
**3rd International conference on “action with women and peace”:
Strengthening women’s roles and leadership in building and sustaining peace, with the
survivor-centered approach**

25 November 2021, Seoul, Republic of Korea

Keynote speech by Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on violence against women

Your Excellency, Mr. Chung Eui-yong, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea

Distinguished conference participants

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation and congratulations to the Government of the Republic of Korea for convening this conference on this important topic.

While the meaning of conflict-related sexual violence, or CRSV in short, continues to evolve, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on what that actually means.

CRSV has been defined so far to include rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, trafficking in persons when committed in situations of conflict for the purpose of sexual violence/exploitation and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict.

CRSV is distinguished from other acts of sexual violence due to the conflict-related environment in which it occurs and the profile of perpetrators and victims.

Perpetrators of CRSV are often affiliated with State or non-State armed groups.

This type of violence is often used as a tool of political intimidation committed by either State and non-State parties to the conflict and can act as constituent elements of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, torture and other violations of International Human Right’s Law and International Humanitarian Law.

CRSV has also been recognized as a threat to international peace and security, persisting long after a conflict has ceased. It may even escalate in post-conflict environments.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action established that eliminating violence against women is a human rights obligation of States, and that rape and sexual violence more broadly are violations of the fundamental principles of international humanitarian and human rights law.

By asserting that violations of women’s human rights during conflict are violations of both international human rights law and humanitarian law, the Declaration questioned the traditional divide according to which the former applied to violence under regular circumstances and the latter to conflict contexts

The Platform of Independent Expert Mechanisms on the Elimination of Discrimination and Violence against Women (EDVAW), which was established by my mandate, has argued that sexual violence and violence against women during conflict cannot be understood in isolation from gender-based discrimination that women experience in times of ‘peace’.

On the contrary: it is connected to and derives from the more general patterns of gender inequality and violence against women. This results in women becoming more vulnerable to conflict-related violence and human rights violations in general, and in the failure to provide access to interim measures and reparations.

In that sense, the Platform had emphasized that addressing the root causes of gender-based violence against women and girls requires a holistic approach along a continuum of “before, during, and after a conflict”. An effective approach also requires full and meaningful participation of women in all political negotiations, as well as in peacebuilding and governance processes, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which also established a framework for addressing sexual violence in conflict.

In the same vein, my mandate had argued in its report of 2021 to the Human Rights Council that rape is a widespread crime in both peace and in conflict.

Sexual violence cannot be successfully addressed in conflict contexts without addressing pre-existing shortcomings in its criminalization and normalization in the State concerned.

In this afore-mentioned report, the mandate further highlighted that the international human rights framework on sexual violence is applicable in times of peace and of conflict, and it is broader than the frameworks of international humanitarian law or international criminal law.

In fact, the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women continues to be the normative framework for eliminating violence against women, in both peace and conflict and therefore also the framework for 1325 related interventions.

It is encouraging to see that there has been some progress in State practice when it comes to making sure that mandates of truth and reconciliation processes include the investigation of gender-based violence. And while conflict-related crimes have gained more visibility, particularly since the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN on sexual violence in conflict, a number of issues remain very worrisome, which include:

Number 1: The lack of significant progress in holding perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict accountable. This is often compounded by the fact that States, including States that have ratified the Rome Statute, have statutes of limitations for the prosecution of rape, which contributes to the widespread impunity for perpetrators.

Number 2: Even though States are obliged to develop penal, civil, labour, and administrative sanctions in domestic legislation to punish and redress wrongs caused to women and girls who are subjected to violence, and even though women bear the brunt of violence during times of conflict, women have not been sufficiently prioritized when it comes to reparations.

Women still encounter significant obstacles in accessing institutions that deal with reparations. For these and other obstacles to be overcome, it is very important to ensure that women participate fully, equally, and consistently in reparations discussions and processes.

When implementing reparations, it is very important that they should not merely bring women back to the same position they were in before suffering sexual violence, but instead should strive for a truly transformative potential. Reparations should aspire, to the extent possible, to challenge rather than

reinforce pre-existing structural inequality and gender stereotypes that may be at the root causes of the violence the women experience before, during and after the conflict.

Though these challenges remain daunting and new humanitarian and conflict crises continue to emerge, we can see the beginning of change happening.

Sexual violence is no longer seen as a simple by-product of conflict, but as a significant form of insecurity, conflict, and a violation in itself, that needs urgent and persistent addressing.

This - I would like to stress is possible - by ensuring accountability, by combatting structural gender inequality, and by truly listening to and including survivors', women's and girls' in shaping lasting solutions.

Thank you.