

## Women as mediators and peacekeepers

An increased presence of women among peace negotiators and peacekeeping forces, among other critical actors, would greatly enhance women's contributions to conflict resolution and post-conflict rehabilitation. As a District Officer from the Ituri Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo explained in a report to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), "Local women [and girls] have difficulty in talking freely to uniformed men, such as male military observers, especially about sensitive issues such as sexual violence and abuse.... In many cases, especially where there is endemic violence, local women [and girls] prefer to speak to a woman peacekeeper because they fear further violence, including from male peacekeepers."

The UN is fully aware of this fact. While the number of women among the uniformed personnel (military and police forces) deployed by DPKO remains miniscule – at 4 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively – active steps taken by the department in recent years have increased the number of civilian positions held by women. These steps reflect a growing recognition that the presence of women among peacekeeping forces is critical to the success of their missions, and can reduce the possibility

that peacekeepers engage in acts of sexual exploitation and abuse against the very populations they are mandated to protect, especially young girls. Among the key findings of an investigation initiated by the UN Secretary-General into such cases was the recognition that "the presence of more women in a mission, especially at senior levels, will help to promote an environment that discourages sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly of the local population."

At the behest of the UN General Assembly, as well as the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, in June 2006 the UN Secretary-General issued a comprehensive strategy for assistance to victims of sexual abuse by UN personnel. This policy, which UNICEF helped formulate, proposes a comprehensive approach to victim support, including basic health, psychosocial, legal and administrative assistance for all victims and, in exceptional cases, financial assistance. Building on this policy, UNICEF, DPKO, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme are organizing a high-level meeting to further address sexual exploitation and abuse in a comprehensive manner.

In addition to peacekeepers, mediators who represent the international community can act as 'tipping points' to help women secure representation in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. A recent assessment of women's participation in peace processes as 'track one' mediators – those involved in official negotiations through formal channels rather than unofficial contacts ('track two' mediators) – found that women remain largely excluded from conflict mediation and resolution processes. At the United Nations, women hold only 6.5 per cent of senior peace-related positions, while the European Union counts no women at all among its current and former high-level mediators. Similarly, despite Africa's deserved reputation of having strong female role models, women are entirely absent from the driving seat of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. In conflicts where pre-agreement peace processes are ongoing, stalled or forthcoming, and where the United Nations or the European Union is not taking the lead role, only Uganda stands out for the presence of a lone female mediator.

*See References, page 88.*