



Dissolving Interagency Silos: The WPS Agenda on the Disaster-Conflict Continuum

October 15, 2020 Taylor Hynes and Punam Yadav

Two women approach a hut that had been flooded by torrential rain before the arrival of Hurricane Delta in Mexico in early October 2020. (Jacky Muniello/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)

The year 2020 has affirmed that there is no place that can remain untouched by disaster. With over thirty-eight million cases globally and counting, COVID-19 has proven the fluidity of risk and of how hazards disregard borders. Likewise, despite the politicization, climate change has become an international threat that no country can afford to ignore. Similarly, the world's conflicts affect around **one third** of the world's population, with **around 100 small and large conflicts** taking place. Unlike old wars, new wars are more complex and can last for several decades, often ending with a no-win situation.

Studies suggest that conflicts are often linked with other global challenges, including climate change and disaster events. However, conflict, disaster, and climate change are seen by some policymakers, and those helping to improve the lives of people impacted, as three separate events. This not only has resource implications, but also has an impact on the effectiveness of any policy intervention.

In order to mitigate the effects of conflicts, disasters, and climate change, it is essential to view them as lying on a continuum and to see how they are interrelated. Doing so will also allow related efforts to be pursued intersectionally, like those that aim to achieve the goals of the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda.

The United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1325 in 2000 to address the special needs of women in conflict. Since then, the Security Council has adopted nine other resolutions—collectively called the WPS agenda—to strengthen the provisions of resolution 1325 and to ensure the rights of women and marginalized in the situations of conflict. Despite its increasing scope, the WPS agenda—along with most country-specific WPS National Action Plans (NAP)—do not consider disaster or climate change, choosing instead to largely focus on increasing women's participation in security and peace processes.

Though **emerging scholarship** has begun pointing to the linkage between **climate change** and the WPS agenda, conflicts and disasters are seen as separate events. Hence, the responses to these two gendered crises, by national and international organizations, are still carried out separately. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is just one of many examples of how disasters and conflict **interrelate** and fall along a continuum, rather than existing as static, siloed experiences. Increased **domestic violence**, affected **health facilities**, **securitized lockdowns**, and cruel conditions for **incarcerated populations** are just a few of the effects of this current pandemic's place on that continuum. When roughly **fifty percent** of people affected by disasters live in conflict-affected states, failing to see disasters and conflict as existing along a continuum has an impact on the interventions targeted to support the victims of both of these crisis. In popular perceptions—particularly those of **humanitarian agencies**—conflict and disaster appear as discreet events: one anthropological and political and one natural and “pure.” However, vulnerability to disaster risk, much like conflict, is economically, socially, and culturally constructed and **varies** with different disasters and timespans and between people of different genders and other identities.

Following Cynthia Cockburn's work rigorously expounding on the **continuum of violence** regarding **gender and war**, a continuum exists between the causes, effects, and responses of disaster and conflict. Unequal power relations, discrimination, human rights violations, government neglect, and exploitative resource extraction are just a few of the overlapping roots of disaster and conflict. Climate change and disasters are not in fact separate from conflict from the perspectives of people currently experiencing the **slow violence** of climate change. Disasters are a **process**, not an outcome. It is a continuation of the pre-existing condition and ignorance that are exacerbated during these extreme events. Climate change is not a looming threat in the future but is **currently devastating** many communities, and is **exacerbating** the impact of many types of disaster by increasing the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. Pandemics, hurricanes, wildfires, and droughts are made worse by a lack of state response, and can easily be seen as a continuation of state violence. Similarly, research is emerging on the cyclical relationship between **gender-based violence** (GBV) and extreme weather events—one can increase vulnerability to the other.

Recently, there has been an increase in UN agency discourse on **gender, conflict, and climate**. However, these concepts are still treated as discreet phenomenon in practice. In both disaster and conflict literature, women are often categorized as a vulnerable group in need of protection—particularly from GBV—as if they are a monolithic group that do not also influence and respond to disasters, nor face other issues during disaster and conflict. Additionally, an essentialized, binary framing of gender during disaster and conflict reporting puts at risk—through a lack of data and specified needs—those that do not fall neatly into a **gender category**.

The localization of the WPS agenda is extremely important in order to have greater impacts. Therefore, understanding the **historic-political complexities** of this conflict-disaster continuum is critical. The starting points for these specific local contexts, NAPs, largely do not include **specific language** about disasters. A few notable exceptions include hazard-prone countries Japan and the Philippines, whose emphasis on disasters could be used as templates for states that do not see themselves as particularly vulnerable to climate change or disasters

The prominent security concerns in NAPs are often drawn from Security Council resolutions, mirroring the salience of militarization in major international bodies. Due to its origin in the Security Council, the implementation of the WPS agenda has also been **narrow**. Framing conflict and disasters on a continuum of human security—as opposed to national security—allows for a feminist, community-oriented response instead of one deemed necessary to respond to a threat. The militarized **responses** to disasters and the **securitization** of climate change make no one safer, despite the fact that uniformed personnel are often given disaster response tasks that could be performed by other government agencies or civil society if funding was diverted toward those groups

Programming that is informed by the WPS agenda often treats the effects of disasters and conflict without tackling the root causes of those crises, a task which must go beyond increasing women's participation in male-dominated institutions such as militaries and the UN. Most NAPs and UN policies have not been able to reach their potential due to these economic and socio-historical complexities not being considered. For example, the ongoing physical violence against Rohingya communities in Myanmar led to an influx of refugees in neighboring Bangladesh. The forced displacement—along with subsequent **flooding and landslides** in the refugee camps and now fear of **COVID-19**—are all linked along the continuum, and all have **gendered impacts**. When it comes to supporting these people, neither the WPS agenda nor the **disaster risk reduction interventions** take these multifaceted problems into consideration.

Prominent features of the twenty-first century—capitalism, globalization, and climate change—indicate we will see an increase in disasters that reach catastrophic levels. Due to the lack of coordination between the actors working in these conflict and disaster contexts, the WPS agenda has not been able to be as effective as it could be, despite its significance.

At this twentieth anniversary of resolution 1325, dissolving the silos of what defines peace and security can make inter-agency implementation of the WPS agenda more effective for addressing all forms of gendered human security risks. Specifically, all UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral organizations working on conflict, climate change, and disaster should coordinate with each other and local governments and develop an integrated program that covers all aspects and possibilities of security from conflict and disaster. By accepting the continuum of conflict and disasters, we can **pool knowledge** about the common difficulties between the two in collecting **data** on gender and disasters.

Peace requires more than just the absence of conflict—or a negative peace—but also the security of decreased disasters and the factors that allow them to happen. Positive peace is the absence of structural violence. The WPS agenda, and thus the peacekeeping agencies and NAPs that implement it, has the potential to broaden its definition of security to include investment in communities and the environment, reduction of social inequalities, expansion of political rights, disarmament, and divestment from militaries, all of which have been **shown** to be effective in disaster risk reduction. Understanding and framing conflict and disasters along a gendered, human security continuum is the first step towards effective interagency coordination.

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This article is part of a series reflecting on the future of the women, peace, and security agenda.



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