

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL OP ED

November 2011

Index: ACT 77/007/2011

Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women

These past few months have seen many advances on women's participation in post-conflict settings; at least on paper.

In September female world leaders gathered in New York to speak to the benefits of involving women in politics, in particular after war. In October the UN Security Council called for increased participation of women in conflict resolution and peace-building. Just last week, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution spelling out state obligations to further women's participation all settings, in particular countries in political transition.

Reality, though, is starkly different.

On October 20, world leaders met with the transitional government of Libya to discuss donations and support for this post-conflict country. In the lead-up to the donor conference, civil society and UN experts expressed deep concern about the overwhelmingly male official Libyan delegation. Some reported a push from the Libyan government to keep female civil society representatives away too.

And as we approach the 10-year anniversary of the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to be marked with a donor conference in Bonn on December 5, it is unclear whether the Afghan government will include women in its official delegation, and whether Afghan women's groups will be allowed to speak and participate meaningfully. The case of Afghanistan is particularly ironic because a key justification for international intervention in the first place was the Taliban's appalling record on women's rights.

Perhaps we should no longer feel surprised at the snail pace with which promises on women in conflict are implemented. Even on rape in war, arguably the least controversial women's rights issue, individual states as well as the international community are dragging their feet.

There is no conflict in recent history where women and girls have not been targeted for sexual violence, whether as a form of torture, as a method to humiliate the enemy, or with a view to spreading terror and despair. Yet it took decades of reports on vicious sexual violence in conflicts across the globe, before the UN Security Council set up an office to gather information and push for action.

Some countries that have emerged out of conflict, such as Cote d'Ivoire and Bosnia and Herzegovina, do not adequately criminalize rape in their domestic laws. More generally, the vast majority of countries fail to prosecute and address both rape and violence against women. Women and girls who report sexual violence face stigma, ostracism and disbelief from the authorities who fail to follow up their cases, and from their own families and communities who blame the victims for the abuse.

Yet there is something about the current climate of change that inspires hope. To be sure, there is a gulf of difference between the Arab Spring revolutions and the Occupy movement sweeping through the North American continent. For one thing, while the police have almost certainly used undue force on some of the Occupy participants in New York and elsewhere, demonstrators there need not fear for their lives. This is not the case of those pushing for change in Syria, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and beyond.

But the call for equality is a unifying element of the demands presented by the popular movements most everywhere. Therefore, regardless of where we are and whether we feel affinity for any of these movements, as we commemorate November 25, the International Day to Eliminate Violence Against Women, let us remind each other that equality means equality for women too.

These past few months have been big on words and renewed promises on women's participation, in particular in post-conflict settings. While it is incumbent on all of us to make sure these promises are kept, governments have a special obligation to ensure equality. This is true whether the government represents a country recently out of conflict, still experiencing high levels of general violence, or a peaceful country merely contemplating financial support for change. Change is possible. Change that secures equality is essential. We just have to commit to actually making change happen.