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Is there room on the broom for a crip? Disabled women as experts in disaster planning.

Abstract

Climate Change related extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe, requiring urgent action to effectively plan for them. While disabled women are one group likely to be disproportionately and negatively affected by disasters, they are often not included in disaster planning. This commentary paper utilises McRuer's Crip Theory as a lens to explore this topic, where the strength of disabled women's capacity to positively contribute to effective disaster planning becomes evident. Their lived understandings of negotiating often unacknowledged barriers can act as useful tools to assuage the impacts of disasters. Their experiences are recognised under the rubric of Crip theory as neither deviant nor 'other', but as capabilities worthy of mainstreaming. Disaster situations that may be seen as chaotic to those accustomed to services and environments that closely match their requirements, could be perceived as both familiar and resolvable to a disabled woman. In this way, disabled women can utilise their everyday problem-solving skills to help tackle these impacts, viewing them as circumstances to be methodically navigated and overcome. Enabling disabled women room at the planning table is neither luxury nor bonus, but essential. Participatory inclusion and successful planning for disabled individuals benefits a much larger swathe of society than initially anticipated, as illustrated in this paper by international examples of best practice. We all profit from more inclusive planning to create more accessible and inclusive communities.

Key Words: Crip theory, disabled women, expertise, disaster planning, inclusivity.

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Introduction

As disasters arising from Climate Change become more numerous and severe (IPCC, 2021), there is an urgent need to adequately plan for them, in both spatial and organisational terms (Veenema et al., 2017). This commentary paper argues that disabled women, especially those at higher risk of being impacted by the negative effects of disaster, need better inclusion within disaster planning. Such inclusion could potentially lead to more effective policies and timely responses, ensuring that emergency preparedness is appropriately customised to a variety of different needs (King, 2019). This argument is framed by the tenets of McRuer's *Crip Theory* (2006) which takes an intersectional approach to disability politics (Crenshaw, 1991). McRuer's theory presents a strong juncture from which to consider the position of disabled women as experts.

Firstly, though, we wish to state our positionality within a hybrid writing team comprising both disabled and non-disabled activists and academics, with three of the authors identifying as disabled. We should also clarify that we do not wish to essentialise disabled women's experiences and views, but see them as diverse and with varying expectations and desires to be included and engaged with disaster management planning. This commentary draws upon the recent PhD research of the lead author, in order to consolidate the arguments advanced within the text.

Inclusivity via legislation?

Despite capacities developed through everyday experiences, and notwithstanding the fact that disabled women are most likely to be disproportionately and negatively affected by disasters, they are unlikely to be included in disaster planning (Gartrell et al., 2020; King, 2019). Yet some of the disparate impacts of disasters arise from a lack of planning for diverse needs, as tragically illustrated by Hurricane Katrina's inequitable access to evacuation, transport, shelter, and medical care for disabled people. This led to the deaths of some disabled people whose needs could not be accommodated in time to save them (Walsh-Warder, 2016).

Laws can go some way to address the shortfall of disabled women at the planning table. Inclusivity in disaster situations is mandated by international frameworks and conventions. For example, the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has been ratified by more than 160 countries around the globe, complemented in most countries by national laws. In addition, the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) operates on an 'all-of-society engagement and partnership' approach, encouraging the perspectives of women, disabled people, and other identity groups to be integrated into policy creation. This Framework proposes that governments should engage with relevant stakeholders, including disabled women, to support the formulation of disaster preparedness policies (UNISDR, 2015). However, legislation derived from such frameworks needs interpreting and enforcing, so that disabled women's contributions can help limit the impacts of disasters upon all individuals.

Intersectionality and its manifold effects

While disasters themselves do not discriminate along the lines of social identities such as gender or disability, nor do they affect individuals equally; extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, floods and heatwaves, will affect particular groups more severely (Baker et al., 2017; Cruz et al., 2020). The negative effects of disasters can be compounded by the consequences of intersectionality, a concept which denotes categories of human social identities such as, but not exclusively, class, race, and sexuality, that intersect in a variety of ways (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality manifests itself so that certain categories are more likely to intersect; for

example, disabled individuals are more likely to be part of a socioeconomic group that is economically disadvantaged (Walker & Burningham, 2011).

Many disabled women are further impacted by disasters as they contend with additional struggles; for example, if mobility impaired, attempting to escape a deluge or trying to stay warm when utilities fail during a disaster (Harrington, forthcoming). The more socially and economically marginalised women are, the more their risk of harm increases during a disaster (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007). Additional incumbrances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, can further exacerbate an already challenging situation, as those exposed to floods find it even more difficult to find available alternative accommodation and replace lost but essential clothing and personal items during periods of lockdown (Harrington, forthcoming). Intersectionality recognises multiple oppressions.

