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Rebuilding Bridges: Toward a Feminist Research Agenda for Postwar Reconstruction

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As feminists who think about war and peacebuilding, we cannot help but encounter the complex, entwined political economic processes that underlie wars' causes, their courses, and the challenges of postwar reconstruction. For us, then, the increasing academic division between feminist security studies (FSS) and feminist (international) political economy (FPE/FIPE) has been a cause for concern, and we welcomed *Politics & Gender's* earlier Critical Perspectives section on efforts to bridge the two (June 2015). We noticed, however, that although violence was addressed in several of the special section's articles, war made only brief and somewhat peripheral appearances, and peacebuilding was all but absent. While three contributions (Hudson 2015; Sjoberg 2015; True 2015) mentioned the importance of political economy in the analysis of armed conflict, the aspects of war that the articles focused on were militarized sexualities (Sjoberg 2015) or conflict-related and postwar sexual and gender-based violence (Hudson 2015; True 2015).

In our input to the "Continuation of the Conversation," we would like to center war and peacebuilding. Specifically, we argue that feminist analysis of the political economic processes and institutions that underlie both war and postwar reconstruction reveals the importance of developing new economic models for feminist peacebuilding.¹ We sketch a new research agenda that is meant to support the development of those models.

¹ In line with many scholars (see, e.g., Pugh, Cooper, and Goodhand 2004), we see economic factors as central among the conditions that lead to state collapse, give rise to and sustain conflict, and complicate peacebuilding. That is not to suggest that the line of causality is unidirectional or that economic factors are the only causes. We see economic processes and war as constantly reinforcing each other, as co-constitutive in many ways, but nonetheless

In our eyes, it could not be clearer that feminist political economic analysis must be more vigorously brought to bear on the study of war—and, we think it important to emphasize, on peacebuilding, which is our central focus in this short piece. In the current context of increasing numbers of complex and seemingly intractable armed conflicts, many in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa, it seems clear that the assumptions and effectiveness of Western peacebuilding models are sorely lacking. In both war and “postwar” contexts, where the beneficiaries of entrenched war economies accumulate further wealth and power as a result of land grabbing, mineral extraction, privatization, and other economic processes, the interrelationship between different forms of violence—physical, economic, and ecological—identified by pioneering feminist international relations scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Enloe 1989; Peterson and Runyan 1991; Tickner 1992) must be an aspect of any astute analysis.

Moreover, in war/postwar contexts, gendered physical, structural, and ecological forms of violence are never restricted to “the local” but rather derive from and feed into global and regional political economic processes and dynamics. The increasing complexity and resilience of war economies, along with pressures to adopt neoliberal economic policies to guide postwar reconstruction, are exacerbating the challenges of building peace. In the face of these challenges, the need for feminists to retain their sophisticated, integrated analysis of insecurity and violence is more pressing than ever. Building the sustainable, equitable peace required to improve the everyday security of women and other marginalized groups depends on all the analytical tools we can bring to bear on the political economies of war and all the creative feminist energy we can muster to generate strategic ways forward.

we maintain there is a central utility to naming economic factors as underlying and fueling wars and to analyzing the ways many of those same factors shape and limit the contours of peacebuilding.

Feminists have not heretofore been silent on the political economy of peacebuilding. Indeed, many have pointed to the neoliberal economic assumptions attached to the “liberal peace” project as the fundamental problem with efforts to integrate gender perspectives into international peacebuilding interventions (e.g., Shepherd 2008; Whitworth 2004). But this general concern with neoliberalism as part of the problem needs to be augmented by detailed accounts of the ways in which specific economic processes deepen gendered structural inequalities in war/postwar contexts. This is the task that seems to us most urgent, particularly because so much feminist energy and attention to peacebuilding is framed around the so-called women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda emerging out of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (whether that energy goes to implementing or critiquing it). We are concerned that even if the WPS agenda were ever fully implemented, gender-equitable peacebuilding would be unlikely to occur because even the best peace agreement can be (and often has been) radically undercut by the political economic processes of postwar reconstruction (Cohn 2013, 2014, 2015; Duncanson 2016; True 2014; Turshen 2016).

