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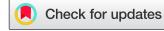
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Infrastructure violence and gendered bodies in Karachi: reflections on feminist political ecology

Asma Yaqoob

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Grounded in a feminist political ecology (FPE) framework, this study investigates how the persistent failure of drainage infrastructure in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, unequally burdens low-income women residing in informal settlements. Employing two key concepts from FPE, gendered bodies as living infrastructure and infrastructural violence, the study argues that gender-blind disaster interventions and the selective implementation of anti-encroachment campaigns perpetuate slow violence against marginalized women while intensifying their domestic and community labour. The findings underscore the urgent need to integrate gendered perspectives into urban infrastructure planning and climate adaptation policies to promote more just urban futures.

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My family members opposed my decision to join the Karachi Bachao (Save Karachi) movement. My father, brother, and brother-in-law all are in police. Sonia is my elder sister. Our whole family is in police but still we are suffering. My brother supported me until our house was not demolished. After that he also went against me and asked Sonia not to support me. I left my home from Lyari and came to Sonia's house to live here. After the opposition from my brother-in-law, I moved to a rented one room house. I have lived like this for one and a half year. My family members did not know where I was at that time. (Maria, 25 years old)

This opening testimony from Maria reveals the complex intersection of family dynamics, state violence, and women's activism that lies at the heart of this study. While interviewing Maria and her sister, both participants in the Karachi Bachao Tehreek (Save Karachi Movement) in 2021, I learned how this grassroots mobilization emerged from a coalition of male and female activists who motivated area residents particularly young women to resist the state's anti-encroachment drive. Living along the Gujjar storm drainage channel (nullah) in a low-income settlement known as Kausar Niazi Colony (KNC) in metropolitan Karachi (Figure 1), Maria and other interviewees believed that this project of cleaning and widening the drainage channel had completely failed because the government demolished their houses in 2021 to embank the drainage

CONTACT Asma Yaqoob  asma.yaqoob3@mail.dcu.ie  Dublin City University, Glasnevin Campus, Collins Avenue, Dublin 9, Ireland

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but still the area got flooded in 2022 and 2025. The area residents emphasized that the demolition of houses is more catastrophic than the flooding itself as the latter was a one-time yearly event, but the former has come as a severe blow in terms of loss of shelter and livelihoods.

Drawing from my theoretical insights in feminist political ecology, I conceptualize this loss as a ‘women’s loss’. Housing is intricately linked to the myriad roles that a woman performs in her daily life, encompassing activities such as cooking, washing, caregiving, child rearing and serving as spaces for social interaction with friends and family. The mobilization of low-income working women alongside housewives and mothers to demand housing rights from the city administration exemplifies what I call ‘common women’s agency’. FPE helped me to contextualize how women’s bodies in patriarchal contexts become powerful symbols in protests and demonstrations which serve a meaningful purpose for women’s grassroot activism.

The environmental conditions in KNC reveal how infrastructure abandonment produces gendered forms of harm. KNC residents reported a persistent absence of municipal waste management services from their area. In response, it has become routine for men, women, and children to dispose of household waste directly into the Gujjar drainage channel – an urban watercourse that had served as a freshwater lake during the 1970s. As a low-income housing society, mainly inhabited by daily wagers, labourers, the KNC is also a haven to drug and ice sellers, well-supported by area politicians. As mothers and wives of many drug addicts, women in KNC suffer from what feminist political ecologists call ‘slow violence’ (Bondi & Rose, 2003; Nixon, 2011; Truelove &



Figure 1. Flooded houses in 2025 in KNC.

Ruszczyk, 2022). Women bodies overwork by performing the duties of absent infrastructure including though not limited to fetching water from distant locations to provide for their families and/or managing to cook as gas loadshedding has become the norm. Many others have lost their electricity/gas connections during demolitions. This led me to think about FPE's approach to 'gendered paucity of time', shaped by 'absent or poor-quality infrastructure putting direct pressure on women's productive and reproductive work in the city and at home' (Datta & Ahmed, 2020, p. 68). From the feminist political ecology lens, this gendered time scarcity, in the context of my research, acquired particular significance when displaced women demonstrated outside the Supreme Court in Karachi, demanding rehabilitation payments. Their street protests represented a pivotal moment where gendered experiences of time characterized by relentless domestic responsibilities intersected with economic injustice and narrowly conceived political decisions, making their structural invisibility visible (Figure 2).

