

Preferred citation

Khan M, Rusczyk HA, Rahman F and Huq S. (2021) Epistemological Freedom: Decolonising knowledge through activating co-learning and co-production, *Disaster Prevention and Management, Special Issue on Decolonization of Knowledge*  
doi.org/10.1108/DPM-03-2021-0070

## **Epistemological Freedom: Activating co-learning and co-production to decolonise knowledge production**

### **Abstract**

This viewpoint challenges the limitations of traditional systems of knowledge production that are embedded in disaster research and climate change research studies. We argue that knowledge production in research processes conforms to colonialist thinking or west-inspired approaches. Such a system often results in the omission of crucial information due to a lack of wider inclusion and diversity of alternative forms of knowledge. In our viewpoint, we argue for epistemological freedom - the incorporation of multiplicity when it comes to knowledge production. Firstly, we provide a brief literature review on the concepts of decolonisation of knowledge and a definition of epistemological freedom. Secondly, the viewpoint proposes to decolonise knowledge through activating co-learning and co-production. We suggest to specifically decolonise gendered roles prevalent within knowledge production processes. Lastly, we emphasise the need for pluralism in disaster and climate change research studies, and research processes in general, and the opportunities offered by the current COVID-19 pandemic to value different forms of knowledge and praxis.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation of knowledge, co-learning, co-production, epistemological freedom, women-led initiatives, western hegemony

### **Introduction**

While disasters and risks being researched take place mostly in communities of the Global South, representation from people living in these communities in western and English language academic literature is underwhelming. The dominant explanation of this trend is the obvious availability of resources (financial, temporal and material) for western scholars when it comes to academic qualifications and the associated established institutional credibility. The normative direction of knowledge or technology transfer has so far been “North to South”. However, it is being increasingly argued that several lessons have been or can be emulated from the South by the North such as ‘local adaptation initiatives’ (Khan *et al.*, 2020). These initiatives have been a direct result of the lived realities of local communities who face disasters first-hand and have implemented them in varied ways to adapt and survive. It is important to not only acknowledge these sources of knowledge but to value them as equal to knowledge that originates from the North.

The *Disaster Studies Manifesto: Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values* has provided a new academic opening to address some of these power imbalances (Gaillard *et al.*, 2019). The manifesto calls for a rethinking of research agendas, methods and allocation of resources. The manifesto elaborates concerns about the status quo and proposes a vision for the future we collectively desire. Furthermore, it suggests pathways towards such a future and invites

collective contribution to a disasters studies field that will be more inclusive, diverse and collaborative.

This special issue by DPM in support of the *Disaster Studies Manifesto* aims to challenge the dominant model of knowledge production which is heavily influenced by western scholarship. It brings to the forefront the cultural deficit that is prevalent in disaster research studies. The continued lack of effective, if not equal, involvement of community members and local researchers may lead to key information being overlooked in academic scholarship. Furthermore, the special issue argues that research practices and strategies are often derived from a traditional, elitist culture where knowledge is held and disseminated by a privileged few. The modus operandi to follow a specific structure in terms of writing, use of vernacular language and research practices, is predominantly west-inspired. Researchers are often motivated by agendas such as access to funding, political interest of the day and publishing opportunities to pursue research studies in a particular manner. Thus, leaving little to no room for local involvement in the academic knowledge production or even for incorporation of alternative forms of knowledge acquisition. In cases where local participation is included, it is often at a superficial level. However, it is also important to acknowledge efforts from the disaster risk reduction field that have attempted to create awareness of the value of indigenous knowledge alongside western “scientific knowledge” (for example please see Mercer et al, 2010; O’Brien and O’Keefe, 2013).

