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Gender-based violence and assets in just cities: triggers and transformation

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Introduction
Gender-based violence (GBV) and specifically violence against women and girls (VAWG) is not only one of the main obstacles to achieving gender equity everywhere in the world, but it is now recognised that there are particular challenges facing women in urban areas. Although the relationship between urbanisation and GBV is contradictory, there is a general consensus that women experience heightened levels of insecurity and conflict in cities (McIlwaine, 2013; Moser and McIlwaine, 2014; Shaw et al., 2013). Such violence and associated fear severely limit women’s right and ability to move freely around the city as well as their capacity to engage in key economic, social and political activities. Although the root causes of GBV relate to deep-seated patriarchal forces, there are also a host of specifically urban-specific constraints that act as important triggers in the perpetration of VAWG. This chapter explores the relationships between these forces and wider gender transformations from an asset framework perspective. In exploring the utility of such an approach, the discussion identifies the nature of these urban-based triggers that exacerbate GBV, but also how assets can be mobilised to reduce GBV in cities. It makes the distinction between accumulating first, second and third generation assets (Moser this volume) as ways of addressing GBV and the gender inequalities underlying it in the short and long term. In effect, this means building and accumulating assets that improve women’s lives in a practical sense, as well as those which address strategic empowerment through ensuring their equal rights to the city as well as their ability to live economically sustainable lives. As gender transformations evolve, there is some potential for challenging the deep-seated gender inequalities that underpin GBV as well as the urban-specific catalysts.

Background context: gender-based violence globally and in cities
Gender-based violence refers specifically to the situation whereby the sex of the victim and perpetrator of the violent act is central to constructing the motive for the violence which revolves around the exercise of social, economic or political power. In turn, the nature of gender ideologies and inequalities in a given society underlie the prevalence and forms of GBV (McIlwaine, 2013). Although men can be victims and women can be perpetrators of violence, especially during armed conflict (Cockburn, 2013; Moser and Clark, 2001), GBV invariably refers to violence against women and girls. Drawing on the seminal 1993 United Nations Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women as the benchmark statement, this usually denotes some form of physical, sexual or psychological harm by an intimate partner or non-partner with the focus on the first two types. Within these broad descriptors, GBV and VAWG can take a wide range of forms that include female genital
mutilation, female infanticide, honour killings, trafficking of women, forced marriage, rape as a tool of war and dowry-related violence (Green and Sweetman, 2013). It is now widely acknowledged that VAWG is a human rights violation, a major public health risk and an insidious form of gender discrimination (UNFPA, 2013). Despite increasing recognition of GBV as a ‘new dominant global agenda’ (Moser and McIlwaine, 2014) not least among UN agencies in relation to everyday GBV and that related with armed conflict, there remains a tendency to invisibilise the former, especially GBV within the private sphere of the home in contexts of marked political violence and armed conflict (see Esser, 2014).

There is increasing acknowledgement that VAWG is endemic with around 35 percent of women globally having experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence. Much of this is among intimate partners with 30 percent of all women who have been in a relationship having experienced violence. A high proportion of this violence is fatal with 38 percent of all murders of women committed by intimate partners (WHO, 2013: 2). Non-partner violence tends to be less prevalent with, for example, 7.2 percent of women reporting non-partner violence globally (Abrahams et al., 2014: 1648). Despite such prevalence, it is also acknowledged that GBV and VAWG are underreported, with Palermo et al. (2014) stating that only 7 percent of women worldwide report to a formal source such as the police and/or some other judicial entity.

Bearing in mind this major caveat, prevalence rates of VAWG vary according to a host of different factors including place, social identity and economic status, in intersecting ways. For instance, lifetime prevalence rates of partner and non-partner violence are highest in the African region at 36.6 percent and lowest in the Western Pacific region at 24.5 percent (WHO, 2013: 17). Of particular importance here is the nature of GBV in cities, with one estimate stating that women are twice as likely to experience violence in cities especially in the global South (UN-Habitat, 2007). Although men are often more likely to experience urban violence and to die from it, especially those involved in gangs, this is not usually as a result of GBV (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). Instead, women are most likely to be vulnerable to such violence, especially in urban slums (Chant and McIlwaine, 2013). However, these patterns are not clear-cut in that some evidence suggests that intimate partner violence is less prevalent in cities than the countryside, while violence by a non-partner is higher in urban areas. For example, 47 percent of women in rural areas in Thailand experienced intimate partner violence compared with 41 percent in cities. In contrast, 14 percent of women in rural areas experienced non-partner violence compared with 20 percent of women in cities (WHO, 2005 cited in McIlwaine, 2013: 67). City-dwelling can therefore potentially severely exacerbate GBV through a series of urban-based risk factors.