The history of KNC illuminates the intersecting vulnerabilities that FPE scholarship foregrounds in its analysis. The KNC was established in the mid-1970s as an informal housing scheme and regularized only under the 1985 Act after migrants from different parts of the country settled there. Following the 2020 floods, the Supreme Court and the National Disaster Management Authority's climate mitigation plan designated houses near the Gujjar drainage channel as encroachments and ordered their demolitions.

Critically, this climate mitigation strategy excluded affluent colonies developed by private real estate firms along the same drainage channel, despite their experiencing



Figure 2. November 2025 protests.

similar flooding levels in 2020. This selective enforcement underscores FPE's emphasis on intersectionality and the uneven distribution of social and material vulnerability. In KNC, many women with multiple identities – such as land ownership, housing location, income, and political connections – have attained advantageous positions. In contrast, those who lacked one or more of these identity markers experienced heightened economic and political marginalization.

FPE scholarship questions about how our identities, relationships, and places we build are all related to power. They have shown how systems affect marginalized groups (Sabhlok & Truelove, 2024). Through FPE's lens, I was able to explore how KNC's missing infrastructure has impacted different groups of women along age, education, geography and class identities. It also allowed me to centre the community's perspective in exploring how material infrastructures – such as water and sewage networks, paved roads, drainage channels, waste disposal sites, and private housing colonies – intersect with social infrastructures, including gender relations, women's labour and support work within neighbourhoods, across various scales and spaces. FPE's insights into social vulnerability enabled me to understand how broader political processes, intertwined with temporal and spatial dimensions, co-created and sustained unequal environmental vulnerabilities in KNC.

My theoretical understanding of gendered bodies as living infrastructure (Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022) shaped my empirical investigation of how politics of inclusion and exclusion structure urban life. I learned how urban poor communities develop alternative responses to missing infrastructure networks, that simultaneously enable survival and perpetuate socio-economic marginalization. Concurrently, these gendered bodies working as sewage labourers, plumbers, bus drivers, and domestic workers function as invisible infrastructure, sustaining the city through their essential yet unrecognized labour. Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) has evolved from merely identifying who is vulnerable to a deeper inquiry into how vulnerability is actively created and maintained (Weatherill, 2024). My engagement with literature conceptualizing bodies as infrastructure within FPE frameworks highlights a crucial metaphor for understanding uneven urbanization experiences (Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022), in rapidly growing metropolitan areas like Karachi.

In low-income areas of Karachi, poor and illiterate women suffer with slow infrastructure violence. This violence is tied to social and patriarchal dynamics, where women are responsible for managing home waste (Datta & Ahmed, 2020) and where access to basic resources is determined by institutions who know nothing about intersectionality and treat women as a homogenous group, passive and victimized. I argue that this infrastructure violence is also a product of those patriarchal structures which fail to see the inherent link between women's agency and their intersectional identities. During my field research, I was able to witness how gender-blind disaster intervention by the city administration in poor neighbourhoods of the city overlooked crucial considerations of mobility, safety and livelihood opportunities for many self-employed women in KNC.

FPE scholarship expands the idea of 'infrastructural violence' to include both visible and hidden forms of gendered violence in cities, focusing on how power structures can exclude certain genders from essential services like adequate water supply, sewage disposal and safe housing. This framework connects public and domestic spheres of infrastructure violence, the former resulting through uneven urban form of capitalist

developments and the latter as unpaid, unsafe and temporally abusive productive and reproductive roles for many women residing in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Datta & Ahmed, 2020). Walking through the area and sitting in some of the half-demolished homes, I was able to see many women struggling with the problem of flies and mosquitos entering the houses freely. Maintaining hygiene becomes nearly impossible when one lacks adequate space to sleep, cook, and wash. The challenges intensify for pregnant, illiterate women who suffer intimate forms of gendered violence including financial insecurities, restrictions on external mobility and safety issues associated with sleeping outside homes during power cutoffs.

