FEATURE

Women's Spatial Struggles in a Climate Vulnerable Era: The Case of eKhenana

Nduduzo Majozi

Introduction

Throughout the cities of South Africa, women face a variety of threats, such as landlessness, climate hazards, unemployment, and a lack of basic necessities. Due to a gendered division of domestic and care work, they are made even more vulnerable, since they are expected to carry additional responsibilities such as domestic work, child care, and caring for the elderly (Saloshni & Nithiseelan 2022). This article explores discourses around gender, urban development, and climate change; in particular, it draws on fieldwork I conducted for my doctoral research on the challenges facing women in the eKhenana community in Durban.

EKhenana is an example of a rapid occupation in which occupants illegally occupied a portion of an empty forest adjacent to Cator Crest sportsfields and Glenmore middle-class housing. Since then, the occupiers have faced a series of climate catastrophes – challenges, I argue, which reflect the complex, historically gendered nature of urban spaces in South Africa.

This occupation began towards the end of 2018, and was initiated by urban dwellers with a common goal of creating a space to call home. At first glance, it appears as if it might provide a support system for agrarian life, with the possibility of stock and crop production. In the absence of basic urban services, one cannot clearly say whether eKhenana represents an urban agrarian revolution introducing agricultural livelihoods, or whether it is just another example of climate change and urban housing crises at play.

Gender and ecological struggles in urban areas

The social and spatial structures of cities are interrelated to each other (Spain 2014), so exploring cities from a gender perspective reveals the ways in which spatiality reinforces gendered relations. As Lefebvre (1991) has noted, spaces are produced by those who use them every day, and it is in this way that spaces reflect social norms, including gender relations (Nusser & Anacker 2013).

Thus, I draw from narrative accounts of women occupiers to understand the ways in which women interact with (and within) the occupied urban spaces and to detail their role in shaping the struggle against spatial injustices. Such work draws inspiration from the writings of Irazàbal & Huerta (2016), who emphasise the ethical and critical role of 'contribut[ing] to progressive struggles for greater rights to the city and socio-spatial justice for minoritized people' (p. 725).

In many reports, land occupations are viewed as struggles for basic necessities, including housing (Ngwenya & Cirollia 2021), income, and employment, with some focusing on the legal ramifications of these occupations (Mpofu 2017); yet little attention has been paid to the climate-resilient struggles emanating from these sites. Residents of these areas remain trapped in hazardous zones where, due to a lack of planning, freedom, and resources, they find themselves without drainage systems or buffers from flooding. In the light of this, the case of eKhenana allows us to understand South African cities' ongoing vulnerabilities beyond the often-overstated socio-economic discourses.

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One of the movements championing urban issues is Abahlali baseMjondolo, also known as the 'shack-dwellers movement' of South Africa; this is a socialist movement founded in 2005 to fight for land, housing and urban services (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2024). Since its founding, it has gained traction to become South Africa's largest social movement, with more than 150,000 members. Its woman's wing is championing woman's issues such as gender-based violence and female unemployment. In many of Abahlali's occupied sites, the women's wing has established campaigns of fighting hunger through farming initiatives.

At eKhenana, the two projects include a community vegetable farm and a chicken poultry project. Inspired by their movement's socialist principles, residents share a common vision of living in a de-commodified, collectively owned community or 'commune'. They mobilise resources through fundraising and collectively share the profits from production.

Despite the residents' attempts to raise funds to buy an incubator for a hatchery, the climate gods have not always acted in their favour. The poultry project was recently hampered by extreme weather, which negatively impacts on chicken mortality and production rates; heavy rains also damaged the chicken house and harmed the birds. As a breed, Hy-Line Brown chickens need clean, warm conditions that are not affected by storms or violent weather. However, the chicken house is built only with corrugated iron sheets and other weak materials, leaving the birds vulnerable to heat and rain.

Clearly, climate change is not blind to one's socio-economic status, given that it affects one's capacity for forging meaningful climate-resistance strategies to shield one's livelihood from ecological shocks. So, who then are the real targets of climate shocks, in the context of a patriarchal political economy like South Africa's where women stand at the bottom of the economic ladder?

Gender and climate vulnerability: A page from eKhenana's struggles

Babazile Qwabe (27) is an activist from Abahlali baseMjondolo's women's wing a single mother of two children at a local school near Cato Crest, and an advocate of women's rights. She migrated from the rural Mzimkhulu area, but like many others urban migrants, she found herself unemployed and in need of housing. Similarly, like many other women in the area, she depends for her livelihood on subsistence farming and social grants.

The area faces many challenges, including extreme temperatures, flooding, and drought. Historical inequalities have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the unrest that occurred in 2021. Qwabe explained that, structurally, climate change has made eKhenana's residents vulnerable, since drought impacts their vegetable farming due to a lack of alternative irrigation systems. The lack of basic services, drainage systems, and refuse collection in the area makes the situation worse. Sometimes when it rains, solid waste blocks the river next to the homes, which worsens the effect of floods in the area. In view of the absence of basic infrastructure and other services such as proper sanitation, women are exposed to infections and health risks when solid waste is pushed back into their homes by floods.

