

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the *Slice of MIT* Podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

GABRIELLE Hello, this is Gabby.

KRUKS-WISNER:

JOE Hey, Gabby. It's Joe at MIT.

MCGONEGAL:

KRUKS-WISNER: How are you?

MCGONEGAL: Good. Thanks for taking the call and chatting about the book.

KRUKS-WISNER: It's my pleasure.

MCGONEGAL: I've got a little introduction. Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner is an MCP class of '06, and a PhD class of '13 from MIT, and is an Assistant Professor of Politics and Global Studies at the University of Virginia. Her book is *Claiming the State: Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India*, and it was published August 2018 by Cambridge University Press. Tell us about how you first became interested in the study of Rajasthan, India, and Indian citizens' pursuit of social welfare.

KRUKS-WISNER: The way that I got interested in this question, this puzzle, about how ordinary people, and in particular, poor people, engage the state and demand goods and services and entitlements from the state on a day-to-day basis actually took shape not in Rajasthan, but in a totally different context also in India, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. And at the time, South India, and in particular, the state of Tamil Nadu, was very affected. I had a chance to spend a little bit of time working there after the tsunami with the NGO Oxfam America.

And we were researching what people called the "Second Tsunami," which was a big wave of aid, both domestic and international aid, that was sort of rushing into the affected fishing villages. It was really interesting to me, being on the ground, to see how different people in affected villages were accessing aid, and assistance, and resources in really different ways. So they were similarly poor people. They were similarly affected by the disaster of the tsunami. And yet, they were navigating their local landscape and seeking assistance and resources in really different ways.

Some were turning to elected local officials. Some were trading to NGOs. Some were turning to traditional local councils that were caste-based, or based around traditional occupations. And so this is really fascinating. Why were people navigating their way to resources in such different ways?

So that's where the question came from. I then had the chance a few years later to do some research up in Rajasthan, which is very far away from the Southern Indian context, but has a similar set of dynamics, where I noted that in rural Rajasthani villages which are not faced by a physical disaster like a tsunami, but are faced with the more day-to-day, quotidian disaster of being poor and under-served, there were similar patterns. Where different individuals, similarly poor individuals living in very similar villages, had very different ways of navigating their way to the local state, and to resources and to entitlements. And that was puzzling to me. There was nothing I'd read in the political science literature that could explain to me why similarly-situated people who lived under the same kind of structural and material conditions would have such different approaches to their local governments, and such different strategies when it came to claiming the resources that they needed.

MCGONEGAL: And in Rajasthan, you have not-- it's not the biggest state in India. It's not the smallest, it's not the poorest, necessarily. I guess as a researcher, it's right in the middle, which is good.

KRUKS-WISNER: Yeah, right. Rajasthan is interesting, because it is-- as you said, it's not the biggest. It's not the smallest. It is interesting because it is part of what's referred to as India's "Poverty Belt". It's sort of the Hindu-speaking northern belt that runs across the north of India, where there are a series of states where poverty is generally concentrated in India.

Yet, among those "poverty belt" states, Rajasthan is sort of in the middle. It's not the richest, and it's not the poorest among those "poverty belt" states. And so you're able to examine conditions of poverty, and the strategies of the poor and of local governments in responding to conditions of poverty, but under median conditions, which is an interesting, and appropriate, and important environment. To be in the wealthiest and most developed state would reveal a very different set of conditions. And to be in the absolutely poorest of the poor state would also reveal a very different set of conditions. And so this was a kind of interesting middle ground.

MCGONEGAL: I wonder what insights you have on-- you write that we all have an idea of rural poverty in India. Access to drinking water and education being very limited. But you write that some of

the grandest experiments with treating poverty are also going on. And I wonder what your research-- you observed about some of those. And I know MIT is very involved in some of those.

KRUKS-WISNER: There are some fantastic researchers, a good number of whom are based at MIT or affiliated to MIT, working with the Poverty Action Lab, and a number of other similar organizations that are doing this kind of experimental work. And it's fantastic work. And a lot of it works with governments, with national governments or with state governments, to devise these large-scale schemes, and programs, and interventions that can-- that basically try to figure out how to get resources into the hands of the poor who need them the most.

