Playful Paradigm Gender Toolkit

Taking a gender sensitive approach to playgrounds and public spaces

Dr. Mary Dellenbaugh-Losse, Version 1.1, 26 March 2022

Gender is an important and often overlooked aspect of urban planning, in particular with regard to spaces of play and active recreation. In addition, incorporating play and playfulness into urban planning decisions can foster gender equality and inclusion of multi-generational voices in cities. In the following toolkit, we wish to share insights from the Playful Paradigm master class on gender for both taking a gender-responsive approach to recreational spaces and in incorporating playful approaches to urban planning.

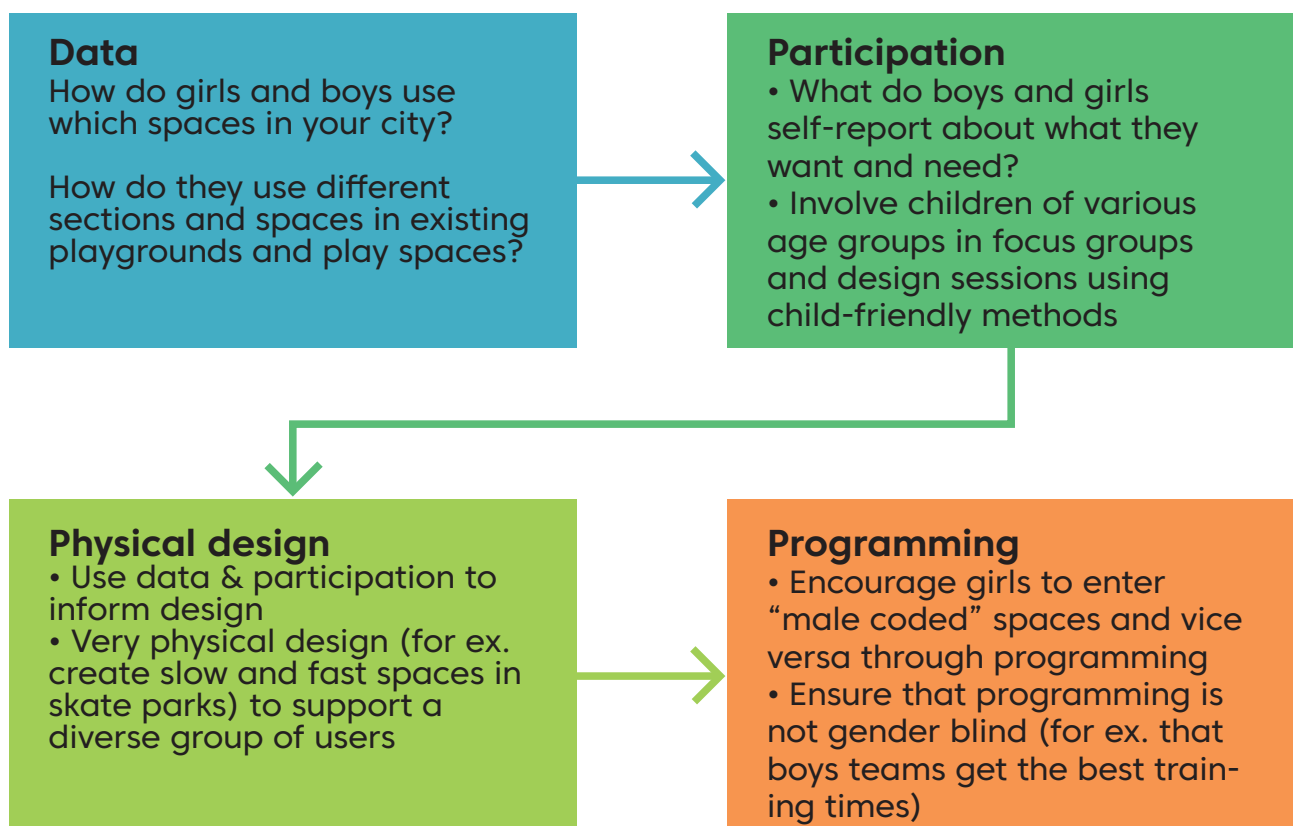## Gender-responsive urban planning: Challenges and approaches

Studies in cities show time and again that women and men perceive spaces differently and have different needs with regard to public space and city infrastructure. For this reason, the same space can affect women and men's actions differently.

