

A woman's place

An essay on urban planning for low-income women in Metro Manila, the Philippines, and how it can be improved



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1 Introduction

In this essay I aim to shed light on the life of women in socialized housing for low-income families in Metro Manila, the Philippines, and how urban planners are addressing their problems.

During a recent field study in Manila, I had the opportunity to visit several socialized housing projects constructed both by the National Housing Authority (NHA) in the Philippines as well as Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), including local charities, religious organizations and global help organizations. While conducting interviews with various families in the housing areas we visited I encountered a problem; I had constructed many questions regarding women's use of public space in the areas - trying to get information on the places women met each other, what they did together, how safe they felt moving through these places, yet the answers I got were not what I had expected. The women I interviewed did not meet other women out and about but rather in each other's homes if at all.

They told me repeatedly they felt safe in their areas but avoided going out after dark and didn't let their children play very far from home. When I asked the women what activities they would do outside, they talked about playing basketball or volleyball, while they actually did not partake in these activities but rather stood on the sidelines and watched, cheering on the boys.

The answers I got in the interviews made me believe there might be a discord between the way people were describing the areas (as safe, equal, sustainable) and how they were actually behaving. Seeing this conflict made me want to delve deeper into the problems for women in areas like these. I wanted to know what was actually being done on the planning level for women in the Philippines as well as globally, to understand what was missing and suggest a better alternative.

The questions I try to answer in this essay are:

- What are the specific planning issues concerning women?
- How are they being planned for?
- How can we better focus our resources in order to make a real change?

2 Theoretical background

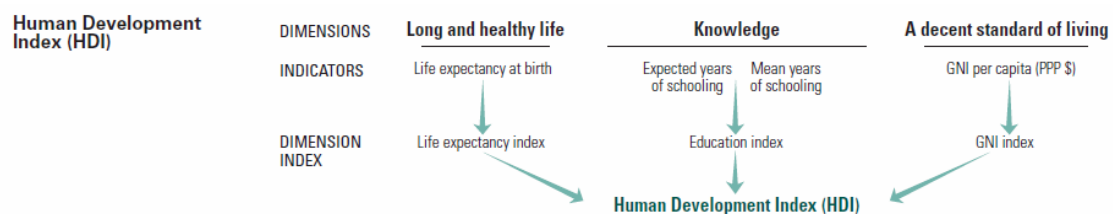
In the text *What does feminization of poverty mean? It isn't just lack of income* Sakiko Fukuda-Parr writes about the growing feminization of poverty in urban areas, a much-discussed subject in urban studies. In order to understand this phenomenon and why it is essential in actually reducing poverty in urban areas, we need to define and discuss two concepts:

(1) *The urban poor* - understood not just as an economical statistic, meaning the number of people falling below the poverty line, but as a group of people with low social movement, stuck in the trap of having to pay high prices for basic needs. These basic needs, such as water, food, healthcare and education, are often of lower quality than in richer areas of the city, and can be much more costly due to the uncertainty of not having indoor plumbing and established institutions. Many people in cities technically do not count as poor due to their income, but have no means of saving money or bettering their situations and are effectively living as urban poor. (Fukuda-Parr, S. p 100)

(2) *the effect poverty has on women in urban areas* is different than the effect on men considering women are more likely to be dependent on and earn less than men. Women are also more likely to sacrifice their education and career in order to take care of children, which in unsafe areas means that they are likely to be isolated in their homes. This makes women even more exposed to being stuck in economically unsustainable situations. (Fukuda-Parr, S. p 102)

The feminization of poverty is the phenomenon of women being the majority of urban poor, with a continually growing gap between men and women “caught in the cycle of poverty” (UN). While this is a complex issue with many reasons, the one I chose to focus on is the fact that women are still more bound to home and household than men and are therefore more likely to be burdened by the growing costs put on families as public spending and social programs decrease.

