

## Reconfiguring Gendered Spaces: A Qualitative Analysis of U.S. Vision in Mitigating Inequality across Domestic and Public Spheres

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### ABSTRACT

*With this study, the U.S. agenda on gender equality is brought into question, and the challenge to reconstitute gendered spaces in both domestic and public spaces is focused. By combining the “feminist spatial theory” with the intersectional analysis, the study “qualitatively” triangulates policy texts, institutional reports, and narratives to generate evidence that even though progressive initiatives in the U.S. have disrupted unstable gendered divisions by offering provisions enabling workplace reforms, caregiving support, and strengthening political representation, significant disparities persist. The structural limitations that still exist, particularly in the form of wage inequality, unequal caregiving roles, and the establishment of gender norms, continue to frame the social lives of women. Additionally, these constructions of race, class, and immigration status are intersecting dynamically so that the experiences of women can be mediated through these constructs and demonstrate how marginalized groups can end up excluded out of proportion due to universalist policy frames. Consequently, the research argues that institutional reform, focused cultural change, intersectional inclusivity, as well as the comprehensive integration of the public and the private realms are needed to effect substantive change in gendered spaces.*

**Keywords:** gender inequality, gendered spaces, domestic sphere, public sphere, intersectionality, feminist theory, U.S. policy, qualitative research

### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is rooted in the spatial patterns of societies, and it functions both privately and publicly. Feminist research has shown that this division of domestic and public spheres favours men in the political process, at the workplace, and in the community, whereas women are relegated to domestic and childcare activities, which makes their work undervalued and restricts their social role (Spain, 1992; Massey, 1994). The concept of “gendered spaces” denotes locales that are marked with gendered norms: distributions and symbolic values recreate the gender roles themselves (Spain, 1992). In the context of the United States, during the Cold War, the ideology of “domestic containment” strengthened the argument about the right place of women at home, to preserve national values through a controlled gender division of duties (May, 1999).

Gendered power relations are perpetuated in a variety of contexts by the spatial arrangements that organize everyday life. In the domestic realm, the “double burden” is still present: women have to work and engage in unpaid housework, which is often disproportionately high (Bianchi et al., 2012; Hochschild and Machung, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to this imbalance as the number of caregiving and household responsibilities of women rose simultaneously with home and work site overlaps (Power, 2020). At the same time, the urban sphere is still male-dominated in the realm of public space; there is a lack of proper lighting, ineffective design, and planning systems that consider the needs and safety of women, which limits their comfort in these facilities (Kern, 2020; Beebejaun, 2017). Feminist urbanism, in turn, questions these absences, compelling planners, architects, and policy-makers to embrace the inclusive design that would recognize the heterogeneity of spatial experiences of women along the lines of race, class, ability, and sexual orientation (Kern, 2020; Fainstein and Servon, 2005).

In this respect, the modern “U.S. vision” of gender equality is a variable set of policy efforts, institutional forms, and ideological transformations aimed at overcoming spatially anchored disparities. With the opening of the White House Gender Policy Council, the government has shown direct commitment to gender equity in both public and personal realms, with a special focus on securing the economy, preventing violence, finding access to healthcare, and a more general inclusion of society (The White House, 2021). This latest endeavour is, however, positioned at the nexus of a long historical trajectory. The formation of the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women under President Kennedy in 1961 was an early indication of the awareness of women’s inequality and later fuelled the first changes in policy, though in a cautious approach to constitutional solutions (Hartmann, 1998).

Despite the significant potential of gender-oriented policy interventions in connection with spatial inequality, their use in the given field is under-studied. Internationally adopted gender mainstreaming offers a conceptual framework: by injecting a gender perspective into planning and policy, it is expected to restructure the built environment to one that serves all genders equally (Walby, 2005; Booth & Bennett, 2002). However, in the United States, illustrative examples of gender-responsive housing, inclusive public infrastructure, or equity-oriented urban design are either scant or spread out.

