



The Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the Climate Crisis: Inextricable Links **Carol Cohn**

Talk presented at The Nordic Africa Institute¹
Uppsala, Sweden
9 March 2020

If the goals of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda are understood as ensuring women's human security, ending and preventing wars, and building gender-just, sustainable peace, **confronting the climate crisis must be understood as both practically and conceptually inextricable from the realization of the WPS agenda.**²

How and why should the climate crisis be understood as integral to the possibility of ever meeting the goals of the WPS agenda? In Part One of this piece, I'll highlight four issues:

- 1) First, if it was the threat war posed to women's human security that was at the heart of the WPS agenda, it is now clear that women's human security – in fact all people's – will never be attained unless we can also deal with the climate and ecological crises.
- 2) Second, even if we focus only on traditional conceptions of security -- that is, addressing armed conflict and war -- we need to address the ways in which climate breakdown can play a role in extending or intensifying violent conflict.
- 3) Third, climate breakdown has to transform our understanding of peacebuilding. It increasingly defines the context in which peacebuilding takes place, requiring us to consider not just climate breakdown's impacts on peacebuilding, but also the ways in which peacebuilding will have effects on climate breakdown and citizens' ability to cope with it.
- 4) Fourth, I'll argue that not only must it transform our understanding of peacebuilding but that it actually, in the slightly longer run, threatens the project of peacebuilding itself.

Then, in Part Two, I will offer a few thoughts about what we can gain get from bringing a feminist perspective to making the links between WPS and climate change.

Part One: Why Should We Understand the Climate Crisis as Intrinsically Linked to WPS?³

1) Human Security in Jeopardy

If it was the threat war posed to women's human security (HS) that was at the heart of the WPS agenda, it is now clear that **women's human security – in fact all people's – will never be**

attained unless we can also deal with the climate and ecological crises. The staggering impacts these crises will have and have already started to have on food security, livelihoods, health, access to water, and shelter, as well as the scale of displacement they engender, make a mockery of the idea of human security.

And as we know, all of these impacts have deeply gendered dimensions. For example, women often bear the brunt of coping with climate-related shocks and stresses, because of the roles assigned to them in most areas of the world, including responsibility for food management, water procurement and caring for family members.

Beyond increasing women's burdens, the climate-induced threats to human security can exacerbate or entrench pre-existing gendered inequalities in multiple other ways as well. Choosing only a few of the many possible examples: if, as noted by feminist scholars of forced displacement, women are often "less mobile and less monied,"⁴ they will face particular challenges when their homes and livelihoods come under threat from climate disruption. Or if, as is the case in many cultures, men are presumed to deserve or need to have access to the best food, the most food, and the most protein-rich types of food, women are going to have more severe nutrition deficits, and thus be rendered less able than men to respond to climate breakdown.⁵ Climate and environment-related health crises can be more lethal for women, not only because of their nutritional status, but because health facilities are more often unavailable or unaffordable to them.⁶

In short, climate breakdown is a massive, multidimensional, gender-differentiated threat to human security; one that is even more pervasive than, but also linked to, armed conflict.

2) Climate Breakdown as a Contributor to War

It is hard to imagine how, in any country subject to the effects outlined above, people's lives could ever be imagined as "peaceful" or "secure."⁷ On those grounds alone, any agenda concerned with women, peace and security must engage with this threat. But even taking only the narrowest construal of the WPS agenda as centered on war, climate breakdown still needs to be confronted, because of the ways it amplifies the well-documented drivers of armed conflict such as poverty, inequalities and economic shocks.

