






Women's On-site Presence in the URBiNAT Process in Sofia: Roles, Points of View and Contributions

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Abstract

The paper presents an overview of the multi-faceted women's on-site participation and their diverse roles and contributions in the Horizon 2020 project URBINAT in Sofia. Building on a gender-sensitive perspective, the analysis relates publicly available statistical data to the URBINAT results obtained through desktop reviews, direct observations (incl. behavioural mapping), surveys and workshops in Sofia. A reflection on the inclusive design process through the lens of women's presence is presented. The paper discusses estimated women's capacity for leadership and their contribution to the selection of nature-based solutions (NBS) to integrate into the Green Healthy Corridor planned in Sofia. General tendencies and peculiarities of the actors involved, their modes of using public space, their perceptions and claims concerning space and public life and their contributions to organizing public space within URBINAT project are discussed. The authors outline general challenges to re-shaping traditional top-down planning approaches and the existing local capacity for doing it. Specific strengths and opportunities stemming from the national and local socio-cultural context are discussed. Conclusions are drawn about the importance of achieving effective complementarity of gender roles in the URBiNAT process in Sofia. Recommendations are made on the further conceptual development of gender-sensitive studies in support of the practical implementation of relevant co-planning and co-design methods addressing public space.

Keywords: gender sensitive urban planning and design, complementarity of gender roles, gender aspects of public space use and management, post-socialist CEE cities.

1 Introduction

Contemporary interdisciplinary research increasingly focuses on the importance of the gender dimensions in the urban development process and its key relation to achieving environmental justice and public health by [1]. Gender equity and

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mainstreaming are also acknowledged in the Sustainable Development Goals [2] and explicitly addressed by the New Urban Agenda [3]. Despite this, women's real-life presence in positions of power and decision-making globally remains below parity [4]. The role of urban planning is to create conditions for co-existence and social cohesion, and to provide material structures as well as opportunities that are gender sensitive, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of all city dwellers [5;6]. This paper discusses the presence of women in the planning process for public space regeneration in four large housing estates (LHEs) at the North-Western periphery of Sofia as identified and studied within URBiNAT project (2018-2024, Horizon 2020).

2 Research Context

The debate on gender equity is considered to effectively contribute to the democratization of society and cultural change [7;2]. Since the mid-1970s various policy and research approaches have been simultaneously or consequently applied to conceptualize the issue: the equity approach, concentrated on women's strategic gender needs; the efficiency approach based on the assumption that women's labour makes development more efficient; the empowerment approach, focused on strategic needs as identified by women themselves [8]. The research frameworks based on the New Household Economics model has gradually evolved from focusing on the specific women's roles [9] to their multiple roles [10;11].

Until the 1990s, most of the gender-related research and policy recommendations worldwide concentrated strictly on women, which resulted in the feminine identity being overexposed, and the masculine – underestimated [12]. Later, research gradually shifted from 'women's interests' to 'gender interests', regarding "gender" as a socially constructed phenomenon [10]. By analyzing the relative positions of women and men within the socioeconomic, political, and cultural structures, the gender and development approach (GDA) required a gender-sensitive transformation of these structures through top-down interventions and emphasized the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations [13]. As main instrument of GDA, 'gender mainstreaming' demands a higher priority to women's concerns in the design and implementation of socio-economic and political interventions [14]. The key influencing factors for GDA projects comprise demographic factors, community norms and social hierarchy, dimensions and level of emancipation, institutional structures, economic and political factors, legal norms and parameters, training and education, attitude of community to development, etc. [15]. The tension between approaches to gender and participation is often highlighted in the context of power distribution and decision-making [16].

Historically, since its emergence in early 20th century, the urban planning and design profession has been dominated by men. Only in 1970s scholars started to criticize urban planners for creating an urban environment prioritizing men's needs [5;17;6;18;19]. The need for a collective vision for integrating domestic life, productive work, and

leisure to prevent segregation of public and private, male and female domains was proclaimed for the first time during the 1980s [20;21].

