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Participatory Urban Improvement and Gender. Lessons from Jordan Refugee Camps

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Bottom-up participatory processes, gender, Jordan, slums, urban improvement, urban planning.

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to investigate the successes and challenges of participatory planning of three urban improvement projects. The paper uses a case study approach with mixed methods of interviews and documents to investigate how women were included and whether the strategies used succeeded in overcoming gender inequalities in the preparation of the master plans and action plans, thus achieving benefits for both men and women in the camps. The results indicate that using of mixed gender inclusion strategies support gender equity, but significant changes cannot take place depending on context. Such projects should focus on the sustainability of the change even if incremental.

Introduction

Countries around the world are facing issues of proliferating urban areas of inadequate environment. They may be called Roma, Colonias, ghettos, or slums but they generally suffer poor municipal services and urban infrastructure, overcrowding, and insecure tenure [1]. One billion of world population was living in such areas in 2016, which has been increasing at a minimum of 20 % since 2018 [2]. Ensuring the sustainable development of cities requires addressing such areas using approaches that focus on the improvement of life of residents without disrupting their social networks but grounding all development work through community ownership and mobilization [1], [2], [3].

Similarly, Jordan contains three types of informal areas. The first resulted from rural-urban migration and are located around the capital city Amman. The second resulted from the 1948 and 1967 wars and are formal long-term Palestine refugee camps managed by the Jordanian Government's Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA) and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA). These areas are of very poor environmental quality compared to the first category. The third category are informal refugee squatters which the refugees built themselves illegally and are the worst in terms of poverty and quality of environment but have been ignored by authorities [4], [5]. In the last two types of areas, refugees originally lived in tents, but gradually constructed shelters using varied materials. These protracted camps slowly transformed into slum-like urban areas due to population growth and absent urban planning, resulting in urban islands of vulnerability (Figs. 1 and 2) [6], [7].



Fig. 1. Jerash Camp, showing the environmental conditions [photo taken by authors].

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Fig. 2. Talbieh Camp, showing the environmental conditions [photo taken by authors].



Fig. 3. Map of Jordan and referenced camps [map created by authors].

In the period 2008–2015, an ambitious Camp Improvement Project was launched in three of the formal camps (Jerash, Talbieh, and Husn camps, see Fig. 3) to prepare urban upgrading plans in a bottom-up comprehensive approach. The community was mobilized using different participatory tools, and plans for the socio-economic and environmental upgrading were prepared in collaboration with stakeholders. This is one of the few projects in Jordan that adopted a truly participatory approach that was invested in community decision-making [6], [8]. As such, the Camp Improvement Project provides a unique opportunity to investigate the possibilities and constraints for gender sensitive planning in deprived areas.

I. Participation and Gender

Models of participation in planning and development have been investigated in varied ways, as the context and objectives of projects vary [9], [10], [11], [12]. Within a context of urban upgrading, issues of local agency are significant, as participation becomes a tool of empowerment and not only a procedural requirement [6]. Participation has been applauded as means to achieve social justice and equity [13], but it has also been critiqued as a means to resource control by local elites [6], [3], [14], [15]. Of particular interest are studies on participatory approaches with vulnerable groups, especially women [16], [17].

Also, participation is a necessary approach in areas facing unusual types of challenges, such as urbanised protracted refugee camps. In such instances, locals' input into problem identification and analysis is valuable. Participation in such urban settings can be a tool for improving local agency if managed critically. In other words, special care needs to be given in such instances by the project team to ensure that marginalised groups are included [3], [6], [18].

Gender is among the earliest identified challenges in participatory approaches [15], [16], [19], [20]. Issues of social structure, agency, cultural roles, and local organization have been ascertained to impact women's participation. In literature, several stages of sustainable development are named – women in development, women and development, gender and development, and gender mainstreaming – reflecting the complexity and progression of issues, perspectives, and practices [17], [21].

Moreover, literature on women and urban planning covers wide areas, discussions about women's interest, priorities and needs in the urban environment, women's input in urban planning, women's access to public space, transportation, housing, water, just to name a few [22], [23], [24], [25]. In the 1980s the main focus was on the identification of areas in which women's input was marginalized, especially in housing and urban infrastructure, other discussions focused on safety and women's needs, but new studies focus on mainstreaming gender in process and avoiding the traditional dichotomy of male-vs-female relationships [3], [17], [22], [26], [27]. Further explorations of the methods making the participatory process inclusive stresses the significance of appropriate tools and strategies [11], [28], [29]. Working in poverty pockets and informal areas requires

special attention to the strategies used, which this paper investigates.

