The missing link in the sustainability chain: Gulf women

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper offers a unique perspective on the urbanisation process in developing cities, with a particular focus on the region of the Gulf States. Beyond economic considerations, the analysis sheds light on the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors, gender dynamics and urban development. Based on the calls for human-centred approaches to rethinking urban design and management of cities require the integration of these cities’ inhabitants’ lived experiences, that impact residents’ daily lives. The focus is on the importance of women’s perspectives in the development process.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses a systematic literature review that builds on existing knowledge relating to urbanisation, modernisation, sustainable cities, gender and the Arabian Gulf. It uses Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’ theory to understand the evolution of the Gulf Cities which is a novel approach. This adaptation offers a unique perspective on the transformations and challenges that these urban spaces face. Furthermore, it offers a firm foundation for developing advanced knowledge on the interdisciplinary nature of the topic discussed and assists in integrating empirical findings and perspectives from different resources.

Findings – The extreme levels of transformation in urbanisation in the Gulf States built cities that are no longer solely places for settlement, production and services but operate as significant influencers on the social, economic and political relations that produced design and cultural challenges. These cities became epicentres of power and politics that shaped the national visions and influenced policy. The process of inclusive and conside ate urban development that the Arabian Gulf region is aiming to embark on is not a new exclusive strategy. But a process that has been implemented and tested in other urbanised areas globally.

Research limitations/implications – Very little historical urban research on the Arabian Gulf countries exists, hence, the difficulty in researching the Gulf urbanisation process or providing historical encounters of the change.

Originality/value – This paper delves into the gendered aspects of urban planning, an aspect that is frequently overlooked. It contributes to the discourse on gender inclusivity in urban spaces by focussing on Khaleeji women’s experiences, offering insights that go beyond economic considerations. The use of Lefebvre’s “right to the city” theory to understand the evolution of the Gulf Cities is a unique approach. It investigates the interaction of various factors such as economic, cultural and political influences on Gulf urban development. This adaptation offers a distinctive perspective on the transformations and challenges that these urban spaces face.

Keywords Gulf women, Urban design, Inclusion, Sustainable development, Gender equality

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper offers a unique perspective on the concept of urbanisation, with a particular focus on the Gulf States. The typical focus on this region has been from economic considerations. However, this analysis sheds light on the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors, gender dynamics and urban development. The use of Lefebvre’s “right to the city” theory to understand the transmogrification of the Gulf Cities is a contemporary approach. This adaptation offers a unique perspective on the transformations and challenges that these urban spaces face. Using urban development and Lefebvre’s theories, this paper delves into the gendered aspects of urban planning, an aspect that is frequently overlooked within this region. It contributes to the discourse on gender inclusivity in urban spaces by focussing on Khaleeji women's experiences, offering insights that go beyond economic considerations.

Undeniably, the factors that influence urban development are interconnected, and thus, it is vital to understand the interactions between the economic, cultural, social and political...
influences impacting the Gulf urban development process. As such, an in-depth examination offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in these evolving cities.

The changes that have faced the region are enshrined in its approach to the drafting, writing and implementing of policies and strategies. Examining the methods and outcomes of women’s inclusion in urban development and addressing the critical aspects derived from existing literature while emphasising their relevance to the region adds to the existing knowledge base and provides insights into the success or failure of women’s inclusion. Highlighting the significance of the contextual exploration of gender dynamics within the Gulf region adds to the literature on urban development and gender inclusion. As an example of this, a simple search today that uses keywords of women, Arab Gulf and development highlights two extreme ends!

Extremes in Gulf women’s image
The first is the openness and ambitious agendas that the Gulf region is embarking on and on the other extreme is the orientalised image of the passive and excluded women. However, undeniably the exclusion of women’s voices in these aspiring agendas which include the sustainable development process is evident in the Gulf States’ political, economic, social and urban structures. The voices of Gulf women, if they exist are either, controlled and restricted to pre-empt directions; or very minimal, undermined and dismissed entirely in the processes and structures. As an example of these two extremes, a simple Internet search of two words: women and Saudi Arabia presents one of two illustrations: a woman in full black or a woman behind the wheel in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi women driving decree: a reactive process. Interestingly, the time between the decree allowing women to drive in Saudi and the actual date for women driving was just under two years. However, the ecosystem needed for women to drive on Saudi roads was not carefully thought through or considered, such as not all stakeholders were aware of this change or how they needed to act upon this new change. For example, not enough driving instructors or schools were in Saudi to accommodate the growing number of Saudi women wanting to obtain their driving licences, so after major societal pressures they outsourced some of the demand to Bahrain. Another was for the first few days women had difficulty fuelling their cars because some of the workers were not clear if they were allowed to serve women drivers or how they would interact with them.

Having said this, this is not a criticism of the approach, but merely to highlight the importance of including women’s voices and perspectives in not only issues related to women but also to the family and community. This is not to suggest that women were not consulted or included, according to the Rector of Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University (PNU), Einas bint Suleiman Al-Eisa, a couple of women including her were invited to the announcement. Nonetheless, as the PNU Rector mentioned in her comments during the opening of the Gulf Research Meeting (GRM) 2022, it was not the usual inclusive process of consultation that is globally used, she was an invitee in the launch of the transformation plan rather than a contributor to the process.