Urban-specific triggers of gender-based violence: an asset framework perspective

2
It is important to note that urbanisation and living in a city is not a cause of GBV in itself. Among the range of different conceptual frameworks that have been developed to explain why GBV occurs, it is generally acknowledged that no single cause at a specific level or scale generates such violence, but that constellations of factors may create situations where gender-based political, economic and social violence is more likely to be perpetrated. These frameworks range from those situating male violence against women in biological differences or ‘impaired masculinities’ linked with socialisation to those that locate it firmly within prevailing patriarchal relations with GBV being the ultimate weapon for men asserting power and control over women (O’Toole and Schiffman, 1997). With explanations that emphasise natural and immutable factors being widely critiqued (Green and Sweetman, 2013), it is now accepted that the causes of GBV extend beyond individual relations to much wider structural processes within communities, cities and nations related to armed conflict, socio-economic change and poverty all of which are underpinned by unequal power relations between women and men (McIlwaine, 2014; Pickup et al., 2001). However, many aspects of these wider structural phenomena intersect with a series of risks that are specific to urban living that can precipitate the likelihood of experiencing GBV in cities. These are closely interrelated with the erosion or lack of women’s asset portfolios that can be viewed in relation to first, second and third generation assets; the lack of these can precipitate GBV and their gradual consolidation over time can potentially reduce it (see Moser this volume).

**Erosion of first generation assets and gender-based violence**

First generation assets are those that focus on the provision of ‘basic needs’ revolving around provision of land, housing, basic services and micro-finance and which are closely linked to the structural causes or driving forces underpinning GBV (Moser this volume). In the context of GBV, first generation asset erosion relates to income poverty, housing, infrastructure, alcohol consumption in public spaces and education as a human capital asset whose erosion can catalyse GBV.

**Income poverty**

Income poverty is central to understanding how basic needs are met as well as the incidence of GBV. It is often argued that in certain contexts, poverty may precipitate GBV even if it is important to remember that such violence occurs regardless of socio-economic position (Morrison, Elsberg and Bott, 2007). In turn, the prevalence of poverty in slum areas of cities of the global South is arguably related with low levels of asset ownership which can also make GBV more likely to occur. For example, in Lima, Peru, it was found that poor married women experienced higher levels of psychological, physical and sexual violence than their counterparts in middle class areas although prevalence was still high among the latter (Gonzales de Olarte and Gavilano Llosa 1999). Poverty can therefore act as an ‘aggravating factor’ in the incidence of GBV that is closely interrelated with asset ownership (Krug et al., 2002, 99). Indeed, it is not always income poverty which increases propensity
for GBV to occur, but the fact that the poor, and especially poor women, have limited asset ownership individually and collectively which can make them more exposed to the phenomenon (see Moser, 2009). Economic insecurity is closely linked with personal insecurity which is undermined by lack of access to a range of different assets related to housing, employment/income and infrastructure (see below). This resonates with Kabeer’s (1999: 149) claim that poor women are often the most vulnerable to harm because: ‘they are most exposed to the risk of violence and least able to remove themselves from violent situations’. Being able to remove oneself from a violent situation is closely linked with asset ownership and the ways in which this intersects with prevailing gender ideologies and inequalities.

