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Planning for Gender Inclusion: Gender-Inclusive Planning and Design Recommendations for Los Angeles Parks

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Planning for Gender Inclusion

Gender-Inclusive Planning and Design Recommendations for Los Angeles Parks

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A comprehensive project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Urban and Regional Planning.

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Disclaimer

This report was prepared in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master in Urban and Regional Planning degree in the Department of Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was prepared at the direction of the Department and of Kounkuey Design Initiative as a planning client. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department, the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, UCLA as a whole, or the client.

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Executive Summary

Urban planning theory and practice have created gendered environments that mainly privilege the needs of cisgender men. Women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people face various constraints on their use of public space which has profound effects on their health, daily living, and safety. This research study seeks to understand gender disparities in park usage, planning, and design in Los Angeles parks and offers recommendations to mitigate those disparities through improvements to planning processes.

I begin with a review of relevant planning literature to document the existing research on women's use of public space and parks, as well as current planning strategies and interventions that address gender disparities. My research methodology includes a case study on Lafayette Park (located in the Westlake and Koreatown neighborhoods) and qualitative interviews with L.A.-based park planners. The case study consists of eight semi-structured qualitative interviews, field observations, and archival research. My key findings are:

- Women have diverse needs and opinions related to park amenities, services, and preferences.
- Women and nonbinary people are not the majority users of Lafayette Park. The most common uses for women park users were leisurely walking and supervising children. Very few women engaged in exercise or vigorous physical activity (other than walking) while using the park.
- In planning processes, as with other municipal processes, the loudest voices in a community often have disproportionately more power in decision-making. These loud voices have historically been, and continue to be, the voices of white, middle-class, and cisgender people.
- Park planners need to balance competing needs for space, especially in dense city neighborhoods such as Koreatown and Westlake where Lafayette Park is located.
- Parks are not just a place for leisure, but also settings for economic activity and shelter.
- Women's past experiences of harassment in public places have created anxiety and fear for their safety in parks. Women are careful about how they dress while using parks to avert unwanted attention on their bodies.
- Parks provision and staffing are chronically underfunded and embedded in broader political dynamics.

My research findings demonstrate that women are not a monolithic entity: there is vast diversity across women and nonbinary people's needs and desires. For planners, the challenge is to ensure that voices that have historically been prioritized in urban design (white, middle-class, cisgender, male) do not wield outsized influence on

park planning and decision-making. Recommendations for park planners that would address park disparities among women include:

1. Think critically about gender by leveraging a feminist planning perspective that recognizes that people of all genders have multiple, intersecting, and dynamic identities that hold meaning and power.
2. Use participatory methods that favor marginalized voices, open planning discussions to a wider range of opinions, and make time for collective decision-making.
3. Build a network of diverse parks that can accommodate a range of different desires and partner with nonprofits to explore alternative stewardship and ownership practices.
4. Explore creative design and programming options that are designed with all abilities in mind and maximize limited space in inner cities.
5. Invest and fund our parks equitably with a particular focus on providing resources for communities that are park poor due to historically discriminatory planning practices.
6. Pursue further research on park users across the spectrum of gender, age, ability, and housing status.

Planners must cultivate continuous community feedback in their work of planning and maintaining urban parks. By including women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people in planning processes, planners can make park spaces equitable for all Angelenos.



*Women playing ball in Lafayette Park. Date unknown.
Source: Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection.*

Introduction

Urban planning theory and practice have created gendered environments that mainly privilege the needs of cisgender men. These gendered spatial practices have profound effect on the health, daily living, and safety of women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people. Of course, not all people in these user groups interact with public space in the same way: racial and ethnic identity, income and socioeconomic status, ability, cis- or transgender identities, and sexual orientation (among many other axes of difference) impact the ways in which women move through and relate to public space. In this capstone research project, I leverage primary and secondary data, paired with existing planning literature, to create a set of recommendations for more gender-inclusive planning processes for Los Angeles parks.

My primary research questions are:

1. What are the current gender disparities in park usage, planning, and design of Los Angeles parks, and what are their drivers?
2. How could these be mitigated through improvements to city-wide design and planning processes?

Throughout this research, the term 'marginalized genders' includes, but is not limited to, women (cisgender and transgender), nonbinary, and genderqueer people. These categories encompass a range of distinct identities and diverse experiences. For the purposes of this research, I intend to use the term 'women' in its most expansive form, but also recognize its inherent limitations.



Literature Review

Even though women are ubiquitous users of public space, urban planning theory and practice have created gendered environments privilege the needs of cisgender men (Beebejaun, 2017; Doan, 2015). These gendered spatial practices have profound effect on women's health, daily living, and safety. The following literature review seeks to explore the discourse about women in public space, how women use urban parks, how this translates to a Los Angeles context, and the ways in which planners can work with communities to promote inclusive urban parks.

Women In Public Space

Existing literature in the United States has established that women interact with public space differently than their male peers. First, women use public space less than men. Research indicates that women are an underrepresented user group as they frequently face constraints on their use of public space (Day, 1999; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). When in public, women frequently navigate unwanted attention or victimization, often sexual in nature, which leads to feelings of vulnerability (Beebejaun, 2017; Krenichyn, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; McCormack et al., 2010; Mazingo, 1989; Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). In response, women learn and practice non-verbal cues—like averting their gaze, appearing alert, or crossing their arms—to avoid unwanted interactions (Mazingo, 1989). The feeling of safety, real or perceived, is essential to women's comfort and inclusion in public space.

Of course, not all women interact with public space in the same way: racial and ethnic identity, income and socioeconomic status, ability, cis- or transgender identities, and sexual orientation (among many other axes of difference) impact the ways in which women move through and relate to public space. Day (1999), for example, finds that white women and women of color share a strong fear of sexual assault in public spaces, but that Black and Latina women fear race-motivated crime in public space as well. Doan (2010) describes the ways in which transgender women and non-binary people face harassment in public space when their appearance and gender presentation does not fit neatly into the male/female dichotomous category.

Additionally, women's traditional responsibilities in the home, such as child rearing and other dependent care, household labor, and the 'second shift,' may contribute to women's lower usage of public space (Hochschild, 1989). These care giving responsibilities traditionally have taken place in the private domestic sphere, while responsibilities that are coded as masculine (connected to the economy and capitalist production) are assigned to the public sphere (Day, 2011; Hayden, 1980). Even though women have historically performed (and continue to perform) the majority of unpaid labor in the home, a strict and gendered differentiation between

public/private spheres does not reflect actual, lived experiences. Black women and other women of color have worked outside of the home throughout the history of the United States (performing paid and unpaid forced labor), and people of all genders live their lives in both the private and public spheres (Day, 2011; Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). Yet the historical design of cities and public space maintains this division and impedes the roles of women as both workers and caretakers (Day, 2011; Hayden, 1980). This is evident in the design of public transportation, where Blumenberg (2004) has documented that transit modalities are not built around women's travel patterns and needs. Women travel outside of rush hour more frequently than their male counterparts or seek to accomplish multiple tasks or reach multiple destinations in the same outing, and bus schedules are not typically created with this kind of travel in mind (Blumenberg, 2004). This can make using public transit exceedingly inconvenient and expensive for women users. The collective research about women in public spaces provides ample evidence that planners have not considered women as primary users of public space.

Women In Parks

In this applied planning research project, I am interested in examining women's relationships with one particular subset of public space: urban parks. As in other public spaces, women are underrepresented as users of urban parks (Cohen et al., 2016; Derose et al., 2018; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). The reasons for this underrepresentation include fear of victimization, constraints related to dependent care and household chores, and barriers related to programming and the design of the built environment.

Scholars attribute personal safety concerns in parks as a reason for less women users. For example, park landscaping with trees, bushes, shrubs, and shade, pose as threats to safety: women may feel concern or reluctance to enter areas that seem hidden or dangerous (Krenichyn, 2006). Other environmental cues, like low lighting, trash, and speeding cyclists are also reasons leading some women to feel unsafe in urban parks (Derose et al., 2018; Krenichyn, 2006; McCormack et al., 2010). Additionally, the presence of some men can also cause women to feel vulnerable in parks. In one study, some women talked about their desire to wear lighter or less clothing to feel comfortable while exercising, but their sense of freedom was compromised by the anticipation of harassment from men (Krenichyn, 2006).

When women visit parks, they are less likely to get involved in physical exercise than their male counterparts. Instead, women's park use tends to blend leisure with responsibility; parks can represent an extension of their household labor such as caring for children at the playground (Ho et al., 2005). While providing child care at the park, women are more likely to be passive observers engaged in stationary activities (Ho et al., 2005; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995).

