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Research paper

A Critical Feminist Perspective on Participation in Co-design for Planning Practice

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing prominence of participatory processes as mechanisms for the democratisation of decision-making, they perpetuate systemic power dynamics, inequalities, and exclusions. This article's critical feminist perspective on co-design processes as a mechanism for participatory planning practice offers new understanding of how different actors' intersectional positionalities influence their approaches to participation, across at three levels of intersectionality: intracategorical, anticategorical, and intercategorical. The study draws from 26 in-depth interviews with diverse participants in four case studies across Scotland. The findings show disparities persisting in the experience of participation, hinging on intersections of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status despite narratives of co-design as an inclusive practice. Additional barriers encountered by women and individuals from underrepresented communities include implications of having a voice, different communication and reasoning styles, and methods of communication across differences. Through raising sensitivity awareness of subtle intersectional barriers, this article highlights the need for deliberate strategies to realise both the inclusion of diverse voices and acknowledging the diversity of intersectional positionalities embedded in participatory processes to enable transformative participation. This article advances a critical feminist perspective by revealing the ways in which co-design is challenged as a mechanism to promote inclusive planning practice.

Keywords: transformative participatory planning practice, co-design, critical feminist perspective, intersectional standpoints, underrepresented communities

This article applies a critical feminist perspective to interrogate co-design in participatory planning practice in Scotland and contributes by showing how different actors' intersectional positionalities shape their approaches to participation across three levels: *intracategorical, anticategorical* and *intercategorical* (see McCall, 2005). Cities have historically been designed and planned with a male perspective in mind and by men (Terraza et al., 2020). This has led to a systemic exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from urban planning and design process, meaning that their perspectives and experiences have rarely shaped spaces of everyday life (Beebeejaun, 2017; Kern, 2020; Andres & Natarajan, 2023; Lennon, 2023). This makes shaping spaces of everyday life a feminist issue (Elkin, 2017, cited in Bassam, 2023, p. 1), foregrounding the need to investigate how exclusion is enacted, even within participatory practices such as co-design. The critical feminist perspective and its

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underpinnings, power relations of everyday life, intersectionality, and the lived experiences of different voices, offer a nuanced understanding of participation that goes beyond traditional technocratic approaches to decision-making (See Haraway, 1988; Crenshaw,1991; McCall, 2005; Wood, 2009). This perspective challenges the assumptions of neutrality and equity often associated with participatory planning and underscores the need to examine not only whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced but also the complex ways in which exclusion is experienced across different actors within participatory spaces. Notably, post-colonial and post-structuralist approaches—challenging racial hierarchies and prioritising the perspectives of marginalised communities—have already been highlighted (see Colomb & Raco, 2018), yet intersectional feminist perspectives remain underexplored, despite their potential to capture the relational, situational, and often inadvertent ways in which exclusion occurs in practice. Therefore, this article aims to interrogate the complexities of intersectionality within the context of participation in co-design in Scotland by asking: *How do different actors' intersectional positionalities shape their approaches to participation in co-design for planning practice?* In doing so, the article contributes by revealing complex, subtle ways in which power, privilege, and exclusion are reproduced in co-design and by demonstrating how intersectional positionalities influence having a voice, communication and reasoning styles, and methods of communication.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION AND CO-DESIGN

Deliberative and participatory planning processes—most notably *communicative planning* (Innes, 1995; Innes & Booher, 2004), *collaborative planning* (Healey, 2006), and *deliberative planning* (Forester, 1999)—are often positioned as mechanisms for democratising decision-making by bringing diverse voices into the shaping of places. Yet their inclusivity has long been criticised for overlooking the conflictual nature of human interactions, as consensus-oriented participatory processes often reproduce power imbalances whereby some actors have fewer resources and influence than others (Hillier, 1998; Fainstein, 2009). Participation does not always empower marginalised communities but can reinforce existing power relations, as the perspectives of dominant groups often become normative, *othering* less mainstream or less powerful social groups (Young, 1996, 2000; Hillier, 1997, 1998; Sandercock, 2000; Beebeejaun, 2006, 2019). The key challenge, therefore, is not only who participates but also whose perspectives ultimately prevail in shaping a place (Massey, 1991). These dynamics reveal that power in participatory settings is not simply a binary division between the powerful and powerless; rather, it is complex and relational. Power relations within participatory settings shape who gets to speak, be heard, and influence decisions, and the ways in which local communities are asked about their contribution to the process since "certain groups may be hard to reach in some contexts and locations and not in others" (Gorjanicyn et al., 2008, p. 5). Young (2000) refers to this as *external exclusion,* when certain groups are absent from decision-making spaces in the first place, often reflecting broader structural inequalities. However, she notes that having the right and access to participation spaces does not ensure influence over the outcomes for everyone. But equally, those who experience discrimination in society face the same challenges in participatory planning and decision-making processes (Mansbridge 1983; Young, 2000), leading to *internal exclusion* (Young, 2000). These often more subtle forms of exclusion can manifest in multiple ways, for example, individuals with low confidence may find self-expression difficult; women and those for whom English is not a first language may struggle with dominant norms of communication (Lightbody, 2017). Participation must therefore be understood as embedded within broader political, economic, and social systems of privilege and discrimination (Young, 1990, 2000; Seydel & Huning, 2022). It is not a neutral process but one shaped by institutional logics and practices that reproduce capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial ideologies (see D'Avolio, 2021). These contradictions are mirrored in the structural exclusions and methodological limitations of planning, where structural inequalities remain entrenched despite efforts to include diverse voices (Sandercock, 1998, 2003; Beebeejaun, 2006, 2019).