The concept of gender mutual complementarity [22] has been influenced in urban planning research by the feminist movement and its critiques of the patriarchal systems, reflecting traditional gender roles and division of labour [23] and failing to respond to the needs and experiences of women in society. By implementing urban planning tools to study exclusion, marginalization, and segregation of women and studies of their needs, interests, habits, and experiences, researchers have already identified how gender roles are embedded in urban spaces and how these roles affect women's mobility [24], access to services, safety, and the environmental injustice in cities [25;26;27]. Urban studies have identified gender differences in the use of urban space at the regional, city and neighborhood level [1;28]. They have outlined that women use urban spaces in specific ways [12], often preferring the anonymous ones and avoiding some the ones being perceived as barriers [29]. Published research on gender inequalities in Bulgaria has focused on general issues as employability [30], gender inequalities in Roma communities, educational opportunities [31]; on spatial inequalities related to mobility, commuting time and accessibility at the regional and urban level, and on gender-specific perceptions and uses of the city [12;32].

Socialist urban policy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) proclaimed gender equity as a key societal principle, which had a substantial impact on urban planning through guaranteeing the provision of relevant and accessible social services (e.g., healthcare, kindergartens) [33]. The transition to market economy in the CEE region led to a decline in the availability of state-provided social services; it affected gender relations and disparities, and reinforced the traditional gender roles, thus departing from the gender equity concept proclaimed before the 1990s [33;34]. After 1989 women in CEE experienced the societal transformations from state socialism to free market alongside a cultural transformation by facing the dilemmas between the values of socialist collectivism and the liberal values that penetrated East European societies [12;30;34]. Despite this, partially due to a culture of gender equity and the levels of education acquired under the previous period, women in the post-socialist countries still enjoy greater access to jobs in prestigious economic sectors than women in Western Europe [35]. A considerably higher share of women in CEE compared to the rest of Europe are engaged in scientific research and development [36]. The educational level of working women in Bulgaria is higher than that of men [37] and with a share of 52 % female scientists Bulgaria ranks second among the EU countries [38]. However, the average gross wages and salaries of the male employees in every economic activity is higher than these of female employees and the gap has been widening since 2007 [37]. The equal voting rights of Bulgarian women, achieved more than 80 years ago, in 1937 [35], regrettably do not guarantee their equal representation in politics at the national and local level nowadays. Significant gender imbalance exists in political representation at the municipal level [39]. The political dimensions of the situation could be traced in the statistical information on gender representation at the national and local political level.

The composition of the municipal council of Sofia is not generally different than the national political landscape in 2021 (Table 1). The team of the first female Mayor of Sofia (2009-2023) consisted of four female and four male deputy-mayors [40].

Table 1. Gender representation in politics at the national and local level in Bulgaria, 2021 [39]

Women representation in politics	Share
Women in national parliament - members and speakers (no quota)	24,6 %
Women in national governments; senior and prime ministers	15,8 %
Women in local/municipal councils	27,2 %
Women municipal mayors (265 municipalities)	14 %
Women in Sofia Municipal Council	23 %

The proportion of women to men in the population of Nadezhda district is similar to the one of Sofia municipality in general (48% to 52 %). The economically active men are more than the women (18122 against 17730) and the number of the unemployed women is smaller than the number of men (1522 against 1808) [35;41]. The employment in the service sector, technical professions, and humanitarian professions (business, administration, health, education) is dominated by women (Table 2).

Table 2. Participation in selected economic activities in Nadezhda district by gender, Sofia, 2011 [41]. Activities with prevailing female employees highlighted by authors.

Number of employees in selected economic activities	Total	Male	Female
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	117	69	48
Manufacturing	3896	2194	1702
Electricity, gas, steam and AC supply	321	215	106
Water supply; sewerage, waste management	216	142	74
Construction	2032	1684	348
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of vehicles and motorcycles	8116	4008	4108
Transportation and storage	2401	1659	742
Accommodation and food service activities	1679	711	968
Information and communication	1293	698	595
Financial and insurance activities	1284	409	875
Real estate activities	436	201	235
Professional, scientific and technical activities	1863	720	1143
Administrative and support service activities	1804	1317	487
Public administration and defense; social security	2343	926	1417
Education	1337	250	1087
Human health and social work activities	1501	250	1251
Arts, entertainment and recreation	597	293	304
Other service activities	1247	542	705