Reframing this example and analysing the process of Saudi women driving decree can be eloquently articulated through Henri Lefebvre’s expression of “cry and demand”. The route taken by the Saudi government has been a reactive process of dealing with the rising issues rather than proactively approaching the development process through the inclusion of women’s voices and other relevant stakeholders.

Impact of rapid urbanization and modernization
The sweeping fast-paced developments in the Gulf States over the past 40 years following independence and over 70 years since the discovery of oil have radically restructured the
region socially, culturally, politically and economically. The rapid growth associated with the economics of oil placed the Gulf States on a fast path to urbanisation\(^1\), modernisation and globalisation\(^2\); severely impacting traditional family relations and function. These radical changes did not only restructure the Gulf States' urban layout but also reshaped the Khaleeji family structure due to the modernisation process. Several studies have been conducted to estimate and evaluate the impact of modernisation and Westernisation on traditional family structures (Riad, 1981, p. 8). However, research that reflects the views of women in the modernisation and urbanisation process is relatively limited. Therefore, it is crucial to examine and obtain the women's perspectives on the particular elements that impact their lives both positively and negatively (Al-Ammari and Romanowski, 2016). The last century has witnessed tremendous transformations that shaped the global world order; be it the end of colonialism, the construction of a new world, the formation of new nation-states, the administration and enactment of the international political economy, or simply the creation of an intergovernmental global entity such as the United Nations (UN). These novel global structures have and continue to influence national and regional strategies and constructs of societies and communities. To this end, this report examines the circumstantial factors related to the inclusion of women in the development processes of urbanisation.

Unveiling the rapid urbanisation and modernisation processes that accompanied the oil boom and the silencing and omission of Khaleeji women's voices and perspectives are crucial to highlight the importance of their voice; ensuring a collective and cohesive urban development that is in line with global developmental demands of sustainability and inclusion (Riad, 1981). The use of these terms in this paper is deliberate to highlight how the developments associated with them have been heralded as progress and have notably lifted millions of people out of poverty, yet in recent years aftermath of these developments has been alarming with entrenched inequalities, violence, environmental destruction and accelerating climate change (Kasper et al., 2017).

**Gender dynamics in gulf urbanization: unveiling challenges and transformations amid economic growth**

The modernised and urbanised spaces for social events have unveiled a higher ratio of women, relative to men, in greater utilisation of public spaces. Higher densities of women are an indication of their success and a demonstration of excellent management that satisfies a diverse range of people (Whyte, 1980). Yet, these spaces can facilitate inequalities because they are created by men, for men, and consequently, undermine the presence of women (Moghadam and Rafieian, 2019). A noticeable gap and limitation are apparent in studies on Gulf women, their modern cities and the associated social problems that coexist within such urban spaces (Alomair, 2015; Kelly, 2009). Women in the Arabian Gulf, like their counterparts in other urbanised cities, face key challenges in developing urban cities. While not necessarily new, these challenges vary in significance and trend with urbanisation and modernisation. The rapid processes that accompanied the oil discovery transformed the Arabian Gulf cities to become ‘centres of economic activities and globalised societies.’ And thus, became employment hubs attracting the immigration of regional and global communities to reside and aid in the rapid development process, influencing the traditional national citizenry and impacting the urbanisation infrastructure of desert lands (Cummings et al., 2019, p. 6–8).

Amidst the numerous transformations and developments in the Gulf States over the last five decades, the role of women has changed; whose prospects have ebbed and flowed with economic, political and social transformation and disintegration. In fact, the continued political turbulence in the Middle East has affected societies and women’s opportunities in the entire region, including the Gulf States. Studies show that although women form half the world population, numbers have not prevented historical suffering from variations of
The discovery of oil transformed the labour market demand and supply mechanism in the region, facilitating an influx of foreign labour and creating much imbalance at the national level. According to Maurer and Potlogea (2021), natural resources of gas or oil wealth are salient in creating gender-biased shocks to the labour markets. Oil and gas are considered to be male-biased labour discoveries that typically increase the demand for a male-dominated workforce and increase male prospects and wages. While the economic advantage is clear, this phenomenon is detrimental to women’s participation in the labour market and is referred to as the Dutch disease (Ross, 2008).

The high demand for fulfilling the rising global need for the natural “black gold” substance has omitted women from the equation of employment in this field. The imbalance of the oil discovery was beyond the natural resource workforce; it harmed and affected sectors that included female-based economic specialisations such as health, education and service-based industries. Thus, increasing male wages allowed for a decrease in married women’s labour supply, driving women to shy away from being active members of the national workforce. In the same breath, the growing local population, comprised of national and migrant residents, required another influx of foreign female labour that the national citizenry could not accommodate due to education or vacancy. This resulted in a decrease in both the supply of and demand for female labour, resulting in a decreased female workforce and consequently, negatively impacted the urbanisation process of their localities. Evidence for this can be observed in the increase in foreign male labour on a yearly basis, for example, it increased from 50.5% in 1975 to 70% in 1980, which continued to increase with the national development and changes (Birks et al., 1986, p. 801).

The impact of migration and demographic shifts on Gulf urbanization

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) the Gulf States host over 10% of all migrants globally. The proportion of non-nationals in employment is amongst the highest in the world averaging 70.4% ranging between 56 and 93% in the individual countries. However, with the increasing influx of foreign labour to cover the growth needs of the labour market, there was a need for a new era of urbanisation. The sudden oil wealth was accompanied by unparalleled demographic changes resulting in rapid growth in populations residing in the Gulf cities, some of which saw almost 100% such as Qatar and from 50 to 80.7% in Bahrain. Similarly, in Kuwait, UAE and Saudi, but not Oman, urbanisational shifts accompanied the growth of trading routes over 200 years ago (El-Arifi, 1986, p. 227). The urbanisation process and demographic increase in local populations that accompanied the oil wealth carried estranged elements of modernisation and globalisation.

