

PLANNING FOR WOMEN



Rachael Williams

As the city moves ahead with developing a gender equity strategy to address the different ways that men and women use and experience the city of Toronto, advocates say that rethinking urban planning and the city’s community consultation processes need to be top priorities.

At the city’s September 18 executive committee meeting, councillors unanimously adopted a staff recommendation to create a gender equity unit within the city’s people and equity division to oversee the development of a gender equity strategy. In addition to addressing gender inequities, the strategy will seek to establish targets for addressing intersectional gender equity in key areas such as housing, governance, transit planning and urban planning, among other things.

Critical to the success of this strategy will be looking at the role that land use planning plays in perpetuating gender inequities and finding solutions to overcome these systemic issues.

“Cities and local governments are responsible for the urban built form – how we build our streets, our local infrastructure such as

parks and roads, and all of the physical assets have everything to do with how we actually want to deliver services to people who are living in the city and that should include men and women, boys and girls and non-binary people, including trans people,” said Ward 13 Toronto Centre councillor **Kristyn Wong-Tam**.

Gender-discriminatory policies specific to land use planning exist in a number of areas, including the highly controversial *Neighbourhoods* designation of the city’s Official Plan. In a 1979 report by **Social Planning Toronto** that looked at the evolution of Toronto’s suburbs, it noted that the preference for single-family housing, which has been firmly entrenched in the *Neighbourhoods* designation, was established with the nuclear family in mind and did not address the challenges that women face if they are not a part of that family dynamic.

“Being able to design family homes outside of the conventional definition of nuclear family is critical,” said Wong-Tam. “We oftentimes have single parent-led households, and being able to design family units to accommodate those needs, I

think, is absolutely key.”

The city’s employment lands zoning has also been criticized for being discriminatory towards women. As Toronto’s employment areas are changing from industrial manufacturing sites to accommodate more state-of-the-art office buildings, “sensitive uses” like daycares are still not permitted in these buildings according to the city’s comprehensive zoning-by-law. The city’s employment lands review, as part of Official Plan Amendment 231, allows daycares to be permitted in site-specific instances in office buildings, however the zoning has not caught up.

Ryerson University senior researcher **Diana Petramala** also pointed to the role that transportation planning plays in providing a more equitable environment for women. According to 2016 census data, almost 400,000 women commute by transit in the Greater Toronto Area, accounting for 57.8 per cent of transit commuters.

“The commute to work is a really important factor in whether a woman chooses to work, or the type of job she takes... Women are less likely to leave their Census divisions than men are, so that beholds

them to jobs that are closer to home. That’s why [more] women in the suburbs work in service-related jobs than, say, management or professional jobs,” said Petramala.

In Toronto, Wong-Tam stressed that there have been a number of transportation infrastructure decisions that perpetuate this gender imbalance by prioritizing the needs of men over women. For example, she questioned why city council continuously supports repairing the Gardiner Expressway, which accounts for 53 per cent of the city’s ten-year state-of-good-repair budget.

“If men are the predominant drivers of motor vehicles, then the fact that we’re rebuilding the Gardiner to facilitate the movement of passenger vehicles more quickly as opposed to thinking how do we make the street level environment more pedestrian-friendly with a network of rapid buses, then right away, I can tell you that that would be us designing the city of the 21st century, once again for men and the needs of men,” said Wong-Tam.

“And when council talks about the need to build subways, subways, subways, I

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am pretty confident they are not talking to women and girls who live in the far corners of Toronto, where having subway access right to the downtown core may not be their top priority. Their top priority may be having better surface transit and rapid buses,” she said.

CP Planning principal **Cheryll Case** told *NRU* that the systemic discrimination towards women in urban planning and transportation policies is largely due to ineffective community consultation practices.

“In the City of Toronto, the average attendee of a community planning consultation is a white, male homeowner over the age of 55. It says a lot. So, it’s important that this office and strategy is in now. Really, what its role is, is to undo all of the mess that we have now as a result of 100

years of a lacking relationship with women in the city,” said Case.

Typically, to gather feedback on city planning matters, staff will organize city-wide community consultation meetings, where residents are encouraged to attend and provide feedback. In addition to these community meetings, the city will put out formal surveys and collect feedback received via social media. But residents doing shift-work, or those working multiple jobs and / or having significant child care responsibilities cannot attend the city’s public consultation meetings. Lack of internet access also excludes people from the community engagement process and ultimately, from participating in the creation of city-building policies.

Social Planning Toronto

executive director **Devika Shah** told *NRU* extensive community engagement will be critical to ensuring that the city collects data on the lived experiences not only of women, but of women of colour, of members of the LGBTQ community and of other groups that are disproportionately discriminated against.

“We need to have a flip in our understanding that if [the city] puts out calls for consultation and people don’t respond, it doesn’t mean people aren’t interested. The onus is on [the city] to get the responses,” she said.

This involves knocking on doors, going into open community forums, and working with community ambassadors to establish trust between city institutions and residents, which will help staff collect data and information on the lived experiences of residents.

Other land use and transportation strategies that the city can pursue that would more accurately reflect the needs of women and other groups that face gender discrimination in public policy include prioritizing transit-oriented development, sidewalk and public realm improvements, lighting upgrades and other pedestrian mobility improvements.

The cost of developing a gender equity unit within the people and equity division for 2020 is projected to be \$333,132, which will be

included in the 2020 operating budget of the office of the city manager, subject to council approval. Once the strategy is developed, staff will report back to council in the fourth quarter of 2021. 🌸

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