An additional barrier to urban park use for women may be the dearth of gender-

inclusive park programming offered by park administrators and planners. Cohen et al. (2016) found that park programming tends to focus on youth more than adults, thus limiting the options available for women. Loukaitou-Sideris (1995) stated that women's needs for outdoor recreation has never been fully understood by park planners, so women are satisfied by the same facilities primarily used by men and children. Derose et al. (2018) suggested that park programming was difficult to arrange with childcare, and that programming that synced schedules with children's activities would be better used. This lack of clear understanding of women's needs means that planners must investigate how to provide programming that would help balance the gender inequity in urban parks.

Public Health Implications

Women's access to parks matters for their health and overall well-being. Parks and open spaces offer multiple social and health benefits to communities: people who live closer to parks are more likely to exercise, have better mental health, and maintain stronger social ties (Boone et al., 2009; Joassart-Marcelli, 2010; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Sefcik et al., 2019). Other research documents a link between park access and longer life expectancy (Garcia et al., 2003; Gies, 2006; Poudyal et al., 2009). Krenichyn (2006) finds that outdoor exercise — including in parks — is linked with women's pleasure and enjoyment, release of stress, feelings of independence, and pursuit of activities that make participants feel stronger. Women and girls, however, are less likely to exercise than their male peers. This gender gap in physical activity is likely shaped by an interplay of multiple factors like lack of social support (Edwards & Sackett, 2016), barriers to involvement in sports (Senne, 2016), and uneven home and care-giving responsibilities that limit women's time (World Health Organization, n.d.). On top of these reasons, parks and other features of the built environment are less hospitable to women's needs. The well-established physical and mental health benefits of park usage are conferred disproportionately to men as majority users of public space. This means that there is a significant opportunity for urban planning interventions to improve women's health (and public health more broadly) by facilitating more equitable park access and use.

Women in L.A. Parks

Fewer studies have specifically looked at how women use parks in Los Angeles. Derose et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study about gender disparities in park use in high poverty L.A. neighborhoods. Drawing from data gathered in a cluster randomized controlled trial that examined women's physical activity in 48 parks across the city, they found that women had fewer and shorter park visits and a lower probability to be exercising in parks than men. Black and Latina women had even less probability of exercising in a park than white and Asian women, illuminating some difference among women based on racial identities. In a different study by Derose et al. (2015), they similarly found that women were less likely to report being active in parks compared to men. The women observed in this study often accompanied their children and used park time to socialize rather than exercise.

However, this 2015 study found that women visited parks with a similar frequency to men: even though women exercised in parks less, they still used them with almost equal frequency. Though few research studies focus specifically on Los Angeles, other researchers have studied national trends in urban parks that translate across urban settings. Still, more research about women using Los Angeles parks would be helpful to investigate how gender disparities may be unique to this context.



Inequities in L.A. County and City Parks

Despite the few research studies about women in L.A. parks, several studies on inequitable distribution of L.A. parks help fill in a bigger picture as to inequities related to the area's parks. In Los Angeles County, over half of the population lives beyond ½ mile of a park, with low-income communities of color having the least amount of access to green space (Los Angeles County Department of Parks & Recreation, 2016; Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2016; Wolch et al., 2005). This ½ mile distance, or about a 10-minute walk, is a common metric used to describe a reasonable walking distance for most people in the U.S. (Los Angeles County Department of Parks & Recreation, 2016; The Trust for Public Land, n.d.). In their review of research on urban parks, McCormack et al. (2010) found that proximity to parks increased the likelihood that nearby residents would both visit and use them for physical activity.

In addition to proximity, the quality of amenities and facilities at parks encouraged more use. Kaczynski et al. (2008) found that park facilities — such as trails, baseball diamonds, exercise equipment — attracted more physical activity in parks. The Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation assessment (2016) calculated the number of facilities per 100,000 residents and reported that the county had less than the national average. The County then surveyed residents: only 42% of residents thought park amenities were in good condition, with the remainder of the population ranking them as “fair” or “poor.” Thus, in Los Angeles, a park-poor city, planners must design and upkeep these facilities as vitally important resources that support residents using parks.

Strategies and Interventions for Parks

The literature outlines tangible recommendations for designing parks that are more inclusive of women. These are discrete strategies that enact change to either the physical design or programming offered in parks. For example, environmental cues like park cleanliness, improved lighting, or better visibility around corners are often-cited ways that women can feel safer (Byrne, 2012; Derose et al., 2018; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2004). Low visibility in parks, caused by walls, structures, landscaping, and inadequate lighting are often associated with feelings of fear for women (Byrne, 2012; Krenichyn, 2006; Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). By limiting these “blind spots,” planners can enhance park experiences for women and improve their feelings of safety.

Building on research that proximity to parks may increase park use, gender-inclusive design research speaks to the proximity of park amenities within parks. Strategically placed park amenities may help women meet multiple needs while in parks. An example of this is placing walking paths or exercise equipment along the perimeter of playgrounds to allow women to engage in physical activity while watching their children (DeRose et al, 2018). Another design concept which accommodates women in their common role as caretakers is to place seating near or close to playground areas so they can comfortably supervise their children (Ortiz-Escalante & Gutierrez Valdivia, 2015).

Inclusive participatory planning

While the above planning strategies may be useful to increase safety and comfort for women in public parks, gender-inclusive and feminist spaces cannot be accomplished by simply installing certain features or adhering to a particular design. Instead, feminist planning is a transformative process by which people can articulate what they want and need in public space, explore their relationship with that space, and participate in decision-making about it (Huning, 2020; Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). This type of planning requires constant engagement and negotiations of diversity, difference, and right to public space (Beebeejaun, 2017; Huning, 2020; Roy, 2001). It also asks planners to be simply facilitators, instead of the experts on what women need (Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015).

Ultimately, the goal of feminist planning practices is to promote inclusion, health and well-being, visibility, and comfort in the public sphere. Such practices aspire not only to benefit women, but also other groups who are generally marginalized from planning processes as a way to include diversity of experience and subjectivities (Ortiz Escalante & Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). This applied research project further explores how urban planners may apply feminist and gender-inclusive recommendations to their processes so that Los Angeles parks can benefit all.

Research Design

This project centers on a case study of Lafayette Park, located in the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. While the primary research questions explore gender disparities and possible interventions in parks across the city, this project intentionally focuses on a single case study. Although each city park has a unique set of planning challenges, Lafayette Park has characteristics that are commonly found across many parks in L.A, such as its location in a dense and diverse inner-city neighborhood and its variety of park amenities. Given limited time and resources to conduct this research, narrowing this study's focus to one case study provides opportunity for open-ended inductive research and a detailed understanding of a vibrant urban park. Mukhija (2010) states that the major tradeoff of conducting a single case study is the difficulty in generalizing the findings, yet the results are still useful in understanding needs and disparities among park users in other parks.

Since this research is primarily concerned with gender, the data collected primarily represent people who identify as women and nonbinary. The scope of this study was limited to adults, ages 18 and older. While gender disparities related to park usage exist amongst adolescents and children too, this was simply beyond the scope of this research. (For more on this population, see: Kaczynski et al., 2011; Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009; Loukaitou-Sideris & Stieglitz, 2002.)

Data Collection

I collected the bulk of the data through eight semi-structured phone interviews with people who live near or frequently visit Lafayette Park. This small sample size may limit the generalizability of my findings and recommendations; however, these eight conversations allowed me to speak to a range of people who held varying perspectives. The 8 conversations were in-depth, lasting 20-50 minutes. This allowed me to gather a level of rich qualitative

Research Methods Included:



Literature Review



Qualitative Interviews



Archival Research



Site Observations



A wooden welcome sign on the iron fence at the northeast corner of Lafayette Park.

data and insight which I would not be able to get through a mass survey, but because of the small number of interviews my findings are not representative of all women users at Lafayette Park. I asked interviewees questions about their experiences in, impressions of, and feelings about the park. For those interviewees who were monolingual Spanish speakers, I used a professional interpreter. (The complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix A.) I used convenience sampling to find interview respondents: I messaged personal contacts, asked park users during site observations, and reached out to community-based organizations near the park, including Koreatown Youth + Community Center and Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA). While I relied on a convenience sampling strategy, I made efforts to recruit participants who represented a mix of identities, including diversity across age, gender, race/ethnicity, and language spoken.

