

**THE GLOBAL SUMMIT:
END SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT NOW**

Judith Rowbotham and Fiona Tate¹

Judith:

This was certainly a global occasion, in terms of the attendance at the summit itself (a closed affair, which included a carefully selected range of delegates chosen for their relevant expertise and/or experience) and at the Fringe. Rather like the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe, I suspect that many of the more exciting and challenging stuff was going on in the summit Fringe, rather than in the official arena. But – to be fair – while the summit sessions were closed, you viewed figures like Hague and Jolie entering and exiting the closed off rooms, and Jolie certainly made appearances at the Fringe, as did many of the other delegates. Many of these were familiar figures to any attending the SOLON War Crimes and other conferences: Lesley Abdela was (of course) a delegate, and so were Toby Cadman, Stephen Kay and Cissa wa Numbe amongst others.

The Fringe event was vibrant, with a series of wide-ranging and imaginative sessions and presentations. You looked at any one of the three day's programmes for the Fringe and found yourself thinking – since I would be interested in them all, which one do I want to go to most? And at the end of the day – one's brain hurt because you had taken in so much information. In a sense, that was an issue for me. I acquired more information, but – little that I heard was new or surprising. It was often tragic – heart and gut-wrenching stuff. It was anger-making to hear how, in place after place, promises made by governments about the implementation of various UN and other resolutions seeking to outlaw violence against women were being cynically ignored by those charged with the actual day-to-day implementation. But was I surprised by any of it? Hardly anyone who has worked, as an academic or an expert, on issues touching the realities of women's experiences (past and present) in conflict is all too familiar with the what happens and the consequences of violence which targets the vulnerable – mainly women, but also men – in conflict situations. So was it a waste of time? I have been left with an even deeper respect and admiration for the bravery of those there who had experienced violence themselves, and were willing to stand up and bear testimony to its scale and awfulness. It was heart-warmingly good also to

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see how determined the activists from around the world who, working in their own patches, were determined to do something positive to help those who had suffered and to try to make it less likely that it would happen again to vulnerable non-combatants in the future. I enjoyed noticing how many of them, proudly wearing identifiable local costumes, sat and talked to others with totally different garb, exchanging information and ideas. I found myself hoping that many of them would be able, thanks to the internet, to stay in contact and provide extra reinforcement to each other's groups.

The Summit has also made it easier to access material and evidence: the silent cinema strand, showing a continuous stream of material, more or less sophisticatedly filmed and presented, was a testament to how much material on the perpetration and consequences of sexual violence in conflict is available to researchers and practitioners. That should certainly be a legacy of the event, even though I wish that more had, and would, come out from the main summit itself. The Chair's summary (available on gov.uk) is singularly poor in terms of anything but rhetorical aspiration. Predictable in one way, disappointing in another. The International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict seeks to set up agreed international standards on collecting evidence and protecting witnesses, which sounds marvellous. Unfortunately, what is lacking is the necessary precursor of a clearly agreed international understanding of exactly what behaviours constitute criminally prosecutable sexual violence, in or out of a conflict situation! It might seem obvious – but any detailed and dispassionate auditor at the Fringe would have seen how problematic this aspect is. Where, for instance, does sexual enslavement fit the model, especially when it is presented as a 'commercial' transaction benefitting both sides? Four key areas for change were presented, headed by an intention to improve accountability. But – the details of any mechanisms to achieve this have so far not gone beyond the headlines. It is also, therefore, disappointing that, instead of following up with government initiatives and seeking to promote change in the UK Foreign Office etc., official reactions seem to be governed by complacency. A serious epidemic of resting on laurels seems to be under way in Britain in reaction to suggestions made (to my knowledge) to build on and follow up the Summit. So was it a waste of time? Overall, I think not.

