WOMEN'S VOICES

LOCAL WOMEN'S VOICES ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

In January 2021, Ireland and Mexico were appointed to the UN Security Council and began co-chairing the Informal Expert Group (IEG) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The IEG brings together Security Council experts at the working level to facilitate a systematic approach to WPS within the Council's work and enable greater oversight and coordination of implementation efforts. The IEG hosts approximately 9 sessions a year on conflict-affected countries, meeting with the UN Country Resident Coordinator and/or Heads of UN Agencies present in the country. A summary of each IEG meeting was sent to the UN Secretary-General and published as an official document of the Security Council.

When Ireland was appointed co-chair of the IEG, the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV) began to host listening sessions for staff of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, ICGBV members and the Irish Mission to the UN, with female civil society members from the countries under review.

These sessions worked to provide a platform for local female civil society leaders to give first-hand information on the reality for women and girls in that country. This supported Ireland to be well informed and centred on the experiences of women in their work at the UN as well as incorporating them into the recommendations that they brought to the IEG meetings.

The purpose of this document, "Women's Voices" is to highlight key issues raised during the ICGBV Listening Sessions.

SUMMARY

'Women's Voices' reflects on the experiences of local women and civil society speakers that were shared at the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence Listening Sessions to inform Ireland at the United Nations Security Council Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security.

Women's Participation in Politics, Employment and Education: Women's participation is currently hindered due to patriarchal norms, exclusionary practices, and a lack of resources to support women's participation. To ensure implementation of Resolution 1325 women's participation must be prioritised, protection needs to be provided and civil society space increased.

Women and girls should have full, equal and safe participation in all areas of society.

Intersectional approach: Women and girls face a range of challenges that are compounded and exacerbated by intersectional identities. The inclusion of a diverse range of women and girls is essential for Women Peace and Security.

Women and girls in all their diversity should be heard and included in Women, Peace, and Security recommendations and policy development.

Regional differences: The different country regional experiences that impact the lives of women and girls are important to acknowledge. The IEG on WPS is encouraged to highlight such differences to show a varied experience of Women Peace and Security issues in a country regional context.

In country regionally diverse women and girls should be included and acknowledged when addressing Women, Peace, and Security.

National Action Plans on Women Peace and Security: National Action Plans (NAPs) are instrumental in creating change as they outline a government's approach, course of action for localising action and focuses national efforts on WPS. NAPs must be created, implemented, monitored, and evaluated by including women and girls as well as women-led and focused organisations voices and priorities.

National Action Plans on Women Peace and Security should be developed with women and girls and women-led and focused organisations.

Access to Gender Based Violence Services: It is essential to ensure that all survivors of gender-based violence, in particular women and girls, have access to the needed services. These services include access to a justice system, medical and psychosocial care, financial and basic needs support.

The Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security should advocate with the greatest urgency and emphasis for inclusive services for survivors of gender-based violence.

Food Scarcity and Insecurity: Food scarcity and insecurity are interconnected with the daily challenges women and girls face. There is a need for the inclusion of the food security issues of women and girls in the effective response, prevention and mitigation of gender-based violence throughout GBV and WPS interventions.

There is a need for the inclusion of the food security issues of women and girls when addressing Women Peace and Security.

Ending Impunity: Fear, lack of political will and insufficient legal structures lead to women and girls being unable to or not reporting any misconduct, inclusive of gender-based violence. This is highly concerning as it leads to perpetrators not being held accountable and survivors without access to legal justice. There is the need for safe and accountable legal pathways for survivors of gender-based violence.

The Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security should advocate for safe and accountable legal pathways for survivors and all perpetrators of violence must be held accountable and brought to justice.

Localisation Investment: Often local organisations are the ones reaching the most difficult areas to support. However, many local civil society organisations worldwide face difficulties in accessing capacity building, training and funding. There is the need to commit to the support of women-led and women-focused organisations by streamlining funding to local women led and women focused civil society organisations.

Intentional investment should be directed into local women led and women focused civil society organisations through partnering, funding, supporting and capacity building.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

To create gender-inclusive and respectful societies, women and girls' holistic participation is integral, and is one of the core pillars of UNSC Resolution 1325[1]. Currently, women are hindered from participating due to patriarchal norms, exclusionary practices, and a lack of resources to support women's participation. Conflicts magnify gender inequalities and with that, also limits women's participation. To ensure meaningful women's participation in areas including politics, education, and employment, both in times of conflict and non-conflict, these norms and practices need to be

challenged. This is a demanding but an essential process to ensure the rights and livelihoods of women and girls globally.

