



The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights

Human Rights and Security

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Charlotte Bunch: I would like to begin by saying that groups like the Boston Consortium are very important. We need to have more ongoing conversations like this about the relationship of security, feminism, gender, and human rights.

There are two topics that I am going to address today. The first topic is a response to a conversation that your group had with Jennifer Klot, in which, she argued that it was important to get women and armed conflict issues on the UN agenda through the “security side of the house” (the Security Council and Department of Peacekeeping Operations), rather than through the human rights side; as I understand it, she argues that the security field has many more resources and more power in the UN and the world at large than the human rights field does, so it is critical to get gender perspectives made normative in the security field. The second issue you’ve asked me to address is raised in my article “Whose Security?” in *The Nation* [September 23, 2002], which is about the pros and cons of women organizing *as women* against the war in Iraq.

I was recently at a meeting in New York of the three High Commissioners for Human Rights; the new High Commissioner, Sergio Vieira de Mello [2002-03], Mary Robinson [1997-2002], and the first High Commissioner, Jose Ayala-Lasso [1994-1997]. In one of the major sessions, on the future of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, topics that came up frequently included terrorism, and the importance of connecting human rights in the UN system to the UN Development Program (UNDP). But in that particular panel nobody even used the word “security,” which really surprised me.

I began with that point to pick up on Jennifer’s statement that peace and security people and human rights people are not the same groups, and do not work together very much. I think that in the UN that is true, for structural reasons, and I think that it is interesting to reflect on why -- because in my experience in the women’s movement, a lot of the women talking about peace and security are also talking about human rights. But in the structures of the UN they tend to be separate. In fact, I think there have been four somewhat separate, sometimes intersecting, tracks at the UN: human rights; development; security; and humanitarian assistance.

The first is the Geneva-based *human rights* crowd. I think it is important to note that the High Commissioner for Human Rights is based in Geneva, and the New York UN people don’t always keep up with what’s going on there. So if Jennifer said that in the New York UN operation, human rights are not seen as terribly powerful, I think that in terms of structural power and money she’s right. In terms of another kind of power I don’t think she’s necessarily right. I think part of the power of human rights is the power it has to move people, and the way that movements use it as well, but we’ll return to that.

The second track is the *development* system, symbolized, of course, by UNDP (the United Nations Development Program), but it is really a whole world centered on the development paradigm UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women) comes out of that development paradigm; it was only in the 1990s that UNIFEM also began to take up human rights, as well as peace and security. The third big track is the *Security Council and the peacekeeping operations*, which is where the ultimate hard power lies. The fourth track is *humanitarian assistance*.

Now what happened in the 1990s in the UN is that a lot of emphasis was put on finding ways for these four different tracks to be better integrated, and for human rights to be mainstreamed throughout the system. That led to more conversation about: what does human rights have to do with humanitarian assistance, or what is the relationship between human rights and development? The whole UNDP Human Development Report for 2000 is on human rights and development. Then, security began to be more integrated with the rest of the system. For example, in 1994 the UNDP's Human Development Report started to talk about security. Today you have a commission in the UN, the Commission on Human Security, trying to unite the work on human development with the peace and security work. The whole UNDP Development report for 2000 is on human rights and development. When people talk about security in the UN setting they generally mean peace and security. In actuality, a lot of conversation within the UN revolves around human security, which tries to pull together the development work and the peace and security work.

Now this may sound great, but one of my concerns, which I wrote about in that *Nation* article, is that, as *peace and security* and *human development* are brought together, *human rights* might fall out of the picture. Many people on the inside view human rights as a drag, as a nuisance. Human rights activists constantly raise moral and ethical questions about who is accountable and how it should be done, which operational people sometimes find frustrating. And the attitude of some human rights people doesn't always help; they're sometimes seen as "unrealistic" and "arrogant." Certainly, we hear this from the people in humanitarian assistance. So there is a lot of debate going on

From my point of view, if you don't have some notion of human rights, what is the value system that's supposed to drive all this? So, while I think that Jennifer is right to say that the money and the power, the hard power, is not in human rights, in terms of soft power – the power of persuasion and vision – I do not think she is necessarily right. Part of the power of human rights lies in the power that it has to move people, and in the way that movements use it, as well. It is the power of persuasion, the power of ethical vision. Human rights is visionary; it begins with a notion of how we should be in the world, how we should treat each other, and how states should treat their citizens. I think the world system needs to be driven by some set of ethical principles and human rights is trying to provide those principles -- that is its place in the system. It doesn't have much hard power of re implementation or accountability, but where the human rights system has been successful in particular is where governments don't want to look bad in the eyes of the world. To drop it out would be a big mistake.