It is postwar reconstruction policies—which are too often treated as strictly technical, apolitical matters—that will determine whether the potential for sustainable, inclusive, gender-equitable peace and security will be realized or jeopardized. Many predictable postwar political economic processes and dynamics can have the impact of cementing or deepening the structural inequalities, marginalization, exclusion, and lack of prospects that preexisted and contributed to armed conflict—and can even create new ones. Some WPS feminists have begun to focus, in particular, on these gendered harms and inequalities created by neoliberal postwar reconstruction strategies, which focus on expanding capitalist markets by encouraging extractive industry exploitation of fossil fuels and minerals, the selling off of land for biofuel production and export

agribusiness, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises and services² (Cohn 2013, 2014, 2015; Duncanson 2016; Goetz and Jenkins 2015, 2016; Haynes 2010; Turshen 2016). Beyond the multitudinous specific harms caused by extractive industries, agricultural land grabs, and privatization, these feminists see these strategies as problematic because they marginalize questions of inequality, provide no support to crucial forms of nonmarket social reproduction, and ignore the possibility of more just and sustainable paths to postwar development (e.g., Peterson 2013).

But what might feminist alternatives to neoliberal postwar reconstruction strategies look like? A turn to feminist political economy finds, in the past decade, a flourishing of research on alternatives to what might be thought of as “economic business as usual” (e.g., Gibson-Graham 2006; Harcourt 2012; Nelson 2012). These analyses have emerged in response to waves of financial crisis and austerity, climate change, and global crises of social reproduction. They draw upon a feminist ethics of care and sustainability to challenge the market-centered logic of the mainstream and its claim that we are all beholden to an invariant capitalist logic; they highlight, instead, a diversity of economic forms such as cooperative practices, community economies, household and reproductive economies, and solidarity economy initiatives (Bergeron and Healy 2015; Peterson 2003; Safri and Graham 2011). These conceptual innovations move beyond critique of neoliberalism to suggest new policies and projects that recognize economic diversity and nurture economic forms directed toward justice.

But while the feminist political economy scholarship has addressed a wide range of sites, practices and policies (e.g., incorporating feminist insights into the Ecuadoran community-

² Despite the evident gendered harms and inequalities of neoliberal postwar reconstruction strategies, key actors in postwar contexts, including the United Nations and the donor community, presume that neoliberalism, with its preoccupation with deregulation, liberalization, and privatization, is the only real policy option (Pugh 2006; Wade 2011).

centered *buen vivir* movement³ and other community economies initiatives in cities around the world), it has heretofore paid little attention to war-torn societies and thus has not explored alternative models of postwar reconstruction. Many of these feminist alternatives to neoliberal economic models have been developed in contexts that do not face all the challenges postwar countries might face, including decimated human and physical infrastructure, a despoiled physical environment, collapse of state institutions, and entrenched illicit war economies.⁴

In order to address the pressing theoretical and practical issue of whether and how alternative economic models might function in postwar contexts, and whether and how they might tackle gendered inequalities, FSS scholars focused on postwar reconstruction and FPE scholars focused on alternatives to neoliberal models of growth must rebuild old bridges and collaborate more consistently. Informing and collaborating with each other, together they can address urgent questions:

- How might alternative economic models meet the particular challenges of postwar contexts? What refinements might be required to enable their suitability for postwar contexts?
- Can feminist political economists' conceptualization of the economy as a diverse space (rather than a singular capitalist logic) help reframe the politics of postwar construction as a site of ethical negotiation rather than technical management?

³ *Buen vivir* stresses that the good life comes not from individualist consumption, but from living well together in community and in harmony with the natural environment.

⁴ Even those FPE feminists working within a more explicit international development field, despite often being centrally concerned with postwar contexts, tend to pay insufficient attention to the specifics of gendered war economies and gendered economic processes of postwar reconstruction beyond the micro level (see, e.g., Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007; Jackson and Pearson 1998; Visvanathan et al. 2011).

- How can feminist analysis of neoliberal models, dynamics, and processes and, moreover, feminist alternatives be framed in ways which are compelling and able to be instrumentalized by “insider” institutional gender experts in these processes?

We believe that these questions, and others catalyzed by the increased reintegration of FSS and FPE scholars, will enrich the theorizing of alternative economic models; that they can provide critical levers for the transformation of reconstruction efforts; and that they are key to improving the security—broadly defined—of women and other marginalized groups in war/postwar contexts.

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