"Let them sing!" The paradoxes of gender mainstreaming in urban policy and urban scholarship

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ABSTRACT

The early twenty first century has been a defining period for urbanization at a global scale. There is an urgent imperative to bring a gender analysis into debates on urbanization in this period of rapid urban growth and change. This article examines the potential of intergovernmental and scholarly spaces for gendering approaches to urbanization. We do so by reflecting on our experience of attending the 9th World Urban Forum (WUF 9), held in Kuala Lumpur in February 2018, as well as a series of academic conference sessions held in Toronto, New Orleans, and Montreal in 2018 on the theme of social reproduction and the development of a feminist urban theory for our time. We ask, to what extent do the discursive and performative strategies used in these different institutional settings serve to substantively center gender in transformative visions of the urban?

Introduction

The Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre is filled with light on a quiet morning toward the end of the United Nations (UN) World Urban Forum. We hear our footsteps ringing through the cavernous lobby as we join a scattering of conference delegates walking sleepily to an early morning session. A joyous chorus of women's voices suddenly breaks through the still air, their voices rising in harmony. We awaken and smile at each other; the mood has shifted, become celebratory. We turn as we reach the escalators and see a group of Black women from Slum Dweller's International (SDI), a UN Habitat partner organization representing grassroots work and grassroots women, dancing in step with their song as they move down the hall. As they reach the escalators their singing stops, mid-chord. Two men in blue UN Security uniforms step in front of the escalator and demand to see their IDs. "Let them sing!!" shouts someone, as we ascend the escalator. A man says as he passes us, "They think it's a riot? People are just happy!"

Above is a scene we witnessed at the 9th World Urban Forum (WUF9) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in February 2018. This encounter between UN Security agents and SDI members encapsulates the contradictions of an institutional space in which the transformative potential of exchange across state, civil society and grassroots groups to address challenges of contemporary urbanization was blunted by the institutional violence operating to discipline participants, specifically poor women of color, entering into that space.

We attended WUF9 as urban scholars from a transnational comparative feminist research project entitled "Urbanization, Gender and the Global South: A transformative knowledge network" (the GenUrb network).[1] We were there to discuss issues of gender inequality in cities through the intersections of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 (on women and girls) and 11 (on cities and sustainable human settlements).[2] Drawing on our experiences at WUF9 and a series of

academic conference sessions on social reproduction and feminist urban theory held in North America, we reflect on the extent to which these different institutional settings create productive spaces for integrating gendered perspectives into visions of the urban. In the context of advancing scholarly debates on urbanization and gender, we also reflect on this series of conference sessions held in North America and hosted by a collective of Toronto-based feminist urban scholars, including the first author, on new approaches to feminist urban theory and social reproduction.

We focus on two trends apparent in two very different institutional settings. First, the emergence of "women's streams" at both events were, paradoxically, useful organizing tools that helped the thousands of delegates at these meetings to navigate large events by topic, while also serving to contain topics on gender and women in dedicated streams, rather than integrating discussions of gender into the broader thematic discussions at the conference. The second trend we observed was the deployment of the figure of the "grassroots woman" in both intergovernmental and academic contexts to provide a common vocabulary for the inclusion of particularly poor, marginalized and racialized women from the global south (Narayanaswamy, 2014) in discussions of gender and poverty, while at the same time instrumentalizing the figure of the "poor woman" in urban policy-making and theory building. We reflect on these contradictions and our own participation in these events to trouble and extend calls for more meaningful discussions and actions on issues of gender in urban theory and policymaking.

Situating gender in the spaces of urban theory and policy exchange[3]

The dawn of the twenty- first century has been a transformative period for global urbanization. For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population lives in urban areas (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social A airs, Population Division, 2019a, p. 5, 2019b, p. 37). Key developments in global urban policy in this period attempt to address challenges resulting from the increasing urbanization of the world's population. For the first time, urbanization is explicitly addressed as a key priority in a global development framework, namely the SDGs, through the introduction of SDG 11, "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (Barnett & Parnell, 2018; Parnell, 2016; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social A airs, 2018). The SDGs seek to end poverty and promote peace and prosperity while protecting the environment, and include an underlying commitment to gender equality. Their adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 was followed by the adoption of the New Urban Agenda at the United Nations Habitat III Conference in Quito, Ecuador in 2016, as a key instrument to facilitate the implementation of SDG Goal 11 on cities and human settlements (United Nations, 2017).

