

From Invisible to Empowered: Mainstreaming the Gender Perspective in Planning

By Chun Xu and Yu Wang

In the fall of 2022, a Gender and Planning Panel was launched at Cornell University. It was supported by the Department of City and Regional Planning (CRP) and organized by two Cornell CRP students – Chun Xu (Master of Regional Planning '22) and Yu Wang (Master of Science Candidate in Regional Science '23). The panel invited Melissa Dickens, AICP and Andy Micklow, Ph.D. as the panelists for discussion to examine the role of planning in creating and maintaining gender divides into urban spaces in the United States. The panel attracted over 50 attendees, including students, professors, and practitioners. When asked about the most important takeaway from this panel, the organizers said, "Planning for women is complicated, controversial, but never outdated. We are glad to learn from this panel that planning is a field with the capacity to change."

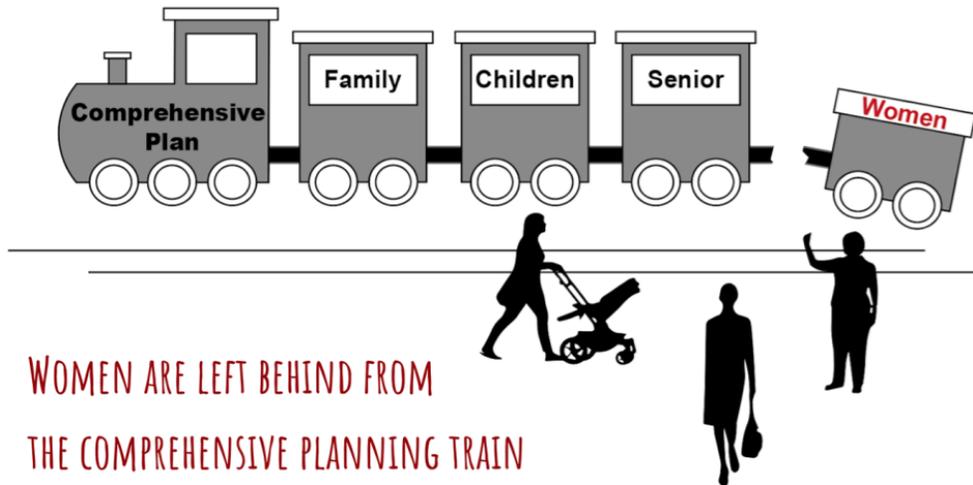
Student Research: [Invisible Women in Comprehensive Plans](#)

The idea for the panel emerged from a student-led research effort called "Invisible Women in Comprehensive Plans." Chun and Yu formed a student team of four members in the 2022 Economic and Community Development Workshop, seeking to find out whether or not planning in the United States has considered women's needs. The research was supervised by Professor Mildred Warner.

According to a national survey conducted in 2019, 12% of communities asserted that they addressed women's needs in their comprehensive plans. To further understand how these communities address women's needs, the students reviewed all their comprehensive plans using machine learning methods.

At the beginning of their research, the students interviewed several planning professionals and scholars on what "planning for women" means for them. Interviewees reminded the students that mother or care provider is not the only role for women and thus, caregivers' needs only partially overlap with women's needs. In addition, women use public services more frequently, including transit and affordable housing. Nevertheless, new concepts like trip-chaining, which involves grouping errands or other activities into one trip instead of returning home in between each one and can enhance women's mobility, may not appear in these plans.

After conducting interviews and analyzing the responses, the students compared the frequency of keywords regarding identities (female, child, senior, etc.) and planning elements (housing, land use, transportation, etc.) in the 80 comprehensive plans. Their findings revealed that "neutral is not neutral" -- women are mentioned the least among all groups. While women's needs might be addressed indirectly through aging or care provider concerns, the unique needs of women as individuals are not.

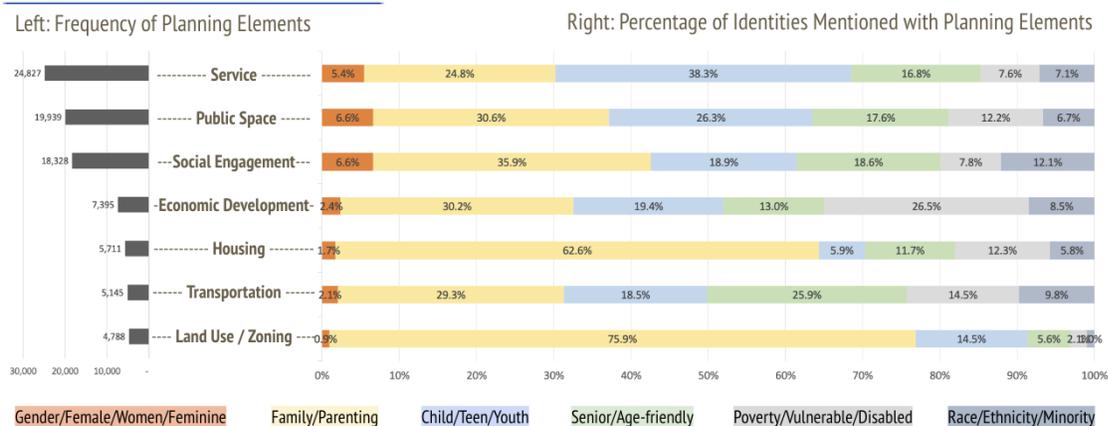


After the Workshop, the students shared their findings and concerns at the 2022 APA Virtual National Planning Conference and the 2022 NYSCMA Annual Conference. Their presentation in the APA NPC online section managed to receive over 500 views nationwide. Over 30 city/county managers from upstate New York participated in the discussion.

Cornell CRP Colloquium: [Gender and Planning Panel](#)

In September 2022, Chun and Yu organized the Gender and Planning Panel with the support of Professor Mildred Warner and Professor Linda Shi. The intention of the panel was to generate interest in planning for women and listening for differences.

Upon introducing the panel, Chun shared the groups' research *Invisible Women in Comprehensive Plans*. She emphasized that women are the least mentioned identity in comprehensive plans. Comprehensive plans should be updated with concepts like trip chaining, accessibility, care facilities, complete street, universal design, and other ideas that support gender equity.



Chun's presentation was followed by a set of questions that returned to the students throughout the research. Should planning explicitly call out women's issues and needs? In what ways could we mainstream the gender perspective in planning?

The two panelists Melissa Dickens, AICP and Andy Micklow, Ph.D. acknowledged that explicitly calling out women's issues and needs can be tricky. However, "Exclusion of women in planning is intentional," Andy said. Local officials and planners have a responsibility to begin integrating gender equity considerations into planning processes to help build more inclusive and just communities.

As to how planning can empower women, Melissa underscored two points for public engagement in the planning process: information collection and decision making. First, how information is collected is important, including the composition of community participants, engagement tools, time of meetings, virtual options, and childcare support. Planners need to go out, get into the community, and talk to people about their experiences. It is not only data but emotion and real-world experience that make decisions, and this particularly holds true in the elected officials' fields. An explicit focus on gender has been missing in the planning process, and it deserves to be added.

The panel received overwhelming support and positive feedback from the audience. CRP students called attention to the intersectionality between gender and ethnicity. The current planning paradigm is not only problematic for women, but for all identities and abilities.

Professor Mildred Warner and Professor Neema Kudva assured the students of the capacity of planning to incorporate equity and inclusion into practice. "Paradigm change comes hard, and it's super painful," Professor Warner said. "However, opportunities come from all directions. As a change-oriented field, planning will grab them."