While many scholars argue that climate change does not directly cause violent conflict,⁸ evidence suggests that climactic conditions in combination and interaction with socio-economic and political factors can intensify it.⁹ When societies cannot fairly distribute resources which climate breakdown has rendered increasingly scarce, such as water, arable lands, pasturing lands, and so on; when the increased migration due to climate disruption can lead to stressed humanitarian and governance systems; when governments cannot mitigate the volatility of food prices and hunger is widespread; when societies cannot prevent economic opportunities from disappearing; when both global corporations and richer nations seek to control land in other countries (for production of food or biofuels, or to access scarce resources) and dispossess local people of both their land and their livelihoods; when infectious diseases spread geographically to new populations that have no resistance to them, or new infectious diseases cross the animal/human barrier and create epidemics or pandemics – when any of these happen, conditions

for violent conflict are ripe. And increased militarization is often the state response, which further entails its own violences.

Of course, what is conventionally understood as warfare is not the only form the violence takes. Already, climate and environment activists and defenders of the land, many of them indigenous and many of them women, are being murdered at unprecedented rates by state militaries, paramilitaries, police and private military contractors.

And at just the time that tremendous financial resources are required to try to head off even greater CO2 emissions and environmental destruction, the national security establishments of already highly militarized countries envision the climate crisis as leading to increasing numbers of wars over scarce resources, justifying ever increasing spending on militarization.

3) Climate Breakdown as the Context of Peacebuilding

In the short term, climate breakdown has to transform our understanding of how to build peace. Given that climate disruption's effects are already being felt all over the world, it inevitably shapes the context in which the attempt to build sustainable peace takes place. Therefore, any thinking about effective, realistic, practicable models for how to build and sustain peace must take it into account. We need to **consider not only climate breakdown's impacts on peacebuilding, but also the ways each decision made as part of peacebuilding will have impacts on climate breakdown and citizens' ability to cope with it.**

Climate breakdown's impacts on peacebuilding:

The impacts are and will be increasingly numerous and devastating. To highlight a few: Building peace requires the provision of jobs and livelihoods, at the same time as climate breakdown destroys the conditions for maintaining traditional livelihoods. Building peace requires addressing issues around land reform and restitution, at the very same time that climate breakdown reduces the quality and quantity of land available for sustaining livelihoods, and forces yet more people to leave their homes. Building peace requires dealing with the injuries caused by war as well as the health needs which went unaddressed during war, while climate breakdown puts additional pressure on health services through the rise in infectious diseases. Building peace requires the rebuilding of physical infrastructure, everything from roads and railways to power grids, at the same time that climate breakdown causes an increase in extreme weather events which destroy physical infrastructure.

Peacebuilding's impacts on climate breakdown:

As if climate breakdown's effects on peacebuilding were not already enough of a challenge to how we imagine doing successful peacebuilding, WPS advocates will also need to consider the effects of peacebuilding *on* climate disruption, and on citizen's resources to cope with it. For example, decisions about postwar economic recovery – jobs and livelihoods, land reform, infrastructure – should *not only* consider the key peacebuilding question of whether they deepen or transform pre-existing inequalities (e.g., are employment schemes inclusive of women?; do land tenure systems and agricultural policy support the multi-cropping of smallholder farmers or the large-scale land acquisition and mono-cropping of agribusiness interests?; do roadbuilding plans prioritize local level feeder roads, access to markets, healthcare and schools, or only main

highways to facilitate large scale resource extraction?). Now, these policy decisions must *also* be made in light of their effects on climate disruption and must assess whether the proposed solutions will be sustainable as the climate continues to change (e.g., will jobs created be in sectors that are contributing to climate breakdown or combatting it?; will land and agricultural policy take into account the increasing climate-related vulnerability of mono-crop agriculture, as well as the climate costs of petrochemical-heavy forms of farming?; will roadbuilding materials, labor power and technologies be responsive to predictable climate-related conditions, such as flooding that is more frequent and severe?).

Unfortunately, and in contrast, the “solutions” to the problems of post-war recovery which are embedded in dominant post-war economic recovery models, and are being pushed by transnational corporations, often have disastrous effects both on the inequalities underlying armed conflict and on climate and environmental breakdown.

