



Mohbuba Choudhury

Louise Arimatsu

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## Reclaiming the WPS Agenda: it's time to talk about the elephant in the room

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*Displacement levels in Bangladesh as a result of the influx of Rohingya refugees has had a detrimental impact upon the local environment. The arrival of some [700,000 refugees](#) to a country already marred by the impacts of climate change and the occurrence of frequent natural disasters raises complex questions around the protection of the displaced population and the protection of the eco-*

*system within which sanctuary is sought. [Mohbuba Choudhury](#) and [Louise Arimatsu](#) explore the relevance of the Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda to the protection of the eco-system.*

Between August 2017 and January 2018, Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar in their thousands following acts that have since been described by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as a '[textbook example of ethnic cleansing](#)' leading to one of the largest concentrations of refugees in the world residing in 34 camps in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. The mass displacement prompted the international community into action primarily to provide the refugees with international protection and humanitarian assistance responsive to their particular needs.

The [international protection mechanisms](#) that come into operation are hugely complex and are designed to take account of the [gendered dimensions of displacement](#). It is now widely recognised that displacement not only amplifies vulnerabilities and exacerbates pre-existing inequalities but gives rise to new gendered risks that require specific responses. One such risk, that is gaining greater attention, concerns the adverse gendered consequences that flow from the damage wreaked on the ecosystem due to the mass displacement.

### **Environmental degradation, resource depletion and harm to wildlife**

The environmental degradation in Cox's Bazar has been immense. The expansion of the existing campsites has led to more than [2000 ha of forest loss](#) and the extension of the old Kutapalong camp has blocked the only migration corridor used by the globally endangered

[Asian elephant](#) trapping 45 elephants in the Western side of the camp. The remaining elephant habitat is under severe pressure due to the surge in collection of firewood from the forest, further exacerbating the tension between humans and elephants. Also at risk is the biodiversity of the surrounding areas including the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, the Himchari National Park and the Inani National Park.

For at least several decades, the international community has been aware of the enormous damage that the mass displacement of people can have on an eco-system. Yet, the responsibility of States to mitigate the impact of displacement on the environment remains weak with protection afforded through non-binding instruments such as the [Sphere standards](#), and [UNHCR's Guidelines](#) which call for rapid environmental impact assessments, energy feasibility studies and natural resource management plans ahead of large influxes. As is evident in Bangladesh, these precautionary measures are far from sufficient especially when the displacement affects a State such as Bangladesh that is ill-equipped to cope with a sudden and sizeable influx.



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### **An emerging normative framework**

That far more robust measures are needed to [protect the ecosystem in armed conflict](#) is acknowledged by States as exemplified by the adoption in 2016 of UNEP [Resolution 2/5 by 193](#) Member States of the UN Environment Assembly. In particular, the resolution recognises the “critical importance of protecting the environment at all times, especially during armed conflict, and of its restoration in the post-conflict period, including from the unintended collateral impacts of human displacement resulting from armed conflict.”

Likewise, the issue is also being addressed by the [International Law Commission](#); [draft principle 14 bis](#) reads, “States and other relevant actors should take appropriate measures to prevent and mitigate

environmental degradation in areas where persons displaced by conflict are located, while providing relief for such persons and local communities.” Protecting the eco-system has been recognised by States as a high priority with its inclusion in the [SDGs](#) while, at the domestic level, there is an emerging body of law that recognises the inherent [rights of nature](#).

While these steps are welcome, the need to ensure that a gender perspective is fully integrated into the development of law and policy to protect the environment is critical. The degradation of the ecosystem has severe short- and long-term adverse consequences that affect women and men in different ways including in respect to health, livelihoods, security, dignity and wellbeing. This is recognised in the UNEP resolution which draws attention to the “specific negative effects of environmental degradation on women and the need to apply a gender perspective with respect to the environment and armed conflict”.



*“States and other relevant actors should take appropriate measures to prevent and mitigate environmental degradation in areas where persons displaced by conflict are located, while providing relief for such*

*persons and local communities.”*



International Law Commission - draft principle 14 bis

### **The WPS agenda: protection from and during displacement and relief during displacement**

Through its WPS agenda the Security Council has, on several occasions, addressed the rights of women who have been forcibly displaced in conflict. The WPS resolutions have recognised that **displaced persons face heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence, called for effective mechanisms of protection from violence for women and girls in refugee camps, noted that sexual violence may constitute a gender related form of persecution** (a crucial factor in determining eligibility for refugee status) and have called for **input from women and girls in the design of camps**. These resolutions have served to ensure that a gender perspective is incorporated into humanitarian responses to displacement in conflict situations and that the particular needs of women living in camps are met including, for example, the provision of sufficient lighting, separate sanitation facilities, fair food distribution systems and equal access to education and livelihoods opportunities.

