

# Women's Collective Organizations: An Opportunity for Upward Mobility

A Case Study of the Mezitli Women Producers  
Market in Turkey

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## INTRODUCTION: MEZITLI WOMEN PRODUCERS MARKET

Mezitli Women Producers Market is an exemplary case in addressing the vulnerabilities of women in a patriarchal society. This small Turkish city has made commitments to align with five of the global Sustainable Development Goals. By doing so, this project recently won the Guangzhou International Award for Urban Innovation by providing sustainable economic and social opportunities, while simultaneously addressing the vulnerable populations of women, girls, and refugees. What is unique about the Mezitli case is that the municipality itself has created space and provided support for a women's collective organization, working in collaboration with a group of local women producers to create the first female-only market in the city. The women-only producers market eliminates the financial barrier to participate and designates space for women to work and sell their handmade goods and homegrown produce, preserving their cultural identity and individual pride.

The Mezitli Women Producers Market begs the following two questions: Can collaborative organizations of women find pathways for collective economic mobility? And, can creating physical space and providing support for women through a collaborative planning process ensure gender equality and a local sustainable economy? This case study hopes to explore the outcomes of this simple, but award-winning, project and will consider the exponential benefits provided to these women and the local economy when their upward mobility is prioritized by the local government. Additionally, the potential for replicability of this model will be examined, as the plausibility of doing so in many alternative geographies is encouraging.

## GEOGRAPHIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MEZITLI, TURKEY

Mezitli is located on the southern coast of Turkey (Exhibit 01), approximately 200 kilometers from the Syrian border. As the youngest district of the Mersin City region, it became an official province in 2008. With rapid urbanization, the city has built new housing, infrastructure, and civic institutions like schools and hospitals to accommodate its modernization and its population of 187,536 people within 40 neighborhood districts (Exhibit 02). However, approximately 75 percent of Mezitli land area is still natural, with mountains, plateaus, and fields that support a vibrant agricultural economy. Because of the Mediterranean climate, Mezitli has the good fortune to be able to grow a wide range of citrus, grapes, peaches, and olive products, among other fruits and vegetables (Guangzhou Award 2018).

While located among rich agricultural land and mountainous terrain, this small city has grown rapidly with the need for housing, services, and jobs to accommodate the recent population growth. The economy predominantly functions on agriculture and tourism with a fluctuating population from winter to summer seasons. With the influx of tourists in the warmer months, the city grows from 187,536 people to approximately 300,000. Furthermore, due to its proximity to Syria, Mezitli has also been dealing with an influx of refugees fleeing the war zone, presenting real challenges in accommodating new residents into employment, housing, and public space. All told, when registered Syrian refugees are accounted for, the Mezitli population grows by approximately 60,000 people, a 25 percent increase (Guangzhou Award 2018) It should be noted however that these figures only capture the officially documented Syrians and the number is likely much higher.

The vulnerability of refugee groups fleeing to the city to find a safe place to live, work, and start anew is complicated by the patriarchal traditions within Turkey. In Mezitli, over 50 percent of the population is female, yet women are still "very much dependent on their families, and mostly on their male relatives or husbands" (Guangzhou Award 2018) As is typical of many patriarchal societies, women are often met by gender-based barriers limiting their economic independence from their families or male relatives with a lack of formal opportunity for jobs, access to capital, and active participation in society. Traditionally, women in Turkey are excluded from markets completely, often due to financial barriers to entry and the selection of market participants by men.

