



Center for Women's Global Leadership

A Feminist Human Rights Lens on Human Security

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(This article to be published in Peace Review in March 2004 is based on a speech responding to the presentation of the [Report of the UN Commission on Human Security](#) at the National Council for Research on Women Annual Conference in May 2003. The author thanks Bojana Blagojevic for her assistance in the preparation of this speech.)

The Report of the Commission on Human Security takes a big step forward in initiating a badly needed discussion in the world today about what is security, whose security is at stake when and where, and what are the policies that would actually make the world safer for all.

But before I talk about human security, I want to reflect on the critical moment we're in today. It's ironic that 2003 marks the 10th anniversary of the UN World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, which was such a hopeful and optimistic time for advancing women's rights as human rights. That conference also saw a breakthrough in approaching human rights in a more integrated way, looking at economic and social rights alongside civil and political rights, and taking up the right to development as a critical human rights question. In 1993 there was still hope of a peace dividend from the end of the Cold War. We certainly never imagined that we would be where we are today - with the US openly asserting Empire and a pre-emptive strike doctrine, with ever widening economic inequities around the world, and with some governments questioning whether violence against women is really a human rights abuse.

HUMAN SECURITY VS NATIONAL SECURITY

Considering the role that the US government is playing in the world today, one of the key tasks here is to change the national discourse on security. We need to ask whether security in a globalized world can be found with duct tape, bigger bombs and closed gates or requires addressing people's needs and rights? The report of the Commission on Human Security can be helpful in this effort to widen the discussion of what we mean by security. Whose security are we talking about and at what cost? Who has felt secure in this country? And who hasn't - in terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. What constitutes the basis for achieving longer lasting security today?

Changes in government policy can only be achieved if we challenge the national discourse about security and address the manipulation of fear that is central to many governments, and certainly to the current US administration. We cannot ignore the aftershock of 9/11 in the US, which has been turned into 'shock and awe' around the world. We must address a nation in shock at discovering its vulnerability (even if that it is naïve and/or self-centered) because this insecurity

has become the justification for aggression and war – any war – and for the suspension of many aspects of human rights domestically and internationally. The obsessive focus on anti-terrorism and national security in the US has also provided cover for the Bush agenda of dismantling years of progress on various domestic rights issues, and detracts people from other threats to human security in everyday life.

This UN report could not have come at a better time for helping to take on these issues as many more people in the US are ready or have begun to move from watching the orange and red codes to asking what are the real threats to security in the world, and how should the government respond to them. In addition to questions about what the US is doing in Iraq, the time is right for looking at the fundamental threats to security inherent in poverty and the everyday violence of HIV/AIDS, of racism, of domestic abuse, of ethnic conflicts and massive displacements of people, etc. These are what cause most untimely deaths, not terrorism. The numbers of people in the world who are dying every day from these causes far exceeds the threat of terrorism, and further, they often feed the hopelessness and rage behind terrorist acts.

The concept of human security provides an alternative framework for thinking about security in an integrated approach – that sees peace, security, equality, human rights, and development as inter-related and affecting each other. This is important particularly in the US with a history of single-issue politics, which often keeps groups from working together effectively. It also puts an emphasis on both protection and empowerment. In some debates, victimization and agency are set up as opposites rather than seen as two parts of reality that both need to be addressed – often simultaneously.

If human security is going to be a useful concept, the first challenge is to get it heard. How many people heard anything on TV or in the newspapers about the launching of this report? Women (and men) have to amplify and ground this vision of human security – get it heard and understood in community meetings and on TV and talk radio. We have to show that it is about real policy alternatives that affect the everyday lives of women, men and children. Those who do not want this idea to go anywhere will label it idealistic, wishful thinking, rhetorical and/or expensive. We have to break through that attitude and talk about the real human security based alternatives to the directions being taken by the current administration in terms of how taxes are spent, schools, services, immigration policy, agriculture and trade subsidies, as well as defense and foreign policy.

