

# Political economy, security, and the summit to end sexual violence in conflict

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From London to Ukraine, Madeleine Rees reflects on the lessons of the recent Summit to end sexual violence in conflict, and calls upon States to respond by adopting a new approach to conflict prevention, and to revisit the doctrine of the responsibility to protect.

It feels as if the Summit to [End Sexual Violence in Conflict](#) happened a long time ago, but it is worth reflecting upon and keeping in focus. The tag line “The Time to Act,” was apt. Not nearly enough has been done by States or by the military to address this violence, and for far too long its been left to civil society, mainly women, to address it.

But one thing is clear: things will not be the same again. This was said by someone who works in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), who has seen a fundamental change in the way that the UK does business on this issue, dragging the gainsayers and traditionalists along with its momentum. It is a topic that has become rooted within the FCO, it will take time for it to really grow, but it got stronger with the Summit and must be nurtured. It must also be spread to the other parts of government which have done so much [harm to women](#) with their [economic austerity policies](#), and undermined the economic [empowerment of women](#) - which William Hague has highlighted as crucial in stopping gender based violence.

Much of the criticism of the Summit was based on the emphasis place on the military as protectors, using United Nations Security Council Resolution [1325](#) as a vehicle to get women into the militarised security camp. Such an approach fails to capitalise on the real experience of women, the [factual analyses](#) of academics and Special Rapporteurs, and the [advocacy of feminists](#) over many decades. The way to deal with violence against women is by [creating real security](#), which lies in addressing political economies, the [construction of masculinities](#) in our current structures of power, [militarisation](#) and the [root causes](#) of conflict. But its also about how; how do we get from militarism and the Game of Thrones approach to conflict with the use of exceptional violence, to one where conflicts are resolved through political negotiation, brokered by the international bodies mandated to do so, and based on [inclusivity](#) and human rights?.

Most feminists vehemently oppose the idea of military security and we will continue to do so. It was one of the most criticised elements of United Nations Security Council resolution [1820](#). But perhaps there is a sequencing to achieving our goals that sometimes gets lost in our desire to achieve them. Australian Lt Col David Morrison, speaking at the Summit, drew tremendous applause for his recognition of the need to transform the military, to turn it into the service of the people, and his insistence that it has to be [inclusive and representative of women and men](#) in all our diversities so that the masculine culture is changed. What would that look like? I have no idea, but it would be a radical departure from what we have now. These are conversations that we need to engage in.

Is it not better that we discussed SCR 1325 and applied it to the military, than to pretend that we do not and should not apply it because we don't like the military? A cultural shift is what is needed in all areas of the power and structures of power. The military is one of them, so we need [intelligent engagement](#) with the question of how to fundamentally change the concept of militarised security, how it is manifested, and the modalities of change.

And as for the expertise: the young activists at the Summit brought new and better understandings of

the why and the how, and presented their findings at the closing plenary along with a [video of their participation](#). The presence of many young men in their ranks was a departure from the norm, when typically it is women talking to women - as if this was our problem alone. The future looks better in their hands.

But the highlight of the conference was the Nobel Laureate [Leymah Gbowee 's intervention in the plenary](#). Her charisma, experience, eloquence and just sheer bloody credibility for what she has done, embodied all that is best of civil society and what we say. In the single sentence, "to imagine we can stop rape in conflict without stopping wars, is like imagining we can draw blood without breaking a finger or cutting ourselves", [Leymah Gbowee](#) expressed the exact thoughts of civil society at the summit.

End war, end militarism, empower women. The end game. What we need is a road map of how to get there, and for that we need States and the likes of William Hague, who as British Foreign Secretary has put his office in our camp - more so of late with his embracing of the need for economic empowerment. We need US Secretary of State John Kerry, and indeed all State delegates, to say that no peace agreement without the participation of women can be considered legitimate. And then deliver on it.

We need the military to address its [hyper masculine violence](#) and become servants, so that Plato can finally be proved wrong. And we need Angelina Jolie. Sad beings that we are, its people like her we flock to see and we hang on their words. She brings the media of a different kind into the world of war, and hence brings their audiences into awareness even if not into action, at least not yet. We are lucky in that what she [says](#) is right, intelligent and compelling.

The question is how do we turn so much of what was said into a new approach to conflict and, more importantly conflict prevention? As the Summit was taking place, the situation in Ukraine continued to deteriorate. The descent into armed violence is following a textbook path and one, which reflects absolutely the issues that were brought out at the Summit. Gender relations, social and economic rights, militarisation and the construction of violent masculinities as predictors of armed conflict, and the inevitable violations of international law that follow. These violations are taking place in Ukraine now, not yet with sexual violence according to the UN reports, but how long until the whole plethora of war crimes become daily news, as they are in Syria? The old narrative is re-asserting itself and the international community is responding in kind.

To try to shift things, ten days after the Summit, the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#) brought six representatives of Ukrainian civil society - who are living the daily realities of the descent into armed conflict - to Geneva, in order to participate in the Human Rights Council, and to meet with member states to persuade them of the root causes and the consequences of the crisis. We also brought women from Bosnia in the hope that their experience in identifying what happens in the build up to war would help the Ukrainians. The debriefing with the Bosnians was most telling. What they reported was happening to their Ukrainian counter parts is not printable, but it graphically described their situation. They speak from experience, and they see exactly what direction the narrative is going in and the un-preparedness of civil society to redirect it.

In 1991 and 1992 Bosnia was in the same situation, and so were the states now engaging in Ukraine. The Bosnians had not believed that they had an ethnic problem, they told the Ukrainians that this had been invented for them and was not a narrative that they shared, but one which nevertheless became dominant. They told the Ukrainians to stop being naïve in thinking that an "us" and "them" identity is not already underway.

The Ukrainians did not know how to respond, it was if they had been provided with a glimpse of something coming and were afraid of what they saw. They believed that the European Union would not abandon them and that no war was possible (a refrain rehearsed by one of the delegation from Ukraine with a plea for arms and support, as if a military solution against Russia is conceivable...). The

Bosnians remarked that they too had been down that route and know where it leads.

There is a solution and it is rooted in economics. It is about trade with the east and trade with the west, which is vital, but Ukraine is being prevented from doing so by the two power blocks on either border. If this could be negotiated then the east would be calmer as those who fear for their livelihoods can be mollified. If the conditions of the IMF loan can be cushioned by the intelligent and gendered use of the financial support from the US and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to ensure that the economic - and therefore social position of women - is not further eroded, and if this is matched by social policies that are inclusive of the most impoverished, then some of the conditions for conflict would begin to be ameliorated.

It requires external and internal actors to work together to find ways of talking down the men with the guns and feeding them back into an improved system of cooperation. As with all violent conflict, Ukraine has now the vista of foreign fighters on its soil, and not ones that can be controlled by Russia it seems. Regional instability, even more than usual, is a serious prospect.

We set out these lessons at the Summit, most forcefully in the fringe. We know how it happens, we know what needs to be done to address each part. What is vital now is that States also respond to this knowledge, analysis and experience. It takes time and concerted effort. Given the consequences of a failure to act together, it is surely time to revisit the doctrine of the [Responsibility to Protect](#) and make sure that the states that are engaged in this mess actually comply with their legal obligations to prevent war.