

SRSG Pramila Patten, Keynote Speech

A Decade of Strategic Leadership to Combat Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Progress, Challenges & Change: The Perspective of the Office of the SRSG-SVC

1st International Conference on “Action with Women & Peace” ~ Global Partnership to Combat Sexual Violence in Conflict

2-3 July 2019, Seoul, Republic of Korea

[20 mins]

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Your Excellency Ms. Kyung-wha Kang, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea,  
Nobel Laureate and Director of Panzi Hospital, Dr. Denis Mukwege,

Distinguished panelists and conference participants, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is an honor to address you today at the opening of this international conference, which casts a spotlight on the intersection of women’s rights, peace-building, sustainable development, and the fight against sexual violence in conflict. I commend the Republic of Korea for this timely initiative, which comes as the international community prepares to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of resolution 1325 next year, and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my mandate this October.

Such milestones provide critical opportunities to **take stock of progress, challenges and change**, and to **chart ambitious new ways forward**.

I am confident that this gathering will **strengthen our global partnership**, and **amplify an array of vital voices on a subject that has been called “*history’s greatest silence*”**.

Indeed, sexual violence during and in the wake of war has been the **world’s *least-reported and least-condemned* crime**. It has been **shrouded in a conspiracy of silence that shields the perpetrators and isolates the victims**, even from each other.

The voices of the victims have been stifled by ancient, distorted **codes of honor and shame**, as well as by **structural gender-based inequality and exclusion**. These harmful norms are **exacerbated by the terror and trauma of war**, which causes the collapse of public institutions and infrastructure; the suspension of law and order; mass displacement; arbitrary detention; arms proliferation; the fracturing of society along ethnic, racial and religious fault-lines; and the spreading of hatred that can spark cycles of violence and revenge.

In such settings, survivors of sexual violence have found themselves *alone and desperate*. Indeed, **rape has been used as a tactic of war, terror, torture and intimidation to send a signal to the victims, and their entire community, that *nothing is sacred, and nowhere is safe***.

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Against this backdrop, **the past decade has ushered in a dramatic paradigm and perspective shift.** This has catalyzed real change in three critical respects: namely, in terms of the *normative framework*; our *institutional arrangements*; and our *operational impact*.

Firstly, on the **normative evolution**, it was in **2008**, that the issue of sexual violence as a tactic of war was elevated onto the agenda of the world's paramount peace and security body, the United Nations Security Council, through the unanimous adoption of resolution 1820. For the survivors, this meant that their ordeal would be taken seriously not only as a violation of individual human rights, but also as a threat to collective security, an impediment to the restoration of peace, and a crime of concern to the international community as a whole. For the Security Council, it meant dismantling the old, gendered divide between "hard security" and so-called "soft issues", between political and "private" matters, and **seeing war through the eyes of women and girls whose bodies have been part of the battlefield.**

This new approach affirmed that there could be *no security without women's security*. It brought *new* urgency, attention and resources to bear on an issue as *old*, and seemingly immutable, as war itself. It served to directly engage a broad constituency of peace and security stakeholders responsible for imposing targeted sanctions; mandating, training and deploying peacekeepers; supporting ceasefire and peace negotiations; establishing Commissions of Inquiry and hybrid tribunals; and referring situations to the International Criminal Court. In short, **it gave security actors new responsibilities, and gave survivors and their advocates new avenues for accountability and action.**

Sexual violence is now understood as **directly relevant to peace and security policy**. In the past, it had been omitted from peace agreements, even in conflicts where it was a notorious feature of the fighting, such as **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sierra Leone and Liberia**. Resolution 1820 made it clear that **as a war crime, crime against humanity, and/or constituent act of genocide, sexual violence had to be addressed in transitional justice processes and excluded from the scope of amnesty provisions.** The international community had accepted, at least in principle, that **if sexual violence is not squarely addressed in ceasefire and peace agreements, there will be no peace or peace of mind for women.** To cite just one example of how this has translated into practice: **Colombia's 2016 peace agreement made history by including over 100 provisions on gender** and paying special attention to justice and reparations for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Resolution 1820 was built on the firm foundation of International Humanitarian Law, which enshrines a **categorical prohibition of sexual violence in situations of both international and non-international armed conflict.** This prohibition is now 70 years old, and universally binding on all parties to armed conflict, **both State and non-State actors**, though, regrettably, it remains far from universally enforced.

