Why Aren't We Talking to Each Other? Thinking Gender, Conflict and Disaster as a Continuum

Punam Yadav and Maureen Fordham

Disasters stemming from natural hazards are often viewed as consensus events, 1 with much emphasis on community cohesion and mutual aid. While such pro-social processes undoubtedly occur, a gender analysis uncovers levels of underlying conflict based on unequal power dynamics and pre-existing social inequalities. Those living in conflict and fragile states are more vulnerable to such environmental disasters due to their reduced capacity to respond to dual/multiple crises. The available data suggests that 58 per cent of environmental disaster deaths between 2004 and 2014 were in the top 30 conflict-affected fragile states² – yet this link is under-researched and they remain separate fields of study. This is allied to the compartmentalization of mandates in current institutional structures (including governments, UN agencies and academia) which obstruct collaboration. In terms of global policy frameworks, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction³ does not mention conflict and, as a result, there is no coordinated response to, or prevention of, such dual crises. Likewise, conflict-related policies and frameworks, such as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, does not consider disaster in its conceptualization of conflict and/or post-conflict countries. This siloing of crisis, even when the same people are impacted by all of these events, has impact not only on what kind of policies are formulated, but also on the types of support people are given. Often, women and sexual minorities are the hardest hit in disasters due to structural inequalities that exist prior to extreme events/disasters.

Feminist peace is about addressing the root causes of problems. It recognizes preconflict structural inequalities and how they shape people's experiences during conflict and in post-conflict contexts. It is also about recognizing the continuum of violence, one event leading to another or multiple events affecting people differently due to their gender.⁴ Hence, peace is not an event, it's a process that requires cooperation and collaboration between different actors. In practice, however, silos exist. In this conversation, we come together as two feminist scholars from different fields of study – one from gender and disaster, and one from peace and conflict studies – to explore what can be learned from each other in order to expand our understanding of feminist peace. We situate our conversation within critical feminist peace research.⁵

(PY: Punam Yadav; MF: Maureen Fordham)

PY: Maureen, we have been thinking about this conversation for a while now. Because of our backgrounds, you coming from gender and disaster, and me from peace and conflict studies, we always had different understandings and approaches to how gender featured in our work, but we were always fascinated by each other's research worlds.

Although our Centre⁶ definition of disaster includes conflict, for the sake of this conversation, when we talk about conflict, it will mean political conflicts, including armed conflicts, civil war or ethnic conflicts; and when we say disaster, it will mean extreme events caused by environment, technology or pandemic. We will avoid the term 'natural disaster' as there is nothing 'natural' about disaster. All disasters are socially constructed and are an outcome of unequal power relationships and social structures.⁷ In addition, we see gender, conflict and disaster as a continuum because they are very much linked, often one contributing to the other. Do you want to say something about your own experience from the field of gender and disaster studies?

MF: I've always felt there is this very strong divide between our two worlds. Every now and again, I would meet other colleagues who were working on gender, but in the very different context of conflict. We would find that there were really interesting overlaps, but that we hardly ever met. We were never in the same meetings. We were not reading the same journals and literature. We were never in the same forums or attending to the same policy advocacy meetings. So it was a very different world, but we knew at the heart of it was this issue we all faced around gender inequality and marginalization, the most extreme expression being in terms of violence against women. But there we were, occupying these different spaces, so when we set up the Centre for Gender and Disaster there was an opportunity for us to try and bring these two worlds together. This conversation exemplifies some of the challenges we face in trying to bridge those two worlds. I suppose where we

talk about gender and disaster in my world, it is primarily environmental hazard-triggered events, but it does include some technological – we might also be considering nuclear incidents, for example – and socio-biological events, such as pandemics. But the major work is around floods, earthquakes, cyclones, heat waves and so on. When I think about doing research on a particular disaster, I tend to think about a location, often called a community, often in a fairly well-defined geographic location. Maybe we can also talk about the differences in the way we think about community in a gender and disaster context and what does community mean, for you, in your gender and conflict context? In the disaster context, you can see the evidence of it on the ground, and what we faced as a major problem was getting the social context (extended to social, political, economic, cultural) recognized and respected as much as the technical, the engineering. If there is a flood, the narrative is how do we build a bigger and better flood embankment. In an earthquake, it is how do we build a seismically safe structure. So, our main concern was foregrounding the social and, within that, recognizing the core relevance of gender.

