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**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

**Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in  
regard to gender equality and empowerment of women**

Gender equality, empowerment of women and post-conflict development \*

Submitted by

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

The post cold war era saw the emergence of vast civil conflicts that impacted communities to varying degrees. Women and girls make up the majority of victims in these internal conflicts. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women were abducted, raped and forcibly impregnated. In Rwanda, women were forcibly gang raped and intentionally infected with HIV/AIDS. Liberian and Sierra Leonean women suffered rape and mutilation. The story is ongoing in northern Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo and in many unnamed and internationally unrecognized conflict areas.

Women have now become the greatest victims of war and the biggest actors for peace. The humiliation and pain experienced during conflict has never been able to deter women's peacebuilding initiatives and efforts. The desire and drive has always been to use their own pain and suffering to transform and build more secure communities.

Despite the roles women play in urging for the end to conflict and the rebuilding of their communities, they continue to remain conspicuously absent from formal peace and reconstruction processes. However, women have continued to prove that given the chance they can change the face of conflict and rebuild their communities. Their perspectives and experiences are critical to stability, the strengthening of judicial systems and national recovery.

Globally, conversations about women's roles in the resolution and prevention of conflicts have increased. Women worldwide welcomed and celebrated the passage of the landmark Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in October of 2000. The general feeling and assumption was that finally women would have their say in the debate on issues of peace and security. Today, many more landmark resolutions aimed at protecting women from war related violence have also been passed. Despite these instruments, the political will to support women's efforts in peacebuilding has continued to be a challenge.

Women's activities aimed at building peace and their communities can be categorized into three distinct phases of the conflict spectrum - pre-conflict, during and post-conflict. In the pre-conflict stage, women are the first group of people to know that a conflict is eminent. In Liberia, women at the Jah Tondo displaced camp, spoke some years ago about activities and strange movement in their communities that made them aware that the fighting was approaching their communities. One signs they described was the increase in the number of young men selling on the streets, whose wares consisted of only one pack of cigarette, a packet of chewing gum etc. A second sign was the increase in the number of cross-community soccer matches. The market women gave increases of purchases of their goods from locals as another sign. One may ask, how did they manage such information? Most of these community women said their predicament was passing the information to security personnel without being arrested as an accomplice of the fighters. The role of women in early warning during the pre-conflict stage could help avert conflict if the mechanisms were in place to adequately address the information provided.

During the conflict period women are the ones who maintain the communities through efforts aimed at rebuilding. As the men wage war, it is the women who fetch wood, food and create a sense of community for the elderly and children. In many conflict contexts, the activities of women at this crucial stage are absent from media coverage. Activities initiated by women ranging from religious events, (prayer, fasting and vigils) to social actions (protest, food and aid distribution) have played a key role in the promotion for peace and contributed to holding the fabric of their communities together.

During the war years in Liberia, women's groups and organizations organized the distribution of hot meals and clothing to communities that were affected by the fighting. Over this period, women were also combining their efforts to provide security for their communities through the payment of cash and other valuables to fighters for safe passage of community members. An example of this is the story told to me by a survivor of the Lutheran Church Massacre in July of 1990. She said "as the soldiers entered and started shooting and hacking people on the compound, the women were housed in a classroom, and the soldier in charge of that room came and as they appealed to him, he requested 200 LD per head. The women collected the cash among themselves and negotiated for those who could not afford to be spared all while a group was screaming as if they were being hacked, the soldier later assisted them to flee the compound". According to her, about 50 plus women and children were spared on a compound where over 200 people lost their lives. Stories are told across conflict zones of women who offered to be gang raped by a group of fighters so that their children and community members could be spared. There are also stories of mothers across ethnic lines selling and bartering with each other as their sons and husbands fought and killed each other on the front lines.

Whilst women carried out these actions aimed at providing relief and safety, they also advocated on the political level for an end to the wars that were turning their communities upside down. Non-violent protests and vigils were common actions carried out by women in conflict zones. However, shuttle diplomacy was also carried out by women in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Somalia among other countries for the inclusion of their needs and concerns on the agenda for peace. Eventually women's demands turned into recognition and inclusion at the peace table.

From Afghanistan to Sierra Leone to Liberia, women's role in peace building processes stands out as vital to the recovery of their communities. The Sierra Leonean women's non-compliant action with rebels led to the civil society action that eventually brought down the junta. Several years ago we also saw the emergence of the sixth clan in Somalia, which was a strategy employed by women to be included in the discussion around peace and peaceful settlement to the conflict. Liberian women's resilience throughout the war years finally paid off in 2003 with a peaceful end to the conflict.

Previously many women's groups' and organizations' engagement ended at the signing of the peace agreements. Today women in post-conflict societies are demanding firstly, the recognition of their roles in the process of ending the violence and continuous engagement in the full implementation of the peace agreements. Secondly, women are demanding that said recognition be translated into laws and policies that protect them

from all form of discrimination and further marginalization. Thirdly, women are also demanding that these policies and laws be converted into immediate actions. Finally, women in these post-conflict societies are charting a course for themselves politically. Many who never imagined they would run for political office are doing so and winning. The women of Rwanda are the most successful example of women in a post-conflict society who make up the majority of the political leadership in that country. Liberia is another example of the resilience of women in changing the face of communities after conflict. There are many other examples that can highlight women's role in their nation's post-conflict recovery. Sierra Leonean women in collaboration with their Liberian counterparts carried out a series of non-violence campaigns aimed at averting elections violence in 2007.

