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High Level Ministerial Dialogue On “The Role of Women in  
Countries in Special Situations”

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It is a great honor to share with you my views about the important topic of “The Role of Women in Countries in Special Situations: Africa, least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDs), small island developing states (SIDSs), post-conflict and post-crises countries”. Given my expertise, I have been asked to focus specifically on countries that are, or will be embarking on, the process of economic reconstruction following conflict or other crises.

Thus, my discussion on gender issues will be put in the context of what is happening in Afghanistan and Haiti, two countries at the top of the UN international peace and security agenda, as it is on the agenda of donor countries. I will also be making references to what happened in El Salvador, one of the earliest and more successful UN experiences. Regrettably, the lessons and best practices from this and other earlier experiences seem to have been forgotten, at a great cost for an organization that has repeated some mistakes over and over, and has failed to benefit from its successes.

Many of the post-conflict countries on which I have drawn my views are in Africa and are also least developed countries (LDCs). These include some large countries in the continent such as Angola, Mozambique and DRC, but also some smaller countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. Other countries are LDCs and also landlocked. Afghanistan, Burundi, Rwanda, and Ethiopia are good examples. Others are LDCs and small island developing states (SIDSs) as well. Timor Leste is perhaps the best example that comes to mind.

In my view, however, by lumping the conflict-affected countries together with other poverty-affected countries as “special situations,” we are *ignoring the characteristics and special needs of countries coming out of conflict*. Among them is the situation of women, which often changes in unexpected ways in the transition from war to peace.

*The first reason why post-conflict countries are different* is that, despite the peculiarities of each particular case, as civil war or other internal chaos end, these countries confront a

*complex multi-pronged transition:*

- *Political crime and violence must give way to security for the inhabitants, through the creation of civilian police forces and military forces under civilian control. These new forces need to be sensitized so that violence against women, prevalent during the war, does not recur;*
- *Lawlessness and political exclusion must give way to the rule of law, respect for human and property rights and participatory government. The participation of women in governance is key to a fair and just political system that can guide the transition rather than derail it;*
- *Ethnic, religious or class confrontation must yield to national reconciliation so that people can return where they came from and live in peace. Disarming, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs have proved *sine qua non* for national reconciliation; the fair participation of women in DDR programs is key to their success;*
- *War-ravaged economies must reconstruct and become functioning economies that enable ordinary people—both men and women—to make a licit and decent living. As in normal development, women -who often account for significantly more than half the population of countries coming out of war- need to be active participants in the reconstruction process.*

The fact that the transition from conflict to peace requires *these multiple tasks makes economic reconstruction fundamentally different from “development as usual.”* If anything, reconstruction is a development-PLUS challenge: In addition to the normal socio-development challenges facing developing countries, post-conflict countries also need national reconciliation and a process of management of the trauma of war.

At the same time, if war destruction was widespread, these countries also need to rehabilitate basic services and infrastructure so as to ensure that education, health and other services address women’s needs. Both factors impose serious financial requirements in these countries that do not exist in others.

*The second reason why post-conflict countries are different is that—despite similarities in terms of poverty and low human development, poor governance, weak institutions and lack of respect for human rights, including gender equality—policymaking in post-crises situations is fundamentally different from “business as usual”.*

The differences arise with respect to the horizon over which economic policies are planned, the guiding principles, the amount and stability of technical and financial assistance, and the nature and extent of the international community’s involvement.

- In post-crises situations, policymakers do not have the luxury of planning policies with a medium- and long-term horizon in mind so as to get it right. On the contrary,

there is a *sense of urgency that often leads to distortionary, emergency policies*, mostly of a humanitarian nature, that will probably have unintended consequences in the medium and long-term, unless they are reversed in a timely manner.