I am thinking about this location, a community. For many years, it was *a* community, as if it's some homogenous set of people, but that's only a community of *circumstance*; people affected by a flood, an earthquake, in this location. Then in my work I've been trying to get other people to recognize that there were very different experiences in there and very different opportunities or lack of opportunities for different segments of the population.⁸

PY:

This is very interesting because if you look at literature on feminist peace research,⁹ the word community does not appear as much or at least does not come as an obvious topic of concern. Even when it is mentioned, it means something different from how it is defined in disaster studies. For instance, an ethnic group could be considered a community in the context of conflict, even though they do not necessarily live in the same area. The space and proximity of their location have less relevance in this context. One of the reasons for this could be the assumption that communities are often divided in conflict, whereas the opposite happens in a disaster context. It is assumed that they come together in the event of disaster. Another reason could be that conflicts are political events, which assume the division within the community, whereas disasters are seen as non-political events where it is assumed

that everyone is impacted equally, even though that is not the case in reality, and that they come together to help each other. Hence, community-based disaster management has been given a significant importance in disaster studies, whereas in peace research, the relevance of community is less explored and, where it is explored, it has been limited to community-based peacebuilding initiatives. Although localization has become a buzz term in peace research, this is understood as the participation of individuals from the local communities in policymaking, not as a community-based approach. A better understanding of community in the context of conflict may offer some useful insights for feminist peace research.

MF:

It leads to a question for you, but the issue about community has been part of a central critique of dominant forms of disaster response, and disaster planning, disaster management, which was very top down, a lot of command-and-control management of disasters, which overrode local organized behaviour at various times, local social structures and social relationships. This was a big critique coming out very strongly from the 1980s onwards. 10 Community-based disaster management (CBDM) or community-based disaster risk reduction, all of that became the norm really, the expectation: that there was a lot more that could be and should be done at the community level because that's how people were self-organized anyway, that's what was working, so why should you bring in something externally and lose all of the networks, reciprocity, support, social capital, why should you undermine all that with some external structure that may not be the best fit?

I wonder whether there is anything from the gender and disaster world focusing on community that can be useful to the gender and conflict world. Despite growing critical awareness around the interrelations between natural-hazard-induced disaster and conflict, why do the divisions persist?

PY:

There seems to be growing interest in exploring the relationship between conflict and disaster, including climate change. However, the division still persists. Since we launched the Centre for Gender and Disaster, we both have been attending events on disaster and conflict. The stark divide I felt was at the UN Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in Geneva in 2019. Although I very much enjoyed talking to new people and learning from various specialist sessions, I was struck by the fact that it was all about disaster and no one mentioned anything about conflict, or at least the recognition of how

conflicts may exacerbate people's experiences of disasters, and vice versa, even when the discussion was about countries that were still in some form of conflict.

Also, I felt lonely in the crowd of over 5000 people, whereas you knew so many people. I remember you had a similar experience when we went to Delhi to attend an event on conflict. The divide is felt even at the personal level, as academics, as practitioners and as implementing bodies. Let's talk about the broader question, why does this divide still exist?

MF: I think there are structural reasons for this divide, particularly driven at the high policy level. The Global Platform for DRR has its own policy framework and if you are approaching from a conflict perspective, you will have your own. They're partly divided because we're talking about the UN system and we're talking about the separate entities within the UN system, with their own clearly defined mandates and the difficulty of moving between, or across, or trying not to step on each other's toes. That is a major barrier and although there is a lot of interest in working across those levels, on the ground, it's very difficult. The policy meetings, when you get down to the detail of the planning, they're separate worlds.

PY: Everybody talks about getting rid of the silos and working together – even at the UN level – but in practice, that hasn't happened. That could be due to the current structures and funding mechanisms and all the politics behind it.

To give you an example, in Nepal, disaster risk reduction (DRR) is quite well established, whereas conflict-related interventions come and go. Nepal is categorized as a disastervulnerable country, as well as a climate-change-vulnerable country. Nepal was also impacted by ten years of civil war. However, despite the regularity of disasters, DRR interventions were almost overshadowed by the surge of funding for postconflict interventions after the peace agreement was signed in 2006. While the conflict-related grievances were yet to be dealt with fully, the 2015 earthquake happened, killing around 9,000 and displacing millions. Although the same people were impacted by both, the organizations who work to support the survivors never talked to each other. There was no coordinated approach. They worked in silos. Not only the source of funding was different, but also the organizational structures. DRR-related events are well established and seen as a longterm project, whereas conflict-related interventions are seen as temporary. Soon after the conflict ended, a new Ministry was

established, the Ministry for Peace and Reconstruction, which was dissolved in 2017, although there is a small unit, called the Peace Section, that sits within the Ministry of Home Affairs, where there is also a large unit for DRR.

