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Do French Local Youth Policies Still Fail to Address Gender Issues? Lessons From the RAJE Project

MARIE-ANAÏS LE BRETON, THELMA BEAULIEU, MAXIME LECOQ, PATRICIA LONCLE, MARYAM MAHAMAT, MATTHIEU RAULT¹

Abstract. This article analyses the way in which gender issues are taken into account in the development of youth policies at a local level in France, and more specifically in three rural areas of Brittany. The study is being conducted through the “*Recherche-Action, Jeunes et Engagements*” (RAJE) project, which has been running since January 2024. Involving decision-makers, youth workers and young people, it is an interesting field for understanding how gender issues emerge and are integrated on the youth policy agenda. Based on a collective narrative, this article both sheds light and questions the ways in which gendered subjectivities are interwoven with the engagement dynamics studied and experimented within the action-research. We analyze local situations in a reflexive and qualitative way, which allow us to formulate several hypotheses on the brakes and levers on putting gender issues on local policies’ agenda. Our work suggests that the gendered distribution of power in social contexts (both political and professional), the mechanisms of gender assignment, and the reproduction of heteronormative stereotypes are not only avenues of inquiry for our action-research, but also main ethical and political issues.

Keywords: youth, local policy, gender, action-research, rural.

1. INTRODUCTION

In France, local youth policies have traditionally focused on organizing leisure and sports activities for young people. Over the last few decades, their scope has widened so as to include other priorities, such as cultural issues, access to employment and health, with significant variations from one territory to another (Loncle and Maunay 2022). Though they do not have to meet many requirements, these local policies nevertheless organize and structure an important part of the social system in which children, teenagers and young adults evolve, outside family and school time. Considering how

¹ Each academic and extra-academic author listed here contributed to the present paper. Discussions and collaborative writing, as well as a division of tasks, enabled the academic team to support the extra-academic team. The team’s research engineer provided all the writers with a table summarizing the various interviews and documents available for analysis, as well as a shared Zotero group for accessing bibliographic resources supporting the article’s purpose. She coordinated this article in agreement with all the co-authors.

they influence the way young people are perceived, the activities they are offered, the way they organize and define roles between youth workers, and how they promote certain ways of occupying and sharing space (in particular through public facilities and infrastructures), the question of their role in shaping gender identities is worth asking.

However, gender issues are seldom addressed in the written documentation produced by local authorities, whether these be binding or simply declarative. When they are mentioned, it is merely in terms of parity between girls and boys, in order to address the issue of young girls disappearing from public spaces during their teenage years (Marujéouls 2011). Little consideration seems to be given to the management of girls and boys' equity and what allows or encourages it, despite the evidence that it is an essential condition for challenging gender stereotypes and assignments, albeit not sufficient in itself (*ibidem*). This paradox seems to be an interesting angle from which to examine the way local youth policies are organized and implemented, and how they deal with gender issues. By analysing the patterns of the actions led with young people within local social spaces (Bruneau *et al.* 2018), our aim is to uncover the processes by which gender is placed on the youth policy agenda.

In this article, we draw on the observation and analysis of local dynamics in three inter-municipal areas² in Brittany, all three of which are involved in a same action research project on youth participation (Caraballo *et al.* 2017). Launched in January 2024, the RAJE project³ examines how local public action on youth issues can be developed with the participation of those primarily concerned. The action research project's aim is to improve young people's participation in the making of public policies that concern them by focusing on how professionals operate. It explores and experiments with new ways of spurring youth into action, while rethinking methods of cooperation between local stakeholders. The methodologies are founded upon a qualitative approach, singular to each geographical context. An initial semi-directive interview survey enabled the collection of approximately fifteen interviews from each area. The analysis of these interviews resulted in the researchers supporting the implementation of local and unique actions and experi-

mentations, which were documented in the form of log-books.

Although RAJE was not initially designed to examine gender issues specifically, it soon became clear that gendered subjectivities were fundamentally interwoven with the dynamics of participation studied and experimented in the context of the action research project. In each of the three rural areas the study focuses on, young women and men (aged 14 to 25) experience very different realities. This can be explained in part by the historical, geographical and socio-economic characteristics specific to each territory. While it is not possible to detail them all here, some of their specific characteristics can be examined from a gender perspective. *Loudéac Communauté*, which is the action research inter-municipality farthest from major conurbations, counts only a quarter of municipalities with a positive ratio of women to men for the 18-24 age group, while this ratio is relatively balanced for the 11-17 age group (Insee 2020). This asymmetry can be explained by student migration, which affects young women more than their masculin counterparts (Guéraud *et al.* 2021). Greater gender diversity can be observed in the more Western and Eastern areas included in the study. These are under the urban influence of the Brest and Rennes conurbations, which offer young people relative proximity to higher-level services. Lastly, all three areas benefit from a dense network of clubs and organisations, a factor which should have a favourable effect on youth participation in general. However, the tendency at all levels is to focus on boy's activities (Amsellem-Mainguy and Coquard 2023). Therefore, the opportunities offered in terms of education (Danic *et al.* 2021) and economic integration (Arrighi 2004; Kula and Gueguen 2018) are generally more favorable to young men than to young women, especially in the municipalities located in the center of the Brittany Region, which are defined as rural areas free from urban attraction, with low or very low population density (Insee 2021).

