
Women and Gentrification: A Call for Further Research

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Research studies on gentrification have focused primarily on social class, race, and ethnicity. Little attention has been given to women and gender. This essay is an attempt to indicate women's power in shaping the urban landscape. In doing so, it examines women's contributions to the process of gentrification, and critiques urban theory for ignoring women. Finally, it reveals that women's discontent with suburban living is a facilitator of gentrification. Women's actions in the process of gentrification require further investigation.

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Studies on gentrification have multiplied exponentially in urban studies, but have largely been inattentive to a gender analysis. Some scholars have called for a focus on gender along with race and class (Bondi 1994, 1999 and Lees et.al. 2013 to name a few). This article revisits discussions of women and gentrification, and examines women's struggle for equality, and their relation to the city. Within this context, women's activism is brought to light.

Gender analyses of gentrification are under-represented in scholarship. Researches on gentrification focus mostly on social class with some studies including race and ethnicity. Those which examine gender have come mainly from geography (Lees et.al. 2013; Bondi 1994, 1999; Kern 2010, 2013). Bondi (1994) posits that women favor central residential locations which make possible employment, reduced commuting costs in time and money, and adjustments to gender roles within the family. In direct contrast to the post WWII era, family units are also altered for small family size with few children or no children, enabling the affordability of higher priced housing. This is also supported by a survey of cities in Norway conducted by Hjorthol and Bjornskau in which for women, 'Living in inner parts of the city is convenient for organizing everyday activities' (2005: 363). Bondi also asks,

...insofar as women's preferences are reflected in decisions resulting in gentrification, an important question remains: does the expression and realization of these preferences reinforce, reduce, modify, or leave unaltered existing gender divisions within the home, or in any way encapsulate new conceptions of masculinity and femininity? (2005: 196).

Government, as a component of the political economy, often develops policies to foster gentrification in specific neighborhoods. One example is an investigation of Rotterdam, the Netherlands (Berg 2013). In a deteriorated portion of the city, the plan for revitalization is gentrification. Old housing is replaced with larger, more expensive structures. An appeal is made to young, middle class families, build your own dream house'. The main strategy is to establish a child-friendly city. Research on North Brooklyn's waterfront demonstrates a similar process (DeSena 2009). Local government rezoned the area from industrial to residential. Luxury housing has replaced dormant, decaying factories to create a 'new' community.

Regarding women who work in neighborhoods undergoing gentrification, Kern (2013) investigates the Junction neighborhood in West Toronto and explains that boutique businesses

for middle class women consumers have replaced an urban industrial environment. Women working and possibly living in the Junction find themselves in a precarious position as the neighborhood continues to gentrify. Kern examines how these women mitigate and manage the threat of ongoing gentrification. They present conflicted responses to signs of retail gentrification, and place value on marginality, independent businesses, and mutual care. They formed women-centered, informal networks and filled social service gaps, while remaining sensitive to the likelihood that gentrification will displace small businesses and thus, their own workplaces. These findings raise questions and concerns about the future of women's entrepreneurship.

Women's entrepreneurship was also studied in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Patch (2008) examines street gentrification through 'faces on the street'. These are women entrepreneurs who provide surveillance and foster new relationships 'since a key purpose of a face on the street is to befriend strangers' (p. 109). Unlike Kern's study in which retail gentrification threatened women entrepreneurs, Patch views small businesswomen in Williamsburg as promoters of gentrification, welcoming strangers and serving as friendly representatives of a changing neighborhood. They created quasi-public spaces for women within their storefronts.

