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**Empowerment through participatory budgeting:  
The case of the Commune 1, in Medellín, Colombia**

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This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## List of Acronyms

PBP	Participatory Budgetary Program
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
PB	Participatory Budgeting
LMB	Local Management Board
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
IACHR	Inter-American Commission of Human Rights
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

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## **Abstract**

There is substantial research that highlights the relative exclusion and lack of voice of women in local government decision-making processes, particularly in the allocation of financial resources, traditionally controlled by men. This is particularly so for women from marginalised communities, who are disadvantaged by power relations prevailing in the intersectionalities of class, ethnicity, caste and sexuality, and perpetuated by gender. These women also often experience and are confronted by social and symbolic processes and practices, as well as power relations in specific contexts that continue to hamper gender equality and their political inclusion. Participatory budgetary programmes (PBP) hold the potential for grassroots women to be involved in the priority setting and decision-making processes regarding the allocation of financial resources in local government. This research explores and analyses the participation, empowerment (and disempowerment) trajectories of grassroots women involved in the PBP in the Commune 1, in Medellín, Colombia, in a setting of poverty, conflict, cultural, economic and political exclusion, and persistent gender inequalities.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Participation in the decisions that affect one's livelihood can be argued as key to promoting individual and group empowerment in economic, social and political fields. Participatory Budgeting Programmes provide such a space for the inclusion of the less powerful in society, such as women from marginalised groups. However, the nature of their involvement in these processes, including the challenges they face and overcome, provides greater knowledge into how PBP could influence a more inclusive and democratic development. Through the systematization of women's different trajectories of empowerment, the paper gives insights on ways of increasing women's empowerment in development planning. Moreover, as argued by León (1997: 14), it is indispensable for the Latin American Women's Movement to have a clearer understanding of the particularities of the processes of empowerment and disempowerment, and the conditions in which they take place.

## **Keywords**

Empowerment (disempowerment), participation, participatory budgets, trajectories, local governance, local planning.



# Chapter 1 Participatory Budgeting in Medellín, Colombia.

## Context and development

This chapter introduces the research framework, including its main objectives, research questions and contextual background for the Participatory Budgeting Program (PBP) in the Commune 1, finalizing with a descriptions of the methodology, the case study it-self and the women interviewed.

### Introduction

Local spaces are complex cultural constructions in which different social relations are established. Latin-American cities, as Massolo (2003: 39) puts it, have ‘developed’ in a context characterized by violence, social inequalities, patriarchal structures, poverty, social exclusion, inefficacy and corruption in politics and public services. In this setting, women, particularly those whose lives are disadvantaged through complex intersecting power inequalities based on class, ethnicity and others, are often not involved in the decisions regarding the public distribution of resources. Participatory Budgeting processes, emphasising the involvement of grassroots and marginalized groups, have been widely propagated as means to allow the voices of marginalised groups to be heard in Municipal resource allocation processes, and as a promise for women from these groups to influence the priorities, and, in doing so, to experience political and social empowerment. However, their inclusion and participation in these processes is anything but simple, as “a number of preconditions exist for entry into participatory institutions” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007: 6). This Research Paper explores over a 12-year period, between the creation of the program, in 2004, and a significant change in the regulations of the program, in 2016,<sup>1</sup> the influence of Participatory Budgeting Processes on women’s trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment. These trajectories are explored on the lines of marginalisation, poverty and violence, and the ways in which women have negotiated their power in these participatory spaces.

The research focuses on the case of the Commune 1, the area with the worse quality of life indicators in the city of Medellín, Colombia. According to the most recent Census (Alcaldía de Medellín 2005: 6), the Commune 1, located in the North East part of the city, has a population of approximately 130.369. It is one of the youngest communes in the city, established in the 1950s, and it is the area with the lowest quality of life in Medellín, including repetitive disadvantages in aspects such as rates of unemployment and informality, coverage in pensions and habitability conditions (Alcaldía de Medellín 2017: 19). During the 70s, 80s and 90s, amid industrial crises, narco-trafficking and guerrilla groups boom in Medellín, civic movements emerged claiming

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<sup>1</sup> Modification based on allegations by the local government of illegal and inadequate use of the resources with no contribution to the development of the city. The modification in the regulation was massively rejected by the communities involved in the program, for diminishing people’s power and participation and for taking steps backwards in the advances of participatory democracy, altering significantly the previous structures and functioning of the program, by eliminating the figure of community delegates and replacing it with a much smaller number of community representatives.

greater citizen's power (Uran 2009: 177). With increasing unemployment rates, criminality in the neighbourhoods and narco-trafficking violence, the city experienced in the year 1991 its highest murder rates (2009: 178). As a response, by the mid-90s, social and communitarian organizations started claiming for a pacifist solution to the armed conflict, political decentralization, citizens' participation and for strengthening efforts of local planning through the implementation of participatory budgeting (2009: 179).

By the year 2004, the political movement '*Compromiso Ciudadano*' ('Citizen's Commitment'), formed by citizens' movements, private sector organizations, academic and cultural networks, and unions, won the Mayor elections in Medellín (2009: 180). With Sergio Fajardo as its candidate, maintaining the objective of fighting corruption in the local government (2009: 180). His governing plan included the Program of Local Planning and Participatory Budgeting, consisting on citizens' allocation of at least 5% of the local budget. Its main objective was "strengthening citizens' participation, potentiating communities' capacities to influence the government decisions and local budget, contributing to the generation of a new model of public management that will result in greater democracy and sustainable development for the city" (2009: 180). Recently, the ODI applauded the city of Medellín as a pioneering example of a post-Washington consensus 'local development state' model of economic development (Bateman et al 2011), however, the historical past of the city and a strongly unequal local context, still make some of the groups in it deeply vulnerable to exclusion from political participation and decision-making processes at the local level.

In spite of prevailing inequalities including those based on gender, women in Medellín have been involved in the Participatory Budgeting Program. They have gained space in the political arena, and have increasingly claimed their right to participate, to decide on their lives and on the issues that affect them. Women are attending the Participatory Budgeting Program deliberation and decision-making processes in massive numbers. According to a press release of the local government, in 2016, 59% of the community delegates of the PBP were women (1.396), and 68.190 women voted on the elections (Alcaldía de Medellín 2016: 1-2). The local government qualified this unprecedented participation of women as "a proof of their empowerment" (2016: 1-2).

## **The Commune 1, Medellín, Colombia: Historical and Contextual Background for the PBP**

As noted in the introduction, the history of Commune 1 is marked by violence and exclusion. Rural areas around the city of Medellín have continuously been affected by the historic prevalence of conflicts related to "colonization, exploitation of resources, concentration of the land, political violence, presence of the banana industry and presence of illegal armed actors fighting for control over the land" (Jaramillo et al 2004: 25). This constant conflict resulted in the displacement of thousands of rural dwellers from their homes, and their arrival into the urban centres, which turned into shelters for this internally displaced rural population<sup>2</sup> (2004: 8). The newcomers created 'irregular settlements', pejoratively referred to as 'subnormal' (2004: 30), in the north east and north west slopes of the city, including in the territory known today as the Commune 1. Their presence was considered by the elites of the city as a threat to "public order,

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<sup>2</sup> "3 million people have abandoned their homes due to internal war in Colombia" (Jaramillo *et al* 2004: 13).

to the image of the city as an epicentre of progress, and to the preservation of the good moral and customs” (2004: 32). In an attempt to prevent the creation of more pirate settlements, the national government issued the Law 66 de 1968, “explicitly forbidding the local government from providing infrastructure to the irregular settlements located outside of the urban perimeter” (2004: 26). This decision, far from decreasing the arrival of people to the cities, (2004: 26), created bigger difficulties in which women, who often had the caring responsibilities of their families, were particularly negatively affected<sup>3</sup>.

The period between the 80s and 90s was one of the most difficult ones for the city due the rise of drugs related violence and murders, and the neighbourhoods in the Commune 1 were particularly affected by the consequences of this urban violence (Hajdarowicz 2018: 8). This situation increased the fear of the ‘good citizens’ towards the communes due to its association with crime and violence (Jaramillo *et al* 2004: 33). The newcomers struggled in a city that was not a safe shelter for them; with increasing unemployment and informality, persistent violence led to further stigmatization (2004: 36-39). The waves of migration have decreased, but the arrival of internally displaced population has not completely stopped, and the inhabitants of the Commune 1 continue facing threats and exclusion.

Nowadays, the Commune is inhabited (mainly) by first and second generation internally displaced people and people who migrated from rural areas looking for better opportunities. According to the projections of the 2005 Census, women constitute 52% of the population in the Commune, including Afro-Colombians (2,21%), indigenous (0,10%), white-mestizas (96,67%), and others (1,02%) (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015a: 42). Research conducted by the NGO ‘IKALA’ (2013: 9), shows that women in the Commune have very few to no income generation opportunities; most of them work in (low) paid and unpaid reproductive labour. Women themselves complain of lack of opportunities to access advanced education. Additionally, women face situations that affect their mental, physical and social well-being, such as gender based violence, traditional sexist family practices, and control and subordination to their partners (IKALA 2013: 9).

## **Research Objective and Research Questions:**

The overall objective is to contribute to knowledge on processes of women’s empowerment through their involvement in participatory governance spaces at the local level. Guided by the understanding of empowerment which is “far more complex than reducing dimensions of women’s experience to a set of measurable indicators” (Cornwall 2016: 343). This paper aims to reflect critically on the role of women in such spaces, as deeply informed by gender, race, class, sexuality, among other imaginaries and power relations, as well as on women’s trajectories of participation and empowerment, through their involvement in the PBP, specifically in the context of the Commune 1, in Medellín, Colombia.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Committee that monitors the compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), expressed its concern about the widespread violence in Colombia and its impact on women, particularly female heads of households, who were forced to assume productive and reproductive responsibilities due to displacement” (IACHR 2005: no page).

## **Main research question:**

How has the involvement of grassroots women in Participatory Budgeting Processes influenced their trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment in the Commune 1, in Medellín, Colombia?

## **Secondary research questions:**

1. How have gender, racial, sexual and class imaginaries and power relations informed and influenced the participation, empowerment and disempowerment of grass-roots women within the Participatory Budgeting Program?
2. How have women negotiated the terms of their participation within the PBP program?
3. What are the broader lessons for the promotion of grassroots women's participation and empowerment in local government spaces?

