



Symposium “Gender, Conflict, and Global Environmental Change”

edited by *Christiane Fröhlich* and *Giovanna Gioli*

Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice, Vol. 27, Issue 2, 2015.

The symposium presented here is the outcome of several workshops held by the Gender, Conflict and Climate Change Network which was initiated by Christian Fröhlich and Giovanna Gioli at the University of Hamburg. The network aims at exploring the nexus between gender, environmental scarcity and violent conflict and to build inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge on gender-sensitive conflict analyses in the context of resource degradation and scarcity.

Gender is a relevant category both for the analysis of conflict escalation processes and the understanding of differing vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of women and men with regard to global environmental change and resource scarcity. This understanding, however, has yet to be translated into a comprehensive research framework that integrates gender as an analytical category into environmental and conflict research. Only very few and recent studies explicitly analyze the nexus between gender, environment, and conflict.

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Mapping gender in environmental conflict

Several methodological and conceptual bottlenecks need to be addressed in order to develop a gender-sensitive, holistic approach to environmentally-related conflicts, ranging from the difficulty of collecting and harmonizing sex-disaggregated data across multiple scales to the persistence of what we define as “gender myths.” In the following, four recurrent challenges as well as prevalent gender myths are outlined.

Firstly, gender hierarchies are extraordinarily resilient. Even when acute conflict has changed gender roles, patriarchal and discriminatory social norms tend to reassert themselves in post-conflict periods. Therefore, long-term studies are required in order to fully understand gender dynamics in a particular context. Secondly, legal advances to eliminate gender-based

discriminatory norms and practices tend to be slow to affect the real dynamics of gender relations. The gap between new laws (*de jure*) and practice (*de facto*) remains large. Thus, studies of gender-sensitive decision making need to be accompanied by in-depth field research of their reach and implementation. Thirdly, hybrid institutions as well as a weak state presence across the national territory often leave their mark on resource conflicts. Therefore, gender-responsive approaches must focus not on formal state institutions exclusively, but have to include non-state actors, informal institutions, and local orders in order to draw a full picture. Fourthly, gender issues are often delegated to “gender experts,” resulting in gender-responsive approaches remaining easily dismissible and peripheral to both research efforts and political decision making—which is in itself an illustration of gendered power structures in most societies.

In addition to these challenges, there are five myth complexes which hinder gender-sensitive research on environmental conflicts. These webs of interlinking beliefs and views operate through oversimplification, de-contextualization, and repetition. Once absorbed into policy and donors’ priorities, myths proliferate and are perceived as a valid justification for the work of countless bodies at several levels, making their debunking a requirement for gender sensitive peace and development work.

The most common fallacy is to consider gender as synonymous with women. If gender is not understood and implemented as a relational, intersectional category (or a performative identity), it becomes reified in what could easily be translated as biological sex. Moreover, centuries-old, patriarchal social structures, which confine a large part of global womanhood to the private sphere, to household chores, childcare and the like, have been continuously misunderstood as a natural, female “nurturing disposition.” It is often assumed that women have a special relationship with nature and/or that women are more caring, and thus peaceful, than men. Women’s stronger sense of obligation to and responsibility for family and household matters are, however, not natural phenomena, but socially constructed societal roles. Another gender myth revolves around women as “agents of change”. Investing in women has become a development mantra, which aims to weaken traditional gender and social roles and to empower women to demand further change. The initial idea has increasingly been substituted by a simple, neo-liberal market logic, however: Poor women have become a sound economic and political investment, without investors taking into account the exploitative structures that come with giving money to poor women without simultaneously building the structures and institutions necessary to help them to build and expand a business. In addition, women are often referred to as a homogenous group, with limited consideration of how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, religion, political preferences etc. This leads to discriminating and “one-fits-all” policy approaches. There is a strong need to recognize the ways in which institutional practices shape access to resources and political participation, often through the social construction of gender and its intersection with other factors which shape inequalities and vulnerabilities. Lastly, it is often assumed that women are mainly or even exclusively the victims of global environmental change, resource scarcity, and conflict. They are thereby denied agency in complex social phenomena, which leads to a victimization bias in research and analysis. Such continuous victimization reinforces power and gender inequalities by continuously reifying the assumedly “weak” gender as helpless.

The symposium presented here offers new approaches and solutions to the continuing lack of conceptualization of gender in environmental conflicts.

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