



Urban geography in crisis times: insights from a feminist project

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Abstract. In this short intervention addressing the impact of crises on geographical knowledge practices, we, members of GenUrb (a multi-sited, longitudinal, partnered urban research project), ask, “what counts as crisis?”, sketching out epistemological and methodological points about our project’s engagement with this call. We query the adeptness of dominant Eurocentric epistemologies in addressing crises, adopting the work of Bedour Alagraa, who places crises firmly within a historical–geographical colonial framing that conceptualizes crises not through rupture but through continuation. We illustrate the utility of this epistemological framing of crisis, honing in on the everyday violence that women continually experience, with our research in the cities of Cochabamba, Delhi, Georgetown, Ibadan, Ramallah, and Shanghai, showing that one in every two women participants had experienced intimate partner violence. We further ask what crises mean for the methodologies we adopt, specifically concerning questions of the co-production of knowledge and methods.

1 Crises and geographical knowledge practices

In this short intervention addressing the impact of crises on geographical knowledge practices we, members of GenUrb, can only begin to sketch out a few epistemological and methodological points about our project’s engagement with this call. The GenUrb project (Urbanization, Gender, and the Global South: A transformative knowledge network) is a feminist, multi-sited, longitudinal, partnered urban research

project (2017–2024). It involves research undertaken on issues of economic precarity and embodied violence by six city research teams working in Cochabamba, Bolivia; Delhi, India; Georgetown, Guyana; Ibadan, Nigeria; Ramallah, Palestine; and Shanghai, China (see Peake et al., 2024). Based on the experiences of the GenUrb project, we ask, “what counts as crisis?” We query the adeptness of dominant Eurocentric epistemologies in addressing crises, honing in on violence against women to further question how dominant conceptu-

alizations of crises prioritize rupture at the expense of continuation, with such inquiries leading us to investigations of the everyday. We further ask what crises mean for the methodologies we adopt, specifically concerning questions of the co-production of knowledge and methods.

1.1 Geographical knowledge practices I: unravelling epistemologies of crisis

As Roy (2020:20) recently reflected,

[I]n fields of inquiry such as urban studies, Theory, capitalised, remains resolutely embedded in Eurocentrism... Indeed, Theory itself is seen as the task of narrating the universal history of capital with footnotes about variegation, differentiation and unevenness [and thus it effaces] the racialised and gendered relationalities that lie at the heart of capital accumulation.

We add that “crisis”, which Theory analyses and expounds as an empirical object of knowledge, remains firmly in the durable grasp of Eurocentrism. Narratives of crises are frequently portrayed in popular and academic texts in totalizing language – imminent planetary crises are hurtling us into an unliveable dystopian future of emergencies. And it has been hard to pick up an urban geography publication since the COVID-19 pandemic without coming across references to crises (or poly-crises or crises within crises) as rupture. This is evidenced in human–ecological capitalist crises of pandemics, contagions, and climate, with cities as ground zero, or crises of imperialism and colonialism, seen in wars, genocide, and the mass migrations from the towns and cities of Africa and Asia to the border regimes around “Fortress Europe”, leading to the dispossession of millions from their homes, cities, and nations. Geographical and urban imaginaries of crises are permeated with sharp disjunctures and interruptions, dichotomous portrayals of extraordinary versus ordinary, and capitalist linear temporalities of “befores” and “afters”. In an attempt to decolonize such hegemonic epistemologies of crisis, we turn to the work of Black and postcolonial scholars, who, as Roy further notes, have long developed “other Theory” in their critiques of Eurocentrism but whose work “remains on the margins” (Roy, 2020: 21). Specifically, we draw on the decolonial work of Alagraa (2021) to analyse crises.

It requires a serious unravelling of epistemology to rethink crises in terms of coloniality – not crises as isolated disastrous events but rather as embedded in long-established structures of inequalities – something that Alagraa has undertaken in her re-conceptualization of the catastrophic (as a form of crisis). Alagraa posits an epistemological twist, understanding catastrophe not as an event but as a foundational political category that arose in colonial modernity, specifically in the emergence of the European field of modern natural science (in particular in the work of Georges Cuvier on scarcity and

extinction, Thomas Malthus on calamity, and Charles Darwin on competition) and the formation of plantation modes of production.

