

RESEARCH, POLICY, REALITY: WOMEN, SECURITY, SOUTH ASIA

An Essay

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The theme for this conference posits a gap between what researchers study and what policy-makers consider important.¹ This essay will show that when we discuss the security of women, the true disjuncture is between research and policy on the one hand and reality on the other.

At the root of this disjuncture is the understanding of ‘security’ that is common to both mainstream security studies research and the security policy establishment, and that does not reflect the real life experience of women. This becomes clear whether you adopt a feminist perspective or the simple yardstick of relating policy and research to the lives of most women you know. From either standpoint, both research and policy are found wanting.

This essay will contrast the concerns of security policy-makers, the issues raised by feminist scholars and the reality of South Asian women’s lives, both to illustrate this disjuncture as well as to seek remedies for it. It will do so by posing two questions in each instance:

1. What does security mean in this context?
2. Who or what are the chief referents of security?

The ultimate objective is to identify what both research and policy should be about, what we should raise as security policy concerns and how we should make the argument for their inclusion in security agendas.

¹ The subject of this essay is a question about which I have been thinking for almost ten years. This essay is one moment’s view in a long-term engagement, and I want to register that by dating this essay to November-December 2003 when it was written.

Security and the Policy Universe in South Asia

The universe of policy-making and policy debates is a state-centered one, and the primary referent of security policy is the state.

It is the security of the state that is the first concern of policy-makers. The threats to this security are variously identified. They come from other states, from challengers within the state to the state's legitimacy and continuance in a particular form, from challengers based in other states and from external forces like globalization that undermine the state's scope of action.

The state also is a provider of security, both externally and internally—in fact, some reckon that it is the provision of security to its citizens that is the first function and *raison d'être* of the state. In addition to securing the state, the policy establishment is also concerned with the security mandate of the state.² Since the state's ability to act on its security mandate depends on its own secure survival, the latter acquires priority over the latter.

Mohammed Ayoob's definition of the Third World security predicament is easily illustrated by the security preoccupations of each South Asian state (Ayoob 1995). The primary insecurities of the larger states in our region are concomitants of the state-building process itself, reflecting the traumas of state foundation and consolidation vis-à-vis their neighborhood on the one hand and the consequences of state-building policies on the other. In addition, the insecurities and calculations predicted by classic realist and neorealist international realists are also displayed by the ruling elites, particularly in the

² Thus, we might define the 'security policy establishment' as comprising those laws, offices and agencies that are concerned with the security of the state and the security mandate of the state. The extended 'security policy community' includes, along with this, the epistemic community of scholars, media persons and activists who seek to participate in the policy process with regard to both sets of security questions.

larger states of the region. Thus, the phrase ‘security issues’ conjures up a laundry list of mutual problems: border disputes, arms races, insurgencies and counter-insurgency operations, mutual political interference and even textbook geopolitical problems like access to sea-routes.

Let’s start with *India*: India’s most intractable security problem, no matter what one’s perspective or politics, is the dispute with Pakistan over the status of Kashmir. There are few better examples of state foundation-related conflicts. In addition, India has unresolved border disputes with China. India also expresses a sense of threat over the movement of any external armed forces into the Indian Ocean region and keeps a watching brief over Central and Southeast Asian affairs. The Indian security policy establishment considers the extended neighborhood to be critical to its own security and disapproves of its South Asian neighbors entering into treaty or contractual relationships with extra-regional partners. . This applies also then to the unmonitored or hard-to-limit inflows of people, terror, weapons or drugs along its long land and coastal borders. India would attribute the insurgencies it faces to the aggravation and/or assistance rendered by these flows. Many of these result either from or indisputes with or within countries in the neighborhood.

Sharing a long border and ethno-cultural continuities with all its neighbors, it is also hard for the central government in India to ignore the press of regional public opinion in the face of crises elsewhere in the subcontinent. This has been an important factor in India’s repeated involvement with other countries’ problems. Indian interventions in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, if given force by other temptations, were responses to the immediate pressures of refugees and concern about ethnic kin.

To some extent, the feeling in some sections of India's ruling elite of encirclement in a hostile neighborhood is not unjustified. India bears the cross of being a giant—in every sense—in a region of relatively smaller states, and its own dealings with its neighbors reinforce their suspicion that its every move or shift is calculated to do them untold harm. Take the question of terrorism: like every other country that has the means, India has done its share to train and arm militants operating in other parts of its neighborhood. However, that does not alter the reality that most parts of India have seen rising levels of terrorist violence, killing hundreds and wounding many more. On either side of a conflict, no matter what the cause, that is an inexcusable waste of lives. Today, ordinary Indians live with an unexpressed anger and sense of victimhood that is real. What makes them insecure today, will spill over tomorrow to affect others as they express resentment and hostility. The Indian state in part reflects this feeling when it speaks belligerently.

Socio-economic change has come to India over the last five decades, but it has had uneven impact. Some parts of India like Punjab and Maharashtra have fared relatively well, while others remain mired in pre-industrial economies, suffering scarcity and starvation. The middle class has grown and prospered, especially recently, but things are not changing fast enough for the very, very poor. Some of these developments have exacerbated divisions of class, caste and ethnicity within different parts of India and led to the rise of insurgent movements. Declining institutions and perfidious political leaders have further contributed to India's 'million mutinies' which create for both the state and its citizens who are caught in the crossfire between state and insurgents.

So, how must the term ‘security’ most be used by Indian policy-makers? I would say that ‘security’ is used in its most minimal sense in Indian security discourse—‘safety’ and by extension, ‘defense’ and ‘protection.’ This is neither to impute an innocence of motives nor a lack of offense in Indian security policy or action; it is merely intended to suggest that the Indian establishment does not think beyond this very narrow definition of security and insecurity.

How does *Pakistan* fare? Pakistan is sandwiched between two neighbors, engagement with both of whom is a drain on its economy, society and polity. With India, beyond Kashmir and the arms race, there is the problem of being the lower riparian in the Indus system. On the other border lies Afghanistan, whose endless political tribulations spill over into Pakistan in the form of refugee inflows, foreign military presences and alliances that become part of Pakistan’s political fabric and arms and narcotics trafficking with their consequences for society. Pakistan is thus rather unfortunately located.