## **Justification of the study**

As more and more countries start dealing with decentralization, effective political participation of women and their empowerment at local levels of governance become increasingly important. Women's "persistent and pervasive exclusion from the realms of government" (Pateman 1970: 210 as cited in Goldenberg 2008: 444) constitutes a great threat to actual and deep democracy. Poor women and women of colour particularly face great disadvantage, and are unlikely to participate in deliberative and decision-making spaces effectively, to include their preferences and concerns in the local planning agenda (2008: 444). While grassroots women are continuously resisting exclusion from the political sphere, they often carry out most of the community development work. In this sense, analysing the transformative potential of the participatory budgeting program in the city of Medellín, and its capacity to influence grass-roots women's participation and empowerment, is enormously pertinent to contribute to debates on participatory models of governance and on inclusion of historically excluded groups into the public and political spheres. This research can serve as an important guide for strengthening Medellín's participatory budgeting program, so that it better moves towards transforming power relations and better include women by transversally incorporating a gender equality approach.

## **PBP in Medellín: Functioning and structures<sup>4</sup>**

### **Governmental actors**

The local government is in charge of coordinating the process, through the Participation Secretariat and the Administrative Planning Department. **The Local Management Board (LMB)**, a public corporation democratically elected, is in charge for politically representing the inhabitants of the communes, acting as links between the municipality and the citizens.

### **Social actors**

The neighbourhood delegates are democratically elected citizens who represent the collective interests of their neighbourhoods in the PBP. Delegates can also be representatives of social organizations of the commune, or representatives of different sections of society. Their responsibilities include to take part on the thematic commissions (e.g. Health Commission), to support the diagnosis of the situation of their neighbourhoods and communities. To agree on alternative solutions for project's formulation, and to participate in the prioritization of the projects.

### **Stages of the PBP process:**

Each year, every commune receives a percentage of the 5% city budget destined to PBP. In a first stage, delegates are elected, trained and appointed. Subsequently, each delegate and LMB member has to choose which commission they want to be a part of. Within every commission, delegates elaborate solution proposals for the commune's problems, formulate projects, with the technical advice of the municipality, and prioritize them, through a process in which all delegates and LMB members vote. Lastly, the LMB approves the decisions made and submits the projects and budgets to the City Council for its approval.

## **Methodology**

This paper critically reflects on existing relevant literature, using available quantitative data, and relying on qualitative data gathered from secondary sources, but mainly from interviewing 14 women from the Commune 1, in Medellín, Colombia, who have been involved in the Participatory Budgeting Program, to analyse how such involvement has influenced their trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment. Additionally, 2 interviews with public servants were conducted, to fill up the gaps of unavailable information in existing literature and program documents. The truthfulness of the research material (transcripts of the interviews) was verified with the respondents in follow-up dialogues. The methods used to collect and generate data that would not only provide a broad understanding of large-scale configurations of

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<sup>4</sup> (Sections translated into English by the researcher, from the Regulation Document of the PBP. ABC, Local Planning a Participatory Budgeting, Municipality of Medellín, 2015b).

women's experiences, but would allow a deeper vision and comprehension of how these experiences and trajectories are developed and transformed. The research focuses on women's 'trajectories', as a useful and analytical mean to unpack and reflect on the nature of their participation in the PBP.

## **Case Study approach**

The research goes in depth into the single case study of the PBP and its influence on women's trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment, analysed as a single observation, consisting on grassroots marginalized women who have taken part on the PBP in the Commune 1, through the variables of participation and empowerment. In that sense, the case is drawn from a larger population of cases, which are other PBPs in other municipalities (local level), and its relationship (X<sub>1</sub>Y) with other grassroots women (individual level). At the same time, working through in-depth interviews allowed me to examine details that would be impossible to grasp through a survey, tracing causal mechanisms with sensitivity to the local context. This constitutes a conscious research decision of depth instead of breadth (intensity – extensity trade off) (Gerring 2007: 48).

## **The interviewed women:**

In August 2018, 14 interviews were conducted with grassroots women from the Commune 1, generating over 15 hours of individual interviews. The interviewed women ages ranged between 37 and 63 years old. Two of them self-recognized as Afro-Colombians and the rest as white-mestizo. They came from different backgrounds in terms of place of origin, marital status, levels of education, sexual orientation, intra-household arrangements, among others. Ten of them had advanced education degrees, out of which two were professionals and the other eight had technical or skills degrees. All of them had participated in the PBP between 2004 and 2018, as Elected Local Management Board (LMB) members, or as Delegates representing different neighbourhoods, social organizations, or sections of the society in the Commune.

Eight of them described their main occupation as being community leaders, identifying as well as housewives or as taking part of the informal economy. Only three of them were employees at different companies, two of which had low-paid jobs. Twelve of them considered themselves the head of their households, and only two expressed to share the headship with their partners. Most of them had experience physical and structural violence, and were living in crowded quarters; half of them shared their houses with over four and up to seven more people. Half of them arrived to the commune escaping violence in the rural areas. The other half arrived to the commune looking for opportunities in the city; the new neighbourhoods, offered the possibility for landless families to build their own houses, through land appropriation.

Nine out of fourteen women had been involved in the program since it first began in 2004. Half of them had their first engagement with community participation with the PBP. The other half had other experiences before, mostly related to church, youth and elderly groups. Eleven of them were elected as neighbourhood delegates. The remaining three were organization delegates, out of which two were representatives of women's organizations. Only three women got to be members of the LMB, one of which got appointed after one male resigned. Two of them got to coordinate a thematic commission within the PBP. Ten had been part of the Health and Social Protection Commission, four had been part of the Security Commission, and three had been part of the Culture Commission and three of the Environmental commission. None of them had

taken part in the Public Infrastructure Commission, and only two had taken part in the Economic Development Commission.

In addition to being delegates and LMB members, these women also performed as secretaries of the commissions, or were hired as community links for different prioritized projects. Most of them were now part of social organizations in their territory, but only half of them were members of women’s organizations. Some of the organizations main concerns were strategic women struggles; for instance, women’s empowerment, women’s awareness on gender inequality issues and women’s rights, or transformation of gender traditional perspectives. Other organizations have focused on practical needs of women. One of the interviewed women created an organization to arrange community day cares to support women who are heads of their households and need to leave their children during the day to go to work. “Women and mostly women heads of household, have very little opportunities to go out and get a job, because they’re responsible for taking care of their children, so we had an initiative to support each other, while some are going out for work, other are helping taking care of their children”. \*

### Analytical Framework

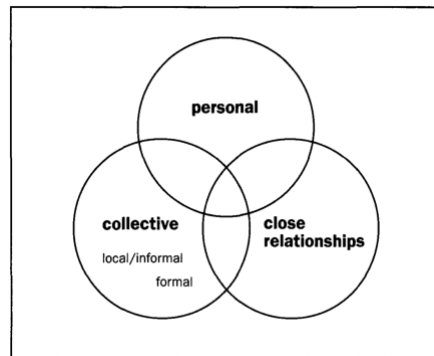
This Research is based on the understanding that empowerment is a deeply complex process, and the analysis of women’s trajectories needs to be embedded in three dimensions through which empowerment operates (personal, relational and collective). To this extent, Rowlands framework given below, has guided the analysis, taking into account not only perceptible expressions of power, but also internalised oppression as barriers for women to exercise power effectively (Rowlands 1997: 13).

**Table 1.1**  
**The dimensions of empowerment**

<p><i>The dimensions of empowerment</i></p> <p>How is empowerment experienced and demonstrated? This wider picture shows empowerment to be operating within three dimensions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>personal:</b> developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression</li><li>• <b>relational:</b> developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it</li><li>• <b>collective:</b> where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on co-operation rather than competition. Collective action may be locally focused — for example, groups acting at village or neighbourhood level — or be more institutionalised, such as the activities of national networks or the formal procedures of the United Nations.</li></ul>
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Source: Rowlands, J. (1997: 13) Questioning empowerment: working with women in Honduras. London: Oxfam.

**Figure 1.1**  
**The three dimensions of empowerment**



Source: Rowlands, J. (1997: 14) *Questioning empowerment: working with women in Honduras*. London: Oxfam.

### **Unravelling the meaning of ‘trajectories’:**

Exploring ‘trajectories’ focuses on women’s **lived experiences** of participation, empowerment and disempowerment, and how those experiences have been influenced by their involvement in the PBP processes. These trajectories reflect, as Cornwall puts it, a journey that women can transit alone or with others, through environments that may be filled with obstacles, with numerous side-routes and dead-ends, new views, expanding horizons, increasing possibilities and external actors that can be obstacles, or can serve as a support throughout the journey, as bridges or sign-posts (Cornwall 2016: 345). All the details that accompanied women’s journeys of participation, empowerment and disempowerment, will constitute the data that will enable us to better understand the hidden paths that women have taken and that are completely out of view in current analysis of participatory governance spaces and its influence on women.

### **Standpoint and positionality:**

As a feminist research, this paper required the inclusion of what Harding refers to as “strong reflexivity” (Harding 1993: 69), in which the researcher openly acknowledges, is aware and reflects on the various ways in which their positionality, personal experiences, emotions and worldviews can influence the course of their research, and serve either as hindrance or as a resource to achieve the research goals (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007: 12–17). I start this research from the acknowledgement that women are not a singular coherent group and their oppression should not only be understood in opposition to men (Mohanty 1988: 350). Women’s situation in the Commune 1 is not simply the one of helpless victims of men. A relevant concern of my research was not to appropriate their complex experiences and struggles (1988: 335), acknowledging that power is exercised in the process of producing knowledge on the experiences of our sisters, who face different kinds of oppressions than I do.

I am a young feminist woman, white-mestizo, middle-class and professional. My skin colour puts me in a privileged position in a city where, due to the colonial legacy, whiteness is highly appreciated over ‘darker’ complexions. My middle class position implies the possibility to grow



up taking education for granted and without major concerns about where the next meal is coming from. This socio-economic position also allowed me to be distanced from the violent outbreaks in my city, and from experiencing any major consequence of the armed conflict myself. In terms of education, I am part of a small 22% of the Colombian population who holds a university degree (OECD, 2018, no page), which translates into higher opportunities to secure a well-paid decent job.