By actively limiting access to markets and other economic opportunities, women are often relegated to the margins of society. Globally, this is not an uncommon framework. However, in many cases, women have self-organized into collective organizations to share information and techniques, provide loans or financing, and act as a social support network for each other. In the Mezitli case, the municipality has prioritized the empowerment of women in their city by creating pathways to financial independence and upward mobility through support of a women's collective organization. Mezitli is one of the signatories of the Sustainable Development Goals and the United Nations Global Compact, and in this regard has committed itself to support and promote "human rights, labor rights, the protection of the environment, and anticorruption" (Mezitli Belediyesi 2017, 6). With these principles in mind, the main objectives set forth for the Women Producers Market are to reduce gender-based barriers, expand employment opportunities for women, increase social and cultural exchange between women from various backgrounds, and encourage them to actively participate in society (Metropolis 2018). The first market, as a place for each of these objectives to manifest, was opened in 2014, with nine total markets opened by the end of 2018. More than 6,000 women have been included in the initiative to date, and the program is still growing, with plans to expand into each of the 40 neighborhood districts within Mezitli (Exhibit 02) (Guangzhou Award 2018, 2-3).

### **THREE STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

An innovative aspect of the Mezitli Women Producers Market is its potential for replicability, as seen in the rapid expansion it has already experienced within the municipality itself. The city employed a collaborative process from the start, by organizing meetings to determine initial interest in the project among local women. Later, those women were fully integrated into the decision-making process from inception to implementation. Starting with a goal of ultimately creating a women's collective group, the local government involved not only women producers but consumers as well, to understand the challenges, needs, and wishes of all parties involved. Bringing these women into the fold as bona fide stakeholders allow them to be partners and beneficiaries throughout the project (Metropolis 2018).

Essentially, three strategies were deployed in this model to achieve the objectives set by the City of Mezitli: collaborative organization, social-cultural inclusivity, and standards of participation (Exhibit 03), each of which, in detail below, act as one of the legs in the proverbial stool of success, where if one were to cease to exist the entire project would not have accomplished an innovative solution to gender and economic inequality at the local level.

### **COLLABORATIVE ORGANIZATION**

The Women Producers Market hinges on the effectiveness of cooperation, communication, and an alliance of stakeholders within the physical space of the market but also in the political framework that supports it. As mentioned previously, the municipal government of Mezitli created the mechanism in which to start the project, has financially supported the implementation, and provided expertise and resources from knowledgeable staff to encourage the longevity of the markets. Also, the City provides the physical infrastructure for the market itself and monitors the overall operations of the facility (Guangzhou Award 2018). From the start, this facilitates an exchange of information between, and ultimately the transition of power from, the city to the women's collective to run and manage the market with autonomy.

Within the market space itself, women from the urban areas intermingle with women from the rural periphery of the city (Exhibit 04). They each bring their handmade goods and fresh produce to sell, but also to exchange information, share best practices, and learn from one another (Metropolis 2018). This rural-urban interface presents an opportunity not only to personally benefit the women active in these exchanges, but to positively affect food security and production in a rapidly urbanizing region. Globally, economic activities are moving





out of the largest cities and into smaller or medium cities, like that of Mezitli, providing new opportunities for livelihood in what would now be considered 'peri-urban' spaces (Lerner and Eakin 2011, 311). Rural households, and subsequently the women that represent them in the marketplace, may rely on 'functional dualism,' where they "produce crops for home consumption but also combine cash crops with non-farm activities to ensure their economic survival" (Lerner and Eakin 2011, 313). The Women Producers Market becomes a place for them to subsidize the agricultural activities they may already participate in for the livelihood of their families but also provides them access to a network of other, possibly urban, women participating in the same subsistence and small-scale commercial production but for very different reasons.

## **SOCIAL-CULTURAL INCLUSIVITY**

The second strategy implemented in the Women Producers Market is to encourage women from various educational, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds to participate and improve their economic status. Participants in the market range from having a college degree to only a primary school education (Exhibits 05 & 06), and women of varying ethnic backgrounds find a unique opportunity to co-work and co-exist in a manner not typically afforded to them (Metropolis 2018). Instances of potential discrimination or prejudice, based on a rural-urban divide, have been avoided. Organizers suggest that these conflicts may typically be expected with the intermixing of these groups, but because of the collaborative nature of the marketplace, the women producers have worked together to avoid conflict and build partnerships to support each other's livelihoods (Guangzhou Award 2018). The women producers share information on sustainable agriculture, marketing methods, strategies, and processes as a way to organize themselves as advocates for their economic stability. The municipality provides additional training as a way to develop social, financial, and legal skills to operate their businesses independently but with support from other women, improving their self-confidence and encouraging their active participation in society (Metropolis 2018).

