



One could hear a pin drop in the big auditorium at the European Development Days when Taffan Ako Taha, a Swedish activist recounted in the first person the agony of a twelve-year-old Yazidi girl who was raped 136 times by ISIS terrorists in Iraq.

As she concluded her story Taha asked a panel on Women, Peace and Security in which she participated: “How do we get her back to life?”

That question will perhaps remain unanswered but the panel discussion organized by the Swedish Kvinna to Kvinna Foundation, focused on how to prevent such atrocities being repeated. Certainly, some of the participants in the panel discussions, where Taha told her story, are in positions of power, such as Pramilla Patten, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence against Women in Conflict, Rose Gottemoeller, Deputy Secretary-General of NATO and Helga Maria Schmid, the Secretary-General of the EU’s External Actions Service (EEAS).

Simon Maxwell, the moderator of the panel discussion on “Time to act! – High-level panel on Women, Peace and Security”, started by asking how many were familiar with UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and a rough count indicated that 20% knew about the landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security from 2000.

Petra Tötterman Andorff, the Secretary-General of the Kvinna til Kvinna Foundation presented a new report: “Suffocating the movement. The shrinking space for women’s rights.” The report is based on interviews with 123 campaigners for women’s rights in 32 countries in Central Asia, the Middle-East, Africa and Europe.

“60% of them had experienced negative developments,” Petra Tötterman Andorff said.

According to the Report the “Shrinking space” is due to a ban on foreign funding, administrative burden, slander and threats of violence to activists, including sexual violence. “A key component of preventing war is civil society”, Andorff said.

“For several years we have seen what we can call an anti-democratic movement, the shrinking public civic space, which makes it really hard for us and our partners to do the work that we do, to promote women’s rights, gender equality and the prevention of conflict... When women’s rights organization aren’t able to do the work that they do, then we have a big problem,”

Pramila Patten, the UN Special Representative on sexual violence against women in conflict said that in the evaluation of Security Council Resolution 1325, now approaching its 20th anniversary, it is extremely important that the focus be placed on prevention. “The world has lost sight of the key demands of women’s movements back in 2000, who were advocating the adoption of resolution 1325. Women were asking that prevention was placed as a key part on the Security Council agenda...The women, peace and security agenda is about ending conflict, it is not about making conflict safer for women.”

The Dayton negotiations to end the Balkan-wars was frequently mentioned as a peace process where women were excluded.

“When it comes to mediation we have to make sure that women are also there,” Helga Maria Schmid, the Secretary-General of the EU’s External Actions Service (EEAS) said. “Women are doing fantastic work at the grass-root level but when it comes to official negotiations there are very few cases where they are involved. I would say that women are side-lined when it comes to post-conflict situations, creation of constitutions and so on.”

Rose Gottemoeller, the Deputy Secretary-General of NATO said that she had been in government when the Dayton agreement was made and confirmed that “I don’t remember many women at the negotiating table.” However, women had been involved from the outset in peace processes in Northern-Ireland and Colombia. “They are not perfect, but they did involve women from the outset and statistics tell the tale, if women are involved in a peace and reconciliation process from the outset, it is much more likely to succeed.”

Taffan Ako Taha, the Swedish activist of Kurdish origin who shocked a normally talkative panel and audience into silence by recounting the story of the girl who was raped 136 times, rounded up the discussion by saying out loud what many were silently thinking:

“Is this going to be just one of these conferences or will there be a follow-up?”. And paraphrasing the title of the panel discussion, it is indeed “time to act”.