

Limitations on women public participation

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Abstract

Urban planning is done by a small group of "citizens" who rarely match the diversity of the people living in the cities. Women represent half of the world population, although they don't have equal access to public sphere as men have. With less presence in decision places the probability of their point of view being attend is scarce.

Trying to identify women limitations on public participation could be a way to shrink the gap between the academic city construction and a real city for all. On the other hand this should be a mandatory goal if we want to achieve social and spatial justice in urban planning policies.

The current European statistics confirm that women are still absent from decision places. In national EU parliaments, less than one in four members is a woman. In ten members of boards in the European largest publicly quoted companies just one is a women. They represent only 32% of managers in companies within the EU, 10% of members of management boards of the largest companies, and 29% of scientists and engineers across Europe¹.

The gender mainstreaming was first introduced in 1979 by United Nations, but it was formally achieved only in Beijing Declaration (1995). Starting from this point there has been a continuous goal driven to emphasize the value and necessity of women involvement in city decisions.

European Charter for Women in the city (1994) supported by the Commission of the European Union and Equal Opportunities Unit is a common platform for discussion at European level. It emphasizes the little involved in the major political, economic and social decisions by women, which make their needs hardly taken into account in urban planning. The European Charter for Equality of women and men in local life (2004) highlighting that equality of women and men represent a fundamental right for all, and an essential value for every democracy. Public participation, a hallmark of modern society, could be a way of achieving decision parity.

Taking into account a study case in Vila Nova de Gaia – Portugal, and using quantitative and qualitative methodologies, our results confirmed that women public participation is lower than men, either as common citizens or due to professional role. One of the main reasons is the widespread confusion between participation and decision power. On the other hand, to be women implies a strongest awareness between what is considered important to urban life quality and the knowledge of the real situation. To men what is considered to be important to urban life quality is not necessary the topics that they use in a routine day, i.e. they aren't really engaged with it. Besides that, women perception is also different from men when evaluating a real situation. Last, but not least, women city model idealization is distinct from men's model.

Furthermore, when dissociating our sample among politicians, technicians and citizens there are no women in the politician group, which proves women absence on decision-making level. They are at the bottoms of the pyramid. Besides, in result of a wrong concept of what is public participation, misunderstood as being a way of decision, or of impose oneself opinion, women declare that they don't participate. On the other side, men merge themselves with their professional role, stressing that when deciding they are participating, stereotype that we also found in women discourses.

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=682&langId=en>, in 25th March 2011.

In conclusion, it seems that the first thing to improve participation should be to explain to all (women and men) what is public participation. Secondly, to show that women and men are not equal, in result of traditional stereotypes, which difficult women conciliation between private, professional, and public life. Thirdly, that they have different aspirations and needs. Fourthly, the way they express themselves is not the same. Finally, it's essential to deal with all those factors together, to ensure parity in public sphere and equity in city planning.

The gender mainstreaming focus the need of taking into accounts both sides of the reality. There is a legal and intellectual assumption that urban planning is not a neutral field but a social and cultural construction made by who sustain power. Knowing that, and recognizing that men and women don't have equal opportunities it's fundamental to improve women voices.

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