

DOCTORAL THESIS

The road of injustice: gender and infrastructure

An analysis of marginalized rural areas

(summary)

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I began my research with the following question: what is the role of infrastructure in maintaining and perpetuating gender inequalities? Specifically, I expected that the precariousness or, in some cases, even the lack of infrastructure would constitute a crucial factor in maintaining and perpetuating gender inequalities. This situation limits the social autonomy of girls and women, particularly concerning access to health services, education, or employment opportunities, and burdens them with domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Correspondingly, in terms of public policy, I believe that identifying and correcting these deficiencies in decision-making processes related to infrastructure could lead to positive transformation, thus reducing gender inequalities and promoting greater participation of women in society.

In the absence of a comprehensive definition of infrastructure that encompasses all its aspects, I propose a multidisciplinary theoretical framework: ranging from engineering to anthropology, with the aim of obtaining a more complete perspective and (re)defining the concept.

I organized the research around three distinct dimensions, which are also delineated into separate chapters:

- local public agenda: through this dimension, I analyzed local investment priorities and how financial resources and development efforts are directed (Chapter 3)
- citizens' (community) agenda: through this dimension, I explored the perspectives of particular groups of women, their personal experiences regarding access to infrastructure (Chapter 4)
- (Institutionalized) Civil society agenda: through this dimension, I studied the intervention of non-governmental organizations in supporting citizens (communities) in claiming their rights and making their voices heard (Chapter 5)

I mention that the choice of this three-tier structure is also influenced by my personal experience as a community organizer. In the nearly two years of fieldwork I conducted before starting the PhD (2019-2020), combined with the experience gained during my doctoral studies (2020-2024), when I continued to conduct fieldwork activities, I observed that the local political agenda is

often separate from the community agenda and the needs of the citizens. I believe it is necessary to bring these agendas together, which I intend to achieve through my research.

The objectives I aimed to achieve in conducting the research were:

- developing knowledge about the necessity of a gender-sensitive approach in the field of infrastructure through a review of the specialized literature (see Chapter 1)
- understanding the logic governing the formulation of the public budget and budget allocation decisions (see Chapter 3)
- highlighting the everyday experiences of women and emphasizing the underrepresentation of their needs and interests on local policy and program agendas (see Chapter 4)
- presenting models for developing a culture of active and democratic participation of female citizens at the local level (see Chapter 5)

I believe my work stands out through a multidisciplinary approach, combining sociological, anthropological, geographical, economic, political, and social perspectives to reveal the complexity and depth of the influence of gender on infrastructure and vice versa. The innovative elements of the work are, on the one hand, theoretical, through the reconceptualization of the premises of public policies related to infrastructure, and on the other hand, methodological, through the use of an intersectional feminist approach that allows the identification of aspects overlooked by previous research, as well as the collection of primary data through focus groups and interviews in areas with difficult access.

Brief overview of the research

In the introductory chapter I explored the various dimensions of infrastructure. I began by defining and differentiating types of infrastructure: traditional, social, and critical (Buhr, 2003; Carse, 2017; Weijnen & Correljé, 2021; Hansen & Schulze, 2021; Gandy, 2005; Ostrom, 1990; Larkin, 2013; Butler, 2004; Harvey, 2017), as well as the concept of infrastructural violence (Graham & McFarlane, 2015; Chelcea & Zamfirescu, 2021). Then, I analyzed infrastructure as a public good, discussing accessibility and its role in ensuring equity at the societal level through appropriate public policies (Miroiu 2015, 2017; Olson 1971; Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1990; Kallhoff, 2011; Frischmann 2012). I also examined the influence of geographical positioning on access to infrastructure: marginalized areas (Varun & Rao, 2017; Ambaw & Negussie, 2022; Calderón & Servén 2004, 2010). I continued with the relationship between gender and infrastructure, discussing the integration of the gender perspective (e.g., the gender mainstreaming model), and how individuals' overlapping identities generate specific needs (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins, 1990; Bunjun, 2010) that should be reflected in infrastructure. In terms of implementing the political concept of intersectionality, I introduced the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA), a method developed to evaluate how public

policies affect different groups of people, considering multiple dimensions of their identity, which has been applied in medicine and public health (Hankivsky 2011, 2014, 2019). Finally, I emphasized that infrastructure is influenced by political, not just economic, factors, examining ideas and practices in development policies (Hopper, 2018; Zafarullah & Huque, 2021; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Sen, 1999) and the integration of the gender perspective (Mariano and Molari, 2022; Ferguson & Harman, 2015; Siemiatycki et al. 2020; Kitchin et al. 2022; Lallement, 2013; Momsen, 2021), culminating with a case study on the World Bank and its development projects (infrastructure).

