

Statement to the UN Peacebuilding Commission on SCR 1325 in Burundi and Sierra Leone

*Karen Barnes, Senior Program Officer, Peacebuilding Issues Program
International Alert
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Madame Chair, Distinguished Members of the Peacebuilding Commission, Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

On behalf of International Alert and the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address you here today.

We know that for peace to be sustainable, it must be built on physical security, accountable governance, equitable economic development, reconciliation and universal access to justice. For peace to be inclusive it also must be built through the participation of both women and men.

Six years ago, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 signaled a growing recognition of the importance of women's participation in all aspects of conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. The achievement of a sustainable peace is far more likely when gender equality and women's rights are made a central aspect of reconstruction, and are prioritized from the outset.

On the road that lies ahead, the Peacebuilding Commission can play a pivotal role in the active implementation of SCR 1325 at the local and national level, by coordinating, promoting and supporting engagement with women's groups and in mobilising political will at the national level to further address issues such as land rights, gender-based violence and women's economic insecurity.

Despite the fact that many Burundians are experiencing an increased level of security, it is clear that women remain especially vulnerable to violent crime, the violation of their rights and marginalisation from political and economic life. What is security if women continue to be targeted with rape, robbery, and assault? What is security if women continue to be particularly vulnerable to economic hardship, isolation and displacement? It is no security at all.

International Alert, a London-based peacebuilding NGO, has been working with partner organisations in Burundi, including women's organisations and networks such as CAFOB and Dushirehamwe, for over a decade. In a statement submitted to the Peacebuilding Commission in October, International Alert identified a number of key priorities for the Commission in Burundi, including gender equality. Alert also recognised the unique mandate of the Peacebuilding Commission and the opportunity it has to forge a unified and influential commitment to peacebuilding in Burundi. It is critical that this commitment is informed by the principle of gender equality and strengthened through the participation of women. The main stakeholders in Burundi's peacebuilding process are the Burundian people themselves, both women and men, and they must, therefore, be more effectively involved.

For more than a decade, women's organisations in Burundi have been using diverse strategies to support the building of peace in their communities including providing survival and basic needs for conflict-affected populations; building trust and promoting reconciliation through cross-community dialogue; promoting women in decision-making and leadership; and advocating for respect for human rights.

However, given that the work of women's organisations and networks tends to be grounded in the daily experiences of conflict-affected communities, it often occurs outside of the formal peacebuilding and

reconstruction processes being supported by national and international stakeholders. This results in their work being frequently passed over by donors which in turn affects the potential of local women's organizations and networks to build capacity and strengthen their work at the local level, causing whole communities to lose out.

Indeed, the absence of local women's organizations and networks from these formal processes is more than a missed opportunity-it is a major gap in the creation of successful policies and peacebuilding strategies, which require their participation to be sustainable.

The Commission must recognise this work, and could use the Peacebuilding Fund as a catalyst to support and magnify the impact that women's organizations already have in consolidating peace in Burundi and elsewhere.

It is important to note that some progress towards the implementation of 1325 in Burundi has been made, and in a speech in September, President Nkurunziza called on the PBC and the UN system to make gender equality a priority. In particular, the new constitution passed in 2005 requires that 30% of all decision-making positions within the government, parliament and senate go to women.

However, increased political representation of women, although vital, does not necessarily equate to greater gender equality and the empowerment of women. Women's political awareness still needs to be strengthened at the community level in order to increase participation of women in the next local administration elections where representation is lacking. Support is also needed for women who have achieved governance positions, ensuring that their election to government is translated into real change in the lives of ordinary citizens, especially women and girls. Political participation is one step towards implementing 1325, but it is critical that it also leads to real and concrete improvements in the personal security of women and their ability to access economic opportunities, including land rights and the availability of credit, justice, and decision-making positions within their communities.

