

Women's Participation in the Context of Urban Renewal in China: A Case Study of Yulin Community in Chengdu

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Abstract

As one of the main concerns of urban studies, more and more scholars have paid attention to the interaction of the government, community, residents and other stakeholders in the process of urban renewal, as well as the significance of participatory planning for the sustainability of cities. Strikingly, however, there are few studies on the gender dimensions of participants. In fact, in an urban renewal project in Yulin Community of Chengdu, I observed that women were the major participants in the process. Therefore, this study uses the theory of intersectionality to analyse the three different female groups in this urban renewal project, including professional women, female community workers and female resident activists. The diverse rights, knowledge, ethics and other backgrounds held by different female groups led to complex participation motivations, processes and outcomes, to fill the research gap of the gender dimension in the participation process.

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Key Words

Urban renewal; Women's participation; Intersectionality; Feminism; Space power relation

1. Introduction

In China, urban renewal is mainly carried out through a "top-down" model, in which the central and local governments are responsible for renewal projects and make most of the investment (Ma et al., 2021). However, with the prosperity of social economy, the development of urban diversity and the awakening of civic awareness, the traditional "top-down" planning method is no longer applicable to current urban renewal processes in China (Li et al., 2019). Urban renewal has to pay more attention to the needs of multiple stakeholders. Since 2007, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Urban and Rural Planning introduced by the Central Government of China has clearly stipulated the basic requirements for public participation in planning processes, and vigorously advocated public to participate in the process of urban planning. Public participation is considered as an effective method of urban regeneration, which can play a crucial role in sustainable urban development (Hui et al., 2021, Li et al., 2020). Therefore, in current Chinese government-led renewal projects, "participation" involves not only the government participation represented by the project working group entrusted by the local government, but also includes the public participation of the residents' committee of the community and the homeowners (Ma et al., 2021). Existing research on urban renewal participation also mostly focuses on the interaction among stakeholders such as governments, project working groups, communities and residents and their influence on the final results of urban renewal (Tan and Altrock, 2016, Zhai and Ng, 2013, Zhang and Li, 2016).

In the 2023 urban renewal project in Yulin Community in Chengdu launched by the Ministry

of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, which I participated in as an intern, I found that women's participation is obviously higher than that of men, and they also maintain an absolute advantage in quantity. 1 As the working group of this project to undertake government work, our working group was entirely composed of women. 2 The staff of the community neighbourhood committee were mostly females. 3 Female residents, such as housewives and female art workers, generally had more positive attitudes towards urban renewal than male residents. Women played an irreplaceable and important role in urban renewal. In fact, there have been several scholars demonstrating the importance of female participation in community development through studies of female staff of the community residents committee (Yingjie Wang, 2023, Yinxu, 2022), and female residents activists (Yinxu, 2022). But their research objects are mostly confined to specific female groups, and there are very few systematic discussions of the three different groups of women in the participation process.

Therefore, this paper tries to fill the research gap on the gender dimension of the participants in the process of urban renewal in China from the perspective of feminism. Taking the renewal project in Yulin Community as an example, this study tries to use the theory of intersectionality to analyse the three different female groups: professional women in the working group, female staff in the community and female resident activists, which is aimed to integrate the seemingly "loose" involvement of women in the renewal project and analyse the oppression and empowerment of ethics and power involved behind various female participants, so as to try to answer the following questions. Why most involved in the urban renewal project are women? What are the motivations and processes for women to participate in urban renewal projects? What are the potentials and limitations of female participation?

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, it will briefly introduce the case of Yulin Community in Chengdu, China; in Section 3, it will outline the methods and analytical framework of this study; in Section 4, it will analyse the dynamic path of women's participation in detail taking renewal as an example; in Section 5, it will discuss the impact of these women's participation on urban renewal and feminism, as well as the possible future development direction of women's participation. At the end of this article, Section 6 draws a brief conclusion and the significance of this study for women's rights and gender-equal urban development.

2. Case Study

Taking Yulin Community in Chengdu as an example, we try to analyse the reasons, processes and results of women becoming the main force of public participation in urban renewal projects.

Yulin is located in Wuhou District, Chengdu, which is a typical old community in the centre of Chengdu (Figure 1). Most buildings in the community were built in the 1980s, and most of them are walk-up buildings on six to seven floors. With the collapse of the unit system, the general ageing of buildings, the imperfect infrastructure, the growth of the urban floating

population and other practical reasons, Yulin started to show signs of decay (Chen, 2023). According to the data of the seventh national population census in 2020, there are more than 21,000 people in Yulin, among which the ageing population (the population over 65 years old) accounts for 15.8 percent, while the ageing population in Chengdu only accounts for 13.6 percent. The ageing situation of the community is pretty prominent. How to rebuild the cohesion of Yulin and make up for the shortage of infrastructure has become an urgent problem to be solved.

