



Statement by Radhika Coomaraswamy at the Fifty-first session of CSW February 27, 2007

Madame Chairperson,

1. For many years I addressed you as the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women for the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Together we ensured that issues relating to violence against women and the girl child were not invisible; we conceptualized standards and recommended practical solutions to deal with the problems of violence. Today, I address you as the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict with a special concern for the problems faced by girls in conflict zones. Violence against the girl child that takes place in peacetime is often accentuated and magnified when there is armed conflict. In the context of war, she is perhaps the most vulnerable in the population to both violence and deprivation.

2. The girl child is affected by war in five ways. Firstly, she is often the direct victim of physical violence, especially sexual violence. In Sierra Leone I met young girls who spoke to me of their personal experiences. Most commonly they spoke of sitting in their homes reading their books, when suddenly everything changed. Rebels attacked their villages, killed their parents and destroyed their homes. They were rounded up, made into porters to carry the loot from the village and on arriving at the rebel camp they were subject to multiple rapes until adopted as the wives of a rebel fighter. This sexual violence is taken for granted and then legitimized when the girl has a child and one of the rebels becomes the father of her child. These experiences lead to complex nuances of feeling, from hate and outrage to a feeling of loyalty toward someone who acts as her husband.

3. Due to effective campaigning by some member states, international agencies and NGOs, there are now international standards on sexual violence. The International Criminal Court makes it clear that sexual violence as a weapon of war is a war crime and a crime against humanity and the standards ar

doing enough to ensure their protection. Without effective protection they are subject to rape when they go for firewood and without firewood they cannot cook their daily rations. They were rebellious not only against their own government but fed up with an international system that speaks of the responsibility to protect but does little to meet its obligations.

5. This only indicates to us that standards alone cannot accomplish what is desired. Unless there is political will and an effective capacity to implement, sexual violence as a weapon of war will persist and perhaps even increase. Norms without implementation only add to a climate of impunity. We therefore cannot give up on our campaigns, our advocacy or our monitoring. It is important that concerted pressure be sustained until governments, international prosecutors and international agencies in partnership with NGOs begin to turn the tide on this issue.

6. The second way in which girl children are affected by armed conflict is as combatants. These very combatants are also often subject to sexual violence though some groups follow a strict code of chastity. Many girl children volunteer to become combatants, escaping poverty at home and attracted by the perceived glamour of being a rebel fighter. Though they transgress gender roles and acquire a measure of self confidence and leadership skills, they are trapped in a cycle of violence. Some psychologists state the children have an underdeveloped death concept. In many conflicts, commanders send young girls into battle first, their fearlessness being an important military asset. As a result their casualty rates are also distressingly high.

7. Once the war is over, reintegration of girl child combatants into society is always very difficult. I spoke with a few when I was in Colombia. They pointed out that men in civil society do not wish to marry women who once wielded an AK47. As a result many of them remain single. Some had entered the sex trade, others were looking for jobs but none were satisfied. DDR programmes around the world have neglected girls – as noted in the Paris Principles

When they are demobilized they may find it difficult to survive in a world where the skills they learnt as combatants are not valued in an adult woman. There is a real need to devise appropriate programmes for this vulnerable group of persons. Tomorrow, on the 28th our office is sponsoring a special lunchtime event that will highlight this issue and we will try to explore together how we can formulate strategies and policies that benefit the girl child soldier. Patricia Sellers, the gender prosecutor at the ICTY and ICTR and Rachel Brett, who has written many books on the subject, will join me in this endeavour.

A third way in which girl children are affected by war is the experience of belonging to internally displaced families. Women and children are a large part of the internally displaced population and girl children are a significant part of that number. As internally displaced children, they not only suffer a lack of food, education and health facilities in living conditions that are often not very sanitary, they also become rootless. In many of these IDP communities, there is little law and order and the norms of social control that governed traditional societies have frequently broken down. As a result, young people from these communities often engage in high risk behaviour whether it is alcohol consumption, prostitution or drug dependency. Young girls are also caught up in this process and many acquire habits that will be difficult to be shed when they become adults.

The primacy given to political and civil rights often leads to the neglect of the economic, social and cultural rights of the internally displaced. While refugees are governed by a complex system of international law, there is no such legal regime for IDPs. There are norms and standards worked out by humanitarian agencies

