

BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY IN URBAN LIFE

GENDER EQUALITY AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING BETTER COMMUNITIES FOR ALL

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Introduction

When looking at cities from a gender perspective, one of the main differences affecting the use of urban space is in terms of female and male care-giving roles and responsibilities. Due to the gender-specific division of labor, women do most of the direct care-giving work within families and communities. As such, women are central to urban planning and development, both as key users of urban space in their role as home managers, and as key producers of residential environments in their role as community leaders and initiators of neighborhood networks.

The current development of urban infrastructure and the built environment needs to be redesigned to promote greater gender equality in the use and benefits of urban space. Many of the past and present trends in urban planning and development reflect the male perspective regarding the role of women as primary caregivers. Viewing families, communities, towns, cities, and regions from a gender perspective requires a radical shift both in thinking and in actions.

This article summarizes basic principles that can inform urban planning, policies, and programs in the process of redesigning and redeveloping urban areas to be more gender-sensitive, inclusive, and responsive to everyone's needs.

Reclaiming Public Space for Daily Life

Decades of a fragmented approach in urban planning has led to segregated urban environments where residences, workplaces, shopping districts, and leisure environments constitute separate spheres linked by extensive motorways and public transportation systems. In this approach traffic has become dominant, relegating all other functions to compressed and de-linked pockets of urban life amidst a vast landscape of infrastructure and technology.

Caregivers needing to deal simultaneously deal with many varied aspects of everyday life find even the technocratic efficiency of mono-cultural urban environments to be counterproductive. They need multifunctional urban spaces to match the balancing of their multi-tasking daily realities. Complete neighborhoods of mixed uses with short travel distances and close proximity to work, childcare, and schools, plus extensive availability of stores and services, along with safe pedestrian environments and frequent and easily accessible public transportation systems — these constitute some of the main elements of a urban life that fits the needs of women as caregivers.

Urban Life is for Everyone

The structure of urban space often poses more difficult challenges for residents with lower mobility, such as children, older people, and people with disabilities. People in these and similar categories have become marginalized and relegated to segregated spaces that specifically target their special needs. Often they are not welcome in the mainstream of urban life. Mobility and a "footloose" society have created residential environments lacking in community atmosphere because the inhabitants engage in social activities outside of their own neighborhood. The Internet and other new forms of information and telecommunications technology are reinforcing these trends.

Since automobile traffic now makes it too dangerous for children to play on their local streets, the scope in which they can autonomously explore their home environments is becoming increasingly limited. Youth are becoming increasingly dependent on parents and other adults to drive and escort them to those places that specifically cater to their needs, including parks and playgrounds.

As residential neighborhoods and their inhabitants grow older and less mobile, homogeneity becomes a problem. In view of the demographic challenges of an aging society, economically, socially, and ethnically, and age-diverse communities are better equipped to suit the needs of what will soon become the majority of the population.

The Power of Presence

Neighborhoods are sustainable if they have a genuine mix of population in terms of different kinds of interests and needs, as well as in different kinds of assets that residents have to contribute to their neighborhood. These assets include time, care, skills, culture, and social capital, as well as money. “Gentrification” often changes neighborhoods into economically mono-cultural environments. A common criticism of newly built or redeveloped residential communities is that they are beautiful, but boring. Their inhabitants spend a lot of their time outside the neighborhood. These neighborhoods lack spirit and vitality.

In order for neighborhoods to be safe and lively they depend on people who are able and willing to invest time, energy, creativity, their presence, and their social networks in improving and enlivening local conditions. If neighborhoods are to be safe and supportive environments for children and other dependents, neighbors need to know and watch out for each other and feel a basic responsibility for their environment. There needs to be social cohesion and mutual understanding. This kind of situation cannot any longer simply be assumed or taken for granted. Creating or reviving such circumstances takes conscious and active citizen effort combined with public and private sector policies designed to reconstruct both the physical and social qualities of our urban environments. Different kinds of people in different phases of their lives have different things to offer each other in their neighborhoods. From this perspective, urban planning needs to focus on providing structures and opportunities for a lively local interchange of a wide variety of different capital assets to be mixed together within communities.

The Importance of the Local

Creating inclusive neighborhoods, towns, and cities that are also more accommodating to women’s needs and female lifestyles involves reclaiming the “local” in urban spatial planning and land uses, in economic and community development, in civic engagement, and in cultural integration.

