

Gender and Urban Space: A Feminist Analysis of Public Spaces in the Historic Center of São Luís, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how gender relations shape the configuration and experience of urban space, focusing on women's access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities in the Historic Center of São Luís, Brazil. Grounded in socio-spatial theory and feminist urban studies, the research applies Gender Safety Audit and Walkability methodologies to assess urban interventions implemented between 2016 and 2022 under a municipal revitalization program financed by the Inter-American Development Bank. Based on questionnaires conducted with women users of the area, the study analyzes perceptions of safety, accessibility, and spatial appropriation. The findings indicate significant improvements in infrastructure and overall user satisfaction, while also revealing persistent gender-based inequalities in the use and perception of public space. The study argues that urban revitalization policies must systematically incorporate a gender perspective to advance spatial justice and ensure women's full right to the city.

Keywords: Public space; gender and the city; urban equity.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research stems from personal reflections combined with more than 25 years of experience in public administration in São Luís, Maranhão, particularly in the design and implementation of urban programs supported by multilateral organizations. As Coordinator of the Management Unit of the Historic Center Revitalization Program of São Luís, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), I was responsible for ensuring compliance with the socio-environmental safeguards required by the international institution, with particular emphasis on conducting meaningful stakeholder consultation processes. This experience highlighted the need to deepen the understanding of the urban planning processes adopted within the program—from conception to implementation—and, above all, to critically reflect on the presence and role of women in the city's public spaces.

During the implementation of the program, women played a significant role both in community participation activities and within the technical team. However, questions emerged regarding how this participation effectively influenced urban design decisions and the formulation of public policies, highlighting the need to investigate the planning process, the tools employed, and the outcomes achieved.

This concern also brings the present study closer to the field of Design, particularly Strategic Design applied to urban public policies. Beyond evaluating the physical outcomes of urban interventions, this research seeks to understand how knowledge produced by different social

actors—especially women who use public spaces—can be translated into design decisions. From this perspective, Design is no longer understood solely as an activity concerned with the formal configuration of spaces; rather, it becomes a process of mediation between social needs, knowledge production, and the development of urban solutions. Consequently, this study engages with contemporary approaches to Participatory Design and Design for Social Innovation, in which citizens are recognized as co-producers of knowledge and active agents in the construction of more inclusive cities. For this analysis, the following public spaces were selected: Parque do Bom Menino, Praça da Bíblia, Praça da Saudade, and Praça da Misericórdia.

Historically, urban planning has been guided by technical and legal parameters that are often considered neutral and universal. However, such approaches tend to overlook the social dynamics that shape urban experiences. Making urban planning truly inclusive requires recognizing the different ways in which people inhabit the city and the diversity of needs among social groups. In this sense, understanding how social relations—particularly those shaped by gender, race, and class—materialize in the structure and use of urban spaces is essential for revealing inequalities and proposing policies that promote spatial justice.

Since the 1970s, the concept of gender has increasingly been incorporated into debates on urban planning and has come to be understood as a sociocultural construct distinct from biological sex. The sexual division of labor assigned women responsibility for reproductive and caregiving activities, generally unpaid and socially invisible, while men were traditionally associated with productive activities and the public sphere. Even today, despite their growing participation in the labor market, women continue to face lower wages and remain underrepresented in urban decision-making processes. As Calìò (1992), referring to Engeu (1974), argues, “the city reproduces a division perceived as natural. There is an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside.’ The outside of the city belongs to men. The inside, the home, is considered the place where women are safe.”

Gender inequality in Brazil remains evident and multifaceted. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), women continue to bear primary responsibility for caring for children, older adults, and people with disabilities; they are disproportionately represented in informal employment; they constitute the majority of public transportation users; and they face daily situations of violence and harassment in urban environments. This reality is also observed in the context analyzed in this study, where women working in informal commerce, dependent on public transportation, and exposed to risks while using revitalized public spaces constitute the majority of users. These data reinforce the importance of incorporating a gender perspective as a structural dimension of urban planning, recognizing that relations of domination and exclusion are also expressed and reproduced through the spatial organization of cities.

In this context, the general objective of this research is to contribute to discussions on gender and the city by analyzing the quality of urban interventions implemented in the Historic Center of São Luís, Maranhão, through the Municipal Historic Center Revitalization Program (PROCIDADES/IDB). The analysis focuses on the perspectives of women who occupy and experience the revitalized spaces through the organic narratives that emerge when people interact with their urban environments.

The specific objectives are:

- To understand gender perspectives within the established research scope;
- To evaluate the urban planning instruments employed by the Municipal Historic Center Revitalization Program as tools for promoting gender inclusion within the territory;
- To analyze the interventions carried out in the revitalized public spaces through the lenses of gender equity, functionality, and the empowerment of women directly affected by these interventions;
- To understand the perceptions of women street vendors operating in the revitalized spaces regarding the potential impacts generated by the interventions.

1.1. The Interventions of the Municipal Historic Center Revitalization Program of São Luís/IDB

The Historic Center Revitalization Program of São Luís promoted the requalification of several public spaces located in the central area of the city.

As a territorial focus for this research, four of these spaces were selected, whose interventions present relevant characteristics for analysis from a gender perspective:

- **Praça da Saudade:** underwent improvements including bleachers for cultural events, a designated area for florists, a playground, accessible restrooms, a diaper-changing facility, and eight new kiosks. The square is particularly frequented during nighttime due to cultural activities and the operation of the kiosks, and it experiences a significant increase in visitors on All Souls' Day, when there is an intense flow associated with flower commerce.



