

Building a sustainable urban environment adapting to the needs of women and girls in Vietnam

Dr. Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet

National Academy of Public Administration

Abstract: Vietnam has made a solid commitment to implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set forth by the United Nations and has undertaken numerous practical actions to fulfill these commitments. Alongside the achievable goals (goals 1, 2, 4, 13, 17), there are still many goals we must strive to achieve, including goal 11 on sustainable and safe urban development. One challenge to fulfilling this goal is the regulations concerning the planning and construction of safe and sustainable urban areas according to gender criteria. This article examines the rules and current status of safe and sustainable urban areas based on gender criteria in Vietnam. It offers some recommendations to build secure and sustainable urban areas that meet the needs of women and girls, accelerating the achievement of sustainable development goals for Vietnam today.

Keywords: Urban environment; sustainability; adaptation; needs; women; girls; building.

1. Introduction

Although 61.9% of Vietnam's population lives in rural areas (General Statistics Office, 2023), urban areas are expanding due to urbanization. In 2019, the urban population accounted for 34.4% of the total population; in 2023, it reached 38.1%. From 2009 to 2019, the annual population growth rate in urban areas was 2.64%, nearly six times this rate in rural areas. The economic restructuring has also driven a shift in employment from agriculture to services and industry, prompting many women and men to seek jobs in cities. Women

constitute a higher proportion of the urban population in Vietnam, with 96.5 men for every 100 women in urban areas (Australian, ADB, ILO, UN Women, 2021).

Planning and development of urban areas are essential to meet the needs of population movement from rural to urban areas. In particular, it is crucial to pay attention to the needs and legitimate interests of various groups to build safe and sustainable urban areas and residential areas in line with the United Nations' sustainable development goals for these areas.

Received:

February 15, 2024

Revised:

April 20, 2024

Accepted:

June 18, 2024

<https://doi.org>

10.59394/JSM.24

2. Legal and practical basis for building sustainable urban environments adapting to the needs of women and girls

In 2015, the United Nations introduced the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), determined by 169 specific targets and 232 indicators, aimed at eradicating hunger, reducing poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring peace and prosperity for all by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Among these goals, SDG 11 focuses on sustainable cities and communities, including the following objectives:

(1) Building safe, resilient, and sustainable urban and residential areas, ensuring everyone's housing conditions are improved.

(2) Ensuring everyone's access to safe, adequate essential housing services by 2030, upgrading slums with affordable prices.

(3) Developing safe urban areas and expanded residential areas with convenient, modern, and accessible transportation systems, paying particular attention to the needs of vulnerable groups, including women, children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly.

(4) Improving housing conditions through integrated urban planning and management policies; increasing the number of cities and settlements while paying attention to minimizing human impact on the environment.

Accordingly, one of the critical objectives of sustainable development is to build safe urban areas and expand residential areas with convenient, modern, and accessible transportation systems, paying particular attention to the needs of vulnerable groups such as women, children, persons with disabilities, and the elderly. However, this urban planning and construction aspect has received little attention in Vietnam. The convenience, modernity, accessibility, and

safety of urban environments, particularly for women and girls, have not been sufficiently prioritized.

Urbanization brings about economic and social changes that positively and negatively impact women's and men's lives. However, due to their various roles, urban women have different needs than men regarding accessibility, affordability, and safety of urban services to facilitate their access to employment, childcare, elder care, and household management. However, in many countries, including Vietnam, urban development is often viewed as "gender-neutral," meaning the specific needs of women are neither considered nor integrated into the planning and development process.

Vietnam has committed to achieving sustainable development goal 11, which aims to make cities and settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. To accomplish this goal, Vietnam has undertaken the "domestication" of policies and legal regulations, including:

Regarding housing and residence, Vietnam has enacted urban planning policies to outline this trajectory in Decision No. 445/QĐ-TTg dated April 7, 2009, by the Prime Minister, approving the modification of the Master Plan for the Development of Vietnam's Urban System by 2025 with a vision to 2050 (National Urban Master Plan). This plan classifies urban areas and provides urban planning frameworks based on density and scale. The approach of the urban master plan allows major cities more autonomy in decision-making. However, this master planning framework focuses more on guidelines to expand spatial and infrastructure planning rather than addressing the various needs of resident groups. The plan lacks national guidelines on participatory consultation, gender

mainstreaming, and accessibility improvement for people with disabilities and diverse resident groups in urban planning. Consequently, the level of participation and consideration of gender inclusivity, as well as accommodation for people with disabilities, can vary significantly between different jurisdictions.

The Law on Housing 2014 and the Prime Minister's Decision No. 2161/QĐ-TTg dated December 22, 2021, approving the National Strategy on Housing Development 2021-2030, with a vision to 2045 have been issued to improve the quality and affordability of housing as cities develop. These policies provide a framework for reforming critical areas such as enhancing self-built housing standards, encouraging the private sector's participation in residential development, and increasing accessibility to affordable rental housing, especially for workers in industrial zones.