3 Research aim and methodology

Sofia is one of the three front-runner cities and one of two post-socialist cities involved in the URBiNAT. The urban analysis of the local process in Sofia in the time interval June 2018 – January 2022 also addressed inhabitants' use and perceptions of urban space, their perceptions and claims on public green places, their motivation, and capacity for practical action. Nadezhda district located in the North-west periphery of Sofia was chosen as the project case study, based on a comparative analysis of several peripheral areas where the estimated social challenges comprised also the neglected public space of the prefabricated large housing estates (LHEs) inherited from the socialist period (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. Location of URBiNAT study area in the north-western periphery of Sofia. Base map created in Internet [42]

The project built communication channels among inhabitants, local administration and researchers and enabled the discussion on different groups' needs and values. A set of workshops were initiated to organize a Healthy Corridor (HC) in the public space linking two large parks and four areas of URBiNAT intervention (Fig. 2).

citizens, and regular taskforce meetings. The share of women and men among the participants in different URBiNAT activities as the survey on health, the co-selection and co-design workshops, the applications for joining Sofia Advisory Board (AB), locally established to support project activities, and minutes of AB meetings, provided baseline data for the gender dimensions of engagement in local activities. Women's perceptions and claims on public space and public life were extracted through content analysis from the interviews, cultural mapping, walk-through, and co-design workshops [44;45].

4 Results

4.1 Women's modes of use of open public space

Public spaces in the URBiNAT area were characterized as multifunctional and equally attracting women and men. The gender-specific uses were defined by the availability and quality of the equipment, the time of use, the age, lifestyle, and daily routines of the inhabitants. Elderly men and women, mothers with young children and teenagers were among the usual users of the observed 19 open public places in the study area (Table 3, Fig. 3).

Table 3. People's everyday presence in local open public places in numbers. Key: W- women; M - men; Ch - children; N.d.- not defined.

Public space observed	W	M	Ch	N.d.
P. 1. Entrance to Severen Park 1	122	113	11	85
P. 2A. Entrance No.2 to Severen Park	39	50	7	86
P. 2B. Connection to Iliyantsi retail complex	32	126	9	37
P. 3. Sports school No.153	166	307	59	1
P. 4. Primary school No.102	317	281	128	93
P. 5A. Zhekov Blvd, Stilyanov & Bbuditeli St.	154	136	9	4
P. 5B. Zhekov Blvd and Republika St.	102	133	15	11
P. 6. Center for arts culture and education	58	60	31	9
P. 7. Primary School No.15	133	177	148	53
P. 8. Flowers market	134	176	61	24
P. 9. "Sveti Duh" church	155	113	62	9
P. 10. "Saznanie" local cultural center	249	194	20	15
P. 11. Post office	178	212	10	11
P. 12. Block No. 65 in "Lev Tolstoy" HE	82	88	11	33
P. 13. Nadezhda Park	429	263	341	100
P. 14. Triagalnika neighborhood	174	147	24	18
P. 15. Gorska kultura Park	119	123	49	2
P. 16. Secondary School No.54	98	71	77	20
P. 17. Primary School No.141	234	226	34	14