Historically, participatory practices have evolved from formal public hearings to more interactive co-design processes that aim to actively involve communities (Sandin, 2020). The focus of this article is co-design, a process that represents a collaborative, design-led approach to planning and placemaking. As such, co-design has gained traction in urban planning processes in recent years (Sendra, 2023), as a methodology for engaging with stakeholders including local communities who are affected by certain decisions in the process of making those decisions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, 2012; Kelly, 2019; AlWaer & Cooper, 2020; Sendra, 2023). In Scotland, for example, East (2024) advocates co-designing places with girls rather than merely for them, to counter women's historical underrepresentation in spatial planning. Co-design is often celebrated for foregrounding power imbalances and creating structures intended to empower communities (Sendra, 2023). Yet it continues to be shaped by the same shortcomings as earlier participatory methods. Much of the UK and Scotland's participatory practice is still limited to consultation (CCQOL, 2024), often considered minimal participation rather than meaningful (Beveridge et al., 2016). As Escobar et al. (2014) argue, participatory processes risk becoming rhetorical unless terms such as *community engagement*, *collaboration*, and *participation* are redefined through new forms of experience, knowledge and legitimacy.

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This argument resonates with broader critiques of planning systems in Scotland and the wider UK, which have historically been—and still are—shaped by white, middle-class male interests and have often aligned with the cultural norms and priorities of dominant populations, ultimately resulting in the exclusion or tokenization of minority voices (Lightbody & Escobar, 2021). Nevertheless, Matthews et al. (2012) caution against a reductionist approach to Scottish communities, echoing Beebeejaun's (2006, 2012, 2019) findings from English and UK contexts. Structural inequalities, whether rooted in geography, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, ability, or socioeconomic status, continue to shape whose perspectives are heard (Arnstein, 1969; Hillier, 1998; Forester, 1999; Healey, 2006; Atkinson & Marlier, 2010; Short, 2021). But inequalities are not only present but intertwined.

Crenshaw (1991) and McCall (2005) emphasise that social positions do not operate independently but intersect to produce unique lived experiences. Intersectionality asserts that to comprehend truly an individual's position and experience, one first needs to recognise that each social position relates to all other positionality markers within that individual. For example, engaging women in planning cannot be approached without recognising how age, employment, childcare, race, and faith intersect to shape their participation (Breitenbach, 2006). Colomb and Raco (2018) caution, however, highlighting that *difference* without considering power dynamics can mask inequalities, making all differences seem equal when some have a greater impact on social hierarchies. While emphasising diversity helps prevent broad generalisations about social positions like age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, it can also lead to fragmentation. This, in turn, may undermine the political and intellectual groundwork necessary to challenge the structural barriers that feminism has long fought against (Hendler, 2005), highlighting the need to understand intersectional positionalities involved in participatory planning and co-design.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative case study approach informed by a Critical Feminist perspective (Haraway, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991; Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) to explore the role of different actors' intersectional positionalities on their participation in co-design processes as a mechanism for participatory planning practice. In doing so, it draws on McCall's (2005) and Windsong's (2018) intersectional studies of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations. This complexity can be unpacked through the ways in which social categories are comprehended and analytically employed through critiquing rigid social categorisation (*anticategorical complexity*), emphasising diversity across multiple social groups or intersections (*intercategorical complexity*), concentrating on complexity of experience within a specific social group or intersection (*intracategorical complexity*), or an overlap of these three approaches (McCall, 2005; Windsong, 2018). Although researchers often apply an *intercategorical* approach focusing on differences and inequalities across intersections (Bauer et al., 2021), here we draw on both *intercategorical* and *intracategorical* complexities as appropriate. For instance, as Beebeejaun and Grimshaw (2010) argue, it is important to draw on commonalities between women, whilst acknowledging the different experiences of individual women and the depth of their heterogeneity. The data collection and analysis discussed in the following sections were carried out employing this critical lens.