In the second chapter I detailed the methodological considerations of my research, providing a solid foundation for understanding the approaches and techniques used. I began by presenting the general methodological perspective—qualitative methodology, specifically action research (Adelman, 1993). I explained the theoretical and philosophical framework underpinning the research—the feminist principles (Holland, Ramazanoğlu, 2002; Letherby, 2003). Then, I discussed standpoint theory, which emphasizes the importance of social position in the production of knowledge—the idea that the experiences and perspectives of individuals from marginalized groups offer unique and valuable insights into social structures and power relations (Harding 1987, 2001, 2004). In my research, I consider the voices of focus group participants as epistemic resources that can influence social change, thus embracing the transformative role of this work. I defined the purpose, objectives, and research questions, clarifying the study's direction and intentions. I detailed the specific techniques used for data collection, with particular emphasis on the ethical dimension. I continued with a description of the information gathering techniques, explaining the practical procedures and tools employed. In conclusion, I addressed the limitations of the research, acknowledging the constraints and possible influences on the results.

In the third chapter I analyzed the public agenda and investment priorities, focusing on how budgets and investment decisions reflect and influence infrastructure development. I began by exploring the logic of budgets and investments, providing an overview of the state budget, local budget, participatory budgeting, local public investments, and national investment programs: the National Program for Local Development (PNDL) and the "Anghel Saligny" National Investment Program (Pop, 2022). I addressed the integration of the gender perspective in local infrastructure investments, highlighting the importance and benefits of considering gender aspects in the planning and implementation of projects (Băluță et al., 2008; Mateescu & Tufiş, 2024). Finally, I included a case study on the Local Development Strategy of the Valea Mare Pravăț commune. Although this strategy appears to be the result of an extensive consultative process that should incorporate the needs of the community, in reality, it does not adopt a reflexive approach and does not include the diversity of community needs but rather reflects a homogeneous voice that aligns perfectly with the development plans established by the town hall.

In the fourth chapter, I explored the profound connection between personal experiences and the political sphere (Okin, 1989; Schuster, 2017; Miseres, 2015; Reid, 2018). I conducted a detailed analysis of the living conditions of women in five marginalized rural communities. This analysis brought to light a series of everyday issues: lack of paved roads, access to water and electricity, heating, waste management, transportation, access to education, medical services, and the relationship with local authorities. I presented models of women's involvement in community development, such as better political representation (Phillips, 1998; Squires, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Miroiu, 2004; Clayton et al., 2019; Gyan & Mfoafo-M'Carthy, 2022).

In the fifth chapter, I began with a retrospective of the history of community organizing in the USA and Europe (Alinsky, 1945, 1972; Grand, 2021; Smith, 2005; Schutz & Miller, 2015; Knight-Abowitz, 2018), highlighting the evolution and influences of this process, with the aim of better understanding the mechanisms and implications of bottom-up organizing practices at the community level. Then, I thoroughly analyzed how the community organizing process unfolds (Beckwith & Lopez, 2001), providing concrete examples of actions and initiatives from the USA and Romania through the three interviews conducted with experts (community organizers). Through thematic analysis, I presented both their successes and the obstacles encountered in their endeavors.

In the sixth (and final) chapter, I synthesized the main conclusions and observations and formulated a series of recommendations for public policies aimed at improving the quality of life and the participation of citizens in decision-making processes.

Methodological considerations

Methodologically, I opted for a mixed approach. My aim was to obtain a comprehensive and detailed perspective on the interaction between gender and infrastructure, and in this regard, I combined qualitative and quantitative methods to adequately capture women's experiences and needs regarding local infrastructure.

To gain a profound understanding of the daily realities of women in rural environments, I organized 5 focus groups where study participants shared their experiences. These discussions facilitated a better understanding of how infrastructure influences women's lives and their specific needs.

Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 3 community organizers active at the local level, aiming to understand their intervention methods and how they interact with local authorities in promoting gender-sensitive infrastructure. These interviews provided a broader perspective on the approaches and strategies used to draw attention to women's needs and rights in the context of infrastructure.

In complementing qualitative data, I also utilized existing data and statistics, integrating previous information and research addressing gender and infrastructure-related aspects. This approach served to substantiate arguments and contextualize research findings within a broader and more robust framework.

Field research main findings

In identifying the localities where I organized focus groups with women, I relied on the Atlas of Marginalized Rural Areas and Local Human Development in Romania (World Bank, 2016) as a sampling framework. The localities are: Pălămida neighborhood in Valea Seacă village, Bacău county; the villages of Gura Pravăț in Valea Mare Pravăț and Slănic in Aninoasa, Argeș county; the villages of Munteni-Buzău and Borănești in Ialomița county.

