No human security without gender equality

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Women's empowerment is essential to human development and poverty eradication. Human security, a promising platform and framework for the United Nations to promote peace, human rights and human development, will become one more lofty idea that does not translate into action if it is not used to improve the situation of women in their families and communities.

The United Nations has been a critical forum for the global women's movement particularly in the past 30 years. From the 1975 UN International Women's Year, through the Decade for Women (1976-1985) and the global conferences and summits of the 1990s,[1] women participated actively and with resolve to shape economic, social, and sustainable development. In these settings, advocates influenced key resolutions, won crucial commitments and established strategic mechanisms that set a far-reaching global policy agenda in which it became widely accepted that promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is essential to human development and poverty eradication.

Yet, despite these policy gains, and despite efforts to use these government commitments to achieve legal and policy changes to protect and advance women's rights at the national level, many women - especially poor women - are worse off today than they were a decade ago.

Over the past decade, major global forces have emerged that are undermining the gains made by women. The neo-liberal economic model and market-driven policies - particularly changes in trade and finance rules, and the deregulation and privatization of public goods and services - have exacerbated the poverty, food insecurity, and economic exclusion of the majority, while increasing the wealth and economic opportunities, and thus over-consumption, of the privileged few. At the same time, the world is becoming increasingly dangerous due to unilateral military intervention and communal and ethnic violence. Escalating militarism and new and revived fundamentalism, both secular and religious, have created a stifling climate for progressive change.

While it is well documented that women's empowerment is central to poverty eradication and national development, women still face significant barriers when it comes to access to resources, wage employment, and decision-making positions. As macroeconomic and national policies are too often gender blind, they are ineffective in addressing the needs of poor and minority women. In many parts of the world, the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has further increased women's income-earning, domestic and care-taking responsibilities.

These external forces and trends, promoted by the international financial institutions and the WTO, perpetuate and reinforce the structural inequalities between women and men in the economy and society. As a result, the external stronghold on national development policy and frameworks has weakened the ability of some governments to meet basic social needs, while increases in military and "anti-terrorism" spending further drain limited public resources for education, health and social services. This emphasis on national security and policing is also being used to undermine hard-won civil rights and civil liberties.

These trends are exacerbated by the policies of the United States, where the current administration employs its unsurpassed military and economic power for narrow economic, political, and ideological interests with dire consequences for people in the United States and around the world. The pre-emptive war in Iraq, the most extreme case so far of US unilateralism, was preceded by the administration's earlier repudiation of the Kyoto Protocol, its retreat from the International Criminal Court treaty, and its failure to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Women advocates working to implement the global policy commitments of the 1990s have often been stymied by these global challenges. While the UN is the most universal and legitimate global governance institution, it finds itself at a crossroads, weakened by a lack of resources and a broad agenda, as well as power imbalances among its diverse membership. The voices of developing countries and civil society, particularly those speaking for women, the poor, and other marginalized groups, are demanding reform. Instead of advancing the status quo by accommodating the international financial and trade institutions, the transnational corporations, and powerful industrialized countries, the UN must emerge as a counterweight, an accountable institution and effective promoter of peace, human rights, gender equality, sustainable development, and economic justice.

Human security is a promising platform and framework for the UN to promote peace, human rights and human development. However, what we have learned from more than a decade of experience of working with women seeking not only gender equality and equity but also social transformation is that without an explicit commitment to gender equality and the application of a gender lens, women's aspirations, needs, concerns and solutions are neither visible nor adequately addressed.

Too often, "human" development, "human" rights, and now perhaps "human" security assume men's experiences are the norm, fail to acknowledge gender differences and ultimately do not succeed in achieving their goals.

Women's empowerment and gender equality is central to human security. Unless approaches to human security can be used to improve the situation of women in their families and communities, it will be one more lofty idea that does not translate into action. We hope this paper will further bridge the discourse between proponents of "human security" and women's rights activists and together we can further develop a more "gendered" approach.

A people-centered human security does not necessarily imply a gender-sensitive approach to human security.

Traditionally, security has been understood in relation to the State, with a focus on security of territory from external aggression, or as global security from the threat of a nuclear apocalypse. The 1994 Human Development Report advocates for greater emphasis on people's security marking a shift from the provision of security through armaments, to security through human development. This understanding of human security does not replace the security of the state with the security of people. Rather, the two aspects are seen as interdependent.

A people-centered human security approach is in fact a gender-neutral approach. This approach is usually biased to women as it assumes men's experiences as the norm. Thus, given the absence of an explicit discussion of gender inequalities, the assumption that a people-centered approach automatically includes a gender perspective rings empty.

However, it is much easier to raise issues of gender equality and women's empowerment if the discussion focuses on people rather than the state. It is difficult to ask, "Where are the women?" if the emphasis is placed on the states.

Integrating a gender perspective into the human security approach

The Beijing Platform for Action calls for bringing a gender perspective to all structures, institutions, policies and programs. Its paragraph on gender mainstreaming specifically states that: "governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programs so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively."