This burden gets especially heavy on single mother households - a continually growing group - as they have not just lower incomes than single father or dual-parent households, but also less resources and opportunities. Because of this it is important to understand poverty not just as an economical concept but a socio-economic one. An index called Multidimensional Poverty Index introduced by the Human Development Report in 1997 (MPI,1997) divides poverty into four categories: survival, knowledge, decent standard of living, and social participation. The index argues that poverty is a combination of these four aspects intertwined, giving the social aspects of poverty - the aspects that urban poor women are likely to get struck by - the same status as the economical. These are the aspects that keep women in poverty. (Fukuda-Parr, S.)



Male and female domains

A related subject concerning the lives of women in cities is the question of male and female domains. Traditionally the home has been women’s responsibility, while work and economy have belonged to men. These coded spaces are still obvious even though we have come a long way from being forced into them, Jane Darke writes in *Changing places: women’s lives in the city*. Darke argues that women are still highly connected to the home sphere in ways of feeling great pride in their homes, seeing it as a reflection of themselves, being judged by others because of it, something men are not subjected to in the same extent. (Darke et al)

The problem with gender encoding these different spaces is that we tend to see the world in dichotomies - polar opposites such as male and female, private and public. If the home is deemed the woman’s place, the public space - it’s opposite - must therefore be ‘male’.

And while trying to create cities for everyone, these different (dis)allowances in the city, whether it be physical or social, is something we must see in order to counteract.

(Darke, p 61-71)

Though it may seem more obvious that the home is considered ‘female’ than public space being ‘male’, there are many ways in which public space can be considered gendered. In the anthology *Gender, Space, Architecture* (Rendel et al) several arguments are made for the existence of gendered space:

Henri LeFebvre points to symbols and words being coded as female or male (such as “a soft curvaceous interior vs a phallic tower”) to show that there is a system of gendered assumptions controlling not only how we see each other but how we see objects, space and the invisible rules of public and private space. (Rendel et al, p 103).

Shirley Ardener discusses territorialism as an explanation for division of space, how borders create different rooms in which we are taught to behave in certain ways. Different rooms belong to different socio-economic groups, professions, ethnic groups and genders. What begins on a nation level, with borders around a piece of land, is also existent on a street with different levels or a square with fenced-off cafe seating. Ardener also points to the spatialities of the rooms as influential, saying “a dozen people in a small room is not the same as a dozen people in a great hall; seating-space shaped by a round, rather than a square, table, may influence the nature of social interaction among those seated.” (Rendel et al, p 108)

Commercialization of public space is another issue that enforces gendered space; with public space becoming more and more privatized, women - who have less economic power and are less financially independent than men - have less access to commercialized space.

(Rendel et al, p 106)

The common ground for these different views on gendered space is that there are different rules for women and men in different places, including public space. Not only are women moving less through public space, they have very different experiences of it. Public space as an inherited male domain is an issue of social control, enabling men to move freer and safer throughout the city and the world. If we accept the notion of public space being male-dominated it is crucial that we, with the goal of planning equal cities, take this into consideration.

3 The Filipino context

Metro Manila in the Philippines is one of southeast Asia's ever-growing megacities. In some ways Manila is representative of the global urbanization trend, facing many of the same issues caused by a too rapidly growing population: traffic congestions, pollution and failing infrastructure. In other ways it is a unique melting pot of several colonial occupation periods mixed with the history of the indigenous tribes that once ruled. (Carino, 1999)

Though they seem to be sustainable, with minimal carbon footprints and dense living conditions, megacities in developing countries are facing the same issues rapidly growing urban centers in the west were a hundred years ago. Most striking and alarming are the slums, or informal settlements. These are areas where people live crammed together without electricity, running water or plumbing, running risks of diseases, exposure and being struck by natural disasters. The country has put huge efforts into disaster management since Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, a devastating storm causing over 6000 deaths and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. In the following years victims of the disaster were the country's top priority, as well as informal settlers living in dangerous areas. Because of this many housing projects has been built in a short time, providing much improved shelter but lacking in quality public space. (the Guardian, 2015)

