A GENDER EQUALITY APPROACH TO ISTANBUL’S URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The city is a complex mechanism in which various actors with different interests coexist. Within this structure, local governments try to safeguard the interests of different groups through urban policies and city planning. However, urban planning and urban development are still far from providing gender equality. Through the case study of Istanbul, this article outlines how traditional urban planning reinforces inequality between men and women and offers recommendations to achieve gender equality in urban development. The article argues that a gender equality approach to urban design and planning is key to an egalitarian and sustainable city.

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he city and the urban processes that create it, forms the primary area of social class struggles.”

This paper will examine the possibility of building and maintaining a livable Istanbul for the women in the city, with an “egalitarian local management” approach. Urban policies and rights, along with how women are affected by urban problems, are examined within the framework of gender-sensitive urban planning and egalitarian approaches to local management systems and services. The management approach of Istanbul’s metropolitan and district municipalities is discussed in terms of gender equitable approaches, women’s participation in decision-making mechanisms, and the equal access of women to urban services. The paper also outlines proposals that are developed from selected local municipalities to establish and to pursue gender-sensitive urban development.

Urban planning and urban design are a series of macro and micro decisions—from the entire city to individual neighborhoods and from the street to the buildings. At every level, planning and design issues should be approached with gender-sensitivity. What are the design criteria that should be observed to achieve gender equality? What type of urban scheme should be developed for a city that wants to promote gender equality? What are the design principles that will facilitate the daily life of women in the neighborhood and solve security problems on the street? What should be the location of buildings, their heights, and how should we form and organize the indoor and outdoor spaces in order to cater to the needs of women? How should transportation services be diversified to ensure accessibility to women?

**Basic Processes in the Realization of Urban Rights**

The European Urban Charter adopted by the Council of Europe in 1992 is an international document describing citizen rights. The European Urban Charter, which is directly related to the qualitative characteristics of urban development and the quality of life, accepts that different settlements have different problems. However, it is based on the notion that, in essence, they have similar structural characteristics, and defines a series of guiding universal principles that can be practiced in almost every country. Accordingly, local governments have the obligation to provide basic rights to citizens regardless of their gender, socio-economic class, faith or disability to guarantee a safe, clean and healthy urban environment, a right to benefit from socio-cultural activities, a right to free movement, and a right to decide where one wants to live.

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1 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, (Verso, 2013) p.116.

The European Council adopted the European Urban Charter 2 in May 2006. In this new document, the urban citizenship principles of the 21st century were re-emphasized with the “Manifesto for a New Urbanism” certificate. The manifesto builds on the principle that cities serve urban residents and states that cities are socio-economic and cultural values to be passed on to future generations. In that regard, local governments are required to implement ethical values in public policies and sustainable development practices. The importance of access to information for a participatory democracy is emphasized by stating that people cannot own cities and towns without being responsible, active, and knowledgeable citizens. Furthermore, important urban policies such as prevention of waste of resources caused by urban sprawl, prevention of social and spatial marginalization, and reacting against commercial urban planning are identified. The Charter also states that urban policies that cover all areas of activity of urban life should be established and implemented in cooperation with local administrators, professional experts, and urban residents. The formation of local democracy and the realization of local services within the framework of citizens’ rights depend on the identification of the demands and needs of all men and women by democratic and participatory processes.

“It is incumbent on local governments to develop specially designed approaches for the participation of different urban groups.”

All citizens should be able to participate in the decision-making processes regarding access to services and control of local processes. It is incumbent on local governments to develop specially designed approaches for the participation of different urban groups. Urban consciousness—in other words, caring for the city—is only possible by means of appropriate participation.

**Women’s Accessibility to Urban Services**

Local governments aim to meet our common spatial, social, socio-cultural and economic needs in relation to our environment. The legal definition of the right within the framework of citizenship includes the participation of the citizens in the administration processes and the use of the services. Although there is no discrimination in the legal regulations, it is imperative that the particular needs of women be

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3 Council of Europe (2009).
identified and addressed to ensure their proper participation in the political process.

The studies on gender equality in local politics carried out by the Association to Support Women Candidates (Ka-Der) indicate that providing equal local public service does not guarantee equality. This requirement is generally considered to be local practice in the provision of women-specific local services to reduce their daily burden. Women’s full use of urban rights can be ensured by considering and realizing all local policies in terms of gender equality in the program, project, and implementation stages. On the other hand, the main reason why women’s problems and solution proposals are not sufficiently reflected in local decision-making mechanisms is the lack of women’s representation in local councils and decision-making processes.

An Egalitarian City Approach

Although studies on equality have a long history, studies on women in urban environments began in Europe in the 1980s. Female political representatives in European cities sparked discussions about why women were underrepresented in local politics and local councils. The first local and regionally elected women’s conference was organized by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) in Pisa in 1983.

