

# Book Reviews

## *Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*

By Carol Cohn  
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Carol Cohn's December 2012 anthology *Women and Wars* uses descriptions of the varied roles of women during conflict to push forward an agenda for full inclusion of their perspective in securing the peace. *Women and Wars* fills the vacuum left by the "women as victims" approach that characterized the early 2000's, with a diverse array of options for understanding the roles and perspectives that women have during conflict, including: soldiers, civilians, caregivers, sex workers, refugees and internally displaced persons, anti-war activists, and community peace-builders.

Over the last two years the expansion of information on women, peace, and security has been vast both within academia and policy circles. The space once characterized by "awkward silences,"<sup>1</sup> between feminist researchers and security practitioners is closing rapidly – assisted by an improved understanding of why gender matters during conflict and post conflict. During the preparation of the 2011 U.S.

National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the U.S. government reached out to a consortium of civil society groups and academics, of which the author was a member. They were looking for "proof" (both empirical and anecdotal) that gender matters in stability operations, and data to show that women's equality is foundational to stability and security. Cohn's book is an excellent example of such proof. It is a series of well tested, field based examples of why gender matters during and after war.

As founding director of the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights, Cohn's access and professional history have led to a book the strengths of which lie firstly in its diversity of subjects (the roles of women in war), and, secondly, in its' diversity of effort (the chapter authors). An introductory chapter provides context and concepts, setting the stage for an inclusive understanding of peace and security. Individual chapters within the book are authored by well-known scholars and practitioners, regularly relying on real life examples of impacts and outcomes. Chapters are organized thematically and cover such issues as security sector reform, disarmament, sexual and gender based violence, returnee and refugee issues. As a result, the traditional lens through which womens' participation in conflict has been seen for so long, that of victimhood, erodes with each compelling and well-written chapter.

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Research has proven that the inclusion of women earlier in the process of peace building and peacekeeping leads to greater security for the state as a whole.<sup>2</sup> We also know that gender parity plays a strong role in state stability. A 2005 study funded by the Canadian government assessing what factors make fragile states more so, concluded that “gender parity may play a strong and measurable role in the stability of the state”<sup>3</sup> even when separated from other known correlations. In other words, it showed that it is not just a matter of more developed societies being more stable, and more developed societies also being societies marked by greater gender equity, but rather that gender equity may well increase stability.<sup>4</sup> Inequitable societies (i.e. societies in which a portion of the population, principally women and/or ethnic minorities, are oppressed) show a much higher propensity to solve their international disputes by initiating violence and war.<sup>5</sup> Countries with a lower level of gender equality are more likely to engage in violence, international crises, and disputes.<sup>6</sup>

Transversely, research shows, as do many failed “nation building experiments,” that leaving women out of rebuilding and renegotiating in the post conflict space has dramatically harmful impacts on the direction of society by reducing stability and prosperity.<sup>7</sup> In other words, inclusivity begets stability. Cohn’s book not only makes this point, but also advances it by providing the blueprints on how to get there. Her chapter-by-chapter approach reveals a methodologically sound formula for addressing the needs of women’s inclusion across sections, specifically within security institutions that have for so long been male dominated: police, militaries, and militias (including non-state actors).

*Women and Wars* provides a strong assessment of foundational aspects of long-term exclusion of women from various stages of the conflict cycle. Cohn recognizes and responds aptly to the fact that, “institutions have gendered presumptions built into the structures, practices and values,” which in turn shape their agendas and priorities overall. She documents the fact that institutions often use ideas about gender to shape and produce policy, which may “in turn have cultural and structural impacts beyond the bounds of the institutions itself.” In other words, the experience of women during war is both shapes and is shaped by the local context. Perhaps nowhere is Cohn’s point more clear than in Afghanistan, where the presuppositions of U.S. institutions have profoundly influenced women’s equality and protection, while at the same time creating national backlash in the form of conservative decrees and an uptick in violence against women and girls.

