



The role of international institutions

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The last Stand, Speak, Rise Up! Forum highlighted the multiple consequences of sexual violence in conflict. This violence has not only physical, but mental and societal consequences due to the stigmatisation of the victims. The impact is not limited to direct victims, but also affects those around them. It is thus the cheapest and most effective weapon to break both an individual and his or her entire community, fuelling conflict and seriously damaging the prospects for lasting peace. This is why such violence is so distinctive and so widespread.

Yet the Secretary-General's latest report for 2021 shows that sexual violence continues to be used as a tactic of war, a means of torture, a tool of terrorists, and a vector of political repression against civilians.

The root causes of conflict-related sexual violence (including militarisation and proliferation of weapons, impunity, institutional breakdown, structural gender inequalities, and harmful social norms) have been exacerbated in recent years by a confluence of crises: humanitarian, health, political, and security. The result is the widespread and systematic use of conflict-related sexual violence. **History has taught us the willingness of some to downplay sexual violence in conflict as merely the "random acts of a few undisciplined soldiers", or of assuming that it is an "inevitable consequence of war".**

The adoption of Security Council Resolution 1808 in 2009 transformed the approach to sexual violence in conflict at the international level, by opening the door to a series of robust resolutions providing a set of diplomatic and political tools. This international legal framework and new understanding of this phenomenon has led to a sea change. Sexual violence in conflict has been recognised as a full-fledged threat to collective security and an obstacle to peace making. **It can now constitute a war crime, a crime against humanity and an act constituting genocide.** This type of crime can therefore no longer be considered as mere "collateral damage". It must be recorded and accounted for in the archives, addressed in transitional justice processes and excluded from the scope of amnesty provisions.

Resolution 2467, adopted in 2019, marked a new turning point by explicitly articulating a survivor-centred approach to preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. It emphasises the responsibility of states and the international community to provide the necessary care for survivors of these heinous crimes, including essential reproductive health care. It also calls for a multi-dimensional response and a more comprehensive understanding of justice and accountability, including the provision of reparations to survivors, as well as financial support to enable them to rebuild their lives, support their families, and prevent the widespread abandonment of children born of rape. This is the core of the survivor-centred approach.

« We must convert an age-old culture of impunity into a culture of accountability »

However, I have a key question: what do this legal framework and the ten 'Women, Peace and Security' resolutions - five of which directly address the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence - mean for a woman in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Myanmar or Tigray?

My vision for this mandate since I took office in 2017 has always been to prioritise meetings with survivors and communities at risk, so that their voices are heard louder and more urgently than ever. My mission is to build bridges between their needs and the decision-making bodies, between the actors on the ground and the political leaders on the international scene. My thirst for peace and justice guides my actions to give a voice to the victims, to understand their needs, and to guarantee them an appropriate response.

The experience of survivors and their communities must always guide our search for a global solution. In all the conflict areas I have travelled to, I have seen that survivors are not a homogeneous group and that their profiles, and therefore their needs, vary. Women are generally

disproportionately affected by conflict. Children are increasingly targeted in ways that destroy the future of communities. Men and boys are subjected to sexual violence, particularly in detention or during interrogation. Members of the LGBT community are targeted because of their sexual orientation and gender identities. Human rights and women's rights defenders face reprisals for the positions they defend. Victims often come from socio-economically marginalised populations, particularly in rural and remote areas where state authority is weak. They are often targeted because of their real or perceived ethnic, religious or gender identity. Services and interventions must therefore be flexible enough to adapt to individual situations.

In this context, **the case of children born of rape is of particular concern**, requiring both immediate and long-term responses. These children are often perceived as being affiliated with the parties involved in the conflict, leading to stigmatisation and, in some cases, infanticide, abandonment or other assaults. This perception breaks the social fabric of the community, making these children extremely vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation.

In various field visits to IDP camps, whether in Maiduguri, Goma, Darfur or South Sudan, **I have seen how the plight of these children is inextricably linked to that of their mothers.** In Iraq, I visited shelters overflowing with abandoned children and listened to the pain of mothers who had no choice but to abandon them. The authorities and society continue to struggle with the traumatic legacy of the crimes perpetrated by Daech between 2014 and 2017. There is an alarming trend of increasing suicides among the Yazidi community, especially among survivors of sexual violence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, I met adults born of rape and realised the extent of the suffering associated with the stigmatisation and discrimination of their mothers. Without recognition of the initial violations, we find a transmission of harm, plus denial of individual dignity and human rights across generations. These trends underline the urgent need for further research in this area, using concrete data which can contribute to the creation of appropriate responses.

I am therefore pleased that my advocacy efforts on this issue were able to inform the drafting of Resolution 2467. This recognises that children born of sexual violence have rights that are not only linked to, but also distinct from, those of their mothers. The resolution also mandated the preparation of a Special Report on the subject, which was prepared by my office in consultation with all relevant UN system partners. Released in January, this Special Report of the Secretary-General on women and children born as a result of sexual violence in conflict provided an opportunity to review and consolidate the UN's knowledge and experience.