In terms of **institutional arrangements**: In **2009**, the Security Council adopted resolution **1888**, to equip the United Nations with new **infrastructure** to respond. This included the creation of my mandate, as **Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict**, to provide coherent and strategic leadership to global efforts, including as Chair of the

interagency coordination network, **UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict**. It also established a **Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict**, to strengthen institutional safeguards against impunity at the national level, and called for **Women Protection Advisers** (or WPAs) to be deployed to the field, to enhance our monitoring, reporting and response.

In **2010**, resolution **1960** authorized new **monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements at country-level**, as part of a system of deepening the evidence-base for action, and pressuring parties to comply with international norms by listing or “*naming and shaming*” those credibly suspected of committing or being responsible for patterns of conflict-related sexual violence.

In **2013**, resolution **2106** emphasized critical dimensions such as **early warning and prevention**, and the need to **empower women and women’s civil society organizations**.

In **2016**, resolution **2331** condemned sexual violence as a **tactic of terrorism, including trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation**, which has been used to fund and fuel the operations of armed and violent extremist groups. This was a response to transnational terrorist groups, such as Da’esh, which reduced women and girls to an expendable currency in the political economy of war.

This year, in April, resolution **2467** called for a **holistic, survivor-centered approach in the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence**. The debate around this resolution shows that challenges remain in fostering consensus on certain issues such as sexual and reproductive rights; protection of members of LGBTI communities from persecution based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity; and the need to ensure accountability through cooperation with global institutions, such as the International Criminal Court.

Turning to **operational impact**: *Today the United Nations system is reaching and supporting thousands of survivors who had once been invisible and inaccessible. Peacekeepers are now systematically trained* on how to prevent, deter and respond to sexual violence as part of their operational readiness to protect civilians. **Sexual violence offences are now an integral part of international criminal investigations**, thanks to a growing number of specialists in this field. Stand-alone **designation criteria on sexual violence have been included in the sanctions regimes for the Central African Republic, the DRC, Libya, Somalia and South Sudan**. The two **operational arms of my mandate**, the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law, and the UN Action network, are **supporting survivors through concrete projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, the DRC, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and elsewhere**.

My **operational methodology** is to secure commitments with national authorities in affected countries to prevent and address sexual violence in line with Security Council resolutions, and to anchor these commitments at the highest level through concrete implementation plans and strategies. To date, **my Office has signed Joint Communiqués to prevent and address conflict-related sexual violence with Côte d’Ivoire, the DRC, Guinea, Somalia, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Mali and Myanmar**.

To highlight just one positive example of progress at the national-level: the first delisting pursuant to my mandate was that of the **Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire** (or FACI) in 2017. Following their adoption of concrete action plans for the security sector, developed with technical assistance and support from my Office, the number of cases declined significantly until in 2017 there were no new allegations of sexual violence by the national armed and security forces.

While such progress in terms of national security sector reform is encouraging, I must also emphasize that **non-State armed groups** constitute the majority of credibly suspected perpetrators that are listed in our annual report. Leveraging behavioral change on the part of non-State actors, to ensure they comply with international norms, is a critical challenge for my mandate moving forward. Several such groups have begun to engage in condemning sexual violence by their members, as in **South Sudan, Mali** and the **Central African Republic**, and we will endeavor to build on this practice. Yet of the **49 parties** listed in our latest report, **36 are non-State actors that have made no commitments to prevent sexual violence**, despite most of them having been listed for several years. We must bring added scrutiny and pressure to bear to ensure they cease these violations and prevent their recurrence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my view that if civilians continue to suffer sexual violence in situations of armed conflict, it is not for a lack of international norms and institutions to protect them. *It is because existing norms are inadequately implemented and enforced. It is because existing institutions are not backed with sustained political and financial support.* To give just one example: it remains a constant challenge to ensure the inclusion of Women Protection Advisors in peacekeeping mandates – posts related to gender and the fight against sexual and gender-based violence are the first to be cut when UN budgets are reduced.