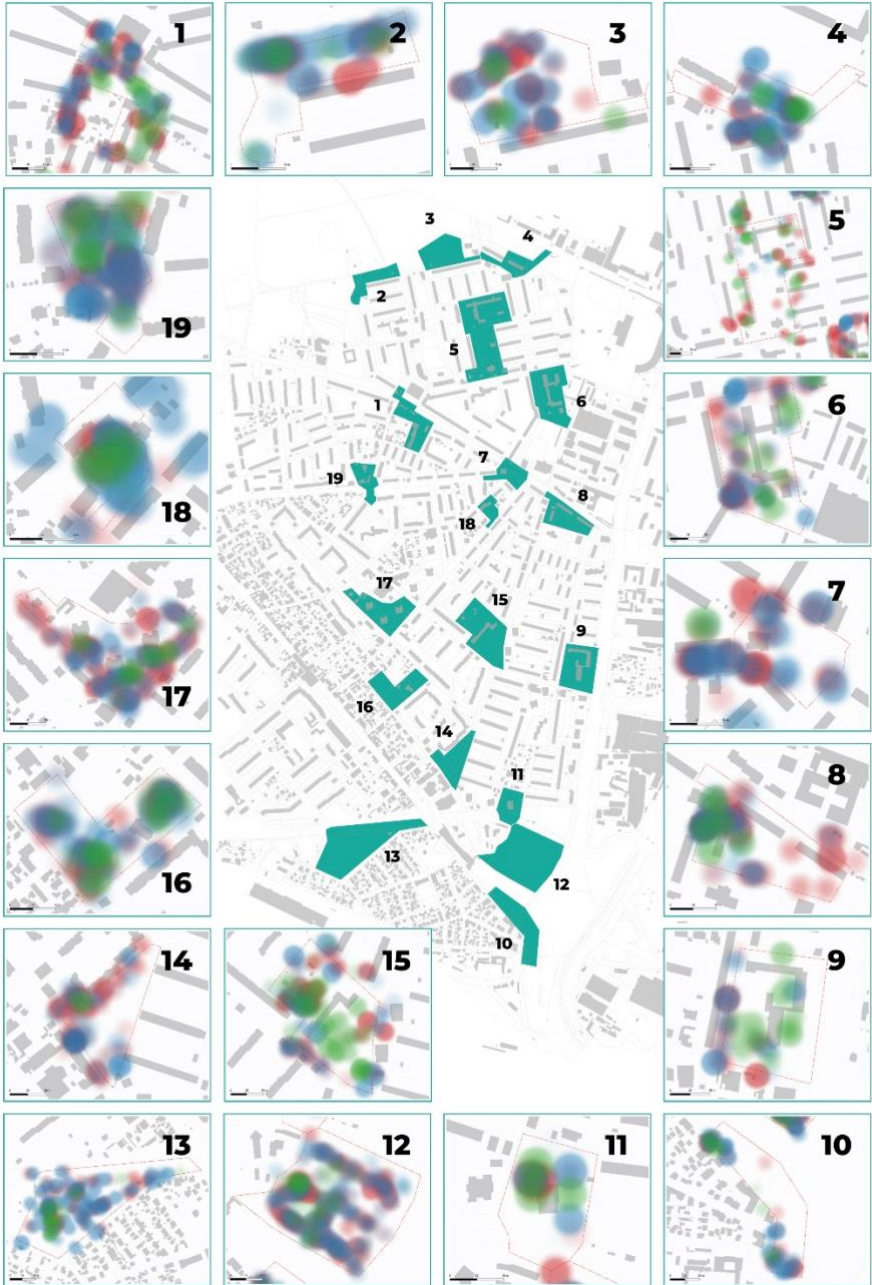


Fig. 3. Real-life use of public spaces in URBiNAT study area, gender perspective. Based on Behavior mapping [44]. Open public spaces observed (turquoise); prevailing concentration of women (red); prevailing concentration of men (blue); prevailing concentration of children (green).

Women used open public space for walking, staying, and socializing. The main points of interest on their daily routines included schools, the church, tram and bus stops, supermarkets, open-air fruit and vegetables markets. Women were not involved in dynamic activities in the south-west low rise residential area and around the cultural centers. Their most frequent role of mothers accompanying children at games or non-formal education activities was combined there with the one of the sitting observers or waiting for the end of the classes. Men were moving and staying close to the park, the sport school, the entrance to the retail complex. They played with children and were almost missing at the cultural centers, around the church and one of the three secondary schools in the URBiNAT territory. Women were the least represented among the persons staying near the entrances to the retail complex and the parks, especially on working days. Most of the players were boys and men, while girls and women were missing in the playgrounds.

Table 4. Inhabitants' activities and roles in the areas, chosen for interventions related to the Healthy Corridor. Key: A - Access; P - Participation in activities M - Maintenance C - Control; CMB - Condominium Managing Board; n.i. – not identified

Area	Topic of intervention	A	P	M	C
Co-place	Paved public space	W, M	W, M	M	M
	Furniture	W, M	W, M	W, M	n. i.
	Gardens in front of buildings	W, M	W, M	W	W
	Green areas	W, M	W, M	n.i.	W, M
	Community Pavilion	W, M	W, M	CMB	CMB
Health-Energy	Paved public space	W, M	W, M	M, n.i.	M, n.i.
	Furniture	W, M	W, M	M	M
	Children's playgrounds	W, M	W, M	M	M
	Parking along the street	W, M	W, M	n.i.	M
	Green areas	W, M	W, M	n.i.	n.i.
	Sport facilities	W, M	M	n.i.	M, n.i.
Aqua Vita	Paved public space	W, M	W, M	M	M
	Furniture	W, M	W, M	W, M	M, CMB
	Children's playgrounds	W, M	W, M	W, M	M, CMB
	Gardens in front of buildings	W, M	W, M	W, CMB	W, CMB
	Green areas	W, M	W, M	n.i.	n.i.
	Sport facilities	W, M	W, M	n.i.	n.i.
Green Assembly	Paved public space	W, M	W, M	n.i.	W
	Furniture	W, M	W, M	CMB	CMB
	Children's playgrounds	W, M	W, M	CMB	CMB
	Gardens in front of buildings	W, M	W, M	CMB	CMB
	Green areas	W, M	M	n.i.	n.i.

