

In 1990s Birmingham, a group of women came together to campaign for change in a city built for men. **Debbie Humphry** and **Sue Brownill** share some lessons from their experiences

Women's health and participation in planning

The TCPA has long campaigned around the impact of the built environment on health outcomes. However, aspects of this relationship can remain hidden. This article focuses on a group who came together in Birmingham in 1989 to campaign for a city that would meet the needs of women. It reveals two important findings for healthy cities that remain relevant today: first, that the built environment, particularly if it is unsafe, can impact women's health; and second, that the process of women's collective action around planning can itself bring potential health benefits.

The impact of the built environment on health outcomes has long been recognised. Way back in 1898, TCPA founder Ebenezer Howard was advocating for an antidote to 'dark satanic mills', while in this century, *The Marmot Review* highlighted the role of the built environment in promoting or restricting healthy lifestyles.¹ However, the gender dimensions of this relationship remain underexplored – even though research shows that men and women experience the built environment differently; and despite decades of action by women to improve urban spaces.²

Women in the centre

One example of this activism is the Birmingham for People (BfP) Women's Group, who campaigned from 1989 to the mid-1990s for a city that put women's demands at the centre. Key to their work was an emphasis on safety. The city had been redeveloped in the 1970s to meet the demands of the male commuting businessman, rather than the everyday needs of the women who lived and worked there. This was manifested most prominently in the proliferation of dark, dangerous and disorienting subways under an inner-city ring road, which pedestrians had to access by steps.

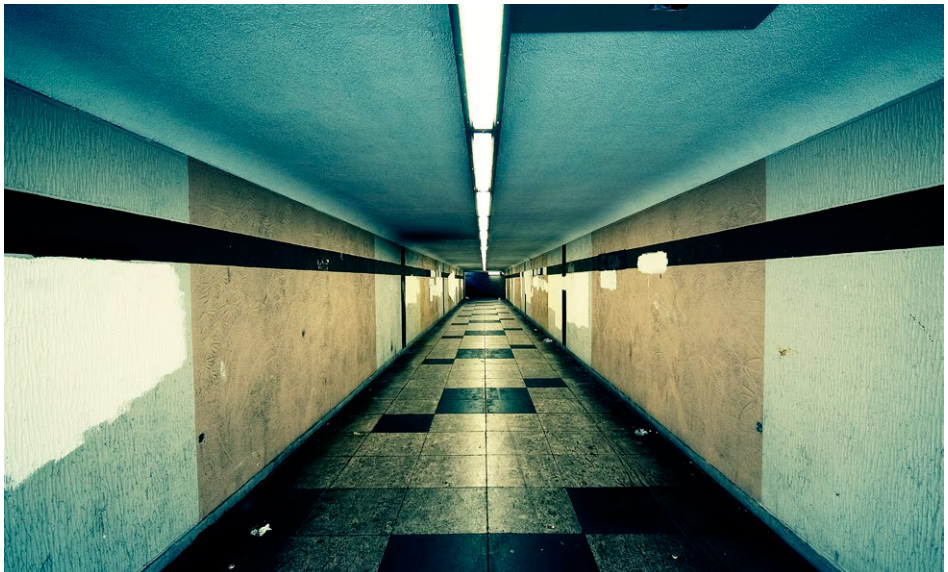
Recent reports have highlighted the impact of unsafe spaces on women's physical and mental health,³ but women have been aware of this for decades. From 2022 to 2024, we conducted historical and archival participatory research with the BfP Women's Group.⁴ Their work has implications for health and is still relevant today.

The group emerged from a broader community campaign called Birmingham for People (BfP), who were advocating for a more people-friendly redevelopment of Birmingham city centre. The women involved realised at the very first meeting that their voices and concerns were not being heard. In response, they set up a sister group, which for the next five years worked relentlessly to push for women's needs to be recognised and met by the city planners.



Great Charles Street
Queensway,
Birmingham:
in the 1990s
the BfP
Women's Group
campaigned for
underpasses
such as this one
to be better lit
for safety

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Women's health and wellbeing was central to the work of the BfP Women's Group. On the one hand, they focused on making the city's public spaces and transport safer for women, such as calling for the subways, multi-storey car parks and bus stops to be better lit; and on the other hand, they attended to the physical needs of women, pushing for more breastfeeding areas and public toilets.

One BfP Women's Group member, Tonia Clark, explains how the focus on safety incorporated both the physical and emotional, and was connected to women's typical role as carers:

'We did a lot of work on community safety – both feelings of safety and the changes needed to the built environment to make them actually safer. This was central to health in terms of a lower risk of attack or rape. We looked at physical space in terms of safety and I think feelings of wellbeing were part of this. When women have a voice in planning and in urban design they will design spaces that improve wellbeing – partly I think because of their need to create positive spaces for their children and dependent elders.'

The group were active at a time when many councils, including in Birmingham, were setting up women's units, and when national advocacy groups, such as the Women's Design Service, were operating. Karen Garry was the first paid worker for the group, and the central remit of her job was to build relationships with the city council and influence its policies. She worked with its community safety unit and the planning and architecture department, supported by the council's newly established women's unit.

