

Equality units as a tool for women's participation at the local level

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To understand participatory local governance, let's examine through a known case local processes where women's participation is not supported: a neighborhood in the center of Istanbul, with some 20,000 inhabitants, an equal gender ratio, a relatively high child and youth population, seven- or eight-story buildings, narrow streets and little if any green space... One day, a decision is made about that limited green space.

The green space that everyone could use, and is a basic need especially for children and women, is transformed into a 'green field' that the football-loving male population between ages 15-35 can use for a fee. Several women meet the then-mayor to let him know that they are not happy with this new arrangement, and want their green space back. The mayor, replying "Well, why didn't you say so?" does not change the plan. The women think they don't have a right to object, so none of them asks in turn "And why didn't you ask us before going ahead?"

Women demand a green area instead of a football field not only for themselves, but also for their children. While the responsibility is not solely theirs, the gendered division of labor deems it a 'duty' that is primarily theirs. This example of urban policies and services illustrates the result when women, children, the elderly, in short every group with a right to utilize the space are not well-informed, and each and every one of them does not participate or make an effort to participate in processes.

In addition to this example, lack of access to cheap (free of charge) and safe transportation; women's care responsibilities for children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled due to the gendered division of labor; lack of provision of cheap (free of charge) and accessible care services by public institutions; lack of access to support mechanisms when faced with violence; and lack of access to the information and support necessary to participate in economic life constitute the main barriers to women's participation in social, political and economic life.

Recommendations and policy instruments from around the world

International agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Istanbul Convention are political documents committed to women's participation in both national and local government and their equal access to services.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which complement these texts, comprise 17 goals, including the eradication of poverty, the protection of our planet and the promotion of peaceful and prosperous societies. SDGs were adopted by 193 states at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, and assign comprehensive duties to signatory states to achieve the empowerment of women and girls by 2030.

Each article spelled out in international agreements must be translated into ordinary life in order to overcome the problems brought about by the routine rights violations and inequalities. In addition to implementation guides for law- and policy-makers, developing right to information manuals for women, whose experience of participation is often restricted to elections, remains a fundamental need.

The city and participation in Turkey

Action plans on global issues and ways to overcome them concern every piece that makes the whole: countries, cities, even neighborhoods and streets. Following Turkey's post-1980s social transformation and the urban population tripling the rural population in the 2000s, the duties of and the problems facing local governments have changed. Today, local governance is being discussed together with the terms social governance, self-governance, decentralization, sustainable and child/woman/elderly-friendly cities. On the other hand, it remains a matter of dispute to what extent access to services, and participation in decision-making and governance processes are enjoyed equally by all city residents. Beyond equality being a constitutional right, realizing equality in action remains a significant responsibility of local governments.

In addition to means and mechanisms such as public meetings, referendums, polls, communication democracy and forums that support individual participation, encouraging collaborations between rights-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local government, inclusion of NGOs in citizen assemblies, and the creation of advisory boards and round-table meetings are measures that pave the way for increased participation. Aside from techno-bureaucratic means such as petitions, right to information via BIMER (Directorate of Communication), filing formal complaints, and influencing by joining NGOs, interactive, transparent and participatory mechanisms like the abovementioned must be created, and practices that respond to women's needs and demands must be structured according to a gender-sensitive framework. The European Charter of Local Self-Government, which Turkey is a signatory to, allows for such practices.

Equality units

Women are the group that suffers the most from lack of access to the city. Among those initiatives to curb exclusion, the inclusion of the principle of gender equality into planning processes, and the parallel 'Women-Friendly Cities United Nations Joint Program', introduced in 2006 to strengthen local governments and women's organizations and increase their collaboration opportunities, stand as important thresholds. Alongside the woman-friendly policies it has enabled in the 12 cities it was implemented, another outcome of this project is the circular numbered 2010/10, issued by the Ministry of Interior that has paved the way for the creation of Equality Units and Equality Commissions in all public institutions and local governments.

As much as gender is an indicator that cuts across many different groups in social exclusion, there are myriad others that factor into disadvantage in access to the city. While age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious belief and ethnicity all contribute to experiences of discrimination in enjoying urban services, being an old woman, a disabled refugee or an LGBTI Roman might be reasons for experiencing multiple layers of discrimination.

In order to foster an understanding of egalitarian local governance, recognition that the city is also inhabited by disadvantaged groups and the creation of mechanisms that facilitate their participation in public life must be given priority. Equality Units have been created precisely for the purpose of first, eliminating gender inequality, and second, identifying the needs of disadvantaged groups and devising policies for local governance to respond to these needs.

It is crucial to increase and make visible the demands of all groups with lesser access to urban services in order to bring to life equality policies, which leaders are all too uninformed, as well as reluctant about. The existence of mechanisms such as Equality Units is also important to enable transformation from within, in order to allow interactions between rights-based NGOs and local government, as well as to develop participatory mechanisms.

Equality Units have the potential to both localize international agreements, that is, to translate them into the political documents and services of local governments, and give life to the rights enshrined in these documents. As such, diversifying and disseminating participatory tools are some of the main purposes of Equality Units.

Recommendations for women's participation in the city

Barriers to women's participation include rights-violations in areas such as education and health, and span as wide as the violation of the right to life. In order to prevent and compensate for these violations, signatory states, central government and consequently, local governments have primary responsibility to revive documents such as CEDAW that aim for gender equality.

Aside from gender-equality trainings, the first step towards equality in local government is providing training in specific areas such as gender-sensitive budgeting and urban planning, as well as encouraging leaders and administrators to adopt an egalitarian perspective. In addition to structuring local policy documents such as the strategic plan and performance programs within the framework of gender equality, a Local Equality Action Plan must be devised.

In conjunction with institution-wide work, it is just as important to launch initiatives that boost awareness, participation and demand. To combat those official claims 'there's no such demand', 'nobody uses it, 'no one showed up' and the like, **information must be provided in an effective manner and women must be encouraged to participate**. As such, women must first become acquainted with their surroundings and the services local government provides them, and these services must actually become accessible to them. For someone who does not know of the nursery and counselling services, vocational training courses, cultural events and the location of the health clinic in her municipality, these services practically do not exist.

Therefore, to make aims visible, information must be disseminated through written and visual material such as banners, leaflets and booklets, as well as meetings where services are introduced directly and guided tours organized by parent-teacher associations.

In today's society where information is an effective tool of the power apparatus, **returning the long-withheld information back to women** is of primary concern. The implementation of educational models such as Human Rights Education Programme for Women (HREP) by local governments is vitally important for women to learn their rights. It is by sharing with women through these programs the ways in which they can **claim their democratic rights** that neighborhood-level participatory mechanisms can be supported.

Due to the gendered division of labor, in participation as well as in employment one of the greatest barriers, **child care**, requires the provision of widespread and accessible public services. In particular, effective policies and services must be provided in order to combat **violence against women**, which tends to border on violation of the right to life. Support mechanisms must be diversified to respond to the needs of refugee, disabled, LGBTI+, elderly and young women.

International agreements stand as the biggest pillar of support for each and every woman to participate in decision-making processes on matters that concern them and take part in social life. Yet, for words to come to life, women, as well as rights-based NGOs must be more effectively allied with local government, especially during local elections, in order to exert pressure for increased participation, and to make sure promises align with gender equality. There is unanimous agreement that equality policies are not only a fundamental right, but also serve the mutual benefit of every individual, and local governments must engage with this transition fast than stay on the sidelines.



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