**Housing as a physical asset**
Limited access to housing in cities of the global South can make poor women in particular more likely to experience GBV. Residing in makeshift dwellings which are insecure and in communities where everyday violence is endemic makes women vulnerable to burglary, theft and rape (Chant, 2013). While this can exacerbate non-partner GBV, intimate partner violence also flourishes in over-crowded conditions where people live in ‘stress-inducing’ conditions (Hindin and Adair, 2002). Therefore, although limited access to assets such as secure housing is partly linked with wider structural forces such as urbanisation and poverty not to mention patriarchal relations that underlie male bias in inheritance, property and land rights (Chant and McIlwaine, forthcoming; Rakodi, this volume), it acts as an important trigger for the occurrence of GBV. Indeed, in India, Panda and Agarwal (2005) showed that women who did not own a house and land were much more likely to experience GBV in the home than those who did own them.

**Urban public space and infrastructure**
Another set of related risk factors underpinned by driving forces relates to the configuration of urban spaces and the nature of the activities therein. This links closely to women’s access to basic infrastructural assets and again, how their compromised access can precipitate the likelihood of GBV. Although intimate partner violence is prevalent in the private spaces of the home, non-partner GBV is concentrated in certain public spaces such as at and around toilets and in secluded areas such as narrow lanes and open fields, especially where they are poorly lit (Bapat and Agarwal, 2003 on India; Moser et al., 2005). For example, in Johannesburg, South Africa, one study noted that 31 percent of rapes were perpetrated in open public spaces (Jewkes and Abrahams, 2002). Similarly, women as the primary water collectors can face assault when water standpipes are located far from their homes and/or in isolated areas (Khosla and Dhar, 2013 on Delhi). Potential attacks on public transport also affect women’s mobility and generate fear (Levy, 2013; this volume; also below).

**Urban public space and alcohol consumption**
Other spaces in cities of the global South that are often linked with widespread GBV and which undermine women’s right to move freely around the city are those where alcohol is bought and consumed. Indeed, there is a strong relationship between the incidence of GBV and especially sexual violence in and around bars or taverns. In the case of Guatemala City, women living in one poor community reported being afraid to go near cantinas because they thought they would be raped or assaulted by men (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004: 134). Women who do frequent bars often face the risk of experiencing GBV and especially those who participate in ‘survival sex’ or ‘sexual exchange’ (informal sex for money as distinct from commercial sex workers) as well as commercial sex workers (see Chant and Evans, 2010 on the Gambia; Wojcicki, 2002 on South Africa). These associations are partly related to the fact that alcohol is recognised as a primary trigger in the perpetration of GBV affecting non-conjugal and intimate partner violence (Flake and Forste, 2006). For instance, in a study of 7 countries, women whose partners got drunk regularly were 4-7 times more likely to suffer violence (Kishor and Johnson, 2004). There is also some evidence that in a small minority of cases, alcohol abuse can also lead to intimate partner violence perpetrated by women (Ansara and Hindin, 2009 on the Philippines).

**Education as a human capital asset**

Somewhat contradictorily, attending school can increase girls’ risk of GBV in cities of the South and is another way in which GBV can erode women’s asset base in that education is a primary human capital asset. Indeed, estimates suggest that 60 million young women are sexually assaulted either at or going to and from school every year globally (Oxfam, 2013). School violence is often linked to male gangs or predatory men targeting girls arriving and leaving school grounds (see Moser and McIlwaine, 2004 on Colombia). Within schools themselves, there is evidence of male students and teachers perpetrating GBV and especially sexual violence and exploitation; in the case of teachers, this is a serious breach of trust and abuse of power (Abrahams et al, 2006; Jewkes et al, 2002). While school-related GBV also affects women in rural areas, the concentrations of schools in cities and higher population densities mean that schools are invariably larger and which may foster more violence. School related violence can therefore deter young women and girls from attending which will ultimately lead to lower levels of human capital. This process can be cyclical in that lower levels of education are also widely identified as a risk factor in women’s greater likelihood of experiencing GBV (Morrison, Elsberg and Bott, 2007). The perception and reality of schools as violent places in cities also affects young men’s attendance and subsequent attainment which also has implications for GBV; it has been found that men with lower levels of education are more likely to perpetrate VAWG (ibid).

**Erosion of second generation assets and gender-based violence**
Second generation assets in the context of GBV refer primarily to individual, household and community social capital in cities. GBV can be provoked when these assets are eroded through the fragmentation or absence of social support functions and the ways in which gender ideologies and tolerance of conflict changes in urban as compared with rural areas. Therefore, their erosion also prevents processes of strategic empowerment in terms of gender relations (Moser, this volume).