Urban population growth, driven both by natural increase and rural to urban migration, has shifted from the global north to the cities of the global south, with over 90% of urban growth from 2000 to 2050 expected to occur in the global south (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social A airs, Population Division, 2019b, p. 1). Cities of the global south have seen the urbanization of poverty as large numbers of rural migrants have been incorporated into the poorest urban communities (Craig & Porter, 2006). This is accompanied by the feminization of the urban population through increased rural- urban migration by women, demographic aging and rising proportions of female-headed households in urban areas (Miraftab et al., 2015; Chant, 2013; Chant & McIllwaine, 2016). The creation of sustainable futures in this dynamic global context is premised on the urgent task of understanding the gendered impacts of urbanization (Moser, 2016). In the context of global urban policy, this necessitates the integration of SDG 11 on cities with SDG 5, which aims to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." However, the

implementation of the SDGs as an integrated and indivisible framework remains a challenge that faces the parties implementing the SDGs, as well as the expert groups engaged in the ongoing task of developing indicator frameworks to measure the implementation of the SDGs.

The process of developing the SDG indicator framework for SDG 11 includes opportunities for stakeholder groups to provide input into consultation processes to inform the definitions and methodologies adopted in the implementation process globally. The broadly consultative and participatory nature of preparatory processes have been cited as among the defining characteristics that have distinguished the SDGs and New Urban Agenda from previous global development frameworks, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2017, iv). Engagements between governments, policy makers, civil society, grassroots organizations and scholars were central to cementing the consensus on which the NUA was based. However, questions remain as to the effectiveness of institutional settings in the academy and in global policy-making spaces in integrating gender perspectives into understandings of the urban that are substantively rooted in women's lived experiences in urban contexts.

As urban scholars, we are engaged in a project that aims to bring academic research with communities and women's organizations into dialogue with policy makers and policy-making processes. As part of our engagement in WUF9 we hosted a session at the conference examining the synergies between SDG 5 on women and SDG 11 on cities. This event was attended by approximately 25 people and included presentations on the work of the UN Habitat Gender Hub, the GenUrb project, policy mobilities, and the SDG indicator framework. In the context of advancing scholarly debates on urbanization and gender, the first author of this article also worked with a collective of Toronto-based feminist scholars to host a series of conference sessions on the theme of "A feminist urban theory for our time: rethinking social reproduction, the urban and its constitutive outside". These sessions were held at the Urban A airs Association conference in Toronto in April 2018, the American Association of Geographers Conference in New Orleans in April 2018, and the Canadian Women in Geography Conference in Montreal in August 2018. These conference sessions yielded papers on a range of topics, all of which engaged with the concept of social reproduction; a key conceptual framework to emerge from Anglo-American feminist urban scholarship (Bondi & Rose 2003; Katz, 2001). A total of 20 papers were presented at these sessions, covering a range of topics, including, practices of infrastructural labor, counter hegemonic practices of reshaping the urban, practices of dispossession and commoning, feminist social movements, indigenous self-determination, food security and water justice.[4]

The analysis that follows in the next two sections draws on our experiences of attending these events and offers a critical perspective on the possibilities and limitations of the conditions that prevailed in both institutional settings for the task of bringing a gendered perspective to urbanization.[5] We argue that the discursive and performative strategies used to bring gender into urban knowledge production in both policy and academic contexts can operate to paradoxically sustain the marginalization of gendered perspectives and to instrumentalize the bodies of poor women within prevailing colonialist landscapes of global power in both urban development and urban scholarship.

