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 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. (Photo: Bryce Edwards/Flickr Commons)

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.

Michelle Barsa is Senior Manager for Policy at Inclusive Security Action, where she focuses on expanding the role for women in peace and security processes, with a particular focus on Afghanistan and Syria.

Kristin Williams is Senior Writer and Program Officer at The Institute for Inclusive Security, where she strengthens women’s leadership in the Middle East and North Africa and makes the case globally for women’s substantive participation in the peace and security decisions that affect their lives.

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