In the FPE literature, gendered bodies as 'infrastructured' (Lesutis & Kaika, 2024) profoundly informed my field research. I interviewed women who stood up to not only protest government's eviction drive along the Gujjar drainage channel by standing in front of the bulldozers, organized sit-ins on the highways of the city and paid endless visits to local authority offices (Deputy Commissioner, Karachi Metropolitan Corporation, Supreme Court) for cheque collection in compensation for house demolitions, but who simultaneously maintained caregiving roles within their homes. They managed to cook food and wash clothes when the gas and electricity metres were cut off because of bulldozers. Men and women happened to manage drinking water from far areas as the water supply fell short.

House demolitions or cutting as interviewees recurrently termed it, resulted in multiple security issues for men, women and children besides loss of privacy. Those unable to afford rental housing used bed linens as makeshift walls and doors. Most of them were afraid to reconstruct their houses for fears of repetitive cutting as the drainage widening project remained incomplete.

My own positionality as a Pakistani woman from a different social class significantly shaped my understanding of female vulnerability through multiple dimensions. Contextualizing my observations through the lens of FPE, I gained insights into how women's multiple layers of vulnerability arise from pre-existing socio-economic inequalities, asymmetrical urbanization, and limited political empowerment. Many women who had not received any compensation for rehabilitation expressed their feelings of vulnerability, particularly regarding their lack of access to government officials responsible for money handling on house demolitions. They urged me to communicate their physical and emotional distress to the city government.

In contrast, some women managed to alleviate their vulnerability by leveraging personal political connections to secure multiple compensation cheques. Despite these differing experiences, all participants shared a common conviction: genuine vulnerability reduction required regaining housing in the same neighbourhood, where their social networks and livelihoods remained embedded. It is important to pay attention to people's observations and choices on how the city's infrastructure is being planned and managed by the government bodies. Feminist political ecologists suggest, 'a good idea or act of resilience at one scale may not be so at another', and remind us that 'the world's urban majority's aspirations for modernity are considered within their space of possibility' (Ruszczyk, 2023, p. 7). Women experience slow violence through patriarchal power structures that limit them to roles of resilience rather than growth.

We live in times where resilience is supported as a positive trait to address critical issues such as climate change and environmental vulnerabilities but a mere focus on

resilience without addressing the root causes of socio-economic vulnerabilities normalize patriarchal norms and drive attention more towards women survival than their political progress and equal exercise of rights. My field research revealed that unjust political actions diminish resilience and catalyse resistance. I found it encouraging that women in low-income areas such as KNC are rejecting social and institutional barriers that interpret women's silence as resilience. This shift is promising as they have stood up for their and others' housing rights.

To conclude, Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) helped me identifying the intersection of socio-economic inequalities, gendered vulnerabilities, and infrastructural violence in low-income urban neighbourhood of Karachi. My research revealed how patriarchal structures and gender-blind environmental plans exacerbate marginalization while overlooking women's agency and intersectional identities. The demolition of their homes not only represented the loss of shelter but also disrupted the intricate roles and spaces that define women's daily lives. Women's participation in movements like *Karachi Bachao Tehreek* exemplifies their agency in resisting systemic injustices, transforming their lived experiences of slow violence into powerful acts of protest. The activism demonstrated by housewives and young women in KNC reflect a growing awareness and assertion of their housing rights. Their protests not only challenged systemic injustices but also signalled a shift towards redefining urban governance and equitable climate actions. These grassroots efforts highlight the urgency of addressing the gendered impacts of poor infrastructure and building inclusive urban futures.

Declaration of using AI

I have used Perplexity's web interface and Claude Sonnet 4.5 to paraphrase sentences/improve language clarity in this article.

Ethics declarations

This research meets best ethical practices as outlined by the DCU ethics committee and was undertaken after receiving approval from the *Humanities & Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee* (F-REC), Dublin City University. It also complies with GDPR guidelines and requirements. The ethics application approval number is DCU-FHSS-2024-010.

Informed consent

The participants of this study have provided informed consent both verbally and in writing for the academic use of their views after getting to know about the research through verbal communication with the author. They have also given a written consent to publish their views and names.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Asma Yaqoob is in her final year of PhD at the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University. She has a bachelor's degree in international relations from University of Karachi (Pakistan); and a master's degree in Practising Sustainable Development from Royal Holloway University of London (UK). Her research at DCU is on Feminist political Ecology of 2022 Flooding in Karachi, Pakistan: Unpacking Women's Differential Vulnerabilities. Her thesis at DCU is co-supervised by Dr. Danny Marks and Dr. Valesca from the School of Law and Government.

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