- In post-crisis situations, policymakers often need to put the guiding “equity or development principle” (that is, the principle of treating equally all groups with the same needs) in favor of *the “political” or “reconstruction” principle*. This principle *justifies giving special treatment to groups most affected by the war*—particularly male and female combatants, but also other women that experienced violence during the war, child soldiers, youth, returnees, and other groups—so that they get a stake in the peace process, diminishing the chances that the country would revert to war.
- Countries in crisis attract media attention to the plight of raped women as a tool of war, of starving children, physical destruction and other tragedies. As a result, *foreign aid exhibits sharp spikes right after crises*. But media frenzies are short-lived, and aid flows soon return to the low and stable levels that characterize normal development. Spikes of aid put pressure on countries with low absorptive capacity to utilize them effectively and avoid corruption, something that has proved exceedingly challenging.
- Because post-crisis countries rely heavily on aid to finance a large part of their economic and social needs, as well as needs relating to governance, the rule of law and security, there is *often a large and intrusive political involvement of the international community in the internal affairs of these countries*, which would be inadmissible under normal development. Donors could and have used such leverage to promote women’s rights but, by imposing their own views, it has often backfired.

Ignoring the peculiarities and special needs of these countries has, in my view, been a major factor in the last two decades’ dismal record with reconstruction: *Roughly half of the countries that moved from conflict to a fragile peace—either through negotiated settlement or military intervention—have reverted to conflict within a few years.*

Such a record has led to more human tragedy, large numbers of refugees and internally displaced populations, and huge costs in military intervention and peacekeeping forces. Failure at the country level has spread to the region and to the world since failed states are an incubator for terrorism, trafficking of drugs and women, other violence against women, piracy, and other illicit activities.

*Of the other half that has managed to keep the peace, the large majority end up highly dependent on foreign aid—hardly a sustainable model in the context of the global financial crisis and the increasing need for funds for development and environmental purposes elsewhere.*

*The international community needs to seriously debate ways in which to improve this record. Focusing on this is the best way to improve the condition of women in these countries.* In my view, the debate on women and poverty, human development, and

economic development, should focus on a number of areas as follows:

○ **Aid delivery and execution should be improved**

A broad debate needs to take place on how to improve the effectiveness of aid delivery and execution. Without a significant improvement in the use of aid, so that these countries can create *dynamic and inclusive economies*, *there will be little chance of improving the condition of women*. Current aid delivery and execution fails in three broad areas:

- *Aid is wasted in the process and little reaches the targeted groups*

The case of Afghanistan is illustrative of problems in this area. World Bank data show that only \$20 out of \$170 per capita allocated to the country by donors as ODA in 2008 is allocated to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), seriously undermining the governmental objective of reaching such goals. The rest was largely dilapidated in overhead costs of several organizations involved in the same project, bilateral donors' contractors and experts, security costs for foreign contractors, endless reports and conferences, and other such expenses, which have not benefited the local population.

- *Aid is provided outside the government's budget and priorities*

Although the percentage is expected to be falling, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) data shows that, of all reported aid to Afghanistan in 2008—amounting to \$6 billion (\$216 per capita)—82 percent was channeled outside the government budget. Hence, rather than supporting the government priorities, aid is supporting the agenda of the donors.

It is not surprising then that, despite its commitment to the MDGs, the government has already indicated that the MDG of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger will be difficult to achieve. In fact, the country could be 2 to 5 years behind target (the year 2020). Despite important progress in terms of health and education of women and girls, the country is also years away from achieving the gender goals in the MDGs,

- *Aid is provided in a fragmented way rather than pursuant to an integrated approach*

The fragmented approach most commonly used at the present time will not allow the improvement of the condition of women in a holistic way. The latter requires the application of Tinbergen's principle that to attain a given number of independent targets there must be at least an equal number of instruments.

In addition, in order to exploit potential synergies among different interventions an integrated approach is required. Thus, women need to be educated, but clinics are also

required so that they do not die in childbirth for lack of midwives or because of contaminated water. They should also be able to find a productive job after finishing school since otherwise the gains from education will be lost which in turn will lead to frustration and discontent.