For the Pakistani state, insecurity first stems from the presence of an India at their eastern threshold which they suspect has still not come to terms with their existence or its rationale and which has played a vital part in their loss of one wing. It is manifest in the complexities of the Kashmir issue, and in the way that has played out over five and a half decades. From India’s looming presence comes a consciousness that Pakistan now needs allies to balance or check this neighbor. This has resulted in close relationships with China, the US and the community of Islamic states. In turn, the vagaries of the relationship with the US and the price Pakistan has paid for it are sources of insecurity to Pakistan. Pakistan’s engagement with Afghanistan can also be described partly as an attempt to ensure a friendly western neighbor.

The Pakistani state has also been threatened, like the Indian one, by violence within. While it has faced and been partitioned on account of one secessionist movement, others like the Pakhtoon and Sindhi ones have lost momentum as events have overtaken them. Instead it is the escalation of urban violence that has threatened Pakistan, with Karachi being the worst example. Escalating levels of violence are at some point beyond the capacity of the police and the paramilitary and army come to be deployed. This ratchets up the violence further, and also politicizes those institutions. In Pakistan, the army is already a political player. In that sense, the identification of the state with its security apparatus is near complete in this case. As a corollary, the line between regime and state security blurs.³

Escalating violence militarizes and brutalizes society. It also generates and fortifies alienation among those who find themselves on the margins and/or caught in the crossfire. The growing popularity of *jehadi madrasas* in the last few years is testament to this. Militancy in the name of Islam threatens Pakistan as much as it threatens those that

³ Early writers on political development feared revolutionary activity and dramatic change and the academic literature reflected their concerns (see Huntington 1968 for a classic statement of this view). Stability became a desirable political attribute and lasting institutions—regimes—something to which to aspire. In itself, this is not an objectionable goal; however, to the extent that a regime is not representative or accountable to its citizens and to the extent that it is not marked by rule of law, those of us that value civil and political rights may object to this identification of regime and state. The security apparatus of the state and its monopoly over legitimate means of coercion are placed at the disposal of whoever controls the government.

The state is hardly a monolithic black box, being better described in any or all of the following ways. First, the ‘state’ is a legal-institutional complex that is actually run by human agents who bring to their actions and interactions the whole range of values, interests and temperaments. Thus, to speak of the state in a fashion that obscures the push and pull of this plurality is to simplify what it is. Second, the state does not operate in a vacuum but in a social and cultural setting that is both more unchanging and more dynamic than the state itself, and whose hierarchies and internal boundaries are played out in the state arena also. Neither does the state exist in a moment without past or future. In other words, the state is embedded both in a socio-cultural and a historical context. Finally, inasmuch as the state’s agents act in its name, it follows that those who dominate the political process determine the actions that the state takes. A given intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and generation characterize the group(s) that is/are most influential in a particular polity at a particular historical moment. Every state, every South Asian state, manifests this oligarchic tendency.

are the militants' better-known targets. It does so in three ways. First, it legitimizes the use of violence as the language of dissidence. Second, it intensifies the identification of regime and state, and their security. Inasmuch as the regime in power is viewed as the last bastion against such militancy, its own inadequacies are overlooked and its security is seen as a precondition for state security. Finally, the militants redefine the political spectrum, making earlier conservatives look moderate and previously untenable political compromises more appealing. The result is a shift in the political discourse over time, and usually to the detriment of citizens' lives.

In Pakistan's policy universe, how is 'security' understood? In light of the above survey, I would answer, as 'survival.' The next question is, 'Survival of what?' The answer to this is classic realism again: the state and/or the regime in control of it. While the consequences of Afghanistan's problems and escalating violence are felt by society as a whole, it does not appear as if those concerns are perceived as 'security' problems.

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has obscured every other security issue the island-state faces. It is the looming presence of the Indian subcontinent, with expansionist Tamil kingdoms just across the Palk Straits that have been the most consistent threats to the survival of kingdoms on the island through history.

Like many of the security issues plaguing India and Pakistan, Sri Lanka's conflict can also be described as a consequence of particular aspects of the founding and consolidation of the state. A pattern of negotiations followed by one party reneging on the deal made persists, with the government initially being the regular defector, and now the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam taking their turn. From the point of view of the Sri Lankan state, the fundamental question is that of survival in its present form—that is,

without a partition. Given the demographics of the country—that it has a majority Sinhalese population—the government largely represents and reflects their threat perceptions. For the majority community, the minority Tamil community is seen as acting not alone but with the backing of the Tamils across the Straits, thus vastly outnumbering the Sinhalese.

The Indian state has intervened variously in the conflict, initially arming and training Tamil militants, then mediating and finally, disastrously overseeing the demobilization of the militants and guaranteeing the peace. Since the 1990s, it has kept a distant, watching brief on the conflict, but Indian intervention looms always as a possibility—more welcome at some times than others.

To Sri Lanka, then, as to Pakistan, security is survival. Today, Sri Lanka faces the situation that Pakistan did in 1971, however, without the complications of physical separation, outside intervention at its expense and with the real prospect of resolution.

The most inescapable determinant of security and insecurity in *Nepal* is its location. “The kingdom is like a *tarul* (fruit) between two stones. Great friendship should be maintained with the Chinese Emperor. Friendship should be maintained with the Emperor of the Southern Seas” (Baral 1988: 15). Nepal can take neither India nor China for granted. After India let the trade and transit arrangements with Nepal lapse in 1989, sealing 13 out of 15 of its transit points to Nepal, that landlocked state cannot be sanguine about its only easy access to the sea. China’s annexation of Tibet on the other hand however precludes Nepal blinking in that relationship either.

The most pressing security issue faced by the Nepalese state today, however, is the Maoist insurrection that directly challenges the bases of the state. The Maoists

challenge both the social and the political order, pointing to the neglect of certain regions and the failures of Nepal's democratization process. Thus, they threaten both state and society, but it is the state that is rendered most insecure by their actions. Because one of the demands of the Maoists is the abolition of the monarchy, in the counter-insurgency operations undertaken against them, state and regime security have nearly become identical. As Nepal has tried to cope with the rebellion, its democratically elected governments have floundered. This has left the army largely in charge of the situation and placed the monarch in a position of renewed significance.

