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Creating the anti-sexist city: The potential of the local state in combatting sexual harassment

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ABSTRACT

In this article we advance theory by developing a conceptualisation of the local state as an active player in the promotion of anti-sexist urbanism. While recent theory has explored ways in which the local state has promoted socially progressive goals under neoliberalism, this work has focused almost entirely on economic-rather than social-goals. We extend this work by developing a concept of the local state in the promotion of social and gender-justice agendas. We do this by bringing scholarships on the local state; feminist urbanism and arts-led feminist activism to bear on a case study of Bristol, UK. Through an analysis of the ways Bristol has activated urban space to challenge sexual harassment through collaborations with artists and third-sector partners, we extend understanding of how the local state can re-script urban space as spaces of resistance, through which more emancipatory forms of urban life might be possible. We argue that the local state has an important role to play in combatting sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence and drawing forth the anti-sexist city. We advance theory in and beyond Geography about what local states can be and do, and submit that the forms of urban innovation seen in Bristol constitute a model of how the local state can promote anti-sexist place-making.

> *The spatial structure of the city is not merely the concrete manifestation of past and present ideas about gender and other social relations. It not only provides the conditions for the reproduction of gender relations and gender roles, but, hopefully, it also provides some of the conditions for the transformation of those gender relations and gender roles into a more spatially equal city.* Kim England (1991, p.144)

> *It's repeatedly at the level of municipal statehood where radical exercises of governmental agency and initiatives emerge* Davina Cooper (2017, p.341)

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the scope, scale and harm caused by sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. Sexual harassment is a breach of bodily autonomy which can be understood as having control over what happens to ones' body (O'Brien & Newport, 2023) and freedom of movement (Reilly, 1997). While geographers have explored this concept predominantly in the context of reproductive choice and maternity care (Fannin, 2013; Wicks, 2016), bodily autonomy has also been proposed as a framework through which to understand sexual harassment in terms of how it limits mobility and inclusiveness in public space (Barry, 2018; Reilly, 1997; Srivastava et al., 2017; Valentine, 1989).

Worldwide, the bodily autonomy of women and other marginalised subjects is compromised daily through forms of gender regulation ranging from street harassment all the way up to the most serious forms of gender violence, including murder. Moreover, as feminist and political geographers have argued; intimate/'local', forms of gender violence and gender violence at larger geopolitical scales are not ontologically distinct but rather part of the same system of gender domination. For example, as Rachael Pain has argued, domestic violence exists in conjunction with violence at much broader scales such as state-and military sponsored gender violence, highlighting the way intimate and global gender terrorisms are always already intertwined (Pain, 2014; see also Brickell, 2014; Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Wright, 2008). Put another way, as Reilly notes: "The right to live in safety underscores women's right not to be subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional violence inside or outside the home, either by private individuals or by people acting on the part of the state. Sexual harassment of women prisoners … or the use

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of rape as a form of torture are examples of state-sponsored violations of bodily integrity" (Reilly, 1997, no page number). We suggest that 'street level' gender violence in the form of sexual harassment must be understood within a conceptual framework of the global-intimate: such violations are experienced daily by women and others around the globe; reinforcing a system of gender-based bodily domination and exclusion, and enabling more serious forms of gender-based violence.

Sexual harassment is an issue the world over (Senthillingam, 2017; Sen et al., 2018), with research suggesting that up to 90% of women globally have experienced harassment (Johnson & Bennett, 2015 in Fileborn, 2021, p. 1). Research also shows that women of colour experience more sexual harassment than white women (Nielsen, 2009); and that 90% of gay and bisexual men (McNeil, 2012) and nearly half of trans people experience street harassment (2015, report of transgender survey). Stopping sexual harassment is thus fundamental to achieving the goal of anti-sexist urbanism in which all citizens have full bodily autonomy in public space.

Yet little is known about what the local state is doing -or might do-to combat gender-based street harassment. We argue that the local state has an important role to play in the fight against street harassment and the promotion of anti-sexist cities. We extend existing knowledge by showing how the local state can advance a vision of anti-sexist urbanism by activating spaces in the city as sites to raise awareness about harassment and promote more respectful ways of inter-relating in public. This argument both extends longstanding concern in feminist geography with the politics of gendered rights to space (Domosh & Seager, 2001; Massey, 1994; Staheli et al., 2004; Whitson, 2017); efforts challenge sexual harassment (Adiv; 2017; Boyer, 2022; Lubitow et al., 2017); and the potential of public space as a medium through which to challenge misogyny and heterosexism (Carr, 2013; Davis, 2003; Mackay, 2014; Sandberg & Coe, 2020; Whitson, 2017; Wright, 2005). In turn, it extends scholarship in political geography on the theorisation of the local state (Cochrane, 2020; Cooper, 2017; Joubert, 2023; Russell et al., 2022; Thompson, 2023 & 2021), and specifically the potential of the local state to promote social justice causes. In what follows we will first review the relevant literatures, focusing on scholarship on the local state and in turn how the local state relates to programmes of anti-sexist urbanism and arts-based feminist activism. We then introduce our case study and methodology, and then move to analyse a set of initiatives in Bristol, England to promote gender justice, and conclude with policy recommendations.

