

Madeleine Rees: Human rights lawyer on her battle to combat violence against women



Human rights lawyer Madeleine Rees tells Karen Attwood why attitudes to rape in conflict need to change

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Human rights lawyer Madeleine Rees has a reputation for speaking out about violence against women.

As a United Nations official in Bosnia she helped to blow the whistle on the role of UN peacekeepers in sex-trafficking. More recently, she has played a key role in shaping the protocol for the investigation and documentation of sexual violence in war zones.

The high-profile End Sexual Violence in Conflict conference, which Rees worked on with William Hague and Angelina Jolie-Pitt a year ago, has recently been criticised as “costly and ineffective”. Reports indicate sexual violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has actually risen since the former foreign secretary and the Hollywood star highlighted violence against women in the region.

But Rees, 58, who is the secretary general of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), believes that the criticism is “pernickety and misplaced”. “We all knew that, of course, sexual violence was not going to die overnight,” she says, but “having men from the military stating that this was a problem” was a huge step forward. “Stopping rape in war is never going to be entirely possible but there are ways to create more accountability.”



Madeleine Rees has worked with William Hague and Angelina Jolie-Pitt (pictured) on the End Sexual Violence in Conflict conference (AFP/Getty)

Since the conference, UK troops have trained 700 peshmerga in preventing and responding to sexual violence in Iraq and Syria, and last month Baroness Anelay, the newly appointed Prime Minister's special representative on Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) announced £700,000 in new funding to support a training programme for African Union peacekeepers. Some £20m of funding has been allocated to PSVI-related work.

"There are elements that need to be more coherent within the initiative and it does need to have more of a strategy," says Geneva-based Rees, who is in the UK to discuss a PSVI collaboration with the London School of Economics. "Rape is used because it works and this is because of all the cultural issues around it. If you speak to survivors of sexual violence, they often say it's not the worst thing that has happened to them. They may have seen their husband torn to pieces or their kids murdered and you don't get over that. But rape works because of patriarchy and the objectification of women."

Rees believes that if "women's bodies were not seen as the property of a man and if she is not disgraced [by being raped] then it would stop working". But how can we change such attitudes?

"It can change and be changed very quickly," she says. "You don't get shamed if you are tortured but you do if you are raped. Women are seen as being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is part of our culture that sees women as objects and not as subjects in their own sexuality. One of the ways of changing this is showing that women are not walking round in a permanent state of readiness for sex. Men have to understand that. Men are brought up in a culture that denigrates women in that way."

To illustrate her point, Rees tells me the story of a Bosnian woman who was raped in front of her parents before they were murdered. The woman said, in court testimony: "I hope they [her parents] forgave me before they died."

Rees says that it is that attitude of self-blaming and guilt that accounts for why rape "works" as a means of oppression. "Increasing understanding and awareness that men get raped too will have an impact," she says. "When men get raped it is seen as torture but when women get raped it is rape ... this awareness is going to change over time and change the way we think about rape. We will see it as part of torture."

In pictures: Argentina protests to condemn violence against women

A colleague of Rees recently got upset when she saw images of Yazidi women in cages – captured by the so-called Islamic State (Isis). They were reportedly raped and sold off for as little as \$25.

“I told her that that happened in Bosnia too, only there the people buying were the Americans and Europeans,” says Rees, who was a teacher in Birmingham for many years before retraining as a lawyer in her thirties. “There are fault lines everywhere. There are white Londoners doing this here. Let’s not pretend that everything is rosy for woman around the world, because it is not.”

WILPF, which is celebrating its centenary this year, brought women who have lived under IS to a conference in Istanbul, in June. The women, who were smuggled out of Syria and Iraq, told the conference that if bombing raids by the US and its allies stopped, IS “would implode” due to internal divisions.

“The thing that keeps the coherence of Isis going is that they are at war,” says Rees. “The motivation for joining is obviously diverse. In Iraq, Sunnis were persecuted by the Shia militia for years ... Isis comes along and gives them money and guns and, of course, they fight back. You have the foreign fighters. You have men and young boys from Syria, some of whom have been sent by their mothers to fight with Isis as they might be safer there than at home, where barrel bombs and the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas means that 93 per cent of all deaths are civilian deaths. There are many potential divisions. And bombing never works.”

Rees was played by Vanessa Redgrave in the 2010 film *The Whistleblower* which told the story of Kathryn Bolkovac, a peacekeeper in post-war Bosnia who exposed the UN sex scandal and cover-up. Rees has seen the film more than 40 times at conferences and special events. She says it “doesn’t get any better” than being played by Redgrave, and jokes that she now knows the script by heart. While her own character was a “composite” of several people, the film itself was a “completely accurate portrayal of what happens to trafficked women”, she says. Sadly, she does not believe the UN has changed since the movie’s release.



An Argentinean woman takes part in a demonstration to raise awareness of 'femicide' in the country, and to demand the implementation of the law against gender violence

“We know it still goes on,” she says. “We know why nothing is done – because of impunity. The UN is a deeply patriarchal organisation and even the women who go into positions of power reflect that. I

think the UN carries the seeds of its own destruction. It is no longer credible. It's all about the UN protocol rather than the human rights abuses.”

Despite this she says she does have hope. Without it “I couldn't do the job I do”.

“Despite some of the things I have seen and heard I still have faith in humanity. We are better than we are allowing ourselves to be. The wonderful thing about my job is I meet the most incredible people and