

No Sustainable Peace Without Involving Women - Interview with Rachel N. Mayanja, Assistant Secretary General/ Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women

Addis Ababa, 12/02/2008 - Ms. Rachel N. Mayanja, Assistant Secretary General/ Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women Ms. Mayanja chaired a three-day High-Level Policy Dialogue on the national implementation of Resolution 1325 from 6-8 February 2007 in Addis Ababa.

In an interview with the UN Economic Commission for Africa, Ms. Mayanja said that women are much more affected by conflicts "both as victims and as bearers of responsibility and sustainability of their communities". To this end, they need to be empowered to be involved in the peace negotiations and become part of the reconstruction process. This approach, she said, presupposes that gender issues and gender equality are effectively taken on board. To ensure this, national budgets need to be gender audited.

Ms. Mayanja also insisted on the importance of having all stakeholders work together to enable a change of mindset and ensure a better implementation of Resolution 1325, which is relatively still unknown in Africa.

Q: In your opening remarks, you struck the heart and minds of participants when you said "Modern warfare had increasingly converted the woman's body into a battleground where rape and sexual assault are accepted weaponry". To what extent is this true of Africa?

A: Regrettably, Africa is one continent where this scourge if I may call it so has been exercised at quite a wide level. We saw it in Rwanda in fact, which led up to the Tribunal determining that rape is a war crime. We see it continuing in the DRC. Horrific stories of rape and sex assault keep coming out on a daily basis and regrettably these attacks spare no one, even children as young as less than 1 year old have been reported attacked...Disturbing stories in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc. So, yes, I can confirm that this scourge is taking place in Africa and is taking a toll on African women and girls.

Q: Do you think that this HLPD comes at a timely and opportune way then?

A: Absolutely, and I am hoping that the member States that are represented here will be determined to do something about most of the issues that have been raised, including this one of rape and sexual assault in conflict situations. But beyond that, what we want is to find ways of empowering women because we have seen the resilience of women during conflicts. We would want to see that resilience being put at most use after conflict, that women are empowered to be in the peace negotiations, to be part of the reconstruction and rebuilding of their countries and that they're indeed beneficiaries of the demilitarization and demobilization processes.

Q: But despite this resilience, how do you explain the fact that Resolution 1325 is still so poorly implemented in Africa especially? Is it because of its idealistic, almost messianic content?

A: My sense is that it's a combination of factors and no one can really put their hands on the one cause that we could say is responsible. In many cases, it's total ignorance of the Resolution. It is not known and it has not been articulated in their communities. It needs to be publicized. Besides, it has not been translated in local languages, so a lot of people don't know about it. They cannot read because they don't speak English, French or Arabic, in which this Resolution may be found. So, as you can see, there are a number of reasons and we need to get to the bottom of these reasons.

Q: Can we really dissociate women's participation in negotiating peace agreements and post-war reconstruction from the actual success and sustainability of these agreements?

A: I could ask the same question about the continuing discrimination and marginalization of women in the aiming at eradicating poverty, and I agree entirely with you that there is no way we can guarantee sustainable peace without involving women. Women are 50%, if not more of the population. They are much more affected by conflicts both as victims but also as bearers of responsibility and sustainability of their communities. So clearly, if we want to be successful, we have to recognize that role and we have to take advantage of and maximize the involvement and the participation of women.

Q: Don't you think that because these peace agreements are not sustainable in their essence for that matter, women's participation is not guaranteed nor made possible?

A: Indeed, women's participation is not made possible because it was never considered as relevant in the first place, when these agreements were being made. Therefore, the agreements are not sustainable. On the other hand, were those people who were promoting the negotiations to plan the involvement of women in those negotiations, we would probably see difficult agreements, agreements that would cater for the entire community and that would not focus entirely on combatants and authorities, but that would pay more attention to the community, to the children, to the refugees and the displaced.

Q: How would you assess the national country experiences and good practices presented to the meeting?

A: I find them fascinating and very encouraging. I think what is happening here is that actually, Resolution 1325 or its contents are being applied without referring to that outcome as based on the Resolution. So, what I am discovering here is that many countries are engaging women in the processes and are doing a lot to sensitize the women, but they are not always saying they're doing it on the basis of 1325. This means that at the nations level, there must be legal political and social frameworks that dictate in favour of the engagement of women in all these processes. It will make our work much easier.

Q: Indeed, as you said in your speech, the UN has developed a system-wide action plan for the implementation of Resolution 1325. Could you tell us more about it?