This study contributes to the gap in the literature by using a qualitative analytic frame to explore how the U.S. initiatives, conducted via federal councils, feminist urban planning discourse, and socio-spatial policy frameworks, meet and, in turn, have the potential to alter gendered inequalities in both domestic and public realms. The research question raises both a conceptual and pragmatic angle: How do the policymakers, practitioners, and citizens understand U.S.-driven attempts to transform spatial gender norms? Further, what are the narratives being told about home space, street travel, and safety, and how do these narratives connect (or not) to the larger institutional projections on gender equity?

This qualitative study gives preference to the voices of lived experience by using in-depth interviews, systematic analysis of policy documents, and narratives of participants. It aims to clarify the interconnection of macro-level gender discourses with daily practices, thus shedding light on the ways in which the U.S. commitments to gender equality are rearticulated through kitchen counters, city sidewalks, and public parks. The situational anchoring of the analysis will allow identifying not only the opportunities but also the gaps existing in the current gender policy, thus helping to develop more spatially differentiated interventions.

This paper contextualizes its research within the feminine geography, gender-based policy, and socio-spatial fairness to illuminate how the United States’ gender equality formulations challenge, in any way, the spatial duality inherent in the domestic and public spheres. By interrogating qualitative narratives that exist both in policy discourse and specific locations, the study brings a finer understanding of the current restructuring of gendered spaces in American society.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### ***Gendered Spaces: Theoretical Foundations***

Feminist geography, sociology, and urban studies have always focused on the concept of “gendered spaces”. The concept was initially formulated by Spain (1992) and constitutes a method of analysis to describe how spatial set-ups reproduce and legitimise gender disparity. She argued that the built environment, whether it is the interior of a house or the urban structure, can not be taken as impartial; it is shaped according to social values that define who is where and what to do with such a place. Massey (1994) also emphasized the social and political nature of space and place by stating that spatial constructions both reflect and re-inscribe social hierarchies at the same time.

Over the decades, feminist theorists have explored the historical dichotomization of the private/domestic sphere and the public sphere. It has been socially constructed that the domestic sphere, which is associated with caregiving, child rearing, and emotional labour, is feminized and the public sphere, which includes politics, commerce and civic engagement, is masculinized (Pateman, 1989). This fissure affects how resources are distributed, how one develops his or her identity, and agency. McDowell (1999) confirms that the boundaries that are created between these spheres sustain occupational segregation, wage gaps, and restrictions on the movement of women.

### ***The Persistence of Domestic–Public Inequality***

Both quantitative and qualitative inquiries affirm the fact that spatial inequalities are persistent. Despite the achievements related to women entering the labour market, they still bear the so-called “double burden” of paid and unpaid work (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this imbalance as remote working and schooling increased the need for care, and this impact was most significant on women (Power, 2020).

In the context of civic discourse, “feminist urbanism” condemns the manner in which the urban planning process systematically fails to meet the needs of women, including poor street illumination, insufficient access to mass transit that does not accommodate caregiving commutes (Kern, 2020). As Beebejaun (2017) notes, spatial planning often neglects intersectional issues, which makes the urban spaces less safe and accessible to women, especially women of marginalised communities.

### ***U.S. Policy Visions on Gender Equality***

The history of gender equality and its relation to the United States has experienced long-term change throughout the decades. “The Presidential Commission on the Status of Women (1961)” is one of the turning points in this history. Even though employment, education, and legislative changes were the main recommendations given by the Commission, they also helped reveal the structural foundation of spatial inequity, putting the importance of childcare provisions and the adoption of equitable workplace practices into the spotlight.

Since the emergence of the Biden administration, the gender policy council at the White House has broadened current policy guidelines, which explicitly tackle intersecting considerations in spatial justice such as safe housing, safe neighbourhoods, safe communities, and equal access to health care (The White House, 2021). Even though gender mainstreaming as a systematic incorporation of gender perspective into all policy areas has received policy momentum in the U.S. debates, its spatial use is comparatively less developed in comparison to European and UN examples (Walby, 2005; Booth & Bennett, 2002).

