

A new narrative on human rights, security and prosperity

[opendemocracy.net/5050/jennifer-allsoop/new-narrative-on-human-rights-security-and-prosperity](https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/jennifer-allsoop/new-narrative-on-human-rights-security-and-prosperity)

Jennifer Allsopp

It's up to us to 'reframe the narrative' of development, to move beyond the historic thrust of capital and war and to say no impunity for the murder of Indigenous women. Jennifer Allsopp reports from WILPF's [Centenary Conference](#) in the Hague.

As I left the [Nobel Women's Initiative](#)

conference on women human rights defenders yesterday to head the conference of the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) (WILPF), I was ruminating on an unresolved tension. How does the liberal conception of human rights, which places the individual at its core, sit with the collective consciousness that is necessary for peace?

I found the answer in the women around me. In her opening address to the 1,000 women who had travelled to The Hague from 80 different countries, [Jody Williams](#), who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, declared that, like many of us, 'when I hear anyone in a movement say "I" an awful lot, I get extremely nervous.' She's confident that the peace movement has to be about 'we: us unarmed civilians coming together to change the world'. For [Mairead Maguire](#), who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 for her work creating peace in Northern Ireland, the movement for peace and human rights is also a collective. 'It's a great mosaic', she explains, 'if once piece is taken away it can't work. We are involved in an evolution of the human family, and a whole new way of living.'

Like a mosaic, the collective finds its strength in its individual parts, in the personal, and in individual dignity. This is a relationship, says Jody, that is best articulated in the concept of human security: 'We women know what is security', she asserts, 'it's food on the table, a house to live in, it's access to medical care, it's a dignified job so you can raise your children, it's taking all that money put to weapons of death and putting it into welfare for a better world. That's security', she concludes, 'it's human security.'

Human security

While security in the historical sense means a national security that protects the apparatus of the state and its structures of power, human security protects the integrity of citizens and the diversity of communities. It means a world where up to [2,000](#) people are not killed by arms every day. It means a world which calls on the United Nations to urge members to reduce military budgets by 10% and spend the saving on the social security of the people, says [Shirin Ebadi](#), Iranian Judge and 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Jody speaks at the UN against killer robots

This conception of security was something missed by the Dutch ambassador, Kees van Barre, on the first day of the Nobel Women's Initiative conference when he proudly declared that 'human rights, security and prosperity' were at the heart of their international agenda. The Netherlands is frequently lauded as one of the countries that is [doing most](#) to support women human rights defenders internationally, but they seem to have missed the point. As Shirin reminded



him, the genealogy of human rights is peace and human security, not militarism and capitalism.

Jody confessed to us that the ambassador's comments had stopped her sleeping, 'the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I thought, more of this Western mythology! We need to ask what kind of human rights we are talking about', she clarified. Is it the 'name and shame human rights' which, in the words of Mairead, are used to justify the undemocratic 'taking out' of dictators? Or is it the expansive view of human rights: social, economic and cultural rights?

Beyond a liberal conception of human rights

Discussions on the final day of the Nobel Women's conference centred on the fact that for communities facing environmental destruction at the hands of international corporations, an expansive, grounded view of human rights is fundamental. There's an interconnectedness, says Tatania Cordero Velasquez, of the [Urgent Action Fund Latin America](#), that stems from the sacredness of life itself. Indigenous women in particular often 'want to be supported to stay in their territory as a collective'.

Many of the strategies that Indigenous women have developed in Ecuador and Colombia to protect individual rights rely on linking the collective to land rights and the environment. 'We've inherited the idea from the liberal approach to human rights that it's us *on top of the earth*', says Tatania, 'this has been an important approach to modernity but there is a limit to these human rights...we need to remember the connection and have a more integral and whole approach to life.' This integrated approach is a common feature of Indigenous and Afro-descent communities. 'They do not speak of territories', Tatania explains, 'It's not water alone, the river alone, the forest alone, the people alone, it's everything. It cannot be broken up. The land cannot be seen in a fragmented way, nor human beings' relation to the land.'

As a result of the involvement of Indigenous peoples in the constitutional process, Ecuador, like Bolivia, has enshrined this interconnected in their constitution by giving rights to nature as well as human beings. At the heart of this approach, explains Tatania is the notion of *buen vivir*, plenitude of life. This, she says, is the context for our human rights. Yet even in those societies with constitutional environmental rights, she warns, the threat of state defined notions of security and prosperity loom heavily in the form of foreign business. The Chinese have invested 20 billion dollars in what remains of the oil industry in Ecuador, and the debt means the government is doing everything to get the oil out, including silencing people. The future has already been written, says Tatania, and no one even asked us.