Also, studies have covered women as agents of urban change [30], gender as determinant of urban space production [31] and how urban environments are built to reinforce gender stereotypes [32]. Early literature identified the significance of controlling the surrounding environment, a political issue that is often exclusive to men. Urban space is intertwined with social relationships and mirrors the gender relationships as it creates them [26], [32]. The following case study further explores these ideas.

Use of the built environment is greatly related to the everyday life practices of women [23], thus bringing public space closer to private life practices and needs. Literature also evolved to address more than specific needs of women to offer a critique of the process and outcome. Day [33] emphasized the need to study women in developing countries, which this paper attempts.

There is critical literature on the inclusion of women in project development and implementation stages, but only few discuss women during the planning stage [16], [17], [26]. Often, women will find themselves out of the decision-making process or their interest marginalized even within participatory development projects. This vulnerability often occurs due to the complexities of the process, or they often remain vulnerable while confronting stronger power structures [15], [22], [23].

Also, few investigations address process and strategies. Huning [27] calls for diversification of strategies in urban planning and gender studies to better address power relationships in space. Indeed, the adoption of a fixed set of tools for community input limits engagement [22], which the case study avoided. Others [25], [29] provide an assessment of the process of inclusion and point out successful tools. This paper builds on the above literature as it tackles participation in an urban upgrading project, assessing the methods and strategies used.

Of special interest are the projects in slums, as socio-economic development is integrated with urban planning. Beal and Todes [16] contend that projects targeting such areas have high potential for gender sensitive planning and practice. Often, women find themselves out of the decision-making process or their interest marginalized even within participatory development projects [17]. This takes place due to process complexities, as they remain vulnerable confronting stronger power structures and cultural roles [15], [19]. Still, research points to the importance and positive results of women engagement in the planning, design, and implementation of urban upgrades [29].

Literature points to the important role of women in urban upgrades noting not only their importance as implementers of initiatives, but also that they are often the party responsible for community maintenance. Research also points to the positive results of women's engagement in the design and implementation of urban upgrades [16], [24]. Still, few investigations bridge the above literature. Thus, this paper investigates urban upgrading projects, focusing on the strategies that were used.

II. Objective and Methods

The objective of this paper is to investigate the opportunities and challenges of gender sensitive participatory planning in slums, using protracted refugee camps in Jordan as a case. The Camp Improvement Project, which was implemented in three camps is investigated through varied methods. The three urban improvement projects in the camps adopted a gender sensitive approach and mainstreamed gender in all the planning phases while adopting a bottom-up approach in all project stages. The projects are investigated through the following questions:

1. What were the strategies used for gender inclusion in planning the upgrading?
2. In what ways were these strategies successful or not?
3. What is the local perspective on women's inclusion after the projects have been finished?
4. What are the lessons learned from this experience?

The study uses qualitative methods due to its exploratory nature. Multi methods were used:

1. Document analysis using project and UNRWA documents.
2. Site visits to the three camps, conducted mainly in the period June – September 2019, including informal interviews with some of the locals.
3. In-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by phone with individuals who participated in the planning phase of the project, conducted in the period August 2020 – February 2021 (Table I).
4. Follow up interviews to discuss some of the findings with the interviewees, conducted in February 2022 by phone.

One of the authors was involved in the case studies during the project's work, thus obtaining personal

TABLE I

Distribution of Interviews [by the authors]

	Total number of interviewees (men and women)	No. of women interviewees
Husn camp locals	6	4
Talbieh camp locals	10	5
Jerash camp locals	7	3
Unrwa	4	3
DPA	2	0
Total	29	15

knowledge about project participants, which enabled to open discussions of varied perspectives.

The paper proceeds as follows: a short overview of the case studies is given, including an overview of the main stakeholders and the participatory strategies utilized in each project phase; then, the analysis of the main challenges and opportunities, first by identifying themes from local perspectives about women participation, then analysing the strength and weaknesses of the strategies using mixed methods; and the conclusion reflects on the main lessons learned from the projects.

III. Camp Improvement as a Case Study

The Department of Infrastructure and Camp Improvement of UNRWA is a relatively new department initiated in 2006 to address complexities of refugee camps. This task is addressed through a participatory, bottom-up, integrated development approach to develop camp improvement plans including physical and socio-economic aspects. The policies and strategies of camp improvement are based on principles of holistic sustainability [6]. Husn, Talbieh, and Jerash camps were tackled in the period 2009–2015, developing improvement and action plans generated in a participatory manner (Table I, Fig. 4).