2. Scholarship on the local state, anti-sexist urbanism and arts-based feminist activism

2.1. Theoretical framings of the local state

In recent years scholars have begun to re-theorise the role and potential of the local state operating under the crisis of neoliberalism and, in the UK, over 10 years of austerity budgeting (Thompson, 2023). Through the work of Allen and Cochrane (2010, 2020) Jones (2012), Ward et al. (2015) and others this field of scholarship has developed a conceptualisation of the local state as an assemblage that emerges relationally through interactions between public and private actors, with porous boundaries between what is traditionally thought of as 'the state' on the one hand and civil society on the other (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; Cochrane, 2020; Jones, 2012; Ward et al., 2015). Scholarship has –rightly- shone light on the local state as an agent of violence within programmes of neoliberalism, acting as executor of revanchist economic and social policy (Donald et al., 2014; Ince, 2012; Jessop, 2013; Theodore, 2020). However, alongside this a more hopeful vision of the local state has also begun to take shape.

This work seeks to highlight the potential of the local state as a space, scale or set of relations in which progressive politics might be fostered (Cooper, 2017). Falling under the banner of the new municipalism, this work has focused on the ways the local state can resist the inequalities and injustices of neoliberalism in ways that recall the municipal radicalism of the Greater London Council in the 1980s, in which the local state promoted socially progressive goals and economic equality, sometimes working outside fields normally associated with governance (Cochrane, 2020; Cooper, 2017; Joubert, 2023; Russell et al., 2022; Thompson, 2023 & 2021). Like the municipal radicalism of the Greater London Council, the new municipalism is characterised by "a readiness to campaign, and not simply govern, on behalf of marginalised and subjugated interests", (Cooper, 2020, p. 181 in Joubert, 2023, p. 2256), fore-fronting social justice goals broadly conceived. Building on this and cycling back to the earlier point about the ways local states emerge relationally between state and non-state actors, Joubert argues the new municipalism represents a framework for understanding "progressive left urban politics at the intersection of social movements on the 'streets' and the formal politics of local institutions" (Joubert, 2023, p. 2252, see also Thompson, 2021).

Yet while this scholarship has explored ways cities can be more inclusive, most of this work has focused on economic rather than social inclusion, through initiatives such as ethical investment and co-operatives (Russell et al., 2022; Thompson, 2015; Thompson, 2021). We build on conceptual work in this field by analysing how the local state can enhance social and specifically gender inclusivity, thereby extending theorisation of the local state as an agent of anti-sexist placemaking. Having situated our project within scholarship on the local state, we will now turn to consider two further bodies of scholarship within which this project is situated: first, initiatives to promote anti-sexist cities; and second the role of feminist artists in partnerships with the local state.

2.2. Anti-sexist urbanism

Efforts to challenge misogyny, homo- and trans-phobia through interventions in urban space have been topics of long-standing concern in and beyond geography (Carr, 2013; Davis, 2003; Mackay, 2014; Sandberg & Coe, 2020; Whitson, 2017; Wright, 2005). These analyses have been based broadly in concepts of the right to the city (Lefebvre et al., 1996) and the *gendered* right to the city specifically (Fenster, 2005); the right to everyday life (Beebeejaun, 2017); and the injustice of the fact that women and LGBTQ+ people often feel constrained and fearful in public space due to fear of sexual violence (Pain, 1997; Valentine, 1989). A long-standing means by which women, LGBTQ+ people and their allies have fought back against this has been by occupying public space in the form of marches. Relating most directly to the topic of this article are Take Back the Night marches, which began in the 1970s and now occur around the world (Mackay, 2014; Sandberg & Coe, 2020; Whitson, 2017).

Historically focused on women's right to occupy night-time space without fear, Take Back the Night is a prime example of collectively fighting back against gender violence (and fear thereof) as a "spatial expression of patriarchy" (Valentine, 1989, p. 385) in how it limits the spatial freedom of women and other feminised subjects. Variations on this include marches protesting femicide such as the Ni Una Mas/not one more march in Mexico demanding women's access to the public sphere and advocating women's agency and right to space (Wright, 2005); and slut marches (Carr, 2013) seeking to protest women's right to wear what they like without getting harassed. While all of these interventions seek to resist gender violence by occupying public space, they take a range of different approaches in achieving this goal: generating atmospheres varying from sombre to angry to playful. Yet they share the common thread that they all emerged from grass-roots feminist activism rather than the state (or collaborations with the local state).

Another means of fighting back against street harassment and other forms of gender-based violence has been through education-based initiatives to promote more positive gender-cultures. These are configured variously as consent or bystander training, sexual ethics training or within the curriculum envelope of relationships and sex education and

have been rolled out in a broad range of educational settings. These include universities (Fenton & Mott, 2018; Lewis et al., 2018; Lewis and Marine, 2018; Vladutiu et al., 2011); secondary schools (Boyer and Wood, 2022, 2023; Bragg et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2021) and primary schools (Bonner-Thompson & Nayak, 2021; Nayak & Bonner-Thompson, 2022). While not focused on public space directly, to varying degrees each of these programmes seek to improve the way people interact with one another both in intimate relationships and in encounters with unknown others in public space. As primary and secondary schools are funded by the local state in the UK (and many other places), these last two examples provide examples of the local state working to promote social and specifically gender justice.