Many disabled women who have been subjected to the impacts of disaster have expressed frustrations regarding barriers to recovery, such as the presence of flood water preventing the ingress of their Personal Assistants, upon whom they heavily rely (Harrington, forthcoming). Conversely, it has been shown that the availability of resources such as, but not limited to, extensive social networks and access to finance can render disabled women more resilient to the impacts of climate change, as they can call on these networks for support in times of disaster or, alternatively, can afford to pay for assistance they may require (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007).

Since disabled women are more likely to belong to a disadvantaged socioeconomic group, there is a higher possibility of residing near to or on a flood plain and of having reduced access to flood insurance (Fielding, 2018). In the United Kingdom, this situation has somewhat improved with the establishment of Flood Re., a system that makes provision for insurance companies (that are teamed with Flood Re.) to offer flood insurance at a reasonable cost to properties deemed to be at high risk of flooding [floodre.co.uk]. In other countries such as France, insurance is deemed to be "socialised" so costs associated with home insurance are fairly evenly distributed, irrespective of risk of disaster in a given community or region. These insurance methods could help address the imbalances caused by intersectionality, notwithstanding the inability of individuals to afford insurance provision in the first instance.

Lived experiences as expertise - valuing disabled women's input to planning

Women, irrespective of their physical and mental health, are sometimes unable to resist the impacts of disasters, for a variety of reasons. Some women might be obliged to remain in the home to look after elderly or very young family members, and some may wear clothes that restrict their movement, making retreat from a disaster situation more cumbersome (Gartrell et al., 2020). In addition, women are frequently charged with the double-burden of working *and* project-managing repairs to their home during the recovery phase, often having to handle a plethora of overwhelmingly male-led emergency and recovery services (Medd 2007). This is at a time when many disabled women suggest they are already in a state of exhaustion, and possible shock too (Harrington, forthcoming).

Even outside of disaster situations, disabled women have experience of continuously negotiating physical, institutional and psychological barriers, including the potential risk of being subjected to violence; they are obliged to develop capacities and skills to negotiate these often-unacknowledged hazards and exclusions. These skills can feed into innovative policy focused upon resilience-building; for example, their keen awareness of the need for accessible housing, and also the requirement for limiting the construction of 'accessible' housing in flash-flood zones (Harrington, forthcoming).

They can offer unique insights into how to reduce harm and build resilience throughout the disaster cycle. To ensure we have plans that can reduce harm and ensure the most constructive outcomes from disaster recovery,

we need to construe disabled women as experts, fully able to lead the way. Disabled women, by virtue of not fitting assumptions disaster planners may have about what most people may need and desire, are able to consider plans more holistically; they offer a distinctive input towards building successful emergency preparedness. This sits along with an emphasis upon the fundamental need and right for disabled women's long-excluded views to be made integral to any decision-making process.

Yet, disabled women may not be heard when they are essentialised as vulnerable and needing assistance. As a consequence, the wealth of experience they could offer to formulating inclusive policies, and their ability to assume leadership roles representing themselves and their access requirements, can be undervalued or overlooked (King, 2019). The concept of inclusivity refers to equal treatment during disasters, but also to equal participation in terms of planning for, and management of, disasters.

Crip theory

Crip theory offers an explanation as to why, despite their awareness of their needs and accompanying expertise, disabled women are still sometimes ignored. Crip theory positions *compulsory ablebodiedness* (alongside *compulsory heterosexuality*) as both logical and inevitable outcomes of neoliberal sociocultural framings. 'Able' bodies/minds planning for disaster resilience instinctively focus their work around unattainable, ideal, and 'able' bodies. This approach will fall short of provision for many, if not most, *non*- -white, -cisgender, -hetero, -neurotypical people, whereby 'the ideal able-bodied identity can never, once and for all, be achieved' (Butler in McRuer, 2006, p25).

Yet conversely, and especially in the case of those who have lived experiences of coping with and adapting to the impacts of disasters, disabled women can identify the gap between what is required and what is delivered in terms of disaster planning. Their experiences, going beyond the mainstream, can give them a wider view of what could be helpful in novel situations and how to create policy that meets the needs of diverse social groups. For example, inclusive and universal housing design can be appropriately customised to fit a variety of different needs, reducing harm and building resistance throughout the disaster cycle (King, 2019). Bridging these gaps could mean a sooner return to normal after disasters, which could mean return to employment, renewal of connections within a community…and overall, a healthier lifestyle as forms of recovery and renewal, even transformation (as communities bounce forward rather than bounce back), take place.