Men and women had equal access to public space in the URBiNAT study area in Nadezhda. The analysis of the inhabitants' roles in the intervention areas of the HC revealed, however, some disproportions concerning the role distribution in the maintenance and control over the space and facilities there. The identified disbalance

partially stemmed from the different skills and capacities of male and female inhabitants. Women were taking care of the gardens in front of the multifamily buildings and were usually engaged with the maintenance of the children’s playgrounds, while men were taking care of the furniture and the sports facilities. (Table 4).

4.2 Women’s participation and contribution in the URBiNAT project activities in Sofia

Women were identified in ten different roles in the URBiNAT process in Sofia – these of researchers, members of the public administration, workers in the field of education and culture, local planning experts, business actors, inhabitants, community activists, homeowners’ representatives and policymakers, participants in the student Swimming pool competition (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Women’s roles in the URBiNAT process in Sofia. Based on attendance lists, protocols, survey, and student design competition results.

The distribution of responsibilities among men and women was in line with their qualification, job positions, and role in the project. Women prevailed among the members of the URBiNAT Sofia taskforce and were involved into day-to-day activities, operational project tasks (as organization of events, coordination of activities, communication, field work), research leadership and independent research activities. Men were leading the decision-making process in Sofia Municipality (chief architect, district mayor, senior expert), while female participants (from UACEG and Sofia

Municipality) were leading in the preparation of the project proposal, communicating with local partners and coordinating the research and participatory processes internationally. Female participants prevailed in the educational and cultural institutions in Nadezhda district (headmistresses of schools and kindergartens, female directors of cultural institutions) and held the positions of deputy mayors, and experts in both the district and the municipality administration (architects, ecologist, PR, urban planner). Control and verification functions within the local administration were usually performed by men.

Registered participation in URBiNAT activities identified women as survey respondents on-site, as participants in the co-selection and design, as applicants for being part of Sofia Advisory Board and as submitting authors in the swimming pool design competition. Except for the survey, where the sample methodology requested and achieved almost equal gender representation, more women than men participated in the co-selection and co-design activities (Fig. 5).

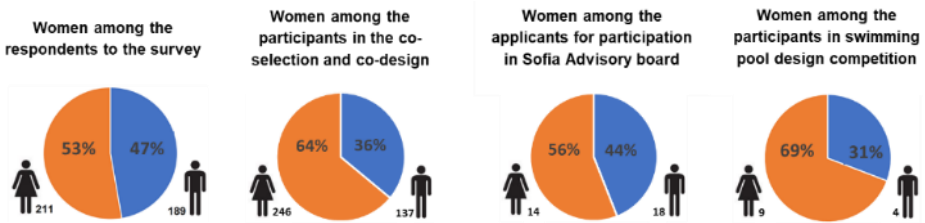


Fig. 5. Women and men among the participants in URBiNAT activities



a



b



c

Fig. 6. Prevailing women's presence in URBiNAT operational tasks: (a) interviewing an elderly inhabitant; (b) walkthrough with district administrators; (c) on-site workshop with citizens. Photos: authors

Women in various roles were also prevailing in all the operational tasks on-site: stakeholders' meeting, walk-through, workshop with citizens, regular taskforce meetings (Fig. 6).

A bigger number of women from the local community applied for joining the Advisory Board as volunteering members (all of them with higher education or specialized vocational training). Male participants seemed to be more interested and motivated to attend the Advisory Board (AB) meetings when it came to control and giving practical advice during the HC co-design, while female participants seemed to sustain long-term involvement due to the combined aspirations for care and control. More female students participated in the swimming-pool competition.