In the Nepali context, security is again survival—between the two giant neighbors, away from the sea, against the Maoist threat and the line between state and regime security is thin.

For *Bhutan*, landlocked in the same way as Nepal, the solution has been to stay close to India and keep a low profile otherwise. Bhutan's most pressing concern has to do neither with state nor regime security as much as societal security.

As a small country with more land to till than people to till it, Bhutan allowed migrant workers from densely populated Nepal to meet that need. The Nepalese-origin population in Bhutan has grown, and in fear of being swamped and losing their cultural distinctiveness, the Bhutanese government introduced new citizenship laws and a cultural policy that defined dress and behavior codes for 'Bhutanese' culture largely along the lines of the Drukpa culture. This has created a large refugee problem, spurred a Nepalese-led democratization movement and a law and order problem as people take advantage of the large numbers of displaced to loot and raid. Moreover, the forested plains in the southern reaches of Bhutan have become staging grounds for militant outfits in India's

northeast. They take advantage of the area's contiguity with India and the poor enforcement capability of the Bhutanese state to hide out and regroup here. In December 2003, at great risk to itself, the kingdom of Bhutan undertook extensive operations to uproot the camps and drive out the militants.

Bhutan's insecurities thus stem from its smallness, in terms of population and resources, rather than the malevolent intentions of its neighbors. It fears being overrun by outsiders, be they migrant workers or militants. The primary referent for its fears is really the Drukpa community and its continued cultural survival.

For the *Maldives*, too, security is survival, but the most imminent threat has a different quality. Maldives is most vulnerable to rising sea levels that can engulf its coral reef atolls. This is the international policy area on which the republic is most vocal and active. So the referent of security in this instance is the very physical existence of the state.

Realpolitik analyses would problematize the archipelagic nature of its geography, which leaves distant islands that are vulnerable to secessionism and occupation by pirates, seafaring powers or other armed actors, at a remove from the integrationist drives of the central islands. While these do pose problems for the Maldives as its history of attempted coups suggests, there is not to them the inevitability of the environmental threat. Furthermore, these are threats to the regime and not the state itself.

In addition to physical and regime security issues, Maldivian politics suggest an anxiety about societal security—as in the secure continuance of values and customs. The Maldives are South Asia's only more or less homogenous society even though the culture of the islands is a product of centuries of trade and travel contacts with the littoral

cultures of the Indian Ocean. Apart from strictures on the identity of the President and the defining provisions of its constitution, one illustration of this anxiety are the restrictions that confine tourists to certain islands not allowing them much access to the rest of the island.

Security here, then, is survival and survival at different levels of urgency. For both the Maldives and Bhutan, South Asia's smallest states, the primacy accorded by realist theorists and 'realistic' policy-makers to state security of a certain sort, make much less.

Both blessed and beleaguered by the outflow of two perennial rivers through its territory, *Bangladesh* has been instrumental in highlighting the interconnectedness of national policies on water. Too much or too little water, location in the river's course, river water usage and the consequences of flooding and flood erosion all raise survival issues for people.

India borders Bangladesh on three sides. Shifting river tides create and submerge islands along the southern reaches of the border, creating demarcation issues between the two states. However, with undocumented migration from Bangladesh into India, the fencing of the border has complicated and added urgency to the issue. Bangladesh faces its own inflow problems, having become the entrepôt for narcotics traffickers and also safe haven for militant groups from both India and Myanmar. This is developing into a thorny issue in its relationship with both states. Moreover, affiliates of Al Qaeda have been active in Bangladesh targeting academics and others perceived as liberal.

Bangladesh has also faced internal conflict as a consequence of state-building politics.

Development and nation-building projects dispossessed and alienated the peoples of the

Chittagong Hill Tracts, and led to a confrontation between them and the military forces. As in other South Asian states, the military is in Bangladesh the law enforcement and disaster management agency of last resort.

How do we characterize the common usage of the term 'security' in Bangladesh? Security is used both in the sense of survival and in the sense of safety. In common with the Maldives, an important component of security involves coping with the hand dealt the state by nature and geography. The other referents are the state and to some extent, the regime.

South Asian states for the most part understand security as either survival and/or safety. For India, it is safety. For the others, crowded by India's presence and preferences, it is survival. For Bangladesh, the Maldives and Bhutan, size, location and terrain accentuate the urgency of survival concerns. State-building definitions contribute to the ease with which regime and state security are conflated in all these states.

There is some variation in the referent in the seven states. Other states, sub-state groups, cross-border movements, development projects with trans-state consequences, the vagaries of nature and environmental change define the range. The individual features seldom in this calculus and the female individual is altogether invisible.

To be fair, there is an element of circular reasoning in this account. Having attributed a certain point of view to states and international relations scholarship, I have listed examples that support my contention. However, the account broadly reflects the issues that make the headlines in each state, and any omissions are hardly as detrimental to the well being of millions as the states' own omissions are.

Who gets left out of this way of looking at security? People at large do. There are many moments when focusing on the security is tantamount to securing the people. However, in certain circumstances, as individuals and members of other collectivities, the security of the state can be inimical to that of ordinary people. Ethnicity, religion and class all lend themselves to mass mobilization. Gender however does not. Women and men do not live in mutually exclusive communities, untouched by other affiliations or histories. Rather, all other politics are engendered, and reflect in their symbols, issues, inclusions and exclusions, the dominant pattern of gender relations.

Feminist Critiques Of The Security Discourse

This brings us to the second part of this essay. What does feminism lead us to expect of the security discourse?