The questions this article sets out to answer are the following: how do stakeholders (both elected representatives and youth workers) perceive these inequalities? Are these inequalities the object of specific consideration? How are they placed on the youth policy agenda? To answer these questions, the article will be based on a collective narrative written by six of the eleven members of the RAJE team⁴. The production of this narra-

² In France, there are three levels of local government: municipalities, departments and regions. Inter-municipal areas are a form of cooperative arrangement between several municipalities grouped together.

³ «RAJE» stands for *Recherche-action Jeunes et Engagemnts* (which could be translated into «Action Research, Youth and Participation»). It is funded by several institutions: a national public institution (*Agence Nationale de la Recherche*), the Region of Brittany, and Erasmus+. In the following article, the project will be referred to by its acronym, RAJE.

⁴ When the call for proposals was sent to us, we consulted all the team members about their interest in gender issues and their availability to produce the article. Discussions and collaborative writing, as well as task allocation, enabled the academic team to assist the extra-academic one. For example, the team's research engineer provided all the writers

tive was informed by a comprehensive set of qualitative data, which was meticulously gathered during the first year of the research. This data set encompassed participant observations of local meetings and semi-structured interviews conducted with youth workers and elected representatives. Among the six writers, four are women and two are men, two of which are academics (one occupying a senior academic position and not the other) and four extra-academic members of *Coop'Eschemm*. To avoid giving too much importance to status, we have chosen to present the authors in alphabetical order.

2. GENDER ISSUES ARE GRADUALLY MADE EXPLICIT IN THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

The reflexive framework provided by the process of writing this article allows us to observe the gradual integration of gender issues in *RAJE*, by questioning the funding schemes and the composition of the teams involved in the action research project.

2.1 A theoretical entry point: gender as an ethical and deontological issue in the project

In contrast to other European countries, French public research was relatively slow in embracing project-based funding (Hubert and Louvel 2012). The policy of formalizing research funding through contracts, which began to develop strongly in Europe in the 1980s (Lepori *et al.* 2007), did not appear in France until the mid-2000s, in particular under the impetus of the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche*⁵ (ANR). In addition to this process, funding sources became more diversified, local authorities and the State, asculine competitive calls for proposals. Funds for action research were introduced even more recently (2022 for State fundings via the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche*, and 2021 for fundings by the Region of Brittany for example). Since they are competitive, these calls are based on evaluation criteria, among which gender plays a minor role. Recommendations to integrate gender in research are multiplying and translated into concrete measures to limit gender bias in the allocation of research funds (Guyard *et al.* 2024). However, there seems to be little effort to take gender into account in the way the projects are actually conducted. At this stage, there is insufficient academic work on the subject in France to shed full light on this

intuition. We therefore propose to study in more detail two of the call forms completed for *RAJE* project funding: that of the ANR call for proposals and that of the Region of Brittany's call for proposals, both of which were published in 2023.

Both calls are structured along thematic entry fields that invite project leaders to explain, among other things and in a limited number of characters and lines, the scientific, methodological, and organizational biases of their research. While neither of these two forms invited respondents to take a clear stance on gender issues, the «ethical and deontological dimension of the project» entry in the Region of Brittany's call for proposals provided the *RAJE* project team with a way of confirming its commitment to the issue:

Another essential ethical issue for the project team lies in the attention paid to gender issues and, more specifically, to preventing possible reproductions of gender inequalities. With this in mind, we have taken care to ensure a balanced representation of men and women on the team, and we will make sure to identify manifestations of inequality within the project in order to actively correct them (project RAJE, submitted in 2023, p. 8).

The attention paid to this subject is a habit inherited from *Coop'Eschemm's* past experiences in integrating gender in the design of their research projects. It finds part of its roots in responses to European calls for project proposals, in particular in the *Dialogue pour la Jeunesse* scheme of the Erasmus+ program, which funded the «Tiers Espaces, Lieux et Appropriation» (TELA)⁶ project in June 2021. The call for project proposals requested to «provide general information on the age of participants and describe how you will ensure gender balance in the main activities carried out in [the] project».

This research ethic was not set out in the response to the ANR call for proposals, which did not question the integration of gender in any way. Gender issues were actually raised when the scientific research question was expounded, through the asymmetry observed in youth participation:

Since the physical and symbolic presence of young people differs according to their age, their sex, and their social background, we wish to question public space in its double sense, material and symbolic (political), and to develop an intersectional approach to different kinds of public through the analysis of realities experienced in the context of participation (project RAJE, submitted in 2023, p. 3).

with a table listing the various interviews and documents available for analysis, as well as a shared Zotero group for accessing bibliographic resources that expound on the article's subject.