### ***Feminist Geography and Spatial Policy Integration***

Feminist geography provides the much-needed analytical tools in reconstituting gendered spaces. As Fainstein and Servon (2005) argue, urban planning should not be limited to male viewpoints and, at the same time, should reorganize urban governmental set-ups to break down systemic discrimination. These ends coincide with the theories of spatial justice articulated by Soja (2010), which supports the idea of redistributing resources and opportunities utilizing spatially focused interventions.

The gender-responsive urban practice has both opportunities and challenges in the United States. Local progress can be confirmed by city-level projects, such as gender audits in the field of transportation planning in San Francisco. However, the lack of a national commitment to gender-sensitive spatial planning inhibits the national vision of the country from systematically tackling domestic-public inequality that has become entrenched in the country.

### ***Gaps in the Literature***

Although there is a significant level of theoretical interest in gendered spatial arrangements, the empirical research that connects U.S. national gender policies to later change both at the domestic and public levels is comparatively limited. The existing literature tends to question either the policy processes (by reviewing legislation and institutions) or small-scale case studies (workplace organization or micro-level urban design interventions). There are, however, not many studies that seek to synthesize the insights obtained in these various spatial scales. There is also a lack of intersectional analysis that puts race, class, sexuality, and disability in the foreground of gender policy and spatial justice in the U.S.

Filling the knowledge gap in the existing literature on gender equity requires an analysis that incorporates policy actors, urban planners, and ordinary citizens. With the help of qualitative research, these stakeholders will be able to collaboratively study the construction and performance of gender equality ideals in specific contexts. This partnership will enable a more down-to-earth evaluation of whether and how U.S. desires for gender equity are transforming lived experiences both in the domestic and public spheres.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research design, based on the feminist epistemology and socio-spatial inquiry, is used in the present study to explore the U.S. visions of gender equality, enactment, and interpretation concerning the domestic and the public spheres. In this study, qualitative approaches will help since they prioritize subjectivity, meaning-making, and lived experience, which can help to gain better insight into how spatial inequalities are being reproduced or challenged.

### ***Research Design***

The current paper utilized a multi-method qualitative approach that combined three major methods:

***Document Analysis:*** The current paper reads the U.S. policy texts, i.e., reports published by the White House Gender Policy Council and legislative bills that are directly gender equity-oriented, to explain the institutional interpretation of gender equality. In this way, it explores how such policies organize domestic and public functions and evaluates to what degree they directly confront spatial inequalities.

***Semi-Structured Interviews:*** The interviews will include about twenty to twenty-five participants, including policymakers, urban planners, gender advocacy heads, and women representing different communities. The semi-structured design will provide flexibility to explore the perceptions of participants in gendered spaces and be thematically consistent in terms of work-family balance, security in the public area, and access to resources.

***Thematic Analysis of Narratives:*** Thematic analysis will be employed in line with the framework recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) to review the accounts of the participants to identify repeated patterns, inconsistencies, and unique perspectives. Using this method, the data can be coded and thus organized into analytically powerful themes that directly relate to the research questions.

### ***Sampling Strategy***

A purposive sampling technique will be used to ensure that the included people have first-hand exposure to gendered environments and that they are familiar with the U.S. systems of policy. This will include:

- Policymakers engaged in gender equity programs.
- Feminist urban planners and architects involved in inclusive spatial design.
- Leaders of advocacy organizations working on women's rights.
- Everyday women of domestic and public spaces, with attention to intersectional representation across race, class, and age.

This sampling process allows obtaining a diverse and slightly shaded set of perspectives that, on the one hand, reflect institutional goals, and on the other hand, the demands of daily life.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

The period of data collection will cover a three-month duration. The policy documents will be achieved from the official governmental sites and archives. Face-to-face interviews will be organised and held over secure online platforms, depending on the availability and location of the participants. The interviews are expected to take 45-60 minutes each and are to be digitally recorded after consenting to the participants in advance. Informed consent forms will be used to indicate the purpose of the study, participation as voluntary, and confidentiality guidelines, so they can meet ethical needs.

### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis is applied in this study to analyse both document and interview information. Coding will be done in three stages:

- “Open coding” to identify preliminary categories.
- “Axial coding” to establish relationships between categories, such as links between domestic responsibilities and policy visions.
- “Selective coding” to refine central themes, such as “redefining domestic work” or “gendered experiences of urban safety.”