Part of ensuring higher participation of women is providing and increasing space for civil society engagement. Civil society members and human rights defenders understand the on-the-ground needs and requirements of marginalised women and girls. There is a need to create space for women-led and women-focused organisations as well as human rights defenders to implement their programming and share their insights. Their voice and knowledge are required at all levels of society to enable women's meaningful participation.

Speakers from our listening sessions have brought forward several examples of how participation is hindered and highlighted the consequences of exclusion. For example, in Somalia, most nominees and elected members into political positions are men. This is despite a voluntary gender quota of 30%. Reasons for this are patriarchal norms and structures that persist in Somali society and lead to members of society preferring male candidates over female candidates based solely on gender considerations. This patriarchal social element excludes and further marginalises women and girls.

The lives of women and girls in Afghanistan have been seriously impacted in the last number of years. They have been banned and excluded from public spaces as well as from receiving an education. This has had a negative effect on receiving medical attention and furthering education, limiting their wellbeing and future prospects of employability. Women and girls' ability to participate in society is extremely limited due to the restrictions placed on them by society and the Taliban.

When women and girls persist in demanding equal rights, they are at risk. In Iraq and Myanmar, civil society organisations are monitored and scrutinised continuously. When they do not follow the expectations of the government, their work permits are revoked. This prevents service provision and advocacy by both individual human rights defenders and civil society organisations. In Colombia, human rights defenders, especially indigenous women, are at risk of being killed.

INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

To appropriately address the priorities, wants and needs of women and girls it is necessary to consider all facets of identity. Women and girls face a range of challenges that are compounded and exacerbated by intersectional identities. This includes-but is not limited to- their culture, race, sexuality, gender identity, education level, dis/ability, age, religion as well as being internally displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers. For instance, children with disabilities are disproportionally limited in accessing education. Globally, they are 49% more likely to have never attended school[2]. To ensure appropriate inclusion of differing priorities, needs and wants, detailed intersectional needs assessments and monitoring must occur.

In our listening sessions, women speakers brought forward several examples where intersectional differences in needs and access became clear. In Lebanon, refugees and other marginalised women and girls face significant additional barriers when reporting gender-based violence and accessing services. They suffer from a range of issues, for example, they are afraid of losing their children and losing access to phones when reporting. Similarly in the Central African Republic, women and girls with disabilities are strongly marginalised and, in some cases, accused of witchcraft. As a result, they are often excluded from participation in the limited available services.

Additionally, women speakers across countries expressed how young girls are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence and exclusion from participating in areas like education. This is supported by statistics showing that 44% of boys versus 36% of girls complete secondary school[3]. There is an urgency to address WPS with an intersectional approach as experiences and access to public life differ depending on the intersectional identity of the survivor.

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REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Experiences differ regionally (sub-nationally) for women and girls. This also manifests in the poverty divide that exists between rural and urban areas. Rural poverty globally is at 46%, which is double that of urban poverty which stands at 23%[4]. This directly impacts the experiences of women and girls as the risk of gender-based violence increases with poverty[5]. Rural girls are also twice as likely to not attend school in comparison to urban girls [6]. Recognising these differences and adjusting the implementation of policies accordingly is essential to respond to the priorities, wants and needs of women and girls. This means that programming and response to gender inequality and gender-based violence need to acknowledge and include different regional experiences.

In the listening sessions, regional differences were explicitly and repeatedly addressed by women speakers. In Colombia, rural areas are more affected by violence and the strong rural-urban divide increases inequalities. Speakers highlighted that access to gender-based violence services in rural areas are minimal at best and the 2016 FARC Peace Agreement has limited impact in rural areas due to limited funding and implementation.

This divide also depends on who is in control of a particular region. In Sudan, women in government-controlled areas do have access to basic gender based violence services. This is not the case in non-government-controlled locations where there is often only one hospital serving a large area. Hospitals often lack gender based violence services, leaving survivors to walk for hours to another facility.

NATIONAL ACTION PLANS ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

Currently, 104 states have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS. These NAPs are instrumental in creating change as they outline a government's approach, course of action for localising action and focuses national efforts on WPS. The four pillars of WPS are (1) Participation, (2) Protection, (3) Prevention, and (4) Relief and Recovery. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom(WILPF) has reported that one third of NAPs are outdated and that many countries who are developing and/or implementing a NAP do not sufficiently consider women's voices at each stage of planning, implementing and monitoring.[7] Successful implementation of NAPs is essential to achieve the WPS agenda as seen in the pillars of 1325, in particular when addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence.[8] This was echoed by local women speakers who emphasised the need for further accountability on NAPs.

