
Statement at the Security Council Open Debate on Strengthening the UN's Response to Gender-based Violence in Conflict/Post-conflict Situations

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Presented in French

My name is Agathe Rwankuba. I am a lawyer at the Bukavu Court of Appeals and a member of the non-governmental organization Réseau des femmes pour la défense des droits et la paix, based in Bukavu, in the province of South Kivu, in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

First, I extend my sincere thanks to the Government of the United Kingdom, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, and International Alert for giving me the opportunity to participate in this meeting on behalf of the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In my statement today, I shall make three specific recommendations to help the Council in its efforts to eradicate sexual violence against women. We all are aware of the extent of gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. For example, in the eastern part of the country, we believe that at least 35,000 women and girls have been raped since the beginning of the war in 1996. Given the extent and the devastating consequences of gender-specific violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and many other conflict areas throughout the world, I would like to thank the Security Council and the United Kingdom during its presidency for devoting today's meeting to this issue.

My first recommendation is that financing allocated to the Human Rights Section and the Gender Section of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) should be enhanced in order to establish a genuine partnership with local women's organizations. The fact that the Security Council, by resolution 1565 (2004), has enlarged MONUC's mandate is positive. Since December 2002, MONUC's Human Rights Section has been working in the province of South Kivu with local women's organizations, including my own, in order to identify and rehabilitate the victims of violence, according to their rights. The organizations support the women living in the most remote rural regions, to which MONUC has no access due to lack of sufficient resources. MONUC's Gender Section is based in Kinshasa, which is 2,000 kilometres from South Kivu.

My organization has never had the opportunity to meet a staff member of the Gender Section. It is clear that the Gender Section should have greater support in order to form an effective partnership with women's organizations.

Secondly, I endorse the recommendation of the Secretary-General that states that the Security Council, Member States, the United Nations and other international organizations should "Apply increased pressure on parties to armed conflict ... to cease all violations of the human rights of women and girls, including sexual and gender-based violence". (S/2004/814, para. 87)

Although the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has officially ended, some local and foreign militias continue to sow terror and commit sexual violence in the eastern part of the country. The fact that the Security Council has decided to strengthen the number of Blue Helmets in my country has given rise to enormous hope among the local population, especially the women with whom I work every day. We

must earnestly hope that those peacekeeping forces will help strengthen security in the Democratic Republic of Congo, restore peace in our region and prevent other crimes.

However, given the great extent of our national territory, the number of Blue Helmets continues to be clearly insufficient. That is why I urge the Security Council to further strengthen their number and presence in the east of the country as soon as possible, to help the country to work in consultation with its neighbours to disarm and repatriate foreign militias, and to apply pressure on countries that still have armed groups in our country to repatriate them.

Another particularly alarming problem in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is that some armed groups continue to hold girl soldiers as sex slaves, thereby excluding them from the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process. It is imperative that those girls be included in the MONUC programmes. Therefore I urge the Security Council to provide the Gender Section and the Human Rights Section of MONUC with the necessary human and financial resources in order to collect information on those girl soldiers and ensure that they are demobilized.

Finally, I recommend that the Security Council, in accordance with paragraph 87 of the report of the Secretary-General on women, peace and security, act immediately to put an end to impunity by means of the following measures. First, there should be an independent international enquiry to identify in a precise manner those responsible, individually and collectively, for sexual violence against women during the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Secondly, the Human Rights Section and the Gender Section of MONUC should be requested to work with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, to harmonize national legislation with international standards. The women of South Kivu have mobilized to combat sexual violence and fight for the vindication of the rights of the victims. The Coalition Against Gender Violence, of which my organization is a founding member, has made proposals to reform national criminal law to redefine and strengthen criminal laws against rape. However, those proposals have gone unheeded.

Although rape and sexual abuse spare no age group, they particularly affect the active female population in agricultural areas, which is the main productive force and essential pillar in any subsistence economy of the region. The physical and moral damage suffered by those women has considerably reduced their productivity, thereby exacerbating the poverty of rural communities.

In that context, it is important for the international community to provide funds for women's groups in rural communities, work in close cooperation with those groups and take into consideration their point of view in the reconstruction process, as the Secretary-General recommends in paragraph 88 of his report. The necessary resources should be provided for programmes that provide care and support to victims of sexual violence. In particular, all female victims should have access to medical assistance in order to treat medical problems resulting from rape and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

In conclusion, I express my thanks for the praiseworthy efforts that have been made so far by the Security Council to bring peace and security to the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, I ask the Council to accept the following three recommendations to better protect women, prevent renewed violence and encourage the participation of women.

First, funding has to be increased for the Gender Section and Human Rights Section of MONUC so that they can work in partnership with women's organizations and assist victims of sexual violence. Secondly, peacekeeping forces in the country need to be strengthened, and the Gender Section and Human Rights Section of MONUC must receive human and financial resources so that they can collect information enabling them to identify girl soldiers and ensure that they are included in DDR programmes. Thirdly, we must act immediately to put an end to impunity by urging the Gender Section and the Human Rights Section of MONUC to advocate legislative reform in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and by establishing an independent international commission of inquiry on sexual violence committed during the war in the country.