In 2014, 1007 women were murdered in Colombia, and 37.881 cases of violence against women where the perpetrator was their intimate partners were denounced. Even though I am not exempt of suffering the consequences of gender discrimination and gender inequality, my different positions intersect and contribute to how I experience being a woman in my country and in my city. In this sense, my feminist ideology, is not only rooted in my direct struggles and experiences as a woman, but in the issues and concerns of other women who experience oppression in significantly different degrees, and in my awareness of racist, colonialist, sexist and homophobic practices in my environment.

My interest in the topic of my research derives from the realization of the lack of truthful representation and reflection of women's perspectives and experiences within research related to participatory governance spaces. After a careful review of the scholarship related to the PBP in the city of Medellín, it was clear that women's lived experiences had mostly been left out. Moreover, my interest in undertaking this research resulted from my personal relationship with the interviewees, with whom I worked for 2 years as part of a state program. Their everyday fights, strength and resilience in such an adverse context struck me. Some of them remain close to me since then, however, it is important to be aware that a main important power relation crossed our closeness: state representative/community, in addition to many others.

While conducting the interviews, my position as a woman allowed the interviewees to feel comfortable narrating their experiences with men within the PBP. My feminist perspective and solidarity towards them probably influenced their openness to share their experiences from a similar perspective. However, my educational level and class backgrounds were a hindrance at various points, and distanced me from the interviewees. For instance, when enquiring about their educational level, many of them appeared uncomfortable about revealing their own, and answered with clear embarrassment. Moreover, some of the interviewed women were single mothers, and did not feel comfortable sharing their marital status with me. My position as a feminist could have also had problematic implications in my analysis of their interviews, as I was more likely to depict and spot gender-based oppressions, even when these were not mentioned or identified as such by the interviewees.

## **Final remarks:**

- Maintaining a reciprocal and transparent relationship with the participants, based on dialogue and on principles of self-determination was essential to my research. All participants were recognized and valued as “equal contributors to the research project” (Minkler 2004: 684).
- No attempts to question the truthfulness or the validity of their stories, perspectives and analysis of their own experiences was made, with the main aim of representing their experiences as understood by them.
- Some of the interviewed women were strongly against the change in the regulations of the PBP in 2016. This position might have influenced their answers, as they might have avoided being too critical about the experiences within the program in the last 12 years and about the malfunctions of the process during that period, to defend their position.

## Potential and Limitations

There has been little academic research so far on gender issues and the PBP in the city of Medellín. In the year 2013, the Polish researcher Inga Hajdarowicz studied the PBP in Medellín, to understand how “local processes of participatory democracy contribute to women’s empowerment” (Hajdarowicz 2018: 1). Her agency-focused approach to empowerment however ignored the need for “explicit consideration of structural inequalities that affect entire social groups” (Luttrell and Quiroz 2009: 9). Understanding empowerment exclusively from an agency perspective, places emphasis on self-esteem without giving attention to the political dimension of empowerment. This Research Paper analyses women’s empowerment by taking into account a combination of both, agency and structures, and an understanding of power relations as complex, operating everywhere in many different forms, and impossible to reduce to a set of categories. Such an approach and research has not been done so far.

A limitation of the research is that it deals with historically specific complex of gender power relations, and it could be difficult to generalise on the potential PBP as a tool of women’s empowerment in other contexts.

## Chapter Overview

This research paper is structured into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction, presenting the research main objectives, questions, contextual background and methodology. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the different theoretical approaches, perspectives and debates that served as a framework to guide the analysis on women’s trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment in participatory budgetary processes, specifically through the lens of the concepts of participation and empowerment, with a post-development focus. Chapter 3 and 4 analyse the collected data, in the light of the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 focuses on the particularities of women’s participation in the PBP, exploring and analysing their trajectories in this regard, including their interactions, struggles, negotiations and challenges, in the light of theorization on participation, participatory budgeting processes and the role of women in local governance spaces. Closely related, Chapter 4 explores further the influence of the PBP on women’s trajectories of empowerment, in the light of the reviewed literature on the matter, particularly analysed through Rowland’s framework of the different dimensions of empowerment. The conclusion takes into consideration the category of ‘trajectories’, to conclude on the participatory budgeting programs influence on women’s journeys of participation and empowerment. All citations taken from the interviews conducted for this research are marked with an asterisk in the text. The participant’s identity will be kept anonymous, to avoid any negative consequences for them. All interviews were conducted in August 2018, in the Commune 1 in Medellín, Colombia.

## **Chapter 2 Participation, participatory governance spaces and women's empowerment: a theoretical framework**

This chapter aims to shed some light into the different theoretical approaches and debates that served as a framework to guide the analysis on women's trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment in participatory budgetary processes. The initial part of the chapter is devoted to understanding the evolution and different perspectives on Participatory Budgets. Followed by a discussion on the concept of community participation, including its origins, meanings and main contestations, paying special attention to the considerations of the concept from a post-development perspective. Subsequently, the concept of women's empowerment is explored, including aspects such as its history, evolution, meanings and contestations, emphasizing again on post-development perspectives of the concept. Lastly, a brief section is dedicated to theorization on the role of women in local governance spaces.

### **Participatory Budgeting: a review of its history, potential and limitations for women's empowerment**

Participatory budgeting strategies have emerged in different parts of the world as an innovative practice to include marginalized and underserved individuals in urban governance processes (Wampler, 2010: 1). The first of these initiatives appeared in Brazil, in a post-dictatorship context, with the idea of developing new institutions to bring the benefits of democracy to the people in the lower socioeconomic strata. It originated in the city of Porto Alegre in 1989, and since then, this it has been implemented in more than twenty countries (2010: 6). Participatory Budgeting is a practice of participatory democracy where citizens can “debate and decide on urban public investments and spending priorities” (Brugman 2017: 4), with the goal of guaranteeing state accountability and empowering the marginalized. It is believed to be an alternative to neoliberal planning of development logics, and is considered an effective tool for the transformation of power relations (2017: 4).

Participatory budgets have been adopted in recent contexts to involve the ideas and opinions of those who are conventionally not taken into account in traditional government budgets. Experiments in participatory budgets have shown that these have been important in identifying and considering the actual needs of the marginalised groups in the allocation of funds. At the same time, participatory budgeting is also believed to have promoted deeper democratic engagement with grassroots groups, by “allowing them to voice their priorities and needs, providing them equal opportunities to influence the decisions that affect their lives” (Akbulut 2012: 1134).

However, although in theory the PBP should guarantee equitable development, its operationalization can be problematic and its success is questionable (Akbulut 2012: 1134). There is “increasing recognition that such mechanisms might fail in ensuring effective participation of all stakeholders and, consequently, be prone to (re)producing inequalities and remaining ineffective” (2012: 1133). Local communities are fragmented along different axes of inequalities and not all community members receive equal benefits, opportunities and challenges when participating in these processes. The capacity of particular groups to effectively participate in local decision-making spaces is shaped by “interacting local inequalities” (2012: 1133). Moreover, the first experiments of Participatory Budgeting might have carried a more revolutionary tone, as

they were a response by social movements to local power inequalities, aiming to “establish conditions that allow them greater autonomy over decisions affecting their lives” (Scuderi 2013: 5).

Post-development theories have analysed the PBP as another tool within the development apparatus, which loses its transformative potential when institutionalized, depoliticizing grassroots’ participation amid the mainstream development scenario. Authors from this perspective, have suggested that community participation is “a manipulated and tele-guided” (Sachs 1992: 116) process, disembedded from the socio-cultural roots which gave birth to it, reduced to taking part in the aims of determined economic interests or for politicians’ own ends (1992: 120). Theorization on Participatory Budgeting processes points then into two opposing directions. On one hand, as a possible form of ‘counterhegemonic globalization’ (de Sousa Santos 2005: 28) and resistance to social exclusion, meant for the redistribution of local resources in favour of vulnerable social groups. On the other hand, as a tool to achieve specific developmental goals and an institutionalization of direct, deep and participatory democracy, “inconsistent with grassroots democracy and part of a state strategy to co-opt and undermine neighbourhood associations” (Ganuza 2005 as cited by Heller 2015: 126).

According to some, Participatory budgeting today refers to “very different ideas and actions in different settings” (Heller 2015: 128). The language of its regulations have changed, as noted by Heller, “moving away from social justice and social transformation” (2015: 122) to “a mechanism to assign public resources in a just, rational, efficient, effective, and transparent manner, which strengthens the relationship between state and civil society” (2015: 122). Its meaning has changed and in some cases, it has lost its empowering potential. The risk that comes with the PBP institutionalization as an official government policy, as critics sustain it, consist on it gradually losing its original transformative purpose. It is becoming a simple collection of expenditure options or voting processes to continue advancing a neoliberal agenda that renders resources distribution even more inequitable. Far from destabilizing the status quo, it is becoming as a central tool for running government effectively and for improving development outcomes. This is, Participatory Budgeting as the means to achieve an end, rather than as a valuable process in itself.

## **Women’s Empowerment and Participatory Budgeting**

Many development agencies have advanced different frameworks to measure the degrees of women’s empowerment at different levels and domains, achieved through their interventions (World Bank, UN, Oxfam). These approaches rely on different understandings of power and empowerment, but most of the frameworks available are based on the assumption that empowerment is something that “can be done to or for someone else” (Cornwall 2016: 344), focusing on the instrumental benefits of women’s empowerment for development (2016: 344), and overemphasising on ‘assets’ and ‘opportunity structures’ (World Bank 2016).

Research has been conducted on Participatory Budgeting and gender, dealing with issues such as: women’s inclusion in this form of public finance; gender inequalities between men and women’s engagement in PB processes; obstacles for women’s participation in the latter (McNulty 2015: 1), “subjective identity transformations” (Walker 2013: 199) of women taking part in programs of participatory budgeting. How grassroots women “rearrange their positional identities along the lines of social power relations and are empower to change their political practices” (2013: 199). Along with the research on “the importance of embodied political practices and locally situated notions of male and female bodies” in this process (2013: 199).

On analysis of power and empowerment, Jo Rowlands notes that avoiding efforts to discussing power is the “fundamental weakness of the literature on women and development” (Rowlands 1997: V). She promotes a more specific use of the concept of empowerment and offers a framework for the categorisation of power, differentiating four types of power relations. Her four types of power relations are: (power over, as the capability to influence and coerce; power to, as the capability to organise and change existing orders; power with, as the power exercised from collective action; and power within, as the power coming from individual consciousness (1997: 13)). Her three different dimensions of empowerment are (personal, as “a sense of self confidence for undoing the effects of internalised oppression”; relational, as “developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it”; and collective, as “individuals working together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone” (1997: 15)). These ideas have influenced, as it will be discussed later, important frameworks for analysing women’s empowerment through PBPs.

