

"Is human security a useful concept...?"

Is human security a useful concept for achieving gender justice, human rights and development?

An interview with Bernedette Muthien, a South African gender and peace studies academic, and Charlotte Bunch, an American gender and human rights academic, exploring the usefulness of "human security" as a tool for furthering human rights, women's security and human development.

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In 2001, the United Nations established a Commission on Human Security (CHS) in an effort to produce a comprehensive response to the Secretary-General's call at the 2000 Millennium Summit for a world free of deprivation, want and fear. The publication of the commission's report in May 2003 broadened and refocused the discussion of security from state to the security of people. This report outlined the ways in which the protection of human rights, economic justice, environmental integrity and human development are connected, set out necessary conditions for human security and claimed that this new concept would build on and enhance human rights and development frameworks.

AWID: What is the purpose of reframing security as human security?

Muthien: The concept of security has changed because the world has changed. There is now a greater interplay among states, individuals, groups, communities and various international organizations. We now need an understanding of human security that moves beyond threats to a more positive framing. We need not only look at freedom from threats but also provide an integrated affirmation of integrity and dignity for the realization of social justice and peace.

Bunch: For me the greatest usefulness of the human security concept is to counter the notion that national security and global security are only defined by militaristic, nation-centered approaches. At the core of the issue is how secure is the person. Often when we hear terms of national security we don't really think of this - we think of nation, this has nationalistic and militaristic interpretations. In the human security concept the effort is to say whose security, what is it, what do we mean. Conceptually, the strength of the concept is in its refocusing of the security discussion on what kind of security we want and whose security we are talking about.

AWID: In this refocusing of the definition of security has the role of the state in security become obsolete?

Muthien: The concept of human security does not entirely supplant the construct of national security. However, in the shift of the definition of security the role of the state has changed drastically. For example, if you look at issues related to the trafficking in women and children, the porous borders in Africa, globalization and its associated interactions - the traditional model of security based on nation-states does not offer much. Remember that concepts such as the nation-state are not preordained or natural but were created for particular purposes. The actors who created the nation-state concept and international system were of a specific era, had specific interests in mind, and were operating from their own political biases. The fact that this system was created by and for men, in a political climate dominated by male actors, reveals its strong gender bias. Nothing operates in isolation and therefore one must always ask the critical questions: whose definition is it, why are they defining it, and whose interests does that definition serve. One can never ask too many of such questions!

AWID: The human security concept proposed by the UN Commission on Human Security is praised as the agenda that connects and fills in the gaps among development, human rights and security agendas. What is the use of linking human security to human rights and human development?

Muthien: This kind of inter-disciplinary work is of critical importance to achieving peace and social justice. All of these concepts are connected and compartmentalizing them does not serve our purposes. In reality you cannot speak of human rights without development, nor can you speak of security without human rights. And once the language that has dominated the security agenda

changes, the conceptualization and mindset connected to it must follow. In this sense the framework put forth by the CHS is admirable and worthy of our respect.

My critique of the concept, however, is that it falls short on its understanding of current gender and human security discourse. Many of those who worked on the CHS report do not come from security backgrounds; rather most of its members have a development perspective. Although the development aspect of human security is important, the CHS concept really needed a more balanced representation of the other kinds of thinking that it claims to amalgamate. Had the CHS consulted with peace and security academics, their framing of human security in this report could have been far better informed.

Bunch: The taking up of the human security concept by the UN is indeed a step forward in the right direction as it represents an affirmation by mainstream institutions of the interconnectedness of human rights, security and human development. Conceptually it is definitely a more holistic framework, but in practice it is only useful insofar as its parts are given due weight. Without the continued strength of the human rights and development frameworks the human security framework will be undermined.

AWID: Conversely, however, could the conceptual integration of human rights and human development into human security somehow weaken these frameworks? Should issues like poverty or domestic violence be framed with regard to their implications for security rather than primarily as violations of human rights?