The "malestream"

WUF9's conference programming developed a series of Thematic Itineraries to help the 23,000 participants navigate the meeting. Among itineraries that included "Urban Basic Services", "National Urban Policy", and "Risk Reduction and Resilience", was also an itinerary concisely

named: "Women". Unsurprisingly, in the events in the "Women's" itinerary, women made up the vast majority of the audience, while other sessions were far more mixed. One exception was the "SDG-5 and SDG-11 critical drivers of the Leave No One Behind aspiration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" organized by UN Women. The panel comprised four women experts (including both "grassroots" and UN representatives), and the Indian minister of housing, a man. The packed event was held in a large auditorium, initially about half the attendees were male. When the minister finished speaking, a fourth of the audience left – men streaming out of the doors at the front of the room. When the minister apologized and had to leave before the last speaker, another fourth of the audience, again mostly men, followed him out the door. Women in the audience were vocal about the male exodus, there were perhaps 10 men left in the room, which had gone from standing room only to half full. We recount this event to excavate the microspaces of policy and decision-making to highlight the broader implications of such gendered engagements in terms of the respect accorded to women's voices in urban planning and urban politics. Over the past thirty years, since the establishment of UN Women, women have been given a space to speak, yet if they are talking only to themselves, how can their voices and perspectives meaningfully be incorporated into action?

More specifically, the exodus of men from conversations on gender and the concomitant segmentation of gender issues in "women" streams, an all too common occurrence, is indicative of the challenges of integrating SDGs 5 and 11. In many sessions outside the "Women's Itinerary" women and gender were not mentioned, or were mentioned in instrumental terms as access points to local communities, rather than being seen as constitutive of the urban. By continuing to contain gendered issues within a "Women's Itinerary" rather than integrating discussions on gender across thematic groups, WUF9 demonstrated the ongoing ways that, despite almost forty years of gender mainstreaming, the "malestream" (O'Brien, 1981; Wekerle, 1984, p. 18) continues as the dominant paradigm of knowledge translation in global urban policy. This trend was reflected in the virtual omission of "women" and "gender" in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Cities 2030 (these two words are collectively mentioned a grand total of five times). This lack of inclusion demonstrates that, despite hope- fulness that the inclusion of SDG 5 on women and girls might indicate a more holistic approach, concerns that the SDGs and NUA will be "business as usual" (Zinkernagel et al., 2018) are a real possibility and indeed are already coming to fruition, without concerted e ort on the part of individual governments to address the role of gender in urban development.

Similarly, the segregation of gender issues that occurred in the policy space of WUF9 also found resonance in academic spaces we engaged in. In the course of attending academic conferences in urban studies and geography (in particular the Urban A airs Association and American Association of Geographers conferences) a familiar feeling of frustration coalesced around the (seemingly) inevitable realization that most sessions and papers that were not explicitly dealing with gender for the large part omitted any consideration of gender or gendered analyses. A similar frustration also accompanied the discovery of silences around related axes of difference, such as race or sexuality. However, as with WUF9, it was not that gender was not being discussed in these spaces. Rather, it was the institutional structure within which gender was addressed that made it possible to elide gender approaches in the mainstream, or malestream, spaces of these conferences.

While it is productive and necessary to create feminist spaces, or spaces attentive to gender, in such academic settings, questions remain as to the structural impact of these spaces in ensuring that gender perspectives and gender analyses are indeed main- streamed. Such spaces provide necessary grounds to challenge hegemonic knowledge frameworks and test new and emergent methodological approaches. However, in creating a "safe" space for scholars interested in gender

work, such thematic streams also serve to isolate gender analyses as a specialty concern. Sequestering gender analyses and issues into specialty sessions absolves scholars who engage in malestream theory from explicitly considering a gender lens or critical bodies of scholarship, such as feminist work, that question the epistemological and methodological foundations of urban scholarship. The proliferation of presentations at these conferences that failed to account for issues of gender, race, sexuality or other axes of difference served as a reminder that in the malestream the specificity of masculinist or patriarchal epistemological structures and their material effects remain unnamed, and the particularity of the gendered experiences of women remain invisible or of peripheral interest at best (See for example, Katz, 1996; Peake & Rieker, 2013; Derickson, 2015; Parker, 2016; Peake et al., 2018).