I screened interviewees to confirm that they either (1) live within a 10-minute walking distance or ½ mile from the park, or (2) visit the park at least twice per month. These eligibility criteria were meant to capture women who are familiar with the park and use it regularly, as well as women who live near the park but choose not to visit it.

Additionally, I interviewed two urban planners to provide professional perspectives on park planning processes. I asked the planners questions about stakeholder engagement throughout the planning process and their impressions of how the planning field can improve equitable provision of services. (A complete list of questions for planners can be found in Appendix B.)

In addition to these interviews, I conducted field observations during three in-person visits to Lafayette Park. I took notes on park users, including their perceived gender, age, and observed activities in the park. I also engaged in conversations with people using the park to both recruit for phone interviews and to ask them about their overall impressions of the facilities. The primary limitation of this observation-based

research method was that I had to assume the individuals' gender based on their appearances. Though gender is the primary focus of this research study, I found that it was unrealistic to ask each park user's gender identity because of the number of park users and also some users' unwillingness to engage in conversation with a stranger. This is a limitation in data collection methods.

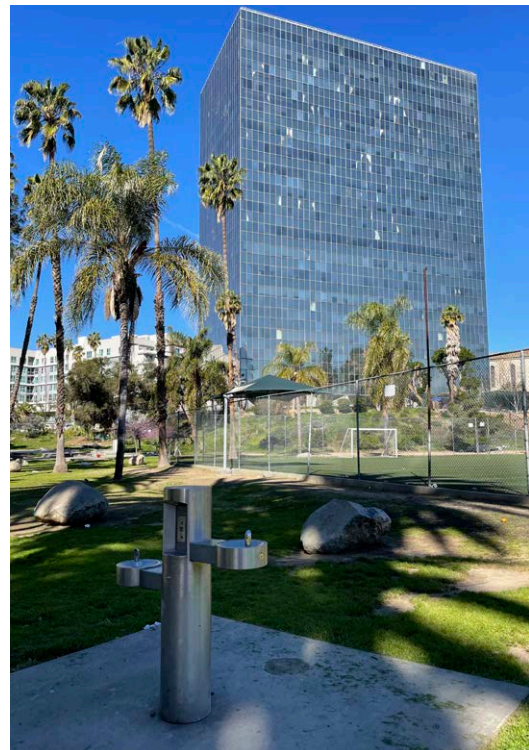
Lastly, I use archival research to build a foundational understanding of Lafayette Park and the surrounding neighborhood. For this, I researched L.A. Times and online news blogs to understand the park's history, the media's views of the park, and how city politics may have shaped the surrounding neighborhood.

Interview Data Analysis

I analyzed interview data using an inductive thematic coding process, in which I identified and grouped themes that emerged in my review of interview transcripts and site observation notes. Due to the short timeline of this research project, I simultaneously collected and analyzed data during a 2-month period, requiring an iterative process. I recruited participants ad hoc and reworked codes as new and more specific themes emerged. After all interview data were collected and coded, I conducted a holistic analysis of themes to understand how they fit together and examine the overall story they tell about gender disparities in parks and the drivers of these disparities. My analysis focused on comparing interview findings to understand similarities and differences across respondents and explain potential causes of disparities in park usage.

Study Limitations

As a convenience sample, I was not able to reach many segments of the population, particularly older residents and Black residents in the study area. I also limited my interviews to adults; thus the perspectives of people younger than 18, is not represented here. While trying to find willing interview participants, I spoke with several women who felt they were too busy to talk with me because they were providing childcare. Additionally, the extra step to set up a formal time and day was an apparent barrier for several women who expressed initial interest, but ultimately were not interviewed. The participants in this study, while arguably diverse, represent people who were motivated or had time to follow up with me.



A view in Lafayette Park during a site visit.

In addition to the small number of interviewees, a single case study of Lafayette Park also has limitations, especially in a city as diverse and vast as Los Angeles. This case study is not meant to provide an absolute set of recommendations for gender-inclusive planning. (In fact, that would run counter to one of the main arguments of this research, which is that planning needs to be in constant conversation and negotiation with stakeholders.) Instead, this case study is an exercise in how planners can engage women and stakeholders throughout an investigatory process. This case study represents an opportunity to develop a more in-depth understanding of one L.A. Park, indicating the level of insight necessary to inform gender-inclusive park planning, design, and programming.



An early view of Lafayette Park, circa 1913. Source: Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection.

Case Study: Lafayette Park

A Brief History of the Park

Lafayette Park is a 9.72-acre park managed by Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. It is located on the traditional homelands of the Gabrielino and Tongva Nations. The park was originally named Sunset Park and renamed after World War I for Revolutionary War figure Marquis de Lafayette (Historic Resources Group, 2014). Clara Shatto, wife of industrialist and land developer George Shatto, donated the property to the city in 1899 (Historic Resources Group, 2014; Los Angeles Conservancy, n.d.). In 1929, the city opened the Felipe de Neve library branch located directly next to the park. The branch is named after the first Spanish governor of Las California who is counted among the “founders” of the City of Los Angeles (“Trace History of L.A. in Talk,” 1929).

Surrounding Neighborhood

Lafayette Park is located between two neighborhoods now known as Koreatown and Westlake, and falls under the jurisdiction of three neighborhood council districts: Rampart Village, Wilshire Center/Koreatown, and MacArthur Park (Fonseca, 2019). It is situated in one of the most diverse and densely populated areas of L.A., with a high concentration of low-income households (Population Density - Mapping L.A., n.d.). When compared to the city overall, the census tracts immediately neighboring the park have higher Hispanic/Latinx and Asian populations, yet lower white and Black populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The Median Household Income (MHI) of these tracts ranges from \$34,196-\$69,656 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Several of the tracts have MHI that are nearly half of the city’s overall MHI of \$62,142, suggesting deep economic inequality affecting the residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Moreover, the average percentage of renter-occupied units in the surrounding census tracts is 93%, whereas the city’s overall percentage of renter-occupied units is 63% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Much like the rest of Los Angeles, the ongoing housing crisis has manifested in large encampments in and around the park – meaning that there

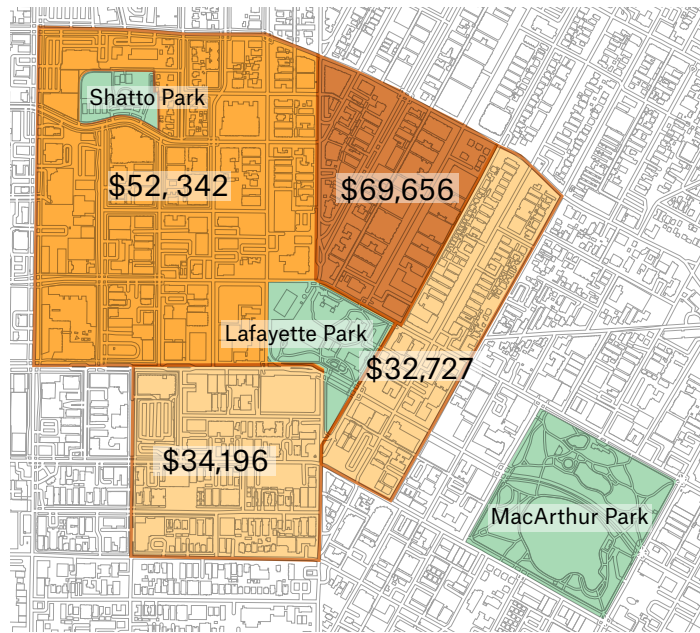


Figure 1. Median Household Income (MHI) of tracts surrounding Lafayette Park. The City of L.A.'s MHI is \$64,142.

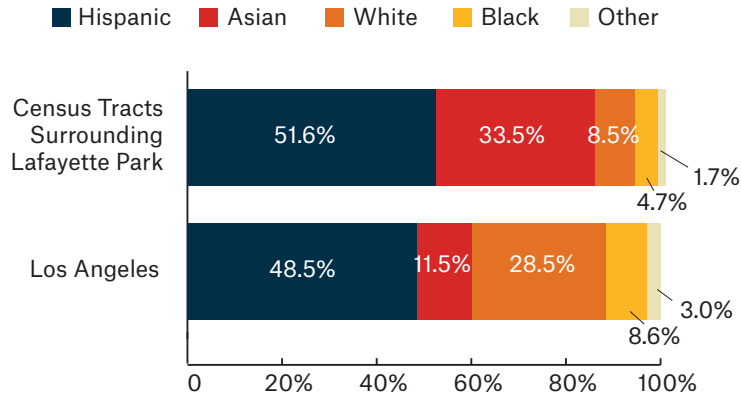


Figure 2. The racial and ethnic demographics of census tracts surrounding Lafayette Park and the City of Los Angeles.

are a varying number of unhoused people who use Lafayette Park for shelter at any given time.