The meetings organized by CEMR created a platform in local governments to initiate a conversation on the inclusivity of women in urban spaces. The meetings refused to accept that inequalities between women and men in urban life exist only because of biological differences and argued that actual inequalities arise from the different roles imposed on women and men through societal pressures. This situation is even more aggravated for women coming from disadvantaged social groups (disabled, poor, sexual orientation, etc.). As a result of the studies mentioned above, on 12 May 2006, the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life was published by CEMR and stated that local and regional governments in Europe should practice policymaking through gender-sensitive approaches. In order to ensure the equality of men and women, local and regional governments should develop and implement activity plans and programs with appropriate human resources and a

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6 According to the results of 2019 general local elections, a total of 43 mayors out of 1396 are women (3 metropolitan municipalities, 1 province, 39 counties). However, 54 women co-chairperson should be added to this number. Only one female mayor was elected in the 39 district municipalities of Istanbul.
budget allocated to gendered policy-making. According to the document signed by 1688 local and regional authorities from 32 European states as of November 2017:

The Program for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights of Women and Girls in the United Nations, aiming the formation of “Women-Friendly” cities by developing strategies of collaboration and cooperation between local governments, women’s organizations and public institutions to support women’s participation in local decisions, targeted the preparation of Local Equality Action Plans, specific to cities as a means of adopting an egalitarian approach to local urban policies and urban services. The program was conducted in two stages in 12 cities (2006-2010) and (2011-2015).

“All citizens should be able to participate in the decision-making processes regarding access to services and control of local processes.”

Egalitarian action plans prepared by the governorship, special provincial administration, and women’s organizations propose local solutions to local problems in a manner that covers the inequalities faced by women. These areas require the participation of women in local decisions, equal use of urban services, prevention of violence against women and girls, economic empowerment of women, equal access to working life, education and health services, and prevention of migration and poverty. To realize such goals, equality commissions, in which NGOs take part as actors, should be established to implement action plans and to ensure the sustainability of the plans.

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9 Municipalities in Turkey did not show interest in the Charter until 2013. The number of municipalities which have signed it as of 2019 is just 23 out of 1396. For additional information please refer to www.tbb.gov.tr>uluslararasi-il-iskiler
Gender-Sensitive Urban Planning

The city has a complex structure, therefore local governments try to protect the interests of different groups through urban policies and urban planning while maintaining the public interest. However, gender inequality, like all other inequalities, has both socio-economic and spatial dimensions. It cannot be said that gender equality in planning has been sufficiently part of Turkish planning practices. On the contrary, it has had an important place in the international planning approach starting from the 90s.

Due to patriarchal family divisions of labor and the burden of unpaid care work, accessibility to certain opportunities and resources and the ability to move between different urban facilities and spaces has gained more importance. Therefore, the distribution and accessibility of urban service areas (hospitals, health center, community center, nursery, etc.) in the city, especially in the neighborhood, is critical for women to easily reach public transportation and pedestrian means. In our metropolitan cities, urban sprawl aggravates the problem of transportation for urban women, regardless of the differences in economic status. In this context, women have less access to urban spaces and generate less use of them. One of the issues to be considered in planning should be the distance that women travel to reach urban services. Since they usually walk or use public transportation, the location of these services and transportation nodes become very important.

Addressing the urban environment with a gender-sensitive approach involves a dynamic and differentiated attitude. In addition to the socio-economic issues, it is important for urban planners to consider the question of how to design an urban space that is gender-sensitive. A design and planning approach that takes into account the gendered nuances of all urban dwellers in spatial processes should be developed. In the development of our cities, urban spaces should be created with an egalitarian approach and universal planning and design principles. Women should be included as one of the target groups in this process.

It is essential for local governments in Turkey to take the city as a whole in planning and urban design studies, as well as integrating criteria to make the gender perspective an indispensable for all programs, plans, and projects. To achieve this objective there are two prerequisites: The first is to increase the awareness of local administrators and urban service providers about gender equality. The second is to collect statistical data on the city basis in terms of gender and to carry out studies that will reveal the needs and demands of women for urban services.
Examples of Gender-Sensitive and Egalitarian Local Management in Istanbul Municipalities

Istanbul metropolitan and district municipalities generally approach their women-related work through their family, social, or cultural services. In some district municipalities, studies on gender equality are carried out in the equality units established by the request of municipal administrators. Only four district municipalities of Istanbul, namely Büyükçekmece, Beylikdüzü, Şişli, and Kadıköy have signed the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life.

Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality: A Women’s Coordination Unit (Center) has been established within the municipality. The Center organized a panel titled “Istanbul Towards a Women-Friendly City,” in cooperation with Istanbul Women’s Research Center (IKAM) with the aim of participating in the Women Friendly City program in March 2008. The panel attracted a wide audience and the mayor of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul also attended but later this issue was not followed through. The metropolitan municipality cooperates with the Department of Social Services and provides aid to women, children, and disadvantaged families, as well as organizing vocational courses, workshops, and social activities. Regardless, there is no proper management approach to integrating gender quality into the municipality's policymaking.