Personally, it was good, and useful, to have these events and experiences brought together in a way that promoted comparisons which emphasised the huge scale of the problem, but also reminded audiences of the importance of looking beyond the similarities to the differences in experiences and causatory attitudes which derive from local circumstances, cultures and traditions. The external powers and institutions seeking to help must realise that positive interventions can never be planned on a 'one size fits all' model. If there are always

some commonalities, the differences are likely to be the things which mask those commonalities so effectively for those locales where they are trying to help that a whole initiative can founder on a 'small' issue of difference. I am glad that so many foreign dignitaries thought it important to attend the Summit; even if I am sceptical about how much they will – and can – do themselves to bring about substantial change, it brings a hope that there will be a change in elite cultures which means that eventually, it will be easier to hold governments to account effectively - both through the international criminal justice process and through internal measures. One of the messages most constantly voiced was the importance of challenging 'impunity' - otherwise known as the habit of leaders in post-conflict states of excluding themselves and their key followers from danger of prosecution for war crimes. All too often, the crimes most likely to enjoy impunity are those which have habitually been considered by so many as an 'inevitable' accompaniment to war, i.e.: those involving sexual violence. Much condemnation has emerged from the UN and from Western governments relating to the habit of African, Asian and Balkan elites to try to protect themselves. But, as was pointed out (again) during the Summit, such exhortations ring a little hollow when impunity for themselves is claimed by the ones condemning local leaders. Returning to the earlier point about complacency, we were reminded that America and Britain both need to address the issue for themselves, as well as exhorting others to do so. I did witness a couple of sessions where there was a certain wriggling of discomfort and irritation in the audience when British politicians were a little too self-congratulatory about Britain's own record when introducing events that they had helped to sponsor at the Fringe.

One of the most engaging events at the Fringe was the Mock Trial of UNSCR1325, organised by Zarin Hainsworth of Serene Communications. The format featured counsel for prosecution and defence, and a judge, witnesses who were questioned by both sides, and with the audience as a somewhat large jury reaching a conclusion on the basis of that evidence and speeches for prosecution and defence. Obviously, taking place over an hour, it was a curtailed and somewhat artificial format, but using the formalities in this way focused attention on the headline exercise of enquiring how useful, in terms of actual practical impact, UNSCR1325 had been over the last 14 years. The arguments for prosecution and defence provided the headlines of the arguments pro and con. These were not original; they have been rehearsed at length in various critical articles and books, but the able presentation by practised speakers focused attention on the key issues *and* made these usefully accessible to a mixed audience. As might be expected, the evidence given by the witnesses, based on their own personal experiences in a range of conflict zones, was telling – and generally particularly so in terms of the failure of UNSCR1325 to make the impact it should have, in theory, been able to make. But it must be stressed that the trial format

ensured that the positives, as well as the negatives, were well-presented, enabling a balanced assessment to be made – especially given the effective contextualisations made by both defence and prosecution counsel. Stephen Kay and Toby Cadman, taking on what might have been seen as a thankless task in speaking for the defence throughout the three days on which the trial was staged, were extremely effective in pointing out what UNSCR1325 HAD done. That does, always, need to be remembered and amidst the criticisms, it is easy to overlook this.

While the weight of evidence given by the witnesses, in terms of the failure to implement the substance of the resolution by governments but also by the UN itself, through its various institutions and personnel, pretty well guaranteed that the verdict delivered by the audience jury would convict, the good that UNSCR1325 had done was also recognised. In many ways, what was most striking, however, was the able summary and ‘sentencing’ delivered by the figures acting as judges. On the second day of the trial, the trial judge was Cherie Booth. For me, the most striking contribution was the summary by Anne Marie Goetz, when she acted as judge on the final day of the Fringe event.² Pithy, witty, telling – it deserves to be written up and published, and I hope it will be. It served to emphasise one thing – that the fault lay not so much with the drafting and rhetoric of UNSCR1325, but rather with the failure to implement its provisions, including mechanisms from the UN side to encourage/compel compliance (I would add, also, a failure to establish a clear agreed comprehension of what constitutes rape and sexual violence in terms of internationally agreed and legally enforceable definitions). It was Dr Goetz’s emphasis on the failures of the UN itself, and the figures therein entrusted with aspects of its implementation that was so telling. It means that it was not the usual (and frequently resented) rehearsal of the failures of local states, particularly the various African and Asian ones, to do their best, with the delinquencies of the UN glossed over. This was a truly refreshing change. The final round table discussion of what the trial had brought out was also extremely useful, and deserves also to be published. And I would also welcome seeing this format used, by academics and practitioners, for other enquiries into the effectiveness of the implementation of legislation as a way of identifying where the key weaknesses in such strategies lie. Zarin and her team are to be congratulated for their initiative.

