

HUMAN SECURITY: A CONVERSATION

Mahnaz Afkhami
Kumi Naidoo
Jacqueline Pitanguy
Aruna Rao

REPRINTED FROM
Social Research
Volume 69, Number 3, Fall 2002

HUMAN SECURITY: A CONVERSATION

**Mahnaz Afkhami
Kumi Naidoo
Jacqueline Pitanguy
Aruna Rao**

Human Security: A Conversation

On May 12, 2002, Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP), an international nongovernmental organization dedicated to empowering women living in the global South, organized a conversation to map out an approach to a definition of the concept of human security. The participants—Mahnaz Afkhami (Iran/U.S.), Kumi Naidoo (South Africa), Jacqueline Pitanguy (Brazil), and Aruna Rao (India), co-chair and commissioners of the Commission on Globalization—discussed the concept of human security in order to identify the parameters as well as the limits of the traditional definition of human security, and to broaden it to encompass a wider spectrum of both human material and spiritual needs. The participants agreed to base their discussion on a value system that puts people's welfare at the center; emphasizes power sharing at all levels; and promotes an economic framework that encourages sustainable development, social justice, human rights, gender equality, and democracy. The conversation is a prelude to organizing a policy action group on human security with the support of the WLP and the Commission on Globalization.*

Mahnaz Afkhami: It might be appropriate to begin with some reflections on the concept of human security and how our own work is related to our definition. In my view, the traditional definition of "human security" is unsatisfactory since it has been tied too closely to conflict on an international or national scale, and

*Organizational affiliations appear on the inside back cover. This dialogue among steering committee members of the Commission on Globalization's Human Security Policy Action Group (www.commissiononglobalization.org) took place on May 15, 2002, at the Women's Learning Partnership (www.learningpartnership.org).

limited in focus to anti-military, anti-nuclear, anti-landmine struggles and movements. To come to the essential idea of what makes the individual human being feel secure, we ought to look to a more comprehensive, more inclusive, more interconnected series of ideas—"human rights writ large."

Jacqueline Pitanguy: I agree that we need to adopt a more comprehensive perspective of human security and I believe that this concept should be framed under the human rights paradigm, which provides the ground, the base, from which human security stems. If we adopt this more comprehensive approach, human security goes beyond the right to live free from violence and coercion and encompass other dimensions of life, such as the right to exercise civil, political, and reproductive rights; to have access to food, sanitation, education, and health; to be free from discrimination based on sex, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or religion; to live in a safe environment, including a safe domestic environment. In the twentieth century there has been an important enlargement of the conceptualization of human rights and its indivisibility, which affects the idea of human security. In more formal language, security is closely related to the frontiers of order and disorder, crime and punishment, danger and safety. These frontiers are being expanded and redefined through social activism and political action, bringing us to a new concept of security.

Kumi Naidoo: I agree with the two comments that were just made. However, I think that the real challenge to thinking through the usefulness of the concept of human security *in practice* is keeping it from becoming what our American colleagues would call "motherhood and apple pie": all things to all people. There is a danger of the concept becoming so inclusive that we don't know where it starts, much less where it ends. When we think about the strategic arena of intervention to advance human security, different choices have to be made about interventions called for by government, business, and civil society.

If we look, for example, at the position of the members of the global commission on human security, they come from humanitarian backgrounds and they have a great deal of influence, which they focus on what might be called emergency or unexpected events: earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters, as well as potentially the current religious conflict in the state of Gujarat in India, for example.

But I am contradicting myself a little bit here, in the sense that the concept as it is often used by the commission doesn't in my mind at this stage include the issue of domestic violence, for example. In my own conceptualization, human security needs to address how human beings can find security around the basic day-to-day activities they perform to create a peaceful and prosperous life for themselves. I very strongly support integrating social and economic events within this concept.

One of the areas of emphasis here is the need to look specifically and particularly at groups that are marginalized so that they do not have a public voice. Such social exclusion leads to disempowerment, which in turn does lead to a sense of psychological insecurity. When people talk about social exclusion, a presumption is made that "social exclusion" pertains to minority constituencies of citizens. But if we unpack that a little, if we have to name those constituencies, we find that we are in fact talking about the majority of the world's citizens: women, older persons, conventionally socially excluded peoples, such as people living with disabilities or indigenous people, for example. Then we see that we are living in a world where a large number of people do not have a sense of security about their lives, a sense of security about their space.