Data collection

The article focuses on the observations, perceptions, and experiences of those involved in co-design practice as part of the broader doctoral research carried out at the University of Dundee by the lead author. Therefore this article focuses only on the qualitative data gathered through 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out between January 2024 and August 2024 with diverse participants involved in four case studies across Scotland: Case Study 1 (2017, in-person without using online platforms, except using a website to communicate with local community on which part of the community survey was conducted), Case Study 2 (2018/2019, in-person workshops and widespread community survey), Case Study 3 (2020/2, in-person design workshops, online engagement was through the project website), and Case Study 4 (2022, hybrid blending in-person and online engagement methods such as online workshops using Zoom, online surveys, online summit). These projects were diverse in terms of location (they were selected within areas with multiple deprivations across Scotland[1]), sociocultural and socioeconomic status of communities involved, and the subjects of visioning and planning (for example, they are part of regeneration or revitalisation projects, or developing a masterplan, not a single residential development plan). Access to the project reports and results, place, and people was key in the process of case selection. **Table 1** shows the selection criteria followed, in line with the maximum diversity approach (see Seawright & Gerring, 2008) to capture variations in geography, socioeconomic status, planning scale, actor roles, and modes and methods of engagement. Selected projects shared some commonalities but

[1] The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a tool used to identify areas of Scotland that are experiencing high levels of deprivation across multiple domains, including income, employment, health, education, housing, and access to services: https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/

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differed in others, making them suitable choices to contribute to the breadth and depth of understanding of actors' experiences in different contexts. This set the context for designing a purposive participant recruitment process within each case study. This further helped to contextualise their experiences in the data analysis process.

Table 1

Table one-case study selection criteria

Selection Criteria	Rationale	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3	Case Study 4
Time Period	Captures how time shapes participation practices	Pre-COVID-19 (2017)	Pre-COVID-19(2018/19)	Pre- and During COVID (2020)	Post-COVID (2022)
Participation type	Focuses on collaboration and co-creation	Collaborative/ Co-creation	Collaborative/ Co-creation	Collaborative/ Co-creation	Collaborative / Co-creation
Participation Modes	Explores digital divides and inclusivity through mode diversity	Interactive website, Face-to-face workshops + surveys	Face-to-face + (online) surveys	Interactive website and in-person	Online + in-person (Hybrid) (surveys, workshops)
Location (Geographic Access)	Ensures feasibility, equity of access for researcher and participants	Deprived urban area	Deprived urban neighbourhood	Deprived residential neighbourhood	Deprived rural area
Actors Involved	Multi-actor collaboration reflects power dynamics and knowledge plurality	Local community/groups, local authority, external experts	Regeneration forum, local community/ groups, local authorities, external consultants	Local community/ groups, local authorities, external consultants	Local authorities, local community/ groups, external experts
Tools & Techniques	Diversity of tools reveals how facilitation either excludes or includes	drop-in sessions, in-person co-creation workshops, surveys, interactive website	Co-creation workshops, surveys, drop-in sessions	Co-creation workshops, art therapeutic workshops, drop-in sessions, interactive website	Online group discussions, surveys, in-person co-creation workshops
Breadth of Planning Topics	Unpacks how different planning themes shape inclusion/ exclusion dynamics	Community vision, masterplan and action plan	Plan and visions for Regeneration	Planning a 20-minute neighbourhood	Action plan for the future of active travel
Access to Data & Reports	Ensures transparency, and ability to critically engage with formal outcomes of co-design	Available via digital archives	Accessed through Consultancy	Available via digital archives+ Consultancy	Available via digital archives
Suitability for Intersectional Analysis	Captures overlapping identities (gender, age, ethnicity, Socio-economic status) and differentiated positionalities	Moderately diverse participant base	Mix of age, socio-economic status, ethnic and gender diversity	Moderately diverse participant base	Mix of age, socio-economic status, ethnic and gender diversity

Source: Authors

Participants within each case study included community members, urban planners and architects as facilitators, and local authority officers. **Table 2** shows the participant composition who took part in the interviews. The interviews were offered online or in-person at the convenience of interviewees, and, in some cases, the opportunity to take part in a group discussion was offered for participants' convenience to keep the research process more inclusive.

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Table 2

Table two-participant composition by the intersection of gender and age

Case Study	Gender	Age	Community Member	Planner, Designer, Facilitator, Interpreter	Local Authority Officer
Case Study 1	Male	18-35	0	0	0
		36-55	0	1	0
		>56	3	0	1
	Female	36-55	0	1	0
		>56	1	0	0
Case Study 2	Male	18-35	0	0	0
		36-55	1	1	0
		>56	0	1	0
	Female	18-35	1	0	0
		36-55	0	0	0
		>56	2	0	0
Case Study 3	Male	18-35	0	0	0
		36-55	1	1	1
		>56	0	0	1
	Female	18-35	1	1	0
		36-55	0	0	0
Case Study 4	Male	18-35	1	1	0
		36-55	0	1	0
	Female	18-35	2	1	0
		36-55	0	0	1

Source: Authors

The semi-structured interview protocol allowed a natural flow of conversation so participants could freely share their insights on their experience of co-design and participatory practices, while follow-up questions enabled clarification and the probing of deeper perspectives. For this reason, the transcription was verbatim. By centring participants' narratives, the interviews sought insights on how participants' identities, experiences, and positionalities influenced their perceptions of participation in planning processes. This participant-centred approach prioritised the voices and perspectives of those involved—directly or indirectly—in co-design practices, making the research process more inclusive (see Haraway, 1988).