⁵ This could be translated as «National Agency for Research».

⁶ The name of this project could be translated as «Third Spaces, Places and Appropriation».

Given the inductive approach of our action research methodology, gender issues were seen more as potential lines of inquiry than as a research focus.

2.2 A practical application through inclusive methods for cooperative work

To understand how the *RAJE* project operates and how gender issues are addressed within the team of researchers, let us examine its composition from this angle, as well as from that of the status of each participant and working time devoted by each of them to the project. This should shed light on how interactions are actually organized within the team, which is made up of eleven people from two circles that intermingle and partially intersect.

The first circle is made up of the five *Coop'Eschemm* researchers. Four of these people (three men and one woman) are employee-partners at the cooperative. Without going into the details of how *Coop'Eschemm* operates, it should be noted that these jobs are funded by the budgets allocated to various projects (including, but not exclusively, *RAJE*). These four people have been working together since the cooperative was founded in 2019, and therefore benefit from knowing one another extremely well. The fifth researcher, a woman, is a work-study student currently enrolled in a master's program in Rennes, after completing a master's degree in gender studies and political science at the *Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne*. From a gender point of view, this circle is predominantly made up of men, which is a subject of internal discussion. The team's composition is based more on friendships and shared experience than on any intentional move towards parity. However, hiring a work-study student who is also a specialist in gender issues, reflects a desire to take account of the potential difficulties created by this asymmetry. Considering status, we should underline that a certain precariousness characterizes the positions of the members of this circle, who are submitted to competitive calls for project proposals (Breton 2014). We should also point out that they do not devote the same amount of time to *RAJE*: two of them work more than half-time on the project, and the other two a third of their time, and then there is work-study student.

The second circle is made up of six "academic" researchers, with a significant representation of women (four women and two men), which is not indicative of the overall distribution of university positions in France⁷. Four people work at the University (two woman

university professors, one woman lecturer and one man lecturer), one man is based at *Askoria*, a regional school of social work, and one woman is a contractual researcher. The statuses of these people are therefore quite heterogeneous, since four of them are civil servants, one is employed by a non-profit, and the last is employed on a fixed-term contract for the *RAJE* project. In terms of time devoted to the project, the situation is also highly diversified, and stems from the multiple constraints currently weighing on academics (Musselin 2008): the research engineer has been working full-time on the *RAJE* project since September 2024, one of the university professors devotes around 30% of her working time to the project, the *Askoria* employee a limited time too, and the three other academics are mainly involved in scientific team consultations and in regional meetings attended by local stakeholders and researchers. In addition, the ties that bind these people together are much looser than those of the first circle.

These two circles are not entirely mutually exclusive. The research engineer, whose time is dedicated to the project, acts as a kind of intermediary between the two sub-groups. One of the university professors, which has long-standing friendships with members of the cooperative and with two of the members of the academic circle, acts as a bridge between the two worlds (Loncle 2024).

As a result of these three dimensions (gendered distribution, status and work time devoted to the project), we observe the coexistence of several phenomena leading to discordant repercussions on team work. On the one hand, and this is a classical phenomenon (Hall and MacPherson 2011), the effects of hierarchy are, to all appearances, rather favorable to women in how the team overall operates. This is all the more true that *Coop'Eschemm* members offer facilitation techniques that encourage speech to circulate in order to promote horizontality despite status (Bessaoud-Alonso 2017). As a result, during meetings, the women express themselves widely and can formulate numerous suggestions and participate in decision-making. On the other hand, the amount of time devoted to *RAJE* favors the men of the group, who dedicate a significant proportion of their time to field work and therefore have a much more in-depth knowledge of the territories and stakeholders than the women, especially those occupying senior academic positions. This situation has led some of them to express difficulties in finding their place in the team.

Higher Education and Research in 2021 [URL : https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/eesr/FR/T493/la_parite_dans_la_recherche/#ILL_EESR17_R_36_01, last consultation on 12 December 2024]

⁷ According to a set of data produced by the French Ministry of

Taking this into account, *Coop'Eskemm's* members have been working throughout the project to rebalance the dynamics. They set up tools that enable everyone to get involved to the extent of their availability, drawing on everyone's skills. For example, "co-development" sessions have been introduced to enable those doing field work to share problem situations with the other researchers, and regional meetings have been organized to enable those members occupying senior academic positions to analyze situations they have not directly investigated. During the remaining year of the project, we will have to see what effects these attempts to rebalance power within the project have had and draw conclusions on the way women found a suitable place in the team or not.

2.3 Examining gender of local action research partners

The local stakeholders involved in the action research project can be divided into two categories, according to their degree of power in local public policy making: decision-makers on the one hand, all of whom are elected representatives (mayors, presidents, town councillors) or heads of departments within local government administrations; and youth workers on the other hand, who work with young people on a day-to-day basis (tab. 1).