Crip Theory critique is premised upon and restricted by the ableist, cis-gender norm, whereby bodies and sexualities not tailored to this mould are considered abnormal. Recognising this narrative there is a need to forge new linkages to include individuals who do not fit this 'ideal' standard, *cripping* disaster planning to support a *whole society* approach. Our attention should be focussed upon the necessity of (community-led) disaster planning for *everyone*.

Eschewing a one-size-fits-all approach to disaster planning, community-led emergency management plans can tailor strategies to take account of local terrain, area customs and cultures, and a region's socioeconomic conditions (Kenny and Phibbs, 2015). The needs of disabled individuals must be seen as integral to plans and policies, rather than viewed as an add-on or a burden (Gartrell, 2020). Effective policies could include ensuring, for example, that flood warning's expiration time/date are clearly publicised, to lower anxiety levels of those anticipating floods (Harrington, forthcoming). Disabled women have discussed how continuous alerts make them anxious and, at the same time, de-sensitive them to responsibilities and actions to be discharged and executed (Harrington, forthcoming). Responses to disaster situations could include an empathetic approach, a commitment to some minimal level of contact to each household from responsible local authorities within a certain timeframe, so that those subjected to disaster's impacts are aware a process is in place to help them move through and beyond the disaster management spiral's response phase. Some disabled women who

experienced recent English floods wondered if they had been forgotten, questioning whether any responsible authority cared about them or was even aware of the dire circumstances they found themselves in (Harrington, forthcoming).

Input to urban and spatial planning

The need for disabled women's voices at the disaster risk management planning table should encompass spatial, as well as organisational, planning. The impacts of disasters, while not totally avoidable, can be minimised with the use of judicious spatial planning and adherence to inclusive guidelines.

Sitting within a wider paradigm of flood risk management (Sayers et al., 2013; Challies, 2016), in spatial planning there has been a shift in emphasis away from a model of flood defence resistance i.e., reducing the risk of water entering into a property through structural engineering measures, towards integrated water management. The latter involves a more wide-ranging proactive water management process covering water systems and using sustainable principles (Busscher et al., 2019). Flood risk management concentrates upon adaptation to the impacts of disasters and is often aimed at the level of the individual or households. Concomitant with this shift is an acceptance of flood risk, which brings with it the need for recognition of the requirement for property-level flood resilience measures with implications for household recovery. This corresponds to an 'advanced liberalism' move in government style, deemed necessary since the effects of climate change and rapid urbanisation render defence resistance measures inadequate for purpose (Butler & Pidgeon, 2011). It should be noted that the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change (2006) claims a shift from mitigation towards adaptation will be necessary in the medium-long term as climate change impacts become ever more present.

Flood risk management spatial planning involves 'arranging physical space and guiding future activities' according to accepted principles (Ran & Nedovic-Budic, 2016, p68). For example, disabled people, and women in general, have argued for better urban planning, reducing the need for (car) travel. This, alone, could help reduce contributions to climate change because of shorter travel distances. Mixed land-uses, multiple shopping and recreation centres, more integrated home/work locations and more frequent small green spaces offer multiple further social benefits, along with a measure of flood protection. It is clear that spatial planning can aid individuals and communities to cope with, and recover from, the impacts of extreme weather events, as well as adapt to new realities brought on by such disasters. Spatial planning can also help to plan for less anticipated events, such as a pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen many individuals, when required to work from home, seek combined house/workspaces. The same pandemic highlighted the gap between disabled and non-disabled individuals' experiences. The UK Office for National statistics (ONS) reported that disabled people were twice as likely to feel lonely during the pandemic, and three times as likely to feel a burden upon others than those identifying as non-disabled [Office of National Statistics, 2022]. Conversely, disabled people are much less likely to have their travel or life events disrupted because of the pandemic and its mitigation. While no explanation is offered, it is possible that less opportunity to participate in society in a full and equal way, due to a variety of barriers, could result in a dearth of plans that could be disrupted by a pandemic. Inclusive and well-thought-out spatial planning could potentially offer better social opportunities for disabled people, and everyone else.