In a meeting of members of the National Assembly, local elected representatives and members of women's organisations organised by the Center of Women for Peace in October 2006 identified key priority areas for the PBC to focus on in support of achieving greater gender equality within the peacebuilding process. Some of the recommendations given include:

1. Invite local women's groups to discuss issues of concern and offer recommendations alongside other international actors and stakeholders on an ongoing basis. Institutionalized mechanisms such as biannual consultations with civil society in-country would provide a forum for regular dialogue and exchange of information and would be one way to ensure that the expertise, experience and recommendations of local women reach the country-specific configurations of the PBC.
2. Support the rapid establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ensuring that gender-based violence-related crimes are fully addressed and women are able to effectively participate in the work of the Commission.
3. Support the reform of discriminatory legislation in areas such as inheritance and property rights and rights within marriage. The government should also be supported to harmonise the international conventions that Burundi is signatory to including CEDAW with domestic laws. Measures to support gender justice, in particular for gender-based violence crimes, should be a priority of the PBC.
4. Finally, the proliferation of small arms, violent crime and personal insecurity continue to affect women disproportionately in Burundi. Women must have the opportunity to be more actively engaged in security sector reform and DDR processes to ensure that their specific needs are met, and that they are able to enjoy and benefit from the improved security situation in the country.

In Burundi, women's organisations have responded to challenges by developing networks and alternative coping strategies to deal with problems such as food scarcity, sexual violence, shortfalls in health and education provision and income-generation. In addition to limited resources, one of the biggest objectives to implementing 1325 and a gender perspective in peacebuilding is a lack of knowledge by international and national stakeholders of how to operationalise it on the ground. The reality is that women's organisations know how to do this, and often they are already doing it. Women's organisations and networks must be brought into the work of the PBC as partners.

One of the best and most fruitful ways to bring women's organisations into the work of the Commission is through a strong and well-resourced gender advisory capacity, both at headquarters and country-level. A permanent, senior-level gender advisor position must be established in the Peacebuilding Support Office.

Equally as important is that a permanent, well-resourced gender advisor position be established at the outset of any mission. Following the drawdown of the UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone at the end of 2005, the new integrated office established in the country did not retain the post of gender advisor, although there are plans underway to establish this post next year. This has had clear consequences for the work of the UN, as it no longer has the capacity to fully mainstream gender within its work in Sierra Leone. It is also an obstacle for women's organizations who relied on the gender advisor of UNAMSIL as their key point of contact within the UN mission. Without a clear line of responsibility for gender issues within peace operations, it is difficult for women's organizations to access decision-makers within the UN and the Peacebuilding Commission and to make their voices be heard and be counted. As Burundi undergoes a similar transition in the coming months it is critical that the gender advisory capacity is maintained in order to ensure that the gains made by ONUB in implementing 1325 and supporting women's organizations are not lost.

Madame Chair,

Women must not be seen as mere victims, but as agents of change who are vital to the social, economic and political fabric of their communities and countries. When women are not fully and actively engaged in peace and security processes, this halves the resources, expertise and potential for building sustainable peace and development.

In the midst of pressing reconstruction needs, the imperative to address the political, economic and social status of women is often treated as a separate and lesser priority - one that can be addressed further down the road when a country has recovered. Such thinking is misguided. Gendered relations are a part of every single aspect of society, rather than a separate category that one can keep in a box and add on at the end. In every aspect of reconstruction - from rebuilding roads to rebuilding political structures - every decision taken, every project funded, and every policy implemented will have a gendered impact.

I would like to close with a quote from the report of the October meeting organised by the Center of Women for Peace held in Bujumbura,

"We would like to recognize the government and the United Nations for their efforts in bringing Burundi to the road of sustainable peace. We sincerely appreciate the progress made in the promotion of the rights of women and equality, aware, however, that the road that lies ahead is still very long."

It is incumbent on the Peacebuilding Commission and the broader international community to keep walking this road until we reach the end.

Thank you.