

The most unequal of the unequal

If for most of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean human security is a long way from becoming a reality, this is especially true for women, for whom human security is only a dream. In the region, women have suffered historically from discrimination and social exclusion in the non-recognition of their specific rights as women and the violence to which they are subjected. The region faces a huge challenge in the next few years: to provide and guarantee the conditions that will make it possible for all its citizens, men and women, to live in dignity and peace.

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We kept on twisting and turning, and gaining altitude... there were so many curves in the road that it was impossible to know what we would find around the next bend... until at last the wind dropped, and we came out of the clouds, we all gasped with wonder, and then we sighed, because we were in a place you only ever find in fairytales, the blue sky above, the white clouds below, and all the problems of the world forgotten...

Amy Tan²

The concept of human security has been defined in multifarious ways, yet it could be summarised as the full and progressive realisation of human rights, essentially the right to live life in peace, to have one's basic social and cultural needs met, to have access to the beneficial developments of science and technology and to enjoy a healthy environment. For United Nations experts it includes economic development, social justice, environmental protection, disarmament, respect for human rights and the rule of law;³ the capacity of States and individuals to anticipate and resolve their conflicts by peaceful means;⁴ the quality of life of members of a society;⁵ and freedom from fear and deprivation.⁶

These definitions inevitably lead to the conclusion that in Latin America and the Caribbean, for the vast majority of the population, human security in any real sense of the word is still a long way off. Women are worse off - for them human security is only a dream.

In more economically developed countries advances in human security are the product of government policies designed to overcome inequities

and of laws promoting the real enjoyment of human rights. States that guarantee the human security of their citizens strive to establish conditions favourable to personal security and the protection of life. Improving human security goes hand-in-hand with resolving internal as well as international armed conflicts. In countries experiencing internal or international armed conflicts human security is seriously compromised. However, the greatest threats to human security arise from inequality and social exclusion.

In the light of historical discrimination and exclusion perpetrated against women, the outlook is gloomy. The most serious indications of their plight are the non-recognition of their rights as people - particularly of their specific rights as women - and the violence to which they are subjected.

The persistence of a patriarchal culture perpetuates prejudices against women in the public mind which exclude them from participating in the exercise of power. Women are therefore prevented from participating in improving the material conditions of their own lives, and from receiving any social and political recognition. The former translates into unequal distribution of wealth, making women "the poorest of the poor"; the latter is evidenced by the absence of public structural policies and relevant legislation to promote their empowerment.

Taking account of the specific needs of women

The welfare and the human security of women in the region depend on access to adequate and timely health services; access to quality consumer goods; the opportunity for active participation in decisions affecting the future of their country or region; the right to knowledge and to an education free from stereotypes and discrimination; the right to housing; and in general to everything that makes it possible for men and women to live life with dignity and in peace.

One way of overcoming historically determined inequalities based on sexual discrimination is to design affirmative action measures, such as are recommended in the various international human rights treaties and in the action plans of world conferences, all of which have been signed by most of the countries of the region.

These measures, aimed at taking proper account of specific gender needs and long-term social inequities that exist to this day, are urgently demanded by women, but they have been extremely difficult to implement.

The quest for equality and recognition of gender differences implies that full realisation of rights for

women in the field of health care involves, in addition to basic health care, sexual and reproductive health. Governments must urgently develop policies and legislation promoting women's autonomy in the areas of sexuality and reproduction, legalising abortion⁷ or penalising sterilisation without consent. Secondly, accessible services must be provided for (a) informed fertility control, including access to safe and effective methods of contraception, and to assisted reproduction techniques; (b) universal coverage during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum period; (c) medical attention for spontaneous or induced abortion.⁸

Other ways of recognising differences without converting them into inequalities appear in the Belén do Pará Convention and the Vienna Declaration (1993), which acknowledge that violence against women constitutes a human rights violation. Whereas specific health rights for women derive from biological differences, violence as an expression of discrimination against women constitutes a historical phenomenon. In spite of the above-mentioned international instruments, women continue to be subjected daily to violence in many shapes and forms. If human security involves good quality of life and the chance to live it in peace and free from fear of violence, human security for women is non-existent either in the public or the private spheres.

