

War, Climate Change, and Women

By Maryam Roberts

War, militarism, and climate change are destroying countless communities worldwide and women, particularly women of color in the Global South, are paying the highest price.

“It is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier in modern conflict,” says Major General Patrick Cammaert, a former United Nations peace-keeping operation commander in Africa.¹ And to be a poor woman, even outside the theater of war, is to be at risk for starvation and displacement.

Of the approximately 50 million people displaced from their homelands, about 80 percent are women and children.² Of the 1.3 billion people living on less than \$1 a day, 70 percent are women. Among the chronically hungry people in the world, 60 percent are women. Climate change will only exacerbate these numbers.

Although rarely responsible for the conflicts or the greenhouse gas emissions creating this global climate crisis, women are the first to feel the impacts—whether through sexual violence at the hands of male soldiers (including women in the military themselves), or displacement (along with children) by war and occupation. Women also are often left alone to head households when their husbands, fathers, and brothers are killed in combat. And the very normalization of militarism and violence in our communities supports domestic violence.

The Cycle of War and Consumption

The resource wars foreseen in the Pentagon’s much ballyhooed study of climate change are already underway in Iraq and Afghanistan.³ “The U.S. military is the greatest user of oil in the world,” says Gwyn Kirk of Women for Genuine Security. “They’re fighting a war in Iraq so that they can carry on using oil.”

This self-reinforcing cycle of militaristic acquisition

and inequitable use of natural resources aggravates green house gas emissions, causing greater climate instability and a further depletion of resources, which in turn leads to more wars of acquisition and even greater climate instability.

Since former President Bush declared the War on Terror eight years ago, military spending and the consequent greenhouse emissions have surpassed all previous levels. In 2000, the United States military spent just under \$300 billion; in 2008, it spent over \$700 billion.⁴

For 2004, military fuel consumption increased 27 percent over the average annual peacetime usage of 100 million barrels.⁵ In just three weeks of combat in Iraq, the Army burned 40 million gallons of fuel—or almost two million gallons per day—an amount equivalent to the combined gasoline consumption of all Allied armies during the four years of World War I.

Women: Most Affected but Least Responsible

During these years of the so-called War on Terror, over 50 percent of the national budget priorities have been given to the military, while education and health care are given just over six percent.⁶ One tangible side effect of taking away resources from healthcare and education—industries dominated by women in our society—has been the displacement of women from viable employment.

“The oppression of women is a key piece in the hierarchy of the military,” says Kirk. “It parallels racial hierarchy, and the hierarchy of people abusing the environment. Colonization, militarism, and racism interlock and what links them together is this hierarchy of power, respect, and value.”



Lisa Gray Garcia, a.k.a. Tiny

In the wake of endless corporate media reports on whether or not climate change is real and how many polar ice caps are melting, a 48-page classified report created by Homeland Security was released last year at a special house subcommittee hearing chaired by Representative Anna Eschu on the "security impact of global climate change."

This briefing confirmed what many of us poor people already suspected: climate change is likely to result in the ratcheting up of a police state to "control" us, the crowded masses, as we riot for food, water, and land.

It's no mystery, what will happen to our poor in a future crisis. Look at what's already happened to low-income communities in the past. From Haiti to New Orleans—in extreme cold, we have frozen to death; in extreme heat and drought, we've died of thirst, hunger, and

exposure—with no more crops, livestock, or land.

A forecast of the what's to come can be seen in Sheriff Joe Arpaio's infamous jail for immigrants. "Poor people have been dying of thirst with no access to water or air conditioning in the heat," reports Michael Woodard, poverty scholar and Poor News Network correspondent.

In essence, that's the risk that climate change poses. Poor people can't just move to higher ground, purchase imported foods, or upgrade their roofing, windows, and foundation to keep from being displaced by the next hurricane.

"We are forced to live in poor neighborhoods near poisonous industries that already are killing us. If you add increased heat and decrease of land to the sick soup—we wont last long in a global warming reality," says Ingrid De Leon, with *Voces de Immigrantes en Resistencia*.

The surprising thing is, we already know a lot about how to reorganize our economies for moving from "surviving" to "thriving." Indigenous and poor people have long known that sharing resources with each other, practicing interdependence, and building real community are the best route to independence.

POOR is an indigenous and poor people-led organization of revolutionary poets, artists, multimedia producers, educators,

and poverty scholars (as we call ourselves) who see the urgent need to be producing and educating so we can stop being talked about, researched, reported on, criminalized, and legislated against.