The accelerated urban development accompanying the modernisation and globalisation of the Gulf societies left little room for nationals to voice their views. The advent of oil provoked a massive state-led modernisation project that transformed the Gulf countries, cities and societies in irremediable ways. The deliberate urbanisation was imposed by Western experts who had little understanding of the local dynamics of societies. Parah Al-Nakib (2016) describes how the commissioned master plan for transforming Kuwait City into an urban modernist avant-garde socially progressive city in the Middle East. It was a city that had both the ultimate urban plan for an idealistic city and society altogether and planning that aimed to implement a novel form of a collective societal association that functions to instrument unidirectional aspects of social change (Al-Nakib, 2016, p. 5). Such modernist planning ideology required a strong authoritarian regime and a weak prostrate society that would and could not challenge proposed changes.

The oil wealth that fell into the ruler’s pockets empowered them with a submissive immunity from local societies that had become more receptive to the change. To better illustrate, oil wealth remains a form of personal wealth for ruling families, and thus, the ruling
families have continued to govern urban decisions with little criticism or oppositional recourse. It instilled a sense of a desire and requirement for the progress and development of a prospering region. Al-Nakib argues that the new oil-built urban cities were not designed to accommodate a new futuristic, prosperous society, but a form a state-led strategy for social control (Al-Nakib, 2016, p. 6). Oil disrupted every aspect of society life in the Gulf States. Men were overwhelmed with government demands for a national male workforce, while women were indulged in ease and prosperity. Hence, a state-led urban planning strategy has been and continues to be an essential form for understanding and controlling cities, structures and urban areas. It allows for the perception of cities as unified and orderly wholes rather than a collection of disjointed parts; minimising the chances of the unpredictable and uncontrollable situations that may arise especially for these newly formed Gulf Countries. However, this ambitious, controlled strategy neglected to account for the evolution and growth of societal demands, especially concerning women.

The majority of habituation in Gulf areas is centred in main cities, with a remarkable urbanisation rate of 98% according to 2015 UN estimates (UN.org). These cities demonstrate both state-led control and power strategies over territories and populations and aspirational social developments and lifestyle choices of its inhabitants. This is especially true within highly educated young youth and women. The spatial practices of growing populations within these cities, be it mobility, consumption patterns, leisure activities, entertainment interests, or accommodation, are all reflective of the considerable differences between this generation’s demand of the urban city and their predecessors. The impact of these tight-knit urban areas limited the movement of its female population both national and foreign, failing to consider that society is comprised of both sexes and that planning processes impact women’s social and economic status, their inclusion in the workforce and labour, their education and training, their geographic and social mobility, associations and groups (Papanek, 1976). The processes of urbanisation and the nature and scale of migration to the Gulf have been shaped by gender roles and relations, in particular with the high influx of male migrants to cover the shortage of oil demands.

State-led urbanization and the overlooked role of women

However, female migration to the Gulf States has also increased to restore the equilibrium the discovery of oil disturbed. Hence, careful review and consideration are crucial for assessing and modifying shared, unisex urban spaces to ensure women’s safety and security, work environment and transportation. Although the Gulf region is considered safe for women according to the global Women, Peace and Security Index (WPS index) See Figure 1, concerns remain. The Gulf States ranking in the index vary and is not of the best or highest ranks, for example, both Bahrain and Qatar rank at 97/170, Kuwait at 123/170, Oman at 110/170, Saudi Arabia at 102/170 and the best is UAE at 24/170. However, one of the greatest safety and security challenges is faced by female migrant workers in private households and employers. In recent years, several countries have introduced basic legal protection measures, but the effectiveness is yet to be seen. In addition to safety concerns, an apparent determinant of these spaces is they highlight the inequalities in areas of policymaking (Fuszara, 2019, pp. 689–698), sustainable education and development (Suwarno, 2019) and, most importantly, health (Borrell et al., 2019, pp. 515–534).

Contemporary literature concerning Gulf cities suggests that these cities are no longer just centres of economic activities but are predominant social development hubs of their inhabitants. Inhabitants perceive them as a marketplace that serves as a hub for exchanging goods, services, and ideas, and for learning. Cities are complex systems of interrelated socioeconomic dynamics of transformative and disruptive powers influencing people’s lifestyle patterns, social choices and resource sustainability (Cummings et al., 2019, p. 6). Thus,
their lack of sensitivity to the presence of women is a concern for any future urban planning agenda. Urbanisation and urban development have hastened in many developing countries in the past few years. However, as many of the Gulf cities witnessed major urbanisation and modernisation over the last fifty years or so, it has been both effortless and challenging at the same time. While citizen and migrant-led population growth has undoubtedly contributed to urbanisation; oil wealth has accelerated local and global migration to these cities, creating an imbalance in the economics of supply and demand. The ability to adapt and adjust to the changing demands of the growing population has placed cities and their governments in an awkward position. They face local pressures for reform and change and global demands for sustainability and inclusion, making that initial state-led strategy of control difficult to maintain, especially with the decline of the oil wealth and the instability that faces the region as a whole. The need for a revived urbanisation strategy has heightened since the Arab Spring, with little room for recourse progression. The times when a sole ruler held the capacity and means to sustain a vision for the future are outdated with the present demands of local pollution to co-create and co-produce a sustainable future. Therefore, any urbanisation and modernisation plans necessitate a different strategy that can only succeed with the active participation of the voices of its women and young youthful generation.

