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Global cities will be epicentres of gendered climate insecurity: why we must foreground women in urban climate security policy

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As the 26th UN Climate Change Conference takes place in Glasgow, [Maryruth Belsey Priebe](#) and [Tevvi Bullock](#) ask is there adequate attention to gender in urban-climate-conflict discussions, pledges, and policies? Their blog is evidence of why the gender-climate-security nexus is critical for countries to be better prepared to deal with climate change.

The recent 2021 [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report](#) has categorically declared that scientists are observing changes across the

entire climate system, and in every region of the world. We know that, on balance, women and girls face [disproportionately higher levels of insecurity](#) when exposed to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters; they are [under-represented in climate negotiations](#); we see sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) [spikes in post-conflict and post-disaster](#) situations; and “conflicts and situations of instability exacerbate pre-existing [patterns of discrimination](#) against women and girls.”

We also know cities are at the epicentre of climate risks: by 2050, cities will generate over 70 per cent of [CO2 emissions](#), 70 per cent of the global population will be [living in urban areas](#), 970+ cities could be [subject to extreme heat](#), 1,600+ cities may suffer from food insecurity, and 570+ cities may be impacted by sea level rise. Urban environments are also incredibly gendered spaces and can be sites of further empowerment or disadvantage for women and girls. So, we must ask, where is the urban environment in climate-security-gender discussions?

Systemically, socio-culturally, and (infra-)structurally, cities are discriminatory and often dangerously gendered spaces, and frequently see increased rates of harassment, discrimination, and SGBV, with [78 per cent of global experts](#) across 22 cities identifying sexual harassment as a high or extremely high risk for women and girls in urban environments. Within urban environments, [patriarchal structures and laws](#) limit women’s access to affordable housing, basic services, financial systems, and public transportation, and, as evident with COVID-19, crises can exacerbate these pre-existing inequalities.

Moreover, climate-related disasters can create acute crises for cities, unique in their scale, such as malfunctions in sewage systems, interruption of waste removal, power and internet blackouts, road closures, and water shortages. When grievances over such disruptions

emerge within densely-packed cities, tensions, protests or violence may erupt, further amplifying SGBV risks and *gendered* inequities. Climate disasters within urban environments may also create opportunities for, “previously unseen combinations of **ideologies, actors and urban theatres**”, making way for malign actors to engage in crimes such as theft, land seizure, kidnapping, and terrorism, any of which could trigger further urban political instabilities and threaten women’s wellbeing.



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Beyond acute climate disaster pressures, the ways in which climate change will slowly transform local economies, natural resources, environmental conditions, community composition, and infrastructure will all have implications for political stability, and critically, for *gendered* human security.

Cities will likely receive the vast majority of climate refugees, creating conditions for cultural and economic clashes as ethnic, religious and class diversity increases, and competition for jobs and resources accelerates. The UN estimates 80 per cent of those [displaced by climate change](#) are women, with many settling in peri-urban areas and slums, leaving them [particularly vulnerable to natural disasters](#). As the impacts of climate change destabilise built urban environments, spurring increasing numbers of displaced and migrating peoples, and thereby heightening the risk of urban crises, it is morally and environmentally imperative – and politically and economically just – not only that women’s and girls’ human rights are promoted and upheld, but that they lead and participate fully, equally, and meaningfully in urban climate adaptation, mitigation, decision-making, peace-building and humanitarian action.

Despite the growing visibility of the intersections between climate change, human insecurity, political instability, and urban environments, gender-responsive policies lag. The UN Sustainable Development Goals of Gender Equality (#5) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (#16) [aren’t consistently linked](#) with Sustainable Cities and Communities (#11) and Climate Action (#13). The interlinkages of climate change and women’s security were only formally recognised through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in UNSCR 2242 in 2015. [Keina Yoshida has argued](#) that failing to address climate change as one of the greatest challenges of our time demonstrates “a narrow framing of peace and security by the Security Council” one we argue must be addressed.



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Yet whilst important new research is emerging, including in key UN reports such as [‘Gender, Climate and Security’](#) (2020), IUCN/USAID’s [‘Advancing Gender in the Environment’](#) (2020), and particularly in [‘Women Building Resilient Cities’](#) (2020), which draws lessons from Freetown, Sierra Leone, the urban environment as a distinct site arguably remains understudied in WPS-climate scholarship. There is a need for more robust gender-disaggregated data on emerging urban dimensions of the gender-climate-security nexus. Furthermore, greater recognition is needed in WPS policies, including WPS National Action Plans, of urban environments as complex, evolving sites where the security, empowerment, and leadership on climate change and climate-related conflicts of diverse groups of women and girls is inextricable from peace.

