



Ending violence against women: Fulfilling UN commitments on Resolutions 1820 and 1888

United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1820 and 1888 provide a framework for international action against sexual violence, including rape, in war. From the health and psycho-social effects on survivors themselves to the wider collective cost for families, communities and society at large, gender-based violence has a persistent legacy even after war ends. It ratchets up the level of violence “tolerated” on a daily basis, fosters a culture of impunity and weakens the socio-economic fabric and governance. What is the role of the UK Government in the implementation of 1820 and 1888, and in addressing these challenges? As members of Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (GAPS), CARE International UK and International Rescue Committee UK have identified four steps essential to achieve the goals of these Resolutions in terms of preventing sexual violence and ending impunity for the perpetrators:

1. Recognise basic services as a key entry-point for action against rape

Recent debates on rape in war have been much preoccupied by issues of impunity and security sector reform. Both the recent DFID White Paper and the Conservative Party Green Paper place significant emphasis on justice issues. To gather reliable, verifiable data concerning sexual violence and its assailants, one must have access to survivors of violence themselves. This means, first and foremost, the provision of unimpeded access to emergency health assistance, protection, psycho-social support to survivors in a safe and confidential setting. No survivor of sexual violence in war can risk retribution and further shame without her basic health, livelihoods or psycho-social needs being addressed with a guarantee of confidentiality. Participation in any judicial process cannot be sustained without similar support and protection over the longer term. And yet too often, just a few interventions are funded in a limited number of towns or camps for displaced persons; with little or no services available in rural areas. Furthermore, funding for programmes to support rape survivors also often evaporates once the humanitarian phase is declared over and donors switch to development funding to governments. Yet the reality is that gender-based violence does not decline after the war is declared over and, all too frequently, addressing the issue does not feature high on the priorities of new governments. For these reasons, Resolution 1888’s call for a mapping of gaps in services should go beyond the headquarters level to include effective consultation with operational agencies and survivors’ groups on the ground in key contexts in which sexual violence has occurred.

The UK should push for a comprehensive and credible UN mapping of gaps in frontline services for survivors in consultation with operational NGOs at the country level and provide funding to address gaps. The UK should also ensure that basic health, psycho-social and livelihoods support is sustained beyond the end of a conflict, when the attention too often drifts to the next crisis.

2. A survivor-centred approach to data collection and tackling impunity

The new UN Resolutions and recent UK policy debates place much emphasis on security and justice measures against rape, and the need to improve monitoring and reporting of rape incidents. In implementing these commitments, the UK and other actors should recognise the physical safety and dignity of survivors as the top priority. For impunity to be tackled in any meaningful or sustainable fashion, the UK Government needs to emphasise the access of survivors to justice at the country-level. This will entail providing aid to ensure that local institutions are strengthened over the long-term; with ordinary women and rape survivors having a say in how the system works. Furthermore, people provide data on rape at great risk to themselves on the understanding that action will be taken to address their concerns in a timely fashion. While much attention has been placed on getting more information on incidence of sexual violence, in most conflict situations, a prevalence survey is neither feasible nor necessary for ensuring a timely response to meet survivor needs.

We have found that the best way to get information is by establishing confidential, quality and accessible services to survivors. Pursuit of data collection to inform diplomatic or justice processes must not compromise the safe and effective delivery of basic services to survivors, or put such women at further risk.

The UK must ensure that any new international systems to improve data collection on rape or tackle impunity place the rights and needs of survivors themselves at their heart, not least their need for safety, dignity and confidentiality. The first priority in such systems should be improved services and remedial action on the ground, not diplomatic imperatives at the international level.

3. Enhancing coordination and accountability within the UN system

Historically, responses to gender-based violence in countries experiencing conflict have been hindered by ineffective systems of aid delivery and coordination. Inadequate expert and dedicated capacity across the UN and other agencies also constitutes a fundamental obstacle to effective provision of programmes. As a result, all too often, lack of coordination yields duplication and gaps; and the potential for the UN to use its position to call global attention to the issue remains untapped. As a consequence, survivors go unassisted in the midst of an emergency.

Resolution 1888 aims to improve coordination by calling for a Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) to provide leadership on gender-based violence response and enhance the accountability, coordination, and coherence of the UN response. While this is a welcome initiative, it is largely dependent on the UN Secretary-General appointing the right person with the political clout needed to raise the visibility of sexual violence in armed conflict and break down blockages in the UN system. That role will also need on-going political backing and support from the UK, and other UN member states, to lead a rigorous process of peer review amongst UN agencies, and ensure that recommendations arising from agency evaluations are implemented. Too often, lessons identified from one crisis are not learned or applied in the next.

The UK should back the appointment of a credible Special Representative to the Secretary General to tackle weaknesses in coordination and accountability within the UN system. The UK Government, through its role in the Security Council, UN agency governance boards and peacekeeping reform, should assist the SRSG in promoting accountability by ensuring follow-up on the recommendations arising from agency evaluations.

4. Prevention: addressing the root causes of violence and promoting women's empowerment

Prevention of gender-based violence is generally regarded as one of the hardest challenges in countries affected by war. The new UN Resolutions recognise that more must be done in the midst of conflict to prevent abuses from occurring. They also acknowledge that women themselves can play a key role in re-establishing security and ensuring that women's perspectives and needs are taken into account. Towards this end, the UK should provide political, financial and human resource backing towards (i) increasing the number of women peacekeepers and availability of police deployed to such contexts and (ii) supporting trained women to enter into politics, the judiciary and the police service. Women should be at the centre of administering justice and security for women. Our experience suggests that more can be done before and after war to address the underlying social, cultural and political drivers of gender-based violence. This requires long-term investments in national and community-based programmes aimed at both empowering women to participate fully in public life and changing attitudes and behaviours that condone violence against women and girls.

UK government departments should outline their plans for increasing the number of police and female staff in peace operations which can be deployed to countries affected by war. Such staff should be properly trained and sensitive to sexual based violence and its consequences. In parallel, the UK should have a clear longer term strategy and sustainably funded programmes, informed by a human rights and gender analysis, which prioritise women's political empowerment and tackling the root causes of gender-based violence, such as women's socio-political exclusion.

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