

Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
Tuesday, 24th October 2000, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by Mr. Ben Mustapha, Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations

I would first of all like to express our appreciation to you, Mr. President, and to Ambassador Andjaba, for turning the attention of the Security Council to such an important subject as the one before us today.

I would also like to take this opportunity to declare my country's interest in any exchange of views in the Council having to do with humanitarian concerns resulting from conflict situations. We welcome the fact that the Council has given particular attention in recent years to such varied aspects of conflict situations as the plight of refugees and displaced persons, the protection of children in armed conflict, the protection of civilians during armed conflict and the protection of humanitarian personnel.

All these topics having been considered and debated in recent months, it is certainly worthwhile to underscore the importance of today's topic of debate: women and peace and security. The Council's participation in this area is particularly valuable, as the struggle to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women — and in particular in conflict situations — and to promote their rights is far from over, and should mobilize us all.

As has just been eloquently stated by the Secretary-General, Ms. King and Ms. Heyzer, women and girls were, and continue to be, the primary targets of all sorts of discriminatory violence. Indeed, they are among the first victims of armed conflict and are often reduced to the role of human shields in the hands of belligerents. Along with children, women represent 80 per cent of refugees and displaced persons, and are the first to suffer the worst acts of sexist violence, in particular rape and other forms of sexual abuse. They also constitute the majority of the victims of anti-personnel landmines, and are the most exposed to the scourge of HIV/AIDS because of increased sexual violence and the failure of health systems. As new conflicts erupt and tension and warfare intensify in various parts of the world, the number of poor and defenceless women suffering the horrors of violence and displacement increases, their traditional role is often changed overnight and their workload increases considerably.

The rights of women and girls constitute an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. Their suffering in armed conflict is a violation of international law on the protection and rights of civilians, which is fully applicable to women and girls, in particular the 1949 Geneva Convention and the obligations under its Additional Protocol of 1977 and the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol of 25 May 2000. In this regard, we join the appeals made to the parties to every armed conflict to scrupulously and fully respect international law. We also believe that it is up to States to put an end to impunity and to punish those found guilty of crimes, including extortion and acts of sexist violence, against women and girls.

We encourage the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in all multidimensional peace operations, both at the national and international levels. We also encourage the undertaking of an analysis of gender equality in order to promote gender mainstreaming during the planning of policies, strategies and programmes for peace and security.

In addition to Tunisia's commitment to gender equality and its policy of fostering the rights and improving the status of women, we recognize the important role women can play in all areas, including in conflict prevention, the maintenance of peace and peace-building. In this connection, we support the participation of women in peacekeeping operations and in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes. As women are the ones most exposed to the devastating effects of anti-personnel landmines, we stress the importance of educating them about the dangers of mines and about the intensive use of mine-detection techniques.

I would also like to draw attention to the adverse effects on women and girls of sanctions, which increase their vulnerability. Recent experience has indeed shown that sanctions have extremely negative consequences on civilians, and in particular on children and women.

Apart from their role in the economic and social spheres, women are increasingly playing an active role in the area of peace. In this regard, we would like to express our appreciation for the leading role played in the United

Nations system by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), one of whose top priorities is the elimination of all forms of violence against women. UNIFEM must continue its efforts to promote the effective implementation of international conventions, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

In that regard, we support UNIFEM's efforts to promote women's participation in the decision-making process at all levels of peace-building, as well as its efforts in developing women's capacity-building in the area of conflict prevention and resolution. Moreover, the multidimensional nature of peacekeeping operations — in particular with regard to their political aspect, the protection of children, the holding of elections, refugee reintegration, humanitarian assistance and the protection of humanitarian workers, demining, institutional capacity-building at the local level and human rights — offers women an opportunity to contribute to peace and security, which will definitely help to improve the protection of women and young girls in situations of armed conflict.

We believe that women's commitment to peace is crucial in ensuring that peace agreements signed by political and military factions hold. We are also convinced that there must be real change not only in the words of the laws themselves, but also in people's mindsets and in social practices.

We hope that today's debate will help break that silence and that it will lead to a denunciation of violence against women in all its forms — physical, psychological and moral — especially in armed conflict. We wish also to express our support for initiatives and institutional measures to protect women and ensure their safety and security, particularly in armed conflict; we appeal to all States to cooperate to that end.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of implementing appropriate preventive measures to resolve conflicts, especially the use of dispute- settlement mechanisms set up by the United Nations and by other organizations such as the Organization of African Unity. We stress further the importance of the effective contribution that women can make in this regard.