

Reclaiming Public Space for Teenage Girls

Strategies for designing
inclusive public spaces¹

Cristina Maria Nearing

This webpost explores why teenage girls are often absent from outdoor recreation spaces and what can be done to change that. It draws on research and case studies from Umeå's girl-centred Frizon space and the Equalizer participatory method in Malmö to highlight practical strategies for creating outdoor play environments where girls feel welcome. The post calls for recognising the gendered experiences of public space and designing with girls' needs and perspectives in mind.

Cities built by men for men

Cities have largely been planned around the needs and mobility patterns of men. Planning models traditionally prioritised long work commutes and car-based travel, overlooking the shorter, multi-purpose, transit-dependent trips that shape many women's daily lives.² This bias affects not only adult women but also girls and young women, who rarely see their needs reflected in the built environment.

Girls and young women are also overlooked in planning. As Leslie Kern notes in *The Feminist City*, when communities call for "spaces for youth," the default tends to be skate parks, basketball courts and hockey arenas, facilities that overwhelmingly cater to

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² Hanson, S. (2010). Gender and mobility: New approaches for informing sustainability. *Gender,*

Place & Culture, 17(1), 5–23.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690903498225>

boys rather than girls.³ This experience of not feeling belonging in parks is captured in this quote from a 14-year old participant in research by UK-based charity Make Space for Girls:⁴ “Why would I go to the park? There’s nothing there for me.”

Cities such as Vienna have long recognised this imbalance. In the 1990s, the city adopted gender mainstreaming after finding significant differences in how men and women used services and public spaces.⁵ Vienna applied gender-mainstreaming to reshape public space, from Frauen-Werk-Stadt housing with flexible layouts, safer sightlines, communal facilities and pram-friendly access, to Mariahilf’s district upgrades that widened pavements, improved lighting and crossings, added seating, and removed mobility barriers.⁶ These changes directly responded to women’s safety, caregiving roles and everyday travel patterns, showing how public space can look different when designed with women and girls in mind.

Challenges teenage girls face in outdoor recreation spaces

Teenagers are among the most frequent users of public space, yet girls are often “designed out” through a lack of suitable facilities and low adult tolerance for their presence.⁷ For girls, this exclusion is worsened by boys’ dominance of many public spaces.⁸ Ensuring they can access outdoor environments is critical, given rising youth mental-health concerns and the wellbeing benefits of being outside.⁹ Their challenges can be grouped into the following key areas:¹⁰

Male-dominated facilities: Many public spaces prioritise competitive sports e.g. football fields, sports courts which draw far more boys than girls (Figure 1).

3 Kern, L. (2019). *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*. Verso.

4 Walker, S., & Clark, I. (2023). *Make Space for Girls: The research background 2023*.

5 Bauer, U. (2009). Gender mainstreaming in Vienna. How the gender perspective can raise the quality of life in a big city. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, (3-4).

6 Committee for Sydney. (2020). *Designing a City for Women Lessons from Vienna*.

https://sydney.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Committee_City-for-Women-Final.pdf

7 Travlou, P. (2003, July). *Teenagers and public space: Literature review*. OPENspace: The Research Centre for Inclusive Access to Outdoor Environments, Edinburgh College of Art and

Heriot-Watt University.; Wood, J., & Hamilton, J.

(2023). *Teenagers and Public Space Research: Final Report*. https://aplaceinchildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Teenagers-and-Public-Space-Report_FINAL.pdf

8 Book, K., & Högdahl, E. (2024). Equalizer: Breaking down the barriers at informal outdoor sport and recreational spaces. *Leisure Studies*, 43(6), 961–977.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2088833>

9 Hjort, M., & Larsen, S. H. (2025). Motives for and barriers to the use of public space among teenage girls: A scoping review. *Leisure Studies*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2025.2451290>

10 Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge.



Figure 1. Sports Courts/ Multi-use Games Areas, UK

Source: Pentagon Play (2019).¹¹

Limited spaces for social, creative and lower-intensity activities: Spaces that support social, creative, or lower-intensity physical activities that girls do are limited.¹² This imbalance means girls often find fewer places that fit how they prefer to spend time outdoors.

Gendered social norms & policing: Girls face stronger social judgement about how they spend time in public, from hanging out with friends to simply being visible.¹³ Boys' dominance of central areas can intensify this, creating environments where girls feel watched, judged or unwelcome. As Judith Butler's work on gender performativity suggests, public space becomes one of the places where gender norms are reproduced and policed, shaping how girls learn to take up or shrink from space.