Right now I think that President Bush is the person who is doing the most to both directly and indirectly undermine human rights. Indirectly, because he symbolizes the most powerful government in the world not caring if they look bad in the world. And he has done a lot of things to undermine the human rights system directly, as well as indirectly; incidents like Guantanamo Bay are just the tip of the iceberg. But I think the biggest problem may be not only what he's done against human rights, but also that the stance he's taken is emboldening other governments that don't really care about human rights. Whether it's the Asian governments that say it's an imposed Western system, or all the other kinds of ways in which governments are resistant to human rights. So I do think that human rights are, in a sense, in a crisis right now, because this is a moment in which the post-9/11 the security discussion and the anti-terrorism actions have begun to undermine the belief that the human rights vision has the same power and importance that it had in the 1990s. I would not, however, conclude that it is weak and we should not use it.

I would recommend reading the Commission on Human Security's report, which comes out in March [*Human Security Now*, May 1, 2003]. This is an authorized commission of the UN, but it's not a UN process, so it is co-chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, and one of the writers is Vivien Taylor from South Africa. It is going to articulate a new vision that brings these things – security and human rights – together. Or course, I am very nervous about the question of how strongly gender will be a part of the report. Vivien says it's in there. I haven't seen it – I'm not on the commission. I'm sure it will be there, but the question is, how strongly? Is it just an add-on, or is it really integrated into the concepts?

I wanted to make one other comment on Jennifer's description of human rights as being so far from peace and security: that's really interesting, given where the human rights system comes from. Although the concept of human rights has many origins, the current UN human rights system emerged out of World War II as the answer to war and as the mechanism of creating peace and security. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights says, essentially, that we will never have peace and security without human rights. So given that we are still confronted by an enormous amount of warfare, do we conclude that the the human rights system has failed, or do we conclude that the system is still relevant to that task, but isn't powerful enough? Isn't working effectively enough? Isn't integrated enough? The connection just really struck me because I think there are a lot of peace and security people who see human rights as irrelevant, or just a nuisance. However, it is my view that the basis of that UN vision was that human rights – and here I mean the full spectrum of human rights, including the social and economic rights that have been neglected until recently – are very important to long term peace and security.

Q: Just to be clear -- when Jennifer was here, she certainly wasn't saying that human rights are irrelevant either for peace and security or for women. What she was doing was looking at the various ways that women's advocates have tried to make progress in the UN system. She traced the progression of first working through *development*, and then, finding the limitations of what could be accomplished there, framing the fight for women's advancement as a *human rights issue*; women have the right to equal education, they have the right to understand their own fertility, etc., as part of a human rights framework. (Obviously, you had a key role in this reframing.) But while this was a very important advance, some limits to this strategy are due to the relative weakness of the human rights track at the UN. So the next step was the idea of *women and security*; here, women's rights advocates could work through the center of power in the UN.

CB: I think that is very helpful, because she is tracking the trends. I believe in working from both ends, so I do not think she is wrong at all to try to advance women's causes by linking them up to peace and security. In fact, I think *we must use security, we must link to globalization*. Those are the powerful forces and languages being used. I would emphasize, though, that this linkage to peace and security does not mean human rights should not continue to be used as a hook. I think human rights play a different role: they must be a part of how we talk about globalization and security. And we must ask, *how has human rights contributed to women's security?*

I am much less pessimistic than Jennifer may be about what has happened. I think human rights has made an enormous advance in how women's issues are viewed. The work on making rape a war crime and the recognition that there are gender-specific war crimes came out of the 'women's rights as human rights' paradigm. We began to be able to talk about these issues because of the Bosnian attention to rape and the attention to women's rights as human rights. Also, the new International Criminal Court has just elected 7 women out of 18 judges, which I consider a huge victory. This is a direct consequence of the Women's

Caucus demanding a quota system that meant that in the first four rounds, they had to vote for more women. In this instance, women organized very well and got what they demanded. This is unheard of. In the history of the inter-American court system, there has only been one woman. Now, starting at the beginning with International Criminal Court, 7 judges out of 18 are women. It is very interesting that, of course, the US is outside of this – a point that I will return to later. Another advance -- Amnesty International is launching a massive campaign next year about domestic violence as a human rights issue. This would have been unheard of 10 or 15 years ago. I think that this shows that the power of human rights is not gone. I think it is just not new. There is a lot of attention and money around ‘peace and security’ because it is a new idea. How long will that continue? I don’t know.

