Speaking notes for Alyson JK Bailes, Dept of Political Science, 31 January 2008.

Since the end of the cold War in 1989/90, we have seen at least 3 major shifts in the way that the security agenda, and priorities within it, are defined by mainstream international opinion in the West.
- From the early 90s onwards, attention was focused on local, internal conflicts (‘civil wars’) both within and outside Europe (the Balkans, Somalia, Congo) and on the tasks of conflict management and peacebuilding
- after the mass-casualty terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US, types of non-conflict violence such as terrorism and major crime shot to the top of the agenda together with the risk of WMD spreading into the hands of terrorists, criminals or what the US called rogue states
- more recently, attention has started to swing back to other, non-human or non-intentional, threats to human life and welfare such as epidemic diseases, violent weather and other natural disasters and the longer-term impact of environmental damage and climate change. These are often linked with sub-state violence as part of a ‘human security’ agenda, but the most comprehensive new approaches also include ‘functional’ security issues that are crucial even for quite rich and safe societies such as the reliability of energy supply and the risks of infrastructure breakdown, including cyber-sabotage.

(Must stress that the agenda is still changing and growing, and that the different sets of concerns haven’t so much replaced each other as been added on top of each other, in different combinations for different parts of the world.)

The one thing linking all three new agendas is that they are steadily moving further away from the most traditional or ‘Westphalian’ defence and security agenda that focusses on the relationships of power between states (or alliances of states) and on the risks and results of military combat between them. That traditional agenda was not made by women, has never been particularly good for women and is one that many women feel alienated from on principle. Can we therefore say that the move towards wider and more varied security agendas, where the military element is relatively minor and instrumental or even irrelevant, is a good thing for women in general? We could break down the meaning of ‘good’ here into two separate aspects
- does the new approach focus better on types of risk and danger that are objectively more important for women or that loom larger in women’s thinking about security , and
- does the opening up of these new definitions of security also open up fields in which women could play stronger roles as actors, not just expressing their needs but helping to deal with them through policy making and positive contributions, in a way that they have scarcely been allowed to do or wanted to do in the traditional military sphere?

These are the questions I want to go into in this talk but I should start with three warnings. First, the time and my knowledge are too limited to do more than sketch some of the huge scope and the complexities of this subject. Second, I am not going to offer a theoretical or conceptual approach and I lack the knowledge in particular to apply any kind of gender theory, though I’m hoping you might be able to do that when we get to the discussion! Thirdly, I need to take some time at the start to deal with an issue that often arouses very strong feelings in Northern Europe and that is summed up in the word ‘securitization’.

Roughly speaking, securization happens when when an area of life and policy that seemed to have nothing to do with security is redefined by official policy makers and/or security experts as actually being an aspect of security in itself, or as needing to be managed with an eye first and foremost to its security implications. For instance, you could say that bird flu is now a security issue because of the number of deaths and the destruction of the general social order that it could cause for Iceland or any other country. You could then go on to say that the chicken rearing industry, although still not a part of security in itself, has to be completely redesigned to minimize the security risk that it could play a part in spreading bird flu. The opposite process, desecuritization, happens when some aspects of life that normally would be seen very much as security issues demanding security solutions are not actually tackled with security polices but are deliberately or instinctively set aside, de-dramatized and sidelined. Many analysts would that during the Cold War all Nordic countries to some degree tried to put the massive security problem of the Soviet Union out of their minds and keep it on the sidelines in this way, because there wasn’t really much they could do about it and their populations didn’t want to live in panic every day, but also because sidelining and compartmentalizing the security issues made it easier to have some positive cooperation with the Russian neighbours.

Still today a lot of people in Norden including a lot of women think that securitizing new areas of life is simply wrong: because it risks distorting and damaging the true aims of those activities and the values that should guide them, but also because it risks giving defence and security elites too much power to interfere into wider and wider areas of human life. If you take this view, any practical advantages that women might get from greater official attention to new security fields could be outbalanced by the damage done to human values and social freedoms that are themselves essential for preserving such rights and freedoms as Nordic women have gained.

I have to tell you that while I respect people who hold that view, I find it hard to be convinced by it myself. The most basic point is that as soon as you look more widely, you see that different kinds of things are securitized in different societies all over the world. I suppose none of us would want to tell women in poor African countries that they shouldn’t regard lack of food, clean water and firewood as security issues or shouldn’t regard AIDS as a security issue if that’s what they see making their children die unnecessary deaths. In a similar way within Europe, it is hard to stop British or Irish or Spanish people seeing terrorism as a security issue if they or their friends or workplaces are in constant danger of being blown up, but on the other hand, many Nordic citizens have for a long time seen the defence of the natural environment as a security issue when Brits or Italians have not. It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that securitization is a matter of relativity, not simply good or bad, and that we could best evaluate it by applying some more detailed tests. For me, the most relevant questions here would be:
- is the securitization of a new field justified by objective, new or increased threats and risks in that field, or is it based on wrong judgements and hysteria and perhaps other kinds of motives such as political manipulation or profit-making?
- Second, if a new field must be securitized, is it being handled in a democratic, liberal and balanced way with proper respect for the other goals and values that belong to the field in question? Here I would point out that it’s a bit unfair to assume that applying security concepts means automatically being rough, divisive and destructive because after all, peacemaking and disarmament are security methods as well and ones that women have often been enthusiastic about. So the real question is what kinds of security solutions are being applied – and this is something we can come back to later.