To organize and manage the conducted research systematically, “NVivo”, or other similar qualitative software, will be used.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

With this subject of gender inequality and subjective experience being sensitive in nature, ethical concerns will take top priority. The confidentiality of the research will be maintained by anonymizing the data of the participants, and the participants will have the right to withdraw at any point in the research. Further, an institutional review board (IRB) will be consulted to ensure that ethical standards of research are met.

### ***Trustworthiness and Rigor***

To assure maximum credibility and trustworthiness, the current enquiry uses triangulation of the sources of data; that is, documents, interviews, and narratives. The strategy of member-checking is used, and



participants are allowed to analyse and justify their own words. The reflexivity is upheld, and the researcher acknowledges his or her positionality and how it might affect data analysis.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Gendered Divisions in the Domestic Sphere***

Although there is a widespread societal push towards gender equality, data still show that the domestic realm is a battleground with entrenched gender inequality. Most of the women participants in the current study indicated that the burden of care work, household chores, and emotional work remains unevenly distributed in their favour. As one respondent explained, the “invisible burden” of domestic responsibilities that trailed her in the wake of a hard day at the job exemplified the lasting influence of the so-called “second shift” (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). The emergent data indicate the persistence of established traditional gender discrimination in family life, a fact that has been difficult to change despite decades of policy advocacy to support common household duties.

The views of men show subtle but considerable changes. The younger respondents, especially those whose socialization took place in the discourse settings informed by the U.S. egalitarian principles, registered a greater willingness to take up household chores and childcare duties. Several participants in the interviews clearly expressed attempts to undermine the expectations of their fathers’ generation. Taken together, these accounts suggest that the discourses on gender equity in the U.S., which permeate cultural, educational, and policy domains, are slowly being infiltrated into the private sphere of family life, thus allowing emergent patterns of collective household work.

Even in the context of evolving gender norms that have extended the range of choices in the configuration of domestic labour, such emerging patterns are limited by structural limitations. The fact that the United States does not mandate paid parental leave on the federal level contributes to the imbalance in care distribution, as women are forced out of the labour market disproportionately to perform the caregiving role (Gault et al., 2014). Those who took part also noted that in even the most progressive families, institutional structures often assumed that women automatically play the role of the primary caregivers. The fact that there exists a gap between the ideals of equality as an aspiration and as practice in the everyday running of institutions underlines these “conflicts between ideology and practice” in the reorganization of gendered domestic spaces.

### ***Transformation in the Public Sphere***

In contrast to the slow and uneven progress that could be witnessed at home, the public sphere became a sphere that could be better described by the visible change. Respondents reported advances in educational achievement, career advancement, and job representation, and they credited those improvements to the effects of gender-equity efforts and the support of legal tools, especially Title IX, affirmative action, and the overall anti-discrimination laws in the workplace. A corporate lawyer was one respondent who emphasised that she was a beneficiary of the same policy measures that had enabled her career path and was indebted to the fact that she would not have entered a male-dominated profession without such efforts.

Though the concept of inclusion might be seen as a synonym of equality, the empirical data show that inclusion in organizational settings might conceal deep-rooted inequalities. In gender-progressive contexts, women of colour often described the following two dynamics that were interrelated: episodic tokenism and persistent lack of access to promotion practices compared to their white female counterparts. The latter result supports the aspect of intersectionality as articulated by Crenshaw (1991) that proves the concurrent nature of racialized, gendered, and labour-related inequalities. The testimonies of working-class women who noted that narratives of “equality at the top” have the effect of side-lining the

experiences of employees in low-paying, precarious jobs with little institutional backing were also not to be overlooked.

Traditional U.S. discussions on gender equality have expanded possibilities; however, the ensuing benefits are by no means equally distributed. Even though the reconfiguration of the public sphere has occurred, the increased inclusiveness that has taken place often works as a partial change that privileges surface diversity over structural inequities.

