

## **Building for the Future: Women's Role in Conflict Resolution and Reconstruction**

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### **A Policy Framework for Women's Involvement in Conflict Resolution: Obstacles and Challenges**

“Women's visions, intelligence, energy and experience are indispensable to the creation of a more just, prosperous and peaceful world.”

*-Towards a Women's Agenda for Peace (UNESCO, 2001)*

#### **PREAMBLE**

I would first like to thank the organizers of this event for inviting me to share my views and experiences with you. Also, I would like to take a moment to extend my condolences to those who have suffered so much from Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. It is gratifying that so many Canadian people and the Canadian government are extending their assistance as good neighbors always do.

I was asked to speak about the policy framework that addresses women's involvement in conflict resolution. I do that by briefly outlining relevant international resolutions, conventions and agreements that have evolved over several decades that respond to the changed nature of armed conflicts and then present the obstacles faced in their implementation. My own involvement with these concerns goes back several decades and has intensified following the publication of my monograph, *Are We at the Table? Women's involvement in the resolution of violent political conflict*, based on field research in Uganda and El Salvador in 1992.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

While history is replete with wars from time immemorial, the character and nature of the armed conflicts and political violence throughout the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century have undergone changes that present new and different challenges for those working for peace and development, and for those of us who are here today concerned with building a future where women have a significant role, as full citizens in their societies undergoing conflict resolution and reconstruction, where their voices and views will be heard and respected. For decades women have been advocating for an equitable role in their societies, addressing not only their exclusion from formal decision-making but also the increased level of gender-based violence directed at them in these situations of armed conflicts that are taking place in so many parts of the world, but primarily in the poorest regions of the world. At last count, there were 37 civil wars in different parts of the world.

#### **1995 BEIJING PLATFORM OF ACTION**

Much has been done at the policy level, particularly internationally, to address women's concerns with the increased violence in our world. Of central importance is UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security passed in October 2000, which built on many regional initiatives by women

and also earlier resolutions; most notably I would say the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action 10 years after the end of the UN Decade for Women.<sup>1</sup> At that 1995 UN Beijing conference, women and armed conflict became a critical concern and six strategic objectives were identified after much debate and strong differences. Women are not a homogenous group nor are they all peacemakers but eventually there emerged common ground on which there was unrelenting agreement. It is important to recall that women from a range of backgrounds and locations (activists, researchers, academics, community organizers, government representatives and so on) were instrumental in arriving at these agreements; it was not just a group of technocrats sitting in a room somewhere dreaming them up.

In relation to increased violence and armed conflict, women called on member states to:

1. increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and protection of women living under foreign occupation or in situations of armed conflict;
2. reduce excessive military expenditure and control the availability of arms;
3. promote non-violent forms of conflict resolution and reduce incidence of human rights abuses in conflict situations;
4. promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace;
5. provide protection, assistance and training to refugee women, internally displaced women and other women seeking asylum; and
6. provide assistance to women of the colonies and non-self-governing territories (for example East Timor).

They also demanded gender sensitivity in the statutes that were then being discussed for the International Criminal Court that would include a definition of rape and other forms of sexual violence as crimes. Regional women's organizations sprang up all over the world after these 1995 meetings to ensure that the priorities set out at Beijing would be meaningfully implemented.

One such example of a regional organization established in 1996, with which I have worked is EASSI, the Eastern African Sub-regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women, based in Kampala, Uganda with the participation of women from eight countries in the region (Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda). Their collective advocacy, information exchanges and testimonies of war experiences at the regional level reinforce and strengthen solidarity and confidence about their rights that is carried over within their respective national activities. (See *Women's Organizations Working for Peace and Reconciliation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* [www.gesh-ghsi.mcgill.ca](http://www.gesh-ghsi.mcgill.ca))

#### **UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1325 (October 2000)**

Five years later women rejoiced at the successful passing of UN SCR 1325. It focuses on women, peace and security through the elaboration of 18 specific points, many of which were similar to what was discussed in Beijing but now it was receiving mainstream Security Council endorsement. The resolution calls on Member states to:

- increase women's representation at all levels of decision-making related to the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict;
- fund and provide support for gender sensitive training; end impunity and prosecute those responsible for genocide crimes and gender-based violence;

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<sup>1</sup> During the UN Decade for Women 1975-1985, one of the most important milestones for women, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly.

