International Leaders Prioritize Human Security at WLP Conference "Clash or Consensus"

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More than 250 activists, academics, policy-makers, and organizational and religious leaders from over 20 countries gathered at Women's Learning Partnership's human security conference, "Clash or Consensus: Gender and Human Security in a Globalized World" on October 8-9, 2003, in Washington DC. Organized in collaboration with the Global Fund for Women, the conference provided a forum for women leaders and human security experts from the Global South– particularly from Muslim societies– to explore ways to discuss and define human security goals and challenges from a perspective that is people-centered.

While the concept of security has been traditionally concerned with the security of states and the shoring up borders, the notion of human security encompasses the social, political, economic, and cultural needs and rights of individuals and communities in our increasingly interconnected societies and provides a viable framework for achieving sustainable societal change. In six panel discussions, conference participants discussed challenges to achieving security for all and identified the conditions needed for citizens to live in safety, peace and dignity; exercise their fundamental right to health, education and well-being; exert the freedom to choose; and participate fully in governance. The conference highlighted the ways global gender inequalities in public and private spheres continue to undermine the security of women around the world.

WLP President Mahnaz Afkhami delivered the opening statement, stressing the importance of addressing the "universality, indivisibility, and the global character of human security." Afkhami discussed the need to build cultures of peace in a world where human relations are increasingly defined by violence. "In an atmosphere of escalating ethnic tensions and extremisms," Afkhami stated, "international relations are increasingly defined in terms of clashes between cultures, religions, and civilizations. If we define disagreements in terms of our fundamental values, then clearly we nourish the roots of extremism. We need to begin to encourage a culture of reason, practicality, and consensus."

Mary Robinson delivered the keynote address that served as a call to action for individuals and organizations worldwide who are working to implement human security. Ms. Robinson spoke about conflict and post-conflict situations such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, and Palestine and the particularly dire conditions they repre-

sent in terms of basic human security, particularly for women. She identified HIV/AIDS as a primary threat to human security, noting that women are the primary victims; yet they receive the least support at the communal, national, and international levels. As points of action to mitigate the gendered effects of the HIV/AIDS crisis, Robinson highlighted eliminating gender-based violence, fostering women's economic independence, acknowledging women's burden of care, and finally ensuring equal access to prevention and medical treatment. Robinson suggested that conference participants form a task force in order to generate innovative policy and programmatic recommendations for building human security around the world. She also spoke of the importance of holding governments accountable for re-defining human security and changing how they implement human security strategies.

The first session of the conference, entitled "Rethinking Security: Human Security and Human Rights," focused on re-defining how individuals and organizations address human security and human rights in a globalized world. Kavita Ramdas, Chair of the session, spoke about women's strength in building peace through compassionate activism rather than conflict. Noeleen Heyzer presented the opening statement in which she emphasized the need to examine human security from a gender perspective, particularly in relation to development and to conflict situations. She stated, "There is no security unless security stands on human rights and human development." Jacqueline Pitanguy built on Heyzer's points, focusing on the interconnections among gender, sustainable development, and human security. Madhavi Sunder addressed the relationship between religion and law within Muslim societies, highlighting the importance of empowering women to claim their legal rights within Islam. Charlotte Bunch identified the pervasiveness of violence against women as a major threat to human security. She spoke about the need to break down the culture of violence against women that exists around the world and emphasized the importance of building a culture of peace and respect in its place.

The second session, "Minimizing Threats to Human Security: Gender, Rights, and Religious Fundamentalisms" focused on revealing the commonalities between religious fundamentalisms. Session Chair Azar Nafisi opened the discussion by stressing that all religious fundamentalisms "delete, exclude, and cancel out," confiscating women's rights, human rights, and individual rights in the name of morality. Kathleen Peratis highlighted the main mechanism through which religious fundamentalisms gain power to cause widespread damage in a community, namely, secular state support, citing Israel– where Judaism is the majority religion and religious, state-sup-

ported courts have a monopoly on issues of personal status such as custody, marriage, and divorce– as an example. Azza Karam underlined the importance of including women of faith (who work actively for women's issues within the context of their religion) in the global women's movement, distinguishing them from extremists who use religion as a political tool to gain state power. Frances Kissling explained how the diversity of modern family structures, which no longer neatly reflect the paternal, hierarchical blueprint dominant in many religions, have provoked a backlash whereby religious power structures are working to reassert their influence in state affairs. In conclusion, religious fundamentalisms-- particularly when backed by secular authority-- pose a serious threat to human security, undermining individual rights, most especially those related to the status of women.