Bunch: It is necessary that human security does not gain mainstream acceptance to the detriment of work already being done in human rights and development. If you do not maintain the value and importance of human rights and economic justice in and of themselves, then the human security concept could be misused. For example, a police state can claim that it is providing for human security because its citizens are clothed and fed, even if the social, civil and political rights of the state's people have not been protected. In some ways human security could be used to de-emphasize human rights by streaming the whole concept into a basic needs approach to development, much like the millennium development goals do. It is definitely not meant for these ends but, depending on who is using the concept, the human rights framework could be bypassed in this way.

AWID: What do you think the CHS definition of human security is lacking?

Bunch: There is not so much lacking in the definition itself, what is problematic - as with so many other concepts - is what we read into the definition. The definition in the CHS report does not adequately deal with the security issues in women's lives - including every day violence and lack of reproductive rights. These insecurities are not spelled out because the human security report is essentially still a male centered and public view of security. The report does not sufficiently address security issues in the private sphere or the ways in which such insecurities affect women. The CHS did not adequately develop these concepts because it is still operating with a male gender bias.

Muthien: The definition of human security put forth by Betty Reardon, a prominent peace-studies academic, is much better than that of the CHS. Her work, which the CHS could easily have accessed and should have used in compiling its report, effectively encompasses human rights and human development. Reardon locates violence against women centrally, as both a private and public issue, resulting from a system of domination and oppression that should be addressed as a human security issue on all levels. I think that in the UN definition much of this gets lost. Reardon asserts that human security is derived from the expectation of the fulfillment of four fundamental conditions: first, that the environment can sustain human life; second, that our basic physical survival needs are met; third, that our human dignity, integrity, personal and cultural identities will be respected; and fourth, that our protection from avoidable harm is secured. If a society can ensure that these four conditions are met for most of its people then it is likely a secure society. If a society is working towards fulfilling these four conditions then it is moving toward a just society. (See section 2.1-2.2 in Muthien's "Engendering Security" <http://engender.org.za/ArticleEngenderingSecurity.html>)

AWID: What do you think is at stake when major international institutions assimilate a concept like human security?

Muthien: The adoption of a human security agenda, in any form, is a positive step as it opens new spaces for us to make further changes. Nevertheless, when major international actors like the UN co-

opt and mainstream such concepts it often leads to their depoliticization. I think this is what has happened with the human security concept and its failure to root itself in sound gender and peace thinking. We must remember that the UN is not a neutral organization, nor are the people who work for it. We must always be examining and questioning from whose lenses its commissions and policies are being formulated. Another problem is that once a concept like human security is made "official" by an institution like the UN it becomes very difficult to change. In a sense we are stuck with the CHS framing of human security - despite its many flaws.

Given that the CHS concept of human security is in this format and is here to stay, we must now determine how to use the tools it provides for our strategic goals. Similarly the human rights framework is flawed and imperfect in its origins and presumed universality, but women all over the world use it for their own ends in creative ways. As long as we maintain our integrity and original goals we can use the CHS version of human security in much the same way.

AWID: How do you think the CHS reframing of security can be used to tackle issues that adversely affect women's lives?

Muthien: The human security concept adds further layers of possibilities for women to interrogate, charge and change structures of patriarchy that affect them. It gives women more tools to become agents for change and therefore more possibilities to lead dignified lives. It provides feminists with a new language and space to confront oppression and cause things to shift. With the mainstreaming of human security we have a better capacity to change the lens from which security is viewed by many actors and force gender into that perspective.

Bunch: A holistic concept like human security helps to tease out the multiple dimensions that influence women's lives; it helps us understand the interconnectedness of violence against women, poverty, health care, social and economic situations of women and also how class, race and nationality cross-cut these situations. In some ways the rights-based framework can lead to a separation of these issues. Although the CHS did a good job of integrating gender into topics that were chosen to be important, the CHS did not choose some topics that are important in women's lives. In women's daily lives the threat of violence is perhaps the most prominent insecurity. The lack of control over reproduction is another major source of insecurity for women. The report does not discuss how violence against women is part of what perpetuates war and conflicts; by feeding acceptance of violence as an inevitable and normal means of dealing with differences and conflict. If human security is to be a means to address insecurity as it affects women and society as a whole, those using the concept (CHS) must deal with violence against women as a fundamental cause of human insecurity in and of itself. In many ways I think this gap in the report clearly illustrates why both gender mainstreaming and women specific areas are necessary in any framework.