Equitable enjoyment of access to resources and opportunities

Inequity between men and women is evident in their access to socially constructed opportunities:

7 Abortion is still the first cause of maternal mortality in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay. It is the second cause in Colombia and Peru, while in Brazil, Mexico and Panama it appears as the third cause. With exceptions, abortion is criminalised in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Paraguay. In Panama, under certain circumstances it is exempt from criminal responsibility. Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras and Chile criminalise it in all cases; only in Puerto Rico has abortion been legalised. CLADEM. *Silencios Públicos, Muertes Privadas*. 1998.

8 In Latin America the rate of births attended by skilled health personnel in the period 1995-2000 was between 100% in Chile and 99% in Uruguay, versus 69% in Ecuador and 56% in Peru. As to maternal mortality (1985-1999), the most serious cases are found in Bolivia with 390 per 100,000 live births and Peru with 270 per 100,000. The lowest rates for maternal mortality are in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina with 23, 26 y 41 deaths per 100,000 live births, respectively. Comunidad Andina. *Documentos Estadísticos: Indicadores Sociales: Educación, Salud, Pobreza, Tecnología, Género y Aspectos de Gobernabilidad y Democracia*. Mayo 2003. Report based on UNDP *Human Development Report 2002*.

1 www.cladem.org

2 From *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan, Ivy Books, 1991. Re-translated into English from the Spanish translation of the novel. The original in English was not available at the time of going into print.

3 Millennium Report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. *We the Peoples. The role of the United Nations in the 21st century*. 2000.

4 Sadako Ogata, former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

5 Ramesh Thakur, Vice Rector (Peace and Governance) of the United Nations University in Tokyo.

6 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

employment, housing, education, civil and political decision-making processes, science, technology, credit, etc. Analysis of all these aspects demonstrates the structural inequity that affects women. The picture becomes even more complex when including the prevalent cultural patterns and the roles society assigns to women.

In the world of labour high-powered and prestigious jobs are still reserved for men. Salary differences persist, although they are beginning to blur due to international commitments made by governments and modern constitutional reforms which include human rights. In Latin America and the Caribbean, in the formal employment sector women earn approximately 15% less than men.⁹ In the informal sector and in rural areas, earnings inequalities are higher. Current macroeconomic policies, resulting from the globalisation of market forces, have had their greatest impact on women. Structural adjustment and industrial restructuring have increased women's unemployment.

Women's access to housing, whether as tenants or owners, is restricted. The percentage of all women who own houses or land worldwide is barely higher than 1%, according to the International Labour Organization, which also states that only little more than 10% of the world's wealth is in the hands of women.¹⁰

At the regional level, the consolidated report of the Andean Community,¹¹ gives statistics for the population living below the poverty line of USD 1 per day (at 1985 international prices, adjusted for purchasing-power parity). In Chile and Uruguay, this group represent less than 2% of the population for the period 1983-2000. In Brazil, Bolivia, Peru and Mexico, this group represents between 11.6% and 15.9% of the population; in Paraguay, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela it varies from 19.5% to 23% of the population.

"The GINI Index measures the inequality of income or consumption distribution within a country. For Uruguay (0.423), Ecuador (0.437) and Bolivia (0.447) this indicator shows the more 'equitable' distribution of income. The next group includes Peru (0.462) and Venezuela (0.495). A third group, with less equitable income distribution than the first two groups, is made up of Mexico (0.531), Chile (0.566), Colombia (0.571), Paraguay (0.577), and Brazil (0.607)."¹²

Gender inequalities in estimated income are as follows: in Uruguay, income earned by women is 51% of that earned by men; in Colombia the corresponding figure is 47%; in Bolivia, 45%; and in Ven-

eziuela, 41%. The lowest ratios of estimated income earned by women relative to that earned by men are found in Ecuador, with a ratio of 29%, and Peru (25%).¹³

Privatisation of public services has made customers out of people who as users previously had rights to State-provided services. The effect has been to put a brake on the advances in education, health, access to housing and other public services such as electricity, telephone services, etc., achieved throughout Latin America. This setback has made women more unequal again, and among them rural women are the worst off.