To me this is not an either-or issue – we need to continue to build the relationships between women’s rights, human rights, and peace and security. There are many things that women can and should do in the direction of peace and security. I suggested this in my *Nation* article. While working on a longer paper I wrote last year for a conference in Sri Lanka on women, peace, security and human rights, I kept coming up against the idea that, in the larger foreign policy and human security discussion, women’s voices haven’t been strong enough. If we really want gender integrated into these discussions, these voices have to be stronger. In that sense, I agree with Jennifer about needing to bring more feminist analyses into security as a powerful place.

I will now move on to the second part of our discussion, about the pros and cons of women organizing *as women* against the war in Iraq. At the time that I was writing the *Nation* article, I was struck by the women around the world who were saying to me, “We don’t hear enough from the US women’s movement on US foreign policy. So what I was responding to was my sense that women around the world who are in organized women’s movements wanted to hear what feminist women in the US were thinking. I suggested that these women look at websites like *peacewomen.org* to find statements from American women’s groups that aren’t represented in the press. There is a big gap between what we all know about from our emails and what actually gets into the media. Women wanted to see a distinctly women-identified anti-war impetus and they wanted to know that there were feminists in this country who understood and were critiquing what our government was doing.

I also heard concern from women outside the US that they were not hearing enough about the differences between the desires of the women’s movement and the actions of the US government. In other words, they were saying, “we do not see you as being critical of your government.” I thought about what this means to the coalitions we have all tried to build over the last years through international women’s networking, and I came away with the strong sense that we in the US need to have more of a feminist analysis about what the Bush administration’s very war-like response to 9/11 means. The *Nation* piece was the result of this feeling.

I think there is more feminist analysis now than there was when I was writing the piece in August, but I am still not sure there is enough of it. Really interesting people have been writing about it, like Carol Cohn and Ann Tickner and others, but that work isn’t getting out to where it can be seen and heard. Our feminist critiques of the security state and military policy are not widely enough disseminated. We need to be writing them for a more popular audience.

As for women organizing and participating in public demonstrations and protests — even last week there was a march, on February 15. Women in Black and Code Pink were there, and even though the groups did

not join forces, women's groups were represented, and ultimately that is what matters the most. However, I don't think we had a presence as *women*. Given that the US women's movement has been seen as a very powerful movement - maybe more so by people outside this country than we sometimes feel inside -- I feel like it is important to have that women's movement presence more visible in anti-war demonstrations.

Q: Have you seen any ways in which the feminist movement, feminist principles, and recognized feminist leaders have shaped the direction of the peace movement that has emerged? I think it is interesting to note the way the peace movement turned quickly to the UN instead of focusing on the US as a locus for change. Perhaps this is rooted in the familiarity with the UN that Resolution 1325 has given people?

CB: I don't know if it is rooted in 1325, but I think that it is an interesting and positive development that Americans have turned to the international system. People in the US who feel that our administration is not listening to us, and that it prides itself on not listening to us, have learned what people around the world have learned, which is when your own government isn't responding, you need to move into the international system to try to put pressure on your government. We've learned that the pressure point is not only national - it is also international. In a speech I gave in Berlin last year I said, "we are not being heard by the Bush administration - but maybe the European Union would be heard." In a sense, that is what has happened. Now, whether Bush cares about what the European Union says is another question. Whether he is going to be stopped by the Security Council is another question still. But I think that you are right that the US peace movement has begun to see itself as part of an international system, and is not just looking to domestic responses. I do not know how much of that comes from women; I would have to think about that.

I think I feel less of a need for a separate women's voice in the peace movement now than I did when I wrote the *Nation* article, because so much has been said and done over the last few months. But there is a lot of very good feminist thinking going on--some of which is represented by people in your group--that is not making it into the larger discussion, which worries me.

Q: Why do you think that is?

CB: In my experience, when a woman is speaking at a Council on Foreign Relations session, very few men come. When I go to their mainstream sessions, their male speakers, I feel as though they do not listen to the women in the audience very much. Despite of all the work we have done, when it comes to foreign policy issues, they may think that some of the stuff that we are saying is kind of interesting on the side, but it is not really taken as terribly important. Occasionally breakthroughs like 1325 happen, and there is a little more attention to women around peace and security, but even with 1325, the way they hear it is: *we have to remember what happens to the women*, when what we want them to understand is: *women really have a different role to play and something significant to give*.

Now some of the rhetoric is changing slightly. Kofi Annan is saying better things; his statement from March 8th is very good about the importance of women. But I don't know how much that is really getting through. One question we need to deal with is, "how do we get them to hear us?". The other question is, "how do we get the discussions that are now taking place in small circles into bigger places?". I worry that in part, we may marginalize ourselves sometimes. Those of us who are writing on this subject, myself included, are not reaching out to big enough circles of people. Perhaps we don't reach out more because

we feel like we aren't heard when we do. How can we get out of this? Do you think the women's voices are being heard more, not just on the question of women, but also on security and foreign policy?

