

## **Women and War: Tackling global sexual violence in the age of Trump**

*By Chris Burns*

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After hundreds of thousands of women were raped during conflicts in Rwanda and the Balkans, sexual violence as a tactic of war rages on in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. Amid uncertainty as Donald Trump prepares to assume the US presidency, officials and NGOs at a Berlin conference called for strong new action

“The reign of impunity must stop,” said Zainab Hawa Bangura, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. “Women’s bodies are still being used as battlefields in wars by men. Women continue to be sidelined in conflict resolution.”

Hundreds of women have been captured by the so-called Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq, enslaved and sold, many have been subjected to sexual violence.

The Berlin conference at the German Foreign Ministry focused on how to accelerate UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for greater involvement of women in peacemaking and peacekeeping, and a global effort to fight sexual violence as a weapon of war.

The gathering, held under Germany’s presidency of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) this year, helped to raise awareness before the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, on 25 November.

“The problem now is how to turn these resolutions to solutions on the ground where the crimes are being committed,” said Bangura, a former Sierra Leone government minister and potential presidential candidate. On one recent trip, she visited rape victims at a Heal Africa Hospital in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, where she has pressured the government to do more to combat sexual violence.

Last year, 15 years after the resolution was approved, a UN report said barely one-fourth of the world’s countries had action plans for the effort, and that many of those lacked funding and accountability “for real implementation”.

Since 2002, the International Criminal Court lists sexual offences as crimes against humanity under the so-called Rome Statute. But the UN report says there have been “very few prosecutions, especially on the national level”.

On the upside, the resolution created Bangura’s position, and she works extensively to pressure governments receiving international aid to carry out Resolution 1325. More than one-fourth of peace deals reached since 2000 have referenced women, and the UN study found that such accords have a much higher success rate.

“You can’t have peace and security without involving half of the population. Women bring into discussions and negotiations a different perspective,” Miroslava Beham, a senior OSCE advisor on gender issues, told the gathering.

“They know what is needed - capacity building and awareness raising. We’re working on that. We need more female ambassadors to support our cause,” Beham said. “We need more money.”

## **Syrian carnage**

However, the gathering came under sharp criticism and a desperate call for action from Joumana Seif, founder of the Syrian Network for Women's Rights.

"On the challenges for 1325, the bombings, the rapes, are so severe, despair is everywhere, there is no prosecution of perpetrators," she said, speaking through a translator. "There's been rape, sexual violence and torture for six years. No real measures have been taken to prevent that.

"The entire international community has failed in protecting civilians. A fair political solution must not include perpetrators. We need transitional justice," she said.

"We are so sorry", answered Paivi Kannisto, head of the peace and security section of UN Women. "It leaves space for a country taking leadership. We are working closely with Germany."

Thus Germany's current effort to draft a new action plan for Resolution 1325, with the intent to lead other governments to do the same. Manuela Schlesinger, Minister for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, told the conference she expects it to be finalised next year.

Francisca Brantner, a German Greens MP, said the action plan must have specific funding and a more aggressive push to prosecute sexual crimes by peacekeeping missions. On conflicts in Syria and elsewhere, she said: "I see an erosion of international law. When we see schools being targets, hospitals being targeted...and I think it will backfire hard one day. We will have to pay a high price for it."

Monika Hauser, founder of the Cologne-based women's charity Medica Mondiale, told the conference she wants to see an action plan with more financial support, stronger backing for local women's rights groups, more care for the victims of sexual violence, more support for prosecution of the perpetrators, and gender-equal peace negotiations.

Hauser, who last year called on the EU to give back its Nobel Peace Prize because of all the conflicts raging around it, also notes the "urgent need" to modify the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia. As it stands, it "enhanced a de facto split" between ethnic groups and "made it impossible to engage in any collective processing of war crimes and related trauma."

## **Truth commissions**

Truth commissions and reparations have helped victims of sexual violence, said Kelli Muddell, director of the Gender Justice Program at the US-based International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). While the best-known is the one in South Africa, Muddell says others that followed were more successful, in Tunisia and Sierra Leone for example.

Coupled with the truth commission, an official Tunisia women's committee "has done a vast amount of work reach out to victims" of abuse during the former Ben Ali regime. "Women whose husbands were detained would be subjected to blacklisting for employment, education, their homes would be searched.

"We worked with a network of victims," Muddell told *Equal Times*. "Women are speaking out about it more...some were violated in political detainment."

Coupled with Sierra Leone's truth commission was a push to amend policy and laws to support victims of sexual violence, Muddell said. "Also to help women become more financially independent," as some victims were "shunned by their communities, divorced by their husbands. They needed an economic boost."

Gender bylaws were drafted "on marriage, inheritance...issues that women's groups there had been fighting for for a long time."

### **The Trump effect**

A few blocks away Barack Obama was making a bittersweet swan song visit as US president, arm-in-arm with Europe's *powerfrau* – the German Chancellor Angela Merkel - along with the leaders of the UK, Italy, France and Spain. When Obama passes the torch to Trump, who has been widely criticised for his past misogynistic comments and actions, officials are looking elsewhere in the fight against sexual violence.

"There is a widespread fear that the only person now left to stand for the much-cherished principles of human rights and democracy is Angela Merkel," said a former pro-democracy activist at the conference, speaking on condition of anonymity to *Equal Times*.

Mudell says US-based activists "are incredibly uncertain as to what to expect...how much of the racist comments, misogynistic, xenophobic comments were for pandering and how much he will actually follow through with. When you see the people he's putting in – the advisors, the new Cabinet - they're socially conservative and they are against reproductive rights, LGBT rights, any sort of immigration reform that could be positive," Muddell told *Equal Times*. "I think there's going to be a huge backlash.

"Europe has to – if it's possible for them – to coalesce around a common agenda," Muddell said. In the US, "there is a strong sense of needing to organise and be much more politically active than we have been, that maybe there was a strong sense of complacency during Obama.

"Many people in the US are deeply afraid of what's going to happen and are trying organise as best as they could against sort of an unknown.