

The Gender and Human Security Debate

Anuradha M. Chenoy

Abstract Feminists have welcomed the human security concept for the challenge it poses to national and state security but have faulted it for not adequately addressing women's issues. This article looks at the debate between feminists and human security theorists on the issue of gender, what impact these two discourses have on current thinking, and examines if these contradictions can be reconciled when enacting policy decisions.

Human security challenges the exclusive emphasis on state security conceptualised by realist national security paradigms and advocates that the state must simultaneously concern itself with the security of individuals. Human security evolved as an extension of the human development approach, which looks at alternative models to economic growth and market paradigms. By focusing on the individual and especially marginalised individuals, human security subsumes categories like women, ethnic and religious minorities, etc. Since economic, social or environmental threats impact social groups differently, those who are already unequal are worse hit. Thus, the human security concept argues that women's needs should be specifically addressed, especially during humanitarian crises.

1 The commonalities

Feminists welcome human security as a significant challenge to established ideas about national security, having a close affinity to their own arguments. The exclusive pursuit of national security can lead to the security of the individual citizen being risked, especially when national security laws and expenditure on defence are disproportionate to civil issues. This disproportion is worst under repressive regimes (e.g. Burma, North Korea, etc.) but can characterise even liberal democratic states that prioritise threats to national security over the social and economic needs of their citizens.

Traditional security sees threats to the state coming mainly from other states or from anti-state movements within states. Current crises, which confront all states, are the financial crisis, food insecurity, terrorism, climate change and environmental degradation. Even states that prioritised national security over everything else now recognise that these non-military threats have to be addressed.

Feminists have critiqued national security and the realist doctrines that underlie it as a masculinist doctrine that secures the interests of male elites and endorses the oppression of women. Feminists challenge realist theories of international relations that favour the 'sovereign man' or the 'hero warrior' who is the exclusive symbol of power. The state is complicit in this patriarchal structure through its system of laws and policies; consequently, women's movements are engaged in struggles to change this duality of citizenship rights.

Human security proposes that the frame of security be broadened to include all kinds of threats: environmental, economic, social, cultural, etc. Each of these impacts women differently and threatens women's physical security in various capacities. Insecurity for women can be from within the home, the community and the state. The human security framework does not blame patriarchal structures but calls for an inclusive approach to laws,

institutions, citizenship and the state. It especially asks for the inclusion of all minorities and women. Like the feminist paradigm it suggests that states and institutions will be more democratic, accountable and stable if they are inclusive of these excluded groups.

Human security and human rights 'are mutually re-enforcing and indispensable for each other' (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007: 123). Human rights are by their very nature people-oriented and stand for guaranteeing the welfare of all individuals. Women's rights as human rights form a core of the women's movements that are struggling to get states to tackle policies and practices that discriminate against or compromise women's fundamental rights. Feminists acknowledge that the UN has mainstreamed women's rights as human rights. The centrality of human rights in human security (Axworthy 1997) re-enforces the claims of the women's movements and is acknowledged by feminist theory and practice (Bunch 2004; McKay 2004).

Non-violence is important to women and feminists because, comparatively, women are more likely to be the victims of private or domestic violence rather than men. Women's movements have long struggled against violence and discriminations of all forms against women. The UN passed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and continues its efforts to have the convention endorsed by states and societies. Human security advocates non-violence as its core methodology. It opposes all discrimination and focuses on the excluded sectors of societies.

In areas of armed conflict, human rights groups and women's groups have come together to ensure human security as a way forward to sustained peace. In Nepal, for instance, which experienced a civil war that lasted for over 13 years because of a Maoist insurgency in the rural and backland regions, the Maoists were encouraged to negotiate a peace settlement. Women had constituted one-third of Maoist cadre, and one of the demands of the Maoists was more inclusion of women in all institutions. As a consequence, when elections were held for a Constituent Assembly in 2008, one-third of the seats were reserved for women candidates.

