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Book Review Essay: Women, Urbanization, and sustainability: Practices of Survival, Adaptation, and Resistance¹

Hao Zhang²

The rapid process of urbanization in the developing world has attracted great academic attention. Primarily, urbanization has increased scrutiny of the varying impact of development to men and women.³ Further, to the degree that sustainability is also a goal, urban development offers an opportunity to address women's needs. Anita Lacey in her edited text *Women, Urbanization, and sustainability: Practices of Survival, Adaptation, and Resistance* innovatively scrutinizes urbanization and sustainability under critical perspectives, focusing on women's experiences, practices, and resistance. She highlights the challenges faced by women in the Global South in urban living, such as gaining access to employment and land, securing water and food, and protecting rights to access the city and their safety (Lacey, 2017).

This text makes an important link between Women's Studies and the discussion of urbanization and sustainable development by addressing women's individual experiences, filling a gap in current literature. Further, the text highlights patriarchal norms providing the causation for the marginalization of women's voices (Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hausler, & Wieringa, 1994). Though scholars have made efforts to integrate social elements such as gender equality into the sustainability discussion, many were theoretical (Anand, 1992; Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hausler, & Wieringa, 1994), and unfortunately did not include the real-time experiences faced by women in the developing world.

Given differences in local contexts, the experiences, and practices of women to promote a sustainable urban life differ, however, there are common challenges faced by women in the Global South (Allen & Hofmann, 2017; Chataika, 2017; Reeves, 2014; Tacoli, 2012). Acknowledging how the risks of urbanization, such as poor access to water, food, safety, and health services outweigh the assumed benefits, the contributors to the text balance the discussion of urbanization. The reader is left with an understanding that urbanization offers opportunities, but it also creates vulnerability.

The discussion throughout the text considers the city from the perspective of a gendered space. The discussion approaches sustainable development using a critical feminist perspective which places the prevailing development paradigm into question. Focal areas include a discussion of women-oriented solutions in urban spaces specific to access land and tenure, secure water and food security, and violence and conflict (Lacey, 2017). Addressed is that women are more vulnerable to risks brought by urbanization but are put in a position where their needs and interests are being marginalized. Given that this perspective is not typically included in discussions of development, inclusivity of the needs and vulnerability of women offers an opportunity to all

¹ Reviewed Book Citation: Lacey, A. (Ed.). (2017). *Women, Urbanization, and sustainability: Practices of Survival, Adaptation, and Resistance*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

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³ Refer to "Urbanization: A double-edged sword for women", by International Institute for Environment and Development, 10 April 2013. <https://www.iied.org/urbanization-double-edged-sword-for-women>

readers interested in women's issues but particularly policymakers who may have not addressed how women may be left out. Alternatively stated, if female subjectivities are not considered, then included voices of women may only continue to reinforce the existing hierarchical relationship (De Lima Grecco, 2020). The text highlights this well, leaving the reader with an understanding of why the experiences of all women should be included in Women's Studies through the intersection of gender, class, race, political order, among other social phenomenon. This reinforces De Lima Grecco's (2020) perspective that "feminist theories are not monolithic but are characterized by their plurality." This is implicit throughout the text as the stories of women provided evidence of creativity and resilience, with an ability to engage in the varying politics of survival to secure the essential resources to urban living. Women were depicted as agents of transformation who forge social changes and seek long-term answers to better planning of urbanization and sustainable development.

Post-modernism and multi-cultural feminism intend to embrace differences among women (Blake, 1998), and much research rely largely on empirical evidence, such as case, testimony, and life story analysis, these characteristics are also true of the contributors to this text. The documented cases included were engaging from contestation of women, to neighborhood prohibitions in Kampung, Jakarta, to how women and men seek water justice in Peru and Tanzania, as well as to the probing gendered dimension of violence in the urban context of Rio de Janeiro. Culturally imperialist tendencies were tempered by sensitivity to context (Blake, 1998), and commonality and generalization were given attention. As demonstrated throughout the text, despite the various cultural contexts, women faced similar struggles in urban life and had to develop their practices to secure their basic rights. This reveals an overt fact that even though gender equality and social justice is understood as integral to sustainable development (Leach, Mehta, & Prabhakaran, 2016), these issues persist. This is a significant issue that is consistent with participation rate evidence. Women's political representation at 25% globally, remains below the Beijing Platform for Action target of at least 30%.⁴ Women are unlikely to have sufficient power in making decisions⁵ in urban and sustainable development narratives.

Disparate voices and perspectives are fully expressed in this text, and these struggles and resistance over urban resources and development processes, whether at communal, national, or global level, are helpful. *Women, Urbanization, and sustainability: Practices of Survival, Adaptation, and Resistance* considers women empowerment in the urban and sustainable development nexus, though it cannot cover every narrative regarding this issue, it does capture important arguments and cases to promote the understanding of Women's Studies in the wider context.

⁴ Refer to "Progress or platitudes? Women's rights and gender equality 25 years after Beijing", by Dr Alyson Brody, eldis, 5 March 2020. <https://www.eldis.org/blogpost/progress-or-platitudes-womens-rights-and-gender-equality-25-years-after-beijing>

⁵ Refer to "COVID-19: A Gender Lens PROTECTING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS, AND PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY", by UNFPA, March 2020. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf

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