In terms of overall numbers, the proportion of men and women partners is relatively balanced. Gender inequalities can be observed within either group, and are particularly pronounced among decision-makers. A majority of men are community leaders, while a minority are town councillors for youth affairs. These observations are relatively classic considering the composition of political groups at a local level: women are mostly placed in charge of social issues (Della Sudda and Marneur 2021), and despite their growing numbers within local government, parity is far from achieved (Délégation aux droits des femmes 2021). As far as heads of youth services are concerned, *i.e.* men and women in charge of coordinating youth policies within a local government

administration, the apparent gender balance would need to be further discussed and qualified. In fact, our observations show that not all of them can devote the same amount of time to youth issues specifically (some are in charge of both youth affairs and leisure). The possibility of drawing on other stakeholders and structures (in the fields of sports, culture, clubs and organisations) also varies from one territory to the other. Lastly, they do not have the same seniority either in their position or in their territory. We should also point out that very few of them have devoted time to the action research project.

As far as youth professionals involved in *RAJE* are concerned, it should be pointed out that their working conditions vary greatly from one area to another: some work in pairs in the same youth center, sharing coordination and facilitation tasks; some combine the duties of manager of after-school activities, manager of the youth center, and deputy manager of the activity center; others, finally, are employed by a social services nonprofit. What is relatively common to all the action research territories, and partly due to the rural nature of the municipalities studied, is the low number of youth professionals employed per area (two or three at most) and the precariousness of their status. In terms of gender, the majority of *RAJE's* youth workers are men (only three are women). However, experimentation on a local scale is leading the research team to progressively extend its network so as to include workers from the fields of sports and culture, as well as independent youth collectives, thus ensuring gender, status and age diversity at various stages of the project.

3. AT A LOCAL SCALE, GENDER ISSUES ARE SLOWLY YET UNEVENLY BEING INTEGRATED

Owing to its framework, the *RAJE* research action project, which involves decision-makers, youth workers and young people, is in itself an interesting field for understanding the circumstances in which gender issues emerge and are placed on the youth policy agenda. In this part of the article, we shall study them through the

Table 1. Composition of stakeholder groups in action-research territories.

Stakeholder category	Type	Number of women	Number of men	Total
Decision-maker	Mayor (municipality) or President (inter-municipality)	2	5	7
	Town councillor or deputy mayor for youth affairs	5	2	7
	Head of youth services in a local government administration	4	3	7
Youth workers		3	6	9
Total		14	16	30

Source: *RAJE*, Research data, 2024.

funding mechanisms of youth policies and the initiatives of stakeholders at a local scale.

3.1 *A tardy arrival on the political agenda, unevenly encouraged by youth policy funding schemes*

In 2017, in a study on *The place of young people in rural territories*, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council⁸ aligned with the recommendations of international organizations (such as the Council of Europe and UN Women), thus urging «attention be paid in each of the programs, schemes or projects to gender, by integrating it on a budgetary level» (Even and Coly 2017). If this recommendation seems to arrive belatedly on the French political scene, it is because youth policies have long ignored gender issues. A retrospective assessment helps us understand how boys have been favored by youth policies since the latter gradually made their appearance at the end of the 19th century. Actually, these public policies have, from the outset, targeted “young people” in their interactions with the public sphere and the army (out of fear of their delinquent behavior and the need to shape an enlightened workforce on the one hand and the need to count them as a population capable of defending the country in armed conflicts on the other). Hence, for a great many decades, “young people” implicitly meant “young boys” decades.

Only in the past twenty years did the focus shift somewhat, and public authorities – first and foremost the European institutions, based on the notion of *gender mainstreaming* (Dauphin and Senac 2008) – begin to take a more specific interest in girls (European Commission 2001). There has been an at least partially growing awareness that girls are less present in community facilities (in sport facilities or youth clubs for instance) (Maruéjols 2011). Today, a number of local authorities are taking initiatives to dedicate spaces for girls and to work towards gender-sensitive public budgets. We hypothesize that these initiatives depend essentially on the willingness of stakeholders to take up gender issues themselves.

3.2 *Professionally-led initiatives that vary greatly from one area to another*

The municipalities studied and involved in *RAJE* are influenced by the legacy of a national youth policy, essentially focused on developing sports and, to a lesser extent, cultural facilities. Services for young people are

still designed in this way today. This is justified by the need to offer them places to gather:

In the history of all young people and at all times, they [young people] need to gather in one place or another. So we've built a municipal stadium, we've built places where they can see each other, and now we've just renovated an entire skate park... I think that is what they need, so we have to give them the opportunity. We've also opened a sports field [...] where there's a basketball hoop, [and] something where you can do a bit of running (Interview with the Mayor of a rural municipality 2024).

