WOMEN'S SAFETY

The security of urban women: practice, research, and partnerships

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All public bodies whose mandate includes responsibility for the quality of urban life cannot ignore the question of security. On a global level, it is agreed that action needs to be taken locally, with the input of everyone involved. Since women have more at stake where safety issues are concerned, it is logical that security plans be drawn up that prioritize them. The interaction of public bodies, community organizations, and individual women is in itself innovative, enriching everyone involved, despite the inherent drawbacks and demands. International information networks on women's security are expanding and can help the new partnerships refine their working methods, to the benefit of all, regardless of gender. Still, the transfer of knowledge between partners and among the population is fundamental and demanding. The same applies to the need to develop methods and criteria of evaluation that are adapted to the specific realities of the partnership for prevention of crime and violence towards women.

In any field requiring the intervention of different levels of government, decision making is heavily knowledge based. At stake are politics, grant programs, and the actions of those involved, whether at the government or the community level.

Public bodies have a rather limited view of the reality of urban security and people's sense of security, especially women's. They appraise it mainly via the barometer of statistics on reported crime. These data are often published alongside a survey of people's sense of security, and there can be a false correlation made between the sense of insecurity and the objective risk of attack. A useless debate on whether the sense of security is rational or not can lead to some groups involved concluding that women are wrong to feel insecure, since the crime rate has, for example, fallen in comparison to previous years. Unfortunately, this sort of reasoning ignores huge areas of women's experience, for it is known that the vast majority of acts of violence committed against women are not reported to the police. Also, it is becoming ever clearer that official statistics do not offer an accurate reflection of urban crime and fear of crime among the population and its more vulnerable groups. It is also known that quantitative data are not neutral and must be evaluated separately according to gender. This can be done using, *inter alia*, gender based analysis or mainstreaming, both favoured at present in Europe and in large international organizations working in developing countries. In order to find out more about the impact of violence and women's fear of aggression, we need varied quantitative and qualitative research methods that reveal the complexity of the causes and effects of urban insecurity.

Starting at the end of the 1970s, community groups, especially women's groups, brought their experience to light and turned the subject of violence against women into a focus for research. The statistics already available were therefore complemented by grassroots research conducted among the female population and by women themselves carrying out safety audits to check the security of public spaces. Thus the process of investigating urban security became more participatory and democratic.

Various parapublic and community organizations offer public awareness and crime prevention campaigns. In this context, the partnership approach is essential for the coherence of the different types of input and to balance the

real needs of the populace with the amount of public money invested. In this respect, the Montreal experience of women's security serves as an international example, showing that there is a win-win outcome for everyone involved—for women as well as the population in general.

Researchers have a role to play in urban crime prevention. They can make a significant theoretical and practical contribution by joining the concerted action of the community and of the public bodies mandated to increase security and the sense of security among urban women. This participatory approach, where urban women are at the center of the action rather than the objects of a study, is part of the current trend of "good urban governance", which is based on women's participation in the decision making of public bodies.

GOALS AND APPROACHES

Partnership towards a common goal is more and more the preferred organizational model for urban security. To see how the partnership can be developed, we will look at the benefits and drawbacks of this type of voluntary association for each partner—institutional, community, and private—working in prevention of urban crime against women. We will also examine the benefits and drawbacks involved in allying the research world with the experience of everyday life.

Our study is based on documentary research, on our analyses of local partnership experiences, and on discussions resulting from the 1st International Seminar on Women's Security (May 2002).

DISCUSSION

The advantages of the partnership

For women's, community, and crime prevention groups, there is much to be gained from a multidisciplinary and intersectorial partnership in urban security. There are advantages too for municipalities, the police, health and social services, and schools, all of which can benefit from research input.

In collaboration with researchers, the public and community bodies concerned with women's security benefit from the theoretical approach to the problem and obtain data relevant and useful to their field of work. A knowledge based approach to the problem is therefore profitable to both groups, while the

partnership between them allows projects to be more closely adapted to the different dimensions of women's lives.

Researchers themselves gain from the partnership, as much in their work as in their service to society. They can liaise with grassroots partners to examine certain problems more closely, to develop avenues of research, to vary the population under study, and to apply for bigger grants with a more varied application, aimed, for example, more at community groups and grassroots workers of either sex. When a partnership gets underway, researchers join up with groups and organizations that work with women on a daily basis. This is especially important because there is some haziness about what constitutes fear of crime.

Grant providing institutions and organizations know that their money is being wisely used, because the partnership ensures that resources and different levels of expertise are shared. (However, financing must be adequate.) The partnership also allows for the development of better public policies, which are in turn fed by research results that take into account various misunderstood aspects of the problem.

The partnership empowers women. By getting researchers to focus specifically on their needs, it takes their reality into account, often a very different reality from that seen by public institutions and researchers. The partnership approach also increases women's autonomy in public urban spaces, because it sees problems from their perspective and thus finds the most appropriate solutions. Finally, partnership interventions of this kind have a general effect on safety and the quality of urban life, and thus benefit everyone.

Difficulties and drawbacks

However, there are disadvantages to the partnership, and there is much at stake for each participant in solving these difficulties.

Partners often bring different or contradictory values and approaches. This is because they come from different professions and disciplines and are attached to different kinds of organizations. This variety is evident in, among other things, the terminology they use, their theories, and their

vision of how the interventions should proceed. They might share the goal of urban security, but their backgrounds and approaches contrast sharply.

However, it is in methods and organization that the differences really show. The community wants immediate results, but these are not a high priority for the researchers. Furthermore, researchers differ in the importance attached to copyright, in how to treat the confidentiality of data and results, and in decision making and the question of imputability. As for financing, many participants expend a lot of resources in the quest for funding. There are sponsors, but they are not always familiar with the organizations or with the partnership concept, and so the public and private money involved is not necessarily allocated effectively. This can handicap the partnership and damage its reputation.

Although everyone can gain from a partnership to protect women's urban safety, the participants have to learn how the process works, familiarize themselves with the concept, and follow a plan of action. To do this, a period of time must be formally set aside to give all participants a chance to understand the communal nature of the project and clarify their goals.

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