Some supporters of human security, like Japan, prioritise freedom from want, whereas others, such as Canada, advocate freedom from fear, calling for safety for people from both violent and non-violent threats. An example of ensuring freedom from want comes from India where the right to work (at the minimum wage for at least one member per family) became an Act that is being implemented in the least developed rural districts of India. This Act came after the combined advocacy and campaign by the right to food activists and women's groups. These groups negotiated special provisions for women in this Act, such as childcare where women worked, and quotas for women.

Feminists and women's movements are deeply concerned with structural violence since it impacts women directly in their daily lives and holds them back from participating fully in institutions, even when there are opportunities for participation. Women's movements the world over have lobbied for steps to stop the use of rape as a weapon of war. It was not until sexual atrocities were committed during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia that consistent references began to appear throughout the UN regarding the problem of sexual violence during armed conflict. The 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna was a watershed for women's human rights, as previously these acts had been regarded as private matters and were therefore not seen as appropriate for government or international action (UN 2000).

On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council passed Security Council Resolution 1325 to address women's roles in war and peace. The resolution affirms the important role that women play in the prevention and resolution of armed conflicts and in peace building, asking that women be engaged in all peacebuilding efforts.

Both feminists and human security approaches seek societal transformation by linking security with the human rights approach. For human rights expert Bertrand Ramcharan, the very essence of human security is to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, as 'upholding human rights is the way to achieve individual, national and international security' (Ramcharan 2002: 5). Feminists are committed to fundamental human rights in general as well as to gender-specific human rights issues, such as

violence against women, reproductive rights and women's poverty. Feminists have argued that linking up with human rights is a useful strategy because it is more difficult to oppose a human rights issue than a feminist one (Reilly 1997).

Human security advocates and feminists have a similar response to the debate on the cultural particularity of Western liberalism and the argument developed by some governments on 'Asian values' and 'Islamic values' that have challenged the universality of human rights. The proponents of 'Asian values' allege that they emphasise social and communal harmony, whereas human rights are based on Western liberal ideas that concentrate on the rights of individuals. Asian feminists, however, contend that the claim of cultural specificity had been used to curb women's rights. For example, if a community is given the right to have its own laws under a secular regime, that community can use its autonomy to curb women's rights – as in India, where divorced Muslim women received alimony according to 'Sharia laws' (Islamic laws) rather than the secular laws of the Indian state.

2 The differences

The Commission on Human Security Co-Chair, Sadako Ogata, stated that the commission decided not to isolate women as a special area of concern, but rather to integrate gender-based inequality. Feminists complained that 'by not taking up women as a subject, something is missing in the report' (Bunch 2004). This argument forms the core of the debate between the feminists and human security advocates.

Feminists, despite their internal differences, challenge male-dominated power relations in all fields – social, political and economic. For them, the ideology of masculinity is a cultural universal that pervades all structures from the international, to local, to the personal. This patriarchal assumption privileges men globally. There exist cultural specifics and variations in how patriarchy manifests itself, especially in terms of personal laws (e.g. in some countries women are not allowed the right to abortion, and in others they have to wear veils in public spaces). Women's rights and equity issues are at differing stages in different societies. The state is itself the basis of patriarchal relations and gender, and class relations are legitimised by laws and backed by the coercive power of the state.

Feminists have long argued that social theory subsumes and 'invisibilises' women (Tickner 1992). Human security, by focusing on the individual, is therefore little different in this particular aspect. Feminists argue that some policies that are supposedly for 'all individuals' end up favouring men over women. For example, democracy allows all individuals to be part of power structures and representative bodies, but in reality, the process and circumstances exclude women from leadership positions (the number of women in most parliaments worldwide still does not exceed the average of 10 per cent). Similarly, states like India ensure all individuals the right to primary education. Yet, more girls than boys remain out of schools, and families still prefer that girls be held back as household help, while boys attend schools. Feminists thus argue that to subsume women theoretically or in policy leads to a silent form of discrimination. Women's groups have lobbied for affirmative action and for women's reservation in local and national governments in Pakistan, India and other Asian countries. In India and Pakistan, women received this right in the local self-governing councils. In India, women are still campaigning for reservations for women in the National Parliament, but in Pakistan, they have acquired some reserved seats.

