

Women Participation in Urban Sustainable Development: Emerging Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Women's meaningful involvement in urban development is gaining momentum as a key pillar of inclusive, equitable and sustainable urban development. Women are key contributors to community development, environmental management, local governance, social welfare and the development of resilient communities in cities; but they face pervasive social, institutional, economic and cultural barriers to engagement in formal urban planning and decision-making. This research paper explores some of the new challenges and issues arising from women's role in urban sustainable development, specifically on gender responsive urban planning, access to public services, mobility, safety, employment, environmental aspects, digital inclusion and participation in urban governance. The study touches on the gender gaps that affect women's access to and control over urban resources, infrastructure, opportunities and decision-making processes. It also takes into account intersectional issues of socio-economic status, caste, age, disability, migration, and place which can engender different urban experiences for women. The paper proposes that infrastructure, technology and innovation are not enough to make cities sustainable: meaningful representation of women and engagement of their experiences in urban policies and planning processes are also fundamental. Increasing women's leadership, increasing gender responsive budgeting, ensuring safe and accessible transportation and open spaces, increasing the opportunities for women in the digital and economic sector, and institutionalizing participatory planning, can improve women's contribution to sustainable urban change. The study stresses on the importance of transcending symbolic participation to substantive and sustained involvement of women in urban governance. Such a practice can reinforce social inclusion, spatial justice, community resilience and the access of urban development services, thus contributing to the Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and Sustainable Development Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

Keywords: Women's Participation, Urban Sustainable Development, Gender-Responsive Planning, Women's Empowerment, Urban Governance, Sustainable Cities, Gender Equality, Inclusive Urban Development, Spatial Justice, SDG 5, SDG 11.

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Introduction

Urbanization has become one of the most powerful drivers of the social, economic, environmental, and political development today. Cities are places of work, invention, learning, technology, infrastructure and public service, and urban sustainability is vital to global development. This is because cities are increasingly becoming more vital to the world and Sustainable Development Goal 11 is about inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities. Investments in infrastructure, technology and environmental management, however, are not sufficient to ensure sustainable urban development. It also demands effective involvement of a variety of social



groups in planning, governance, decision-making and implementation. In this context, women's participation has grown to be an increasingly important aspect of sustainable urban development. The key of SDG 11 is inclusive urbanization and participatory planning, and there is an urgent need for transport and urban systems that meet the needs of women and other vulnerable groups.

Women are a significant and growing part of the urban population and a part of cities in a variety of capacities: as paid workers, entrepreneurs, community members, household managers, environmentalists, social activists, and as citizens of city councils. However, they have been poorly acknowledged in the development of cities. Previous models of urban planning have often ignored inter-personal variations in mobility, access to services, safety needs, employment duties and unpaid care work needs of urban populations. This has led to the creation of many urban spaces and services that are not designed with the needs of women in mind. Historical patterns of urban planning and design have frequently reinforced traditional gender roles and disadvantages for women in terms of mobility, public space access, safety, health, climate resilience, housing, and security of tenure, World Bank notes.

Women's involvement in urban sustainable development goes beyond their representation in numbers in institutions. It includes their capacity to shape land use, housing, transport, sanitation, waste management, environmental protection, adaptation to climate change, public health, digital infrastructure, energy, employment and community development. By ensuring meaningful participation, women's lived experiences and priorities can be incorporated into the urban policy and planning processes. Gender responsive urban development should therefore not only see women as beneficiaries of urban programmes, but also as active players, knowledge holders, innovators and entrepreneurs, planners, community leaders and decision makers. Recent research also highlights the link between empowering women and achieving gender equality and socially sustainable urban development, especially in the context of developing cities.

Urban mobility is one of the key sectors where women's engagement is particularly crucial. Women often engage in travel activities related to their work, coupled with multiple responsibilities of caring for their household and caring for themselves and their children, which can lead to travel patterns different from men. Lack of public transport, inadequate pedestrian facilities, poor quality lighting, unsafe public spaces, harassment and lack of accessibility are all factors that limit women's mobility and therefore limit access to education, employment, health care and civic participation. Gender gaps in social roles, employment and responsibilities shape the experience of women and men in urban design and transport infrastructure, the OECD reports. It also highlights the need to involve women in decision-making processes related to housing, transportation and land-use systems, which can help to create more inclusive and environmentally sustainable urban development.

Safety and security are also important factors. Safe streets, secure public transport, good lighting, sanitation and access to public places are important factors affecting women's desire and capacity to engage in urban life. Women's experience of unsafe public spaces can lead to limited social, economic and civic participation. These concerns can be addressed through gender responsive urban planning by making spaces gender-responsive and incorporating women's perspectives in the design and management of public spaces. Participatory approaches, in particular, can be highly useful because they help women to define the issues that are present in a specific context, and which might not be noticeable in traditional planning procedures. UNDP and its partners also highlight the importance of directly involving women in urban decision-making in achieving safer, healthier, inclusive and equitable cities.

The problems are especially acute for women in slum and economically marginalised urban areas. Growth in urban areas may create an imbalance of housing provision, social and environmental risks, and lack of access to clean water and sanitation, among other issues. These conditions may exacerbate gender inequalities as women may be more likely to have a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. UN Women data reveals that in the developing world women often are under-represented in slums and may be impacted by multiple disadvantages related to housing, education, assets, income, and access to basic services.