Qualitative case study analysis with an intersectional approach

Drawing on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) and in line with this study's critical feminist epistemology, a reflexive thematic analysis was carried out in three steps using NVivo 12.6: *transcription and data familiarisation*, *feminist-informed initial coding*, and *development of themes*. The data analysis process was driven by four main considerations, to unpack the power of the data.

First, this study adopted a reflexive approach that acknowledged authors situated knowledge and their active role in interpreting data (Haraway, 1988). Rather than assuming themes *emerged* naturally, themes and patterns were actively *discovered* (Braun & Clarke, 2021), ensuring that the analysis did not treat participant groups as homogenous but instead explored how overlapping social positions (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status) shaped their experiences (Crenshaw, 1991).

Second, the analysis employed an abductive approach that integrated theoretical insights and empirical data in an iterative, non-linear process (Stake, 1995).

Third, the study engaged with both *semantic* and *latent* levels of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through an intersectional lens to uncover the deeper meaning behind spoken and written content. This approach was adopted to achieve a more comprehensive analysis, as suggested by Abrams et al. (2020).

And fourth, the analysis presented here extends Yin's (2013) and Stake's (1995) within-case and cross-case analysis methods with intersectional analysis (McCall, 2005) to examine individual experiences and broader patterns of power and exclusion across sub-groups and therefore avoid overgeneralisation.

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That said, reliance on retrospective interviews rather than direct observation, carried risks of memory bias, selective emphasis, and institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). These limitations were mitigated by the reflexive nature of the analysis and triangulation (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Fusch et al., 2018) to cross-check sources and interrogate both shared experiences and points of divergence across diverse perspectives; the next section presents these findings.

INFLUENCE OF INTERSECTIONAL POSITIONALITIES ON PARTICIPATION

This article explores different qualities of participation across age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status to understand how different intersectional standpoints shape participation in co-design particularly in terms of access to means of communication and going beyond dominant norms of communication, and participation. In the following section, three main themes are discussed: *having a voice*, *different communication and reasoning style*, and *methods of communication across differences*. These themes were discovered organically from the analysis of qualitative data gathered in this study, rather than being predetermined. Also, as Beebeejaun (2006, p. 5) notes, they are not '*real*' or fixed categories, but they are widely recognised and used by research participants across three levels of complexity: *intracategorical*, *anticategorical* and *intercategorical* (McCall, 2005; Windsong, 2018).

Firstly, at the *intracategorial* level of complexity, and despite the research being concerned with four social categories (age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status), the research is situated within highly deprived areas, thus limiting the diversity of socio-economic statuses between community members. Rather than analysing socioeconomic status as a separate analytical category, deprivation serves as the broader context within which these intersecting categories interact. This approach allows for a more focussed and nuanced understanding of how gender, in particular, influences participation alongside age and ethnicity, within communities shaped by socioeconomic disadvantage. This focussed approach makes sense in Scotland, where participation and co-designing future plans are significantly different in 'extremely poor' and 'extremely wealth' communities (Interview 1.1). As a facilitator (Interview 1.1) suggested, participatory processes including co-design '[have] been a success in wealthy communities that could afford consultants (…) but not in those stuck in survival mode'. This is because when people are in 'survival mode', thinking about their day to day lives, participating in co-designing their future may not be a priority; however, when they do participate their quality of engagement is far from that of the wealthier communities, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of their participation.

Findings show that communities who live in deprived areas, despite limited access to economic resources, show a sense of togetherness:

> *"To get together, to work together, to make something happen, then there is a (…) although this is damaged by lots of factors, there is a more natural instinct to approach solving problems, relationally, by getting together and figuring it out together." (Interview 1.1)*

This is seen in opposition to a wealthier community that often '(...) expects to resolve problems by throwing money at it rather than solving them relationally through (…) time and giving (…) love to people' (Interview 1.1); they also perceived to lack awareness of the needs of others without the same resources and connections which can lead to entitlement, unrealistic expectations in participatory working, and even poor behaviour towards each other and consultants, fostering a service mentality rather than true citizenship:

> *"Many people who are retired, (…) have energy and (…) skills, who are vibrant still to an extent, civic society within their particular location, they very rarely have a concept of how that isn't the case for any other community, because people in a certain socioeconomic demographic only mix with the same people, birds of a feather and they can't they can't conceive of they're being other people who are just don't have access to those resources and networks connections. So, what that generates is a sense of privilege, which in terms of consultation often spills over into really quite sometimes quite bad behaviour towards each other and towards the consultants' high expectations and in particular a kind of service mentality which is the opposite of sense of citizenship". (Facilitator, Interview 1.1)*

The discussion therefore acknowledges the different mindsets of participants from various socio-economic backgrounds as shown by the fact that, even when they mix, 'in more mixed communities (…) lower socioeconomic groups would be quieter than middle or higher classes' (Interview 1.2). Sanders (1997) similarly notes that across various racial and ethnic comparisons, higher socio-economic groups speak more, make more suggestions, and are rated as more influential in group discussions. In turn, this supports the notion that more affluent individuals and organisations tend to wield disproportionate influence over co-design processes, shaping planning outcomes in ways that reinforce existing spatial inequalities (Sendra, 2023). This article's focus on communities from a more disadvantaged socio-economic status is justified by the fact that, as Jagtap (2022) reminds us, residents from lower-income communities often face compounded barriers.

