Where municipalities tend to struggle is understanding how to engage with the various groups that are often overlooked in the participation process due to factors that frequently impact women, such as shift- and part-time working hours, childcare, family responsibilities, etc.

To address one of these groups, UN-Habitat together with Global Utmaning, a Swedish-based think tank, initiated *Her City: A guide for cities to sustainable and inclusive urban planning and design together with girls*. Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, states in the guide, “A city can only become gender inclusive, equitable, and prosperous if everyone strives to improve women’s rights, participation, decision-making, and access to services.” *Her City* was initiated to kick-start that process and provide organisations with a toolbox and strategy for participatory planning that brings young women directly into the process, not only provide their lived experience and insight, but also building an understanding of the practices within urban planning to potentially spark and interest in entering the field.

As the introductory statement by Tove Ahlström, Chief Executive Officer of Global Utmaning, outlines: Among the most vulnerable are young women in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Research shows that girls and women do not use a city’s public spaces to the same extent as boys or men. From the age of eight, 80 percent of the public spaces can be dominated by boys, and girls express that they feel significantly more insecure and excluded (*Her City*, 2021: 9). Through *Her City*, some of the frequent barriers faced by women—gender-based discrimination: gender inequality, violence against women, poverty, unpaid care-work, limited control over assets, unequal participation in public and private decision-making, and; barriers to education, employment, housing and basic services—can be better understood by seeing data collection and engagement through the eyes of the people most impacted.

The *Her City* Toolbox enables municipalities to involve young women in the urban development process using a step-by-step process encompassed in three phases: Assessment,

Design, Implementation. The phases allow participants to move through the entire urban development process of a project, participating in brainstorming, stakeholder and public realm assessment, data collection, concept development and evaluation. The process incorporates digital tools that encourage greater interactivity from the participants, allowing groups to take ownership of their tasks and feel valued in the process. As the guide states, “By letting *Her* guide you through the urban development process, you will improve the participatory urban planning, design and implementation that are key for building a city that works for girls and young women, and ultimately for everyone”.

Initiatives like *Her City* will be vital in supporting the participation principle of the 15-minute city concept to ensure it can help cities truly achieve feminist policies and practices. Without such actions, despite best efforts, the process is left too much to chance and interpretation. Additionally, as stated in the earlier section, without concrete policies that build these practices into the urban planning process, many of these steps to create an inclusive and equity outcome risk remaining nice ideas that may once again be overlooked. At the same time, by encouraging civic engagement in a very participatory way, decision-makers can facilitate more solidarity among residents. By collaborating and learning from each other, they can better understand their neighbors, building compassion as well as camaraderie in supporting a more welcoming community. As Jane Jacobs emphasizes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, community is built and maintained through ‘eyes on the street’ looking out for each other and supporting each other. A 15-minute city concept can support this by helping creating space where people want to spend time but are only successful when they benefit everyone.



Conclusion

The intersection of feminism and the 15-minute city concept presents a very exciting potential for cities to adopt more inclusive and equitable environments. The ongoing challenge will be safeguarding against growing gentrification, or genderfication. However, municipalities and organisations should not use this as a reason not to incorporate feminist planning processes into the urban development process.

Rather, by recognizing the potential risk present by placing greater attention of attracting dual-income households than retaining existing residents and addressing this risk through comprehensive policies that support social and rental housing and mixed-use zoning practices. It is vital that organisations that purport to be focused on creating inclusive cities recognize who the city is for – everyone.

For those struggling to understand where to begin, tools like the *Mobility Donut* allow planners and decision-makers to understand the impacts of varying measures on equitable access, availability of mobility options, safety, freedom, and affordability. Through this greater understanding, work can be done to ensure basic mobility for all, investing in measures that enable the core values of the 15-minute city—fewer trips at short distance required to reach essential services, education, and employment—while avoiding the risk of providing more options for one group at the expense of another.

Policies focused on equity of land-use and spatial planning, combined with the provision of tools and options for the greatest number of people to achieve basic mobility, will be essential for cities wishing to implement 15-minute city strategies, if they also wish to be gender inclusive.

Those that simultaneously incorporate participatory planning that invites women and girls from all backgrounds into the process will ensure that the proposed approach, policies, and project meet their needs, which vary greatly from their male counterpart, especially as girls age. Similar, equitable urban development will be predicated on engagement with and participation by historically underserved groups in cities – young women, women from marginalized backgrounds, single mothers, and widowed women. Tools like the *Her City Guide* can be one step to bringing more voice into the planning process, as well as inviting more women into the space to potentially explore careers in the field, broadening the experiences and knowledge of the industry.

Although not a new concept, it is still early in the lifespan of Carlos Moreno's 15-minute city concept to understand what impact it will have on feminist urban planning in the future. The birthplace of the concept, Paris, France, appears to be successfully implementing many of these concepts through traffic evaporation, increased investments in walking and cycling, and greater greening throughout the city. In the United States, the concept was predated by a decade in Portland, Oregon, where 20-minute neighbourhoods have been established under similar guiding principles. Its application in less urban areas, and rural communities, will require less constrained zoning policies that enable mixed-use and support the maintenance of low-income, rental, and social housing. Additionally, policies supporting integrated and sustainable transportation networks that connect safe walking and cycling facilities to reliable public transport ensure those unable to live in dense centres to not subsequently suffer from mobility poverty.

Gender-equitable cities will come in all shapes and sizes, and the potential for the 15-minute city concept to support their success is great. The next step is establishing meaningful policies, addressing the varied transport needs of women, and ensuring the process to achieve it are inclusive of women's perspectives and voices.

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