Re-Imagining Women's Security and Participation in Post-Conflict Societies

Background and Methodology

This project sought to contribute to an understanding of the role and experiences of women in contemporary post-conflict societies by means of an examination of the gendered meanings of security. The study was undertaken through a research partnership between the University of Ulster, Queen's University Belfast and Democratic Dialogue and with research associates in South Africa (Centre for Study of Violence and Reconciliation) and Lebanon (Lebanese American University in Beirut). The project is funded under the ESRC 'New Security Challenges' Programme Award number RES-223-25-0066.

The project was conducted across three regions, Northern Ireland, Lebanon and South Africa, between January 2004 and June 2006 and utilised both quantitative and qualitative approaches involving gender audits, focus groups and key informant interviews.

Defining Security

- Many women characterised security as a holistic concept which encompassed a range of 'securities', and within which personal and economic security is central. In South Africa most of the men had similar holistic definitions.

- In South Africa generally speaking however women were more concerned with everyday realities and security questions in relation to this (e.g. access to water, food for children, accommodation, safety). Men were more concerned with economic issues directly or more broadly, especially employment.

- In Northern Ireland some women disliked the concept of 'security' because of its connotations with the 'security forces' of police and army, preferring to talk about personal safety.

- Another dominant component of security for participants was the idea of freedom, ie of expression, of movement and 'being oneself'.

- There was a strong interrelationship between the economic context, social positioning and security.

- In all three countries the ceasefires that signalled the ending of the conflict were more significant factors in developing a sense of security than the institution-building that followed.

Security in Transition

- For a number of women it was impossible for them to participate in the re-imagining of the notion of security, due to that term's violent and patriarchal connotations, which appear to be maintained in the transitional context.

- In South Africa there seems to be a general consensus among those interviewed or in focus groups that since the transition in 1994 the issue of gender has been given considerably more focus. Much of this has a direct relevance to the security of women. Women are also included as a special category in the various Affirmative Action processes that have unfolded in South Africa. All these have had some impact on the lives of some women.

- One of the most constant security concerns for women in Lebanon was the personal status laws, which regulate women's lives according to their denomination/ethnicity, in a range of areas crucial to women's holistic notions of security, including custody of children, crime and punishment, marriage and divorce. Many women respondents identified these actively discriminatory laws as violent, and impeding to their capacity to achieve social transformation in the transitional environment.

- In Northern Ireland and South Africa women expressed concern that 'normal' crime was increasing in communities and that gender-based violence had increased, partly (although certainly not exclusively) as a result of demobilisation of ex-combatants, The re-deployment of resources in policing terms from managing political conflict to dealing with domestic violence may also account for the increase in recorded crime.

- The range of criticisms women made of policing in the transitional environment reflected a broader concern that the provision of security remains heavily influenced by patriarchy and gender-insensitivity.

- Some respondents believed that male-dominated political structures continued to marginalise women's perspectives, and that women's desire to challenge gender roles in post-conflict society was strongly resisted by men in power.

- In Northern Ireland and Lebanon there were still 'Too many men in the room' in post-agreement political and civic institutions. Women believed that men would not consider policy issues that were of specific relevance to women unless they were equally involved in decision-making.

- In South Africa a number of men seemed to be under the misapprehension that women have gained excessively from the transition in terms of jobs and rights, and are now using their new-found economic power to exclude men. A number of the women (and some of the men) felt this was a reason for the increase in domestic violence, men were acting out their frustrations violently. Therefore we can see a cycle between security and insecurity, i.e. increased economic security of women has led to greater physical insecurity. This raises the issue of the role of men in the security debate, particularly how we try to prevent violent male behaviour in societies coming out of conflict.

Policy recommendations

- Women must have a direct role in conflict resolution and reconstruction processes, as endorsed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

- The research points to the need for a more robust analysis of how policy makers analyse and think about the impact of different policies.

- Measures addressing inequalities of power have to include promotion of women's full participation in public life, including the prevention of discrimination in access to employment and services and promotion of women's control over their bodies.

- A human rights and human security framework must take on board the continuum of violence against women, from the domestic and community to national and global levels.

- The research raises serious concerns as to how men adapt to and deal with transition, especially if part of this involves curtailing or changing power structures. This security-insecurity cycle needs to be further analysed and considered in the policy process.

- The research suggests a radical rethinking on how we understand the relationships between men and women in times of transition.

- Governments must ensure that women are equally represented on all organisations concerned with peace-building and reconstruction as advocated by UN Resolution 1325.

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