

## **Gender in the discussion of quality of life vs. quality of place <sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

In the aim of differentiating the concept of *quality of life* from that of *quality of space*, the gender implications involved in the first become of crucial importance. The fact that men and women, girls and boys, have different roles in society, different access to and control over resources, and thus have different needs (DPU, 1997) implies that a quality of life approach needs to identify this diversity of needs and operationalise them to effectively improve the conditions of men and women, particularly those in which public interventions are involved.

Many attempts to approach quality of life have been restricted to the study of objective conditions of the surroundings, excluding those related to the social or cultural relations, the development expectations and the perceptions of the individuals of their own quality of life. These are indispensable conditions for a comprehensive and actualised conception of the notion of quality of life.

The concept of quality of life, based on its apprehension of the subjective and objective dimensions of reality, provides an innovative way of diagnosing, assessing and proposing alternatives to improve the living conditions of men and women, in our case in urban areas.

This paper presents the results of a study carried out in one of the low income housing sectors in the city of Santiago de Chile, where the perception of quality of life from the inhabitants of the sector was studied. The paper first briefly describes the conceptual framework for understanding quality of life, it then describes the methodology used and finally the results of the study are presented and illustrated with the *Spiral of Quality of Life* with the respective indications of further studies on quality of life.

### **Quality of Life vs. Quality of Place**

Today's urban planning and management process requires the use of alternatives that can effectively improve the quality of life (QOL) of those for whom it is being planned (Fadda et al, 2000). The assessment of quality of life can be a useful platform for setting public policies and allocating funds by identifying the

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communities that need to upgrade services or amenities, promote tax breaks, and initiate urban revitalisations. According to Wee, “spatial comparisons of QOL may provide insights into where amenities are concentrated and the success of government programmes in allocating resources to needy areas” (Wee, 2000: 163).

Researchers from various disciplines, including medicine, economics, geography, sociology, business, philosophy, amongst others, have been interested for quite some time in the study of QOL. Also, public authorities, from different levels of government, have used the concept to transmit their mission statements and political intentions<sup>2</sup>. The interest for studying aspects of quality of life is therefore not new and it has been present for centuries. The QOL concept has been receiving more attention since the 1960s in sociological studies, health care issues, housing quality improvement, and increasingly on environmental studies.

The concept of quality of life is a difficult one to apprehend, define and measure, due to the multiple elements that determine it. It can have various interpretations, depending on the evaluative factors used to assess the lives of persons. In its broadest sense, this concept refers to the factors that make a life better. According to Sen (Nussbaum and Sen, 1996), wellbeing is understood as those aspects relative to “the capabilities, opportunities and advantages” of persons, not merely the physical ones.

In general, QOL will depend on the possibilities people have to satisfy their fundamental needs. In this sense, the concept of *Quality of Life* represents more than the private “life standard” and it refers to all the elements of the conditions in which people live, that is, all their needs and their satisfiers (Fadda et al, 1999). This concept has been developed by social scientists to measure and evaluate people’s wellbeing. In urban areas, this wellbeing may be defined differently depending on the context, in geographical as in social, cultural, economic, historical terms, of the individuals and collective groups (Fadda et al, 2000)

Many attempts to approach quality of life have been restricted to the study of objective conditions of the surroundings (quality of place), excluding those related to the social or cultural relations, the development expectations and the perceptions of the individuals of their own quality of life. These latter ones are indispensable conditions for a comprehensive and actualised conception of the notion of quality of life. From this comprehensive perspective, the concept of quality of life represents something more than a private “life level” and it is referred to all the elements of the conditions in which people live, all their needs and satisfiers (Fadda et al, 2000).

However, depending on the approach used, the definitions can be endless, and thus various approximations to the subject may take place. More and more, researchers have come to the consensus that the measure of quality of life

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<sup>2</sup> The Chilean Housing and Urbanism Ministry slogan is “Improving the Quality of Life”.

requires the analysis of the objective conditions, just as the subjective evaluation of these conditions in a given place and their comparison with several places (Dubois et al, 2000).

QOL studies which present perceptual consultation are sometimes criticised as being too time consuming, laborious, limited in spatial coverage, unrepeatable and expensive and thus with little impact on policy making. They are also criticised for quantifying intangibles such as access to amenities or sense of community. (Wee, 2000). Nevertheless, today's urban planning and management process requires a vision that is interdisciplinary, that recognises the diversity of factors, sectors and actors present in any decision making processes and most importantly, it requires the recognition of the needs and interests of those who participate and are affected by this process.

However, in the decision making sphere, the notion of QOL still lacks a simple unified definition, consensus on the method of assessment and a standard for measure. Due to the complexity of defining QOL, popular literature on this subject has very often used the notion interchangeably with quality of place (QOP), making the assumption that the physical environment and surroundings play a deterministic role in one's QOL. Even though this view seems overly reductionistic, QOP has become a synonym for QOL as in annual top ten best cities list in popular magazines, books on rating places, and research on locational decision to name a few (Wee, 2000).