Women's economic involvement is also related to sustainable urban development. Women's opportunity to access markets, innovate, and be entrepreneurs is significantly expanded in cities. Yet inequalities in access to finance, property, technology, skills, formal jobs, and networks of business opportunities persist, limiting



women's economic contribution. In India, for instance, gender-responsive urban mobility was identified as an important issue as safety, transportation and mobility issues may restrict women's access to employment, education and other opportunities. The World Bank has therefore called for inclusion of women's perspectives in urban mobility and public space planning and more women in decision making institutions.

The elements of climate change and environmental sustainability are other dimensions of the situation. Inequalities in access of resources, income, housing, mobility and decision-making power may give women different exposure to climate-related risks. Women also often participate at the community level in environmental management, waste reduction, water management, sustainable consumption, disaster preparedness and adaptation to climate change. Their involvement can thus enhance the effectiveness and social relevance of environmental policies. A gender-responsive approach to urban sustainability should acknowledge these contributions, and provide for the representation of women in climate governance and environmental decision making, not as vulnerable groups.

Although gender equality is becoming more visible in the SD frameworks, there are huge gaps between policy commitments and participation. The participation of women in urban planning institutions and local governance are still low, as well as in technical professions, infrastructure decision-making and leadership. Women may be discouraged or prevented from being able to participate effectively because of social norms, gender stereotypes, unpaid care responsibilities, limited financial resources, lack of political influence, inadequate institutional mechanisms, and concerns about personal safety. World Bank's gender-inclusive urban planning framework emphasizes that inclusive cities need inclusive planning processes, which involve women's participation in decisions that impact the built environment.

A new challenge is the quality of participation. Women's participation in consultations or committees is not enough to ensure meaningful influence. When women are invited to participate in planning processes, but do not have opportunities to voice their concerns, seek information, have input on budgets, or be involved in decision-making, this can become symbolic. Institutional structures are needed to acknowledge women's knowledge, create opportunities for women to be involved, build women's leadership skills, and hold them accountable for incorporating gender perspectives into city policies. It also calls for the availability of dependable gender-specific data to highlight gender gaps and assess the level of equality among women and men in the impact of urban development programmes.

The new idea of gender-responsive urbanism thus gives a voice to women's experiences in the discourse of inclusive and sustainable cities. It moves away from the notion of women as only consumers of urban services and adopts a new perspective to consider them as players in urban change. Involving women in the public infrastructure can enhance its relevance, boost community resilience, uncover community social and environmental issues that were previously unrecognized, and foster more equitable distribution of urban resources. The recent scholarship also suggests that participatory urban design, feminist urban planning and a greater representation of women in urban governance are relevant avenues that help to tackle structural inequalities and promote spatial justice.

To understand opportunities and structural obstacles in the process of creating inclusive cities, it is relevant to analyse women's involvement in urban sustainable development in this context. A holistic view of the issue is needed, including women's involvement in governance, urban planning, economic activity, environmental management, mobility, public space development, climate resilience and community decision making. Thus, the present study is focused on some of the issues and challenges that arise in urban sustainable development and the institutional, social, economic, environmental, technological and governance factors influencing women's participation. Knowledge of these dimensions can play a role in developing more gender-responsive urban policies and in creating cities where the principles of sustainability, inclusion, equality and participation are mutually reinforcing goals.

Background of the study

The process of urbanization has led to the emergence of large cities as key spaces for economic growth, social interaction, innovation and environmental change. With the continuing growth of urban populations, the sustainability of cities is not just about material infrastructure, technological advances and improvements, but



also about socially inclusive and meaningful involvement in urban planning and urban governance by various social groups. In this context, women's contribution is becoming an important aspect of sustainable urban development. Women's experiences of cities vary from men's due to their different mobility and employment opportunities, their role in caring for the family, their access to resources, their safety and their role in decision-making. Therefore, the integration of women's voice in urban development can help to build more inclusive, equitable, resilient and responsive cities to the needs of the people. UN-Habitat also stresses that omitting gender equality from planning, legislation, financing and economic development can reduce the inclusiveness of cities and constrain women's full access to urban social, economic, political and cultural life.

International development frameworks have begun to pay attention to the link between gender equality and sustainable urban development. The goal of Gender Equality and the empowerment of women and girls (SDG 5) is closely interlinked with SDG 11, which aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Gender dimensions of urban sustainability relate to access to public spaces, to affordable housing, to transportation, jobs, healthcare, sanitation, education, environmental resources and participation in local governance. The New Urban Agenda also acknowledges the need for women's active role in the planning, development and management of cities.

Women are not just beneficiaries of urban development, but also active participants in the operation and maintenance of cities. Women are involved in neighbourhood-based organizations, community-based activities, environmental work, informal economy, social enterprises, local governance, and disaster response. The shared experiences they have are a source of knowledge on the accessibility, safety, affordability and usability of urban infrastructure and services. Much of this contribution is however informal and unpaid or inadequately represented in formal planning processes. UN-Habitat observes that women's community activities and involvement in the care economy often bring great benefits to cities, while women may be under-profit by urban development.

Underrepresentation is one of the significant emerging issues related to women's participation in decision-making in urban areas. Women's participation is growing in the local institutions, community organizations, professional associations, and civic activities, but they are not equally represented and influential in planning and policy-making processes. Therefore, the planning of land uses, transportation, housing, infrastructure, environmental management, public space and urban services can be made without taking into account women's lived experiences. Include women in consultation meetings is less than meaningful participation, it must be accompanied by the establishment of institutional arrangements where women can shape and influence priorities, resource allocation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Active and meaningful involvement of women and girls in decision-making and policy-making is an important means for enhancing their socioeconomic and political status and the effectiveness of urban development.

