

**Remarks by SRSB Zainab Hawa Bangura  
Call to Action  
on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies  
Waldorf Astoria Hotel, 22 September 2014, 12.00-1.30pm**

Secretary of State John Kerry, Assistant Secretary Anne Richard, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

My deepest thanks to Secretary of State John Kerry for his inspirational leadership, personal passion and political commitment to the cause of ending Gender-Based Violence; and to UK Secretary of State Justine Greening and US Assistant Secretary Anne Richard for their unrelenting efforts to keep women and girls “*safe from the start*”. It is also wonderful to see the Foreign Minister of Japan with us today, giving expression to the priority that Prime Minister Abe has accorded this agenda.

I wish to express my appreciation to all participants in the *Call to Action* and signatories to the *Communiqué* for their concerted efforts. I am delighted to announce, today, that my Office will sign on to the *Call to Action* in our capacity as advocate for sexual violence survivors.

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As Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, I hear – *everyday* – the harrowing stories of survivors of warzone rape.

When a 12-year-old girl in the Democratic Republic of the Congo tells me that she dropped out of school due to the stigma she faced as a rape victim – *that is a Call to Action*.

When a rape survivor from Bosnia says: “They have taken my life without killing me” – *that is a Call to Action*.

When a Haitian woman explains that she dare not report her rape to the police for fear they might rape her again – *that is a Call to Action*.

And the children born of rape – the babies I have held in my arms – who have been abandoned and orphaned as living, breathing reminders of brutality, are why we are here today.

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Whether these atrocities occur within your borders, in neighboring countries, or half a world away, they implicate us all. There are no bystanders. The attitudes, actions and example of every individual, organization and country represented in this room and beyond, matter. Gender-Based Violence is *everyone’s business* – but it cannot mean “*business as usual*”.

Today, we meet to share innovations and best practice on implementing our commitments, so that tomorrow and in the future, these efforts can be accelerated and taken to scale.

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Let us be bold, and picture in our minds a world free from Gender-Based Violence. This would be a world where no woman walks in fear of the sound of footsteps behind her at night; where no girl's dreams are deferred because threats and intimidation prevent her from attending school; and where women are equally represented on the frontlines of law enforcement, throughout the security sector, and in the upper echelons of political power.

This may seem an elusive, even utopian, goal. Yet all of these things – freedom of movement, freedom from violence, the right to an education, to equal opportunity and participation in public life, are *obligations*, not just *aspirations*.

Such a world is even harder to imagine in the midst of conflict or crisis, when those who are *least* empowered suffer *most*. The “tyranny of the emergency” is never an excuse for neglecting the plight of women and girls. Nonetheless, we are often told that *women can wait*; that *–later* – once the emergency has abated, there will be time to talk about gender. But, as Cynthia Enloe reminds us: “*Later is a patriarchal time-zone*”.

Acts of gender-based violence are always *life-changing*, and often *life-threatening*. But they can also be invisible: a “*war within the war*” or “*an emergency within the emergency*”. We do not need to wait for hard data to know that insecurity, displacement, arms proliferation, and the breakdown of law and order aggravate violence against women and girls. Gender-Based Violence must therefore be prioritized from the *onset* of any emergency, and women's needs must be addressed from the *outset* of any response.

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Throughout history, in cities occupied or under siege, rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage was simply part of what it meant to be a woman in a warzone. Today, women's bodies are still being used as battlefields in wars started by men.

In Iraq, alarming information on sexual violence, including forced marriages imposed by Islamic State militants, is emerging. In Syria, women and girls are facing increased danger from sexual exploitation in the very refugee camps where they seek safety. And in Nigeria, a terrorist group like Boko Haram is able to abduct hundreds of girls from their schools with impunity.

So how do we convert the prevailing *culture of impunity* into a *culture of deterrence*?

Wherever I go in the world, I emphasize the importance of national leadership: the primary responsibility for protecting human rights and providing humanitarian assistance rests with the State. Where there's a political *will* at the national level, there's a *way*.

A dramatic case in point is the DRC, where we have recently seen the Presidential appointment of a Special Representative to fight sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers, H.E. Jeanine Mabunda. On the 29<sup>th</sup> August, an Action Plan to Fight Sexual Violence was adopted jointly by the Congolese Armed Forces and the United Nations, through my Office, which has already spurred new education, training and capacity-building efforts.

In addition, the Security Council, through a host of groundbreaking resolutions, has expanded and diversified the circle of stakeholders. We are no longer a few lone women calling for action in echo chambers. The relevance of these issues to foreign policy, Rule of Law, and collective security has been affirmed.

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But we can and must do more to convert *resolutions* into *solutions*.

Women are not born “victims”. They are not “innately vulnerable”. They are placed at risk by specific factors and actors. Efforts to understand these dynamics and to avert predictable risks must be routinely included in humanitarian planning and programming. Where a water-point is placed, how food is distributed, the lighting and location of latrines in camps, must be informed by a gender perspective. This is not *more work*, or even *new work*. It is a way of achieving humanitarian objectives more effectively and comprehensively.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence cannot be de-linked from the broader goals of recovery and development. If women are unable to safely access marketplaces, if girls are unable to attend school, then socio-economic recovery will be stalled.

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During this year’s General Assembly, there will be a great deal of discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals. But let me leave you with the image I see when I think about the “face of poverty”. It is the face of a woman who has been raped, cast out of her home and community, and forced to fend for herself and her dependent children in an environment of ongoing insecurity. This woman will confront greater threats, and take greater risks, because the basic health and subsistence needs of her family are not met. And so the vicious cycle of violence and exploitation continues.

But we can push back. Sustainable development and GBV prevention are interlocking issues. There can be no economic or social security without women’s security; no peace without peace of mind for women and their families; and no development when half of society’s potential is squandered.

The solution starts with taking women’s lives seriously. And *now* is the time – not “*later*”.

Thank you.

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