While this policy of open-access facilities partly meets young people's need for informal and unsupervised get-togethers (Zaffran 2011), it runs the risk of perpetuating gender inequalities. By creating ever more spaces favorable to masculine leisure activities (Renahy 2005), this tends to chase young girls away from public spaces. They are in fact places where informal, single-sex boy's activities are generally more important than single-sex girls' activities (Maruéjols 2011; Bellavoine *et al.* 2021). They also are conducive to activities with modes of socialization that clearly reinforce gender stereotypes (Mennesson and Neyrand 2010). This gendered segregation of activities (Mennesson *et al.* 2006) can also be observed in supervised leisure and after-school activities. In rural areas, facilities dedicated to young people have few users in general (David 2014), but they are even less frequented by teenage girls (Maruéjols and Raibaud 2012), who prefer the domestic sphere (Amsellem-Mainguy 2021). Based on these observations, youth workers and decision-makers raise the question of gender in terms of invisibility and absence of young girls: how can their occupation of public spaces be encouraged? How can their absence from places dedicated to youth be solved?

In the areas covered by the study, three solutions are being experimented in an original way, on the youth workers' initiative. They consist in designing places that welcome young people, programming supervised activities, and feminizing the teams of youth workers.

In one of the municipalities involved in *RAJE* (located to the north of Rennes' metropolitan area), two youth workers decided to initiate a remodeling of the youth center, based on the observation that girls came in fewer numbers than boys. Based on a participatory approach, the initiative had a two-fold aim: to mobilize teenage girls by helping them to «take that step into the youth center» (word of a youth worker), while enabling them to get involved in its transformations:

⁸ The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (for *Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental* in French - CESE) is a consultative assembly.

We realized that we had a very masculin customer base, and we said to ourselves we are going to work on mixing genders in our youth center. [...] And so we worked for 4-5 months, with them, we got them involved in the complete reorganization of the youth center [...] we refreshed the cushions, we refreshed the plaids [...] we refreshed the paintwork, we refurbished the spaces, we redefined the spaces as... Well, like when you rearrange your house, in fact, when you move in (Interview with a youth worker 2024).

This experience changed the professional's perceptions of what may interest girls and boys: «We had 70% boys doing the sewing workshop. The girls [sai'] I'm not at all interested in sewing, I want to pa'nt', you see [laughs] [...] we were surprised by that» (Interview with a men youth worker 2024). Collectively, and through a program of mixed activities, teenagers and youth workers experimented alternatives to the predominant gender stereotypes: «We've broadened our choice of activities a little, and today we've got a good mix, with, as a matter of fact, groups of girls who encourage other young people to drop in» (Interview with a men youth worker 2024).

This experience underlines the importance of youth workers' attitudes towards young people (Maruéjols 2024): the models they convey, whether consciously or not, influence boys' and girls' practices, their relationship to the activities, and their gender behavior (Guérandel 2011). In this case, the activities that conformed to gender stereotypes weren't those that mobilized teenage girls the most – since, as the interviewee points out, they were more involved in activities branded as “masculine”. This experience, while original, leads us to question the ideology of gender complementarity (Raibaud 2007) according to which women should be in charge of care work, while men should be in charge of physical and sports activities and authority (Herman 2007).

At the beginning, we asked ourselves a lot of questions [...] we are two boys, does the fact that we are two boys ultimately holds the girls back? Well, not at all, because we actually have, uh... intimate conversations with the girls. And on the contrary, they don't find it awkward, [they find it] even reassuring in a way, well that is their vision... [they say] “no, I don't mind talking about waxing with you, or periods or all that, but it's true that with a girl [woman worker], I don't know if I'd dare... I don't know”. I don't know, after all, we are all they have got, so uh... Maybe it would certainly go well, but I'm just giving feedback [laughs] (Interview with a man youth worker 2024)

Having more women in a team of youth workers is often put forward as a solution to the low participation of girls (Bacou 2004), as they are considered as identity role models in the process of gender construction dur-

ing teenage years (Raibaud 2007). This interview extract, however, shows that the gender of the youth workers is not the only determinant in building a trusting relationship with teenage girls. And yet, on these same assumptions, organisations will, still today, diversify their leisure activities in order to balance the proportion of girls and boys: «See, in dance, there are only chicks, what can I say... we have like two or three [boys] dancers. We're going to try to create a hip-hop class next year [...] and try to create a theater class [...] it's much less gendered, in theater there are more boys» (Interview with a woman youth worker 2024).

Our observations tend to indicate that these strategies are only partial responses to gender inequalities. They are not conducive to active co-education (Raibaud and Bacou 2011) in terms of parity and social interactions between girls and boys and run the risk of perpetuating the mechanisms of gender assignment.