Regarding transport, Decision No. 355/QĐ-TTg dated February 25, 2013, by the Prime Minister, approving the adjusted strategy for Vietnam's Transport Development towards 2020 and the orientation towards 2030, outlines the future direction to develop a sustainable public transportation system. These policies set parameters for improving accessibility to housing, urban services, transportation, and other amenities for the growing urban population. However, these policy documents often overlook gender considerations. They do not address women's specific housing, transportation, or spatial planning needs.

Politburo's Resolution No. 06-NQ/TW, dated January 24, 2022, on planning, construction, management, and sustainable development of urban areas in Vietnam till 2030, with a vision toward 2045, outlines five viewpoints, six main task groups, and

solutions. This resolution emphasizes the role and position of urban areas and urbanization in industrialization and modernization in the new period, laying the foundation for a more comprehensive, systematic, and unified urban transformation and development in Vietnam. Following this, the Government's Resolution No. 48/NQ-CP dated November 11, 2022, promulgating the Government's Program of Action for implementing the Political Bureau's Resolution No. 06-NQ/TW of January 24, 2022, on planning, construction, management and sustainable development of Vietnamese urban centers up to 2030, with a vision toward 2045. This resolution sets specific targets for sustainable urban development by 2030 with a vision to 2045. Nevertheless, these targets are primarily gender-neutral, lacking indicators addressing gender considerations.

3. Current state of building sustainable urban environments adapting to the needs of women and girls

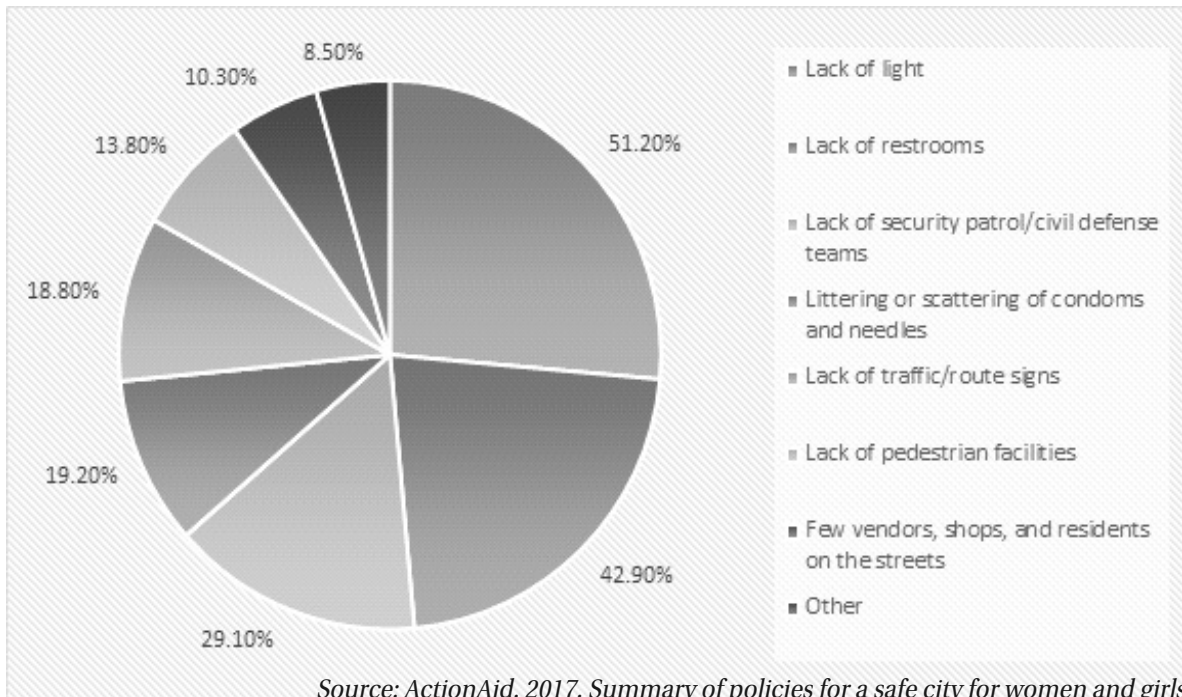
Urban planning decisions often neglect the built environment's impact on women's safety and sense of safety. The development of the built environment - which includes buildings, streets, public spaces such as parks and squares, transportation systems, and land use patterns - can affect all residents' physical and mental health and public safety. However, these factors are especially critical for women and girls. Elements of the built environment can either enhance or diminish their sense of safety. Similarly, safe and accessible streets and public spaces can facilitate or hinder the mobility and safety of people with disabilities.

