The theatre of war

by Brigitte M Holzner and Dominique-Claire Mair


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 13252 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 UN Security Council Resolution 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,3 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,4 condemned the notion of women as male property. Stella Sabiti of the Centre for Conflict Resolution, Kampala, described working with male combatants in Uganda, leading them to reconcile with their former deeds. Igballa 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 Freudsenschuh-Reichl, Director General for Development Cooperation in the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, outlined the need for the Human Security Network5 to bolster UNSCR 1325.

In addition, Judy El-Bushra questioned the concept of ‘women’ used in the text of the Resolution: generalising women without...
Sexual violence: weapon of war
by Katie Thomas

Sexual violence has a profound and long-lasting physical, psychological and social impact.

The physical wounds suffered in most forms of combat are usually visible, prioritised for medical treatment and eventually healed. In contrast, while sexual violence may result in significant physical damage and severe internal wounding, it is far less likely to be treated than other forms of wounding. Handbooks for intervention in emergency situations rarely mention vaginal re-construction as a priority for surgical intervention even though sexual violence is now widely recognised as a frequent method of warfare. Médecins Sans Frontières’ 1997 handbook for emergency response, for example, had only two pages dealing with sexual violence out of a total of 381 pages. It is not only physically mature women who are raped during war but also children whose bodies have not yet developed and who may sustain horrific internal injuries as a result. In addition, in countries where most women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation, sexual violence can cause extensive tearing externally as well as internally.

After conflict-related sexual violence, women and girls with extreme pain and deep internal tears are often left to heal without medication or surgical intervention – and may suffer vesico-vaginal fistulae (tears) and permanent damage to the uterus and vagina and may also contract HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. If she does have access to medical assistance, a woman or girl will have to describe and show the wounds, causing her further distress.

The mental effects of sexual violence are also distinct in comparison with other forms of violence. When violence is perpetrated by a more powerful other – for example by virtue of the fact that the perpetrator is physically stronger, in a gang and/or armed – the trauma of the wounding is compounded by the trauma of being helpless. In addition, when the violence is sexual it invades a person’s most intimate space. Rapists often live with very high levels of anxiety and pain. They may find it difficult to undertake normal tasks and interact with others. Women who have been exposed to sexual violence experience great distress, may suffer periods of mental illness and are at increased risk of suicide.

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.or]
5. [www.humansecuritynetwork.org]