

Gender and human security issues: building a programme of action-research

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Introduction

Since March 2000, McGill University's Centre for Developing-Area Studies (CDAS) has been collaborating with the Women's Centre of Montreal (WCM) and various other organisations in an action-research programme on gender and human security issues (GHSI) to address one of the most pressing problems of our time—the plight of so many civilians adversely affected by violent political conflict.¹ At the time of writing (October 2003), there are over 37 civil wars taking place in different parts of the globe, primarily in the so-called 'developing world', where most of the world's poor reside. Increasingly, civilian populations, especially women and children, are the prime victims of these wars. How to assist them to resume their lives and to feel safe and secure in their surroundings, whether in the post-conflict state, in their region, or in their new country of choice, is the central motivating force behind this four-year (2000–2004) cooperative programme funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)'s Community–University Research Alliance (CURA) programme.

As the nature and number of violent conflicts changed, especially during the 1990s, human security rather than merely the security of national borders or of governments became the more appropriate all-encompassing concern for ensuring the safety of peoples and their communities. The term 'human security' was first used by UNDP in its 1994 *Human Development Report*, where human development was defined as 'the process of widening the range of people's choices', while human security was defined as the ability to pursue those choices in a safe environment, broadly encompassing seven dimensions of security—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. For many of us, however, particularly researchers at the CDAS, people and their enjoyment of these rights were always at the centre of our development pursuits. What was new was the legitimacy and breadth such a shift in perception received from mainstream organisations and governments. Similarly, the problematic of gender, which allows us to examine the differently constructed roles and responsibilities of men and women in situations that are culturally determined and changeable, was clearly useful as we witnessed the degree of gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict.

Our programme stresses the notion of human security from the perspective of rights and needs of women who have experienced or continue to experience violent conflict. Globally, war-torn societies and armed conflicts are producing more refugees, displaced people, and migrants than ever before, including many women coming to Canada. These wars do inordinate damage to

individuals and societies, leaving their wounds, their scars, and their hardships. Our programme seeks not only to understand these conflicts but also to assist in all ways possible to help heal those in need and to instil a culture of peace in our troubled world. Without real peace, including feelings of security and actual security, there are no prospects for development or equality.

Our GHSI programme is focusing primarily on the particular needs of women in Montreal who have lived in war-torn countries and experienced armed conflict, especially in the Great Lakes region of Africa (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda). However, we are also conducting a broader range of studies that explore the impact of armed conflict on human security and on the lives of women under four research axes: human rights and human security; consolidation of peace and reconstruction; education; and health. To do so, we have a team of researchers from political science, education, psychology, nursing, social work, international development, and law who work with community workers in Canada and abroad. The research activities of the GHSI programme are assisted in Africa with the participation of a regional organisation, the Eastern African Sub-Regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI) based in Uganda. The collaboration between academia and the community is of prime importance in this programme, which is based on the belief that, by working together, we can enhance our respective capacities in research and intervention for assisting victims of war while promoting deep-rooted peace and sustainable development.

Before discussing in more detail some of the action-research we are undertaking, it is important to set out the global context of our work.

Global context

While history is replete with wars from time immemorial, the character and nature of these armed conflicts into the twenty-first century have undergone changes that present new and different challenges for those working for peace and development. It is critically important that we understand the specific context of armed conflicts in the countries of the so-called 'developing world' in order that we do not paint all conflicts with the same brush. However, there are some generalisations that can be made about these wars, which are extremely disturbing, as they make the prospects for genuine development more difficult. During the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, most conflicts are happening within states rather than across national borders, resulting in massive displacements of people from their communities and their sources of livelihood. Furthermore, many armed groups deliberately use violence and target civilians as a major weapon in their conflict. Eric Hobsbawm estimates that during the First World War, 5 per cent of the casualties were civilians, which rose to 66 per cent during the Second World War, and to 80–90 per cent at the turn of the twenty-first century (Hobsbawm 2002). There is seldom any distinction made between combatants and non-combatants. In addition, while many violent political conflicts are related to perceived or real social and economic injustices, often made worse by neo-liberal economic reforms or the 'globalisation agenda', the contending parties very often lack any constructive programmatic or political agenda to implement.

The other disturbing trend is the wide and easy availability of warfare equipment, military training, and even small arms to those with the financial means. What is startling is how those in the poorer countries of the 'developing world' are able to arm themselves to continue these conflicts. Weapons are purchased from multinational companies based in North America or Europe where armed conflicts are *not* occurring. Over the last decade, as armed conflict has proliferated, we cannot ignore the global consolidation of a militarised ideology that reinforces these wars. At this time, one global superpower continually validates a global war-like culture

(Eisler 1987), especially at the elite leadership level, as a solution to conflict. Most attempts at peace agreements or cessation of conflict are at best fragile. Military solutions are continuously returned to, thus undermining prospects for peace, a prerequisite to sound development.