Secondly, an *anticategorical* level of complexity within the findings reflects a rigid social categorisation of gender as a dichotomy between men and women. This is not due to a lack of inclusivity in our research design, as interview questions invited discussion on the experiences of individuals from diverse gender identities. However, participants consistently framed their responses within a binary perspective, discussing either their own

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experiences or their perceptions of others in terms of men and women. This suggests that dominant societal narratives and lived experiences may still largely centre on this dichotomy, potentially influencing how participants conceptualise gender in relation to public participation. As Hendler (2005) highlights, there is an ongoing struggle in both feminism and planning: whether to prioritise specific social groups (such as women) or broader, more contextual categories based on diversity and difference. For example, Hendler (2005) points out a concern that contemporary emphases on diversity may inadvertently dilute the focus on women's issues which is ongoing and needs to be discussed.

Thirdly, the findings also show how the experience of participation is also complex at an *intercategorical* level, in such a way that the quantity and quality of participation are perceived and experienced differently at the intersection of gender and age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Participants expressed varying views on women's 'presency' (East 2024, p. 27) in co-design and design-led projects. A few participants, mostly men over 50, believed gender is not necessarily the dominant factor for inequality in co-design and other participatory practices they have been involved in: "the main division is not necessarily gender. It tends to be age…and socioeconomic level" (Interview 3.2, Facilitation Team Member). Others believed "(...) women aren't as represented generally within the events (…)" (Interview 7.1); this female facilitation team member attributed lower number of women joining participatory processes such as co-design to different responsibilities that women have in their everyday life: "(…) they have more responsibilities. They're trying to juggle lots of things". One female community member pointed out that this issue is especially challenging for minority ethnic women in their community, explained that their family responsibilities often make participation difficult: "ethnic groups, like parents, (…) particularly women, have so many responsibilities with families (…)" (Interview 2.2) which makes it difficult to get involved. This is consistent with Kern's (2020) argument that intensive parenting in urban everyday life disproportionately burdens women.

Throughout the following sections, the discussion of findings reveals that the quality of participation at the intersection of gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic context varies in terms of *having a voice, communication and reasoning style*, and *methods of communication* across different groups and individuals.

Having a voice

This study's findings show that, going beyond gaining access to co-design, the quality of participation across gender is significantly different, especially when intersects with other factors such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. And one key aspect that makes the quality of participation different is the participants' perception of *having a voice*. According to this study, older retired men were perceived as the loudest voices in group discussions such as design workshops. In contrast, women may find it harder to speak up in group discussions dominated by men—when more men are present at the table. As observed by a male facilitator (Interview 1.2), women are more likely to enter a co-design workshop, sit quietly throughout the whole event and then leave, whereas men are rarely observed to do so; or at the very least men tend to have a one-to-one conversation with facilitators before they leave the room if have not spoken during the process. In contrast, instances of this occurring with women are significantly less frequent, and if it does happen, it is usually older women who prefer to have a one-to-one conversation with facilitators before leaving the event. This resonates with Cornwall's (2003, p. 1338) warning about the 'add women and stir' approach, meaning that merely increasing descriptive representation of women in discussions does not increase their voice and influence in decision-making processes (Karpowitz et al., 2012).

Voice of minority ethnic woman

Minority Ethnic women might face further challenges in expressing their ideas and concerns because of cultural norms relevant to them. This, for instance, was found by the facilitation team engaged with Syrian refugees—referred to as the New Scots—in Case study 4:

> *"Women, when (…) in a group with a lot of men (…) they are (…) expected, it's considered sort of like respectful and proper behaviour for the women to be a bit quieter, maybe have a more reserved attitude at those times." (Interview 1.4, Facilitator)*

As they observed that 'the women are more comfortable and are more likely to speak and give their opinions if it's an all-women's group rather than a mixed group' (Interview 1.4), they organised separate focus groups—break out rooms in online sessions—by gender with Syrian Muslim participants. In these separate groups, women were perceived as feeling more comfortable voicing opinions without men being present. This highlights the need to acknowledge the power effects of differences while providing an open and safe space for women to *have a voice* and use their agency, as highlighted by Cornwall (2003). This approach prevents the dominance of older male, business-oriented, and socially conservative sections of BAME communities in formal participatory processes, to the disadvantage of women and younger people as indicated by Beebeejaun (2006). Such perception

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of compounded challenges Syrian women faced was also shared by a male interpreter from the same community who was employed to facilitate language and cultural barriers during the project:

"(...) that's a cultural thing (…) [when] there are a group of men and women, especially if a husband and wife and you collecting opinion from the husband-and-wife person. I'm talking about my culture, Syrian culture, so the wife in this case will say a little bit, will not say too much in front of her husband, especially if her opinion is opposite of her husband (…) that will make trouble for her (...) so she kept silent in front of her husband (...)." (Interview 3.4)

Karpowitz et al. (2012) attribute this type of behaviour in adulthood to how girls and boys are raised in different gendered cultures. Interestingly, the interviews with Syrian women showed that younger women in this community were less bound by perceived traditional notions of *proper behaviour* and felt comfortable sharing their opinions in the presence of men. This implies a potential shift in the mindset of the younger generation. Findings also show that women might feel more comfortable taking part in women-led settings, where they could freely express themselves. As a young female community member shared:

"I can understand...[what] put women off from engaging because I know myself sometimes. I'd (...) be (…) conscious (...) if I had, like an older guy and I was myself speaking to him, I never felt comfortable doing that [...and...] in some of the workshops... all the representatives from the Council were men. That annoyed me." (Interview 4.2)

These findings highlight the importance of diverse facilitation teams in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and language, which enables facilitators to build relationships across different social positions, influencing their participation. For example, a facilitator (Interview 1.2) emphasised their team's diversity as a strength that they would 'lean on'.

Voice of young people

Findings reveal a strong sense of agency and activism among the young people involved in this research, prompting a deeper reflection on the often-overlooked dimensions of young people's engagement. Although there was a general consensus among practitioners and community groups members about young people being harder to engage with, this study's findings revealed a hidden in plain sight aspect of young people's and children's participation in co-designing plans: dismissive attitudes towards young people, combined with cultural norms that prioritise adult expertise and lived experiences, often leading to young people feeling undervalued and unheard. As stated by a 12-year-old female volunteer at the time:

"A lot of the time, especially because of my age (…) a lot of people didn't always take me seriously (…) They wanted to speak to an adult (…) Some people thought it was amazing and were really engaged. I explained it to them, but I was kind of really dismissed a lot of the time, as if I was just here with my mum or I was just dragged here, or that I didn't actually want to be here. There was a lot of stigma around that for me. It was really hard to deal with in terms of people not acknowledging me as much as any other volunteer" (Interview 4.2).

This resonates with the study by Kelleher et al. (2014) which highlights that adults' unwillingness or inability to accept young people's agency in decision-making is a significant impediment to their participation. We also found that, while children's engagement is valued, there are underlying perceptions that their ideas need to be *managed* or filtered through a pragmatic lens to fit within the constraints of planning processes, as shown by this adult's views:

"Where you are with the children, it was much, much different because it was very aspirational (…) they wanted (…) big swings and Ferris wheels. That's fine, but that's the kind of discussion you have. So, and it wasn't about tempering that aspiration, I think it was really about making sure the young ones were engaged and fed into the process practically." (Interview 2.1, Local Authority Community Manager)

This shows a mismatch between children's voices and the practical considerations of adult actors, which tend to modulate those younger voices. This has led to young people frequently struggling to assert influence within decision-making structures dominated by older, more established actors (AlWaer & Cooper, 2020) despite youth engagement in participatory planning being increasingly championed (Campion, 2019). Nevertheless, this study found that young people's voices are not universally welcomed, and youth engagement may be received with ambiguity: whilst some older community members preferred separate co-design sessions for young people perceiving them as loud and disruptive, some facilitators emphasised the benefits of having different age groups together, enhancing 'creative listening' which facilitates 'a shared perspective and a shared solution' by helping the 'older members of the community think about the next generation and change (…).' (Interview 2.2)

This shows the need for proactively engaging with young people, especially young girls, when designing and planning cities (East, 2024). Nonetheless, the adult actors themselves are far from homogenous, highlighting different ways in which the final outcomes are influenced by the more powerful, even when everyone is nominally included (Young, 2000). The next section explores different ways in which women and minority perspectives can be undermined because their ways of communication do not conform with dominant norms in society.

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Different communication and reasoning style

This study findings show that the lack of sensitivity to cultural expressions and different communication and reasoning styles, especially across gender and ethnicity, may lead to misunderstandings and disengagement among individuals and social groups.

