**Preliminary contributions by the Human Security Unit (HSU) and the UN Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) to the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls and its upcoming report on the topic**

While gender equality and women’s empowerment are important topics in their own right, the disproportional impact of COVID-19 on women and girls compels us to bolster our efforts to advance equity and inclusion in this decade of action.

Drawing on lessons learned from applying the human security approach in more than 295 programmes in 135 countries,[[1]](#footnote-1) the following outlines how the human security approach contributes to a systematic assessment and application of strategies to advance gender equality and women and girl’s empowerment across different contexts and circumstances.

As both a concept and an approach, a focus on human security underscores the broad spectrum of challenges women and girls face in today’s world. Challenges that are caused not only as a result of conflict and violence, but also due to the growing and destructive effects of climate change, pandemics, persistent poverty, displacement and exclusion, to name a few. These challenges, interconnected and reinforcing, can only be addressed through the human security framework.

A people-centred approach, human security places the survival, livelihood and dignity of people as the fundamental basis for prosperous, stable and just societies.

It acknowledges that people are faced with a broad range of interconnected and often compounding insecurities, particularly in fragile contexts, which require integrated, cross-sectoral responses.

It focuses on the root causes of these insecurities and emphasizes prevention and preparedness, so that shocks and crises do not undo years of peace and development and/or generate conditions of severe deprivation

And ultimately, it provides a practical framework to develop policies, programmes and tools to analyze and respond to complex challenges through **people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific & preventive action** as well as **protection and empowerment strategies**

It is therefore useful to think of the human security approach as an ‘umbrella’ framework, a methodology for analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation guided by the principles outlined above and under which a host of different tools and approaches can be encapsulated, including those to advance gender equality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**The application of the human security approach**

In what ways does the human security approach directly and systematically contribute to efforts to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment?

1. **Analysis**

Inequality is not limited to disparities in income and wealth. It is the result of the interaction of identity markers – race or ethnicity, gender, physical ability, age, religion, etc. – with economic, social, geographic, and political contexts in which a person lives.

It manifests in the extent to which people have access to resources, how they are supported by public institutions, as well as economic and social protection systems.

It is often revealed in the degree of people’s inclusion and participation in political processes, and whether they are accounted for in official data. It is often perpetuated by policies, institutions, and formal and informal practices, which can accumulate over time to create structural or institutionalized barriers for certain groups.

Since people often experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination or disadvantage, it is important to consider ‘intersectionality,’ that is, how personal attributes and lived experience can be compounding thereby creating unique modes of discrimination that are difficult to unpack.

Thinking about how to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment therefore requires a nuanced understanding of the physical, social and institutional environment as well as what different identity markers mean in a given context.

**Multidimensional analysis**

The human security approach is particularly well-suited to unpacking the context within with which women and girls find themselves within societies as it combines a multidimensional situational analysis with an in-depth and localized analysis of the specific needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of various subgroups within in a population.

This situational analysis provides a comprehensive assessment of risks and their impacts across the 7 dimensions of human (in)security, enabling the identification of how risks and their impacts are interconnected across sectors but also from the global, regional and/or national to the local and the individual.

For example, in the case of COVID-19, a stark lesson learned from the crisis is the cascading impact of the pandemic across sectors from health to the economy, education, personal, community, etc. Additionally, the interaction of these risks with interpersonal factors such as SGBV is another element of how a threat, in this case, a pandemic may interact with other vulnerabilities due to exclusion, prejudice and lack of access to basic rights to further exacerbate the impact of the initial threat and result in a domino of human insecurities faced by those least protected and resilient, including women and girls

**Risk-informed lens**

Another aspect of the human security multidimensional analysis is its focus on risks.

One of the greatest obstacles to advancing equality within the context of sustainable development is the continuous onslaught of shocks and crises, large and small, that undo progress, exacerbate poverty, limit decision-making to short-term survival measures and compound insecurity.

Therefore, understanding these risks, and their interactions, supports efforts to identify and address inequality in two fundamental ways: first, it creates a forward-looking lens with a long-term trajectory focused on root causes, which is essential when attempting to reverse trends in inequalities that have often developed over time and potentially become institutionalized; and, second, because those who are already experiencing discrimination or disadvantage are more likely to be exposed to risks and least protected from them, thus making it essential to detect areas where risks are greatest so as not to overlook highly vulnerable situations and groups.