We are living in times of rapid social and demographic change. Family size is declining, single person households are increasing, and older people are increasingly removed from family and kinship-based care. Traditional social networks that have weaved together the bonds of society — including extended families, religious congregations, and charitable organizations — are losing ground, thus generating the need for new ways to create social and community cohesion. The local spatial dimension in urban neighborhoods carries important potential for developing new forms of social solidarity and community networks.

The rapid spreading during the past two decades of the Mother Centers International movement clearly demonstrates the historic need for community support and a widening of the social space with regard to family care and parental responsibilities. The proverbial expression that “It takes a village to raise a child” is a striking reminder that caring for the next generation of children and youth is a task that requires more than just the existing capacity of nuclear families. The “local” comprises a bridging function between private and public, and between informal and formal, that lends itself well to supporting care-giving tasks. Local neighborhood networks create qualities of an “urban village” that provide greater opportunities for wider sharing within the community of the vital tasks of caring for children and older adults. This modern

“urban village” concept and corresponding spatial and social arrangements offers urgently needed support for family caregivers while helping maintaining the good quality of family care. The “local” represents a new vision of multigenerational living neighbors helping provide quality care and with accessible community services that avoid the limitations of overly institutionalized and centralized systems. It enables older people to continue living in familiar surroundings, close to family, friends, relatives, longtime neighbors, and an actively thriving network of services, shops, and social relations.

Re-integrating the Culture of Care into Public Life

Opening up nuclear family structures to local support networks in urban neighborhoods brings a shift towards more collective responsibility and organization of reproductive tasks and a reintegration of family care into public life. This also opens up the potential for adjusting the gender-based division of labor and burden of care-giving within families and communities. Various studies of parental self-help initiatives have concluded that men tend to get more easily involved in family care-giving responsibilities when these tasks are “socialized” in a more public and collective setting.

Public space in the context of family and neighborhood networks remains personal, yet at the same time giving access to community recognition and visibility. The Mother Centers, as self-managed local meeting spaces for families and children in neighborhoods, have been called “public living rooms” which is a good way of characterizing this special quality. Children experience an introduction and integration into public life in protected surroundings, while older people continue to be visible participants in multigenerational society and active participants in mixed-age communities.

Urban neighborhoods are “switchboards” for the exchange of local information, culture, and knowledge. They can be very effective buffer zones for many of the most difficult economic, social, cultural, and personal challenges of contemporary society, helping to overcome isolation and alienation.

Civic Engagement and Integration

The “local” also plays an important role in generating civic participation and social inclusion. When public spaces in neighborhoods are designed to support contact and communication they provide natural places for people to meet, get to know each other, and create common understanding as well as common activities. Small-scale physical and social spaces reinforce the sustainability of mutual support networks. The informal and basically safe familiarity of these community spaces enables citizens to actively contribute their skills and resources and participate in local governance to a much greater extent than within the more formal, institutionalized, and large-scale structures of public life. Significantly, women are frequently the most actively engaged as leaders and participants at the smaller scale community level of public spaces and social networks.

This type of community cohesion is also essential for successfully managing multicultural diversity and fostering social peace. For a variety of reasons today, workplaces no longer function as the primary urban location for social integration. Rather it is now primarily in neighborhoods that immigrants coming to host countries as refugees or as spouses are exposed to local culture and institutions, often through interaction with their children in relating to friends, families, teachers, and other key community members. The “local” therefore has great importance for social cohesion, especially concerning women’s involvement in community life.

Local Economic and Social Development

Industrialization, globalization, technology, and economic competition have created a duality between a highly productive and skilled workforce working increasingly longer hours, and those excluded from the formal economy, spawning conflicts related to social exclusion. Reviving the “local” dimension of community-based economic development can play a key role in bridging this gap. Local economic

development can fully utilize all of the assets and resources within the community, regardless of their level of formal productivity or official qualifications. Further, it creates opportunities for the improvement of people's abilities and talent, and for greater education and training to upgrade their job skills. Community economic development can validate informal employment and informal sector entrepreneurship, especially for women, who generally contribute enormous amounts of unpaid work to their families, communities, and society, even if they also work long hours at formally paid jobs.

Localizing economic and social development also can contribute to community improvement. A neighborhood developed by its inhabitants is a very local product with a local identity that is truly distinct from other communities. Indeed, locally generated and directed urban development will be different from anything that professional planners and property developers can create on their own. Having a distinctive local identity and profile is something that is increasingly influential in marketing the image and value of neighborhoods.

