

Conference on Gender and Human Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

McGill's Centre for Developing-Area Studies (CDAS) organized the Conference on Gender and Human Security from the 4-7 February 2004 under the auspices of its Gender and Human Security Issues (GHSI) program comprised of researchers from McGill University, Concordia University, University of Montreal and the Women's Centre of Montreal.

During armed conflicts, community-level violence and its consequences (violent crimes against women, refugees, internally displaced people, war-affected children) indicate that gender is central to the struggle against insecurity. Combining human security, that is the protection of civilians across borders, and gender, the different ways that women and men are affected, forces us to confront the impact of gender inequality on continued insecurity in societies. The Conference addressed human security from the perspective of the rights and needs of people in societies confronted by political violence. Since March 2000, in partnership with the Women's Centre of Montreal and other units within Montreal universities, the CDAS has carried out an action-research program on gender and human security in the context of war and reconstruction. Our interdisciplinary team (political science, nursing, psychology, humanities and social work) of researchers and activists has been working locally with women refugees, asylum-seekers and immigrants in Montreal from various countries of armed conflict and internationally with women's organizations primarily in the Great Lakes region of Africa. While working with many human security stakeholders, we have observed that the issues concerning human security are often being addressed in different parts of the world but without any knowledge of Canada's Human Security Agenda.

The primary objective of our Conference was to exchange results of this action-research with an international audience while examining additional key human security issues and experiences in Africa and other parts of the world where the search for peace often seems elusive. Canadian-based participants from the academic, community and policy milieu joined with participants primarily from Asia and Africa to share their research and experiences in order to contribute to an elaboration of intervention strategies and policies concerning human security in conflict and post-conflict situations. Canada's approach to human security was made known to key human security stakeholders and was interrogated from an interdisciplinary perspective throughout the Conference, as was the UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

After the Opening Keynote address on Wednesday evening, there were eight panels as well as a closing session providing summaries and recommendations. Each panel had three or more presentations with a Chairperson to guide the discussion. Presenters spoke for 15 to 20 minutes and at the end of the three presentations for each panel, questions and comments took place for about 45 minutes. All of the panels, except for the closing session, had simultaneous translations, were summarized by volunteer *rapporteurs* and were taped. In order to ensure coherence to our Conference discussions, **Panel 1** focused on conceptualizing gender and human security, especially Canada's approach, with critical input from international scholars. Each of the other seven panels treated a human security issue from the perspective of gender in different regions of the world: **Panel 2**, Armed Conflict and Small Arms; **Panel 3**, Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Internally Displaced Persons; **Panel 4**, Impunity and Justice; **Panel 5**, Canadian Perspectives on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325; **Panel 6**, Peace Initiatives; **Panel 7**, Health in Conflict Resolution and **Panel 8**, Strategies for Reconciliation and Reconstruction (see the final program).

The panel presentations combined scholarly research, direct experiences from the field, points of reflection as well as comparative testimonies in order to deepen our understanding of security issues from a gender perspective, thereby advancing policy implications with respect to “freedom from fear”. All the presentations, in varying degrees, emphasized the fact that armed conflicts affect men and women differently and that a gender analysis permits a greater comprehension and grasp of the differing needs during and after conflict. Many similarities were seen among the different conflict situations (for example, in Sierra Leone, DRC, Rwanda, Burma, Gujarat in India and Uganda). Presenters underscored that violence against women, especially sexual violence and rape, is a tactic used to terrorize and undermine the bonds of kinship groups. The testimonials given revealed the extreme nature of the cruelty and atrocities committed against women during armed conflict. It was noted that this violence is often an extension of the traditional discrimination against women used to preserve patriarchal dominance. Participants stressed that we must continue to work to “delegitimize war”, reduce military production and sales as well as improve disarmament and reintegration programs to be more gender-sensitive.

The Canadian perspective on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was the focus of a sustained analysis in one panel and was discussed many times during the course of the Conference. Some participants expressed concern that it was just a lot of rhetoric without serious implementation. Not even within the UN itself, does it appear to be well known or significant. In the actual peace process negotiations being conducted in several countries, women’s representation was seen to be minimal or completely absent, suggesting that very little action has been taken since October 2000 when this resolution was passed. Others stressed the importance of using the resolution as an instrument to promote women’s participation in peace building in various situations.

In addition to 25 presenters and eight Chairpersons (each of whom was chosen for their expertise in the theme of the panel) at the Conference, there were also 84 registered participants, 18 volunteers (mainly graduate students; many of whom served as *rapporteurs* for the panel sessions) and several invited guests. Our eight international presenters came from Burma/Thailand, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Nepal, New Zealand, Senegal, Uganda and the UK. We also had participants come at their own expense from Sweden, Iceland and Colombia in addition to other Canadian and American cities to listen and participate in the debates, thus enriching our discussions.

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