

The Arria Formula Meeting on Women, Peace and Security
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Madam chair, Your Excellencies,

It is with a great sense of responsibility to the women of Sierra Leone and to the women living in conflict around the world that I speak to you today. My organisation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, based both here and in Sierra Leone, has shared its views with you on the gender dimensions of the conflict situation in Sierra Leone over the past two years. Fresh from your visit to Sierra Leone I hope our discussions today can reinforce and highlight the conclusions that can be drawn from what you yourselves saw on the ground. You received both verbally and on paper information and recommendations from the Women's Forum in Freetown, the contents of which illustrate the continued engagement of women in forging solutions to the problems in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone now has the highest number of peacekeepers in the field, however the women of Sierra Leone do not yet feel safe. Security must exist beyond Freetown and its environs. While we know this is UNAMSIL's goal, it is as yet unachieved, and until it is achieved the work of post-conflict rebuilding cannot begin in earnest. It is not just greater numbers of adequately equipped peace keepers that is needed but a clearer and more robust peacekeeping mandate which fully integrates the particular needs of women.

When UNAMSIL was established, WILPF and other women's organisations got involved in the training of peace keepers prior to deployment and in monitoring of the effectiveness of peace keeping mission with regards to women's needs. The Operation in Sierra Leone has a gender point person in the human rights verification unit, designated to systematically monitor and report on violations against women. This elements of UNAMSIL is a model that is carving new ground. We hope it will be routinely applied in peace support operations, but there are lessons to be learnt. The Brahimi Report emphasizes the need for Peace Support Operations to engage with local groups - it seems this particular unit in Sierra Leone are yet to engage its constituency.

Thousands of ECOMOG babies are a reality in Sierra Leone. When the ECOMOG mission began pulling out of Sierra Leone women with the babies that they had borne to the departing peace keepers lined the route to the airport.

These babies are the physical manifestation of a lack of discipline amongst peace keeping troops. When peacekeepers violate the trust of the people they are sent to serve, there is a breakdown in a crucial relationship. Therefore, it is vital that peace keepers have appropriate training on the protection, rights and particular needs of women, from their own member states as well as once they are in the field. We welcome the British and Canadian training manual and we look forward to its impact on these problems.

Furthermore, there must be a standard means of holding peace keepers to account where they commit violations of codes of conduct and international law against the women they are there to protect. We believe that the necessity for peacekeeping mechanisms to build greater links with women's groups and civil society generally can not be over-stated and we believe that gender-sensitivity training will help greatly towards this end.

Civil society groups, particularly women's groups, continue to be the eyes and ears of the peacekeeping operation and are under-utilised so as to prevent incidences such as those that occurred in April and May of this year in Sierra Leone, when the rebels abducted 500 peace keepers.

Your Excellencies,

Article 28. Paragraph 2 of the Lome Peace Accord says, "Given that women have been particularly victimised during the war, special attention shall be accorded to their needs and potentials in formulating and implementing national rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programmes to enable them to play a central role in the moral, social and physical reconstruction of Sierra Leone". Should prior suffering be necessary for women to enjoy their international human right of political participation?

In Lome, one woman was in the government delegation, other women within civil society groups were observers. Although these women were there, they could not participate personally to bring their ideas and recommendations to the negotiating table. All that they could rely on were third parties to sporadically put these forwards for them.

Equal participation of women at all decision-making levels for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict should be standard.

In Sierra Leone girls abducted into armed groups are forced into sexual slavery, subjected to physical and emotional violence and are forced to provide other personal services. The majority become infected with sexually transmitted diseases and increasingly, HIV and AIDS. The demobilisation unit at Mile 91 in Sierra Leone is laying the groundwork for rehabilitation. As you heard from the women in Freetown, the DDR programme under UNAMSIL and the RRR programme under the government must be better linked to increase its effectiveness and to meet the needs of these women and girls in addition to the demobilised combatants.

As the women told you in Freetown, far too many weapons are in circulation in Sierra Leone and this creates insecurity. The DDR Commission is held by the community as THE way forward for a sustainable peace. Implementation of the disarmament component of peace agreements needs to be strengthened generally. This fact was recognised last week in a forum bringing together the disarmament and the humanitarian departments in the UN, something we hope will continue. Women have shown in Albania, in Mali and in Liberia how central the disarmament process is to real peace.

We are encouraged by the setting up of the Special Court for Sierra Leone to address the issue of impunity. We support the definitions of the crimes contained in Article 2 of the Statue, however we are concerned that efforts to include crimes under Sierra Leonean law do not reach the threshold of the ICC as it applies to gender based crimes. The Security Council should ensure that in the statute of any special court or war crimes tribunal in the future ICC standards are fully met in relation to gender based crimes.

We NGOS have provided you with some serious and achievable recommendations that would address the elements I have discussed today using the example of Sierra Leone. We want to thank you for your ongoing commitment to bring peace and security in Sierra Leone, and look forward to our ongoing dialogue.