In light of the above, this DPM issue seeks to contribute to a future where local knowledge from communities is not only acknowledged but valued and trusted, and the ability of such communities to provide vital information in a multitude of forms is recognised. Local leaders should lead and co-lead disaster research and climate research studies, and research studies in general, in partnership with external researchers[1]. Due to the fact that local community members are equipped with contextual coping, mitigation and adaptation strategies, and knowledge, their voices must be prioritised and amplified through dialogue and partnership. For more insights into current discussions please see the podcast series *Disasters: Deconstructed* created by Ksenia Chmutina and Jason Von Meding (2019-2021).

Our contribution is framed as a viewpoint rather than a conventional academic paper with a traditional literature review and methods section. This commentary represents our collective opinion on how decolonisation could be envisioned to make academic space for a much larger group of actors, all of whom possess valuable knowledge that can be shared with scholars, practitioners and policy makers locally, nationally and internationally. Our individual and collective positionality matters to our contribution. Between the four of us, we have a wide range of experiences and decades of knowledge gained in working and researching disasters, climate change, development, and the everyday lived experiences of rural and urban residents in a range of countries. We have an interdisciplinarity set of skills from engineering to human geography to establishing a sustainable textiles business. Two of us are older and the others are younger in age. We have struggled with presenting empirical work in forms that western academia will accept, all the while knowing that there is so much knowledge that is not accepted or valued because the format was not the conventionally accepted form, the English utilised was not perfect or the key concepts utilised are not in vogue at the moment.

Our viewpoint is organised in the following manner: firstly, it provides a brief literature review on the concepts of decolonisation of knowledge and epistemological freedom; secondly, the viewpoint proposes to decolonise knowledge production through activating co-learning and co-production. We suggest to specifically decolonise gendered roles prevalent within

knowledge production process in disaster as well as climate change research as the two can be argued to mutually reinforce each other now and in the future. In the discussion section, we reflect on the proposed practices and address some of the challenges in their attainment. Finally, we conclude our arguments by emphasising the need for pluralism in disaster and climate research studies, and research processes in general, and the opportunities offered by the COVID-19 pandemic to value different forms of knowledge and praxis.

### **Origins and definition of decolonisation of knowledge**

Historically, practices of knowledge production and its universal credibility have been disproportionately attributed to western hegemony. The western system of knowledge acquisition was deemed superior, which led to the exclusion and marginalisation of all other knowledge systems (Said, 1978). Such epistemological colonisation paved the way for global knowledge production and its methodological approaches to be derived from a singular form of origin - the west. The lack of pluralism in knowledge production gives rise to a rather narrow narrative which is based on western experiences and schools of thought. Suppression of some knowledge over others is endangering collective social progress now and in the future.

Scholars such as Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis (2000), and Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) put forward arguments about the trajectory of the western hegemony in knowledge production, and epistemological decolonisation in the twenty-first century, respectively. In *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America*, Quijano and Ennis (2000) refer to the universality of a singular knowledge production as “Eurocentrism”. They argue:

“The intellectual conceptualization of the process of modernity produced a perspective of knowledge and a mode of producing knowledge that gives a very tight account of the character of the global model of power: colonial/modern, capitalist, and Eurocentered. This perspective and concrete mode of producing knowledge is Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism is, as used here, the name of a perspective of knowledge whose systematic formation began in western Europe before the middle of the seventeenth century, although some of its roots are, without doubt, much older” (Quijano and Ennis, 2000, p. 549).

They further add:

“In other words, the model of power based on coloniality also involved a cognitive model, a new perspective of knowledge within which non-Europe was the past, and because of that inferior, if not always primitive” (Quijano and Ennis, 2000, p. 552).

On decolonisation, Ndlovu-Gatsheni defines epistemological freedom as:

“Epistemic freedom is fundamentally about the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism. [...] Epistemic freedom is much broader and deeper. It speaks to cognitive justice; it draws our attention to the content of what it is that we are free to express and on whose terms. [...] Epistemic freedom is about democratising ‘knowledge’ from its current rendition in the singular into its plural known as ‘knowledges’. It is also ranged against overrepresentation of Eurocentric thought in

knowledge, social theory, and education. Epistemic freedom is foundational in the broader decolonisation struggle because it enables the emergence of critical decolonial consciousness” (2018, p. 17-18).