IV. Participatory Process

It is important that the case study is seen considering the context. Participatory projects in Jordan are often tokenistic [6] based on government-led or technocrat-led processes, sometimes with selected individuals representing the local community [3]. Thus, the approach used in this project was new to all involved. Further, the camps have not been planned and the notion of urban planning was new as well. Over the years, residents of the camps took whatever space they could find based on their relationship to power structures. The DPA maintained the street and alley networks in the camp, but open space was a rarity.

The Camp Improvement Project adopted an inclusive participatory process with input from varied stakeholders throughout the project cycle, while also allowing input from professionals. This was done through varied platforms of engagement to include stakeholders.

A. Main Stakeholders

Palestine refugee camps in Jordan include four main groups.

Community. The community encompasses refugees and displaced persons who lost their livelihoods and land in the aftermath of 1948 and 1967 wars. As the political situation continues to worsen, camps have become places of lasting temporariness. Three to four generations of refugees live in camps with limited income, education, and employment opportunities in general (Table 1). Traditional heads of clans and families still exist (dubbed Mukhtar), and they play symbolic roles in social events. The project's process was new to the community, and its inclusiveness irritated local powerful groups.

UNRWA. Established in 1949, UNRWA has several departments providing the following services: basic and vocational education, basic health care, relief and

TABLE II

Indicators of the Conditions in the Targeted Camps [by the author using data based on [34]]

Indicators	Husn	Talbieh	Jerash
Year when the camp was established	1968	1968	1968
Area (km^2)	0.77	0.13	0.75
Original number of residents	12 500	5000	11 500
Current number of residents	22 000	7000	24 000
Mean household size	5.2	5.3	5.8
Percentage of residents with income below the national poverty line	23 %	28 %	52.7 %
Male Unemployment	18 %	15 %	17 %
Female Unemployment	25 %	14 %	15 %
Residents without health insurance	49 %	37 %	88 %
Mean floor area per capita (m^2)	19	17	18
Crowding. Households living in dwellings containing three or more individuals per room	15 %	21 %	24 %
Literacy (can read and write easily)	83 %	86 %	83 %



Fig. 4. Husn camp façade colouring, which was shut down [photo by authors].

social services, infrastructure and camp improvement, microfinance, and emergency response. UNRWA staff participated in thematic groups, and in some work groups, but not all embraced the notion of participation. Many believed they know more what refugees needed than the refugees themselves. Some staff members noted difficulties with the powerful elite in camps, who have their own agendas. Most of the staff were blind to the significance of gender sensitive planning.

Local organizations. The camps contain many local NGOs, recurrent organizations include Women Programs Centre and the Community-based Rehabilitation Centre for the Handicapped, both overseen by UNRWA. There is also a local sports club and a mosque committee. Except for the WPC, the leaders of the organizations are men.

DPA. The Department of Palestinian Affairs was established in 1988 to manage refugee camps and collaborate with UNRWA. Varied services in infrastructure and development are offered through the DPA through offices in different camps [35].

B. Gender Inclusion Strategies for Each Project Phase

Data collection. Women were included as data and information source, since gender-based data was part of all data collection works, such as door-to-door surveys, business mapping (targeting all local businesses), focus groups (targeting grass roots community age 7 to 80+), and interviews (targeting stakeholder representatives, and local leaders). Also, women played a vital role in interpreting data, for example, data collection in the door-to-door surveys was conducted by women workers, and 60–80 % of project staff were women. Additionally, the project put special effort to ensure that women and other vulnerable groups are represented by no less than 30 % in all samples for data collection (focus groups and interviews). Also, there were women-only focus groups to facilitate free input (Fig. 5). The survey and business mapping included data on women in all categories.

Data analysis and interpretation. The qualitative data was analysed and presented in the Work Group (forum for open community meetings), where it was discussed. The qualitative data was analysed in thematic groups. In both cases women were invited to meetings but their presence varied. More women attended the thematic groups as they were specific and smaller, and they participated in the discussions. However, participation in the open community meetings (Work Group) was limited despite attendance. To address that, project teams went to women homes, and neighbourhood meetings of women were conducted to analyse and interpret the qualitative data.

