



Introduction

In January 2009, a group including Nobel Peace Laureate Jody Williams, lawyers, activists, academics, journalists, and staff from the Nobel Women's Initiative gathered at the Airlie Centre in Virginia to debate and discuss "what is next?" in collective efforts to put women's rights on the security agenda.

The meeting took place over two days, and was facilitated by Joanna Kerr, a member of the Nobel Women's Initiative board of directors. Panels explored first how women are stereotyped and sidelined in peace and security agendas, and second how women's activism has influenced national debates, peace agreements, violent conflicts and the agenda of the United Nations Security Council. We ended the meeting with a practical application of our analyses to the crises in Sudan, Iran and Burma.

Putting Women On The Agenda: Challenges, Tensions, Issues

Morning panels on Day 1 explored how women and conflict issues are, and are not, reproduced onto mainstream agendas. Participants examined the tensions that arise when developing and delivering messages that meaningfully challenge status quo gender hierarchies.

The words we choose, and the ideas we convey, are connected to particular values and assumptions: each of our messages about women's rights in war can either reinforce values and assumptions about women – our need for protection, our weakness, the primacy of our chastity, etc. - or challenge these values. Oftentimes, we generate simple messages about women in war in order to appeal to decision-makers, but we leave out the ideas that are most challenging and least acceptable to those in power. We may succeed in changing the law/policy, but we lose the opportunity to present new ideas and, over time, shift values. Changing values and changing laws are both essential to changing women's lives over the long term.

Participants focused on the issue of sexual violence in conflict as an example. When we talk about rape in war, we might wish to emphasize women's security and control over her body. But when we talk about "protecting of women from rape", we appeal to the commonly held - but disempowering- values of chastity and honour for women. The success in putting rape on the international agenda is at least partly explained by this presentation of the issue: the language of "protection" appeals to many decision-makers' beliefs in the importance of women's "honour"/ chastity and of men's role in protecting it.



When the men in question are African, colonial notions of African men as creatures of lust are confirmed, and the Security Council (non-African men) are situated in the comfortable role of interveners. Sexual violation is on the agenda, and that's extremely important, but the assumptions about sex and women, and race and Africa, have not changed. The language we use must emphasize respect for women – not respectability.

Participants also explored the challenge of creating messages that are simple and catchy, but that also capture the complexity of the issues we face. When we focus on the body and sexual atrocity, the economic and political realities that enable the violence are made invisible. The notion that the political solutions to these problems must be connected to rights for women and economic models also gets lost in most media coverage. When we use the phrase “rape as a weapon of war” we need to provide context –how and why it is an effective weapon.

Participants argued that changing habits and rules must be central to the feminist agenda in all arenas; in the words of one woman, “we need to help others see the world differently”. We need to convey the complexity of the message, and not just “soundbytes and bumper stickers”.

Women's Activism In And On War: What Works?

Having spent the morning unpacking the sidelining and stereotyping of women in peace and security agendas, we spent the afternoon of Day 1 focused on what has worked to get women taken seriously.

The women of Northern Uganda

The success of the women of Northern Uganda in influencing peace talks is one such example. When women became a part of the peace process in Northern Uganda, they helped shape the final agreements while critiquing all parties involved in the process and building relationships. In 2008, Northern Uganda had been enveloped in a conflict between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army for 22 years. Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice entered the peace process at a point where there had been no participation of civil society or gender perspectives in the discussions. The organization worked with ten Northern Ugandan women, who created a position paper in consultation with their communities and joined the talks.

The women played a significant role in brokering agreements and were able to insist that participants in the peace process consult their constituents during the peace process. None of the parties to the peace talks had a significant commitment to peace, but they all needed to look like they were committed, so the women used that fact strategically, and dealt with each party as though they were truly interested in peace. While the women are diverse, and recognize that they do not have universally common interests by virtue of being women, they



Solutions and Soundbytes
Nobel Women's Initiative Convening Report

presented a common front on issues they agreed on, and recognized they were most effective when they were united. The result of all their efforts was an agreement with gender provisions, which was not the case with previous agreements. The final agreement has not yet been signed, but the women remain engaged in the ceasefire talks.

Feminist International Radio Endeavor

The creative and groundbreaking work of Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) is another excellent example of successful women's activism re-shaping debates. FIRE is the first women's Internet radio; it is a small team of five women doing work all over the world. They call themselves a traditional media venue with a feminist perspective.

FIRE privileges the human rights of women to have a voice in the world. The goal is to contribute to women's exercise of their rights, by providing them with the means to tell their stories, since the women have been denied the right to communicate through other media.

