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The paradox of plenty and its impact on gendered policy

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Current international approaches to the link between natural resource wealth and conflict fail to address the root causes of these wars and their gendered dimensions. In this article [Eliana Cusato](#) argues that these current approaches uphold a specific image of the relationship between natural resources, war and peace, premised on the so-called 'resource curse' theory which has shaped our understanding of the

problem of conflict resources and the legal and policy solutions to address it.

Access to and distribution of natural resources are often at the root of violent conflict. Yet it is only over the last few decades that international institutions and scholars have started to pay attention to the linkages between natural resources (particularly, resource commodities) and wars. Since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of initiatives aimed at ending wars fuelled through the exploitation of natural resources, preventing conflict-relapse, and addressing selected human rights violations. Examples include sanctions imposed on state and non-state actors by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and regulatory/voluntary measures, such as the [Kimberley Process Certification Scheme for Diamonds](#), the [Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative \(EITI\)](#), and the [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Mineral Supply Chains](#).

Whereas there is a wealth of literature on the possibilities and limitations associated with these initiatives, less attention has been paid to the theoretical underpinnings of existing international practices. This article argues that current approaches to conflict resources uphold a specific conceptualisation of the relationship between natural resources, war and peace, which is premised on the so-called 'resource curse' theory. This theory expounds a 'paradox of plenty' whereby states rich with natural resources experience poor economic growth and an increased likelihood of violent conflict. Within this context, natural resources (oil, minerals, diamonds, timber) are defined in terms of their role in increasing the risk of conflict or acting as an obstacle to peace. However, as claimed by postcolonial

scholars, this theory tells a partial story of the causes of resource wars and may inspire policies and legal arrangements which consolidate the control over natural resources by governments and corporate actors without challenging the structures that generate poverty and grievances in the Global South. Further, this simplified understanding of resource wars has specific implications for women in conflict and post-conflict countries.



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The resource curse theory and its critique

Since the end of the 1980s, there has been a significant body of research proposing a link between natural resource wealth and various socio-political ills. While acknowledging the competing explanations for the resource-conflict correlation, it is possible to identify three main strands within this vast literature.

The first is the 'greed versus grievances' debate. In *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What can be Done?* Collier claims that 'some societies are more prone to conflict than others because they offer more inviting economic prospects for rebellion' such as large deposits of valuable natural resources. A focus on institutional weaknesses is what characterises the grievances theory, which regards undemocratic and dysfunctional governance by corrupt political elites as a factor potentially leading to armed conflict.

Second, resource curse scholars maintain that the availability of 'lootable' natural resources can prolong the duration of hostilities because resource commodities provide rebel groups with the revenues to sustain their military campaign and represent an economic incentive to prolong the fighting. The outbreak of an armed conflict would generate a new "political economy of war", where belligerents accumulate wealth through the exploitation of valuable commodities.

Third, valuable natural resources can act as a disincentive for the peace process. The literature on environmental peacebuilding emerged more recently to reduce the risks associated with bad resource governance in post-conflict settings. A key concern for this

groups of scholars is [to reform how natural resources are managed to improve transparency and accountability, kick start the economy](#), and thus reinforce the peace process.

While some of the early claims associated with the resource curse theory have been revisited, its main propositions have entered [NGO](#) and [government](#) debates on armed conflict. In the collective imaginary, conflicts in Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia (to name a few) have been associated with brutal wars waged by rebels driven by the lust for 'blood diamonds'. Support for this narrative has resulted in internationally-supported interventions to reinforce governmental control over resource-rich areas, to secure extraction sites, promote 'good governance' and responsible business conduct, fight public corruption, and mitigate selected human rights abuses (often committed by rebel groups). Briefly, the resource curse thesis has profoundly shaped our understanding of the problem of conflict resources and legal and policy solutions to address it.

By accepting its main propositions, however, the silences and contradictions of the theory have been sidelined. According to postcolonial scholars, a limitation of the resource curse thesis is that it is based upon a 'commodity determinism', which ignores the historical and structural dimensions of resource scarcity, maldistribution, and poverty in the Global South. By focusing on local actors (corrupt elites, rebel/military groups), the role of external actors, such as former colonial powers, transnational corporations, and international organisations in producing scarcity, poverty and thus violence is obscured. Cyril Obi argues that "[blind spots in hegemonic discussions of the oil curse in Africa include the place of Africa's oil in](#)

the global political economy, and how transnational actors and structures are deeply implicated in the corruption and armed conflicts in oil-rich states". Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt claims that the resource curse thesis is predicated upon on a colonial fantasy, which sees the Global South as a place of "complete lack of control and disorder...whose inhabitants – by some irrational logic of nature – have found themselves endowed with resources that cannot or do not know how to deal with an orderly manner".