Moreover, Andrea Cornwall (2016) has carried out research analysing women’s empowerment. Examining the cases of more than 60 countries to understand the effectiveness of development interventions for women in enhancing their power, rights and agency, Cornwall used quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand women’s experiences of empowerment and what supported them in their change process. Cornwall’s work is particularly useful for my research, as it constitutes a critical analysis on women’s experiences and journeys of empowerment, without reducing its different dimensions to simplistic categories (2016: 7).

## **Community participation: history, potential and contestations**

The development industry has recently placed special focus on community participation, with a vast variety of understandings of the concept that result in clear operational differences in development initiatives. During the 80’s, most of the fiascos of the development project were accredited to the fact that the communities that were targeted for interventions, were being excluded of the design and implementation of the projects. Romantic understandings of community participation have widespread in development discussion, assumed fundamentally good and connoting the best of intentions, promoted for numerous noble purposes, and “permeated with lofty sentiments” (Botes 2000: 41). However, the debate on participation raises a number of questions. Are development agents truly keen to share with communities their decision-making power? (Berner and Philips 2005: 18) is community participation simply a device to “deliver development products as soon and as effectively as possible”? (2000: 44), or is participation really an end in itself? (2000: 44).

Participation can be viewed as a process and a result, as an instrument that focuses more on the outcomes, removing any possibility for political mobilization, or as a transformative alternative which can alone be empowering (Luttrell and Quiroz 2009: 5). It can also strengthen organisational capacity and increase participation of traditionally excluded factions in development interventions by enhancing communities’ access to economic means (2009: 5). As argued by Sen, participation, is an end in itself, and it is the “*freedom* to make meaningful choices between various options that is the essence of development and a precondition for personal well-being” (as cited in Berner and Philips 2005: 18). Community participation can also be a strategy to ensure “quality, pertinence and durability of improvements” (2005: 18), and to improve the “*efficiency* and cut costs by mobilizing communities’ own contributions in terms of time and effort” (2005: 18). Participation has been considered an essential ingredient for effective citizenship and for deepening of democracy.

At the same time, community participation has been linked to the reduction of state responsibilities and to the gradual release of the state from its role as rights guarantor (Cornwall and Coelho 2007: 5). This *Self-help* approach to participation has gained force, based on the assumption that community members are active agents of their own development, specialists in “making the most of scarce resources under adverse circumstances” (2005: 19), and with vital information on their needs (2005: 18). This situates empowerment as the key ingredient for communities to counterweigh for the government’s shortcomings (2005: 17) and to “lift themselves out from poverty” (2005: 23). With the excuse of reducing state dependency, of creating policies that solve the actual needs, and of reducing costs, development initiatives have relied on “the capacities, skills and knowledge of low-income communities” (Anzorena et al. 1998: 171, as cited in Berner and Philips 2005: 19). This, together with the argument that “transfers of resources are degrading”, and that the path towards increasing the self-esteem of the communities is “letting them take care of themselves” (2005: 21). In this sense, participation has been masked as a “defence against calls for redistribution” (2005: 19).

Post-development theory appeared as a possible course of action, according to which the current model of development needs to be completely replaced for a new alternative model, based on the belief that it has done more harm than good, excluding the “knowledges, voices and concerns of those who paradoxically, was supposed to serve” (Ziai 2007: 20). Post-developmentalists emphasize on the need of “an era in which development is no longer the central organizing principle of social life” (Escobar 1991, as cited in Ziai 2007: 20), on the value of the endogenous, on the essential role of local culture and knowledge to social change, and on local autonomy and independence from the control of external forces (Prosser 2010: 36).

The underlying critique is that that the mainstream development discourses (and industry) have adopted a number of stereotypical politically appealing terminology that fits randomly together, these being empty, amoeba words, with no real content and ‘ideal for manipulative purposes’ (Sachs 1992: 127). As noted by Sachs (1992: 118), governments have become experts in controlling participation, obtaining significant political gains through the facade of participatory intentions. This leads to manipulated forms of participation, in which communities do not necessarily feel coerced, but are actually being led to act within the guides of external actors or forces (1992: 116). Through participation and inclusion, governments generate sentiments of complicity among communities, giving an impression of being sensitive to their problems, inviting them to share their needs and their aspirations, and lowering the tension created by development policies or decisions, in order to lower as well the communities’ resistance to them (1992: 118). Participation meets a political function, offering a source of legitimation to development, with the mask of “empowering the voiceless and the powerless” (1992: 121). As stated by Sachs (1992: 120), participation has been ‘disembedded’ from the socio-cultural roots which gave birth to it, becoming simply a means used for economic growth purposes. The action of participating has been reduced to taking part in the aims of determined economic interests or for politicians’ own ends. There is not much evidence indicating that the implementation of participatory approaches has succeeded in increasing communities’ power. It has contributed instead to “disvaluing the traditional and vernacular forms of power” (1992: 123), replacing them with highly questionable forms of power, only useful to the development apparatus (1992: 123). In any way, participation proves to turn into a manipulative distortion, consisting simply on “a ritual among alienated persons acting as programmed robots” (1992: 128).

## Women's empowerment in the context of feminist scholarship

While the concept of empowerment is widely used in development discourse, there are a number of contradictions and paradoxes in its use, and, as Batliwala puts it, its meaning has been blurred (as cited in León 1997: 3). A number of actors, bearing enormous differences with each other, have used the concept to guide their actions, from “International Agencies, to state agents, fundamentalists, patrons, businesses, community actors from the north and the south, social activists, and women” (1997: 4). Initiatives focused on empowerment have widely spread, with diverse understandings of its meaning: from deeply linked to quantifiable and material forms of progress, to deeply related to well-being and its different dimensions.

The blurred contours of empowerment discourse carry a number of contradictions. The terms empowerment and *'empoderamiento'* are not recent inventions. An important contributor was the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, an advocate of critical pedagogy, who proposed the concept of Popular Education in the 1960s. The author did not refer to the term 'empowerment' itself, but he advanced its meaning through to the notions of emancipation and liberation, suggesting the importance of critical consciousness in knowledge production and in its application to social actions, in order to overcome oppressive structures (Freire 1966). Important differences appear when translating the term to different languages. In the case of Spanish, the term *empoderamiento* implies an understanding of power as something that is delivered by an external actor, to a recipient beneficiary (Luttrell et al. 2009: 2). It is advisable to instead use terms such as *'fortalecimiento'*, *'apoderamiento'*, or *'participación social'*, which better convey the meaning of empowerment in English. The interpretations of the term vary among approaches that rely on structural issues and approaches that rely on agency issues (2009: 2). When talking about agency, reductions of the concept of empowerment to an exercise of individual preference or to the acquisition of assets are common (2009: 2). This approach is part of the discourse of many organizations (e.g. World Bank, IMF), giving little space to address matters related to power inequalities (2009: 2).

According to some critiques, the development rationale is immersed in the aspiration to shape societies, which makes it an interventionist discipline. Its “telling other people what to do in the name of modernisation, nation building, progress, human rights, poverty alleviation, empowerment and participation” (Nederveen 2000: 182). This results in problematic issues related to autonomy, to representation and to “the indignity of representing ‘others’” (2000: 182). According to Sachs (1992: 135), there is something essentially wrong when a particular group determines the need for another group to be empowered. As he puts it, the first group assumes, that the second group has no power, and that they themselves own the secret prescription of power that the second groups urgently needs. However, the second group is not at all powerless. Instead, it holds a different and unrecognized form of power (1992: 135). Even with empowerment and bottom-up decision-making at the top of current development practice, community leaders are only trusted to decide on the future of their communities once they have undertaken trainings to “think and act like development actors” (McGregor 2007: 168). The efforts for capacity building of CSOs and trainings and monitoring of these supposedly participatory processes, all are processes for communities' assimilation of the development mainstream culture, imaginaries and processes (2007: 168). Empowerment initiatives come tied up to 'aid rules' in which local structures, goals, imaginaries and identities are reconfigured in the image of international development, with disastrous homogenizing effects (2007: 168). Some critiques state that the word empowerment works as an excuse for organisations to assure that they are addressing injustice without actually altering any structures that (re)produce these injustices (Fiedrich et al. 2003: 25). Development institutions reduce the meaning of the concept

to what Cornwall (2008: 4) calls 'empowerment lite', including women into the development processes without defying existing power relations and without allowing them to improve their chances for political mobilization for sustainable equality.

People have therefore suggested that 'empowerment' needs to be rescued from the control of the 'saviours to be' in the development sector. It needs to claim its original feminist-revolutionary character, restating its liberating dimension and its relation with collective action and social transformation, "delinking the desire for equity from economic growth and relinking it to community and culture-based notions of well-being" (Sachs 1992: XII). In addition to empowerment-focused interventions, transforming power relations implicates resistance against the current development model, through alternative forms of power such as informal networks against the dominant power machineries (1992: 135). The structural approach to empowerment, is closely related to tackling the causes of disempowerment (the causes of the causes), addressing the disadvantages that have been produced by the influence of social relations of power on people's options, chances and well-being (Luttrell et al. 2009: 2). The women's movement through the second wave feminists used the term from a transformative understanding, emphasizing on "the role of the individual in politics" (2009: 2-3). However, the concept gained substantial recognition and influence during the 1980s, when women's development appeared as vital and necessary for the development project. Some feminists activists and theorists were more critical of the Women in Development (WID) approach, arguing that the approach ignored the "underlying reasons for female subordination" (2009: 3), placing its focus only in including women in the development project. In response, the Gender and Development approach (GAD) was proposed, focusing on the dynamics of gender relations and the socioculturally produced differentiations between women and men, addressing explicitly the power dynamics in present gender roles and gender relations (2009: 3). Such ideas are also explicitly acknowledged by Amartya Sen, in the Third Conference on Women in Nairobi, 1985. His words were translated into Spanish by the Interdisciplinary Program for Women Studies of 'El Colegio de México' in the year 1988, titled *'Crisis y Enfoques Alternativos: Perspectivas de la Mujer en el Tercer Mundo'* (León 1997: 7). This text, coming from feminist scholars and activists of the south, demands transformations in the structures that subordinate women. The concept '*empoderamiento*' appeared then as a strategy for advancing changes in women's lives and for creating a transformation process of social structures. The document emphasizes on the need for organization and implementation of democratic and participatory processes to contribute to women's empowerment (1997: 7).