Problem analysis and alternative generation. Thematic groups and neighbourhood groups played a vital role in this phase of the project, the findings and recommendations were then presented in the Work Group for an open general discussion. The list of objectives and action items were created eventually.



Fig. 5. Icebreaker in a female school focus group [photo by authors].

Identification of community priorities. A stratified sample of the residents of the camps based on gender and age group (age 7 to 80) voted on the community priorities through house or school visits to the sample members.

Development of the master plan (the Camp Improvement Plan). The plan was generated in the Work Group mainly, with input from the neighbourhood and thematic groups.



Fig. 6. Thematic group meeting on youth unemployment [photo by authors].

To facilitate input of marginalised groups, the meeting participants were divided into groups of 5–6, where each group developed a suggestion for a particular issue (Fig. 6). Women and other marginalised groups were represented in each group, the suggestions were grouped and mixed, in later meetings the discussion of the suggestions was conducted by the Work Group.

V. Main Challenges

C. Local Perspective

Interviews with locals who participated in the project reflected five perspectives on the participation of women.

Not the average woman's place or capacity. Many locals felt that it is not a woman's place to be involved in major decision making. While all agreed that women should be part of the general meeting structure, decisions should be left to men. It was acceptable to include women in any planning activity, but it was considered that the final words should be prepared by men, having more experience and awareness of the public issues. Some felt that the complexity of the camp requires experts "not housewives" to solve. Many said that educated women would be welcome (there are few in the community), as they would have the capacity to participate. However, education was not required for men's participation. Many local women agreed to the notion and felt that their input is not significant and that the local men would know what is needed. Few women, usually with higher education or experience, appreciated the opportunity and identified the significance of their input. As such, most felt that women do not have the capacities needed, despite the training they have received.

No open spaces for women. The creation of open spaces that women and children can use was controversial in all projects. Many agreed to children's playgrounds, but only if there was extra space. They felt that priority should be given to major functions and not "recreational" functions, playgrounds being one of them. Noteworthy, men use the sideways and street for outdoor socializing, but women are not expected to do that, unless they live in an alley that is not directly open to traffic. The community felt that women should not be visible to passers by, even when they are using playgrounds that have been designed by the community. "…I don't think that a self-respecting woman would accept being a spectacle…", "…our women do not do that…". Many women felt that the improvements of the environment that they requested were ignored, especially in Jerash camp where the high level of poverty took precedence. In Husn camp, attempts at colouring the buildings was not considered a priority by men, although the youth and women agreed on its significance. The project was initiated but shut down before completion. In Talbieh, children's playgrounds and green spaces were implemented as planned but were vandalised after implementation.

Men will take care of it. Some locals felt that the follow up on the plans requires men, as they have the capacity. Some said that women will not be able to follow up on any planned space or function, nor can they collaborate with relevant parties due to "lack of experience". "Women have strength in home making and that makes them more inclined to be at home generally, also the responsibilities of home tutoring fall on them, which limits the available time…". The bottom-up approach to planning encouraged local management of projects and, to the extent possible, local implementation. Many believed that maintenance and upkeep of the spaces can be better done by men, which is in opposition to what literature says. Site visits showed that the women upkeep the alleys between their homes in terms of cleaning, while men would do heavy maintenance.

These are not significant issues. Some men felt that the issues raised by women were not significant, noting that there is no need for police patrol (requested in Talbieh), or for green spaces (requested in all camps). The women's focus on the quality of the environment was considered as negative by some men. Noteworthy, male youth agreed on many of the suggestions on playgrounds and environmental improvements. Further, some problems identified through the female focus groups, especially violence at home and in school, drug abuse, and early marriages were completely rejected by the local male leaders.

Yes, but not any woman. Some of the men encouraged women presence and participation but felt that it should be done by the more experienced senior women, such as retired schoolteachers, or the highly educated ones. Many of the local women were already involved in the Women's Programs Centre, thus identified as local leaders. This emphasizes the significance of women NGOs. Such women were accustomed to the local culture and know what and when to speak. The navigation and negotiation of decisions have become a skill, and they felt that it was not advisable to undermine local culture as that creates undue tensions. Noteworthy, more male youth encouraged women's involvement, and they often agreed to their suggestions.

D. Stakeholder and Team Perspective

The interview with all stakeholders, in addition to the project documents, focused on the process itself and the lessons learned. They reveal how streamlining gender in all phases and encouraging women engagement and agency through the participatory structure was essential. The main challenge for women's input was the Work Group, as it was not only a mixed gender space but also the main platform for decisions and, often, dissidence. Respondents asserted that women engagement was a complex issue and is not dependant on offering them a space for input or involvement.