In addition, Yulin Community has a unique background characteristic. In 2016, Yulin was unexpectedly exposed to the wider public for a folk song called "Chengdu". Yulin has overnight become the most famous living area in Chengdu, the cultural image of Chengdu and well-known in China. More and more artists and musicians come to the community. They buy or rent apartments in Yulin and turn them into studios. The various small bars, coffee shops and tea houses located in the community have become a gathering place for all kinds of art circles. It is no exaggeration to say that Yulin can be called the cradle of modern art in Chengdu now.

In 2017, Yulin Community officially launched an urban renewal project. In 2023, Yulin was listed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development as one of the first 10 pilot cities to "deepen the pilot system of Urban (Health) Check-up". As one of the key steps of urban renewal in China, the main task of Urban (Health) Check-up is to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the real situations of the community infrastructure and the built environment, so as to lay a solid foundation for the more targeted implementation of urban renewal and transformation in the future.

In one sense, as the designated pilot community of the central government's urban renewal project, Yulin is a very representative case of urban renewal in China, which can reflect the overall trend of the renewal process of old communities in Chengdu, China. Moreover, under the unique background of Yulin, the influx of artists challenges the social stereotype of women, promotes a more diverse and inclusive social development, and stimulates the change in the community, which is crucial to promoting the development of feminism.

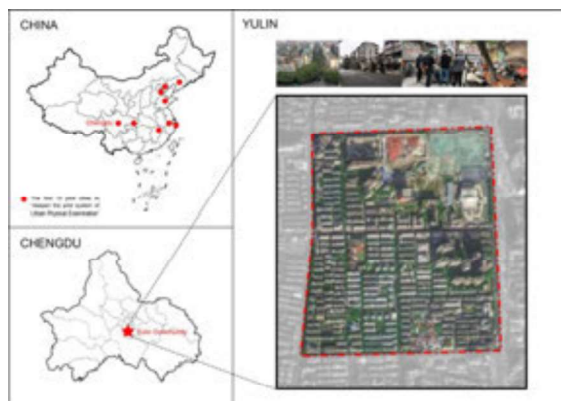


Fig. 1. Location of Yulin Community

3. Methodology

Intersectionality, as an important analytical framework in gender studies, was proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 2013a). By discussing the unique experiences of black women, Crenshaw illuminates their intersecting causes of inequality, particularly along race and gender lines (Crenshaw, 2013a, Crenshaw, 2013b). Intersectionality emphasizes the interrelationship of multiple factors in individual identity, such as gender, race, class, etc., which are intertwined to form unique social status and experience, thus revealing the multi-level inequality and inequality that exists in different social groups. Discrimination. For Chinese society, the intersectionality derived from the black feminist movement shows a strong focus on the oppressed and effectively resists oppressive forces such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, etc., which can preserve vulnerable groups and marginalized groups to provide powerful weapons (Sun, 2023). It is of great significance to the improvement of Chinese feminism and the development of social and spatial justice in China.

Therefore, in order to answer the questions raised above, this study uses the intersectionality theory to analyse the three female groups, including working women, female community workers and female resident activists, observed in the field during the process of Yulin Renewal Project in August and September 2023. The diverse rights, knowledge, ethics and other backgrounds held by different female groups lead to complex participation motivations, processes and outcomes. In particular, in Chinese social culture, structural factors such as state power and grass-roots organizations cannot be underestimated or ignored (Sun, 2023). A deep understanding of the dynamic participation paths of women of different social identities in urban renewal projects can help identify inequalities and make recommendations for improving social systems and spatial planning.

4. Result

4.1 The Working Group Was Entirely Composed of Professional Women.

The four members of 2023 Yulin Urban Renewal Project's working group were all women. This may be the result of unequal power structure in the workplace and gender inequality in planning sectors. Cities are often planned and designed by male dominance, and women are underrepresented in the planning industry (McDOWELL and Walkerdine, 1969). Male planners tend to be more easily responsible for large urban planning projects, such as urban general planning projects, while female planners are in a relatively weak position and can only work for small urban renewal projects. In addition, because of China's current diverse and complex planning realities, the project working group must pay more attention to the link of public participation (Hui et al., 2021). It is widely believed that women can better coordinate the complex interests in the urban renewal process in a more delicate and gentle communication way than men. Therefore, female planners are generally considered to be more conducive to urban renewal projects than male planners.

Therefore, as members of the working group, professional women have the expertise in urban renewal. We were involved by the "institutional arrangement", which has a certain passivity. After informing the community neighbourhood committee about this project, they organized relevant activities, such as indoor lectures, pilot project seminars, etc., to the neighbourhood committee staff and homeowners introduced the purposes, processes and needs of this project, and guided them to participate in the subsequent activities of urban renewal. In general, the working group, as a representative of state power, not only needed to be responsible for various negotiation work related to the grassroots neighbourhood committee and homeowners, but also was required to be responsible for the results of the final urban renewal project.