Recent years have seen more and more initiatives to fight back against gender violence undertaken in collaboration with the local state. One of these is through public-third sector partnerships that have emerged over the last few years between UK charity the *Good Night Out Campaign* and selected municipalities in England and Wales, and similar initiatives in Melbourne, Australia (goodnightoutcampaign.org; Fileborn, 2016). Through collaborations with local councils, *Good Night Out* has delivered bystander training/education (training to recognise and learn how to intervene in instances of sexual harassment) to employees in the night-time economy as well as digital postering campaigns to raise awareness about sexual harassment (Fileborn, 2016; Quigg et al., 2022). In addition to being shown to successfully reduce belief in rape myths and increase the likelihood of intervening in potential instances of gender violence (Quigg et al., 2022), we suggest these collaborations point to ways in which the local state can take a role in promoting more positive gender-cultures.

2.3. Collaborations between feminist artists and the local state in promoting anti-sexist urbanism

In addition to education-based initiatives and occupying public space through marches, another strategy to combat gender-based violence and promote anti-sexist urbanism has been by re-scripting public space through public and performance art. This form of feminist activism draws on the traditions of feminist public art that emerged in the US in the 1970s which consisted of showing art outside of galleries with the intention of engaging and challenging the public about misogyny and heteropatriarchy through interventions in urban space (Moravec, 2013, pp. 146-149). This movement emerged out of the rise of feminist art more generally in the US including through the founding of the first feminist art programme in the 1970s at the University of California, Fresno by Judy Chicago (Moravec, 2013, p. 149). These interventions have ranged from performance-based pieces protesting violence against women, to using urban form itself to invite the public to question gender norms. An example of such an intervention can be found in American feminist artist Suzanne Lacy's piece 'between the door in the street' in which the riser-steps leading up to the Brooklyn Museum of Art -literally the space connecting the formal space of the gallery and the space of the street-were emblazoned with high-contrast questions including: 'Does gender matter?; 'Why do women earn less?; and 'Who's winning the war on women?' (Lacy, 2013).

Of note, these initiatives have included collaborations with the local state. An example of this is Suzanne Lacy's arts-based intervention *Three Weeks in May* which took place in Los Angeles in 1977 after the city had been deemed the 'rape capital of the country' (Fryd, 2007, p. 28). At a time when formal definitions of rape were not yet widely agreed upon (or recognised in the courts), this intervention both raised public awareness and re-positioned women from victims to empowered subjects. According to Fryd: "In formal diversity, *Three Weeks in May* was extraordinary. (It) included installations, speeches by politicians, interviews with hotline activists, self-defence demonstrations, speak-outs, media articles and programs, and performance art all designed to grab media attention and generate awareness of and discussion about rape in American culture" (Fryd, 2007, p. 28). As a means of drawing attention to the scale of the issue of gender violence, Lacy created two bright yellow, 25-foot wide maps which were then installed in a high-visibility public location of a plaza adjacent city hall, chosen to both maximize viewership and elicit discussion on the issues of gender violence amongst viewers (Fryd, 2007). The first map showed the location of rapes reported to the police each day over a three-week period (making daily updates based on new reports), while the second highlighted "the locations of sites of assistance and resistance: prevention centres, rape hotlines, hospital emergency rooms, and crisis and counselling centres (Fryd, 2007, p. 29)", thus making visible the dynamic geographies of both harm and healing associated with gender-based violence across the city.

In addition to bringing together feminists of different stripe (including women's rights groups, feminist artists and women's support groups), the involvement of local politicians and other emissaries from the local state was a fundamental dimension of this project. As Lacy stated in her film 'Women Fight Back' (Lacy, 2019) "being involved with city hall was a really important move" in enabling this project to achieve the kind of reach and exposure it did (Lacy, SFMOMA, 2019). This involvement was showcased by the city attorney and deputy Mayor taking part in a press conference at the event's beginning, a city councillor participating in an end of project rally, and elected representatives from city and county government also being involved in various ways (Fryd, 2007, pp. 28-29). This project serves as a potent example of how feminist activists and members of the local state can work collaboratively to combat gender violence and promote anti-sexist urbanism. Having situated this project in relation to fields of scholarship on which it draws and extends, we will now outline our study, methods and findings.

3. Bristol Nights: background and study methods

This article is based on a case study of the role of the local state in promoting anti-sexist urbanism in Bristol, UK. Located in the South-West of England, Bristol has a population of just under half a million people (ONS, 2021). It is a progressive, left-leaning city with, at the time of writing, a Green Party majority in council and Geen Party Mayor. The city has one of the only Green Party Members of Parliament representing it in Westminster, with the other four MPs being Labour (UK Parliament, 2024). Bristol has strong traditions of activism and protest. It is home to one of the most important chapters in Britain's fight for civil rights in the form of the Bristol bus boycott, and more recently gained worldwide attention in the Black Lives Matter movement when, during a protest, citizens toppled a statue of slaver Edward Colston and dumped it in Bristol harbour (BBC, 2020). As of 2020 it was the first city in the UK in which Greta Thunberg had led a climate March (15,000 people, in 2020) (Morris, 2020) and at the time the research was undertaken was the only city in Europe to have a black mayor.