Figure 1. Aerial view of Praça da Saudade.

- **Praça da Misericórdia:** while preserving colonial elements in its original design, the square was requalified with new access points, kiosks, restrooms, landscaping, public lighting, and restoration of the historic fountain. The surrounding area was paved with interlocking concrete blocks and received accessibility improvements. Located in a predominantly residential area near hospitals and clinics, it is primarily used by local residents, patients, and healthcare professionals.



Figure 2. Aerial view of Praça da Misericórdia.

• **Parque do Bom Menino:** officially recognized as an environmental conservation unit since 2013, the park underwent extensive requalification, including the renovation of sports courts, installation of kiosks, a football field, a playground, and an ecological trail for birdwatching. The interventions also included sustainable urban drainage systems, video surveillance, and accessibility adaptations. The park's surroundings were reurbanized with the aim of integrating it with Praça da Bíblia.



Figure 3. Aerial view of Parque do Bom Menino.

• **Praça da Bíblia:** requalified in 2020, the project focused on accessibility and the integration of the site's different topographic levels. New kiosks, a playground, an outdoor fitness area, green spaces, and areas for cultural activities were implemented. The square also received LED lighting, new urban furniture, and updated signage, significantly increasing its use by the local community.



Figure 4. Aerial view of Praça da Bíblia.

The interventions, conceived in an integrated manner, prioritized the promotion of universal accessibility, thermal comfort provided by landscaping, improvements in urban mobility, and the expansion of social inclusion. The requalified spaces directly benefited informal sector workers—predominantly womenⁱ—contributing to increased circulation and longer stays by residents and visitors. These elements are fundamental to the construction of more just and safer cities for all.

2. BETWEEN GENDER, BODY, AND POWER: METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAYS OF A FEMINIST STUDY

This research adopts a feminist methodological approach aimed at ensuring a critical perspective on the urban interventions carried out in the Historic Center of São Luís. In doing so, it follows the guidance of Maria Odila Leite da Silva Dias, who emphasizes the importance of avoiding traditional and functionalist methods in feminist studies, as these are oriented toward stable and conservative social structures. Instead, the study draws upon approaches grounded in Marxist historical materialism, Françoise Vergès' reflections on decolonial feminism, and Aníbal Quijano's theory of the coloniality of power, as discussed by Maria Lugones. For Lugones (2008), coloniality extends beyond racial classification; it constitutes a system of power that regulates sex, authority, labor, subjectivity, and knowledge production.

Decoloniality, in this sense, is a critical framework aimed at dismantling power structures and hierarchies inherited from colonialism that persist within social, political, economic, and cultural domains. Vergès (2020) argues that decolonial feminism recognizes how gender is intertwined with the colonial legacy, disproportionately affecting racialized and Indigenous women—dimensions often overlooked by mainstream feminist lenses.

This perspective values the decolonization of thought, intersectionality, and the challenge to cultural stereotypes and homogenizing narratives. Quijano (2000) associates coloniality with the Eurocentric distinction between “body” and “non-body,” highlighting how the colonial matrix of power classifies subjects according to racial and cultural criteria. Lugones further argues that such classifications operate through binary and hierarchical logics, establishing

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dominant groups as normative—for instance, white, bourgeois, heterosexual women as the standard of what is understood as “woman.”

From this critical standpoint, the study draws on Henri Lefebvre’s Marxist reading of everyday life as central to understanding social reality. This lens enabled the analysis of the everyday experiences of women affected by urban requalification processes, particularly street vendors and users of the transformed public spaces.

For women working within the analyzed spaces, technical visits were conducted and satisfaction survey data collected by SEMISPE were examined. The survey aimed to document the satisfaction levels of users, street vendors, and workers in the requalified areas. The qualitative and quantitative analysis prioritized evaluating women’s presence across different uses and times of day within the studied spaces.

For women users of these spaces, the research drew upon the participatory audit methodology developed by the Mulheres Caminhantes Project, created jointly by three organizations—Rede Más, SampaPé!, and the Regional Women’s Forum of São Paulo’s North Zoneⁱⁱ. The project seeks to enhance women’s mobility safety by including them in the construction of urban spaces and public policies through participatory auditing. The methodology analyzes urban spaces from a gender perspective, proposing solutions grounded in women’s lived experiences.

This integrated approach was termed the **Gender Safety and Walkability Audit**, developed through the convergence of three methodological strands: gender audits, walkability assessments, and public space quality analyses. In this framework, women are positioned as spatial experts who evaluate public spaces from the standpoint of gender-sensitive safety and sustainable mobility, proposing solutions that address both dimensions simultaneously.

The audit consists of three stages:

1. Preliminary collection of contextual secondary statistical data related to the territory;
2. Meetings with women who circulate within the territory, involving sensory mapping activities, public space evaluation, and co-creation of solutions;
3. Analysis of the process and outcomes for dissemination to strategic actors and the broader public.

However, given the scope of this research, only the first two stages were implemented. These stages are presented in detail below.

3. METHODOLOGICAL STAGES

The applied methodology was divided into two primary stages:

Stage 1: Contextual Data Collection

The first phase consisted of collecting secondary data concerning the study area, including demographic information, public safety indicators, transportation patterns, income levels, and the availability of public facilities. Technical visits were conducted to the selected squares to identify socio-spatial characteristics of the territory. During these visits, pedestrian mobility infrastructure—such as sidewalk quality—and visible social vulnerabilities were observed and documented.

