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## UN Women Agency Must Confront Wartime Violence

Barbara Crossette

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Anticipating the appointment in the next few weeks of the highest-level United Nations official ever to promote the rights and status of women worldwide, peace advocates are demanding that the new office take on the issue of the unending violence against women in conflict zones—a plague that keeps spreading despite a decade of Security Council resolutions.

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Barbara Crossette is The Nation's United Nations correspondent. A former foreign correspondent for the New York Times,...

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By propitious coincidence, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's appointment of the head of UN Women will be followed in the fall by a series of events marking the tenth anniversary of the first, groundbreaking UN resolution—Security Council Resolution 1325—demanding an end to the abuse of women not only by warring parties but also by UN peacekeepers, and the inclusion of women in peacemaking.

The Security Council, divided and dithering for months over whether this was really an issue it should be addressing, acted in unison in the end. It could not ignore the shadow of the horrific 1990s—rape camps in Bosnia, sex slavery in several African countries and numerous incidents where gender abuse had become a tactic of ethnic conflict. Regional war crimes tribunals and the International Criminal Court had made sexual abuse a war crime. It was time to act.

A decade (and three subsequent chiding resolutions later) there is not a lot to celebrate on the ground in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Somalia. In fact, the abuse of women has been carried over into post-conflict civilian life, or been exacerbated, in places such as Liberia and East Timor, where domestic violence is often the most common reported crime. Barely twenty countries, out of the UN's membership of 192, have prepared plans to act on Resolution 1325, whether or not they are in conflict areas. At least some of the plans, a UN official said, seem to be already on the shelf.

Thus the focus among women's peace groups on the still-unnamed head of UN Women, an appointment Ban has delayed for more than a month because, officials say, he is still looking for the right candidate. Whoever it is, says Cora Weiss, a peace activist prominent in the campaign, the nominee must commit to dealing not only with the abuse of women but also with the deliberate exclusion of them from peace negotiations and other tables of the powerful. That task is not specified in the General Assembly resolution establishing the new agency, but it has four Security Council resolutions behind it, and peace activists are brandishing them.

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"UN Women should understand that women will continue to be victims of sexual abuse and murder as long as women are not recognized as part of the authority at decision-making tables and at all levels of governance," Weiss said in a memo to colleagues working on this issue. In an interview, she said that this is not a matter of "making war safe for women" but of using their

negotiating and other skills to prevent conflict and build societies to live in peace.

A coalition of like-minded women from around the world is working through the [Global Network of Women Peacebuilders](#) to bring attention to the opportunity now at hand to force conflict violence and sexual abuse of women on UN Women's agenda for action, and not leave it to the inevitable commissions, panels and special representatives with plenty to say, but no clout with governments—let alone with lawless militias.

Among its other projects, the Global Network, in partnership with other organizations, plans to draw men into the cause, raising awareness and asking them to join in advocating for action on 1325 and subsequent resolutions. Men are also victims of violence and sexual abuse in war time, a reality that is beginning to get a lot more attention, especially in Africa.

It should be noted that a man—Anwarul Chowdhury, a former ambassador to the UN from Bangladesh—was instrumental in forcing the issue on the Security Council agenda in 2000, when Bangladesh was a council member. Now retired from the Bangladesh foreign service and a subsequent job as head of the UN office for the most vulnerable nations, he continues to be an outspoken advocate for action on victimized women. Bangladesh, incidentally, has made great strides in enhancing the lives of women, despite poverty and the opposition of Islamic conservatives.

Chowdhury has also been a leading public critic of Secretary-General Ban's slow-motion approach to getting some action on women in conflict and peacebuilding. Speaking at the US Institute of Peace in Washington recently, Chowdhury was pointed in his remarks about Ban's disappointing leadership role. Noting that it was not until April 2010 that the secretary-general—under the gun from the Security Council—produced a list of twenty-six indicators to track progress on Resolution 1325, but no concrete action plan.

"The international community had to wait for ten years to receive a set of indicators from the UN...that is expected to take, according to the secretary-general, another two to five years—it would be for sure five years or more all the developing countries—to be operational." Chowdhury said. "[Ban] says that making the indicators operational will require a pilot phase to develop a baseline data collection method." And on and on it goes, while women die, are maimed or psychologically wounded, perhaps for life. Chances are probably not good that Ban will name a firebrand as undersecretary-general for UN Women.

At the USIP event, Chowdhury shared the stage with Melanne Verwee, the pro-active ambassador-at-large for global women's issues in the Obama administration, who also echoed the "let's stop stalling" theme. "Although the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution, peace building, and post-conflict reconstruction is irrefutable, and although it's been ten years since the Security Council, in adopting 1325, unanimously acknowledged the intrinsic role of women in global peace and security," she said, "we all know that, while we have made some progress, we still have a long way to go to see the full implementation of 1325—or we wouldn't be here."

Verwee went on to say that the whole concept of women at the center of peace and security is just not registering in too many places: "A government official once said to me during a discussion about women's participation at the peace table: 'I don't get it. They're not government officials. They're not armed combatants. Why would they be included in negotiations?' Women are far too often seen only as victims, not as the agents of change whose perspectives and participation are critical in peacemaking and peace building." The State Department has asked all US missions abroad to start actively promoting the Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security, utilizing "the full range of diplomatic, defense, and development tools to advance this agenda" Verwee said.

Whether diplomats will act on this request remains to be seen, since many will probably not want to spend much time jousting with resistant governments over a "women's issue." The Global Network notes in its plan of action for the next two months that diplomats will be diplomats. It says that though the UN Security Council has backed four resolutions on women, peace and security, when the cameras are off in the council chamber, "few men participate in discussions and implementation efforts."

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1. posted by: joman at 08/10/2010 @ 8:46pm

*Why not take all those Acronym agencies for peaceful everything...and get them started by going after the Muslum world as an opening salvo. Help the Religion of Peace come to grips with itself on how it treats women in general...Michele Obama can't even visit some of those places safely...(altho, by the time her husband leaves office here in a year or so, it might be the same for those two here in the US for destroying the economy in 4 years single handedly)*

*And..get the Religion of Peace to pay for the office and apparatchiks they will undoubtedly need at the UN before anything gets done there..if anything ever will be done except ineptness, endless funding, meetings, conferences galore and international travel....*

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