Article for Themed section introduction: Sexual and Gender Minorities and Disasters

Sexual and gender minorities in disaster

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Abstract

This article introduces a themed section of *Gender, Place and Culture* on 'Sexual and Gender Minorities in Disaster'. This introduction frames the articles constituting the themed section, which together contribute important insights to the growing body of research, policy and practice on the experiences of sexual and gender minorities in disasters. The introduction positions the themed section at the intersection of disaster studies and geography. We briefly discuss how each discipline has attended to sexual and gender minorities to date, and suggest ways in which each discipline can enrich the other through collaborative scholarship on sexual and gender minorities in disaster. Importantly, we draw attention to critical limitations and occlusions concerning sexual and gender minorities in disaster risk reduction (DRR) policy and practice. Redressing these gaps in DRR globally should be a critical focus for future collaborative and applied research on sexual and gender minorities in disaster.

Key words: sexual and gender minorities, LGBTI, disaster risk reduction policy and practice, geography, disaster studies

Gaps in Disaster Risk Reduction policy and practice

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that devastated New Orleans in 2005, a transgender evacuee ended up behind bars for the sole reason that she took a shower in the female bathroom of the shelter in which she was staying – she was arrested and detained simply because some other evacuees and the authorities mis-read her as a man (San Francisco Bay Times 2005). This incident received significant attention in United States (US) media and drew attention on the fate of sexual and gender minorities – that is, people who do not identify with the heterosexual norm and/or the male-female gender binary – in disaster. It blatantly emphasised how the needs of these particular social groups are most often neglected, if not discriminated against, in policies and practices of disaster risk reduction (DRR).

Most of the international policy frameworks and guidelines determining national policies for DRR ignore sexual and gender minorities. Both the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), which served as the international blueprint document for DRR between 2005 and 2015, and the most recent Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, signed by 187 countries in March 2015, make mention of gender but with a tacit assumption that this reflects the particular needs of women, especially heterosexual women (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction 2005, 2015). The HFA mid-term review conducted in 2010-2011 further emphasises the particular needs and role of women in DRR but similarly neglect those of sexual and gender minorities (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction 2011). Moreover, gender-specific guidelines designed to orient the implementation of the HFA explicitly aim at "*building the resilience of both women and men*" (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction et al. 2009, vii).

It is therefore no surprise that national institutional and legal frameworks geared towards reducing the risk of disasters are consistently silent on the needs and potential contributions of sexual and gender minorities. Even a cursory review of DRR legislation in countries where sexual and gender minorities are prominent and disasters frequent, provides ample evidence of the omission. In the Philippines, the 2010 Disaster Risk Reduction and Management law, which is considered to be one of the most progressive in the world, overlooks the fate of the local *bakla* minority (Republic of the Philippines 2010). *Baklas* are biologically male but perform both male and female tasks and responsibilities (Gaillard 2011); some take on 'feminine' mannerisms and dress, but not all. Likewise, the Indian Disaster Management Act of 2005 does not make any mention of the *aravanis* and other gender minorities (Government of India 2005); arvanis 'may be born intersex or apparently male, dress in feminine clothes and generally see themselves as neither women nor men' (Pincha and Krishna 2008, 42). Finally, while the Netherlands was the

first country to legalise same-sex marriage, the national progress report on the implementation of the HFA acknowledged that local policies for DRR have, so far, failed to include gender at large (Ministry of Security and Justice 2013).

This lack of recognition in international and national policies is paralleled by poor attention in practice amongst non-state actors. A brief review of the most influential practitioners' DRR manuals and handbooks published by international organisations, such as the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (Abarquez and Murshed 2004), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2007), and international Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) like Cordaid and its partners (International Institute of Rural Reconstruction and Cordaid 2007) and Oxfam (2007) all omit to acknowledge the particular needs, interests and contributions of sexual and gender minorities. Leading local NGOs, such as the Center for Disaster Preparedness (2010) which has developed a pioneer training manual on integrating gender in community-based activities for reducing the risk of disaster, also most often overlook these groups in their approach to DRR.