To this end, youth workers from an information service and of a delinquency-prevention center have developed teaching kits to raise awareness both on gender issues and sexist and sexual violence. These kits are used when working with high-school students and youth workers. They enable professionals to identify situations in which gender stereotypes are reproduced, and to work on them with the young people who are in their care (Guérandel 2016). For instance, the phenomenon of verbal and non-verbal domination of girls by boys is referred to.

Despite the positive effects of these experiments in deconstructing gender stereotypes and promoting gender diversity, they seem not to last and have trouble transforming local institutions and policies. For example, the communication media for the schemes and tools coordinated by youth services to support youth participation (such as youth project grants) still fail to explicitly include gender issues. No parity goals are mentioned, even though youth workers report on the importance of gender issues based on their hands-on daily experience. The place of gender issues within inter-professional networks, and more specifically in the dialogue between youth workers and elected representatives, will be an area of investigation for RAJE in the future.

3.3 *Is the presence of women likely to help putting gender issues on the agenda?*

Youth workers draw on their hands-on, day-to-day experience of working with young people to adapt their responses. For example, one of the woman youth workers involved in RAJE trained in gender issues after identifying a need among young people to discuss trans-

identity issues. This enabled her to use tools and organize discussion forums in the form of workshops. In the same inter-municipality, other youth workers led a group of schoolchildren into developing peer prevention initiatives on gender inequality issues. This initiative received institutional recognition when the school was awarded the “equality label”⁹. These two examples illustrate the importance of close links between youth workers, regardless of the structure they work for or their status. Implicitly, they also raise a conundrum: indeed, as gender issues are rarely placed on the youth policy agenda, youth workers often have to take the initiative of signing up themselves for the training schemes that will enable them to develop their skills on the subject (Bayer and Rollin 2015), but only once they have been confronted with it. They are increasingly involved in gender issues and are developing expertise on the subject through specific actions on gender equality, fighting against gender stereotypes, or supporting gender minorities. However, these initiatives seem to meet with little response from local political institutions. We formulate the hypothesis that the absence of gender equality specialists at municipal and inter-municipal levels, and the persistence of gender stereotypes in the political sphere, are an impediment to a comprehensive analysis of gender issues.

In addition to the notable absence of equality specialists or elected representatives dedicated to the matter, we found that those who initiated discussions on gender issues were mainly women. During a workshop led by the research team in a rural municipality and attended by elected representatives and youth workers, it was the (woman) elected deputy mayor for children and youth policies who explicitly brought the subject up:

Woman deputy mayor: there's one thing that doesn't appear here at all, and that's the question of gender. Among those who are invisible, there are the girls. Just now, it was blatantly obvious.

Woman youth worker: if you went to the municipal stadium, it figures.

Man town councilor: there were three girls on a bench, colouring, if we hadn't gone and fetched them...

Woman deputy mayor: and even though we went to fetch them, we didn't hear them. When you hand them a microphone, they don't speak.

Man town councilor: yes, they remain completely in the shadows... (excerpt from workshop minutes, April 2024)

During a similar workshop in another municipality, gender was also raised by a woman elected representa-

tive (not specialized in youth but in communications and public affairs this time). When she spoke, none of the other participants (among whom the mayor, the deputy mayor for children, youth and education policies, and the head of youth services) expressed their opinion on the subject.

The elected representative in charge of communications reacts, suggesting various actions to spur youth involvement, including the organization of a mini-concert. She points out that futsal is a gendered, masculine sport. She asks that something be imagined and submitted for young women. The deputy mayor sidesteps this specific point by talking about how to spur “youth” participation and involvement (in a non-gendered way):

Elected official: “How can we involve young people in the preparation of the event, so as to create a snowball effect?” (excerpt from field diary, October 2024)

It's worth noting that in the first example, most women are decision makers, but not in the second. The absence of parity in both cases is all the more noteworthy as it is intrinsically linked to the question of power (Della Sudda and Marneur 2021). The report written by the *Délégation aux droits des femmes* (2021) highlights the difficulties and discrimination experienced by women elected to positions in local government. In our action research project, these women, despite having no training in gender issues, seem to be particularly sensitive to them and, through their own words, try to put them up for discussion. Without going so far as to presume that men would be less likely to do so, this observation should nevertheless act as a warning signal, especially as it has been shown that elected women «must, more than men, justify their skills and struggle to make themselves heard» (*Délégation aux droits des femmes* 2021).

While we cannot, at this stage, answer the question formulated in the section title, i.e. *does placing gender on the agenda have a sex?*, the recounting and analysis of these experiences encourages us to pay closer attention to interactions in the future (through closer observation and analysis of social behaviour and dynamics) in order to uncover the obstacles to placing gender issues on the local youth policy agenda. This could be one of the directions to be explored collectively in the follow-up of the action research project.

4. PROMOTING GENDER INTEGRATION IN OUR RESEARCH: MIDCOURSE KEY QUESTIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION

One of the remaining questions is how to adjust the way we support youth workers in addressing gender

⁹ This label is an institutional initiative designed to highlight and reward initiatives that promote equality (especially between girls and boys) within schools.

issues? But we can also wonder what would have happened if we had taken this into account upstream of the project, both in the way our team operated, and in the way we formulated our main research questions.