Communication style across gender

A young female facilitator, reflecting on her experience in other participatory processes, described moments where she felt excluded because of the style of the discussion, where male voices dominated, talking over one another and making it difficult to focus on the purpose of the discussion:

"I think somebody had said to me, oh, you just need to speak (…) I don't think that works for me because I think they should be more like me (…) why should I be more like the men in the meeting? And I think they (…) should be respectful of everybody else (…) and try to be a helpful participant." (Interview 2.4)

This resonates with Sanders' (1997) and Young's (1996) arguments on how assertive, confrontational speech—often male speaking styles—is valued over exploratory or tentative expression, often silencing women and other less dominant voices. Indeed, we found facilitators perceived women's style of communication as more discussion-oriented whereas men were perceived as more assertive:

"Men can be a little bit more decisive about what the correct solution is for. I find women (…) wanting to have a discussion about it, whereas men will give you their opinion on what should be the right or correct response." (Interview 5.3, facilitation team member)

Communication style across ethnicity

The diversity of communication styles across different ethnicities adds to the complexity of this dynamic. For instance, according to a community interpreter (Interview 3.4), normal Arabic conversation is perceived as loud by the dominant cultural norm in society and might be misinterpreted as 'fighting' when they might be 'laughing and speaking normally'. This misperception could hinder efforts to build inclusive communication during the co-design process. These cultural misunderstandings may also extend to how questions are framed and phrased or even to the broader concept of engaging with local communities for planning purposes. For instance, some questions in Case Study 4 required rephrasing to be comprehensible within a different cultural context:

"Sometimes they ask the question, and I know in our culture or the people's culture, there is no answer. It's not understandable—you need to rephrase it to try to find the answer" (Interview 3.4, Community Interpreter).

This underscores the importance of not only linguistic translation but also cultural understanding between different ethnic—and cultural—groups. In this case, to provide a safe space for participation, two measures were considered: engaging a familiar person who had established a relationship of trust with the community, and a translator/interpreter from the same community to help with language barriers and cultural translations:

"One group was the new Scots with the translator (…) they were in a safe space that they were familiar with, and people [were] comfortable with." (Interview 7.4, Local Authority Officer)

This seemed to be a successful approach, as a female community member shared:

"(…) there is no problem. Because before we had some [language] classes with [Interviewee 1.4] (…) [so] it's easy for us [to speak]." (Interview 5.4)

On the other hand, in Case Study 3, a facilitation team member highlighted the limitations of the process without adequate interpreter support:

"I don't have the necessary language skills and my colleagues (…) if we had five or six interpreters, then we could have more valuable conversations." (Interview 3.3)

The points raised here challenge the efficacy of relying on established norms of communication and whether there is a need for rethinking or going beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to participation.

A tailored approach to participation was discovered in Case Study 4, where facilitators worked with the ethnic group in separate breakout rooms. While this approach enabled Syrian women to voice their ideas and concerns more freely, it also highlighted how gendered spaces can shape discussions differently. For instance, ethnic women's groups provided more solution-oriented responses, whereas the ethnic men's group in this case was used as a space for expressing frustrations without a strong focus on resolution or finding solutions. This highlights the need for "seeking to 'balance' representation between BAME men and women" emphasis by Beebeejaun and Grimshaw (2010, p. 1999).

In addition, it was found that participation and communication across different categories also depend on the issue under discussion and the context in which co-design carried out. For example, an older woman shared

"I (…) feel comfortable (…) talking about things that I know, things that I do (…) and things that I understand, and I might not be comfortable with the discussions around something I don't know anything about" (Interview 6.2, Community Member);

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Whereas male participants were perceived to be more confident in group discussions, even if they were not familiar with the topic under discussion.

These differences stem from diverse actor's modes of being and ways of thinking (Healey, 2006) and they require and reinforce unique, tailored methods of communication across intersectional positionalities.

Method of communication across differences

This study evidence that different methods of communication are perceived and experienced differently across gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. One of the most evident instances, which was accelerated during COVID 19 pandemic, was the increasing use of digital tools and platforms to engage and co-design with local communities. Planners and facilitators from public and private sector shared a belief that online platforms fall short of building high quality interaction and in-depth discussion among actors. A local authority officer shared,

"We had very poor discussions with our communities over the three years of the pandemic (…) we are now having to relearn some of the skills that we (…) had pre 2020 (...) to make sure that the quality of discussion (...) picks up again and over the next few years." (Interview 2.1)

Findings reveal that online participation methods may exclude individuals with low digital literacy, those lacking formal education, immigrant communities where English is not the primary language, people in remote rural areas with unreliable internet access, and older adults. Younger generations can play a key role in situation that require technological fluency such as digital co-design environments.

In using online interactive spaces, some non-verbal communication cues such as body language and expression are lost; this gets even more precarious when engaging with different ethnic groups (see Sisimayi et al., 2026). For example, an interpreter shared how important eye contact is in their culture:

"Eye contact is a school of (…) the speech." (Interpreter, Interview 3.4)

And found it difficult to grasp the tone of the conversation when Muslim women from their community preferred to turn off their cameras, rendering online communication into a barrier:

"Some of the lady they don't show their face, they turn the camera off (...) So we don't know if they if she speaks with anger or happiness or I don't know you can't see her." (Interview 3.4)

Although almost all participants shared a belief that face-to-face participation fosters richer, more relational exchange among actors, by providing a space for '(…) express[ing] your word or your emotions (…)' (Interview 6.3, community member), paying attention to cultural sensitivity or individual preferences seems to be key. For example, sharing an experience from a recent project, a facilitator stated that they would go to Mosque around Friday prayers to reach out to Muslim men who were taxi drivers, and they would reach out to, and have a chat with, their wives in school pickups. However, stating the cultural sensitivity of this reach out plan he said:

"We go, not me, but obviously female colleagues sometimes go to schools for young women and so you're dealing with gender, ethnicity and but you try to do it in a very sensitive way that feels inclusive." (Interview 3.2, Facilitation Team Member)

This supports Beebeejaun's (2012) argument that the failure of participatory frameworks to include ethnic minorities in planning stems from a lack of appropriate recognition of such minorities and the ways in which they would be engaged. As diverse community groups and individuals engage differently; for example, art workshops are increasingly used to promote active participation, mitigating some barriers, enabling participants to speak their mind instead of being quiet during roundtable discussions. However, a male local community member highlighted he was the only man in the art therapeutic session implying that it might not be the best practice for engaging with men: '(...) in the therapeutic art type workshop sessions I was the only man (…).' (Interview 2.3)

A similar pattern was observed by a facilitator that women were more likely to congregate together for mutual support and building relationships, making them more approachable and easier to connect with during co-design and participatory planning, whereas facilitators had to build a relationship before seeking men's input. For example, in Case Study 1, the way of building that connection was playing pool with men before inviting them to have a chat with the facilitator. As the facilitator stated*:*

"Key to that was [that] there was a sense of building relationship by doing something together over a table, which meant that we had formed a bond in that sense, which wasn't really required to connect with the women." (Interview 1.1)

This is consistent with the general view that labelling some groups such as ethnic minorities as difficult to engage with or hard-to-reach, reflects the challenges planners face in engaging them rather than a lack of willingness from these communities (Beebeejaun, 2006, 2012). While historical marginalisation and discrimination mean these groups deserve special attention, the real issue lies in how engagement efforts are structured, not in the communities themselves.

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CONCLUSION

This article builds on a broader feminist discourse on participation and deliberation in planning and decision-making by showing how the intersection of social positions—namely age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—shapes the experience of an individual's participation in co-design. In the multicultural context of planning, recognising the diversity of actors as *we* is a contested issue (Beebeejaun, 2012). To be black in a white community or working class in a predominantly middle-class neighbourhood, an immigrant in a xenophobic urban area, or a woman is not just a 'social category' but means 'to be on the wrong end of an asymmetric power relation' (Short 2021, p. 3). This research has addressed this issue by applying an intersectional approach at three levels—intracategorical, anticategorical and intercategorical—to unpack the complexities of participation in co-design and participatory planning processes in Scotland. The *intracategorical* complexity delved into the nuanced, shifting, and context-dependent experiences of individuals within specific socioeconomic status; the *anticategorical* complexity within the findings reflected a rigid social categorisation of gender as a dichotomy between men and women and the nuances of this historic dichotomy in participation in public life; and the *intercategorical* complexity reflected on the heterogeneity of social positions, thus pointing out the intersectional dynamics that shape individuals experiences and their participation in co-design for planning practice.

These research findings show that underlying power relations in society among gender and age groups impact their participation in terms of *having a voice*, *different communication and reasoning style,* and *methods of communication across differences*; and these dynamics are even more influential when intersecting with ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Men are more likely to speak up in co-design workshops than women, while women might feel less confident speaking up in a male dominated setting; women tend to learn more about the subject of the discussion before making decisions, while men seem to be more decisive about their opinions. However, other social positions such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status add to the complexity of one's approach to participation in co-design; for example, older women may feel more confident to share their ideas in group discussions. Older men are usually observed to have louder voices, those who tend to dominate participatory spaces, especially if being from a wealthy community, being retired and having more time and resources to participate, whereas for low-income communities, individuals may feel inferior or self-conscious about lacking the skills or educational background. In turn, they may think they do not have anything valuable to offer or they may have been let down by the institutional power in multiple ways in the past so that they think their contribution will not matter.

Although Scotland is getting more diverse, this diversity is not fully acknowledged when it comes to engaging with ethnic minority communities in Scotland. These communities are from diverse backgrounds, faiths, and cultures, thus there is a need to adopt different ways of communication that are not considered as the *norm* in Scotland. Being male or female in some ethnic groups with their own culture and faith, can add to the complexity of their participation. For example, in some cultures it is not common for women to speak up in the presence of their male relatives. Therefore, acknowledging differences should go beyond targeting the existing established community groups and networks, requiring in-depth research about the context of the community when planning for participation. Unpacking this complexity is the first step to understanding why some segments of society are continuously underrepresented. Further research is needed to delve into practical pathways to overcome these intersections.

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Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with University of Dundee's ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the SDAD Ethics Committee [ref SREC-SDAD-23-RPG330]. All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation in the research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author contributions

FM: Research concept and design; collection and/or assembly of data; data analysis and interpretation; writing the article; critical revision of the article; final approval of the article. SCS: Critical revision of the article; final approval of the article. DM: Critical revision of the article; final approval of the article.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

AI disclosure

No artificial intelligence tools were used in the writing and data analysis of this manuscript.

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