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Stage 2: Meetings with Women Users of the Spaces

The second phase of the research consisted of meetings with women who regularly use the revitalized public spaces, with the objective of conducting sensory mapping activities, public space assessments, and the co-creation of solutions. Twenty-three women were invited to participate in the study and were selected based on criteria of socioeconomic, age, bodily, racial, and gender identity diversity. Participants included residents of the Historic Center, residents living in the vicinity of the studied public squares, transgender women, and members of the *Por Elas Empoderadas* Collective.

Following the invitation process, three women were selected as facilitators due to their professional experience in architecture and biology, which contributed to the implementation of the methodology and data collection. In addition, a journalist was hired to document the activities through photographs and video recordings. A facilitation handbook was prepared, and two preparatory meetings were held to refine the methodology.

At the beginning of the activity, participants were invited to express their feelings through the exercise “How do I feel when...”. This exercise enabled them to reflect on and record their perceptions of different forms of urban mobility and everyday experiences in the city, including using public transportation, cycling, walking, and occupying public spaces.

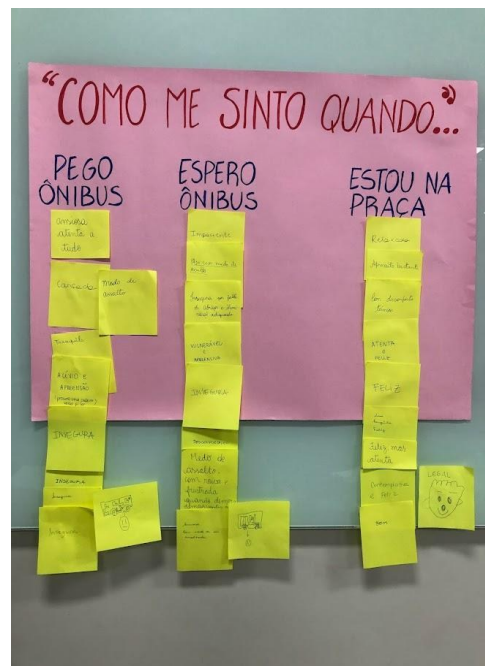


Figure 5. Photograph of the poster from the activity “How do I feel when...” developed during the audit workshop.

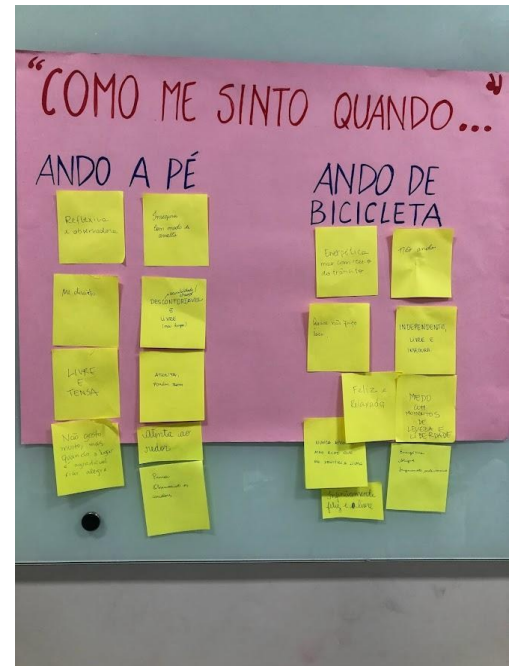


Figure 6. Photograph of the poster from the activity “How do I feel when...” developed during the audit workshop.

In the second stage, participants mapped their routes to the activity site and identified the spaces they frequently used or avoided. They then defined two distinct routes for the audit, connecting the SENAC building on Rua do Passeio to Praça da Misericórdia and Praça da Saudade. During this activity, some participants had difficulty orienting themselves on the map and required support from the facilitators. All participants arrived by car or carpool, with no records of public transportation use or pedestrian access.



Figure 7. Photograph of participants marking their routes and reference points on the map.

After the activities, the participants undertook a silent nighttime walk between Praça da Misericórdia and Praça da Saudade. The objective was to capture each participant's perception of safety while moving through different segments of the route. These perceptions were recorded on evaluation forms, in which participants classified their feelings as positive, neutral, or negative.

CAMINHADA E AVALIAÇÃO

Avalie como você se sentiu em cada trecho com uma das carinhas

	LOCAL	ME SENTI	OBS.
TRECHO 01			
TRECHO 02			
TRECHO 03			
TRECHO 04			
TRECHO 05			

Idade: _____

Raça /Etnia: _____

Figure 8. Evaluation form template for the Gender Safety and Walkability Audit.



Figure 9. Route selected by Group 01. Figure 10. Route selected by Group 02.

The groups began the walk at 8:00 p.m., departing from the SENAC building. The nighttime walk along Route 1 was marked by constant interaction. The group consisted of four women, including one facilitator, and included two children aged four and seven, who were the children of one of the participants. The children explored obstacles and playground equipment along the route, showing hesitation only in the presence of insects and rodents. The women walked close together and remained attentive, particularly along darker stretches and areas with poorly maintained sidewalks, ensuring the children's safety.