First of all, I should clarify that I associate ‘feminist’ with three somewhat separate, though mutually identified, contexts. I grew up, in a family of feminists, with the first one, in early 1980s Bombay. It was the grounded activism of the anti-rape agitation following the Mathura case judgment.⁴ My own feminism still stems from the values reinforced and lessons learned at this time. The second is the context of feminist theory, mostly emanating from Western academia with prominent non-western critiques. The third is writing by a subset of feminist scholars of international relations and security

⁴ In 1980, two policemen raped a young tribal woman called Mathura. The lower courts acquitted the policemen on the grounds that the woman had a prior sexual history. The Bombay High Court found the policemen guilty and the Supreme Court reversed that judgment on the grounds that Mathura had not raised an alarm and there were no marks of injury on her body. This case was the catalyst for a nationwide campaign against existing rape laws and this in turn, provided just the spur for a radicalized, renewed women’s movement.

studies who have since the late 1980s built a corpus of writings and arguments critiquing mainstream scholarship in the field. In this section, it is the third I will draw on.⁵

Feminist theory, like many contemporary theories, contends that people identify in more than one way and many of those identities are constructed. Allowing this reality to inform security analyses allows full play to the complexity of the subject matter (Elshtain 1995: 348). In addition to identity, the state and power (1995: 350, 354) and the dichotomized equation of 'peace-feminine' and 'war-masculine' are also to be deconstructed.

Conventional security studies evolved from the study of war. Women traditionally are invisible in such studies. In recent writing however, women are both agents and victims of war. They fight or manipulate (Fraser 1994; Addis, Russo and Sebesta 1994); they are raped, killed or objectified (Enloe 2000). However, theorists have paid most attention to women not as soldiers or victims, but as mothers. In their maternal role, they are supposed to be nurturing and naturally ill disposed to war and violence (Brock-Utne 1985, 1989). This essentialist view posits also that having very different experiences of security and insecurity, women would bring a distinctive viewpoint while identifying security issues.

The public-male/private-female dichotomy is also challenged by a number of writers including Grant (1991), Peterson (1992: 34), Tickner (1992) and Keohane (1991). By relegating women to the domestic sphere and men to the public, men get to dominate the means of coercion and the state's infrastructure while women perform service and voluntary tasks (Peterson 1992:45). Going beyond the erasure of the internal-

⁵ This theoretical discussion is drawn from the one written for "Women, Security, South Asia: An Exploratory Essay" in *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket* (forthcoming) co-edited with Farah Faizal, and is substantially very similar.

international distinction, the work of feminist scholars like Cynthia Enloe (1989) illustrates the linkages between domestic (household) relationships and international relations.

This dichotomy has dramatic consequences for women. Enforced as law, it places women at risk by excluding many of their experiences from its jurisdiction. Thus, the case has to be made for including issues like female infanticide, domestic violence and marital rape in its purview, even though they threaten women's lives and safety everyday. Breaking down the private-public distinction reinforces the idea that domestic and international relations are closely interlinked. Essentially, this is also a critique of the levels of analysis approach to international relations and adopting this perspective allows us to admit to the scope of security studies internal, inter-state and trans-state problems. From the feminist point of view, this is useful for admitting issues like human trafficking to the field.

Keeping women confined to the private sphere deprives them of agency. They are objects of protection for men who will fight for their safety and honour in the streets, in the political arena and on the battlefield. Because men are chosen to bear arms and lay down their lives, women are chosen to be lesser members of the community. This sacrifice is the full measure of patriotism and citizenship, posing a structural impediment for women to whom this opportunity is usually denied in reality and whose presence in the public sphere is ignored by theory.

J. Ann Tickner's exposition⁶ of how one might refine definitions of security based on women's and feminist ideas, is one of the clearest so far available (1992). Asking how women might define security, she culls historical instances that establish that there is no simple answer to this question (1992: 54-55). Security is defined in a wide range of terms—internationalism and disarmament, safe working conditions, freedom from the threat of war or unemployment, economic and social justice. Insecurity stems, among other things, from self-destructive nationalism, foreign debt and its economic consequences, structural violence nuclear war and the relationship between war and violence against women.

Piecing together from the literature feminist perspectives on security, Tickner shows that the neorealist idea of the state as an island of order and security in an environment of anarchy is inaccurate by citing examples of women's insecurities within the state. Some of the "particular vulnerabilities of women within states" discussed here are the threat of rape, domestic violence, feeling unsafe in public places, the direct correlation between increasing economic troubles, militarisation and violence against women and the impact of (usually state-led) modernisation on such violence. One important difference between conventional and feminist perspectives would be that feminists do not view violence and insecurity at different levels of analysis as unrelated (Tickner 1992: 58). Further, women do not view security as a zero-sum game, where one person's security is enhanced in inverse proportion to another's insecurity (Tickner 1992:55). Finally, based on her summary of feminist ideas, one might expect women's

⁶ This and the next paragraph are drawn verbatim from Swarna Rajagopalan, *Women, Security, South Asia: An Exploratory Essay*, in Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan, eds. *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket* (forthcoming).

definitions of security to embrace many dimensions, diversity and co-operative action, as well as the ambiguities that must follow thence (Tickner 1992: 64-6).

Feminists thus argue for a more nuanced, less dichotomy-ridden approach to security studies and security policy. An erasure of categorical differences will yield a richer and more inclusive analytical reach. Security policy can then include inside-outside, internal and inter-state, concerns that pertain to women and men alike. Accordingly, recent writing on security studies, whether written by feminists or not, has considered issues like declining sex ratios, trafficking of women and the problems of girl soldiers (for instance, Bertone 2000; Hudson and Den Boer 2002; Mazurana et al 2002; Ward and Vann 2002). What feminist theorists in IR and security studies have not done is attempt to answer the questions: what is security and what are the proper referents thereof? In fact, these questions are rendered irrelevant by the opening up of the field to all sorts of considerations. As the floodgates open, the question that becomes more pertinent is: what is NOT security? This is most easily answered looking at real South Asian women's lives.

Real women, real lives, real insecurities

My grandmother was 15 when she was married. Brilliant and musically gifted, she had already won gold medals in her studies and sung on the radio. Within a dozen years she endured several pregnancies, giving birth to six girls. She died giving birth to the seventh. Her husband, my grandfather, died in his late thirties, leaving six daughters behind, five to be raised and married in their turn. What to do with such a liability as five girls with no property to their names? The suggestions were many: Marry them off to widowers or childless men, separate them and raise them, leave some in an orphanage. My mother and her sisters were uniquely fortunate in their maternal great-grandparents. My retired great-grandfather went to work and his sons gave up their chance at higher education to support raising the girls. All five of them were educated and learned to support themselves.