## **STANDARDS OF PARTICIPATION**

As is typical of markets in Turkey, the Women Producers Market in Mezitli has several standards of participation, but in this case the priority goes against the norm by prioritizing participation by local women. Prior to this initiative, the local economy had been completely dominated by men who made up the market administration and instituted strict criteria to limit access for women to sell in the market place (Guangzhou Award 2018, 2). Compounded by the lack of financial autonomy the women in Mezitli have historically had, the typical entry fee of Turkish markets was impossible for them to pay. To alleviate these barriers to entry, the municipal government established new standards, effectively eliminating the financial entry fee for women to set up their market stand and to completely limit the producers selling in the market to women (Metropolis 2018). Additionally, only women local to the region can participate and the goods they sell must be homemade and or homegrown, with emphasis placed on organic vegetables and small handicrafts (Exhibit 07). As part of the Turkish Healthy Cities Union, much of the produce sold in the market is also provided to local kindergartens as a healthy food choice for local children, making it especially imperative to adhere to strict hygienic and organic protocols (Guangzhou Award 2018, 2).

## **WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE THEORY OF CHANGE**

Ultimately, the women's collective is at the center of this case, where their participation and network of support improves their economic mobility and access to jobs, providing improved self-esteem and gender equality in the city. Their visibility in the market as entrepreneurs and business owners brings them from the margins of society right into the center. With participation in the market, women have opportunities to create, develop skills, and gain independence while building the local economy in a thoughtful way that is in line with cultural

traditions. They are then given license to reconfigure the city, redefining the urban morphology and carving out spaces that are safe and accessible for women, girls, and other vulnerable groups. This theory of change begins with the tradition and social identity women claim as being natural nurturers and collaborators and adapting these traits to meet new challenges of upward mobility and economic autonomy. Their livelihoods are often based within the family, but typically supplemented by work with other women friends. The mutual social support from these self-help groups empowers each woman personally and collectively to have confidence and become “social actors in their own transformation of the city” (Kinyanjui 2014, 103).

Furthermore, the Women Producers Market has been able to be a source of positive impact in the refugee crisis from Syria, providing opportunities for vulnerable women to secure their livelihoods in a new environment. The social impact of this market underlines the dynamics of social cohesion when migrants move into the city and how they find alliances with people like them on grounds of religion, ethnicity, national origin, and eventually physical proximity and economic activities. Social bonding leads to solidarity and social interdependence, where “people with similar norms organize and sustain cooperation that advances their common interests.” These sorts of informal organizations happen on their own already, but the formalization of the women’s collective market helps fold newcomers into the city’s existing social fabric (Kinyanjui 2014, 99).

The formalization of social groups into productive economic collectives redefines the role of women in society. They recognize that their business growth and economic success hinges on their unity and solidarity in sharing best practices, improving education, dependence on each other instead of male family members, and understanding their individual worth as women. They can then build capacity to help each other and gain political footing to stand up for what they believe in (Kinyanjui 2014, 104). Markets become critical locations for political campaigns, where politicians come to meet with constituents to understand the issues and to make promises for change. Despite the probability that these promises will come true, with more women in the center of society, in the heart of the city, like the marketplace, their voices become heard. Their influence can only occur if their presence is permitted and the Women Producers Markets in Mezitli provide previously marginalized women a platform to participate in civil society in new ways.

