

Statement at the Security Council Arria Formula Meeting on the Role of Women in Peace Consolidation

Barbara Thaimu-Bangura, National Coordinator

Grassroots Empowerment for Self Reliance

The Sierra Leone Experience – “The Role of Women in the Consolidation of Peace”

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Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies, Gentlemen,

My name is Barbara Bangura and I coordinate an NGO in Sierra Leone that works to build the capacity of marginalized women in society to ensure self reliance through peace and development.

I would like to thank you for inviting me here today to discuss how we can advance, together, the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325, particularly in post-conflict countries such as Sierra Leone which are striving for sustainable peace.

What have we achieved? We have come some way since the cessation of hostilities in Sierra Leone but despite these successes, somewhere along the line, our voices have been lost.

For example:

- Women's groups actively participated in setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was hijacked, leaving women behind. Although women were accorded some attention the government has conspicuously failed to affect some of the recommendations of the Commission particularly on reparations; we are now questioning the so called success of the TRC.
- As part of Security Sector Reforms, the Family Support Unit has been set within the Police to address domestic violence within the family. More needs to be done to expand the facility to communities through out the entire country.
- An increase in women's participation in the democratisation process with more women in parliament and local councils. But women are still under represented because they do not have the necessary resources to participate fully in decision making.

A Bill was passed allowing for the setting up of The Special Court which faces many challenges not least the identification and prosecution of gender based crimes within its mandate. Women victims still face their violators as the mandate of the Special Court only allows for the prosecution of those bearing the greatest responsibility for crimes committed during the war.

There continues to be many challenges to the implementation of SCR 1325 and the participation of women in the consolidation of peace including:

- A lack of awareness of SCR 1325
- Wanton marginalization and discriminatory laws and practices which hinders durable peace and security
- The fragility of peace in my country exacerbates the security challenges to us women and the overall feeling that women are at the edge of the world.

There are many issues at stake in the consolidation of peace but from the perspective and experience of women in Sierra Leone there are several key issues that remain - which the Security Council and the United Nations can play a vital role in working with us to address.

1. Gender Justice is crucial as women are denied their right to inherit property and land on a daily basis thus impoverishing them and their children even more. This challenge goes beyond just passing and raising awareness about laws deterring discrimination against women. It goes to the heart of the matter that particularly rural women who make up the bulk of victims cannot even afford transportation to and from the courts to seek redress from discriminatory laws and practices even where legal aid is provided.
2. Sexual and Gender Based Violence particularly rape and domestic violence continues to rear its head despite the efforts of women's groups, NGOs, the police and international partners/donors. Structures such as the Family Support Unit of the Police Force which is part of the Justice Sector Development Project supported by DFID and in collaboration with NGOs provide medical and counseling facilities for victims. However, long delays within the judicial system resulting again in transportation and other financial implications coupled with the fear of stigmatization by the victims continue to impede progress in this campaign.
3. While women have been brought into decision making processes, we say this is not enough. 3 cabinet ministers out of a total of 22 is progress but definitely not enough. We congratulate President Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia for the confidence she has expressed in women by appointing them to key cabinet and decision making positions and continue to advocate for more qualified women to be brought on board in Sierra Leone and given a free hand to do a good job.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the UN on the creation of the Peace Building Commission which I see as timely and the key to the successful implementation of SCR 1325 as it can correct years of denying women's involvement in decision making on peace and security.

That is of course, if we do want to open the door and usher in the resolution. We, the women of Sierra Leone certainly do; which is why I would like to take this opportunity to make the following recommendations:

4. That local women's groups and other civil society actors collaborate with the Commission as partners to ensure the necessary link between the Commission and the people. I cannot over emphasise the importance of such a recommendation as both civil society and government have to realise that they cannot go it alone but need to work together as partners to implement and monitor progress thereby jointly owning the process.
5. Presently UNIOSL which replaced UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone has no gender adviser but a recently employed focal point in the human rights section that is standing in. Such a break in continuity can only have and has a negative impact in the work of women's groups and the UN. The gender adviser used to be there for us women. She listened to us and provided information, advice, guidance and human resource.

I would recommend that an experienced gender adviser be appointed at decision making level in UNIOSL to fill in the gap and facilitate the implementation of SCR 1325 within the mission. Liaise with women's groups and be the link on the ground with the Peace Building Commission.

For this to happen, I would appeal to you distinguished members of the Security Council to use your good offices to ensure that UN agencies working particularly with women's groups and gender advisers are adequately resourced with staff, funds and your goodwill to enable them provide the support and collaboration we need to forge ahead; this should go a great way in ensuring a concerted effort in the implementation of SCR 1325; inform you of what is on the ground and guide you as to where your direct intervention is needed.

6. That the UN Country Team in Sierra Leone make deliberate efforts to sensitize national staff and program officers on UNSCR 1325.
7. That member countries that form part of Sierra Leone's Country-Specific Committees are encouraged to engage with women's groups thereby taking the lead by example in keeping with Para 1 of SCR 1325 which calls for increased representation of women at all decision making levels in international institutions. The Peacebuilding commission should raise awareness of SCR1325 with my government, and put subtle pressure on them to implement the resolution while creating the opportunity for capacity building programs to enhance women's participation in peace and security processes.

In as much as we hold our future in our hands, women rely considerably on the guidance and assistance that the UN, in its many forms, provides. SCR 1325 can only be successful if the UN Security Council is proactive in the use of SCR 1325 in their work. As such the onus is on you here in New York, to cast your light on the path we follow. Our failure is your failure. Our successes, your successes. I thank you.