Sexual and gender minorities in disaster studies

Sexual and gender minorities' absence in policies and practices for DRR partially stems from a lack of empirical evidence, which mirrors a limited interest amongst scholars of disaster studies. In-depth research on gender and disaster is fairly recent and only dates back to the 1990s (Fothergill 1996; Enarson 1998). Despite a significant momentum since the 2000s, most of the available body of academic literature still focuses on women with a dearth of materials on men and other sexual and gender identities (Fordham 2012). It is only recently that a handful of case studies have highlighted the fate of sexual and gender minorities in disaster.

The emergence of scholarship on sexual and gender minorities in disaster is often associated with Pincha and Krishna's (2008) study of the *aravanis* of India affected by the December 2004 tsunami. A year later, Hurricane Katrina's impact on lesbian, gay and transgender communities of New Orleans was also documented (D'Ooge 2008). More recently a number of studies emerged from a wider range of contexts, including Nepal (Knight and Sollom 2012), Haiti (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and SEROVie 2011), Japan (Ozawa 2012), the Philippines (Gaillard 2011), Indonesia (Balgos, Gaillard and Sanz 2012), Samoa (Smith 2013), Canada (Cianfarani 2013), the US (D'Ooge 2008; Wisner, Berger and Gaillard 2016) and Australia and New Zealand (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2016; Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2016; McKinnon, Gorman-Murray and Dominey-Howes in press a and b). Interestingly, most of these academic studies or policy projects on sexual and gender minorities emerged from the observation of either the unequal impact of disaster or discriminatory practices of DRR.

Indeed, most of the foregoing studies initially focused on emphasising the particular vulnerability of sexual and gender minorities in facing natural hazards. Most concur that sexual and gender minorities are often more severely affected by disasters associated with natural hazards because they lack access to means of protection available to men and women. The frequently marginalised position of sexual and gender minorities in everyday life thus places them at higher risk when confronted with natural (and other) hazards. This vulnerability is reinforced by the lack of consideration of sexual and gender minorities' needs and concerns in policies and practices of DRR discussed in the previous section of this introduction. Such policies and practices therefore lead to further maginalisation of groups already marginalised.

Research on sexual and gender minorities in disasters has however not been limited to the negative side of the coin. Scoping studies conducted in Indonesia (Balgos et al. 2012) and the

Philippines (Gaillard 2011) show that, despite being marginalised, sexual and gender minorities display a wide array of capacities which contribute to reducing the impact of disaster for them and the wider community. These capacities often reflect their everyday skills and resources, e.g. community leadership, or the very nature of their identity, e.g. their ability to undertake tasks traditionally associated with men and women (and to move between these easily). Unfortunately, these capacities are unrecognised in policies and practices of DRR.

Sexual and gender minorities in geography

In contrast, disciplinary interest in sexual and gender minorities is now well-embedded in geography, or at least in certain sub-fields, such as social and cultural, urban and economic, health and medical, and feminist and gender geographies. Indeed, the 'geographies of sexualities' arguably comprises a sub-field of its own, which is itself generative of still newer arenas of inquiry, such as queer geographies, trans geographies and geographies of heterosexualities (Knopp 2007; Valentine 2009; Browne, Nash and Hines 2010; Johnston 2015). For readers of *Gender, Place and Culture*, we suspect that it is not necessary to engage in a lengthy review of the geographies of sexualities, and instead we provide a broad picture of the key themes and inquiries of the sub-field in order to indicate some of the remaining knowledge gaps (for some comprehensive reviews, see Brown and Knopp 2002; Browne, Lim and Brown 2007; Johnston and Longhurst 2010; Brown 2011, 2014).

Geographical research in this area seeks to understand and explain the mutual constitution of sexuality and space. Space is a social product, and sexual relations, practices and subjectivities, as much as other social dimensions, shape our lived geographies. At the same time, normative expectations and constructions of space impress upon and govern the conduct of sexuality and sexual and gender subjects in everyday life (Brown 2000). Early work involved

positivist mappings of ‘obvious’ gay spaces, such as gay ghettos and bars, but quickly moved to critical accounts of gay and lesbian experiences of space and place, highlighting closeting, harassment and social and political needs (Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2015). This work demonstrated that normative heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, is implicated in the construction of all spaces, including both prosaic places (work, streets, venues) and discursive spaces (the nation, law, politics). Until the last decade or so, non-normative subjects such as gay men and lesbians have been marginalised or silenced in – even ejected from – national constructs and social norms (Binnie 2004). Emerging work on sexual and gender minorities in disaster studies shows that this is still often the case in terms of DRR policies and practices (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2014).