From the civic point of view, I think it is critical to recognize, regardless of one's definition of "security," that civil society is an integral part of building human security. In the end, whether we take humanitarian crisis, religious conflict, or even trying to serve the needs of the poorest of the poor, increasingly that burden is being shouldered by civil society organizations.

Aruna Rao: I agree with what has been said so far, but when I think about human security, two issues come to mind. One is “do no harm,” and the other is survival. I think there is a sense of rage at the inaction of national, global, and local systems of governance and a much deeper questioning of the values that underlie these systems and the broader frameworks within which they operate—the economic frameworks, the ideologies, the governance frameworks, and also religious fundamentalisms. Feminists are re-evaluating and criticizing these frameworks, but they continue to hold sway. There is incredible harm being done, both a general, low-level harm and a more flagrant type of harm, which has given rise to protest, movements for a stronger voice, better equity, and greater accountability.

An example of the first kind of harm is the AIDS situation in Tanzania. It is a huge problem but the government is doing next to nothing. So, it is falling on the backs of women in communities who are traditionally seen as the caregivers in the community to try to address the problem, to help people live with the disease. Another kind of harm is exemplified by the recent situation in Gujarat. That is an example of war that out on the battlefield of women’s bodies where the state plays a role in perpetuating ideologies of hate and terror.

It is also clear that increased spending on militarization is clearly linked to human deprivation and human insecurity in many parts of the world. Even those governments that we held up as exemplary are now functioning much to the detriment of basic survival. There is now a greater sense of urgency for change fueled by this outrage and the sense that time is running out on us. How do we change this world? How do we change the values that underlie this kind of system and the way people are thinking about solutions?

Afkhami: The fact that we have recently all begun to look at human security in these broader, more inclusive, more interconnected ways, is reflective of two things. One is that new develop-

ments in science and technology in an increasingly globalized world have given us the potential to solve many of our major problems, such as curing diseases or feeding people, providing shelter, or educating an ever-increasing population—in short, attending to the myriad needs of our lives. We also now have the potential to connect, to learn immediately what is happening in every corner of the world, to know what is affecting people in various regions. But we fail in doing any of these. Our indicators of human development, such as poverty, income disparity, the spread of AIDS, illiteracy, and environmental distress tell us that we are doing worse now than we did in the past, particularly in view of the means at our disposal.

I think there is also a third aspect: that the mechanisms that we have relied on to solve our problems, mobilize our resources, or express our grievances are no longer in fact capable of doing so—leaving aside for the moment the issue of whether they ever did so or whether they did it well or not. We have all looked for and advocated ways to do better, but now, when we look at the structures of governance or the functioning of particular national governments, as Aruna pointed out, forces that can affect lives in every corner of the world are no longer the same forces that at one point we were addressing. The entities that govern important aspects of our lives do not seem accountable, transparent, or even responsible to citizens in any given part of the world.

These three aspects—the extraordinary potential, the extraordinary absence or failure of a solution for the largest part of the population of the globe, and the weakening of the structures that are supposed to do something about all of this—are what I see when I examine the problem of human security.

Pitanguy: I would like to point out that the concept of human security is historically built, and therefore it is either more or less inclusive, broader or more concise, depending on a number of factors. Many of these factors have been brought up, but one aspect I want to highlight is power. Power structures, the balance

and scale of power, and power relations will allow for certain definitions of human security and not for others in certain periods in history and in different countries. Power is expressed through social class, culture systems and social relations, in national laws, local governments, and international governance, all of which has a direct impact on the definition of human security. When we think of human security as molded on a power arena, we can map the way it is being understood and when, as a concept, it is more or less encompassing, more or less legitimate.

For instance, as Kumi has already mentioned, domestic violence is not seen as an issue of human security if we place security solely in the space of the relations between the individual and the state. The same might be the case for certain types of torture or certain types of aggression, such as female genital mutilation, which also fall behind domestic doors. Even torture practiced by a state on its citizens, universally recognized as a human rights violation, has been used and justified in many Latin American countries under the "human security" label. When, during armed conflicts, bombing civilian populations is or is not justified as a national security issue also depends on power relations.