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Another aspect of my work is **bridging the voices of survivors and affected communities to national, regional and international policy bodies**, through regular field visits and consultations with civil society and survivors themselves.

Since my *first day in office*, I have emphasized the importance of a **survivor-centered approach** and made it a strategic priority of my mandate.

*What, concretely, do we mean by a “survivor-centered approach”?*

First and foremost, it is an approach that **empowers survivors by prioritizing their rights, needs and aspirations**. It means treating survivors with the respect and dignity they deserve, and ensuring they have access to high-quality services, including medical, sexual and reproductive healthcare; psychosocial support; economic assistance; legal advice and access to justice, in conditions of safety and confidentiality.

And yet, **my field missions over the past two years have consistently revealed major gaps in services and resources, which make it difficult for victims to move forward as survivors.**

For instance, when I visited **Iraq**, I met with Yezidi women and girls who had been held in Da'esh captivity and subjected to the unimaginable brutality of sexual slavery. Several months after their release, they had received neither medical nor psychosocial support. Some were in a semi-comatose state. Others were suicidal. Specialized trauma care was absent; justice and reparations seemed entirely out of reach.

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, survivors of sexual violence told me how **their physical insecurity was linked with economic insecurity**. I learnt from these women, most of whom had been abandoned by their husbands, how economic support fosters self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and resilience, which in turn reduces their exposure to risk, and bolsters their perceived worth and value in the eyes of their community. Yet access to education, credit, and economic opportunity remain severely constrained for women and girls afflicted by the **double tragedy of rape and rejection**.

My visits to **South Sudan**, **Mali** and the **Central African Republic** were another chilling reminder of the countless rape victims who remain invisible and marginalized due to collapsed institutions and a climate of insecurity in remote regions controlled by armed groups. In the villages I visited, survivors were forced to walk for several days to reach even the most basic healthcare facility. This is despite the fact that when it comes to post-rape care, **distance can be a death sentence**. Post-exposure prophylaxis against HIV/AIDS and emergency contraception are most effective within 72 hours of an incident. This is critical in countries where HIV is prevalent and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world.

Even where survivors are able to access services, they **risk being stigmatized and re-traumatized by first-responders, including medical personnel, police officers and judicial authorities, who exhibit attitudes of discrimination and victim-blame**. Such attitudes are shockingly commonplace and contribute to the chronic underreporting of these crimes. I vividly recall the words of a young **Nigerian** girl I met in Maiduguri who had been raped by a militant while collecting firewood outside of her camp. She recounted her deep shame and frustration at being repeatedly questioned by a doctor before receiving treatment. “*Why did you leave the camp to collect firewood?*” he asked her. “*Why did you go out alone?*” “*Why did you not fight back harder and scream louder?*”

Similarly, in the camps I visited in **Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh**, Rohingya women and girls told me how they had been repeatedly questioned and pressured to recount their stories of rape in graphic detail, sometimes resulting in reports that revealed the identity of the survivor. Some had been interviewed so frequently they could not always distinguish between humanitarian service-providers, journalists, NGO workers and academic researchers. In addition to the fact that repeated interviewing can trigger re-traumatization, create security risks, and raise expectations in contexts where justice remains elusive, it can also render evidence inadmissible in court and discredit testimony due to even slight inconsistencies between the multiple accounts on record.

Conversely, a **survivor-centered, rights-based response**, which we will discuss in greater detail over the coming days, requires that all efforts to document, investigate and respond to conflict-related sexual violence are coordinated, safe, confidential, based on informed consent, and include safeguards against re-traumatization, social ostracism, reprisals and other risks including

so-called “honor crimes”. It also requires *tailored, contextual solutions* that meet the specific needs of the survivor, recalling that **survivors are not a homogenous group**.