Design of spaces, structures and institutions → Perceptions about safety, belonging, etc. → Actions (conscious & unconscious)

Policies, programmes and services which do not take gender into account (for example through targeted participation or gathering gender-disaggregated data) are said to be "gender blind." Spaces which are designed as the result of a gender blind approach can, in the worst case, increase disparities between genders and entrench gendered stereotypes about what roles men and women and boys and girls should play in society and what types of activities are appropriate for them.

Tackling gender inequality in play and recreational spaces

Dr. Mary Dellenbaugh-Losse has developed a framework for tackling gender inequality in play and recreational spaces called "Data and the three little Ps." In order to design spaces which are welcoming and equitable for all participants, we first need to understand what possible users need and expect from the space (**Data** & **Participation**). We then need to incorporate this information into the **Physical Design**. In cases where spaces already exist or we notice that there is a gender split in the use of it, we can use **Programming** to help encourage underrepresented groups to feel more comfortable in the space.

Data
How do girls and boys use which spaces in your city?

How do they use different sections and spaces in existing playgrounds and play spaces?

Participation
• What do boys and girls self-report about what they want and need?
• Involve children of various age groups in focus groups and design sessions using child-friendly methods

Physical design
• Use data & participation to inform design
• Very physical design (for ex. create slow and fast spaces in skate parks) to support a diverse group of users

Programming
• Encourage girls to enter "male coded" spaces and vice versa through programming
• Ensure that programming is not gender blind (for ex. that boys teams get the best training times)

The city of Umeå (Sweden), lead partner in the URBACT GenderedLandscape Action Planning Network, presented a number of examples demonstrating the application of this approach.

Encouraging girls in male-coded spaces

Girls frequently feel intimidated entering male-coded spaces, so spaces with activities that are stereotypically attributed to men and boys, such as skateboarding. Thus, to promote women and girls entering and using these spaces, the municipality used a gender-sensitive approach in the design and programming of their new **skate park**:

- **Placement**: Typically, skate parks are located in former industrial areas, which can be dark and forbidding and have a lack of footfall. Umeå's skate park, in contrast, is located along the river in a space that is well-travelled by a range of people, and is near a youth centre.
- **Empowerment**: The municipality worked with the programme "you skate girl" from the outset of the redesign process in order to embed girls' use of and entitlement to the space from the beginning.
- **Gender-responsive programming**: The rules for the park are agreed in cooperation with all users and there are also specific girl-only events and programmes.

Increasing girls' presence in public space

Umeå also conducted research which showed that teenage girls are often underrepresented in public spaces and also stop using municipal sport facilities at a younger age than boys. For this reason, the municipality decided to design a new public space called the **Freezone** using a participative approach they describe as "inclusion though exclusion." Focus groups were conducted with girls between 15 and 20 years old and the result was a space of relaxation for "hanging out" in which the seating opportunities, round swings, are designed for bodies with an average height of 165cm.

Creating gender-neutral youth centres

Finally, Umeå presented their gender analysis with regard to youth centres. Considerations included:

- What are youths' first impression when entering the youth centre? Is it a gender-coded space such as a pool table or a neutral option such as a café?
- Where is the youth centre located? Is it in a dark and quiet residential neighbourhood or in a lively social area, for example next to a supermarket?
- What does the entrance look like? Do youths have to walk through hallways and well into the building before they encounter their friends and the youth workers, or is the entryway direct and welcoming?

- How is the youth centre decorated? What sorts of colours are used? Are the decorations neutral and welcoming? Are there defined spaces for different activities?
- What sorts of games and activities are offered? Are video games directed at boys (i.e. FIFA, shooters, etc.) or are they neutral and welcoming (dance dance revolution, gender neutral activities)?

The municipal youth workers have prepared a video and checklist in English to assist others in developing gender-neutral youth centres, available HERE.

Playful approaches to urban planning

Two further cities presented their playful approaches to urban planning for the network.