“\*It cannot be said that gender equality in planning has been sufficiently part of Turkish planning practices.\*”

The Kadıköy Municipality Social Equality Unit: In line with the Municipality’s egalitarian policies, “Kadıköy Women’s Forum and Local Equality Workshop” was organized in November 2015. Although the municipality did not take part in the Women Friendly Cities Program, the workshop was its own initiation. After the workshop, the Kadıköy Local Equality Action Plan was prepared with the participation of women as well as other NGOs and professional bodies such as Chambers of City Planners, municipal architects etc. In July 2016, the Municipality Social Equality Unit was established with the aim of providing an institutionalized and sustainable base to pursue gender-sensitive policies.

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12 Istanbul Municipality Women’s Coordination Center, www.ibbkkm.org
The Sisli Municipality Gender Equality Unit: The Five-year Strategic Plan of the Municipality of Şişli (2015-2019) states three main objectives for its egalitarian approach: participation in social life will be encouraged for those who are discriminated against due to their gender and sexual orientation; measures will be taken to achieve social integration and overcome barriers to access local services.; and urban policies against discrimination will be developed and participation and enhancement of civil society will be encouraged. Additionally, the Gender Equality Unit organized a workshop in April 2016 entitled “Equality Unit Workshop-Construction of the Local Equality.” In this workshop, the representatives of municipalities from different regions of Turkey shared their experiences, discussed equality policies, and the strengths and weaknesses of their equality units.  

The Beylikdüzü Municipality Social Equality Unit: Beylikdüzü has shown the most promise in having gendered policies, programs, and projects. For instance, the Women and Men Equal Opportunity Commission was established within the Municipal Council in 2015 and a gender equality and gender-sensitive budgeting workshop was held in April 2016. The purpose of the Social Equality Unit is to institutionalize gender equality activities, coordinate equality studies within the municipality, and work with the Equality Coordination Group which consist of representatives of women NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector. Beylikdüzü’s unit duties include the preparation of the Budget Equality Report, the Equality in Service Report, and Gender Equality Impact Valuation Report.  

Conclusion and Suggestions

Local political will is essential for making cities livable for women. A livable city for women, in other words, a woman-friendly city is not a product of imagination, but a synthesis of gender-equitable urban local policies. In this context, women’s enjoyment of their urban rights will also improve the quality of life of the city and its citizens and ensure the sustainability of urban development.

To summarize:

- Participation and representation of women in local decision-making bodies should be ensured,
- Special local government services should be provided to women,

A gender equality approach to Istanbul’s urban development

- A gender perspective should be incorporated into all urban policy, planning, programs and projects, and all urban services should be arranged within this perspective.

In the context of Istanbul in particular, institutional structures for gender equality, such as the Gender Equality Commission in the Metropolitan Municipality Assembly and the Center for Gender Equality in the municipal structure should be established.

“*Istanbul's Beylikdüzü district has shown the most promise in having gendered policies, programs, and projects.*”

The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality gender equality action plan should include:

- Participation of district municipalities representatives, the private sector, professional organizations, and local women’s organizations,
- Establishment of a general framework of local government tasks to achieve equality between women and men,
- Guidance to women’s organizations and local governments to monitor the progress of a gender-equal city,
- Support for all parties in identifying problem areas on women’s issues to come up with solutions related to these problems.

This action plan should be prepared and used as a road map. It is recommended that all district municipalities of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality develop and elaborate on these recommendations, as well as establish equality commissions and gender equality units in their municipal councils.

Municipalities should strive to:

- Establish a digital network for information sharing among equality units;
- Create an online experience sharing pool;
- Prepare an annual bulletin where activities of equality units across Istanbul are published;
- Organize gender sensitivity workshops;
- Establish and improve the information system for the whole city and collection and evaluation of gender-based statistics;
- Train personnel and managers on gender equality issues;
- Develop targets and strategies in strategic plans for gender equality;
- Prepare a budget that takes into account gender;
- Facilitate women’s participation in local decision and their access to local councils.

Women’s organizations in Istanbul have important knowledge and experience of women’s lives, problems, and needs. Municipalities should cooperate with women’s organizations in policy-making, urban planning, and design. It is time to change local governments in which women are not adequately represented, do not participate in decision-making processes, and where gender equality is an afterthought. As men and women who live in cities, we all have the right to adequate housing, employment, safe transportation, access to local services, as well as free and meaningful participation in urban processes. The efforts of women to achieve gender equality and to assume responsibility for their rights and for their city will change and transform the existing practices of urban planning and local governance.