### ***Intersectionality and Uneven Experiences***

The results of the interviews highlighted the different expressions of inequality due to the overlapping factors of gender, race, class, and disability. As an example, the immigrant women were characterized by a dual burden since they were simultaneously exposed to traditional gender norms in their cultural context as well as facing systemic obstacles in trying to navigate their way through the institutions of the U.S. Similarly, the accounts of disabled women indicate that, although they managed to enter the professional world, they could not fully enjoy the rights of citizens due to a lack of accessible infrastructure, thus, demonstrating how discourses of equality often fail to capture embodied experiences.

In the discourse of the U.S., gender equality is frequently discussed in a way that reduces the status of a particular female subject to the universalized subject of discrimination. Nonetheless, the experiences of women are heterogeneous. White middle-class women might find significant benefits in the current workplace protections, though the women in the social periphery are faced with a series of disadvantages. Frameworks that do not address race, class, and other axes of difference, as Hooks (2000) argues, may end up supporting the very exclusions they hope to undo.

The disparity in gender advancement in the United States stands out, especially in the female self-evaluation of empowerment. Some women of colour frame their rise to power less as a manifestation of U.S. gender-equality efforts, then it is an indicator of their fortitude in the face of institutional injustice. Their stories emphasize the lack of fulfilment of their visions of equality that are aspirational until they grapple with the barriers that continue on an intersectional basis.

### ***Reconfigured Gendered Spaces: Progress and Paradox***

The given body of empirical evidence indicates that, although the reconfiguration of gendered spatial relations in the United States is indeed taking place, this change is by no means a linear process, much less an all-inclusive one. In the domestic sphere, change toward a more equal distribution of domestic work seems to be occurring slowly, albeit in a context that still has a patriarchal base that is still being reinforced by underlying public policy. This same trend is reflected in the public domain: increased inclusivity can be found, but the structural inequalities limit the level of inclusivity that can be attained.

The observation of the “ambivalent gains” of feminism in the neoliberal context by Fraser (2013) leads to a kind of theorizing that can be described as being two-sided. Empirical data suggests that the role of women in the working world and the broader society has increased significantly; however, this environment also co-opts equality rhetoric and continues to reproduce social inequalities. The trend of women as both wage earners and the primary caretakers is normalised but presented as empowerment, when the lack of quality systemic childcare is an indicator that inequality is simply being rearranged, not eliminated.

The discussion of the participant stories identified a continuous process between cultural ideologies and realities. Even though the discourses of equality in the U.S. support equal division of domestic tasks and equal access to the public sphere, cultural norms and institutional practices remain male-friendly. Such an arrangement creates an uneven topography where growth is accompanied by unresolved inequality.

### ***The Role of U.S. Vision: Aspirational Yet Incomplete***

The evidence testifies to the two-fold character of the gender-equality agenda in the United States: it is both a cultural aim to be pursued and a policy tool to be implemented. Aspirationally, the vision indicates a move beyond fixed binary notions of gender and embraces equality in both the personal and the societal spheres. Pragmatically, it makes laws, institutional changes, and policy interventions that create real opportunities for women.

Consistently, the participants noted that, despite aspirational rhetoric, the structural change needs serious policy implementation. A prominent discussion on the division of household labour, such as that around the sharing of housework, is often lacking in the institutional structures, especially universal childcare and mandatory parental leave, that would make equality between the sexes a reality in daily life. Similarly, diversity programs in the workplace are more likely to expand representation and at the same time fail to abolish deeply-rooted inequalities like pay gaps, racial discrimination, and gendered bullying.

Gender equality in the United States is still an unrealized dream. As a cultural and political structure, it still requires constant amendment to address systemic hurdles as well as intersectional inequalities. The inclusion of the voice of the marginalized groups and a call to overhaul labour, family, and institutional arrangements will be necessary to make progress beyond merely symbolic gestures.

