

# Women Take the Lead on International Peace and Security Issues

By Kate Nancy Taylor

In August 2013, the Australian government committed to using its Presidency of the United Nations Security Council to highlight the women, peace and security agenda. Ahead of this thematic focus, the Castan Centre hosted a public forum to discuss the unique position of women in conflict. While Australia's presidential theme was ultimately changed to 'small arms' by the newly-elected federal government, the Centre's public forum nevertheless provided an opportunity for a dedicated panel and curious audience to discuss how best to ensure women play an active role in conflict prevention and the post-conflict rebuilding of communities.

Dr Jacqui True, who chaired the evening, began by introducing the important work conducted by the Australian and New Zealand-based Women, Peace and Security Academic Collective (WPSAC). WPSAC is a group firmly committed to furthering academic feminist efforts in relation to Australia's term on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and focuses on the importance of women's agency and the provision of appropriate structural conditions for lasting peace.

While the international community has already made significant headway in recognising the role of women within the peace and security agenda - as demonstrated by, for example, the UNSC's unanimous adoption in 2001 of Resolution 1325, which calls for a gender perspective in post-conflict reconstruction - there is a current lack of concrete mechanisms to ensure such promises are met, Dr True explained.

Perhaps more positive were the remarks by Dr Sifris, who remarked that gender-based crimes play an increasingly prominent role in prosecutions for breaches of international criminal law. For example, she reminded the audience, the 1998 International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda case *Prosecutor v Akayesu* is considered a landmark decision for its recognition of rape as a form of torture, genocide and as a crime against humanity.

Dr Sifris went on to address transitional justice – a term that refers to various measures that may be implemented in order to redress a legacy of human rights abuses – and its link with gender.

As she explained, a truly restorative approach to transitional justice must recognise that men and women experience conflict differently and, in particular, that women are disproportionately affected by the deprivation of their economic, social and cultural rights during conflict. Similarly, Dr Sifris noted, a restorative approach to transitional justice must acknowledge that because these issues are seen as 'non-traditional' breaches of international law, they require non-traditional agents of change – such as women in leadership positions. On this note, Dr Sifris light-heartedly reminded the audience that "if you're not at the table, you're probably on the menu!"

Following Dr Sifris' remarks, Dr Lesley Pruitt presented her research concerning all-female UN peacekeeping units. As she explained, the UN deployed its first all-female formed police unit (FFPU) from India to Liberia in 2007. As Dr Pruitt reported, in a climate where peacekeeping operations are hyper-masculine, FFPU's are a novel and revolutionary idea – and, since the

introduction of the FFPU, Liberia has made major gains on the ground in relation to women, peace and security. For example, UN sources state that reporting of sexual crimes in Liberia has increased, likely due to the greater presence of women fostering a less fearful environment. In addition, Dr Pruitt said, the percentage of local female admissions to the Liberian police force has seen a marked increase.

Dr Sharon Pickering brought a different perspective to the evening, highlighting the research conducted by Monash University's Border Crossing Observatory on the experiences of female asylum seekers. With the percentage of women who seek asylum on the rise, Dr Pickering explained, women are increasingly reluctant to 'stay behind' and wait for their husbands and families to 'send for them'. This migratory trend has cast into light the violent, illicit and unregulated spaces which disproportionately affect female asylum seekers, she said.

Dr Pickering further highlighted that women are more likely to die, and be subject to sexual abuse, arbitrary detention and expulsion in their attempts to seek asylum. Thus, she explained, conducting robust and independent research is of the utmost importance in shaping national debate and allowing these women's voices to be heard.

Following the diverse presentations by these impressive women, the room was turned over to the audience for a thorough discussion about how to effect real change in a world that often doesn't listen.

Asked what the best ways to make a difference in this area might be, the panelists thoughtfully suggested independent research, social media, and an enduring commitment to keep talking to those most affected.

As the world gradually moves closer to recognising women's important role in the peace and security agenda, these are messages that surely won't be forgotten by the evening's receptive audience.

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The evening's chair, Dr Jacqui True, with speakers Dr Sharon Pickering, Dr Ronli Sifris and Dr Lesley Pruitt.