Helping Each Other

A Swedish Perspective

BY BIRGIT KRANTZ

Women emphasize social perspectives while men talk of problems in individual terms. This was one of the conclusions drawn by two Danish researchers from a study of gender differences in attitudes to urban planning problems and the way that these are addressed in practice. Another difference between women and men was found in their priorities: for instance, while men were not against day care centres, women were for them; but the sexes ranked political issues and values differently, and also differed in their view of the world, and therefore in the arguments they used.

As an example, where the men wanted to increase the capacity of the road system, and to improve road access to where they lived, the women, while conceding traffic issues as important, wanted to improve conditions for pedestrians and people with mobility difficulties.

While these findings were made in the context of specific planning issues, they are relevant to gender priorities in politics generally. Analyzing the gender dimension in politics, Swedish political scientist Abby Peterson has recognized significant differences in men’s and women’s priorities. As she expresses it, men work politically for economic benefit and power; women work to help each other. Women’s political activity and their motives for involvement are derived partly from their experience within the sphere of reproduction, and partly from their common experience of patriarchy. Peterson summarizes the four areas relevant to a feminist perspective in politics as follows:

- kinship reproduction (survival of the generations),
- reproduction of the family,
- reproduction in the public sector,
- the interests of reproductive workers (women), women’s liberation.

Women emphasize the quality of life, while men are interested in the standard of living. The bearing of children leads to a deeper involvement in the quality of life for future generations. Women are bound by close ties to the process of reproduction, which shows in their giving high priority to peace and disarmament, while men to a greater extent emphasize questions of economic growth and related issues of resources. Women’s responsibility for the welfare and upbringing of children leads to a political involvement in the areas related to children and the residential environment, and to reproductive functions in the public sector.

Further insight into women’s views comes from another Swedish political scientist, Gun Hedlund-Ruth. Using empirical studies of how women themselves view their contributions in politics, Hedlund-Ruth has developed a model in which she situates three different perspectives on women’s interests on a harmony-conflict scale. At the harmony pole we find the complementary perspective, which is based on women’s experience and knowledge being able to complement that of men. It is a form of co-operation in which men and women can together improve conditions for everyone. At the opposite, or conflict, pole is what Hedlund-Ruth calls the perspective of interested groups, which implies that only women can represent women’s interests and that these always conflict with those of men. She finds most female politicians are at the middle of the scale, which she has called the perspective of care. Women’s own experience makes...
them expert on questions in the planning and design process which relate to socially vulnerable groups such as children, the aged, the handicapped.

Two thirds of the women interviewed said that women have something special to contribute to politics: "women are more earthy, concrete and practical and view reality differently from our male colleagues." Women have obviously different views of the issues in technical and planning committees; these are issues, according to Hedlund-Ruth, which touch upon the lives of women and which would be neglected in politics if female politicians did not advocate them.

Politics are not only practised in the formal context of central or local governments, but also in extraparliamentary activities, in Sweden involving more women than men: 60 per cent women, compared to men’s 40 per cent. The different patterns can be seen in local committees of the Swedish Tenants’ Association. In committees where women are a majority, the emphasis is on activities for children, courtyard parties and co-operation between the residents. Male-dominated committees emphasize sports, film shows and competitions. Women want to improve the residential environment through their own efforts; they are more interested in what it is like to live in the area, “all the mundane details that must function on a daily basis,” while cars are a major interest among male members of even local tenants’ committees.

The general pattern of gender-specific values and priorities in the politics of everyday life that has been shown in research supports an understanding of women’s search for radical alternatives in which their values could be combined into a coherent vision.

Such a vision was presented as long ago as 1979 at the first Nordic conference on Building and Living on Women’s Terms (a meeting held every two or three years). Most of the large number of women at the conference were professionally engaged in planning, design and construction. Their vision distills the essence of feminine values and demands: the society which women desire has a basis in consideration of the needs of children and of people’s need for daily social renewal. It is a society which is organized in smaller, comprehensible units, self-governing, utilizing local resources for production and management. All participate in and are responsible for the husbanding of resources, technology, work, caring, decision making and the management of the residential environment.

Working life and the residential environment are characterized by:
- geographical and temporal closeness between residence, care and social facilities, work and recreation, and by
- proximity between age groups.

Work shall be shared by everyone. Transport shall be collectively organized, keeping in mind the needs of vulnerable groups. Technology will be locally controlled. The physical environment will provide opportunities for social activities as well as for solitude and privacy. It should be flexible to meet new needs and provide opportunities for creating new values and forms of living. Public institutions for care and social services are situated to respond to people’s need for relief. Distribution of responsibility between public and private providers can vary according to need.

These ideas for an alternative approach to living and work were further elaborated by a group of Nordic researchers, all of us women, and presented in a study called The New Everyday Life — and Ways to It.4

The model for the alternative everyday life focuses on what we have described as the intermediary level, or in other words the interface that could be developed within the residential environment between private households, the public sector and even the market. Individuals and households can co-operate with each other, but also with locally based care institutions.

We thought the best way to illustrate the feasibility of this intermediary level would be through using examples of how it operates in practice. We showed how co-operative housework is done in Swedish and Danish collective living situations, how almost a social movement (in Sweden it is supported by local authorities) as nearly 50 collective houses are in operation. We also showed examples of how an interface between private and public interests can be achieved, as in the new Swedish child care centres, run as parental co-operatives. Local self-management is now developing in many residential areas, initiated both from the grassroots and from the top, by municipal housing companies. Self-management activities need a local organization, of which various models exist in the Nordic countries.

As many of the ideas which contribute to the new everyday life operate in collective housing, some detail about how this works may be of interest. Collective housing in general responds to the kinds of need identified by women, although there are many variations in its form. The classic Swedish concept from the 1930s and 1940s depended on paid services for running the collective life, a staff of servants (female, of course) for cooking,
To summarize, a woman's perspective on planning and design of the environment emphasizes caring and well-being. As women working in planning and design we have to raise our own consciousness about our values and priorities and then argue strongly for them. Our arguments might challenge conventional, rational thinking — mostly male thinking — but are urgently needed if a change is to be possible in the way we live our everyday lives.

Difficulties stemming from women's under-representation in the political process of planning are obvious. Current data in most countries, even in Sweden, tell us about the non-equality of the sexes in decision-making at all levels. We must change this situation. There are no simple recipes, but a more general direction is shown by Marilyn French, who talks in her book Beyond Power: on Women, Men and Morals, of a flexible strategy. She maintains it is not possible to create a humane or feminist world in a linear manner based on single-minded effort. What is required is a cyclical approach, working through mutuality and integration within all the dimensions of culture.


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