If you look at people's lived experiences, the same people who were displaced during conflict have also been impacted by the 2015 earthquake. However, there is no coordinated approach to support these people. These people initially received some relief from the government as part of being conflict victims and now are receiving funding from the government, whatever is available, as victims of the earthquake, but these interventions and supports are very different from their needs that are still unaddressed from the conflict. Here, we can see the impact of how the international global policy trickles down to the national level.

MF:

I think you're painting a picture of the way the state is structured, and that its ministries, its departments, its offices of state, have to be funded. Because disasters with environmental triggers happen regularly, there are so many different forms of them, and yet the consequences of those different hazards are similar in many ways, in the ways that they hit people, so there has to be this structure that's available, if not 24-7, then pretty much ready to go at quite short notice. Whereas in a conflict situation, I imagine, that all takes a lot longer, it has to gear up around a very serious conflict situation, before all of that can be activated, all of the drawing down of funds, the interest from outside, and then the structures to deal with and manage it. There's a different temporal rhythm going on between the two, I think.

PY:

What do you think about the politics of it? What has politics got to do with these siloed approaches? Disaster is often seen as non-political, not threatening in terms of local politics, so it is an easy entry for the international organizations to work on DRR. However, conflict is a highly sensitive political event. The international community either has no capacity to intervene or does not want to intervene due to political reasons. For instance, if there was a natural-hazard-led disaster in Myanmar, people in Myanmar would have received a lot of international support. However, they have been asking for international support since the coup in February 2021, 12 but what kind of support have they received, despite the call for international support from the local people? What has been the UN's role in supporting the people?

MF:

It's very different than a DRR context, because on the face of it, politics can be kept at arm's length. In fact, people will often say, don't bring politics into it, this is about humanitarian assistance, it's on that basis. However, the neoliberal political agenda itself creates risks. We talked about environmentalhazard-triggered disasters, but it's not as simple as that. For example, if we look at people who are flooded regularly: yes, the flood is a natural event in terms of water coming from rivers or from the sea, but why are people in that location? Why are people in a location that's prone to that kind of flooding? Why are they in housing that does not withstand floodwaters or cyclones or earthquakes? There are profits to be made from building properties and developing businesses in particular locations and the hazard risk is externalized. It's a lot easier to keep politics – apparently – in the distance, when actually it's completely implicated in everything that's happening in so-called 'natural disasters', which is, of course, a term we just don't use anymore. It's nonsense to call a disaster natural when the many contexts for its occurrence are implicated in social, economic, political frameworks and beliefs. But you can't really deny it in a conflict context, it's obviously there.

PY:

By just saying that a disaster is natural, you are avoiding the politics of it and justifying that your intervention has nothing to do with local politics. That it is just to support people in need. Hence, the inevitability of natural disasters is established, even in the discussions of prevention or risk reduction. This is against everything that feminists have advocated for. For instance, the new Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) policy is seen as highly gender-sensitive. However, a close examination of the policy reveals how gender has been included as an add on. Likewise, the gender sensitivity is only considered in response, not on prevention.¹³

Disaster is not natural, it is socially constructed and, therefore, the impact is felt and experienced differently by people depending on their gender and other intersecting categories. This also avoids any discussion about the structural problems of gender inequality. The impacts felt by people are not just an outcome of one event, but the result of structural inequality. For instance, women in Nepal reported increased cases of gender-based violence after the 2015 earthquake. The ongoing pandemic has also impacted women differently, with an increase of gender-based violence during the first lockdown, including a disproportionate number of women committing suicide. These

are only a few examples of the gendered impacts of disaster. In order to address that structural inequality, we need a coordinated approach, recognizing the continuum of violence people have faced well before a disaster event, which could be conflict or disaster or both of them.

I think we could have started this conversation by discussing the Rohingya crisis. For instance, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees are in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. It is common knowledge that the Rohingya settlement is prone to various hazards, including flooding, landslide and only recently it was on fire. Thousands of people have lost their homes once again and then add COVID-19 to it. However, if you look at the support they are receiving, they are all humanitarian interventions, temporary in nature, and there is no consideration given to structural problems. A single cause of the problem is identified and the rest of it is ignored. Will this kind of intervention lead to the peace imagined by the feminist peace scholars and advocates?

MF:

It's also because when you look at conflicts and disasters through a gender perspective, you can see you're up against problems that are difficult to fix. Whereas in the DRR world, you can (theoretically) contain the problem and see a way of fixing it. If you view it technically, technologically, you can fix the problem. Building a bigger flood embankment, for example, it's really addressing a symptom and not the root cause of why we really have a disaster, why a hazard becomes a disaster. Whereas what we're often talking about, when we're talking about those who are impacted most severely across this continuum, it's the same marginalized, disadvantaged groups, we're talking about a whole range of inequalities and prejudicial behaviours – that's very difficult to 'fix'.