Another major obstacle is mobility and safety. Public spaces, roads, transportation systems, parks, markets and other urban areas can be different experiences for women and girls, subject to harassment, violence, poor lighting, poor infrastructure and fears for personal safety. These can affect the way women can move freely in the city, and how they can access employment, education, healthcare, recreation and civic involvement. Safety, mobility and accessibility are key pillars of gender-responsive urban planning as identified by UN-Habitat and SDG 11.7 places the focus on universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible public and green spaces, including for women, who may be at risk of being left out.

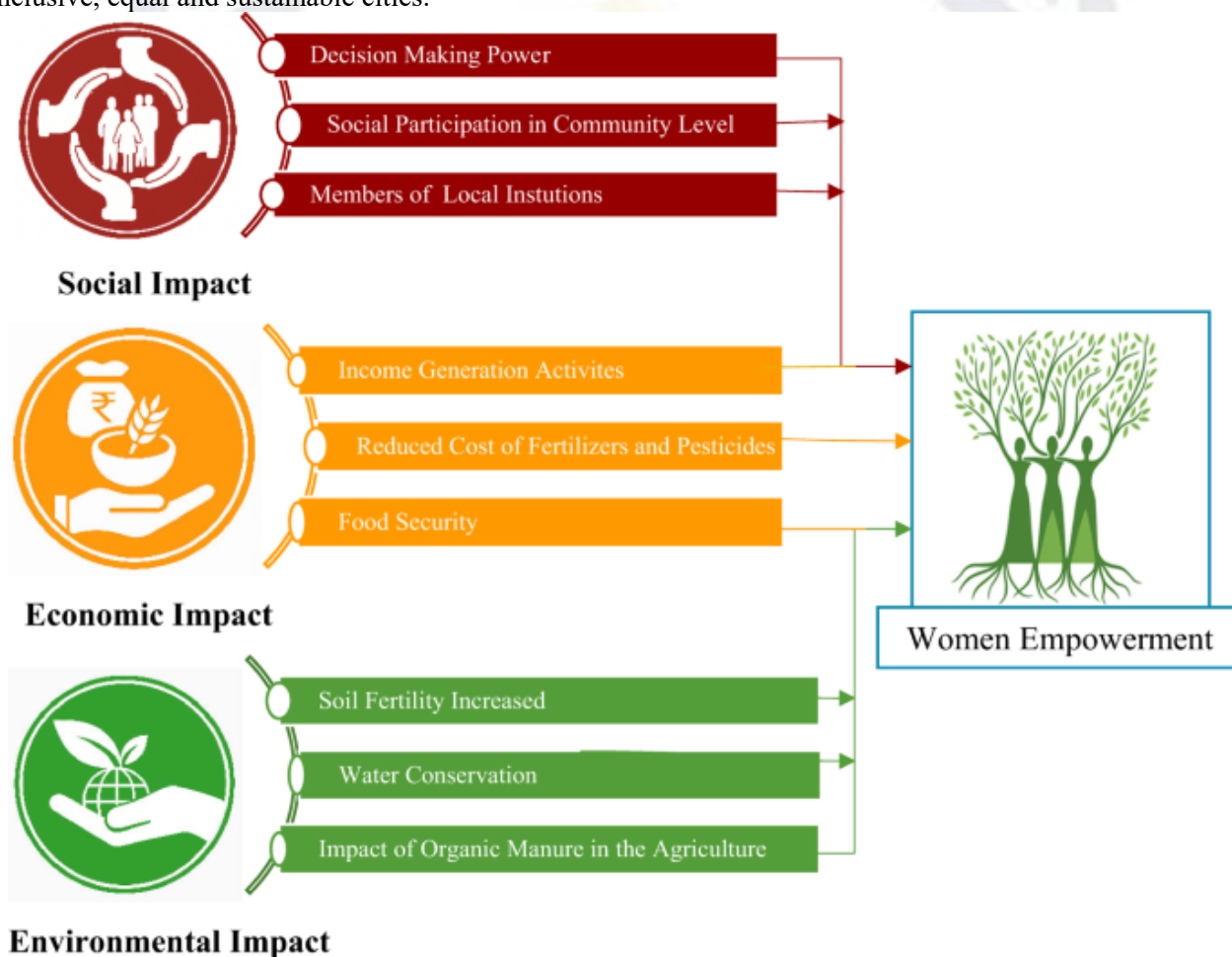
Women's capacity to engage in sustainable urban development is also affected by economic inequality. While urban areas may offer increased opportunities for women in terms of employment and entrepreneurship, education, access to health, and social networks, they can also limit the ability of women to reap similar benefits in terms of equal wages, occupation, access to finance, secure jobs, land and property ownership, and unpaid care. Women in low-income groups and informal settlements may have extra challenges due to poor housing, insecure tenure, poor sanitation, lack of access to formal financial resources, and poor transportation. The socio-economic and infrastructure disparities can then impact women's ability to engage in community decision-making and urban development works.

The environmental aspect of urban sustainability adds to this the need for women's involvement. The impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, water insecurity, waste management problems, air pollution and



extreme weather on urban populations vary. Women may find that they have extra responsibilities due to household care, food, water and other resources they are responsible for, especially in economically disadvantaged communities. Simultaneously, women also have valuable knowledge on household resource management, community resilience, waste reduction, local environmental practices and adaptation strategies. The inclusion of their involvement in environmental planning processes can then further enhance the social and ecological aspects of sustainable urban development. Their involvement in environmental planning can therefore reinforce the social and ecological aspects of sustainable urban development. UN-Habitat guidance recently included the participation of women and girls in the planning and various other aspects of the development of the city, with a particular focus on reducing women's exposure to climate risk.