With the above contextualisation of the region and its development process and problematic development agenda, this paper not only identifies the issues but also makes recommendations for more inclusive urban planning. These recommendations are grounded in the understanding of the Gulf region’s context, making them applicable and impactful for policymakers and practitioners.

**Aim and objectives**

This paper aims to examine how the urban design process has overlooked the perspectives and contributions of women in Gulf cities and advocate for their inclusion in future sustainability efforts.
The specific objectives of this systematic review are:

1. Explore existing literature on urban design in general and if available specifically on the Gulf cities.
2. Examine how gender-inclusive urban design can enhance sustainability.
3. Analyse the role and contributions of Gulf women in urban development.
4. Investigate historical perspectives on women’s presence in Gulf city architecture.

Methodology

The research methodology employed for this review article involved a systematic exploration of literature to examine the role of women in urban development globally and highlight the limitations in the literature about the Gulf cities, with a specific focus on the implications for sustainable and inclusive urban design. Initial searches were conducted on platforms such as Google Scholar and Science Direct using a carefully selected set of keywords encompassing topics such as urbanization, gender equality and sustainable development. The keywords employed included: “Gulf women, Urban Design, Urban management, Human-centered approaches (Thatcher, 2013), Sustainable development, Social cohesion, Gender equality, Urbanization, Modernization, Arabian Gulf Region, GCC States, Women’s contributions, Sustainable Cities, Urban growth, Economic access, Equality, Demographic changes, Natural resources, and Global sustainable demands.”

This was followed by employing a combination of Boolean operators to refine search results. Focussed on peer-reviewed articles, conference papers and authoritative publications. To enhance the comprehensiveness of the literature review, access to university library resources was utilised, ensuring retrieval of peer-reviewed articles, conference papers and reputable publications. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to filter relevant works, prioritizing recent publications and seminal contributions.

The selection process involved an initial screening based on titles and abstracts, followed by a detailed evaluation of the identified articles for relevance and quality. Data extraction involved the synthesis of information related to key themes, methodologies employed and findings. The synthesis and analysis phase categorised literature into thematic groups, examining historical perspectives and contemporary challenges in urban design and women’s contributions. A critical evaluation of the reliability and credibility of the selected literature was performed, considering the methodologies employed in relevant studies and the contextual relevance to Gulf cities.

The synthesis of findings contributed to the development of a conceptual framework emphasising the importance of gender-inclusive urban design for sustainability. The final composition of the review article involved structuring the literature in a coherent narrative, incorporating relevant quotes, statistics and case studies to support key arguments while maintaining academic rigour through proper citation and referencing standards. Ethical considerations were integral, ensuring due acknowledgement of sources, upholding academic integrity and respecting intellectual property rights. The review also acknowledged potential limitations and suggested avenues for future research on gender-inclusive urban design in Gulf cities.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria:

1. Included studies addressing gender-inclusive urban design.
2. Focussed on works exploring the role of Gulf women in urbanization and sustainability where available.
3. Excluded irrelevant or outdated publications.
A new phase of urbanisation: her city!

The call for the “integration of women in the development process as equal partners with men” has been a defining objective of UN development agendas since 1975. In fact, the UN delegation in Mexico City stipulated “bringing sustained improvements to the well-being of the individual and society that bestowed benefits on all”, highlighting inclusivity objectives. However, this broad objective took decades to manifest by governments and individuals alike. While governments recognised the importance of women at that time, women were included and discussed superficially (Papnek, 1977). These efforts continued as obstacles to women’s inclusion and development participation remained static and unchanged. By 1980, a new ideology emerged underpinning sustainable development as a metaphor for defining human welfare and environmental management; wherein, urbanisation was identified as one of the most important strategies for development in the 21st century.

Today, 55% of the world’s population lives in urban areas; while this ratio has exceeded 70% in the Gulf Countries, in areas such as Qatar and Kuwait urbanisation is at 100% (Ramadan, 2015). Despite urbanisation being often acknowledged for producing job opportunities and increasing income, health, education and infrastructure services; the unprecedented rates of urbanisation have consequently posed numerous challenges in terms of overpopulation, pollution, climate change and loss of fertile land (Shen et al., 2016). Previously, the urbanisation process concentrated on creating an infrastructure that served the economic developments and industrial expansion of needs, and although some might argue that growth reasons for expanding urbanisation, others contend that it is urbanisation that attracts growth (Spence et al., 2008). Urbanisation has been considered as a sign and a reflection of a developed region, and while this consideration can be biased, it encouraged developing countries to urbanise and modernise their countries and nations (Dijkstra et al., 2021).