Huge urban centers today are potential hubs for poverty, keeping people poor by charging higher prices than people can actually afford. Another aspect of the 'poverty trap' previously mentioned is the culture of consumerism striking especially those who can not afford it, since they will spend money on shopping in order to be able to go to malls and be part of the culture instead of saving. This culture was extremely present in Manila, which is the city with the most malls in the entire world. (the Guardian, 2014)

Postcolonial feminism

The Philippines have a long history of oppression by different western nations, leaving behind them remnants of different cultures' influence. Going from being an independent island nation with many different autonomous tribes, to being colonized by the spanish, sold

to the americans and briefly occupied by the japanese during world war two has created a strong people's movement, though many feel torn between different identities. (Carino, 1999)

Looking at the Philippines' history through a feministic perspective gives some insight into the country's social development. Because the Filipino people were under oppressive regimes, not having the rights of the ruling class, the women's movement didn't have much power or unity until the 1980s, after the Filipino people's national movement against the dictatorship of Marcos. Before that the actions being taken to help women were pragmatic, focusing on single issues such as reforming women's prisons, labor reform and reducing infant mortality by providing mothers with pasteurized milk and education on child care. (wordpress, 2016) Mina Roces describes the feminist movement in the Philippines as a 'postcolonial feminism' having several hurdles to pass because of the country's shattered history. Basically, one would have to deal with the social, legal and cultural ramifications of the colonial occupation in order to get to the root of the feminist struggle in the Philippines. (Roces, M. 2012)

Metro Manila today - current issues

Though there are specific women's issues, many of the current issues in the Philippines today are also impacting women on a larger scale.

Migrant worker culture, for instance, is a huge issue in the Philippines, with many workers (both men and women) leaving their families and homes for years at a time to make more money elsewhere. Though this might seem as a possibility for women to get out of restraining conditions, women are in fact more exposed to being used in the situation, since they are likelier to work as maids or caretakers, being isolated in another family's home without knowledge of their rights or a support system. (UN, 2016)

Segregation, consumerism culture and high crime rates are all contributing factors to women becoming isolated in their homes. As previously stated not moving outside the home sphere is a big reason for women's increasing poverty, reducing their opportunities both socially and career wise. In many of the housing projects we visited women were having most of their social interactions in their homes, including having home businesses such as sari sari shops, internet cafes and restaurant businesses. Long distances to other employment opportunities as well as having to be home for school children going only half days made this look like a

comfortable choice, but in fact trapped women in their apartments most of the day. This arrangement leads to women not moving around in public space as much as men, as well as creates a dependency situation where women, not having the same options as men, are dependent on their husbands and the situations they are in.

Filipino feminism - what is being done

Today the main focus of feminist actions in the country seems to be on sexual violence and harassment against women. As this is a serious issue in Metro Manila (3 out of 5 women report harassment in public space - the numbers are even higher in the age group 18-24) keeping women from feeling safe while moving around, it is a great effort in changing the everyday lives of Filipino women. The fact that many campaigns are directed towards men as well, educating and empowering to speak up when they see something happening, is a good way of not making the issue women's responsibility. (UN, 2016:2, 2017)

While fighting sexual harassment in public space is an important aspect of allowing women movability and safety in cities, working against domestic abuse is something that could help women become more free in their lives. Though domestic abuse has been illegal since 2004 in the Philippines, numbers of cases reported has been rising in the last few years, indicating an issue in dire need of being addressed. (PCoV, 2014)

In the interviews I conducted I talked to several women who had been abused by husbands or boyfriends, discussing how they eventually got out of those situations. They mentioned finally going to women's crisis shelters once they were fearing for their lives, and realizing they had to leave their homes permanently. When asked why they didn't ask for help sooner they replied the husband or boyfriend wouldn't have let them. This level of control within the homes was something they described as normal.

While talking to these women I had a realization they could have been helped much sooner if there had been less stigmatized resources, and a culture of talking to other women in their everyday life.

