

Estoril Political Forum
Women in Multilateralism - contributions to consensus building
27 June 2023

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Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to focus on the real-life, practical impact of international instruments, some of which we have just heard about. Here, I am mainly thinking about the ICPD, CSW, WPS, Beijing declarations and others.

Specifically, I wish to highlight the power they manifestly can have when used effectively. And, especially, when used by women - for women - and for their rights and participation in nation building, post-conflict and peace building settings.

This, to me, is where their true value lies.

For this, a deep understanding is critical since negotiated instruments and acronyms can seem impenetrable and are often, understandably, met with bewilderment and skepticism.

There are, of course, examples of successful substantive participation by women in post-conflict, peace and nation-building talks, which have helped shape the future of countries for the better. Bosnia, Colombia and Liberia to name just a few.

And, yet, for every encouraging and hope-inducing success, there are many more examples of where women's participation has been woefully lacking or downright absent. Here too, the outcomes are plain to see. Afghanistan, South Sudan and Yemen to name just a few.

So, why is the substantive participation of women important ?

We know...

-that women's role in democratic and post-conflict consensus building is crucial for achieving sustainable peace and promoting inclusive governance.

-that women bring unique perspectives and experiences to bridge divides and build relationships across ethnic, religious and political lines.

-that women's participation in politics and governance is essential for women's rights, which equal human rights, and for promoting gender equality.

-that despite the formidable challenges women face in participating in decision-making, such as adverse societal norms, discrimination, intimidation and even violence, their engagement is essential for building a more peaceful and just society.

For this, these brave women merit our respect and our support.

One of the most memorable encounters of my career took place in a humble cinder-block hut on a remote hilltop in Guatemala where I had the privilege to meet two amazing Indigenous women activists.

Their passionate account of their journey into activism was truly mind-blowing. In their story, many international instruments came to life - CEDAW, ICPD, CSW, 1325...

With the support of national and international organizations, they acquired an education, learned of their rights and international instruments.

They stood together against gender-based violence in their village and in their communities, for themselves, their daughters and for human rights.

They went on to hold local and national authorities to account with their oft-superior knowledge of national and international commitments.

Their bravery and determination led them from abuse, illiteracy and marginalization to a force to be reckoned with in their indigenous communities, nationally, and ultimately, at international fora and through the documents they subsequently influenced.

They have shown that lofty-sounding resolutions, declarations, statements and agreements really can change lives.

Of equal importance is the role of women in post-conflict, peace and nation-building talks.

Despite the transformative nature of 1325 and the WPS agenda, the inclusion of women in peace talks globally remains, at best, lackluster and uneven.

In international fora, women learn, quickly and the hard way, that asking nicely often yields nothing.

The meaningful participation of women hinges on political will and a principled commitment by national and international actors.

Access to information is paramount. As is support and training in understanding and deciphering the instrument-jungle that underpins inclusion and rights-based arguments.

With these elements in place, women are increasingly able to stand up and demand fair and substantive representation.

Women's groups have publicly and courageously called out those, including in the international community, who do not stand up for women's rightful and equal participation in peace talks and in nation building.

For this, they too deserve the support and recognition of the international community. Including, the necessary financial support.

A somewhat controversial example of progress is the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) for Syria established by the UN in 2016. This followed years of advocacy and mounting pressure by Syrian women activists. The Board is the first women's advisory body of its kind established by the UN.

The Board consists of Syrian women from diverse backgrounds and across the political divide. It is mandated to provide advice and recommendations to the UN on the participation of women in negotiations, women's rights and on gender-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding and reconstruction.

However, the Board as a mechanism, its composition and effectiveness is subject to debate. Key areas of criticism range from the selection of Board members to the lack of first-hand access to the peace talks.

Much of the impact of this mechanism -and women's participation in general - depends on the extent to which its recommendations are taken into account by the parties to the conflict and the international community.

Far from perfect, the Board is nonetheless a concrete result borne from the combination of underlying international instruments and persistent activist pressure. It is a step from which to learn and upon which to build better towards true and meaningful participation in peace talks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Still, today, the fair and equal participation of women in peace talks and nation building is often curtailed by lamentable lack of political will and backbone, among all actors. It is often reduced to mere tokenism.

The UN, and other conveners to peace talks, have been criticized for yielding to political pressures, and rightly so.

Women in the international fora, all of us, have a role and responsibility to ensure that women everywhere can claim their rightful participation in decision making, regardless of the circumstances.

As Madeleine Albright so aptly said, in 2006 “There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women”.

Thank you and I look forward to discussing some of these ideas with you in our upcoming discussion session.