Furthermore, Ndlovu-Gatsheni states that despite the fact that “political, economic, cultural and epistemological decolonisation were and are always inextricably intertwined”, political sovereignty was a practical and logical preference against colonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, p. 18). Hence, addressing the issue of colonisation of knowledge production has been tremendously delayed, if not intentionally overlooked.

According to Andraos (2012), colonialism is often perceived from the lenses of political, economic and military systems. Cultural, social and knowledge colonisation delve deeper and are more long-lasting. They are difficult to extricate as they are hard to identify. Andraos refers to the author, Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s meaning of coloniality which is separate from colonialism, in relation to knowledge:

“Coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration. Thus, coloniality survived colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday” (Andraos, 2012, p. 8).

In her recent paper, Priyamvada Gopal (2021) defines decolonisation as the:

“process which signifies the end of rule by a foreign power and the recuperation and/or formation of an ‘independent’ entity usually a nation-state, through a process often referred to as a ‘transfer of power’” (p. 881).

In this paper, we define decolonisation of knowledge as:

An active, conscious and deliberate practice in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, which recognises the plurality and/or diversity of knowledge bases across the world, with an emphasis on knowledge rooted in grassroots communities, that is effectively integrated in both the acquisition and production of knowledge.

In our view, a notable paradigm shift is required in both the acquisition and production of knowledge that constitutes the following: diversity of voices; incorporation of local knowledge; co-production of knowledge between local and non-local researchers and traditional and non-traditional or academic and non-academic knowledge creators. Decolonisation of knowledge is the dismissal of a universal knowledge system that has been historically dominated by the west, and the legitimisation of non-western knowledge systems. Ultimately, the aim is to achieve a just knowledge space where a multitude of forms of knowledge production are equally valued.

The following section of the paper proposes activating two practices, co-learning and co-production, in order to further decolonise knowledge in disaster research studies and the related field of climate change adaptation and mitigation.

### **Activating co-learning: Decolonising the classroom model**

Ever since the world has been gripped by the paralysing pandemic from March 2020, we have witnessed the renewed and pressing need to include diverse forms of knowledge to inform decision-making and an inclusive method of teaching that no longer remains in the confines of the traditional classroom. The first practice we argue for is co-learning. In a series of lectures, Achille Mbembe argues (in the African context) that institutions have been teaching “obsolete forms of knowledge with obsolete pedagogies” and discussed the reinvention of the classroom without walls (Mbembe, 2015).

According to Mbembe, universities have become a marketplace that offers education as a product to its customers: students. They operate largely as a hierarchical authority, emphasising careful attention on various metrics such as “grading, accountancy, merits, penalties” and so on. It has become increasingly important to steer education away from becoming yet another neoliberal commodity, and to investigate and implement alternative practices of operation of universities as knowledge providers. The current system is crowded with the achievement of publications, courses on offer, number of students and the “quantitative measures of teaching excellence” (Mbembe, 2015). He further argues, “Excellence itself has been reduced to statistical accuracy” (Mbembe, 2015). An achievement-oriented focus may browbeat researchers to emphasise quantitative measures of success (number of publications in particularly prestigious journals) over qualitative measures (inclusive research practices) when conducting their studies.

Globally, knowledge transfers, be it in a classroom or in communities that are vulnerable to crises, have mostly been unidirectional and top-down, whereby teachers or experts teach or train students or community members, respectively. Given that society has evolved from being dominantly industry-based to becoming more geographically mobile and technologically advanced, it can be argued that the current dominant education system has failed to adapt to these changes (Bates, 2018). The traditional education system plays an integral role in the production of valued forms of knowledge. The unidirectional and the top-down approach are prevalent when it comes to research studies as well. Thus, it is vital that the system is challenged on the grounds of obsolescence. The question is, how? In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1992) proposes that decolonisation is not only about rejecting the western hegemony but about *re-centering*. In the context of Africa, he puts forward the notion that:

“[...]Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literature, things must be seen from the African perspective” (p. 94).

