

# The theatre of war

by Brigitte M Holzner and Dominique-Claire Mair

**Narrating the fate of the women of Troy, the Greek playwright Euripides provided the script for modern warfare: the murdered children of Hekuba, the sexual slavery of Briseis, Andromache as war prey, Polyxena burned as a sacrifice and Cassandra raped and made bed-maid of the Greek warlord, Agamemnon.<sup>1</sup>**

This is the perpetual dramaturgy of war – where female bodies are appropriated, mutilated, impregnated and annihilated. The civil wars and internal conflicts of the last decades have challenged this archetypal woman-as-victim image and presented other roles – the female combatant, the girl soldier, the porter of weaponry, homemaker for the warriors and even the female torturer. This has been paralleled by the recent emergence of a more positive image – woman as peace-builder, as negotiator at post-conflict tables, as political actor involved in peace processes. The age-old mediating role that women have played in the private sphere is being transported into the public sphere. UN Security

Council Resolution 1325<sup>2</sup> ushers onto the world stage a new woman.

A symposium convened in Vienna in April 2006 by the Austrian Development Agency – entitled ‘Building peace, empowering women: gender strategies to make UNSCR 1325 work’ – assessed the potential of this initiative to redistribute gendered power relations.

Speakers alluded to all three images. Elisabeth Rehn, former Finnish Defence Minister,<sup>3</sup> stressed that women do not ask for revenge but do need to know that their suffering is noted seriously. Renate Winter, Vice President of the Special Court for Sierra Leone,<sup>4</sup>

condemned the notion of women as male property. Stella Sabiiti of the Centre for Conflict Resolution, Kampala, described working with male combatants in Uganda, leading them to reconcile with their former deeds. Igballe Rogova of the Kosova Women’s Network castigated the UN administration in Kosovo for consolidating patriarchy by excluding women from talks about the province’s final status. Penda Mbow, former Senegalese culture minister, stressed the need to separate religion and the state: religious representations of women convey a male bias and governments need to assert gender equality principles. Irene Freudenschuss-Reichl, Director General for Development Cooperation in the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, outlined scope for the Human Security Network<sup>5</sup> to bolster UNSCR 1325.

In addition, Judy El-Bushra questioned the concept of ‘women’ used in the text of the Resolution: generalising women without

acknowledging their differences assumes a common female agenda that is hard to define. Osnat Lubrani from UNIFEM Bratislava illustrated UNIFEM's initiatives for promoting UNSCR 1325 in South Eastern Europe and the Middle East, building on national women's movements for peace. And donor representatives from Switzerland and Denmark emphasised the necessity of gender mainstreaming in projects and programmes in conflict-prone countries.

Changing gender roles during conflict can empower women but all too often their increased role in household and community decision making proves unsustainable when peace returns. Former female combatants face marginalisation and discrimination because they have breached gender stereotypes. They are all too rarely compensated for the sexual and psychological abuse they have suffered.

The 300 participants contributed to recommendations for enhancing and strengthening implementation

of UNSCR 1325. Speakers and participants concluded that:

- If we do not manage to improve women's status at times of peace we cannot succeed in doing so at time of war.
- Preventing conflicts is as important as peace-building in post-conflict situations: effective prevention requires good governance, a functioning justice system and active respect and enforcement of human rights.
- While justice necessarily entails punishment for human rights violators, it also depends on healing, truth, reconciliation and forgiveness: local traditions and rituals can contribute to this process of reconciliation.
- It is important to recognise that boundaries of who is victim/perpetrator/protector are often blurred.
- It is vital to support the media to disseminate peace messages.

UNSCR 1325 has opened doors but the resolution and its implications

are poorly understood. There is a need to go beyond awareness and advocacy in order to strengthen the political process and engage local, national and international actors, including women's organisations.

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1. Symposium speaker Renate Winter drew this parallel with the Trojan war.
2. See preceding article by Kirk and Taylor.
3. Also former UN Under-Secretary-General, and co-author – with (current) Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – of UNIFEM's *Women, War and Peace*.
4. Set up by the Government of Sierra Leone and the UN, it has indicted 11 senior members of the country's former warring factions on charges of committing war crimes. [www.sc-sl.org](http://www.sc-sl.org)
5. [www.humansecuritynetwork.org](http://www.humansecuritynetwork.org)