

Statement
by
Ms. Rachel Mayarja
Assistant Secretary-General
Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
at
The Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
New York, 29 October 2008

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Members of the Council,

It is a great honour for me to introduce the report of the Secretary-General on women, peace and security. I welcome the leadership shown by the People's Republic of China in holding this open thematic debate during its Presidency, a testimony to their commitment to gender equality and the full involvement of women in all peace processes. I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for affording me this opportunity to address the Council on the critical theme of women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

The report before you (document S/2008/622) provides an assessment of progress and challenges in implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) and measures taken by Member States, UN entities and civil society, including best practices, to improve capacities of Member States.

Over the past years, some important progress was made in mainstreaming a gender perspective into the overall peace and security architecture, making it more sensitive to women's needs and concerns. This Council addressed various aspects of women and peace in its thematic debates and country specific conflict situations on its agenda. The adoption of its resolution 1820 (2008) earlier this year marked a new milestone in fighting sexual violence in situations of armed conflict. The Council recognized sexual violence as a security problem that requires a systematic security response. It squarely placed responsibility for stopping sexual violence against women on parties to conflict and committed itself to adopting appropriate steps to address widespread or systematic violence.

I commend the Council for its efforts in ending sexual violence. We must maintain and build on the momentum created by the resolution as well as General Assembly resolutions 62/133 on the elimination of all forms of violence and 62/134 on rape and other forms of sexual violence and including through the Secretary-General's Campaign on "UNite to End Violence against Women" launched on 25 February 2008 and many other initiatives by the UN system.

There have been undoubted gains in many of the broad areas for action set out in the resolution, namely, awareness of the importance of gender equality, development of national action plans, gender mainstreaming, capacity building and support for greater participation of women in decision making and nation-building, including in elections and governance.

The UN system has a vital role to play in supporting Member States and civil society by building women's capacities, providing technical cooperation, advocating and facilitating their participation in elections and formal and informal peace processes. Significant gains have been made in gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. More attention to gender equality is being paid in peacebuilding.

Civil society has been active in the national implementation process, holding governments accountable and injecting new dynamism into societies.

However, a noticeable gap between policies and implementation of the resolution remains, in particular, at the national level. We have a long way to go in ensuring women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, particularly in conflict prevention and resolution, equal representation in security institutions and decision making bodies, as well as ensuring women's protection from sexual violence and ending impunity. Only ten Member States have developed specific national action plans for implementation of resolution 1325(2000) and five more are in the process of developing such plans. The capacity of the UN system to provide coherent, timely and demand-driven support to Member States must be significantly enhanced.

The report contains a number of action oriented recommendations to fill these gaps, calling for more gender sensitive conflict prevention and early warning; stronger focus on means to prevent or deter sexual violence; dispatch of missions of this Council to assess situations when sexual violence is being used as a tactic of war, and consideration of targeted sanctions on individuals or parties to conflict carrying out widespread or systematic sexual violence. The report also recommends strengthening the mandates of peacekeeping operations to prevent sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations and providing them with adequate resources, more systematic gender mainstreaming in security sector reform and the rule of law, and increasing the use of Arria meetings.

Mr. President,

Allow me to make a few comments on women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security as mandated by resolution 1325 (2000).

Women are most affected by armed conflict and post conflict situations. They experience war and conflict in different ways compared to men, as victims of rape, trafficking, sex slavery and forced prostitution as well as in some instances, perpetrators of violence and participants in conflict.

But they are also a driving force for prevention and management of conflicts. They are peacemakers and advocates for peace and national reconciliation. They are single heads of households, and principal care givers.

Starting from grassroots activities including humanitarian assistance, demobilization and disarmament, child and health care, hostage exchange, and using traditional conflict management approaches such as peace caravans, abantu, and the peace tent, women's organizations in all continents have grown in strength and legitimacy. They have extended their roles to a wider political agenda. Indeed, these grassroots activities often serve as catalysts that motivate others to mobilize and enter the struggle for peace.

Drawing on shared values of security, women come together around shared concerns - getting wells and schools, community health, nutrition and care for children and the elderly - engage in confidence-building programmes across communities and play a key role in fostering reconciliation both during conflict and after. Women's networks mobilize women across party lines and are sometimes able to build consensus around peace proposals. They are amongst the strongest advocates of transparent and accountable governance. In addition, they increasingly create national coalitions and international networks for peace and democracy, building blocks for future sustainable peace and gender equality.

However, despite their successes, women continue to be marginalized and ignored.

How can we harness the full force of women's agency in the peace and security sphere?

First, by increasing women's representation at higher levels of decision-making. Current power structures have to recognize that by denying women the right to be part of the decision making process, they are denying true democracy and the more comprehensive political agenda which it introduces.

Second, by ending gender-based violence against women. As the Secretary-General's report clearly stated, "only when the basic need for personal security is met can one begin to consider participation in public life." We cannot rest until impunity for sexual violence is ended, until there are adequate laws to deal with these crimes and until the military, judiciary and the police take action and are held fully accountable for enforcing anti-violence laws.

Third and, perhaps, the most important, by breaking out of our old peace paradigm to make it more accountable and inclusive of women and their concerns. We cannot afford that - more than half the world's population - continues to be excluded in the strategies of peace and security.

To engage those resources requires a fundamental shift in our thinking.

It must become unthinkable not to have women integrally involved in every stage of peace and post conflict reconstruction processes.

It is our duty and, indeed, our obligation to millions of women in conflict areas to use the opportunity offered by Security Council resolution 1325(2000) to set in motion perhaps one of the most promising approaches to conflict resolution of this new century – a comprehensive approach based on inclusive values and gender equality.

Thank you, Mr. President.
