

Recognising women's role...  
from war to peace

PEACEBUILDING

UNIFEM REPORT

# women, war, peace



## UNIFEM report describes the impact of war on women and their role in peacebuilding

**C**hantal, a Rwandan woman now living in a United Nations centre for refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo, spent five years of her life as a sex slave to mass murderers who also used her as a porter and human shield. Maria, a community organiser from northern Colombia, received a videotape of a colleague being tortured and killed. "The message was clear: If I continued with my activities, I'd be next."

Asha Hagi Elmi, an activist in Somalia and a delegate to the National Peace Conference in 2000, understood that peace could only come from cross-clan reconciliation, not official negotiations among warlords and faction leaders. "We lobbied for a quota for women in the future legislature, the Transitional National Assembly. But we faced opposition from the male delegates. 'No man,' they told us, 'would agree to be represented by women.'"

### "Epidemic of Violence"

These women's stories are but a few of the testimonies presented in a report on women and armed

conflict, *Women, War, Peace*. The report concludes that while women have always been among wars' victims, they have been systematically singled out in recent conflicts for sexual violence and other atrocities. Where this has occurred, the violence has largely been undocumented and perpetrators have frequently gone unpunished. Moreover, despite the fact that women have fostered numerous initiatives to prevent, stop and recover from war, they rarely have access to political power structures or are included in official peace negotiations as mandated in 2000 by the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

The Independent Experts' Assessment was commissioned by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in close collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in response to Resolution 1325. The assessment was conducted by Elisabeth Rehn, a former Finnish defence minister, presidential candidate and United Nations human rights investigator, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a banking execu-

tive and a former finance minister and presidential candidate in Liberia.

During visits to 14 war zones in Africa, the Middle East, South America, Asia and Eastern Europe, the experts found shocking evidence of an “epidemic of violence” against women and girls during recent conflicts. They also found that while women were rarely part of official peace talks or reconstruction efforts, they have played a pivotal role by campaigning and working for peace at the grassroots level, often working across traditional dividing lines and borders.

## Working for Peace and Justice

During armed conflicts, women often experience violence, forced pregnancy, abduction, sexual abuse and slavery. Their bodies have been used as ‘envelopes’ to send messages to the perceived enemy. “The harm, silence and shame women experience in war is pervasive, but their redress is almost non-existent,” the report states.

Women do not enjoy equal status with men in any society and during armed conflict, a pre-existing culture of discrimination is often exacerbated. Even after hostilities end, changes are rarely made to ensure that women and women’s rights are protected. “We saw the scars, the pain and the humiliation. We heard accounts of rape camps, gang rapes and mutilation, of murder and sexual slavery,” the experts say in the report. “Yet, time and again, we met women who had survived trauma and found the courage and the will to recommit to life. They were struggling to rebuild their community and remake their lives.”

All over the world, the report found, women have challenged militarism and urged reconciliation over retribution. They have opposed the development, testing and proliferation of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction and the small arms trade. They have transformed peace processes on every continent by organising across political, religious, and ethnic affiliations.


## An Equitable Role for Women

In their recommendations, the experts convey women’s call to governments and the international community to help stop violence. The women also demand an equitable presence at peace negotia-



tions as well as in legislatures and in the planning and operation of humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping missions.

The experts also call on governments and the international community to adopt and vigorously enforce laws aimed at protecting women and ensuring their human rights. They recommend that an international Truth and Reconciliation Commission be set up in order to highlight the plight of female war victims.

Moreover, the Experts also call for more female candidates in post-conflict elections, the appointment of more women to United Nations peacekeeping and diplomatic posts, and a greater role for women in peacemaking and post-conflict reconstruction activities. Procedures and mechanisms to investigate, report, prosecute and remedy violence against women in war must be strengthened, the Experts say: “Otherwise the historic refusal to acknowledge and punish crimes against women will continue.” 

*Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building - By Elisabeth Rehn & Ellen Johnson Sirleaf can be found at [http://www.unifem.org/index.php?f\\_page\\_pid=149](http://www.unifem.org/index.php?f_page_pid=149).*