Catastrophe, she argues, is no less than a way of life, formed through colonial encounters and solidified in the plantation. Conceptualizing catastrophe as a “repeating structure” (Alagraa, 2021) offers her “an analytic for the manner in which people structure their political and social lives, akin to other foundational concepts in colonial modernity such as freedom, sovereignty, rights, etc” (Alagraa, 2021). Such a re-conceptualization turns the table on “the assumption that at the heart of the sovereign tradition is a preservation of life – it is in fact the opposite that anchors the expression of sovereign power in general, and especially in the colonial context” (Alagraa, 2021). The sovereign tradition of the European colonizing nation state, Alagraa argues, is characterized by the logic of exception as the “rule” (Alagraa, 2021): not the preservation of life but its destruction, not independence but servitude, and not rights but the meting out of violence.

In engaging Black radical thought to understand catastrophe as a repeating structure, a way of life for those deemed to be left behind, Alagraa shows how thinking from elsewhere opens up new epistemological windows for understanding crisis: surviving the repetitive nature of crises as they are experienced in the everyday of those left behind shows how the making of life is possible beyond Eurocentric colonial framings of rupture. Specifically, Alagraa turns to the ways in which Black people have used poetry, prose, music, painting, dance, and other modes of creativity in the making of everyday life (see also Santos Ocasio and Mullings, 2021). It is precisely these “unspoken realities” of everyday life “that hegemonic discourses of successive, overlapping, or ‘nesting crises’ render invisible” (Carastathis et al., 2018, Alagraa, 2021).

1.2 Geographical knowledge practices II: crises and violence against women

What are the implications for urban geography of thinking of crises not as constituting a rupture but as a constitutive element of everyday life? We argue that one global crisis we would be able to see expresses a different unspoken reality of everyday life: not of creativity, but of violence against women. And yet within the extensive literature on crises and the violence threaded through the urban – slow violence, infrastructural violence, gang violence, urbicide – (and outside the work of a small number of feminist urban geographers: see, for example, Pain, 2014; Brickell, 2020) urban geography has had virtually nothing to say about the bloody and murderous litany of violence perpetuated against women in all its various manifestations, not only as a physical act, or

threat of an act, but also as a structural and psychological power relation.¹

Although affecting women differentially – across lines of gender identification, race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, ability, age, legal status, and geographic location – the normalizing and downplaying of gendered violence against women constitutes a global practice, until its horrors build up, puncturing through the carapace of silence: the gang rapes and murders of women in India (Datta, 2016); violence against Indigenous women in the United States and Canada (Moral, 2018; Lucchesi, 2019);² the genocidal violence in post-war Guatemala (Fuentes, 2020) and the post-war African states of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Côte d’Ivoire, where rape is used as a weapon of war; state-tolerated and enabled femicide in Mexico (Frías, 2023); and the mass shootings in the United States with their deep association with domestic violence (Geller et al., 2021).³ These are but a few of the horrific experiences that speak to a world in which at least one woman in every three has “been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime” (UNA-UK, 2012).⁴

Such a “repeating structure” of violence against women is not about one-on-one violent acts or exceptional or sporadic incidences but is a permacrisis of the everyday:⁵ not domestic abuse but femicide and not the actions of a few men “gone bad” but a logical consequence of toxic masculinities. It is deeply embedded within “lethal intersections” (Hill Collins, 2021:27) of broader intersecting economic, political, and social structures and processes. In GenUrb, we are in agreement with Hall (2023) in understanding violence against women as incorporated into a broader form of gender violence, i.e. whereby people experience violence because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity, or perceived gender. As such, violence against women is enmeshed not only in the gendered structures of racial capitalism, colonial-

ism, and imperialism that perpetuate embodied violence but also in the everyday experiences of interpersonal violence meted out through heteropatriarchal and misogynist structures that differentiate and punish femininity and other feminized gendered identifications, serving to enforce and tolerate violence and obscure misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. In this respect, the violence against women that pervades the everyday is also in need of the epistemological twist – from event to political category – that Alagraa (2021) offers.