During the 1990s, different international development institutions introduced the use of the term for the promotion of Sen's 'capabilities approach' (Luttrell et al. 2009: 3). The concept was transformed and appropriated by different development actors, removing partially or completely its initial revolutionary and political content, as intended by the women's movement, and narrowing down its meaning, conveyed now through "technical programming with little heed to wider struggles for equality" (Zakaria 2017: A23). Throughout history, the term was linked to gender issues, however, many argue that the concept is about social transformation of disregarded and marginalized groups, to collectively decide and claim their rights (Luttrell et al. 2009: 3). The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has given a definition of the concept of empowerment as consisting on process of emancipation in which "the disadvantaged are empowered to exercise their rights, obtain access to resources and participate actively in the process of shaping society and making decisions" (SDC 2004 as cited in Luttrell et al. 2009: 28).

Wieringa and Young presented provoking arguments, pointing that the term only has meaning when "used for social transformation according to a feminist conception of the world"



(as cited in León 1997: 4). Young argued that, for feminism, empowerment means “a radical alteration of the processes and structures that reproduce women’s positions of subordination” (as cited in León 1997: 4). The feminist use of the term is rooted in the importance of the idea of power in social relations within social sciences debates. During the 60s, the radical speech of the movement for civil rights for African Americans identified the search for ‘black power’ as their strategy. During the 70s, the women’s movement takes up and develop the concept (León 1997: 4). The Indian feminist NGO Nirantar, offers a definition of the concept as “the ability to define the change for themselves, negotiate change, understand and challenge injustice and inequity, and act towards the achievement of strategic goals that address issues of women’s status/position” (Cornwall et al 2008: 3). Longwe advanced a framework of possible levels of empowerment to assess the empowerment potential of development initiatives. She mentions the ‘welfare degree’ (basic needs are met but structural roots are not addressed), the ‘access degree’ (equal access to services), the ‘awareness degree’ (structural and institutional discrimination are addressed), the ‘participation and mobilization degree’ (equality in decision-making) and the ‘control degree’ (individuals can make decisions that are fully recognized). She argues that these different levels of empowerment are hierarchical; it is necessary to achieve every degree in order to attain the next one, and that the initiatives aiming at achieving the higher levels, are the ones that have potential for actual empowerment (Longwe 1991).

Effusive eloquence about women’s empowerment is everywhere, however, the actual share of the budgets being directed to key issues for women’s empowerment, is low, and very few development institutions are willing to support women’s mobilisation (Cornwall et al. 2008: 8). Women’s role in local governance. Trends within the development industry to link women with the local space has significantly increased, arguing the key role of grassroots women as agents of social welfare, and making them assume the tremendous burden for family well-being and collective survival in their neighbourhoods (Massolo 2000: 40), resonating, as mentioned before, with current paradigms of participation over-relying on communities’ *self-help*. Evidence suggests that while the local government is the closest to citizens and linked to their everyday life needs and experiences, this does not necessarily translate into greater access to different positions for women within the local government (2000: 45). In the micro context of neighbourhoods, communes, and communitarian grassroots action, women’s activism, efficacy and leadership, in the same way, does not necessarily translate into better opportunities for recognition and equal inclusion into the political sphere of local governments (2000: 45). In this context, the issue of every-day power relations plays a more important role in local spaces debates and the setting of priorities. Issues such as inclusion, exclusion and the opportunities for women to influence or transform the structures that marginalise them from power, often result in complex and non-linear empowerment processes, depending mainly on individual’s contexts, history, and their location in different power structures (León 1997: 13).

Historically, there has been a widespread portrayal of women’s collective and individual actions in the local arena, as associated to the everyday life sphere of family and domestic labour, and the neighbourhoods and localities represent the spaces of social life in which women have played their roles and fight their struggles (Massolo 2000: 40). Gender studies have highlighted for years the importance of women’s participation at the micro level, for their insertion into public participation. However, this perspective is highly problematic as it naturalizes ‘women’s place’ in social life as limited to the strictly local, which contributes to continuing to invisibilize the exclusion and discrimination of women from higher political instances and decision-making spaces (2000: 40).

According to Molyneux (1984: 62), there are two different interests of women’s participation: one is related to the traditional roles of women in the domestic sphere, those

related to being a mom, a housewife or a wife, and respond to communities' most immediate, often linked with the lack of basic services and goods. In these kind of interests, class and gender are closely interrelated, as usually poor women are the ones who will mobilise by economic necessity (1984: 63). Moreover, these practical interests do not specifically question gender inequalities but they can be the root for the second kind of interests to arise: the gender strategic interests (1984: 62). These second ones, usually referred to as 'feminist' interests, result from women's social position through gender elements, and are based on the awareness of women's subordination and on the desire for alternative social arrangements. Their focus lays on issues such as overcoming women's subordination through "the abolition of the sexual division of labour, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labour and childcare, the removal or institutionalised forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women" (1984: 62). As put by Massolo (2000: 43), when women's participation is in line with these strategic interests, effective participation and empowerment take place, by altering gender power relations (2000: 43).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the relevance of understanding each of the concepts as highly contested, complex and multifaceted. The review of the concepts of participation and empowerment, and of the debates around participatory budgeting processes and the role of women in local governance spaces, were used in the subsequent analysis to explore women's lived experiences, subjectivities, perceptions, struggles, identities and positions within their societies with regards to class, ethnicity and gender, and the institutions and ideologies prevailing in their own contexts, as the factors that constitute and shape their journeys and trajectories of participation, empowerment and disempowerment, through their involvement in participatory budgeting programs.

## **Chapter 3 Analysis: Trajectories of women's participation within the PBP**

This chapter reflects on the interviews and discussions with the women involved with PBP analysing the different ways and nuances of their participation in the PBP, to explore and analyse their trajectories in this regard. This includes their interactions, struggles, negotiations and challenges, in the light of the literature reviewed on participation, participatory budgeting processes and the role of women in local governance spaces.

### **The nature of women's participation in the PBP**

The creation of participatory spaces in local governance such as participatory budgeting processes has certainly many grassroots women to become political actors. These participatory scenarios have proved to be helpful in increasing the spaces in which women can join the political sphere and decision-making arenas (Cornwall 2007: 7). These processes are an opportunity for citizenship creation, where women learn to participate as citizens and gain skills that they will likely give use to in other spheres of their lives, not only in formal politics or in grassroots action (2007: 8). However, as the following analysis on their participatory trajectories shows, even with all the institutional arrangements, there is a significant gap between the intended purpose of the arrangements that have been created to mainstream participation in public institutions, and the actual practices taking place in reality. One of the consequences of this gap is the persistent exclusion of marginalized groups from this decision-making spaces, as it is the case of women (2007: 8).

Medellin's local government has bragged in local media about the about women's majoritarian participation in the PBP (Alcaldía de Medellín 2016: 1-2). However, the roles that come with more power within the PBP, the Local Management Board (LMB) members, who act as the link between the local government and the communities, are still majority men.

“We attend every meeting but men keep making the decisions. Out of 6 LMB members representing our commune, 4 are men and 2 are women”. \*

Such statements do not taken into account that women have household and care responsibilities that prevent them at times from participating in these positions. This feminization of responsibilities is very clear in the case of the interviewed women, with most of them confirming that they or another female relative did these tasks. Most of the interviewed women were also the main providers in their household, and took part of the PBP program. Their involvement in the PBP in such poverty contexts also carried emotional and practical risks, with women indicating to have faced negative consequences in their household relations, due to the long hours dedicated to their participation in the PBP:

“It has distanced me a lot from my family because of the lack of time to do everything. My sons say that I abandoned them for the community”. \*

As it was mentioned before, ten out of fourteen interviewed women were part of the Health Commission within the PBP. When asked about their main objectives in the commission, issues related to women's traditional caring roles were mentioned, such as the health of children and elderly, while no women's health or sexual and reproductive health matters were brought up. Most of them were also involved in the Security Commission, one of the most pressing concerns

in their context. This was the case as well for the Cultural Commission, where most of the woman stated that it was a vital area to focus on in contexts of violence and presence of armed groups, as a strategy to give children and adolescents an alternative other than joining these armed groups. Additionally, one of the interviewed women stated that they tried once to prioritize a project to train women in political participation, but the municipality offered them cooking classes instead, arguing that skills training will result in greater benefits for women's economic situation.

## **Reasons for getting involved**

When women were asked about what drove them to get involved in the PBP, many of them stated that they saw the need to participate due to the circumstances of their neighbourhoods. Issues like lack of drinking water, lack of adequate health and education services, among others were mentioned.

“I arrived to the commune trying to escape from the violence in the country side, and when I arrived here, I found even more violence, and in the face of that, one has to find solutions”. \*

“I saw the many needs that our community had and the need to find ways to improve the quality of life of the Commune inhabitants”. \*

“We had to work with children and adolescents in preventing them to join the armed groups through sports and recreation”. \*

“It was the only available way that we had to contribute to achieving some transformations”. \*

As mentioned before, for grassroots women in poverty settings, participation is more a matter of necessity than a citizenship right to take part on public affairs. It appears as an almost unavoidable urge to find solutions to their families and communities most pressing needs in their everyday lives, such as lack of access to public services. As argued by León, their interests are often related to the traditional roles of women in the domestic sphere, to respond to immediate needs (León 1997: 6).

## **Challenges of women's participation**

It is common to perceive women as the key factors for the success of development interventions. There is a common belief among local governments that women are a free public service for the development of the local spaces, with limitless time available to deal with every problematic and social emergency. This belief assumes that women have more free time than men to spend at the service of the community needs and assumes their unconditional availability, ignoring their overloads of work, the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, and the time juggling that implies this ‘permanent availability’ (Massolo 2000: 43).