Using the lens of local activism, another perspective on women and gentrification is offered. North of Patch's research site is the neighborhood of Greenpoint. Greenpoint has experienced environmental injustices with more of its share of toxic producing industries and environmental polluters. One example is an oil spill from a refinery that leached into the Newtown Creek and flowed into the foundations of the homes of nearby residents. There was obvious concern about diseases and property damage that would result from a failure on the part of the oil company to contain the leak. In their analysis of the community activism that took place around this issue, Hamilton and Curran (2013) indicate how long-term residents 'school' gentrifiers about their long-standing struggle since the 1970s. Attention to the issue from the media and State government came with increasing gentrification. Long-term residents were able to frame the challenges of this problem as a common concern for all residents; this was an attempt to create a coalition among residents regardless of social class and length of residence. The authors declare that long-term residents were successful in their endeavors in that they were able to maintain the working class, industrial, immigrant character of this part of the community, while also moving forward the issue of clean-up. It is concluded that,

In this case study, a committed group of long-term residents and gentrifiers, along with Riverkeeper and elite allies at various government agencies and scales, compensated for each other's imperfections and created a successful 'ecology of agents' (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0042098012465128>).

My own research has documented various trends of neighborhood stability and change in North Brooklyn which includes gentrification and large-scale development (DeSena 1990, 1999 2005, 2009; Krase and DeSena 2016). Analyzed in these studies are women's informal and formal activism, and their skillfulness at mobilizing the community around issues such as toxins, schools, affordable housing, green spaces, and feeding the poor. These studies examined both working class women and women gentrifiers with each group participating in 'parallel

cultures'. At the same time, regardless of social class, women are the 'switchboard' (Goodman 1989) in neighborhoods. Information comes through them and they strategize and take action.

Yet, these studies are relatively few within the context of the larger field. In fact, it has been argued that there is a 'missing feminist revolution' (Stacey and Thorne 1985) in urban studies. Essays which focus on women and their relation to the city shaped the field of urban feminism. An example is the now classic volume, *New Space for Women* (Wekerle et al. 1980). This compendium of essays addresses a number of topics as they relate to women's lives and women's needs, such as a reconceptualization of housing design for family types other than the nuclear family, and a feminist critique of architecture and urban planning. Around the same time, the journal *Signs* published a special supplement, *Women and the American City* (Stimpson 1981). The volume broadens the discourse and incorporates discussions on women's local participation and spatial constraints.

Moreover, historically, urban theory is a male paradigm. The Chicago School and its tradition is dominated by men and continues to investigate men in the city, as members of the gang (Thrasher 1927), as hobos (Anderson 1923), corner boys and college boys (Whyte 1943), defenders of the neighborhood (Suttles 1968), and blue-collar workers (Kornblum 1974). Even the more recent 'code of the street' (Anderson 2000) emphasizes men's milieus. When women are discussed, they are extensions of the men under study. Community studies which focused exclusively on women are not emphasized. *Sally's Corner* (Presser 1980), for example, follows unmarried mothers in New York City and examines their coping strategies as their responsibilities increased with parenting. Similarly, *All Our Kin* (Stack 1974) and *Norman Street* (Susser 1982) investigate the informal strategies developed by women to address poverty, and how support systems of family and friends play a major role.

As urban theory shifted attention to the political economy, the perspective directs interest and research consideration away from aspects of social life where women are more readily seen. The focal point moves from ordinary people and everyday life to power brokers within growth machines (Logan and Molotch 1987, Gottdiener 2010, Harvey 2010). Even the urban culturalist perspective (Borer 2006) does not give explicit thought to women, even though the paradigm would be appropriate for such research. The activism of ordinary women drops out of view (Jacobs 2016, Naples 2014, Marwell 2009).

Over time, more urban feminists seized the responsibility of investigating women within an urban context. *How Women Saved the City* (Spain 2001) is an example of an historical investigation of the contributions of women in shaping the urban landscape at the turn of the 20th century. The focus is on the creation of 'redemptive places' in which middle class women assisted single women, immigrants, and African Americans adjust to life in urban America. Spain also poses the question to urban scholars, 'What happened to gender relations on the way from Chicago to Los Angeles?' (2002). She critiques the development of urban theory which ignores women. Spain cites the contributions of women to the development of the city. In Chicago, she highlights the settlement work of Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop, and the documents and publications created from their work at Hull House. This movement was given no mention by the Chicago School. As urban theory transitioned to focus on Los Angeles (LA) as a model, the efforts of urban feminists continued to be snubbed. Spain emphasizes the

achievements of Dolores Hayden, architectural historian, and Jacqueline Leavitt, urban planner, both of UCLA. Their contributions were overlooked as the LA School progressed.