As MacLeavy has observed, Bristol's local council puts an emphasis on "community and the empowerment of local people" (in Ward et al., 2015, p. 447), and, we submit, represents a good example of how the local state can promote social justice objectives by partnering with non-state actors and working across fields not typically associated with governance. The council has shown its commitment to protecting the bodily autonomy of its citizens through the Trans Inclusion and Gender Identity Policy (2023) which outlines a range of actions to protect the rights and freedoms of trans and non-binary citizens, including freedom from harassment. The political backdrop to this legislation included a motion brought by Councillor Brown stating that: "Bristol is a city that believes in gender equality and solidarity" (Trans Rights are Human Rights, 2022, p.3). In a related move the city has also collaborated in setting up a 'playing out' initiative which involves closing roads for safe children's' play (Ferguson & Page, 2015), again showing its desire to champion the rights of an often-overlooked segment of the population.

Initiatives to enhance gender inclusivity in Bristol were launched by the council during Covid as the city began to unlock, in response to the realisation that due to lockdown multiple 'generations' of young people

were exploring the night-time city for the first time. Badged as the 'Bristol Nights' campaign, this initiative included appointing a Night-Time 'Czar' (Carly Heath) to oversee the programme and aimed to promote and celebrate Bristol's night-time economy and make sure it was safe and welcoming to all. This position is fully within the auspices of the local state: it is funded by the council and the Night-Time Czar position sits within Bristol City Council. These initiatives were then extended in 2022 in the aftermath of the high-profile rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a standing UK police officer when the UK Home Office launched a fund for local councils to develop initiatives to promote the safety of women at night. In March 2022, Bristol City Council was awarded a £282,000 grant from this fund (BBC News, 2022). Initiatives launched through Bristol Nights has included a march against gender violence (akin to a 'Take Back the Night' March); and creating a Women's Safety Charter designed to improve the safety both of customers and women working in the night-time economy (Bristol Nights 2022a, p.4). A further dimension of this work has been an education component in the form of anti-sexual harassment training to staff in 106 venues, funded and delivered by the local state via the Bristol Nights Initiative (bristolcitycentrebid.co.uk). In addition to these actions, the Bristol Nights campaign has featured efforts to re-script public space and increase inclusivity through a sustained multi-year postering campaign and funding two large, high-profile murals against sexual harassment.

To understand these initiatives, in 2022 we undertook interviews with key stakeholders and a visual analysis of the graphic materials created as part of this project, together with an analysis of secondary sources such as city council documents, local and national news reports and posts on social media platform X (formerly twitter). We adopted a purposive sampling strategy in order to target people with specialist knowledge of this project or with public profiles as Bristol-based activists. After Emmel (2013 p.6) we sought out the most 'well situated people' to interview. We interviewed 7 stakeholders including: a key representative from city council (the Night-Time Czar), a further council member, the two artists who produced the murals, two local activists and a representative from the Bristol Street Intervention Service that works with the Bristol Business Improvement District to enhance street safety.

Participants were approached after completing background research on relevant stakeholders. City council-based participants were found via the council website and the artists were recruited after researching their work online. The activists were recruited via a Bristol-based activist blog and snowball sampling. Interviews were open-ended and lasted between 35 and 45 min. Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically based on key themes to emerge from the literature (Galletta, 2013). Participants were given the choice to remain anonymous, had the right to withdraw at any time and gave informed consent. No personal information was collected and the project received ethical approval from Cardiff University. Such undertook most of the interviewing and interview transcribing, whilst both authors took part in the analysis and writing. Secondary sources of council documents, X/twitter, websites and news reports were found through purposive searching by topic and relevance, and analysed thematically (Galletta, 2013).

Visual data were found both via campaign websites and through physical street observation in popular public and leisure spaces in Bristol known to Boyer as a resident of the city. After Rose (1996) we sought to explore: "how an image functions to produce a particular representation of the world" (Rose, 1996, p. 283). Posters and murals were analysed as socially and politically situated objects, attending to the content of the image itself (subject matter, framing, use of colour, perspective) as well as the background politics and power relations structuring how the image was produced, who produced it and its intended audience.

Our research was informed by feminist methods both through topic choice, in highlighting an initiative which promotes gender justice, and by recognising that our engagement with the topic, research process and findings were shaped by our respective subject positions. Such is a white, middle-class cis-gender heterosexual in her mid 20's currently working as a Town Planner and Boyer is a white, middle-class cis-gender heterosexual academic in her mid-50s. Both have had many personal experiences of street harassment and are passionate about making cities more inclusive and welcoming for people of all genders. Having laid out the background literature and methodology, we will now turn to analyse the initiatives Bristol has taken to re-script urban space in order to promote anti-sexist urbanism.