It would be impossibly long (and boring reading) to mention and summarise all the sessions attended. All those I attended were interesting and thought-provoking. Usually, I regretted that they ended without more debate being possible from the floor, though that is a common

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weakness, especially given the round table format of most. But one such session does deserve singling out because of the topic and the speakers included in the debate. The focus was on the attitudes towards gender of troops involved in peace-keeping missions. This is, obviously, core to the success of international initiatives to manage sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. If such personnel are not informedly sympathetic and committed to a gender balance in the reconstruction of societies and the inevitable accompaniment to this, seeking justice for those affected by combat, then UNSCR1325 can never hope to be more than well-meaning rhetoric. This means a shift in service culture at a very profound level. I feel more hopeful after listening to the speakers in this session, though still somewhat unconvinced about the culture obtaining in the British forces, sadly. But – it is plain that the efforts of Dr Sue Atkins, the Service Complaints Commissioner for the British Armed Forces, have at their heart a will to eradicate institutional misogyny as a way of diminishing the danger of sexual violence within those forces. She has practical powers at her disposal to help shift thinking amongst those in authority, to aid that will. I would be happier, though, if successful female officers were a little less complacent about the ability of other women to emulate them. Experience amongst officers, for instance, is not the same as experience in the ranks. As was commented, it is not just down to a shift in service culture – shifts in the contextualising culture of a state and its people are also needed. There is, of course, a further complexity: as I know, because mine is a service family (I grew up on an RAF bases, and for generations past my family has stocked the navy, army and marines as well), there is an internal service culture which can pride itself on being different and preserving older traditions, including certain assumptions about ‘proper’ gender qualities and roles. That also needs to be challenged.

The efforts of Lieutenant General David Morrison, Chief of Army in Australia have commanded respect already: his attitude towards accusations of inappropriate behaviour within the Australian army towards women was tough and practical, as his message to the army last year underlined (if you haven’t seen it, follow this link – <http://www.army.gov.au/Our-work/Speeches-and-transcripts/Message-from-the-Chief-of-Army>). He was also one of the speakers in the session, and along with Dr Atkins, the most impressive. He was a powerful speaker because he was essentially pragmatic, as well as admirable in his sentiments. He concentrated on showing how it was possible to combine the objectives and language of expectation of the armed forces with the objectives and language of a gender-balanced society, as he explained his strategy in opening up all areas of the armed services to women, without exception or reservation. More individuals like him, who see the failure to use properly women’s talents and abilities, could go a long way to improving the ability of peace-keeping forces to command local respect, and to win the trust

of victims (male and female) of sexual violence in conflict (for a link to a photograph of the panel, see <http://www.dcaf.ch/layout/set/print/Event/Forces-for-good-Changing-military-culture-Global-Summit-to-End-Sexual-Violence-in-Conflict-Fringe-event-on-military-culture>).