**Individual, household and community social capital as assets**

The nature of access to social capital assets can lead to GBV in complex ways. From one perspective it has been argued that positive social capital and social relations have been disrupted in cities of the global South not least because of neoliberal economic policies, rising inequalities and a re-configuration of state-society relations (Watson, 2008). A central element of this has been the growth and proliferation of urban violence of which GBV is an important component (Moser and McIlwaine, 2014). Therefore, endemic everyday urban violence can both be cause and outcome of the erosion of social capital (Moser and McIlwaine, 2006), even if communities have emerged as being extremely resilient in the face of such conflict (Muggah, 2014). A core aspect of eroding social capital in the first place is gendered intra-family violence which closely interrelates with a panoply of different insecurities (Moser and McIlwaine, 2007). Furthermore, for women who might already be at risk of GBV, weakened social relations and/or a compromised social asset base may act as a further trigger. Indeed, where social capital assets such as friendship circles are limited women may be less able to remove themselves from situations of GBV especially in the home (Heise et al., 2002). In turn, women without much in the way of social support may be less likely to seek formal help when they do experience GBV (Kabeer, 2008).

Beyond networks and social support are values, another pertinent set of social capital assets are norms and ideologies (Bebbington, 1999; Moser, 2009) which affect the incidence of GBV in fundamental ways. It is generally thought that gender ideologies are more flexible in cities than rural areas where social relations tend to be more conservative (Chant, 2013; Shaw et al., 2013). More specifically, patriarchal strictures tend to be more relaxed in cities meaning women are able to function more independently and challenge GBV violence (Chant, this volume; Hindin and Adair, 2002; Rao, 1997). However, even in contexts where more flexible gender ideologies prevail, at the micro-level of the household, if women dominate decision-making processes this can aggravate and threaten men who sometimes react violently (Hindin and Adair, 2002 on the Philippines). In Colombia, for example, Pallitto and O’Campo (2005) note that increasing ‘female autonomy’ did not necessarily lead to a reduction in VAWG because of a violent backlash among some men.

These processes tie in broadly with the ‘sanctions and sanctuary’ framework advanced by Krug et al. (2002: 99) who proposed that the likelihood of GBV is greatest where community sanctions fail to
condemn it and/or where shelter or support for women does not exist. Although this varies according to context, tolerance tends to be higher in rural areas where women can be pressurised into accepting gender-based violence as the norm (Heise et al. 2002). In urban areas, by contrast, women are more likely to voice concerns and to seek help in situations of GBV, thus mobilising the positive dimensions of changing gender ideologies more likely to prevail in urban areas (McIlwaine, 2013). However, although the erosion of these types of social capital assets can trigger GBV in cities, they can also be harnessed to for prevention purposes (see below).

**Erosion of third generation assets and gender-based violence**

Third generation assets relate to those that ensure financial and institutional stability over time and which maximise the linkages among different assets (Moser, this volume). In the context of GBV, this relates mainly to access to work, mobilising labour power and generating financial capital. The inability to mobilise these or their depletion can precipitate GBV in cities and prevent gendered empowerment and transformation.

**Work and financial capital**

Within the context of a ‘global feminisation of labour’, there has been a ubiquitous increase in female labour force participation over the past three decades with marked increases in cities of the global South (Chant, 2013). Although not explicitly couched within an asset accumulation framework, there has been a long-standing debate on the ways in which women’s access to paid employment can lead to empowerment and gender transformations in households, the labour market, and wider society (Kabeer, 2008). While mobilising their labour as an asset is often positive for women, however, it is also necessary to recognise the type of paid work involved as well as the ways in which women’s other responsibilities, especially for caring, are re-negotiated as a result of their employment (ibid). Similarly, the relationship with GBV is equivocal. In the context of GBV in the home, building financial assets can allow women to potentially leave a violent household. By the same token, it can also be construed as threatening and lead to a backlash against women in the form of GBV (Bhattacharyya et al., 2011 on India). In the case of the Philippines, for example, one study showed that when women earned more than 50 percent of the household income they reported more domestic violence than those who earned less (Hindin and Adair, 2002). In addition, those employed in low-paid and casual jobs are generally more likely to experience GBV in the home than those working in better-paid, higher quality jobs (Kabeer, 2008: 48 on Bangladesh). Women engaged in certain types of jobs, such as sex work, are also more likely to be exposed to GBV, especially sexual violence and trafficking (Watts and Zimmerman, 2002).

