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HOST: Resilience is often a celebrated state of being. But is it useful to use resilience as a policy? Resilience might be the watch word if you're fighting a zombie apocalypse or evading a meteor that threatens all life on earth, but if we zoom out, celebrating resilience doesn't solve or change issues that plague society, like inequality. Vinita Srivastava about the need for structural change to the systems that no longer serve us. Welcome to The Conversation Piece.

VINITA SRIVASTAVA:

This week, my family attended both a wedding and a funeral. The funeral was for my uncle and the wedding was for my brother. His fiancé, whose family is in India, recently lost her father to COVID. Although the events are in different countries, far away from each other, the fact that these events can happen on the same day is a marker of the pandemic. These are the times we are living in which demand that we both celebrate and mourn on the same day, it demands a certain kind of resilience of us. And I want to honour and celebrate that resilience, but there has been a rise of another kind of oppressive call for grit, along with a celebration of resilience. The assumption is that we just need to lean in as Sheryl Sandberg so famously put it. It was around the time of that lean in that I started hearing the word "resilient," attached to whole communities, as well as to cities. This was a shift in language.

A few years earlier when I was a grad student in international affairs, the language used was more goal-oriented and included things like ending poverty and food insecurity goals. I actually believed achievable when I was a grad student, this distinct policy shift from development Coles to creating resilience. Cities struck me celebrating resilience and demanding. It are two different things. So for example, Toronto was going to be one of a hundred resilient cities and the Rockefeller Foundation was going to help hold communities learn to be resilient. So it seems that instead of working on fixing issues like inequality in healthcare and poverty, we should now be focused on celebrating those that survive despite these problems. So in other words, we may not be willing to truly challenge our belief systems to help change things. Or we may not have the resolve to stop it, but we can celebrate the resilience of communities that survive despite the denial of some basic human, right, right back to Toronto.

After a decade in New York, one of the first things I did was start an organisation for marginalised youth. The organisation was called verse city. I got a grant from the United way, and I partnered with the CBC and I designed a programme to teach young people how to tell stories about their lives. I ran the programme based on the idea that empowering marginalised youth to tell their own stories would help them become more empowered in society. But later when I travelled to India and Rwanda, I connected and I connected young people to the project. I was challenged by my youth worker counterparts to me when I used the word empowered. I meant things like becoming stronger and more confident, but as I grew to understand from my peers, especially in India, the concept of individual empowerment ignores structural obstacles.

## The Conversation Piece Podcast: Vinita Srivastava

So this is similar to the issues surrounding the word resilient while resilient might be a worthwhile tool for some. And it is a beautiful thing to behold and celebrate. It's not useful as a policy or as an organising principle, celebrating Toronto as a resilient city, especially during COVID may be great for civic pride, but what does it do to address systemic issues like housing and homelessness, land theft, police violence. You probably know by now that Sandberg's corporate feminism has been deeply challenged since her lean in days, especially by working moms of colour, the most famous one being Michelle Obama, who told a Brooklyn crowd, it's not always enough to lean in because that doesn't work all the time. Another word that pops up next to resilience is grit. And the Ted docs, us psychologist, Angela Duckworth said she could determine if a child was going to be successful by how much grit they showed in school.

But research has shown that black children in north American schools are more resilient than their white counterparts. Why is this? Because they have to be black students, but also indigenous and many racialized children are forced to find ways to cope with the ongoing, psychological and emotional stress of daily racism. These students learn to deal from a young age education professor. Carl James says, kids can get trapped by this idea of their resilience because they keep bouncing back. No matter what we do this structural racism combined with Canada's alarming pattern of income inequality for children of colour means our children Canada's future population is greatly impacted by inequalities like a lack of tech resources, green playgrounds, and for some indigenous children, safe drinking water in these many cases, is it fair to say grit and resilience will get you through?

So yes, being resilient should be a celebration. We need resilience to survive, but in the context of development or urban policies, this language also covers up brutal structural realities. And instead leans into kind of a celebration of suffering. Maybe the grit we need right now is the courage to withdraw from systems that no longer serve us. Maybe we should call in our leaders to have the resilience and fortitude to work with and listen to communities who can lead the way for massive structural changes. Thank you for listening.

HOST: Vinita Srivastava is an editor at *The Conversation* and the host and producer of *Don't call me Resilient* - an anti-racist podcast, both linked in the description of this episode. **She spoke at TD Bank Group presents The Walrus Talks at Home: Resilience in May.** And she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled, or virtually zoomed onto the stage at The Walrus Talks and The Walrus Talks at Home.

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