Park Amenities

The park has two buildings on site: the Lafayette Park Recreational Center and the Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA) Arts and Recreational Center. HOLA offers underserved youth with free after-school programs in academics, arts, and athletics (Heart of Los Angeles, n.d.). The park also shares property with the 19-story Los Angeles Superior Court’s Central Civic Courthouse. At the time of this study, the community center and HOLA were closed to the public due to precautions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and various portions of the park were fenced off for construction.

The park’s amenities include a skate plaza, two outdoor basketball courts, a futsal (or mini soccer) field, a children’s play structure, and scattered cement picnic tables. The park previously had tennis courts located on the Southern triangular parcel of land across the street from the main portion of the park. This site has now become Bridge Housing for formerly unhoused individuals (Linton, 2019).



Lafayette Park schematic

Findings & Analysis

This section presents key findings from interviews with women community members, interviews with planners, park site observations, and conclusions drawn from these results.

A Summary of Key Findings

- » Women have diverse needs and opinions related to park amenities, services, and preferences.
- » Women and nonbinary people are not the majority users of Lafayette Park. The most common uses for women park users were leisurely walking and supervising children. Very few women engaged in exercise and physical activity (other than walking) while at the park.
- » Women's past experiences of harassment in public places have created anxiety and fear for their safety in parks. Women are careful about how they dress while using parks to avert unwanted attention on their bodies.
- » Parks are not just a place for leisure, but also settings for economic security and shelter.
- » In planning processes, as with other municipal processes, the loudest voices in the community often have disproportionately more power in decision-making. These loud voices have historically been, and continue to be, the voices of white, middle-class, and cisgender people.
- » Park planners find that they have to balance competing needs for space, especially in dense neighborhoods such as Koreatown and Westlake where Lafayette Park is located.
- » Parks provision and staffing are chronically underfunded and embedded in broader political dynamics.

Characteristics of Interviewees

Eight community members participated in one-on-one interviews during which they shared their experiences with, perceptions about, and opinions of Lafayette Park—as well as the ways in which they use parks more generally. Of the eight individuals, five spoke English and three spoke Spanish. Most interviewees identified as cisgender women, while one respondent identified as nonbinary. All participants fell within the 25-64 age range with the majority between 25-34

years old. Five identified as Hispanic or Latinx, one identified as white, and two identified as mixed race. All participants lived within a half mile of Lafayette Park in the Westlake and Koreatown neighborhoods. Table 1 provides a summary of interviewee demographics.

I screened interviewees to confirm that they either (1) live within a 10-minute walking distance or ½ mile from the park, or (2) visit the park at least twice per month. These eligibility criteria were meant to capture women who are familiar with the park and use it regularly, as well as women who live near the park but choose not to visit it.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Demographics	N (%)
Gender (as identified by respondents)	
Woman/Female	7 (87.5%)
Non-Binary	1 (12.5%)
Age	
25-34	4 (50%)
35-44	2 (25%)
45-54	1 (12.5%)
55+	1 (12.5%)
Race or ethnicity (as identified by respondents)	
White	1 (12.5%)
Hispanic/Latinx	5 (62.5%)
Mixed: Half Korean, Half White	2 (25%)

Interview respondents' tenure in the neighborhood varied between 1-32 years. About half of them moved to the Westlake or Koreatown neighborhoods within the past two years and are still becoming acquainted with the neighborhood and Lafayette Park. The other half of respondents' have lived in the neighborhood for eight years or more. Across participants, park visits varied from once or twice a year to multiple times a week. My interviewees included women who use the park regularly as well as women who live near the park but choose not to visit it often. All but one travel to the park by walking. In line with the literature suggesting that proximity to parks encourages neighbors' use, these findings indicate that living nearby makes Lafayette Park a convenient location for recreation among study participants (Boone et al., 2009; Joassart-Marcelli, 2010).

Activities in Lafayette Park

Consistent with existing literature, I found that women and nonbinary people are not the majority users of the park (Cohen et al., 2016; Derosé et al., 2018; Loukaitou-

Sideris, 1995). Particularly during site visits, I saw that many women are often in the park not by themselves, but to accompany and care for children. In fact, while recruiting interview participants at the park and sharing about the scope of this research study, most women shared their observation that women and non-binary people use parks less often than their male counterparts. They shared that this project's scope resonated with their experiences in parks.

The most common park-related activity among interviewees was walking through or around the park, either by themselves or with their dog. (This differs from what I observed during site observations, which could reflect bias in the convenience sample. Women with childcare responsibilities may have been less able to participate in my interviews.) Other activities included supervising children or grandchildren, playing basketball, going to the library, or dropping off their voting ballot. During site visits, I observed some women engaging in diverse activities, including street vending, watching their children play, playing basketball, or jogging along the park's perimeter. One passerby park user mentioned that she frequently sees an unhoused woman living in a tent in the park, thus using the park for shelter. Though I observed diverse activities among women park users, the majority of park users during my site visits were men or boys. The skate park and synthetic field were heavily used, though only by groups of male-presenting people. Out of approximately 20 people I observed playing basketball, two were women. Overall, I found that very few women used the park for sports-related exercise. This reflects what I found in the literature, which is that women are less commonly using public space and urban parks for exercise purposes (Derose et al., 2018).



The front door of the Felipe de Neve Library Branch located on the park property. One interview participant shared that visiting the library is one of their main reasons for going to the park.

Two interview respondents reported playing basketball when visiting the park. One woman remarked that she felt self-conscious at first, but ultimately felt comfortable playing amongst other players. Her experience of playing basketball at the park illustrates how women may perceive an unwelcoming environment and thus feel intimidated by unstructured sports play, though this may not reflect a lived reality.

“The times that I went there to play basketball...I’m bad and going to be on the court by myself dribbling and [thinking] are there going to be people there that want to kick me off? ...I felt a little self-conscious doing that but it was totally fine and I felt really comfortable there and there was enough space for everyone who wanted to play. That was nice. I’ve always felt okay being there.” –Interview Participant

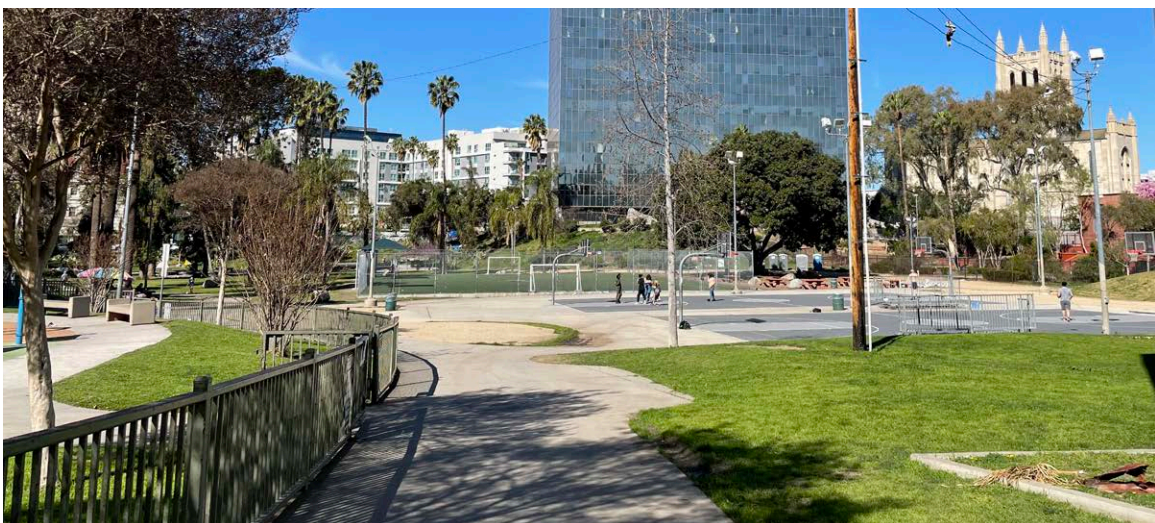
One activity I observed at the park which was not mentioned in interviews was street vending. During a Saturday morning site visit, two women were setting up tables to sell drinks and prepared food. The omission of this activity in interviews was likely a consequence of my convenience sampling method and the lack of inclusion of women street vendors among my interviewees.

For a full report of the activities of women in Lafayette Park, see Appendix C.