4. Analysis: the role of the local state in the promotion of anti-sexist urbanism

4.1. Postering campaign: 'It's Not OK' and Bristol Rules

One way the Bristol Nights campaign has sought to combat street harassment has been through a postering campaign under the dual banners of 'It's Not OK' and 'Bristol Rules'. As the representative from the Bristol Street Intervention service told us, harassment had not previously been part of the Council's approach to street safety. As the Bristol City Councillor with whom we spoke told us, the Safety of Women at Night programme was designed to make the city safer for everyone but especially women and girls. Herein we find an example of the local state promoting social justice goals by campaigning on behalf of marginalised subjects in a way that resonates with Cooper's work (2020). The Bristol Nights website outlines how the poster campaigns advance this aim: 'We're asking men to consider 'Am I being a Creep?' – a poster campaign throughout our night-time venues will invite you to look at your behaviour and question: Is it unwanted? Is it OK?' (www.bristolnights.co.uk). The first of these, the 'It's Not OK' campaign consisted of a list of behaviours (flirting, catcalling, touching, staring, grabbing, groping) that can be experienced as harassment. The aim of the campaign has been to raise awareness and literally lay out 'what not to do'. As leader of Bristol Nights, Carly Heath stated: "a campaign highlighting what constitutes sexual harassment as well as actions they should take when faced with an incident of harassment is so critical" (Pipe, 2022). This campaign consisted of myriad bright purple posters displayed on building surfaces and in licensed venues throughout downtown as illustrated in (Fig. 1)

The strategy of laying out what constitutes harassment was based on research showing that most men in the UK cannot articulate what sexual harassment is (APPG for UN Women, 2021), a question which Bristol also investigated locally. As Heath told us: "We spoke to over 200 people in face-to-face interviews about their perceptions of safety and nightlife and what were the things that we needed to concentrate on. Every single woman that we spoke to could name a sexually harassing experience. 58% of the men we spoke to couldn't name a sexually harassing behaviour. When we asked them 'what is sexual harassment?', they said 'rape or groping'. And we were like, 'no' …".

As activist a viewed it, it was the tone and vibe of the campaign which made it so successful in communicating this information in a way that it would be received. As they noted:

> The night charter poster campaign was actually really well done in terms of the messaging and language they used. It was very on point, they didn't pull any punches with it. They were like 'here's some behaviours, inappropriate language, inappropriate touching, telling women to smile and all that', those kind of behaviours. And it just called them out and said 'it's not okay', 'if your mates are doing this, tell them it's not ok', and it just got to the heart of the problem

Both by wading into areas not normally associated with governance (here, the governance of embodied, affective gendered interactions) and campaigning on behalf of marginalised subjects (Joubert, 2023) this initiative provides a good example of how the local state can promote anti-sexist urbanism. The campaign also provides an example of new municipalist statecraft in respect of the local state working collaboratively with non-state actors (here, venues in the night-time economy) (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; Jones, 2012; Ward et al., 2015).

Fig. 1. 'It's Not OK' poster (Evans, 2022).

Fig. 2. 'Bristol Rules' (photo taken by author, 2022).

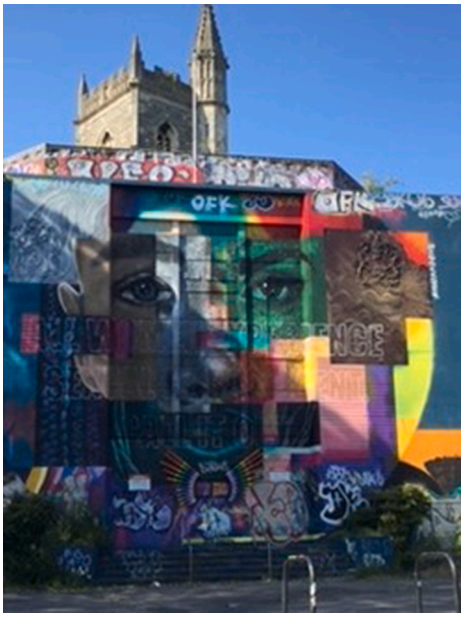

Fig. 3. Mural by HazardOne (photo taken by author, 2023)

In a second, related campaign, 1000 posters were put up around the city, on both vertical surfaces and eye-level, person-size stand-up posters attached to pavement furniture like lamp posts under the banner of 'Bristol Rules' (Fig. 2). Taking the opposite approach to 'It's Not OK', this campaign laid out the steps to take for a *good* night out, including ways of relating to strangers in public. Taking a holistic approach to the necessary ingredients for a good night, the posters speak to personal safety (for example 'keep away from the edge' refers to staying away from the edge of the Bristol Harbour, in the heart of downtown), looking out for your friends and not overusing drugs or alcohol. Other messages raise awareness about sexual harassment, asking people to become active bystanders ('call it out'). Finally, posters call upon citizens to 'respect everyone', thereby promoting a more generalised message of inclusivity across intersectional difference. This message was expanded upon in social media posts and on the web through messages such as: 'Our differences are what makes Bristol such a brilliant place. So regardless of how someone dresses, how they speak, what they look like, who they date or how they dance, leave them to it' www.bristolnights.co.uk/projects/bristol-rules. Both sets of posters were eye-catching, used relatable language, and, especially in the case of Bristol Rules campaign, keep the messaging positive, (mostly) presenting 'do's' rather than 'don'ts'.