Feminists critique the realist notion of power as domination but feel they have to engage with power themselves because they understand that power is at the root of all social relations. For realists and other traditional theorists, power is defined as the ability to influence others and is backed by force when consent fails. For feminists, on the other hand, power needs to be distributive, and women should also have power that equals men. Human security asks for inclusion, but does not deconstruct or take on social power. Both paradigms look at ways of empowerment that imply changes in the notion of existing social categories.

The human security approach supports special protection of women and children, especially during times of acute insecurity (war, military occupation, conflict, economic collapse, famine, etc). Feminists have criticised this 'special protection' as a 'protection racket' (Elshtain 1987). This is because protection of women has historically disempowered women, curbing their rights, clubbing them together with children and

underlining their lack of agency. While human security argues for empowerment of all individuals, including women, it also recognises the special needs of protecting, rehabilitating and supporting women in times of threat. The influential international Report on the 'Responsibility to Protect'¹ evolved from human security concerns, but it is contested among women's groups with only some supporting it and others rejecting it, claiming that it is designed to facilitate international intervention, based on 'just war' theories reconstituting the colonial project.

Feminist scholarship directly confronts the structural link between power and masculinity. Feminists show that power is constructed as a masculine (muscular) trait and femininity a sign of weakness. The feminist approach to power is radically different to that of human security. Human security does not directly confront the issue of state power. It merely argues for broadening and flexibilising power to include negotiation. Like other UN resolutions and proposals, human security advocates disarmament and warns against the danger of militarist methodologies in resolving civil issues. Feminists, by contrast, question the very structure of patriarchal power as 'power over the other'. They advocate power as negotiation and empowerment of women.

Feminist critiques of national security pinpoint the intersection between the ideological notions of masculinity and militarisation. The latter is a process with both ideological and material dimensions. Feminists focus on the ideological dimension since focus on the material alone leaves untouched and unexplained the most powerful ideological processes that perpetuate militarism (Enloe 2000). Feminists show that gender hierarchies and power inequities exacerbate their insecurity (McKay 2004). UN resolutions like UNSCR 1325 recognise how social systems are gendered with one gender given marked preference in all forms of security: food, economic, personal and political security.

All types of violence are abhorrent to the human security paradigm, but this paradigm does not clearly demarcate what constitutes gender-specific violence. Research has shown that there is a nexus of violence between the public and private spheres. New data recorded by Amnesty International (2008) and the UN (1996) claims

that in militarised regions or zones of armed conflict, domestic violence increases. Feminists like Erin Baines (2005) have argued that the war against women does not end when official wars are over.

Susan McKay (2004) argues that since human security is a tool for peace building, it is important to acknowledge women's roles in this process. Women peace builders working at the grassroots and community levels emphasise processes that build peace and human security and have had significant impact in restoring normalcy. She argues, therefore, that human security be analysed using feminist and gender lenses.

3 Interrelationships between gender and human security approaches

The human security concept detaches the question of security from its traditional conception of safety of states from military threats to concentrate on the safety of peoples and communities – but as we have seen, it does not directly confront the ideologies and structures that oppress or deny justice and equity to women. To use Charlotte Bunch's (2004) critical phrase: 'Women can build on the concept of human security and write the missing chapter ...'.

It may be argued that the human security position of 'integrating' women along with other marginalised groups is based on the belief that women are also in positions of power and not all women are subordinate to men, a belief commonly held by feminists like Inger Skjelsbaek (1996) and Ann Tickner (1992). Furthermore, some types of feminist theory and practice could be accused of subsuming all men together without looking at how class differences or how majority groups – ethnic, religious and social – exclude and marginalise minorities.

