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**AT THE JUNCTION OF FEMINISM AND ECOLOGY,  
TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE URBAN PUBLIC SPACE**

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**Abstract**

As more cities and local governments resort to gender sensitive approaches to urban planning, it is insightful to address gender and the environment as crosscutting issues (Levy, 1992). Indeed, the greening of cities is a widespread response to climate change, as mitigation and adaptation to its microclimatic effects in cities. This creates opportunities to reassess the gender inclusiveness of urban space, as projects of greening school yards show (Maruéjols, 2014). Yet if the conversation on gender inclusive public space is not well rooted in the local government, policies to protect the biodiversity might impede the appropriation of the city by women and LGBTI people.

Our paper is based on the empirical work conducted as part of a PhD thesis on that matter, in three French cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants. We question how gendermainstreaming translates into tools and solutions for urban green spaces, as well as re-vegetated public places.

The paper will show how civil servants working on the conception and maintenance of such green spaces understand and familiarize themselves with the gender sensitive perspectives and the challenges they face doing so. We will describe what hinders the production of more gender inclusive public green spaces. We will also discuss how civil servants and elected officials regard at the right to the city for women and LGBTI people as a security issue, and its implications on the framing of the public problem and the solutions to it.

**INTRODUCTION**

Firstly I want to thank the organizers of this conference and of this session for allowing us all to share our work, in spite of the current situation.

In this paper I will present some of the results of an ongoing study, that I am running for my PhD thesis. I am working on the junction between feminist policies and the production of urban nature in three cities of more than 100k inhabitants in France, cities A, B and C.

I argue that the greening of cities creates an opportunity to reassess the ways we build public space hence to integrate the goal of equal participation to public space for women and men, as well as LGBT people. My focus is then on the civil servants and elected officials in these three cities working on gender equality policies as well as the production of public space, especially in landscaping and gardening.

At the moment I conducted 65 interviews with 73 people and 220 hours of observation.

In the cities A and B, there is a program on Gender and the City involving several civil servants from different departments, including Green Spaces. In City C, no formal instrument has been created to develop that policy, and the study should start a workshop up on that matter.

I am looking at how the attention to gender equality in the city grew, at the network of actors who put it on the agenda and how. I refer myself to the sociology of bureaucracy and public action, authors such as Kingdon, Lipsky and Selznick, as well as Howard Becker, to understand how policies are constructed.

The main issue on this matter is the framing of the public problem, at the junction of two politics: the greening of the city as a response to climate change on one hand, and the gender equal appropriation of public space on the other.

There has been a shift towards green and sustainable cities, at the turn of the century in french cities – even though the competition between policies (economics, mobility...) is still significant. As for feminist city planning, this process of agenda setting and framing is ongoing.

As I will show in my presentation, the legitimization of a gender-sensitive approach of public space, is an ongoing challenge, and depending on the path on which the debate heads to, different policy instruments and outcomes might occur.

## **1) HOW THE LINK BETWEEN GENDER AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE CITY IS SET ON THE AGENDA**

### ***A renewed approach of public space, as well as feminism and ecology: the political opportunities***

There are political opportunities to address feminism and ecology at the same time in the production of public space at the moment. Indeed, we have seen a renewed interest for public space and its use in cities. (Tomas, 2001)

Especially, green spaces in the city are valued in political as well as property programs, to face climate change and to allow a good quality of life. The demand for greening of cities has been widely studied by scholars (Boutefeu et al, 2005 ; Charlot, 2014 ; Boudes, Glatron, 2016).

As for feminism, there is a new wave of feminist social movement, that issued the #MeToo movement – in France, #BalanceTonPorc – with a focus on public space as street harassment was set on the agenda; policies were built to address that issue (Gayet-Viaud, Dekker, 2021). The brilliant thesis of Mischa Dekker analyses the framing of street harassment as a public problem and the production of the offence of sexist contempt in France (2021). The combination of scholars, activists and political actor's attention to gender equality in public space created an opportunity to address these issues in local governments.

