Women, War and Climate Change

Claire Duncanson and Carol Cohn

Claire Duncanson and Carol Cohn are both members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Claire in Scotland, UK and Carol in the USA. They work to develop a Feminist Roadmap for Sustainable Peace. This article is based on a talk Claire gave for Scottish WILPF in October 2020.

What can a feminist lens bring to our understanding of war and to climate change? And, more importantly perhaps, in what ways can feminism help us respond?

One thing that feminists might draw attention to is the way that both war and climate breakdown have *gendered impacts*, often disproportionately harming women

Women often bear the brunt of coping with war and climate-related shocks and stresses, because of the roles assigned to them in most areas of the world, which include responsibility for food management, water procurement and caring for family members. Feminist scholars of forced displacement note that women are often "less mobile and less monied;"[i] as such, they face particular challenges when their homes and livelihoods come under threat from war or climate disruption; it can be harder, riskier to seek safety. War and climate-related health crises can be more lethal for women, because in many parts of the world, health facilities are more often unavailable or unaffordable to them.[ii]

But, while war and climate breakdown have profoundly gendered impacts, there are some risks in emphasising the disproportionate impact of war and climate breakdown on women. What about the people from other marginalized groups, and the many men, who suffer? Do we risk reinforcing the idea of women as essentially vulnerable, as victims – an image that has limited what women can do, and prevented them from being taken seriously as actors, as leaders?

This brings us to a second thing that feminists might draw attention to: the way that mainstream policy solutions to war and to the climate crisis *tend to neglect women's agency.*

Women are not equal participants in decision-making bodies on climate policies, and their work developing local, on the ground sustainable solutions adequately is not acknowledged or valued. While some of the recent COPs (conference of parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)) have affirmed the need to ensure 'gender balance,' the targets have still not been reached. When it comes to responding to war, women are still hugely underrepresented in peace processes, comprising, between 1992 and 2018, only 13 percent of negotiators, only 4 percent of signatories, and 3 percent of mediators.[iii] This is despite 20 years of the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which is focused on increasing women's participation in peacebuilding.

Feminists campaign for women to be included in climate negotiations, and peacebuilding, for their expertise and agency to be recognised. But, there are risks here too. When the argument for women's inclusion and participation is based on the difference women will make, it can can reinforce the same stereotypes and myths that have prevented women from being taken

seriously in public life. Furthermore, the argument for women's inclusion risks placing too much weight on the virtues of individual women, and too little on the need for structural change. That is, these narratives suggest that women will be able to clean up the messes men have made, despite their limited access to social, economic and political power, while leaving in place the forces that have been driving the problems in the first place. The forces driving both climate breakdown and war are structural and originate in the patriarchal, racist economic system of extractivist capitalism.

This is why feminists also draw attention to a third thing: power structures, the need to challenge them, and to challenge the dominant narratives that naturalise and legitimate them.

If we're to address the climate crisis, we need to challenge extractivist capitalism, which relies on the extraction of Earth's resources as if they were unlimited, and which encourages the destruction of Earth's ecosystems by leaving the environmental costs of production, from pollution to the release of greenhouse gases, entirely outside of its accounting systems. It is this that has driven us to the climate and biodiversity catastrophes we currently face.

If we're to address war, we need to challenge the structure of militarism. Collectively, governments around the world invest nearly two trillion dollars each year on military spending.[iv] And, whilst many parts of the economy have collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic, arms manufacturers have been treated as essential services in many weapons-producing countries, enabling their profits to increase. As WILPF put it, we have structured our societies for war, not peace.[v]

To challenge dominant power structures such as capitalism and militarism, which are intertwined, we also need to challenge dominant narratives that underpin them. We need to challenge the ideas about gender that underpin both the thoroughly extractive, domination-oriented relation to people and the planet that is at the heart of our climate crisis and the aggression, domination and confrontation that underpin and drive militarism and war.

From ideas that it is man's right to have dominion over nature and to have cheap and plentiful energy via fossil fuels, to the idea that it is manly to have the most powerful weaponry and to stand up and fight, it is the association of masculinity with certain ways of approaching the world that makes them seem natural, "realistic" and superior.

The association of masculinity with certain ways of approaching the world also shapes the kinds of "solutions" to climate breakdown and war that are bring proposed and invested in. Geo-engineering, carbon capture and storage, and so on pose environmental risks themselves, threaten to deepen existing inequalities within and between nations, and are not commensurate with the deep transformations in our approach to the planet we live on that the scale and urgency of the crises demand. But, their association with masculinity – high-tech, mastery over nature – has enabled them to seem like credible ways forward.

Likewise, when it comes to resolving conflict or ensuring security, the preferred approach is often militarized confrontation and aggression. In 2017, worldwide military spending was 12 times what OECD-DAC countries spent on aid. Imagine if the resources were instead channelled into peace, diplomacy and development. That they are not is in part due to the power and profit to be gained from militaristic responses. But what makes it seem reasonable and "natural" that they are not is rooted the masculinized association of strength and

protection with confrontation and domination, and the concomitant idea that any other approach to security is weak and wimpy.

So, what does all this mean for how we respond to war and climate breakdown?

It is, of course, important to draw attention to the gendered impacts of war and climate breakdown. They are very real, and they can be a useful mobilising tool, convincing people to care. But we need to be aware of the risks as we highlight war and climate breakdown's disproportionate impacts, and make sure we neither essentialise women as victims nor ignore other marginalized groups.

Equally, it is important to highlight women's agency. Women often *do* have solutions and it's women's right to participate in peace and climate processes. But again we need to be aware of the risks and mitigate them; for example, don't let women be held up as "perfect peacebuilders" or "sustainability saviours" without simultaneously being well-resourced and empowered to work towards structural change.

But simultaneously, and perhaps most critically, it's important to focus on and challenge the dominant political and economic structures driving war and climate crises, and the narratives that make them seem natural and legitimate. This is harder to do, especially in the policy world, but crucial if we are to create a political system based not on mutual armament but on interdependence – among people and among nations – as the basis for mutual collaborative action; and an economic system based not on the short-sighted, destructive ethic of limitless individualistic acquisition and corporate concentration of wealth but based on an ethics of care and the goal of enabling people and the planet to flourish.

[i] 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.

[ii] UNEP. 2016. *Global Gender and Environment Outlook*. Nairobi: UN Environment.

[iii] https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures

[iv] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Global military expenditure sees largest annual increase in a decade—says SIPRI—reaching $1917 billion in 2019," April 27, 2020, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largestannual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion

[v] https://www.wilpf.org/from-ceasefire-to-divestment-and-disarmament/