Urban Development from the Bottom up

Neighborhood Initiatives — the Example of the Mother Centers

The Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) is a grassroots self-help movement originating in Germany and spreading to 15 countries during the past two decades. In these Mother Centers, women join forces together to improve the lives of their families and communities, connect with families from different social and cultural backgrounds, reclaim public spaces for their communities, gain long overdue acknowledgment for their everyday life experience and expertise, and actively participate in community and civic governance. The Mother Centers function as focal points for the development of "close-to-home" services including childcare, eldercare, meal services, janitorial services, thrift shops, and toy libraries. As such, they provide highly animated meeting points within their respective neighborhood. To date more than 750 Mother Centers exist worldwide. They recreate family and neighborhood structures where they have been weakened by the forces of modernization, (Western Europe, North America), by formerly communist regimes (Czech Republic, Bulgaria), by war and civil conflict (Bosnia, Rwanda), by poverty and HIV/AIDS (Kenya), or by internal migration (Philippines).

The Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) connects and supports the 750 Mother Centers currently existing in 15 countries. (www.mine.cc). MINE has been designated as a "Best Practice" by the United Nations Human Settlement Program (UN-Habitat), and was selected by UN-Habitat in 2002 as a winner of the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment. This international recognition was given to MINE for "strengthening of the capacity of civil society to revitalize local neighborhoods and revive community life."

Women and Child-Friendly Cities

One of the major lessons of the Mother Centers International movement is that it takes more than parents to raise children. It takes a supportive and accommodating community environment. Children and parents need family-friendly situations not only inside but also outside the walls of their homes and not only inside but also outside the walls of the Mother Centers. One of the advocacy issues that Mother Centers typically engage in is working to create women and child-friendly cities and urban communities.

During 2004 we co-authored a study on behalf of MINE for the Netherlands Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, entitled "Not the Chicken, Not the Egg, But the Nest!" In this report we applied the lessons learned and success stories of the Mother Centers movement to housing and urban planning issues in general. The focus of our research was developing social structures to accompany physical planning for urban development and regeneration projects. Our purpose was to identify and describe effective methods of stimulating civic engagement and community governance of the urban environment where public space is increasingly being taken over by market forces. Property developers view urban communities primarily in terms of financial investments and the design, construction, and sale or lease of

buildings and spaces. In most cases, issue of social cohesion and community participation are not part of the economic calculations. The Nest! Approach is intended to reconcile the social with the physical in urban development and management, by building communities through building “community” whereby urban planning and social cohesion become integral elements of strategic economic development.

‘The Learning City’

Communities, towns, cities, and regions work the best when the knowledge, resources, and skills of all residents inform public decisionmaking. Both the hardware and the software of urban space need to be shaped with a gender-sensitive perspective continuously at the forefront. This is especially true of the so-called “orgware” — meaning how the planning and governance processes are organized.

The best plans are made when those with a vital interest, namely the residents, play an active role in creating such plans. When a neighborhood is planned and developed through a community-based process, rather than as an engineering product from a drafting table or a policymaker’s office, the results are far superior, particularly for women. Women generally spend many more hours working in and near their homes and communities than do most men. Based on their everyday experience, women acquire deep and insightful knowledge of what is needed in and for the built environment, such as the design of public space, infrastructure, and services to meet the needs of all members of the community. In order for this knowledge to be mobilized and made productive for urban governance and development, neighborhoods and local governments must find ways of organizing themselves as learning organizations. They should create a framework of opportunities for the active participation of residents in the development of their neighborhoods, towns, cities, and regions. They need to establish an enabling context for identifying and assessing local capacities and for linking formal with informal knowledge.

MINE has developed the concept of Neighborhood Academies as a knowledge-building methodology for generating community participation and involvement through organizing neighborhoods as learning communities. The Academy has both an internally oriented task of structuring internal communication and community building, as well as an external task of partnership building linked to public decisionmaking (the details are available on our website at: www.nest.cc.)

