Using Space to Mitigate Gender-based Violence Against Women In Emergency Shelters

Question: Can spatial programming in emergency shelters, that considers gendered experiences of space, decrease women's and girls' exposure to potential incidences of gender-based violence?

Why: Emergency Management best practices for providing shelter cite specific minimum requirements to meet to provide the bare necessities to support individuals' needs in a time of crisis. There is little guidance built into these requirements that outlines how those needs for men and women may differ and what that would look like when implemented (Marsh et al., 2006; UN Women, 2017; Vall, 2020; Saito, 2014; Martino et al., 2020; Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2015).

Methods: Instrumental Case Study using an interdisciplinary approach, with a feminist and social-constructivism lenses.

Cases: 2 cases
1. Southern Alberta Floods (2013) – Calgary, AB, CAN
2. Hurricane Katrina (2005) – New Orleans, LA, USA

Data Sources:
1. Peer-reviewed & Grey Literature
2. Interviews (Practitioners)

Key Literature highlights...
1. Modern architectural practices recognize that “a city or building can thus be literally ‘read’ as a map of aspects of a society, its social structures and values” (Boys, 1998, p. 206).
2. Gender-based violence tends to occur in specific locations in shelters, such as bathrooms and other spaces linked with more privacy (Juran, 2012; Pain, 2001; Farmer et al., 2018).
3. Broken and unstable public spaces lead to private spaces becoming less secure; “under such circumstances, gender-based prejudices, patriarchal values, and behavior patterns are likely to gain new vigor and scope” (Acar & Ege, 2001, see also Villarreal & Meyer, 2019, p. 286).

Physical Space: When focusing on gender-specific needs, elements such as locked doors, surveillance, and privacy that highlighted bathrooms and sleeping spaces as a vulnerable point became front of mind. There was an association of smaller-scale spaces with an increased sense of safety, due to temperature, reduced numbers of strangers, noise, lack of privacy, and a general sense of overwhelm.

Perceived Space: There is another type of space built and influenced for individuals in an emergency shelter, a psychological space built based on individuals’ unique perception and experience. Rebuilding that social container creates a sense of structure, of stability, of place, with a notable gap identified as known but not implemented.

Understanding Space & GBV: The need for shelters to build in micro-spatial supports for stress management for all individuals and developing social capital opportunities so that those occupying the shelters can leverage each other's capacities to navigate their next steps.

Findings

Current Situation

Practice

Advisory Committee: Tim Haney & Jean Slick
Ethical Approval: Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board