

Rt. Hon. Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities
Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

6 November 2023

Open Letter: The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) must tackle the gender bias embedded in the UK's built environment

Dear Secretary of State,

Over the last decade, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has been a key mechanism for the UK Government to shape and direct planning policy towards delivering on the country's wider economic, social, and environmental goals. Yet, addressing critical questions around the impact of gender bias within the urban design, property, and planning sectors remains a critical blind spot in the NPPF that can no longer be ignored.

A consequence of the male-dominated nature of both the UK's planning sector and political systems, is that many of our cities and towns outrightly fail to meet the needs of the millions of women and girls who make up over half of the UK's population. Despite growing female representation, women still only comprise [14% of the built environment workforce](#).

This leaves us with a built environment that woefully underdelivers for women and girls, including both cisgender and transgender women and girls. Rather than creating equitable spaces where all feel welcome and comfortable, the design and nature of our built environment can act as a barrier to the full participation and enjoyment of public spaces by women and girls.

A deep-rooted unconscious gender bias in planning is evident in the fact that the built environment is not fully accessible for women and girls. Bad lighting, a lack of active surveillance, dark corners and alleys and inadequate transport infrastructure all contribute to creating spaces where women don't feel safe, particularly at night. These factors coupled with the fact that [70% of women in the UK](#) say they have been sexually harassed in public, leads to the avoidance of public spaces by women and girls.

At the same time, investment in youth facilities is overwhelmingly directed towards multi-use games areas (MUGAs) like skate parks, BMX tracks, and enclosed football pitches – which are used almost entirely by boys and young men. There is a lack of consideration and research into what facilities girls and women need as [numerous studies show](#).

By failing to consider the distinct needs and preferences of women and girls in public spaces, [we essentially send a strong message to girls from a young age that they are not welcome, and that the public realm is not for them](#). A [Swedish architectural firm's](#) research in 2015 showed that from the age of 8, the imbalance between boys and girls was 80/20 in parks, and that teenage girls felt ten times more insecure in public spaces.

Recent [UN research](#) on the subject found that the design of the built environment can significantly affect women and girls' access to essential services and their wider enjoyment of cultural and recreational activities.

While the conversation around how to design more gender-inclusive public spaces is beginning to grow within the planning sector, to date the Government has focused exclusively on the issue of women's safety in public spaces.

For instance, in the most recent NPPF consultation, the only gender-related question the Government asked industry was whether the NPPF should place greater emphasis on making sure that women, girls, and other vulnerable groups in society feel safe in our public spaces.

Yet focusing on safety exclusively is not enough, and all vulnerable groups' needs, whether shared or specific, should be considered in greater depth and detail through the NPPF. For women and girls specifically, we should

be focused on designing and delivering public spaces that are fun and judgement free. Despite being the only gender-specific question in the NPPF the Government offers no specific criteria for local authorities to measure the safety, let alone inclusivity of proposed developments.

We call on the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities not only to include specific safety policies referring to and considering women and girls, as a minimum standard, but to go beyond this and have the NPPF address the wider gender bias impacting design and placemaking policies in the system at large.

In line with the conclusions of the Royal Town Planning Institute's recent study on 'Women in Planning', we call on the Secretary of State to ensure gender mainstreaming is integrated into all planning policy — ensuring that future policymaking considers women's interests and concerns to create a more equitable landscape. This will necessitate far more in-depth consultation with women and girls, through surveys and interviews, to ensure proper alignment with their needs.

The choices we make around how we design our built environment have a key role to play in ensuring that women can use various facilities and infrastructure to enjoy all spheres of life. As stated by Jacqueline Leavitt, an urban planning professor and social justice advocate, "women face problems of such significance in cities and society that gender can no longer be ignored in planning practice".

As the bedrock of the planning system in England, this change must begin at a national level through the NPPF, but so much more is needed.

Firstly, the Government must begin to bridge the 'gender data gap' which has left policymakers with limited access to sex-disaggregated data on the female experience in public spaces, which is essential to informing policies and decisions.

Secondly, as well as integrating gender mainstreaming policy into the NPPF, practical guidance should be produced separately to support local planning authorities, developers, and planners in implementing these measures, and additional resources provided to help action these measures.

We have seen gender mainstreaming planning policy already integrated successfully in cities like [Vienna](#), with Barcelona following suit with its own [gender mainstreaming strategy](#). In October 2022, [a Motion was passed by Glasgow City Council](#), which seeks to put women at the heart of urban planning. By fully integrating gender mainstreaming into the NPPF, the Government can take a critical step forward in establishing the UK as a world leader in nationwide gender-inclusive planning policy.