Feelings about the Park

Interviewees had mixed feelings of Lafayette Park. Two participants shared positive experiences in the park by expressing enthusiasm about its liveliness which inspired them to go more often. Two others felt that the presence of HOLA, which provides after-school activities for youth, has a positive impact on Lafayette Park. They stated that the park became cleaner and safer after HOLA opened.

In contrast, other respondents had more negative feelings to share about the park. One respondent argued that the park was underused which made it feel eerie and uninviting. Several other interviewees felt the park was too small with uninteresting amenities. One woman reported that because she did not play sports, the park’s sports-centric amenities (including the futsal field, skate park, and basketball courts) did not serve her recreational needs.



A view of the park looking west. Two interview participants said they enjoy playing basketball in the park. During a site visit, a group of young people use the courts for a photoshoot.

"I think Lafayette is defined more for sports. There's plenty young people who go there because there's a football area where they can play ...and they can roller skate all around. There's not a path really. It would be good if they can put in a path for people who want to walk around."

- Interview Participant

Safety

Several interviewees cited feeling uncomfortable or self-conscious in the park because of onlookers. About half of respondents said they tend not to walk around their neighborhood or to nearby parks at night because of fear for their personal safety. While none described recent personal experiences of harassment or assault at Lafayette Park, several respondents told stories of being followed or cat-called elsewhere. One recounted being followed by several men at MacArthur Park when she was a teenager. Another disclosed an experience of harassment at night in a public space in another city. Many also described hearing about the experiences of gendered harassment from peers and family members. Prior personal experiences of harassment in other places, as well as trauma and anxiety among peers or family, have caused them to fear for their safety primarily at night.

"I have to be very hyper vigilant with like what I'm wearing and trying to make myself less visible ... [I] have to be very mindful of what I'm wearing to avoid being harassed, which happens a lot to me in parks." - Interview Participant

Three participants mentioned that they need to be careful with how they dressed while visiting Lafayette Parks or walking in the neighborhood to avert unwanted attention around their bodies. The interview respondent who identified as nonbinary said they felt neutral about the park and did not express any concerns for their safety while visiting the park.

"So just a lot of times when we go through the park with our dogs, we're just going to wear baggy, super baggy, covered up clothes so we don't have to deal with harassment of that sort." - Interview Participant

One noticeable omission from interviews was any suggestion or desire to increase police presence in parks. Some communities, particularly communities of color, may view police presence as a safety risk or make people feel less safe.

Surrounding Community

When asked about pressing issues of the surrounding community, participants named poverty as the main issue facing the neighborhood. Two participants noted that the neighborhood felt abandoned or forgotten by the city, citing poorly paved sidewalks and dirty streets. One of these participants felt that this lack of investment was connected to the "working class...Black and brown people" who live

there. These collective comments represent some residents' perspectives that the city may be unwilling to invest in low-income, communities of color. Every interview participant mentioned the homeless encampments and unhoused neighbors nearby or inside the park. The interviewees I had spoken with earlier in the study period mostly mentioned unhoused individuals outside of the park grounds, but later interviews focused more heavily on unhoused individuals within the boundaries of the park — which could potentially reflect a shift in where unhoused people were finding shelter during the study period. (However, this is difficult to assert with a small sample size.)

Additionally, two women who have lived in the neighborhood for a longer tenure noted the presence of gangs in and nearby the park. This often made them feel unsafe, though neither woman cited this as a reason to avoid the park.

Features and Activities

All participants had suggestions for what could be added to Lafayette Park to make it more appealing for themselves and for others. Two mentioned that a hilly or varied terrain would be an attractive feature for sitting on or for exerting themselves during exercise. Almost all participants said that hiking or walking trails are the primary features they desire in any park they visit. (These hiking or walking trails may not be a preference for older adults or people with physical disabilities, which are demographic groups that are not adequately represented in the research sample.)



Part of a walking path in Lafayette Park which ends abruptly at the skate park area. Interviewees expressed desire for a designated walking path that loops around the park.

Some shared ideas of what they had seen in other parks, such as outdoor yoga classes, craft fairs, or a farmer's market. The interviewee who is gender nonbinary said they would like to see LGBTQ social groups held in a room at the community center. Several women mentioned that beautifying the park, by removing trash, cleaning picnic tables, and adding a flower garden, would make it more desirable to visit. For a complete list of desired park amenities and programming listed by interviewees, see Appendix C.

Lafayette Park's sports-centric amenities were underutilized by women. Very few women interviewed or observed in the park engaged in strenuous physical activity, like jogging, skateboarding, or soccer. Most participants listed amenities like flower gardens, clean picnic tables, or walking paths as desired amenities, revealing a preference for decentering sports amenities which tend to be used more frequently by men. This suggests that parks should include amenities other than only sports facilities like basketball courts and soccer fields, to attract more varied park users and make them more welcoming for women.

For most interview respondents, Lafayette Park wasn't their preferred park for leisure activity. Of the women interviewed, most had mobility/ability to find alternative parks to visit. A few respondents, however, had limited transportation options, and were only able to access parks within close walking distance of their homes. Respondents mentioned preferences for Shatto Park (located about 0.5 miles away from Lafayette Park) for its tennis courts, Vista Hermosa Park (about 2 miles away) for its beauty and downtown vistas, or Griffith Park (about 5 miles away) for its hiking trails. Despite their preferences for other parks, even those respondents with relatively more car access still visited Lafayette Park with some frequency because of its proximity to their home. Their continued visits underscore the importance of having open space and public parks in close proximity to



Shatto Recreation Center at Shatto Park, located 0.5 miles away from Lafayette Park. One interview participant preferred Shatto Park over Lafayette Park for its tennis courts. Image Source: laparks.org

residences. Outdoor public spaces, particularly in dense urban residential and commercial areas, have use and importance for people who need access to a natural or green space. Even if residents do not particularly like a certain park, they still use it for some form of leisure or benefit. This should encourage planners to think about quantity (in addition to quality) as an important factor for park access. Instead of relying on a single park to address all of women park users' needs, increasing the number of parks overall could create a network of public spaces that work together to offer a variety of options for recreation and leisure.

Conversation with Park Planners

To understand the larger scope of current park planning and community outreach practices, I interviewed two professional planners working in Los Angeles. These conversations supplemented interviews with Lafayette Park users and provided insight to help identify where and how existing park planning practices might be changed or strengthened to promote gender inclusion. One planner represents the perspective of a nonprofit planning and design agency while the other works as a planner with the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, the city's primary park planning agency. These interviewees described best practices and persistent challenges with effective and inclusive community outreach.

Community Outreach

"There's not a community outreach playbook because it's different in all communities." – L.A. City Park Planner

*"No matter what the project is whether it's a policy change project or whether it is a research-driven project or a design and build project, we always think that those things are best shaped by the people that know them best."
– Nonprofit Planner*

Community engagement is a core strategy through which planners collect, assess, and implement community desires for a project. Planners face the logistical challenges of scheduling meetings or charrettes that reach important stakeholders and processing/consolidating diverse opinions to create a park that serves a whole community – not just the people who gave input. Both planners indicated that their roles require them to respond to the distinct needs of each community, since no two communities are exactly alike.

For planners in both nonprofit and municipal agencies, budget and time constraints can limit their outreach efforts. Public agencies may have limited funding and staffing, and they must balance the needs of all the parks in their system. This can, in some cases, result in less-than-robust outreach. In lieu of citizen feedback, municipal planners sometimes need to use their own discretion to make decisions on behalf of the community. They may base decisions on comments received from

a community in the past or on their recreation staff's individual experiences working with constituents in parks.

While nonprofits do not have the same constraints related to public funds, they also may be working with a limited amount of resources. Nonprofits often operate on smaller budgets and navigate restrictive grant funding, which can only be spent on purposes designated by funders. However, nonprofits can also embed participatory planning into their mission and even solicit funding to specifically support this aspect of their mission. For the nonprofit planner, participatory planning is a core value in their organization — accordingly, they plan outreach events that are designed to meet community members where they are. This allows for more flexibility to accommodate hard-to-reach constituents who may be less likely to attend a “typical” planning meeting (like those held at city hall or in neighborhood council spaces, during business hours or on weekdays). Any divergence in practice between the nonprofit and public planners' outreach efforts is likely related to funding, scope of work, and organizational/institutional culture and values.