Another emerging facet is participatory and gender responsive urban planning. The traditional method of planning has often assumed an urban population are a relatively homogeneous group and has failed to account for variations in gender, age, income, disability, ethnicity, and other social factors. In recent times, more methods have been promoted that involve citizens in the process of defining problems and creating solutions, such as participatory planning. UN-Habitat's theme of Her City explicitly calls for the inclusion of girls and young women in urban planning and design, highlighting the potential for participatory processes to help build inclusive, equal and sustainable cities.



Source: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s44282-025-00313-2>

New opportunities are also emerging in the realm of technology for women to be involved. There are other avenues for women to have access to, such as, digital platforms, geographic information systems, online consultations, mobile applications, and social media, which can give them other outlets to voice their concerns,

document their issues, engage in consultations, and contribute to urban planning. The digital divide might, however, disadvantage economically poor women, older women, women with disabilities, and those who are less digitally literate, in accessing these opportunities. Thus, the use of technological solutions should not be a substitute for access to face-to-face and community-based participation.

Then the problems of women participation are multi-dimensional. These encompass patriarchal social norms, underrepresentation in decision-making forums, unequal access to economic resources, unpaid care work, safety concerns, mobility constraints, lack of infrastructure, weak property rights, and lack of gender-sensitive planning mechanisms. Gender intersects with poverty, disability, age, migration status, and living in informal settlements, which may exacerbate these challenges. Urban women and girls are not equally affected by urbanisation and gender sensitive approaches must account for various social and economic contexts, UN-Habitat emphasises.

In this context, the role of women in urban sustainable development must be seen from the perspective of social justice and as a need to create sustainable cities. The meaningful participation of women can enhance the relevance of urban policies and increase the sense of community ownership, recognize needs that have been neglected in the city or assist in developing more inclusive approaches to infrastructure, mobility, environmental management, housing, public space and local governance. Current international approaches increasingly focus on recognizing the needs of women, rather than on participatory mechanisms where women and girls can actively influence urban environments.

Hence, the study, Women Participation in Urban Sustainable Development: Emerging issues and challenges is important as it discusses the evolving roles of women in shaping sustainable cities, and the challenges which still limit their effective participation. In order to make the development of more gender responsive strategies by policy makers, urban planners, local governments, civil society organizations and community institutions, it is important to understand these issues. A more in-depth understanding of participation by women could be a key element in bringing to fruition approaches for urban development, which are not only economically productive and environmentally sustainable, but also socially inclusive, equitable, safe, and responsive to the needs of urban communities.

Justification

The social, economic, environmental and institutional fabric of communities has undergone a dramatic change in the face of rapid urbanisation globally. Cities now are more and more centres for work, invention, administration and social development, however, the advantages of city life are not shared equally among all social groups. Women are an important segment of the urban population and play an important role in the welfare of their families, communities, economic life, environmental management and social change. However, their involvement in formal processes of urban planning, governance and decision making is limited. UN-Habitat has underlined that neglecting the inclusion of gender equality in the planning, law, finance and economic development of cities can obstruct the creation of truly inclusive cities.

The need for a focus on women's role in urban sustainable development also has strong linkages with the aims of SDG 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment) and SDG 11 (inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and communities). These goals are interlinked as sustainable urban development is not possible if women are not involved in decision making related to house, transportation, public spaces, environmental management, infrastructure, employment and local governance. At present, there is some evidence that women's equal "right to the city" is not fully realised, especially for women in economically and socially deprived situations.

Women and men are social responsibility, travel and move differently, and have different opportunities and access to safety in the city. Lack of public transport, unsafe streets, lack of sanitation, unequal access to housing & land, lack of employment opportunities, unpaid care responsibilities and gender-based violence can limit women's participation in city life. Not only are these issues local issues, they also have an impact on the "inclusiveness and sustainability of urban development. It is therefore essential that planners and policy makers have an understanding of women's daily experiences and bring women's views into the design and management of cities, for gender responsive urban planning.

Women's involvement is especially relevant since they have information about the needs at the community



level that are not being recorded in traditional urban planning frameworks. Women are often very closely associated with household resource management, care work, community networks, water and sanitation as well as neighbourhood activities and informal economic activities. They can offer the opportunity for learning about the accessibility, safety and effectiveness of urban infrastructure and public services. This can make urban policies more relevant and enhance more responsive and equitable development, therefore. UN-Habitat fosters greater women's and girls' participation in the planning and design of urban space, as a central element of its participatory practices, with a particular focus on the Her City initiative.

Although it is understood that women can benefit from participation, there are a number of structural obstacles that continue to limit women's participation. Women may be unable to influence decisions on urban development due to patriarchal norms, representation in decision making institutions, lack of financial and physical resources, absence of ownership of property, limited mobility and weak institutions. Low-income women, living in informal settlements or other marginalised groups can be multiply and multiply excluded. Research and policy dialogues must, therefore, go beyond the focus on women as beneficiaries of urban development and acknowledge them as stakeholders, planners, leaders and contributors to sustainable cities.

The study is also warranted by the new environmental and climate issues that are affecting cities. The economic context, social roles and responsibilities of women may render them vulnerable to climate change, urban flooding, heat stress, environmental degradation, poor waste management and increasing scarcity of resources. Enabling more participatory approaches to climate adaptation and environmental policies by adopting a gender-sensitive approach to sustainability can help recognize these differentiated vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, women's involvement in community-based environmental initiatives, sustainable consumption, waste reduction and management of local resources can contribute to social foundations of urban sustainability.