4) Climate Breakdown as a Threat to Peacebuilding

In the somewhat longer term, the climate crisis threatens the entire process of peacebuilding. The almost unimaginably increasing scale of humanitarian crises that will be caused by the climate crisis in the next decades -- crises provoked by drought, heatwaves, flooding from monsoons and hurricanes; intensified prevalence and incidence of infectious disease; greater food insecurity; and climate-based displacement -- will devastate economies, disrupt our (already-unequal) systems of meeting basic human needs, and subsume massive amounts of financial, governmental, physical and human resources.

Given the already tremendously inadequate resources and attention given to post-war humanitarian response, peace agreement implementation, and post-war reconstruction, is it realistic to think those resources will not be subsumed by the humanitarian and economic crises caused by deepening climate and ecological crises?

Part Two: Bringing Some Feminist “Lessons Learned” to Making the Link between WPS and the Climate Crisis

I have been arguing that the goals of the WPS agenda – ensuring human security, ending and preventing wars, and building gender-just, sustainable peace – cannot be realized unless we recognize their inextricable connections with the looming climate and ecological crises, and unless we integrate that awareness into our analysis, policy, advocacy and activism.

As we do so, it is worth reflecting on our experience of 20 years of trying to implement the WPS agenda. To what potential problems and pitfalls might it help us be more alert? To what pathways forward might it fruitfully point us?

Women positioned in different social and economic contexts, in different geographical locations, in struggles against different wars, and with different relations to the WPS agenda will all have different perspectives on these questions. What follows are some preliminary thoughts and questions based on our experience at the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights.

1. We need to be aware of, and to try to head off, some of the **same troubling patterns we've seen in WPS discourse**, which have already emerged in the policy discourse on women and the climate crisis.
 - a. Specifically, the women and climate discussion, at least in the policy realm, is often framed around **“disproportionate impact”** on women and on **women as vulnerable victims** – not on women as active agents, nor on the transformation of social relations that would be necessary for women to less vulnerable or to meaningfully exercise power, nor on ways that ideas about gender have contributed to causing the problems (of war or the climate crisis).
 - b. To the small extent that women *do* appear as active agents, too often it is women in the global south cast as **“sustainability saviors”**¹⁰ -- a framing that has a lot in common with “women as peacemakers.” In both cases, there is a rhetorical valorization of a characteristic attributed to women, and idealization of how they will be able to clean up men’s messes (despite their very limited access to social, economic and political power) – while simultaneously leaving in place all of the forces that have been driving the problems (e.g., patriarchal power relations; the arms trade; racist neocolonial economic and political relations; unequal distribution of access to land and other resources; the imposition of neoliberal development models; the unfettered extractive practices of global corporations; the deepening of inequalities within and between nations; the continuing attachment to fossil fuels and the tremendous militarization and environmental degradation it takes to ensure access to them, etc.).
2. Another parallel, and place to learn from WPS experience: **both environmental crises and wars disrupt social relations**, thereby at times creating more fluidity and opportunity for change in the status-quo of patriarchal relations, as well as other unequal power relations. In both cases, the openings/necessity for women to take on new roles may create new opportunities but also typically create additional burdens. How can that be taken into account when designing post-war recovery policy, for example, in plans for physical and social infrastructure? And we know that when wars end, there is tremendous pressure to return to the patriarchal status quo. What can be learned from the ways women in war-affected countries have dealt with this?
3. At the same time, we have seen that in crisis situations, including wars and environmental disasters, response often falls prey to **the “tyranny of the urgent,”** as in: “we must immediately respond to this urgent need; gender can come later.” That is, in crisis situations, there is a strong tendency for gender considerations to be shoved aside, deferred. This is only possible because they are seen as an add-on, rather than integral both to what the problem is and to what solutions will be effective. How can that be forestalled in climate crisis response?
4. In addition to thinking about women per se, we need to focus on the ways in which *ideas about gender* have functioned to underwrite not only militarism and war, but also the

thoroughly extractive, domination-oriented relation to people and the planet that is at the heart of our climate and environmental crises. *And* on the ways those same ideas about gender are shaping the kinds of “solutions” that are being proposed and invested in (e.g., male-dominated, centralized, technocratic solutions aimed at profit-making, rather than those which are associated with a feminized and devalued “nature.”)