People in societies affected by these conflicts face systematic human rights violations and often live for years in a climate of terror and insecurity. In this context, women and children are particularly vulnerable and, as has become well known, are frequently raped, humiliated, and deeply traumatised by their war experience (Agger 1994; Atlani 1997; ISIS-WICCE 1998; Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998; Vickers 1993). Moreover, while women often form the majority in these societies, they generally have no significant role in the formal prevention or resolution of these conflicts and are frequently absent from the formal process of reconstruction (Boyd 1994; Byrne 1996; Date-Bah 1996; Maynard 1997). Furthermore, there has been a growing realisation (Boyd 1994; Kasmann and Körner 1996; Osman 1993; UNIFEM 1997) that gender differences mean that women have particular needs that differ from those of men and that they also bring 'to the table' a different approach to conflict resolution and to reconstruction that requires validation. These are just some of the issues we have been addressing.

Global problems in a local context

In our globalised world, the instability of one region has direct effects on other regions. The Women's Centre of Montreal (WCM), situated in the heart of the city, has increasingly been attending women immigrants and refugees from countries ravaged by war and violent conflict. These women seek assistance not only to find employment, to improve their language skills, and to deal with other practical matters in their new environment; they also seek assistance to overcome the dire psychological effects of war and violence, notably the trauma resulting from violence in their past circumstance (Rousseau et al. 1999). In order to serve these women better, the WCM, whose general mission is to help women to help themselves, has, under the rubric of this action-research, defined its objective as being to focus on the immediate and particular needs of immigrant and refugee women who have experienced trauma from armed conflict situations; to develop a model of group intervention in order to better assist the adaptation of these women to their host country, in this case Canada; and generally to strengthen the capacity of those who are working with women from war-torn societies.

Trained facilitators from the WCM, under the guidance of its Executive Director Johanne Belisle, and its community activities coordinator Dorys Makhoul, have worked with groups of women immigrants and refugees, all of whom have experienced tragedies first hand during armed conflict, to address their precarious situation in Canada. The first group was primarily from the Great Lakes Region of Africa (Burundi, DRC, Rwanda and Uganda) and the three subsequent self-help groups were from other war-torn countries. Through these self-help group sessions, women have gradually developed a sense of security and understanding in their new Canadian environment, thus addressing the healing of their trauma. The techniques of art therapy have proved extremely useful in this process as they enable women to symbolise their traumatic experiences and to control the process of their healing (Benoit 2001).

From these various group sessions, the action-research will eventually produce a guide for those working with women who have been traumatised by the violence of war. This work contributes to a better understanding of the emotional issues that refugee women and survivors of trauma may experience in their country of resettlement. An academic article will analyse the WCM programme and describe the creative interventions that have been integrated within it. As a complement to this, the researcher in this endeavour, Miranda D'Amico (2003), has completed a literature review of the support programmes currently in place for women refugees in Canada. This review examines whether the effects of post-traumatic stress are taken into

account in programmes seeking to aid the integration of refugee women into Canadian society. Another researcher, Claudia Mitchell, has undertaken a study of the girl-child within refugee and immigrant communities in Montreal. Together with two research assistants, she has compiled an annotated bibliography with a selection of topics and issues relevant to working with refugee girls and women, particularly those who have been relocated from conflict zones (Mitchell et al. 2002).

As one of the oldest service institutions for women in Canada, the WCM has always paid special attention to improving the lives of newly arrived immigrant women. The CDAS, established in 1963, has as its mission to conduct research on development issues and has had researchers involved in the Great Lakes region of Africa for over a decade. Before this programme got underway, the CDAS and WCM were working informally to share knowledge across the divide between women's organisations and activities in Montreal and those in the so-called developing world. Women visitors from China, Indonesia, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda, often on training programmes at the CDAS, have had fruitful exchange sessions with members of the WCM.

This long-term relationship between community service and university research locally and globally was brought to bear on our action-research programme. The short-term goal is to improve the capacity for assisting women refugees and immigrants, specifically at the WCM. Over the long term, the programme is designed to develop various strategies and methodological tools for conducting research and intervention in the field of human security from a perspective that addresses women's rights and needs in relation to war-torn societies.

Our range of action-research covers various levels of integrated understandings: personal and political, theoretical and practical, local and global. For example, one CDAS researcher, Myriam Gervais, with over a decade of research in Rwanda, has developed an operational definition of human security, especially elaborating a system of values and norms that discourage violence as a means of defending particular interests (Gervais 2002). Early in our programme, an experienced researcher from the CDAS (Rosalind Boyd) who has conducted research in Uganda for over ten years, and a member of the WCM (Ginette Aumont) visited Rwanda and Uganda specifically to meet with organisations that are working to assist women who are victims of the conflicts in the Great Lakes region, including those dealing with treatment of trauma, and organisations that are promoting peace and reconciliation (Boyd 2001). Hosted by the regional women's organisation, EASSI, the team was able not only to identify the many women's organisations working for peace and conflict resolution but also to document the innovative efforts that women are employing to address trauma in the region, especially in Rwanda. The transfer of knowledge from the region to those working with women in Montreal is clearly recognised as important throughout our programme.