In North Arcot, the Tamil Nadu district, from which both my parents' families come, the sex ratio has declined from 1013 in 1941, 998 in 1961, 988 in 1981, 962 in 1991 and 945 in 2001⁷ (Chunkath and Athreya, 1997). The killing of female children is thus an issue that is very close to my heart; singular good fortune allows me to be alive and write you this paper.

Conventional wisdom places great faith in the civilizing influence of modernity. However, over fifty years of planned development in India have seen a decline in sex ratios. Further, it has accompanied an improvement in other social indicators. In fact, technological advance has been an accomplice in these murders; even as pre-natal diagnosticians have been legally proscribed from determining the sex of a child or informing the parents or their relatives, mobile ultrasound units ply the Indian countryside and illegal sex-selective abortions continue to be performed.

A surviving fetus still faces the threat of infanticide. No matter what the rationale or the explanations for the practice of feticide and infanticide, one thing we know—it is women who are most often involved, usually the paternal grandmother or the midwife, in the actual killing. (To say this is not to suggest that the women are acting in isolation of structures, customs and power relationships in society or to place blame solely upon individual women. However, there is some irony and tragedy in the fact that women end up killing women.) According to one report, 35 midwives in one North Indian village claimed to each have killed 3-4 babies in one month and to another 10 midwives claimed

⁷ North Arcot district was bifurcated in 1989 into Vellore and Thiruvannamalai. The child sex ratio (sex ration for population 0-6) for Vellore is 937 and for Thiruvannamalai 952, making the average 945. Interestingly, the average sex ratio for the entire population is 997, showing that more and more female children have been killed in recent years than were in previous decades. (Source: Census 2001 figures for Tamil Nadu)

to have killed 1-2 babies a month. With approximately 500,000 midwives in that state, the possible total number of girl babies killed boggles the mind (Bahukhandi 2000).

I grew up in Bombay, as I proudly and frequently inform people. I would go out with my cousin sisters from other cities and notice how much more hesitant their steps were. I strode like I owned the world and had no time for any one's objections to that; they walked like they had permission for a finite number of steps. Some of the Bombay girl's confidence came from the safety of Bombay streets—we used to say. The Bombayite would stay out of your business, but heed your cry for help, and so why worry?

On Bombay's crowded suburban trains, two or three bogeys are designated 'Ladies' Compartments,' usually one each in the second and first class categories. At rush hour, both are packed to bursting point. Other than baby boys coming with their mothers, any male straying into the compartment faces summary eviction. Women travel in other compartments too, particularly when they travel with male companions or in a large, mixed group. Vendors and beggars, usually women and children, go in and out of every compartment on the train. Unlike other cities where women return like homing pigeons at sundown, Bombay girls grow up knowing they can be out on the trains and buses as late as they need.

On 14th August 2002, a drunken man raped a 12-year-old girl in front of five men who looked away. There were five men in that compartment who saw him rape her. They looked away. One of them was a reporter; he wrote that they were afraid.

Sexual violence knows no limits—really, not even gender. As a form of brutal domination, it is indiscriminate in its victims. In this section, although the victims of violent sexual abuse are both male and female, I want to focus on girls and women without denying that horrors are inflicted on young boys and men in similar situations.

In relatively conservative South Asia, the specter of rape and sexual violence fills every girl's life with strictures, taboos and warnings: "Don't stay out late, don't wear this or that, don't talk to so and so, don't play there, don't go alone." These stem partly from an anxiety to protect the child from violence, but also from the high value placed on chastity and virginity in the patriarchal societies of the region. A girl is property to be

transferred at some point to her rightful owners (*paraaya dhan*) and as such must be preserved unsullied. As she enters adulthood, the consequences of this fear multiply.

It makes silence about abuse imperative. When abuse occurs, the girl or woman must face it alone. It makes the abuse of boys, whose virginity is not priced in the same way, palatable. It transforms the victimhood of the girl or woman into culpability of sorts. Precautions following from the fear of rape limit the girl or woman's horizons and opportunities. They deprive her of a chance to be educated; she gets married off early; she cannot leave the house to earn a livelihood and must therefore depend on others for survival; and she internalizes these limitations as affirmations of her weakness and incompetence. This in turn increases her dependence on the very structures and relationships that made her vulnerable in the first place.

Childhood sexual abuse, rape and domestic violence are three of the most common threats faced by women.

For those who would abuse children, opportunities abound in South Asia. Joint and large extended families where age hierarchy and patriarchy forge a climate of silence, extreme poverty that feeds into sexual tourism and trafficking, relationships of faith and surrender that places certain contexts beyond question, and most recently, with more and more women leaving their families behind in order to earn a livelihood—there is little a child can say or do to counter the overwhelming press of circumstance. A survey by an Indian NGO of 348 girl students yielded some horrific statistics: 83% had experienced physical eve teasing; 47% had been molested or had experienced sexual overtures; 15% had experienced serious forms of sexual abuse including rape. If these were not bad enough statistics, 10-15% of those in the first two categories were younger than 10 when

they had these experiences and 31% of those experience serious abuse were less than 10 years old.⁸ A national security system or a regional security discourse that leaves the truly defenseless vulnerable does not appear to serve any useful purpose.

Rape is not the consequence of uncontrolled passion. It is, in all circumstances, an act of violence and of the coercive assertion of power. South Asian women, like other women and like men in certain circumstances, are vulnerable to rape in a variety of situations. Rape is possible within the household, whether as incestuous rape, marital rape or sexual assault by someone outside the family. Public spaces have to be neither secluded nor dark for the threat of rape to be real, as the incident on the Bombay train shows (Sharma 2002), and the victim does not have to be poor or disabled, as the recent incidents of rape in New Delhi of a college student and a Swiss diplomat have shown (Vetticad and Subramanyam 2003). Rape is also an instrument of choice in inter-caste, inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflict, serving as an assault not on a particular woman's body, but that of her community as a whole.