The second reason is related to women's involvement in governance of cities. Decision-making systems need to be transparent, participatory and representative to achieve sustainable development. A diverse array of experiences and priorities can enrich urban policies when women have meaningful opportunities to participate in planning consultations, neighbourhood committees and civic organisations as well as local government. But women's participation is not just about the mere number. To participate meaningfully, opportunities need to be provided to voice opinions, influence decisions, access information, have leadership and hold institutions to account. UN-Habitat also highlights the need to: Take gender differences into account in inclusive urban governance; and Ensure that communities and their representatives have the space to be actively involved in the planning and service provision.

The study has a special relevance in the context of rapidly evolving urban societies in developing countries where economic growth and urban expansion often take place alongside social inequalities. In the city, women can have more access to education, employment, health care, and political opportunities; however, these opportunities can be limited by insecure housing, informal employment, and lack of infrastructure and social discrimination. Experience in developing-country cities suggests that women may suffer disproportionate disadvantages as a result of poor housing, sanitation, services and asset ownership.

Moreover, the difference between nominal participation and substantive participation must be drawn. Including women in committees and inviting them to consultations does not automatically mean that their concerns are taken up into policies. Quality, continuity and institutionalisation are also a key aspect of participation. Therefore, understanding how women are involved, what challenges they face and how their involvement contributes to urban sustainability can provide valuable information for policy makers, urban planners, local governments and civil society organisations.

The study thus is recommended for the need to have a more extensive knowledge on how women's participation is related to the sustainable urban development. It aims to raise awareness of the current challenges on women's participation, to address institutional and socio-economic constraints, and to explore how to enhance women's agency in the decision-making process of cities. The research can be useful to the broader goal of creating socially inclusive, economically viable, environmentally sustainable and responsive cities, by putting the voice and perspective of women at the centre of the analysis.

Finally, sustainable urban development should not be measured solely in terms of physical infrastructure, economic development or environment indicators. It is also a measure of how well various groups can



participate in the creation of the cities they live in. This means there is a need for women's meaningful participation to be addressed as both gender justice and a critical element of good governance. Empowering women's voice, representation and leadership helps to build more inclusive, resilient and responsive urban policies and spaces to serve communities. It is timely and academically significant to investigate the issue of "Women Participation in Urban Sustainable development: Emerging Issues and Challenges".

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the level of involvement of women in sustainable development programmes in the city and community development programmes.
2. To evaluate the contributions that women can make to environmental sustainability, social inclusion and quality of life in urban communities.
3. To find out the key barriers and challenges to the meaningful involvement of women in urban planning, governance and sustainable development processes.
4. To examine the participation of women in environmental programs in urban areas, such as waste management, natural resource management, climate action and sustainable consumption.
5. To explore how women's education, employment, income and socio-economic status affect their participation in Sustainable Cities.

Literature Review

Focusing on women's role in sustainable development in cities has become an important research area due to the differential impact of the design, governance, and management of cities on women and men. Previous development planning strategies often overlooked gender differences in the experience of moving around, accessing safety, employment, public services, housing, and environmental resources. Moser (1993) said that urban development policies must acknowledge women, not only as a beneficiary, but as an agent of development. This viewpoint laid the groundwork for understanding women's capabilities to foster more equitable city environments.

Rakodi (1991) pointed out the need to interweave women's daily lives and their experiences into the urban planning and environmental decision-making process. The study showed it is possible to provide practical knowledge which can be useful in relation to household needs, resource management and community welfare, by involving women in the study. Likewise, Wekerle (1984) pointed out that there are differences in the way women and men experience urban space due to the differential nature of their household responsibilities, employment, mobility and access to resources. The gendered experiences are still relevant to the current discussions on inclusive and sustainable urban development.

Under the theme of "gender and sustainable urbanism", the subject has also been of growing academic interest. In the concept of gendered spaces, Lacey (2017) highlighted the work of women in cities via governmental, nongovernmental, community-based, and grassroots programs and initiatives for more sustainable urban life. Her work shows that women are not only involved in formal politics, but in everyday activities in which women respond to social, economic and environmental problems.

Systematic review has reinforced the importance of Women's participation in Urban Planning. Moghadam and Rafieian (2019) after reviewing around 275 studies published in the past 40 years concluded that the topics of health and safety, economic opportunities, social justice, the right to the city, and women's involvement in urban planning processes were the major research areas. They also found that there were further gaps in mainstreaming women's perspectives in urban development planning.

Beebeejaun (2017) stated that gender responsive planning cannot be achieved by placing women in the current plans. It demands a reassessment of which knowledge is taken into account, whose needs are taken into consideration, and who decides about the use of urban space. In this sense, women's involvement must be not symbolic but one that has real influence in the priorities set in the planning. Particularly in the realm of sustainable development, this is important as participation without decision-making power can have



limited effects on urban inequalities.

Another theme that occurs regularly in the literature is women's safety and mobility. Women often experience public transit, streets, workplaces, parks and other public spaces in different ways due to harassment, violence, poor lighting, workplaces lack of accessibility and unsafe transportation systems. According to OECD (2021), urban design and transport infrastructure impact women and men differently and that it is essential to incorporate gender into sustainable urban design and transport policies. In this sense, one of the advantages of involving women in urban planning is that it can detect types of spatial exclusion that are not apparent in traditional urban planning.