Wa Thiong’o suggests that education or knowledge attainment should emanate from the knowledge of one’s own immediate surroundings, which will form the basis of one’s pursuit of knowledge about the world. Hence, to decolonise knowledge production in disaster and climate research studies, and research processes in general, a system of co-learning, whereby knowledge is produced through respect, mutual learning, information exchange and a bidirectional information flow between local communities and (external) researchers. This may

lead to creating a culture of trust and inclusion, and resulting in a more nuanced knowledge production.

Mbembe and wa Thiong'o's extensive work on decolonisation of the university classroom and knowledge, respectively, can be used theoretically to promote inclusion, integration and co-learning in research studies. Future academics need to be equipped to think in a new way whereby they learn to value the insights from local grassroots leaders and non-academic individuals and include them as equals in the research process. A recommendation to decolonise the university classroom, would be for academic institutions to implement initiatives or programmes that lead to knowledge exchange between local community leaders, industry practitioners and academic researchers, and foster a culture of co-learning. This may lead to a convergence of diverse information and allow for availability and redistribution of different kinds of knowledge (Mbembe, 2015).

### **Activating co-production: Decolonising gendered roles in knowledge production**

The second practice (co-production) to decolonise knowledge creation discussed in our viewpoint has been inspired by a recent non-conventional form of academic knowledge production carried out through story-telling. Voices from the Frontline (VFL)[3] by International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) and Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), in partnership with Global Resilience Partnership (GRP) is a global project that began documenting and sharing community resilience stories during COVID-19 from across the world since June 2021. These forms of knowledge production offer valuable lessons from those who have been on the frontline of the pandemic, often resorting to collective and community-based resilience and adaptation strategies.

In their paper, Albert Norström and colleagues gathered experiences and perspectives of leading researchers and practitioners in the context of sustainability research, and collectively defined knowledge co-production as an:

“Iterative and collaborative processes involving diverse types of expertise, knowledge and actors to produce context-specific knowledge and pathways towards a sustainable future” (2020, p. 183).

This definition is useful in considering the varied forms of expertise, knowledge and pathways being emphasised to implement a collective future. They argue that successful knowledge co-production is more likely to occur, if it adheres to four principles: it is *context-based* whereby there is an understanding of how a challenge emerged, such as from social, economic and ecological frames, and the different needs of those affected by it; the process is *pluralistic*, one that recognises a range of perspectives, knowledge and expertise; is *goal-oriented* whereby goals of the research are clearly defined and shared; and finally, *interactive*, which allows for ongoing learning, active engagement and frequent interactions among diverse actors. While we agree with their four principles, the conceptual framing for the principles once again appears to be from the Global North. In our opinion, challenges and crises should strongly reflect perspectives of those who are most impacted by them, and this requires meaningful participation arguably through collaboration and recognition. However, often times it can be quite laborious to clearly define and mutually set goals in co-production involving multiple actors. Inevitably, there will be tensions and compromises that need to be addressed and negotiated. Trust, respect and valuing each other's views are essential.

In our viewpoint's section on activating co-production, we decided to emphasise grassroots women's role during crises and in knowledge production. Two stories from the VFL project are highlighted, and they represent women-led initiatives from two different countries from the Global South – India and Bangladesh. The COVID-19 pandemic is only the most recent example of collective acts of solidarity led by women in adaptation and mitigation, in times of disaster and crises. Through the VFL project, more stories of women-led initiatives came to the spotlight. As the world prepared for a global pandemic and devised plans for protection measures, grassroots women were able to respond with agility due to their knowledge about their communities and the local environment, the social capital that they built over the years, the networks they had developed with other women and through a strong and deeply embedded instinct of care provision (Ruszczuk and Khan, 2020).