- The beginning of the walk was perceived as the most tense moment due to the emptiness of the streets, generating silence and discomfort within the group;
- The feeling of insecurity eased upon arrival at Praça da Misericórdia, where, despite inadequate lighting, there was pedestrian activity and music;
- The children played on the square's equipment, bringing a sense of lightness to the experience;
- Participants reported discomfort with litter, unpleasant odors, and deteriorated sidewalks along certain segments;
- A critical point was the crossing of Rua das Cajazeiras near Hospital Djalma Marques, which lacks signage and pedestrian crossings. The street is wide and sloped, with

vehicles traveling at high speed. The women crossed together, forming a protective barrier around the children;

- On Rua do Passeio, when passing a bar where men occupied the sidewalks with tables, the participants chose to walk on the street to avoid the narrowed pedestrian space;
- Approaching Praça da Saudade generated a sense of relief among the group;
- The presence of cyclists, people at the kiosks, and adequate lighting contributed to a stronger perception of safety in the square.

Route 2 was conducted by five women, including two facilitators. The group remained close and silent throughout the walk, maintaining a constant state of alertness. At certain moments, slight distancing occurred between participants, prompting those at the front to frequently look back to ensure that no woman was left isolated.

- Early in the walk, some participants reported fear when encountering a man in a poorly lit area;
- This sense of insecurity diminished upon reaching Praça da Misericórdia, where the presence of bars and live music created a greater feeling of comfort and welcome;
- Recurrent comments highlighted discomfort caused by accumulated garbage and damaged sidewalks along the route;
- Arrival at Praça da Saudade was again marked by expressions of relief, comfort, and safety, reinforced by the smell of food and increased activity in the area.

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Figure 11. Translating Audit Findings into Design Guidelines.

The second meeting, held in the morning, began semi-structured discussion circle aimed at identifying connections and differences among the various forms of violence women fear in urban contexts. During the conversation, one facilitator recorded participants' statements on a poster displaying the guiding question: *What are you afraid of when walking on the street?*

Several comments highlighted the relationship between the city's physical elements and feelings of insecurity while walking. Recurring obstacles mentioned included broken sidewalks, litter, holes, and uneven surfaces—factors that compromise walkability and intensify fear, particularly among older women. The synthesis of the audit findings was translated into urban design recommendations through a structured design process. Each recurrent perception reported by participants was interpreted as evidence of a spatial problem and subsequently converted into a design guideline capable of informing future interventions. This process transformed women's lived experiences into actionable knowledge, reinforcing the role of Strategic Design as a bridge between community participation and urban decision-making. A younger participant succinctly captured this perception when addressing an older woman: "You stop seeing the city because you are constantly looking at the ground."

Beyond infrastructural deficiencies, participants also expressed concerns related to accidents and unforeseen situations in public streets. Fear of robbery frequently emerged in association with sexual violence—the latter initially mentioned by a younger participant and promptly acknowledged as relevant by the others, although not spontaneously verbalized by the older women.

Fear of walking alone in empty or poorly lit areas was also common, particularly in situations involving the presence of men on the streets. In contrast, one participant shared a positive experience, stating that she did not feel fear when circulating through the city, often using roller skates or a bicycle as modes of transportation and reporting a sense of safety.

Following the discussion circle, a walkability assessment was conducted, preceded by an introduction to different forms of urban violence and a discussion on sustainable mobility. The public space analysis was structured through four evaluative layers:

- Ground layer: assesses sidewalk and crossing conditions, including width, paving, slope, obstacles, and crossing safety;
- Upper layer: considers elements above the sidewalks, such as façades, lighting quality, thermal comfort, seating areas, cleanliness, pollution, interaction with local commerce and services, street interface, and the presence of symbolic violence;
- Access layer: refers to connectivity with other transportation modes and accessibility, evaluating access to public transport, signage, buildings, and waiting areas;
- Uses and people layer: examines sensations and interactions, including building conditions, diversity of users, activities in the area, soundscape, smells, behaviors, and street attitudes.

Participants were organized into four groups, each responsible for analyzing one specific layer. During the walks, they documented observations through photographs using green frames to highlight positive elements and red frames for negative ones. They also assigned

scores from one to five—one being the lowest and five the highest—accompanied by qualitative justifications for their evaluations.

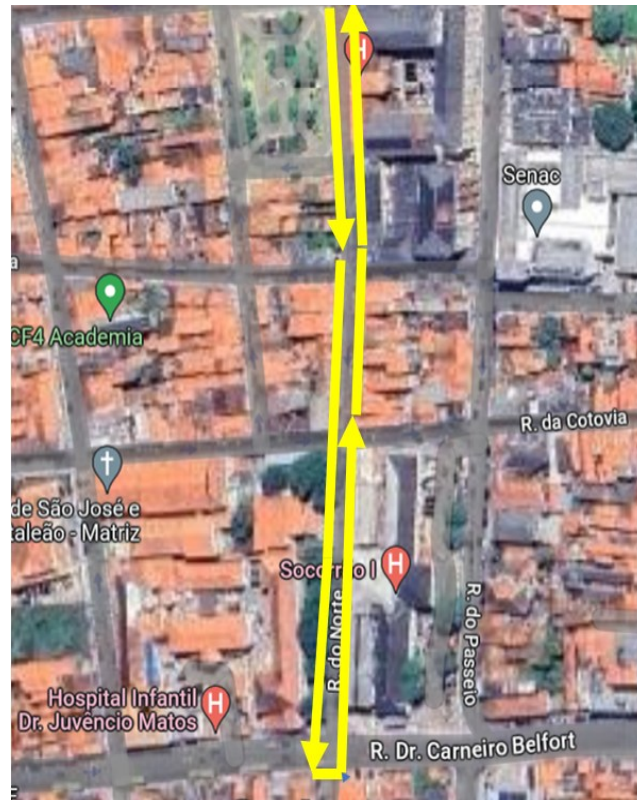


Figure 12. Route selected for the layered evaluation.