In line with the already registered trend of women's wider participation of in the project activities, the number of participants in the URBiNAT co-design workshops by gender indicated women's prevalence. The content analysis of the events' results outlined different gender perspectives concerning the perceptions about the existing situation and the declared needs of the participants. E.g., women were more concerned about the environmental conditions and their health impact, while men were claiming for proper management, which would improve visual aspects and personal comfort; women needed improved walkability, men requested better conditions for biking; women mentioned the lack of places for recreation and relaxation, men – the lack of open public space for active sports. The preferred type of the equipment in the public places was also different – women claimed a need for covered spaces for meetings, creative activities, togetherness, culture and discussions, while men valued meeting places in front of the buildings and indoor space for entertainment. The perceptions on safety and security also significantly differed – women focused on the risks of sex abuse, while men focused on threats of drug abuse and aggression. Neither women nor men indicated willingness to control or maintain the green areas and the sport facilities in three of the four areas of intervention. Men claimed parking to be a hot issue in one location. The visions and proposals for local public space future were also gender specific. Women insisted for better control and penalties on improper parking, while men - for better traffic organization. Women were more sensitive to climate-change adaptation and mode of public space use thus seeking harmony with nature, while men focused on innovations, active life and personal involvement in the visible transformations of the built environment. Women recognized the transformational change potential of the Tasty gardens of learning in educating respect to Nature, while men perceived it as a practical training tool for getting acquainted with vegetables and gardening (Table 5).

Table 5. Actors' perceptions, claims and visions on public space and public life. Based on interviews, cultural mapping, walk-through and co-design workshops

	Women	Men
Perceptions		
State of environment and infrastructure	Dirt in the streets, waste, air pollution, noise, dog poops; Cleanness of the river and inter-block spaces and streets.	Lack of proper general maintenance; Attention paid to visual aspects and discomfort
Perceptions on safety and security	The dangerous places are dark, unlighted, and invite suspicious men to gather. Associate overgrown greenery to insects and risk of sex abuse. Afraid of insects, stray dogs, suspicious towards homeless cats.	Vandalism demotivates to undertake actions for improving open public space The overgrown greenery brings threats of insects and risk of crime Afraid of drug addicts, dealers and aggressive locals.
Mobility	Need to improve walkability within the neighbourhoods	Need to improve conditions for biking within the neighbourhoods
Space for sport, recreation, and relax	Lack of equipment for exercising, jogging, sports, relax. Lack of space for recreation	Need for free-accessed playgrounds for children. Eager to participate and run open air activities
Public space and public life – vision	Need for covered meeting space, creative activities for adults and children; space for togetherness, culture, and discussions.	Space for socializing, places in front of the buildings' entrances, place for entertainment (cinemas and indoor spaces)
Visions and proposals		
Traffic, mobility, parking	Introduce strict control and penalties for inappropriate parking; Stop parking on the green areas	organize more space or provide flexible options for night parking; Improve traffic organization
Ideas for change	Sensitive to the context, the local needs, and the public wife	Many innovations fit the area – examples from everywhere
Perception of water	To bring back drinking water fountains in public space	To introduce water in public space, Ready to contribute during the construction of fountains
Vision for the mineral water	The swimming pool – a place for recreation and healing; Doubts about the access during and after the construction	The swimming pool – a place for active sport (swimming); Build just another playground there instead of a swimming pool

Expectations to Tasty Gardens	To develop children's sensitivity and respect to Nature.	To use it as a training tool for gardening and growing vegetables.
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A gender-sensitive analysis was undertaken to estimate participants' proposals for organizing open public space in the 4 intervention areas, shared during the co-design workshops, and later integrated into the Healthy corridor concept adopted by Sofia municipality (when considered relevant to URBiNAT objectives). Men and women alike supported pragmatic ideas such as the building of sports facilities and a thermal-water swimming pool, leisure places for children and families, a Tasty Garden of learning, a dog garden, and a bridge widening. Women were more sensitive to Nature, socializing and recreation, while men proposed a parking for different vehicles and an outdoor fitness facility (Table 6).

