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Urban Gendered ‘We’ ness of Resilience

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Abstract: The ‘we’ ness of groups in the city cannot be underestimated because they bring about unexpected yet powerful maneuverings through social mobilization. We should not be using the word ‘community’ in relation to the urban, rather the emphasis could be on the words ‘we’ or ‘collective’. These two words convey the fluidity of the groups in the city. I also argue urban resilience should also be linked with gendered aspects of the city. Women’s groups provide social reproductive services within their communities as well as providing economic safety nets. Using the rapidly urbanising context of Nepal, an evidence based conceptual space is created to showcase the invisible and vital resilience function of women’s groups in under researched, medium sized cities of the global South. The urban risk governance landscape allows women to be resilient but they are not allowed by the existing governance structures to rework the urban to suit the needs of themselves, their families and their networks. SDGs number 5 (gender equity) and 11 (sustainable cities and communities) are intertwined and require understanding and debate because they are fundamental to a positive collective future world. Given the current context in Asian cities where the local level is the site where risk governance is increasingly decided, socially just futures can be gained by making visible, listening to and engaging with collectives or the urban ‘we’ more substantively.

Keywords: collective; governance; feminist; gender; justice; futures

Key points related to the urban gendered ‘we’ ness of resilience

1. We should not be using the word ‘community’ in relation to urban, rather the emphasis should be on the words ‘we’ or ‘collective’. These two words convey the fluidity related the actions and composition of groups in the city.
2. In Nepal, the urban risk governance landscape allows women to be resilient but they are not allowed by the existing governance structures to rework the urban to suit the needs of themselves, their families and their networks.

3. Increasingly, the local level is the site where risk governance is decided. Therefore, socially just futures can be gained by making visible, listening to and engaging with informal collectives, the urban 'we' more substantively.
4. I am interested to collaborate on initiatives related to urban resilience that include people into the framing of urban resilience with practitioners working on SDGs 5 and 11.

1. 'We' or the 'collective' but not community in cities of the global South

Asian cities especially those with a population of fewer than one million, are where the world's urban population lives and where future growth will be (<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/>). These cities are called regional cities, medium sized cities, even ordinary cities (<http://oro.open.ac.uk/4240/>). But no matter how they are described, they are not understood to our collective future peril. Feminist urban theorists such as Peake and Rieker argue "the urban, now more than ever, is a political stake that opens up and close off new possibilities and constraints" (<https://www.routledge.com/Rethinking-Feminist-Interventions-into-the-Urban/Peake-Rieker/p/book/9780415518819>). When considering cities in the global South, the individual does not have much power and control especially if the individual is a woman. The vital yet invisible (<https://press.princeton.edu/titles/9564.html>) role of women's groups who serve as providers of social and economic resilience in these ordinary cities warrants consideration. This 'we' ness (<http://www.abdoumalqsimone.com/files/114564846.pdf>) of women's groups cannot be underestimated because it allows for unexpected yet powerful manoeuvrings through social mobilization. I argue that women are the socially just resilience in cities through social reproductive services they provide within communities as well as financial provision of funds they give in times of crisis to those in need.

2. Urban risk governance landscape of Nepal

Nepal is radically changing due to dramatic political, economic, social and environmental processes including the internal conflict (1996-2006) where 13,000 died and the 2015 Gorkha earthquake due to which 9,000 people died. Within this context, Nepal is urbanising rapidly, not just in the Kathmandu valley but also in regional cities. There are now 10 cities with over 100,000 residents. Bharatpur and Dhanghadi, the case study sites, are two of the largest regional cities of Nepal. Both are located on the plains of Nepal. Today, Bharatpur is a heterogeneous city of 300,000; the main caste and ethnic groups are Brahmin, Chettri, Newari, Tamang and Gurung. Internal migration continues and includes new affluent high caste migrants, migrants who are fleeing tensions in their villages and towns as well as economic migrants from impoverished neighbouring Indian state of Bihar. Dhangadhi has a population of 200,000 and is a border town with India. There are fluid movements of migrants in both directions (between Nepal and India) and also movements of people from the mountains and hills of Nepal to Dhanghadi. In these medium sized, regional cities, the local economies (and national) are largely financed by international remittances from young men working in the Gulf countries and Malaysia. Women are living in cities often with their extended families or with the families of their husbands.

SDGs number 5 (gender equity) and 11 (sustainable cities and communities) are intertwined and require understanding and debate because they are fundamental to our collective future world. It is in this context where existing forms of social mobilization need to be made visible, understood and strengthened in the most appropriate ways. The urban risk governance landscape of Nepal forces women to be aspects of invisible urban infrastructure. Women have not been allowed by the existing elite power governance structures comprised of local authorities and male dominated groups to change the status quo in the urban to suit the needs of themselves, their families and their networks. The needs of women are not being heard in the scales where long-term transformation can be articulated and possibly implemented. Rather women are allowed to function on a micro scale supporting each other to cope and get by but not to flourish.

For example, Dilu, who is a strategic advisor of the Little Flower women's group in Bharatpur, explains how her group serves as environmental and social resilience in the city:

“The women's group cleans the roads and during religious festivals we coordinate with other organisations. We work for empowerment of women. We solve problems in the community and resolve disputes. Women have great power in the community. We do a lot of work but it is unseen [by the local authorities]. The major issue is that the municipality does not want to communicate with the women's groups. We are working for them, the government, [doing their work] but they still not seeing it”.

Women's groups address social issues for each other and the more vulnerable residents even if they are not members, financial security through savings and credit schemes and lastly, are often volunteered by and mobilised by the TLO or their husbands to keep the streets tidy. The women understand the value of the services they are providing and are dissatisfied with the invisibility granted to them by men, the neighbourhood groups and by the local authorities. Several women's groups highlight limitations of the women's group due to social constraints imposed by men (women need permission from husbands to join women's groups and men dominate women's groups meetings when men are present) and the government (who is not interested to engage directly with women's groups). This is the same local authority that is willing to use women to clean the neighbourhood streets.

3. Socially just urban futures can be achieved by engaging with women

There are opportunities for intervention to foster progressive change and sustainable development by attacking the root causes of structural inequality. This could involve engaging with local authorities to create a policy space where informal groups such as urban female residents can contribute to social and economic discourse as well as by supporting women's groups to advocate for change (in a way they view appropriate). Given the current context in Asian cities where the local level is the site where risk governance is increasingly decided, socially just futures can be gained by making visible, listening to and engaging with women more substantively.

4. Collaboration on urban resilience that consider residents of the global South

If you are a practitioner, an UN agency, a donor or a scholar, please get in contact with me at h.a.ruszczyk@durham.ac.uk to explore how we can work together. At the present time, I am an

Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and a Research Fellow of the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience at Durham University (UK). I investigate urban risk and resilience governance strategies in medium sized cities of the urban South from the perspective of local authorities and community groups in Nepal, northern India and Bangladesh. For more information about my research please look at <https://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/staff/geogstaffhidden/?id=11019> or <http://hannaruszczyk.weebly.com> . I am interested to collaborate on initiatives related to urban resilience that consider residents in the framing of urban resilience in the global South.

Before I entered academia in 2012, I spent over a decade living and working in countries that are rapidly changing and urbanising. From 1995-2004, I fundraised, developed and managed projects amounting to \$10 million for the United Nations (ILO and UNDP). The projects focused on livelihoods, small enterprise development, social enterprise development, fair trade and local economic empowerment. From 2005-2012, I was an independent consultant working on monitoring, evaluation and learning for the UNDP and other international organisations such as Traidcraft Exchange and the Fairtrade Advocacy Office.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

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