Urbanisation brought with it numerous challenges, particularly in terms of inequality. The urbanisation process overlooked the inequalities and increasing poverty that urbanisation created when poorly unplanned and implemented, especially in developing countries, where rapid urbanisation elicited socio-economic imbalance. It widened the socio-economic and political gaps between the rural and urban areas, urban city centres and their outskirts and between the diverse groups in society. The societal learnings were crash courses that were created to help societies move from the rural governance mandates to the newly developed urban ones. Unlike the developed countries where urbanisation was gradual, accompanied by high gross domestic product (GDP) and education per capita. This gradual urbanisation is what Henderson (2002) refers to as “Cities in a Mature Urban System” and allowed for the development of politico-economic institutions and market tools crucial for efficient urbanisation, equality and quality of urban life. Urbanisation in developing and emerging countries presents an opportunity to transform production and income levels for people, especially by including women in the process. Applying the relevant and applicable policies, strategies, governance and support, urbanised cities and towns can drive the desired development. Therefore, prioritising urbanisation that is inclusive of women’s perspective at the top of national agenda and vision, can facilitate positive change and development.

Traditional urban and city plans and designs fail to recognise the complex and unequal relations between the sexes in societies and communities. Until recently, women’s rights in urban areas were ignored and disregarded, dismissing the fact that women have been active participants and users of urban spaces and buildings in the cities. Still, many challenges remain, limiting women and girls, and hence, the need for city policies to ensure equal conditions and opportunities for all people in society (Falú, 2017). With the increase in the world’s population, urbanisation has encouraged the formation of informal unplanned urban settlements that are becoming a predominant risk, specifically to the most socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable; young girls and women. Urbanisation and urban spaces hold
social constructs of gender-based discriminating features that form barriers and vulnerabilities for women. These barriers highlight urbanisation biases towards gender inequality, poverty, unpaid care work, violence and unequal participation in the decision-making process that create barriers to female education, employment, housing, health, transportation and basic services. Research has shown that the usage and advantage of public spaces by women and girls is much less than that of men and boys; and that they feel significantly insecure and excluded. There is a lack of participatory urban planning and design. The absence of the most vulnerable, local actors, communities and children, in the planning and designing process is a crucial area for development in these spaces. Research has shown that the inclusion of these groups in the planning and design process creates opportunities for more inclusive, equal and sustainable urban development (Andersdotter Fabre et al., 2021).

Urbanisation has shaped most of the significant trends in societal infrastructure in the 20th and 21st centuries. The global shifts in urbanisation have been a transformative force that can and ought to be utilised to ensure the sustainable development of people and places globally. These urban cities, if properly managed and planned, can provide both tremendous opportunity and a valuable tool for guiding global sustainable development agendas. They are ideal for addressing many challenges for sustainability such as poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation and climate change. However, this can only be achieved through effective interventions and tools that mainstream gender, youth and socioeconomic perspectives by strategically involving women and girls in urban planning and design.

Over the last few decades’ organisations, networks, feminist groups, female scholars and women politicians have contributed tremendously to unveiling the ways in which the traditional forms of planning and designing city policies and actions neglect women. The traditional planning and designing fail to recognise the importance of women in shaping, building, improving and maintaining human settlements in urban areas that ensure better habitat conditions. Women grassroots organisations and social movements have successfully ensured women’s rights to land, housing and services, issues that are otherwise neglected by the traditional urbanisation policy process. The cultural and social composition of urban cities is typically diverse, allowing for socio-economic and cultural changes and developments, as well as education, and jobs to flourish. Urbanisation makes it possible for social and political movements to deconstruct social and gender stereotypes and challenge the local traditions that often hinder the enactment of women’s rights in cities.

The success of urbanisation and city policies depends on their capacity to create a shared sense of belonging and commitment that ensures equal opportunities and habitat for both sexes as well as the diverse and ethnic minority groups of these cities. In urban theory, cities are understood as social and historical constructs that are viewed by different individuals in different ways. The conditions, forms of accessibility and quality of life that cities offer to individuals are different according to gender and other socially constructed identity categories (Falú, 2017; Moghadam and Rafieian, 2019). Territorial factors such as localisation, mobility and accessibility determine how cities are experienced and lived by women, men, young people and children. How people use and enjoy urban spaces also links to their citizen rights: rights to health services, infrastructure, transport, security and recreation. Each inhabitant experiences, uses and enjoys public spaces in a unique way that is the same or different from the other. The unequal gender relations manifest themselves in various scale of the territory: housing, neighbourhood, city, health services and also through her body where she is disputed with bodily integrity and endangered reproductive rights (Falú, 2017). Therefore, the question of equality is not limited to physical spaces, access and usage but also relates to the symbolic and political sites inhabited by people and diverse groups.

The unprecedented economic, environmental, demographic, social and spatial challenges that face cities, towns and villages require global strategic plans, road maps and drivers of
sustainable urban development aimed at delivering key goals and results. The emphasis that gender equality is systematically integrated into all sustainable urban development activities is a long-standing priority for the UN. Hence, the UN through its different entities such as the UN-Habitat and SDGs has presented clear strategies and guidelines for countries to develop country-specific strategic plans and road maps that lead to more inclusive sustainable urban development (UN-Habitat, 2013).

**Gulf states new urbanisation agendas**

This guideline emphasised by the UN entities has been embraced by the Gulf States within their national visions and strategies, but this has not been the only determination for the embarkment of change. The sequence of events and reports that began with 9/11 followed by the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) in 2002, the 2005 report “Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World,” and, recently the “Arab Spring” all triggered a global focus on the situation of women in the region, highlighting the deficiencies the Arab governments face when it comes to women. Furthermore, the UN’s launch of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 highlighted the urgency of sustainable development for humanity’s survival, placing pressure on individual countries to address and tackle sustainability problems as a matter of high importance. Along with 180 other global governments, the Gulf States signed the pledge that showed their commitment to 17 SDGs. Still, their unprecedented growth and increasing oil wealth led these States and their populations to unsustainable patterns of politics, economics and distribution of vital resources.

