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The Role of Women in Countries in Special Situations

Remarks by Jan Egeland

I am glad to address the issue of the role, the vulnerabilities and the great potential of women in circumstances of conflict and crisis.

The good news, as we discuss this issue in ECOSOC 2010, is that we have over the last decade gotten a whole series of international norms, decisions and declarations that once and for all declare that a gender perspective is a necessary precondition if we are to succeed in promoting security, development and humanitarian principles.

In October this year, we will mark the 10th anniversary of the landmark **UNSCR 1325** on women, peace and security. In addition, we work towards the effective and comprehensive implementation of the provisions of UNSCRs 1820 and 1888, which confront sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations.

The UN has thus, once and for all, declared that we must have a specific focus on women in all our work in crisis and post-crisis situations - not only because it is in conformity with our ideals, but also with our interests. We will fail in our peace, development and humanitarian efforts unless we focus on the needs of and resourcefulness of women.

There is also good news in terms of some implementation, some places. In a few post-conflict situations, from Burundi to Nepal, the representation of women in political decision-making has increased manifold since peace agreements were made and the peace process started. In many development programs and capacity building efforts inside and outside of the UN there is greater, better and more effective focus on empowering women.

Women and girls have over the last decade in most countries achieved greater access to health care and education. In many

emergency operations humanitarian workers have mainstreamed gender perspectives and relief groups provide more appropriate and effective aid for women and girls as well as men and boys. When I was the Emergency Relief Coordinator we established a stand-by gender capacity that can send experts anywhere in the world on short notice to help protect and promote the rights of women in extreme situations. So far operative gender experts have been deployed to improve humanitarian programs in more than 20 countries.

But the bad news dwarfs the good news: the bitter realities in most crisis and post-crisis situation are that little has changed. Too many places women and girls continue to live in extreme vulnerability, suffer unbelievable human rights abuse and remain totally marginalized in all decision-making that affects their lives and their communities.

In short, although UNSCR 1325 deserves to be celebrated as a major breakthrough for women's rights in the peace and security arena because of its systematic insistence on the interconnectedness between gender and peace and security concerns - the realities on the ground have not changed for most of the women in most of the situations that the UN wanted to reach.

Humanitarian crises - be they conflicts or natural disasters - reinforce, increase and perpetuate social inequalities and discrimination, including gender inequalities. The potential contributions that women can make to disaster risk reduction, to crisis response and to post-crisis reconstruction and peace building are all too often overlooked and female leadership in building community resilience frequently disregarded.

Pre-existing vulnerabilities are also often exacerbated. We see more sexual and domestic violence. We see violations concerning housing, land and property rights, personal documentation and status rights. Again, more often than not, it is women, girls and boys that bear a disproportionate brunt of these violations.

We must acknowledge that the systematic integration of gender into humanitarian responses has not yet been achieved and much remains to be done at many levels – policy development, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, needs assessment tools and, more than

anything else, operational tools and practices. The systematic collection and analysis of sex- and age-disaggregated data; and the integration of gender perspectives in appeals and planning tools related to disaster preparedness, responses and post-crisis reconstruction and peace-building are critical steps in the right direction.

Gender programming in humanitarian response is about humanitarian effectiveness first and foremost. If those who deliver humanitarian assistance continue to do “business as usual” only the strong will receive assistance. We have all seen the big trucks delivering food off the back where teaming people – ALL MEN – fight to get a bag of food. Where are the women – who is making sure that they get services? And when coupon systems are set up in some places attempted to provide food directly to women – some women may be forced to have sex with the distributors of the coupons in order to get what is rightly hers.

We must have systems in place to ensure that all women, girls, boys and men have equal access to and benefit from humanitarian assistance. If we do not have a gender perspective our job is not done and people who we are there to serve are possibly put in harms way.

All humanitarian actors must be held accountable to ensure that they understand the different needs of women and men – girls and boys and design their interventions taking these differences into account.

They must furthermore analyse data by sex and age so they know who received support. If some say “we provided health care to 10,000 people or we have 8000 kids going to our schools – what does this tell us about who actually is benefiting from the support. What if there are 7500 of the kids where boys? Where are the girls? Or if 9000 of the 10,000 where women. Where are the men? What prevents them from reaching services?

Humanitarian workers also need to know if they are putting people at risk of sexual violence by increasing their vulnerability. If a shelter provided does not make sure the shelter is safe – and puts women at risk of rape – then the shelter provider did not do his job. If again latrines are not separated and women cannot access sanitation facilities safely – then the provider of sanitation services did not do his or her job.

All humanitarian decision makers must “follow the money” – if we do not know how much money is going to support gender programming we will not have the resources needed. A new gender marker in the international Consolidated Appeals Process is the first effort to follow where the money goes and tell us how we allocate resources.

Importantly, the use of resources must be grassroots oriented and operational and advocacy more focussed. Many of the good advocates for women’s rights have in recent years been more successful in organising seminars and studies in New York, Geneva, Nairobi or Oslo than in getting field projects, envoys and local action to make a difference on the frontlines.

We’ve talked about gang-rape in the Congo, Darfur and elsewhere too long. Rape is a crime of the worst kind. In war it is a war crime. The first international trial declaring rape as a war crime took place in Europe in the 13th century – but women are still physically and mentally destroyed in war and crisis in all cultures and on all continents. Those military and civilian commanders who condone or commit this abuse belong in jail and campaigns need to target their individual accountability.

Similarly, religious or administrative leaders who do not defend women subjected to local or tribal atrocities, including so called “honour murders”, must be targeted and brought to justice. Authorities who tolerate systematic abortion of girls because local traditions prefer sons must be exposed for international condemnation.

In summary, research undertaken by my own Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and the International Peace Research Institute of Oslo confirm that the momentum for focusing on women’s governance and political, economic and social rights is not and must not be lost. Many initiatives are under way, although it has proven to be necessary to have long-term perspectives on UNSCR 1325 implementation efforts than was hoped. Some clear goals to aim for over the next 10-15 years can, however, be formulated:

* Women should always be part of peace negotiations and peace processes

* No peace agreements should be endorsed unless women are either signatories or women's interests are catered for in the agreement.

* When peace building strategies, reconstruction plans, long term development plans etc are made or negotiated, the UN country teams, International Financial Institutions and member states must make sure that these consult with, involve and benefit women.

* In addition to including women in the more general planning of governance, humanitarian and development strategies separate funding should be set aside to women-specific projects. The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), for example, aims at having 15-20% of the Peacebuilding Fund devoted to women's empowerment projects.

* Micro-financing has helped a lot of women to get started with small self-sustainable projects. More finances should be invested in larger schemes and more ambitious projects to help more women get to the markets to sell their products. Many women experience that it might not be too difficult to get micro-loans. But those who have larger ambitions have difficulties getting assistance.

* More than anything we need to get the transfer of best practices from those places that have empowered, promoted and protected women and girls to those places that lag behind. Countries, like my own, that have systematically attempted to promote equal rights for all have experienced a marked increase in human development and standard of living for all, also men. If women continue to be marginalized with a fraction of economic wealth, productive capacity, political influence and administrative positions, all - women and men, society at large, will suffer stagnation, under-development and increasing, I believe, international condemnation.

It is as easy and as difficult as that. Making our norms a reality among women and men, girls and boys everywhere.