When the physical presence of women as producers in markets (and elsewhere) becomes normalized, their role within the city can be reimagined. By creating spaces where women can feel safe, be social, and be economically productive the city begins to change into a more gender-inclusive environment. With greater mobility within their own communities, women can move from the informal to the formal city and back again. And with more representation in public space, in the economy, in politics, and in planning, women begin to carve out spaces that better suit them. Women producers who have had success, when working in collaboration, can expand their entrepreneurship into new enterprises and new market spaces. Redefining what is typically considered feminine space has the power to transform the city to be more inclusive and economically sustainable (Kinyanjui 2014, 98).

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CITY PLANNERS**

Based on the example provided by the Mezitli Women Producers Market, the policy and planning recommendations address the physical and ephemeral state of the city through the following strategies (Exhibit 09).

- *De-colonize, de-westernize, and de-masculinize planning.* Planners should integrate cultural norms and traditions into their planning strategy by embracing the qualities of women that make them pillars of society, including networks of support and tendencies to nurture others. These will result in people-centered and long-term policies.



- *Prioritize mobility and accessibility.* Planners must prioritize the mobility of women throughout society and include their informal and formal networks and economies into the planning process from the start. The legitimization of economic informality removes barriers of entry for women to access economic empowerment.
- *Provide infrastructure and agency.* Planners should develop the physical infrastructure necessary to connect women to the rest of the city; this includes safety measures and continued maintenance of these spaces. The city should be held responsible to keep market places clean and safe as a way to encourage women (and others) to be active participants in the city's welfare (Kinyanjui 2014, 121).

These strategies are reminiscent of plural planning outlined by Paul Davidoff in which the planner becomes an advocate for the community (or client) they are serving by presenting alternatives that offer an opportunity of choice not typically afforded to the public (Davidoff 1965, 335). By holding meetings at the inception of the Women Producers Market project, the Mezitli municipality began an advocacy process of planning with the interested women producers and their potential consumers. They then were able to establish a common goal for the market's outcome, which was to form a women's collective organization. By establishing a vision, as recommended by Norm Krumholz in the 1970s, there is a shared purpose and a measure by which every action or strategy can be evaluated (Zapata and Bates 2015, 247). Having a female-centered approach to city planning is an innovative method of governance that actively places the ideals of the Sustainable Development Goals, gender equality, and equity planning at the forefront of Mezitli's vision for the future.

Planners should realize that communities created by women have transformed cities. The empowerment of marginalized populations can quickly elevate a woman from producer to property owner to eventually housing provider, and beyond. Their collective power deserves capacity building and support at the governmental level. However, the local government must be willing to let the women's collective operate on its own without excessive oversight and to only offer a peripheral role of support as time goes on. Too much municipal control and excessive project implementation limits a community's own leadership and opportunity to develop a project based on their own defined goals. "Instead communities are forced to fit into predesigned models. This often leads to fragmentation, negative competition, duplication of efforts as well as empire building" (Mwaura-Muiru 2010, 198). The Women Producers Market in Mezitli is a case where the city has intended from the start to pass the supervision and operations over to the women's collective, demonstrating a thoughtful model that does not undermine the capability and agency the women have on their own (Metropolis 2018).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to note that while Mezitli is a small city, it has made commitments to align with the Global Sustainable Development Goals and implement them at the local, municipal scale. The Market has been replicated seven times over within the city itself, with plans to have one women's market in each of the 40 city districts. This speaks truth to the idea that simple solutions can achieve great innovation and have a higher chance of replicability. The Mezitli Women Producers Market is an exemplary case in prioritizing the experience of women as participants in the social and economic machine of the city. Livelihoods of women bear great importance on the livelihoods of their families and their communities as a whole. When a local government places value on the social and financial independence of their female residents, by amplifying their collective identity, they improve the quality of life for the entire city.