The journalists ensure the women can frame their own information. The framing of the news is just as important as putting women's voices into the news; when women frame their own information, they present a different picture. Participants recognized the difficulties involved in this approach: "women" are not a homogenous or like-minded group and individual women will often present views that are problematic from a feminist perspective. In order to accommodate both the feminist and the information-dissemination aspects of their mandate, FIRE often uses a debate format to allow people with opposing views to have their opinions aired, while also presenting listeners with a feminist perspective.

FIRE focuses on strengthening "alternative" media, while also coming up with new strategies to reach "mainstream" media. It is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each: mainstream media often uses alternative media when they want to go into more depth, but there are issues with fact-checking and sourcing from many alternative sites.

Documentary Film: The Greatest Silence

Participants watched clips, and then discussed and debated the film, *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo*. The film was shown on HBO in April 2008, the US Senate Judiciary Committee held a viewing, and the House of Parliament in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also held a screening. The film had a political impact both in the DRC and in the global community, as it inspired the introduction of Security Council Resolution 1820.

The film tells the story of rape in the Congo from the perspective of the affected women and girls and focuses on the human toll of rape. The idea was to break the wall of "otherness" from both the viewers and the victims. The filmmaker brought newspaper clippings of her own rape to her interviews with the women in the DRC, and tried to show that the film was about "every woman". She ensured that the women wanted their stories told, and returned several years after the film had aired to see how they felt about the film.



Participants questioned the focus on the women's experience of rape, rather than the context of the war, and the root causes. Some wondered whether the focus on victim-hood is disempowering to viewer and subject. Others suggested that positioning the victim as a survivor, who tells her story, can be empowering for that woman, and enable her to keep doing her work. In some cases, depending on the culture and the circumstance, providing a venue for survivors to tell their stories can be re-traumatizing. It is important to understand why the woman is telling her story, and if she realizes what the decision to tell the story will mean for her.

Women in the Pacific

After the coup in Fiji in 2000, women began organizing to tell women's stories, particularly those of marginalized and underrepresented women. They wanted to be sure women were involved in decisions about the re-democratization of society. Since the year 2000, they have used e-news, and a mobile radio station through rural networks to disseminate women's voices. The women from FEMLINK Pacific use Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as a basis for their activism: they make interviews and presentations, write stories, have even written a jingle and script for a play, and link their work back to 1325.

These women have been successful because they have carefully considered the purpose of their media engagement: the aim is not always the largest audience. They aim to link women to policy makers, without them having to travel to the capital city, and to translate the women's messages into the language understood by policy makers. They also aim to have their work recognized as a source for the larger media networks in a "trickle-up effect".

Participants noted that small-scale media is effective in some cases, whereas in other places, where there is state-controlled media like in Iran, women engage with the international media. This too is complex, since women associated with the international media can be stigmatized, and in the case of Iran, they become associated with the US agenda.

There is no longer one "media". The Internet, alternate media, and many other venues are different spaces of engagement and require separate strategies and analysis. The Internet in particular is fraught with complexity for women, but these debates are currently framed as security issues and pornography issues. Participants noted some of the excellent initiatives aimed at exploring Internet communication, including IT for Change in Bangalore, UNESCO's initiatives, and Take Back the Tech.



Putting the Rubber on the Road: What are the Policy Agendas?

On Day 2, we turned our attention towards the policy agenda: what are the challenges and opportunities in the current policy environment?

The financial crisis was put on the table as an opportunity to argue in favour of re-prioritizing global resources. We need to make the case that the money going towards militarism can be spent better. The numbers speak for themselves, and we should use them more: 1,339 billion is spent annually on the military worldwide, equivalent to 600 years of the UN's funding budget. It would take \$3 billion to meet the Millennium Development Goal on education (achieving universal primary education). That figure is equal to what is spent occupying Iraq for nine days. There is abundance, but it is all going to the military, and to preparation for war.

The financial crisis is also an opportunity to re-frame debates about the role of the state. What does the "good state" look like, and how do we, as women, want to rebuild it? We want to defend the state from erosion due to corporate globalization, but we do not need to defend either the particular states that have injured us, nor the "minimalist state". The same applies to the United Nations: we do not have to defend any aspect of what the UN is or is not doing, but we need to continue to demand that they keep their commitments, and play their role. Security Sector Reform can play a role in rebuilding the institutions of the security apparatus so that they are transparent and accountable to people's own priorities for security.