Many of these measures are already required of States pursuant to their existing treaty and customary international law obligations. For

those who have been displaced across an international border, like the Rohingya population, the [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) applies. The treaty elaborates on the specific rights to which all refugees are entitled underpinned by fundamental principles including non-discrimination, non-penalisation and non-refoulement.

Over the years, courts have played a critical role in interpreting States' obligations to ensure the Convention's applicability and relevance to women in light of their particular needs including, for example, the right to work, to education, housing and travel documentation. These provisions have also been reinforced by international human rights law including the [Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#).

In particular, the [CEDAW Committee](#) has elaborated on the interplay between the [Convention and the WPS agenda](#) reminding States Parties of their obligation to protect the rights of displaced women and girls including access to basic services during flight, displacement and in the context of durable solutions and to address the specific risks and particular needs of different groups of women who are subjected to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Thus, the WPS agenda provides an invaluable frame through which the specific risks and particular needs of displaced women can be surfaced including new gendered risks they confront in ever-shifting precarious environments. But does the agenda provide an 'entry point' through which to address the protection of the eco-system?





*View of the sprawling Kutupalong refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Image credit: [DFID \(CC. BY 2.0\)](#)*

## What peace?

The 'relief and recovery' pillar of the WPS agenda remains the most ambiguous of the four pillars that comprise the agenda. It is frequently associated with humanitarian relief efforts, with access to criminal justice, health services and trauma counselling for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and with post-conflict peace-building measures. Notwithstanding the limitation of the terms themselves, 'relief' and 'recovery' have been interpreted to encompass the potential for transformative change, holding out the promise of a future in which gender equality and peace *that is relevant and meaningful to women* is realised.

Read in this manner, protecting the eco-system is an integral



ingredient of the WPS agenda. Clearly, in the context of relief efforts, protecting the environment is necessary if only to ensure that the rights of displaced women are not violated by virtue of the degrading environmental conditions that are likely to have a disproportionate adverse effect on their day to day lives. Likewise, protection of the eco-system is necessary to ensure that there is a sustainable environment within which communities can recover, rebuild and flourish in

As the Rohingya refugee crisis heads towards a situation of protracted displacement, the protection of the ecosystem is becoming of paramount importance. The WPS agenda provides a critical entry point through which to explore and craft new answers to this complex crisis.

*This blog is part of the mini-series on Gender, Nature and Peace, framing the conversation on women's rights, climate change, the environment and post-conflict situations, and builds on the first Gender, Nature and Peace workshop, funded by the British Academy small grant and by the AHRC project a Feminist International Law of Peace and Security. The second workshop is due to take place in Colombia in December 2019.*

Read the latest report from the Centre, [Gender Action for Peace and Security](#), and the [LSE Middle East Centre – “Women, Peace and Security and Displacement in the Middle East”](#) on the gendered impacts of displacement and how the Women, Peace and Security agenda can be used to address the issue of conflict-related displacement better.

*The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not reflect LSE's or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.*

## About the author



**Mohbuba Choudhury**

Mohbuba is a lawyer with extensive experience in refugee law and policy. She has worked in a variety of contexts including for the UK government and international organisations. During her work for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) she advised the UK government on improvements to the asylum and statelessness procedure in line with international law. Recently her work with UNHCR in Ethiopia involved practical implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, including contributions to the Ethiopia Economic Opportunities Project and the progressive new Refugee Proclamation. She has co-authored a number of publications on asylum and refugee issues. Her research interests include international refugee law, international humanitarian law, trafficking, statelessness, and the intersection between humanitarian and development spheres in the forced displacement context.



Dr Louise Arimatsu is Distinguished Policy Fellow in the Centre for Women, Peace and Security, where she works on the AHRC project 'A Feminist International Law of Peace and Security' and the ERC project 'Gendered Peace'. Her current research projects include 'A Feminist Foreign Policy' and 'Women and Weapons'.

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