That being said, the Arab region has had successes in advancing women’s social, economic and political rights, specifically the Gulf regions in relation to their vast oil wealth. However, the fundamental issues that hinder women’s equality and rights continue to be shadowed by political structures, hegemonic institutions and urban spaces created with consideration to only expanding male workforces. While some scholars have emphasised the noticeable, marked modernisation in the Gulf cities, much of this work has primarily focused on the economic perspectives of urbanisation: the skyscrapers, the wide roads, the luxury malls and extravagant lifestyles. Thus, the Gulf urbanisation and modernisation strategies transformed entire countries into urban settlements. As mentioned previously, Qatar and Kuwait are almost 100% urbanised leaving little room for new urban developments, and instead, a reshaping of the existing Gulf urban city. Hence, it is important to extend the lens beyond the economic perspectives and examine the intersections of urban spaces, socioeconomics and politics from a trans-disciplinary and pluralistic perspective. These cities represent a key platform for new and acute transitions that affect not only the material representation of the Arabian Gulf nations but also influence their social and spatial practices and create new spaces and opportunities for equality (Cummings et al., 2019).

That said, across the Gulf countries there is ambiguity around the meaning and definition of the terms “sustainability,” “sustainable development,” and “sustainable design.” This ambiguity allowed the use of a green-wash development agenda built by international corporations for a global community and suited the prospering nation-building agendas promoted by the State rulers in the region. Hence, the occurring research themes of sustainability in the Gulf region reflect how the vague concept of “sustainability” can be co-constituted with other powerful political and economic systems such as the national visions, strategies and nation-building that are driving the new urban development agendas forward. However, as argued by Guy and Marvin (1999), this singular approach to the sustainable city or urban development agenda is endangered by blindness, preventing them from other logical and innovative approaches to sustainability. Effectively, this singular approach is omitting the voices of the most important constituent the Gulf women; hence, they are the missing link in the sustainability agenda.
Women’s right to the city: the Khaleeji version

The Gulf States’ urbanisation and development patterns have transplanted an alien urban culture that has radically transformed these States from tribal societies to Westernised societies, but dismissed an important constituent of these cities that was overlooked—women. Referring back to Lefebvre (1996) “The Right to the City” description of the urban development of a city as “cry and demand” frames the current picture depicted in the Gulf States that ignored a large percentage of its residents’ perspectives. Strengthened by wealth, ambition and scarcity of time and challenged by biased national policies, real estate developments around the Gulf States meant immediate decisions and rapid developments had no time to accommodate others’ perspectives on the use of urban space (Bagaeen, 2016, pp. 39–41).

The right to the city has invoked many diverse voices that used Lefebvre’s claim to focus on the content and prospect of realising this right. It is considered with the question of how these spaces are best used for human living and survival, and not with dependencies on market value or commercialisation. Yet, most of the current modernisation and urbanisation in the Gulf region embraces the stances of property rights over urban spaces rather than the right to the city (Zaidan and Abulibdeh, 2021, pp. 193–195). This precise stance in the urbanisation and modernisation process allowed women to take a back seat to their rights in the city. Furthermore, the region’s cities were reshaped by its increasing number of migrant inhabitants who were diverse in gender, age, race, ethnicity and occupation that were helping build and make the cities but had little rights to them in the process. With the growing number of women—both local and migrant—using these cities beyond a mere area of residence, but for work, leisure, entertainment and errands; it has become evident how the urbanisation infrastructure that once seemed modern, appealing and welcoming is becoming restrictive and stifling. The issue of thinking and incorporating human rights in general and women specifically is particularly important with the increasing calls for women’s inclusion and development that these States strive to achieve. The significance associated with the right to the city and the value of what the city offers to its inhabitants is overshadowed by their commercial and architectural value and view rather than the use of their inhabitants, especially women and families (Purcell, 2014, p. 142).

According to Harvey (2006), the right to the city encompasses the right to change and alter the city to its inhabitant’s needs. Harvey (2006, p. 102) argues that “we must imagine a more inclusive city, even if it is a continuously fractious one, based not only upon a different ordering of rights but upon different political and economic practices.” Harvey (2006, p. 83) considers it a precious and treasured human right, where one can reinvent oneself through the ability to transform, renew and reshape the city. Employing Lefebvre’s argument for the right to the city, Harvey argues that ‘If the right to the city is a cry and a demand, then it is only a cry that is heard and a demand that has forced to the degree that there is space from and within which this cry and demand is claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public’ (Harvey, 2006, p. 114). This signifies a mandate for public spaces that can be seized by social and cultural movements, spaces that are catalytic sites for new developments, concepts and configurations for urban living can be imagined and created.