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**EXHIBIT 1:**

*Mezitli is located along the southern coast of Turkey, 200 km from the Syrian border.*

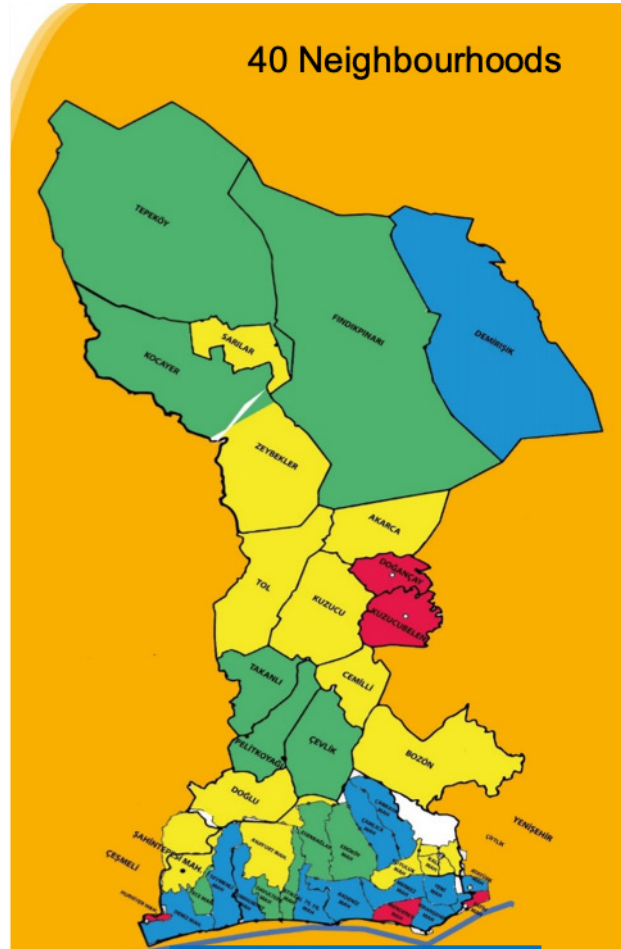
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Source: Map by Author, data from GIS.

**EXHIBIT 2:**

*Mezitli Has 40 Neighborhood Districts Within the Municipality.*



Source: (Guangzhou Award 2018)



**EXHIBIT 3:**

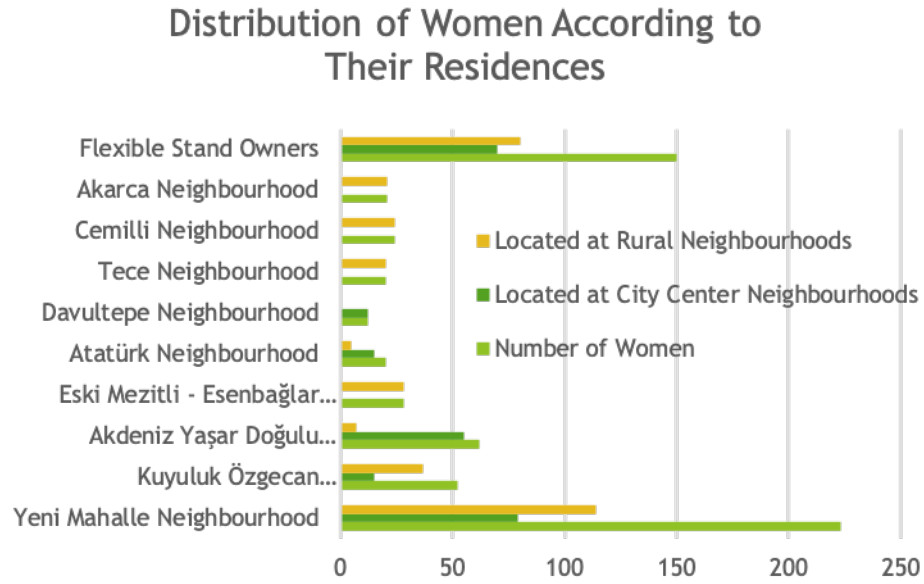
*A Diagram Illustrating the Three Strategies of Implementation and Their Effective Results.*



Source: By Author.