Survivors include **male victims** who may be overlooked owing to stereotypes about masculine invulnerability; **detainees** under interrogation in order to coerce confessions and break their morale; **rural women** living in remote areas; **indigenous women**; **widows**; **female heads of households**; **women’s rights defenders**; **journalists** reporting on these crimes; **children born of wartime rape** who are often shunned as “*bad blood*” or “*children of the enemy*” and placed at heightened risk of exploitation, recruitment, radicalization and statelessness owing to a lack of legal documentation; **forced wives and captives** of terrorist and violent extremist groups who are often seen as *affiliates* rather than *victims*; women and children associated with armed groups, including **child soldiers**; and members of **LGBTI** communities.

We must keep bringing new dimensions of this issue to light, to **ensure that no one is left behind or excluded from the dividends of peace and development**, which is also the commitment at the heart of the **Sustainable Development Goals**.

Essentially, a survivor-centered approach is one that **gives voice and choice to the survivor**, restores their agency, builds their resilience, and enshrines their experience on the historical record. At the same time, it should deprive the perpetrators of their liberty and means of doing further harm, through sanctions, accountability and vetting. By shifting power dynamics in this way, **a survivor-centered approach that works not only for, but with, affected individuals can be a profoundly transformative approach. It can reaffirm the status of the survivor as a holder of rights that must be respected.** Women’s groups have, for many years, expressed this succinctly through the motto: “*Nothing about us, without us!*”

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In terms of the **way forward**, let us be guided by the priorities of survivors. While I have visited many diverse, war-torn corners of the world, the survivors I have met with, demand **two things above all else**: firstly, that the perpetrators be brought to **justice**; and secondly, that they be provided with the **means to support themselves and their families**. In this regard, **reparations** are what survivors ask for *most* – yet receive *least*.

It is time their demands be heard and heeded.

My Office is proud to support the effort of Nobel Laureates Dr. Denis Mukwege and Ms. Nadia Murad to establish an **International Fund for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence**. This can help survivors to *rebuild their lives and livelihoods*, and signal that sexual violence is *no longer a ‘cost free’ crime*.

Reintegration and recovery means being able to re-engage with society and resume the rhythms of daily life in the context of a family and community. We therefore need to address the **stigma** associated with sexual violence, and to this end, we must scale-up our engagement with traditional, religious and community leaders to **shift harmful social norms and attitudes**.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

We are still navigating the long and winding road from *rhetoric* to *reality*. Along this journey, ***the plight and rights of survivors must be our moral compass***. Yet a **major implementation lag** remains between progressive policies and practical change that touches the lives of affected individuals and communities, and influences the behavior of past and potential perpetrators.

Two striking examples illustrate this gap.

Firstly, in 2009, just as the Security Council celebrated the adoption of resolution 1888 condemning conflict-related sexual violence, in the public square outside the UN building protestors held up placards depicting the mass rape of pro-democracy demonstrators in the capital of **Guinea, Conakry**, including images of sexually assaulted women that had been caught on cellphone cameras and circulated to the world.

Likewise, in June this year, as the UN held its commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, global headlines called our attention to the ongoing rape of political protestors in the **Sudanese capital, Khartoum**. These alleged acts of rape and gang-rape were reportedly committed by members of the RSF, a successor group to the Janjaweed militia that is notorious for patterns of sexual violence in Darfur.

These cases remind us that **outside our conference halls and meeting rooms, sexual violence continues to be a pervasive tactic of war, terror and political repression**. The response continues to be painfully slow. Impunity remains the *rule* and justice the *rare exception*. Services are still scarce. And security policy is still a male-dominated domain, despite clear and compelling evidence linking gender equality with peace.

As we **set the stage for the next decade of progress, let us remember that, ultimately, the measure of success is *not more reports and meetings, but less violence***. It is time to move from *groundbreaking resolutions* to *solutions on the ground*; from *national commitments* to *national capacity*; from *praising the work of women's groups* to *adequately funding their work*; and from *paying lip service to the concept of reparations* to *actually paying reparations to the survivors*.

We must continue to **harness the global media as a magnet to pull public attention towards “forgotten conflicts”, forgotten victims, and inconvenient truths**, because as long as violence and armed conflicts expand, the number of victims will tragically continue to rise.

Let us therefore seize this opportunity to join forces to realize the founding promise of the *UN Charter* to **“save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” and from its most enduring injustice – the scourge of wartime rape**.

Thank you.