

By Lesley Abdela

Today is the anniversary of a United Nations security council resolution that, if fully implemented, could change the dynamics of war and peace. Eight years ago, the UN security council voted unanimously to pass resolution 1325, their first ever resolution to address the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. It calls for equal participation of women in all aspects of conflict prevention, peace building and reconstruction; prevention of violence against women and protection of the human rights of women and girls during times of conflict. A similar resolution was passed by the European parliament in November 2000, with an accompanying recommendation calling for at least 40% women's representation in all levels of decision-making in peace building and post-conflict recovery.

Both resolutions tackle full on the glaring fact that peacemaking is mostly in the hands of the world's men. Peacemaking and peace-building ought not to be left so overwhelmingly to men, for one practical reason: men on their own are no good at it. The record proves it. Arnold Whittick, who served in the infantry in France in the first world war, was lecturer to HM forces on reconstruction in the second world war. Writing about the Versailles treaty peace talks he said, "Some might reflect sadly that if women's influence had been stronger there might have been no second world war, but one does not write history with ifs."

In today's troubled world more than 50% of all conflicts break out all over again within 10 years. The problem derives in part from deeply flawed peacemaking attempts, in which women are under-represented in ongoing top-level decision-making on peace- and state-building processes, while men, who are more likely to be the wagers of war, are over-represented.

The other reason women should be equal partners in peace-building is to ensure issues of importance to women's lives, as well as men's, are high on the agenda such as: personal security and safety; infrastructure and services; livelihood and employment; property rights; food security; needs of widows and female former combatants; political representation and decision making; and preventing impunity for rape. There have been pockets of progress on making 1325 work at grassroots and middle levels. UNFPA, UNIFEM and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have been working with women's NGOs and national governments to implement UNSCR 1325. The UK and other UN member states have drawn up national action plans for 1325.

The extreme disappointment is at the top levels, where it counts. Government ministers, politicians and diplomats have consistently failed to insist women be included as equal partners at the top table in peace talks. They have also failed to appoint women heads of UN missions. Out of 30 current peace operations (peacekeeping, political, and peacebuilding missions), there is only one female chief of mission, the UN secretary general's special representative to Liberia, Ellen Margrethe Loej from Denmark.

Women also continue to be frozen out from top-table peace talks despite energetic, courageous lobbying by female NGO leaders in war-torn countries demanding to be included. Exasperated at women on both sides not being treated as equal partners with men at the top table of the Middle East peace talks, Israeli women have told me they are on the verge of challenging their own government in the law courts. This step is unprecedented.

In Sri Lanka, women's groups lobbied both domestic political leaders and the Norwegians who were acting as peace-brokers to bring the country's interminable civil war to an end, but these women weren't included at the top table and the killing goes on. In the Balkans, the international contact group brokering talks on the status of Kosovo included four permanent members of the UN security council, the United States, United Kingdom, France and Russia. Yet they ignored their own resolution 1325. The NGO Women in Black in Belgrade and, on the other side, the Kosovo NGO Network comprising 80 women's NGOs, including the Kosovo Women's Network, demonstrated and lobbied their own politicians, Members of the European parliament and the international contact group for the right to be included as equal partners in negotiations. Result? The contact group, led by special envoy and now Nobel peace prize Laureate Marti Ahtisaari ignored the Balkan women's peaceful requests.

Equal participation of women and men in conflict prevention and peace talks would be a natural next step to a precedent that has already emerged in post-conflict parliamentary elections, in which women's NGOs have lobbied hard for a gender balance quota with the result that one third of countries with more than 30% women in parliament are countries recovering from conflict, including Rwanda (56.3%); Mozambique (34.8%); Nepal (33.2%); Burundi (30.5%); Uganda (30.7%); Angola (37.3%); South Africa (32.8%). Even Afghanistan (27.7%) and Iraq (25.5%) have a higher percentage of women in parliament than in the United Kingdom's House of Commons.

The old view that women in conflict zones are victims rather than an immense prospective resource for bringing conflict to an end must be overcome.

Readers can help to "give peace a chance". Every time there are peace talks anywhere, from the Congo to the Caucasus, ask your government ministers, diplomats and UN officials: "Where are the women?" Support and encourage NGOs lobbying for women to be equal partners in setting the peace agenda.

To see this story as originally published with its related links on the guardian.co.uk site, go to <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/31/gender-women>

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Lesley Abdela is to address parliamentarians in the House of Commons at a U K Defence Forum dinner on Monday 3rd November 2008