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**Voices from the Margins:
A response to “Security sector reform in
developing and transitional countries”**

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In his review of “the relatively recent concept” of security sector reform (SSR) in developing and transitional countries, Herbert Wulf observes that such reform has the potential to be excitingly broad in its scope, since it should be undertaken with the intent not only to disarm a society or reduce the size of its armed forces, but to fundamentally change civilian-military relations by installing democratic control over the security sector. To successfully institute this process, he observes, it will be necessary to address “the security of every single being within society.” In my response, I shall interrogate this key phrase more closely to address what I see as a problematic vagueness in his paper: who, in precise terms, are the individuals who should participate in, take ownership of, and ultimately benefit from SSR?

This rejoinder starts from a similar political position to that upheld by Wulf, using as its cornerstone, as he does, the contention that several forms of social exclusion must necessarily be addressed if a society wishes to advance to that state of universal well-being characterised by peace and security, good governance and positive civil-military relations, and the egalitarian participation of all social actors in decisions about security. My objective, however, is to show that such an observation runs the risk of being hollow and ineffectual without a careful and detailed enumeration of precisely who is excluded from participation in security-related decisions and an honest assessment of how this exclusion comes about and is maintained. To overcome traditional lacunas in debates about the security sector and its potential for reform, I argue, a political commitment has to be made on the part of those who write about this area to include in their reviews non-mainstream voices, and to acknowledge marginal or grassroots interventions which may not always have received the recognition they deserve.

Since it is clear that not “every” social actor has, either historically or contemporaneously, been allowed to determine what constitutes security, or indeed, to offer their views on how the positive potential of the security sector might be better realised, I argue that those who wish to advance the debate on security sector reform have a responsibility to do the following:

1. Identify the individuals and/or social classes who have been marginalised from this conversation—this includes, among others, most women, the urban and rural poor and ethnic/racial minorities;
2. Ask whether most of these individuals have expressed opinions, ideas and policies on how their personal security might best be assured;
3. Discover how these have been articulated, to whom, and in what fora;
4. Ascertain if anyone in a position of authority and power is paying attention to what the least powerful people believe and say about their security needs.

Although I cannot fault his carefully-detailed critique of the problems, contradictions and failings of existing efforts at social security reform and how these can best be overcome, my response is driven by discomfort that Wulf, in his otherwise comprehensive review, should have overlooked the significant contributions made to discussions of what constitutes security, and how it can best be implemented, that have been made by some of the world’s most under-represented people. From a feminist perspective, as well as from the perspective of people in indigenous peace and sovereignty

movements, none of the issues raised in this “new” debate are really all that new. Wulf recognises the decades-old contribution made to this conversation by the development community, but it would have been interesting to see him engage in more detail with some of the diversity of these discussions. In my view, what makes the richness of our contemporary vision of security sector reform possible is precisely the fact that “the development community” is not homogeneous: while it may have paid increasing attention to the need for security sector reform/transformation since the 1960s, it was a relatively small proportion of activists – those engaged in expanding and challenging prevailing notions of what makes us safe – who led us to where we are today. When I think about security sector reform, then, I include in the scope of the debate much more than the work of the past forty years, and do not confine my purview to that which has been focused on developing and transitional countries.

In the face of the all-too-frequently disempowering and even destabilising programmes endorsed by politicians, the military, and sometimes even the development community itself, courageous, consistent and endlessly innovative voices have been raised “from the margins” of society where they play a significant role in raising awareness of hidden security concerns, all the while expanding debates and developing and implementing policy reform. Without these voices, the breadth of contemporary conversations about security sector reform would be far more limited.

I would like to propose that versions of the current security sector reform debate have been ongoing since at least the middle of the 19th century, choosing that date rather than any other because since that time, indigenous peoples, the poor and women in every corner of the world have, in innumerable interventions, challenged and expanded “traditional” concepts of security and the institutions through which these are implemented and maintained.

As early as 1915, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) issued a plea for the transformation of the “culture of militarism and war to a culture of peace and non-violence,” stressing that attention must be paid to the interconnections between economic, social and cultural issues on the one hand, and conflict, the production and sales of arms and war on the other. WILPF has worked ever since “for economic and social justice and the promotion and protection of individual and collective human rights and the rights of women.”¹ When he observes that the potential breadth of the scope of SSR will only be realised by means of “an overall strategy of development and democratisation of the society” under review and argues that SSR must be “embedded in general peace-building and development” and come about through holistic processes of reform, Wulf endorses once more the ideals of this venerable organisation. His argument, in other words, is very similar to one that has been central to interdisciplinary feminist research, analysis and policy in both the security sector and beyond.