Fig. 7. A Talbieh woman leading the workshop with Husn Work Group [photo by authors].

Women engagement was supported by project teams in a variety of means, such as special training for the WG on gender roles and participatory development, special invitations and encouragement for local women and youth, and by supporting priorities identified by women. Indeed, some of the local women showed leadership potential and were asked to lead workshops (Figs. 7 and 8).

The assessment and planning stages adopted a critical strategy for gender mainstreaming in which the needs, priorities, and vision for camp improvement incorporated women's input without highlighting, thus avoiding dichotomizing male-female needs. Notwithstanding all successes, strong resistance to female presence in WG was not always against women per-se, as some community elite women were accepted. Introducing new female faces, especially from among the grassroots, was challenging. In general, women involvement was diverse and fluctuating with strong contribution by educated female youth. However, the main challenge for women was slowly developing as the final phases approached (Table II). And although the dichotomous division of men vs women was avoided in the initial stages, the conflict over the finalization of the plans brought this issue into the forefront.



Fig. 8. Women training session in Talbieh [photo by authors].

Noteworthy, the respondents identified a pattern in priorities within the three camps. The top tier of needs was often agreed upon regardless of gender, usually included income generation projects, shelter, health, or educational improvements, depending on camp conditions. The second tier, however, was when differences appeared between genders, as men mostly identified issues related to traffic and transport, support to local organizations, or soft loan sources. Women, on the other hand, requested green spaces, children's playgrounds, and better camp security and street lighting. Therefore, blind grass-root voting on priorities was essential to identify the camp priorities, which were later developed in the Thematic Groups, Neighbourhood Groups, and Work Group into an urban master plan and action plan of physical, social, economic, and environmental aspects – the Camp Improvement Plan.

Further, the operationalizing of women roles in the detailed design of the urban projects was emphasised by encouraging their input, visiting them at their homes, conducting meetings with them in their own private spaces, and supporting their arguments at the WG. The fact that the majority of the project team were women facilitated local women's engagement, as they felt comfortable in visiting the project offices.

Tensions over the upgrading of open urban pockets or the creation of green areas and playgrounds were noted by most interviewees. For men, it was important to maintain hegemony over the urban space; consequently, some spaces, such as a large playground in Husn camp, did not face issues as it was originally suggested by men. While a similar space in Talbieh camp was highly controversial, since women emphasized its importance as a children playground, while men sought to build an NGO on the same site. The diversification of gender inclusion strategies helped the project teams circumvent around some challenges (Table III).

Similarly, interviewees noted that women provided more input in closed meetings (Table IV). While open forms and community meetings limited female input, and in many times, women were subject to criticism and their ideas were ridiculed. This, naturally, raises questions on

TABLE III

Analysis of Participation by Local Community Members [authors of the article]

	Adult males	Adult females	Male youth	Female youth	Seniors
Interest	High level by the elite and average persons	High level among the activists mainly. Housewives showed limited interest. Interest responded to the level of education	High	High	High
Attendance	Elite, retirees, family heads. Mainly principal business owners or those who do not work long hours. The representation of the disadvantaged was limited although some did attend (retirees).	Low attendance. Typically attended when meeting was conducted in the morning.	Low attendance in general. Attendance was higher at the beginning of the project but dropped after the youth felt that their views were not being accepted by the rest of the WG members. Preferred to work at the project office on youth-led initiatives.	Moderate attendance in general. Attendance at the start of the project was nil. However, recruitment and mobilization had positive impact and the numbers of attendees increased.	Regular attendance by males, but no female seniors attended at all despite mobilization attempts. The idea was extremely far-fetched for them. Did not see this as their "role".
Voicing opinion in the meetings	Very dominant during discussions. Their opinions were articulated with clarity and skill. Their skills to manoeuvre arguments and critique were varied but sometimes based on ridicule and quarrels. Used different tactics for lobbying and self-organization.	New attendees did not speak or participate, but elite females were accustomed to participation and their opinions accepted		without voice, limited input, mocked or ignored when attempted, required coordination between them and functioning as a group	Voicing opinion
Meeting dynamics	Aggressive group lobbying. Reject presence of any of the non-elite males, in addition to youth and women	Withdrawn	Reject adult presence, avoid the meetings unless no seniors are present	Attendance only. Limited input.	Did not accept the attendance of women and youth. Unable to accept viewpoints other than their own, excluding some Bedouin leaders who refused to attend unless the WG was closed.
Planning issues under focus	Economic improvement targeting projects, improvement of shelters and infrastructure.	Shelters, urban environment, health, recreation, leisure, income.	Employment, Leisure.	Employment, leisure, education, shelters	Socio-economic relief, rations, health