In the city A, the mayor presents herself as a young, feminist and ecologist woman, with a team of people determined to take on innovative solutions for social and ecological progress.

In their administration, there was already a group of civil servants working on gender and the city, that appointed me as a PhD student and consultant to work on gender and urban nature. After the municipality was elected, the work of this group and my study have been advertised in interviews, meetings with other towns etc.

With metropolization in the background, seizing this kind of opportunity allows them to gain national and European recognition, as a pioneer city.

### ***The feminist approach in city planning: added value and cost-effectiveness for urban projects***

The integrated approach of gender equality in local public administrations is the result of internal strategies as well, combined with the use of an external network of activists and scholar to back the propositions.

Indeed some scholars working on gender and public space have been able to advertise their work in the media, and specialized press and now work as consultants.

The intertwined fields of feminist activism, scholarship and policy actors create resources for the agenda setting of new issues.

The leader of the group working on gender and the city in city A highlights the cost-effectiveness of a gender sensitive approach: if the project manager is trained, they can plan an inclusive park without further cost, but the communication on a gender inclusive project will promote it as innovative. For her, this is a great incentive for project managers or directors to adopt a gender sensitive approach, and then for the public problem to gain serious attention and turn into effective policies.

Yet the affordability of gender policies is the biggest hindrance for maintaining the issue on the agenda. For instance in the city C, the departure of a deputy mayor, then the medical leave of the project manager put an end to all the ongoing projects.

This is why enrolling colleagues from other departments helps to spread the issue in the administration and to gather more resources.

→ **Conclusion:** The study of the trajectories of those policy entrepreneurs is important (Kingdon, 1984), to show how they have a foot in different spheres and therefore multiple resources from a network of scholars, activists, to legitimize the cause and to gain the support of their hierarchy

## **2) THE FRAMING OF THE PUBLIC PROBLEM REGARDING GENDER AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

### ***The debate on the specificity of women's experiences of the city***

Everyone agrees to the principle of gender equality being an important aim of public action, yet what it means exactly is still up for important debate.

Some of the interviewees express stereotypical views on men and women and their relations to public space, and nature: for them women are associated with flowers, calm activities and care; while men are described as needing more space, especially younger men and boys, and to be less respectful.

Other interviewees question themselves a lot to avoid stereotypes and are therefore unsure when suggesting actions, meanwhile they know that women do take on most of the care activities and jobs.

The third most common type of speech is one that includes women's experiences in other categories: some prefer to talk about different types of activities, or age groups. Those interviewees want to change the relation of the public with city space, with the environment. This speech might be rooted in ecologist or social activist stances, but it can also come from a refusal to address the specificity of women's and LGBT people's experiences in the city.

This typology is still work in progress as I try to understand the determinants of each type of discourse (Koerner, 2021).

This will affect the framing of the public problem, depending on whether the feminists are able to convince others and to gather enough resources to ensure that definitions and solutions won't be altered too much through the process.

### ***The framing of the public problem as a security issue***

I chose to work on gender equality and urban nature because I saw more women in parks than men, which disputes the saying that men stay in public place while women only come and go. I wanted to understand why, and see if what we learned from it could help with the emancipation of women. So for me it's an issue of fostering the participation of women and LGBT people in the city.

Except when I explained my project to elected officials, they were interested because greening the city might resolve street harassment, or because bushes may be hiding spots for assaulters. And when the queer dimension didn't disappear, LGBT people were only described as victims, too.

The importance of security issues in the political agenda in France impact how gender issues are set on the agenda. And the growing attention to gender equality encourages the re-writing of solutions for safer parks as feminist, while it is long-standing demands of the police forces.

On the other hand, presenting nature as a pacifier of social relations or as dangerous, may limit the acceptance of spontaneous vegetation in cities. To ensure safe cities for women, there should then be only very controlled nature: this framing of the public problem might deter the landscapers of the cities from acting for gender equality.