We have launched an equity campaign for a project we call "homefulness," a sweat-equity cohousing model for landless families, which includes a community garden for localizing and producing our own healthy food, and several micro-business projects to build sustainable economic support for all of us. So far we have established a social justice and arts café, a family-friendly project-based school, and a community media teaching and production center.

My mother, Mama Dee as she was called, died from complications of her smog-related asthma and heart condition. As I was growing up she and I talked constantly about how to get away from the poisonous environments where we were forced to live—near power plants, freeways, and factories. In the end, Mama Dee succumbed to the illnesses our poverty caused. But her spirit of resistance lives on in our community and in the mobilizations to work for climate justice across the planet. ■

Lisa Gray-Garcia a.k.a. Tiny is a de-colonized Taina poverty scholar, the single mother of her son Tiburcio, the daughter of Dee, and coeditor of POOR Magazine.

In Syria, where more than 1.2 million Iraqi refugees now live as a result of the United States occupation of Iraq, the women and girls who bear the brunt of supporting their families are forced to turn to prostitution to make a living.⁷

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the largest climate-spawned disaster to hit the United States, 180,000 people in Louisiana lost their livelihood. Of these, 103,000 were women. Health, education, and hospitality, all women-dominated industries, were hit hardest. Also, households headed by low-income single mothers in New Orleans has dropped from 18,000 in 2005 to 3,000, indicating a significant displacement of these women and their children.⁸

Every time war and climate change erode the lives and rights of women, they further damage the fabric of our families, our culture, and our societies.

No Conclusion without Inclusion of Gender Justice

To effectively end the compounded impacts of climate change and militarism on women domestically and globally, it is imperative that we view the issue through a gender and racial justice lens and look to women's everyday lives for inspiration.

"Justice has a history [of] recognizing that women bring their forces to the table, and they bring their own solutions," noted Michael Dorsey, assistant professor in Dartmouth College's Faculty of Science, at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Poland last year. "...justice isn't technical, justice is not in the realm of experts only, it's in the realm of everyday activities of women on the ground."⁹

Another delegate to the UNFCCC, climate change activist Rose Mary Enie, who represented Ghana and Cameroon, pointed out that in Africa today, three



million people lack access to clean and safe water. Now climate change is adding to their existing problems. Enie was part of the delegation from Gender CC—a network of women from the most impacted areas of the Global South who are working to ensure a gender perspective to climate justice.¹⁰

“Most of the women in rural communities depend on water from a river or stream,” explained Enie. “With the droughts that are happening in some parts of Africa today, the rivers are [dry]. These women have to walk longer distance[s]. So you can imagine how much time is wasted by these women just [to] get water for cooking... for taking their bath... for washing their clothes. The woman is the caretaker of the home, so you can imagine what impact climate change has made on the woman.”¹¹

Obviously, the problem cannot be resolved by focusing on the symptoms—drought and hurricanes, war and displacement—of climate change and militarism. We need to tackle the causes, which require a drastic shift in our patterns of resource consumption. And that cannot happen unless women are given a place at the table and a voice in the proceedings.

Copenhagen 2009 through a Feminist Lens

The United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 must keep social justice and gender equity at its core. Without consideration of those two issues, any strategies for resistance and survival will be meaningless.

It was a point Sharmind Neelormi of Bangladesh was trying to make at the UNFCCC in Poland, when she said, “We are trying to integrate more intensely the gender aspects of climate change into the policy. We are trying to lobby our parties, our government negotiators, and the UNFCCC process to be much more sensitive on gender issues.”¹²

Gender CC was a step in that direction. As co-founder Ulrike Roehr explains, “We try to provide a space where we [can connect] to each other, and discuss and share all our thoughts, and try to enable people to create a new community and make a shift in communicating [with] each other. Our vision is to have a lively and colorful network.”¹³

Closer to home, in the Bay Area, members of Mobilization for Climate Justice West—a coalition of 35 organizations—which subscribe to the core principles of climate justice. David Solnit, a volunteer organizer says “That means making space for the most impacted folks, domestically and globally, and looking to local and people-based solutions rather than corporate and market-based solutions.”■

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Photo:
Gender CC activists held a briefing in Poznan, Poland where they presented proposals for the integration of gender into the UNFCCC process

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

(Front cover) San Francisco Financial District, Sept 21, 2009. ©2009 West Coast Mobilization for Climate Justice / Rainforest Action Network.

(Inside Front) Richmond refinery. ©2008 Scott Braley. (Inside Back) Urban garden in Havana Cuba. © John and Faith Morgan / www.powerofcommunity.com.

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