In this regard, the Millennium Villages Project (MVP) in Africa, led by the Earth Institute at Columbia University, is a model to be studied and emulated. The MVP pursues an integrated development approach by empowering communities with basic necessities, low-cost technologies, and other tools so that they can lift themselves from extreme poverty and meet the MDGs.

After only three years in operation, remarkable results have been achieved at a reasonable cost. By not keeping expatriates in the country, except for short periods of time, and by following a holistic and bottom up approach to development, aid channeled through the MVPs in Africa has proved to be more effective and cost efficient in all areas, greatly benefiting the condition of rural women.

- *New aid should not support bad models for women*

Aid to Haiti in the past has been more the problem than the solution. Despite large volumes of aid, jobs have been scarce and badly paid. An important source of employment for women has been the export-processing zones in the garment industry. These so-called “sweatshops” have been a source of labor conflict since wages have not allowed women to rise above poverty levels and working conditions have been unnecessarily harsh. Security has also been lax which has led to frequent violence against women.

Given the new trade preferences given to investors under the US HELP Act following the earthquake in January 2010, the Government of Haiti should seize this opportunity to ensure that investors in these zones contribute to improving the condition of women and of the country.

In exchange for the important trade and tax preferences that they will receive, the government should ensure that investors contribute to the transfer of technology to, and the training of, women in the zones in higher value-added production; that workers receive fair salaries and that they increase in line with their productivity; and that basic security, human rights, and other adequate working conditions for women are respected in the zones. Investors should also be required to exercise corporate responsibility and support the communities through the financing of infrastructure, including schools, clinics, parks, etc.

- **DDR programs are key in addressing women’s special needs**

A key aspect of the process of national reconciliation is the effective DDR of former combatants and other groups affected by the conflict. Because women have been involved as combatants, but have also played many other roles, and have been victims of

specific violence during the conflict, DDR programs are particularly important to address or redress some of these problems.

Most reintegration programs have provided some kind of temporary employment for groups in the process of disarming and demobilizing. However, the international community has failed miserably in supporting countries coming out of war or chaos to create sustainable jobs in the private sector through entrepreneurship and new start-ups so as to enable them to stand on their own feet. Adequate credit and technical support for these programs have been lacking or inadequate.

Most reintegration programs have relied on short-term public employment for rehabilitating services or infrastructure, which are not fiscally sustainable. Others rely on jobs provided by the NGO, UN agencies and bilateral donor communities which are short-term and unsustainable since the spike in aid will not last.

Although there is agreement that gender issues should be considered at each stage of the design and implementation of the DDR programs, there is disagreement on how this should be done and whether specific gender provisions are likely to improve the situation of women or women would benefit more with more informal arrangements. The experiences on El Salvador and Guatemala—two countries that reached peace through UN-led negotiations few years apart—show contrasting models:

- *El Salvador arms-for-land program*

While the Salvadoran agreement talks about potential “beneficiaries” of the land program, there was never any doubt that women were included. Women had provided about 30 percent of the FMLN forces (as compared to about 15 percent in the case of the URNG in Guatemala). In addition to the women that were disarmed and demobilized, potential beneficiaries of the arms-for-land program included a large number of women heads of household that were among the so-called “*tenedores*” (in Salvadoran parlance) or “landholders” that had occupied land in the conflict zones.

In his book *Peacemonger*, then Under-Secretary General for Political Affairs Marrack Goulding describes a visit to Perquín with me to see what a “*tenedor*” looked like, as follows:

“The *tenedor* we met was a woman living with a man, an aunt, a grandmother, seven children, two pigs and two chickens in a house which they had reconstructed from a bombed ruin, with just over two hectares of maize and beans.”

This description is significant: She was clearly the beneficiary of the program (even though she lived with a man). There were all kinds of problems with the El Salvador arms-for-land program but gender was never an issue.