While it is indisputable that access to financial assets such as that generated through paid work facilitates greater decision-making power and a degree of economic independence, this can also
aggravate the power balance within households and beyond. Indeed, at the household level, working women who live with male partners who are unemployed or have irregular jobs are more likely to experience GBV (Krug et al., 2002). This also has much wider implications as the case of brutal killings and assaults known as femicides in Mexico and Central America illustrates. Women’s disproportionate employment in export manufacturing electronics and garment factories or *maquilas* vis-à-vis men has been associated with a marked increase in VAWG. The explanations behind this phenomenon are complex but seem to point to a backlash from men who are resentful of women’s status as preferred workers and their apparent greater independence as a result, together with the fact that they are effectively transgressing the boundaries of ‘acceptable womanhood’ (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante, 2010; Prieto-Carron et al, 2007). Again, while accessing and accumulating financial assets through this type of work can potentially improve women’s well-being in relation to GBV, it also brings serious risks of increasing its incidence both in households and in the public sphere.

**Outcomes and corollaries of GBV: barriers to asset accumulation in cities**

While the erosion of first, second and third generation assets can lead to urban-specific triggers of GBV, such violence further compromises women’s socio-economic well-being and mobility in cities as well as act as a barrier to subsequent asset accumulation. For example, GBV has many physiological and psychological health effects that include immediate injuries such as fractures and haemorrhaging, miscarriage, stillbirth, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as greater susceptibility to HIV and STIs (WHO, 2013: 21-22). Also important are harmful alcohol and drug use, depression and suicide and rape trauma syndrome (Morrison, Elsberg and Bott, 2007; Oxfam, 2013; WHO, 2013). While these affect women regardless of their residence, the fact that GBV is disproportionately concentrated in urban areas can influence the wider health and economic sustainability of cities.

The direct and indirect health effects of violence undermine women’s ability to function productively, thus severely eroding financial as well as human capital assets. For instance, in Nagpur, India, 13 percent of women had experience of not being able to participate in paid work because of the health effects of partner violence, resulting in missing an average of 7 work days per incidence of abuse (cited in Krug et al., 2002: 102-3). This also affects husbands’ ability to work with 42 percent of women who reported an injury in another Indian study stating that their husband had absented themselves from work following a GBV incident (ICRW, 2000 cited in USAID 2014: 10). The actual income lost was the equivalent to nearly 100 percent of women’s average monthly income for a labouring job in urban slum communities (ibid.). Furthermore, when women are unable to work to their potential due to limited human capital, disability, stress or distraction, they end up ‘making ends meet’ in informal and poorly remunerated jobs (Duuvvery et al. 2013; Moser, 2001). A damaged psychological state also influences social capital as women survivors often withdraw from friendship
and social networks for fear of shame, stigma or rejection, especially in cases of sexual violence (Heise et al, 2002). These social costs also affect families and children as primary female care-givers may withdraw from this role. There are also marked inter-generational effects of children who witness GBV and VAWG in that they are at an increased risk of anxiety and depression often resulting in poor performance at school (Duvery et al. 2013). This clearly reduces the potential for inter-generational asset transfer, especially in terms of their human capital accumulation.

Another outcome of GBV is the loss of power at the intra-household level whereby GBV within the home can be used as a ‘coercive instrument’ to erode women’s decision-making abilities (Bobonis, Castro and Gonzales-Brenes 2009 cited in Duvvury et al. 2013: 14). This can mean they are less likely to leave the violent household (ibid.). This is exacerbated by lack of access to human and financial capital through paid employment although the relationship is somewhat contradictory (Vyas and Watts, 2009; see also above).