Poverty and other forms of gender-based social exclusion have been associated in the Latin-American region with increasing female-headed houses. As mentioned before, twelve out of the fourteen interviewed women considered themselves the heads of their households, bearing the main responsibility to provide economically. 6 out of 14 stated that they were the only ones bringing economic resources into the house. The rest of them stated that it was a shared responsibility between some of the members of the household. It is not always the case, but local spaces are increasingly inhabited by women in charge of the sustenance and development of the

family. The access to a high paid job is particularly difficult for women from these poor settings, and their jobs are usually more precarious and low paid than those of men. By 2014, almost 47,7% of the employed women in Latin America were doing precarious low paid jobs (CEPAL 2014). As mentioned before, out of fourteen interviewed women, only three had formal jobs, two of which were low paid jobs as cleaners.

To illustrate this, nine out of the fourteen interviewed women stated that their family members repeatedly discouraged them to continue taking part of the PBP, arguing that they would like to see them in the house more instead of always outside. Other reasons include the fact that they do not make any money to bring home out of their participation in the PBP, summed to the safety risks that participating on the program implies for them. Moreover, due to women's role as caregivers and intra household work responsible, their participation in public sphere spaces implies major trade-offs and compromises in other spheres of their lives.

“My youngest daughter grew up alone till she was 5, and I missed many nice moments those years, and that affected them, to see their mom taking care of everyone in the community, but not of them”. \*

Most women stated that they have had to negotiate their participation in the PBP with their family members, trying not to attend to certain meetings, or attending only during weekdays, or staying until certain hours,

“Mostly I have had to negotiate the time I invest in the PBP, but I try to clean my house and make food every time before leaving for a PBP meeting or activity”. \*

“I have had to stop participating in many spaces to spend more time in the house so they calm down”. \*

The increasing importance given to participatory local spaces of governance has not equally benefited women and men as citizens and subjects of rights. Massolo refers in her text ‘The local space and women’s empowerment’ to women’s “paradoxical dynamic of inclusion and exclusion” (Massolo 2000: 44) in participatory spaces of governance. Even with the best of intentions, in contexts with prevailing gender inequalities, there is great danger that these participatory spaces will perpetuate the dominance of men over women, and sustain the existing orders of knowledge and power. The PBP does offer women the possibility to have a role in the public space, but gender inequalities don’t seem to disappear because of that. Even today, women’s participation is concentrated in issues or tasks related to traditional notions of gender roles and “essentialized stereotypes of women’s concerns and capabilities” (Cornwall 2007: 12), such as base-needs related issues and family and community matters, while men massively participate in positions of power in political and institutional instances. Participatory spaces such as the PBP do not operate in a vacuum, but are deeply embedded in the context of the city, the country and the world, where all kinds of manifestations of gender inequalities are present (2000: 42). Some of the interviewed women stated, their active role in their neighbourhoods, in contexts of permanent violence and presence of armed groups, has also put their safety in great risk.

“Three years ago a community leader was killed, so since I’m rude, I shout and I demand and say what I think, because otherwise I won’t be taken into account, my family was very worried for my safety and urged me to stop participating in the PBP”. \*

## **Women's position in relation to men within the PBP:**

The interviews showed that participatory spaces are embedded in existing gender relations of power, putting women aside or allowing them only certain degrees of power and participation within them. Many of the interviewed women stated that they didn't always feel like they had voice within the program, even though they had already been democratically elected as delegates. They stated that other leaders, who also happen to be men and have more power, "are more heard even when they have no idea of what they are talking about". \* They also expressed that in order to have a voice within the program, they had to be part of patronage and corrupt structures, that if they decided to step aside from, they would be left out of the process.

Some women try to escape the normative expectations over them as female community leaders and have claim their rights to have a voice. But in cases, this results in other different forms of exclusion (Cornwall and Coelho 2007: 13). However, the interviewed women expressed that they have had to come up with different strategies in order to be heard and considered within the PBP process.

"It hasn't been easy, I have to be rude and to fight men back, because if I talk calmly and at a lower tone and volume, then I won't be heard. So I feel like I'm forced to shout to try to be at their level". \*

"I always have to raise my voice and to demand to have the floor when they're not letting me speak, because other leaders are more powerful and if you don't want to join them and you want to have your own opinion, this will become a big problem for you". \*

The interviewed women repeatedly mentioned the amount of power that the members of the LMB (majority men) hold.

"It is very hard, most of the leaders are men, the LMB members who coordinate the commissions have their own particular interests that clash with collective interests and with women's interests". \*

When asked about how comfortable they felt expressing and lobbying for their needs within the PBP, the interviewed women expressed to feel uncomfortable because they did not feel that they were being taken into account:

"This makes me think sometimes that there's no point in being involved in these spaces, because you get tired, and the ones with more power will always win". \*

"I try to express them, but sometimes, when I am not heard, considered or at least respected by anyone, this creates an impotence feeling and causes discomfort". \*

"I feel comfortable but a bit intimidated because all the powerful leaders are men and they expect women to do exactly what they want". \*

"You ask for the floor and they don't give it most of the times, and you are also insecure, because you don't use the same language as those who have studied, so you're afraid to say something stupid or something wrong so you avoid to say anything". \*

The situation turns even more complex when women explain how free they felt to share their opinions in the PBP meetings. Only 3 out of 14 women expressed that they felt that they could freely express their opinions. Most of them made reference to the coercion caused by strong male leaders, who hold greater power because of their position in the program (LMB members).

“Us women have to be strategic, we cannot openly oppose to these powerful leaders, cause if you say something and they are not happy about it, then you’re out”. \*

“I have always expressed what I think, but always with fear of saying things that they won’t agree with and then there might be consequences for me. They cannot take me out of the program because I was democratically elected, but they will exclude me, they will call me a trouble maker, a problematic woman, and they will stop inviting me to assist meetings, until they somehow exclude you”. \*

“There are some restrictions, mostly if our ideas go against theirs, they find it really hard to see an empowered woman. And in meetings, we sometimes feel like expressing our opinions, but we see these powerful men in the room and then we don’t feel comfortable talking”. \*

“Sadly in our commune, if you are not friends with certain group, you will be stigmatized as a bad leader, you will be humiliated, excluded and taken out for not agreeing with their points of views”. \*

“I gained many enemies by making public accusations. Immediately everyone changes the way they treat you. In here, is less serious to insult god than to insult an LMB member, they are the gods and we are their subalterns, not their peers”. \*

Violence was mentioned as another major factor to consider when expressing your opinion, some of the interviewed women argued that their participation in the PBP could also have serious consequences for their lives:

“There have always been dark forces, you cannot ignore the context in which you are embedded and that includes a number of armed groups operating in our city. And as community leaders, but mostly as women, we have to know how far we can go, and in which spaces we are free to express ourselves”. \*

“Armed groups have also been infiltrated in the PBP, so at times we are to scare to talk in the meetings”. \*

Moreover, women were asked about the situations in which they have felt in advantage or in disadvantage with regards to men within the PBP. Their replies were overwhelmingly related to disadvantages. The only two references made to advantage situations over men, were related to the difference in the threats for both, men and women, to exercise community leadership, due to the strong violent context.

“Had I been a man, I would be dead by now, they face bigger threats”. \*

“In the violent period in our commune, male community leaders were being killed and threatened, so us, women, were able to exercise community leadership easier, because we were not seen as a threat for the armed groups purposes”. \*

With regards to situations in which women felt in disadvantage vis-a-vis men, issues such as corruption, clientelism, violence, lack of acknowledgement, lack of organization among women, gender-based exclusion and women self-consciousness and insecurities.

“I don’t know if it’s because they (men) have more experience, but it seems that the public sphere is easier for them, the streets, the relations with the government, they understand how politics work, and what is happening at a broader level than just the neighbourhood one, they understand the city and the country and that puts us women in disadvantage”. \*

Chaudhuri and Heller (as cited in Cornwall 2007: 11) argue that one of the major flaws of the democracy debate has been the assumption that “individuals are equally able to form associations and engage in political activity”. This, as they argue, ignores important power imbalances between social groups, such as men and women, in our case of study. This is particularly problematic in contexts where basic rights of participation and organization are permeated by corruption, clientelism, and other forms of exclusion.

“Men speak louder, stronger, somehow they have more voice, they are not afraid of anything, they talk all the time, if they don’t know what they are saying, they make things up, for them it is easier to do it than for us, because we consider the consequences of saying or doing a certain thing, so we are more self-conscious, we internalize that, we assume it so even if we’re free to express our opinions, we don’t do it”. \*

“Men get together and they establish alliances to get votes for whatever is in their interests, and we have more difficulty in making alliances between us”. \*

Women repeatedly referred to the disadvantage that the lack of organization between women poses for their effective participation in the PBP:

“We haven’t been able to organize properly to fight our battles, so we always end up being told what to do by a man, instead of us deciding and acting upon our own interests”. \*

“All the powerful leader occupying high positions are men, we divide among women, point fingers, criticize each other, and in the meantime, they are coming together and manipulating us”. \*

Moreover, women complaints mentioned that the way men do politics involves aggressiveness and violence, and that this puts women in a situation of disadvantage:

“Men tend to use violence, threats, they pull dirty tricks, and we are in great disadvantage in the face of the corrupted and clientelist dynamics with which they operate”. \*

“When I ran for the LMB, a young man who was also running told me he will make my life impossible if I continued in the run, so I had to step out”. \*

“All the leaders occupying power positions are men. We divide among women, point fingers and criticize each other, and in the meantime, they are coming together and manipulating us”. \*

When asked about how their position as women affected their leadership and their exercise of political participation, most women agreed on feeling that being a woman did have repercussions in the way they participate. Many referred to issues like *machismo*, like facing bullying in the shape of ridiculing and mocking and like feeling that they have to be twice as informed and prepared for public debates to have a chance to influence decisions next to men.

When interviewing a female city council member, who has been involved in the Participatory Budgeting Program and has been constantly critical about its malfunctioning processes, she stated that women face within the program similar challenges to the ones that other women face in higher levels of governance. She mentioned that for women to get involved in politics, there were three alternatives: getting a political godfather, who will tell you what to do, what causes to support and what causes to fight against; having sex with one of the men who hold power; or acting with traits traditionally associated to men, like being aggressive, shouting, among others.



## Intersectionality

Two out of the 14 interviewed women identified themselves as afro Colombians, stating that the previously described discriminations and exclusions, intensified in their cases, where their identities as black persons, and as women, intersected. The two women referred to the lack of organization of Afro-Colombian women in the Commune, and to how, when joining the wider struggles for women's rights, their particular struggles as black women were left out. Many of the remaining women, who identified themselves as white, or as white-mestizas, stated to be aware of their privilege or power in terms of the complexion of their skins.