Sandström, Ericsson and Hedvall have followed up this issue in the context of public space design. They explored gender engagement as a means of sustainable development and showed how the implementation of gender responsive design processes can shape the participation and non-participation of various groups in public space. They argue that participation must be rigorously analyzed as it is not enough to involve women in design and governance without addressing the inequalities in design and governance that already exist.

Women's empowerment and SDD has become a pivotal issue in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. SDG 5 stresses on gender equality and women empowerment, whereas SDG 11 stresses on inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities. These goals are increasingly being seen as interwoven and not separate policy fields by recent scholarship. Ababneh et al. (2025) conducted a systematic literature review and identified that the subject of the gender equality and how it relates to smart city and sustainable urban development has been increasingly gaining interest in the academic world. Their findings show that gender responsive interventions can help enhance access to services, safety, economic opportunities and engagement in decision making.

Likewise, a recent literature review of gender, sustainability, and urbanism by the researchers found three broad areas of literature: gender diversity and governance; gender and environmental sustainability; and gender-sensitive urbanism and community development. The review also noted that while women's involvement in sustainable urban decision-making processes is growing, their representation is not adequate in a number of contexts. This means that institutionalization of gender equality has outpaced the actual change in decision making structures.

Another aspect of women's participation in governance is urban governance. Local government, municipal and planning bodies, and community groups can be influenced by the inclusion of women in their decision-making roles, with regard to the priorities given to public services, infrastructure, housing, sanitation, transport, safety, and environmental management. However, formal representation does not necessarily translate into substantive participation. Women may have access to less financial resources, less political networks, gender stereotypes, unequal opportunities for leadership and institutional discrimination against them. For instance, recent studies on women in urban planning in Saudi Arabia revealed that gender biases persisted in professional opportunities and in decision making, and that the need for legal changes, education and training, and organizational cultures that are inclusive of women remain paramount.

Intersectionality is also growing in prominence in the literature. Women are not a single social group and their experiences of urban development are class, caste, ethnicity, age, disability, migration status, income and geographical location specific. Gender-blind policies might then therefore work well for relatively privileged women, but not for marginalized groups. In the context of India's Smart Cities Mission, the gender dimension has been mentioned in particular in relation to caste, class, disability and cultural aspects. An intersectoral approach is crucial to making sure that urban sustainability policies do not lump women together but take into account their diversity.

Women's participation has continued to broaden, thanks to climate change and urban resilience. Women may be at risk from the climate context in different ways due to unequal access to income, land, housing, transportation, health care, information and social protection. Recent studies in the field of gendered urban resilience highlight the barriers to gender justice in institutions, infrastructures and socio-economic systems and advocate for participatory governance, gender-responsive budgeting, gender-inclusive infrastructure and for intersectional approaches to resilience planning. Women's representation is therefore increasingly seen as not just a question, but also as a tool to enhance the adaptive capacity and resilience of urban communities.



Challenges and opportunities of digitalisation and smart-city development. Digital platforms can facilitate women's access to information, public services, civic engagement, entrepreneurship, and participatory decision-making. Concurrently, digital inequalities, digital literacy gaps, online harassment, privacy issues, and socioeconomic inequalities can perpetuate existing patterns of exclusion. Ababneh et al. (2025) propose that digital tools can be used to increase women's participation in policymaking, however, this will depend on the extent to which the women's voice is explicitly included in the smart city strategies and whether they are accessible.

New research also has started to shift the focus of scholarship away from the notion of women as vulnerable groups and towards acknowledging women as active agents of urban change. Women's role in urban inclusivity, accessibility, design of public spaces and participatory planning is a key aspect in modern urban development, as identified by Panahi and Vahidbafandeh (2026). They highlight the existence of systemic biases and governance gaps that still limit the influence of women, and participatory urban design as a tool to enhance women's agency and promote spatial justice.

The literature as a whole shows that women's participation is a key element in socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable urban development. There are however several gaps. First, it is often difficult to determine whether participation is being measured by the number of people representing them or whether it is a representation of the people who are empowered to make decisions. Second, women in the marginalized socioeconomic groups are underrepresented in many urban planning processes. Third, gender-sensitive interventions are implemented separately and not as parts of broader transportation, shelter, climate resilience, information and communications technology (ICT) governance, employment, public space, and environmental management programs. Fourth, there is still a need for more empirical studies at the local level that explore how women's involvement in the urban transformation process is manifested in measurable gains in sustainability outcomes.

Thus, the existing literature indicates a shift from women represented to women actually involved in the process of sustainable urban development. Future urban policies should encourage participatory governance, gender sensitive budgeting, safe and accessible urban infrastructure, inclusive urban mobility, digital inclusion, neighborhood leadership and intersectional policy. These action can enhance the capacity of women to shape urban development, and contribute to social, economic and environmental city sustainability. The growing literature then puts women not just as beneficiaries of sustainable urban development but as active stakeholders and decision makers in the planning process, as community leaders, innovators, and agents of urban change. This gives a solid conceptual frame to study the new issues and challenges related to women's involvement in sustainable development in cities.

