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To all victims of sexual violence I offer my compassion and my respect for your courage and your dignity. To the many distinguished participants in this Global Summit, it is an honour beyond words for me to be able to contribute to this vital cause.

At the heart of every great human endeavour – crystallising the work of nations, of governments, of summits such as this, stands the individual: a man or woman whose conscious choice, for good or ill, determines the fate of all our aspirations.

To end sexual violence in conflict is a great endeavour and at its heart stands the soldier and the choice that he will make, when all is at its most elemental – a simple, terrible choice – to be a protector or a perpetrator. I have said “he” deliberately, for the world’s armies are overwhelmingly male institutions. I have deliberately excluded a third choice – to be a bystander while others commit sexual violence. There are no bystanders – the standard you walk past is the standard you accept.

These matters are so complex, so fundamental to our humanity, that the comments that I may make as a soldier could be construed as simplistic and without practical merit. Nonetheless, I can state without hesitation that an end to sexual violence in conflict will not be achieved without fundamental reforms to how all armies recruit, retain and employ women; and how they realise the improved military capability that is accrued through more effective gender and ethnic diversity.

Military service must be seen in the context of the civil societies from which all soldiers are drawn. Soldiers are a reflection of their societies as much as they are the personification of any military values they have been taught.

I am no sociologist. I have no anthropological training, but I am certain of this: we live in a world where the squandering of women’s talent, the traducing of their potential, is a global disgrace.

By every credible measure, women are denied opportunities that are accorded to men as a birthright of their sex. For far too many, formal

education is an unfulfilled dream. At home they face levels of domestic violence that imperil their very being. This is the case in so called first-world nations and in the developing world; it is a feature of secular and non-secular societies. Women face barriers, sometimes tangible, often subliminal, that constrain their lives and their contributions to the development of our world. This debilitating aspect of modern society affects us all, including those who become our soldiers.

So what must armies do if meaningful change is to be made? All military forces inculcate values in those they bring into their service. Those values may vary between nations influenced by prevailing cultural, religious and societal beliefs and mores, but they are absolutely key to ending sexual violence.

Why? Because those values are employed to distinguish the soldier from the civilian. And here I offer no criticism at all. If Plato was right, and I think he was, that only the dead have seen an end to war, then military service will remain a feature of the human condition. Thus soldiers will continue to carry a contract with their nation of unlimited liability. In their service, they literally offer their lives as collateral on that contract.

I am proud to be a soldier in my Army and I know first hand the work that Australian soldiers and the soldiers of many nations, have done as protectors in conflicted societies around the globe. Their courage and capacity for sacrifice is to be honoured.

But armies that revel in their separateness from civil society, that value the male over the female, that use their imposed values to exclude those who don't fit the particular traits of the dominant group, who celebrate the violence that is integral to my profession rather than seeking ways to contain it - they do nothing to distinguish the soldier from the brute.

There is, I believe, hope in all of this. There are some militaries who are now taking substantial measures to address systemic cultural issues that set the values, behaviours and beliefs of those who serve in their ranks. What makes these measures notable is that they are being driven by leaders who want to make their institutions more capable, not by managers seeking to deal with the latest instance of aberrant conduct. What characterises that leadership is a pragmatic assessment that gender and ethnic diversity creates more effective armies, navies and air forces.

This requires considerable political and military courage but the benefits, both for capability and for ethical conduct on operations is tangible. I offer two initiatives that have been shown to have a dramatic impact.

First, make all areas of military service open to women. It wipes away the barriers to achieving potential and sends a clarion call to all who serve that talent will prevail, not gender. Secondly, appoint an independent statutory authority to review the treatment of women, and of men and women from

ethnic minorities who comprise the force. The first step to reaching a solution is knowing that you have a problem.

Know that once committed, there is no going back but that the opportunities presented will make you more capable in every respect.

After all, if militaries are required, as they continually are, to protect threatened societies from violence, their capacity for empathy and their respect for the diversity intrinsic to those societies can only make them more effective not less.

I am, of course, respectful of the fact that some nations and societies will not seek such paths. They will do so for cultural and possibly religious reasons. Nonetheless, my own experience is that there is great benefit to be gained from being inclusive of all the potential and talent that is available within both genders and all ethnic groups that make up the nation state.

That great American Robert Kennedy was right. He said “It is from the numberless acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Every time someone stands up for an ideal, or speaks out against an injustice, or moves to improve the lot of a fellow human being, they send a tiny ripple of hope - and crossing one another from a million different centres of energy and daring, those tiny ripples can build up to a tidal wave capable of sweeping away the mightiest walls of resistance and oppression.”

It is my belief that these ripples can be regimented, clothed in the uniforms of soldiers, marched to the beat of a progressive drum. That we can all make a difference, citizen and soldier alike.