

Women are Key to UN Reforms

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, September 14, 2005

In his first public undertaking as US Ambassador, John Bolton is pressing for sweeping institutional reforms at the United Nations. His approach is presumably intended to enhance UN efforts at peacekeeping, fighting terrorism, nuclear disarmament, and democratization.

This week, 175 world leaders will convene for a summit that's billed as the largest gathering of its kind in history. As they discuss reforms and the UN's future, let's recognize a key reality: Sustainable peace requires a model of "inclusive security," in which all stakeholders, especially women, participate fully in formal and informal peace processes.

In 2000, it appeared the UN might be seeing the light when the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325. In addition to calling for protection of women and girls from gender-based violence used as a weapon of war, the resolution recognizes women's leadership in peace processes. Nations came together to urge all actors—including the UN itself—to include gender perspectives in all peace and security efforts. The Secretary General and his top staff enthusiastically endorsed the resolution.

Five years later women remain largely excluded from efforts to implement fresh, workable solutions to conflict. Until 2000, only four women had ever served as Special Representatives of the Secretary General (SRSG), and things have hardly improved. A paltry two of 17 SRSG's heading UN peacekeeping missions are women: Carolyn McAskie in Burundi and Heidi Tagliavini in Georgia.

But this is more than just a numbers game. Many men have great gender sensitivity, and many women have forgotten their own. Still it's critical to have women in leadership positions to inspire others on the ground as they work night and day preventing conflict, stopping war, and stabilizing damaged regions.

Just what do women bring to the table?

First, they're community leaders with formal and informal authority. They lead NGOs, electoral referenda, and other citizen-empowering movements that promote democracy. After the 1994 Rwandan genocide, women were 75% of the population. At only 26 years old, Aloisea Inyumba drove the village-level reconciliation initiative that helped stabilize the country. She also spearheaded a national adoption campaign to find homes for children orphaned by the killings, reducing the number without families from 500,000 to 4,000.

Second, women bridge ethnic, religious, and political divides. Catholic and Protestant women in Northern Ireland won the Nobel Prize for organizing public marches demanding an end to the violence. And in Sri Lanka mothers in warring factions have united in efforts to stop war.

Third, women are less threatening than men. Ironically, their status as "second-class citizens" can help. Jelka Kebo in Bosnia says that because women were assumed not to have fired the guns, they were able to work on post-war reconciliation long before the men were.

Fourth, women are highly invested in stopping conflict. When rape is used to humiliate the enemy or terrorize civilians, they become targets themselves. But they also watch as sons and husbands become combatants or prisoners of war; many never return, leaving women to care for children and elders. Counselors in the Philippines working with mothers of schoolchildren held hostage are convinced that, had those distraught mothers been making the decisions, "they would have said no to war, no to violence."

Finally, living and working close to the roots of conflict, women have their fingers on the pulse of the community. In Kosovo, Vjosa Dobruna, physician, transformed herself into a one-woman response unit speeding to sites of Serb-perpetrated massacres. After documenting abuses, she was put in charge of post-conflict "democracy and civil society." She made a local café her office, using her cell phone to launch initiatives promoting democracy and independent media.

Given the UN's inability to follow through on its promises to include women in peace efforts, firmer measures are needed, such as setting aside a proportion of positions at all levels of the UN family. The Secretary General must commit to appointing women to lead a reasonable number of UN missions, even as the Bonn Agreement set the percentage for women in the Afghan parliament. All mission leaders must include women in every decision-making structure addressing post-conflict resolution and peacekeeping. Finally, the offices of ambassadors to the UN in New York need at least 30 percent female employees, infiltrating from top to bottom.

Even at 60, the UN has become set in its ways. In the days ahead, the United Nations faces a defining choice. Will it recycle the same old same old, or refresh itself with new players?