Material and Methodology

The present study used descriptive and analytical research methodology to study about women participation in urban sustainable development and to identify the key issues and challenges that affect women's participation in urban planning, governance, environmental management, public infrastructure, mobility, community decision-making process, sustainable livelihood activities, etc. The study was conducted mainly on primary data collected by using a structured questionnaire with the women residing in selected urban areas. A purposive sampling was used to ensure that women of various ages, education, work status, income levels, and living arrangements were sampled to make sure that a variety of experiences of urban participation were represented. The questionnaire addressed issues of awareness of sustainable development, involvement in local decision making, community and environment involvement, access to public services and transportation, feelings of safety, employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, digital participation, and challenges for leadership and civic engagement. Secondary data was gathered from academic journals, books, government documents, international organisation reports and relevant policy documents on gender responsive urban development and sustainable cities. Over the last ten years, a new perspective on the city, grounded in a gender-sensitive approach, has been adopted that addresses participatory planning and the inclusion of women and other marginalised groups in the process of identifying needs and planning urban interventions. The collected primary data were systematically coded, classified and analyzed using



descriptive statistical methods including frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation and may be used appropriate inferential methods to consider the relationship between demographic characteristics and level of participation. Where qualitative responses were received, they were thematically analysed and common issues of poor representation, safety, mobility, access to resources, care responsibilities, institutional barriers, lack of awareness and limited opportunities for leadership were identified. The findings were contextualized in the context of gender-responsive and inclusive urban sustainability, focusing on how women's meaningful participation can help to make urban societies safer, more equitable, resilient and sustainable.

Results and Discussion

The results suggest that women's engagement is being more recognised as a critical element of urban sustainable development and there is less than equal engagement in urban planning, governance, environmental management and urban community decision making. Women play a significant part in the city in the fields of community, household resource management, informal economic activities, neighbourhood associations and local sustainability programmes. These contributions are, however, often informal, unpaid, and not well reflected in institutional decision-making processes. From this it seems that there is a big divide between the role and contribution of women in urban development and their influence in the policy and decision making process that affect the urban environment. This finding aligns with UN-Habitat's evaluation that gender parity in urban planning, legislation, finance and economic development can limit women's full participation in cities.

One of the key discoveries is related to the women's involvement in urban governance and decision-making. The participation of women, through community-level organizations and participatory development programmes, can help to better identify local needs, including those in relation to sanitation, water, housing, transport, public safety, healthcare and childcare. But, not everyone who participates has decision making authority. In many contexts women might be called in for consultation but not have a say in priorities, budgets, implementation and monitoring. This means that lack of a numerical representation is not enough to obtain gender responsive urban development. UN-Habitat also calls for genuine involvement to differ from the mere inclusion of women in meetings to consideration of their roles and influence, material benefits, and power dynamics.

The findings also show that problems with urban safety and mobility continue to be barriers to female participation. Harassment, violence, lack of adequate lighting, unsafe public spaces, lack of pedestrian facilities, and the lack of reliable public transportation can inhibit women's access to employment, education, public services and community activities. Such limitations are especially relevant for women from low-income groups, older women, women with disabilities and women from informal settlements. Women and girls are increasingly vulnerable to the unsafe public space, insufficient transport and the conditions of the environment in fast-growing cities, according to the latest evidence by UN Women. Therefore a sustainable development in the city is only successful if it is impactful on the environment, but also ensures women have access to a city in a safe and equitable manner.

A second significant finding is on economic participation and livelihood security. In the urban context, women have opportunities to work, to run their own businesses, to become self-employed, and to be involved in the informal sector. However, gaps in access to productive assets, financial resources, land, technology, skills and decent employment remain a constraint on the economic contributions of many women. Working women in the informal sector also can be out of formal social-security structures and urban economic planning. The results indicate, therefore, that there is a need for sustainable urban development to combine women's economic empowerment with policies and measures on the environment and infrastructures. Sustainability actions in cities could simultaneously foster gender equality and inclusive economic growth, while generating green jobs, nurturing female entrepreneurship, increasing access to finance, and enhancing skills development. Economic opportunity, access to services and participation in leadership are highlighted as potential gains of urbanization for women, but structural inequalities may hinder women from benefiting from these opportunities.



The study also underscores the importance of Women's role in Environmental sustainability and Climate resilience. Women often have detailed information about the ways in which the household consumes resources, how it manages water and waste, food habits, local surroundings, and environmental issues at the community level. This knowledge can have a significant impact on adaptation to climate change, disaster preparedness, waste management, urban greening, and resource conservation. Formal urban planning, however, does not always include women's environmental knowledge. The results reveal that the success of sustainable development programmes is enhanced when women are not just recipients but participants as planners, innovators and decision makers. The New Urban Agenda also acknowledges women's knowledge and experience as valuable assets for the sustainable management of urban ecosystems and resilience.

Another discovery relates to social inequalities and intersectionality. Urban development is not the same for women. Their opportunities may be affected by factors like income, age, disability, migration status, household structure, location, education and technology. Residents of informal settlements and low income neighbourhoods are facing numerous disadvantages as it pertains to housing security, sanitation, clean water, transportation, safety and employment. UN Women's analysis in low- and middle-income countries reveals that women often over-represented in urban slums and are typically subjected to multiple disadvantages in terms of housing, education, assets and basic services. Thus, policies formulated based on the needs of a generalized category of "urban women" might not capture the situation of marginalized groups.

The findings show that there is potential for participatory and gender responsive urban planning to yield wider benefits for the community. Urban interventions that involve women and girls directly in the identification of problems are more likely to take into account safety, accessibility, sanitation, mobility, recreation, and social inclusion. UN-Habitat's Her City approach places a particular emphasis on the participation of girls and women in urban planning and design processes, recognising that their contributions – which are often missing from the process – can help create more inclusive and sustainable cities. This aligns with the current finding that women's participation must be brought in from the planning stage and not at the implementing / evaluating stage.