The campaign was covered by the BBC (2022b), and the local media (Millen, 2022) as well as social media. In terms of the public awareness/visibility of these campaigns, participants told us: "I see them everywhere, like my walk to work takes me right across the city and you see them everywhere across town" (activist a); and: "They put them up everywhere, you couldn't *not* see them if you were going out (activist b). Particularly around the night club areas they had them, so you couldn't possibly avoid it if you were going out and about. So, I thought that poster campaign was well done" (activist b). We suggest this campaign strongly evokes the idea of 'calling forth' the kind cities we want to live in as suggested by new municipalist statecraft (Thompson, 2021). In this way this initiative shows how the local state can activate space in the city in new ways to promote anti-sexist placemaking. Noting that sexual harassment most commonly occurs on the street (42 percent), followed by night-time venues (31 percent) (Government Equalities Office, 2020, p. 8) by placing posters literally right on city pavements at eye-level,

they were located where harassment is most likely to occur, and where women and other feminised subjects feel most unsafe (Valentine, 1989). As well, because posters are located in high-traffic areas (and because they are so numerous) they also target people during their general use of the city, such as commutes to work, errands and day-time leisure as well as in and around night-time venues, thus reinforcing the messages through repeated viewing. As Heath noted: "You're just as likely to be cat-called in the middle of the daytime as you are in licensed premises but at least in the licensed premises we have the ability to be able to step in and go 'that's not acceptable here' … whereas that's not the same if you're just walking down the street, you know? … Where's your bystander when you're walking in the street?". This points to the importance of interventions in public space tailored to address what's happening in those spaces.

By outlining explicit 'rules' relating to comportment, both campaigns seek to re-script and activate urban space by asking citizens to reflect, and (potentially) change both their thinking and their interactions with others. The 'Bristol Rules' campaign asks people to become involved in urban life in a new way, not only reflecting on their own behaviour but monitoring and potentially intervening in the behaviour of others, harking back to MacLeavy's observation about Bristol's emphasis on community and empowerment of local people (MacLeavy in Ward et al., 2015). And it brands these modes of active, respectful urban citizenship as *Bristolian* urbanism: linking these (progressive) ways of being in public space –an expression of anti-sexist urbanism– to this particular city.

The 'It's Not OK' and 'Bristol Rules' campaigns intersect with traditions of feminist urban activism and theorisations of the local state in different ways. In highlighting the issue of gender violence in public space and directing citizens to take steps to promote gender justice the initiative clearly builds on long-standing traditions of feminist activism, from 'Take Back the Night' to interventions such as Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*. The question of how intersectional these initiatives are could be answered in a few different ways. In promoting respect for people of all genders and sexual orientations, the 'Bristol Rules' postering initiative arguably promotes an intersectional vision of feminism that encompasses anti-homophobia and anti -transphobia, even though other components of the Bristol Nights campaign (such as the 'Women's Rights Charter' and 'Women's Safety Campaign') do not clearly acknowledge the gender violence faced by LGBTQ+ people, especially gay men and people who identify outside of the gender binary.

In turn, this case helps advance theorisation of the local state as an agent in the promotion of social justice goals beyond economic goals. It shows ways in which the local state can promote anti-sexist urbanism; echoing Cooper's work on the pre-figurative local state (2017), rejecting the idea that sexual harassment is unavoidable and instead asserts that a different, 'more just' world is possible, (and takes concrete steps to create this new world). Having considered how the local state can promote anti-sexist urbanism through the 'It's Not OK' and 'Bristol Rules' postering campaigns let us now turn to ways it can do this through collaborations with feminist artists.

4.2. Murals

In the Spring of 2022, the Bristol Nights campaign unveiled two building-size murals in the city centre, on the derelict former Bank of England building in Castle Park (Figs. 3 and 4) (ITV News, 2022). These were completed by two women artists Emily Joy Rich and muralist going by the name HazardOne. They were undertaken in collaboration with both the Council and UPFEST, a Bristol-based graffiti art organisation that hosts the largest street-art and graffiti festival in Europe and manages many street art projects in Bristol. As far as negotiating the content of the murals, the artists reported that they had control of the design and messages within the remit of the Bristol Nights goals. As Rich told us: "I pretty much had free reign on the design, I just had to get it signed off by the council". The murals both portray clear messaging against sexual

Fig. 4. Mural by Emily Joy Rich (https://emilyjoyrich.com/its-not-ok, 2022)

harassment, the first with the message 'all women experience sexual harassment, call it out' overlain against a composite image of a young woman of colour, and the second, a glow in the dark mural with distinct lettering on a colour-block background: 'If it's unwanted, it's not ok'.

