

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 10th anniversary celebration

Report by Beatrix Campbell on behalf of the WNC.

The 10th anniversary celebration of the adoption of UN Resolution 1325 Ensuring Women's Participation in Peace and Security in Brussels in September was a paradox: simultaneously a celebration and a critique.

The event was opened by Baroness Catherine Ashton, whose role as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs attracts a new level of confidence among women that a gender perspective will begin to be palpable. She said it was time to revisit the under-valued role of women in conflict and conflict resolution.

The Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere, affirmed the tone of the gathering when he argued that while gender mainstreaming had become, so to say, mainstream - 'inevitable' - he said, it was a 'disgrace' that a fifth of the world's women were confronted by sexual violence.

The UN in the Congo conflict had failed to address responsibility of perpetrators of rape, and atrocities remained 'the daily reality of people.'

There had also been a failure to secure the participation of women in decision-making and peacekeeping – part of the purpose of resolution 1325.

This theme was confirmed by other speakers. Rachel Mayanja, the Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women cautioned that 'impunity exists for perpetrators' and she concluded that 'all of us agree that the achievements have fallen well below expectations.' She enumerated the achievements, 19 National Action Plans, an all-woman peacekeeping forces in Liberia, provided by India. And yet women and children endured sexual violence in conflict zones, traditionalist male resistance to women's participation in politics and peacekeeping. That resistance was compounded by the problem of distance, which contributed to women's inability to gain access to peace negotiations.

The concern about rape as an unaddressed weapon of war was expressed at the highest level. Margot Wallstrom, formerly an EU diplomat and now Special Representative to the UN Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict – another person who is attracting high expectations - reported that whilst the UN Security Council had recently discussed the Congo conflict 'at this very moment in thousands of huts in Eastern Congo families are trying to cope with sexual violence and rape. If his happens to a mother while her children are watching, how will they ever feel safe again?

'If this does not require the attention and action of peace-keepers then what does?' Impunity reigned, she added, insisting that there was 'no security without women's security.'

Yet who could women report to if local male hierarchies felt that a woman's pain was not worth reporting, if women had no access to UN forces, not to mention access to women within the military forces. If states existed without infrastructure, without capable governments, then women's access to support was compromised.

Discussing women's role in peace negotiations, she argued that potential women negotiators should be identified and she herself was 'in favour of quotas.' Bineta Diop, executive director of Femmes Africa Solidarite, another official speaker, said that Resolution 1325 was very important to African women - the themes of protection, prevention, participation were key. And yet 1325 was regarded as weak because it remained 'an instrument without accountability.' Furthermore, the context of armed conflicts and peace negotiations created settings which 'provide resources for those with guns but there is no strategy to include the women.' Women were doubly disarmed.

Peace negotiations often took a very long time and it was vital, therefore, to ensure that women could continue to participate.

Undoubtedly the UN Security Council is listening to these women – and to Ireland's former President Mary Robinson, a vigorous campaigner for human rights. A note of caution was added by Shirin Ebadi, founder of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre in Iran. She was the first Iranian and first Muslim to be awarded the Nobel peace prize. She is now living in exile in the UK. She described the current regime in Iran not as an Islamic revolution but a revolution 'staged by men against women.' A country could therefore claim to be democratic whilst depriving half of its citizens of their human rights. 'When we are talking about peace we are not just talking about the absence of war – we are also talking about tranquillity and stability; we can only live in a real peace when human rights are respected. No person who has no education because of poverty, who can be imprisoned for expressing opinions, who sleeps rough on the streets, is not living a life of peace.'

Several speakers among the representatives from all over Europe expressed strong concerns about the need for resources without which women could not participate in peace processes and grave anxiety about the sexual violence perpetrated daily in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The European Women's Lobby in particular called for an approach to war and peace that did not 'legitimise' masculine wars by particularly masculinised peace processes. It was tie to insist upon women's presence in peace negotiations and to impose sanctions on those delegations that excluded women.

Closing the event, Finnish Minister of State Elisabeth Rehn, herself a former special investigator, appointed by Kofi Annan during the armed conflict in Bosnia, recalled being shocked that a 'very merited UN officer' had told her that it was 'very difficult for commanders to ask their men not to rape and loot because that's their only salary.' It was vital that the problem of impunity be discussed, she said.

One of the most vigorous advocates was European Women's Lobby secretary general Myria Vassiliadou, one of the few who managed to speak during the short time allocated to the participants. She urged 'a holistic approach to conflict' that included the multiple dimensions and problems of war that may not be contained by traditional concepts of conflict and conflict resolution. She draws attention to the crisis of rape as a weapon of war and a conflict paradigm that is 'particularly male' and legitimates war whilst failing to address the epidemic of rape in some of the world's current conflict zones.

Although she did not have time to elaborate, the European Women's Lobby feels strongly that although there are some positive developments – not least Cathy Ashdown's appointment and Margot Wallstrom's new post – targets and timetables need to accompany commitment to resolution 1325. It is positive that Ashdown has appointed the first woman representative – to Somalia. But only 19 countries have National Action Plans.' Ten years to appoint one person,' notes Vassiliadou. And rape a virtual silence, 'why no National Action Plan? Why impunity?'

Vassiliadou's comments attracted considerable attention among participants, not least because of the latest alarming reports of mass rape in the armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and northern Uganda.