

### We need to break with gender binarism and cisnormativity: towards an inclusive feminist peace and conflict research! (commentary)

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hauk, S., & Wilshusen, F. (2023). *We need to break with gender binarism and cisnormativity: towards an inclusive feminist peace and conflict research! (commentary)*. (BICC Commentary, 8. March 2023). Bonn: Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) gGmbH. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-88028-1>

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08 March 2023

## Commentary \ **We need to Break with Gender Binarism and Cisnormativity: Towards an Inclusive Feminist Peace and Conflict Research!**

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For over a hundred years, the 8th of March marks the feminist day of struggle, nowadays still mainly celebrated as International Women's Day. Although we have come far, the sole reference to 'women' is problematic since it reproduces a gender binary that excludes anyone that does not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth, i. e., transgender (in short: trans) and non-binary individuals<sup>1</sup>. This tends to undermine and even deny the day's aim to fight sexism and misogyny in all its forms. Perhaps a good way to counter this trend is to incorporate trans and non-binary perspectives systematically into peace and conflict research.

The term 'gender' mostly refers to aspects of gender identity and gender expression that are understood as socially constructed. While this has often been conceptualised as a female–male dichotomy in the past, there are more gender identities and expressions than those of cis women and cis men<sup>2</sup>. Instead of two opposing poles, gender is more of a continuum which inclusively mirrors all gender identities, like trans people and individuals that identify themselves as non-binary. As researchers have stressed, rigid adherence to the gender binary reproduces the norm and privilege of everyone who is cisgender, assuming that those who do not identify in this way are deviant. This 'cisnormativity' is itself a form of violence.

We believe making these vulnerabilities visible and supporting a truly inclusive and gender-sensitive approach is ever more important. Across Europe, right-wing populist and anti-feminist movements have gained strength in recent years. An increasingly transnationally organised anti-gender movement aims to fight the so-called gender ideology or genderism. It attacks women's rights and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people—which, after all, are human rights. In particular, they attack LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights and medicine, sexual education and gender equality. Members of the anti-gender movement oppose same-sex marriage, as this would allegedly abolish the 'natural' role of mother and father. Sadly, even within feminist discourses, voices argue to exclude trans and non-binary people from the feminist struggle for a more equal world. Indeed, there is a long history of 'anti-transgender feminism', or, as it is more recently called, 'trans exclusionary radical feminism (TERF)'.

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<sup>1</sup> There are other self-designations that we would like to recognise, such as gender divers, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, genderqueer, intergender, agender, multigender. However, for better readability, we will use non-binary here.

<sup>2</sup> Cisgender (also: cis women and cis men) refers to people whose gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth.

## **Trans and Non-binary People suffer Discrimination and Violence due to their Gender Identity and Expression**

While the 2022 [BICC Commentary](#) on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women already stressed that we lack data to assess gender-based violence (GBV) against cis women, this lack becomes even more alarming when we consider forms of GBV that are not (only) targeted against cis women.

Trans and non-binary populations bear a significantly higher risk of being denied access to the most basic resources and of living in precarity. They suffer higher rates of unemployment and homelessness and are much more likely to be discriminated against in employment and housing situations. They have a disproportionate poverty rate and are imprisoned six times the rate of the cisgender population while also more likely to experience abuse in prison. When combining this data with other forms of discrimination due to race, nationality, class, (dis)ability, religion or sexual orientation, the rates are even higher, which is why we need more intersectional vocabularies to reveal the tight connection of these abuses, as some researchers have called for. Violence by security forces presents a problem as trans and non-binary people experience disproportionate violence at the hands of the police. One example which [Transgender Europe e. V. \(TGEU\)](#) documented are reports of trans sex workers in Turkey being forced to have sex with police officers to not receive a fine or being subjected to violence, pepper gas attacks and arrest by police. Moreover, we still lack data on the living situations of trans and non-binary people due to significant challenges like barriers to hiring trans study staff, attacks on study offices, low interest among donors and low or slow recruitment in general.

