

DifferentTakes

Human Security: A Gender Perspective

by Angela Raven-Roberts, Ph.D.

As once again the United States undertakes for military operations overseas, it is more important than ever to examine alternative approaches to national security.

International Relations had previously placed an emphasis on the security of the state. The focus of human security, by contrast, is on individuals in and of their own right, as well as on understanding and engaging with a much wider range of political, social, environmental and economic threats that pose challenges to individual and community well-being.

A gendered and generational perspective of human security entails a more nuanced understanding of what people's own perspectives of human insecurity might encompass. It emphasizes addressing how women, children, adolescents, and the elderly, disabled and socially marginalized groups in any given society experience insecurity and risk, for example.

The concept of Human Security owes its origins to the debates within the development arena in the 1960s and 1970s that increasingly sought to place the individual as the focus of the development enterprise. With this came the recognition that poverty and human suffering, environmental degradation, inadequate protection of human rights and the disintegration of social and community structures all were interlinked and posed threats not only to stability within states but to international security as well.

Because human security is conceived as both "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear," it requires different terms of engagement by international actors. The Canadian government was instrumental in 1999 in incorporating a human security framework as the key ideological foundation for its foreign policy and since then has tried to encourage other governments and UN agencies to adopt this perspective:

Human security is an alternative way of seeing the world, taking people as its point of reference, rather than focusing exclusively on the security of territory or governments... Human security entails taking preventative measures to reduce vulnerability, minimize risk and taking remedial action when prevention fails. (Human Security:

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Safety for People in a Changing World.
Dept. of Foreign Affairs and International
Trade, Canada, Ottawa. 1999)

Today, the focus on human security comes at a time when the international donor community, human rights organizations and humanitarian agencies as well as development institutions are confronted with seemingly new and intractable crises, apparently failing states and extended periods of violence affecting a range of societies. The end of the Cold War was supposed to usher in a period of peace and prosperity, but instead has resulted in new patterns and forms of violence, poverty and marginalization.

While human security's emphasis on the individual is laudable, it requires a more radical understanding of the complexity of today's crises and the ways in which both local and international factors are shaping the particular risks that communities (and especially women) are facing. Most specifically, it entails recognizing where and why new forms of power, control and authority are taking shape and how they are expressing themselves.

Many regions of the world increasingly are being left out of the gains in global trade and investment. As these economies weaken (even while becoming more integrated into the global economy), the capacity of and rationale for government leaders to respond to their people's needs and implement effective governance diminishes. New forms of political and social structures emerge led by warlords, heads of criminal networks and paramilitary forces, often working in complicity with government authority. These forces pay little respect to norms of accountability, international standards of human rights or participatory or represen-

tative processes and institutions.

They also often deliberately create unstable situations in order to consolidate power and gain maximum economic profit from unregulated and uncontested access to legitimate assets such as diamonds, timber or oil. Profitable trafficking in illicit goods, such as human beings, drugs and small arms, flourishes under such circumstances. These are the new forms of mal-governance where protection and access to resources are distributed according to allegiances to militia groups or extorted in exchange for protection from other predatory forces. Unsurprisingly, these areas of instability characterize the zones where women and children are suffering greatly.

In these new conflicts the nature, form and function of violence also have distinct characteristics. Gender-based violence in the context of contemporary conflicts has become a critical weapon of warfare. Women are subjected to specific forms of violence in war because, as women, they are viewed as cultural bearers and reproducers of "the enemy." Rape, forced impregnation, sexual slavery and other forms of humiliation take on powerful political and symbolic meanings. The deliberate initiation by and endorsement of these acts by military commanders and political leaders underscores the significance of these acts as more than random assaults.

At the same time, because of their special roles and responsibilities within the domestic economy, women can inadvertently be at risk from 'collateral' damage such as land mines, abductions, sniper attacks, etc., in the course of collecting water or firewood or engaging in farming or trading. The increasing impact of militarism on many communities, exacerbated by the availability of small arms, also has serious consequences for women and children. Families are destroyed through death and injuries, robberies and raids become more deadly, and traditional forms of community authority are undermined as younger members acquire arms and can set themselves up independently from the disciplining and governance of elders.

A key element of the human security agenda rests on the notion of a renewed imperative to promote and protect human rights. The 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna as well as the UN Declaration of the "Elimination of Violence against Women" recognized the specificity of discrimination against women and gender violence and endorsed the principle that protection against these violations were important human rights issues. Such a rights-based approach also highlighted how other aspects that affect women's security such as forced marriages, gender-specific torture,

sexual surgery, trafficking in women and forced prostitution are not only threats to an individual's integrity, identity and safety, but are also violations of human rights. In addition, this framework demonstrates how global criminalized forces exploit poverty and weakened authority to reassert control over women, and use trafficking, forced marriage and prostitution as important, highly profitable economic activities. The economic aspects of these activities are underscored by the ways that forced prostitution, bonded labor, trafficking in women and children are embedded and connected into legal and illegal international networks of exchange. They are thus more than aberrations based on traditional and cultural forms of discrimination against women and girls, but are rather new forms of commodification of human beings.

Throughout the world there is a major discrepancy in the ways in which women and men have access to land, credit, extension services and other resources. These inequalities compromise the effectiveness of livelihood strategies, especially in times of crises. Survival strategies vary according to gender and generational roles and relations. Female poverty and lack of access to education and skills are important constraints that influence how women cope with crises but also the degree to which they can respond to changing circumstances and opportunities. Not all women suffer equally or similarly in these contexts. For example, one of the most compromised of categories of women are widows. Throughout the world, culture, traditions and national legislation help to reinforce certain behaviors and discriminatory practices against widows. In many societies and particularly those societies affected by protracted conflict, widows of all ages -

young, old, disabled - form an invisible underclass of asset-less, unprotected and often exploited individuals, simply because they are without their spouses. The human security framework has the potential to be an important tool for addressing the many complex crises that are affecting communities today. In the final analysis, human security should be about addressing injustice and enabling people to deal with the new forms of power and subjugation that are shaping their lives. A gendered approach disaggregates the cultural, social, economic and political mechanisms for the distribution of power and control and recognizes who is affected and how and what specific forms of protection or assistance are needed—by whom. It is therefore a vital element of the human security agenda.

There is a danger, however, that human security will merely become yet another slogan employed by intervening agencies so that they simply appear to be effectively tackling the complex problems of global poverty. The more likely possibility is that there will be neither the sufficient development funds nor the responsible investment that is needed for true economic development that narrows the gap between the rich and poor. Equally likely to be lacking is the adequate political will needed for the realization of long-awaited justice to address the oppression that the world's poor are facing.

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