Consequences of internal armed conflicts

Armed conflicts, whether internal or international, seriously endanger human security as well as human life. Although political and social instability is evident in many of the region's countries, at the moment only Colombia is affected by a civil war.

The internal armed conflict in Colombia has repercussions which affect the entire population. International Humanitarian Law has been flouted, and with it human security has vanished like a mirage - especially for victims of forced displacement, which is particularly hard on women and children. Forced displacement involves multiple simultaneous violations of human rights, such as social and cultural uprooting, loss of property, including land and homes,¹⁴ loss of jobs and livelihood, and loss of food security.

More than three million people in the country are victims of this desperate humanitarian crisis. Adding insult to injury, there are no public policies in existence to tackle the problems faced by forcibly displaced people in an integrated way, even though the Constitutional Court has repeatedly ordered government authorities to speed up the relocation processes for these people and provide for their food, occupational, clothing, health and housing needs, and for the education of children.¹⁵

Living conditions for people in the war zones, as well as for the general population, are even more adversely affected by the government policy of spending resources on the war that should have been allocated to social investment.

The National Human Development Report for Colombia 2003,¹⁶ sets out four conditions that make human life worth living: long life and health; access

to knowledge; an income adequate enough to live a decent life; and actively belonging to and participating in a community.

All four of these conditions could be achieved for everyone in Colombia and in all the countries of the region if governments put into effect the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The unequal status of women would also be overcome if governments honoured the international human rights treaties and the commitments made at world conferences, among which the following can be mentioned:

- Implement measures to eradicate poverty; design policies to address structural unemployment and underemployment of women and young girls; offer training and provide access to productive resources; introduce appropriate measures to increase incomes; and bridge the earnings gap between women and men.
- Eradicate stereotypes and introduce cultural transformations which States have committed themselves to; reduce the burden of domestic labour of women and girls, in their homes and out of them; provide social security to women workers' who do paid work at home; and adopt effective measures to eliminate the adverse effects of poverty on the opportunities open to children and young people.
- Adopt measures that take into account the poverty-related risks and illnesses of women; ensure adequate social and economic protection during illness, maternity, child-rearing, widowhood, disability and old age.
- Design policies to guarantee food security in order to improve the nutritional status of girls and women, and adopt measures to promote effective participation by women in decision-making at all State levels.

Latin America faces a huge challenge in the next few years. It must provide the conditions and guarantees that will make it possible for all its citizens, men and women, to live life with dignity and in peace; where all are included as full participants of society and are able to exercise democratic choices; and where systems of justice become more credible and government institutions are perceived to be more legitimate.

In the light of all of the above, we affirm with Adela Cortina, that "for any state to properly maintain its democratic legitimacy, it must be capable of creating consensus and obtaining the commitment of society to provide a certain 'acceptable minimum' for all its citizens, as measured by the standards of humanity's achievements and needs, and to make real progress towards social inclusion."¹⁷ ■

9 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). www.eclac.org

10 IEPALA. *Hagamos un solo mundo*. Madrid, 1986.

11 Comunidad Andina, *op cit*.

12 *Ibid*. The dates of reference for Andean Community countries are: for Ecuador, 1995; for Colombia and Peru, 1996; for Venezuela, 1998; and for Bolivia, 1999. For MERCOSUR countries the dates of reference are: for Uruguay, 1989; and for Brazil and Paraguay, 1998. For Chile and Mexico the date of reference is 1998.

13 *Ibid*.

14 Studies show that 59.8% of the Colombian population are below the poverty line. Land is in the hands of the very few: 1.08% of the population own 53% of the land. Only 55.7% of the population are landowners. Nearly three million children and young people have no access to basic education. Garay Salamanca, Luis Jorge. *Colombia: entre la exclusión y el desarrollo. Propuestas para la transición al Estado social de derecho*. Bogotá, 2002.

15 Corte Constitucional. Sentencia T 1635/2000, SU-1150/2000, among others.

16 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *National Human Development Report 2003 for Colombia. Understand in Order to Transform the Local Roots of Conflict*. Bogotá, 2003.

17 Cortina, Adela. "Presupuestos morales del Estado Social de Derecho". 1995. Quoted by Garay Salamanca, Luis Jorge, *op cit*.