1.3 Geographical knowledge practices III: violence against women and the everyday

Postcolonial and feminist urban scholars have done much to unravel epistemologies of the everyday. Far from a free-floating signifier, it is firmly grounded in what Bhan et al. (2020) term “collective life”, which they understand as being framed by global colonial and imperial “arrangements of extraction and wealth creation and the history of the formation of national elites” with resultant “urban majorities that live with minimal resources, vulnerable to small changes in social and economic arrangements” (Bhan et al., 2020). Their understanding of everyday life in the context of the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in the urban Global South also leads them to critique the notion of ruptures of “before” and “after”. They point out that crises serve neither to interrupt nor to create vulnerability but to intensify and deepen already-existing vulnerabilities through the disruption of relationalities and arrangements. Similarly, Guma et al. (2023:290), working in Nairobi, see survival as “an urban practice that is continuous rather than intermittent, ordinary rather than catastrophic and crisis-laden, and inevitable rather than conditional upon particular circumstances”.

Despite the leaning in of these postcolonial readings to the everyday, it is to feminist scholarship on this analytic that we must turn to find how women’s everyday practices, mobilities, and opportunities are circumscribed by gendered violence. Pioneered by the groundbreaking work of Smith (1987), there is a lively set of feminist literature currently conceptualizing and problematizing the everyday and its relation to violence against women, including, for example, by feminist geographers (Hall, 2019), feminist sociologists (Feldman et al., 2011), and feminist political economists (Elias and Rai, 2019; Delaney, 2023; Hall, 2023). While feminist analyses give voice to the ways in which gendered violence against women structures the everyday, they also draw attention to the ways in which there is more to women’s lives than this violence, emphasizing the agency of women and their modes of resistance.

In GenUrb we concur that the lives of the women we worked with “before” and “after” the COVID-19 pandemic were not so easily distinguishable (Razavi et al., 2023). Tracing processes of social reproduction at the household and city scales in the narratives in women’s recounting of their

¹These manifestations include violence that is verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, reproductive, institutional, infrastructural, structural, symbolic, and epistemic.

²This led to the 2019 Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

³Geller et al. (2021) found that in the United States “59.1 % of mass shootings between 2014 and 2019 were DV [domestic violence]-related and in 68.2 % of mass shootings, the perpetrator either killed at least one partner or family member or had a history of DV” (Alagraa, 2021).

⁴Even in situations of modern warfare, it is more dangerous to be a female civilian than a soldier (Chemaly, 2012), which is all too obvious in 2024 in the genocide in Palestine (<https://www.humboldt.edu/supporting-survivors/educational-resources/statistics>, last access: 16 August 2024).

⁵Feminists are making some inroads on this matter. For example, on 20 July 2023, the Toronto city council declared gender-based and intimate partner violence an epidemic. Toronto joined 30 other municipalities across Ontario, Canada, that have already declared intimate partner violence an epidemic in their jurisdictions.

everyday lives in 2020, we found that pandemic responses caused spatial–temporal contractions and expansions that have deepened existing gendered and racialized exclusions across cities. Measures to restrict movement increased the time and effort required to undertake essential activities, the retraction of employment increased economic precarity and care work, and mental and physical health was strained as women and their families navigated the pandemic. Women traversed everyday life by stringing together material and affective resources, enabling multiple livelihoods through ties to rural or other urban places; crossings between formal and informal economies; access to informal credit savings schemes and social infrastructures of care; and networks of sociality and solidarity, such as those formed through strangers, friends, and relatives. Amidst challenges, they organized circulations of care via traditional networks of reciprocity as well as forming new social reproduction solidarities. The pandemic magnified how unpaid and low-paid social reproduction work, primarily undertaken by women, was crucial to the continuation of urban economic and social life.

What was impossible to ignore in our research before and during COVID-19 was how women’s everyday lives were also ensconced in violence. Our research corroborates the findings of many other feminist studies that intimate partner violence in the home was the most common form of violence against women (see, for example, García-Moreno et al., 2005) and had been experienced by one in every two women participants. It was also common for women to mention the high risk of sexual harassment or abuse they faced in public places throughout the city, especially at nighttime, including on public transportation, in isolated places, and in their local neighbourhoods. In GenUrb, we observed multiple outcomes of resistance, characterized by heterogeneity and incompleteness – from staying with partners and seeking help from family, women’s organizations, and the police to leaving partners, sometimes only to return. These practices served to affect women’s everyday lives differentially, mostly narrowing their social and economic worlds, with the impact being felt across productive and social reproductive realms. We found that understanding the everyday in relation to gendered violence renders it at once knowable and unknowable, predictable and unpredictable, familiar and unfamiliar, safe and unsafe, and intimate and frightening.