Loudest voices in the room

Both planners agreed that “typical” city park planning processes, like hearing feedback at a neighborhood council meeting or a weekend morning charette, inherently exclude people who cannot attend meetings. These may be citizens who are not aware that such meetings take place or who may not feel comfortable or welcome in such settings. These activities also exclude community members who have competing priorities in their lives, or may not have access to the transportation, childcare, or time off from work required to attend. In this way, relying on this limited set of traditional activities alone can fail to collect the breadth of opinion desired. The city planner acknowledged that “squeaky wheels” who participate often in meetings are the constituents most likely to be heard and have impact.

The city planner shared that the department has a few standing commissions or committees that advise the parks department on recreational needs and preferences. One such long-standing group is the Los Angeles Equestrian Advisory Committee (EAC), a citizen-led, publicly sanctioned effort to inform government officials on, and advocate for, horse-riding related issues. The planner alluded to this committee's power in the parks department because of their organized and sustained presence at planning meetings. They described that individual decision makers and civic processes within the department may be more responsive to the EAC, and other formal committees, and informal groups of private citizens organized around a particular interest than individuals who participate infrequently or have not explicitly organized. The EAC represents a singular, specific interest and a narrow group of constituents (those who can afford to own or ride horses) who are mostly wealthy and white. While their interests are not always in opposition to those of other park users (they have advocated for safe crosswalks which can benefit horse riders, parents and young children, and many other pedestrians, for example),

groups like the EAC do not reflect the breadth of community needs and may have outsized influence.

The city planner shared their desire for more continuous feedback from all constituents. While they described that the department will occasionally convene ad hoc groups to give input or be involved in a specific activity (in response to a conflict or when the department is standing up a new program, for example), such groups do not become a fixed presence to advise the department or a long-term constituency to whom the department must be accountable. L.A. Recreation and Parks should have many other standing committees, representative of the diverse needs of the city, especially those populations who are underrepresented as park users and may face barriers to participating in the planning process. These committees could include an LGBTQ council and a women’s park advisory group.

Community outreach needs to be continuous and ongoing. ...If a group only meets because we need them, that’s not really the point [since] they’re there only for us. They should be there for them. And we should be engaging them on a constant and ongoing basis. Too often stakeholders are pulled together at a point of conflict [or] when we’re doing a new thing. ‘We brought you together to fight about it, to debate it, come to a consensus, and be opinionated.’ But a lot of input needs to be ongoing. – L.A. City Park Planner

Funding Challenges

The city planner noted that park funding is cyclical, and that the city is balancing competing priorities as it allocates resources. Park planning does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is vulnerable to broader political dynamics. For example, the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 — significantly reducing property taxes — created massive budget cuts across all levels of government in California. The parks department, along with most other public departments, needed to drastically



The Lafayette Multipurpose Community Center. During this research study’s observation period, the Center was not open to the public.

downsize park services and programming in the decades following (Lavin, 1994). Prop 13 and other measures that have affected city revenues have had a lasting effect on park services. Since then, other voting cycles have brought more money to parks, such as Measure K in 1996, which taxed property owners for city park improvements, and Measure A in 2016, a county-wide parcel tax (Belgum, 1996; Measure A Projects, 2020). Still, the winnowing of municipal budgets impacts all public services, including public parks.

Competing Desires

My conversations with the nonprofit and city planners highlighted that sometimes the requests of citizens can be in direct opposition with the practices of park staff. As one specific example, past research has suggested that parks be designed with exercise equipment located near children's play areas so that caregivers can exercise while watching their children. While the city park planner said that this request is frequently made in community meetings, the department has not accommodated such a design change as park staff do not necessarily want parents distracted from watching their children. They also underscore that exercise machines are not meant for children to play on and placing them near the playground might invite unsafe play on them. Thus, park planners and designers often put them on opposite sides of the park. This highlights a central tension between the city's requirements for park safety and requests from children's caregivers (who are often women) who are giving a suggestion that may encourage them to use parks for exercise in addition to childcare.

The parks department also faces a challenge in responding to community members' competing desires around park safety. As surfaced in my interviews, safety is a primary concern for women park users. The city park planner explained that the department often hears constituents name differing preferences around safety – some describe wanting a more active space with increased numbers of people in the park, while others voice preferences for more passive measures like security cameras. Each of these interventions have implications for park users' experiences, with the potential to change the character of the park in a way that some may find unsatisfying. Increasing the volume of visitors in a park, for example, could limit enjoyment for users who are primarily interested in quiet, open space. Thus, a challenge for all planners is to find commonalities and balance all voices. Still, not everyone will be satisfied with a decision. This underscores the importance of providing a variety of parks available for citizens to use, allowing people to select the space that best fits their needs and preferences. Different parks can complement one another, catering to different users.

Space

In the Koreatown and Westlake neighborhoods where Lafayette Park is located, a primary challenge for park improvement and design is lack of space. Since these are the densest neighborhoods in L.A., park planners are not able to expand park



The Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA) building was completed in 2019. It provides free after-school programs in academics, arts, and athletics.

lands. The city planner reflected that the decision to build HOLA's building on the site was a contentious one. While the new building replaced some of the park's passive, natural space that formerly housed trees, HOLA's afterschool services were a resource the community ultimately wanted. A more recent example was the construction of bridge shelter housing for unhoused individuals which replaced the tennis court in the southern triangle of the park (Linton, 2019). While the need for shelter in the city is compelling, the city had to balance competing needs for space.

Conclusions from all interviews

Interviews with community members revealed that women, as a broad category, have divergent experiences with and needs related to public parks. At times, respondents gave very different feedback about their feelings and experiences with Lafayette Park. The interviewees have demonstrated women are not a monolithic entity: there is vast diversity across women and nonbinary people's needs and desires.

For planners, the challenge is to ensure that the voices who have historically been prioritized in urban design (white, middle-class, cisgender) do not disproportionately influence park planning and decision-making. The nonprofit planner urged that in order to build gender-inclusive spaces, women must be included in every step of the planning phase, from inception to funding, leading, outreach, implementation, and evaluation. They emphasized that gender inclusive parks are created at the time of park inception, early in the process, and cannot be "tacked on" after foundational decisions have been made. Insights from interviews with planners highlighted that continuous feedback from community members needs to be central to planning and maintaining urban parks.

Planning & Policy Recommendations

Planning has a critical responsibility to reduce gender disparities in public spaces including parks. Drawing on the findings and analysis of my interviews with community members and planners, archival research, and site visits, I formulated a set of general recommendations for gender-inclusive park planning.

Overview of Planning and Policy Recommendations

- 1. Think critically about gender** by leveraging a feminist planning perspective that recognizes that people of all genders have multiple, intersecting, and dynamic identities that hold meaning and power.
- 2. Use participatory methods that favor marginalized voices**, open planning discussions to a wider range of opinions, and make time for collective decision-making.
- 3. Build a network of diverse parks** that can accommodate a range of different desires and partner with nonprofits to explore alternative stewardship and ownership practices.
- 4. Explore creative design and programming** options that are designed with all abilities in mind and maximize limited space in inner cities.
- 5. Invest and fund our parks equitably** with a particular focus on providing resources for communities that are park poor due to historically discriminatory planning practices.
- 6. Pursue further research** on park users across the spectrum of gender, age, ability, and housing status.

Recommendation 1: Think Critically About Gender

Planners are often called to make informed decisions independent of public feedback in their roles. Planners should leverage a critical feminist planning perspective to help inform such discretionary decision-making. This perspective recognizes that people of all genders have multiple, intersecting, and dynamic identities that hold meaning and power.

When planners treat women as a monolithic entity — as if all women share the same essential characteristics or universally experience public space in the same way — they make uniform standards that ignore the vast diversity that exists within and across women's experiences. Such an approach can preclude deeper work to identify and understand the range of different women's needs, which may demand different priorities in terms of allocation of resources. Historically,

policy and planning decisions that rely on a monolithic category of ‘women’ have privileged the needs of white, cisgender, middle-class, and young or middle-aged women — while overlooking or actively erasing the particular experiences of women who are BIPOC, transgender, older, and low-income. Gender inequality is fundamentally linked to race, class, age, sexuality, immigration status, and related demographic characteristics. Indeed, gender inequality, structural racism, and other forms of discrimination operate together and exacerbate one another. Ultimately, a nuanced consideration of women’s intersecting identities should be built into the park planning timeline, as the consideration of such intersections and necessary dialogue about how best to meet women’s different needs — especially those most marginalized from public space — takes time.

A critical feminist planning lens also requires that planners include in the planning process and give voice to gender nonbinary and genderqueer people. One limitation of this study was that data from interviews with nonbinary respondents was combined with data from cisgender women, but we know that nonbinary people’s experiences are often distinct. Given the dearth of existing literature examining nonbinary people’s needs in public space, planners invested in thinking critically about gender should prioritize research and community outreach and engagement in this area.