One last point I think is important to grasp is that in the end, all this is about money or more precisely, about how a country or an international organization prioritizes and distributes its resources.. Even in Europe, we typically find that once you put the label of defence and security on something it automatically gets priority for the application of government funds and has a better chance of avoiding spending cuts. If we try to justify peaceful diplomacy, development aid, and our own social and welfare spending with arguments that have nothing to do with security I’m afraid that this pure-minded approach won’t necessarily end up in them getting more money – it could be less. The risk since 9/11 is that the use of the security label has been officially extended to things relevant for anti-terrorism like police work or border security but hasn’t been extended any further, so that the total defence-plus-anti-terrorism package has been getting priority at the expense of (for instance) public health measures against epidemics or computer security or the protection of the environment. Personally I would be ready to see the security label applied much more widely if only it would make our leaders think harder about these less sexy and macho issues and realize that a bit of extra funding for them now could save enormous problems in the longer term.

But before this becomes the longest introduction in history, let’s get back to the three new sets of security issues I mentioned at the start, and look in more detail at their implications for women’s concerns and women’s roles:

The new focus on intra-state conflict (‘civil war’) clearly has helped draw attention to women’s suffering because it highlights how mass violence within a society hits the whole of society. Even in the most chaotic civil wars women are still in a clear minority as soldiers and as a proportion of deaths in conflict, but far more die as a result of deliberate violence against civilians including terror-type tactics, of having their homes and property destroyed and being driven out as refugees, of hunger and general economic breakdown, of the epidemics that always accompany warfare and the breakdown of medical and welfare services. Secondly, women are the targets of specific types of conflict violence including the use of rape as a weapon of war, but also human trafficking and forced prostitution to the fighting forces - sometimes sadly even including peacekeeping contingents.

Equally, we can say that modern thinking about avoiding, resolving, and rebuilding after conflicts has given new openings to women because the mainstream view on this more and more stresses that military solutions are only a small part of the answer and are instrumental at best. Mass violence and breakdown of order happens because something is sick in society, which many very well include the abusive treatment and exclusion of women; and the sickness can only find a lasting cure through complex processes of political, psychological, social and economic change in which women’s skills eg of communication, compromise, empathy and nurturing (let alone common sense!) are badly needed. More often than not these days the international community is there to help with some or all parts of the change but in the end, local men and women have to do it for themselves or the crucial elements of ownership and sustainability will be missing. Within this framework, much attention both in security studies and in practice to women’s roles such as
- peace/anti-war movements and mediation, including women-to-women dialogues across dividing lines
- the need for peacekeeping missions to address women’s needs and also to have women working within them (often provided by Nordic contingents!)
- the need for blueprints for rebuilding the country’s security system (SSR) to make use of women as advisers, to lay down standards for women’s rights and to include women among those who will carry them out in various different contexts (government, parliament, NGOs etc)
- the possible need to create new legal standards and institutions to protect women’s general political and civil rights
- the need to mobilize women as part of the broader social and economic reconstruction effort
- women’s part in the exercise of post-conflict justice which should include proper attention to and punishment for special gender crimes such as rape (women have also often been leaders of courts judging war crimes eg in Rwanda, and Carla Ponte in FRY).
Summing all this up – UNSCR 1325 based largely on a UNIFEM report where one of two authors was Finnish! (Possibility of national 1325 programmes, eg for Iceland itself).

And yet…it is hard to say that women have had an equal share in practice in what you could almost call the modern industry of crisis management (c.m.) and peacebuilding. Their numbers are actually very small in those parts of the business that are most influential and prestigious or concerned with make-or-break power realities, such as high-level mediating efforts, the organization of peace conferences and conferences that coordinate aid donations, the general design of peacekeeping policy in the UN or EU or elsewhere and leadership of individual missions, the general design of SSR, the design and execution of local disarmament and military reconstruction plans (DDR), etc….. Partly and sadly, this just reflects the general lack of women in security elites including those who run the relevant bits of the UN, NATO, EU, African Union, IMF and World Bank or other relevant groupings. For the same reason, there is an enormous temptation even for women theorists who specialize in these matters always to assume that women will be working from outside the official power structure and from the bottom up – as NGOs, as protestors, as aid recipients or whatever. ‘NGOs should be consulted to make sure women can have a say in SSR programmes and draft laws on security’ – but why not talk of women leading SSR programmes or being MPs who can vote on the laws? Of course, some post-conflict blueprints make the opposite mistake of writing in compulsory high proportions of women in official positions and parliaments, but not considering how they can be trained and supported and defended in those roles so that the effect is one of ‘tokenism’ – either the women inside the institutions are shouldered aside from real power, or the whole institutions are as the nation slips back into informal power politics or gun rule.