The Zina Ordinance in Pakistan illustrates how law and custom connive to exacerbate this situation. Where people are predisposed to look at a rape victim as being responsible through careless or immorality for her experience of violence, this law makes it possible for a rape case to be tried as a case of extra-marital sexual relations, an offence for which both men and women may be tried. The burden of proof with the woman, who is obliged by evidentiary requirements to produce four adult eyewitnesses who have to be Muslim and male. The Human Development in South Asia report, 2000, from which I draw this example says, "... it is virtually impossible that a woman could get raped in front of four adult males of good character"(2000: 99). However, the Bombay train

⁸ The NGO is Samvad and the survey is cited in Raman (1995).

example belies this optimism. Further, if families are willing to use this ordinance as an excuse to control their own daughters and imprison them for their own reasons, then a raped woman has even less chance of finding four people who were eye-witnesses to speak for her.

Domestic violence is underreported in every society and consequently statistics are hard to come by. The idea that spousal abuse is part of the married woman's lot and that the virtue of a woman is measured by her capacity to bear with it, remains ingrained in most South Asian households and where it was fraying, it is being reinforced by a majority of the family dramas that have a stranglehold on our television sets—in any language.⁹ In September 2000, the United Nations Population Fund reported that 47% of Bangladeshi women faced assault by men, giving them the dubious distinction of topping “world charts when it comes to violence committed against its women” (Dawn 9-21-00). This was reported in several South Asian papers, along with the fact that India followed soon thereafter with 40%. High female literacy is usually considered a precursor to better status of women, but even in Sri Lanka, the Human Development Report, 2000, tells us that 60% of Sri Lankan women suffer domestic violence (2000: 93). Laws in South Asian states inadequately address this problem.

Even as we try and grapple with documenting and then analytically weaving the insecurities faced by women into a policy-oriented research-informed agenda, new forms

⁹ Kiran Ahmed points out rightly, feelingly and with a great deal of evidentiary support that there are dissenting voices in the mainstream media. She uses short stories in Urdu women's magazines to illustrate this point. As she says, these are completely ignored by those, like this author, who use generalizations to underscore the inherent conservatism of the mainstream. Kiran Ahmed, *Urban Women Rebels: Voices of Dissent in Urdu Popular Fiction*, paper presented at the Sustainable Development Conference, Islamabad, December 2003.

of violence against women emerge to supplement the old ones. Where *karo-kari* and *sati* (or at least, *sati* worship) continue, we also now have acid attacks.

My need to work on women-security issues stems from my discomfort at many levels with my profession. Security studies is a male dominated field and as such, one is often the only woman in a seminar room or one of a very few women. Men gossip and trade jokes as if they were in a locker room, use sexist metaphors or in my book, worst of all, mistake suggestive lewdness for insight. Sometimes women speak up; sometimes we are silenced. One has moments when one is suddenly as ill at ease as if one were locked in a confined space with menacing strangers.

And then there was the Rupan Deol Bajaj versus KPS Gill case, in which a senior Indian Administrative Services officer accused a prominent police officer of fondling her inappropriately in a social situation.

By any definition, academics and bureaucrats occupy the more privileged echelons of the workforce. It is not unreasonable to assume that domestic workers, caregivers for children and construction workers are more vulnerable than Ms. Bajaj and I are. So, the question is: where is the line drawn between those colleagues and work relationships in which you are secure, and those in which you are not? And the answer: in the sand, amid a blowing gale.

The Sri Lankan government set up a Bureau of Foreign Employment because so many hundreds of Sri Lankans were going abroad to work. Many of those going are women who would work as housemaids. Year after year, it is reported that large numbers of these women are returning abused—ill treated, raped, beaten. In the meanwhile, at home, the incidence of incestuous abuse is on the rise and the children left behind by these working mothers are the victims. Nepal and Bangladesh have responded to this threat by prohibiting their women from going abroad to work. Where does this leave the women? It leaves them unable to support themselves and their families, trapped in poverty and in dependence on more or less reliable family support. Protection of women, yet again, takes the form of treating them like children, making decisions for them and placing restrictions on their mobility rather than curtailing those who would threaten the women in the first place.

Thus limited, women in extremely poor settings become all the more susceptible to the promises held out by dream-spinners who turn out to be traffickers. Bangladeshi NGOs estimate that 10,000-15,000 women and girls are trafficked to India every year and Nepali NGOs place their estimate at 5,000-10,000 (E/CN.4/2001/73/Add.2: 8). Most of them end up as sex workers. In the case of girls who are trafficked thus, it seems as if everyone who should be caring for them and protecting them is complicit in their suffering—parents, police, border agents and local officials. Again, the solution sought is restricting their movement or summarily putting them on buses and trains to head home. However, the high likelihood that they have contracted HIV/AIDS or some STD means that the return home is not simple.

2 p.m. My sister, who works in a newspaper office, just called to say that reports of communal clashes were coming in from different parts of the city. Buses were being stopped and passengers beaten. My daughter usually leaves college at 1:30 and should be on her way. I hope she got past the violence.

3 p.m. She still has not come home. She normally gets here around 2:45. I hope she is alright. 3:15. "Has she reached? Some women were stripped and molested in that area. There are all sorts of rumors." Oh, god, where will she call from in these circumstances? Bring my daughter back safely, please. 3:30 p.m. "What bus does she take? Does she take a ladies' special? They are being targeted." Yes, she does. Why did we allow her to study so far away? Girls are not safe in such times.

4 p.m. "Has she reached?" No. "Has she reached?" No. "Look, don't panic prematurely, but things are really bad. You know they were saying some women had been molested? We don't know which community they were from but now there are rumors of reprisals everywhere." Please, bring my daughter back safe and sound.

5 p.m. No, she has not come.

6 p.m. I would be worried anyway because it is now pitch dark outside. What-what you hear. Women are stripped, beaten, raped, gang-raped. Just bring her back in one piece. I will not let her out of my sight. 6:15. A doorbell. Relief?