The UN organisation UNESCO and UN-HABITAT have both adopted and championed the term “The right to the City” to articulate policy reforms for more inclusive and sustainable urban development (Purcell, 2014, p. 141). The efforts of these international organisations have led to conceptualising the right to the city as part of a broader human rights agenda (UNESCO, 2006; UN-HABITAT, 2010; Sugranyes and Mathivet, 2010). The aim was to articulate these objectives to develop global and national charters that can emphasise the right to the city and encourage urban policies that promote sustainability, justice and inclusion. However, the right to the city that is being advocated is understood
how these spaces are best used for human living and survival and not dependent on their market value or commercialisation. Yet, the advocacy push has become broad and all-encompassing, incorporating beyond the human element of space, but to include telecommunications, cultural memories, retraining, architectural barriers and so on, that pore more on the revenue elements of urban development to the point that it is becoming everything and nothing. This broad over-inclusion allowed for the term ‘the right to the city’ to be infertile (Purcell, 2014, p. 141).

Having said that, in 70 years following the discovery of oil, the Gulf urbanisation process neglected the ecological systems of its inhabitants. This rapid process created disruptions in the societal structures of the Gulf communities and their well-being. Hence, careful thought should be reflected upon for several considerations on the urbanisation process that accompanied the Gulf States. First, the modernisation process that accompanied the discovery of oil addressed the rapid requirements of urban developments needed to accommodate and house the overflow of non-nationals, abandoning the current urban structures of societies and communities of the Gulf States. Second, the flow of oil revenue and demand for labour promoted the migration of Bedouins from their native habitats to these new economic cities. In Qatar, the reconfiguration of lands and habituated areas dislocated tribes and communities from their original homelands to remote unfamiliar areas, for example, the current location of Qatar Foundation used to be home for a number of Al-Thani and other tribal families (Wiedmann et al., 2012, pp. 38–42). Third, the national and international legal and illegal migration contributed to the development of slums in these new cities, an issue not unique to the region. As such, real estate developments in the Gulf States became cramped and confined to a small group of political and economic elites that shaped these cities, creating a form of power dynamic that is increasingly widening the inequality and social injustice gap considering the migrant percentages in these countries (Bagaeen, 2016, p. 42). Fourth, the ambitions of the urbanisation process damaged and disrupted the agricultural and maritime economies that once were the lifeline of these communities, and though some might argue the benefits of oil disruptions outweigh the amount of damage, which actually oil wealth can accommodate. For example, the urban developments in Bahrain have destroyed the once known as the “island of a million palm trees,” similarly the redemption of the sea-land has affected the Sea life surrounding Bahrain Islands (Thompson, 2009; Bucheery, 1999, p. 62).

Addressing inclusion and sustainability in urban design and planning is a complex, multi-disciplinary issue that requires different perspectives on space and use. The push for sustainable agendas and the impact oil has had on urban development presents the Gulf States with a serious conundrum that can only be resolved with a genuine and determined agenda that is inclusive of women, families and societal structures.

Practicality and research implications
The research findings recognise the importance of setting actionable plans and practical steps for strategies that can create inclusive and sustainable urban spaces in the Gulf States. The most successful practices can be highlighted as follows:

1. **Implementation Committees:** establishing and encouraging the formation of committees or finish task forces devoted to the implementation of gender-inclusive urban policies. Additionally, ensuring that these committees have diverse representation, inclusive of women, urban planners, policymakers and community leaders.

2. **Pilot Projects:** the implementation of pilot programmes and development projects in selected urban areas that can test and refine any proposed strategies. As well as an
effective monitoring and assessment procedure for these programmes that can address specific issues confronting women in urban settings.

(3) **Awareness Campaigns:** launching public awareness campaigns to educate residents on the significance of gender-inclusive urban planning, and ensuring information is disseminated through various media channels, community events and educational programmes.

(4) **Local Collaboration:** The efforts must be collective, hence forming alliances with community organisations, civil society, women grassroots and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are concerned with women’s rights and urban development. The use of existing networks is highly beneficial in increasing the impact of initiatives and ensuring community participation.

(5) **Directives:** Creating and implementing training programmes that provide directions and instructions for city planners, architects and policymakers is essential to the success of this process. Providing workshops and seminars to help communities better understand gender dynamics in urban spaces and to equip them with the tools they need to incorporate inclusivity into their projects.

**Conclusion: Khaleeji women’s right to HerCity**

Although Lefebvre developed his theories about the evolution of space within the context of urban Europe, an analysis can be utilised to understand the evolutionary characteristics and future considerations for the Gulf Cities. Lefebvre’s “right to the city” illustrates the idea of inclusion of the inhabitants of a city. He sees it as a struggle to “de-alienate” urban spaces so that inhabitants can remake and reshape cities by reintegrating them into the web of social connections and appropriation. He describes that by appropriating the city, the inhabitant makes it one’s own, making it accommodate to needs and wants (Purcell, 2014, p. 149; Lefebvre, 1996, p. 174).

In the case of the Gulf States, the process of inclusive and considerate urban development that the region is aiming to embark on is not a new exclusive strategy. But a process that has been implemented and tested in other urbanised areas globally. The extreme levels of transformation in urbanisation in the Gulf States built cities that are no longer solely places for settlement, production and services but operate as significant influencers on the social, economic and political relations that produced design and cultural challenges. These cities became epicentres of power and politics that shaped the national visions and influenced policy. Today Gulf cities illustrate both old and new urban strategies, demonstrating room for change, yet they still display the Gulf governments’ strategic control and power over territory and population, and their ambitious social developments and lifestyle choices.