Also may be
- macro-questions over whether the whole emphasis in c.m. and rebuilding is right: still a temptation to stress military aspects, constitutional aspects, law and order while paying less attention to getting the economy going again, esp trade and services and small enterprises where women find it easy to contribute, plus welfare, health and education sectors, freedom of travel and access to information etc
- micro-mistakes in failing to include women’s aspects in specific areas of policy such as DDR (women soldiers, camp-followers), refugee handling; or looking at gender aspects in the growing practice of outsourcing to Private Military Companies/Private Military Companies (perhaps they’d do less harm if more women worked in them!).
And a larger conceptual question: are we sure where to draw the dividing line for the level and type of violence that c.m. and rebuilding policies should address? Should national and international peacebuilders for instance address violence within the family, or streetfighting and hooliganism? Considerable evidence that suppressing the ‘higher’ levels of violence (armed groups) often ‘squeezes out’ more male aggression into these areas, raises rates of murder and suicide etc.

‘New threats’ of terrorism, violent major crime and proliferation of destructive technologies – first of all these are or should be real concerns for women because just like the worst civil wars, they can create massive death and damage in an absolutely indiscriminate way. Terrorists try to break down trust and decency as well as order and efficient functioning within society; they abuse modern freedoms of travel, communication and free expression and go to ground within innocent societies often exposing these to serious damage when the terrorists themselves are violently attacked. Could also note that huge majority of terrorists, just like soldiers, are men and I personally have never heard of a women being involved in nuclear weapon making and trafficking (though a woman is head of the French civil nuclear energy company Areva!).

In practice however, it is much harder to say whether recent responses to terrorism have actually helped women on balance, let alone empowered them. Two positive aspects:
- improved frontier and border security helps stop human trafficking and other socially damaging forms of smuggling and crime (eg drugs)
- ‘hearts and minds’ efforts again terrorism can help women even unintentionally by focusing on improvement of living conditions, improving access to correct information, and arguably even by restraining the most harsh and intolerant versions of Islam which are linked with incitement to jihadism.
But can count more concerns on the other side:
- Women still very under-represented in police, intelligence, customs, border security and other elites who have gained new powers in this process
- Women’s rights and freedoms more vulnerable than men’s in most societies and will thus suffer more if anti-terrorism measures encroach on such freedoms and spread paranoia and intolerance; also suffer from new ethnic tensions and divisions in multi-ethnic societies
- Similar risk that proliferation concerns might cut back the peaceful and beneficial exploration esp of chemicals and new bio-techniques (accept that many women would actually like civil nuclear power to be cut back!), and cause unnecessary hardship in developing countries by reducing technology transfer
- (Issue already mentioned of new security spending detracting from social and welfare needs)
- Most violent responses ie invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have started very nasty new conflicts involving great suffering for women, with no guarantee yet that durable political systems will emerge that improve gender rights
- Micro-annoyances such as transport safety rules (a man can carry a fountain open where a women can’t carry an eyeliner; trouble when travelling with babies, etc)

(More briefly) the attention to non-military and non-violent dimensions of human and functional security (from bird flu to electricity breakdown) has to be good for women because these are all things that damage all society and often find women in a more vulnerable position; they have often been neglected in past due to lack of ‘sexy’ or ‘macho’ dimensions. Some policy responses have highlighted women’s importance eg as health carers and mentors of their families, as social networkers, as consumers making ‘green’ choices etc. Reflections on events like Hurricane Katrina or on mass illegal migration as a security issue have made people look harder at social deprivation and injustice in people’s home territories as an aggravating factor. Also, I guess many of us would feel that the best remedies are made along principles that are inherently welcome and friendly to women such as ecological awareness and responsibility, partnership and solidarity in coping with disasters, and empowerment of the individual citizen to make the right choices for safety and sustainability. On the other hand, not so many obvious cases where women have taken the lead in related policy crusades, or in solving challenges caused by individual disasters. (Some exceptions in epidemic handling!) Women’s voices have been heard mostly in the NGO and perhaps the media and entertainment sector. It is worth reflecting on whether women are excluding themselves from some now critical areas of research and policy forming such as energy policy, environmental protection, infrastructure safety and cyber-security – and whether putting a clearer ‘security’ label on such things would help to focus women’s interest or just deter women more.

This brings discussion almost full circle (remember ‘securitization’?) and seems a good place to stop. To encourage debate, will just throw out a couple of general ideas on things women could do to assert their influence on and control of all these new agendas more strongly:
- (obviously!) more security research based on a broad-spectrum approach, incorporating social and ethical considerations, making a link with gender studies and of course with much more of it done by women (mention DCAF, WIIS etc)
- Reflect on who women should be trying to influence when they have demands or have the right answers and personal contributions to offer – in all these agendas governments do not have the full or even most important powers, and international organizations are starting to realize they cannot solve much without help of both business and society. Women already active in the ‘third sector’ of NGOs etc, but could try to do some new thinking about their relations with all kinds of economic actors including private business; and might ask themselves whether they would sometimes do more good by gaining power within the structure of the private sector just as traditional gender programmes try to give them power within the structure of the state.