



**Feature by SRSB on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström for August Edition of
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Ending Sexual Violence: Translating Promises into Practice

A decade since the Security Council first considered the agenda item Women, Peace and Security we are compelled to ask some difficult questions. Have we delivered peace and security for women? If our measure of success is not the number of reports and meetings, but rather the number of women who feel safer in their daily lives, then recent events in Kyrgyzstan, Guinea and Haiti suggest that the challenge is more urgent than ever. Has bold language in thematic resolutions been translated into action and accountability? Again, if our measure of success is not speeches but sanctions for war crimes against women, then the reign of impunity in places like the DRC and Liberia implies that promises on paper have rarely been translated into practice.

Readers of this newsletter are all too familiar with that reality. It is not news to you that there are still too many examples of “total war” – waged on the bodies of women and children – and too few prospects for “total peace”, in which women equally benefit. Resolution 1820 demands nothing less than the “immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians”. Yet rights and obligations have little impact unless they are known. The PeaceWomen Project is working to translate 1820 into local languages to put this powerful tool into the hands of women everywhere. It is a practical initiative, but one that is emblematic of our broader goal: translating international security policy into terms that are relevant and meaningful to women.

After all, war is not just “men’s business”. It does not end where women’s lives and bodies begin. The notion that sexual violence can be explained as the random acts of a few renegades or a “private” matter is misleading. In fact, sexual violence is commanded, condoned or condemned according to the choices made by those in power.

Resolution 1820 requires us to “debunk the myths that fuel sexual violence”. Perhaps the most insidious is the myth that rape is an inevitable corollary of conflict. This is deeply self-serving, allowing everyone from warlords to world leaders to shrug off their responsibility and say nothing can be done. No other human rights violation is routinely dismissed as inevitable. Last month, I helped to launch an inventory of good practice by peacekeepers to prevent and deter conflict-related sexual violence. This shows that rape can be stopped if we build the skill and the will to respond. Peacekeepers and humanitarians will never have enough resources to meet all

needs, but that cannot serve as an alibi for inaction. Nor can the self-perpetuating myth that sexual violence did not happen because it did not feature in official reports. From the way sexual violence spans history, the burden of proof in wartime should be on those who suggest that rape is not rampant. When law and order collapses, sexual violence should be automatically included in contingency plans. A related myth is that rape is “collateral damage”. In modern war, sexual violence is not a side effect but a new frontline.

In response to these changing dynamics of conflict, I have framed a five point priority agenda. My first point is ending impunity: ensuring that perpetrators do not remain at the helm of security institutions and that amnesty is not an option. Secondly, women must be empowered to seek redress and claim their rights. Women activists should never have to risk their lives to do their work. The third point is to mobilize political leadership so both traditional and non-traditional stakeholders feel accountable for the success of this agenda. Fourth is increasing recognition of rape as a tactic and consequence of conflict used to shred the social fabric and make peace less possible. Finally, I will drive and empower efforts to ensure a coordinated response from the UN system working through the inter-agency network UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict. My vision includes ensuring the UN system is attuned to early-warning indicators. Crimes on this scale are no accident - often they are strategic, planned and therefore predictable. My goal is also to help give the issue sustained prominence in public debate. It is unacceptable that sexual violence in Darfur has dropped out of the news cycle and that rape in countless “forgotten conflicts” never makes the headlines.

To advance this agenda, my first field visit was to the DRC, where the UN estimates that a staggering 200,000 women have been raped during 12 years of conflict. I went there to listen to the survivors and relay their experiences to the Security Council, which I did during a closed session that followed the April open debate. This is one concrete way I can contribute to ensuring that sexual violence remains at the top of the Council’s agenda and was foremost in their minds when they visited the DRC shortly afterwards.

In DRC, I was pleased to note that robust laws and policies are in place. Yet there remains a critical need for these to be backed by political will, resources and real capacity for implementation. For instance, the Women and Child Protection Unit in Goma, whose dedication was evident and inspiring, had just one motorbike to go out in search of suspects in a context of endemic insecurity and sexual violence. The Congolese people deserve a credible security sector that can protect them. Yet the armed forces are too often themselves a major cause of insecurity. I called for practical steps to be taken to establish a reliable payment chain for soldiers, garrisons to avoid commingling with and preying upon the population, as well as human rights training backed with disciplinary measures and military justice. As I emphasized to the Government of DRC, so long as rapists remain at large they hold the international reputation of the Congo hostage. Much more needs to be done not only to help the victims, but to help ensure there are no more victims. Not one of the women I met in DRC described rape as a part of her “culture”. On the contrary, the refrain from women across the Kivus was: *“if only it were not for the war”*.

Similarly, in Liberia, I heard how the use of widespread and brutal sexual violence during the 14-year civil war left a profound imprint on society. Today, rape is the number one reported crime according to monthly police statistics. The aim of my mission was to ask why rape has persisted long after the guns have fallen silent. It is, after all, impossible to prevent what we do not understand. Among the structural drivers are high unemployment, low national capacity, alcohol and drug abuse, impunity and trauma carried over from the war. Conflict at once increases the need for justice and reduces the likelihood of ever accessing it. It is encouraging that the Government of Liberia has agreed to be the first country to host the new Team of Experts on the rule of law, mandated by Resolution 1888 to help combat impunity for sexual violence.

Both of my recent missions reinforced one critical point: survivors are their own best advocates. I hope to not only champion their cause, but to empower them to create a permanent and globally-networked pressure group. We all need to join forces to maintain the current momentum on 1325, 1820 and related resolutions well beyond the October milestone.

The dawn of a new decade for Women, Peace and Security, and the advent of a consolidated gender entity (UN Women), provides a unique opportunity to breathe new life into the promise of Resolution 1325. As part of the 10th anniversary commemorations, Global Open Days were held in 20 post-conflict countries where senior UN officials opened their doors to women activists. Against a long history of doors being closed to women who seek to participate in peace processes, these Open Days are a welcome development. Of course, by now, women's participation should not be a novelty but normality. No peace agreement engineered exclusively by men will ever be legitimate so long as wars affect the lives and livelihoods of women. No society emerging from the ashes of conflict can realize its full potential unless women and girls are free to realize theirs. In the grammar of international security, women have been treated as objects, not subjects: the Victims, the Vulnerable. Today, women are increasingly recognized as agents of social recovery and change, as political leaders and uniformed peacekeepers. As we look back on the decade since the adoption of 1325, we look forward to the day women will realize their right to peace and security on their terms, in their language.