**EXHIBIT 4:**

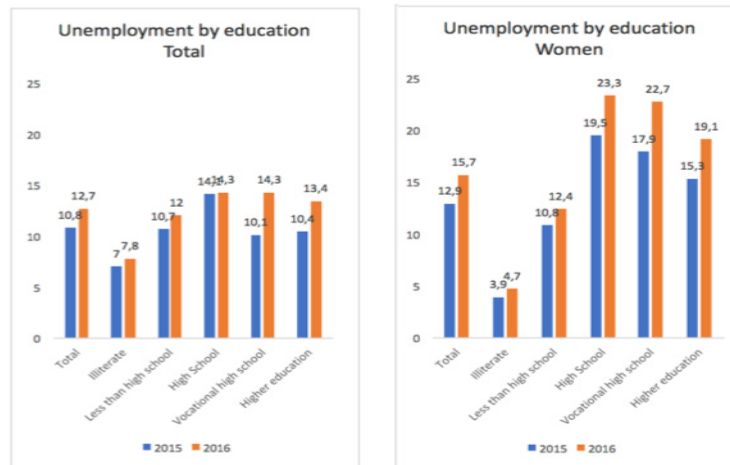
*Distribution of Women Producers According to Their Residence.*



Source: (Guangzhou Award 2018)

**EXHIBIT 5:**

*Unemployment by Education in Mezitli, Turkey.*

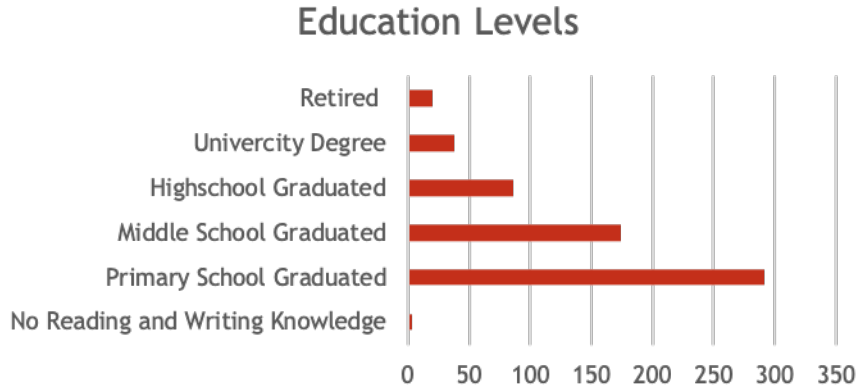


Source: Turkstat, Labour Force Statistics, December 2016.

Source: Turkstat, Labour Force Statistics, December 2016.

**EXHIBIT 6:**

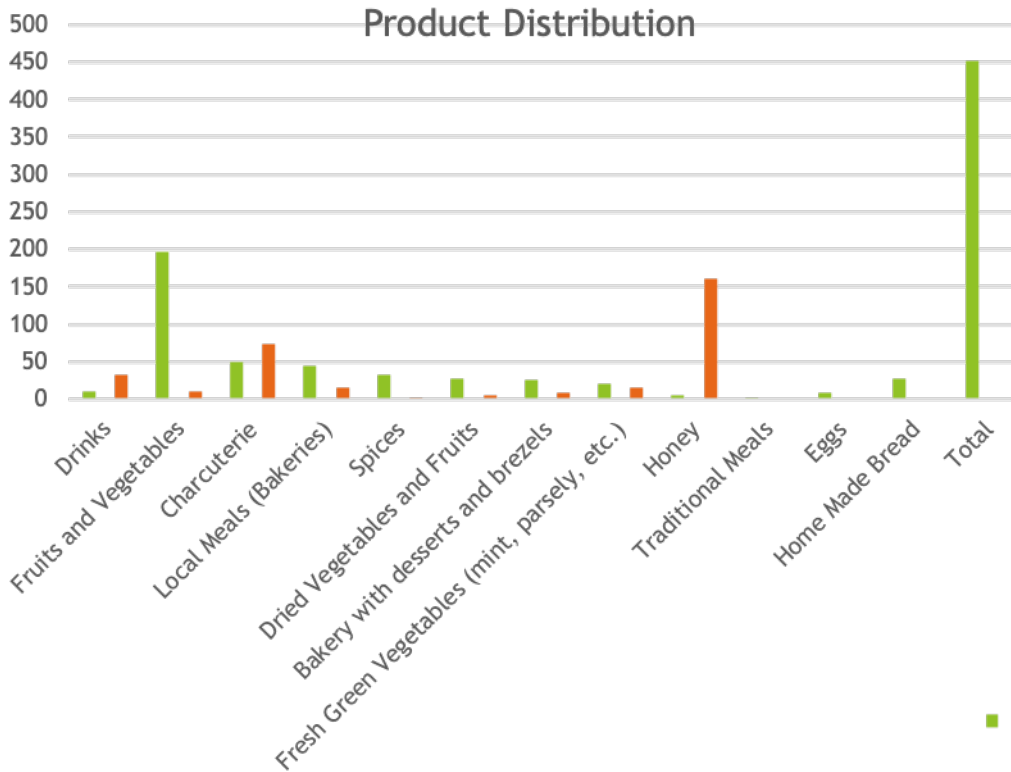
Levels of Education for Women Producers Market Participants.



