INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON GENDER EQUALITY AT LOCAL LEVEL - WOMEN FRIENDLY CITIES –

# Ankara, 10-11 June 2015

**INCLUSION OF LOCAL WOMEN’S “EXPERTISE BY EXPERIENCE”**

 **DEFINES THE QUALITY OF HOUSING 2.0.**

The case of the Women’s Advisory Committees (VAC) in The Netherlands.

 By Lily Hutjes-Boelaars.

Introduction.

I will speak today about how local women(and their organisations) in The Netherlands make the most of their expertise and of their specific knowledge about the users-quality of their houses and their living environments. How they forward and spread this knowledge and thereby have influence at the base at the local housing and building policies.

This can be an example and stimulus for women in other countries who want to improve their own housing situation.

VAC’s

Thirty years ago, I was one of a group of women that started a Women’s Advisory Committee (we say VAC).

A VAC is an volunteer organisation of women, “housing-consumers”.

Today in the NL there are about 240 local VAC’s with around 800 volunteers.

From a women’s perspective and vision, a VAC is promoting the interests of residents, who live in the so-called “social housing”. These are houses, partial governmentally subsidized.

The objective is to act on behalf of, and together with residents as a partner in consultations with architects and builders, but also with the responsable authorities and politicians in the area of housing and planning of the built environment.

The “building world”, that is: the planners, the architects, the local authorities/surveyors in townhall, the builders and commisioners, include these “experts by experience”, women from the “living world”, who are informed and are trained to give a good argumented residents-assessment and -input on the designs and plans of the builders.

VAC’s gives an advice , according to their findings in the assessment.

Together with the responsable authorities and builders they present and discuss their input.

Because VAC’s are advisory committees, not action- or pressuregroups. They try to get influence on building processes through delivering good argumented assessments on building plans. In this way they want to guard and promote a good users quality, especially for citizens with low incomes.

Together the VAC’s in the NL form a network of women, that mainly looks locally after the interests of women and their families. They perform, out of a care for a good housing quality in many senses.

The contacts and relations from VAC-women with the ”building-world”, with local authorities , politicians and financers, is different from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, from urban to rural, from province to province and thereby also from country to country. Thus, a translation of the NL situation and of VAC- activities, to the specific Turkish local situations is a prerequisite.

Living and building.

Decades ago, in the planning of cities, a separation of the functions of living, working and recreation was based on the traditional thinking about the family, where women and men had different tasks and activities at different places. This separation determined the cityplanning until the seventies/eighties and caused crowded neighbourhoods and large distances between work and home and especially problems with combining the work activities with the home-based activities. This situation was and is mostly detrimental to women (with children) who wanted, or were obliged to work for income.

Combining both work and home activites was/is mostly problematic.

Nowadays growing cities and new neighbourhoods are planned in a more “compact” way, where home, work and facilities are more close to each other. So, Spatial Planning can provide development and then brings changes in the conditions for both men and women, not only in the process when planning the housing, but also when planning the surrounding environments, e.g. spaces for schools, parcs and play-grounds, shops, and other community-facilities, etc..

Although visions of men and women can be different, looking after their daily roles, both have a common interest and obligations, that is : taking care for a good quality of housing and surroundings. This means that, besides the existing influence of men, there is a necessity for an equal input and influence from women, based on their experiences, on the decision-making in planning and housing.

Women are mostly positioned in the “living-world”, where they work and take care for their family. But the position and role of women in the “building-world” still is not very common.

More and more women become aware of the fact that, when building houses and designing neighbourhoods, more ideas and wishes from men than from women are taken into account.

Women/housewives, with the home and direct surroundings as their workingplace, have different perspectives and different experiences, and they saw and keep seeing in their home a lot of practical problems, that are not well considered during the planning and building process.

That is why in The Netherlands, women in several cities came together and created VAC’s. They wanted to be involved in the decision-making in an early stage of the process of planning and buiding, because this process also regards them in their daily work and life.

How do VAC’s make an assessment.

VAC-women look through a consumers/users lense, when assessing a design or lay-out of a house :

They have followed special courses on how to read and assess building designs and plans for new to build houses and also, for existing and new-planned surroundings, neighbourhoods and districts.

They also make use of special VAC’s checklists

With regard to the following USERS CRITERIA they make assessments on the plans and lay-outs of houses and their living environment :

These criteria are:

\* Usability and efficiency :

* sufficient space for activities and hobbies for each member of the family
* the position of rooms with regard to each other, distances,
* walking ‘routes’, logical and efficient lay-outs.
* sufficient privacy for residents vis a v is to each other.