Figure 13. Photograph of participants documenting positive elements along the analyzed route.

Upon returning to the support point, the groups presented the main findings identified throughout the route and collectively defined the priority issues. Complementing these tools, observational visits were conducted in all public spaces included in the research, on different days and at various times. The purpose of these visits was to document the researcher's perceptions as a woman user of the spaces and to capture impressions from other women users encountered randomly during the fieldwork.



Figure 14. Photographs of positive and negative elements identified during the analytical

These different perspectives contributed to a more sensitive engagement with the experiences of women who use the public spaces requalified by the Municipal Revitalization Program of the Historic Center of São Luís, as well as those directly affected by the implemented urban interventions. The adopted approach made it possible to explore the multiple layers that shape women's access to public spaces and to the city.

All perceptions and sensations were recorded using methodological instruments specifically developed for this stage of the field research, guided by the principles of the Gender Safety and Walkability Audit. The resulting data were integrated with the post-occupancy satisfaction survey applied to users, street vendors, and workers in the analyzed spaces, as well as with other documentary analysis procedures. Together, this set of information constitutes the results presented here, based on a qualitative–quantitative approach with explanatory and exploratory objectives, aiming to articulate theory and practice throughout the development of the study.

4. URBAN NARRATIVES

This analysis, inspired by Jane Jacobs' emphasis on observing everyday activities in urban spaces, highlights the richness of the narratives that emerge from these interactions. The appreciation of diversity and urban vitality is central to this study, recognizing that individual and collective stories play a fundamental role in shaping cities.

The study examined the urban narratives of women who live in or frequent the public spaces requalified under the Municipal Revitalization Program of the Historic Center of São Luís. After the completion of the interventions and a period of use, post-occupancy data provided by the Municipality of São Luís were analyzed.

The survey included 52 users, distributed as follows: 20 at Praça da Saudade, 10 at Praça da Misericórdia, 14 at Praça da Bíblia, and 8 at Parque do Bom Menino. The primary objective was to assess user satisfaction and evaluate the impact of the newly implemented public

facilities on the daily lives of their users. The analysis was conducted from a gender perspective, comparing women's perceptions with those of other user groups.

A satisfaction assessment was conducted using questionnaires composed of both open- and closed-ended questions, focusing on the post-occupancy evaluation of the requalified spaces. The assessment considered environmental performance and the perceptions of users, street vendors, visitors, and residents after a period of use.

The first stage of identifying respondents involved recording gender and age group, followed by questions addressing socioeconomic status, characteristics of use, and satisfaction with the requalified public spaces. Additional questions related specifically to the Social Technical Work (STW) component were directed to vendors registered in the program.

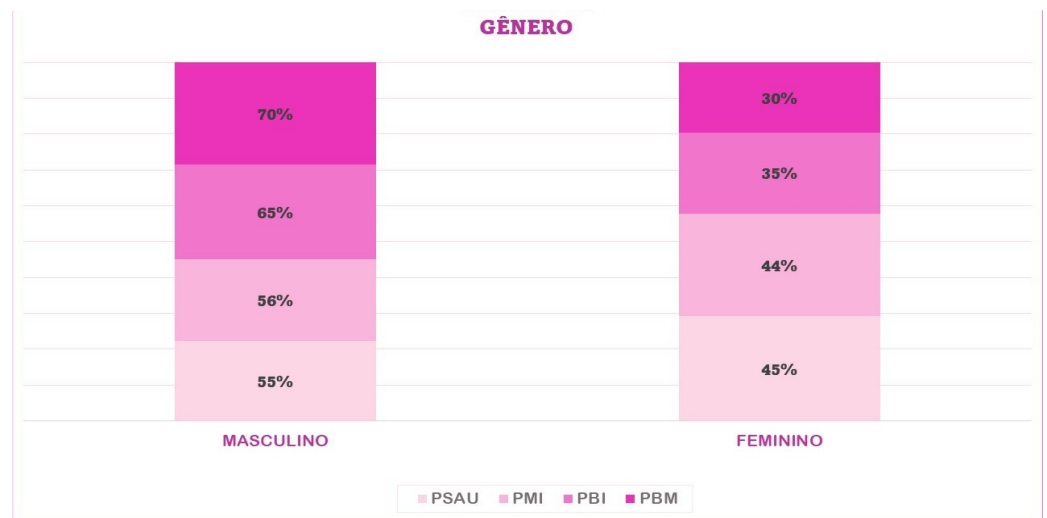


Figure 15. Chart showing gender data of the surveyed users.

The Post-Occupancy Evaluation (POE) conducted by the Municipality indicated that the projects of the Municipal Revitalization Program of the Historic Center of São Luís achieved their objective of improving the requalified spaces, with positive satisfaction results among users. However, the evaluation did not consider the specific needs of women nor the impacts of the interventions on them. Women continue to represent a minority in these spaces—particularly at night—often occupying them for caregiving purposes, such as accompanying children or elderly relatives. Furthermore, the absence of more vulnerable groups, such as low-income residents, was observed in the public spaces, revealing persistent inequalities in access.

