

Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
Tuesday, 24th October 2000, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by Mr. Levitte, on behalf of the European Union, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia — and the associated countries, Cyprus and Malta, align themselves with this statement.

Allow me to thank you, Sir, on behalf of the European Union, for having inscribed on our agenda the theme of women and peace and security. The Security Council's interest in the specific situation of women is recent. The Council paid tribute to their special role on 8 March 2000 on the occasion of International Women's Day, on the initiative of the President at the time, the Ambassador of Bangladesh. This debate logically follows from the interest accorded in the protection of civilians in armed conflict and the competence of the Council regarding peace and security.

Our work should not disregard those involved elsewhere in the United Nations. The question of women in conflict was one of the 12 action areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, and the follow-up special session of the General Assembly held in June 2000, which rightly included "peace" in its title, took up and strengthened the recommendations on this topic. The role of women in all situations, I have no doubt, will be taken into account by the Security Council.

My first comment is that when we deal with conflict the role of women seems to be basically passive. Women are generally mentioned only as victims. To the extent that it is civilians that suffer most from conflicts, women represent a high percentage of the victims. It is therefore important that peacekeeping forces be sensitized and trained to bear in mind in their missions women's specific protection needs. In recent years particular attention has been paid to the use of sexual violence as a method of warfare. These acts of aggression basically target women, who are sometimes the victims of systematic rape and gender-based acts of aggression. These acts must not go unpunished.

In this regard, the European Union is happy that the International Criminal Court describes as war crimes, and in specific circumstances crimes against humanity, acts of sexual violence committed in times of conflict. It appeals to all States to sign or ratify the Statute of the International Criminal Court and to incorporate its principles into their national legislation.

Women also constitute a high proportion of refugees and displaced persons, which makes them extremely vulnerable. The European Union is concerned about the development of trafficking in persons in conflict situations. We welcome the progress towards the adoption of the draft Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its protocols, particularly that relating to trafficking in persons. We appeal for the speedy conclusion of this work.

Ending violence is a twofold challenge: on the one hand, the duty to see justice done, and, on the other, the need for reconciliation. Women have often played a decisive role in this area, particularly in Africa — I am thinking of Burundi, for example — and Latin America. We all recall the example of the Plaza de Mayo grandmothers, who ensured that the memory of the disappeared would not sink into oblivion.

This example also shows us — and this brings me to my second comment — that women are not just victims in conflict situations; they can play an essential role in conflict resolution and in rebuilding. While still under-represented in decision-making positions, women have started to participate actively in conflict resolution, in peacekeeping, in defence and in foreign affairs. It is important to create the conditions in which more of them can become stakeholders.

Within the competent bodies of the United Nations, it is taken for granted that women must be able to be heard and to have access to decision-making positions. We must increasingly appoint women with the necessary experience and competence to the posts of special representatives or envoys. Here we have a reservoir of human resources that the United Nations does not use to the fullest.

The Brahimi report (S/2000/809) gives an opportunity for an in-depth discussion of integrated strategies for conflict prevention and peace-building. It would appear that the role of women has not been mainstreamed, including in the recommendations on the training of United Nations field staff. The new importance assigned to the civilian aspects of peacekeeping operations should enable women to participate more fully. A balanced composition of teams should be sought to allow women to use their widely recognized ability to make contact with local communities and share in the realities of their daily life. We hope that this question will be taken into consideration in the follow-up to this report.

In their own countries, women must be encouraged to participate in reconciliation and rebuilding; it is something they already do. We should also study ways to better involve civil society, particularly women's organizations, in areas vital to reconstruction, such as justice. It is also essential to maintain basic social services, particularly for women and children, in post-conflict situations.

Social cohesion, which is necessary to stabilize States emerging from conflict situations or threatened by them, is promoted by equality between men and women and respect for their rights. Rebuilding a country's democratic institutions and its political and public life must involve the participation of women in the decision-making process, because of the need for gender equality. In this regard, the European Union welcomes the initiatives taken by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, within the Stability Pact for the Balkans, the establishment of a working group which has drawn up a plan of action for gender equality.

The European Union also stresses that this question figures prominently in the Declaration adopted at the Millennium Summit, which we must implement for the benefit of the peoples concerned.