New Approaches to Urban Governance

In some urban centers, community problems may be the result of institutional dominance rather than institutional weakness. Sometimes too much structural capacity can be its own worst enemy. In the Netherlands for example, it is exactly because of the depth and success of formal urban planning that there is an institutional blindness to a much wider array of necessary and available stakeholders and community resources. This situation has prompted growing calls for “deinstitutionalization” and the strengthening of self-help and citizen involvement, along with a shift in the role of all levels of government from being key decisionmakers and service providers to being facilitators of a community-based governance process. In this new type of governance, community residents articulate their interests, mediate their differences, and contribute their skills and resources. Concepts currently under discussion like the “network society” or the “creative class” need to be matched by innovative participatory policymaking with regard to spatial development planning. Appropriate “urban orgware” requires creating governance models based on social inclusion and community networking, along with more responsive and accountable public management systems.

Engaging in co-production and co-development with civil society is an entirely new and nontraditional role for local governments, which necessitates formally recognizing the human experience of “everyday life” as generating a type of urban expertise that is equal in importance to formal higher education, professional qualifications, and institutional experience. Making these substantial reforms will require finding new channels of civic participation outside of formal decisionmaking agencies and procedures. It requires creating organizing and supporting equitable and sustainable partnerships, and making radical adjustments in the professional culture and relations that normally guide urban development. Ultimately it

means the end of “business as usual” with a major re-balancing of economic and political influence, policymaking authority, and the flow of resources and power.

The resulting process of respectful collaboration involves learning at all levels by encouraging citizenship skills and capacities such as self-initiative, collective responsibility, and active participation. Designing and implementing these new governance models for local governments will involve public officials “leading by stepping back” because they will need to learn to foster and collaborate with constructive and sustainable partnerships between multiple stakeholders across all segments and aspects of urban society.

Women’s participation and leadership is absolutely necessary for this learning and new governance process to succeed. Long term development is more likely to be holistic and sustainable when women are not only actively involved but are playing a central role. Globally, the experience of women’s involvement and leadership in local governance has generally represented significant advances in social inclusiveness and political effectiveness, because women leaders tend to take the perspectives and needs of all groups in the community into consideration, not just the views and interests of the quick, the articulate, the powerful, and the influential members of society. Women often also take the lead in building bridges and alliances across social, cultural, and ethnic divisions and conflicts within their communities.

Conclusion

In recent international debates on the issues of urbanization and urban planning and development, the best methods of addressing major challenges are increasingly seen in the strengthening of social resources and human capital, rather than by building physical structures. Strategies of urban regeneration, preventing violence, and securing social peace, increasingly focus on the social instead of the physical ecology of cities and neighborhoods through promoting social cohesion, civic engagement, and active community participation. People may be part of the problem, but they also are the only viable solution to the problems, because they are most abundant and powerful economic, social, political, and cultural asset that any community, town, city, or region possesses.

This new governance approach limits the power of property developers and physical designers and engineers have urban planning decisions, programs, and investments. Neighborhoods need to come alive through a process of resident involvement and community building. In this perspective citizens are seen not primarily as consumers or beneficiaries of policies but as the real producers of urban development.

Demolishing and renovating the built environment as the primary strategy for developing and upgrading urban neighborhoods needs to be complemented and balanced with strategies for strengthening and maintaining social networks and community participation. Typically, billboards and advertisements of property developers and real estate agents depict those elements of attractive community life that they cannot provide simply by constructing or marketing even high quality urban space and structures, amenities and services: people, atmosphere, community, and identity. Only the neighborhood residents, workers, and entrepreneurs can contribute these substantive missing elements, if they are given the proper opportunity and respect as formally acknowledged and dignified partners in the process of urban development and management.

Recommendations

Participatory and gender-sensitive urban environments can be supported by the following policies:

- Mixed use of space, integration of the functions of work, commerce, living, caregiving and recreation

- Equal attention to and investment in the hardware, software, and “orgware” of communities
- Supporting community residents to provide for their own needs and develop their own solutions
- Providing for self-managed meeting spaces for community residents
- Public infrastructure that welcomes and includes in public life: children and youth, older people, and people with disabilities, as well as other dependents
- Allowing for the multiple and flexible use of public space by community residents
- Enabling conditions for the preservation and development of local economic activity, including community-based businesses and locally owned small and medium-sized enterprises
- Creating experimental spaces in communities to allow for the development of bottom-up creativity and innovation
- Supporting and enabling community-based initiatives such as the Mother Centers and the Neighborhood Academies
- Channeling greater public resources to grassroots community actions
- Acknowledging residents of local communities as important partners and stakeholders in urban development
- Promoting and supporting women’s participation and leadership in urban governance and community development.

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