In Lebanon, women speakers stated that there were significant delays in the launch of the NAP due to a number of factors, these included; COVID-19, a lack of an active government, financial limitations, and patriarchal structures within the country. The overarching challenge was a lack of education on NAPs as women speakers reported that the government and other stakeholders do not necessarily understand the importance and what a focus on WPS can achieve. Civil society organisations have been working on this understanding since 2011 and were more than willing to further engage with relevant ministries and agencies to ensure the mainstreaming of the NAP into wider government strategy. For this to be possible all relevant stakeholder voices, especially women-led and women-focused organisations, need to be fully integrated into the NAP process.

ACCESS TO GENDER BASED VIOLENCE SERVICES

Access to gender-based violence services is essential for survivors. Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019) stresses that survivors of gender-based violence need access to "specialised multi-sectoral

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services"[9]. Such services include access to a justice system, medical and psychosocial care, financial support, and safe shelter. Often, even if services exist, they are not sufficient and hard to access.

Limited services are often combined with significant costs and lengthy time required to access facilities. Marginalised women and girls are disproportionately excluded, particularly those living in rural areas. Even if services are available in the capital, rural women and girls need to take long and costly journeys to access them. In many cases, this prevents access to services as they cannot take the time off from work or from their care duties.

Women speakers from Sudan highlighted that referral pathways are weak or non-existent and services are often dominated by male staff, leaving many women and girls feeling scared and/or vulnerable. This leads to women and girls not being connected to services they need or feeling uncomfortable whilst accessing services.

In Palestine, services are located in areas that are difficult to reach due to closures and limited movement caused by the occupation. The main barrier is limited movement due to the many checkpoints and border controls that are operated by Israeli forces. This is especially concerning when considering that more than a third of women in Palestine have experienced gender-based violence[10].

In Iraq, women speakers showcased the consequences of when little to no protection and response mechanisms are in place. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are the primary providers of these mechanisms currently despite having insufficient funds and capacity to provide holistic support. This is especially seen in camps for internally displaced people where many survivors of ISIS still reside. This leaves all survivors, but especially survivors of ISIS, with limited to no access to services and resources. Government responses, such as the Yazidi Survivor Law, lack implementation and sufficient scope.

Currently, reporting of gender-based violence is very limited with patriarchal social norms and stigmatisation contributing to preventing women and girls from reporting. Less than 10% of women who seek help will report to a police service[11]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this already low number decreased by an estimated 50% in reporting of gender-based violence[12]. The prevalence and scope of gender based violence is at pandemic level but accountability is low, impunity is high and responses and services remain minimal in many countries.

FOOD SCARCITY AND INSECURITY

The impact on food and nutrition security in many countries is at crisis level and needs to be highlighted continuously. In 2021, between 702 and 828 million people were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity[13]. Women make up the majority of those facing food insecurity[14], an estimated 150 million more women were hungry than men in 2021.[15] This food insecurity and scarcity is fuelled by climate change and conflict. Women are the primary caregivers in the majority of households and are expected to provide and prepare sufficient food for the family.

Women speakers in the listening sessions highlighted how food insecurities magnify the other challenges women and girls face daily. In Somalia, women's socioeconomic and political challenges are exacerbated by extreme food insecurity, driven primarily by climate change and conflict. Climate change has impacted small local farmers, particularly in the Horn of Africa, from being able to produce sufficient crops for both market selling and personal use. In Sudan, malnutrition levels are very high, especially among children. This food scarcity leaves women and girls vulnerable as they do not have control over resources. They are expected to provide sufficient food and nutrition for their family and are not able to meet the household needs. Women often eat last or not at all in order to feed their family members first.

ENDING IMPUNITY

Levels of impunity for violation of the rights of women and girls, including sexual exploitation and abuse, are extremely high for all perpetrators. Perpetrators can be members of conventional and irregular armed forces; UN service personnel; humanitarian and development agency staff; local community members and others in positions of relative power. Studies of the Asia-Pacific regions show that up to 80% of perpetrators of violence against women were not prosecuted[16].

Barriers in justice systems include but are not limited to the male-dominated and persistent patriarchal norms. For example, domestic gender-based violence is considered a private family matter rather than a crime, leading to security forces being unwilling to respond to reports. Women speakers emphasised the devastating consequences this has.