Supporting regional peace initiatives

An integral part of our programme is to directly support our regional partner, working in the immediacy of war-torn societies. We contributed to a solidarity visit to Somalia by women from EASSI in collaboration with ISIS-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (ISIS-WICCE) and the Centre for Conflict Resolution, all based in Uganda and working with women for peace in the region. Somalia has been plagued by civil strife since 1991 and women have suffered the brunt of this conflict while also having to cope with severe daily hardships. The visitors witnessed the destruction by war familiar in so many countries, including that of schools and health centres. The visit, the first by a group of African women, reinforced the determination of the Somali women to work for peace and conflict resolution. Women's initiatives such as these contribute to the trust and regional collaboration critical to the

reconciliation process. They also affirm the importance of global women's alliances in working for peace throughout the world.

Another highly innovative project that we supported was the training workshop on the documentation of peace-building initiatives organised by EASSI in Kampala, which brought together 20 participants from Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. These countries have all experienced, and are continuing to experience, armed conflict even while peace-building programmes are underway. The overall goal of the workshop was to develop the participants' capacity to establish a documentation system that will enable them to capture their own experiences and draw the lessons from their work in peace-building initiatives and projects.

A central approach of this programme is to share and respect knowledge from the region. We are always working to ensure an understanding of the conflicts and peace-building attempts for the benefit of those who are working in the community organisation in Montreal.

In that respect, another study is now underway to help understand the overall situation of armed conflict in the DRC, a country that has been at war since 1996, resulting in the deaths of over three million people. Pascal Musulay Mukonde, a lawyer specialising in international law and a CDAS researcher, is examining the current state of legislation, of jurisprudence, and of doctrine in the DRC in relation to the international law (regional and universal) relative to the violence done to women and girls in the course of the armed conflicts (from 1996 to 2003). He is focusing on the state of legal protection for women and girls who have been victims of sexual violence during the war there. Once again, civilians in general and women and girls in particular have been the victims of massive and serious violations of human rights. Entire villages and cities have been destroyed. There have been frequent massacres and women and girls have been violently raped. Humiliated, many of these women and girls live with the burden of having been sexually violated while the perpetrators live in impunity even though these crimes against humanity are legally punishable. His study, to be published in the region and in Montreal, will assist in the legal pursuit of these crimes.

While our programme has initially focused on women in war-torn countries of the Great Lakes region of Africa, we have also broadened our concerns by addressing other significant issues in the area of human security and gender. For example, in collaboration with the South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC) in Montreal, Shree Mulay has undertaken a study of South Asian women asylum seekers from the Indian subcontinent. Many women arrive in Canada have been trafficked by unscrupulous agents and once in Canada are left to fend for themselves with no resources. The programme has also supported the field research of Manal Jamal, a doctoral student in political science at McGill who is examining the women's movement and grassroots organisations in El Salvador and Palestine (Jamal 2002). The social dimensions of untreated trauma in men, particularly demobilised soldiers, and the ideology of militarisation, are being studied by Rosalind Boyd as an aspect of continued insecurity as societies attempt to reconcile following armed conflict.

Conclusion

Ursula Franklin has said that

we understand peace to be more than the absence of war. It is also the absence of fear: fear of the knock on the door in the middle of the night, fear of hunger and helplessness, fear of the absence of justice. Peace is, then, the presence of justice for all, peace means respect for all human needs as well as the condition that force, in all its forms, is not an instrument of national or international policy. (Franklin 1994)

In our programme of action-research, we are attempting to work with women to heal themselves and their societies after war, to understand the nature of violent conflict, and to contribute to building a culture of peace globally.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we witness a changed context for armed conflict, which necessitates new ways of intervening. We have opted for an integrated and holistic approach in our gender and human security programme by addressing the personal needs and rights of women while simultaneously examining the socio-economic and political context of violent conflicts. The security of large sections of the world continues to be threatened by poverty and war. Building a culture of peace requires transforming values. Confronting the militarisation of societies is one of our greatest challenges. Only with a broad commitment to demilitarisation and the elimination of poverty can development with peace take root.

Note

1. The Centre for Developing-Area Studies (CDAS) of McGill University and the Women's Centre of Montreal (WCM) jointly conduct the GHSI programme with the collaboration of the following partners: Johanne Bélisle, Executive Director, WCM, and GHSI Programme Co-director; Rosalind Boyd, Director, CDAS, McGill University, and GHSI Programme Director and Principal Investigator; Rex Brynen, Professor, Department of Political Science, McGill University, and Coordinator of the Inter-university Consortium for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (ICAMES); Miranda D'Amico, Associate Professor, Department of Education, Concordia University; Myriam Gervais, Senior Research Associate, CDAS, McGill University; Dorys Makhoul, Director, Front Line Services and Immigrant Women, WCM; Claudia Mitchell, Professor, Department of Education, McGill University; Maude Mugisha, Coordinator, Eastern African Sub-Regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI), Kampala, Uganda; Shree Mulay, Professor, Department of Medicine, McGill University, and Director, McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women (MCRTW); and Bilkis Vissandjée, Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Montreal. The GHSI programme is financed by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Community–University Research Alliances (SSHRC-CURA) programme. Suzanne Boutin is the Programme Coordinator for GHSI and is based at the CDAS.

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