And to me, one of the missing pieces to that is really the politics of it all. And in particular, the question of citizen engagement, citizen voice, and citizen participation in those large-scale experiments. It's all well and good to devise large-scale programs, and I'll give you a concrete example, like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in India, which guarantees 100 days of work on a government work site to rural households that request it.

There's been a lot of research studying these large interventions. They're incredibly important interventions. There's recent research coming out of the Poverty Action Lab based at MIT that shows that there's been a massive reduction in poverty associated with these kinds of programs. And yet, what we know very little about is what these programs look like from the eyes of citizens, and when and why citizens engage these problems and these programs. How much do citizens actually know about them.

And so these questions that I tackle in my book about citizens' own sense of entitlement, citizens' own aspirations towards the state, what do they think they are due, what kinds of entitlements and benefits will they actually seek? What are their strategies that they employ when these large-scale governmental programs go awry? What do they do in the face of local corruption, or malfeasance, or poor administration?

And so trying to understand the bottom-up story from the citizens' perspective of how citizens themselves are engaging these large-scale experimental programs, I think, is a really important frontier, and kind of a black box we don't understand enough about when we think about the administration of these large-scale programs, largely from the governmental side. We then need to understand from the citizens' perspective what they look like, and how they're experienced from the bottom-up. And that's part of what I'm trying to do in this book *In*

Claiming the State, is trying to map out the perceptions of the state, the understandings of the state, the engagement of the state. Is it seen and experienced from the bottom up to the eyes, and lives, and livelihood of citizens themselves?

So that's sort of an answer to the first part of your question. The second part that you asked me is a really important question. You asked did I feel hesitancy in my researcher role as an observer and recorder of poverty.

And I guess I can answer that in two ways. The first is to say what I was really researching and recording was not just poverty, but the enormous level of organization, and activity, and savvy sophistication that exists among the rural poor in Rajasthan who are not passively sitting and waiting for programs, and goods, and services, to be delivered to them, but rather are claiming the state.

That's the title of my book. And who are really actively participating and organizing themselves, often in very small, very quotidian ways, that are not about big protests, and big social movements, and big barricades, and big elections. But rather, much smaller quotidian things that we miss, and that fall below the radar screen. Particularly in political science, where we don't necessarily study these smaller, more day-to-day acts of participation.

And so I [INAUDIBLE] saw my role as recording, and observing, and reflecting on, and analyzing active participation of the poor. So not just simply recording poverty, but recording how the poor are responding actively to their own conditions, and trying to improve their own lives and livelihoods.

MCGONEGAL: You see research like that as complementary to those wide-scale efforts to alleviate poverty, and a necessary missing piece right now?

KRUKS-WISNER: Absolutely, absolutely. I think those large-scale, more experimental efforts to alleviate poverty, or to address certain components of poverty, many of which are running through governments, and particularly in the Indian context, the state governments, or through national [INAUDIBLE] government schemes and programs, are an essential part of the landscape when we think about poverty alleviation.

But if we don't tackle the flip-side of that question, which is about how citizens are perceiving, understanding, engaging, and seeking to actually access these programs, we're not understanding the demand side of the puzzle if we're only studying the supply side. And that's

where I see my book and research agenda complementing that other large agenda.

MCGONEGAL: You've got a celebration in here, and a spotlighting and amplifying of the citizens doing some of the best claiming of the state. You start off with Shandiby, if I'm pronouncing that correctly.

Shandiby, mhm.

MCGONEGAL: Shandiby, tell us about her. And you open the book, really, chapter 1, first paragraph, with shining a light on her.

KRUKS-WISNER: Shandiby was a woman-- the name is, of course, made up to protect her anonymity. But she's a woman that I met at an NGO training center in Rajasthan, and had a chance to speak with her for some time. And one of the really striking things about her, she was a poor woman, in terms of income, poverty. She was poorly educated. She was functionally illiterate.

