



## **Linking Postwar Infrastructure Reconstruction, Feminist Peace, and Sustainable Development**

Date: *Tuesday, March 12, 2019 - 14:30 to 16:00*

Location: *Vartan Hall, The Armenian Convention Center, 630 2nd Avenue, New York, NY 10016*

### **Panel Summary**

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) co-hosted an interactive panel session titled, "Linking Postwar Infrastructure Reconstruction, Feminist Peace, and Sustainable Development," on the second day of the United Nation's 63<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York City.

The theme of CSW 2019 was "social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls." This panel offered a critical perspective on the ways that postwar physical infrastructure projects, especially those related to energy, water and transportation, often exacerbate gendered inequalities and hinder, rather than enhance, peacebuilding efforts. The panel also addressed the ways in which decentralized, women-driven infrastructure solutions can potentially support gender-just and environmentally sustainable peacebuilding processes, and explored how to create the enabling international policy environment to support those solutions.

The discussion was opened by Carol Cohn, Director of the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights. She argued that infrastructure reconstruction has the potential to be a key resource in postwar peacebuilding: it can contribute to transforming the inequalities underlying the war by both ameliorating the conditions of existing livelihoods and creating new livelihood opportunities. It can also support reconciliation when infrastructure reconstruction is carried out through locally controlled and cross-community participatory processes. However, she asserted, that is not what usually happens. Instead, "the economic recovery prescriptions of the international financial institutions...prioritize growth of GDP over peacebuilding, and thus lead to infrastructure projects designed to facilitate the opening of the country to international markets, extractive industries, and agribusiness." The Grand Inga Dam project, for example, the world's largest proposed hydropower plant, is planned to provide energy for industrial and urban uses primarily outside of the country, despite that fact that in 2013, at the end of its feasibility study, 91% of people in the DRC lived without access to electricity. It would also displace thousands of people in the western DRC where the dam will be built, disproportionately impacting women's livelihoods and security.

A key issue, according to Cohn is that "there is now an overwhelming push in the international community to treat infrastructure not as a development priority for states, but rather as a financial investment opportunity for private actors." This, in turn, has brought mechanisms such as the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) clauses that undermine democratic control, not only of

infrastructure, but of the country itself. In conflict and postwar settings, there is the added issue of the securitization of infrastructure, as states use the targeted provision and withholding of infrastructure services as a form of political control.

Sylvie Ndongmo, President of WILPF Cameroon, presented an example of the inequality exacerbated by infrastructure in Cameroon – from roads, to hospitals, to schools – stating that “one of the reasons that pushed me to join the women’s movement is this issue of infrastructure.” Ndongmo emphasized that in Cameroon, infrastructure development is a tool of political manipulation: “if you are not in favor with the ruling party, you cannot benefit...if you don’t vote for the President, know that you are never going to have roads.” In addition, Ndongmo pointed out that Cameroon has seen a significant amount of corruption tied to the mass privatization of infrastructure, resulting in poorly constructed infrastructure.

Nina Potarska, WILPF’s Programme Coordinator in Ukraine, followed Ndongmo’s comments with a critical connection to peacebuilding, stating, “Infrastructure is the link for community... Infrastructure is the entry point for preventing conflict and building sustainable peace.” She contrasted that to the negative impacts of recent IMF-supported reforms to the healthcare system, and specifically the construction of larger, centralized hospitals and the elimination of smaller clinics, especially in zones close to conflict lines, despite a lack of roads and transportation infrastructure – “just one bus per day to the biggest cities.” In a context where there are high levels of outmigration, and “all care work, all reproductive work is being done by women,” the lack of infrastructural support and IMF austerity measures together influence women disproportionately and serve to “divide the people, even in one city.”

Madeleine Rees, Secretary General of WILPF, tied the situation in Ukraine to that in Bosnia, where centralizing healthcare into fewer, bigger facilities was the precursor to privatization and “top-down solutions with no inclusivity...a complete and utter failure to look at social, economic rights, which are inherently linked to nature and type of infrastructure that you want.” Rees echoed Potarska’s point that “IMF conditionalities have really damaged women’s opportunities to participate in governance structures,” and noted the same process of infrastructure investment undermining women’s ability to engage in local activities was seen in Bosnia, where external actors such as the World Bank encouraged investment that prioritized the EU’s access to new markets – (e.g. in the form of roads to Turkey, and a destructive hydroelectric dam) – over the needs of the Bosnian people.

Rees emphasized that despite the fundamentally corrosive nature of this type of infrastructure development, pushback is now coming from feminists, and it has led to more recent engagement on policy at the intersections of infrastructure and the gendered dimensions of social and economic rights from, for example, the UN Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States. Cohn concurred, adding that “if you look around now at women’s rights organizing and women’s environmental organizing, a tremendous amount of opposition to hydroelectric projects, to dams, to other infrastructure reconstruction that are damaging to local communities, is coming from women’s activism.” Rees concluded the panel discussion by calling attention to the importance of developing a strong feminist plan to enact regulatory legislation, where projects are monitored and held accountable, pushing back against the neoliberalism and militarism that have undermined countries’ democratic control.