The outcome of siloing feminist or gender-related concerns into specialty sessions was that often such sessions effectively served to reproduce the same audience in an incubated space. Those presenting feminist or gender analyses in these spaces often find themselves effectively preaching to the converted; that is, like-minded scholars already engaged with feminist theory and analysis. It is not clear the extent to which the sessions held drew in scholars who may not otherwise have engaged with feminist scholarship, gender analyses, or work about the lives of women. We now turn from the production of gendered spaces of academic and policy knowledge production to one of the strategies used to engage with the everyday lives of women in both scholarly and policy debates, the incorporation of the figure of the "grassroots woman."

The "grassroots woman" in policy and scholarship

In both academic and scholarly work the "grassroots woman" has become a central figure for democratizing and legitimizing development agendas (Narayanaswamy, 2014) as well as "critical" or "radical" scholarly agendas. However, what is the work that the figure and the body of the "grassroots woman" is put to in both policy and academic settings?

Civil society and governmental engagements with people living at the grassroots level of communities have been built over the decades of global policy development in relation to gender issues, from the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979) to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the UN's 4th World Conference on Women (1995) and beyond into the contemporary era of global development compacts, such as the MDGs and SDGs (see Narayanaswamy, 2014). Civil society organizations serve as crucial conduits for directing the concerns of communities at the grassroots level to governmental and intergovernmental bodies. In this process, forms of organizing and action that are undertaken by communities around the world, often deploying innovative practices of improvisation and informality (Roy, 2011; Simone & Pieterse, 2017), are made comprehensible to policy makers. In this context, the " . . . 'Southern women's NGO' has come to symbolize the ultimate organizational form of grounded, representative, collective action," which is credited as giving voice to the agency of women from the global south (Narayanaswamy, 2014, p. 576). It is through being rendered legible within increasingly professionalized (Narayanaswamy, 2016) global civil society organizations and structures that grassroots organizations, such as Slum Dwellers International or the Huairou Commission, are brought to and given a space at the table of global urban policy making (Carty & Das Gupta, 2015, pp. 102–104).

However, as we saw in the case of the encounter that we recounted in the opening vignette, institutional spaces like the UN will ultimately discipline bodies that are seen to exceed the space they are accorded. In a context where the term "grassroots" has garnered widespread acceptance

within the political grammars of global liberalism (and neoliberalism), the question arises as to the extent to which the "grassroots" has served as a way to domesticate and govern the dissident and insurrectionary energies and grievances of disenfranchised populations around the globe (cf Jad, 2007).

The celebration of the e orts of grassroots women, their communities, and collectives was at the center of the WUF9 Women's Assembly, which was held over the course of a whole day. However, the congratulatory mode of the Women's Assembly was belied by the limited extent to which the, no-doubt herculean, achievements of the grassroots women who were represented in that room were acknowledged or known outside of that room. A problematic politics of representation was also invoked when the body of the "grassroots woman" became a convenient symbol for the local diffusion of global development agendas, without any critical interrogation of the transnational and global structures of power and coloniality through which grassroots realities are translated to such governmental settings (Carty & Das Gupta, 2015; Narayanaswamy, 2014, 2013). The structures of coloniality on which global civil society has been built was starkly evident at the close of the Women's Assembly, when a group of approximately seven "grassroots" women from different regions of the global south took to the stage to sing the praises of, and eventually place a crown on the head of, a veteran white feminist from the United States to thank her for decades of work to give a voice to grassroots women. The colonial overtones of this seemingly unscheduled performance strangely undercut the day-long chorus of grassroots women's empowerment that had formed the substance of the Women's Assembly by re-centering liberal white feminism and recalling the colonial trope of the "white man's burden" of "saving" the world's dispossessed masses.

