

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.¹ 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.² 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,³ 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 on 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 tenants 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 distils 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, now 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,

washing, cleaning, etc. The aim was simply to rationalize housework for women who went out to work. Today's concept emphasizes resident co-operation in daily life. "To live on the basis of working fellowship" is the motto coined by a group of ten women who developed ideas and principles for this collective form of living: in short,

- household work undertaken in common,
- self-management,
- husbanding of resources,
- integration of living with caring and welfare.

The new generation of collective housing in Sweden ranges in size between approximately 20 and 70 apartments, with fully fitted kitchens and other amenities. The residents have had to accept some reduction in apartment size in order to support communal space without increasing rents. In some of the buildings the residents have extended their common responsibilities to include cleaning the communal areas, waste disposal, repairs and improvements, activities that help to keep costs down. Regular dinners and the communal work connected with meals are characteristic of this form. Normally this work is carried out as a two- or three-person team, which means that the adults take a turn, for instance, every third week.

A sense of community arises when daily tasks are performed together. When some of the household chores — cooking, for instance — are moved from the individual household to the collective, they become a matter that involves both men and women. It is more than a rationalization of women's work which occurs. As well, previously invisible work becomes visible, visible to the men. This makes the rigid pattern of sex roles more flexible, as has been convincingly demonstrated in existing collective blocks of flats.

Control of one's own immediate environment is a question often raised by women. It has obvious links to the identification by the feminist movement of patriarchal structures in society. Which forms of participation are sanctioned is also significant. In collective housing, decision-making structures and patterns of work are democratic, with house meetings and a large number of work groups where responsibility is delegated.

The idea of living so as to husband

resources naturally includes self-management. Collective use of premises and equipment, instead of their acquisition by each private household, saves resources. It ought also to point to alternative ways of exploiting information technology. Though TV sets and videos are already privately owned, home computer use might be quite different if collective living served as a model.

The fourth principle mentioned above was the integration of living with caring and welfare. Caring can be both an informal activity between people who feel responsible for one another in the family or in the immediate neighbourhood, and as a public concern in an institutionalized form, such as child care and care of the elderly. Closeness in daily contacts can mean more direct support and a richer life for the single, aged or handicapped. This has been well documented in studies of Swedish collective housing.

Child care centres can be integrated into collective housing, run either by the municipality or as parental co-operatives, with municipal support. The parental co-operative form means a deeper involvement of the parents in the lives of their children as the parents are supposed not only to be collectively in charge of the centre but also to spend, for instance, one day each third or fourth week on working in the centre, complementing the ordinary staff. Up to 200 such co-operatives are now operating in Sweden.

The new organization of everyday life in the interests of women, exemplified here by collective housing, needs to be supported by the housing structure, architecture and the built environment. Some key requirements could be mentioned: spatial closeness as a positive attribute helps people to meet and organize; low-rise and high density as a characteristic of building configuration might support the idea of closeness more than widespread high-rise blocks of apartments. A basic principle, however, is the provision of premises for common use, rooms to meet in. Mentioned here in connection with collective housing, this is possible to provide in any kind of multiple housing form.

Closeness of services such as laundries, day care centres and shopping, is important. Residents' participation should be supported by the physical structure: adaptability of the buildings can facilitate

the fulfilment of people's short and long-term needs. And this flexibility must be incorporated in the planning and design process.

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.

¹ V. Larsen and H. Topso-Jensen, *Urban Planning and the Everyday Life of Women*. Horsholm: SBI, 1985.

² Abby Peterson, "The Gender-Sex Dimension in Swedish Politics," *Acta Sociologica* 1, 1984, pp. 3-17.

³ Gun Hedlund-Ruth, "Kvinnorörelsens paverkan på lokal politik," (The impact of the Women's Liberation Movement on Local Politics). *Kvinnoretenskaplig tidskrift* 2, 1985 (English summary).

⁴ Veier til det nya vardagslivet (The New Everyday Life — and Ways to It). Report from Forskargruppen for det nya vardagslivet, Nordiska Ministerrådet, NORD 1987, p. 61.

Birgit Krantz chairs the Department of Building Functions Analysis in the School of Architecture at the University of Lund, Sweden.