As part of the empirical research on the use of these spaces, several visits were conducted throughout 2023 on different days and at varying times. The purpose was to observe women's presence and how they use the public spaces.

Visits to Parque do Bom Menino were conducted at two distinct moments in 2023. On both occasions—one in the afternoon, observed at a distance, and another in the morning, alone—a predominance of men was noted in areas designated for sports activities, while women were concentrated in picnic areas and along the walking track. During one visit, I experienced a sense of discomfort and restricted freedom while photographing a football tournament taking place in the gymnasium. On that occasion, I was discreetly followed by a municipal guard seeking to ensure my safety; however, his presence reinforced a perception of surveillance and unease within the space.

In addition to these observations, attempts were made to incorporate a gender perspective into the park's design. Proposals such as gender-neutral restrooms and family restrooms were suggested by the SEMISPE technical team following recommendations from the Inter-American Development Bank. However, these proposals were rejected by the municipal administration, which chose instead to renovate the existing facilities while maintaining the traditional gender-segregated layout. The only advancement in this regard was the signage of the walking track, which was updated to include the female symbol alongside the male symbol.



Figure 16. Photograph of gender-inclusive signage on the jogging track at Parque do Bom Menino.



Figure 17. Photograph of gender-inclusive signage at Parque do Bom Menino.

The visits indicated that the park is predominantly used for sports activities, with an increase in attendance compared to the period prior to the interventions. Men predominate in collective activities, while women concentrate along the walking track, playground, and resting areas. The peak usage period occurs in the late afternoon. The Skate Park area remains sporadically used, mainly during specific commemorative events, with no users observed during the conducted visits.

Visits to Praça da Bíblia followed the same methodology applied at Parque do Bom Menino. A greater presence of women was observed in the late afternoon, typically accompanying children, walking pets, or participating in cultural activities. For example, a group of women waiting for a traditional *dança junina* rehearsal reported feeling safe and comfortable in the space. At night, the square becomes frequented by a younger and predominantly male audience, particularly around the food kiosks, which operate only during the evening.

During a morning visit, the square was found to be empty, generating a strong sense of insecurity while taking photographic records. Women's presence was predominantly associated with caregiving activities. The presence of unaccompanied children and adolescents in the afternoon was also observed, possibly indicating a positive perception of safety during that time of day.

Visits to Praça da Misericórdia followed the same methodology applied in the other spaces. Two observations were recorded, in April and May 2023. The first, conducted in the afternoon and accompanied at a distance by my partner, revealed moderate activity, with kiosks operating and local residents present. The atmosphere was calm and welcoming, with a strong sense of community among users. During the second visit, conducted in the morning, the

square was nearly empty, with only one kiosk open. Overall, the space functioned as a peaceful gathering place for neighborhood residents, reinforcing feelings of safety and belonging.

Visits to Praça da Saudade were conducted on different days and at different times, revealing varied dynamics. During the first visit, in the afternoon, limited activity was observed, with preparations underway for the nighttime operation of kiosks, most of which were occupied by men. The environment was calm, with women accompanying children and residents interacting.

During the second visit, in the morning, the square was occupied by a fresh produce market and a second-hand market organized by women, resulting in high levels of movement and user diversity. In both situations, perceptions of safety were maintained. The square is most frequented in the late afternoon and evening, with a balanced presence of men and women, largely due to food and beverage commerce.

In the final stage of the research, the Gender Safety and Walkability Audit methodology was applied, adapted from the model co-created by the organizations Rede MÁs, SampaPé!, and the Women's Forum of São Paulo's North Zone. The activity took place over two days, with participants selected based on criteria such as residence in the central area, employment in the region, or regular use of public spaces, representing diverse age groups, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and transportation modes.

The experience of the Gender Safety and Walkability Audit provided crucial sensory information for evaluating the quality of the analyzed spaces. Praça da Misericórdia and Praça da Saudade stood out as "oases" within this urban stretch, offering relief and positive sensations during both the walk and participants' daily routines. However, participants reported a sense of tension during the nighttime walk, increasing vigilance regarding the route, the presence or absence of people in deserted areas, and environmental conditions. These findings demonstrate that the presence of active uses, adequate lighting, and a continuous flow of people strengthens women's perception of safety, highlighting the importance of mixed land uses and urban vitality as key design principles of creating more inclusive public spaces.

A relevant finding of the audit was the perception that women did not constitute the majority in Praça da Saudade, with many women observed accompanied by children or other women. This observation prompted an important reflection: women's presence in public space is often marked by the need for companionship or caregiving responsibilities, reflecting an implicit concern with identifying allies within the environment.

On the second day of the audit, when the evaluative walkability activity was conducted, groups assessed the selected route through the layered evaluation method. The lowest scores were attributed to the **Uses and People** layer and the **Access** layer. The **Ground** layer received a positive evaluation due to the intervention at Praça da Misericórdia, where wide sidewalks, accessibility features, and thermal comfort were highlighted in the group's observations.