Though there seems to be a growing platform for women to share their experiences and become informed of their rights, for example the women's network turned political party GABRIELA, there is still much to be done for women having meeting places where they can share and socialize. In order to reach the women not reporting their abuse, being stuck in a controlling home environment, much effort will have to be put into creating better meeting places and forums designed especially for women.

There is also a lack of focus on helping women out of poverty, as poverty is one of the biggest issues in the country. A lot of focus has been put on bettering the conditions for migrant workers, women especially. Yet not as much is being done for the situation for workers in the country compared to many other developing countries, such as micro-loans, financial guidance and business education.

4 Planning for women

In recent years there have been trends in planning cities with a female perspective, targeting different aspect of women's issues. In this chapter I will discuss some of these approaches.

Feminist planning

Urban planning with a feminist focus has been executed in many different ways, often trying to pinpoint aspects of the built environment as reasons for how safe a place is considered to be. While it has been considered 'feminist planning' just by talking about women in the process, it is not always clear what the feminist aspect actually entails.

In this context the issue of allowance often comes up: the different object we place in our surroundings that allow us to do - or not do - certain things. For instance, the allowance of a fence might be to keep people out of an area or it may allow for seating or leaning if it is of the right height. In feminist planning objects have sometimes been talked about as allowing sexist behaviour, making it easy for the planner to simply remove or change it.

The criticism feminist planning has gotten is that it has missed the mark on the real issues, simply trying to move the problem. While the approach has been moderately successful, it has brought up a discussion about the psychology of the built environment. (SR, 2015)

Female-only space

In an approach related to public space, many crowded cities especially have started working with allotting space to women. In response to issues with sexual harassment and groping, many cities has decided it is best to simply divide the sexes, in part at least.

In Japan, several subway trains are for women only, the same in several cities in India and the Philippines. Much has been written about this method, from women praising the new-found relief in public space to women not appreciating being pointed out as victims, to confused bystanders wondering about the new social rules following these drastic changes.

(the Telegraph, 2015)

Participatory methods

Having citizens participate in the design process of planning houses and cities is a well-used method, with varying degrees of influence. While visiting the NGO *TAO Pilipinas* I was told about the many participatory meetings they have had with people all over the Philippines, mostly women due to men having to work. Even though women were more present and vocal than the men, they tended to raise questions concerning planning well for their children and their family as a whole, neglecting their own needs. In order to truly plan for women we would both have to have a feminist participatory method as well as female planners, critics have argued. (GSDRC, 2012)

Policy making

In many developing countries, banks have discovered that women in poverty are a great investment, opening up for micro financing. In the 1980s Muhammad Yunus started the first micro financing bank lending only to women in Bangladesh. After being rejected for financing from the world bank, Yunus has since proved women are an underestimated economic force with a return of 97% and a Nobel peace price in 2006. (Yunus center, 2015)

5 Planning for change

To give a concrete example of my findings, I will summarize my suggestion as an architect's brief for a women's center placed in a planned, standardized NHA site in Metro Manila.

Choosing a method

I believe that in order to make a real difference with urban planning we must have a clear goal and plan for how to get there, steering away from generalities. When planning 'for women' being too general is a real issue since women are a large, heterogenous group.

Breaking down the focus to urban poor Filipino women the job becomes clearer but not easier. In a complex postcolonial context like Metro Manila more than urban design solutions are needed to make a lasting change in people's lives.

Using a combination of methods in a project is a demanding task, but can ultimately show a great understanding of the site, as well as demonstrate the importance of combining fields of knowledge. By using design aspects as direction, relationship between private/public and rooms adapted to function, combined with economic programs directed at helping women out of poverty I could reach many more women than would have been possible otherwise.

Thoughts on design

As I have searched for reasons why women are not using public space in the same manner and extent as men I have found that the same systems that keep women at home are the ones that keep women isolated, poor and dependent on others. To build public space, say it is for women, and simply leave it in the world, is to ignore the systems at work. In order to impact change it would have to work over time, be self-sustaining and lasting in its form.