In Figure 2, a playground places a sports court at the centre, which boys occupy.

11 Pentagon Play. (2019). *5 Game-Changing Benefits of Multi Use Games Areas for Schools!*

https://www.pentagonplay.co.uk/news-and-info/5-benefits-muga?srsId=AfmBOoquCj29KwuR09Ng5qyXwefo0ZNgxTDG-bCx47b_CWyzGFIW8bCE

Girls cluster around the walking track and staircases, choosing to socialise away from the central zone. This pattern is common: when the main facilities serve boys' interests, girls retreat to the margins.

Girls also encounter lower adult tolerance in parks and recreation spaces; they are more likely to be discouraged from gathering or lingering, even when their behaviour is harmless.¹⁴ This inconsistent treatment reinforces the sense that public space is less “for them” than for others.

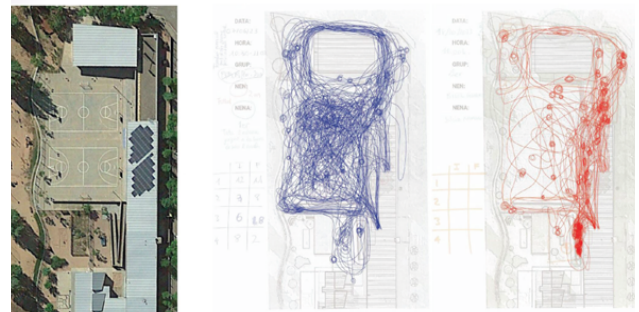


Figure 2. Girls pushed to the periphery of school playground by boys, Spain

Source: Honorata Grzesikowska, Architektoniczki.¹⁵

Strategies to make outdoor recreation spaces work for girls

Designing for girls also creates more welcoming environments for gender-diverse young people who often face similar pressures around visibility, safety and belonging. Research and practice

12 Hjort, M., & Larsen, S. H. (2025). Op. cit.; Walker, S., & Clark, I. (2023). Op. cit.

13 Ibid.

14 Hjort, M., & Larsen, S. H. (2025). Op. cit.

15 Subramanian, A., & Rice, C. (2023). *Girls just wanna have fun: How do we design a better public realm for adolescent and teenage girls?* Perkins&Will.

point to several ways outdoor spaces can be made more inclusive for girls:

Provide facilities that reflect girls' interests and support multiple ways of using space: Outdoor spaces with natural elements such as gardens, walking paths and water tend to be more appealing to teenage girls because they support a mix of social and solitary activities. Research shows girls prefer collaborative, rhythmic and imaginative play rather than competitive sports, and they use a wider mix of features, from swings to seating to quiet green areas, rather than a single dominant court.¹⁶ Designing multi-use environments with seating, greenery, small niches and flexible play structures (see Box 1) creates places where girls can gather, talk, move and explore without competing with boys for central fields.¹⁷

Box 1: Frizon (Free zone), a social space designed for teenage girls – Årstidernas Park, Umeå, Sweden

Umeå, with a population of 134,000, is recognised as one of the world's most feminist cities. Since 1978, a Gender Equality Committee has evaluated municipal policies for gender impact, including details like public seating designed for women's average height.

Frizon (Free Zone), opened in 2016, is a landmark example of designing public space with and for teenage girls. Created in collaboration with local girls and artist Kerstin Bergendal, and supported by the municipality, Frizon rethinks what recreational space can be when girls' needs are prioritised. Gender equality officers describe it as a space for everyone, but shaped around the insights of teenage girls in Umeå.



Frizon has the following features:

- Social-oriented seating (large suspended swinging seats)
- Seating at the height of average teenage girls
- Located in a highly visible area of the park where people can see who is coming and who is going
- Playful, eye-catching, and colourful carousel-shaped gazebo
- Phone connection to speakers installed in the roof to listen to music
- Located near natural landscapes and river

Source: Groskop, V. (2024, October 30). The world's most feminist city: How Umeå in Sweden became an idyll for women. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/oct/30/the-worlds-most-feminist-city-how-umea-in-sweden-became-an-idyll-for-women>:

Make Space for Girls. (n.d.). *Umeå Case Study*.

<https://www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk/case-studies/umea>; Gustafsson, L., & Dalen, A. (2025).