The Commission on Human Security and subsequent discussions address the reality of state power and sovereignty but presses for a more humanised state and a sovereignty that takes on responsibility and accountability. By focusing on all individuals, the human security approach attempts to change the very nature of national security-based states. The tactic of human security is to keep away from directly confrontational debates and push for gradual change in the terms of a discourse that will allow

for expansion of a notion of rights and security as linked to human welfare and dignity.

Also, human security remains context and structure specific (Hampson 2004). So for some countries, food security may be the greatest issue, for others energy security, and for yet others, terrorism. Similarly, for some individuals the greatest insecurity could be domestic violence, while for others it may be the threat of starvation. The logic of human security is not to privilege any one individual's threat over that of another, but to view and treat each threat with the respect it deserves. For feminists, women comprise a social group that has not received proper recognition and treatment with respect to human security. The two discourses are thus not contradictory. Their objective is the same: the dignity and welfare of men and women.

4 Globalisation and gendered human security

What difference have the human security and the gender approaches made in the last decade, especially since the threat of terrorism to national security has become a primary concern of the international community? One response to the broadening of security has been the conceptual division between 'hard' power – identified with national interest of the state – and 'soft' power that includes culture, ideas, environment, food, etc. Human security issues fall under the realm of soft power – and arguably during the past decade have taken second place to hard power concerns like terrorism.

Yet global trends are reinforcing the importance of both human and gender security issues. As social tensions rise and as wage differentials and inequity widen differences between classes of people, the world has seen an increase in economic and environmental migrants. Feminist economists, like Jayati Ghosh (2008), have shown that globalisation has led to the feminisation of poverty. Human development reports have shown an increase in the informal sectors, as labour moves from the formal to the unorganised sector. When labour is flexibilised and the numbers of home workers increase, more women are likely to find employment, although in very exploitative conditions. Human security analysis argues that development is not possible without security and supports the idea of sustainable development as opposed to development as mere growth. It advocates labour standards and rights as part of

growth. The annual *Human Development Reports* and the advocacy of alternate principles of development by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have put pressure on governments and corporations to pay more attention to labour rights and poverty alleviation programmes.

Nevertheless, many states have internally repressive policies and are far from recognising women's rights as human rights. While states, especially in the South, have succumbed to the pressure of international financial institutions (IFIs) and globalising powers, they have also been willing compromisers to retain their own power and privilege and maintain the *status quo*. Once they accept the market and withdrawal of state intervention (except during serious crisis), they withdraw from social sectors and loosen their control of the economy. Such governments become increasingly incapable of handling crises like the recent food and financial crises. At the same time, this opens opportunities for active rethinking of policies and human security measures. Women's groups can insert their voices in the reconstructive discourse, demanding more welfare measures for women and children and increased regulation by the state.

5 Conclusion

Many states and regimes realise that to maintain their legitimacy, they need to bring human security issues to the table and take policy measures to secure them. In South Asia, for example, India has legislated 'the right to work' to at least one person in every family, at the minimum wage, Pakistan has moved towards democracy, and Nepal has negotiated a peace agreement with Maoist rebels and is to negotiate a constitution. All of these issues are linked with human security. At the same time, women's movements in each of these countries have negotiated special provisions for women throughout the processes leading to these changes. For instance, in India the Right to Work Act ensures that women will have a quota. The Pakistan Assemblies have quotas for women representatives; the Nepal Constituent Assembly reserved seats for women. States and regimes have to be pressurised by popular movements to accept their demands. This has been the key for women's movements historically in declaring and attaining their rights. In turn, human security and women's movements must work together. The debate

cannot be whether human security is preferred to gender rights or vice versa, but rather how to

create a truly gendered human security that accounts fully for women's human rights.

Note

1 www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/pages/23

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