She came from a scheduled tribe, which in India is one of the lowest statuses, lowest economic groups, which have traditionally had a very marginalized position in society and in politics. In terms of the sort of priors that one would have from the broader political science literature about the kinds of citizens who should be best equipped and most likely to be active participants, and to know-- to actively and effectively engage the political system, she was not a likely suspect.

And yet, here was this woman who, again, functionally illiterate, from a poor background, who was incredibly articulate about her relationship to local government and her relationship to local officials. Incredibly confident, and had around her neck a mobile phone on a cord. And she was showing people how she had the phone numbers for different officials, district-level officials and village-level officials, on speed dial on her phone, so that she could call them to complain about issues, both on her behalf, and on the behalf of other community members.

And so she had become this very active play-maker, where a lot of the scholarship and literature predicts that she's precisely the kind of person would not be so active. And so that was intriguing, and exciting, and puzzling, and was sort of an entry point for me in trying to think about what we're missing when we make blanket statements about the behavior of "the poor", quote unquote, at large, without trying to understand the enormous variation in how different kinds of people, or differently situated people who are experiencing similar poverty, are responding in different ways to those similar conditions. And that seemed to me like an important puzzle to try to take apart, to try to understand this enormous variegation among the

poor, and whether, and how, and why they're engaging the state.

MCGONEGAL: You surveyed hundreds of citizens in 105 villages across Rajasthan in Northern India. And like Shandiby, you do note in-- I think it's in one of your appendices, that women were more likely to refuse to be surveyed and interviewed about their claims on the state, and some bias because of that, some gender bias.

KRUKS-WISNER: Mhm, mhm.

MCGONEGAL: Why do you think women were more likely to refuse to be surveyed?

KRUKS-WISNER: Oh, I think there's many, many reasons. So one of the key findings of the book and of the research, and this is no surprise to anyone who has spent some time on the ground in rural India, is that rural women in general were participating less in many activities. And so they were participating less in making claims on the state and in their political participation, and they were also, by extension, participating less in the research, and refusing interviews and surveys at higher rates.

And part of this is because of the set of cultural norms related to normative-- of seclusion and restriction of mobility for women. And so a lot of women in this region practice Purdah, which is the practice of wearing the veil and remaining somewhat secluded in the public sphere. And so it was a big ask for researchers, and foreign researchers and surveyors, many of whom were male, to come to their homes and ask them to open up and share their experiences.

Now that said, a striking number of women did consent to interviews, and did consent to participating in the survey. And again, it's really interesting to look beyond these blanket statements and say, OK, among women who, in this region in India, generally are restricted in terms of their mobility and their participation in the public sphere, again, we see enormous variation. We see some women who are very active, and out participating in the workforce, participating in politics, making claims on the state. And we see other women who are not.

And so it becomes difficult, then, to stand back and say gender is the obstacle. But rather, we have to think about, well, what are the particular experiences of gender, and of sex, and of restricted mobility, and of restricted participation in the public sphere as they apply to this particular group of people, as opposed to another group of people? So in all of this work, it's about unpacking that micro-variation and trying to understand, how do we look beyond large labels and variables such as "poverty" or "gender," and then try to understand these micro-

variations that mean that similarly-situated people who share features such as their socioeconomic status or their gender are encountering and experiencing the state, and participating in politics in very different ways.

MCGONEGAL: You use the word "exposure" quite a bit in the book. I think one of the conclusions you reach is generally having exposure and crossing any kind of boundaries on a regular basis for these citizens is vital to them becoming more active citizens. Am I saying that right?

KRUKS-WISNER: Yeah. I think one of the key insights of the book is that-- the notion of both social, but also spatial exposure being very important to building the capabilities, the knowledge, the information. But also the aspirations and expectations that citizens hold when they think about the role of the state, and when they think about their local governments.

And so you can imagine that a rather isolated community in a remote rural area that doesn't have a lot of connectivity, it doesn't have a lot of bus service, it doesn't have good roads, there aren't a lot of economic opportunities that take people outside of the village. You can imagine in addition, being a woman in that village who, because of the same sort of norms of seclusion and limited opportunities for both social and cultural participation in the public sphere, becomes even more secluded. You can imagine that the sources of information, the ideas, the narratives, the experiences to which that person is exposed are almost by definition, almost by nature, restricted.