Discussion, Questions and Answers

Q1: I would like to comment on the American feminist movement from a European perspective. Women in Europe do not think that the feminist movement in the United States is inactive, just that it is not very effective in influencing the US government and foreign policy. It seems that it has more influence on the UN and other organizations than on the US government. Europeans see the US government as an important player that should be lobbied for changes.

I had many meetings at the beginning of this year about this topic. The prevalent view was, "Why are women in the United States not more organized to influence the Bush administration?" Nobody was saying that American women are not organized, or that there is no feminist thought or writing going on – because people who are interested visit the websites and have conversations to inform themselves. But speaking strictly from a Balkan perspective now, people don't see the UN as really having opposed the United States in launching the war – so this is another reason why Europeans think that American women, feminists, should go straight to the Bush administration and express their opposition.

Q2: Is there a perception that European women are influencing their governments more than the US women are influencing theirs?

Q1: No, but the European women that I have contact with think that Europe is not pushing for the war as much as Bush and the US are. As a result, the European women do not feel that they have to do a lot to oppose it, with the exception of Italian women. Italian women are very outspoken. They are keeping their government on guard and are very active in advocating against the war. British, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and German women are waiting, somehow expecting American women to do more in influencing government. Because everybody is seeing now that it is a Bush government issue. It is not the coalition, as it was after 9/11 anymore.

Carol Cohn: I agree with that. Internationally, I think the question that I was being asked and was difficult for me was – *Why aren't US women having more of an impact on US foreign policy?*

CB: Well, the women's movement in the United States is extremely decentralized; it is a social movement with many heads. This decentralization is one of the major issues that we face; it is part of the reason we do not have more influence. Feminist women have historically had more influence with the Democratic party, which has been more responsive to women, and we really have not figured out how to have an influence with this government at all. I think there are some good reasons for that. The real challenge, though, is what are we going to do about that? This government is having enormous impact on everyone's lives. How do we escalate our ability to influence it?

Recently, the largest American feminist organization, the National Organization for Women, joined the Win without War Coalition. I think that partnerships like these are important, but that there is still a big gap between forming these partnerships and actually having an impact in this crisis around the war in Iraq. Part of it is an ongoing question: how could we lobby and work on foreign policy – not just with this

particular war crisis, where I think a lot of women's voices have started to be heard – in a more long-term way?

Q3: At the end of your *Nation* piece, you suggest that women in the United States have a problem holding our government accountable because of our failure to sign onto international human rights treaties. You talk in your article about the little interest here in using international treaties such as CEDAW [*The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly*] to advance domestic issues. I have heard that the Center for Women's Global Leadership has played some role in the CEDAW coalition campaign. What do you think about that grassroots kind of movement here for the implementation of human rights law, even without ratification by the government?

CB: Because the Center for Women's Global Leadership is a small organization, our role is small in that movement. However, getting women interested in using international treaties at the local level is very important. This movement started in San Francisco, when women's groups decided to get CEDAW passed as local law so that they did not have to wait for US ratification to make it effective in their city. Most importantly, they also got a budget allocation from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to have an analysis done of all San Francisco city policies – not just law, but policies and the implementation of those policies -- what would need to change for them to be in compliance of the CEDAW convention. There have been a series of moves to do that in other cities, including New York, which we are a part of.

Before the war and the 9/11 crisis I was very excited by these strategies and I do think they should continue as a part of our ongoing work. Right now, the connection I see is even more in the ways in which we in the US in women's movement have not sufficiently understood, analyzed, critiqued, challenged American exceptionalism – the notion that the United States is above the international system and does not have to be involved in it. It is my hope that if we get through this crisis without too many horrible things happening that we might be more ready to take on this exceptionalism. We see – through this crisis around Iraq and in the need for stronger women's voices on foreign policy – that we must be more engaged in the international system as a domestic group. As the women from Europe said, women from the US have been in the international system but not necessarily making those linkages. I think our absence in this discussion has a lot to do with the separation of domestic and foreign policy in the US. We need to be critiquing the ways in which foreign policy is done in the US. Any efforts we can make to challenge the way the US sees itself and separates itself from the rest of the world would be extremely important.

There was a very interesting article in the *New York Times* on Sunday, written by a Frenchman, on the American attitude in this war. It exposed some of the attitudes that still have a lot of power in the United States, attitudes that we need to be critiquing. Many Americans believe, for example, that the US is always working for the good, is always progressive, is always advanced. I do not think we have done a sufficient critique of how beliefs such as like these influence foreign policy and the public mindset. It is very exciting that so many people are out marching, but there is still a lot of acceptance of these attitudes that we have to challenge.