Pristina, Kosovo:
Gender-responsive urban planning and the block by block Project
Pristina was one of the first sites in Europe to be selected by UN-Habitat to test the Block by Block Methodology for participatory urban planning.[1] The project focused on a cooperative re-design of the former green market in Sunny Hill following the idea that residents know better than planners what is needed. The design proposal was developed in three phases. First, residents, with a specific focus on including the voices of young girls, identified needs and priorities for the design of the park. Then, after a short introduction to design and public space, small teams of participants modelled different design solutions.

Gender and multi-generational inclusion underpinned all of the design categories. For example, participants suggested that the natural slopes in the area be transformed into slides for children and youth. Urban furniture was designed with a view toward accessibility, user-friendliness and comfort for a variety of body shapes and sizes. In the last stage of the co-design process, participants co-created the final design on a multiplayer Minecraft server based on the seventeen ideas generated by the teams.

These final designs were presented to a wide audience of urban professionals as well as the mayor of Pristina. The final concept featured a range of facilities addressing the needs of various groups, including gardens, comfortable resting places, a playground, and Kosovo's first skate park. The final report can be downloaded online.[2]

[1] https://www.blockbyblock.org/projects/kosovo
[2] https://unhabitat-kosovo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Inclusive_-Safe-and-Accessible-Public-Space_2.pdf

Minecraft has been used for other UN-Habitat co-design projects such as https://hercity.unhabitat.org/botkyrka. Watch the video on this project here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ItMomtypFs

Pordenone, Italy:
Using Live Action Role Play to explore gender and urban planning
Women make up more than half of the Italian population, but they continue to live, move and work in organisational and urban contexts historically designed and coded by men; Gender gaps in participation and planning highlight persistent structural imbalances. Against this backdrop, the city of Pordenone sought to develop a participative format that could be applied in medium-sized cities to encourage the collective conceptualisation of how the future of the city might be. Their core question was: Can we envision a better future from a gendered perspective? Their main goal in this process was to raise awareness among the population of the city and embed gender mainstreaming in planning and policy in the city.

The city chose three strategic areas to work on - work, intergenerationality and time & spaces - and designed a treasure hunt through the city based on Live Action Role Play (LARP). A path was designed which included stops at schools, supermarkets, municipal buildings, the cinema, etc. Female participants were instructed to answer questions at each stop and find an object from the past and the future. The next point in the path resulted from their answers and choices. The aim of this exercise was to facilitate a new vision among the participants by disrupting usual/ habitual paths and offering a new perspective on familiar spaces.

The exercise offered a reflexive and immersive approach to thinking about the future of the city which pointed to opportunities and not just problems. You can read more about the project in the final report (in Italian):
https://www.comune.pordenone.it/it/comune/progetti/pordenone-citta-futura

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Gender-responsive and playful approaches in your city

So how can playful approaches help you design your city in a more inclusive way and how can you use an inclusive approach to design and programme your play and leisure spaces?

The examples and the framework above offer starting points and inspiration for beginning to be able to tackle these questions in your own context. Above all, they demonstrate that knowledge and data are the main starting point for any strategy. We need to know what our residents want, feel, need and long for in our cities. Playful approaches then allow us to engage them in lighthearted ways which promote emotional expression, innovation, thinking "outside the box", and enjoyment. Above all, remember that you don't have to be an expert to make incremental change in your own city!

You can find a range of additional resources below.

Additional resources

- Lousã (Portugal), one of the Playful Paradigm partners, has a Guide for the Local Integration of the Gender Perspective in Urbanism and Environment in Portuguese, available here: https://lge.ces.uc.pt/-files/LGE_urbanismo_habitacao_ambiente.pdf
They have been also awarded as gender equal city.
- Check out the card game "Citizen Participation? Hell No!" developed by the URBACT ActiveCitizens Action Planning Network, available in English and French here: https://www.shop.strategicdesignscenarios.net/?product=citizens-participation-hell-no-en
- Check out Vienna's case study on gender-responsive park design, which considered in particular the needs to 10-13 year old girls: https://use.metropolis.org/case-studies/gender-sensitive-park-design
- Read more about the Berlin district Lichtenberg's gender analysis of their playground infrastructure and two case studies of gender-responsive play space planning (in German) here: https://www.berlin.de/ba-lichtenberg/politik-und-verwaltung/beauftragte/gleichstellung/mdb-balichtenberghohenschoenhausen-gleichstellung-spielplatzbroschuere_1_.pdf