How Planners Can Use an Intersectional Lens in Practice

- » Value lived experience as expertise
- » Do not assume that one woman speaks for all women
- » Facilitate meetings so that all people – especially people who represent marginalized communities – have a chance to offer opinions and feedback
- » Add more weight to comments that may come from someone who represents a marginalized or minority group
- » Diversify or expand outreach efforts to alternative groups, such as cultural organizations or LGBTQ groups
- » Reflect on whether community input comes from a diverse set of voices, representative across a spectrum of age, ability, race/ethnicity, and gender
- » Integrate women at all stages of decision-making processes
- » Other ways planners can support women in community planning processes:
 - » Provide childcare during community engagement or planning meetings
 - » Compensate people for their time and expertise
 - » Offer language interpretation

Recommendation 2: Use Participatory Planning Methods That Favor Marginalized Voices

Participatory processes guided by community members must be incorporated at all levels of park planning and decision-making, from design through evaluation. The interview with the city planner revealed that the city's planning practices are often highly influenced by the loudest voices in the room. City-wide planning and design processes should institutionalize a practice of participatory planning that centers marginalized voices, opens the process for a wider range of opinions, and makes time for collective decision making. Planning timelines should add checkpoints (not literal checkboxes) that give planners an opportunity to reflect on whether a diverse and representative constituency was involved throughout the process. Planning practices must use an equitable approach, prioritizing groups with the highest need that are less commonly heard in the planning arena. Based on this study's findings, some priority populations include but are not limited to women of color, genderqueer and nonbinary people, older adults, people with disabilities, monolingual Spanish speakers, street vendors, and unhoused women.

Strategies for Increasing and Sustaining Diverse Participation

- » Create a welcoming atmosphere:
 - » Attend to the power dynamics in the room.
 - » Incorporate introductions and community building activities into the agenda.
 - » Give community members multiple ways to participate, including opportunities for oral and written feedback, or small and large group discussions.
 - » As mentioned under the first recommendation, provide childcare, compensate people for their time and expertise, provide language interpretation, and offer transit passes to get to/from meetings and events.
- » Build long-term relationships with community members and local community-based organizations who are trusted messengers. Invest in and grow these relationships over the long-term (e.g. building a pipeline for community members to eventually sit on an advisory board or access employment opportunities with the department).
- » Be transparent about how community engagement feedback and data will be used. (For example, explain whether feedback will be used in an advisory manner with planners ultimately making decisions, or whether participants have decision-making power.)

During these participatory processes, planners should act as facilitators, rather than experts, giving opportunity for community members to directly lead processes. Women, genderqueer, nonbinary people, and other underrepresented groups in the planning process are the experts on their lived experiences as users of park and public spaces. In their facilitation, planners should recognize the racial, class, ageist, ableist, and gendered biases within formal planning processes and work to counteract that, particularly when seeking public feedback. This might mean that planners give more weight to the opinions of people representing marginalized groups or interrupt speakers who may be domineering or have outsized influence. Participatory methods allow for planners to wrestle with diverse opinions and new ideas in partnership with community members. They may not produce a complete set of answers to make gender inclusive space, but the process of including and weighing diverse opinion is valuable. Giving community members the opportunity to articulate their needs regarding parks and have influence in the process of their design and programming encourages them to further exercise their power.

Recommendation 3: Build a Network of Diverse Parks

Because women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people are not a monolith, no single park will accommodate their vast desires and preferences. Park access must be measured in terms of both quality *and* quantity. A network of public parks that offer diverse amenities would provide options for community members to find spaces that fit their needs and tastes. As an example, Lafayette Park's sports-centric amenities serve some users, but several interview participants expressed the need to travel to other city parks to find walking paths or to enjoy natural scenery. Being able to access more park options within close proximity of one's home would ensure that residents have more access and choice in green space.

In Los Angeles, availability of land is a primary barrier to the creation of new parks. Park planners must be judicious and creative in park design and programming. Local nonprofits – such as L.A. Neighborhood Land Trust, Trust for Public Land, and L.A. Neighborhood Initiative – have been organizing communities to co-create innovative solutions for new park spaces. Their models for community stewardship of parks, adoption of vacant or abandoned lots, and activation of schoolyards as parks can help L.A. to have parks in every neighborhood, especially in low-income and BIPOC communities which are historically park poor due to discriminatory planning practices. Even more, integral to the missions of these park nonprofits is their commitment to community design and inclusive feedback processes. These nonprofits are part of a larger solution to offer diverse park options for all L.A. residents. Diversity in park stewardship and ownership can alleviate pressure from the city parks department while diversifying the community's options for parks.

Recommendation 4: Explore Creative Park Design and Programming

Creative park design and programming can help maximize limited space in dense city geographies and diversify options for park users. The recommendations below reflect the kinds of park features, amenities, and programming that interview respondents indicated would encourage them to use Lafayette Park more frequently as well as findings from my literature review (AARP et al., 2022; American Society of Landscape Architects, 2022; Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2014). They overlap with universal design principles which outline a framework for design that is equitable for people with diverse ability, flexible for a wide range of individual preferences, simple and intuitive to use, and appropriate in size and space for all bodies (Story et al., 1998). This suggests that designing for gender inclusion is likely to increase park usage not only among women, but also among older adults, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented user groups. Planners can leverage thoughtful design elements to create park spaces that are inclusive, welcoming, and encourage all members of a community to participate in public life.

Provide Basic Amenities

- Provide and maintain clean restrooms, including single stall, gender-neutral restroom options.
- Install adequate lighting, especially for use at night. Lighting supports women, older populations, and people with impaired vision to feel safer in the park.

Offer Recreational Amenities

- Design continuous walking paths that loop around the park so that walkers and joggers have designated space for laps around the park. In urban parks with limited space, a continuous, uninterrupted path around the park perimeter gives users the option to walk/run/roll for short and long distances.
- Ensure surrounding streets are walkable with improved pedestrian and wheelchair accessible amenities such as wide sidewalks or paved footpaths. Well-maintained sidewalks provide safe pathways to and from the park and can serve as an alternative for walking paths within park boundaries.
- Plant flowers, verdant plants, or biodiverse garden beds for pleasant and varied scenery. As vegetation grows over time, it should not obscure sightlines as this can compromise feelings of safety for park users.
- Install exercise equipment within the park that is usable by adults, but also safe for children. Exercise equipment provides an alternative for strenuous exercise that is not related to sports.

Connect the park to the street

- Remove fences around park perimeters and increase the number of points of entry to allow people to see into the park.
- Allow for clear lines of vision into the park so that women and other users can

see into the space to discern if they will feel safe and comfortable.

Consider diverse programming and activity

- Implement events that this study's interviewees suggested, including craft fairs, food events, farmer's markets, Zumba classes, or movie nights.
- Decriminalize and destigmatize street vending in parks and allow space for food stands and vendors.

Gender-Inclusive Design Must Include Street Vendors

In thinking about the designing for gender inclusion, planners must remember that parks have uses other than recreation. From my observations at Lafayette Park, street vendors use parks as places of commerce, entrepreneurship, and economic security. According to advocates working for rights for street vendors, approximately 80% of Los Angeles street vendors are women (East LA Community Corporation, 2018). This means that parks that are planned and hospitable to street vendors benefit women. Decriminalization of street vending, especially in parks, would support of women's presence and use of parks.



Recommendation 5: Invest and Fund Our Parks Equitably

Decisionmakers and policymakers should invest in chronically underfunded park agencies so that they have sufficient resources to meaningfully engage communities and plan parks that meet community needs. Increased and sustained investment would allow for the dedicated human and financial resources needed for more equitable park planning, design, maintenance, and operations. Scarcity in funding can pit marginalized communities against each other or create competition for limited resources. In the example of Lafayette Park, community resources like HOLA and bridge housing replaced valuable park amenities and space. These

essential public services should not be in competition with one another: Westlake and Koreatown residents should have affordable housing, programming for children and youth, and robust public parks.

When the Recreation and Parks Department or other public entities experience budget cuts, communities are not affected equally. Lower-income, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and other communities of color – like those in the Westlake and Koreatown neighborhoods – suffer disproportionately, while wealthier neighborhoods can find financial resources elsewhere (supplementing public investment with private funds). My interviews with community members reveal that Lafayette Park users feel that their park and greater community are neglected by city services. This is apparent, interviewees say, from the excessive trash, uneven pavement and sidewalks, and lack of clean park furniture. These issues may not be the result of a single department’s shortcomings, but a symptom of pervasive disinvestment from public services.