\* Accessibility :

* e.g. for elderly, children and wheelchair residents (turning circle)
* for visible handicapped
* for walking handicapped : thresholds and obstacles

\* Safety :

 - prevention of accidents in the house and living environment

* fysical : stairs, windows, glass walls
* social : lighting, no dark spots
* traffic : safe crossings and zebra-paths

\* Health and comfort

* sufficient ventilation and isolation, fresh air, light, heating, airconditioning
* no trouble with noise, moist, damp, draught, too much cold and heat

\* Maintenance and hygienical friendly :

* washing windows inside/outside, house-cleaning, waste disposal

 \* Sustainability :

 - sustainable buiding materials, recyling, cradle to cradle

With the above criteria, VAC’s look after the designs and lay-outs of houses that are going to be built.

They make an imaginairy “WALKING-TOUR THROUGH THE HOUSE”.

They assess the :

\* position of the hous(es) vis a vis he sun, the wind, rain, traffic, etc.

\* isolation for warmth and cold, the ventilation.

\* usability/functionality and surface of the rooms,

\* use of materials,

\* light-plans, and inhouse-safety regarding electrical/gas connections,

\* the doors : logic way of opening, inside and outside, closet-doors

(to the right or to the left)

\* space for playing by children,

\* working space for occupants.

Rooms : in general : ventilation, space to walk and move. Logical lines to walk from one room to the others, no obstacles

- Living room : lay-out : logic space for table, chairs, sufficient upboard- space, space to walk and move around.

- Sleeping room : logic space to put a bed(s), closets to store, etc.

- Kitchen ; logic layout for stove and sink (e.g. no refrigerator/freezer at the sunny side of a wall), sufficient space to store kitchen-equipment and food, storing of waste, washing and drying of laundry, etc

- Sanitary : space to wash and shower, separate toilet, etc.

The same USERS CRITERIA are used when making an imaginairy “WALKING-TOUR THROUGH THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT” assessing neighbourhood and district plans, designs and lay-outs :

\* How is the position of the houses within a district

\* How is the **infrastructure** of the district regarding the functions of the facilities, the traffic safety and the social safety.

There should be attention to the following items :

Auto-highways, bridges, tunnels, foothpaths and cyclepaths, waterbasins, parcs, lighting, play-grounds for little/older children, and local public transport.

\* How **attainable** , within easy reach, are facilities like schools, shops, the market, playgrounds for children, the communitycenter, the healthcenter, the workplace, public transport, the church, the mosque, the city-center, sport- and recreational areas.

\* How is the **safety,**  in the neighbourhood, both physicly and social, in the district, on the way to the workplace, on the way to the schools both when walking and cycling and also when pushing a pram, when walking with crutches or wheelchair.

Is there sufficient lighting for safety in tunnels. What about the timing of trafficlights at a pedestrian crossing near an elderly home or hospital.

The above activities make women’s groups useful and

indispensable, when fulfilling the wish to become a

 Women Friendly City.

## Present and future

Everyone, both in the global North and in the global South, lives locally, in a neighbourhood, within a city or village, that means, at grassroots level, and there is no-one who lives globally, except only in fantasy movies.

Besides working and thinking nationally and/or globally, all of you live in a communitiy, so you have local knowledge and experience, especially the women among you.

Local women living in neighbourhoods and communities have through their daily experiences, the knowledge on what is needed and what are women’s priorities, and ,very important, what are the solutions they already found to improve their situations, mainly at local level.

But the challenge is, to forward these issues from the bottom-up and to bring them to different decision-making levels.

Trough an effective interaction between local and national levels and vice-versa, many opportunities to improve the policies can be developed. E.g. around safeties in communities, healthy environments, safe food production and selling, basic services, clean water and sanitation.

This is where National Councils of Women (who are member of the ICW) can/should jump in, and engage and partner with those local/grassroots women groups, and, together lobby and influence the local, provincial and national politicians and decision-makers.

On your own it is difficult, but together and organised you are strong.

Do not think or say this is not possible or can happen, or does not help us. Do not act as a victim: but say: yes we can, yes we will.

Think positive, you have nothing to lose.

Another option is to engage together with similar local groups, forming a local grassroots women network and even nationally and you might become a member of a greater global network like the National Council of Turkish Women, who is a member of the International Council of Women (ICW) , who is a member of the Huairou Commission, who works for local-to-national organised women’s groups.

Like ICW, the Huairou Commission is a global umbrella organization, with mainly local organised women’s groups in more than 50 countries in the world, also in Turkey.

I have the honour to represent both global organisations.

And can give you more information on what those global organisations can mean to you. (look at the websites below)

Q + A.

Thank you for your attention.

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www.icw-cif.com

www.huairou.org

www.unhabitat.org