The collaborative aspect between artists and the local state seen in this campaign both echoes above-noted traditions of feminist urban art initiatives like that of Suzanne Lacy, as well as new municipalist initiatives to promote social inclusion and combat inequality, in which, as Thompson (2021) (p.317) avers: "urban activists are experimenting with spatial practices that (re)claim the right to the city".

Reflecting on the role of collaborations between the local state and feminist artists as a means to promote gender justice (and how these more material forms compare with on-line approaches), Carly Heath told us: "The writing is on the wall when it comes to how Bristol responds to harassment of women in our public spaces. Do you know what I mean? So we painted it on the side of the building." In turn, artist Emily Joy Rich averred:

> I think it's a great platform to talk about these things. It's nice that it transcends digital media too. Yes, people can post pictures of street art, but it's also something that you can stumble upon out and about in the city without particularly looking for it. And as it's in the real world (rather than online) it might be something that is slightly outside of your social media echo-chamber - which in my opinion is a good thing.

Reflecting on the reasoning behind the murals as a component of the Bristol Nights campaign Rich added:

> I think the goal was really just to get people talking, to make people have conversations about these tricky topics which often feel a bit taboo. With two huge murals in the middle of town on such a prominent building that (to my knowledge) has never been painted before in full, it became pretty hard to miss for people in the area.

Through this initiative we see further ways in which local states can take up issues not normally associated with governance (Joubert, 2023), through collaborative efforts with non-state actors (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; Jones, 2012; Ward et al., 2015). Mural artist HazardOne added to this point, noting: "Street art is the perfect way to take up space! Art and activism work hand in hand and it's essentially a giant billboard for any message you want to get across". As Rich observes, there are often issues with people being in their own social media 'echo-chamber' and surrounding themselves with political beliefs that affirm their own. However, by displaying in such a central city location, the murals are viewed by everyone across the political spectrum. While for some anti-sexist urbanism will be consonant with what they see on their social media

feeds, for others it won't or it may challenge their views.

To put this choice of medium in context, it is worth noting the role of 'political' graffiti and street art in Bristol. Bristol is home to Banksy, arguably the most famous graffiti artist in the world and specialist in using graffiti to highlight social injustice, and the city has many high-profile murals on social justice themes (especially in the gritty 'arts quarter' of Stokes Croft) (Buser et al., 2013; People's Republic of Stokes Croft, 2022). One of the most prominent of these is a neighbourhood-scale mural project by artist Michele Curtis (in collaboration with the City Council and others) commemorating Black British women and men who were fundamental in the UK Civil Rights movement, the Bristol Bus Boycott and community development in the largely Afro-Caribbean neighbourhood of Saint Pauls (Wall, 2018). Employing muralling as the medium to promote anti-sexist urbanism thus aligns with other –consummately Bristolian-forms of arts-led activism.

These murals build on traditions of arts-led feminist urban activism in various ways. Like Suzanne Lacy's work, they draw attention to and prompt discussion about gender violence, a topic which still remains (as participants note) 'taboo' to some in the UK. In communicating this message through a building-size image of the face of a woman of colour (as noted, one of many murals in the city featuring women of colour), HazardOne's mural also hits back against long legacies of public art and sculpture featuring white men. The fact that women of colour experience higher levels of sexual harassment than white women is not made explicitly, but this point is arguably suggested through the choice of subject. The visual complexity of the image through multiple patterns and colours draws the viewer in; and the use of blocks of different hair and features suggest a 'composite' subject, signalling the universality of the experience of harassment (though again, it does not acknowledge harassment experienced by gay and bisexual men or trans and non-binary people). The image encourages viewers to meet the subject's direct gaze and thereby take a moment to absorb and contemplate the mural's message.

And while the murals carry a serious message, they are also joyful, exuberant and beautiful. This tone resonates with other features of the Bristol Nights campaign, which at its heart views the city as a space of celebration, exploration and acceptance. This theme was underscored in our interview with Heath when she highlighted the role particular venues can play for young LGBTQ+ people as important spaces of community and acceptance, stressing the value of such venues for marginalised young people who might not feel able to express their full identities at home. In a very real sense, it was this vision of the city's role that was a key driver for the Bristol Nights campaign as a whole, including the vibe of the murals and posters. As Heath queried: "How can we have difficult conversations in the public realm and do it with joy? That's where we ended up coming up with the murals."

Together these examples help us re-theorise the role of the local state in promoting anti-sexist urbanism. In their collaborative dimension they highlight the metaphor of assemblage in thinking about the state in a non-binary relation to civil society (Allen & Cochrane, 2010). In turn, they show the role of collaborations with the arts specifically as a means of promoting social justice goals in and through urban space, providing an example of "creatively generating innovative and experimental spaces where … new ventures in well-being … are advanced", as Cooper has theorised (Cooper, 2017. p.335). They further show the local state presenting ways in which everyday life could be otherwise, thus, "refusing the naturalised dominance of (the) status quo" (Cooper, 2017, p. 335) (see also Huber [2015] on the role of creativity in calling forth alternative urbanisms). Finally, they highlight a vision of the local state approaching public space as social infrastructure (Thompson, 2023) and terrain for promoting innovation, inclusivity and experimentation (Thompson, 2015 & 2023).