Table 6. Inhabitants' proposals for regenerating open public space in the 4 intervention areas integrated in the adopted Healthy Corridor Concept

Area of intervention	W	M
Co-place		
An eco-parking for different kinds of vehicles		x
Two areas for open-air family games	x	x
A space for leisure with a flower garden	x	
A picnic and social zone	x	x
Health-Energy		
A playground facility made of natural materials	x	x
Restoration of a multipurpose sports playground		x
Removal of the existing private garages on municipal land		
Aqua Vita		
A public swimming pool with mineral water	x	x
A school greenhouse, supplied by mineral water for heating	x	
An outdoor fitness		x
Social place and a square	x	
Green Assembly		
An open-air green amphitheater	x	x
A flexible recreation area	x	
A workshop/cafe/infopoint the URBiNAT pavilion	x	x
Urban forest	x	
Other locations		
Tasty garden of learning in the yard of kindergarten N90	x	x
Bridge overarching Suhodolska river	x	x
Dogs' garden	x	x
The Healthy Corridor linking the two existing parkts	x	x

The jury of the students' architectural design competition for the swimming pool comprised 3 men and 5 women. Like in other URBiNAT activities the number of

female competitors - team members or individual authors - was greater than the male ones (Fig. 7).

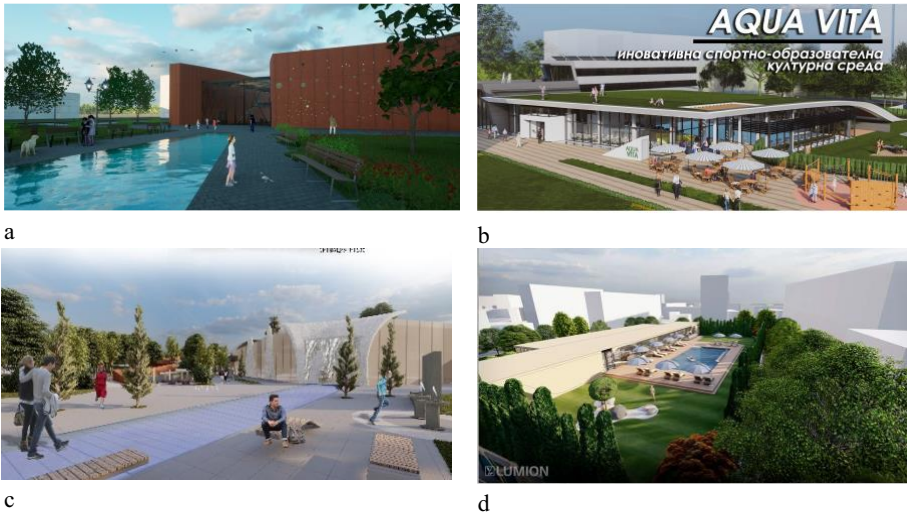


Fig. 7. Awarded Swimming pool competition projects: (a) 1st prize – M. Terziiska and V. Filipov, UACEG; (b) 2nd prize – R. Ivanova, VSU; (c) 3rd prize – S. Ustoyanov, UACEG; (d) Citizens' Award – A. Pregjov, V. Ivanova, D. Georgieva, F. Tahchieva, UACEG. [46]

5 Discussion

The opportunities to test gender-sensitive inclusive planning in Nadezhda district in Sofia were framed by the existing demographic, economic and political conditions, the community norms, and the existing social interactions. They also stemmed from the levels of women's education and their roles in society. Two key challenges were faced in the attempt to overcome the traditional top-down planning approaches in the country while relying on the existing local capacity for doing it. The first one was about understanding how an intervention in open public space would interfere with the existing gender relations and the power control over public space. The second one was about how these could support the planning and design process in gender mainstreaming, and what the context-relevant tools and techniques would be for doing it.

A gender-sensitive perspective to inhabitants' behavior and activities in the local public places of URBiNAT study area enabled an enhanced knowledge about the public places and their meaning in the life of communities, also beyond their planned functions and everyday use. If incorporated into the planning and governance procedures, a preliminary gender-sensitive evaluation on the expected impacts of planned and designed urban interventions could increase the integrational potential of the multifunctional public space, where users compete for places, infrastructure, and urban facilities.

The finding that women in the URBiNAT study area were more sensitive than men to environmental and health issues indicates a probability that some specific needs had not been adequately addressed up to the present moment. Although some guidelines for considering gender difference in perceiving constraints, inconvenience, and dangers in development planning are already at hand [19], further in-depth studies on women's experience of distributional, procedural and substantive spatial and environmental injustice at the local and neighborhood level are needed to improve the effectiveness of inclusive planning and design. Socio-spatial analysis and mapping, considered as a dominant methodology in the environmental justice field, should be complemented by additional qualitative studies on gender perceptions, needs, motivations and roles.

