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# SUM MAR IES!

## WOMEN IN NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISM

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# Women In Neighborhood Activism

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- **Gender plays an important role in politics;** it is associated with a spectrum of constraints and opportunities.
- **Neighborhood and community activism is especially favorable to women’s engagement:** in this area, the boundaries between public and private life blur, and women feel more confident and appropriate in the traditionally “female” domains of home and community life.
- **Women are more likely to act as “bridge leaders”**, building social capital and facilitating social ties in the community, as opposed to building power and personal political reputations.

## Gender and neighborhood politics: a zone of opportunity?

Historically, men have been the “default” political actors: being a man was a primary condition for voting rights, public leadership positions, and even knowledge and expertise. Women had to fight to acquire these formal rights, and in many countries worldwide, legal gender equality still has not been fully achieved. However, even in countries where the rights of women and men are formally equal, various cultural mechanisms limiting women’s public engagement and legitimacy are still at play. These mechanisms shape what members of society, including women themselves, expect from women and how these expectations are enforced.

However, one domain stands out from the point of view of gender and politics. Neighborhood and community activism is a “gray zone” where the boundaries between public and private life blur (Martin 2002). Solving local problems and improving the quality of life in a neighborhood are political tasks immediately connected to people’s private lives; neighborhood issues may also be framed in terms of caring and community building, tasks traditionally associated with women.

**Traditionalist gender ideologies** assign women the roles of caregivers (as opposed to, for example, to those of active breadwinners), prescribe them certain emotions as gender-appropriate (women can express fear or concern for their loved ones, whereas men are expected to demonstrate only “powerful” emotions, such as outrage and pride), and place them in the private sphere of home and family as opposed to public life and social visibility (Culley and Angelique 2003; Luhtakallio 2012). Even in societies praising themselves on gender equality, female leaders and politicians are especially scrutinized and often face public backlash when they don’t seem to comply with these gendered expectations.

## A study of women’s mobilization against urban renewal in Moscow

In 2017–2019, I conducted a qualitative study (involving interviews, observations, and digital ethnography) of an urban renewal controversy in Moscow, known as the “Renovation” program. This program suggested demolishing thousands of socialist-era apartment buildings across the city and relocating their residents into new high-rises. The proposal sparked a controversy: some residents supported the relocations, while others ardently opposed the idea. Both sides mobilized to convince their neighbors to support or oppose the inclusion of their buildings in the demolition lists.

At first, gender was not my main focus in this study. However, I quickly realized that this mobilization had a distinct gendered profile. Most of the activists were women, and some even used their unique “female” connection to their homes as a justification for activism, which for many was the first such experience in their lives.

## Opportunities and constraints for women's activism at the neighborhood level

I argue that one of the cultural mechanisms shaping women's involvement in public life is the demarcation of certain spheres of life as "female:" while the labor market and public politics have historically been associated with male actors, caregiving and housing were symbolically associated with femininity, "a particular province of women" (Gittell and Shtob 2012). Still, this opens up an opportunity: women may feel that political mobilization in response to a threat to home is gender appropriate.

Women's position in the social fabric of their neighborhoods (their daily activities such as shopping, watching over children at playgrounds, etc.) also opens specific gendered opportunities. For example, they are well placed to act as "bridge leaders" (Robnett 1996), meaning that they focus on building and maintaining social ties between neighbors and community members, as opposed to building personal reputations and power (Stall and Stoecker 1998).

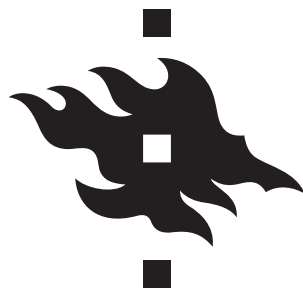
My research has confirmed the important observation in previous studies: **neighborhood activism can be the first step for women's political activities**. They may move on to higher-level political activism after they develop political subjectivities, skills, and confidence (Feldman and Stall 2004; Jupp 2012). Still, **women may face gendered constraints even in this field**: their targets and opponents may be dismissive of women's opinions and actions, see them as "irrational" or "emotional," mistrust their expertise, or negatively respond to women not complying with the traditionalist gender roles (for example, claiming leadership).

### Acknowledgments

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