According to Wee (2000), place statistics have always been used as indicators of social, economic and environmental quality of place. They are the quantitative abstractions which governments go by in terms of funding allocation and how the health or progress of a place is judged. QOP studies frequently use proxy indicators such as number of Interstate highways to infer inter-metropolitan accessibility, number of physician per 100,000 to evaluate healthcare quality, number of opera houses to represent arts and culture, and property value to infer neighbourhood attractiveness (Wee, 2000). One common trait of these measures is the use of aggregated socio-economic and environmental government statistics to measure the conditions of places, rank them and infer that the highly rated cities offer high QOL. When some people's perception have been incorporated to these studies, for ranking for instance, the overall results become the complete opposite, thus explaining how, the same data can bring about completely different results depending on the interpretation.

What makes a city liveable? Is it the city itself or the people? The emphasis placed to evaluate this is what makes the difference, obviously in order to have a better QOL the optimal physical attributes would be desired, however, the most liveable cities can have a very low a quality of life according to its residents' perceptions. Most of the studies which rank cities show that there is no single way of measuring the merits of a location, nor a uniform set of criteria for assessment. However, even though all of these studies make claims about the QOL of these places, none of them actually interviewed the local residents to assess their perceived life quality.

Nevertheless, there appear to be a group of universal indicators adopted by these studies, namely crime, healthcare, housing, cost of living, unemployment, income and environmental quality (Wee, 2000).

Increasingly, studies have opened up to a new perspective on the issue of liveability, one that is grounded at the local community scale. Here, the focus is firmly on exploring the perceptions of local people of the quality of life, their community area, and their views of the future (Rogerson, 2000).

Sometimes, the results may appear contradictory and these can be explained by the regional, cultural differences. This is precisely why, in QOL studies, including perspectives such as the gender one, can become increasingly useful and necessary. This is because human beings perceive problems and their possible solutions from different viewpoints or according to the social roles (including reproductive, productive community based and political roles) they play and satisfy their needs under different criteria. The same physical object or a specific experience may be perceived differently by different persons.

By using gender to “see” quality of life, it becomes apparent that perceptions vary depending on the gender relations taking place, the needs, roles, access and control over the resources men and women have and particularly over the decision-making capacity they also have. Men and women’s entitlements on community based goods and services also have implications in terms of gender. It is thus important to understand who is entitled to what and on what basis and how this entitlement is perceived (Kabeer, 1997).

The inequalities in these relations do not automatically emerge when analysing quality of life for various reasons including lack of practical expertise, lack of advocacy power, inadequate methodologies or simple rejection. Although much work has been carried out to mainstream gender into policies, programmes and projects, it is still greatly misunderstood or conflated with other mainstream concerns such as poverty or the environment. Additionally, though most policies, programmes or projects consider the improvement of quality of life as their main objective, upon analysing the interventions, the concept is rarely defined and gender implications are seldom made visible. This is so for many interventions from NGO’s, governments and International Agencies. Nonetheless, the need to incorporate the environment as well as gender to their formulation is increasingly being considered essential if not mandatory to the urban planning process (SCP, 1998; SPC, 1999).

### **Quality of Life Research in Santiago de Chile**

Over the past two years, the research project “Quality of Life and Gender in Urban Sector in Santiago”<sup>3</sup> has been carried out in a low income neighbourhood in the

west side of the city where large number of government housing projects have been installed over the past 15 years. The research process included the production of information regarding the different factors and indicators of quality of life of the inhabitants of these settlements (such as employment, health, education, access to goods and services, community infrastructure, etc.), and relating them in an objective (how were there in concrete terms) and subjective (how were they perceived) manner<sup>4</sup>.

This process of relating the information was done using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The objective information was obtained from secondary sources in particular census bureau, Ministries, Municipalities, the Police, other studies, etc. The subjective part was done via workshops with the men and women of the community, from which the meanings and feelings on the most relevant problems to them were extracted. These were then translated into a survey which was later applied to the proportionate number of men and women in the community.

Given the large amount of information gathered, the research initially used a modified version of the livelihoods approach developed by British DFID to proceed with the analysis. This approach was used in order to analyse the perceptions of the residents taking into consideration that this approach, like that of quality of life is “inherently responsive to people’s own interpretations of and priorities of their livelihoods” (Carney, 1998).