So I would be very careful with the term "human security." It can be and has been used very differently and for very different purposes in different moments and countries. We need to refer this concept to the human rights language and instruments so that the understanding of human security (at least its formal understanding) will be more encompassing and universal. The definition of human security should be based on what has been already agreed to, at the UN level, in terms of international treaties, conventions, international courts—this is not so utopian. In many societies there have been many achievements that have corporatized the idea of human security through concrete mechanisms—for instance, affirmative action policies.

A more concrete example is the case of domestic violence. In Brazil, as a result of women's rights advocates, special police stations to attend women victim of domestic violence were created

in the mid-1980s. Today more than 300 of these police stations are in operation. This issue has become a question of human security for the government that took security measures to respond to it. It is through the advocacy of civil society organizations—such as women's organizations, indigenous people's organizations, Afro-descendants' organizations, gay's rights groups—that the idea of security is being redefined to be based on the recognition that security cannot mean the same for all. Human diversity in terms of sex, race and ethnicity, age, or social class demands different definitions of security. And even within these categories there may be differences. However, it is possible to address the question of "women and human security" because, in spite of the diversity of this universe, certain issues such as domestic violence are transversal, cutting across social class, race, and age.

The debate on human security is very complex, and I agree with Aruna that there is an urgent need to talk about it. I also agree that we must detach it from the idea of only immediate conflict. I think that through a survey of what has been achieved in terms of law or new instruments for advancing human rights in different countries we can establish a new idea and a new definition of human security. It is a vulnerable concept, and power relations tend to influence it considerably.

Naidoo: The challenge we face as citizens of poor countries is to tap into the vital national democracy and realize its potential to create an environment in which we can advance the agenda of human security concerns. The concern is that security is being reduced to the national level even as greater power, both private and public, is being vested in global processes. Consider the United Nations, which is a more benign manifestation of a global governance institution than the World Bank, or the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Even the UN, which has a certain amount of power over people's lives, is an institution that is completely ill equipped to deal with the realities of our times. I do not believe that we can advance the

human security agenda in a sustainable, macro way, with a real impact on people's lives, if we do not deal with power and institutional failure. The UN, which is very important in terms of its resources and mandate, was established in 1945, at a distinct moment in world history, driven by the victors of World War II, who had nuclear power, and with much of the world in colonial bondage. More than 50 years later the world has changed significantly. Questions about who has the veto within the UN, and how we understand power and institutions, have a great and direct impact on people's lives.

Two more points: When we think about interventions, we must think about long-term sustainable human security, and about an agenda to address the restructuring of not just small institutions but larger institutions that are serving the world, so those institutions become more equitable and democratic.

Rao: At the heart of this is the issue of power—the ways in which power has been expressed, whether through structural arrangements embedded in organizations or through ideology manifested in custom and practice. This has been debated for a long time, and we have examples of how people have tried to change the flow of power toward equity and accountability. But we must ask what makes this moment different from other moments when similar structural inequalities have prevailed. The struggles for change that Kumi referred to have taken place at a variety of levels—whether policy change, mass movement change, or organizational change. What do we think characterizes this particular moment? Is there something about the situation now that should make us define human security differently and strategize to work toward it in a different way?

Afkhami: Aruna, I think you are pushing for what Jacqueline was talking about, with the essence being shifts in power relations. To my thinking, what makes this moment different is the growing difference in the levels of human security in different parts of the

world and its causes—which, to a large extent, has to do with the expansion of globalization. When we look at the movement of money, the power and behavior of multinational corporations, the communication systems we have now and the divides that exist in actual communication capability, we find that authority and responsibility are no longer where they used to be. What, then, does a person in the global South do when forces that affect his or her life are not within the control of any entity to which he or she has any connection? In the Muslim world, for example, we are faced with the problem of fundamentalism, which is on the one hand a political response to the international forces over which we have very little control, and on the other hand a problem of textual and religious interpretation that moves across boundaries and local and national cultures. How does a woman whose human security is so vehemently threatened by this movement respond without putting in jeopardy her physical survival or sacrificing her religious identity? How does she make an impact? How does she make a difference in these complex interactions?

