

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL'S

STATEMENT ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ARMED CONFLICTS AND POST- CONFLICT SETTINGS

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Protecting the rights of women during conflict

The history of violence against women and girls during and after armed conflicts seems to be as old as armed conflict itself. Following the horrors of World War II in all its facets, the Geneva Convention (1949) states in Chapter IV, Article 27: “Women shall be especially protected against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault.” Building upon the Geneva Convention, United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), commonly referred to as the Resolution on “Women, Peace and Security,” also stresses the role of women in conflict prevention and the peacebuilding process.

If we look at conflicts in recent years, the situation has changed dramatically. Armed conflicts are no longer a battle between just national armed forces, but are often supported or initiated by militias, groups of mercenary soldiers, rebels in the name of ethnic or religious groups or even well-organized terrorists fighting for their so-called “right belief.” These groups in most cases do not respect UN conventions like those mentioned above.



Sexual violence as a weapon of war

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court was established in The Hague in 1998 to prosecute the most severe crimes, such as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and aggression. In the list of crimes against humanity, “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” are explicitly named. These crimes also constitute a grave breach of the Geneva Convention and therefore are seen as war crimes when committed in armed conflicts.

The perpetrators, when using conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) as a tactical weapon, aim to destabilize the society of their victims as a whole by causing physical and psychological traumas. CRSV also influences or hinders conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In the case of genocide, forced pregnancies and sterilizations destroy ethnic groups and the individual victim has to deliver a child with whom she often cannot build any relationship. This leads to fragmented societies with traumas of all its members: unwanted children, men who witnessed violence but could not protect their wives and women who survived horrific violence.

Terrorists like ISIS or Boko Haram capture women and girls and hand them as a “reward” to their fighters or sell them directly into slavery to finance their organizations. After liberations through official armed forces, the women and girls often suffer more abuse. For example, they may have to earn food with sex.

Women and children who have been forced to serve in armed groups are especially vulnerable to sexual violence. But as they had been part of the group of perpetrators, support may be denied in post-conflict societies.





ZONTA INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON GOVERNMENTS TO:

- Sign, ratify and implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (2000) and develop, adopt and regularly refresh national action plans to progress the “Women, Peace and Security” agenda as stated in Resolution 2467 (2019).
- Support nations and regions with the will and capacity to stop the territorial expansion of extremist and terrorist groups.
- Prevent recruiting of group members, especially of children and women, through information, awareness, education and economic initiatives for those at risk.
- Find ways to block the income sources of militias and terrorist groups such as oil, natural gas, minerals and antiquities.
- Recognize that discrimination of women and girls, expressed in discriminatory laws, harmful social norms and an ongoing under-representation in decision-making positions, are the root causes for sexual violence and replace them with gender equality driven structures.
- Prevent and prosecute sexual violence committed by armed forces and security forces.

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON ITS MEMBERSHIP TO:

- Join forces with like-minded regional women’s groups to realize gender-inclusive societies.
- Raise awareness of women’s rights in conflict and post-conflict settings worldwide and advocate for implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and for prosecution without impunity based on International Law.

Together, we can take steps to protect women.



Holistic care for survivors

Women who survive CSRV develop traumatic stress reactions that result in insecurity, stigmatization and social exclusion, which can lead to long-term poverty and vulnerability. Care for survivors includes firsthand medical services and psychosocial support; both should be delivered with expertise and a trauma-sensitive attitude.

Silence often seems to be the only way to avoid stigmatization, but it hinders the survivor's ability to cope with the situation. Shelters where survivors can start to overcome their trauma by sharing their experiences with other affected women are crucial for those who are socially isolated due to stigmatization.

Communities also need to recognize the experiences and trauma of survivors and support them in their recovery and reintegration into the community. Projects where these women can work in a secure setting and generate income are important too. Sensitive legal advice should also be given not only to prosecute the perpetrators but also in regard to possible compensation. The best way seems to be a combination in one-stop-centers as installed by Panzi Hospital and Foundation founder and 2018 Nobel Peace Prize Winner Dr. Denis Mukwege in the Democratic Republic of Congo.



ZONTA INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON GOVERNMENTS TO:

- Provide and fund timely assistance to survivors of sexual violence as called for in UN Resolution 2106 (2013), including a survivor-centered and trauma-sensitive approach.
- Provide psychological support systems for all staff members, including police and involved tribunals.

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON ITS MEMBERS TO:

- Raise awareness of the consequences of violence and advocate to change societal attitudes and behaviors.
- Support local or national movements to create a collective memory of the experiences of survivors, witnesses and perpetrators.



Peacebuilding and justice

Even as numbers in the Global Study on the Implementation of Resolution 1325 (2015) show that since its enactment, more women are involved in peacebuilding processes or women's issues were explicitly mentioned there, this seems to be no guarantee that this also leads to implementation to further shape the post-conflict society. Local women's groups often act as a driver to start peace negotiations but as soon as an orderly process starts, the established political and military elites, mainly men, take place at the table. There are a few examples where women's initiatives or counsels were involved and managed to establish not only lasting commitments to gender equality but a new balance of power based on equality and inclusion. Studies show that the more women were involved and heard in the process, the more likely it was to establish an agreement that was also sustainably implemented.

Social stigma and a loss of trust in any state institution often hinder survivors bringing their cases to court. The installation of institutional protection of victims, female prosecutors and investigators, as well as testimonies in a safe surrounding, often in presence of a therapist, and granted legal support open the way for prosecution of the perpetrators. Justice is essential for victims and a future life of dignity.

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON GOVERNMENTS TO:

- Include local women's groups in the peacebuilding process and take a gender perspective when setting a new balanced power structure for the post-conflict society.
- Prosecute perpetrators regardless of their position and grant protection of victims.
- Support prosecution of crimes against humanity as stated in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) in countries other than the place of the crime committed if possible.
- Grant reparations as a sign of recognition and compensation for the harms suffered.

ZONTA INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON ITS MEMBERS TO:

- Advocate to involve local women's groups in the peacebuilding process and encourage them in their efforts.