- adopt a gender perspective when negotiating and implementing peace agreements (special needs of women and girls; measures to ensure the protection of and respect for their human rights);
- take into account the particular needs of women and girls in refugee camps and settlements; and
- make HIV/AIDS awareness training programs available to the military and civilian police.

It also has specific requests directed towards the Secretary-General of the UN, namely calling for an increase in women's participation at decision-making levels in conflict resolution; to appoint more women as special representatives and envoys; expand the role and contribution of women in UN field-based operations; to carry out a study on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peace-building and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution (see study produced by Angela King, special UN advisor on gender issues).

The Resolution provides an indispensable platform from which NGOs, governments and international institutions can advocate for women's inclusion in all aspects of conflict resolution.

At the policy level, women and their organizations through hundreds of meetings in every region of the globe have made outstanding advances. In spite of differences of race, class, language, religion and sexual orientation, these agreements speak resoundingly to women's rights as universal human rights. But implementation on the ground by member states is so far from where it should be.<sup>2</sup>

### **WOMEN BETRAYED?**

At the meetings in June 2005 in New York, looking back over the past 10 years after the historic conference in Beijing, non-governmental representatives of women in 150 countries from all regions of the world felt betrayed. While they identified some advances, for example, international law now recognizes rape and sexual violence during conflicts as crimes against humanity; CEDAW has now been ratified by 180 countries, up from 146 a decade ago; and many countries have adopted laws or programs to increase women's participation in parliament, the general consensus was that the world is far more militarized, far more insecure than it was 10 years ago. They noted that this era of economic globalization with the dominance of neo-liberalism has brought about massive dislocations of laboring people with loss of their livelihoods, dramatic increases in inequalities, obscene income disparities, worsening poverty and destabilizing trends, especially the weakening of the state leading to increases in civil conflicts. With these eruptions of political violence, there are far more refugees and internally displaced people, undermining women's access to even basic services and protection. In particular, and we know of many instances, governments have failed to protect refugees and asylum seekers, particularly women and girls.

### **HUMAN SECURITY**

Within most regions and countries, pressured often by women's groups concerned with this increased insecurity evolving over the 1980s and 1990s, other policies and new conceptual responses began to emerge. A new discourse around security began to take shape—the human security policy framework—seemingly a more appropriate framework for addressing our changing global situation. Certainly, for many women around the world, “human security”, which places the safety of people and their communities at the centre of their concerns while subordinating the traditional notion of state or national boundaries, seemed to echo their priority concerns voiced over the decade. Human security is about protecting people wherever they are. The term was first used by the UNDP in its 1994 Human Development Report where human development was defined as “the process of widening the range of

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<sup>2</sup> A recent study (June 2005) by Gunilla de Vries Lindestam for the Swedish government evaluating the implementation of UN Security Resolution 1325 by Canada, the Netherlands and the UK is available on the website [www.kus.uu.se/pdf/publications](http://www.kus.uu.se/pdf/publications) (KUS Bok nr 24).

people's choices", while human security was defined as "the ability to pursue those choices in a safe environment". Embedded within a human security perspective is a human rights optic as it is clearly addressing protection and rights for all. Security in this sense is about freedom from fear and addressing people's needs and rights.

