

Open Meeting of the Security Council on Women and Peace and Security

Statement by Hon'ble Mrs. Krishna Bose, MP

Chairperson, Standing Committee on External Affairs

on October 24, 2000

Mr. President,

We are very pleased to see you chairing this meeting of the Council. The subject you have chosen for this debate is important to me as a woman and as a politician whose interests lie in foreign policy and security issues. We thank the Permanent Representative of Namibia for very thoughtfully sending around to his colleagues a folder of background reading which contains suggestions, presumably made by the Secretariat, for Council action.

In a subject that is vast and complex, I will limit myself, as I hope the Council will, to those areas which are properly within its mandate - the impact on women when peace breaks down, and their role in conflict and its resolution.

The first point of concern must be that women bear a disproportionately large share of the burden of conflict, but have a marginal say in matters of war and peace. That is perhaps a function of the gender imbalance in our societies, reflected in positions of power and influence. On International Women's Day this year, the President of the Council made a statement, affirming that the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts were essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. I thank the Council for those sentiments, but, looking around this table, could I also say that a Security Council dominated by men illustrates the problem, not the solution.

The second point is, of course, where the equality of the sexes, which we believe is a must, will lead us. Women form so large a proportion of the casualties of modern war because military doctrines throughout the last century no longer distinguished between combatants and civilians; from the Second World War onwards, civilians became preferred targets both because they were more vulnerable and because it was believed that the national will had to be broken to win a total war. Paradoxically, women have become the favoured victims of modern war because they were not combatants. Does the answer then lie in giving women the dubious right to fight alongside their menfolk in modern armies? Throughout history, women have taken up arms when the need has been desperate. The Rani of Jhansi led our first War of Independence in 1857, and died fighting. Kaipkire of the Herero led her people in battles against European slave traders. Those, however, and others like them, were women who took up arms to fight against injustice. We need to consider the impact on our societies, and on their tendency to war, if women become part of and glorify the military culture. Who should women take as their model - Lysistrata, using her femininity to force men from war, or the Amazon, joining and beating men at their own bloody game? A generation ago, two psychologists, Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, established that while certain gender stereotypes could not be proven, one could: men were the more aggressive sex. In every culture, the organised violence of war and conflict has been a male preserve. That is a steel purdah in which we can leave our men.

There is also the question of the technology of war. Until the two world wars, weapons were heavy and hard to use, designed for soldiers who had to meet minimum physical standards and be trained in their use. In total war, weapons had to be designed for conscripts who were not fit and had little or no training; they became light and simple to use. As Graca Machel pointed out in her study on children and armed conflict, light automatic weapons were what made it easy and tempting to use child soldiers. If women become a significant percentage of armies, it is a foregone conclusion that weapons will be adapted even more to suit them, and what is light enough for a woman to use is also very well suited for a young boy or girl. These new weapons will make for even more indiscriminate use, and could very well increase the use of children in conflict.

These are not academic points, because in the Western societies whose norms tend to dominate thinking at the UN, women are now increasingly permitted by law to go into combat. At the UN, including in this Council, there are repeated calls for a gender balance in the composition of peacekeeping forces, which, as the Brahimi Report (prepared by a panel dominated by men) has pointed out, increasingly go into situations where robust military action might be needed. Is it in the interest either of women, or of peace, or of gender equality, for women to embroil themselves in conflict, even if it is in the cause of the UN? We have problems enough with the feminisation of poverty; we need not feminise violence. It would be much better, surely, if women had a larger and more visible role in helping the UN to resolve conflicts, as for instance as Special Representatives of the Secretary General. This the Council can and should encourage.

I want to make one more point about peacekeeping practices. The Council has decided that AIDS is a threat to security, and peacekeepers must all be issued contraceptives by the UN. Unfortunately, as the UN knows to its cost, a large number of the troops it fields are poorly trained; others, in the 90s, have trafficked in women. Blue helmets might very well now believe that, if the UN is giving them contraceptives, they are expected to use them. AIDS has never been a problem in any UN peacekeeping operation, the exploitation of women unfortunately has; the Council's decision could make this worse.

Feminist lawyers argue that human rights law and international humanitarian law do not offer enough protection to women. This is a bit extreme; women's rights and needs have received the attention they deserve in the codification of international law. I do agree that there are loopholes even in the much stronger walls of legal protection that have been raised over the last fifty years, and these must be closed. However, in so far as these are treaty-based protections, action must be taken within the terms of these treaties, and by the States Parties. Otherwise, in seeking to strengthen law, we would be undermining it. Therefore, unless there are treaties that give the Security Council a role in their implementation, we would urge the Council not to assume to itself rights (and responsibilities) that it does not have.

There is a further point, which we have made in this Council before. By definition, it is states that are parties to the treaty-based system of international law. By and large, they respect them, and when they do not, penalties arise through the provisions of the treaties. When their actions gravely threaten peace and security, sanctions can be brought against them by action in this Council. The most egregious crimes against women in times of conflict, however, have been and are committed by irregular forces, often warring against governments; they obey no laws and are, as experience has shown throughout the 90s, much more immune to sanctions than governments are. How, in practical terms, will the Council tackle these forces, which are responsible for the bulk of the crimes that continue to be committed against women?

Situations of conflict vary. Each has its own causes and consequences. Clearly, there cannot be off-the-shelf remedies or panaceas. We need to take practical and effective steps to mitigate the impact of conflict on women and to enhance their ability to restore and preserve peace. The Namibian Plan of Action on "Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations" has many useful elements. We support the call in the Windhoek Declaration of 31

May 2000, urging the Secretary-General to ensure that appropriate follow-up measures are taken to implement this Plan of Action, in consultation with Member States.

The World Bank estimates that by 2015 the world will have more than 1.9 billion poor, most of them women. Globalisation has affected both men and women but women bear the double burden of inequality and marginalisation. Empowering them is therefore both crucial and urgent. The Council will remember that the theme of the Special Session of the General Assembly in June this year was "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace". In considering the role of women in peace and security, the Council will I am sure bear in mind this wider perspective of the empowerment of women.

Mr. President,

This may well be the last statement we will make in the Security Council before Namibia completes its current two-year term. We would therefore like to place on record our very warm appreciation for the work of your delegation in the Council, and for the courageous and independent stand your country has taken on difficult issues on its agenda.

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