



Rape in War – Don't Call it Cultural

**OpEd by Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre
and UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict,
Margot Wallström, on the occasion of her first official visit to Oslo**

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Lumo Sinai is a young woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the age of 21, she was gang-raped so violently that she may never bear children. Rejected by her fiancé, rejected by her family, she waits alone for reconstructive surgery that may never come.

Lumo, and the 200,000 women like her who have been raped during 12 years of war in Eastern Congo, are living proof of our collective failure to protect. They are the reason the UN Secretary-General recently appointed a Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. They are also the reason the Norwegian Government has supported UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict – a network of 13 UN entities – to develop the first-ever comprehensive strategy to combat sexual violence in the Congo. The aim is to provide a cohesive response to a crime that affects every facet of a victim's life.

This strategy, which is now being implemented, provides a precedent we hope to see replicated elsewhere. Indeed, conflict-related rape is not just an issue for the Congo, or even for Africa. No society – especially one emerging from the ashes of conflict – can realize its full potential unless women and girls are free to realize theirs.

Today marks the first official visit of the UN's first Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. While the next stop will be the Congo, it is fitting that this visit is to Oslo. The purpose of this new position is to drive and empower efforts to end the scourge of sexual violence – a cornerstone of Norwegian foreign policy. Norway is a key proponent of the landmark Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security – namely, resolution 1325, which calls for women's full participation in peacebuilding, and 1820, which condemns sexual violence as a tactic of war.

The two resolutions are mutually-reinforcing. Re-thinking sexual violence as integral to the waging of war, gives renewed impetus to the inclusion of women and their perspectives in the building of peace. Strategies to protect war-affected women are also strategies to safeguard their social, economic and political participation. If women are unable to safely access market-places, water-points, or polling-booths, if girls cannot safely get to school, then national recovery and development will be stalled.

In our view, women's security is the best measure of national security. Yet from Chad to Haiti, from Bosnia to Nepal, rape has been slowest to register on the security radar. It has been history's greatest silence and the world's least condemned war crime.

This is no accident. The process of socialization into gender roles includes blaming and shaming women for the violence inflicted upon them. Rape is the only crime for which a community tends to stigmatize the victim, rather than the perpetrator.

This is overlaid with a discriminatory disconnect between women's reality and the realm of high-politics. Although the changing face of conflict has blurred the boundaries between battlefield and homefront, conflict discourse still describes men as implicated in security in a way that women are not. Women are left speaking to one another in "echo chambers", removed from conversations in the corridors of power. While rape survivors are shunned, perpetrators are invited to peacetalks, awarded cash in exchange for weapons, and often elevated to the helm of national armed and security forces. This leaves many women just as threatened by the police, as they are by the criminals. It is critical that women's voices are brought into policy development. Security Council visits to war-zones should establish a dialogue with grassroots women's groups. Without this, they cannot hope to have a complete picture of the situation.

There is, however, a lingering assumption that sexual violence is a tradition, rather than a tactic of choice. Prevailing opinion would have us believe that what happens in a "private hut" has nothing to do with security. While bullets, bombs and blades make the headlines, women's bodies remain invisible battlefields. Yet it is utterly indefensible to downgrade the threat level of sexual violence because it primarily targets women and girls. What makes forced displacement part of the war, and mass rape an intractable cultural trait?

In reality, there are no "rape cultures" only cultures of impunity. Cultural relativism legitimizes the violence and discredits the victims, because when you accept rape as cultural, you make rape inevitable. This shields the perpetrators and allows world leaders to shrug off sexual violence as an immutable – if regrettable – truth. It is time to state, once and for all, that mass rape is no more inevitable, cultural or acceptable than mass murder.

The best way to disarm this weapon is to hold the perpetrators accountable. Governments cannot claim to espouse a policy of zero tolerance, when rapes have zero consequence. That is why the UN is establishing a task team of rapidly-deployable experts on the rule of law to help governments weakened by war to address the vicious cycle of impunity. It is also why Norway is building gender competence into its armed and security forces and developing guidelines for the military on how to protect civilians from sexual violence in theatre. This year marks the tenth anniversary of resolution 1325 and we welcome efforts to advance accountability by adopting common benchmarks against which progress can and will be tracked.

We are convinced that where there's a political will, there's a way. Every rape – even in the midst of war – is a crime that can be commanded, condoned or condemned. That is a choice made by those in power, and it is a matter that concerns the guardians of global peace and security. As Jan Egeland, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, has stated: “If sexual violence is not addressed squarely in ceasefires and peace processes, there will be no peace for women.”

The women, peace and security agenda is central to the efforts of Norway and the United Nations to promote a more just world. Sexual violence prevention and response calls for international attention, action and cooperation commensurate with the scale of the challenge.