Women and Human Security in South Asia

The Cases of Bangladesh and Pakistan

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South Asia Human Security Series

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South Asia Human Security Series

South Asia Human Security Series is the product of a three-year regional collaborative research project titled, *Human Security in South Asia: Discourse, Practice and Policy Proposition* conducted by BIISS under the aegis of the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, 2003-06. The aim of the project has been to provide an understanding of the prevailing discourses and practices on human security in South Asia as well as to generate inputs for policy making at regional and national levels. Five individual country papers on Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and five thematic areas: (a) Constructing a Human Security Index for South Asia; (b) Violence, Terrorism and Human Security; (c) Ethnicity and Human Security; (d) Gender and Human Security; (e) Marginalization and Human Security – were covered. The outcome is the present series.

The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

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Preface

When BIISS approached us at SDPI to write about human security in South Asia from a gendered perspective, we were excited that we had an opportunity to write about aspects that are often assumed and or neglected. Starting with the premises that human security is grounded in the lived experience of people, both men and women, we felt that South Asia as a whole is too varied for us to research intensively. We wanted to avoid the broad strokes of macro perspectives that skip detail, as detail in our opinion would capture the depth of issues that , especially women, face in their daily lives. In an attempt to narrow our focus we decided to conduct a comparative analysis of the Bangladesh and Pakistan cases assuming that there was much that was common to both aside from a shared history—both have long experience with military regimes and difficult democracies and a neo conservative religious right; however, we soon realized that the two countries, despite a shared (though bitter) history of almost 24 years, had very different experiences and contexts. While comparisons could not be made easily, we were able to delineate the complex interconnections between strategic, historical, economic and political concerns and the manner in which these shape women and men's lives.

Aware of the contradictions between the state as the guarantor of security and as the source of women's insecurity, whether in the context of institutions, laws and policies or processes (e.g., democracy itself), we realized that to capture gendered contexts of insecurity was possible but daunting; however, to attempt to *measure* women's insecurity in its multiple intangible contexts is impossible, especially in developing countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh where the links between structural violence and direct violence are embedded in centuries of powerlessness. However, would not such an assumption lead to a fatalistic and overly deterministic conclusion? Were we under-estimating the power of human agency and individual initiative? How far could individual empowerment go in the face of structural impediments? And, if change, albeit slow and not without its pain and retrogressive dimensions, is taking place in the lives of women and men, how can the positive aspects be enhanced, expedited and put on a

fast track? What are the forces—local, national, regional, international—that hamper positive change? These are some of the questions that we confronted in the writing of this report.

Our challenge at the level of scholarship was also immense at different levels. The bitter legacies of violence whether through the suppression of Bangla as the national language or the genocide in 1971, have resulted in little comparative scholarship between the two countries. Given the vast divides resulting from bitter memories and silences before and about 1971, resulting also from the politics between the two states and the lack of contacts amongst the peoples, it was difficult to begin to talk about the experience of women without addressing the issue of who speaks and who writes. As Pakistanis, writing about Bangladesh, we felt it would perhaps be inappropriate to critique the Bangladesh experience. We also questioned our ability to do so. However, our identities as women and as feminists enabled us to place ourselves in a different context vis a vis the writing of gendered experience of insecurity in the two countries. This was extremely important for us as it placed us beyond the narrow confines of nationalism and state-centered identities, so that we could research and write without guilt or fear of being prejudiced.

Our dilemmas did not end with our identities in the context of our own scholarship. We also had to contend with the different assumptions that come with different theoretical approaches. Human security is defined, measured and framed in many different ways. Despite the multiple indicators used in different frameworks to measure this concept, and enable us to map important areas of the human experience, a framework specifically for women's security concerns was lacking. We could not develop neat matrices and frameworks to capture the intricate ways through which patriarchal norms that permeate all aspects of life come together to fence off the openings that the system creates in conjunction with human agency and the desire for justice. We therefore, restricted ourselves to bringing a gender sensitive approach to the examination of the discourse and practice on human security in Bangladesh and Pakistan. This was done to provide an intellectual understanding of the concept of *gendered* human security by highlighting the tensions between policy and praxis, and between the different paradigms within which feminist understandings and policy discourses operate. We limited ourselves to building the conceptual basis for the rationale behind the need for a separate framework for women's insecurity through the introduction of direct and structural violence against women into the existing frameworks.

We believe that we were able to surmount some of the challenges that the project brought us. These ranged from accessing relevant literature to data on the two countries that could be cross-compared. Data was often inconsistent or non-existent and we often relied upon friends and their friends to help us. Sometimes we would make headway but at other times we would be plagued by new questions and the need for new or different data and literature. It is in this regard that we wish to thank Abdur Rob Khan and A.K.M. Abdus Sabur of BIISS for their infinite patience with the delays in submitting drafts, and the questionings and complications in our heads; we are grateful to friends in Bangladesh, especially Dr Amena Mohsin and Dr Imtiaz Ahmed of Dhaka University for gently advising us, sharing much needed materials with us and more importantly helping us develop our understanding of political development in Bangladesh; we are grateful to our reviewers, Professor Muzaffer Ahmad and Dr Amena Mohsin for pointing out theoretical issues and facts and the need to bring these together as well as input from workshop participants to whom an earlier draft was presented.

Most of all, this was a labor of love. In the process, we sometimes neglected other duties, official and personal. For example, at times we were unable to attend meetings at the office as we had to complete a chapter; we hid in isolation, away from everyone and other impending deadlines, so we could finish this report. We were up in the night, working on the report and sometimes had to re-write chapters when computer viruses and bugs attacked the files or relied upon internet cafes to send off files to one another late in the night so the other colleague could work on it. Our commitment encroached upon time with parents, children, friends, colleagues—not necessarily in that order—and we are grateful for the emotional and intellectual support that everyone extended while we were writing this manuscript.

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