Idle No More flash mob blocks traffic in London, Canada. 2012.
Photo: Mark Stewart

On the ground Indigenous women are meeting this global domination with local resistance, and in Canada too, explains [Melina Laboucan-Massimo](#), of the Lubicon Cree First Nation and Greenpeace, 'we're talking about localising solutions on the ground'. 'We can implement new technology on our own. It's a "fuck you" to the big corporations. It's us self asserting energy sovereignty,



food security. These are things we need to localise back into our community. Things that this capitalist system has taken away from us and imported back.' The importance of the interrelation between women's human rights and land rights becomes of critical importance in the context of conflict and

violence, Melina continues. For 'women's bodies are territory also'.

There are currently more than 370 socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America, and as [Global Witness](#) reports in their latest research, in the last four years being a defender of the environment has become much more dangerous as conflicts become more protracted and more violent. In Canada, a new law, [Bill C-51 URL](#) is being passed by the Harper government to criminalise those who defend the land. Meanwhile, defamation campaigns on the political Left and Right class Indigenous and Afro-descent people as *against* development. Legally they are now defined as a terrorist cell, the 'anti-petroleum movement'.

One of the most devastating human rights crises facing Indigenous and two- spirit women in Canada who are resisting their land dispossession is sexual violence and enforced disappearances. 'Resource extraction, conducted with full complicity between the state and private corporations, is explicitly linked to deaths, violence and disappearances of women' says Erin Komsom from the [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#), 'anywhere in the world where resource extraction is happening, fossil fuels, fracking, plantations etc, indigenous communities are seeing the link.' Environmental violence is the new term for this, coined by indigenous women.

I ask Erin why this link exists between resource extraction and women's bodies. 'In many Indigenous communities women hold the power, so if you remove the women it's easier to remove the power from whole nations', she explains. '100,000s of men suddenly come to a community with the purpose of destroying the land. The same kind of attitude to the land is extended to women's bodies, because we are part of that land. It's a hetero-patriarchal model of extraction and entitlement. It's extraction not just of resources, but of women from the earth'.

I ask Melina, who lost her 25 year old sister [Bella](#) in suspicious circumstances in 2013, about the police response. The general attitude is one of indifference, she replies. 'They said we've followed all our leads, sorry...to them now she's a statistic, she's aboriginal and she's a statistic'. [1,017](#) Indigenous women were murdered between 1980 and 2012 in Canada, and 1000s more have been 'disappeared' in suspicious circumstances. Despite pressure from the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Women, the CEDAW Committee and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the Canadian government is refusing to hold an independent inquiry. In a discussion of the issue over lunch, indigenous women activists - some coming together for the first time - agreed that at the heart of the struggle is the need to fight against big business which prioritises prosperity as profit over the prosperity of people.

An alternative to capitalism: prosperity for the people

Prosperity, and its twin, development, agrees Jody, is an ambiguous and dangerous word in the mouths of state bureaucrats. 'Real prosperity', she chides, 'is sustainable development that cares about the planet, that doesn't destroy the Amazon to steal the resources out of it. It's a prosperity that does not glorify the 1% and teach kids this is the greatest measure of success'.

So how is it that we have let those in power define prosperity for us? It's a humbling call to action from [Edith Ballantyne](#) who, at 93, is the oldest living active member of WILPF, having joined in 1942. Back then too, 'the women were talking about what kind of society we need to build', she tells us, 'the women were saying that there must be an alternative system to capitalism. Today we know the system does not work...today it's not even just an economic competition. We're complete slaves of an economic casino.'

The logic of capitalism can never bring peace, echoes [Madeleine Rees](#), Secretary General of WILPF. 'Our founding sisters said if we privatised the arms industry we would let market capitalism into security and it would never work. And now, while we're busy buying arms the economic system isn't working. 1% own 48% of the world's wealth. Next year it's likely to be 52% and it will accelerate and accelerate until there's no such thing as democracy because they will control our countries. And they will need security and they will need arms.'

She's getting agitated. We're all getting agitated. We're sick of hearing the same old words. Enough of state definitions of human rights, security and prosperity, says Jody, 'enough of the men in that UN sitting there and writing resolutions and telling us, granting *us* the right to be participants in defining our own security...nothing about us without us!'

'It's up to us', echoes, [Leymah Gbowee](#), recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, to 'reframe the narrative' of development. It's up to us to move beyond the phallic thrust of history and capital and war, to say no impunity for the murder of Indigenous women. We need to look back, pass on, preserve and restore, says Leymah.

We're fired up in the audience but with a humours flourish, Jody - unstoppable, unshakeable - re-grounds us and energises us so that we're ready to act: 'my mum told me not to use the phrase "F-bomb"', she jokes, 'it tarnishes the Nobel image...'