Kumi referred to the international, global entities; the national entities are the same. Fundamentalist groups are encouraged by global communication, and they seem to be growing very quickly, thanks to the possibilities that exist at the global level. Even criminal networks seem to be expanding, whether trafficking in people—especially women—or narcotics. This does not mean that we are doomed or that we should lose hope, because as I was saying earlier, there is also extraordinary potential and possibility. I think the possibility of institutional transformation that Aruna has been working on, and which some of us have been involved in, offers perhaps a promising way of organizing and dealing with these situations.

Rao: What is at the heart of institutional change is a fundamental transformation of the relationships that power constructs—the rules that determine who gets what and who decides, what we value as knowledge, how organizations function and for what

purposes, and who is accountable to whom for what and how we enforce that. If institutions are the frameworks of rules, organizations are the social structures that operate within these frameworks and act either to reinforce them or to challenge them. These institutional norms often operate below the level of awareness but are knitted into the hierarchies, work practices, and beliefs of organizational life and constrain organizational efforts to challenge inequitable norms within themselves and within the society. So, as important as a new political agenda or a new vision of human security is, more important is how we systematically dismantle the inequities based on a colonial heritage and associated systems of "race" privilege, class exploitation, and gender oppression, which are all embedded to a greater or lesser extent in the institutional foundations of public bureaucracies, parliaments, *panchayats*, global corporations, global governance systems, markets, and, of course, families. Small examples of institutional transformation abound and more and more activists and theorists are converging in their thinking about the kind of leadership that can facilitate this—leadership as responsibility, not power and privilege; leadership that genuinely involves participation and consensus building, the ability to live with ambiguity but at the same time building ways to enforce positive gains.

Naidoo: This idea of making fundamental transformations in institutions is not as hopeless as it would have appeared 15 years ago. Your question about the failure of national government institutions is a key link and a big issue. Many compassionate members of national legislatures who have integrity and intellectual strength are leaving public office because they are coming to the conclusion that national legislatures have increasingly less influence and are run undemocratically. National institutions should cherish people with integrity, but they make it impossible for such people to make the contributions that they can make.

Pitanguy: I think the landmark is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which really marks a certain limit to the possibility of consented abuses, and provides a guideline we can refer to. It comes out of the Holocaust, which marked the most horrible degree of disrespect for the idea of human security in recent history. Now, we don't have in the UN a mechanism or an instrument that is capable of implementing, of improving, of really making the declaration an instrument for transnational and national human security, but at least the words are there and such words are valuable because human security is also defined symbolically, and because having the language marks limits and possibilities for action.

What we have seen in the last decades is the visible and coordinated presence of civil society organizations advocating for a more inclusive concept of human rights and thus of humanity. As the concept of humanity has become more diverse, it has led to a more varied and comprehensive concept of human security. But this does not mean that this has been a homogenous process. The idea of human security is still very uneven. In certain societies the weight of political ideology and religion expressed in culture or in laws creates human *insecurity*, which is then legitimized and not seen as insecure. The overall insecurity of women under the Taliban regime was one of the most visible examples of such a situation. There are many other examples when religion, culture, and power interfere with different dimensions of security. Female mortality and morbidity and illegal abortion are another example of disrespect of women's security, the result mainly of religious influence in public policies. It is urgent that local and international efforts be made to achieve more convergence in the development of a concept of human security that would be more universal in its definition and more enforceable in local contexts.

Naidoo: What are the strengths of some of the prevailing conceptualizations of human security, and what are their implications for practice? The more inclusive concepts pose a constructive chal-

lenge to dealing with the problems humanity faces. If we take the example that Jacqueline talked about, that is, human rights writ large in terms of political, social, and economic rights, and look at it in practice, it is only changing slightly now. Those who are involved in civil and political rights even from the side of civil society are not necessarily engaging in synergizing strategies or trying to forge common approaches with those working on social and economic factors. As a matter of fact, unnecessary dichotomies could be overcome by engaging work in a slightly different area but that is fundamental to advancing a particular focus area. I say this in a self-critical way, thinking about my own work back home in South Africa, which I would argue is a human security issue.