A: The Secretary-General asked the UN system to come up with an Action Plan for the implementation of 1325. So, this Action Plan is really around activities of the UN entities in support of member States. It is designed around the different paragraphs of the Resolution and focuses on what the entities are doing to support member States so as to apply those particular provisions of the Resolution. Different entities are engaged in different areas of work: humanitarian ones on humanitarian aspects of the Resolution, peace keeping ones on missions and peace keeping activities, human rights bodies on human rights issues, etc. It's very broad

and it really encompasses the work of 39 UN entities.

Q: During this High Level Policy Dialogue, insufficient and inadequate funding was unanimously declared as the most arduous challenge. What do you and OSAGI do to address this challenge and advocate for committing additional resources?

A: This is the biggest challenge to 1325, but also to the work of the organization, member States and civil society in promoting gender equality. It has been recognized as such, and as a matter of fact, the Commission on the Status of Women has its theme this year on "Financing Gender Equality". I am looking forward to hearing from the Ministries attending the Dialogue here in Addis, but also from others - most interestingly from Finance Ministries - on what we are going to do about this lack of resources for work on gender equality.

Of course, this issue is usually addressed at different levels: first of all, at the national level, we have a process by which resources are being allocated. If the promotion of gender equality is not considered a priority by African governments as a lot of their Constitutions provide for, how would they expect commitments at the global level to be respected? They need to start right from there. Then, when you move into different plans, like poverty reduction strategies for example, how can you reduce poverty unless you allocate resources in this area; and when you do allocate resources, you must recognize that the bulk of the poor are women and therefore resources have got to be allocated to addressing specifically the poverty endured by them and so on and so forth. We do need to be very conscious when we're preparing budgets; we have to start doing gender audits of these budgets to make sure that resources are being allocated.

Q: Can this be this be dissociated from the present situation, where we can witness the existence of a real war industry that is generating a lot of money. Ironically enough, there is often too much money to wage wars, but there is not enough to establish peace. How can we negotiate a way out of this dilemma, especially in Africa?

A: At the training presentation, we had a good analysis of the economic cost of conflict in Africa. When the figure was given in billions, I could see around the room that people were surprised... We have been talking about cost in terms of lives, not only lives lost but also destroyed. So now, I think we have to bring out discourse to the level of donors themselves. I think this is the language that many of those people who are waging wars and those who are supporting them are going to understand. Those who are making weapons and benefiting from the destruction of so many people, we are going to make them understand there is a cost. And beyond that, I think we need to set in place really strong, effective and workable accounting systems. People have got to be held accountable at all levels, not just government, not just the warring parties, but also the private sector that supplies and serves these weapons that destroy people, just like we are seeing now in the global war against terrorism that those who are providing weapons of mass destruction are being held accountable. If we can galvanize the global community to look at the weapons in a similar way, I think we can make some progress.

Q: I can see that you are reasonably optimistic... Can the UN think about concrete measures to have more countries effectively engage in the implementation of 1325. An incentive- based scheme for example?

A: I am an optimist by nature and I think that we are making progress. This meeting in itself is a testimony to that progress. I think the outcome of this meeting which is a training course to give capacity to the Africans, not just the ministers, but also the entire civil service and the civil society is a positive and concrete way that the UN is working out towards a national implementation of the Resolution. Yes, more should follow this up, but you know, when you haven't taken the first step, you cannot start with a fourth of fifth step. We got to go one step at a time. It will take time because it is a change of mindset, a change of culture and that doesn't happen overnight. We have got to stay the course and will be here to see the training through. We will be back also to assess and monitor the training and to give the feedback on how well they're all doing.

Q: What is your final message to participants, to African ministers, to the media and to UN agencies?

A: Conflict is extremely costly in terms of lives, hope and future. We must work together to ensure that we set in place sustainable peace and we empower our communities to look towards peace rather than war. That is my message!

Interview by Houda Mejri, Information Officer
UNECA African Center for Gender and Social Development.

Related Articles

[Africa Celebrates the International Women's Day Under the theme Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities, Progress for All. \(3/15/2010\)](#)
[Women to Be Seen as Partners, Rather Than Victims in Peace and Security Management, UNECA Chief Says.\(10/8/2009\)](#)

[New edition of Gender Net\(4/18 /2008\)](#)

[ECA hosts a High-Level Policy Dialogue to assess implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 in Africa\(2/5/2008\)](#)

© 2012 Economic Commission for Africa