

# Review Essay: *On Their Own: Women, Urbanization, and the Right to the City in South Africa*

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## Book Under Review

Allison Goebal. *On Their Own: Women, Urbanization, and the Right to the City in South Africa*. Montréal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 242 pp.

In *On Their Own: Women, Urbanization and the Right to the City in South Africa*, Allison Goebal (2015) insightfully draws on the lived narratives of low-income, urban African women in post-apartheid South Africa to argue that women's experiences of urbanization and their capabilities and agencies to exploit the opportunities which urban life has to offer are intricately bound to the intersectionality of race, class and gender. Her analysis of Black African women's livelihoods "from the largest action of the global economy, to the state and its actors, to the intimate lives of men and women" (147) provides a crucial and comprehensive examination of a little-studied group. However, the limited discussion of the impact of care work on women's experience of justice in the city leads Goebal to neglect a crucial dimension of gendered differences in the urban livelihoods of African women.

Injecting Iris Marion Young's (1990) "politics of difference" and a gendered lens into the "right to the city" literature, Goebal's work critically challenges a Lefebvrian notion of the concept which lacks consideration of the patriarchal, cultural, national, and ethnic dimensions of power relations. Rather than assuming a "homogeneous public" in her discussion of justice for the poor, Goebal, in the first two chapters of her work, illuminates the interaction of women's lived histories, socio-economic status, generation, race, class, and gender with their social, economic, political, and environmental circumstances to redefine their inclusivity and mark new boundaries of marginalization for African women in the city.

Goebal's work is well supported, weaving together rich ethnographic data from a case study of the city of Pietermaritzburg over the period of ten years with detailed evidence of national level survey research and the broader literature on South African history, policies, politics, urban theories, and gender studies. Her work is all-encompassing, synthesizing a broad range of concepts in the "right to the city" literature. For example, she discusses Susan S. Fainstein's (2010)

concepts of diversity, equity, and democracy in the state's response to South Africa's housing policies in Chapter Three and David Harvey's (1996) redistributive paradigm in South Africa's comprehensive social protection program in Chapter Four.

Albeit recognizing the contribution of policies to women's constitutional rights to the city, Goebal aligns with Ruth Fincher and Kurt Iveson's (2012) perspective that the translation of philosophical conceptualizations of justice in policies into empirical outcomes "on the ground" is often far from ideal (234). In Chapters Four and Five, Goebal provides a multi-dimensional understanding of women's rights which expands beyond the institutional and public domains, drawing attention to the differential socio-cultural status of women which hinders their enactment of a right to the city through their everyday participation in both the private and public spheres of production and reproduction.

Through a clever adaption of Henri Lefebvre's (1991) radical thinking about citizenship into her work, Goebal engages with the concepts of right to appropriate and right to participate in the production of urban space (Harvey 2003; Marcuse 2009; Purcell 2003) to provide an inspiring illustration of a multi-layered citizenship which incorporates the local. In Chapter Six, Goebal gives credit to collectives seeking to practice their "right to the city" through political action on the localized scale, narrating the practice of public protests and strikes as attempts of the marginalized poor to struggle for what Edward W. Soja's (2010) refers to as spatial justice within the geographically uneven development of South Africa, enacted through a long history of apartheid and further perpetuated by pressures of globalization and neoliberalism.

Goebal's feminist standpoint adds an interesting perspective to the social movement literature. Reviewing the secondary literature on social mobilizations in post-apartheid South Africa, she brings to light the gender-biased internal processes of mobilization within social movements which inhibits women from participation in leadership and decision-making. Regrettably, though, a similar strand of analysis was not translated into her own case study of Nthutukoville where women participated in eviction protests and self-help housing through the support of a housing advocacy NGO. Goebal's rich empirics attest to the socio-economic impacts of

housing improvements on women's livelihoods, albeit falling short of demonstrating women's role in the often messy, unfinished, and unending process of enacting a right to housing through insurgent urban citizenship. In particular, she could have further revealed the power dynamics at play in African women's practice of squatting as well as negotiations and challenges made against the political rights to housing through their participation in a NGO-driven self-help housing scheme in Nthutukoville. Perhaps due to her dedicated focus on the "right to the city," Goebal's analysis of housing conditions falls short of responding to Friedrich Engels' (1873) one hundred and fifty year-old housing question. Goebal's preoccupation with the urban spatial aspect of "right to the city" and with questioning the degree to which South African cities reflect the values of redistribution, fairness, and democracy may perhaps explain the limited attention given to care work. The author depicts the lived realities of a majority of her interviewees as female heads of households with multiple generations of dependents under their care. In her conclusion, Goebal singled out care burdens as one of the key factors compromising women's experience of livelihood improvements in terms of gender equitable access to (1) opportunities for personal development, (2) opportunities for economic advancements, (3) housing, and (4) urban services.

African women's experience of urban poverty and marginalization, coupled with the socio-economic impacts of HIV/AIDS on their livelihoods, imply that women often conduct care within the context of their homes and communities. Such non-institutionalized forms of care bring to the fore the possibility that women's care work may be practiced as a situated response to injustice and neglect perpetuated by urban life. Yet, the impact of African women's everyday practices of care on their experience of the 'right to the city' is little explored by Goebal. She could have taken the opportunity to fill in a significant gap in urban theory which explores how an ethic of care may contribute to the practice of ideals of care and justice within urban life (Till 2012). Goebal's work has, however, opened up future opportunities to examine the mundane, unspectacular everyday activities of "doing" care as women's means of contributing to a just city and to question how the inclusion of care into justice in urban theory might impact the fulfilment of women's "right to the city."

Above all, a major contribution of *On Their Own* to the “right to the city” scholarship lies in Goebal’s strong gendered and feminist perspective and how she weaves an intricate connection between (1) individual women’s everyday experiences in both the public and private spheres, (2) local governance activities, (3) city planning and national state governance, and (4) legal and jurisdictional notions of citizenship. Throughout the text, women’s narratives are not only interesting vignettes of experience, but also function as thought-provoking mechanisms used to question, authorize, and resist jurisdictional, state, and institutional processes. To this end, the text lays the groundwork for discussions on the tenacity of African women in transgressing social, economic, political, and environmental challenges presented by urbanization to pursue their “right to the city.” Rather than explicitly elaborating on the impact of women’s care responsibilities on their “right to the city,” the well-documented narratives in the book serves as a quiet call for widening imaginations of care ethics in the search for a just city.

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