Note: the use of "elite" is relative. All camp residents are underprivileged. Some have managed to obtain better level of education and income. Others have managed to obtain senior positions in public institutions, which offers them status.

the viability of a participatory approach. It is true that women's needs were identified and included, but it was done in an indirect manner, which maintained men at the forefront of the process. So, would that be considered successful?

The answer to this question came from some of the women volunteers who pointed out that prior to the camp improvement project it has been impossible for them to be involved in such a public endeavour. So, some change had taken place. Local women agreed that it may be better to see incremental change than to embark on radical transformations that may backfire against the very women it attempts to assist. Slow changes are not appreciated by development professionals, as the impact is hard to measure, yet it may be more sustainable, as it works gradually on how women and men interact.

TABLE IV

Strengths of Varied Strategies and Participatory Tools (Noting Local Differences in the Tools Between Camps) [authors of the article]

	Provide gender-based data	Identify women's needs, priorities, and constraints	Facilitate women's access to information	Provide voice for women	Allow detailed gender sensitive analysis of issues	Promote discussion between stakeholders	Increase awareness of gender-based needs and constraints	Identify supportive and positive men and boys	Facilitate women's agency	Increase engagement of local women with decision-makers and stakeholders
Surveys	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Limited	No
Interviews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, if sample is representative	Limited	No	Limited	Yes	Yes	No
Focus groups	Yes, qualitative mostly	Yes	Yes	Yes, if some groups are exclusive	Yes, if not all groups are mixed, age mixed, gender mixed	Limited	Yes	No	Yes	No
Thematic groups	Yes	Limited	Yes	Limited	Limited	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Neighbourhood groups	Yes	If gender-based	Yes	If gender-based	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Grass-root ranking	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Work Group	Limited	No	Yes	No	Yes, with challenges	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, if vocal	Yes
Training	No	No	Yes	Yes	Improves the possibilities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Home visits for women	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	No	No	-	Yes	No
School visits with girls	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

Conclusions

This paper addresses the successes and challenges of including women in the participatory planning for urban upgrades within a refugee camp in urban area. The paper addresses the strategies and tools used to empower local women and ensure a fair representation of their needs and priorities. Local social structure and processes impact the role of women in local governance, especially when making decisions about competing interests. Challenges of women involvement are deep rooted in their own perceived role in the community and the acceptance of such an engagement by their families, husbands, and friends. Many women avoid decision-making roles that may threaten male dominance, fearing ostracising. Even when project professionals offer the space and support for women involvement, their opinions are endorsed if they do not threaten male hegemony over decisions and resources. This challenge has been recognized by Beal and Tods (2004), who point out that women participation is variable, and in many times, they do not have the voice to influence project outcomes, since the organizational context is male dominated. As such, they contend that such projects have been disappointing in terms of gender relations. Indeed, the interviews with the locals show that there is rejection to full participation from local women, but it also shows acceptance of the presence of some women based on education and experience. This emphasize the significance of local women-led NGOs, as they are hubs for creating and training local women leaders.

Still, the project succeeded in including the needs of women and other vulnerable groups through its varied tools of inclusion and flexibility allowing them to visit homes and schools. However, they failed to bring women to the forefront. Introducing women into decision-making circles is not simple and will face many obstacles, which will manifest toward the final planning phases. Weisman [32] explained that there are three spatial realms: metaphysical space (moral and religious beliefs), social space (status), and physical space (environment) which interact to create urban space. Urban space is a physical representation of existing social relations. As such, urban planning is an act of power, and participatory planning threatens power relationships by its focus on space.

Consequently, such projects need to be carefully planned to include vulnerable groups, using varied tools and strategies as needs arise, and show flexibility in responding to local circumstances. Still, it is also important to include an authority invested in protecting the process and ensuring that the powerful elite do not hijack the process [6]. Participation remains an important tool for social equity, so even when impact is minimal, it offers possibilities for local women that were not imaginable otherwise. The creation of plans that are sensitive to all residents' needs signifies the importance of a critical participatory approach.

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