The survivor-centred approach is the only way to effectively address sexual violence in conflict. This requires an holistic response that takes into account the full range of needs of victims and their families in terms of care, justice, protection, recognition and reparation. In short, putting survivors at the heart of programmes designed for them, regardless of their background. This approach allows them to be recognised with dignity as being unique individuals, to feel that their rights are

respected, and to have the capacity to make informed decisions about their future. We offer them a platform to tell their story.

Yet this new paradigm and political consensus is being tested by a multiplying number of conflicts, including that in Ukraine, and by the epidemic of coups and military takeovers that are escalating, from Afghanistan to Guinea, from Myanmar to Mali, and beyond.

The unacceptable reality is of situations where it is still largely "free" to rape a woman, child or man in the world's armed conflicts. To reverse this trend, we must raise the cost and consequences for those who commit, order or tolerate sexual violence in conflict. We must convert an age-old culture of impunity into a culture of accountability, prioritising deterrence and prevention through justice and the prosecution of crimes.

My operational methodology is to ensure engagement with national authorities in affected countries, working to prevent and respond to sexual violence, in accordance with Security Council resolutions. The aim is to anchor these commitments at the highest level through Joint Communiqués and Cooperation Frameworks, implemented through specific action plans.

This process is underway in our cooperation with the Ukrainian government. I could not ignore the numerous reports of alleged sexual violence by all parties to the conflict and, at the request of the Ukrainian authorities, I visited the country last May. While the UN is still working to corroborate many of the allegations of sexual violence, I stress that we do not need to wait for the findings of these investigations to initiate a strengthened humanitarian response, and put in place a framework for preventing and responding to sexual violence. **The harrowing images and testimonies heard around the world, including rape at gunpoint and in front of family members, are a call to action.**

During my mission there, I signed with the Ukrainian government a Framework of Cooperation on behalf of the United Nations, negotiated in just a few weeks, which represents one of the most accomplished documents of its kind to date. My team and I are currently supporting the efforts of the Ukrainian authorities and civil society to develop the action plan for the implementation of this Framework of Cooperation. This will focus on five priorities: access to services for victims; strengthening the rule of law; defence sector reform and security; inclusion of sexual violence in peace agreements; and addressing the issue of trafficking for sexual purposes.

While the process, efforts and resources for Ukraine and the victims of the conflict are encouraging signs of there being awareness of the scourge of sexual violence in conflict, we cannot forget other crises. These continue to escalate elsewhere in the world, whether in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Libya, Myanmar and more besides. We must reassure populations at risk that they are not forgotten and ensure that international law is not an empty promise. Addressing the root causes of this violence requires a sustained investment of resources and unwavering political determination to end these horrors.

The best form of protection is prevention. It is both the driver and the key to this agenda. This is about avoiding the practice of perpetually reacting to the consequences of sexual violence in the absence of preventive diplomacy. In the words of a Ukrainian civil society activist I met during my mission: "we must do everything possible, but more importantly, everything impossible to stop the abuses and atrocities." His testimony reminds us that we cannot just do what is convenient, but what is necessary and right.

As part of this effort, this year I led a UN system-wide initiative through the UN Action network to develop a Framework for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict at the Global Level. This is built around a two-pronged approach that aims both to prevent sexual violence in the first place and to mitigate against the secondary harms inflicted on affected individuals and communities when violence is committed.

The two arms of my mandate work towards this goal. On the one hand, the UN Expert Team on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict is working to build the capacity of national justice institutions. Among other things, we have developed a "Model Legislative Provisions and Guidelines on the Investigation and Prosecution of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence". This is designed to guide states in the process of strengthening national legislation and integrating international standards in this area.

In addition, there is the the UN Action network, which I chair and which includes 23 UN entities. It works to improve coordination, expand the development of programmes and advocacy, and support national efforts to prevent sexual violence. Fundamentally this is about responding effectively to the needs of survivors.

Thus, the central premise of my mandate is the need to foster a protective environment that inhibits sexual violence from the start. This will also allow for safe reporting and responses should it occur.

Unfortunately, in many contexts, misogyny, militarisation, impunity and authoritarianism prevent this from happening, and thus fuel the flames of conflict. Sexual violence continues to hamper women's livelihoods in a context of economic shocks and poverty. These trends have been amplified at a time when the global health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has limited access by humanitarian organisations. It has also diverted resources from vital gender-based violence services, which deeply affects survivors, particularly displaced women and girls.

In conclusion, civilians continue to suffer from sexual violence in conflict, not because of a lack of international norms and institutions to protect them, but rather because of a lack of compliance with existing norms, as well as insufficient political and financial support. Compliance with existing norms and obligations is the most effective form of prevention. It is now necessary to implement commitments made, and to move from resolutions to results. For these reasons my mandate continues to exist.

Indignation is not enough, and inaction is not an option.