Moreover, it can be argued that the role of local women-led organisations and initiatives in communities across the globe during COVID-19 is an evident indicator of women's leadership during crises. Despite facing harsh realities such as gender-based violence and discrimination, women, whether in rural or urban settings, have risen to the challenge repeatedly during the pandemic, to support not only their families, but also their communities. However, in spite of their notable and major contribution to crisis management, grassroots women lack recognition, are often absent in policy forums and frequently categorised under the 'vulnerable group' in addition to children, the elderly and other groups considered 'at risk'. Such categorisation is dismissive towards women, and limits their credibility as agents of social change, disregards their key contributions, and places "grassroots women-led scalable solutions in policymakers' blind spot" (Patel and Gupta, 2020, np). These same blind spots limit western academic engagement with grassroots women-led organisations in the creation of conventional academic knowledge. We specifically focus on grassroots women's contribution to knowledge production in this section in order to shine a brighter light on their creative and essential agency during crisis, despite the limitations that surround their daily lives in conservative societies in countries such as India and Bangladesh.

### **Case I: Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, India**

Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) works to organise and empower women in poor and vulnerable communities in India to improve their living conditions. Over the past 25 years, MHT has developed Community Action Groups (CAG) of women leaders who respond to the needs of their communities (Diwakar and Udhani, 2020). MHT recognises that women's leadership is a catalyst for developing welfare services required by such communities and works to build their capacities to exercise their rights and take ownership within their communities.

When India imposed a national lockdown in March 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19, it had various implications. The migrant community was one of the most affected communities in the country; approximately 40 million[2] migrants lost their jobs, were forced to give up their homes due to their inability to pay rent and were unable to return to their villages as transport services across the country were suspended. As the events unfolded, MHT mobilised its CAG leaders to undertake a rapid needs assessment of the migrants, identified as one of the most at-risk groups during the pandemic, and find ways to respond to this evolving migrant crisis.

Groups of 12-25 women participated in local governance by creating awareness, coordinating with government officials, and partnering with various stakeholders to ensure service delivery.

In the months following the initial lockdown, the women leaders worked to: arrange food and transport; ensure that the migrants who were housed by the government in public schools in Delhi were sufficiently informed about the crisis; and that their basic needs were met (Diwakar and Udhani, 2020).

The CAG women leaders showed initiative and agency in responding to the migrant crisis through identifying and maintaining a database of the most vulnerable and fostering relationships with local authorities which enabled them to provide support to their respective community members, such as arranging transport services so that migrants could return back to their villages. It is important to mention that through social capital that was cultivated among the CAG leaders within the MHT network as well as the communities they belonged to, these women were able to coordinate, cooperate and collaborate with each other throughout the mission. The knowledge produced by the CAG women leaders is tremendous. They should be invited to coproduce knowledge in the policy sphere and in academic knowledge outputs.

### **Case II: Sheuly Ishrat, Bangladesh**

In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, Sheuly Ishrat single-handedly led the initiative to extend support to the informal settlers in her neighbourhood, who lost their jobs and were facing food insecurity due to the ongoing pandemic. The informal settlement houses 100 families comprising of multiple family members, with approximately 320 residents. According to Ishrat, “Many of the women living in the settlement are domestic helpers and have lost their jobs because outsiders are restricted from entering private houses for fear of contagion”.

After listening intently to the individual stories of hardships and consulting with the informal settlers, Ishrat mobilised resources including funds, to provide food for the families living in the settlement. Realising the uncertainties of reliance on ad hoc funding and food donations, she built a make-shift community garden and kitchen in the empty spaces available in the neighbourhood. Ishrat involved the settlers in growing and cooking the food, which not only catered to the issue of food insecurity but also allowed them to continue to be productive members of society during the pandemic induced lockdown (Khan, 2020).

