

Correcting Gender-Blind Planning in a Disadvantaged Neighbourhood through the #UrbanGirlsMovement



 Botkyrka, Sweden

Participatory Urban Planning

Gender Blindness

Introduction

In Botkyrka (Sweden), the #UrbanGirlsMovement aimed to further involve girls and young women in a planning process, through exploratory walks, workshops with urban professionals, and Minecraft to model citizens' ideas. The project also served as a pilot in developing a toolbox for inclusive planning practices at the municipal level.

Located on the outskirts of Stockholm, Botkyrka has 95,592 inhabitants. The municipality houses a relatively young and diverse population, with 30% of the residents being under 25 and 63% of them having a foreign background. Over the last decade, the northern districts of the city have been struggling with drug dealing issues in public spaces. The #UrbanGirlsMovement has thus enabled a better rehabilitation of public spaces, as it addresses the needs of female residents.

[Problem Statement]

In many cities, the urban space has been conceived through a male-centred perspective, affecting the quality of life of residents whose needs did not fit into these standards. In Botkyrka, the phenomenon of gender blindness in planning has long been exacerbated by the focus of urban policies on eradicating crime. While this approach is crucial for creating safe public spaces, it often overlooks the question of liveability and inclusivity. Indeed, strategies for crime reduction often involve policing and regulating men's presence in the streets, thereby overlooking girls and young women as potential users and beneficiaries. To shift away from this perspective, the #UrbanGirlsMovement started in 2017 with two main goals:

- 1) Developing a participation framework involving young women from a disadvantaged district in urban development.

The target group for this project was defined with consideration for age, gender, and socio-economic vulnerability. These factors often contribute to a disconnection between citizens and planning authorities, resulting in the underrepresentation of certain groups during consultation phases.

- 2) Designing inclusive public spaces, supporting the daily life of all residents, especially female teenagers.

Gender and age influence how public space is used, especially in relation to infrastructure and aesthetics. In Fittja, a northern district of Botkyrka, the presence of female teenagers outside their homes and schools was largely confined to private spaces such as the shopping mall and cafés. Therefore, expanding opportunities for girls to actively engage with is a matter of gender equality.

The project emerged as a joint initiative of the independent think tank Global Utmaning, UN-Habitat, and the Botkyrka municipality. Additionally, the project was supported by the Sweden Innovation Agency (Vinnova). However, this support doesn't restrict the participatory process to major cities with significant resources. On the contrary, as HerCity coordinator Elin Andersdotter Fabre, pointed out:

“When you're a municipality with scarce resources, you can't afford to not get it right from the beginning. You can't do it all over again So we need to listen to the right priorities and the needs on the ground.”

[Implementation and Actions]

The project was structured in three phases, with multiple workshops over 2018 and 2019. The first step consisted of collecting data that could reflect the experiences of young women in their urban environment. The #UrbanGirlsMovement recruited female residents between 14 and 25 through the network of a local NGO, Changers Hub. Surveys and interviews were conducted to collect the impressions of young women and their spatial relationship to four specific zones in the city. In addition, exploratory group walks in Fittja represented a major resource. Through this process, it emerged that girls and young women lamented the lack of colourful design, proper lighting, and non-consumption seating in the area. Second, the project aimed for the co-production of intervention proposals by various stakeholders. This was achieved through brainstorming sessions with the Urban Girls, urban planners, architects, NGOs, and private actors. During these workshops, MethodKits cards were used to overcome language barriers between participants with various types and levels of expertise.

Once specific ideas about greening or improving light and seating were formulated, participants were actively involved in the design process. The video game Minecraft served as an empowering tool that allowed participants to visualise their proposals in 3D, without requiring any background in urban design. The different areas of Botkyrka had previously been reproduced in Minecraft by UN-Habitat experts. In the next block activity, these ideas were transposed into actionable spatial interventions: architects and young women worked together to create designs with professional design software and produce an estimation of the cost for each proposal.

Finally, the implementation and monitoring phase began after the participants presented their recommendations to the Botkyrka municipality and the public. In August 2019, the UrbanGirlsCube was temporarily installed in Fittja Square to give form to one of the proposals and to gather residents' feedback ahead of a potential permanent installation. Originally imagined as a place to sit and host a local radio station, only the seating function was retained. Six months after the end of the participatory process, participants were consulted again to reflect on the project and its outcomes. This step contributed to the development of the HerCity Toolbox, which outlines the different phases for a gender-sensitive participatory process.

The process also contributed to developing a local cooperation framework involving citizens, municipal agents, architects, and private actors. Building on this pilot experience in Botkyrka, the [HerCity Toolbox](#) — a flexible methodology for participatory urban planning — was developed and is now used in over 300 cities across 100 countries. It is articulated around nine blocks and proposes activities and materials to conduct gender-sensitive participation.

After the end of the pop-up test and the project, some of the original ideas from the #UrbanGirlsMovement initiative were physically implemented through permanent installation. The municipality improved street lighting in specific areas and the municipal housing provider Botkyrkabyggen integrated some of the girls' ideas when transforming a parking area into a park.

[Lessons Learned]

“We are not creating some kind of separatist movement with nice, girly projects. It is about building capacity within the municipality to ensure that including girls becomes part of the urban development process. If we plan a city for girls, it will work for everyone — that is our hypothesis.” Elin Andersdotter Fabre, HerCity Coordinator

1. The design proposed by young women addressed needs that extended beyond their own. The additional seating and its flexible layout were used by senior residents; families with young children enjoyed the colourful design of the Rainbow Park; and all inhabitants benefited from the urban greening.
2. Early stakeholder engagement allowed young girls and women to share their local knowledge and expertise. The way they were integrated as facilitators, with an equal contribution as urban professionals helped them to feel empowered and at ease during the workshops.
3. Sustaining engagement over several months can involve specific incentives, but what mattered to young women was to feel that their participation was valued and had a concrete impact on spatial interventions.
4. In negotiating the different methods and priorities of multiple actors, the think-tank Global Utmaning played a pivotal role, facilitating dialogue and coordination across institutional boundaries.

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Elin Andersdotter Fabre
HerCity coordinator

[+] Learn more about this Project

[Impact Story – Botkyrka – #HerCity](#)

HerCity Guide (2023). [Guide for cities to sustainable and inclusive urban planning and design together with girls](#)

Esposito, V. (2020). [Impact of the Botkyrka Project on Gender Equality and Youth Participation](#) (Dissertation)

Global Utmaning (2019). [Urban Girls Catalogue](#)