AWID: Does the CHS have the capacity to deal with conditions of violence that affect women's lives?

Muthien: Although the framing of the concept within the UN is a great leap forward, the commission does not have the institutional structure or mechanisms to address all of the issues affecting women's human security. As of now it must lean on current institutions to deal with violence against women - such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). Currently the power of the ICC to redress issues related to violence against women is limited. Furthermore few women are aware of how to access this system of justice, and its tools are only good insofar as they can be implemented.

Bunch: That is a very important question - how does the commission envision making this concept useful and practical? I feel like human security is a concept and not a framework in the way that human rights is a framework, simply because HS hasn't been developed in that way. I do not think it will be effective as a framework for action unless it has institutional mechanisms for enforcement. Furthermore there is a danger that the human security concept could be put forth as a replacement to human rights in order to provide states and other actors with the means to evade and undermine its mechanisms for accountability. On the other hand, if human security is used as an interpretation of some aspects of human rights it has the potential to strengthen and further integrate arguments for economic, cultural and social rights into new spaces and systems. If human security can strengthen and expand the use of the human rights framework in this way it could be a very useful tool. But if national and international actors use the human security concept as a means to avoid the human rights system then the results will be very different. In this sense, the lack of institutional mechanisms

of human security is a considerable weakness and I doubt that the institutional capacity of human security will be developed in today's political climate.

AWID: Do you think that there is the political will to make human security an effective tool?

Bunch: The interlinking of the development agenda with human rights has strengthened both the human rights and development systems, but the success of these frameworks still depends on the willing compliance and cooperation of governments. The current trend, however, is in the opposite direction; for example the US, Australian and other governments are asserting that they do not have to accept international standards, systems and treaties and this is undermining the existing mechanisms tremendously. If this trend continues, it will be difficult to institutionalize human security, let alone have the concept taken up by governments. I don't think that other mechanisms, such as new human security institutions, would work better unless governments would better abide by them. But the reality is that there is nothing forcing them to abide by the existing frameworks. These systems need good will to work properly, and that is what we do not have much of now.

AWID: If the political climate is so unfavorable, why did the UN put forth the concept?

Bunch: Conceptually it opens a challenge to the concept of the militaristic paradigm of national security that has powerfully reemerged since 9/11. It is a useful concept to challenge the current political climate - but I doubt that the UN and member governments will actually take up such an agenda and create the necessary institutional space for it to work because the forces of backlash are so great at this moment.

Muthien: Given the constraints and what we are facing on a global scale, now - more than ever -we need such tools to challenge the return to unilateralism and the erosion of the welfare state. Despite an apparent lack of political will, I believe that in movements for justice the impossible is always possible - just like with Mandela's release from prison. In many countries now, politics are rooted in fear - as in the U.S. If we can shift from fear to action and involvement we can force the dominant political will to change. We must continue to formulate challenges to prevailing oppressions and systems that do not work.

AWID: Where do we go from here? Do you think organizations which operate from a rights-based framework for development should use a human security concept instead of human rights framework to further gender justice?

Muthien: There is no need for organizations to move away from a human rights framework but they should begin to look at how women can engage strategically with human security to improve their lives. It could be really exciting to adopt and incorporate human security in new ways. This concept can be an important vehicle and mechanism for change - provided that we do not stay within the confines of the UN CHS definition. Let us use their mainstreaming of the concept to expand on and effect real change where it is needed.

Bunch: I definitely would not suggest that organizations switch from a rights-based framework to a human security paradigm. Despite the flaws of the human rights framework there is a major body of work, tools and mechanisms, and 50 years of thinking and institutional practice that facilitate the use of human rights for social justice goals and it would be a big mistake to ditch that now for a concept that has no institutional framework. The human security concept should not be seen as an alternative to the human rights framework, but rather as a challenge to the dominant security discourse to pay attention to economic justice and human rights. Governments are using the concept of security in a competitive and destructive way and the human security concept provides us with a way to challenge that. I think of human security more as an alternative security discourse - one that says that rights and development are essential for security but that does not substitute for either of these frameworks.

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