And then you can imagine on the flip-side that people who are more exposed, more mobile, more connected, who, maybe because-- in search of economic opportunity, are traveling beyond their neighborhood or beyond their village. Maybe because of contact with a local NGO have been brought to training sessions or on exposure trips to other villages, or even to the capital city. They're gaining information about how the world around them works, about how the government and the administrative structures around them work. They're seeing other citizens and learning about their strategies of action. And by extension, they're building a repertoire of knowledge and a repertoire of examples and encounters that they can draw upon that inform how they will move forward in their own decision-making and in their own strategies.

MCGONEGAL: I have to ask you. The book is based on your dissertation, which, I presume, was finished in 2013. And you've got thousands of MIT alumni who have written PhD's out there among our audience who did not publish as a book. What about the process of publishing, any easier or

harder than the actual writing of the book?

KRUKS-WISNER: Oh gosh, that's a hard question. You know, I think it's hard to say when did I write the book and when did I write the dissertation. It really is one project that evolved over time, and as you say, started as a dissertation at MIT, a doctoral dissertation in the Political Science Department. And I always wrote it the idea in mind that it would become a book some day, but it took a lot to go from dissertation to book.

And in part, that's because I needed the time and the space to reflect, and read, and present, and hold workshops, and have kind mentors and colleagues who could help me stand back and reflect upon the bigger puzzles and the bigger patterns. And so I think the core empirical insight and some of the core theoretical insights were there from day 1 in the dissertation. But it took me the intervening years, and rounds and rounds of workshopping, and feedback, and sharing chapters, and feedback from colleagues to be able to have the space and the time that I needed to situate the puzzle in broader terms that would speak in a bigger way to the political science literature, and to the broader social science literature about why these questions matter.

Why is it that we should care what poor people are doing on a day-to-day basis to claim the state in a corner of rural India? That's going to matter a lot to India scholars, and it mattered to my dissertation committee, but I needed the intervening time and space. And I needed to read a lot and engage a lot to understand how to situate and frame these puzzles in a way that would resonate with-- speak to a broader audiences. So I think that was the real transition from the dissertation to the book.

MCGONEGAL: Talk about how it's being received so far, I realize it's just been published, and what your best-case scenario is for reception in India.

KRUKS-WISNER: Well, one exciting piece, I was really honored to have received the Joseph Elder Prize for best book in the Indian Social Sciences from the American Institute for Indian Studies. And it's a book that's awarded every year to new and emerging scholars who've written books. They award one in the humanities and one in the social sciences.

And that was both humbling and really rewarding to receive, because it spoke to the book's resonance among audiences that know the Indian context really well. There will also be, and this is something I'm very happy about, an Indian edition. And it will be priced in rupees, so it will be affordable. And that will be coming out in India in the coming months. And so I hope it

will have broad readership and reception in India.

And I hope that in my travels to India, I keep going back repeatedly, that I'll be able to present and engage, and make sure that this reaches audiences in India. Because there's really no point writing a book like this one if it doesn't have readership and engagement in the context where it was actually researched. So I'm pleased about the reception that it's had so far. I'm looking forward to the Indian edition.

MCGONEGAL: You're a disciplined researcher who sticks to the heart of the subject in this book. But I have you about active citizenship in the United States. And did your research give you any new insights into the arguments these days about US disengagement and democracy?

KRUKS-WISNER: It's an interesting question, because one of the core theoretical propositions in the book is that active citizenship is, in fact, conditioned by the state. And so when citizens are engaging and participating, they're responding to the action, and the inaction, and the policies, and the implementation of policies by the state itself. And so what we see, even here in the US again, is this enormous variation.

And I actually write about this in the book. One of my first jobs out of college was as an advocate working for a local nonprofit in New York City that was helping poor and low-income New Yorkers facing homelessness to essentially make claims on the state. Now, at the time, I didn't think about it in those terms and with that language. But essentially, there were residents of New York City who were entitled to food stamps, to nutritional support, to housing subsidies, to a range of welfare benefits, and they were being routinely denied these benefits.