Since at least 2000, scholarly thinking within the geographies of sexualities has also turned a critical eye upon itself. Much work in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the experiences of gay men and, to a lesser extent, lesbians, in both cases with the assumption that individuals in these groups shared a common and fairly homogenous sense of gay or lesbian identity, and not diverse identit*ies* wrought through other social subjectivities. While there was some consideration of the link between gender and sexual identity in the spatial experiences of gay men and lesbians, intersections with other social categories, such as race, class and age, were given limited attention (but see Peake 1993). Intersectionality has now become a prominent investigative lens for understanding the diverse social identities, lives and experiences of sexual and gender minorities (Brown 2011). Emerging research in disaster studies, especially in the vulnerability paradigm, shows that this is also an important consideration for sexual and gender minorities in disasters, where vulnerabilities and capacities are differentiated by race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic means and cultural context (Gaillard 2010).

Recognition of diversity has helped to impel a range of new foci within geographies of sexualities. 'Queer' geographies have challenged notions of an all-embracing and fixed sexual identity, and have drawn critical attention to the fluidity and complexity of identities, critiquing and disrupting the man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual binaries that underpin conventional social discourse (Oswin 2008; Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2015). This has helped invigorate studies of heterosexuality, bringing a highly nuanced lens to the diversity and mutability of heterosexual subjectivities and norms (Hubbard 2012). And in this context of shifting scholarly foci, geographers are now turning their attention to gender minorities who have been, in the past, occluded by the concentration on gay and lesbian identities. In the last few years, significant work has been generated on the experiences of transgender and genderqueer people in various spaces and places (Doan 2010; Browne, Nash and Hines 2010; Nash 2010). This work highlights that the geography of gender identity cannot be understood in binary terms, and that critical attention must be given to gender minorities' unique experiences of space (Johnston 2015). Emerging work in disaster studies has been attentive to gender diversity, especially in the Global South.

Revisiting DRR policy and practice

As we outlined in our opening section, increasing attention for sexual and gender minorities within academic circles, including disaster studies and geography, has yet to lead to significant changes in DRR policy and practice. Before bringing our themed section introduction to a close, we revisit and further delve into this problematic omission in DRR practice.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to change is that stepping outside the bounds of heteronormativity (and by extension, gender normativity) remains illegal in many parts of the world, effectively hindering any integration of the needs of sexual and gender minorities into

DRR policy and practice in a significant number of national and regional jurisdictions. The 11th edition of the 'State Sponsored Homophobia report' identifies 73 States that criminalise same-sex sexual activity (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association 2016, 7). Sexual orientation and identity typically do not accord with dominant stereotypes, which often represent them as lifestyle choices made in wilful contravention of state law; thus, there are significant conceptual and practical challenges remaining around sexuality and gender identity (International Council on Human Rights Policy 2009). The International Council on Human Rights Policy (2009) has acknowledged that human rights remain to be addressed in this context. Yet, a human rights-based approach is deeply contested by many nation-states for which anything beyond the male-female gender binary and associated heterosexual relations is regarded as dangerously unnatural.

The Sendai Framework for DRR has a stated inclusive approach and has many more occurrences of the word ‘gender’ than did its predecessor (Hyogo Framework for Action). However, it represents this most often in general terms, such as: “A gender, age, disability and cultural perspective should be integrated in all policies and practices (Guiding principles, 13),” Moreover, it often deploys gender in specific reference to women. When the Framework refers to sexual and reproductive health, the overwhelming (albeit still necessary) focus on women means sexual and gender minorities are not overtly on the agenda. This is problematic, conceptually and practically, as the International Council on Human Rights Policy sets out:

> Streams of work linked to women’s rights and reproductive health, understood as one aspect of social regulation of gender, now appear to have been divorced from work on gender expression and gay identity, despite initial political and analytic links. These projects persist not merely as distinct streams in national, regional and international venues, but sometimes seem to be non-complementary, despite sharing in common the phrase ‘sexual rights’ (International Council on Human Rights Policy 2009, 4).

Furthermore, a tension exists between advocates for a liberal perspective, who take a needs-based approach that recognises particular needs of certain defined social groups in disasters, and those who seek a more radical, rights-based approach that aims to address fundamental power differentials that are made manifest in extreme events. These two positions are potentially in conflict.