By virtue of being funded by the council this project had the significant benefit of being able to occupy a large, high-visibility location and has been a durable addition to the urban landscape. Meanwhile the project shows (and reinforces) Bristol's identity as a progressive city: as activist a suggested, putting out an on-trend message in such a visually stunning (and imminently instagrammable) format did not do the council's reputation any harm. Despite being led by the local state and making the council 'look good'; in the context of a patriarchal society challenging gender violence is still an inherently political act, reflecting new municipalist tendencies to promote social justice causes and advocate for marginalised subjects. As HazardOne notes: "Graffiti has historical political connotations, and I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing because it shows how people want their opinions to be magnified and highlighted". As well, these murals seek not only to claim urban space, but *activate* it in new ways and thus change its meaning. As HazardOne told us: "Street art changes the environment around it so if the art work has an important message that can only be a good thing". We suggest this reflects what Joubert has identified as the capacity of the local state to bridge bureaucracy and activism (Joubert, 2023), and bring progressive politics to the streets (Joubert, 2023, p. 2252).

While acknowledging the good intentions of these murals however, some participants questioned the limits of their power to effect social change. As activist a noted:

> In terms of the glow-in-the-dark mural, I think it's on the border between activism, is it changing anything or is it just a piece of street art? I don't really know. It's on the boundary between somewhere. Is that really going to change someone's opinion? Maybe, maybe not. But it's still interventions in the public space and it's really important with these kinds of campaigns … there's no one policy that's going to change things overnight, it's an incremental thing.

There is arguably an issue of viewers registering these murals as primarily (or solely) beautiful, compelling images. As well, because street art is so abundant in Bristol there is also arguably a risk of these murals- and their message-getting lost amongst the many iconic works of street art across the city. Yet we stand with activist a in highlighting the importance of these initiatives as part of a broader suite of efforts to promote inclusivity and anti-sexist urbanism, and shift (local and national) conversation.

The initiatives discussed here do not purport to solve the issue of gender violence all on their own, but rather to work in concern with other actions to shift thinking and behaviour on this issue. When we asked participants if conversation surrounding harassment is yet a big enough priority in the city Rich told us: "I still don't think it's talked about enough, no, but I think projects like this one help to shine a light on women's safety and sexual harassment." HazardOne reinforced this point, noting: "I think it's a complex issue for the city authorities to address but there has been a spotlight shown on the matter which will hopefully continue to be addressed. The problem is systemic and needs to be addressed at the core which means undoing some societal norms!" Changing social norms is a big job: it is radical, it is political, and it is revolutionary. We have argued that together with other initiatives (such as marches and education/training initiatives), the muralling and postering campaigns analysed here represent some concrete ways local states can challenge social norms to promote inclusivity and social justice. Building on existing theorisations of the local state, we suggest these examples help us understand how the local state can promote anti-sexist urbanism, reflecting what Joubert identifies as the potential of the local state to find ways to advance the agenda of progressive political movements "on the streets" (Joubert, 2023, p. 2252).

5. Conclusion

> *It's important to acknowledge the extent to which the local survives as a point around which alternative political imaginaries may be mobilised* (Cochrane, 2020, p.2)

After Cochraine (above), in this article we extend theorisation of the local state as a scale or organ for advancing socially progressive agendas under neoliberalism. We have argued the state can (and should) move

beyond fields traditionally associated with governance, through partnerships with non-state actors, to promote inclusivity and the rights of marginalised subjects. We extend theorisation on local state by showing how this level of government can promote social justice goals. We have argued that the local state can play a role in promoting anti-sexist urbanism and combatting street harassment; and that the street itself constitutes an important scale for this work. Changing gender norms and promoting bodily autonomy for all citizens requires a multi-stakeholder/multi-sectoral approach, including collaborations between players such as: local and national government; grass-roots organisations; artists; activists, educators and others. Through this analysis we have shown how such constituents can come together to combat sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence, and have argued the local state can promote anti-sexist placemaking by activating urban space as sites of resistance.

Through this work we extend understanding of both anti-sexist urbanism and theorisations of the local state. We build on understanding of how urban space can be re-scripted as spaces of resistance, through which more emancipatory forms of urban life might be possible. In so doing we advanced theory in and beyond Geography on what the anti-sexist city might look like, and what feminist urbanism can be and do. We suggest that the initiatives presented here may be working in various registers that range from the arguably somewhat mundane (like urban branding), while at the same time working toward more ambitious social justice goals (like challenging patriarchy and promoting bodily autonomy). And we argue that just because such activity may be achieving multiple aims does not vitiate its more socially innovative elements. We suggest that the forms of innovation Bristol has deployed (and in some cases pioneered) represent a model other cities can and should follow, and hope this research sparks further work on how the local state (and others) can promote anti-sexist urbanism.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kate Boyer: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lucy Such:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

Neither Kate Boyer nor Lucy Such have any completing interests which would interfere with the academic integrity of this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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