There are numerous women-led, community-based initiatives such as the above that go unrecognised and unrecorded in academic outputs and policy discourses. A diverse body of information surrounding resilience and responses to crisis and disaster management must be integrated into the production of knowledge. Women’s efforts, especially in grassroots communities continue to remain hidden or overlooked as they may not be perceived as ground-breaking but as simple, everyday solutions. However, such simple responses not only provide instant relief but also contribute to long-lasting solutions in times of crisis.

### **Discussion**

Decolonisation of knowledge is a concept that has been spurred by multiple movements challenging the fragmented yet very much prevalent remnants of the world’s colonial history. According to Hira (2017), “[...] Decolonising knowledge can be traced to resistance against colonialism from the very start in 1492”. JC Gaillard (2019) further provides signposting for us to consider. He suggests a research agenda in the coming decades which builds on the importance of local researchers analysing local interpretations of disasters or crises which utilise local epistemologies that resist the hegemony of western scholarship.



In our viewpoint, we argue for epistemological freedom - the incorporation of multiplicity when it comes to knowledge production. We then suggest to specifically decolonise gendered roles prevalent within knowledge production process in disaster research and climate research studies, and extend it to research studies in general. As per an earlier definition provided in this paper, we propose for epistemological freedom through a careful consideration of factors such as inclusion, diversity and equal representation to allow for knowledge pluralism to inform research studies.

The viewpoint explores two practices to decolonise knowledge production: co-learning and co-production. The two practices are not mutually exclusive, and it may be argued that integration of the practices can provide the best possible results. It must be noted that undoubtedly there are countless other practices of people and groups acquiring and producing knowledge that are not recognised. Our viewpoint only provides examples from the pandemic and refers to a brief literature review. However, it is clear that to achieve decolonisation in the production of knowledge and epistemological freedom in research studies, diverse participation in the research process is key.

An important aspect in the knowledge production process that warrants critical attention is learning. Learning is activated and is a crucial component when collaboration takes place between local grassroots leaders and external researchers. It is set in a cyclical motion, where each participant learns from the other as each of them bring specific knowledge to the research process that the other may be unaware of. It is here that the creative role of the external (often western) researcher shines through. The researcher can ask pivotal questions, attempt to incorporate a range of views and information sources, and strive to present the emerging insights in a form that is deemed valuable to all relevant stakeholders.

Research processes are cumbersome in nature. The normative and conventional procedures in research studies often act as barriers to diverse participation. Different academic fields set varying degrees of guidelines and lack harmony, which further prevents inclusion of non-academic individuals due to their unfamiliarity with research terminology as well as methodology. In order to democratise academic knowledge production, the process must remove structural rigidity and introduce more flexibility.

Other significant barriers to implementing systems that effectively decolonise knowledge production and truly reflect epistemological freedom are, but not limited to, cultural and linguistic barriers. To elaborate, in order to implement co-learning and co-production processes, all participants must be able to communicate efficaciously. However, differences encountered must not prevent external researchers from exploring practices to navigate their way into collaboration. As a matter of fact, in order to inculcate pluralism in knowledge production, language diversity must be accounted for and non-English research studies must be included and promoted. A detailed discussion of barriers and ways to overcome them is beyond the scope of this viewpoint.

Jon Harle's (2021) intervention provides a brief but thorough assessment of the necessity to create more equitable ways to assess research and knowledge. Drawing on examples from Uganda and Mexico, he argues that a fundamental shift is necessary, whereby the value of research and the institutions producing knowledge should be determined by the contextual provisions of the knowledge. Erika Kraemer-Mbula and colleagues' (2020) book is a valuable resource pushing the debate about research excellence - what is 'excellent' science and for whom is it excellent. They suggest science in the Global South is expected to do more than

just support research excellence according to journal metrics – it contributes to addressing pressing problems. Further research can be carried out to investigate challenges of decolonisation of knowledge, how to overcome them and how to conduct quantitative analysis to determine the efficacy of the practices identified.