In Search of a method that works: The story of the 'Gendered Landscape' of Umea. In B. Jess (Ed.), *Designing Gender Sensitive Spaces for Consenting Cities: Practices and Provocations* (pp. 14-29). Taylor & Francis Group

16 Subramanian, A., & Rice, C. (2023). Op. cit.

17 Hjort, M., & Larsen, S. H. (2025). Op. cit.

Design with girls, not just for them:

Research emphasise the importance of engaging teenage girls in the spaces they already use, recognising them as knowledgeable stakeholders and co-creators of public space.¹⁸ Co-design and meaningful participation help uncover how girls experience space and what barriers they face (Box 2), ensuring that designs reflect their needs and challenge existing gender norms.¹⁹

Improve the spatial cues and physical layout of spaces:

Girls tend to avoid “fishbowl” environments created by central courts, where users feel watched.²⁰ Research also highlights the importance of places where girls can look out without being looked at.²¹ Flexible or movable elements allow teens to adapt spaces to their needs, supporting a sense of ownership and comfort. Providing soft boundaries, colour cues, and multiple smaller zones provides more options for movement and makes spaces feel more open and approachable.²²

Strengthen organisational, social and programming support:

Girls are more encouraged to use public spaces when supportive adults or youth workers are present and when rules for sharing space are clear.²³ Occasional girl-focused activities or mixed-group sessions can also help them feel more confident in areas that are usually dominated by boys.

Challenge representations and norms:

Images, signage and examples that show girls being active broaden their sense of

what they can do in public space.²⁴ These cues help shift expectations and encourage more diverse use of recreational areas.

Box 2: Equalizer, a tool for inclusive recreational places – Malmö, Sweden

Equalizer is a participatory method developed in Sweden to reveal and disrupt the norms that shape who feels welcome in public recreation spaces. It recognises that the absence of teenage girls in parks and sport areas is not simply about missing infrastructure but about how space is perceived, who dominates it, and how behaviour is policed. Early phases of the project worked with girls and young women in Malmö to understand why many avoid existing sports places, as only nine per cent of girls in Sweden meet the WHO’s recommended daily activity levels.

The approach combines research, co-creation and full-scale testing. Young people identify spaces where boys and young men tend to dominate, reflect on their own experiences through interviews, and then carry out “disturbances” by entering these areas and trying activities themselves. These exercises make barriers visible, from territorial behaviour to discomfort and exclusion. Follow-up conversations help translate these experiences into concrete problems, ideas and design opportunities.

18 Subramanian, A., & Rice, C. (2023). Op. cit.

19 Book, K., & Högdahl, E. (2024).

20 Subramanian, A., & Rice, C. (2023). Op. cit.

21 Ibid.

22 Book, K., & Högdahl, E. (2024).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.



Equalizer has since expanded to schoolyards and other settings, where students work with architects and municipalities to identify obstacles, prototype new activities and reimagine how shared spaces can function. Prototypes range from small interventions that encourage new forms of movement to playful tools that disrupt routine patterns and attract users who would not otherwise participate.

Across both phases, the project has developed a model for identifying norms, testing creative alternatives and transforming recreational places through simple but effective changes. The overarching goal is to make public spaces more inclusive, support physical activity for underrepresented groups and normalise a wider range of behaviours in parks and sport areas.

Source: Book, K., & Högdahl, E. (2024). Op. cit.; FOJAB. (n.d.). Equalizer. <https://fojab.se/en/project/equalizer/>

Conclusion

The examples from Umeå and Malmö show that girls are not simply missing from outdoor recreation spaces. Their absence reflects environments that do not recognise their needs or how they want to spend time outside. When girls help shape

public spaces, a more inclusive kind of place is possible. Teenage girls ask for places to socialise, be creative and move without competition. They also want to feel comfortable and free from judgement.

These observations also speak to how cities can become more age-friendly. A truly age-friendly city is one where people can participate in public life throughout their lives. Many of the aspects that help girls feel at ease in outdoor spaces also matter to older adults including good lighting, comfortable seating, visibility, varied activities and a welcoming atmosphere.

Designing with girls encourages cities to rethink long-standing assumptions about who uses public space and whose needs guide it. Cities that commit to a more complete understanding of recreation become places where people of all ages and genders can enjoy being outside, feel seen, and take part in urban life.

Sources:

Book, K., & Högdahl, E. (2024). Equalizer: Breaking down the barriers at informal outdoor sport and recreational spaces. *Leisure Studies*, 43(6), 961-977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2088833>

Hjort, M., & Larsen, S. H. (2025). Motives for and barriers to the use of public space among teenage girls: A scoping review. *Leisure Studies*, 1 - 18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2025.2451290>

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