The opportunities identified are not without challenges, which include patriarchal social norms, lack of institutional representation, gender inequalities in access to resources, time poverty due to unpaid care duties, lack of safety infrastructure, digital exclusion and poor implementation of gender-responsive policies, and insufficient gender-disaggregated urban data. These challenges overlap and reinforce each other, and can lead to a vicious circle where women have limited time and resources to engage, and their limited participation in decision-making in turn contributes to the limits of urban policies to adequately address their needs. UN-Habitat has also called attention to the lack of gender mainstreaming as a challenge to inclusive urbanization. It is clear from the discussion that women's participation can be seen as a goal for gender equity and is also a need for sustainable urban development. Engaging women can lead to community responsiveness, more relevant public services, environmental participation and safer and inclusive cities. But getting represented is not enough to be meaningfully included; it takes more: access to resources, institutional power, safe mobility, economic opportunities, digital inclusion, and real influence in urban decision making. The evidence thus calls for a transition from a women-as-recipients-of-urban-development-programmes approach to a recognition of women as co-designers and decision makers. Cities can work towards the broader goals of inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable urban development through gender-responsive planning, participatory governance, inclusive infrastructure and provision of targeted support for marginalised women.

Limitations of the study

While the findings of the study on women's involvement in urban sustainable development are presented, these have some limitations and need to be taken into account when interpreting results. First, women are a diverse population and the experiences of women with urban development may differ significantly by socioeconomic status, age, education, occupation, migration status, disability, ethnicity and household situations, and the findings may not fully reflect all categories of women. Previous studies also indicate that there is geographical variation in the amount of evidence available, with a significant amount of literature specific to certain countries and regions potentially reducing the transferability of results to other urban



settings. Second, merely counting the number of women in formal planning, governance or decision-making groups does not accurately capture their roles in shaping urban policies and resource allocation. The informal participation, community-based efforts, unpaid work and grassroots work can be hard to measure. Third, social norms, safety concerns, unequal access to transportation, limitations on time due to unpaid care work, and barriers at the institutional level could impact women's willingness and capacity to engage in urban development processes, and this might be interpreted as some form of structural exclusion. Fourth, the governance systems, public policies, infrastructure and cultural values of cities vary, making comparisons difficult. The study might also be limited by the availability of secondary data, the reliability and comparability of the data, and that some marginalized groups might not be adequately represented in the research that has been done so far. Therefore, the results could not be taken as representative of the broader context, but only in the context of the social, institutional and geographical context of the study. Future research might tackle these limitations in terms of longitudinal approaches, mixed methods research, participatory research and intersectional analysis that would place greater emphasis on the voices and lived experiences of a variety of women in urban communities.

Future Scope

Future studies investigating women's participation in urban sustainable development can go beyond looking at women's numerical representation to focus on the impact women have on urban planning, governance, environmental management, climate action, infrastructure development and community decision making. Gender responsiveness in urban planning is also a significant issue as it allows for the recognition that women and men experience the urban environment, urban mobility, urban housing, urban public services and urban environmental risks in different ways. Comparative and longitudinal studies of various cities would be useful in determining the shifts in women's participation over time and the institutional mechanisms that have resulted in significant women's participation outcomes. More focus can also be paid to the experiences of socially marginalised women, such as women from informal settlements, women in poverty, migrant women, older women, young women etc. and therefore adopt an intersectional perspective. Future studies could explore the potential of digital technologies, smart-city platforms, social media, participatory mapping, and how they can enhance women's voice and participation in urban decision-making. The theme of women's engagement and urban climate resilience, disaster preparedness, sustainable transportation, waste management, water security, renewable energy, and green public spaces is another avenue that has great potential. Further studies are also needed to address gender-responsive budgeting, institutional policies, leadership opportunities, access to finance and land, and effectiveness of local governance mechanisms in generating tangible sustainable-development outcomes as a result of women's participation. This kind of research can help inform city policy, urban planning, civil-society organizations and community groups on how to make cities more inclusive, resilient, equitable and environmentally sustainable and offer evidence-based policy recommendations.

Conclusion

Gender equality plays a key role in building inclusive, equitable, and sustainable cities. The analysis of emerging issues and challenges shows that women are not only beneficiaries of urban development but also are crucial actors in planning, governance, environmental management, community development and building safer and resilient cities. Despite this, meaningful participation by them is still restricted because of gender inequalities, limited presence in decision making institutions, unequal access to resources and services, safety issues, mobility limitations, unpaid care duties, economic disadvantages, and social and institutional limitations. Such difficulties are more acute for women from marginalised and less privileged socio-economic groups. There is growing evidence and there is a clear link between gender equality and women's empowerment with socially sustainable urban development, and gender-sensitive planning can make urban spaces more accessible, safer and more inclusive. Thus, sustainable urban development cannot be achieved by merely incorporating women into policy making but by involving them in policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Gender-responsive budgeting, participatory governance, safe



and affordable public transport, accessible housing and sanitation, inclusive digital infrastructure, and greater women's participation in urban governance institutions should be embedded in the approach to urban policy. More recent studies also indicate the need to focus on participatory urban design, and intersectional approaches that take differences related to class, disability, place, age and other social factors into consideration. In conclusion, the empowerment of women as decision-makers, community leaders, professionals, entrepreneurs and active citizens can help to enhance social inclusion, environmental consciousness, economic resilience, and the quality of urban life. Cities that integrate women's knowledge, experiences, priorities and leadership systematically into their processes have a greater chance of creating sustainable solutions that meet the needs of diverse communities. Therefore, it is important that women's participation is not only considered as a gender-equity goal but as a future planning strategy for inclusive, resilient and sustainable cities.

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