



Indian policewomen stand in formation during their deployment as UN peacekeepers in Liberia. Since 2007, India has sent annual rotations of all-female police units to help restore peace and security to the formerly war-torn country. Globally, women now make up about 10 percent of police personnel in UN peacekeeping missions.

Why Women's Leadership is Key to Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict

By Michelle Barsa and Kristin Williams
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Starting today, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague and Angelina Jolie will co-chair the first Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. Foreign ministers, military, police, judges, and civil society representatives from over 150 countries will discuss practical steps for improving judicial responses, protection mechanisms, and doctrine related to addressing sexual violence in conflict settings.

Summit organizers have pledged to “situate this issue within the broader women, peace, and security agenda,” which means engaging women not just as victims or beneficiaries but as vital partners whose leadership is integral to devised solutions. This is an important step. Only when women are fully integrated into decision making related to peace and security will we see a substantial shift against the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war. As the world prepares for the largest-ever gathering on this topic, here are three critical strategies to bear in mind:

1. Increase Women's Direct Participation in Formal Peace Negotiations

To start, we must continue to push for women's direct participation in formal peace negotiations to increase

the probability that sexual violence is addressed in ceasefire arrangements and peace accords. According to the UN, only 18 out of 300 peace accords signed since 1989 (representing 10 of 45 conflicts), and only three ceasefire agreements in history, have mentioned sexual violence. In some of these, the subject is cited only in passing; none mention reparations for victims, who are often stigmatized and put at an economic disadvantage after the war.

It's no coincidence that women are often excluded from negotiating these agreements. With women fully represented at the table, these discussions are far more likely to include measures to prevent ongoing sexual violence, halt impunity, and allow victims to receive justice. The women negotiating the 2008 Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army demonstrated as much.

2. Promote Women in Public Office

We must also promote women's election to public office in conflict-affected countries. Women's political representation increases the likelihood that national and local legislation against sexual violence will be

enacted. Being the primary targets of gender-based violence, they are more apt to introduce legal and judicial measures that make it easier for victims to report assault and for perpetrators to be prosecuted.

For instance, as Rwanda was recovering from the 1994 genocide—in which between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped over a three-month period—the cross-party Forum of Women Parliamentarians proposed the country's first comprehensive law to combat gender-based violence based on extensive



A sign identifies an all-women police station in Tamil Nadu, India—one of more than 400 throughout the country run exclusively by female police officers. A 2004 study showed that these stations have resulted in a 23 percent increase in reporting of violence against women and children as well as a higher conviction rate. (Photo: Bryce Edwards/Flickr Commons)

consultations with female citizens. There are, of course, many men committed to gender equality. But female political leaders have demonstrated greater propensity to raise the issue in public debates and lawmaking. The more women elected, the more influence they're able to exert to combat sexual violence.

3. Increase Women's Roles in the Security Sector

Access to legal recourse for survivors of sexual violence is more likely assured when women are meaningfully integrated within the security sector. Female survivors are far more likely to report cases of assault to other women. In India, for example, the government has set up more than 400 police stations staffed exclusively by female officers. A 2004 study showed that these all-female stations have resulted in a 23 percent increase in reporting of violence against women and children as well as a higher conviction rate.

Rather than seeing women in conflict zones primarily as victims, we must acknowledge that they are our most important partners.

The majority of individuals deployed to peacekeeping missions—which are often responsible for protecting civilians from sexual and gender-based violence in conflict-affected areas—are men. This typically correlates to limited engagement with women in local communities. Restricted engagement means

information is not collected from those most affected by the ongoing violence, those who are inevitably best positioned to propose viable protection strategies. Increasing the number of women serving in peacekeeping missions will enhance these forces' protection capability.

The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo employed an innovative approach by standing up Joint Protection Teams to expand engagement with civilian communities. JPTs resulted in better information sharing between peacekeepers and host communities, which translated into planning for patrol routes and facilitation of local negotiations that correlated to enhanced security for women. UN staff involved suggested that JPTs increased mission-wide recognition of the need to address sexual violence.

Conflict-related sexual violence is a systemic problem that requires a holistic response. Doctrine and global commitments are important. But we must also shift our thinking: rather than seeing women in conflict zones primarily as victims, we must acknowledge that they are our most important partners.

No one is better equipped to improve national and international responses to sexual violence than those who are living with its pervasive threat. We must engage and support women's leadership at all levels of peace and security decision making. When it comes to this and so many other issues, their participation is the core of the solution.

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