Benefits for all

When recognised, the concept of inclusivity can contribute to pioneering designs that benefit a much broader swathe of society than originally intended. Ideas such as Universal and Inclusive Design, prioritising accessibility and inclusion, have become mainstreamed and should serve the *whole* community as guiding principles in times

of disaster (Stough & Kang, 2015). An example of support for these principles in practice can be found in the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, established via disability legislation; it offers comprehensive, free, and downloadable guidance on developing accessible urban environments. The Centre organises workshops to enable planners and architects from built-environment organisations to mix with end-users, such as those with mobility impairments, to seek opinions and better understand needs. Technical information and know-how are already available; we simply need participatory inclusion and political will to make universally accessible spaces and technologies a reality.

The European Union's (EU) Access City Award annually showcases the best of inclusive spatial design, with accessible public transport, and tactile paving and maps, as well as bottom-up, inclusive approaches to planning. It is expected that Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) are consulted from the beginning of each project (Luxembourg, for example, has an Integration and Special Needs Department which acts as a point of contact for disabled people and DPOs alike) and projects are tailored for a variety of different groups; each group in turn is made aware of the needs of other parties. Participation must veer towards degrees of genuine control and partnership for the disabled, rather than mere tokenism, to offer a blueprint for anticipating needs and listening to the recommendations of those with accessibility requirements. When expecting the participation of disabled women at planning meetings, care must be taken to ensure equality of opportunity is in place allowing disabled women to attend meetings; this could entail safe and reliable transport provision to and from in-person meetings, or ensuring disabled women have the technical equipment and know-how to participate meaningfully online. Thoughtful planning, such as accessible buses, or tactile paving, organised and implemented outside of times of emergency, might form part of an inclusive exit strategy when disaster's impacts mandate an emergency response. The EU Access City Award implicitly acknowledges Crip Theory principles for inclusive spaces, rather than advocating for cities that provide adequate but separate facilities, of which Crip Theory is scathing.

Other successful examples of participatory inclusion can be found in the planned Multi-Hazard Early Warning System (MHEWS). On World Meteorological Day 2022, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres declared the UN would implement a MHEWS for every at-risk individual on the planet within the next five years. Plans for such a system are already informed by research from women-led and disability-inclusive MHEWS initiatives, to make it both accessible and all-inclusive [UNDRR, 2020-2022].

Significantly, improvements meeting the requirements of disabled individuals are seldom advantageous for them alone. Another example of inclusive planning that benefits many more members of society than planned is closed captioning for television viewing; while this is usually intended for deaf/hard-of-hearing people, it can be useful for those with limited proficiency in a country's main language, or simply for message reinforcement. Hence, captioning can become a vital source of information for many groups during disasters. Conversely, an absence of inclusive planning, teamed with low expectations from those disproportionately impacted, can negatively affect outcomes for more of society than anticipated (Roth, 2018).

To ensure inclusive disaster planning, disabled women need to be at the table, co-developing spatial planning principles, involved in accessible strategic and planning sessions for risk management and resilience building, for both emergency planning and wider preparedness. This means representation, scaling up from local, to regional, to national planning fora (e.g. local resilience in England and a Resilience Capabilities Programme in the UK). This representation could help ensure that as broad as possible a range of adapted/adaptable visions are made for disabled people. As argued above, such visioning can only have benefits for the socio-ecological resilience of wider communities. The recently held COP27 has begun to address these issues. A COP27 attendee and Director of an NGO based in Bangladesh, a country facing pressing disaster challenges, explained we need to recognise climate *injustice* before we can fully identify with and address climate justice itself.

Conclusion

McRuer's Crip Theory (2006) acts as a lens highlighting inadequacies associated with able-bodied versus disabled binary-thinking; instead, it encourages us to think inclusively and across intersectionalities. From this framing, if we want to have effective and socially-just organisational and spatial planning around disaster management, room for disabled women in decision-making processes is essential. Progress has been made: in February 2023, CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) holds its meeting on the equal and inclusive representation of women, with reference to the CRPD, in decision-making systems [ohchr.org]. Equally, the recently released Feminist Accessibility Protocol "seeks commitments to ensure that gender equality discussions and decision-making spaces are fully accessible to and inclusive of feminists with disabilities — women, girls, trans, intersex and nonbinary persons with disabilities" [womenenabled.medium.com].

Still, the British Red Cross's recent report *Every time it rains* makes reference to 'local decision makers' without mention of accommodations for disabled people or women so that they too can become a vital part of any decision-making mechanism [redcross.org.uk]. We need to *crip* disaster planning, whether urban, spatial or emergency, enriching preparatory and planning approaches to disaster risk management with new and alternative voices and perspectives, to help improve longer-term adaptive strategies that can benefit the whole of society.

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