The success of farming projects in the area gives residents greater resources with which to establish safer sanitary alternatives; the destruction of farming projects by extreme weather threatens their survival. Zukiswa Joja (49), another woman living in the area and a mother of two (who also works as a cleaner at the nearby university) said:

> You know, the money we used to make from the gardening when it was still functioning very well – it was great. We were able to build new toilets. I mean that many things we've achieved or done came from our own hands.

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A leap of faith: From individual to collective resistance strategies

In the face of this climate plight, the question arises of what coping mechanisms women occupiers like Qwabe use to survive. Given the collective unity among the residents of this commune, are these resistance strategies able to engage in transformational ways with underlying structural issues such as urban resource distribution, spatial planning procedures, and relations between residents and city authorities? This raises the issue of whether the resistance strategies employed by residents here can lead to long-term sustainability in the face of floods, droughts, and heat waves.

In periods of extreme cold, people resort to making woodfires and using paraffin stoves, but this comes with several risks. Many settlements are ravaged by fire disasters during winter seasons due to the use of paraffin stoves and candles. Although eKhenana has not experienced shack fires, in November 2023, 150 homes were destroyed by such fires in the neighbouring Quarry Road Settlement. In short, while individuals' survival strategies – such as lighting a fire – might be fairly easy to carry out, they pose risks not only to the individuals attempting them but also to the community. Fieldwork reveals, too, that while some residents use solar panels for electrification, these cannot function well during lengthy rainfalls or other bad weather when there is little sunshine.

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The most impactful resistance mechanism at the individual level is shifting the mode of survival livelihoods. As the seasons change, people in the community may add to or change their income-generating strategies, for instance by moving from formal to informal trading at the Durban Produce Market during harvesting season. Women in the area are increasingly using backyard gardening as an income-generating strategy. Backyard gardens serve as secondary food sources, particularly during the off-season when bad weather delays the harvesting of the communal garden. Climate change has also altered the political economy within households, in that many of these survival strategies have been initiated by women. However subtly, this has brought about a paradigm shift in which gender dynamics and roles are positioned at the centre of climate-change resistance.

Emerging transformative climate politics beyond the individual level

Collectively, people living in eKhenana have come up with a clean-up campaign to remove waste from the river in order to minimise flood damage to communal gardens. Likewise, new farming methods were introduced in which communal gardens were remodelled from old forms of cropping to use high beds instead so as to minimise flood damage To adapt to changing weather patterns, a new vegetable cropping cycle was established by delaying the farming season. Meanwhile, a fundraising event was launched to raise funds for rebuilding a chicken kraal using concrete, strong iron, and wood. In 2023, a solar-energy project was initiated as a means of migrating the commune to safer and more environmentally-friendly modes of energy generation.

During the observation of these strategies for resilience, it was noted that most of them were more focused on the individual than the collective level. This does not mean that these strategies are any less effective, but rather that they are less than political in their objectives. In other words, they aim to reduce climate change's impact on residents' lives, but not necessarily to change the underlying economic and political systems that facilitate it.

Another evident benefit of the struggle was the redefinition of occupation as a space for women's political awakening. It was observed that the mobilisation of women became a class and a politicisation of their struggles. Some of these achievements were described by Zukiswa Joja (49): 'The Landless Workers Movement of Brazil (MST)

took some comrades there and they learned about socialism and communism.' As a result, the Abahlali baseMjondolo woman's branch within the occupation was revived, championing women's struggles and mobilising women in response to emergent issues. Clearly, this also demonstrates Abahlali's success in gaining traction and forging relations beyond national borders with like-minded social movements, such as MST, which are inspired by Marxism and seek to fight for a just redistribution of wealth and the means of production.

Moreover, Abahlali adopted the new slogan of 'socialism or death', which calls for the abolition of private ownership of land and individualistic ways of life. To date, everything is done as a community, and profitable projects in the area are owned collectively by the community. Thus, women in this occupation are guaranteed an equal share of profits, which they can use to mitigate the impact of climatic extremes, for example by sourcing alternative forms of energy.
So, more and more initiatives are opening avenues for women's voices and political activities within the discourse on climate change, shifting the role of women in the process.

Conclusion

This article has explored the challenges facing women occupiers in South African urban spaces and elucidated them in ways that go beyond conventional socio-economic narratives. It shows that women cannot be expected to act as shock absorbers in the face of devastating crises like Covid-19 and flooding and yet do so without means. The fight against climate shocks requires economic resources, which is why the question of climate struggles in urban spaces should not be a void of socio-economic discussion of ownership.
If women like Babazile are to create resilient strategies in the face of climate shocks, it is necessary to reform underlying gendered political economic structures. This article has highlighted some of the experiences of women occupiers and the strategies of theirs that are revolutionising women's role in climate justice movements.

Nduduzo Majozi is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Poverty, Land & Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape.

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