In Myanmar, women and girls are experiencing gender-based violence, inclusive of physical and sexual abuse, by the military. More than 300 cases each year are reported on gender based violence committed by military personnel. Cases include sexual harassment, threats and acts of rape, sexual violence, torture, and murder. For those targeted, there are no psychosocial services to address trauma and limited access to medical care. The military is also in de-facto control of the judicial mechanisms that survivors would access for justice. This leads to a situation where survivors have no access to justice or accountability. Gender-based violence, especially perpetrated by the military, is not prosecuted but rather perpetuated.

LOCALISATION INVESTMENT

Funding, partnering, supporting and training of local women-led and women-focused organisations is essential to improving the lives of local women and girls. Often, local organisations are the ones reaching the most difficult areas to support. They speak the local languages and are providing essential services in these areas. However, many local civil society organisations worldwide face difficulties in sustaining themselves. Often, small civil society organisations (CSOs) are competing with large international NGOs (INGOs) or international funding organisations. The most recent statistics show that only 1% of gender-focused funding went to women's organisations[17].

It is vital to provide accessible and local ways to apply and receive funding and also take into account such different skill sets. Committing to localisation is in line with the commitment of international donors and actors, including Ireland[18] as outlined through the 'Grand Bargain' and the 'Grand Bargain 2.0' that committed signatories to give support to "leadership, delivery and capacity of local responders"[19].

In Haiti, there is a consistent lack of funding and integration of local women-led and focused organisations. Even though there is a growing number of local women's organisations, funding in the past was channelled predominantly to international organisations, limiting local civil society programming and response.

Women speakers in Myanmar highlighted that part of the localisation of aid is also understanding the barriers local organisations may face when accessing aid. In Myanmar, local organisations that are at the forefront of responding to the needs and wants of communities, are constantly monitored and under scrutiny leaving them with very limited access to banking and other financial services. This scrutiny further limits the ability of women-led CSOs and NGOs to pay staff and fund much-needed programming.

KEY ISSUES

The key issues are drawn from the 'Women's voices' Listening Sessions and have applicability to all contexts and work to end gender based violence. They are particularly applicable to the UN member

states that continue to engage with the Informal Expert Group on Women Peace and Security at the UN Security Council.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

The successful implementation of Resolution 1325 requires ensuring women and girls' political participation, access to education and the labour market. This includes:

- Recognising that the participation of women and girls in politics, employment and education are inherently linked and should be equally supported.
- Providing protection mechanisms for women and girls participating in public life, such as politics, education and employment.
- Providing and increasing space for civil society engagement, especially for women-led and women-focused organisations as well as human rights defenders.

INTERSECTIONAL AWARENESS

An intersectional approach to Women Peace and Security ensures the experiences, voices and participation of women, girls from diverse backgrounds and identities are included in the development, implementation and monitoring of the Informal Expert Group on Women Peace and Security at the UN Security Council and National Action Plans on WPS.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Recognising differing in country regional priorities of women and girls through the implementation of prevention, protection and response mechanisms acknowledges differing regional (sub-national) experiences.

NATIONAL ACTION PLANS ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace, and Security should be created, implemented, monitored, and evaluated by including women and girls as well as women-led and focused organisations. This includes highlighting to relevant stakeholders the positive impact of an inclusive and women-centred NAP.

ACCESS TO GENDER BASED VIOLENCE SERVICES

Holistic, accessible psycho-social and health care services for survivors of gender-based violence are crucial. A protection, prevention, and response model should be utilised when addressing gender-based violence with:

- Gender-sensitive training for all stakeholders including international and national humanitarian and development workers, security forces, local and national government officials as well as community leaders
- The development of national policies and mechanisms that reduce the risk of gender-based violence
- Safe reporting and response mechanisms for gender-based violence

FOOD SCARCITY AND INSECURITY

Continuous inclusion of food security awareness and planning for women and girls increases effective response, prevention and mitigation of gender-based violence in WPS interventions. This includes ensuring women and girls' control over resources and access to food.

ENDING IMPUNITY

Safe, accountable and justiciable legal pathways for survivors of gender based violence are crucial

- Ending impunity for perpetrators should be integrated into all actions and by all actors

LOCALISATION INVESTMENT

Commit to the support of women-led and women-focused organisations:

- Ensure accessible & streamlined pathways to funding for local women led and women focused civil society organisations
- Develop meaningful partnerships with local women led and women focused civil society organisations

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