A second challenge to public discourse that this concept raises is that of government's responsibility for ensuring people's human security. In these times of glorifying privatization and stripping government's regulatory powers, many no longer even imagine that governments ought to be responsible for issues of human security domestically, much less globally. It is therefore difficult to talk in this globalized and privatized economy about governments' responsibilities in terms of control over actions taken by multinational corporations around the world. But we can't even get to figuring out how to hold international financial institutions and international actors accountable if people don't even believe that governments are responsible for human security at home.

A third challenge is to break through the ridicule, cynicism, and dismissal of the United Nations so prevalent in the US. There is a dismal lack of progressive conversation about why we need to be working with and defending, while also trying to change, the United Nations. There are strong forces seeking to weaken the UN including the US right wing, many global corporations, some militaries, and most fundamentalists of various stripes in many parts of the world. Some powerful governments, like the US but not only the US, want to limit the UN to humanitarian operations, to make sure that it is not a counterforce in relation to national sovereignty, whether in military, political or economic policy. And quite specifically, they seek to make sure that the UN is not stronger in its enforcement of human rights. Meanwhile, many who ought to understand the agenda that is being played out and to see why the UN should be strengthened are silent.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMAN SECURITY

The Report of the Commission on Human Security talks about the linkage between human rights and human security. I would go even further to say that if we allow the human security discussion to become separate from human rights or to be a substitute for human rights, we lose a lot. One might be safe and even well fed in a police state but this is not an adequate vision of human security. Rights are about the voice and agency of citizens who are not just passive objects with needs. Further, human rights constitute an ethical vision of how people should be treated and what basic entitlements one has simply by virtue of being human.

Human security is a useful concept for re-focusing what we mean by security, but we need to be watchful lest the focus on human security and the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) at the UN takes us backward to the 1970's-80's framework of basic needs as opposed to rights. Rather we need to ensure that basic needs are seen as human rights and that rights are respected in the pursuit of meeting those needs.

While the report is clear about the relationship between human rights and human security, I don't think all the discussions going on about human security in the world are so clear. Some have picked up on the concept of human security as a way to get around things they don't like about human rights and to weaken human rights enforcement. The aspect of human rights that many governments would like to weaken is its emphasis on accountability. As the Commission co-chair, Amartya Sen, puts it in his discussion of the relationship between human rights and human security in the report, rights are also about duties – someone (mostly governments) is responsible to try to realize these rights in people's lives.

The development of human rights law and the UN human rights system over the past 50+ years has sought to find ways to hold governments accountable to protecting, promoting, and fulfilling rights through laws, treaties, special rapporteurs, and other mechanisms. Granted this system is imperfect; we all know that you don't get your rights just by having laws and mechanisms. But it is a system that many have learned to utilize in their political struggles, and it upholds the principle that someone is responsible for realizing people's rights in the political, economic, and social spheres.

The human rights system has evolved into a complex set of ways in which both governments and NGOs can work to try to achieve human rights at the national, regional, and international level. Many of these mechanisms are under attack today from various governments precisely because they have been effective tools of persuasion and shame, if not always of enforcement. Some seek to weaken the treaty bodies that monitor government implementation of the human rights conventions that they have signed, while others have tried to get out of human rights obligations made by previous governments. The Bush administration's cynical manipulation of human rights rhetoric (including women's rights) and actual disregard for this system, and their efforts to undermine the International Criminal Court in particular, are both direct threats to human rights internationally and legitimize other governments who also seek to avoid human rights obligations and weaken the enforcement of them.

It is not only coincidental that attacks on human rights are happening just as more new actors have begun using the human rights framework for their struggles and working to strengthen the system. Over the past decade, not only women, but also indigenous peoples, racial minorities and those working for socio-economic rights have made significant advances in working with these mechanisms. All of this is threatened if human rights is weakened or superseded by a human security paradigm without such systems of accountability. Therefore it is imperative to maintain the focus on human rights as a crucial component of human security.

