Economic and Social Council

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-fifth session
15-26 March 2021
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

_____

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

At the core of feminism is a powerful demand: the ability for us - women- to make our own decisions. Patriarchal norms and inequalities have long inhibited women and girls from this and from participating in the public and political spheres.

Feminists seek to dismantle gendered structures of power that were designed to prevent our collective liberation. Patriarchy intersects with systems including capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism to enshrine the privileges of an elite few over the human rights of all.

Full, equal, and effective participation of women and all people in public life is a necessary part of transforming these systems of power. Women activists in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom have called for this since 1915. Twenty years ago, Security Council Resolution 1325 recognised this. But despite follow-up Women, Peace and Security resolutions and many normative frameworks to advance gender equality, decisionmakers still actively exclude women from participating in decisions that affect their lives.

The numbers are striking: Between 1992 and 2018, women only made up 3% of mediators, 4% of signatories and 13% of negotiators in major peace processes. When they do participate, women have often been relegated to informal consultations and parallel tracks, where their contributions are often sidelined. There is a great deal of talk about the importance of meaningful participation, but this does not often translate to concrete pressure and commitments from powerful states.

These dire statistics certainly indicate a lack of progress. But they also are reflective of a climate that is antagonistic to human rights, and that contains structural barriers to the participation of women and other marginalised groups. These barriers have been compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Patriarchal inequalities have translated into unequal economic, educational, and political opportunities, effectively blocking women from accessing the same spaces as men. Despite being leaders in their communities, women-led civil society organizations often lack the long-term, flexible financial resources to sustain their critical work.

Women peace leaders are often prevented from accessing formal leadership due to the discrimination of existing social structures. But the striking lack of existing inclusion also means that, despite diversity in ethnicity, race, class, age, and sexual orientation, there is often an assumption that any woman can speak for all women. Tokenistic inclusion is frequently substituted for sustained and meaningful involvement. Austerity measures and capitalism impact the economic and social rights of women, which in turn limits participation.

At the community level, women peace activists work on creating new spaces for participation. In Afghanistan, women are organizing to fight for the inclusion of women, girls and people with disabilities in decision-making processes at the local level and in the talks between the government and the Taliban. In Colombia, women's organizations successfully pushed for greater representation of women in the formal peace process to end the country's conflict and continue every day since the signing to foster peace at the community level. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, with partners, have called for participation of women as part of the negotiation teams, and are involved independently in the several ongoing peace processes including talks on Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, and Korean peninsula.

Where women have subverted power structures to advocate for change, they have increasingly been met with pushback, ostracism, and even violence. Creeping militarism is contributing to shrinking civic space,

particularly for women, people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics, and Indigenous activists. Women human rights defenders, including those who have engaged with the UN system, face reprisals, violence, intimidation, and harassment.

Militarisation, including military spending and the arms trade, directly inhibits the realisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The current international order, maintained through militarism instead of systems to promote the wellbeing of people and planet, fuels armed conflict and violence rather than preventing them. In 2019, global military spending exceeded $1.9 trillion United States dollars, while spending on gender equality has only marginally increased in recent years. Recent studies have estimated that ending world hunger by 2030 would cost $330 billion dollars in total. Militarism and corporate greed squander valuable resources. Instead, financing and resources should be made available for the realisation of human rights and, indeed, the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. The proliferation and possession of weapons also directly contribute to human rights violations and abuses. Within a context of structural discrimination and inequality, arms proliferation increases a climate of fear due to increased risks of torture and sexual and gender-based violence. It therefore restricts women's freedom of movement and political participation, as well as other human rights.

Over the past 20 years, the calls of peace activists and feminist activists for women's leadership in peace have too often been coopted into policies that strengthen the war system. Instead of funding and supporting the work of women peacebuilders, states have focused on adding women to militaries, police, and peacekeeping forces.

Calls for participation are not just about "adding women", particularly to security sector roles that uphold patriarchy and militarism -- they are demands for a fundamental shift in power. The truth is clear. The lack of political will behind implementing commitments on participation exists because the current exclusionary system is working for the people in power.

Meaningful participation of women in peace work requires prioritising action around local women's analysis of root causes of violence. It means engaging with women from their own experiences and removing obstacles to participation so that women can speak for themselves, rather than be spoken for. It requires that the UN and member states support, instead of replicate, existing peacemaking structures, and support bottom-up women's leadership for peace.

We demand a new system that promotes and fulfills the human rights of every single person. A system with enough resources for education, housing, and healthcare -- not fighter jets and tanks. A system that can realise sustainable development, including immediate and future action to address and reverse environmental degradation and the effects of climate change. A system where peace processes are led by those with a vested interest in peace, not war.

To create this system, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom demands democratised leadership and equal decision making.

Recommendations:
Make the direct, full, equal and meaningful participation of diverse women a non-negotiable requirement in all decision-making spaces including peace processes, and refrain from supporting, hosting, or funding new peace processes that exclude women.

Protect civil society space and take concrete steps to ensure that women do not face retaliation for their participation. Adopt comprehensive strategies to protect human rights defenders, with specific measures for women human rights and environmental defenders, that account for the heightened risks they face in the COVID-19 context.

Regularly review UN-led or co-led peace processes, and make the results publicly available, in order to assess the inclusivity of such processes, boost accountability of UN staff and leadership for promoting women's meaningful participation and identify concrete ways to support participation and avoid exclusion in the future.

Require women's full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership: Recommend that all COVID-19 decision-making bodies are inclusive, gender-balanced and include dedicated gender expertise. All response design, implementation and evaluation should involve local civil society, particularly women-led organizations and those working on human rights.

Reduce military spending, stop arms trading, eliminate nuclear weapons, and work for full disarmament. Redirect the money from weapons and war toward building systems of solidarity and care, mitigating the climate crisis, and building green energy, ending poverty and hunger, and investing in gender equality.

Radically transform how we evaluate the health of our economies and development of our countries towards human wellbeing. Strengthen the public sector and states' ability to protect economic, social and cultural rights. Public interests must always be prioritised over private interests, including through legal safeguards against corporate capture of policy-making spaces and regulation of corporations. Bans must be introduced on profiteering from natural resources and governments must ensure that conditions and accessibility of public services are constantly improved. The rights to housing, access to free education, universal healthcare coverage and clean air and water must be constitutionally guaranteed.

International financial institutions should ensure that their funds – during the pandemic and beyond – reach the most vulnerable and provide universal, equitable and gender- responsive access to essential services, including healthcare, food, housing, water, sanitation, education and sustainable livelihoods. This includes avoiding funding projects that harm the environment, displace people, threaten food security or weaken public services.