



General Assembly

Distr.: General
XX August 2023

English only

Human Rights Council

Fifty-fourth session

11 September–13 October 2023

Agenda item 8

Follow-up and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by Servas International, a non- governmental organization on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

Women poverty and conflict

Gender equality and women's empowerment are integral to each of the 17 SDGs and only by upholding rights of women and girls across all the goals will we get justice and inclusion, economies that work for all and sustain our shared environment now and for future generations, UN Women notes.

Nevertheless in 2023 the world is still far too far from these goals. Extreme poverty is rising and globally nearly one in ten women above the age of 15 is in a household living on less than 1,25 US\$ a day, without enough food, housing, health care or education. Small scale farmer households headed by women earn 30% less than those headed by men and world-wide women's unequal decision-making power undermines development at every level.

Poverty and Conflict

Poverty and conflict are widely understood to be interconnected. Research has shown that low per capita income and slow economic growth drastically increase the chances that a country will experience violence. Poorer countries are more prone to civil wars and armed conflicts in return are weakening governance and economic performance. On country-level, poverty can also lower resilience to conflict by weakening government institutions and stripping the capacity for goods provision.

In times of conflict, women and children suffer disproportionately. While a century ago around 90% of war casualties were armed combatants, today about 90 % of all war casualties are civilians, 80% of whom women and children. According to a UNICEF report the reason behind this development is that today's wars take less and less place in the battlefields but are instead fought in the lanes of villages and suburbs, where the distinction between combatant and non-combatant quickly melts away.

The UN Secretary General warns in a report from 2017 that "In many conflicts, government forces and non-state armed groups continued to defy international law by directly targeting civilians and civilian objects, launching indiscriminate attacks or failing to take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm. Civilians were killed, tortured, raped, enslaved, abducted, disappeared, used as human shields, forcibly recruited or forcibly displaced, among other violations. In some conflicts, deliberately attacking hospitals, schools and places of worship were strategic methods of warfare." In such situations violating women becomes a way of warfare.

Women are also more likely to be the target of sexual violence, especially rape and they sometimes face insurmountable obstacles to seek justice. "Rape is a weapon even more powerful than a bomb or a bullet," says victim Jeanna Mukuninwa, a 28-year-old woman from Shabunda, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. "At least with a bullet, you die. But if you have been raped, you appear to the community like someone who is cursed. After rape, no one will talk to you; no man will see you. It's a living death." Jeanna Mukuniwa has been raped in 2004 by soldiers attacking her village. She remembers that they used sticks and rifle barrels as well. She was 16 years old.

Their role as carers, combined with higher levels of poverty further means that the impact of war's destruction weighs particularly heavily on women and forces many of them into prostitution. Prior to the 2004 war, Iraqi women had the most progressive human rights in the region. During and following 2004, the situation changed dramatically. In 2005 the reservist Patrick Lactatt boasted that "for one dollar you can have a prostitute for one hour"

Amid worsening humanitarian crises and economic shocks, sexual violence also hinders women's livelihood activities and girls' access to education. Women and girls are also disproportionately affected by the lack of access to digital tools and resources, thereby

hindering their access to life-saving security, public health information, networks and internet income solutions. Those circumstances illustrate that the gender-based digital divide is nowhere more acute and perilous than in situations of conflict. Positive and proactive approaches to support women are urgently needed!

One positive example would be an innovative project funded by United Nations Action 2022 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, implemented through local women's cooperatives in 13 conflict-free mining sites. Through that project, hundreds of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have been able to access medical, psychosocial, legal and socioeconomic reintegration support. In December 2022, the Parliament of the Democratic Republic of the Congo also adopted a law on protection and reparations for victims of conflict-related sexual violence and established a reparations scheme. A national commission was subsequently created to outline the terms of eligibility for reparations and establish a national fund.

Women as Shapers of the Future

Despite being very likely to be made the first victims of war, women often become leaders of their communities in times of conflicts. With their husbands and even under age sons being abducted, killed or called into war, women and girls become actors who bear a responsibility that goes far beyond their traditional roles, and they often take on roles previously held by men.

Equally important is the role of women in peace and reconciliation processes. A study by the International Peace Institute found that of 182 signed peace agreements between 1989 and 2011 there is a 35 % increase in the probability that a peace agreement will last 15 years or more when women are included in peace processes,. Altogether the participation of civil society, including women's organizations, makes peace agreements 64% less likely to fail. Evidence indicates that women participants in peace processes are usually focused less on the spoils of war and more on reconciliation, economic development, education and transitional justice – all critical elements of a sustained peace. Thus women in peace negotiations take care to eliminate poverty and foster development of all members of society.

Nevertheless, women's participation in formal peace processes remains low. Between 1992 and 2019 women constituted, on average, just 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators and 6 percent of signatories in major peace processes around the world. Peace efforts in 2020 reflected this struggle to include women represented only 10 percent of negotiators in the Afghan talks, just 20 percent of negotiators in Libya's political discussion. The vast majority of peace agreements reached since 1990 also failed to address women's concerns, such as gender-based violence (GBV). Around 81% of all peace agreements made no reference to women at all and only 5% mentioned GBV.

The international community must work on solutions to build individual and institutional resilience against economic, security and climate shocks. This includes enabling an environment for the meaningful participation of women, and of communities at risk, in political and peacebuilding processes. States should also ensure access to multisectoral services, justice and reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

The 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 reaffirmed the important role of women in conflicts prevention and resolution, stressing the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and insisting on equal participation by women in decision-making and increase their role in the decision-making process. In line with this idea, in 2009 UN resolution 1889 called on the UN Secretary General to increase the role of women peacekeepers.

A positive example to be mentioned in this context is Rwanda, where women played a key-role in the peace and reconciliation process and with 63% now far outnumber men in parliament. They are the living proof that women can turn from victims of conflict into actors that must be strengthened and empowered by the international community. As

parliamentarians and in government they can act on behalf of women and their role in building a strong economy and society resilient against impoverishment.

Conclusion

In 2023, women are still disproportionately affected by poverty and inequalities. Poverty increases the risk of conflict, and again women are highly likely to become victims of conflict. Nevertheless, hard times also reveal the unique strength and potential of women. First of all they are the ones providing food and water, shelter, education and care for their families while men are away. They can turn from victims into peacemakers, shapers of future and transform their societies from violence into reconciliation, peace and cooperation in elimination of poverty and inequalities. Women therefore ought to be particularly protected and empowered, recognition and active work on an international level is needed, particularly in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Positive and proactive approaches to support women are urgently needed! As an NGO committed to peace and equality, Servas International pays special attention to gender balance and women inclusion in decision making processes, internally, as well as regarding international decision making and UN policies. States should work on better including women in political decision making and reconciliation processes and the UN should develop persistent action plans to this end, in line with the SDG 5, calling for legal frameworks for equal participation of women in public affairs, women empowerment programs and their role in economy, in particular in producing food.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs>
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