The VFL initiative explores self-organised community approaches that have been utilised during the pandemic to support the most vulnerable. There are a few key messages that are emerging from the stories being collected and published from communities across the world. The messages are interconnected and are collectively forming the basis of the argument that local women’s leadership in community-based initiatives warrant a crucial role in academic knowledge co-production. The knowledge created by grassroots women from local communities provided are based on stories produced in real time during the pandemic. We argue that they are valuable and call for the same form of respect that traditional forms of academic knowledge production have received in the past. How to give non-traditional academic forms of knowledge production equal footing or value is the question we must collectively work through in the immediate future.

Efforts to decolonise narratives that do not consider gender, racial and socioeconomically diverse epistemologies must take precedence. A solution to ensure that grassroots women’s voices are being heard is to include them in key positions in research studies, thereby incorporating their insights, highlighting their contribution and thus helping to establish their credibility within the research community and beyond. Furthermore, it is especially recommended that the initiatives are documented and form an integral part of the production of disaster and climate change research studies. Local women from grassroots organisations and external researchers can participate in the co-production of knowledge based on their respective expertise. Despite the essential role they play in building resilience during crises, women remain underrepresented in published disaster and climate change studies. It is important to truly recognise women’s contribution as active and equal agents in society, question their inclusion in the vulnerable category and engage them in partnership and dialogue to produce knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Earlier in this viewpoint, we defined decolonisation of knowledge as:

An active, conscious and deliberate practice in the pursuit of truth and knowledge, which recognises the plurality and/or diversity of knowledge bases across the world, with an emphasis on knowledge rooted in grassroots communities, that is effectively integrated in both the acquisition and production of knowledge.

During the pandemic, no access to “the field” required many researchers to reassess their pre-COVID-19 ways of conducting academic research. This meant rethinking methodological approaches, how to collect “data”, what is considered valid forms of knowledge production and who is involved in the research process.

The lack of physical presence of western researchers in the Global South during COVID-19 can be regarded as an opportunity to decolonise traditional knowledge production methods. This situation allowed local communities to own their narratives and share without perceived judgment and any unintended influence, which resulted in raw honesty, removal of filters and a focus on the true nature of the message that meaningfully represent the perspective of those

who are impacted disproportionately during crises. It is recommended that external researchers engage and invest more actively and resolutely in learning about community stories of resilience and self-organised management practices during disasters and crises to seek out partnerships and conduct research studies accordingly. Co-learning and co-production address the aforementioned features, and allow for such a methodology to be undertaken, and may help to create transparency and democracy in research processes now and into the future.

Based on the case studies presented we argue that disaster research and climate change studies, and research studies in general may explore methods that include diversity and pluralism in knowledge production through participation and inclusion. We especially emphasise on recognising grassroots women-led initiatives as co-producers of knowledge, which often act as first responders during crises in communities. The pandemic has unveiled a gateway to a new world, one that values diverse forms of knowledge and praxis – the time is now.

As Arundhati Roy poignantly pens:

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (Roy, 2020, np).

Let us take this opportunity provided by the pandemic to decolonise knowledge production processes together, through co-learning and co-production.

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[1] Researchers who are not native to the community under investigation.

[2]<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/lockdown-in-india-has-impacted-40-million-internal-migrants-world-bank/articleshow/75311966.cms>

[3] <http://www.icccad.net/voicesfromthefrontline/>

## **Acknowledgements**

Hanna Ruszczuk would like to acknowledge the support she received from the 'Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice (GRRIPP) - Networking Plus Partnering for Resilience'. She utilised some of her GRRIPP allocated time to co-develop and co-write this paper during 2020 - 2021. The UKRI Collective Fund award 'Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice (GRRIPP) - Networking Plus Partnering for Resilience' is funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund.

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