The motto throughout was that it was ‘time to act’: who could disagree? What remains to be seen is how useful the actions that result from this event are going to be in changing things. Hopes were high, and I suspect inevitable reactions will set in which will, in a year or so, judge the summit and the Fringe more harshly. I certainly suspect more will come out of the Fringe, in practical terms, than out of the formal summit. But – that will be, I suspect equally, almost despite rather than because of the way that the Fringe was organised. It was something which attracted huge numbers of participants of all ages – though there was certainly a predominance of women. Many of them were clearly not UK based – and that was a source of rejoicing. But – the Fringe was less effective than it could have been if the British government had thought more realistically about its potential. I came away with the impression that the Foreign Office and other elements in the British government who had organised and supported the event saw the Fringe as something which was more window dressing than a serious asset. This was because of the actual physical arrangements for the event. Taking place in the Docklands-located ExCel centre, it was not an easy location to access. More problematically, the Fringe was housed in a huge hall, which in terms of floor space was just about sufficient to contain everything planned: but four of the six ‘discussion rooms’, as well as the Theatre and Performance Stage were completely open at the top, and so – the noise levels and the difficulties that many delegates and contributors from the floor had in making themselves audible was very considerable. And that was a real shame. More thought about the practicalities of organising the Fringe could have remedied this with relatively little extra cost (the two ‘closed’ discussion rooms were better, being contained in sort of ‘igloo’ shaped tent structures). It was also very expensive to be there. The cost of water, of tea and coffee, and of food was high even by London standards. I did not see that delegates from overseas, from the charities and NGOs, those who were in many ways the ‘stars’ of the event – were being provided with tickets or vouchers to enable them to get such supplies affordably: that concerned me also. And – from a personal point of view – do not get me started on the issue of access to the ExCel centre! Another human rights issue – being disabled, but mouthy, I managed to cope by using the closest Docklands railway station. Most others I saw, including elderly and individuals with mobility issues, were being blocked from that station, both coming and going. Events like this do need their practicalities to be addressed, as well as the content.

Fiona:

Extending on the points made by my learned friend, I too feel that the Global Summit was extraordinarily helpful in drawing public attention to the ongoing issue of sexual violence against women. Members of the general public who were uninformed about the use of rape as a systematic weapon in war, for example, commented on various social media platforms that the conference not only transformed both their way of thinking and their perspective, but helped them appreciate and understand the gravity of the epidemic. This is positive praise indeed.

Likewise, I was happily surprised by the sheer volume of men, not only attending the seminars, but also facilitating them. Whilst I have attended countless conferences addressing various aspects of sexual violence, the audiences have been largely (if not exclusively) dominated by females. Considering that scholars have extensively argued that the systematic employment of sexual violence against women lies largely in the untreated issue of male 'privilege', it was encouraging (to say the least!) to witness men from various backgrounds actively participate in the discussion panels, and listen to their experiences and perspectives.

Whilst I found it refreshing to see so many people from various walks of life taking an interest in the ongoing issue of sexual violence, I felt that, overall, the content of the seminars did little to stimulate innovative debates. While complete novices felt enlightened, for those attendees who were even marginally familiar with existing discourse regarding issues surrounding sexual violence, discussions were far from pioneering. For example, whilst there was a strong focus on explaining the how rape is deployed in conflict and the plight of the victims thereafter, there was little discussion regarding treating the cultural root of the problem (including the issue of 'male privilege') and what more can be done to help support survivors of sexual violence seeking asylum in the UK and worldwide. Considering that each seminar was facilitated by delegates and experts from around the globe, this was disappointing. 'Time to Act'? YES, YES, YES – a thousand times over, YES! So let's step it up a gear: let's focus on *treating* the problem, not just highlighting it!

Concluding Comments from Both:

But – we both agree, the key issue is: HOW do we move beyond the rhetoric? Too much too soon must not be hoped for, but that does not mean that we should not hold people and institutions to account – to ask of them what they are doing to achieve the ends they have promised. And that means that we have to keep up the pressure. Bodies such as the

Foreign Office cannot be allowed to rest on what they feel are duly deserved laurels: they must be reminded that the mantra 'Time to Act' involves **action** by them, and not just rhetoric. We need to ask those on the front line who encounter the aftermath of sexual violence in conflict, figures like Lesley Abdela and Cissa wa Numbe, if *they* are seeing a real difference. We need to ask those charged with prosecutions, figures like Stephen Kay and Toby Cadman, if they now find the structures they work with in international and national courts are more responsive to the realities of prosecuting perpetrators of sexual violence, enabling them to have a greater chance of success and so supporting and validating this category of victims of conflict. And then, we need to publicise their responses....