The idea of seeing reality comprehensively lead us to attempt to analyse information in such manner, however, understanding it as particular processes in themselves. Thus, starting with the idea of capitals and complementing it with Bourdieu’s definition of fields and habitus, it became easier to apprehend the assessment of quality of life. Bourdieu defines *fields* as “a set of objective, historical relations anchored in certain forms of power, while *habitus* consists of a set of historical relations deposited within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996). Together, these concepts replace that of capital as a list of resources which individuals possess. Each area was thus denominated as a field, understanding that it is more than the resources people have or lack, but as the spaces of power, relations and perceptions men and women have which make each field a process to study.

In the analysis of the information the fields used included: natural, human, physical and socio-cultural. The social and culture field were joined due to the idea that part of our definition of quality of life included the social networks, but also the sense of belonging, identity and cultural aspects relevant to quality of life. Also, the financial field was not included, as it was not originally considered in the study, this does not mean that it is not regarded as important but one to be considered in future studies.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of the methodology used see Fadda, G. and P. Jiron (1999)

As will be seen later, these fields were used as a way of organising data, however we hypothesise that the variables included in each field may not necessarily be those that fit into those fields, and the resulting factors could even create completely different fields than those expected. In order to proceed with this analysis, the data was correlated to allow for a qualitative analysis of the perceptions inquired in the survey and a verification if the chosen fields were indeed the correct ones.

The Spiral of Quality of Life best explains the main results of the research. This figure allows us to globally visualise, in one illustration, the distribution of the perceptions and of the indexes of quality of life perceived by men and women, according to each field. These four coloured areas represent their evaluation in terms of: very bad (red), bad (orange), good (light brown) and very good (yellow).

A close look at the figure permits a visualisation of a virtual "spiral", conformed by the curves that correspond to the indexes of each field. This shows an upward spiral, starting from the worst to the best perceptions of quality of life, beginning with the Human field as the worst, continued by the Socio-cultural one, the Natural and the Physical one. This last one, being the most distant to the centre, is the best evaluated. As it can be seen, no indicator is located in the "very good" area.

The Human field is the worst evaluated of all. In it, the indicators of social problems (alcoholism, drugs and unemployment) concentrate toward the centre of the circumference, in the red ring (very bad). This points out that these problems are perceived, as much for men as for women, as the sharpest. Continuing in importance, inside this same category of "very bad", are the qualification of sport services and of health and the recreation.

This field presents significant differences between men and women, particularly in terms of access in terms of time to arrive at the school and the clinic. This is related directly with who is the person with the responsibility of taking to the children to the clinic and school, in general it is women and they have a clearer vision of the difficulties to access these centres and thus a worse perception.

In the Socio-cultural field, the same proportion of men and women assessed this field as "bad". In it, the differences between men and women's indicators are accentuated, and women perceived their QOL worse than men do. Perception improved as group's age increased, particularly for adults over 61 years of age who rated this field as "very good".

Within the aspects measured, the one that presented a larger gap between men and women's perception was access to recreation. Women assess this condition of the neighbourhood as "very bad", while men, as "good". This has direct relationship with the gender roles that women and men play in the society. On one hand, the available spare time that women have is much less than the one of the men, even if, in most cases, men work outside of the neighbourhood. This recreation aspect is

a topic to be further research in more depth by gender studies as well as by studies relating to the planning and management of the human settlements.

Other indicators of this field that also showed significant differences between men and women are those of security, participation and social problems and action capacity.

The Natural field also presented indexes inside the “bad” ring, although the men’s evaluation is located in the limit between “bad” and “good”. In this field, the biggest distances are detected between the indices of men and women.

Also, the distances between men and women’s respective perceptions of their qualities of life are considerable, with women always presenting a worse qualification. This perception can also be attributed to the fact that women, being in their majority housewives (60% do not leave the neighbourhood), spend most of their time in the neighbourhood, having natural environment problems closer to them, in particular those related to plagues, air pollution and diseases which especially affect the children in the neighbourhood and it is thus women who look after them. The lack of environmental hygiene is qualified as the worse indicator, women rate is as “very bad”. This indicator is followed by sound and atmospheric contamination.

The Physical field is the best evaluated of the four fields and, although the indicator of access to the rest of the city is classified as “very bad” by women, there are other indicators such as those for quality of services, access to the city in comparison to the previous neighbourhood and quality of the housing, that are perceived as good.

Once again, this perception is assessed more positively by men who rate this as “good”. Women’s perception is on the limit between “bad” and “good”. This difference in perception can be related to the roles and the limitations that the women face in the use of great part of the community equipment and public spaces.