Liberian women's community sensitization and engagement with fighters facilitated the successful implementation of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme. Women's groups' support to the civic education and voter's registration process contributed to the full participation of over fifty-one percent of women during the elections process. The continuous resistance by the women of Liberia to any form of oppression have yielded many laws and policies aimed at protecting the rights of women, namely, the rape and inheritance law, the national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and the national Gender Policy, just to name a few.

It is clear that women, who bear the greatest brunt of conflict, are refusing to allow their suffering to limit them from participating in the process of community recovery. The question now is how can these remarkable efforts by women be supported, strengthened and maximized as a means of building healthy communities?

Women's peace initiatives can be supported and strengthened in the following ways:

1. Empower local women and women's groups in training and information dissemination in areas where conflicts are brewing and support their strategies aimed at avoiding conflict.
2. Support women's participation in peace negotiations at all levels by strengthening women's representation in local, national and international bodies for the resolution of conflict through training on mediation and negotiation skills and multi-level peace diplomacy.
3. Increase the number of women in delegations on national, regional and international meetings concerned with peace and security as active participants, not just as observers, and facilitate women's input through consultations aimed at addressing their priorities and concerns.
4. Provide of sustained funding for women's peacebuilding initiatives.

The above-mentioned strategies lead into attaining the gender equality agenda at all levels and structures within post-conflict society.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Elisabeth Rehn have noted that, “the impact of conflict on women’s lives is a reflection of the interaction during peacetime.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is very true. Cultural practices and entrenched systems of patriarchy serve as blockades to the advancement of women in areas of governance, leadership and economic empowerment.

If gender equality goals and commitment are to be realized, it is imperative that constitutional review and reform with the aim of addressing areas of discrimination takes place.

Judicial reform seeking to address gender-based violence must be prioritized. For example, as a means of adequately addressing the increase in cases of rape and sexual abuse in Liberia, criminal court E was established through an act of the Legislature in September of 2008, to specifically deal with rape and other gender-based violence cases. A special gender-based violence crimes unit with the intention to expeditiously handle and prosecute said cases was also set up to prosecute cases in criminal court E. The unit and the court were formally opened in February 2009. Since its establishment, a total of 20 cases have been tried with six won, eight lost and six transferred or dismissed for insufficient evidence. Another example is the Women and Children Protection Unit in Sierra Leone that seeks to address domestic violence and other forms of violence.

In order to address the disempowerment of women through property rights, a bill seeking to grant property rights to women in customary marriage was passed into law. The law makes provision for women to acquire some properties of the husbands in the event of death or divorce. This law is an example of the changing dynamics on women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) calls for women’s involvement in post-conflict leadership and decision-making process. In many post-conflict communities special provisions in laws and policies are ensuring that there is an increased number of women in decision-making. Affirmative action is, for example, proving in Rwanda and other countries that special measures are essential for women’s inclusion in decision-making and political participation.

Women’s participation in peace and security governance and leadership and the promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment are necessary conditions for building sustainable peace for nations recovering from war and conflicts. Sustainable peace and post-conflict reconstruction require the full involvement of women as central actors in these processes.

Good governance is defined as the exercise of political economic and administrative authority to manage a nation’s affairs and the complex mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutions through which citizens’ groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations and mediate their differences. Accountability,

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<sup>1</sup> Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts’ Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women’s Role in Peace-Building (Progress of the World’s Women Vol.1), 2002, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

transparency, participation and legitimacy are core elements. Gender responsiveness is essential to all of these, and is a measure of good governance. Analysis and action on gender issues, the participation of women, as well as men, in peace and security governance processes at all levels and the recognition by institutions of women's rights and needs, issues and concerns are critical to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction processes.

There are a number of entry points for enhancing gender-responsiveness in peace and reconstruction processes and advancing gender-sensitive development in the long term:

1. Developing national action plans based on the Beijing Platform for Action and Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) as a means of addressing the roles and responsibilities of women in post-conflict peace and reconstruction processes.
2. Preparing country reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
3. Strengthening United Nations country teams and their partnership with governments, donors and civil society to ensure the active participation of stakeholders, specifically women. This active partnership will elaborate and redefine public policy.
4. Enhancing donor and development agency coordination on issues of peacebuilding.
5. Increasing national capacities, in particular those of national mechanisms for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, to participate in policy analysis and dialogue, security and justice sector reform and community development initiatives. This also includes enhancing accountability and participation at the local level, by prioritizing decentralization and development cooperation in local communities.
6. Strengthening capacity for gender analysis and governance in United Nations peacebuilding operations and recognizing the role local women can play in helping peacekeepers achieve their goal of building a stable society.