WILPF’s founders also anticipated the contemporary observation, as articulated by Wulf, that security sector reform is deeply embedded in four broad pillars – the political and economic spheres, social definitions of what constitutes security, and reform of the institutions which govern the security sector in all its aspects. Women peace activists have long asserted that it is these pillars of social power that are most in need of overhaul if security sector reform is to be achieved. In enumerating these, then, Wulf echoes an argument that has consistently been articulated by feminists and post-colonial critics and activists as central to overcoming the systematic social exclusion of the world’s most marginalised people and the poverty, violence, illness and despair in which they are mired as a result of this exclusion.

What a pity it is that current discussions of security sector reform do not adequately

¹ For more information, see the website of WILPF – <http://www.wilpf.int.ch/history/hindex.htm>.

acknowledge their debt to the tireless activism of people who have themselves experienced the violent impacts of segregation. Without their efforts, the very concepts and terms used in the debate on security sector reform would be impossible: it is they who have developed the language with which we now describe the institutionalised racism, sexism and class inequality of dominant social, economic, political and, sometimes, cultural structures. Contemporary advocates of security sector reform must recognise the contribution of this community of civil society activists that has identified, named, and made visible the mechanisms of violence through which institutions maintain their exclusionary power. It is largely their resistance that has forced the opening of spaces in which the amelioration of such violence can begin.

One of the most striking places in which this shift in discourse can be seen has been in the growing capacity of disempowered people to bring to light the full extent, and impact, of “the everyday violence of HIV/AIDS, of racism, of domestic abuse, of ethnic conflicts and massive displacements of people”.² In particular, women have taken on the enormous task of bringing to light the horrifying rate of gender-specific violence around the world. They have insisted on the importance of treating this violence as a rights-based issue and thus capable of being addressed through existing mechanisms for ensuring women’s right to live free from fear and harm, and they have made some impressive impacts, at both the local and international levels, in the process.

Yet it is simultaneously true that violence against women and the insecurity it promotes remains, outside of feminist circles, the most under-scrutinised topic in discussions about the security sector. This lacuna should serve as a warning that even in the circles where reform is debated, certain topics remain taboo: while women’s particular insecurity in times of war has been more prominently brought to light since the beginning of the 1990s when sexual violence, especially rape, was first named as a specific weapon of war, it remains true to this day that in times of peace, domestic violence is a silent killer not only because it is improperly addressed by the security and judicial systems but because it is still shrouded in secrecy.

Yet there can be little doubt that women’s combined efforts to name the scourge, wherever it is manifest, and to measure how it underpins violent social structures, have impacted on societal understanding of what really constitutes security. Even though we may have little or no access to the corridors of power, women activists have insisted on the importance of listening to what women say about their security needs. As a result of this action-oriented research, we are challenging militarised views of what constitutes safety, including in our purview such issues as access to healthcare and adequate nutrition. We have also succeeded in offering a clear assessment of whose safety actually counts. We know, and protest the fact, that it is not we who are most likely to control those institutions that are meant to make individuals feel secure, and have courageously drawn attention to the problem of “secondary” victimisation through the ill-treatment or actual abuse of victims when those in charge of security are confronted with certain forms of violence.³

Women activists have brought to public attention the fact that violence against women, usually perpetrated in the home although facilitated by public social structures that refuse to treat the problem as a serious crime, is a universal social phenomenon and has enormous political and economic implications wherever it takes place. Because we have insisted that this problem be measured, we now have global statistics that show it is the single biggest source of injury and death

² Charlotte Bunch, 2003. “A Feminist Human Rights Lens on Human Security.” Paper delivered at the National Research in Women Annual Conference, May 2003.

³ Information on global rates of domestic and other forms of violence against women can be found at www.unifem.org. See also the current international campaign against violence against women at <http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/index-eng>.

⁴ The World Health Organisation estimates that violence is the leading cause of death for women aged 15-44, more than cancer, traffic accidents and malaria combined (www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-genderviolence.html).

to women (and also to children) in developed and less-developed countries alike.⁴ We continue to stress that these figures still fail to record the enormity of the burden of violence that women endure, because even in countries with a vigorous women's movement and an advanced commitment to gender-equitable judicial and security sector reform, violence that takes place against women in the private sphere remains drastically under-reported. When systems break down in the face of war, even fewer records are kept of how women's security, including their health and nutrition, is impacted. This lack of record-keeping then leads to all kinds of impunity for abusers of women and girls – some of which are even being initiated by those who are sent to restore security.⁵ Our increased knowledge of the enormity of levels of violence against women graphically proves that for many of the world's most dispossessed people, even the capacity to make decisions about their personal security remains an impossible dream. The voices of this silent mass are still not being heard.