In the third session, "Caring for the Future: Development for Human Security," panelists shared strategies on ways to ensure economic security and on how improved access to health, labor, and education can enable women to freely participate in the development of their communities and nations. Afaf Mafouz, who chaired the session, emphasized the importance of eliminating both economic and emotional poverty. "We cannot think of the future of human security," she said, "without emphasizing human dignity for each boy, girl, woman, and man." Zenebeworke Tadesse and Nadereh Chamlou focused on how social and cultural values have led to women's oppression in the labor force. In her opening statement, Tadesse talked about the urgent need to re-conceptualize care work as valuable to all of society. In this informal economic sector, the bulk of care work conducted by women, primarily in the home, often goes unrecognized and unpaid. Nadereh Chamlou discussed how women in the Middle East/North Africa region continue to face limitations to their participation in the public sphere, hindering the overall economic growth and development in the region. Limited funding for health and education programs was also identified as a major limiting factor for achieving sustainable development. Attiya Inayatullah described how women's reactions to the conditions of their health and reproductive rights continue to be a "silent scream" in regions where social conservatism and fundamentalisms prevail. Marian Wright Edelman advo-

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cated for increasing resources and state support for social and educational programs for children in order to end child poverty.

The fourth session, entitled "Participatory Leadership and Democratic Governance," dealt with the ways in which participatory leadership and democratic governance impact the achievement of human security in countries around the world. As Chair of the session, Carl Gershman spoke about the need to empower people at the grassroots level in order to build effective democratic societies. In her opening statement Najma Heptulla addressed the relationship between political participation, democracy, and human security. She stated that gender parity and women's political participation should be the mandate of every democratic institution. Heptulla also spoke about the necessity of involving women in conflict-prevention discussions and conflict-resolution strategies. Mishka Mojabber Mourani focused her remarks on work being done at the grassroots level to challenge traditional, patriarchal leadership styles by empowering women and men through innovative leadership methodologies that are horizontal, participatory, and inclusive, using the Machreq/Maghreb Gender Linking Information Project and Women's Learning Partnership "Leading to Choices" workshop as a case study. Aruna Rao discussed the relationship between institutional change, women's citizenship, and human security. She stated that full citizenship involves women's right to participate in decision-making processes, which cannot be achieved without fundamental transformations of institutions. Kumi Naidoo spoke about the ongoing challenges to democracy around the world, in particular, elected officials' lack of accountability to their constituents. He emphasized that citizens' freedom to participate fully in political processes is a primary component of building human security. Naidoo also discussed the importance of including men in conflict prevention, peace building, and democratic development.

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"Recovering from Violent Conflict: Gender and Post-conflict Reconstruction," the conference's fifth session, highlighted the importance of women's participation in peace processes both during and after conflict situations. Ambassador Swanee Hunt chaired the session and provided the opening statement, noting that women are a largely untapped resource in peace negotiations and

in conflict prevention. Amneh Badran explained that limitations imposed by curfews have led to soaring numbers of people living in poverty in Palestine. The once-vibrant Palestinian women's movement has declined as members have lost contact with one another and grassroots work has refocused on providing humanitarian aid, documenting human rights violations, and providing trauma counseling. Sakena Yacoobi, highlighting the importance of international long-term support for communities recovering from violent conflict, expressed concern that lack of infrastructure in Afghanistan threatens the positive short-term changes that have taken place for Afghan women seeking education and training. Zainab Bangura stressed that the high numbers of women-headed households resulting from conflict situations, as in Sierra Leone, have important economic repercussions and noted that post-conflict processes must incorporate women's perspectives in order "to support a sustained peace." The speakers concluded that working to eliminate poverty and facilitating access to basic services, increasing educational opportunities for women and girls, and including women in all stages of the peace process are essential components of a campaign to ensure human security.

In the lively final roundtable session women leaders of national, regional, and international human rights organizations discussed "The Role of National and Transnational Organizations in Ensuring Human Security." Mahnaz Afkhami, the session's Chair, presented the context for the discussion, describing how international democracy and rights organizations are coming under fierce attack by many governments for carrying out work that is considered both subversive and disruptive. The fact remains that NGOs are becoming an increasingly visible and powerful force in world affairs. As head of the International Human Rights Law Group, Gay McDougall emphasized the importance of networks and alliances among human rights organizations and discussed how the Law Group is working to strengthen the capacity of organizations in the developing world. Indai Sajor of the Asian Center for Women's Human Rights provided a case study of how women's rights organizations in Asia have worked together to bring international attention to the issue of sexual slavery and the plight of comfort women during World War II. Asma Khader of Sisterhood is Global/Jordan and Kavita Ramdas of the Global Fund for Women discussed the necessity of listening to women's voices at the grassroots level to articulate their rights in their own words at the international level. While NGOs must not be expected to take on the functions that are the province of governments, they play an increasingly vital role in creating innovative programming, mobilizing for change, and pressuring governmental and international institutions to respond to the human security needs of the people in their communities.