

At Angelina Jolie-chaired summit, faith leaders work to end sexual violence

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LONDON (RNS) Religious leaders from across Africa and England came together Wednesday (June 11) to discuss the role clergy should play in preventing and responding to sexual violence.

The panel was part of the three-day Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict co-chaired by Angelina Jolie, the special envoy for the U.N. high commissioner for refugees. Jolie made an unannounced appearance before the event, causing attendance to surge and preventing several dozen participants from entering the crowded conference room.

In a pre-recorded video message, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby started the session by describing some of the positive developments he observed firsthand on a recent trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"Historically there has been a culture of impunity," he said. "Faith leaders are challenging that culture fiercely and saying that rape and sexual violence in war is absolutely unacceptable and will result in consequences."

Clergy from England and a range of states in Africa championed Welby's message.

"Religious leaders are a tremendous moral and spiritual influence and they have a unique understanding of their own communities," said Shahin Ashraf, the University of Birmingham's Muslim chaplain and an activist for gender justice. She cautioned that while religion can be part of the healing process it can also be part of the problem "when people aren't properly informed about religious texts and debates."

Rabbi Shulamit Ambalu, a Jewish leader in London, said faith leaders must "speak the unspeakable" and actively support women and men who have suffered from sexual violence, a crime she described as both physical and spiritual.

"When a woman who is taught that her body exists to guard the family's purity is raped, she is then shamed, internalizes that shame, and blames herself," Ambalu said. "If religious institutions suppress that—or even, God forbid, cause that—then we heap humiliation and helplessness not just on women but on boys and men who might also be the victims of rape."

Archbishop Onesphore Rwaje of the Anglican Church of Rwanda nodded in agreement. "We have to prevent sexual violence by playing our prophetic role," he said. "The church is a sleeping giant. Let us get up and speak out."

The Rev. Nicholas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, president of the Evangelical Alliance in the Central African Republic, said that to overcome conflict, religious leaders must be fully integrated and involved in the peace-building process.

A closed session of government representatives planned to discuss implementing recommendations raised in the public session.