For example, if you are a mother or father whose child gets seriously ill, and you go to a doctor and you come home and you can't read the prescription, there is a potential for incorrect dosage. This puts you in an insecure position. When I was working in adult education, I didn't clearly state the connection between my work on adult literacy and other people's work on HIV/AIDS or in other areas. But if you think about it, if adult literacy is politically advanced, and given a more integrated approach, those learning to read would have been getting some practical information that would be relevant to their lives. I think there is something about human security content that has opened up a window and encouraged us to think about how we respond to various human security challenges, how we can integrate our work and use our various resources more effectively.

Pitangui: HIV/AIDS is a very important example, because the epidemic has provided the opportunity for many of us to understand that a disease and the transmission of its virus is multidimensional, and that in this case, health goes far beyond the hospital and medicine, and rather has much to do with power, poverty, stigma, international commerce, and access to medication. Of course, it also has to do with how gender relations are structured,

and the question of women's position in society in general, and especially within the family itself.

When the Ministry of Health in Brazil began keeping track of HIV/AIDS in 1984, the proportion of those infected was about 34 men:1 woman. Now it is officially 2:1, according to epidemiological reports of the ministry's STD/AIDS program but it is probably 1:1, since there is a severe under-reporting on women. What we do see is that women who are infected are primarily married or in stable relationships, and that the HIV/AIDS epidemiological pattern no longer is framed by risk groups of male homosexuals or intravenous drug users as it was during the eighties and early nineties. However, the fact that, for a decade, it was portrayed by health sectors and the media as being an issue circumscribed by such groups, which are also, for large part of the population, seen as stigmatized groups, has had significant effects on the actual heterosexual epidemiological trend. Women, particularly those in stable sexual relations, were not considered as being at risk. HIV/AIDS was portrayed as the disease of the "other," the gay, the prostitute, the drug addict. Stigma is largely responsible for the difficulty in accepting that they could also be affected, since we only protect ourselves when we perceive that we are in danger. We can thus say that the symbolic dimension of HIV/AIDS as the problem of "the other" has had effects on the "human security" of women and children due to the vertical transmission from mother to child. The current epidemiological trend also expresses gender relations that restrain women to demand safe sexual relationships, because men are the basic transmitters of AIDS in the heterosexual pattern. This gives us a very important view of how close human security issues are to sexual relations, and how they are organized in terms of gender power relations.

Yet HIV/AIDS treatment has brought on an international dispute between the right to health, as expressed by the World Health Organization (WHO), and the right of patent holders, defended by organs such as the WTO. This debate over access to medication involves governments, the commercial sector, the UN

Human Rights Commission, international organizations, competing private laboratories producing anti-viral drugs, and governments such as Brazil's that have public policies of offering free and universal access to antiretroviral therapy. Brazil has in fact taken the lead in this dispute, which clearly has to do with the definition of human security from another standpoint, one where, in view of the effects of HIV/AIDS infection (over 36 million people in Africa), the right to health prevails over the right over patents. Fortunately, in this case we have had a better ending, but it has been a very tough power struggle. I believe that the cure and the prevention of AIDS depend largely on changed cultural patterns and changed power relations. Innovative technological and biomedical discoveries are important, but having access to them is decided in political arenas. We can see in the case of HIV/AIDS how a very concrete issue reveals the multiple layers of the concept of human security.

Afkhami: The description that Jacqueline gave again brings us to the multinationals, it brings us to the issue of health and medication, it brings us to the fact that certain parts of the world simply cannot afford the medicine they need and have no way of influencing the decisions that affect their access to medical treatment. I would like to hear comments on this—that on the one hand we have the international organizations and the transnational corporations, and on the other hand the nation-states, which are losing their impact on these issues; and then we have the NGOs. I am beginning to think that while a great deal of weight is placed on NGOs, and considerable hope is invested in them, sometimes the NGOs (of which we are all a part) lack the popular mandate or the ability to answer to the public, and sometimes they lack the resources. Sometimes the weight put on them because other structures fail leads to another layer of incompetence, or to institutions with a lack of transparency, or to organizations that do not have a real popular base taking on responsibilities that they are not suited to take on. How should we begin to work toward a

structural transformation that will give these institutions a more powerful voice based on demonstrable accountability?