4.2 The Staff of the Community Neighbourhood Committee Was Almost All Female.

It was observed that only two of the more than ten staff members of Yulin Residents Committee were men. The personnel composition of the community neighbourhood committee is largely regulated by the traditional ethics in China, which affects the behaviour, attitudes and choices of different gender groups (Sun, 2023). On the one hand, community work is favoured by women because of its stability and proximity to home; on the other hand, men have to try their best to leave this low-income industry because of great life pressure.

The staff of the community neighbourhood committee directly facing the homeowners, needed to keep in touch with the masses. At the same time, they also had to help the government to complete good community management and service, like reducing the contradiction between owners and between owners and the working groups. They obtained professional knowledge training by participating in the indoor lectures organized by the working group, thus assisting the working group to better carry out the project and encouraging the owners to participate in relevant seminars. As a grass-roots organization, the community neighbourhood committee helped to improve the quality of local urban

governance and alleviate the social conflicts in urban renewal at the micro level.

4.3 Most of the Owners Involved in the Renewal Project Were Women.

In this project, female residents tended to be more actively involved in community activities. According to the data of the fourth Chinese Women's Social Status Survey in 2021, women are still the main force of family activities in China, and undertake the main internal family labour such as caring for children and supporting the elderly. They use the community space and play an important caregiver role in society more often than men, so they need planned urban projects to support them in this role (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). Particularly, in the Chinese patriarchal context, the women outside governments' system as the marginalized social groups, such as housewives, are restricted by the traditional social ethics. They intentionally use institutional paths to express their interests, improve their status in the community, and alleviate the inequality of power in the male-dominated state (Guan and Liu, 2021). Not only that, a large number of female artists in Yulin also pay more attention to gender equality and female power than ordinary property owners. They are more active in expressing their desire for women's voice, challenging the traditional gender ethics, and calling for women's equal society through various media. Naturally, they didn't want to miss the opportunities and channels to participate in such public affairs as urban renewal, play a role at the level of community, and strive for gender equality. Feminism grew in the community and in the city.

Therefore, female residents, artists, etc sought possible ways to express their spatial demands by actively participating in relevant activities organized by the working group. For them, their competition for space was their right to be seen, be heard and have a direct impact on the country and society (Mitchell, 2003). Public participation in urban renewal projects could be seen as a powerful weapon against gendered cities by vulnerable and marginalized women.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 The Motivations of Different Groups of Women Who Are the Main Population Involved in Urban Renewal Are Complex Due to the Intersection of Identities.

The professional women in the working group are passive participants due to gender inequality in the workplace and specific gender role stereotypes; while community female staff and female resident activists who are influenced by social ethics and avant-garde artistic atmosphere, are active participants in order to work more stably or to improve their status in the community and alleviate the inequality of gender power.

5.2 Women's Participation in Urban Renewal Has Significant Advantages.

5.2.1 Women's Participation Means the Spatial Empowerment of Individuals and Collectives of Women, Especially Marginalized Housewives.

They exercise their civic power by participating in the process of urban projects. Collective empowerment can make the knowledge and experience of women, especially marginalized women, visible and provide a platform and space for them to have a voice for themselves (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). In a patriarchal society, public participation, as a political and social channel, can be used by marginalized female social groups to express their reasonable demands, give more autonomy to manage their lives, and improve their status in the community. Women's participation alleviates the traditional male-dominated spatial power relations to some extent.

5.2.2 Women's Participation Is Conducive to Building More Inclusive and Gender-equal Cities.

Traditional "top-down" urban planning generally considers the interests and needs of men, but rarely considers the special needs of women (Beebeejaun, 2017, Garcia-Ramon et al., 2004). Women participate in urban renewal projects by virtue of their gender advantages, so as to strengthen the public's attention to spatial deprivation in women's daily lives and make up for the neglect of urban renewal under the traditional "male perspective" or "asexual perspective" theory on the needs of female groups, who account for half of the total population. Therefore, we can pay more attention to the voices of women, fill the gap in gender knowledge, and make the city more inclusive and equal.

5.3 Women's Participation in Urban Renewal Has Certain Limitations.

5.3.1 Women's Participation Only Provides a Repair Reference for Urban Renewal, but Cannot Directly Influence Urban Decision-making.