How should proponents of security sector reform respond to this crisis? Given that political, economic and social institutions are globally dominated by elite men, an in-depth assessment of security sector reform is impossible unless those who undertake research, develop policies and implement reform processes are scrupulous about gaining access to, and reflecting on, the insights of those who are in marginal social positions because they are female, poor, ill or infirm, ethnically/racially dominated. As they have no access to the corridors of power, it is difficult for them to influence decisions made about security at the national, or even, in many cases, the personal level: but this does not mean they are not speaking out. Their opinions can and should be included through such measures as consulting with specialists in participant-oriented research methodologies, making a political commitment to a consultation process that is broader and more inclusive than at present, and reading the writings of those whose lives are most affected by various manifestations of “everyday violence.” It can also mean a clearer focus on how transitional justice and police reform take into consideration invisible crimes such as domestic violence. Finally, to succeed in its goals at all, security sector reform must come from a rights-based approach that is reinforced by already existing legal frameworks. The precedent for developing holistic approaches to what constitutes human rights has been set for many years (for example, at the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights), meaning that the security sector can easily find models on which to base its approach to reform.

In my reading, when Wulf recognises, as has the women's peace movement since its inception, that security sector reform must derive from and be supported by the will of the society, and particularly its leadership, to endorse far-reaching changes, his argument reaches a new level of complexity. It touches the place in which most resistance is to be found: after all, women have been campaigning about our right to influence the structures of power, including military, peacekeeping and police forces, for over one hundred years. Yet, whether in conflict zones or places in which high rates of violence result from poverty and dispossession, or even in developed countries without proactive policies to support women's entry into the public sphere, women remain marginalised. The numbers of women in security sector institutions, especially in leadership positions, remains abysmally low—and the incidents of violence against women perpetuated in them or endorsed by them remain alarmingly high.

What can be done to change this situation? Years of activism has finally introduced effective language into the realms in which decision-making takes place. UN Security Council

⁵ Public outrage over a number of recent events, such as the information that peacekeepers have been implicated in incidents of sexual violence and people trafficking, has begun to increase popular awareness of just how vulnerable women and girls can be.

⁶ The text of SCR 1325 can be found at <http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement>. Accounts of women's activism to promote it are at www.unifem.org, among others.

Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, for example, calls on governments to take a more proactive stance to promote the entry of women into the security services.⁶ This may not, of course, be enough to change the way in which these services do their work, since it should never be assumed that all women share the same approach to women's, or indeed, any human rights.⁷ The mere inclusion of women workers into security sector jobs is unlikely to produce a sea-change, although there is evidence from peacekeeping missions that a core of women operating in a mission can produce a fairly dramatic change in a unit's approach to its tasks. In the end, however, awareness-raising through careful training and monitoring and evaluation of those (women and men) who have participated in such training will remain an essential part of the process of changing the psychology of security sector workers. This is why women peace activists continue to fight for the rights of women to be heard whenever and wherever security-related decision-making takes place.

Here are just four suggestions. In each case, their implementation relies on a coherent strategy which includes the following: a) creating links with existing activist movements at both the international and grassroots level through such initiatives as the World March of Women,⁸ indigenous people's forums, and other local peacebuilding initiatives; b) public education campaigns through which to involve communities, leaders and the security sector alike in understanding the principles of human rights and their role in upholding these. Special care must be given to education about gender-based violence and strategies must be developed to address it as a matter of national security policy; c) legislative, judicial and economic reform; d) greater economic investment in social support systems.

1. *The scourge of violence against women, whether it is perpetrated at home or in public spaces, must be addressed as a matter of extreme urgency through legal reform and legislative initiatives supported by public education.* No aspect of security sector reform should fail to address this problem because in the absence of a genuine, measurable commitment to ensuring the safety and protection of women, no security sector reform can be said to have taken place. One example of proactive change comes from South Africa where, since the end of apartheid, the government has developed a national Crime Prevention Strategy, Sexual Offences Guidelines, a Gender Policy for the Department of Justice, a National Plan of Action for children, and other such far-sighted legislation. Even these reforms, however, are not effective enough in a place where the poorest members of society continue to live in ignorance of the law and are thus at the mercy of institutions that continue to subvert their rights. South African activists recognise the government's proactive stance as a good basis, but are now calling for the establishment of public education programmes to inform individuals of their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.
2. *Women's participation in all aspects of political decision-making must be actively promoted.* This can include such measures as quota systems in elections, but should also include specific efforts to campaign for the right of women to vote, educating women about their political rights, and protecting them, where necessary, when they exercise their political rights.
3. *Women's participation in all aspects of peace-making and security must be prioritised.* This means including women in positions of authority at peace talks; recruiting and promoting them in the military, police, judiciary, financial and all related security sector institutions; appropriately training them as advocates of women's security; taking seriously their theoretical and operational