**Ground-up, localized approach**

A third attribute of human security is its highly contextualized approach that seeks to understand the realities of challenges and opportunities as they manifest at the local level.

This approach helps elaborate the cultural context, uncovering values, traditions and customs that have a real, albeit sometimes subconscious impact on determining the roles, responsibilities and expectations of men and women in societies.

Digging deeper into perceptions and beliefs is a hallmark of the human security approach, and given the impact of traditions and beliefs on the creation of social systems, this contextual knowledge is important for solutions that can transform opportunities and expectations pertaining to gender and the invaluable role that women and girls can and must play within societies.

**Assessing needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities**

As noted earlier, human security seeks a granular understanding of the context and experience of different subgroups, and how intersectionality plays out to create unique and complex human insecurities for these groups.

It focuses both on needs, which indicate a person’s status at a given moment in time, and vulnerabilities, which indicate potential future status, thus helping anticipate how risks may exacerbate human insecurities, and as a result enable effective targeting of actions for certain subgroups.

In addition, the approach requires a detailed assessment of the capacities, resources and assets that exist at the local level – from people to physical structures, spaces and organizations, services and initiatives.

Building on what exists at the local level, such as engaging and supporting women’s collectives or cooperatives, or establishing local level governance models, where all members of society including men, women, elders, businesses, youth, faith based organizations come together with national and local authorities to assess, prioritize, and plan for their communities, provides the foundation for inclusive approaches where women and girls can actively participate and create opportunities for greater community development, social cohesion, and prosperity.

1. **Planning & implementation**

Moving from analysis to planning, implementation and evaluation, key attributes of the human security approach include:

**Identifying entry points for collective action**

Another benefit of the multidimensional analysis discussed earlier is the ability to identify entry points for collaborative action (sectors and levels of governance) that are likely to result in positive impacts across multiple dimensions of a person’s life.

While these entry points will be specific to the context and the reasons for women’s and girl’s disadvantage, common entry points across UNTFHS programmes include: economic empowerment; equity in education; access to healthcare, proper nutrition and sanitation; as well as the engagement of women and girls in decision-making processes.

**Participatory approaches as essential to whole of society solutions**

A second area is the systematic promotion of inclusive and participatory approaches. A requisite strategy for most, if not all, societal interventions, as well as a foundational element of the human security approach, is inclusive participation by all relevant stakeholders, beginning from the earliest stages of assessment and planning and cognizant of formats that enable the unique knowledge and perspectives of women to be shared across stakeholders and incorporated without incurring risks for their participation. It should include both informal and formal processes and support the promotion of women’s leadership in these processes or institutions.

**Protection and empowerment strategies**

Thirdly, an important aspect of the human security approach is its focus on protection and empowerment strategies, which enable the development of responses that combine legal, policy and institutional measures, with capacity-building and community-based initiatives to promote equality in access, opportunities and outcomes.

Bringing together the elements of protection and empowerment in mutually reinforcing arrangements is essential. Having laws that promote gender equality without strategies to address social norms, attitudes or practices that inhibit women from accessing opportunities will not successfully advance gender equality and women’s empowerment. Similarly, promoting opportunities for women within communities without ensuring a policy environment conducive to their advancement will limit the extent and impact of their participation.

Considering these elements in tandem also helps identify a broad range of actions, from targeted initiatives for women, to engagement of the broader community in understanding and redressing existing inequalities that could result in policy amendments, or changes to political and societal representation which would require a longer-term commitment.

1. **Monitoring and evaluation**

Lastly, with a focus on impact, human security policies and programmes must include indicators to measure concrete changes in the lives of women and girls, and help track progress over the medium to long-term towards gender equality and women’s empowerment targets.

1. The [UN Trust Fund for Human Security](https://www.un.org/humansecurity/trustfund/) has been the focal Trust Fund for advancing human security at the United Nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a more detailed presentation, please refer to the [LNOB Guidance Note](https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/FINAL-LNOB-Guidance-Note-for-web_compressed.pdf) and [Realizing the Triple Nexus](https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/FINAL-Triple-Nexus-Guidance-Note-for-web_compressed.pdf) prepared by the Human Security Unit. Both notes provide good examples on the methodology and application of human security and how women and girls are increasingly engaged through this lens, including the entry points, strategies, challenges and opportunities learned from these experiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)