COVID-19 is another example. One of the things the COVID-19 pandemic has done is to raise the visibility of gender-based violence, particularly family violence, as if COVID-19 caused it, as if it's a new thing. Whereas those gender and disaster scholars who work on gender-based violence will have decades of examples of how gender-based violence is one of those root causes of other impacts, it's not another symptom, it's there at the root, and it's there before disaster ever comes into the equation.¹⁴

PY:

That actually leads to two points. One is that purely because the disaster, for example, COVID-19, is seen as amenable to a technical fix, we saw rules coming with immediate effect like 'stay home, stay safe', as if the home was the safest place. Whereas for many women, it was not a safe place to be.

Moreover, building and rebuilding is a masculine act. This may help answer the question I always had; that is, why is the discussion of women's participation in DRR not as advanced as that in post-conflict interventions, despite the fact that disasters are considered non-political events? Despite the challenges of increasing women's representation in decision-making for peace-related interventions, the discourse on women's representation is quite advanced and efforts are being made. You would think that women's participation in DRR should be more advanced, but that is not the case. The discussion around women's participation in DRR is very much limited to the community level, but when it comes to policymaking or any decision-making level, women's representation is far less in DRR than peace-related interventions. DRR is very much male-dominated, as it has to do with technicality, it has to do with engineering, it has to do with building and reconstruction, which is guided by the perception that women can't or don't do it. Likewise, gender mainstreaming is an important part of DRR interventions. However, both the discourse and practice of gender is very much limited to the needs of some special categories of women. The gender discourse in DRR is not as advanced as in peace and conflict studies. What is your observation on that?

MF:

It has been male-dominated for a long time in the more formal structures, but any of the gender and disaster research will spotlight the very obvious role of women in the more informal settings of disaster response, disaster mitigation, disaster planning, disaster reconstruction. There has been in recent years, and it's relatively recent, a proper recognition of women's role. 15 By the way, I'm aware that we're taking a very simple binary approach to discussing gender, but as the majority of the literature is really based in that binary male-female. masculine-feminine construction, so most of the research will focus very much on women and the policy frameworks. The policy frameworks, the global policy frameworks, like Hyogo Framework for Action and the follow-on Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-30; there has been a very slight shift, not the big shift to equity and then equality that a lot of us were campaigning for, advocating for, but there is recognition around women's leadership coming through in those, so a recognition that women are not just represented

as needy, that we should take account of women's needs, and that they can be vulnerable, but it also recognizes that they are actively engaged in all of these different levels and that we have to be more mindful of women's existing leadership and make spaces for more. That becomes easier at this community-based level; it's a lot easier for women to get a foot in the door at this local level than to be represented at national or global level forums.¹⁶

PY: One of the commonalities between the two fields is that women are seen as largely victims, not as agents of change, ¹⁷ and even when women are recognized as agents, a very narrow lens has been applied. Women's agency is looked at through a victim perspective. For a woman to be seen as an agent of change, they need to be included, promoted, empowered *by*

someone else. Until then, they are not included, they are still a victim. This has a consequence for achieving gender justice

and sustainable peace.

Let's move on to the final part of our conversation and talk about what needs to be done, how should we move from here onwards? What should be done at a policy level? What can we do practically on the ground? And, what should be our role as scholars from these two separate but connected fields of studies? That's quite an agenda. If I started at the last question, and thought about the scholarship, then it would be interesting to have more pieces of work where there were dual authors, like

ourselves, coming from the two perspectives.

The conflict field has been so much better (and you will immediately think of all the ways it's not!) in terms of its recognition and its security agenda for women, to recognize the threat to women. That has only relatively recently come on the agenda in the disaster context. I think there are some really useful things that we in the disasters world can learn from that and we can be alert to the security risks – and I mean that in personal terms, such as intimate partner violence, as well as wider security risks to women and other marginalized groups, such as sexual and gender minorities. 18 From disaster, we could say look at some of the advances we've made in women's representation, particularly at the local level and particularly around women's leadership role and recognition and respect for that role, and it would be interesting to sit down to explore how this would play out in a conflict context; what is transferable and what is deeply problematic and cannot be, but there just isn't that conversation normally.

MF:

PY: Let's talk about the policy because this is where the problem lies. What do you think should happen at the global level and national level?