While there are several variations on the concept of human security, including the U.N. Commission on Human Security (2003), Canada's foreign policy from about 1996 until 2000, actively promoted a human security policy framework. Canada's most visible interpretation of human security has been a people-centered agenda that is issue-oriented, focusing on specific rights and abuse issues that transcend national boundaries, while building an international consensus, mainly through international laws, conventions and statutes. Consultation, dialogue and engagement with those usually excluded, such as NGOs, civil society groups, women's groups, international actors and the victims themselves signaled new negotiating spaces for these voices that were finally being listened to by certain government officials. While women were viewed as victims, they were also given some agency, some role much the same way that we saw in 1993 in Vienna with the tribunals on human rights as women's rights. The most noted examples where Canada has taken a lead are the Anti-personnel Landmines Treaty 1997<sup>3</sup>, the International Criminal Court, Small Arms and Light Weapons agreements, War-affected Children conventions, the Responsibility to Protect and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. All of these respond to normative or ethical concerns in terms of the plight of civilians, non-combatants so adversely affected by political violence and armed conflict. And, although there are weaknesses in the human security approach, which I do not have time to elaborate, I believe that it does provide the framework for a new discourse on rights and security that responds more appropriately to the changed nature of armed conflicts at this time.

## **CHANGED NATURE OF ARMED CONFLICTS**

What is the changed nature of these armed conflicts over the last few decades that brought about these policies, and the human security agenda, that I have briefly outlined above?

While each armed conflict (be it Sudan, Sri Lanka, the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, East Timor, Nepal, Burma, and so on) has its own historical and political specificity, there are some broad common factors that we can observe which have implications for women, and of course men and children. First, most conflicts are taking place within states rather than across national borders, resulting in massive displacements of people from their communities and sources of livelihood (for example, Sudan and Northern Uganda have large portions of their populations internally displaced). Refugees and asylum-seekers spill over to neighboring countries often disrupting those states as well. There are over 400,000 Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon (approximately 225,000 are registered in the 12 official refugee camps and the remainder in unofficial camps), without basic rights and any entitlements that one would generally have as citizens; and they have been languishing in these camps for decades.

Secondly, armed groups deliberately target civilians, non-combatants, especially women and children as a major tactic in their conflict. For example, the Lord Resistance Army under Kony in the Northern Uganda, in addition to committing terrible crimes against the people in the North over the past 17 years, has kidnapped thousands of boys and girls from their villages to become child soldiers or sex slaves and involving these children in horrendous atrocities. The English historian Eric Hobsbawm estimates that 5%

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<sup>3</sup> Even though almost every country in the world had land mines in clear violation of the Geneva Convention, a global consensus, including new international actors, led to the passing of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, Ottawa, 1997. Also, in 1997, Jody Williams and the US NGO International Campaign to Ban Landmines received the Nobel Prize for Peace for their remarkable contribution to this Convention.

of the casualties in the First World War were civilians, 60% in World War II and at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 80-90% of casualties are civilians. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), it is estimated that between 1996 until 2003, over 3 million civilians were killed and the fighting continues there. The Iraqi Body Count website [www.iraqbodycount.org/](http://www.iraqbodycount.org/) estimates that since the start of the military intervention, there have been between 24,585 and 27,799 civilians killed in Iraq as of 8 September 2005.

Furthermore, as is well known, women and girls (non-combatants) are increasingly the victims of rape and sexual abuse as a deliberate strategy in these armed conflicts. Rape is one of the most extreme expressions of patriarchal power in the drive towards male domination over women. In every situation of armed conflict that I know, rape and sexual violence have been used as weapons to humiliate, shame and dishonor the other, the enemy, showing how men are unable to protect their women. Rape rips apart the fabric of society leaving women scarred and stigmatized, often never able to marry. In Burma, the Shan Women's Action Group (SWAN) has documented in "License to Rape" the way in which Burmese military officers targeted the ethnic minority Shan committing rape and other forms of sexual violence. In Rwanda, during the genocide and after, there were many incidents of rape and horrendous violence committed against women, deliberately spreading HIV/AIDS infections; some survivors have lived to tell their tales as witnesses at the Arusha Tribunals, though they often do not want to revisit these experiences. More recently, Save the Children released a report two weeks ago concerning 12,500 girls linked to armed groups in the DRC as child soldiers or child wives ("Forgotten Casualties of War"). The legacy of trauma within societies brutalized by these horrendous atrocities may take decades to overcome.