4.1 Highlighting inequalities in order to formulate research questions and design experiments

Although writing this article is a cooperative exercise that does not involve all RAJE members, it is not conducted behind closed doors, and already seems to be transforming the action research process. These transformations will here be examined in the way gender issues are raised at a local scale, and the effects induced by the gradual development of expertise on the subject (as knowledge is acquired and a work-study student specialized in these issues is hired).

To illustrate how gender issues have been placed on the agenda in the inter-municipalities involved in the RAJE project, we propose to discuss two situations: one which occurred prior to writing this article (March 2024), and the other more recently (January 2025). The first concerns a participatory workshop led by a researcher and which brought together four youth workers from the same area. Invited to react to excerpts from interviews, the participants expressed their perceptions of the needs, experiences and expectations of young people in their municipality. One extract in particular shed light on gender issues: «Our older girls are less present [...] I don't see them too much anymore. We lose them in high school» (anonymized excerpt from an interview).

The youth worker who selected this excerpt explained that it shed light on how young people at the age of 16 tend to a certain extent to abandon local places (regardless of their gender). It was the researcher who intervened to steer the discussion towards the absence of young girls in public spaces. As this participant works in a public center that provides care for a public ranging from childhood to adolescence, she did not perceive this situation through a gender lens. Another youth worker, who also lives in the municipality, testified: «I agree with the statement 'girls, we don't see them'. [...] I walk around a lot. Every time, it's the guys you see» (youth worker).

In the process of identifying issues collectively through action research, the gender issues are unevenly brought to light. Often, as in the previous testimonies, it is through the invisibility of girls in public spaces and the gendered mechanisms of participation that they are brought to light (by the stakeholders and, less frequently, by the researchers). It should be noted that Coop'Eskemm's researchers are able to identify problematic situations and put them up for discussion, thanks

to their expertise in working cooperatively with youth groups and producing knowledge about the issues at stake. When questions addressing gender specifically are raised in formal settings, they encourage participants to express themselves freely, acting as facilitators and helping them reach an objective analysis of youth-related issues, thus contributing to the process of training youth workers and decision-makers. In less formal situations, it is more difficult for them to maintain this posture, and exchanges tend to revolve around the sharing of personal points of view. Since the arrival of a work-study student trained in this area, a turning point has been reached in the way the subject is apprehended with local stakeholders, leading more quickly to shared analyses of situations.

Later and in a different formal context, i.e. in January 2025 at a regional meeting of youth workers involved in the project, one of the researchers mentioned the present article and asked the group about gender inequalities in the areas covered by the study:

Researcher: we didn't ask the question of women/men or girls/boys... in the areas you are in, are there gender differences? Do some people find it difficult to express themselves? These are questions we ask ourselves at RAJE. Is there a place for everyone in terms of gender?

Respondent 1: Sometimes these questions come from the young people.

Respondent 2: We have been alerted by an education adviser, girls are speaking up less and less in class groups.

Researcher: At all levels. In one Masters' degree there are 3 boys out of 20 students: they're the only ones we hear.

Respondent 3: Guys talk more easily

Respondent 2: we organised a single-gender workshop in an "adapted general and vocational education section"¹⁰, and the girls were happy, but the teacher had mixed feelings about it. In her opinion, the girls participated because they had no choice, whereas when there are boys, they don't speak up (excerpt from a plenary discussion between researchers and professionals, January 10 2025)

Although the subject had not yet emerged during the workshops preceding this talk, the question nevertheless enabled the expression and sharing of experiences, thus highlighting the existence of problems shared by all the youth workers, regardless of the specificities of the areas in which they intervene. The way researchers place certain issues on the agenda in action research encourages us to question more openly the way we assist stakeholders, but also, and more generally, the transformative dimension of our interventions.

¹⁰ A special class for secondary school students with important educational needs

4.2 Deconstructing gender?

The numerous talks within our collective, prompted by the drafting of this article, have also led us to question the relevance of measuring parity between girls and boys in our social systems according to binary criteria. First, because our observations demonstrate the inadequacy of a binary approach to fully grasp gender issues; and second, because these approaches tend to establish a heteronormative gender order and, ultimately, to define a specific place and role for (young) men and (young) women in society. Therefore, the space left by the absence of gender issues on the youth policy agenda seems to be an interesting opportunity to work collectively on these issues and, at the same time, involve those primarily concerned.

One way of assisting stakeholders could also be to get them to think more broadly about the issue of gendered participation and the invisibility of girls while simultaneously questioning the constraints and expectations that weigh on them, particularly those linked to the role of caregiver, which is more strongly attributed to women (Orange and Renard 2023). The aim would be to make them aware of the need for an integrated gender policy, following the example of integrated youth policies (Kalala Mabuluki and Siurala 2019).