The new administration in the US put nuclear abolition on the table on the first day of Obama's presidency. This is a critical opportunity to change the meaning of security and thereby decrease the political and strategic value of nuclear weapons. The Obama administration opens the door for us to change the discourse on the war on terrorism and security outside and within the United Nations.

Plans will be made for Beijing 15 this year, and a ten-year report on Security Council Resolution 1325 is due towards the end of the year. Security Council resolution 1820 provides some new opportunities as well, by establishing that sexual violence against women is a matter for the Security Council. It is our responsibility to keep re-asserting what we want done with these tools. We should broaden the agenda by connecting women's voice to their security, and situating violence against women as a disabler of women's voice. We should be talking about the continuum of violence affecting women. Resolution 1325 must be used to give women voice, to combat militarism, but also to combat patriarchy, the underpinning of militarism.

While the opportunities for policy influence are many, the resources for women's rights work are shrinking. AWID's reports – the Fundher reports – illustrate the decline in resources, but there are some excellent opportunities. The Dutch government, for instance, created an innovative new fund for women's rights work. Resources are power.



Applying The Theory: Messages From Sudan, Iran And Burma

The final session of the meeting was a laboratory for applying our debates and discussions. Participants from Sudan, Iran and Burma each led brainstorming sessions with three small groups of participants, and then presented their key messages to the “press corps” of participants, who playfully fired questions at them.

Key Messages

Sudan:

- 1) Women must be front and centre in the Sudanese election and the international community must provide support so that women can fully participate in upcoming elections.
- 2) We call for full implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement — specifically of the commitments to women.
- 3) Sudanese women are working across the divide of ethnic and other lines — unlike the men in Sudan — it is our responsibility to support them.

Iran:

- 1) The Million Signatures Campaign in Iran is similar to other movements around the world to end discrimination.
- 2) Iranian women are actively working for equality through legal reform.
- 3) The safety of human rights defenders must be protected everywhere.

Burma:

- 1) No aid is given through the military junta in Burma.
- 2) Violence will continue to increase as long as the junta is in power.
- 3) The recently passed constitution must be dismantled — it bars women from political office.

Currents And Undercurrents

Throughout the two-day meeting at Airlie, certain themes occurred and recurred. The central importance of listening to stories from the conflict zones themselves and working collaboratively with local groups was raised several times. Local civil society is undermined when big NGOs come in and ignore them.

The complex reality of “peace tables” was another undercurrent. The peace table is being occupied by the men who do the fighting, rather than by the people making peace. We do not just need to get women at the peace table, we need to change the peace table itself. One participant suggested we take the example of the successful Tribunals on women’s rights as human rights, and make our own peace tables.



Solutions and Soundbytes
Nobel Women's Initiative Convening Report

The question of what constitutes a “women’s issue” and when and if it is appropriate to position any issue as “women’s” bubbled up in various guises during group meals, panels and small group discussions. Participants questioned how “women’s” interests and voices could be argued at a peace table, when the category of “women” has so many divisions and diversities. What constitutes a “women’s interest”?

In many post-war contexts, there is a significant rise in violence against women after the guns are silenced and the “peace” has been declared. Rather than being seen as a security issue, and a threat to the peace, the violence against women is positioned as a “women’s issue”. The example of the Central American wars was used to illustrate this problem, with the suggestion that we need a re-conceptualization of peace if a society with massive violence against women is considered at “peace”.

Some participants suggested that a broadened definition of security was essential for women’s rights advocates. The notion of Human Security makes more sense for women, because it recognizes the range of issues affecting women’s security: floods, storms, poverty and hunger.

Debates about the positioning of women as victims, versus recognizing us as actors, were central to many of the sessions. Participants agreed that we must not just talk about women as victims; we should talk about the strength of women, and how they are dealing with conflict in a constructive way. Women are often both victims of war, and agents of peace, and we need to acknowledge this complexity. We need to understand power when we talk about women, peace and security. Power is not just about winners and losers: interests are varied, and constantly shifting.

Often in the presentation of women victims, it is the implied need for male rescue that is problematic, not the acknowledgement of victimization. The victim-agency dichotomy is coded with women as victim, men as agents. In fact, we are all vulnerable and we are all capable of exercising agency.

In the case of violence against women, the victimization is about controlling women’s agency: the victimization is a force being used against women, to deny our agency and control us. But we can reclaim and transform it. Speaking up as a victim can take the sting out of the trauma, and help us control the narrative. When testimonies have a political context, tell the story of what women are doing in response, and point to the action women want taken, the victim-agency dynamic can move us forward, and get us away from the protection paradigm.