Public participatory planning for urban renewal in China is still at the initial stage (Hui et al., 2021). Even though there was a participatory shift happened in China emphasizing the importance of public participation, the impact of communities and homeowners in the statutory planning process is still limited (Beebeejaun, 2017, Guan and Liu, 2021). Although most owners are positive about government-led urban projects and keen to participate, they cannot fully participate because the process setting is not carefully designed (Ma et al., 2021). Almost all public participation activities are distributed in a variety of disconnected, unrelated and fragmented environments. This hinders the formation of inter-community and inter-regional coordination and the emergence of awareness beyond the local environment (Guan and Liu, 2021). This also results in participatory activities in China largely disconnected from political decision-making (Beebeejaun, 2017, Guan and Liu, 2021). Moreover, as mentioned above, urban space is usually designed and planned by men, and women have insufficient representation and leadership in the urban planning sectors (McDOWELL and Walkerdine, 1969). This has led to the planning departments and local governments being ostensibly open to supporting the principles of powering women and potentially accepting the idea of their involvement in consultations on important issues in a particular location. However, in a patriarchal society, men have political and economic power that women do not access, and use this power to create a male-dominated ideology. They are

often more reluctant to commit to incorporating women's views and ideas, let alone allowing women to intervene directly in actual changes in the city (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015).

5.3.2 Women's Participation Strengthens the Stereotype of Gender Roles to Some Extent.

Judith Butler's gender performativity suggests that gender is not an inherent identity, but a social construct that is constantly realized through action. Gender performance may reinforce stereotypes ideas and social expectations (Butler, 2020). The involvement of professional women in the working group adhered to traditional gender norms and expectations that women are more advantageous in negotiations, thus fuelling the perpetuation of traditional gender values. This reinforcement of stereotypes due to performativity further negatively affects individuals, which can limit women's work choices through harmful gender norms.

5.4 The possible future direction of women's participation.

5.4.1 Change the Unequal Power Structure of the Workplace.

In the workplace, continuous efforts can be made to address the power imbalance by subverting traditional gender norms and gender role stereotypes. By guaranteeing gender quotas, diverse training and flexible work arrangements, we can drive dynamic changes in power in the workplace and create an equal and inclusive working environment.

5.4.2 Change the Male-dominated Social Structure.

Formal and informal training on urban planning from a gender perspective is an important strategy to overcome the gender inequality barriers encountered in urban transformation (Ortiz Escalante and Gutiérrez Valdivia, 2015). It helps to make more planners aware of the need to engage women actively in urban renewal projects. This strategy requires a stronger political commitment at the institutional level to enable structural changes to promote gender equality.

5.4.3 Expand the Influence of Public Participation.

The main problem with China's participatory planning is that the existing participation does not fully receive public opinions. In particular, the perceptions of the government are consistent with the professional views of the private sector like the working group, but are far from the perceptions of the citizens, which ultimately leads to the neglect of the public voice (Liu et al., 2022). According to Bingsheng Liu et al., in the performance evaluation, the stakeholders should be required to measure the level of public participation in China's urban renewal projects, so as to overcome the problem of insufficient influence of public participation (Liu et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

This paper explores the dynamic path of Chinese women's participation in urban renewal based on observations and secondary resources. In order to protect the rights and interests of participants in this urban renewal project and avoid possible sensitive information involved, this paper mainly uses existing literature and research results to conduct an intersectional analysis of the phenomenon of Chinese women becoming the main participants in urban renewal. This allows for a broader understanding of the complex motivations, processes and outcomes involved in participation behind the phenomenon. However, it must be acknowledged that the use of limited primary data may result in the reliability and accuracy of this study being affected by the researcher's subjectivity.

However, the above research still has certain potential and significance. By using an intersectional approach to study the relationship between gender, power, space and knowledge behind different female participating groups in the Yulin community renewal project process, it explains the role of women in urban renewal in China. phenomenon of the main actors in the process. (1) Due to the unequal power structure and gender role stereotypes in the workplace, the project working group was forced to be composed entirely of professional women. As representatives of the government, they led the entire urban renewal project; (2) Influenced by traditional social ethics As a result, almost all the staff of community residents committees are women, and most of them actively join this industry; (3) More female residents actively participate in the urban renewal process and seek opportunities to voice their demands for women's space.

Female participation in the urban renewal process has alleviated the traditional male-dominated spatial power relationship to a certain extent, helped planners fill the gaps in gender knowledge, and made the city more inclusive and equal. However, it has to be admitted that women's participation provides more of a patchwork reference for urban renewal, but cannot directly influence urban decision-making, and to a certain extent strengthens gender role stereotypes.

But this does not mean that women's participation is useless and unimportant. Urban planning and renewal from a gender perspective is a necessary means to eliminate gender discrimination in cities and ensure women's empowerment. This study critically reflects on women's participation in urban renewal practices not only as a conscious and purposeful questioning of the male-dominated planning industry and participatory planning, but also as a way to provide adjustments from a gender perspective for the sustainable development and stability of cities. Urban renewal not only requires the active participation of more women, but also requires more profound structural changes at the social level to promote gender equality.

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