GENDER, HUMAN SECURITY, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Sadako Ogata, Commission on Human Security Co-Chair, said in her opening that the Commission decided not to isolate women as special areas of concern but rather to integrate gender based inequality and violence into the discussion of the topics that it discussed. I agree that this is the approach of the report, and it does a good job of gender integration. There are many places where gender is discussed in relation to areas, which the report deems significant, such as the differential impact of poverty on women and men, or some of the specific problems that women encounter as refugees. The report also recognizes that women, who often are responsible for holding family and community together, have played important roles in addressing human security concerns like armed conflict and poverty. I would add that human security - as opposed to national security - has in many ways long been the primary concern of many women, including many women in politics.

However, by not also taking up women as a subject, something is missing in the report. What it fails to explore fully as core matters of human security are those complex issues of bodily integrity that women have identified as critical to their intimate security: reproductive rights and violence against women in the family in particular. This gap goes to the core of the debate about gender mainstreaming versus women specific work, and illustrates why we need both. Gender should definitely be treated as cross-cutting and integrated into other topics in order to show its impact on mainstream issues. Yet, often without also paying specific attention to women as a subject or constituency as well, issues that predominately affect women often remain invisible or get side-lined as aspects of other issues deemed (more) important. Since women's lives are usually still not at the center of analysis in mainstream settings, a woman

specific approach also needs to be taken to ensure that women's realities are adequately reflected.

Bodily integrity/reproductive rights/violence against women in the family are the missing chapters from this report, and all too often from much of the human security literature and discussion. Yet, if you look at definitions of human security, there is no better paradigm for human insecurity than violence against women, which directly and indirectly affects a vast number of people. The Commission Report for example talks about how "violence unseats people's security," and the health chapter refers to domestic violence as a "silent crisis" of human security – yet this report does little to bring it out of that silence.

What is needed first is an examination of violence against women in its many forms as a major underlying source of human insecurity for women all over the world - in and of itself, not just as a byproduct of other issues. The recent World Health Organization report on violence for example notes that in several national studies it has been found that about one third of girls experience their first sexual encounter in some forced or coercive fashion. Just think about the socialization that happens when one third of the female population first experiences sex as domination and coercion. What does that embed and reinforce in terms of female insecurity around the body? If you add the fear of violence and lack of control over sex to many women's lack of access to control over when they will become pregnant, you have a very solid core of human insecurity surrounding issues of women's bodies.

Secondly, I believe that violence against women is not only an important human security issue in its own right, but also is connected to the perpetuation of other forms of domination and insecurity in the world. If we look at how violence against women in the family is normalized, we begin to understand that this is a key component to creating a culture that accepts the violence of war, militarism, and other forms of domination and conflict that are discussed in the human security report. What the report does talk about is how violence against women is exacerbated by war and conflict, which is true. But what it doesn't discuss is how violence against women is part of what perpetuates war and conflict, what feeds acceptance of violence as an inevitable and normal means of dealing with differences and conflict.

The climate of impunity for violence against women that exists at the core of most societies – the notion that men and boys have that they can get away with it - feeds the culture of impunity towards violence more generally. This culture of impunity can be seen in some of the problems described in the report, such as men demanding sex for food in refugee camps, which has implicated men of all cultures. It also reinforces at the gut level that violence wins, that domination succeeds, whether at home or in wars. A disturbing sign of this in the US is the growing number of girls who are becoming violent because they read society's message that to be empowered and avoid being female victims, they have to be violent.

Cultural violence is not what often gets presented as some marginalized (exotic) practice "over there." It is the culturally embedded practice and assumption of domination over women in most societies, and the general acceptance of violence as a means of maintaining that control, even of defending one's masculinity. Rather than labeling some things "cultural and traditional" forms of violence, we need to understand that all violence against women is cultural, at least as

long as the culture (in the form of family, community, friends, colleagues, religion, etc.) generally accepts it. This is the real cultural challenge of violence against women.

Women can build on the concept of human security and write the missing chapters from a feminist lens, starting with the principles of human security outlined here and elsewhere and going forward from there. In so doing, we can add to the understanding of what it will take to create human security for women as well as advance an understanding of what it takes to reverse deep seated patterns of domination manifested in racism, militarism, and war. Addressing violence at the heart of society, in our families and daily life, is a key component to addressing how we lay the conditions for human security for all as an alternative to the nationalist military based security that is fueling so many conflicts and problems in the world today.