GBV generates costs at community, city and national levels in that it puts pressure on health care facilities, which are invariably concentrated in cities. As such, collective as well as community assets are undermined. In Vietnam, for instance, the average health care spend for a case of domestic violence is US$12.6 (cited in Duvvury et al. 2013, 9). This links to wider costs to judicial and social services. In Colombia, for example, the national government spent US$73.7 million in 2003 to prevent, detect, and offer services to survivors of family violence. This was equivalent to around 0.6 percent of the national budget (Sanchez et al, 2004 cited in Morrison, Elsberg and Bott 2007). There are also costs to the wider economy as well as to individuals; one estimate of the economic effects of intimate partner violence based on data from nine countries suggested a loss of 1-2 percent of GDP which nearly equalled government spending on primary education (Duvvury et al. 2013). In the case of Bangladesh, the direct monetary costs of VAWG to victims, perpetrators, and families as well as costs to the state and to non-state actors were estimated at 12.5 percent of the total government expenditure and 2.1 percent of the GDP. This contrasted to a mere 0.12 percent spent of expenditure spent on combatting VAW (USAID, 2014: 10).

The final major outcome of GBV in cities is fear and insecurity which is not only a direct outcome of GBV but which also affects the ability of women to accumulate first, second and third generation assets. Although fear affects women and men in cities, it is widely acknowledged that women experience higher levels due to a combination of patriarchal relations and the perception that women face more danger from GBV in the cities. In Delhi, India, for example, more than 80 percent of women said they were sexually harassed on public transport, while 62 percent stated they had been harassed on the streets (Whitzman, 2013, 39). Even if perception and incidence of GBV are not always directly linked (McIlwaine and Moser, 2007), the psychological power of perception can
severely constrain women’s freedom to move around the city in terms of using public transport and operating freely in open public spaces (Whitzman, 2014). In the case of Guatemala City, spatial freedom was severely restricted among women due to fear of sexual assaults, itself fuelled by gossip about gang rapes (Winton, 2005). Similarly in Mumbai, a study of headcounts of people in public spaces showed that only 28 percent were women (Phadke, 2007 cited in Whitzman, 2013: 41).

Forced immobility not only leads to lack of choice and isolation for women, but it also affects the accumulation of assets, and especially human and social capital assets. For example, the limited social interaction imposed by immobility is a central element of the erosion of social capital. This can be individual and collective; in relation to the latter, participation in political and community events is affected when meetings take place in the evenings when women are most fearful of travelling, especially between communities (Cárdia, 2002 on Brazil). Such erosion can be experienced by women in relation to a wide range of situations that also undermine the accumulation of other assets. For instance, young women’s ability to attend night school has been found to be reduced because of fear in Colombia and Guatemala thus eroding human capital (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). The range of productive opportunities available to women and thus their financial assets, are also reduced if they have to travel long distances on insecure public transport systems. As outlined above, such compromised access to a stable asset base can lead, in somewhat circular fashion, to even greater risk of GBV actually occurring.

Conclusions

This chapter has outlined how an asset-based perspective can potentially provide important insights into understanding GBV and VAWG in cities of the global South. While the roots of GBV lie in unequal gendered power relations and patriarchy and their intersections with processes of urbanisation, poverty and inequality, lack of access to or the erosion of a series of first, second and third generation assets act as important urban-specific triggers for the perpetration of GBV. As such, women have partial and compromised experiences of a just city in that they are rarely able to exercise their full rights to the city on an equal basis as men (Whitzman 2013). Generally speaking, women’s limited access to a range of physical, human, social and financial capital assets can put some at greater risk of GBV. However, the accumulation of certain assets can also help them guard against GBV in the longer term as well as feed into wider processes of gender transformation. Crucial to this is the primary building of first generation assets in the first instance to reduce vulnerability to GBV. But it also involves a move towards a more integrated approach that focuses on building second and third generation social capital and financial assets that can ultimately lead to more sustainable challenging of gender inequalities that underlie GBV as well as the potential backlashes that can occur as gender transformations evolve. Therefore, an assets-based approach allows for the deconstruction of both the
causes, triggers and effects of GBV in cities in ways that ultimately help in thinking how it might be reduced through gendered empowerment and transformation processes in the longer term.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Caroline Moser and Sylvia Chant for their helpful advice and comments in revising this chapter.

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*Gender & Development*. 21:3, 433-452