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These critiques call attention to some generalisations and biases of the resource curse theory, and its incapacity to grasp the broader causes and dynamics of resource wars. Given its dominance in international policy and academic circles, the question that needs to

be engaged concerns the effects of the theory on global legal responses to 'conflict resources'. What becomes seen and what is hidden by the current focus on security, transparency, and good governance? What harms and forms of violence receive international attention and what are marginalised?

The effects of normative and policy solutions to conflict resources on women and girls

Women may be part of a community affected by conflict-related resource extraction, while at the same time [suffering differentiated impacts to those of men](#). These impacts include contamination of lands and water, its effect on biodiversity, and the increased burdens on women who may be responsible for food production and finding clean water; gender specific health impacts of resource extraction; loss of livelihood; and increased risks of sexual violence due to the influx of male workers or the presence of the military and private security forces to protect extractive projects.

Yet, [dominant approaches](#) to conflict resources focus on rape and sexual violence as the main negative consequences suffered by women and on rebel groups/local actors as the key perpetrators. In other words, sexual violence [has been understood](#) as the primary manifestation of violence against women in these contexts. The emphasis on sexual violence has resulted in the failure to take seriously the structural forms of gendered violence linked to resource extraction in conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

Notably, [as observed by Catherine Macdonald](#), women in mining communities may suffer economic inequalities in relation to

accessing the benefits of extractive projects, while disproportionately bearing the costs. Economic inequality, like gender inequality, is a form of structural violence, which can be understood as violence against those whose economic marginalisation maintains their situation of vulnerability. Economic inequality can be exacerbated by situational factors such as violent conflict. Inequality in access to natural resources is also recognised as one of the drivers of conflict. However, current international approaches to conflict resources **fail to address the root-causes of these wars, including distributive justice concerns.**



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Based upon the connection between resource extraction and sexual violence, the conflict resources narrative assumes that women need

to be parted from these settings to be 'saved' or 'rescued'. This approach negates women's agency, reinforces the same gender stereotypes that help fuel sexual violence (notably, representing men as sexually dominant/aggressive and women as submissive/passive), and becomes the justification for paternalistic and imperial responses, [especially when the 'victims' are women in the Third World](#). [As noted by Lahiri-Dutt](#), this denies women's active choices to pursue employment in the extractive industry, by constructing women living near extractive sites as 'homogenous groups' and labelling them as powerless, exploited and sexually harassed.

Although women living closely to mines may be more likely to be subject to sexual violence and rape than other women, it does not mean that removing them from the mining scene will improve their situation. The '[exit strategy](#)' is a way of treating the symptoms, instead of tackling the causes, like patriarchy, structural inequality, and subordination. Given the scarcity of alternative means of income, legislation and policies aimed at protecting women by excluding them from mining/extractive areas [may actually be counterproductive](#) as they reinforce the male-dominated nature of extractive industry.

Integrating a gender perspective

Informal normative processes, like the Kimberley Process and EITI, which have been the mainstream solution to conflict resources, do not sufficiently integrate a gender perspective. Further, measures aimed at reinforcing state control over mines often include the prohibition of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). ASM is the conventional extraction method employed in developing countries (especially in conflict zones), where the workers use simple tools, often digging by

hand. [Data shows](#) that women account for up to 30 per cent of the global ASM workforce, reaching 50 per cent in Africa. As such, the ban on ASM has a negative impact on women livelihoods and socio-economic rights.

The UN Group of Experts on the DRC [found that](#) due diligence requirements, combined with commodity sanctions imposed by Western states, have resulted in extractive companies to turn to 'safer' sources of origin, such as Asia. The decline in production not only affects local miners but also numerous small businesses in mining areas. Although women are not in a majority in the mining industry, many depend on the demand of services connected to the industry. The side effects of these policies have been raising unemployment and poverty, including among women.

Simplified discourses, premised upon the resource curse thesis, have created one-dimensional and often ineffective responses, which leave unaddressed the complex root-causes and dynamics of resource wars. Global efforts to address the resource-conflict nexus and its gender dimensions have done little more than perpetuating inequalities, stereotypes, and the status quo. Moving forward, a deeper engagement with structural forms of gendered violence linked to resource extraction in conflict and post-conflict countries is needed. [As feminist legal scholars](#) have argued, paying attention to the underlying causes of violent conflict, in particular unequal distribution of natural resources, may eventually lead to a different conceptualisation of peace, as something more than just the absence of war.

This blog is part of the mini-series on Gender, Nature and Peace,

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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.

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Eliana Cusato is a visiting scholar at the Lauterpacht Centre for International Law (University of Cambridge). She holds academic qualifications from the National University of Singapore (Ph.D.), Catholic University of Milan (LLB and LLM), and University of Technology of Sydney. Eliana's research explores the link between nature and violent conflict in the context of international legal practices. Prior to entering academia, she worked as a litigation lawyer specialising in corporate and transnational crimes and interned at the International Criminal Court.

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