So, as the world turns to Glasgow for COP26, is there adequate attention on gender in urban-climate-conflict discussions, pledges, and policies? The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) [Adaptation Knowledge Portal](#) houses hundreds of action pledges, case studies, tools, peer-reviewed papers, policy briefs, and multimedia materials, yet currently contains an insufficient examination of gender, insecurity, and conflict in urban environments. The UNFCCC's [Climate Action Pathways](#) offer a set of visions for achieving a 1.5°C resilient world by 2050. One pathway – [Human Settlements](#) – recognises cities' outsized greenhouse gas emissions, and the imperative of ensuring urban environments are liveable within the bounds of a 1.5°C increase, yet gender is not engaged with substantively, including within the impact area of 'social equity'.

Indeed, in the most recent [COP25 report \(2019\)](#), references to the urban environment are minimal, with state parties merely instructed to address commercial and residential building stock and urban structures with regards to "greenhouse gas emissions and removals". It is positive that the enhanced five-year Lima work programme on gender and its Gender Action Plan ([GAP](#)) was adopted by the state parties, yet addressing the under-representation of women on COP state party delegations remains critical – at COP25 only [39 per cent of state party delegates](#) were women, with just 21 per cent delegation heads.



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Although key global frameworks and policies are lacking in the full and meaningful integration of gender in urban-climate-security discussions, local non-state-actors and transnational networks are stepping up to lead. Evidence shows [women are actively contributing](#) to building resilient cities, and carving paths to inclusion across multiple levels of urban governance, thus helping communities become safer and more prepared to cope with disasters. [C40Cities](#), a network of the world's megacities committed to addressing climate change, has argued *only* gender-inclusive and gender-responsive [efforts to tackle climate change](#) in cities will be successful, highlighting progressive approaches by cities such as Barcelona, with its [city Plan for Gender Justice](#).

Civil society organisations are also driving key initiatives. Germany-based *Gender CC Women for Climate Justice's* ['Gender into Urban Climate Change Initiative'](#) brings a critical gender lens to citizen empowerment and participation in urban planning and implementation, with pilot cities in South Africa, India, and Indonesia. Meanwhile, [UN Habitat](#) has launched [#HerCity](#), aimed at engaging girls in building more sustainable, equal, and inclusive cities. Whilst these plans and initiatives underscore important

progress towards integrating gender-climate-urban issues, the conflict and insecurity angles require additional attention, and WPS scholarship is well-placed to play a leading role.

As the [2021 WPS Index](#) by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security has shown, countries which promote women's inclusion, justice, and security are also generally better prepared to deal with the increasing threats of climate change. To ensure our responses to two of the greatest global threats – climate change and gender inequality – are inclusive, transformative and sustainable, it is important we pay more nuanced attention to the gender-climate-security nexus, and *equitably* address the root causes of the climate crisis in our world's diverse urban environments.

About the author



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Tevvi Bullock is a non-resident Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Fellow and Young Leader at Pacific Forum International, a Gender, Peace and Security Next Generation Fellow '21/22 at Women in International Security (WIIS), and a Casual Sessional Academic at the Australian National University. Her current research agenda broadly encompasses gender, peace and security, climate and ecological crises, the WPS agenda, and men and masculinities, with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region. Tevvi holds a Master of Diplomacy (Advanced) from the Australian National University, a Graduate Certificate of Gender, Peace and Security from Monash University,

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Maryruth Belsey Priebe is a non-resident Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Fellow at Pacific Forum International, a Harvard International Relations graduate student, and the author of numerous articles.

Using social science, feminist foreign policy perspectives/analyses/theories, and data analysis, her research focuses on the nexus of gender, climate change, and peace and security in the Asia-Pacific. Maryruth's circular food economy policy work was been selected for inclusion in the OpenIDEO Food Systems Game Changers Lab, and she has held several research and fellowship positions focused on women's leadership. She is also a member of Harvard's Climate Leaders Program and the Research Network on Women, Peace and Security, and is a volunteer for multiple gender-climate causes. Maryruth tweets @greenwriting

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