Funding, at all levels of park provision, including planning and upkeep, are essential for accessible, equitable public space for all people to enjoy. At the city level, public officials can consider increasing the amount of revenue generated by park bonds. Proposition K, passed by voters in 1996, provides L.A. City parks funding for a 30-year period, ending in 2026 (Proposition K (The LA for Kids Program) Fact Sheet, 2022). As planners and policymakers think about how to extend or replace Proposition K funding, they should consider a new bond measure that would increase funding for parks and embed equity into the way in which new resources are allocated. This could potentially be done by:

- bolstering the amount of funds earmarked for communities that have been historically underserved (based on criteria such as median household income, race/ethnicity, and existing park acreage or access);
- designing a grant process that provides technical assistance to support community-based organizations in underserved neighborhoods to access funds; and/or
- ensuring that the existing Local Volunteer Oversight Committees—which review and monitor the progress of all grant projects in their Council District—are accessible to and adequately represent women, LGBTQ communities, communities of color, older adults, and people with low incomes.

At the state level, planners and policymakers could seek to pass additional bond measures (like Proposition 68) to generate more revenue for parks across California, including L.A. City. As with Proposition K at the city level, state officials could consider implementing new processes to further embed equity in the allocation of existing Proposition 68 funds (which are intended to bolster park resources in “critically underserved” communities across California) (Statewide Park

Development and Community Revitalization Program, 2022). In addition to existing funding criteria related to park acreage and poverty, state officials could also provide technical assistance to grant applicants and create citizen oversight/leadership structures that make space for underrepresented park users to participate in funding decisions. These actions could benefit people across the state of California – not just Angelenos.

The first four recommendations made in this report would be supported by proper funding in our parks system.

Recommendation 6: Further Research

The opinions and knowledge of people across the spectrum of gender are key areas for further research. The existing literature on park access, usage, and related health outcomes largely reflects the experiences of cisgender people and relies on a binary conception of gender. As mentioned in the first recommendation (Think Critically About Gender), planners need further research about parks and planning processes that center the needs and experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer people. In addition, other intersectional characteristics — such as race/ethnicity, age, ability, housing status, citizenship status, language, and income — need to be considered and studied more thoroughly.

In my findings, I noted that Lafayette Park was being used as a space of shelter for a small population of unhoused people — including, at minimum, one unhoused woman (per the observations of this study’s respondents). While this study didn’t directly interview anyone who is unhoused (a key limitation of the research), all participants mentioned homeless encampments and unhoused individuals as a marked and growing presence within the park. The housing crisis in Los Angeles has forced many people to find shelter outdoors, including our city’s parks. Sleeping outside is dangerous, especially for women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people. Planners should seek to understand how parks function in a shelter capacity and plan for how park amenities might serve unhoused women’s most basic needs, such as for single stall bathrooms that remain open at all times.

In addition, research on older adults is particularly limited. Older adults are often underrepresented in public parks, which may be a result of park design that neglects the needs and preferences of this user group. Los Angeles communities would benefit from parks that privilege older adults by creating universally accessible facilities and intergenerational social spaces. This study did not consider the intersection of gender and age, and this area should be considered in future research.

Conclusion

Women's intersecting identities, including racial and ethnic identity, income and socioeconomic status, ability, age, cis- or transgender identities, and sexual orientation (among many other axes of difference), impact the ways in which women move through and relate to public space. In Los Angeles, women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people are not traditionally the dominant users of park spaces, and thus do not equally benefit from ways in which parks can improve health and overall quality of life. The field of planning has a critical responsibility to reduce gender disparities in parks by examining community planning processes and remedying where women, nonbinary, and genderqueer people have not been adequately included. A nuanced consideration of women's intersecting identities should be built into the park planning timeline, as the consideration of such intersections and necessary dialogue about how best to meet women's different needs takes time. When planners leverage a critical feminist planning perspective to inform their practices, people of all genders will ultimately benefit from greater inclusion, health and well-being, visibility, and comfort in our city parks.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Lafayette Park Community Members

1. What is your relationship to Lafayette Park? Do you live close to the park? How often do you visit? What did you do during your last visit to the park?

Probing questions: Is this park important to you? Do you have any memories you'd like to share about your experience in Lafayette Park? What do you think are some of the most pressing issues facing the surrounding neighborhood more generally? What do you hope for the future of this park? How do you think we can arrive at this future?

2. How do you feel when you visit (this park or any) parks? Mostly positive or negative feelings? Do you feel safe when you visit these spaces?

3. What other parks do you visit near your home? What do you like about them? What would you change if you could?

Probing question: What design features or activities/programs would make you visit them more?

4. Who do you go to the park with? Family members? Friends? Parents or kids?

5. I'm interested in learning how to get more women into the park. What kind of things do you think would attract women to visit this park?

6. What is your gender identity?

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender Woman
- Transgender Man
- Gender Non-Binary
- Genderqueer
- Other
- Prefer not to state

7. Race/Ethnicity

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Latinx
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other
- Prefer not to state

8. What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-54
- 55-70
- 70+

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Urban Planners

1. Please tell me about your organization's work and describe your role.
2. I'm interested in learning the process of planning and maintaining urban park or similar public spaces. What does stakeholder engagement look like in park planning? What are ways that you involve public opinion?

Probing questions: How do planners decide what amenities and features will be in a park? How do you ensure different groups of community members can express their opinions? Do you engage stakeholders at all stages of the project? How do you balance differing opinions from community members? How do you make sure that you're reaching all parts of the community? If a park isn't being used very much, or being used for a purpose other than intended, do planners step in to make changes?

3. My capstone project is about how urban planners might make park planning processes more gender inclusive. The existing literature indicates that women generally use parks less than cisgender men. Research cites a variety of reasons for this: women have different responsibilities than men that prevent them from having leisure time in parks, women experience fear for their personal safety in public parks, or parks aren't designed with women in mind as the central user group. What do you think about this and does this resonate with your experience? How does this dynamic play out in the parks that are within your organization's purview?

Probing questions: Do you find differences across different identities that women hold, such as race/ethnicity, class, or ability? How does planning respond to these differences?

4. What are ways that you think parks or the park planning process can be more inclusive to women?

Probing question: Are there ideas for changes on a higher, systemic level that make parks more gender-inclusive?

5. In general, what are other ways planning can improve or evolve to serve communities more equitably?

Probing questions: Are there things you would change about the planning process? Do you have concerns about how parks are currently planned? Do you wish that parks looked different?

6. What do you think is unique, or should be unique, about planning parks in Los Angeles versus other cities or regions? How should the process be tailored?

7. For this capstone, I'm focusing on Lafayette Park as a case study. Have you been to Lafayette Park? Do you have any feelings or memories you want to share about Lafayette Park? What reflections do you have on how that park can be improved? (If they haven't been to Lafayette Park: Is there a park in L.A. that you feel exemplifies community planning or great amenities that serve the community?)

Appendix C: Participants' Interview Responses & Site Observation Notes

Table 1. Women's Activity in Lafayette Park

Self-reported Activity from Interview Participants when asked, "What do you do while at Lafayette Park?"

- Play basketball**
- Walk the perimeter
- Walk through the park
- Drop off voting ballot
- Sit on a picnic blanket
- Walk dog (four participants mentioned this)
- Go to the library and read their book in the park
- Bring kids or grandkids to afterschool tutoring or HOLA program
- Bring grandkids to play sports

Observed Activity of Women in the Park

- Playing basketball in groups
- Vending drinks
- Setting up their table to sell goods
- Seated and talking on the phone while their child skateboarded nearby
- Walking their dog
- Seated and watched kids at the playground
- Jogging along the perimeter

Table 2. Desired Amenities and Programming in Lafayette Park

Amenities (Features or Facilities)

- Any activities other than sports***
- Clean bathroom**
- Dog park**
- Hill or change in elevation**
- Walking path**
- Inviting signage
- Native plants or a community garden
- Secluded space
- Tennis court
- Upgraded play structure
- Visible crosswalks

Programming (Activities or Scheduled Events)

- Farmer's Market
- Food Event
- Craft Day
- LGBTQ social group
- Women's Pick-up Basketball
- Yoga or Aerobics Classes, like Zumba**
- Cultural Enrichment or Language Classes**
- Tutoring classes from UCLA or USC college students**

** Two participants mentioned this in interviews

***Three participants mentioned this in interviews; these respondents felt the park was too sports-centric