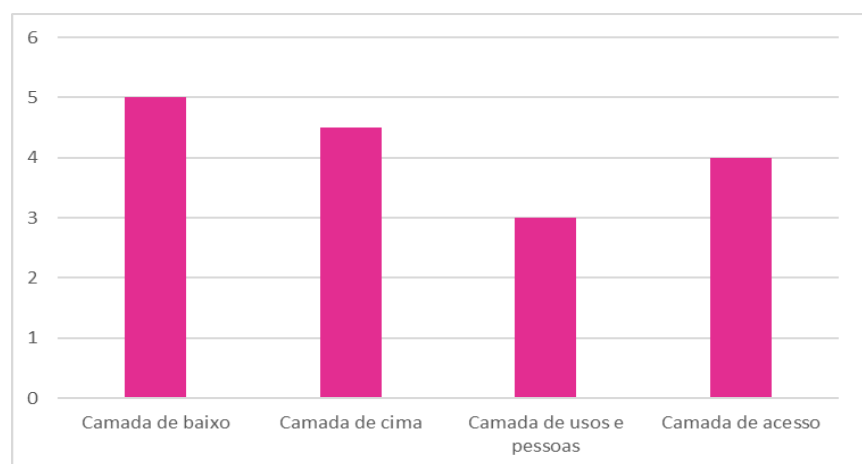


Figure 18. Chart of the layered evaluation results.

The following is the layered analysis conducted by the participants of the audit:

Table 1: Results of the evaluation walk and walkability activity

Ground Layer	Results
Sidewalks and crossings	Praça da Misericórdia has good infrastructure, wide sidewalks, safe crossings, accessibility features, and adequate signage. In the remaining stretch along Rua do Norte, sidewalks are narrow, with numerous obstacles and lack of maintenance. Crossings are safe, with marked pedestrian crosswalks.
Upper Layer	
Everything above the sidewalk and façades	Praça da Misericórdia presents adequate lighting, thermal comfort, cleanliness, and appropriate urban furniture. Along the remaining stretch, particularly on Rua do Norte, participants highlighted poor lighting, the presence of garbage, and unpleasant odors. Several buildings were closed or abandoned, contributing to a perception of insecurity. There was also a report of symbolic violence, marked by the presence of a man urinating in the street.
Access Layer	
	Access to buildings was highly deficient along the entire route. Accessibility features were observed only at Praça da Misericórdia. Resting areas were available within the square and at the taxi stand next to Hospital Djalma Marques, with particular attention drawn to the bench signage indicating exclusive use for taxi drivers.
Uses and People Layer	
	Diversity of users: women, men, older adults, young people, and children. Mixed smells were reported, including urine, barbecue, garbage, and sewage. A combination of sounds was also noted, such as ambulance sirens and music. In the area of Praça da Misericórdia, affectionate attitudes were observed toward participants who were local residents. Along the remaining stretch, however, participants encountered indifference and discomfort, including a remark from an elderly man who asked, "What is this group of women doing here?"

Upon completion of the field research phase, it becomes possible to analyze the data and perceptions that compose the urban narratives presented here. From a Strategic Design perspective, these findings demonstrate that women's experiences should be understood as design inputs rather than merely evaluation results. Rather than serving only as evidence for post-occupancy evaluation, these narratives provide actionable knowledge capable of informing the conception, development, and refinement of urban interventions. These narratives reveal the complexity of human relationships, social, economic, and cultural

challenges, as well as individual experiences within the urban context, which manifest concretely in public spaces.

According to Lefebvre (1991), space should not be understood merely as a physical entity, but as a social construction constituted by three interdependent dimensions: perceived space, conceived space, and lived (or practiced) space. Perceived space corresponds to everyday space, subjectively experienced by its users and shaped by memories, emotions, and interactions with the environment. Conceived space refers to the space idealized and planned by professionals such as architects, urban planners, and public administrators, expressed through maps, plans, zoning laws, and regulations—a formal representation that may be detached from lived reality. Lived or practiced space, in turn, refers to the effective use of space through people's movements, encounters, and daily activities.

These three dimensions are fundamental to understanding social and urban dynamics, as they both shape and are shaped by human relations. Urban space is therefore not neutral; it reproduces structures of power, domination, and inequality. Among these structures, gender relations are particularly significant, since in patriarchal societies distinct social roles are imposed upon men and women, generating political and social inequalities (Pateman, 1993).

In recent decades, feminist studies have made significant advances, offering valuable contributions to understanding women's position in capitalist and patriarchal societies. These studies move beyond biologically deterministic perspectives, proposing instead a cultural reading of gender inequalities and revealing how women are socially conditioned and perceived. They expand the debate beyond statistical disparities, reflecting on how women perceive, occupy, and attribute meaning to urban spaces, especially in relation to safety, social interaction, leisure, and the well-being of their children.

Analyzing public spaces through a gender lens implies questioning who conceived them, for whom they were designed, whom they effectively serve, and what emotions they evoke in their users. Not all urban spaces are inclusive, welcoming, or accessible; many fail to promote encounter, safe mobility, and a sense of belonging. As Foucault (1988, p. 102) reminds us, we live in a “society of normalization,” in which public spaces are often conceived from a heteronormative perspective.

Recognizing heteronormativity as a foundational element of urban configuration makes visible the multiple challenges women face daily in exercising their right to the city. Women's active presence in urban dynamics and in the formulation of public policies represents not only an act of resistance, but also a movement toward empowerment and citizenship. This protagonism contributes to dismantling oppressive structures and constructing more just, safe, and inclusive cities for all.

The right to the city, as defined by Rolnik (2018), encompasses housing, services, culture, leisure, and mobility, and is essential for urban justice. In the context of the Historic Center of São Luís, the requalified areas function as “islands” of quality within a precarious surrounding environment, demonstrating the importance of integrated urban planning.