The findings from this research highlighted valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that urbanisation presents in the Gulf States. The first is the *Changing Urban Dynamics* within societies with a growing young and youthful generation. The quantitative data revealed shifting patterns in the younger Gulf generations’ spatial practises, mobility and consumption, which indicate a shift in Gulf cities’ traditional role as economic hubs to influential social and trendy cultural centres. The other highlight is the *Gendered Mediation or conciliation of Space*. The qualitative study investigating the gendered mediation of urban spaces emphasised the need for more engagement with women’s everyday spatial practises and needs. It identified challenges such as economic inequality, safety concerns and a lack of female lead spaces are barriers to inclusion.

The spatial practices of mobility, movement, accommodation, leisure activities and consumption patterns exercised by the younger Gulf generations demonstrate the changing
social and lifestyle perspectives and views. These cities are no longer economic hubs but also social centres that are transforming and disrupting the city structures in an unsustainable way (Cummings et al., 2019, p. 6). The numerous visions, master plans and development projects accompanying the development process of these States adopted rhetoric that were aligned to the global policies but created local disparities axing women from the public sphere economically and culturally. The call for human-centred approaches to rethinking urban design and management of cities requires the integration of these cities’ inhabitants’ lived experiences that impact residents’ daily lives.

The crucial question that stems here is, what and how can we learn from others to implement tailored urban solutions? It is not enough for women to have a seat at the table without a voice or vote in the solution. The critique by feminists over urban theory and planning that developed in the 1970s demonstrates how urban developments created gendered environments predominantly suited to the needs of men. Despite many useful insights and examples that have been developed to rectify the issue, there remains a limitation in the integration of women’s perspectives within the professional practice of urban planning. The recognition of this and other limitations to women’s inclusion in the planning process can help to understand the ways in which women will be able to access and use these cities. The shifting patterns in gender relations reflect the successes of socio-political movements in reclaiming rights to the city over the past decades. However, even with these advances, women continue to tolerate unequal situations in society. Women continue to face economic inequality in the labour market, especially the dismissiveness of the fallen burden of unpaid labour. The underrepresentation of women in political and leadership roles has a tremendous impact on planning and development agendas. With the increase of working women, there is the issue of women’s safety and security, especially with the persistence of widespread violence against women (Beebeejaun, 2017, p. 324).

Hence, creating inclusive urban spaces requires an understanding of the gendered mediation of space through greater engagement with the everyday spatial practices of women. This engagement can provide critical insights into how urban spaces can be claimed by women and enable them to exercise their rights. As global efforts increase to de-gender urban spaces, what and how can the Gulf States learn from others to implement tailored urban solutions, while remaining true and considerate of cultural and societal norms to avoid any of the former modernisation and globalisation mischiefs? It is not enough for women to have a seat at the table without a voice or vote on proposed solutions, but it is vital that she is at the centre of the analysis and evaluation of the solution. Formulating the right strategies inclusive of women’s input can bring about the anticipated sustainable performance in the development process. Therefore, fostering social cohesion, inclusion and safety in society is a core element for creating sustainable and resilient cities and communities. The inclusion of women at the centre of the urban planning process can overcome the current fragilities of mobility, economic access and equality for women.

Through thought-provoking investigation and integration drivers of women’s social, technological, environmental, economic and political contributions, better sustainable cities can be shaped. Hence, for the Gulf States to embrace the inclusion of women in their sustainable agendas and to align with global development changes, the following set of proven implementation strategies have been highlighted as suitable recommendations:

1. **Co-Creation and Co-Production programmes**: Creating and implementing targeted programmes to increase women’s participation in urban planning decision-making processes; and establishing initiatives that address exclusion and economic inequalities, such as promoting equal opportunities and reducing women’s unpaid labour burden.
(2) **Security and safety precautions:** Implementing measures to improve women’s safety and security in urban spaces by ensuring that public areas are well-lit, improving policing, spreading awareness and increasing the number of community engagement programmes to educate societies.

(3) **Participation in the Community:** Encouraging community engagement using technology and other collaborative platforms that include a diverse range of stakeholders, while ensuring that women’s voices are central to the planning process.

(4) **Integration of Policies:** Integrating gender-sensitive policies into urban planning frameworks to ensure that women’s unique needs and perspectives are considered at all stages of the development process.

(5) **Building Capacity:** Provide urban planners with training and capacity-building programmes that can raise their awareness of the cultural and traditional implications of the process.

The findings of our research are consistent with the overarching goal of promoting long-term sustainability. While the study provides valuable insights on recommendations, additional research can help us better understand the complex interplay between urbanisation, gender dynamics and sustainable development in the Gulf region. Future research priorities could include:

1. **Long-Term Impact Analysis:** Longitudinal studies should be conducted to assess the long-term impact of the implemented strategies on the social, economic and cultural infrastructure of Gulf cities.

2. **Comparative Evaluation:** Comparative analyses with other global cities can be used to identify best practices and innovative solutions for gender-inclusive urban planning. A number of South American countries such as Colombia and Peru have proven to be successful in their implementation strategies.

3. **In-Depth Community Research:** Conducting in-depth research in specific communities to better understand the unique challenges and opportunities that women face in urban environments.

4. **Integration of Technology:** Investigating the potential role of technology in making cities safer and more accessible to women. Most of the Gulf countries have clear and concise digital strategies that can be utilised in this process.

By addressing these practical and research-based concerns, this study hopes to provide a road map for turning recommendations into tangible outcomes, thereby contributing to the advancement of gender-inclusive urban planning and sustainability in the Gulf States.

**References**


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Further reading


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