6:30. Just wanted to let you know she is here. She is okay. But very shaken. The bus right behind hers was stopped, evacuated and burned. By the time they reached the big junction, there were roadblocks and the buses were being searched. She saw them pull the women aside. Some were taken around the corner. She managed to walk really fast and walk past before anyone noticed, but when she looked back, she saw the police feeling some of the girls up as if they

*were carrying concealed weapons. She is very shaken. And she had to walk almost one-third of the way home. She has been walking since 3. Just wanted to let you know.*¹⁰

This is an incomplete litany, both in terms of what threatens women and what threatens women in each of the seven countries. Constraints of space limit this to an indicative discussion. Women are insecure in many spheres—in the home, in public spaces, in the workspace, and in their capacity as individuals and as members of particular groups. Their class, caste, and communal identity, inheritance rights, family laws and limitations on political participation also compound their vulnerability.

In the last book of the Ramayana, which was added later on and describes the post-coronation life of Rama and his family, there is a wonderful description of *Ramarajya*, which is one South Asian vision of utopia, where the perfection of Rama's governance is established by the absence of pain during childbirth (see Subramaniam 1981). We have come a long way from there, and as we theorize and mobilize around specific gender-related questions, still stop short of making women's lives painless in every way. To raise questions about women's welfare in the context of security or any other 'national' policy, we have to first justify why this is an issue that should concern everyone. But I want to ask: who is secure when almost half the population is not?

To describe the vulnerabilities of women is not to deny either their culpability in making others (even other women) insecure or their agency in securing their lives. It is not to erase the presence of those women who record and report, who narrate and remember and who interpret, advocate and analyze. It is simply to try and answer the two questions posed at the beginning: what does security mean in this context and who or what is the chief referent of security here?

¹⁰ This is a fictional anecdote I have written for the purposes of this paper.

The experiences of women suggest a range of meanings, equally urgent, for the term ‘security.’ The first is survival—in the womb, as an infant and thereafter. The second is safety—against violence (both physical and structural), abduction and torture. The last is a minimum physical quality of life, which depends on equity. This provides some insurance to her against threats to her survival and safety, but more important allows her to get past survival crises and build a more positive security for herself. Given the immediacy of each of these, the most practical referent is the woman herself and possibly people around her. The survival struggles of women are so dramatic as to make it hard to imagine that for most of them, wishing to secure a glacier, oil wells, the stock exchange or even government buildings would have the same sense of urgency.

A few weeks ago, I sat through a seminar where we were told it was really important to address the threat of nuclear terrorism. No one would deny that nuclear weapons are harmful and that nuclear terrorism sounds scary, but as I listened to the discussion, I thought of the woman who works in our house and another. She is a widow raising her two daughters alone, with her mother living there for support. She feeds four mouths on a salary, which however generous we might deem it, is less than what she needs. Her dwellings are in a shanty and have burned down, leaving them homeless, more than once. She gets water once every few days and every wind that blows her way is an ill wind. I thought about her and how I would explain the urgency of the nuclear threat to her.

To bring the countless women in her position and the state of the security discourse in South Asia to the same place should be the objective we pursue.

A Comparison of the Three Perspectives: A New Agenda for Research and Policy?

Let us now juxtapose the three perspectives—that of the policy establishment, that of feminist scholarship on security and that of ordinary South Asian women—by juxtaposing the answers to the two questions posed in each instance.

What is security and to whom does the term refer? To South Asian policy-makers it is either the safety and/or survival of the state, and in some instances, this is read as being coterminous with the regime. To feminist scholars of security studies, these are

irrelevant questions as they push for a non-zero sum, non-dichotomous, nuanced understanding of politics itself that is inclusive in terms of issues and identities. In practical terms, that leaves us with a field of unmanageable scope for both research and policy. In the previous section, I concluded that for most ordinary women, security is survival, safety and a minimum physical quality of life. In this one, I would pare that down to survival and safety--for each woman, her survival and safety and that of her immediate kin and kith. As we delimit a new way to focus our research and policy-oriented advocacy, this lends our efforts greater urgency even.

When we contrast the policy establishment and feminist security scholarship's perspectives, they seem diametrically different. Feminist scholars would deconstruct the very state that policy-makers are engaged in securing. To policy-makers, even those who are feminists, what scholars in their critiques would push for would leave them not much with which it is feasible to work. On the other hand, while the issues that concern policy makers do affect women as much as men, the threats that are particular to them by virtue of gender seldom make it to the attention of those in the security policy establishment—which is ultimately what we are concerned about. We are concerned about bringing closer the content and politics of the three perspectives discussed here. Finally, contrasting scholarship and the lives of real women, it would appear that while the recommendations of feminist scholars are to the point and would create a paradigm shift that would benefit women and others who are marginalized, there is still a gap between the two. That is a gap between the abstract, theoretical and general on the one hand and the very concrete, tangible and specific things that threaten women on the other. Recent

empirical scholarship does begin to bridge that gap, but the field itself is too new to provide ready answers.

So how do we forge a research-driven, policy-oriented work agenda that reflects the inescapable everyday threats faced by women? To put it another way, how do we give their concerns the leverage that is gained by labeling something a ‘security’ concern? To take issues like feticide and infanticide out of the ghetto of women’s studies or better prenatal care out of the slow-cooker called development projects, and accord to them the urgency with which their consequences are played out, should be our primary motivation. Let us screen and filter the other two perspectives, taking as our point of departure real women’s lives. This provides us with two parameters already.

The first is to focus urgently on the concrete and the tangible. In facing all the threats listed and not listed in this short essay, time is of the essence. To policy-makers, this means prioritizing the ‘who is safe and who is now hurt or homeless’ question over stands that reflect abstract ideals or distant legal principles. So what is happening in Kashmir is not ‘the problem of Kashmir’ but the problem of making life safer and better for Kashmiris. In the context of our paper, to illustrate, it means fighting as hard for the girl children who are going missing as for soldiers lost at war and it means fortifying border patrols to secure girls, boys and women who are being trafficked as much as it does fortifying them against smugglers of arms or drugs. It means above all, acknowledging that for each person who is insecure, there is no time to be wasted—by the time policy-makers finish their white papers and academics finish their literature reviews, it will be too late for the bride who is burnt, the female fetus who is aborted, the woman who is beaten, the girl or boy who are smuggled across to a strange country and

sold. When you look at security through the lens of each person's life, there is no time to be lost.