MF: I think there are beginnings of change which should certainly be developed. One example, which is not a link between disaster and conflict so much as another policy framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – another area that has tended to be separated, with its own agenda for moving forward – but the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction have a little graphic where they have made some connections between the Sendai Framework targets and some of the SDGs. ¹⁹ I think that kind of thing could go a lot more widely, you could do that kind of mapping across different policy domains and specific policies and how they might benefit from the interaction between them.

I agree, mapping policies related to DRR and conflict – for PY: instance, all the Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security – could be the first step. The next step would be the coordination between different agencies and organizations working on conflict, DRR and climate change, from the global to the local level. At the moment, the divide is not just between DRR and conflict, but also climate change, which is seen as separate to DRR. Even at the national level, they need to come together and map what are the policies, where are the gaps, and then design interventions accordingly. What we are talking about today is re-envisioning disaster and conflict as a continuum, where root causes are taken into consideration in order for a gender-just, peaceful society. What we mean by this is that gender becomes a starting point for any conversation around DRR policies and frameworks, where structural cases are taken into consideration for prevention. Likewise, gender is often understood as women. However, the gendered structure also impacts men and sexual minorities differently. Hence, gender-just society is where the needs of all genders are given equal consideration for a sustainable peace.

MF: There's a commodification of these worlds and the different UN agencies have to ask for money from Member States for their very existence. It has to be framed around a cause, a problem, a target, a goal, and it's very difficult for the individual UN entities to give up any hard-won money that they may have received, to share it with some other entity. There is a massive structure behind it that has to do with the material realities of how these entities come into existence and are maintained.

which is a whole other area we don't have time to explore in this conversation, but certainly needs looking at.²⁰

PY: The power relations and funding and how that has impact on the ground is something that is quite complex and not easy to resolve, but if the structure is questioned, maybe that might give us some way forward. I think we also need to rethink the notion of civil society in feminist peace scholarship.

Notes

- Consensus event refers to an assumption that community conflict occurs less frequently in emergency periods and tends to be in the post-impact (post-emergency) period. Stallings, R. (1988) 'Conflict in natural disasters: a codification of consensus and conflict theories', Social Science Quarterly, 69(3): 569–86.
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- ³ UNISDR (2015) Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, UNDRR, Available from: www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework
- Yadav, P. and Horn, D.M. (2021) 'Continuum of violence: feminist peace research and gender-based violence', in Väyrynen, T., Parashar, S., Féron, É. and Confortini, C.C. (eds) Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research, Abingdon: Routledge, pp 105–14.
- See Väyrynen, T., Parashar, S., Féron, É. and Confortini, C.C. (eds) (2021) Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research, Abingdon: Routledge.
- ⁶ Centre for Gender and Disaster, Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction, UCL, www. ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/research/centre-gender-and-disaster
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- ⁸ Zaidi, R.Z. and Fordham, M. (2021) 'The missing half of the Sendai Framework: gender and women in the implementation of global disaster risk reduction policy', *Progress in Disaster Science*, 10, 100170, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2021.100170.
- ⁹ Tickner, J.A. (1995) 'Introducing feminist perspectives into peace and world security courses', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 23(3/4): 48–57.
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- ¹² See Henri Myrttinen and Diana López Castañeda, this volume.
- ¹³ Yadav and Horn, 'Continuum of violence', pp 105–14.
- See Rezwana, N. and Pai, R. (2021) 'Gender-based violence before, during and after cyclones: slow violence and layered disasters', *Disasters*, 45(4): 741–61; Molin, J. (2018) 'Preventing gender-based violence post disasters: building the capacity of humanitarian actors in the Philippines to engage with men and boys to reduce the risks of perpetration of violence', MA diss., Uppsala University.

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- UNISDR, Sendai Framework, p 13; Enarson, E. and Dhar Chakrabarti, P.G. (2009) Women, Gender and Disaster: Global Issues and Initiatives, New Delhi: Sage; UNDRR (2019) 'Women's leadership key to reducing disaster mortality', UNDRR News, 16 May, Available from: www.undrr.org/news/womens-leadership-key-reducing-disaster-mortality; UNDRR (2015) Women's Leadership in Risk-Resilient Development: Good Practices and Lessons Learned, Bangkok: UNISDR, Available from: www.unisdr.org/files/42882_42882womensleadershipinriskresilien.pdf
- ¹⁶ Zaidi and Fordham, 'The missing half of the Sendai Framework'.
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- 19 The Sendai Framework and the SDGs, Available from: www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/sf-and-sdgs
- ²⁰ See Helen Kezie-Nwoha, Nela Porobić Isaković, Madeleine Rees and Sarah Smith, this volume.

Further reading

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