

Speech: Better Education and Stronger Political Opportunities for Women

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Thank you very much Mr President and thank you to your delegation for putting this important topic as an open debate today. Thank you to our two Ministers for joining us; I found your presentations really powerful. It's excellent that you've given us time to be with us today. Minister Wallström, you are a very frequent visitor to this Council which is extremely welcome and I think all I can say is that I wholly endorse what you said in the Council today, both of you, so thank you very much indeed for that. It's a very important opportunity; thank you to the Secretary-General, the Executive Director and Randa Siniora. I just wanted, if I may Mr. President, to digress briefly to repeat what I said on 17 October about the content of briefings to this Council but we do believe that civil societies contribution is essential.

I want to add our voice to those congratulating the Nobel Peace Prize winners. I think in this year it's a very important signal of the criticality that their work has, not just for the communities who benefit from it and are protected by it, but what it says overall about the international community's priorities when it comes to putting the issue of women and girls and women, peace and security right at the centre of policymaking.

Two years ahead of the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325, we're very pleased to have this important moment to reflect on progress and consider what more can be done. It's not just a moral issue, this issue of women's political and economic empowerment; fundamentally it's an economic issue. Countries who enable equal opportunities for all their people, who enable equal access to the law and services, who enable equal participation in the economic life of that country are much more likely to thrive and prosper than countries who do not. So fundamentally, enabling half of your population to participate fully is much more likely to improve inclusive growth and sustainability. And I think that's a really important economic point that we all need to bear in mind.

Mr President, successive Security Council resolutions have of course argued that greater political and economic empowerment of women is a key element of conflict prevention and I think this is all part of the Secretary-General's core agenda. He spoke very powerfully today. We welcome his leadership, we welcome that of the UN Secretariat and we look forward to working more with them.

When women meaningfully participate in peace processes, the resulting agreement is 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years. It will be more inclusive and hence, it will better serve the community it represents. I'd like to echo what the Swedish Minister said about the importance of participation being a right, not a bonus.

As conflicts around the world become more complex and formal peace processes risk stalling, women's efforts to tackle conflict have never been more needed or more vital. In this regard, we as the United Kingdom were pleased to bring members of the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth network to New York this week to exchange experiences with other regional women's mediation networks and explore ways collectively to drive the agenda forward. I do think these mediation networks, whatever their label and wherever they come from, are actually an important resource for us all. The Executive Director was able to describe some of the work on the ground that has been very important and I am sure that they would be delighted to work even more closely with the United Nations.

Mr President, SDG5 collectively makes clear that empowering women isn't just about these community-based actions. It also requires addressing systemic challenges and structural issues and getting to the core of the barriers to women's full and equal participation and exercise of basic rights. In line with this, my government has cross-government National Action Plan committing to increasing women's participation in decision-making and scaling up interventions to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. I commend such plans to all of those countries who don't have them. And we also commend a signing-up of the UN Compact on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse which the Secretary-General also mentioned today.

We often hear about the importance of mainstreaming gender equality right the way through policy. As an example of this, the United Kingdom has opened all military roles to women and we are closing in on our target to have women make up 15 per cent of our armed forces. It is not enough but we believe it's a good start.

Mr President, you may not know, colleagues may not know that there is today a British aircraft carrier sitting just off the coast of Staten Island. It's on a friendly visit to New York. I want to stress the word 'friendly.' But what I also want to stress is that 13 per cent of that ship's company are women. 83 out of 650 personnel on board are women. It's the highest that we have of our Royal Navy fleet. As I say it's not enough but it's a good start and we hope very much to build on that.

Mr President, I'd like to talk a little bit about education. Education is key to achieving our ambition and this means educating women, men, boys and girls if we want to change attitudes and behaviours. We have a Leave No Girl Behind campaign. This has the goal of empowering women and girls through quality education, including education in emergencies. And I do just want to stress the word 'quality.' A lot of excellent work has been done around the world in getting girls into school. I previously had the honour to be the British Ambassador to Afghanistan and I've seen girls going to school and I've seen the difference it makes to their lives. The next challenge is to make that a real quality education so that they get the skills and the tools necessary so that they can as they grow up play a full role in the political and economic life of their country. Also as part of this campaign, we've endorsed Safe Schools Declaration and we believe that this represents an important step forward.

We've talked also about sexual and gender-based violence. By definition, this prevents women from being active participants at school, in the workforce and in other political and economic spheres. I want to endorse what the Netherlands Minister said in particular about speaking out against violence against women leaders because they are the people who at the moment will be driving this forward and we support you in that.

Finally Mr President as we collectively look towards 2020, the ambition for all of us should only continue to grow. I want to really echo what the Ministers and others said about the need to change our plans into concrete implementation. I think it's very important. I hope we will be able to continue to address these issues in the Security Council. I just wanted to close by referring to Minister Wallström's quote from the women she met about wanting bigger boats, bigger nets and not to get raped. I think there is a wealth of meaning and description in that very simple sentence. If we do nothing else, we ought to be able to provide them with better equipment, better safety and the personal security that they require.

Thank you very much Mr President.