⁷ Recent images of U.S. women soldiers assisting men in the humiliation and torture of Iraqi prisoners of war are ample evidence of the fact that, circumstances and attitudes permitting, women are no different from men in their capacity to abuse human rights.

⁸ The World March of Women is an international feminist action network connecting grassroots groups working to eliminate poverty and violence against women. It is composed of 5500 participating groups in 163 countries and territories (see www.worldmarchofwomen.org).

contributions to the discourse on security and its implementing structures, and training more women as military observers and as experts in demobilization and all aspects of disarmament. Government funding, not just the money of international donors, should go towards this process so that it is nationally owned. There is a growing body of evidence from the field that women are taking it upon themselves to enter into weapons collections programmes, to better understand arms control and management, and to inform themselves about decisions made on national spending so that they have a voice in how security budgets are determined. Initiatives include the Women's Network of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development and its pioneering work on gender responsive budgets, and UNIFEM's contributions to United Nations policy and practice on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) processes.

4. *The current male domination of the security sector, and male culpability in violence against women, whether as perpetrators or through passively condoning such violence, must be acknowledged and actions put in place to address and overcome its root causes.* This is probably the biggest challenge facing the security sector today: that communities have lost faith in institutions which, instead of assuring the security of societies' most vulnerable people, are seen to, or perceived as, actively participating in their exploitation. It may seem as if institutional violence cannot be overcome, but there are several excellent examples, both national and local, of programmes of action to redress historical inequality. Comparative studies should urgently be undertaken of how countries (such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Canada and South Africa) have instituted legislative reform on gender-based exclusion that has made momentous changes in the lives of women and men alike. Careful attention should also be paid to local men's movements, such as the Canadian-instituted White Ribbon Campaign, South Africa's Men Against Rape (MARS), Australia's Men Against Sexual Assault, the Men to Men Initiative in Kenya, Malawi, Namibia and South Africa, and Men Against Sexual Violence, USA. These organisations form a global network of men who have allied themselves with the women's movement against violence, and they form the foundations of a movement which could become global in scope. Such a movement, initiated, organised and run by men, could begin to make inroads into the highly masculinised institutions of state security by educating other men on how to empathise with those less powerful and act from an ethic of care.

These examples are intended to give readers a taste of the breadth and inventiveness of current initiatives that parallel security sector reform, and hopes to broaden the parameters of the security sector debate so that these initiatives will also be included in its purview. The harsh truth, however, is that more than one hundred years of strong, active, broadly-based, creative and persistent women's peace and anti-violence movements has failed to ensure that all women are actively able to participate in exercising their fundamental human right to a life free from fear and harm. Violence against women, and against others in subordinate positions, persists today because our social structures, including even those structures whose mandate is to promote security, permit it. There is a general culture of impunity which allows men of all cultures to exploit women, and this culture "reinforces at the gut level that violence wins, that domination succeeds, whether at home or in wars" (Bunch: 2003).

It is idealistic to assume that those who wield power within violent and exclusionary structures will easily give it up. To move the debate forward, then, analysts should consider whether it is indeed reform that will suffice: for those who have historically been excluded from engagement with any aspect of the security sector, nothing short of its transformation will help them take their

rightful place at democratic co-owners of control over the forces and institutions that are intended to ensure the safety of all.

The Author:

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Her work includes the production of a guide to 'lessons learned' about the need for gender awareness in DDR, and she has made recommendations for the improvement of future DDR and micro-disarmament processes conducted by the United Nations. She has produced a practical "checklist" and seminar materials for the implementation of gender-aware DDR and published several articles in academic journals and in public media and activist forums. She lectures widely on gender mainstreaming in DDR and disarmament in various forums at the UN and at universities and international conferences.

Farr is currently engaged in analysing gender mainstreaming in weapons collection programmes and DDR processes, undertakes research on the gendered impact of SALW for the Small Arms Survey, and is co-editing a book on SALW for the United Nations University. She is also a volunteer with the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) Women's Network.