Naidoo: I think that is an excellent point. Indeed, this weekend there was a CIVICUS board meeting and one of the major programs that will be carried out in the next three years is what we call "improving civil society governance and accountability." Part of this is driven by many of the comments you have just made—a recognition that with increasing space, authority, and influence must also come increased accountability and increased efficiency and effectiveness. Now I think as far as we are concerned as advocates of civil society, our starting point is that we need good, accountable governments, because civil society organizations cannot be a replacement for government. In fact, unless we have good, accountable, effective governments that can take responsibility for the provision of basic services, NGOs will never be able to address the scale of need that exists in many societies around the world, not only in developing but also in developed countries.

One danger in the way we unpack this debate and speak about it is that there is a growing critique from the people in political power and a growing anxiety around the space that has been secured by civil society. We need to be careful in the way we seek to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of NGO practices, so that we don't feed into a growing anti-NGO rhetoric.

I'll give you an example. At the World Economic Forum, I attended a breakfast meeting with the heads of UN agencies and other international organizations and businesspeople. At the meeting, Mike Moore, the head of the WTO, said, "We will only talk to NGOs that are accountable, transparent, and elected by a defined constituency." On the face of it, this sounds fine, but we all know that these criteria are not applied to the member governments of the WTO. There are a range of governments that are not elected, and of course many are not transparent and accountable, but the sustenance of even bad or mediocre governments on an organizational and financial basis is guaranteed by taxation revenue.

It is a bit of a myth, however, to say that NGOs are not accountable to anybody, because the system has an accountability factor built into it: none of the resources secured by NGOs, whether from government, business, individuals, or other sources, are given to them by obligation. There is a minimalist accountability measure that the ability to raise revenue to employ staff and do work actually puts on developmental organizations. That is not to say that we don't have to do much more work to advance organizational efficiency and so on, but I think the real challenge is: do we foster an equitable relationship between the different institutional formations of society, governments, and business in a way that all the energies of those institutions can be harnessed to advance the security of people?

Of course, this is a loaded debate even within civil society, particularly around the role of business. Some civil society organizations have a more accommodating approach toward business, others believe fundamentally that business is part of the problem. This all goes back to the comments Jacqueline made on power. I am not pessimistic. I think there is a very high level of recognition that the global system we have, whether it be political, economic, or otherwise, is not actually working. I don't know if you have seen George Soros's new book on the challenges of global capitalism. If you block off his name and block off certain references to what his background is, some might think that it is written by a raving left-wing socialist. So even beneficiaries of the economic system are beginning to raise fundamental questions regarding this. Even if the word "security" is not used explicitly, what is required is not military intervention here and there. We need some substantive institutional and structural changes, we need to raise some questions about capital flow, and we need a little more certainty about how those things happen. It is a tricky subject, but I think that it cannot be avoided in a discussion like the one we are having.

Pitanguy: Another aspect of human security concerns the actors that play a role in the human security arena. We have discussed

civil society and NGOs. I want to express how important it is to those of us who come from the NGO perspective to have a sense of our limits. We can never substitute for governments, and I think that democracy has to do with calling on governments to fulfill their role. Sometimes the most important role that an NGO can play is an advocate's role. It is important to build coalitions that exist for certain moments, certain issues, can involve alliances of civil society organizations and governments, but are not permanent.

One last point I would like to raise concerns human security in a transnational order dominated by global markets and global communications speeded up by the technological revolution: this transnational context has implications on all the issues that we have been discussing.

Afhami: I think we have covered some of the major questions that need to be raised about human security. It seems clear that human security is far more complex than any single set of issues and covers more than any one dimension of human life. It certainly affects the people in various parts of the world differently. Different classes in the same society face different problems of security. For some in the North and for many in the South simple sustenance is a primary problem of security. If we want to look at human security in terms that are relevant to the largest number of the world's peoples, we need to approach the issue from a holistic, multidisciplinary, and inclusive perspective. We must begin to reexamine the ways and means of establishing constructive liaisons between the NGOs and national and international governmental and business organizations. We probably need to look seriously at the structural changes we must bring about to enable us to deal successfully with the issue of human security at both the theoretical and practical levels. This has been a beginning.