The analysis of living conditions in these marginalized rural communities highlighted several significant issues impacting women's lives - for example, the lack of paved roads, especially during rainy periods, creates major difficulties in accessing essential services such as education and healthcare. Limited access to clean water and electricity poses other significant challenges. Dependence on unsafe and non-potable water sources poses health risks and entails additional efforts to ensure adequate supply for various household activities. Additionally, difficulties in accessing and acquiring resources for home heating lead to considerable financial pressures. Inadequate waste management is another major issue in many rural communities. The lack of a clear waste collection system can lead to its accumulation around homes or in makeshift areas, with consequences for the environment and people's health. The long distances to high schools, clinics, hospitals, etc., and the lack of adequate transportation generate additional costs for parents and restrict children's access to education and healthcare services. Moreover, the relationship with local authorities reflects the need for transparency and collaboration in addressing local issues. Women especially feel the lack of support and power in voicing their needs and problems.

Alongside inadequate infrastructure, women face the pressures of patriarchy and the negative effects of racism and poverty. These pressures are felt both within the community, where traditional gender roles limit them, and externally, where they encounter discrimination and marginalization from the wider society. All these aspects create additional burdens on their shoulders.

Planning inclusive and gender-sensitive infrastructure involves direct consultation as well as understanding the specificity of their issues and needs at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class, and other axes of marginalization.

As an alternative method of empowering communities and balancing power at the local level, I have utilized the example of community organizing—a process in which community members

come together to act collectively towards common goals. At the core of this process lies the concept of power, understood not only as political or economic influence, but as the community's ability to effect change through collaboration and solidarity. Interviews with experts (community organizers) highlight the necessity of active listening and a deep understanding of the real needs and concerns of community members to develop effective and sustainable solutions. The interviews emphasize the focus on mobilizing and empowering community members, facilitating their active participation in the decision-making process and actions for change. The importance of close collaboration with local authorities to obtain support and necessary resources for community projects is underscored, along with the need for an equitable partnership relationship. The success of community initiatives requires persistence and long-term commitment from organizers and community members. For example, women in Mizil succeeded in having their neighborhood streets paved as a result of pressure on local authorities through monitoring local council meetings, writing letters and petitions, as well as organizing protests. In Detroit, a community organizer persuaded sewage authorities to engage in a discussion with the community by using the stories of people who annually experienced flooding in their homes and damage to their appliances. Similarly, students in Ciobotea, supported by their mothers and a community organizer, managed to illustrate the difficulties they face in their daily journey to school because the transportation does not pass through their village.

Regarding the challenges in fundraising, in the United States, the culture of fundraising and community involvement in donations and volunteering are highly developed, facilitating the acquisition of funds needed to support activities. Conversely, in Romania, most non-governmental organizations work on a project basis, which involves intense bureaucratic work and limits their flexibility. Moreover, the process can be influenced by the broader political, economic, and social context in which it takes place. In societies with consolidated democratic institutions and a culture of civic participation, community organizations can benefit from a favorable climate for development and obtaining the necessary support. On the other hand, in contexts characterized by lack of resources, corruption, or political oppression, community organizing may encounter significant obstacles.

Conclusions

The conducted research has highlighted the close relationship between infrastructure and gender, with the presence or absence of adequate infrastructure significantly impacting women's lives, especially in marginalized communities. Beyond gender, the development of infrastructure must consider individuals' intersecting identities, which also influence specific needs. The Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) can guide a more reflective process of developing inclusive policies and programs - an effort that would contribute to a more equitable society.

On one hand, the analysis of local investment priorities has demonstrated the need for a more inclusive approach in planning and allocating resources, with a focus on the needs of women and marginalized communities. Examining the investment priorities of the National Local Development Program (PNDL) and the National Investment Program "Anghel Saligny," it was found that there is a tendency to focus on large-scale infrastructure projects - especially road paving - but not on communal ones, which traverse segregated villages from the rest of the commune, as are the five villages where focus groups were conducted. Critical sectors for women, as indicated by nationally representative research, such as nurseries, kindergartens, and health facilities, remain overshadowed by local priorities. Of course, roads are also essential, as are water and sewage, and they are often discussed in focus groups. However, the lack of nurseries and kindergartens, as well as the absence of playgrounds for children and the long distances to dispensaries, add extra burden on rural women.

On the other hand, the analysis of living conditions in the five rural communities included in the research has highlighted a series of problems with a major impact on women's lives - namely, the direct impact of poor infrastructure and gender inequalities on their lives. Limited access to clean water and electricity poses health risks and requires additional efforts to meet basic household needs. Issues related to heating homes, waste management, and limited access to essential services and employment and education opportunities directly affect women and their families. Additionally, impassable roads create difficulties in accessing essential services, while the lack of resources such as running water and electricity exacerbates women's domestic work. Last but not least, in their relationship with local authorities, women particularly feel the lack of support and power to voice their needs and issues.

Lastly, the examples presented from interviews with community organizers demonstrate that active community involvement can lead to significant outcomes (including promoting women's rights and improving local infrastructure).

Thus, the literature review, along with case studies and examples of best practices, demonstrates that there is already a solid foundation for adopting this concept in the planning and implementation of infrastructure projects.