The representative power that has accrued around the figure of the "grassroots woman" became apparent to us in the course of an event that we hosted later during WUF9 on synergies between SDGs 5 and 11, when a conference delegate from a global grassroots advocacy coalition organization challenged us as to why we did not have "a grassroots woman" on our panel and suggested that their organization could have "supplied" us with a "grassroots woman". She was seemingly unmoved by our explanation that, in addition to the fact that we were at an early stage of our project, many "grassroots" women's organizations that we worked with were highly critical of United Nations structures, while many more felt such bodies and their deliberation processes were of little relevance in effecting change in their daily lives, and thus had no desire to attend a UN meeting. The suggestion that merely inserting the body of an unspecified and generic "grassroots woman" into a project dealing with people and communities with whom they had no connection would make our session more representative elides the crucial connections between people and place that are necessary for the successful implementation of global development compacts. This interaction shed light on the unquestioned instrumentalization of the bodies of poor and racialized "grassroots women" in civil society and intergovernmental contexts.

In academic settings, the figure of the "grassroots woman" can be used to legitimize the necessity of research projects, their ethical and political credentials, and their transformative aspirations. As part of the ongoing feminist commitment to interrogate the relationship between knowledge and power, feminist and decolonial projects involving activist scholarship, action research and participatory methodologies have sought to remedy the extractive nature of academic research by building relationships with individuals and communities being researched based on an ethics of collaboration and co- learning (see, for example, Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012; Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2015; Davis & Craven, 2016; Asselin & Basile, 2018). In so doing feminist research methodologies have drawn attention to the need to "make the topographies of power visible within research and take active steps to redistribute power within the research process itself" (Mullings, 2005, p. 278).

However, even in the most-well intentioned of projects, questions must be asked regarding the discursive, symbolic, and material work that is done by the gure of the "grassroots" subject in lending credence to the global economies of knowledge production (Narayanaswamy, 2013) within which universities, as institutions deeply rooted in ongoing colonial and imperial historical projects, assume ongoing privilege (see Esson et al., 2017; Noxolo, 2017). In the enthusiasm to do academic work that makes a transformative impact in the world, an imperative that grows ever-more more urgent as the demonstrability of "impact" becomes more crucial for survival in the neoliberal academy, scholars (progressive or otherwise) are drawn to the political and discursive potential of the "grassroots".

The majority of papers presented in the series of academic conference sessions on "A feminist urban theory for our time" were dealing with issues and challenges facing marginalized populations in various parts of the world, with analyses drawn from the experiences of "grassroots" populations. This is unsurprising as the everyday experiences of people at the most underprivileged ranks of society can be crucial in enabling us to understand the nature of social change and the operation of power (Mohanty, 2003). However, several papers presented at conference sessions failed to give voice to the women and communities being studied, in the form of quotations from interviews, discussion of ethnographic details, or strategies of coauthoring or co-presenting with members of communities being studied. Similar absences were also apparent in subsequent written iterations of a number of these papers. The discarding of raw ethnographic detail from analyses at the point of dissemination has a deeply political effect of silencing the voices of those through whom researchers access the nature of urban life in different contexts, while at the same time allowing researchers to theorize the complex and disparate experiences of people who may lack the power, opportunity or resources to become knowledge makers themselves.

Notwithstanding the acknowledgment of the importance of laying bare topographies of power in research in feminist debates more broadly (Mullings, 2005), issues of positionality and the transnational landscapes of racial, gender and economic privilege often received no, little or summary attention by authors at the presentation and publication stages. These elisions suggest that even within feminist discursive contexts such issues were secondary considerations in the knowledge creation process, rather than intrinsic to feminist interventions that strove to transform asymmetrical power relations in research. As Simone and Pieterse have noted, "The research business is full of many tricks . . . " (Simone & Pieterse, 2017, xv). Indeed, the sleight of hand by which even "progressive" and well-meaning scholarship that aims at the betterment of the conditions of the "grassroots" facilitates the erasure of the bodies and voices of these very people demands continued scrutiny.

In both the academic and policy contexts the bodies of "grassroots women" and the lifeworlds that they represent can be effectively instrumentalized to lend credence to the programs for action and change emanating from both settings. However, the instrumentalization of the figure and body of the "grassroots woman" ensures the marginalization of these same women from decision-making and knowledge creation processes, while at the same time buttressing the colonialist underpinnings of knowledge production about the urban in both governmental and academic contexts.