In summary, the relative lack of urban research focused specifically on women suggests what Lofland describes as the ‘thereness’ of women (1975). Women are merely ‘there’, part of the scene like window dressing, but not part of the action. The research camera has failed to zoom in on them.

Furthermore, women’s relation to the suburbs is a catalyst of gentrification. The post-World War II era ushered in a major spatial transformation in the U.S. To a large extent it is a period of building highways and bridges leading to suburbs, and presenting one’s success and acquisition of the American Dream by residence in suburbs. A number of factors made suburbanization successful. Developers of suburban communities lured families through advertising campaigns, (<https://www.google.com>) creating the desire for home ownership that offered more private, indoor and outdoor spaces, with trees and grass relative to the city. Driving was also deemed more preferable to taking public transportation in getting around. The financing for suburban homes often came through government mortgage programs for veterans of the War. At the same time, cities were experiencing the migration of Blacks from the South, spurring racial tensions. Within this context, public education in cities was perceived as losing quality. These circumstances lead to massive white flight from cities to suburbs. As an example, New York City lost about a million people between 1970 and 1980 and with them their tax revenue, a factor in creating the fiscal crisis.

The ‘good life’ in the suburbs did not fulfill the dream for all. Feminists, who were college educated and advocates of the Women’s Movement, found themselves raising children in suburban communities. Betty Friedan, author of the classic *Feminist Mystique* wrote in a chapter titled, ‘The Problem that has No Name’,

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night — she was afraid to even ask herself — ‘Is this all?’ (1974: 11).

Her work stirred a national conversation regarding ‘women’s place’.

Urban feminists questioned, ‘Is the bloom off the suburban rose?’ (Fava unpublished). Fava wrote in ‘Women’s Place in the New Suburbia,’

This chapter begins with the premise that suburbs constitute a different environment for women than for men. As geographic extensions of our male-centered society, suburban environments offer a secondary place to women, a place inhibiting the full expression of the range of women’s roles, activities, and interests (1980: 129).

She goes on to indicate how the low density of the suburbs inhibits women's mobility and opportunities in general. Time and distance are features in decision making regarding employment, shopping, and socializing.

Following this and similar feminist critiques of the suburbs, the debate takes a different turn contending that 'Women's Place is in the City' (Wekerle 1984). In this article, Wekerle asserts that urban issues are women's issues. Women's increasing labor force participation created greater demand for amenities and proximity to them which is found in cities. Thus, the suburbs are failed environments in meeting the needs of women. Additionally, she wrote,

Women are a major impetus for the revitalization of North American cities. The dramatic increase in women's participation in the labor force in the seventies has created a new demand for urban housing and for services that can only be found in cities. At the same time, it removes the full-time services of women 'to manage household consumption' (1984: 11).

She goes on to cite economist Eli Ginzberg who asserts that neighborhoods that supported dual-career families are drivers of gentrification and revitalization of the city. Thus, Wekerle's article is early recognition of the influence that women have on the process of gentrification.

It becomes clear from these essays that feminism and changing gender arrangements have been major contributors to population shifts in the urban landscape. Urban feminists acknowledge that suburban living at best limits women and at worst isolates and oppresses them. In making residential choices, many women reject the suburbs and opt instead for living in the city. This is also the case for women with children, regardless of family type. These choices produce a process of gentrification. Preference for city living is further supported through economic restructuring in which work for women is more readily available and more easily accessible in the city.

This essay is an attempt to call for further research on women, as well as additional research on gender, gender relations, and gender identity with regard to the process of gentrification and neighborhood change. It concludes with a quote from a study of women in Barcelona.

Female consciousness...promotes a social vision embodying profoundly radical political implications...To do the work society assigns them, women have pursued social rather than narrowly political goals. When it appears that the survival of the community is at stake, women activate their networks to fight anyone—left or right, male or female—whom they think interferes with their ability to preserve life as they know it (Kaplan 1982: 566).

Kaplan's statement is a reminder of women's power in shaping the city. And for this reason, they should be central to research on gentrification.

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