Despite the potential of participatory processes, practice reveals that they are often implemented merely to fulfill formal requirements imposed by funding agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank. Participation must be meaningful and sensitive to territorial specificities for programs to genuinely respond to local demands.

Incorporating a gender perspective into urban planning means recognizing that men and women experience the city differently, with unequal access and opportunities. If the city is composed of multiple territories marked by diversity, it is necessary to critically reflect on how spaces reproduce exclusion and inequality. This leads to debates on citizenship, the right to the city, and spatial justice (Fraser, 1990; Soja, 2010).

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed public spaces revitalized through the Municipal Historic Center Revitalization Program of São Luís from a gender perspective, using a territorial framework that enabled a post-occupancy evaluation focused on users' perceptions. The research is grounded in the understanding of urban space as a material expression of social relations, as proposed by Flávio Villaça (1991) in his discussion of the relationship between superstructure and territorial structure.

Inspired by Jane Jacobs' (2007) people-centered approach, which emphasizes everyday interactions in urban spaces as fundamental elements of urban vitality, this study explores the narratives that emerge from women's experiences in the analyzed spaces. The selected sites included Parque do Bom Menino and Skate Park, Praça da Bíblia, Praça da Misericórdia, and Praça da Saudade. Data were collected through interviews conducted by SEMISPE, field observations, and the application of the Gender Safety and Walkability Audit, a methodology in which women evaluated both the public squares and the routes connecting them.

Regarding the street vendors registered by the program, the study identified a generally positive level of satisfaction with both the physical interventions and the Social Technical Work (STW) carried out. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the revitalized spaces remain largely insensitive to gender-specific demands and continue to reinforce cycles of oppression that hinder women's full appropriation of the city.

Mobility, analyzed as a research category, reflects the patriarchal logic that has historically shaped urban planning, prioritizing individuals engaged in productive activities. Women, who remain predominantly responsible for reproductive and unpaid care work, face significant constraints in their daily mobility. They constitute the majority of public transportation users and often undertake complex journeys involving multiple destinations and, frequently, long walking distances.

In response to these challenges, this study developed a methodology for evaluating public spaces from a gender perspective, combining physical analysis, socio-spatial assessment, and participatory audits conducted by women as urban experts. This approach seeks to provide public authorities with a qualitative tool for more inclusive urban planning. The methodology can be applied both in post-occupancy evaluations and during the design phase of urban projects, thereby strengthening women's participation in the development of urban solutions.

It is important to emphasize that the effectiveness of urban interventions depends on their articulation with integrated public policies, educational campaigns, and socio-cultural initiatives. Urban revitalization projects alone are insufficient to challenge and transform patriarchal structures.

The post-occupancy evaluation conducted by SEMISPE indicated positive levels of overall user satisfaction. However, it did not adequately address the impacts of the interventions on women's lives. The low presence of women, particularly during nighttime hours, suggests

limited female appropriation of these spaces. Many women use these areas primarily for caregiving-related activities, such as accompanying children or elderly family members. Furthermore, the most socially vulnerable groups—Historic Center residents with monthly incomes ranging from one-quarter to two minimum wages (IBGE, 2010)—do not appear among the regular users of the revitalized spaces, revealing persistent inequalities in access and use.

As defined by Rolnik (2018), the right to the city encompasses access to housing, public services, culture, leisure, and mobility, constituting a fundamental condition for urban justice. In the Historic Center of São Luís, the redeveloped public spaces function as isolated “islands” of urban quality surrounded by areas that continue to experience significant socio-spatial precariousness, highlighting the importance of integrated urban planning.

Despite the potential of participatory processes, practice shows that they are often used merely to fulfill formal requirements imposed by funding institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Participation must be meaningful and responsive to the specific characteristics of territories and their populations if urban programs are to effectively engage with local needs and aspirations.

The principal contribution of this study to the field of Design lies in demonstrating that participatory methodologies informed by a gender perspective can function as knowledge-production tools for urban design and public policy innovation. The findings show that women’s everyday experiences constitute a valuable source of information for understanding how different social groups perceive, use, and appropriate public spaces.

The methodology adopted aligns with the principles of Participatory Design by recognizing women not merely as beneficiaries of urban interventions, but as active agents capable of identifying problems, formulating diagnoses, and contributing to the development of solutions. In this sense, the Gender Safety and Walkability Audit presents significant potential for incorporation into both post-occupancy evaluation processes and the early stages of urban project development.

From a Strategic Design perspective, the results suggest that public participation should move beyond its traditional role of consultation or institutional validation to become a structuring element in the formulation of urban policies. The systematic incorporation of collaborative processes within public administration can help transform lived experiences into evidence for decision-making, strengthening practices of co-production and public innovation.

In conclusion, the development of more inclusive cities depends not only on the physical quality of urban spaces but also on the capacity of planning and design processes to incorporate the knowledge produced by their users. By recognizing women as legitimate producers of knowledge about the city, the potential for developing more equitable urban solutions—sensitive to differences and committed to the right to the city for all people—is significantly expanded.

ENDNOTES

Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (Continuous PNAD, 2022) indicate that more than 50% of women in Brazil are engaged in informal activities or in the service sector. Women’s presence in these spaces is also related to the concept of gendered use of space, discussed by Calìò (1992) and Saffioti (1992).

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