All of these atrocities are still occurring after Beijing 1995, after the passing of the UN Resolution 1325 (2000), and after 150 countries have ratified CEDAW. We must ask why?

I think that the answer rests in part from our inability to address the central issues related to armed conflicts and political violence. The most disturbing trend in the changed context is the wide and easy availability of warfare equipment, military training and even small arms. In September 2000 when I was in Uganda, small handguns could be purchased for the same price as a chicken in Kampala and they were easily available and illegal purchases are steadily increasing. And in many societies, it has been shown that after peace agreements, often just fragile male deals for power sharing, domestic violence against women increases as soldiering and gun use is often the only way many former soldiers know. But it is not just former soldiers; most societies around the globe are far too militarized and far too violent. Refurbished AK47s can now be purchased in African countries for about \$150 and armament factories are springing up in many poorer regions. And, while over 80% of the world's armaments still come from the five permanent member states seated on the UN Security Council, all of the civil wars are taking place in the poorest regions of the world. In 2002, the US accounted for approximately 42% of world military expenditures (SIPRI Yearbook 2003).

Article 26 of the UN Charter calling for the reduction of expenditures on military armaments is seldom adhered to and the related provisions in Resolution 1325 and the Beijing Platform of Action are not being seriously implemented. We need to raise the campaign for "naming and shaming" states and transnational corporations that produce and sell arms (and often to both sides), fuelling these conflicts. While we have struggled to have the conventions, the laws and the policies that I believe are quite remarkable, there appears to be a lack of will to enforce or implement in most member states.

Women also face obstacles from traditional religions and cultures that are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures. All traditions are invented at some point in history. We must ask ourselves: By whom? And for what purpose? It is likely that women's limited inclusion in conflict resolution is directly linked to who has the power to define who is included, how and when.

Patriarchal structures (systemic male domination) lie at the root of militaristic tendencies that we are seeing worldwide. Related to the increased expenditures on weaponry and military training, there is this global consolidation of an ideology of militarism that reinforces these armed conflicts. Here I am speaking of the concept of “militarism” beyond the military as a social institution and identifying militarism as “an ideology that prioritizes war (as a solution to conflict) thereby serving to legitimize state violence. This involves the subordination of civil society to military values, whereby militaristic attitudes and social practices are viewed as normal and desirable”. What we also need to address as women and men is a masculinity that is not built on subordination or dominance; a need to rupture the connection between militarism and masculinity. A militarized society is necessarily undemocratic and secretive while claiming to act for “national security”. As is well known, these high expenditures on the military option are at the expense of public services and the public good; priority must be given to reducing poverty by increasing spending on basic health, education and housing.

## CONCLUSION

What we have then is continuous advocacy from women and their organizations often in alliance with many men in all regions of the world who want women to contribute more fully in the formal spheres of decision-making and then a global world situation that is worsening in terms of poverty, inequalities and of course armed conflicts. I look forward to hearing how the other panelists are dealing with this challenge.

We have the legal instruments and the international body, the UN, where all states are represented. We also have important regional institutions. We need to make them more effective, more accountable and most importantly more representative.

A central point about women building a peaceful world is the willingness to enter into all kinds of strategic alliances, across our differences, sharing information about rights and laws, sharing experiences and testimonies of our victimization, sharing tactics about dealing with abuse and confronting patriarchal structures. Over and over, we see women coming together across ethnic, social and even political differences because women find common ground as women on specific issues. Women often bring “to the table” a different way of resolving conflict, a difference that requires validation.

To each of these tragedies, women worldwide have been responding and resisting. And certainly, having the international policies, conventions and resolutions assist them with their struggles in their national or community locations. The main long-term issue remains the struggle to delegitimize the military as a solution to conflict and thereby *prevent* the continuation of these abuses and crimes.

A wise Aboriginal saying is worth recalling: “*We do not inherit this world from our ancestors but borrow it from our children.*” With this in mind I am confident that another world is possible.