Cohn’s point is particularly important in a post conflict context where identities may be malleable, and international institutions are strong in both resources and influence. She documents the importance of institutional identities in nation building processes, such as planning national elections, disarmament and demobilisation processes or security sector reform efforts. One finds that the identities of the institutions and their gendered orientation towards human security have great potential to impact the structured equality of women on the ground. The book’s chapter on women and peace processes is especially impressive in making this point as it moves step by step through the conflict cycle, examining entry points where women are both impacted and impactful of the on-going negotiations and mediation. The chapter relies on examples

from Afghanistan, Burundi and Sri Lanka to illustrate the fact that tradition and culture should not be confines of progress. Practitioners still struggle to figure out entry points, and how to use them best, a query that needs additional research the likes of which *Women and Wars* provides.

In the introduction, Cohn points to the fact that women's perception of wars and conflict know no "temporal nor spatial bounds." This being said, the only issue one finds with the text is that it does not completely address the "boundless" nature of war for women, but seems instead completely bound by a focus on hard sector security. The book's focus and strength is on reform of security sector institutions (state and non-state military forces) and security related processes (such as disarmament and demobilisation.) However, what is less obvious for the reader is the impact of conflict on women's health, economic and social well-being. In other words, where post conflict reconstruction meets development. In the case of health, for example, the chapter that covers Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) only addresses, "other health concerns related to war," as a chapter footnote to deal with pressing issues around HIV/AIDs and maternal mortality. It seems a number of social, perhaps developmental topics are omitted and as a result, the text is slightly incomplete in its understanding of the impact of war on women.

It is likely that aversion to addressing "soft sector" issues more concretely is borne out of the fact that these sectors have typically dominated discussions around gender and conflict for many years. As a result, "serious" feminist academics have sought to avoid evoking discussions around health and education because of the stereotypes they carried, namely that

women are victims.<sup>8</sup> However, to come full circle on the topics of understanding the gendered impact of war, we must take on a robust approach which integrates shifting social parameters alongside, for example, shifting movement of refugees.

In a world dominated by lengthy, smouldering inter-ethnic conflicts that do not end when the peace accord is signed, wars do not end quickly for women. Scholars of women, peace and security must be willing to take on anthropological and sociological vantage points to go more deeply into evolving social norms and behaviors that will actually impact that ability of a nation to recover from violent conflict.

War and its aftermath, Cohn concludes, is neither a discreet event nor a gender neutral one. Nor should be the researching, writing and policy responses to war. Over a year after the adoption of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security was adopted, the U.S. government is making impressive strides to engender conflict and post conflict policies within USAID, the State Department, and the Department of Defense. New scholarly resources such as the Georgetown University Institute for Women, Peace and Security and the Social Science Research Council's International Centre for Gender, Peace and Security (IC-GPS) are working to continually improve what we know about women and conflict. Thanks to Cohn and her cohorts, today, we have all the proof we need: women matter during war. **PRISM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. Tickner, "You just don't understand: troubled engagements between feminists and IR theorists." *International Studies Quarterly* 41.4 (1997): 611-632.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, et al. "The heart of the matter: The security of women and the security of states." *International Security* 33.3 (2009): 7-45.

<sup>3</sup> David Carmet, et al. "Failed and Fragile States 2006," *Country Indicators for Foreign Policy* (2006).

<sup>4</sup> David Carmet, et al. "Failed and Fragile States 2006," *Country Indicators for Foreign Policy* (2006). Also See: Hudson, Valerie, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett. 2012. *Sex and World Peace*. Columbia Press, NY

<sup>5</sup> Mary Caprioli, "Gender Equality and State Aggression: The Impact of Domestic Gender Equality on State First Use of Force," *International Interactions* 29 (2003): 195-214.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Caprioli, "Gendered Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, 37.1 (2000). Also see: Caprioli, Mary and Mark Boyer, "Gender, Violence and International Crisis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 45.4 (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, and Mary Capriolo, *Sex and World Peace*. (Columbia University Press, NY, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Charlie R Carpenter, "Women, children and other vulnerable group: gender, strategic frames and the protection of civilians as a transnational issue," *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(2) (2005): 295-334.