Women in Nadezhda study area seemed to be more interested than men to engage in the URBiNAT activities, e.g., focus groups and workshops, and to get involved in the local Advisory Board. They also demonstrated a greater ability to listen, convey the gender specifics and easily connect the NBS concept to their everyday life in the neighbourhoods, which could be considered an important asset to be further utilized for activating senses and building confidence. In comparison, male participants, and explicitly young men were enthusiastically ready to immediately start building something but lost their interest after a month as their expectations for fast visible results were not met. That is why gender complementarity and dialogue could be considered a factor of key importance to a sustainable regeneration process.

Most of the women involved in URBiNAT activities, had multiple roles. Following Moser's definition [10], these included reproductive and productive roles (for payment in cash or voluntary); community managing (usually in-kind and unpaid work). Despite the current moderate involvement of women in the political and governance institutions at the national and city level in Bulgaria [39; 40], women were actively involved in URBiNAT transformative action at the neighborhood level. Practically all the women involved in the project relied on abundant real-life experience in diverse roles, which brought an added value to their sensitivity to gender-specific issues and their competence in addressing them. These multiple roles defined women's citizenship not as an abstract category, but as an operational one "that starts with the specific roles performed by women" [11]; they enabled the formulation of "strategic needs as identified by women themselves" [8]. The involvement of women in the Sofia Task Force of URBiNAT – as academic researchers as well as municipal staff, but also in the decision-making processes at the local administration level - enabled an explicit attention and respect for women's points of view. Women's leadership proved to be helpful in many URBiNAT activities alongside the effective partnership of women and men in the Task force, the district administration and in the neighborhoods. Women demonstrated self-confidence but also an ability to listen to different claims and visions.

Unfolding over a span of five years, the URBiNAT research project was able to trace the evolution of gender issues in relation to the key research objectives of the project – developing inclusive planning approaches to urban regeneration of social housing areas through NBS implementation. Gender aspects being integrated in all the project stages was an important factor for better understanding the socio-cultural peculiarities of the urban process but it was also a chance to inspire and motivate women for actively contributing to inclusive urban regeneration. The strong presence of women on-site -

as citizens, members of governance bodies or volunteers, not only outlined specific needs and demands but also fostered the continuity of community development through intergenerational communication.

6 Conclusion

URBiNAT general sensitivity to women's presence, perceptions, and visions was an important factor for keeping a persistent long-term focus on integrating gender aspects in all the stages of the project.

The action research undertaken in Nadezhda district, Sofia, complemented the URBiNAT study by a multi-faceted illustration of the gender dimensions in the current development of post-socialist housing estates in Southeastern Europe. The sociocultural diversity currently identified in the studied area has been designated by the initial planning of the estates in early 1970s. The high share of well-educated inhabitants, including women; the still functioning social infrastructure (schools and kindergartens); the strong sense of community fostering intergenerational links and continuity distinguishes the housing estates in Sofia from the social housing estates in the other URBiNAT front-runner cities Nantes and Porto. If properly integrated into the urban regeneration process, the demonstrated self-identification of the inhabitants with the place and the complementarity of gender roles in public space use and its maintenance could be effective prerequisites for the sustainability of the area in the long term. Women could be considered key actors in enhancing the mutual trust between citizens and local administration, which seems to be among the major current challenges in the urban policy field in Sofia.

Gender mainstreaming, as a strategy that complements the gender equity policy, would require rethinking of current approaches to policy making, procedural changes, shifts in the organizational culture and the creation of new channels for consultation and co-operation. Qualitative and quantitative aspects would be equally important in this process, but a strong focus on the quality of women's involvement rather on the number of women involved should be kept.

A lot of work is still to be done for better hearing women's voices, and for empowering women in the urban process. Integrating gender- and context-sensitive studies as a mainstream practice at all governance levels is to be persistently sought for. It is important to value and reward women's involvement in the governance and maintenance of urban public space. It is also crucial to achieve a deeper knowledge about the complexity of gender interaction and the complementarity of gender roles and contributions in the urban process. Relevant indicators, estimating the gender dimensions of urban policy need to be developed to support balanced gender participation and responsibilities in the real-life planning and governance of open public space. Gender-sensitive education of all actors and at all governance levels should be conceptualized to provide them with the needed capacity for strategic thinking and practical action.

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