Source: (Guangzhou Award 2018)

**EXHIBIT 7:**

Women Producers Market Product Distribution.



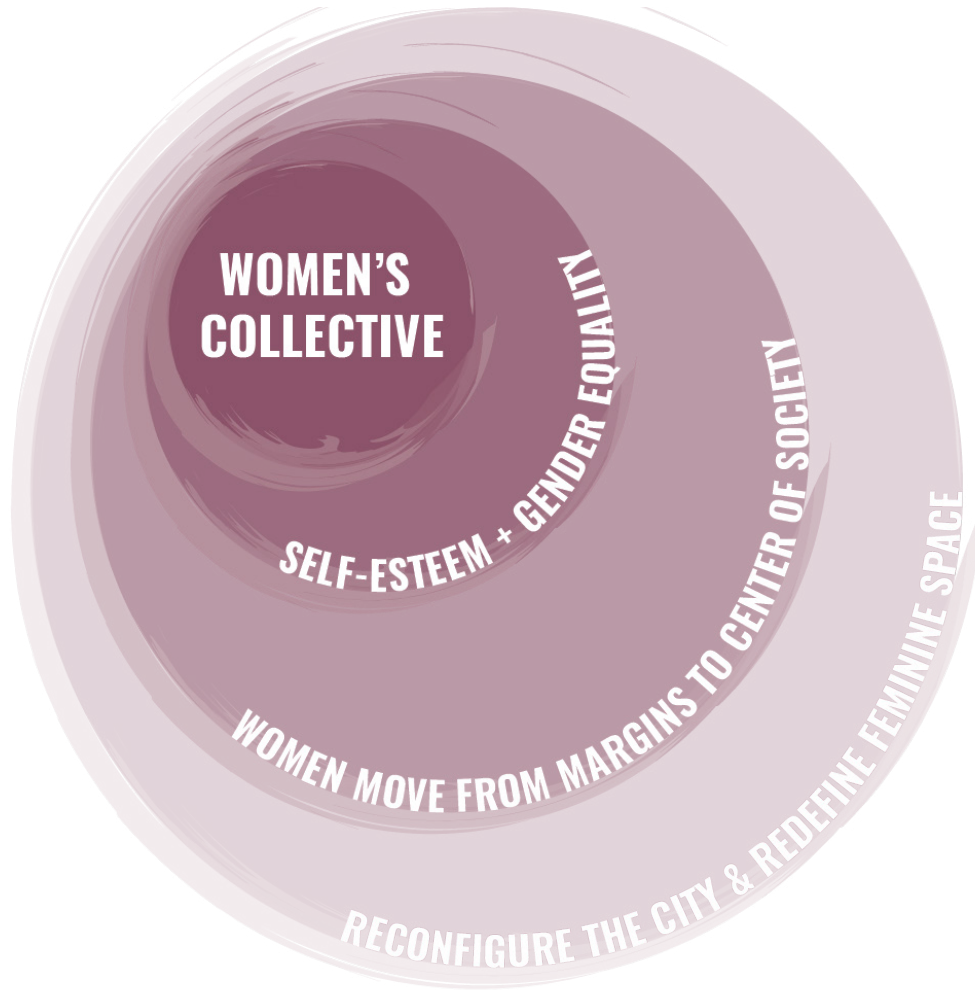
Source: (Guangzhou Award 2018)