Initial data collections suggest an extremely high burden of GBV among trans populations, with GBV often causing lifelong health issues and deaths. Data shows that at least 4,042 trans and non-binary people were murdered between January 2008 and September 2021. The necessity to look closer into this form of violence becomes even more obvious against the background that 2021 marked the year with the highest reported number ever, with [375 trans and non-binary people killed](#)—which represents an increase of seven per cent compared to the previous year. In 2022, another 327 trans and non-binary persons were murdered—of whom 95 per cent were trans women, which depicts the severity of GBV. Much of the data comes from countries with strong networks of LGBTQIA+ people who monitor these cases—the number of unrecorded cases worldwide is likely to be much higher. Most cases go unreported or receive minimal attention. Consequently, most global research on GBV refers to the experiences of cisgender, heterosexually identified women.

### Towards an Inclusive Feminist Peace and Conflict Research

The fact is that trans and non-binary populations are among the most vulnerable groups—and even need to [navigate personal security](#) in day-to-day life, i. e. in times that are generally considered peaceful. What already holds true in times of peace becomes even more relevant in times of conflict. Yet, peace and conflict research has only recently begun to question its underlying assumptions about gender identity and to recognise the experiences of individuals who do not identify as cisgender. Feminist researchers who put some initial thoughts into how to address trans and non-binary vulnerabilities highlighted how they are affected by varying degrees of social, economic, political, symbolic and structural exclusion and violence, especially during conflict and all phases of civil breakdown. These forms of violence include families and communities that discriminate as well as states with limited protection of trans rights or openly transphobic policies and practices. Situations of violent conflict usually further increase these risks. Research has shown that trans and non-binary people are at risk of direct violence in active conflict, as armed actors may deliberately choose them as targets. Moreover, violence against trans and non-binary people often follows the same pattern as violence against cis-women but is far less recorded. In post-conflict stabilisation, the needs of trans and non-binary people are often neither considered nor met. This becomes evident, for instance, when critical medical needs like HIV treatment or hormone medication are usually not considered in humanitarian aid packages. Also, fleeing from a conflict does not (necessarily) mean that a trans or non-binary person can escape violence; it rather causes new vulnerabilities. One example is that refugee camps are also organised along the gender binary, separating people into ‘men’ and ‘women’. This not only affects trans and non-binary people psychologically but may also result in physical attacks. Moreover, a discrepancy between displaced persons’ sex according to their ID card and the identified sex and appearance may cause further discrimination, like denied access to shelters or humanitarian services. Crossing borders with non-matching documents can become very dangerous for trans and non-binary people and is likely to lead to arbitrary arrest, direct (physical, psychological, and/or sexual) violence and even extra-judicial killings. Finally, the experience of post-conflict transitions can be twofold: For one thing, historically, transitions carry the chance of transformation and thus may open up spaces for greater inclusion and protection of trans and non-binary people. For another, it is also likely that the recollection of strong traditions to stabilise society creates a backlash against progressive ideas and strengthens gender binary thinking, ultimately increasing the risk of violence against trans and non-binary people.

While trans and non-binary communities are very vulnerable towards violent conflict, they regularly unite in acts of resistance and peacebuilding. Indeed, trans and non-binary communities have a history of building alliances of mutual aid and solidarity to somehow

survive hostile environments, mobilising against police harassment and violence in the form of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance.

All of the above underlines the need for peace and conflict research to take the perspectives of those into account who experience cissexist censure and violence on the basis of their gender identity and expression. This is not only crucial to understanding trans and non-binary realities and subsequently addressing their needs but may also serve to better understand violent conflict dynamics. Yet, it has shown that their perspectives and realities of life are largely excluded from peace and conflict research, as a search for the term 'transgender' among the leading journals of peace and conflict studies revealed: Most returned only a single result. Hence, much of the peace and conflict research landscape is currently silent about transphobic violence in conflict-related environments and about the ways trans people have contributed to nonviolent resistance and peacebuilding alike.

We find that we, as peace and conflict researchers, have ignored and silenced trans and non-binary perspectives in our work for too long—and we still do. This needs to change! The suffering of most vulnerable populations has been overlooked long enough by most of the peace and conflict research community. We lack recognition of their fights for a more equal and just world. In our view, taking an inclusive approach towards peace and conflict research should translate into serious attempts to fill these (severe) gaps in data and research and consequently consider the lived realities of trans and non-binary populations. As some authors have stressed: Making genderqueer bodies invisible in research is a function of cisprivilege. Countering this privilege means working towards a more inclusive feminist peace and conflict research.

***Stella Hawk and Fiona Wilshusen***