

Remarks at a Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

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Thank you, Madame President, for organizing today's debate. We appreciate greatly the remarks and leadership of Special Representative Zainab Bangura and Ms. Hamsatu Allamin on the critical issue of combating sexual violence in conflict.

Fifteen years ago this October, the UN Security Council acknowledged the critical importance of women in the maintenance of international peace and security. This October, the Council will convene at the ministerial level to take stock of our progress over these past 15 years and determine the way forward.

Looking ahead to this high-level review in October, today's debate is an opportunity to assess the progress made, and the challenges ahead of us related to protection against conflict-related sexual violence. As we know from experience, women and children are disproportionately affected by such violence, and the use of sexual violence as a tool of war too often serves to marginalize women and obstruct their participation in peace processes.

Over the last several years, the international community has galvanized around this issue, denouncing the culture of impunity surrounding sexual violence and supporting judicial and legal reforms, among other interventions. We have seen progress in this regard, but there is much more that remains to be done. Special Representative Bangura has demonstrated admirable leadership in tackling this difficult issue head-on. Her personal efforts, along with those of many individuals here today, have already resulted in significant changes in the way we approach conflict-related sexual violence.

Women leaders have been dynamic agents for change in combatting sexual violence, and we are inspired by their work around the world. They not only support survivors in their work, but also promote prevention, recovery, and resilience through efforts that champion women's active participation in decision-making and society.

Women such as Landy, a 28-year old law student in Haiti who volunteered with a U.S.-funded program and has since committed herself to using the law as an important tool for preventing violence.

Women such as Sri Lankan peace activist Shreen Saroor who, through her NGO, has fostered critical grassroots peace building and reconciliation activities, and provided essential support for survivors of sexual violence.

And in the Central African Republic, our efforts to support survivors' recovery through economic empowerment are intricately tied to ensuring the future safety and protection of these courageous women.

Across the world, we are working with women through leadership programs, small grants, and professional training to demand better, safer lives through legislation that protects the rights of women, and men, from gender-based violence. Unfortunately, there are severe gaps in many local justice systems and international accountability that must be remedied in order to hold all perpetrators accountable.

At the June 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, representatives from over 120 different countries committed to strengthening accountability. They agreed that the way forward must include capacity building and focus on the rule of law in order to create a sustainable and secure system of justice. The United States unveiled our new Accountability Initiative at the June Summit, which supports specialized justice sector mechanisms and reflects our commitment to move sexual violence out of the shadows and into the sphere of justice.

However, we must not forget that we have come a long way. In the period since this Council took up the issue of conflict-related sexual violence in resolution 1820, many member states have made significant strides, as demonstrated by the Secretary-General's recent report on conflict-related sexual violence. Of the five states cited as having security forces suspected of committing or being responsible for patterns of rape or other forms of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict on the UN Security Council's agenda, four have committed to adopting specific measures to address conflict-related sexual violence.

Unsurprisingly, the Syrian Armed Forces, intelligence services, and pro-government forces stand apart from international norms, in this regard. Among the violations faced by Syrians daily are reports of sexual violence against women, men, girls, and boys in flight, house searches, checkpoints, and especially detention.

A significant challenge also lies in curtailing the violence and crimes of non-state actors, such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, also known as "ISIL" or

“Da’esh”. These groups utilize conflict-related sexual violence not only to terrorize women and children, but as a war tactic to suppress opposition and to punish those whose beliefs differ. Sexual and gender-based violence has become an ingrained aspect of their overall strategy for controlling territory, destroying the social fabric, and recruiting new supporters.

Yesterday marked the one year anniversary of the kidnapping of 276 girls from Chibok, Nigeria. And heartbreakingly, as Ms. Allamin has just reported, many of their fates remain unknown. Boko Haram’s gross violence against women and girls – abduction and rape often exercised under the cover of false terms, such as “marriage” or the use of girls as suicide bombers – is a symbol of its toxic ideology. And in Iraq, the devastating plight of minority communities wrought by ISIL, especially sexual slavery faced by women and girls, is a call to action.

As so compellingly detailed by Special Representative Bangura, the tools at the disposal of the international community require further refinement in the approach to non-state actors. The threat of prosecution, while necessary, does not alone deter groups like Boko Haram or ISIL, nor are the groups responsive necessarily to international censure. Consequently, we must consider stronger, more innovative, and more aggressive approaches to address these groups’ use of sexual violence. I invite the UN Secretariat and the international community to think thoroughly about this challenge and to join us in New York in October with a renewed commitment to stopping the sexual predations of non-state actors.

Another area we applaud the Secretary-General for including in his report is the disproportionate and unique impact of sexual violence on the LGBT community. Pre-existing political disenfranchisement, social exclusion, and violence against LGBT individuals intensifies in situations of conflict, often with complete impunity. When individuals are targeted for conflict-related sexual violence based on their real or perceived identity, it is not only appropriate but necessary for the UN and the international community to identify ways to halt it.

We must protect all people from the crimes of sexual violence and improve measures to protect those most at risk. Preventing sexual violence is not about politics. It's about our common humanity. It's about respect. We must all stand united in taking urgent action to combat sexual violence in conflict and to reach out to support survivors around the world. Thank you, Madame President.