Gender and Urban (In)Security in Fragile States

Rapid urban growth in fragile states brings benefits and problems. It fosters economic growth and development, but it exacerbates the challenge of creating security in a city. Violence in fragile states' urban areas is a common feature of everyday life and a major threat to the safety of people living in congested cities that lack reliable institutions and social services. Analysis of these issues from a gender perspective is crucial to a complete understanding as it reveals important differences in urbanites' security needs. Combined with analysis of other characteristics that influence an individual's (in)security—such as socio-economic status, age, and religion—a gender perspective paves the way for more sensitive, inclusive, democratic, and effective urban security governance.

This policy brief draws on evidence from non-fragile developing countries and makes recommendations for how fragile states and their development partners can integrate gender into urban security governance and urban planning.

Gendered Violence

Exposure to violence and experiences of victimization in cities in fragile states are clearly gendered. Research on urban violence unanimously agrees that perpetrators of violence are primarily men. While victims are both men and women, men are more likely to experience lethal and non-sexual violence. The biggest threat to women's safety is sexual violence. Unpacking the sources and mechanisms of urban violence reveals its complexity and provides few, if any, clear explanations. For example, an increase in women's economic empowerment leads to increases in violence against women in some cases and decreases in others. Complex social processes relating to issues such as victimization, sexual violence against men, and how individuals become perpetrators of (sexual) violence are poorly understood at present.

Anecdotal evidence from Santiago, Chile, shows some of the interconnections between violence, social structures, and gender identities. Interviews with men and women of different socio-economic backgrounds revealed that people experience different forms of violence and describe risk differently and in a highly gendered manner. Whereas interviewees from high-income backgrounds face mostly economically motivated crimes like burglary and theft, middle-income interviewees deal with domestic violence and family breakdown as they desperately try to improve their economic status. In the low-income group, sexual violence partly related to drug use and trafficking was the most pressing issue (Rodríguez, Saborido, and Segovia 2012, 4).

One facet of gendered violence that is often overlooked is fear. Accounts from Chile, Brazil, and India indicate a disconnect between the statistical danger of becoming a victim of violence and the fear thereof. In Santiago, substantially more women than men are afraid of being attacked in public, with the highest perception of vulnerability being found among low-income women (Rodríguez, Saborido, and Segovia 23–24). In three Brazilian cities in the state of Pernambuco, fears vary according to sex. Men are afraid of being killed and robbed, whereas women have similar fears but also fear rape, sometimes more than death (Taylor 2011, 8, 17–19). Fears also vary according to economic class. In Santiago, men and women living in high-income neighbourhoods fear, among other things, economically motivated attacks from small, poor surrounding enclaves. In low-income areas, women often feel that they are at the mercy of drug-related violence and men highlight the danger created by a proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Rape is feared by women—

especially young women—of all classes (Rodríguez, Saborido, and Segovia 2012, 75–76).

No matter how diverse fears are, they have a greater impact on women than men. Women in Brazilian cities reported that they consciously reduce their mobility and leisure time (Taylor 2011, 23–24). Similar evidence from India shows that women confine themselves to the homes that they assume are safe. Statistically, however, an Indian woman is in far greater danger of becoming a victim of domestic violence than public violence (Paul 2011, 419–20, 426). This is extremely problematic because it reduces women's quality of life and creates new safety risks, since fear (re)produces regressive gender identities and oppressive social structures that only provide more opportunities for violence and its normalization.

Gendered Livelihood Security

To most urbanites, security means more than freedom from violence. Almost as important as personal security is livelihood security, which includes access to good quality housing, urban infrastructure, transportation systems, health care, education, and justice. Like violence, livelihood (in)security is highly gendered and very complex. Men and women face different challenges based on socio-economic and political status, age, and religion in addition to gender. Poor men and women in cities are most severely affected by livelihood insecurity because they have fewer coping strategies compared with their rural counterparts, for whom subsistence living is more of an option. Moreover, community ties that can act as social safety nets are weaker and less prevalent in cities.