The recent appointment by the United Nations Human Rights Council of an 'independent expert' tasked with identifying the underlying causes of violence and discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (Morello 2016) is a milestone in the UN system, despite some watering down of the language and its agreement by a very small majority. However, this should be read in conjunction with the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action 1993, which states:

> While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Nevertheless, member states retain their sovereign powers to set law and policy as they deem appropriate and thus the examples of relevant policy language and action may be welcome but disappointingly toothless.

Moving forward: what role for geography?

We want to conclude by reflecting on the implications of the disaster experiences of sexual and gender minorities for geographical scholarship, and the contribution geographies of sexualities might make to DRR. With its expanding, deepening and increasingly nuanced set of foci, researchers within the geographies of sexualities have been exploring new terrain in which the

needs of sexual and gender minorities have not been yet adequately addressed. This has involved reaching out to find common interests, themes and problems with cognate disciplines and sub-fields. One of the most productive relationships in the last few years has been that between geography and planning, with important new collections by Doan (2011, 2015) and Maginn and Steinmetz (2014) focusing on urban and regional planning and incorporating insights from geographical thinking and contributions from geographers. The dialogue between geographical thinking and planning theory and practice has been valuable for identifying ongoing challenges faced by sexual and gender minorities and proffering ways to address these political, legal and practical problems.

We believe that bringing geographies of sexualities and disaster studies together provides the same kind of productive ground for new thinking and practice. Arguably DRR has similar goals to urban and regional planning: it concerns planning for the potential impacts of hazards, reducing risk, ensuring resources are in place for recovery, and coordinating disaster management. Geographies of sexualities therefore offer commensurate insights to DRR as they have for urban and regional planning – insights into the needs of marginalised populations, of sexual and gender minorities, who are often occluded from policy and practice, but who need to be included to ensure the practice-based goals of DRR (of reducing risk and aiding recovery) can be best met across the whole population. Scholarship within the geographies of sexualities may provide insight into the existing vulnerabilities and capacities of sexual and gender minorities (e.g. coping strategies associated with existing social marginalisation; managing existing health and medical threats, such as HIV; forging different social relations and places of belonging, such as families of choice and community institutions), which could then be incorporated into DRR policy and practice.

Likewise, disaster studies and DRR have much to offer to geographies of sexualities. Their attention to practical problems in local sites challenges the efficacy of some of concepts deployed within geographies of sexualities. Certainly sexuality and gender identity are mutable and fluid, but how might this be brought to bear in practice, in situations of disaster management (or can it even be brought to bear – see Leap, Lewin and Wilson 2007)? Or perhaps DRR offers a means to actualise the concept of intersectionality. Different vulnerabilities and capacities are wrought by intersections of sexuality and gender with race, age, socioeconomic means, inter alia, and DRR offers the possibility to understand how these are played out in material conditions, and how such differences might be mediated in policy and practice.

Bringing geographies of sexualities and disaster studies together has important insights on policies and practices, both in the context of DRR and in wider situations. Together, they draw attention to the diversity of sexual and gender identities, beyond man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual binaries, in both theory and practice. This theoretical and practical recognition may enable more effective strategies that encompass the entire population in its difference and diversity. In this way, a dialogue between geographies of sexualities and disaster studies, which reaches out to and across different audiences, will be invaluable.

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Notes on Contributors

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Andrew Gorman-Murray is a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences (Geography and Urban Studies) and Leader of the Urban Research Program at Western Sydney University, Australia. His expertise is in gender, sexuality and space. His primary research interests are sexual and gender minorities' experiences of belonging and exclusion in everyday spaces, including homes, neighbourhoods, suburbs and country towns. His work analyses the intersections between queer politics, everyday experience, and urban and regional geographies, seeking to enhance social inclusion alongside scholarly thinking.

Maureen Fordham BSc PhD is Professor of Gender and Disaster Resilience. She has been researching disasters since 1988. She has a particular interest in marginalized and, so-called, vulnerable groups in disaster including women and children in particular. She was a founding member of the Gender and Disaster Network in 1997 and is the coordinator of its website (www.gdnonline.org) and activities. She is a frequent participant in gender and disaster policy level meetings within the UN system as well as nationally and internationally. She has edited, and is on the editorial boards of, international disaster-related journals. She is affiliated with Durham University, Northumbria University, and University College London Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction in the UK, and Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand.

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