Sexual Violence In Conflict: Why Silence Is Our Greatest Obstacle To Universal Change

By: Alexandra Rashedi

Information for this article was gathered from an interview with Zainab Hawa Bangura in June 7, 2013.

In the United States we tend to view sexual violence as a taboo subject, something that threatens only the unlucky young woman walking home alone late at night. Western society may view the topic as being made up of isolated incidences usually involving alcohol and really only an area of dire concern in poverty stricken communities. However, in countries torn by conflict and war, rape and other acts of sexual violence are tools used to exert not only power, but complete domination and humiliation of one’s victims.

Shedding light on this shadowed issue, Mrs. Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict for the United Nations, described sexual violence as “the world’s oldest crime”. “Nobody talks about this; people are scared”, she elaborated. “Rape [in conflict] does not happen by accident; it is planned and premeditated.” In hopes of altering this bleak reality, Mrs. Bangura is pursuing a six-pronged strategy during her time as Special Representative.

The first step in her approach is to work to end impunity and to bring justice to victims – anyone who commits a crime should be tried.* The second objective is to protect and empower those who have experienced sexual violence. This element is key to helping victims in the aftermath of assault and to preventing future occurrences. Mrs. Bangura’s third objective is to mobilize the political arena to address the issue. This is viewed as the only way to ensure permanent change in the communities where sexual violence occurs. Particularly in countries where rape is not considered a crime, lobbying is a necessary tool to encourage the creation of legislation that will guarantee consequences for the guilty.

As a fourth objective, Mrs. Bangura hopes to strengthen the response of the United Nations and the international community. Defining rape as a tactic of war is the fifth strategy she will follow, and lastly, she will encourage ownership of the issue by countries. Recognition of the problem is necessary in order to take action against it. Her daily objective is to work together with nations around the world, especially those currently engaged in conflict, to develop a plan and a message about the realities of sexual violence.

In many communities around the world, sexual violence is highly under-reported because victims fear retribution; they will be called a liar and will be prosecuted or worse, they will be killed. Most often, the rapist is in a position of power over the victim, making the individual even more reluctant to step forward. This is probably the most critical obstacle in eliminating this power tactic. Even with laws against acts of sexual violence, this seldom leaves protection for women inside the home, where she often spends the majority of her time and where the rape can occur also.

How do we as a world move forward in the quest to eliminate sexual violence? The issue will always remain an uncomfortable and complex matter, surely, but the only way to fight against this horrific reality is to end impunity and stop the cycle of acceptance and ignorance. Light must be brought to the issue and aid to all victims must be extended. Until we break the silence, we have accepted defeat.

*On June 24, 2013, the United Nations Security Council unanimously voted to adopt a resolution designed to end impunity for those who commit sexual violence in conflict.