

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Council, April 2014, Security Council Chamber
Statement by Mr. Moura, Permanent Mission of Portugal to the United Nations.

I would like to thank Nigeria for convening this open debate on women and peace and security, with a particular focus on sexual violence in conflict, an issue to which Portugal attaches great importance. I also wish to warmly congratulate Ms. Zainab Bengura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, on the excellent work she has been carrying out.

Portugal aligns itself with the statement made this morning by the observer of the European Union, but I should like to make a few remarks in my national capacity.

While acknowledging that important progress has been made in the implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent Security Council resolutions on women and peace and security, we need to recognize that significant challenges remain. Women are still underrepresented at the several levels of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, just as they are inadequately represented in formal peace negotiations. The exclusion of women from peace talks and peacebuilding efforts often means that insufficient attention is paid to addressing women's needs and concerns in the post-conflict phase, thereby reinforcing a circle of inequality and marginalization. Moreover, the abuse of the rights of women and girls is a dominant feature of conflict, and sexual violence is often widespread and systematic both in conflict and in periods of political instability.

Sexual violence and rape are prevalent in regions of war as well as in refugee camps. Violence against women, including rape and sexual slavery, is often used as a weapon of warfare in order to dehumanize women themselves or the communities to which they belong. Importantly, high levels of sexual and gender-based violence also rarely cease at the end of hostilities and continue well into the post-conflict phase. The costs of sexual and gender-based violence are largely underestimated and ignored. Such violence is surrounded by a culture of silence and impunity, and the range and complexity of the underlying causes make it a difficult issue to address, particularly in conflict-affected contexts where judicial and security institutions are weak.

Durable peace and reconciliation are heavily compromised if the perpetrators of such acts are not prosecuted. Impunity for perpetrators and insufficient response to the needs of survivors are unacceptable. The grave violations of women's human rights through mass rape and other sexual violence require the immediate attention of such organizations as the International Criminal Court and other relevant tribunals.

Furthermore, international and national courts should have adequate resources, access to gender expertise, gender training for all staff, and gender-sensitive programmes in order to more effectively prosecute those responsible for such crimes.

Further prompt action on the part of all actors is necessary to change the reality on the ground for women and girls at risk of becoming victims of violence or already affected. We need to redouble our efforts, notably in the fight against impunity. Often, in the name of peace amnesty is given to combatants who had used sexual violence as a tactic of war. We believe that there can be no sustainable peace without justice for victims; targeted and graduated measures should be imposed against all parties to a conflict that are responsible for grave violations of women's rights. Perpetrators, including commanders who commission or condone the use of sexual violence, should be held accountable.

On these matters, zero tolerance has to be the rule. We also need to strengthen support networks to ensure that survivors of violence can return to take an active part in public life, especially in peacebuilding efforts. And we need to work with UN-Women and the United Nations country team partners to help countries to develop national action plans to coordinate the implementation of all women and peace and security resolutions.

Women have indeed a crucial role to play in rebuilding war-torn societies and in preserving social cohesion. They did it in Europe during and after two world wars; they did it in South America; and they have done it in Africa in countries divided by civilian strife. They still do it on a daily basis in several countries tormented by conflict. What is essential is to guarantee that women are included in peace processes and to ensure that their perspectives, direct knowledge of the concrete situation and concerns are taken into account as important contributions to the reshaping of torn societies in post-conflict situations and in peacebuilding efforts.

To conclude, Portugal has been striving to support the promotion and protection of the human rights of women and their political participation. In this context, my country reaffirms its commitment to ensuring women's effective participation in peace and security and to translate this commitment into enhanced action.