ActionAid's research (an international organization fighting against poverty and injustice in over 40 countries) highlights significant safety concerns for women in urban areas. More than half of the urban women surveyed feel unsafe on crowded buses and at bus stops (ActionAid, 2017).

Another research by Plan International (an international non-governmental organization for child-centered community development in nearly 50 countries) emphasized the safety risks faced by adolescent girls in Hanoi. Almost half of the surveyed girls (49%)

reported that they never (15.6%), rarely (9.6%), or sometimes (24.1%) feel safe in public spaces (Plan International, 2020). Other factors within the built environment also undermine women and girls' sense of safety.

Figure 1: Factor influencing women’s sense of safety in urban environment



According to the United Nations Entity for gender equality and Women’s empowerment (UN Women), a study on sexual harassment in public spaces in Hochiminh City found evidence that sexual harassment on buses, other public transport means, as well as in swimming pools, public restrooms, universities, schools, and various facilities is prevalent. Due to its frequency, sexual harassment has been normalized (UN Women, 2017).

Limited lighting and few people on streets often contribute to women’s feeling unsafe in urban areas. City centers in Vietnam typically feature well-lit streets, numerous small shops, and high pedestrian traffic, while smaller

towns or non-central urban areas often lack these conditions. Therefore, integrating these factors into planning new urban areas and secondary cities is a priority to enhance women's sense of safety. People with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, often face difficulties in accessing workplaces and urban services due to their inaccessible designs. Designing spaces for physically disabled individuals will also facilitate the movement of the elderly and mothers using strollers with their babies. Vietnam has established urban design standards to promote mobility.

However, there remains a significant lack of resources and compliance with necessary

standards within construction companies. Consequently, many accessibility requirements for vulnerable groups are not met. An analysis of public locations inspected in Hanoi, Hochiminh City, Da Nang, Can Tho, Vung Tau, and Da Lat revealed that less than 1% of these locations could fully provide accessibility (Australian, ADB, ILO, UN Women, 2021).

Globally and in Vietnam, there has been a clear recognition of the need to reduce gender-based violence against women in public transportation services. Gender-based violence in public places negatively impacts women's mobility and economic empowerment opportunities; it can decrease the usage of public means of transport not only by women but also by children and the elderly. In Vietnam, as in many other countries, women are at a higher risk of violence from strangers on public transportation and when walking to and from these means of transport.

A comprehensive study and preliminary survey conducted by the Hochiminh City Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs in 2017 under the "Safe City Program" (2017-2021) (UN Women, 2021) indicated that areas related to transportation, including buses, bus stations, and bus stops, were among the three most unsafe public spaces for women and girls regarding the risk of sexual harassment. Women interviewed reported they had been sexually harassed both verbally and physically while on buses, while bus drivers and assistants also acknowledged the commonality of such harassment on buses. Therefore, improving public transportation services for women by enhancing their personal safety experiences is crucial.

Vietnam has signed several international documents and commitments to eliminate

violence against women, such as the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1951 Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration, and the 1958 Convention No. 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation). Vietnam has successfully integrated many of these international obligations into its legal system and domestic action programs, including the 2013 Constitution, the Land Law, the Law on Nationality of Vietnam, the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control, the Law on Marriage and Family, the Law on Social Insurance; the National Action Program on Women, Peace, and Security for 2024-2030; Decision No.1464/QĐ-TTg dated July 22, 2016, by the Prime Minister, approving the project on gender-based violence prevention and response for period 2016-2022 with a vision to 2030. However, to support successfully the policy implementation, it is crucial to reduce the risks of gender violence and harassment in public spaces.

Urban expansion poses more challenges for designing an efficient public transportation system. An analysis of factors contributing to sustainable cities identified that only 56% of Ho Chi Minh City residents use public transportation (UN Women, 2021). Furthermore, in places with public transportation, the distances between adjacent areas and public transport stops are often long, with an average walking distance of 1 km to reach a bus or vehicle stop.

Despite Vietnam's commitments to ensure the rights of women and persons with disabilities, including the right to mobility, accessibility has not been systematically integrated into public transportation investment. Requirements for private

transportation services to serve persons with disabilities have not been adequately addressed. Incomplete urban public transportation systems have restricted the mobility of women, low-income individuals, and persons with disabilities who depend on these services to access employment and services.

4. Policy recommendations

From the current policy landscape, legal framework, and the situation of women and girls in public spaces in urban areas, several policy changes, technical assurances, and funding to implement effective policies are necessary. The following policy recommendations can be considered to address these issues:

Firstly, the housing, construction, and urban development policy should be enhanced based on gender responsibility and gender mainstreaming. Actively promote the amendment, supplementation, and adjustment of regulations, programs, strategies, and urban planning regarding urban areas, housing, public transportation, and public spaces towards gender mainstreaming and gender responsibility following sustainable urban development criteria and objectives. It is crucial to continue assessing the impact of gender equality policies in programs and lawmaking projects, ensuring comprehensive and practical gender mainstreaming in these projects.