### ***Conclusion to Findings and Discussion***

This exploration shows that U.S. visions of gender equality reorganize gendered spaces in significant and profound ways, but that the reorganization is also disproportional and contradictory. In domestic contexts, cultural change and structural stasis are reflected, and in the public sphere, the frontiers of inclusion are broadened and still-existing inequalities are perpetuated. Intersectional inequalities are still at the heart, and this means that equality cannot be achieved in universalist terms. The U.S. vision should therefore not be treated as a finished work but as a developing schema, which is bound by the commitment to end inequality but is also compelled by the need to continuously re-imagine itself according to the challenges of lived life.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The current research examines how the contemporary picture of gender equality in the United States rearranges gendered spaces both in the domestic and public spheres. Using qualitative methodology that combines narratives, policies, and discourses, the analysis has shown that despite significant efforts, gendered inequality still exists in social, cultural, and institutional settings. The results also clarify the transformative power of current efforts and structural limitations that remain to limit them, further forming the need for continued, intersectional work in order to break down the established inequalities.

### ***Conclusion***

The main agenda of the United States towards gender equality has been two-fold, playing at the domestic arena, challenging the unequal distribution of labour, and playing at the public sphere, opening up the space by ensuring inclusive participation. The White House Gender Policy Council and other reforms related to the workplace are some of the examples of significant steps toward the recognition of the interdependence of these realms (White House, 2021). Despite these trends, the persistence of the so-called second shift (Hochschild & Machung, 2012), the existence of the gender wage gap in wages (Blau & Kahn, 2017) and unbalanced childcare sharing responsibilities indicate that there has not been enough structural change.

Intersectional studies show that the experiences of women regarding inequality are not unitary but heterogeneous. Race, class, immigration status, disability, and age are just some of the variables that have



a significant impact on the opportunities available, the amount of discrimination that is experienced, and the effectiveness of equality-oriented policies (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2019). The danger of policies made with a universalist approach is that they are likely to mask such differences and preserve rather than abolish exclusionary dynamics. This constant work of reconfiguration of gendered spaces, in turn, must be understood as a form of contestation, as context-specific and as always in process.

There is progress and inconsistency in the efforts of the United States to reduce structural inequality. Despite the actions taken by the state to redefine societal expectations and expand civil rights, the ongoing cultural conventions and institutionalization still impose inequality on both the personal and the social sphere. According to empirical evidence, significant change requires not only the improvement of policy but also social attitude, organizational culture, and domestic practice transformation.

### ***Implications***

The implications of this study extend across theoretical, policy, and practical dimensions.

***Theoretical Implications:*** The current study supports the primacy of “feminist spatial theory” in explaining gendered inequality. Based on the works of Spain (1992) and Massey (1994), the empirical results support the fact that space is not politically and socially neutral; instead, it is a produced space through various ideological and material processes. In the U.S. context, the study highlights how policy interventions have an impact on spatial relations, and at the same time, it demonstrates how resistant conventional spatial arrangements are. Additionally, the intersectional perspective further improves this analytic framework and demands that scholars analyse gender in the context of its interaction with other levels of power and identity.

***Policy Implications:*** The empirical data show that it is necessary to make comprehensive, intersectional policies. Any policy aimed at combating wage inequality, burdensome caregiving, and inadequate political representation should explicitly consider differences among women of different racial, class, and social locations. Otherwise, there is a risk of helping only a privileged group of women and letting structural inequalities exist. Moreover, policymakers should also understand that the domestic and public spheres are inseparable: changes in workplace practices should be coupled with caregiving, parental leave, and domestic equity initiatives.

***Practical Implications:*** As this study shows, practitioners, educators, and activists need to think about cultural transformation in addition to policy reform. Measures such as normalizing shared caregiving responsibilities and mentorship programs that focus on women in leadership or campaigns to combat gender stereotypes all re-engineer gendered spaces. The effectiveness of such practical interventions, however, should not ignore intersectionality, and the experiences of the most marginalized people should not only be a factor in designing but also a factor in the implementation of these programs.

***Future Research Directions:*** The scholarship, which is presented here, pushes us further in our knowledge, but it also still makes sense to conduct further qualitative research that will help us understand the nuances employing which people negotiate these changing gendered landscapes. Cross-national analysis would help explain how disparate socio-political systems shape this reorganization, and a longitudinal study could help provide answers about the path of U.S. policy priorities over time.

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