Additionally, two of the interviewed women who hold professional degrees, stated that their position as educated women, often more educated than men in the Commune, had put them in a position of greater power.

"I studied, I'm professional now, and that makes men to perceive me in a different way. Many of them are not professional, so they see me and the way that I express myself, and they don't believe that I'm also from this commune"<sup>5</sup>. \*

"I feel a lot more respected by men than when I wasn't a professional, but I also feel that many women don't feel very comfortable around me now and that's also not good". \*

"The educational level becomes a barrier to relate to people with different educational level. In my case, I'm a professional and got to study through the PBP, and that somehow creates a division with the ones who didn't". \*

For the rest of the interviewed women, their educational level was also a big factor in their participation. Many of them state that regardless of their knowledge of their territories, the fact that they don't hold a degree strongly affect their power in participatory spaces. Moreover, they expressed that the educational level also carried a significant meaning, in the sense that it was directly related to people's socio-economic situation. Uneducated women could hardly attain a well-paid job under decent conditions, and that implied a whole different number of implications all together.

"We can have a lot of empiric knowledge, knowledge inherited from our grandmothers, knowledge of the territory, but if we don't have a degree, it is not valuable knowledge". \*

Additionally, women expressed that the fact that they were mothers, deeply affected their participation. One of the interviewed women expressed that men would make them feel like they were not good enough leaders because they had to distribute their time between community leadership and their responsibilities as caregivers.

Most of the women expressed that their socio-economic level was another relevant factor that influenced their power and the participation dynamics. Some of them expressed that the simple fact that they could not afford to pay a taxi to go to the meetings that were taking place in the city centre, or in the lower neighbourhoods of the Commune, excluded them from

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to point here the stigmatization mentioned in the context of the research of people coming from this particular area of the city. This is evidenced by how the fact that the above interviewed woman was not perceived by others as being part of the Commune, is a positive perception that will release her of this stigma in different spaces around the city.

participating under equal terms in these spaces. Similarly, when they have to work during the days because they are the main providers of their families, they cannot attend meetings that are scheduled in the daytime.

## **Final remarks on participation**

Lastly, women expressed that most of the times, the municipality professionals will previously give them a set of alternatives from which they could choose which projects they wanted to prioritize. This is evidence of participation how participation is disembedded from its socio-cultural roots turning into a manipulative process, only useful to achieve the state and the development apparatus goals.

The description of the LMB members' coercion of the PB process is another proof of how participatory processes have possibilities the rise of very questionable forms of power in favour of external interests than those of the collective good.

Moreover, the program fails to be a revolutionary process to distribute the power equally, as it is sustained by the local government, and instead, ends up as another developmental initiative that fails to question the validity of the development project in it-self (Sachs 1992: 122), that, far from challenging the status-quo, reinforces existing gender power relations, in which women are virtually excluded.

## **Conclusions of the chapter:**

- Women's trajectories of participation are not straight forward, but full of continuities, for instance, in the reproductions of gender norms and roles, and in terms of gender inequalities and gender-based oppressions.
- The PBP has proved to be a space in which women can enter political and decision-making arenas, contributing in citizenship creation terms, by which women learn acquire skills that might be used in other spheres of their lives.
- Even if institutional arrangements are provided for women's participation, significant gaps persist in the actual practices taking place, resulting in the persistent exclusion of women from participatory local spaces of governance.
- Gender inequalities persist, as women's participation is still concentrated in issues associated to traditional notions of gender roles, while men massively occupy positions of greater power at higher instances.
- The idea of women as the key actors for the success of community-level development initiatives naturalizes 'women's place' in social life as limited to the strictly local, which contributes to the invisibilization of women's exclusion and discrimination in higher political spaces.
- Grassroots women's participation in poverty settings, is influenced, if not determined by a significant intersection between gender and class: it is a matter of necessity, more than a citizenship right to take part on public affairs, and it appears as the urge to find solutions to their families most pressing needs in everyday life.
- Issues such as corruption, clientelism, violence, lack of acknowledgement, lack of organization among women, gender-based exclusion and women's self-consciousness and insecurities, contribute to women feeling in disadvantage in relation to men.

- Participation in the local space is informed by masculine ideas of violence, domination, rationality, among others, which make women's inclusion into these spaces even more difficult, as they have to adopt masculine ideas of proper leadership or face exclusion.

## **Chapter 4 Analysis: Trajectories of women's empowerment within the PBP**

This chapter aims to explore further the influence of the PBP on women's trajectories of empowerment, in the light of the reviewed literature on the matter. Firstly, the opportunity to undertake education at different level, and its effects on women, will be briefly addressed, followed by an analysis on women's experiences of participation in the PBP, analysed through Rowland's framework of the different dimensions of empowerment, starting from the personal, followed by the relational, and finalizing with the collective dimension of empowerment, to lastly present some conclusions of the chapter.

### **General remarks**

When asked about their perception on the PBP's effect on women's situation, all 14 interviewed women answered that there has definitely been an improvement in the situation of those women who have joined the participatory space of the PBP. All of the interviewed women were able to pursue higher degrees of education through the PBP, some got to finish elementary school, high school, or got advanced education like technical or professional programs. The opportunity to get this education, to which they wouldn't have had access to otherwise, translated into better employment opportunities, and in a higher degree of awareness.

Projects such as "The school reaches out to adult women, aimed at women's completion of elementary and secondary school, was one of the few victories of organized women within the PBP, who after great struggles, got to prioritize this project within the program. Another example of this is the project 'Access to Advance Education, which was not aimed particularly at women, but women managed to benefit massively from this program, that intended to support the access and permanence in advance education programmes for all the citizens of the Commune.

"Many got to study and to work, and that improved their economic situation. Almost 60% of the people studying with PBP scholarships are women. We have also received courses on gender issues and women's rights, and that also improves somehow our situation". \*

"At least we have started talking about women's rights, about economic autonomy, we don't want to be the victims anymore, or housewives, and that has been a product of our participation in the PBP". \*

"We have discovered different dimensions of violence against women that we didn't know existed, like psychologic or economic violence". \*

### **Personal dimension of empowerment and empowerment in the household**

12 out of the 14 interviewed women stated that their participation in the PBP impacted their power to influence decision-making and budget allocation within their households. They brought the skills acquired in these spaces to their everyday household dynamics, and they expressed to have experienced a transformation at a more subjective level, being less submissive, more confident, more independent, and saying what they think and what they want.

“Even inside of my house, when we are discussing, I speak with better arguments now. I can even talk about laws now, and I try to bring everything that I have learned in the PBP and in the streets into my house”. \*

“I’m more autonomous now, I speak with more clarity, and I express better what I’m thinking and what I want. First, I would do whatever my husband said”. \*

“My opinions are more taken into account now, they respect me more because I have started talking like a man, with more confidence, and authority. They know that my opinion is acknowledged by the community so they also respect it now”. \*

“I have become more critical, I have my own opinions and I organize my time and my money better”. \*

Empowerment is a process that manifests itself in different scenarios, Stromquist refers to phases (1999), Unicef spiral levels (2015), Wieringa refers to spheres or parts of a matrix (1994), and Rowlands refers to different dimensions in which empowerment is exercised (1997). All these dimensions are interconnected, and the achievements made in one dimension facilitate the success on the others. A personal dimension of empowerment, as Rowlands puts it, consist on how women can develop “a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression” (1997: 15). With this in mind, it can be said that, in terms of transformations on women’s individual confidence and on the way that they perceive themselves, their capacities, their rights and their power, significant progress has been achieved through these women’s participation in the PBP.

Actions such as their opportunity to advance their formal education, the recognition of their neighbours as community leaders, the training provided by the Women’s Secretariat of the local government in political participation and feminist perspectives, their new found power and acknowledgement within their household, and their overall opportunity to be part of the public and political realm, contributed towards women gaining this sense of self-confidence, and partly supported them to undo the results of marginalization and oppression (Rowlands 1997: 15).

Additionally, the relation between women and the local space is not based solely in their necessity to satisfy basic needs for social services for their families or the improvement of the quality of life in their neighbourhoods, as mentioned in the previous chapter. It is also based on women’s desire for new social experiences, for participation in the public sphere, and for increasing their self-esteem.

“I saw an opportunity to get out of the house, to learn and to take part of the spaces where decisions were being made. I saw the need to transform myself, and to transform the idea that women should stay in their houses, cleaning, cooking, ironing”. \*

“I suffered from depression and community engagement gave me a reason to get better”. \*

“I started feeling more confident, I started informing myself before going to the meetings, and I lost fear of participating and talking”. \*

“I noticed I had more knowledge now and that I could even help my family with solutions for things they didn’t know and that, since I was spending time outside, I already knew”. \*

“I have become a lot more critical, I have my own opinions and I organize my time and my money better”. \*

However, with the above described achievements of the PBP on women’s subjectivities, it is important to acknowledge, as Cornwall states, that “empowering experiences in one area of a woman’s life do not automatically translate into greater capacity to exercise agency and transform power relations in another part of her life” (2016: 344-345).

## **Relational dimension of empowerment and how women negotiate their participation and power within the PBP**

Women were also asked about their negotiation strategies with men in order to try to reduce or eliminate these disadvantages. On one hand, some women stated that the structures of gender relations of power were so strong within the program, that there were no negotiation possibilities. In the statements of this kind, women expressed to have felt discouraged to continue taking part in these spaces, and some of them, even decided not to take part in the program anymore, disenchanted with the whole process. As Cornwall and Coelho (2007: 12) put it, “internalization of norms valuing certain knowledges and forms of discourse can lead to people silencing themselves” (2007: 12).

“I haven’t negotiated, I simply decided to let them win and to step aside, like a forced retirement from community leadership, for self-care reasons”

“Men use our needs to manipulate us, so that we either join their team, or we are left out, so I prefer to just step aside and let them do it”

“Men don’t want to lose their time listening to others; some of them are so blinded by ‘machismo’ that we just play dumb instead of wasting our time with them”

“I just stayed quiet, and gradually stepped out completely because I don’t like having to beg people to listen to me, so when I feel that I’m not being taken into account, I just feel discouraged to participate, I don’t want to get into a fight with them”

As evidenced by the above statements, “empowerment can be temporary, and some pathways of empowerment can lead women into experiences of disempowerment, from which they may or may not surface empowered” (Cornwall 2016: 344). The demotivated responses of women who decided to step out of participatory governance spaces is nothing but the disempowerment of once empowered women. There are many elements that can contribute to women’s disempowerment, including violence, institutionalized gender norms, politic dynamics informed by traditional notions of masculinity, lack of acknowledgment and consideration, among others. In a setting in which women have scarce opportunities to gain the necessary skills to effectively participate in the public sphere, and where men actions constantly banish, exclude and render women unimportant, the potential for disempowerment is not to be ignored.