Secondly, approaches and techniques for urban planning and public transportation should be strengthened with gender responsibility. These approaches and methods need to be evaluated and developed into policies, guidelines, and decisions to prioritize them as part of investment plans in major cities and urban areas.

With such measures, comprehensive urban planning can create gender-sensitive,

safe, green, and modern urban centers. As metropolitan areas expand, planners need to ensure that investments in infrastructure and other measures are gender-responsible.

Options may include investing in women and child-friendly urban spaces, including recreational areas and specific planning. Street, bus stops, and public spaces must have adequate lighting and reasonable distances. Separate male and female toilets should be provided, especially in urban areas and along highways, together with accessibility for strollers and wheelchairs in buildings and on streets; having female staff in critical public service positions, including traditionally male-dominated fields like drivers and public transport assistants. This solution can contribute to creating a female-friendly urban environment; enhancing surveillance camera systems on streets and in public spaces to strengthen the prevention of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, especially against women and girls; building gender-responsible and inclusive transportation and urban systems to ensure equitable access for women and girls.

Fully implementing these measures and technical standards may increase construction and operating costs in public spaces. However, such investments are necessary and worthwhile, so the State should allocate additional funding for these technical standards.

Thirdly, enhancing awareness and promoting gender equality. All citizens need to be aware of and comply with actions that ensure gender equality. However, strict sanctions are also essential to ensure gender equality in urban areas and public spaces. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and promulgate standards or norms for communication and behavior in public places, on streets, in buildings, and urban

public spaces, accompanied by strict sanctions to deter and address gender-based violence, particularly against women and girls.

5. Conclusion

Gender equality is a critical and long-term goal globally and in Vietnam. Gender equality goals are increasingly comprehensive and substantive, including ensuring gender-equitable access in urban construction and operations. However, this remains relatively novel and unfamiliar in Vietnam, necessitating increased attention from government authorities and more time and resources to achieve these goals. This effort will contribute to achieving sustainable urban development and gender equality objectives.

References:

1. Action Aid. (2017). *Summary of policies for a safe city for women and girls*.
2. Australian, ADB, ILO, UN Women. (2021). *Overview of gender equality in Vietnam 2021*.
3. General Statistics Office. (2023). *Press release on the population, labor, and employment situation in the fourth semester and 2023*.
4. Plan International. (2020). *A better normal: Girls call for revolutionary reconstruction*. Melbourne, Australia.
5. UN Women. (2017). *Safe cities and safe public spaces: Global results report*. New York.
6. UN Women. (2021). *Gender-responsive budgeting with the goal of building safe cities for women and girls. Initiatives of Hochiminh City in providing public passenger transport services*.
7. United Nations. (2015). *The 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development*

Further Reading:

1. Government. (2022). *Resolution No. 148/NQ-*

CP dated November 11, 2022 promulgating the Government's Program of Action for implementing the Political Bureau's Resolution No. 06-NQ/TW of January 24, 2022 on planning, construction, management and sustainable development of Vietnamese urban centers up to 2030, with a vision toward 2045.

2. Hoa, N. T. N. (2020). *Some solutions to improve policies and laws on planning, management, and land use in urban areas*. Retrieved February 24, 2024 from <https://www.quanlynhanuoc.vn/2020/08/06/mot-so-giai-phap-hoan-thien-chinh-sach-phap-luat-ve-quy-hoach-quan-ly-va-su-dung-dat-dai-tai-do-thi/>

3. Huong, T. (2023). *Scientifically managing urban development is crucial to develop sustainable urban areas*. Retrieved February 24, 2024 from <https://www.quanlynhanuoc.vn/2023/10/24/muon-phat-trien-do-thi-ben-vung-can-quan-ly-phat-trien-do-thi-mot-cach-khoa-hoc/>

4. National Assembly. (2014). *The Law on Housing 2014*.

5. Prime Minister. (2021). *Decision No. 2161/QĐ-TTg dated December 22, 2021, approving the National Strategy on Housing Development 2021-2030, with a vision to 2045*.

6. Prime Minister. (2013). *Decision No. 355/QĐ-TTg dated February 25, 2013 approving the adjusted strategy for Vietnam's Transport Development towards 2020, and the orientation towards 2030*.

7. Prime Minister. (2009). *Decision No. 445/QĐ-TTg dated April 7, 2009 approving the modification of the Master Plan for the Development of Vietnam's Urban System by 2025 with vision to 2050*.

8. Politburo. (2022). *Resolution No. 06-NQ/TW, dated January 24, 2022, on planning, construction, management, and sustainable development of urban areas in Vietnam until 2030, with a vision toward 2045*.