Homelessness in Indian slums illustrates how men and women's gender roles create different experiences of urban livelihood insecurity. In Indian city slums, more men and teenage boys live on the streets than women and teenage girls, who are more likely to experience "hidden homelessness." Hidden homelessness is the term for people who are living in provisional private or public shelters. This form of homelessness possesses specific risks. While men and teenage boys living on the streets face many challenges and are likely to be exposed to violence and crime, women and their children experiencing hidden homelessness are often endangered by their extreme dependence on their hosts. Unhealthy living conditions and domestic violence are often accepted by these women, who highly value motherhood and child care in accordance with their gender roles. Women and girls in shelters are less visible to and thus less addressed by policy-makers than men and boys living on the streets.

Homeless men and boys suffer due to gender norms since they are often more reluctant to ask for assistance because social norms place great value on them being autonomous providers for their families (UN-HABITAT 2012, 7). The complexity of visibilities and vulnerabilities in livelihood security can best be understood by integrating gender and other determining factors into an analysis. Take for example the case of informal urban traders and their forms of self-help in West African cities. In Senegal, the influence of Islam leads to fraternal organizations with male membership, whereas in Ghana, prevalent matrilineal family structures and Christianity result in many specialized organizations nominally and effectively led by women. In both cases, poor informal traders are excluded from these organizations. In Senegal, non-Muslim and new migrant traders

are excluded as well (Brown and Lyons 2010, 39–41). While associations may not always be powerful, they do offer some protection and a means to give political voice to members. Exploring informal traders' visibilities and vulnerabilities using gender, socio-economic status, religion, and ethnicity perspectives yields a much clearer picture of the dynamics of exclusion mechanisms.

What About Fragile States?

Evidence and analysis from non-fragile developing countries on gender and urban (in)security is growing, but little attention has been paid to how the dynamics of these issues play out in states with weak state-society relationships and fledgling social services. Absent contextualized data, it is still possible to hypothesize how these issues manifest in fragile states.

In many fragile states recovering from conflict, social services are fragmented and weak. This suggests that support for survivors of urban violence and programs to prevent it would be rare, leaving the root causes of gendered urban violence unaddressed and perpetuating vicious cycles of violence and poverty. In cities of many fragile states, particularly conflict-affected countries, two realities are likely to further exacerbate these dynamics. First, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons means that altercations can quickly escalate to deadly violence. Second, people displaced by armed conflict often flee to the perceived safety of a city, arriving with few plans and fewer resources in cities whose infrastructure and services are ill-equipped to accommodate them.

It is unlikely that state fragility is a catalyst for

gendered insecurity. Social upheaval in fragile states often leads to a breaking down of old gender roles as women and men are forced to adapt to survive, contributing to violence and insecurity. In some countries, it may be the case that gender and urban (in)security interact in much more positive ways.

Recommendations

In order to provide sensitive, inclusive, democratic, and effective urban security governance in fragile contexts, the acknowledgment of gendered security needs, experiences, and vulnerabilities is key. To ensure a meaningful integration of gender into urban security governance and urban planning, fragile state governments and their development partners should:

- Integrate gender meaningfully in all urban development and security governance programs by considering the connections between gender and other factors that influence security needs and experiences of insecurity. Examples include socio-economic background, religion, ethnicity, and age. These factors can vary between different urban areas.

- Partner with local actors, such as civil society organizations, to ensure that gendered security governance is meaningful to people living in urban areas and that projects resonate with local populations.

- Invest in research on gendered (in)security in cities that looks beyond women and takes the complexity of different needs, vulnerabilities, and visibilities into account.

- Invest in research on how gender, urban (in)security, and state fragility interact to

better understand the particular challenges and opportunities of making cities in fragile states more safe and inclusive.

- Recognize that even small projects with limited scope can make a difference and facilitate change. While gender mainstreaming and holistic approaches are idealistic goals, in some cases they are not practical. Promoting gender roles that value peace and equality and that actively engage urbanites can yield positive results.

References

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