However, as stated by Cornwall and Coelho (2007: 12), reversals in these power dynamics can occur in which women who have been excluded or silenced can “regain their agency and voice” (2007: 12).

Many of the interviewed women stated to be finding or creating new spaces of their own, to continue their struggle, not only within institutional arrangements for citizen’s participation, but grassroots spaces, built from below, and disembedded from institutional structures. Here they can play by their own rules and make politics in their own terms. On the other hand, some of the women stated that even though they felt like they were not under equal conditions with men within the program, there was some space for negotiations of the power imbalances with men, and some effective strategies to do so. As Sachs states (1992: 135), the people, in this case women, who are subjected to fear-power dynamics, are not powerless at all, and some forms of power that are not always perceived as power, are real, and operate through some, often quiet, informal organizations for resistance “against the prevailing power apparatuses” (Sachs 1992: 135).

“We negotiate with men by making alliances with them. We tell them we agree with things that we don’t and that we will vote for whatever they want us to vote for, and in the end we don’t, and we keep our conscience clean”

“This is going to sound like corruption, but what we do is to negotiate with them, offering them the votes of us women for their interests and projects, in exchange of them voting for and supporting women’s projects”

Sadly, playing by what they refer to as ‘men rules’, moving in the same networks of patronage and clientelism does not always result in benefits for women.

“We try to create alliances with men but it happened recently that men got the votes from women on what they wanted, and they didn’t keep their word of voting for women’s projects. So somehow we are always the ones losing”

As highlighted in the methodology section, Rowlands conceptualization of the relational dimension of empowerment entails a process by which women develop the “ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship, and the decisions made within it” (Rowlands 1997: 15). In this sense, a limited number of the interviewed women stated to have negotiated the terms of their participation within the program, including their power to influence the decisions being made within it. For a more significant number of women, the relational dimension of their political participation in these participatory spaces had brought disempowering consequences. Partly due to the persistent *machismo*, still present in their context, and partly due to the lack of awareness or political will from the program managers, to effectively include and transversalize a gender equality approach to the PBP, conscious of the gender power dynamics described above.

To conclude, governance processes such as the PBP can bring excluded and erased communities and individuals into participatory spaces, but this does not necessarily provide them with the psycho-social set skills to communicate assertively and effectively with other actors that take part of such spaces (Cornwall 2007: 13).

## **The collective dimension of empowerment**

The interviewed women stated that several women’s organizations had resulted from women’s participation in the PBP. Route M, Women’s Association Looking for Pathways, Neighbourhood Women Associations, and the Collective of Women were some of the organizations mentioned in the interviews. However, the majority of the interviewed women stated that out of these organizations, none of them had feminist objectives, guidelines or perspectives, and most of them had in mind the above-mentioned ‘practical interests’.

Moreover, most of the interviewed women stated to have few to none common interests with other women in the Commune. Some interests such as being recognized as citizens, or gaining economic autonomy were common to all women in the commune, but they argued that women in this area are not a homogeneous group, as they have different levels of education, socio-economic levels, intra-household arrangements, among others.

“A single mom from a peripheral neighbourhood is not the same as a woman with fewer kids and a partner, and living in the lower neighbourhoods”. \*

“Even in my organization, we are 12 women and we all have very different needs”. \*

“We do share some of our needs, but there are women in greater vulnerability conditions, like conflict victim, who arrive to the city without housing or skills to work in an urban setting or indigenous and afro-descendants”. \*

Additionally, most women stated that women in the Commune were resistant to organize with other women. Many highlighted jealousy, selfishness, and internalized sexist ideas as a reason for this resistance.

“I don’t like the approach of some women’s groups to gender equality, saying that women are superior to men, and being too feminist”. \*

“We doubt each other, we are jealous of each other, we hurt each other and envy each other, we reproduce patriarchal practices, we discourage other women to participate, we believe that there is only room for one or some of us, we discriminate each other, and that is very harmful. We need to stop attacking women who get leadership positions, we have not realized that if we organize, we are stronger, if we unite and resist together, we can advance quicker”. \*

Following Rowlands conceptualization on the different dimensions of empowerment, the collective dimension of empowerment, as the stage in which women “work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone” (Rowlands 1991: 15). Along with including the participation in political organizations or structures, as well as other forms of collective action “based on principles of cooperation rather than competition” (1997: 15), the Commune 1 still has a lot of progress to achieve. Several women’s organizations have been created, resulting in the inclusion of more projects designed by and for women in the Commune within the PBP. However, a number of obstacles still impede women from gaining more force and power through organizing with each other.

## Conclusions

- Clear empowerment effects can be traced regarding the personal dimension of empowerment, such as increased confidence and self-esteem, greater decision-making power in the household, the possibility for new social experiences, and the entry into public and political spaces, among others. However, this empowerment does not necessarily translate into empowerment in other dimensions or spaces in their life.
- Aspects such as the impossibility to find negotiation windows, the deeply engrained machismo, the perception of not accomplishing anything through their participation, the existing terms of political dynamics, among many other dynamics within the PBP, often result in the disempowerment of women. However, at times, it also results in their greater empowerment, through their emancipation from institutionalized governance spaces to grassroots organization and action.
- Internalized gender norms and patriarchal practices and conceptions are still deeply engrained on women’s attitudes towards other women, and competition logics take place over cooperation logics, hindering the achievement of collective dimensions of empowerment.



## Chapter 5 Conclusions

My research analysed how women's involvement in the PBP influenced their participation, empowerment and disempowerment trajectories. There are several important observations that emerged in the process. At the outset, very few concrete and measurable outcomes can be identified from women's involvement in the PBP, and their trajectories were less than straightforward. They made their 'journeys' together with their partners, families, neighbours and other community leaders, through rough environments in which a number of obstacles were present. Some of the main obstacles were intersecting power inequalities, which stemmed from traditional gender norms, the feminization of responsibilities, the transfer of state responsibilities and traditional political practices. During their trajectories, women face a number of choices regarding their strategies to negotiate power inequalities within the PBP. These included building alliances with men, playing by their rules, stepping out of institutionalized local governance spaces, creating new alternative spaces for action and transformation of their realities, or stepping out of public and political arenas altogether. Nevertheless, women gained new views and expanded their political, social and economic horizons through their access to education, and through their influence in decision-making and budget allocation at the local level. This led to transformations in household power dynamics and relations. Furthermore, it challenged traditional gender norms and roles, where women became more aware of gender inequalities and gender-based oppressions. Overall, there are evidences of transformation resulting from participatory budgeting processes, however very few of them have affected the gender power relations for the women of Commune 1.

Women community leaders used the PBP as a bridge to get further in their journeys towards effective participation by working, at times collectively, to advance themselves. They also recognised they could be obstacles for other women's effective participation through reproducing patriarchal notions of women's role and place in the local space. Men on the other hand, could support women's journeys towards empowerment by questioning their own privileges and their power in the local space and within the PBP, and re-constructing themselves based on the awareness of gender inequalities and gender-based oppressions. State actors, in the same way, could support women's journeys and act as bridges or signposts, through facilitating women's integral inclusion in local governance process, and eliminating the obstacles for their effective participation. However, they can also hinder their journeys, without the inclusion of a gender sensitive approach into their programs and institutions.

PBPs do not operate in a vacuum, but are embedded in existing gender relations of power. This research is evidence that mechanisms such as a PBP often fail in guaranteeing effective participation of all the actors involved and, are prone to reproduce social inequalities, perpetuate the dominance of men over women and sustain existing orders of knowledge and power. It can also be ineffective in redistributing power within society, stepping women aside or allowing them only limited degrees of power within them. As in society, communities taking part in the PBP are fragmented along different axes of inequality such as gender, class, ethnic origin, social status and education level. Hence, not all PBP participants receive equal benefits, opportunities and challenges when participating in these decision-making processes. More importantly, this research acknowledges that women's disempowerment has structural causes that cannot be tackled by simply including women in existing governance structures. Therefore, it is not particularly clear how their involvement in the PBP will make significant impact in terms of power, under existing oppressive structures.

Nevertheless, the question of participation and empowerment through PBP is not an either/or one. The PBP does enable women to have a role in the public sphere, but gender inequalities do not just disappear. The interviews showed that even today, women's participation is concentrated in issues or tasks related to traditional gender norms and roles, and to simplified stereotypes of what are women's concerns and capabilities (Cornwall 2007: 12). Such as base-needs related issues and family and community matters, while men still massively participate in positions of greater power within institutional instances.

While empowerment, in its more revolutionary sense, should be about tackling the causes of disempowerment and addressing the disadvantages that have been produced by power inequalities (Luttrell et al. 2009: 2), one could conclude on the basis of the research that PBPs failed to integrally 'empower' women. as the root causes of women's disempowerment are not being transformed. The study shows, however, that PBPs significantly contributed to women's empowerment in the personal dimension, allowing transformation at a more subjective level, which includes aspects such as greater confidence, ability to express their opinions and ideas, self-recognition as citizens, bearers of rights, greater independency, among others. Again, it is not clear how these transformations at the individual level can result in wider societal transformation.

Some contributions to women's empowerment, in the relational and collective dimensions, can be depicted from their involvement in PBP, as participants' answers informed that women have not fully achieved the power to influence their relations with other actors, and to influence the decisions made within such relations. Additionally, women have not reached the power that occurs when they come together in cooperative, rather than competitive collective actions.

It is clear that some of the obstacles to women's participation could perhaps be removed or reduced through the effective mainstreaming of a gender perspective into the regulation and functioning of the PBP. At the same time, challenging existing power relations based on gender and other intersectionalities requires countering some of the assumptions, logics and ideologies of mainstream development discourse. This research underscores the need for bottom-up, grassroots, local participatory governance initiatives, disembedded from developmentalist rationales, to pursue and promote social justice and social transformation for all, and more specifically, the more vulnerable groups in society.

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