This is consistent with the approach of the UN Commission on Human Security, which quite successfully integrates gender concerns throughout their report. The report concentrates on distinct but interrelated issues concerning conflict and poverty. These include protecting people in conflict and post-conflict situations, shielding people forced to move, overcoming economic insecurities, guaranteeing essential health care, and ensuring universal education. The Commission discusses for example the differential impact of poverty on women as well as men and specific problems that women face as immigrants or refugees. The report also recognizes the important role women play in peace processes including conflict resolution. However, the report fails to identify as core matters issues of physical integrity that women have identified as central to their intimate security. These include especially issues of violence against women in the family and women's reproductive rights. This gap is an illustration of the fact that we cannot prioritize gender mainstreaming over women specific work or vice versa, as both approaches are complementary.

What it would take to create human security for women

Until now, no comprehensive examination and analysis of women's human security has been undertaken although the Beijing Platform for Action identified in 1995 many constituent elements of women's human security such as issues of security in situations of armed and other forms of conflict, security from violence, environmental disaster, food security, shelter and housing. It is essential to understand the concept of human security from a gender perspective, in order to improve women's human security in a comprehensive and holistic manner. This means that gender equality goals and objectives must be incorporated into the human security approach. These issues relate to the central question of what is different about women's and men's security. These questions are not to be seen as additions or extras to the main discussions. Rather they should be integrated into the very understanding of what human security approach entails.

Violence against women

Violence against women is a very different security issue for women and men. Acts or threats of violence, whether occurring within the home or in the community, or perpetrated or condoned by the State, instill fear and insecurity in women's lives and are obstacles to the achievement of equality. The fear of violence, including harassment, is a permanent constraint on the mobility of millions of women and limits their access to resources and basic activities.

Violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. In many cases, violence against women and girls occurs in the family or within the home, where violence is often tolerated. The neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and rape of girl children and women by family members and other members of the household, as well as cases of spousal and non-spousal abuse, often go unreported and are thus difficult to detect. Even when such violence is reported, there is often a failure to protect victims or punish perpetrators. In many cases, women do not have control over sex and become pregnant. All these factors represent a concrete core of human insecurity surrounding women's bodies.

A second issue to highlight is violence against women during armed conflict. Women are subjected to violence because they are women. They are raped, forced into prostitution, trafficked, or impregnated against their will. There is great concern over gender-based violence in times of conflict not only because of its prevalence, but also because the most horrific crimes against women go unpunished and are not always recognized as violations of fundamental human rights.

Inequalities in power and decision-making

Worldwide, women continue to be dismally represented in political decision-making despite some gains made at the local level where women have better chances of getting elected and where they start their political careers. These disparities between women and men in public positions persist throughout national and international fora. Today, women represent only 15.2% of national legislatures.

Structural and cultural barriers prevent women's full and equal participation in decision-making. Prevailing gender stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes present serious obstacles to women's political participation. Similarly, the type of electoral system and campaign finance laws limit political opportunities for women. Furthermore, the unequal control over economic resources described below influences women's decision-making at the basic level of the household as well as in public institutions.

Both the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action highlight the importance of women's equal representation in political decision-making. Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention respectively call upon State Parties to ensure that women, on equal terms with men, participate in the formulation of government policy and international institutions. The Platform for Action is concerned with both women's access to and full participation in public, private and non-governmental structures and organizations and women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership positions.

These inequalities in relation to power are essential in the context of human security. It is important that women represent a minimum critical mass of 30% in political decision-making because they are then more likely to influence the decisions that affect their lives and the future of their families.

Inequality in access and control over resources

Nowhere in the world do men and women have equal access and control over resources - over credit, land, water and time. Women play a critical role in managing natural resources and have extensive knowledge and experience of the water, land, and energy supplies that sustain households and communities. Yet, their lack of land tenure or inheritance rights, and current trends such as water privatization, undermine their ability to own, manage, use, and conserve these resources and to provide for themselves and their families. Women's limited title to land, property and inheritance often means less access to agricultural extension services and credit and translates into reduced access to water and food.

Women are still concentrated in the informal sector, where there are no job or safety protections, and those entering the formal wage economy tend to be employed in the lowest-paying jobs with the greatest environmental and safety hazards. Women still earn less than men for the same work, outnumber men among those who are illiterate. Women's responsibility for domestic chores tends to mean that time is an extremely limited resource for women - time to participate in community organizations, time to study and time to earn an income. Thus, women's ability to protect their own security and ensure the security of family members differs enormously.

Women's human rights

The protection and respect of human rights has been identified as an important element in a human security agenda. This aspect of the agenda must be explicitly broadened to ensure a more active pursuit of women's rights as human rights. It is important that the use of human rights in this context clearly include gender-specific rights issues such as women's reproductive rights and violence against women in the family. Women's human rights must be at the core of the understanding of human security.

Women's agency

A human security approach should not focus solely on women as victims - as rape victims, as refugees without options, as widows without resources, as powerless community workers excluded from the main decision-making organizations, etc. It is crucial that women's agency, especially in times of crisis, be highlighted, as even in the most difficult situations women possess resources, skills and capabilities.

There is growing conscientious effort in documenting women's initiatives in building peace and security especially since the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution, which calls for an increased participation of women in peace processes. Similar initiatives are underway to highlight women's agency in the area of food security.

No human security goal can be achieved without taking into account the security interests of both women and men. It is critical that discussion on human security continue to focus on people - both women and men as an alternative to the state military-based security that has created so many conflicts worldwide.

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Note:

[1] UN Conference on the Environment and Development, Rio, Brazil 1992; UN Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 1993; International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, Egypt, 1994; UN Conference on Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1995; UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 1995.

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