- *Specific gender provisions in the Guatemala Peace Agreement*

The Guatemala Peace Agreement, on the other hand, included a large number of gender provisions. Together with excessively ambitious social and economic goals for reform, the agreement lacked political support and faced serious problems with regard to financing and implementation. Thus, gender provisions remained on paper but had hardly any practical effect. There is no question in my mind that Salvadoran women were better off in regard to their post-war reintegration than the Guatemalan ones in this regard.

- *Property rights for women*

A serious problem with effective reintegration of women, however, involves countries in which women do not have a right to hold land or other assets. These women often find themselves returning from war to find out that, because their husbands or fathers have died, they have lost their land and often their homes. This is indeed an area that deserves a serious debate on how to override these constraints and on the possibility of eliminating them.

In Afghanistan, the Sharia law favors males but allows women to own land. Moreover, *de facto* decisions resulting from family negotiations can override *de jure* ones. Despite the obstacles and limitations, women have been increasingly involved in rebuilding the orchards, vineyards and forests, 60 to 80 percent of which were lost during decades of war.

In an inspiring keynote speech at Connecticut College in May 2010, Dana Freyer, co-founder of the Global Partnership for Afghanistan (GPFA) recounts how this NGO, with the help of 150 Afghan staff members, 40 of which are women, has helped 12,000 farmers, including 1,200 women, to reclaim their scorched land. Among its achievements, this program has planted 8 million trees since 2004, providing productive reintegration to women and men in almost half of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

- **Policy “ownership” is key to implementation**

National policymakers’ “ownership” is key to successful implementation and sustainability. Without it, policies will not be effectively implemented nor sustainable. With regard to the gender issue in post-crises situations, three points are relevant:

- *Gender provisions need to be broadly supported to have an impact*

The case of Guatemala Peace Agreement, in which neither the government nor the URNG negotiating team supported the gender provisions, is a case in point. When changes in the institutional and legal framework will be resisted or ignored altogether, it is often better to think about ways to improve women’s conditions in an informal and less confrontational way.

- *Don't expect from others what you cannot achieve yourself*

I find it absurd for the UN, and the international community in general, to expect dramatic gender changes in a country like Afghanistan, where major cultural, religious, ethnic, and family factors act against them, when they cannot even do it themselves.

A casual look at the UNAMA web page shows the face of three male Europeans in the three top positions. This is certainly not a good example of gender equality nor a good model to be imitated. Neither is it a model of the diversity that should characterize all UN activities. Do these people—whom I do not know: this is certainly not a personal attack—have the background, experience, and sensitivity to understand the cultural, religious, ethnic and other factors that should be key to designing effective and sustainable gender policies in the country? What kind of support can they provide the government in this regard?

By the way, there might be some (though not much) diversity in the Haitian team but there are no women in any of the leadership positions of MINUSTAH either. I think this is indicative of the difficulty in dealing with gender issues in the global economy. Imagine in countries coming out of war or other chaos at very low levels of development!

- **The “peace” objective should prevail over all others**

One of the most important premises for effective reconstruction is that the “peace” (or “political”) objective should prevail at all times over the “development” one (with “development” defined in a broad sense to include not only the socio-economic dimension, but also gender issues, other human rights, and environmental sustainability).

It should be clear to all that, should the country revert to war—which, as I said earlier, happens half the time—there is no chance for development. In fact, the most affected would be women, who are victims of war violence, will lose their children and husbands in the fight, will have to fight themselves, and will see their dreams for better education and health for themselves and their daughters and sons shattered.

Because DDR programs have important financial consequences and need to be given priority in budget allocations, the peace and development objectives often clash. This is why optimal and best-practice macroeconomic policies are not usually possible or even desirable during the transition from war.

Similarly, gender issues that will threaten the achievement of peace or result in the recurrence of war should be put aside. Peace negotiations with the rank and file of the Taliban, for example, will most probably fail if Western concepts of gender are insisted upon. As with optimal economic policies, optimal gender provisions could be a luxury of peacetime. Avoiding the recurrence of war should be *the first and top priority of reconstruction. Women can hardly afford going back to war.*