→ The challenge here is to avoid for any policy, for biodiversity or gender equality, to be diverted from its initial goal and ambitions. That might happen ensuring women's safety is used to temper with an ambitious ecological program, or, on the other hand, if the policy is ill-constructed and ends up in silencing the diversity of women experiences by producing stereotypical park designs.

### **3) WHAT INSTRUMENTS FOR THIS POLICY? THE CHALLENGES OF FOSTERING AN INTEGRATED APPROACH**

The instruments that will be built to implement a policy depend on how the public problem was framed, as well as the training and education of actors, and the usual instruments and customs of the local government and departments. Most of the times the instruments for new policies are reformulations or new combinations of existing instruments.

#### ***The case of school yards: clinical test of a gender/environment friendly policy?***

The first way that the junction between gender and urban nature is being realised is in the reorganising of school yards. As cities want to face microclimatic effects of climate change, i.e. heat island effects, school yards gained attention as they were mostly built with asphalt and because they welcome a vulnerable public: children. Other arguments helped, such as teaching kids new ways to interact with nature in cities and this way building a new generation of citizens sympathetic to nature.

This example is great to explain the dynamics of agenda setting of gender issues. Indeed, these programs were seen as opportunities to reassess the use of space equally between girls and boys by deputy mayors and project managers in the three cities.

To legitimize a gender-sensitive approach, the work of geograph Edith Maruéjols on gender equality in school yards was mobilized, since she gained recognition in the professional and general media and works as a consultant.

For the project teams, this attention to gender was mostly cost-effective as they just read about gender in school yards and organised workshops with the teachers and children. Yet they had extensive press coverage as it is new and innovative.

The activities are organised differently, especially the football field that is moved away from the center of the yard, to promote more diverse and inclusive games and extend the vegetated areas.

One of the deputy mayors suggested that it is the primary place where this junction is made because it is a controlled and close environment with activity leaders to regulate social relations all day. I will argue as well that there is a strong belief that gender inequality will be resolved through education rather than conflict in the administration.

#### ***An integrated approach: the gender dimension at each stage of urban projects***

To build a gender-sensitive approach to planning parks and revegetated areas, each stage of urban projects must integrate the gender dimension.

This is why the framing of the public problem is important, so that all actors intervening on that production line speak the same language. To ensure this, training programs are a key item. It must be relevant to each and everyone's occupation and practical, and appeal not only to already feminist civil servants.

The administration resorts more and more to participation for urban projects. A gender-sensitive approach is crucial to allow women and LGBT people to participate and for their experiences to be really heard.

Then a challenge is to include gender-equality items in the specifications for project managers because this step might be the one where stereotypes are fixed or where landscapers reject the idea because they might receive it as yet another constraint on their work.

And at last, evaluation of the use of the new parks and town squares, with regards to gender, is important to thicken the knowledge on social practises and to assess the actual change.

The way those instruments are built is still up for debate in the three cities, while they benchmark ideas and discuss them. Depending on the outcome, the policy might fail, or it might be so well integrated that it will become a routine, yet a new box to check, or it might induce real social change, by keeping the topic on the agenda, in the public debate, thanks to an extended and intensive networks between activists, policy entrepreneurs, scholars and new female and LGBT participants enrolled through the process.

### **CONCLUSION:**

As a conclusion, I will point out the circulation of best practices and experimentation for a policy under construction, in the context of government from a distance, and metropolisation. Indeed, cities are emulated to try and build innovative policies and have the space to do so horizontally, through cooperation with other cities involved on the matter, with scholars and local or international feminist ecosystems.

The ongoing study must now go further with new interviews and focus groups to address the challenges I discussed here with the participants to the study, and compare our findings with the realisations of pioneer cities such as Vienna, Paris, Barcelona for instance, via a field trip there.

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