And I worked with an organization that would help these residents of the city make those claims. And there was, again, a really interesting variation in trying to understand why some people were on their own, without the help of my organization, able to navigate that local system and make those active claims on their local government, and others weren't. And so the questions that I raised in the rural Indian context are questions that we could ask about New York City. They're questions that we could ask about my hometown here in Charlottesville, Virginia.

I think they're really broadly universal and applicable questions, with the key insight being that they're going to reflect the local experience and conditions of the state. And so where the state is broadly responsive and well-resourced and well-performing, the actual need for this active citizenship, the need for this claim-making is somewhat reduced. Because citizens can count

on turning on the water tap and having clean water coming out.

Now, where you can't count on that, where you can't take for granted that clean water will flow, the need to engage the state, the need to claim the state on the day-to-day basis becomes all that more acute. And so the intensity with which citizens are making claims on the state, and the breadth of the range of issues about which they're engaging the state, reflects very much the underlying conditions, and the terrain, and the scope, and the reach of the state itself.

MCGONEGAL: What else is to be written about this subject? And how is your research continuing?

KRUKS-WISNER: There are a lot of different directions to take this in. And the way that I've chosen to pursue it is to say, OK, I've written a lot in this book about active citizenship and claim-making that happens on the very day-to-day basis. But what I'd like to know more about, and what I ask a bunch of questions about in the conclusion of the book, is, well, how do we build it?

How do we build deeper, stronger, more effective, active citizenship? How do we help build the capabilities and the capacity of citizens to become stronger, more regular, and more effective claim-makers? And so one of the areas that I'm trying to pursue this in is actually working with an NGO in India that works with a large coalition of community activists and community journalists who are essentially carrying out claim-making by using video, using tablets or smartphones, to go out and document deficiencies in local service delivery.

So for example, they'll go out and they'll take footage of an empty school house where the teacher is not showing up, or they'll take footage of a broken hand pump where there's no water. And then use that footage to try to advocate and solve the problem, and try to hold local officials to account. I've been doing some work with that network of local advocates and local journalists to try to understand what it is that's building their capabilities, and what's enabling them to become more effective and more powerful claim-makers.

So that, to me, is the new terrain, the new arena, that I'd like to explore. I've understood and learned a lot in the course of writing this book about the day-to-day act of claim-making and act of citizenship. And now I want to understand from a policy perspective, and from a design perspective, an institutional perspective, more about the conditions that can help citizens become stronger, and more effective, and have deeper capabilities for claim-making.

MCGONEGAL: Those NGOs are shaming the state while claiming the state. Sorry, bad joke.

KRUKS-WISNER: No, no. It's actually a very appropriate joke, because you-- they are shaming the state to claim it, right? So if they were simply shaming the state, that would be one thing. But they're shaming the state to claim it, and then they're holding a kind of a public window up to these deficiencies in service delivery in a way that they hope will hold the local officials to account, so the affected citizens can, in fact, make effective claims on their entitlements.

MCGONEGAL: Tell me what else you're reading right now.

KRUKS-WISNER: What am I reading right now? Well actually, one book that I have out on my desk right now, I am re-reading it-- it's not new, but I'm re-reading it, because I teach it in a couple of my classes, is called *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. It's by Katherine Boo, and it's that life, death, and hope in a Mumbai undercity.

And it's this really beautiful journalistic account of life in one of India's largest slums. And it gives you this real sense, again, a theme that I think resonates a little bit with my own research, about poverty not being a static condition. Poor people not being passive, but being embedded in these really active social networks and political networks, and devising these really savvy, sophisticated, and complicated strategies to make their way through life, and through the systems of governance that surround them. And so it's written in an urban setting, and it's just a really beautiful account of that, which I would highly recommend. It reads like a novel.

MCGONEGAL: Gabby Kruks-Wisner's new book is *Claiming the State: Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India*. And it's available now through Cambridge University Press, published this month, in August 2018. Gabby, thanks for joining.

KRUKS-WISNER: Thanks for the opportunity.

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