

**Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in  
Conflict**

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**[Keynote speech on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Committee on  
the Elimination  
of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW):]**

***Protecting Women from Sexual Violence  
in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations***

**(Geneva, 18 October 2012)**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, *Chers Amis*: Thank you for inviting me here today – and a special thank you to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, and other key partners involved in the organisation of this important event. It is a true honour to be invited to address you on an issue which is not only dear to me, but one which I know is a priority to you as well – the fight against conflict-related sexual violence.

On this occasion, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CEDAW, I think it is important to remember that although there are many different forms of discrimination against women and girls, one of the worst and most evil of them are acts of sexual violence. The consequences of rape and other forms of sexual violence often linger long after the conflict has ended. Mental and physical illness is common. Survivors of rape often face pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, as well as other crippling repercussions. Depression, anxiety disorders, flashbacks, difficulties in reestablishing intimate relationships, and fear, are among the common long-term psychological impacts of this crime. A rape survivor from Bosnia captured the long-lasting consequences best when she said “They have taken my life without killing me.”

Women are the backbone of society, and the fabric that holds families and communities together. The Security Council, recognising the disproportionate effect of armed conflict on women, adopted a series of resolutions, among them Security Council Resolution 1325, and the follow up resolutions 1820, 1888, and 1960. Security Council Resolution 1820 was a landmark resolution which recognised conflict-related sexual violence as an impediment to international peace and security, requiring a security response to protect women and girls. The Resolution, in its spirit, acknowledged that this crime destroys families, tears societies apart, and creates

incentives for revenge. The crafters of Resolution 1820 and its successor resolutions also understood that if impunity reigns, faith in a country's judicial system is undermined, and the prospect for reconciliation and a sustainable peace and security is jeopardized.

As the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, my goal is nothing less than the eradication of this terrible crime. An attack on women and children during or post-conflict is more than an attack on an individual; it is an attack on families, communities, on the rule of law, and an assault on the belief in your government to protect you. In short, it is an attack on dignity and humanity.

To strive towards the goal of the eradication of sexual violence in conflict, my predecessor developed a five point agenda:

First, we believe that there must be an end to impunity for perpetrators and justice for victims. Rape during war must be taken seriously and condemned as a war crime, not written off as an inevitable by-product of war. Ultimately, prosecution is also prevention – because it sends a clear message to perpetrators that there is no hiding place, that wherever you go we will go after you to make sure that you are prosecuted, and it can also serve as a deterrent to would-be perpetrators.

Second, protection and empowerment are twin pillars of the solution to sexual violence. This means that sexual violence must be treated as a serious peace and security issue that warrants a security response, and women must not be seen just as victims but as stakeholders who will be included in all measures taken to combat sexual violence.

Third, we must engage political leaders to strengthen the implementation of the Security Council resolutions that are the foundations of our mandate. To make this a reality, we need active scrutiny from the Security Council to ensure that these resolutions are being implemented by Member States and they are held accountable for their commitments. It is time that rape is treated as a security issue with real consequences, not a second-class crime that happens to second-class citizens.

Fourth, there is a need for consistency and coordination in the response from the international community to this crime. A rape victim doesn't know – and should not

have to know – about Security Council resolutions. She simply knows whether their country and the UN are providing the security they need and the justice they deserve. There also needs to be a holistic response to victims of sexual violence as this crime affects every aspect of their lives. Ultimately, we need to have standardized best practices that are used in responding to sexual violence and its aftermath.

Fifth, the world needs to recognize rape as a tactic of war. It is important to understand what it means when rape is used as a tool of war and peoples' bodies are used for military gain or political advantage. This war tactic is as effective as any bomb and as destructive as any mine, and it needs to be addressed with the same determination as any other deadly weapon used in war.

Lastly, I have added to this agenda a sixth point – the emphasis on national ownership, leadership and responsibility. Solutions cannot be imposed from the outside. What is required more than anything else is a change in the attitudes of everyone from political leaders, to activists, to journalists, to citizens. Every sector of society needs to understand the devastating impact of this scourge, and be determined to end it.

To this end, I will deepen my engagement with government officials and NGOs as well as rebel groups, including in states that are part of the *francophonie*. In Africa, for example, women make up over half of the continent's population, but they represent over 80 per cent of the informal economy, and produce more than 70 per cent of the continent's food. They have supported their families in times of war and have helped rebuild their countries in the post-conflict period.

No continent, indeed no nation with such an abundance of human capital, wants to see its women raped and humiliated and their spirits trampled. So I will work with governments and non-State actors to address this issue, calling upon them to ensure that the amazing potential of its women and girls is not destroyed by this atrocious crime.

While I will increase my outreach to African States, it must be noted that my mandate is worldwide, and by no means limited to Africa. My office has engaged on this issue in Europe – in Bosnia and Herzegovina – and in Colombia in South America. We are also engaging with Cambodia in Southeast Asia concerning residual cases from the

Khmer Rouge period. And last, but by no means the least, we are also focusing on more recent cases in Syria in the Middle East. Conflict-related sexual violence is a global problem. Sadly, history has shown us that no part of the world is immune.

I know that putting an end to the scourge of sexual violence in conflict is not impossible. You may ask what makes me so confident that we can reach our goal. It is because I stand before you as someone who knows what it means to be vulnerable, to be written off because I was born a girl and to be targeted for being a woman who stood up and spoke out. My mother, a woman who could not read or write, swore that if she had a child, that child would have an education. And she risked everything to make sure that her only child, her daughter, got the education she never received herself because of her gender.

I know, firsthand, what it is like to be threatened by rebels who vowed to rape and kill me to silence me and stop me from working to restore peace and democracy in my country.

I know how it feels to look your child in the eye and tell him to run for his life because you may not make it out alive, and what it means to have your home looted and destroyed.

I know, firsthand, what it feels like to flee your country with nothing but the clothes on your back in the hopes of making it to safety and seeking asylum in a land not your own.

The fact that I can stand here today to tell you my story after all I have seen and lived through is what makes me confident that we can make a difference, and that ending sexual violence in conflict is not an unrealistic dream, but an attainable goal.

The road ahead of us is long and it will not be easy, but those things worth fighting for are rarely easy to attain. I firmly believe that sexual violence is not unfortunate collateral damage, but a crime that can be stamped out through education, empowerment, equality, justice, and security. We have the tools at our disposal, now we need to harness the will to make the end of sexual violence in conflict a reality.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, *Chers Amis*, in closing I would like to ask for your unrelenting help to break what has traditionally been called 'history's greatest

silence', to speak up against this crime, to support women who are working to build peace and security and to promote the rights of women so that it is universally accepted that women's rights are human rights. Fear of assault is an impediment to women's participation in economic activities and girls' school attendance. Together, we have to ensure that girls have the same access to education as boys, that girls are valued as much as their male counterparts, that they have access to nutrition, that gender discrimination – de facto and de jure – is done away with, that equal opportunity in the work place exists and that women have full participation in politics. In this respect, I would like to point out that although having more women in leadership positions is an important part of the solution, by all means we should not stop there; the hard work continues once you have made it to the top, because the difficulty is in staying there.

Finally, I would also like to thank you for all the work you are already doing to advance women's rights and gender equality, including in terms of our combined efforts to stop rape now. With your continued support against all sorts of discrimination against women, comprising sexual violence in conflict, we can make this a thing of the past. And to this end, it is important that we remember our collective strength as leaders. To paraphrase Laura Liswood, who is with the Council of Women World Leaders: "We are like snowflakes. One alone will melt, but together, we can stop traffic." Thank you.

[Words: 1,780 = approx. 15 minutes]