

A safe place to call home: Transforming the physical/ built environment for sexual and domestic violence prevention

Place matters for sexual and domestic violence prevention. The physical/built environment significantly influences individual behavior, with the potential to promote safety and protect against violence. “Place factors,” such as whether or not a neighborhood looks and feels inviting and safe and access to parks and open space, can work alongside sociocultural factors, such as sense of community and strong social networks, to reduce sexual and domestic violence. This topic builds on the THRIVE framework exploring the role sexual and domestic violence prevention practitioners can play in helping design spaces that promote safety.

RESOURCES

- [Web Conference Recording](#)
- [Web Conference Slides](#)
- [Text Chat](#)
- [SV Technical Package](#)
- [IPV Technical Package](#)
- [How to Design a City for Women](#)
- [Women Friendly City Project](#)
- [Experiences from the Gender Inclusive Cities Programme](#)
- [Together for Women’s Safety](#)
- [Building Safe and Inclusive Cities for Women: A Practical Guide](#)
- [Virtual Knowledge Center to End Violence Against Women and Girls](#)
- [Prevention Toybox](#)

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- [Development Without Displacement](#)
- [Community Safety by Design](#)
- [Sectors Acting for Equity: a Health Equity and Multisector Approach to Preventing Domestic Violence](#)
- [Community Safety: a Building Block for Health](#)

KEY FINDINGS:

A. Improving the physical/built environment can help prevent sexual and domestic violence by creating safe and inclusive spaces that counter harmful gender norms and motivations to abuse. Understanding the role of the physical/built environment, the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence grounds their prevention strategy in the idea that “what surrounds us, shapes us.” The coalition believes that community surroundings can either fuel or deter an individual’s motivation to abuse, and also influence the community’s response to violence. The coalition has created a comprehensive approach that works to shift norms by creating conditions and spaces that are safe and nurturing. For example, in Bloomington, Indiana, the coalition engaged people with disabilities in a participatory mapping process to identify structures that impact those individuals differentially and advocate for change in public spaces to ensure accessibility and inclusion.

Women in Cities International understands that men and women experience a safety gap in urban spaces, with women experiencing higher rates of unwanted sexual remarks and touching, as well as rape and homicide. These experiences affect women’s sense of safety, their experience in a city, and their mobility and access to opportunities. The organization focuses on a gendered approach to creating inclusive and equitable communities, supporting meaningful participation of women and girls in urban development to increase women’s access to public spaces, sanitation, mobility, and more.

B. Safety audits are a tool that allows users of a space to identify design issues that hinder their safety, and participate in the process of designing solutions. Understanding that women are the experts of their own experiences, Women in Cities International works with women to audit their spaces and documents what women like about their environment, what they would want to change, and their sense of safety. The result is a local safety diagnosis and set of recommendations for improvements to match the users of the spaces. Women in Cities International lists seven principles of design for women’s safety that pave the way to more gender-inclusive cities:

- 1. Know where you are:** signage, signals and orientation
- 2. See and be seen:** visibility, lighting, hiding places
- 3. Hear and be heard:** rush hour, peak circulation, social use of space
- 4. Be able to get away:** formal/informal surveillance, access to emergency services

5. **Live in a clean and welcoming environment:** design, access and maintenance
6. **Work together:** community participation by the appropriation of public space
7. **Accessibility and inclusion:** consider breadth of intersecting issues

C. Around the world, communities are implementing place-based strategies to transform the physical/built environment in support of prevention. In Gatineau, Canada, a group of elderly women tapped into the work the city was already doing to improve public spaces, vocalized their needs, and the city incorporated their feedback to improve a local park to make it completely accessible for individuals with restricted mobility.



The image on the left shows the park in Gatineau before it was improved, and the picture on the right shows the updates made to the park to make it more accessible. [Image on left shows sand all over the ground, with multiple trees in the sand and a plastic curb also going through the sand. Image on the right shows multiple levels of sidewalks and sloping walkways with railings throughout the park.]

In Vienna, Austria, a photo exhibit in the 1980s showed that girls stopped using city parks around the ages of eight or nine. The city then invested in gender-mainstreaming their urban planning to ensure access to parks for girls. Since then, the city continues to invest in urban planning through a gender inclusive lens, including creating outdoor space for children and parents close to home, establishing on-site pharmacies and doctor's offices, and building housing close to public transit to make running errands and getting to school and work easier. Seoul, South Korea, has also been creating more inclusive spaces for women. A team of women from the Women Friendly City Project evaluate how safe public spaces, such as parking garages, streets, and restrooms, are for women. So far, 240 out of 359 restrooms and parking lots have been certified as women-friendly facilities.

Looking at the American context, in Marion, Indiana Hands of Hope has partnered with neighbors and entities like the local parks and recreation to revitalize and increase usage of Barnes Park, a small neighborhood park that has been viewed as unsafe in the past. Neighbors and partners have been engaged in renovating the facilities and discussing

what the park will look like and what amenities will be included, such as a mini-library and dog-walking area. This type of place-making work is important because safe community spaces are places where people can connect with each other and where respectful social interactions can be publicly modeled and normalized.

TIP:

Take inspiration from work in other communities but leverage local context.

D. Often place-based approaches require generating community support and political will for change, but are efficient and have built-in sustainability. Hands of Hope has been intentional in building relationships between neighbors and with local government. Students organized a presentation to the parks and recreation board advocating for park improvements, and community members are helping rebuild the park. While acquiring playground equipment or raising funds for renovations can take time, place-based strategies can be efficient due to the longevity of the equipment and commitment of the community and local government to maintain public spaces.

TIP:

Engage citizens in the process so they recognize that they have power.



Residents from the neighborhood near Barnes Park in Marion came together to move a piece of playground equipment to the park. [Image of large piece of jungle gym equipment with about ten individuals standing around it.]