Note that here, as in peacemaking, to the extent that women’s activities, knowledge, and solutions ever get acknowledged, it is *their local, small scale* efforts at building peace or sustainable environmental practices. While these efforts may at times be acknowledged or even glorified in “sustainability savior” discourse, at a wider policy level they are not viewed as significant, not seen as relevant to the scale required to solve the problem – and they are then certainly never funded or invested in at a scale that would, in fact, have a larger impact. The strategy of supporting local, democratically controlled solutions *could* actually be seen as a large-scale strategy requiring large scale investment; but its associations with women and the “feminine,” along with the associations of centralized, technocratic solutions with the “masculine,” help make it appear ‘self-evident’ that the latter is the most “realistic” path.

At the Consortium, we argue that the paradigm shift we need for gender-just sustainable peace, and the paradigm shift the planet needs to survive this climate emergency, are very much the same. At the heart of it is a *feminist green transformation*. In arguing for such a transformation, we are not just making another call for green economies, or green new deals, which are too often market-based approaches that involve the commodification and enclosure of resources and commons, undermining livelihoods, justifying land- and green-grabs and dispossessing local people, especially women food producers. And too often, their attention to gendered power relations and global justice issues is all but non-existent. Instead, we are calling for a *feminist green transformation*, an entire paradigm shift, that restructures production, consumption and political–economic relations along truly sustainable pathways, with feminist analysis at the core.

¹ This talk was presented as part of the research seminar, African Perspectives on the 20th Anniversary of UNSCR 325 - Gendering Peace and Security, The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden, March 9-10, 2020.

² This piece builds on a shorter exploration of these arguments created for the NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security: Cohn, Carol. 2020. “Notes on Why Confronting the Climate Crisis Must be Integral to WPS.” Unpublished internal report for the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, February 9, 2020.

³ Many of the ideas in this section draw on and are further developed in joint work with Claire Duncanson. See: Cohn, Carol and Claire Duncanson. Forthcoming. Women, Peace and Security in a Changing Climate. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. See also: Cohn, Carol, and Claire Duncanson. Forthcoming. Feminist Solutions for Ending War: Placing Justice, Care and Sustainability at the Heart of the Economy. In *Feminist Solutions for Ending War*, edited by Megan MacKenzie and Nicole Wegner. London: Pluto Press.

⁴ Giles, Wenona. 2013. "Women Forced to Flee: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons." In *Women and Wars*, edited by Carol Cohn, 80-101. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

⁵ BRIDGE. 2014. *Gender and Food Security: Towards Gender-Just Food and Nutritional Security*. Overview Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

⁶ UNEP. 2016. *Global Gender and Environment Outlook*. Nairobi: UN Environment.

⁷ Of course, it is important to note that not everyone’s lives will be equally affected – that there will be differential impacts both between countries and within countries. Worldwide it is the people who have the fewest economic, political, and social resources, as well as those whose livelihoods are tied to specific landscapes and those who live in especially vulnerable areas such as coastal or arid zones, who will be among the most-impacted (see, e.g.,

UNFCCC. 2018. *Considerations Regarding Vulnerable Groups, Communities and Ecosystems in the Context of the National Adaptation Plans*. Bonn: United Nations Climate Change Secretariat).

⁸ E.g. Buhaug, Halvard. 2015 “Climate–conflict research: some reflections on the way forward,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 6:3, 269-275; Selby, Jan. 2019, “Climate change and the Syrian civil war, Part II: The Jazira’s agrarian crisis,” *Geoforum* 101: 260-274.

⁹ Koubi, Vally. 2019. “Climate change and conflict,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 343-360.

¹⁰ Leach, Melissa. 2014. “Why Gender Equality and Sustainable Development are Inextricably Linked.” *Steps Centre* (blog), October 19, 2014. <https://steps-centre.org/blog/gender-equality-sustainable-development-melissa-leach/>.