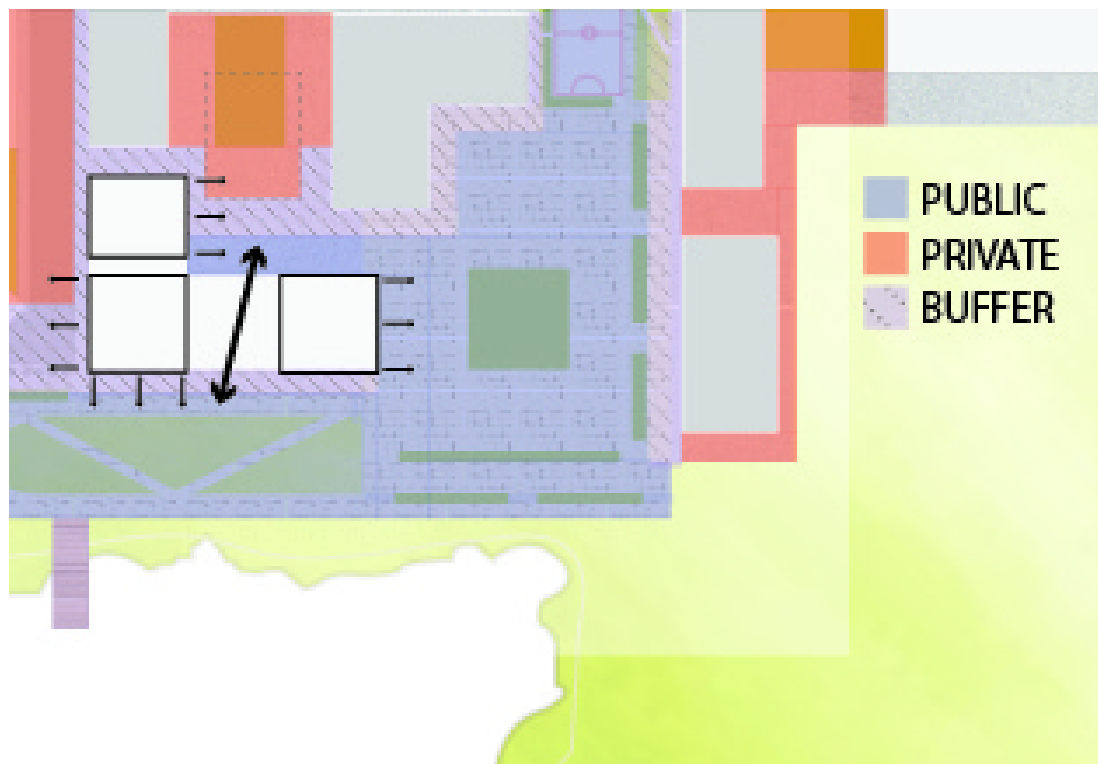
Going back to the notion that the home sphere is 'female' and the public 'male', it would be an interesting idea to explore the gray scale between those opposites in relation to gender. That gray scale could be interpreted as the border between public and private, as well as categorizing different functions on that scale and placing them in different constellations. Functions could also be categorized as traditionally (or culturally) 'male' or 'female', making combinations unexpected.