Conclusion: the ongoing work of feminist praxis

The enactment of transnational feminist praxis, whether through academic research or policy making, is a political act (Peake, 2016), which necessarily involves an ongoing, iterative process of

critically scrutinizing our methodologies and the alignment of our political commitments with our scholarly practice (Nagar & Lock-Swarr, 2010, p. 3). It involves being able to recognize the ways we may fail or fall short of those commitments, and to revise our approaches to ensure that women are heard. This commentary aims to contribute to this iterative critical process as part of the ongoing project of transnational feminist praxis.

Institutional forums such as inter-governmental and academic conferences are spaces in which knowledge claims about the urban are advanced and agendas for transformative visions of urban governance and scholarship are forged through transnational dialogue. The discursive cultures, epistemic vernaculars, and performative strategies deployed in such settings are in turn revealing of the tensions emanating from the fraught histories of these institutions and ongoing struggles over the terms of recognition in both policy and academic contexts.

The containment of "gender" in specialty streams in both policy and academic settings reveals the ongoing challenge of highlighting the constitutive role of gender in the urban within institutional and disciplinary settings built on normatively patriarchal foundations which occlude the lifeworlds of women. The institutionalization of the "grassroots" woman further signals the impossibility of extracting transnational civil society organizations, feminist or otherwise, from imperial and colonial histories of conquest, racial domination, and extraction, in which those transnational relationships and structures are embedded. Our attempts to parse through the cognitive dissonance we felt at WUF9 prompted us to make these reflections on the impossibilities and contradictions of gender mainstreaming e orts, not in the quest for ethico-political purity, but rather in recognition of the necessity of wading into the mire of those contradictions as part of a reflexive feminist praxis.

Although there has been much discussion about the need to increase the connection between research and policy, our experience has shown that these remain largely separate spheres. And yet, the same matrices of inclusion and marginalization persist in both contexts. As the global community proceeds with the implementation of the SDGs through emergent challenges posed by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing women's experience from the periphery to the center of our understanding of contemporary urbanization continues to be essential to sustainable urban change, and without such understandings, scholars and urbanists alike miss out on more than half the story. If acceptance of the inherently compromised natures of policy and academic forums is a condition for engagement in these spheres, the privilege of inclusion must enlist a concomitant responsibility to ongoing scrutiny of and contention with the discursive and embodied limits they signal and the contradictions inherent in performances of inclusivity. We need, as Donna Haraway (2016) says, to "stay with the trouble". It also raises questions about when, where, and how activists and scholars may need to strategically refuse the compromises of policy or academia and re-orient their energies outside of those spaces to pursue decolonial possibilities for urban transformation.

Notes

1. The 6-year GenUrb project is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and brings together a network of over 40 feminist scholars and activists. The project critically engages with academic research and policy making processes related to gender and the urban in order to address gendered place-making in cities. It includes research with low-income women and policy shapers in eight cities: Cochabamba, Bolivia; Georgetown, Guyana; Ibadan, Nigeria; Ramallah, Palestine; Shanghai, China; Cairo, Egypt; Mumbai, India; and, Delhi, India.

2. As authors, we recognize that gender is a non-binary category. However, in the UN context gender mainstreaming is primarily concerned with issues facing girls and women and this piece speaks in reference to these policy discussions.
3. Parts of this section, in particular the second paragraph, draw on unpublished materials from the GenUrb Project.
4. See the forthcoming publication coming from these conferences entitled, *A Feminist Urban Theory for our Time: Rethinking Social Reproduction and the Urban* (Peake, Koleth, Tanyildiz, Reddy, and Patrick, 2021 (in press)).
5. Both authors attended WUF 9, while only the first author attended the academic sessions. Our analysis and motivation for writing this piece stems from our discussions at WUF9 and subsequent conversations with each other as well as our ongoing scholarly work on the role of conferences in policy, activism, and academic debates (cf Temenos, 2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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