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Environment and war: what the WPS agenda can teach us about invisible crimes

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How can non-human beings and the environment be better protected in war? [Benjamin Duerr](#) explores the lessons we can learn from the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda in making crimes against the Earth visible, and in innovating international law and policies.

In wars, animals and the environment are invisible casualties. Conflict can lead to the [devastation of forests, waters and entire areas](#) and, in many cases, is [one of the strongest factors in the change of animal populations](#): when war breaks out, populations decline significantly.

The perception of these wartime attacks on the environment resembles the way the international community has been thinking about crimes against women in the past:

- Both have been ignored by governments, militaries and prosecutors for most of the time in history. They have been largely invisible in policy processes, court proceedings and peacebuilding efforts.
- Violence against both women and the environment have been seen as collateral damage and as an inevitable consequence of war.
- Both have received relatively little attention from lawyers and policy-makers who have taken a long time to take action against the grave consequences of war on women and the environment.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda made violence against women in war visible. Survivors, civil society and committed states have shed light on the problem and put it on the [agenda of the Security Council and other international institutions](#). There is broad recognition among governments that war has brutal effects on women, and that crimes against them should not be tolerated. As a consequence, laws, institutions and a policy framework has evolved in the Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This agenda has led to the establishment of the Office of the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and the implementation of National Action Plans on WPS by some states, as well as initiatives at the local level around the world. Although there are still [gaps between the ambitions and the actual implementation](#), the WPS process has led to some important improvements, for example, in the development of policies by states at the national level, the prosecution of sexual violence crimes and the level of awareness among states, organisations and individuals.

Lessons from the WPS agenda

How did the WPS agenda achieve these improvements? And what lessons can be learned for a new Environment and War agenda? Most importantly, the WPS agenda has triggered a 'moral awakening' at the international level – the realisation by governments that crimes in war against women are widespread, that they should not be tolerated, and that they can be addressed and stopped with the right interventions.

In addition, civil society and governments have developed a framework for WPS policies, such as on the protection of women and girls or the investigation of sexual violence. [National Action Plans, for example, have been effective tools for advocacy and the development of policies.](#)

The international community can learn from this process to focus its attention on the consequences of war for the environment. Similar to the progress achieved through the WPS agenda, an Environment and War agenda could help mitigate the devastating effects of conflict on the Earth. Through an Environment and War agenda, attacks on non-human beings and the environment could be recognised in a similar manner as those on civilians in war and conflict.

International agenda for the environment in war

The international community has been concerned with the humanitarian consequences of war – the consequences for humans – but has rarely taken notice of the devastating consequences of war for non-human beings and the environment. An Environment and War agenda, one that pays attention to the lessons of the WPS process, could help to raise awareness for the issue, give impetus for the improvement of international law, and ensure that environmental concerns are taken into consideration in processes of war and peace.

Such a process can learn from the limitations of the WPS agenda, such as, for example, the implementation of policies in conflict-affected countries with weak institutions, the lack of financing of commitments at the international level and, crucially, the constant threat of setbacks.

Despite the gains of the WPS agenda, wartime violence against women is still a regular feature of conflicts.



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Most importantly, however, an Environment and War agenda could benefit from the successes and positive experiences from WPS. One powerful tool an Environment and War agenda could employ is law: by recognising non-human beings and the environment as subjects that need and deserve protection – and criminalising violence against them – they become part of the discourse. Law has been a powerful tool to recognise issues of global concern and develop, enforce and spread international norms – for example in the process of abolishing land mines, chemical weapons and genocide.

However, simply adding non-human beings and the environment as subjects in existing laws is not enough. Giving them legal personality has even [been seen as problematic](#). The WPS process has shown that an element of ‘moral awakening’ is crucial. The laws of war have been clear about the prohibition of rape and other attacks on women.

However, the crimes started to be prosecuted only when the ignorance faded, the perception changed, and awareness grew. A process and framework similar to the WPS agenda for wartime violence against women can help to give visibility and recognition to the consequences of conflict for non-human beings and the environment.

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.

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Benjamin Duerr is an international lawyer and political strategist based in The Hague. He has worked in government on international law and policy. In the past, he helped to establish the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation of the Congolese Nobel Peace laureate, where he worked on advocacy strategies against conflict-related sexual violence. As an award-winning journalist, he has reported from ten African countries and wrote extensively about conflicts, foreign policy and humanitarian affairs.

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