1.4 Geographical knowledge practices IV: praxis and the co-production of knowledge

If epistemological work is one contribution of GenUrb to a “rethinking of geographical knowledge practice”, another is methodological. How do we begin to rethink how we approach the production of knowledge in “crisis times”? Notwithstanding the fact that it is now 30 years since Alexander and Mohanty (1997:xx) wrote that “[w]e literally have to think ourselves out of . . . crises through collective praxis and particular kinds of theorizing”, the instruction still rings true.

For GenUrb it meant analyses that start with acknowledging and building on the everyday struggles of women, with knowledge production rooted in collaboration, solidarity, and feminist praxis.

Thinking collaboratively in GenUrb was achieved through the co-production of knowledge based on research partnerships (Smyth, 2024; see also Lee et al., 2024). The composition of each city research team in GenUrb varies although they all constitute a mix of partners with various combinations of feminist-scholar activists, women activists, students, and local civil society organizations. They comprise members who live in the cities under investigation, as well as those from these cities who now live in the diaspora, and feminist-scholar activists from the Global North who have praxial connections with these cities. And they work through networks of solidarities between these groups and women living in marginalized urban neighbourhoods, networks that in some cases had been built up over years of on-the-ground engagement, as in Cochabamba, Georgetown, and Delhi, and, in the cases of Ibadan, Ramallah, and Shanghai, that were more recent. While research partnerships are not synonyms for solidarity or praxis, their infrastructure and the trust, reciprocity, and friendship that sustains the organic process of developing relations within them help foster a rich ecosystem for grounded knowledge production. However, the continuous critical reflexivity and the emotional labour needed to navigate and sustain co-production over time both with research participants and within the research teams should not be underestimated.

Knowledge production on violence against women is often regarded as difficult, given its association with shame, vulnerability, and secrecy. In GenUrb this difficulty was primarily addressed through rigorous in-depth training in methods, enabling a high degree of trust in the data produced. The Georgetown City Research Team, for example, which comprised researchers from the grassroots women’s organization Red Thread, who have worked for decades on research projects that have required months of training (see Peake, 2000), was able to approach, engage with, and interview women with experience, empathy, confidence, hope, and insight. In urban geography’s rush to develop new methods, we endorse the tried-and-tested use of the in-depth interview – it enables face-to-face opportunities to sit together, to talk, to listen, to probe, to come back, to continue, and for each to give to the other.⁶ Even in times of COVID-19 (see Razavi et al., 2023), it still has much to offer, especially to the well-trained interviewer, when located within feminist partnerships built on an ethics of care.

⁶Not to mention the added blessing of its low-level technological requirements.

2 Parting words

We live in violent times. The incomprehensible scale of the never-ending and multiple everyday violent acts played out globally on women's bodies helps us to problematize how urban geography may choose to understand crisis. Shifting urban geography's focus toward the marginalization of the systemic violence that permeates women's lives requires twisting the epistemological status of grand narratives of crises, turning to feminist analyses of everyday urban life, engaging in research grounded in partnerships, and utilizing feminist-employed methods. Though these steps will still only ever produce partial knowledges, they are ways in which women's lives and struggles against violence and imaginaries of a different collective life become valid sites of knowledge production in the urban. And what we choose to study has implications for who matters. For those for whom the feminist imperative is to put violence against women onto the terrain of urban geography – not just empirically but in its theories, ontologies, and epistemologies – these are necessary steps, tools to enable us to get to the heart of “the racialised and gendered relationalities that lie at the heart of capital accumulation” (Roy, 2020:20), colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy.

Data availability. The GenUrb data sets are not publicly available as they contain information that could potentially identify individuals, and they will not be deposited in any archive.

Author contributions. The data discussed in this paper were collected and entered into NVivo by teams led by Grace Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, Anindita Datta, Karen de Souza, Penn Tsz Ting Ip, Joy Marcus, Linda Peake, Carmen Ponce and Nasya S. Razavi. Biftu Yousuf prepared the data for comparative analysis in NVivo. As a member of the Delhi City Research Team, Swagata Basu organized its fieldwork. Carmen Ponce and Araby Smyth conducted the initial analysis. Linda Peake and Mantha Katsikana prepared the manuscript with contributions from all team members.

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