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**EXHIBIT 8:**

*A Diagram Illustrating the Women's Collective Theory of Change*

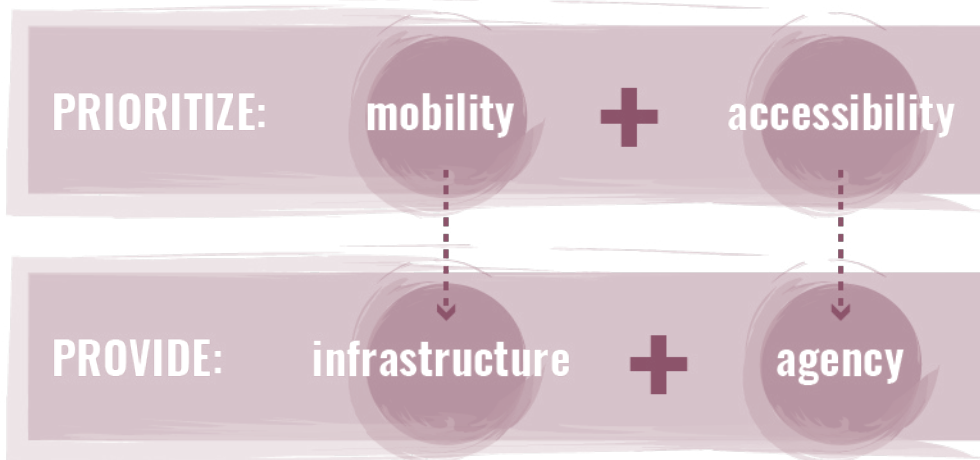
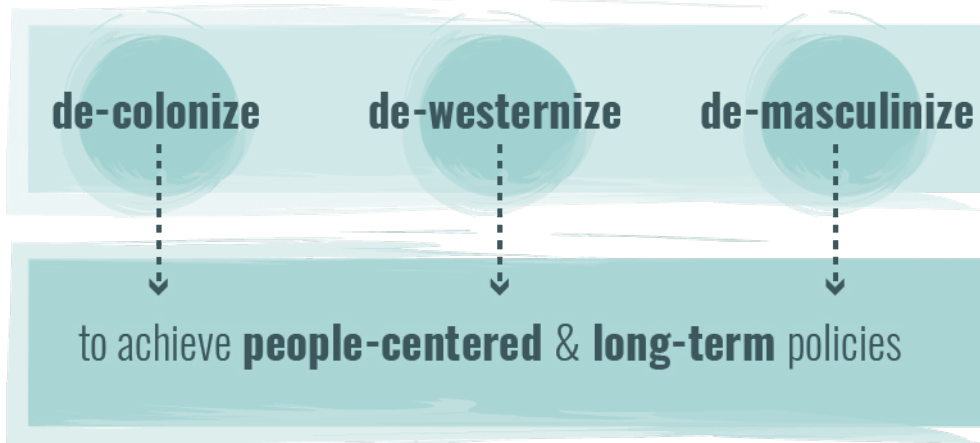
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Source: By Author.

## EXHIBIT 9:

A Diagram Illustrating Recommendations for City Planners to Empower Women Collectives

**PLANNERS SHOULD...**

acknowledge that...



Source: By Author.





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