Safe estates for women

As well as the focus on making the city centre more accessible, the group were active on housing estates. Karen worked with Jeanette Arregger, who was seconded from the council as a community architect, on the Bloomsbury estate in Nechells, then undergoing regeneration. Karen describes it as: 'a typical 1960s estate. Lots of dead-end alleys, lots of overhanging bushes. Lots of lighting that's not working. Lots of steps, lots of

underpasses.' The estate already had a resident-led management board, but again this was dominated by men, so Karen and Jeanette pulled together a group of women residents to form the Safe Estates for Women (SEW) group. Karen describes their approach:

'We walked around the estate, and the women mapped it, and they said "these are areas that we go to, these are areas that we don't go to. This is where we'll let our children play." And they did it from their point of view.'

To ensure the women's views translated into action, Karen and Jeanette built strong relationships between SEW and the city planning department, as well as with local service providers, such as the police, the council's community safety unit, highways, lighting and maintenance teams, and with councillors, who they showed around the estate. Jeanette describes the women 'going around with clipboards, finding all

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Women residents performing a safety audit at the Bloomsbury estate in Nechells, Birmingham

© Birmingham for People Women's Group



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the nasty areas on the estate that were just unsafe basically'. Karen recalls that 'they used to report lights going out and uneven paving slabs and all that tasking kind of thing. And they did get changes on the estate as a result of their work.'

The methods developed on the estate resulted in a safety audit tool used by women across the city to gather evidence themselves about their environment and lobby for change. The women's work led to the setting up of a more strategic city-wide body called the Women's Safety Initiative (WSI), which brought together women representing various organisations across the city, along with key agencies. This cross-sectoral group was able to push effectively for women's perspectives to be taken on board in policy decision-making, ultimately contributing to the breaking up of the inner-city ring road with surface-level crossings.

The wellbeing benefits of activism

From the start, however, it was also apparent that the processes of involvement and advocacy brought other potential health benefits. Group members spoke of how important their work was for positively reinforcing their self-confidence and wellbeing, and indeed how important community activism was for women's health in general. Polly Feather, a volunteer, says:

'My over-riding belief is that most forms of community and grass-roots engagement and activism, where people who perceive themselves as being 'without a voice' do actually acquire a voice and make themselves heard, are health-giving to those involved. By 'health' in this context I mean mostly mental health. Any improvement in self-esteem and self-confidence is by definition a strengthening process, even leaving aside the possible beneficial outcomes that the activism has been aiming for.'

Through her experiences as a community architect on the Bloomsbury estate, Jeanette Arregger joined BfP Women's Group as a volunteer, and she reflects on the importance of being part of a women-only group for her own health. Throughout her career she had undiagnosed ADHD and says

she struggled to make her voice heard, especially in groups and committees, and in the context of a male-dominated patriarchal society:

'I was terrified of saying the "wrong thing" and found those situations extremely stressful. Birmingham for People Women's Group offered a supportive group where my ideas were listened to and taken seriously. Knowing that the group supported my ideas gave me the confidence to set up the Women's Safety Group in Nechells ... I had to attend all-male or male-dominated meetings and raise issues that were not necessarily prioritised. So having a supportive group behind me encouraged me to promote other women too. My mental health must have benefited from their support, as my role as community architect was quite an isolated one.'

Prioritising safety in urban planning from early on is crucial to women's long-term health



Jeanette also describes how the Bloomsbury women residents who joined SEW benefited from the support of a local group where they felt safe to express their feelings and share personal situations, as well as their opinions about the public good:

'Some of the women who joined the group struggled with poverty and ill health and the isolation of living on a large housing estate, but gained confidence and optimism from being listened to and seeing small improvements being made to their environment.'

Several of the women went on to take what they had learned with the group into other workplaces – some, like Karen, moving specifically into health.

Linking past and present

Three main issues emerge from this history, which are relevant to those involved in creating healthy places today: first, their work clearly shows that prioritising safety in urban planning from early on is crucial to women's long-term health. This

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underlines, then and now, the need for women's concerns to be taken into account in the planning process, and the importance of funding and supporting groups that advocate for such change; second, it shows the importance of partnership working between women's groups, councils and other agencies to deliver the changes in the built environment needed to address these demands; and third, it highlights the importance of women's involvement in activism and decision-making for positively reinforcing self-confidence, mental health and wellbeing. We need to learn the lessons from these types of projects and carry them forward.

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Notes

- 1 M Marmot, J Allen, T Boyce, P Goldblatt and J Morrison: *Health Inequality in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*. Institute of Health Equity, 2020
- 2 M Brennan: 'Rethinking Urban Spaces; A Focus on Women and Girls'. Webpage. Belfast Healthy Cities. www.belfasthealthycities.com/news/rethinking-urban-spaces-a-focus-on-women-and-girls-by-maeve-brennan-belfast-healthy-cities/
- 3 See *Cities Alive: Designing Cities That Work for Women*. Arup, University of Liverpool and United Nations Development Programme, 20 Oct. 2022. www.undp.org/publications/cities-alive-designing-cities-work-women; and A Barker, G Holmes and R Alam, et al: *What Makes a Park Feel Unsafe*. West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2022. https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/194214/1/Parks_Report_FINAL_7.12.2022.pdf
- 4 The Spaces of Hope research was funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council grant, number AH/T00729X/1. See also D Humphry and S Brownill: 'Women in the centre: dialogue on past and present community-led planning in Birmingham'. *City*, 2025, Vol. 29 (5-6), pp. 1118-1132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2025.2544490>
- 5 Read more about the research at www.peoplesplans.org/peoplesplans/case-study/feminist-community-planning-in-birmingham