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Gender-Inclusive Planning and Design for Los Angeles Parks

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# Gender-Inclusive Planning and Design for Los Angeles Parks

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## Issue

Urban planning theory and practice have created gendered environments that favor the needs of cisgender men. These gendered spatial practices profoundly impact the health, daily lives, and safety of women and nonbinary people. Racial and ethnic identity, income and socioeconomic status, ability, cisgender or transgender identities, and sexual orientation — among many other axes of difference — impact the ways in which women move through and interact with public space.

This research examines women’s relationships with urban parks. As in other public spaces, women are underrepresented users of urban parks, which can be attributed to fear of victimization, constraints related to dependent care and household chores, and barriers related to programming and the design of the built environment.<sup>1</sup>

This study’s primary research questions are:

- » What gender disparities currently exist in the usage, planning, and design of Los Angeles parks and what are their drivers?
- » What can be done to mitigate these disparities through citywide design and planning processes?

In this brief, the term *women* includes cisgender and transgender women, and *marginalized genders* includes, but is not limited to, nonbinary and genderqueer people. For the purposes of this study, the researcher intends to use the term *women* in its most expansive form, but also recognizes its inherent limitations.

## Study Approach

The study focused on Lafayette Park, located in the Westlake and Koreatown neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Lafayette Park has characteristics that are commonly found across many parks in Los Angeles, such as its location in a dense and diverse central neighborhood and its variety of park amenities. Narrowing

this study’s focus to one case study provided opportunity for open-ended inductive research and a detailed understanding of a vibrant urban park. The researcher conducted eight semi-structured qualitative interviews with women and nonbinary people, field observations, and archival research. Two qualitative interviews with L.A. park planners provided insight into current planning practices, which informed the researcher’s suggested improvements.

## Key Findings

- » Women have diverse needs for and opinions on park amenities, services, and preferences. In interviews with park users, some women shared positive experiences in the park by expressing enthusiasm about its liveliness which inspired them to go more often. Another interview respondent had more negative feelings, stating that the park was underused which made it feel eerie and uninviting.
- » Women and nonbinary people are not the majority of users of Lafayette Park. Based on field observations, women park users were most commonly seen leisurely walking and supervising children. Very few women engaged in exercise or vigorous physical activity (other than walking) while using the park.
- » In park planning, the loudest voices in the community often have disproportionately more power in decision-making. An interview with a city planner revealed that individual decision-makers and civic processes in park planning may be more responsive to groups of organized and sustained community members rather than individuals who participate infrequently or have not explicitly organized around an issue. These voices in these organized community groups have historically been, and continue to be, 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. For example, planners reflected on the decision to build Heart of Los

Angeles' (HOLA) services center: While the new building replaced parts of the park's passive, natural space, HOLA's afterschool services were a resource that the community ultimately wanted.

- » Parks are not just a place for leisure, but also settings for economic activity (such as street vending) and shelter. Field observations and interviews with park users revealed a diverse use of park space beyond recreational use.
- » Women's past experiences of harassment in public places have created anxiety and fear for their safety in parks. Interviews with women park users revealed that many are careful about how they dress when visiting parks to avert unwanted attention on their bodies.
- » The allocation of land for parks and park staffing are chronically underfunded and embedded in broader political dynamics.

- » Conduct **further research** on park users' preferences and needs across the spectrum of gender, age, ability, and housing status.

Planning has a critical responsibility to reduce gender disparities in public spaces including parks. Planners must cultivate continuous community feedback in their work of planning and maintaining urban parks. By including women and marginalized gender people in planning processes, planners can make park spaces equitable for all Angelenos.

## For More Information

Chu, C. (2022). Planning for Gender Inclusion: Gender-Inclusive Planning and Design Recommendations for Los Angeles Parks (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ht60519>.

## Recommendations

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. Gender-inclusive parks are created at the time of park inception, early in the process, and cannot be "tacked on" after foundational decisions have already been made. Continuous feedback from community members must be central to planning and maintaining urban parks. Park planners and urban designers should consider the following recommendations for gender-inclusive park planning:

- » **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.
- » **Use participatory methods that favor marginalized voices**, open planning discussions to a wider range of opinions, and make time for collective decision-making.
- » **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.
- » **Explore creative design and programming** options that are designed with all abilities in mind and maximize limited space in central city neighborhoods.
- » **Invest in and fund parks equitably** with a particular focus on providing resources for communities that are park poor due to historically discriminatory planning practices.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Cohen, D. A., Han, B., Nagel, C. J., Harnik, P., McKenzie, T. L., Evenson, K. R., Marsh, T., Williamson, S., Vaughan, C., & Katta, S. (2016). The First National Study of Neighborhood Parks: Implications for Physical Activity. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 51(4), 419–426. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2016.03.021>
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