

Intervention in Security Council Debate, Monday 5 October 2009

Mr. President,

Our warm thanks to Vietnam for organising this debate.

I might begin with a personal recollection. Almost 17 years ago, in December 1992, I went to the Former Yugoslavia as a member of the EU mission to investigate the rape of women during the Balkan conflict. The experience left a deep imprint on all who participated. It was the end of any illusion that barbarity is confined to faraway places. There, in the heart of Europe, on the threshold of the 21st Century, rape was once again an instrument of war.

In an article written with a colleague after that mission, we discussed a number of aspects of what had happened. We included the following point: "A distribution of roles whereby men negotiate peace in Geneva while women devise aid programmes for victims seems to us fundamentally unacceptable".

Mr. President,

That issue of roles and responsibilities remains central to our consideration today. It is imperative that the duality of women's situation - both victims and actors - is fully recognised. Men have always inhabited these two spaces simultaneously: victims and victors, waging the wars and authoring the peace. Women have largely been imprisoned in the victim role: the collateral damage of war and, if present at all, a kind of add-on at the peace table.

Resolution 1325, nine years on the books, is trying to overthrow the patterns of centuries. The story recurs again and again, with the fundamentals almost always the same. Men who have been in the front line of conflict feel they have earned the exclusive right to broker peace. Women who are struggling to get hearth and home together after the fighting have other priorities.

Implementing Resolution 1325, therefore, means climbing mountains. To get to first base, we need real, transformative, attitudinal change.

I was struck by a comment made by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at a breakfast co-hosted with Netherlands and Brazil during the high-level segment of the General Assembly. Secretary Clinton said that she is repeatedly questioned by the US media as to why she is spending so much time on secondary, 'soft', issues such as women in conflict. She has had to explain for the millionth time that these issues are not secondary, but primary; that they are core foreign policy issues.

The Secretary of State's experience captures a reality - so many commentators, analysts, opinion-formers do not truly rate the kind of discussion we are having today. The nod of political correctness is there, but not the conviction or prioritisation the issues deserve.

Overall, the Secretary-General's report makes for sober reading. There are some bright spots, particularly on the training front, and all successes deserve recognition and commendation. But the statistics - to take just one example, only 2.4% female signatories to peace agreements since 1992 - tell their own story.

In searching for practical ways forward, the Secretary-General's report rightly emphasises the importance of national plans. Ireland is currently developing its own National Action Plan. As part of this process, we have embarked on a cross-learning initiative guided by the experiences of women and men in countries emerging from conflict.

We are currently working in partnership with Liberia and with Timor-Leste in a tripartite cross-learning process. Through this collaboration, our aim is to ensure the achievement of real and immediate change for women who have experienced conflict, and who can and should be stakeholders in state-building and peace-building.

A first cross-learning meeting was held in June 2009 which discussed the issue of advancing women's participation in politics and decision-making. A second meeting on protection issues is to be held in Timor-Leste this December; a third meeting dealing with gender perspectives is proposed for Liberia in early 2010. Throughout the process, we are supporting and encouraging progress on activities covered by Resolution 1325 in Liberia and Timor-Leste.

Although the contexts are obviously very different, we are discovering just how many common issues there are. A report on the process will be shared with the UN in advance of the 10th anniversary of Resolution 1325.

A further effort to stimulate cross-regional discussion on implementing Resolution 1325 was our hosting in Dublin earlier this year of the Ministerial meeting of the Human Security Network. The theme of the meeting was how the Network can best participate in implementing 1325; a report is currently being finalised.

A final point, Mr. President, is the importance of coordination. Within the UN System, there should be a one stop shop to offer guidance and advice to member States in drawing up National Plans. We suggest the Inter-agency Task Force on Women, Peace and Security be tasked with identifying such a focal point. At national level too, there is a role for focal points to provide drive and leadership. In Ireland, a distinguished woman of wide and highly relevant experience, Nuala O'Loan, has been appointed to the role of Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security. Perhaps this model could be of relevance elsewhere.

Mr. President,

None of us here is in any doubt about the scale of the challenge and the urgency of action. Next year's tenth anniversary of the adoption of Resolution 1325 is an opportunity to be seized - not for a talkfest, but to assess, strategise, and commit. In the collective effort to prepare for and mark this anniversary, we look to the Security Council to continue to show leadership and determination.