This brings us to the second parametric shift—a shift in the referent from the state to the individual. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive. Securing the state is often tantamount to securing the individual, but securing the state alone simply reinforces a legal-ideational edifice. Therefore, national security policies—as they by and large stand—only do part of the job. To simply append to this existing view a rag-tag collection of concerns about women would not be effective. It still keeps state and individuals separate rather than seeing them as organically related, as they are.

A state cannot exist without people. Therefore, it makes eminent sense to see it as a set of people, marginally more than its parts but only insofar as it serves their ends. Seen thus, a threat to the parts is a threat to the whole. The whole has no independent existence and if almost fifty percent of its component parts are under threat, then that is a more pressing concern than any faced by descriptive abstractions the whole adopts. In other words, a state is only a very little more than the people who make it up, and if almost half of those people are threatened on a daily basis, then that is a more real threat than any threat faced by principles the state favors or buildings that it treasures. Taking that view creates a natural and central space for thinking not just about those things that threaten the survival and safety of women, but also for instance, things that cause large-scale death like famine or human rights issues that place individuals at risk from the agents of an abstract extension of a community or whole that they make up.

The threats faced by women are manifold. However, policy-making is about establishing priorities, and thus charged, we have to weigh one threat against the other.

This means we have to choose some threats over others, and using urgency as a parameter, I would suggest that physical survival and safety from violence is the measure to adopt here. Those threats that women face that could cost them their life or hurt them physically should get attention ahead of those that might cost them their livelihood or hurt their self-esteem. An unhappy compromise if there ever was one, but at least one that allows us to save people's lives in peacetime and at war. Thus, childhood sexual abuse, sati, honor killings, acid attacks and rape might get categorized as security threats, while eve-teasing, poverty, poor prenatal care and lack of education do not—although in their own way they could affect a woman's ability to survive. Just as in the present dispensation, prioritizing territorial security does not mean that we do not fund irrigation, it is to be hoped that categorizing physical survival and safety from violence as security matters, does not preclude our commitment to the structural changes that are required anyway.

Where do the old issues that each state faces go when you do this? Some of them lose importance and some gain importance. Placing people at the center makes it easier to think of ways to resolve long-standing disputes because you save and lose face for different reasons. You lose face when something you say results in large-scale loss of life or displacement; you gain when you prevent that from happening. Battles of attrition that are costly when they are fought over territorial or ideological issues are completely counter-productive to some of the problems discussed in our last section. Many of the states in the region face security problems that stem from particular state-building programs or policies. If the state is only a little bit more as a whole than its parts, then there is no rationale for pursuing or continuing to defend those policies that ultimately

pose a threat to those parts. On the other hand, for those states whose security concerns have to do with natural resources or natural disasters, this approach reinforces those concerns. Where Maldivians will go if their atolls are submerged, for example, is a question that is urgent to them as individuals and as members of a collective.

To regard individuals and their survival and safety as the center of security thinking, is not however to regard them in isolation of their relationships. Feminist scholarship asks us to deconstruct reified categories and this must include the individual or the individual woman. In our quest to reframe security thinking, we should recognize the multiple relationships and affinities that color each woman's experience or view. Does this mean one security policy per woman? No. It means security policy that acknowledges that women don't automatically share interests—so protecting the female infant may mean arresting female midwives and grandmothers. It may mean revoking the license of female health care professionals and placing their livelihood (ergo survival) in jeopardy. In the choices we make, all this must be considered. This is where research can help.

Feminist scholarship also asks us to abandon dichotomies, which also means we should not frame individual security as precluding the consideration of all other categories. States, communities, cultures, institutions and property do need protection as well, but the point is that securing them at the expense of individual safety serves no purpose. The one need not exclude the possibility of the other.

To summarize:

1. Security questions require urgent consideration and action, not years of arcane debate.

2. Individuals are the proper primary referent of security, not states and other collectives.
3. Security means first, physical survival and second, safety from violence.
4. We cannot essentialize the referent and must remain cognizant of complexities and contradictions in the identities and interests of referents.
5. Security is indivisible. That which we wish to secure exists in relation to other referents and the one cannot be secured in isolation of the other.

With these building blocks, what is the research or policy agenda that we can design?

If this is to be the new security agenda then what is the role of research and what is the role of the policy community? The theme for the SDC conference posits a symbiotic relationship between research and policy. Research is meant to inform policy, and policy is supposed to take cognizance of current research. What must people research and what kinds of advocacy might we need?

From the point of those real women whose lives we took as our third perspective, security research should look at the whys, wherefores and the whats of their lives and the things that render them secure or insecure. Why is the practice of dowry spreading? Why has public health remained a low priority in developing countries? What are the problems faced by women displaced because of conflict? Research like this is now being undertaken, and we need to see more of it in the South Asian context. Further, such research needs to build a case for intervention by the security policy establishment in these areas that hitherto have been sealed as 'private' or 'domestic.' It also needs to do so

in concrete legal and practical terms rather than in broad brush general moral prescriptions like those in this paper. But academic research is not enough.

Those who do the research and those who are engaged in advocacy need to work together to get these issues in the public eye. In this region, scholars regularly contribute to the various mass media, and media persons undertake their own research and analysis. A concerted effort to make scholarly work on questions related to women's security more accessible to the public and to strengthen the analytical content of media interventions on the same subject is required. Other emerging media than print, radio and television may also be used. The Internet is a great resource as several advocacy groups have shown over the last ten years. To use email and the web to disseminate and make available in usable modules the information that we generate through research is extremely important in this age of marketing and consumption.

Researchers manage to work with media in South Asia, but their access to governmental circles where they could advise or lobby remains limited. Rather than the American model of acting through pressure groups and lobbies, South Asian scholars tend to hope for government patronage as a path to engagement. What we need to get recognition for the threats women face as security threats is an active interest group in each country and region-wide that will frame and articulate issues rather than respond to events and policy statements. We need such groups to seek out and lobby legislators and bureaucrats in relevant departments and to create in them an interest in our interests.

Will South Asian scholars like me and others who read what I have written have what it takes to initiate these actions? That remains to be seen—the subject of another person's paper ten years from now, I hope.

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