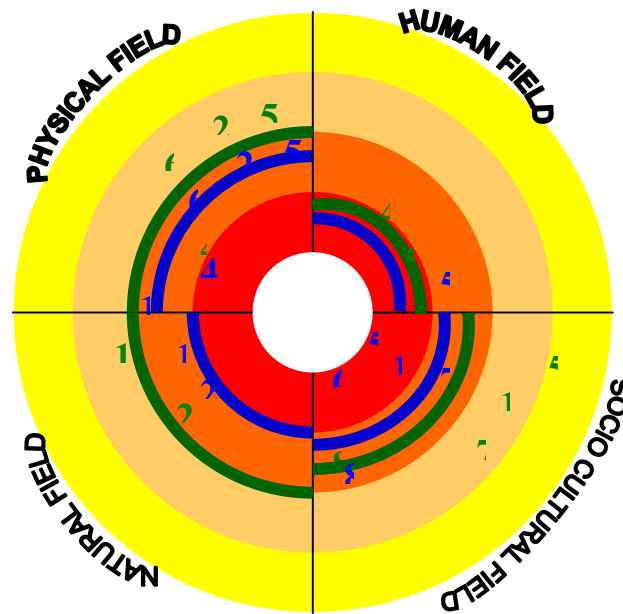
# SPIRAL OF QUALITY OF LIFE

## PHYSICAL FIELD

1. Quality of Access
2. Quality of Services
3. Drainage
4. Improvement of access in neighbourhood
5. Improvements made to housing
6. Quality of Housing

## NATURAL FIELD

1. Quality of Housing
2. Quality of Neighbourhood
3. Environmental Hygiene



## HUMAN FIELD

1. Social Problems (Alcohol)
2. Recreation and Leisure
3. Access to Health
4. Health and Sporting Services
5. Access to Education
6. Quality and Capacity of Schools

## SOCIO CULTURAL FIELD

1. Access to recreation
2. Access to cultural activities
3. Desire to move
4. Friendliness
5. Security
6. Participation and Social Problems
7. Action Capacity
8. Perception of Authorities



## Conclusion

The area studied resembles the majority of housing interventions carried out in Santiago over the past 15 years (with an average of 8,000 housing units built annually in this city)<sup>5</sup>. The results presented in the Spiral of Quality of Life, which show a better evaluation of the Physical field, can be explained by the typical intervention which intend to improve quality of place without an integral view of human settlements and a clear association with the environmental, socio cultural or human needs of men and women in this city. The low evaluation of these latter fields is not surprising as the dimensions in the other fields are not visualised as being just as important or related to the physical ones. This leads us to think that any intervention which deals with improving the quality of life of men and women cannot be done placing all the emphasis on improving the physical aspects of the place, that is improving the quality of place. It is of outmost importance to recognise the existence of other dimensions of reality (objective and subjective) of men and women, considering the diversity of interpretations of those who experience urban spaces, in particular the poorer ones.

Furthermore, it is important to note the importance of incorporating a gender perspective is not merely a sex disaggregation of respondents. Nevertheless, this disaggregation of opinion is needed in order to incorporate a gender relation analysis which generate theses differences, the causes and possible solutions to improve or revert certain situations.

One of the purposes of this research was to make recommendations in terms of urban management and planning. The higher level of criticism from women can be considered a potential for change in their initiatives if they were organised. However, the results manifested very low participation and organisation from the community in general and women in particular. Most of the time, the strategies present to improve quality of life were individually generated (gating the houses, for instance) and very seldom in collaboration with others. This need for organisation must be recognised both by the community and also by the local authorities who are responsible for providing adequate resources and channels for these strategies to take place. The sense of abandonment from the Municipality, reflects the need for higher recognition of men and women's need from the local authority.

This study also presents the need to carry out studies recognising the diversity of contexts. This is because some quality of life studies carried out in other more developed countries usually present certain behavioural patterns, such as women, elderly persons, religious and higher income groups have a higher levels of satisfaction or happiness with their QOL. A situation which is not necessarily reflected in the Santiago case.

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed explanation of the impacts on quality of life of housing location in the city of Santiago see Fadda, G, Jirón, P. and Allen (2000 in print).

Finally, it is important to note that this was an exploratory study and thus with many weaknesses and aspects which could be improved. In methodological terms, the incorporation of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of QOL as well as the use of qualitative as well as quantitative techniques is crucial to a better comprehension of the subject. However, it must be recognised that working interdisciplinarily is not always the easiest task, particularly when the habitus is to work independently and “add” results at the end. Similar situation occurs when conjugating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The easiest solution is segmenting areas of data organisation and analysis, however, this sum of aggregates hardly ever results in integral visions.

This evidences the need pass from a diagnosis of “state of quality of life”, in descriptive terms, to understanding the processes for perceiving and modifying these conditions of quality of life. This is particularly important in terms of gender relations, as most of the time, there are elements of power relations than inhibit or promote conducts to improve quality of life.

Also, the division of information into fields which could be quite illuminating in terms of organising the data. However, this is not the optimal method of analysis, in other words, it is necessary to find other forms of information analysis which can relate the fields and that can also allow for a construction of different of fields. This lack of conjugation can be considered as a weakness in the analysis of the research and one to be overcome in the continuing investigation.

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