Understanding the architect's role

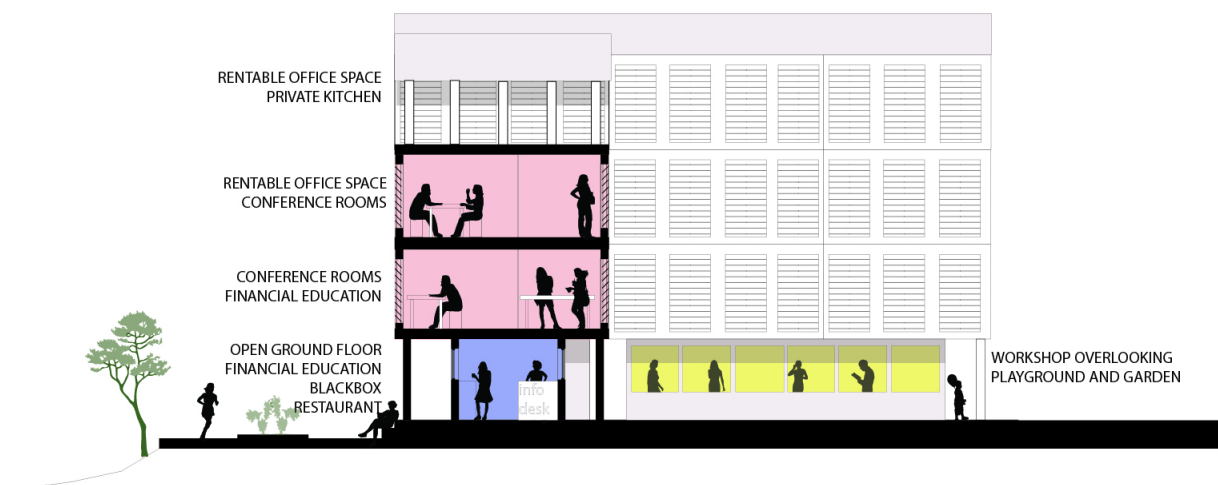
Seeing a culture from the outside as a planner from another country can be both a blessing and a curse. I realized my ideas on feminism and planning did not apply in the same way to Metro Manila as I had expected, forcing me to put things I had taken for granted in a whole new perspective. Coming with new ideas to a country quite unlike your own can be a recipe for success, since it is much easier for me - the outside planner - to criticize without consequences. It is also easy for the outsider, who might have seen the proposed changed working elsewhere, to visualize change and different approaches. In order to plan successfully, though, a great understanding for both the culture and people's lives and behaviors are necessary - especially if you are trying to implement some radical ideas.

My suggestion

Keeping in mind the specific issues for women in Metro Manila, I wanted to have a sensitive approach to feminist planning, while making a bold statement of ownership and right to the public realm. By placing a women's center on the border between public and private, I want to explore the zones inbetween - making it easier for women to establish themselves as a part of the public. It is only natural then that the building has parts that are more private and more private in relation to its surroundings.



The function of the center is different from the traditional crisis-managing ones, with a clear focus on the different aspects of women’s economical growth instead. The building should provide spaces for social gatherings, information desks and lecture halls, as well as workshop areas and office space. More social rooms benefit from being situated near the square and boardwalk so that activities can move outside in case of a larger amount of people, while more static, private rooms should face the private courtyard. The higher levels of the building should be increasingly private and static, so that the higher up you get the more permanent role you have in the building, in contrast with the very public and flexible ground floor.



The organization of the building should be constructed to be self-sustainable eventually. In order for this to happen, the women of the organization should be part of both the exterior design and the building phase. This would create a sense of ownership and individuality. By using low-maintenance local materials such as structural bamboo, brick and wood the cost and weight of the building would be kept low. Later on the organization would be run by women living in the area, growing from a simple product workshop to a microloan bank and startup hub for female owned businesses.

6 Conclusion

In this essay I have come to the conclusion that women in poverty are an underestimated group in society, with great economic and creative potential that has yet to be realized. While planning social housing areas I believe we have an opportunity to reach some of these women who otherwise lead isolated lives.

It has become apparent to me that women's lives in cities depend not only on their economical situation, but their status in society. Having a rigid divide between the genders ensures a system of continually growing gaps, making all of our efforts to empower and change women's lives a nearly impossible task. If we want to permanently change women's lives for the better we have to counteract the systems that keep them in 'poverty cycles', as well as actively planning for the real women's issues.

Some of these issues can be planned for using policy making, while others are more suitable for urban design, but I believe it is important to have a clear focus on all fronts working together towards making real change. Seeing women as a group with great economic and creative potential that has yet to be realized is something that could inspire us to tackle the real women's issues - changing the systems that are keeping women down.

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