It would also mean taking better account of and recognizing the situations of young people who do not identify with any particular gender. This approach requires a major mobilization effort, based on abandoning the binary boys vs. girls logic and recognizing the existence of multiple gender identities. The action research method used by *RAJE* aims at enabling young people to investigate their own situations in order to politicize the issues they encounter and identify solutions and avenues for improvement. We believe this method to be a way of taking better account of the situations experienced by young people themselves and moving beyond a binary treatment of gender in public policies.

4.3 Adjusting our research strategy

At first glance, the exercise of writing this article has had beneficial effects: it has enabled us to cross our perspectives and knowledge, to learn from each other and to uncover a shared object that has strengthened our ability to carry out research together. Observing this transformation prompts us to question our methods. What would have happened if we had taken the gender dimension into account upstream of the project, both in the way our team operated and in the way we formulated our research questions? This analysis will enable us to

readjust our research strategy for the remaining year of the project.

First of all, with regard to the way our team operates, a more systematic consideration of gender (as well as the influence of status and time spent on fieldwork) would have clarified our respective positions. In this way, the fact would have been made explicit, that the team was in fact structured by positions of power rather favourable to the women occupying senior academic positions and we would have seen what could be done to reduce them. Admittedly, the organizational suggestions currently being made by non-academic researchers to enable everyone to find their place in the project go some way towards reversing these positions. However, they do not come from the women occupying senior academic positions (or at least not from all of them), and they leave power relationships unexplained, which is always damaging in the long run. For example, we still don't know how the research publications will be signed. Will we opt for alphabetical order, regardless of the time commitment and actual fieldwork, or for the project acronym? Another potentially problematic question is: how will we take into account the fact that the junior academics making up the rest of the team will have to move on to other projects at the end of *RAJE*, because of how their jobs are funded, while those occupying senior academic positions will be able to continue working on it, even if they are not the ones who have invested the most time and energy in it?

Secondly, as regard to the research questions, a more systematic integration of gender when writing the project could have enabled it to unfold differently. When responding to the various calls for project proposals, we could have insisted on two particularly structuring dimensions. First, the fact that, in national and local youth policies, men and women are taken very differently into account, with a historical focus on men. We could have pointed out, for example, that a very large percentage of public funding is in fact aimed at men - in terms of equipment and dedicated human resources (Maruéjols-Benoit 2014). Next, we could have brought up the fact that men are generally more present than women in spaces dedicated to supporting youth initiatives, that they tend, in mixed groups, to take over the most prestigious positions (Porte and Poisson 2015), that, more than women, they develop strategies that enable them to enhance their self-esteem over the long term and take advantage of their participation in order to consider careers as political leaders (Walther and Lüküslü 2021). Formulating these reminders would have led us to express these issues in the same way with the stakeholders and young people in the areas covered by the study,

and to lay out the situations as they arose. In doing so, we would have paid specific and systematic attention to pre-existing approaches in the areas included in the study and we would have been able to take into account the difficulties linked to gender issues when structuring new actions by.

Now that these observations have been made, it's up to us to share them with all those involved in the action research project (both our team and the local stakeholders) and, having done so, to draw lessons both in terms of knowledge production and research implementation.

5. CONCLUSION

Studying the way in which gender is integrated in local youth policies in France is challenging for several reasons. Firstly, the commitment of local stakeholders to youth policies and their interest in the matter are uneven. Besides, the implementation of youth policies is increasingly subject to fund raising through competitive calls for proposals. Secondly, gender issues, which these policies have, for a long time, failed to address, still very rarely are. European institutions embraced the notion of gender mainstreaming twenty years ago and France seems to be lagging behind. Finally, the intersection of gender, youth and rural issues is still relatively undocumented, especially as regard to the precariousness of (young) women in academic literature, and the invisibility of adolescent girls in public policy.

Conducting this study through an action research project focused on local youth policies allows us to explore this blind spot, even though RAJE was not initially designed to specifically examine gender issues. Writing this article has enabled us to address them in a reflexive and qualitative way and, simultaneously, led us to formulate several hypotheses on the barriers and facilitators to placing gender issues on the agenda. While we have revealed that calls for projects and funding mechanisms for youth policies are less likely to include considerations on gender, we have yet to identify the factors that encourage or, on the contrary, limit the initiatives of stakeholders in the fight against gender inequalities. The gendered distribution of power in local government, the mechanisms of gender assignment, and the reproduction of stereotypes are all avenues of inquiry for action research. The dialogue between young people, decision-makers and youth professionals seems to us to be a particularly adequate forum for collectively exploring these lines of research, with the prospect of raising awareness and empowering each participant.

In view of the low level of gender awareness among local authorities and youth professionals and of the persisting inequalities in this field, adopting this focus would appear to be a major ethical and political challenge for the follow-up to RAJE.

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