

## Women's Day Policy Dialogue Women and Children in Conflict Situations: Gaza, Sudan/South Sudan & the Central African Republic

7<sup>th</sup> August 2014  
Burgers Park Hotel, Pretoria

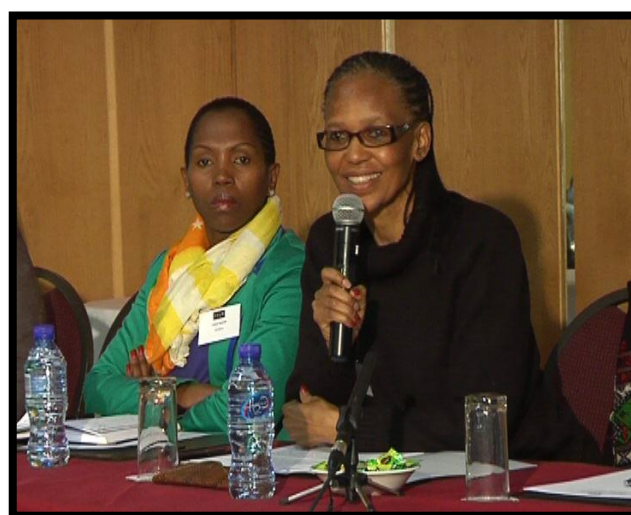
### Executive Summary

On the advent of Women's Day on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2014, SALO hosted a policy dialogue to raise awareness and provide an opportunity for a policy debate on the issues affecting women and children in conflict zones. Speakers represented various sectors of South African society including government, the national human rights institution and civil society. The discussion focused on issue affecting women and children in Gaza, Sudan, South Sudan & the Central African Republic, and the role played by South Africa in the protection of women's rights in the continent.

### Summary of Presentations

#### **Ambassador Sikose Mji: Chief Director for Central African Region, DIRCO (Department of International Relations and Cooperation)**

Under the theme of *Women and Children in Conflict Situations*, Ambassador Mji indicated that there are several similarities between the Central African Republic and South Sudan. Comparing these two, she noted that the challenges in governance; the lack of modernisation, and the impact of ethnicity. Ambassador Mji argued that these issues play a major role on regional conflicts, and that both countries are faced with these challenges. As a result of the aforementioned issues, many demeaning traditions have continued to disempower women and children in these two countries. Commenting on the Central African Republic specifically, Ambassador Mji said that during Seleka's advance on Bangui in 2012, hospitals, schools and warehouses were looted and entire villages destroyed. As a result, internally displaced persons had little or no access to clean water, schools or health services.



Ambassador Mji pointed out that the ongoing conflict and displacement raises particular concern for the protection of civilian populations, and food security is a growing concern, as many farmers missed the planting season due to the instability. She quoted the statistic that one in five children die before their fifth birthday in the Central African Republic, and one third of the population completely lack access to safe water and sanitation. The Central African Republic also has one of the region's highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates. Ambassador Mji noted that 240 000 orphans are estimated to be infected with HIV/AIDS. Within this reality, more than sixty-seven percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day.

According to Ambassador Mji in the Central African Republic, child soldiers remained prevalent, especially in the north-western part of the country and this ensures the continuing spread of terror on villages and families. Not even the legal framework covers all forms of violence since spousal rape has not been made illegal. The submissive role of women is pronounced by economic and social discrimination. As a result, women-headed households are denied family subsidies because women cannot be considered as heads in Central African Republic society Ambassador Mji highlighted. She argued that in terms of social discrimination, women are denied equal access to education and jobs. Moreover, a significant number of over six thousand street children, between the ages five and eighteen roam. Ambassador Mji concluded by stating that the South African Government strongly supported the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSC) 2121, which expressed the UNSC's support of the African Union-led International Support Mission in the CAR. South Africa therefore takes the cue in dealings with the CAR within the AU framework.

**Zeenat Adam: International Relations Strategists; former Director: Horn of Africa and Indian Ocean Islands, DIRCO**

Ms Adams began with a quote from Katherine McKinnon's book *Are Women Human?*



*“When women are violated like men who, but for sex, are like them; when women’s arms and legs bleed when severed; when women are shot in pits and gassed in vans; when women’s bodies are salted away at the bottom of abandoned mines or dropped from places into the ocean; when women’s skulls are sent from Auschwitz to Strasbourg for experiments, this is not recorded as the history of human rights atrocities to women. When things happen to women that also happen to men, like being beaten and disappeared and tortured to death, the fact that they happen to be women is not noted in the record books of women and human suffering. What happens to women is either too particular to be universal, or too universal to be particular, meaning either too human to*

*be female or too female to be human.”*

Through the quote Ms Adam sought to emphasise that the suffering of women and children during conflict situations is often generalised or completely masked and unspoken. She argued that statistics are manipulated to minimise the focus of the devastating effects of war on women. Ms Adam made an example of how the catastrophic impact on women and girls during the Syrian conflict has wreaked chaos on the social fabric. Subsequently, Syrian women and girls are placed in more vulnerable positions for sexual exploitation, forcing them into exile or displacement.

Once thriving communities succumb to poverty, Ms Adam explained that women are driven to prostitution, teenage marriages, or out of desperation they strike up sexual relationships with men who can provide rent or food. Sexual harassment is thus rampant and the perpetrators include Aid Workers and peacekeeping troops. Ms Adam argued that though consensus exists, measures of the extent of sexual exploitation are difficult to come by since the women are reluctant to come forward with complaints of abuse for fear of stigma and secondary abuse.

Regarding the Central African Republic (CAR); she mentioned that reconciliation efforts have been sporadic and they have yet to address rape as a medium of genocide. South Africa's former Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, in her role as Executive Director of UN Women, recently visited CAR. Ms Adam pointed out that, Mrs Mlambo-Ngcuka appealed to the UNSC on the plight of women and girls, and also urged the UNSC to ensure that gender issues are addressed from the outset in peace-making and peace-keeping initiatives. Ms Adam further mentioned the call made by Mrs Mlambo-Ngcuka for women's participation in leadership and reconciliation to be elevated. Mrs Mlambo-Ngcuka also called for an increase in medical and psycho-social support; this, not only for the women in the CAR, but for the refugees and the internally displaced persons as well, and particularly for the victims of rape. Describing the entrenchment of sexual vulnerability of young women and girls in the CAR, she said:

*“This violence has taken place in house-to-house searches, at unauthorised roadblocks, in military camps and as part of sectarian violence.”*

Reflecting on the positive stance of the South Sudanese Diaspora, members gathered in Washington to consider solutions to the current impasse in the political process. The case of the State of Bahr el Ghazal was put forward as a positive story on peace-building and peace-keeping, noting that the region has remained relatively peaceful, despite the spate of violence elsewhere in the country and this was attributed to the leadership role of women. The meeting hailed the role of women in negotiations that led to the comprehensive peace agreement and the subsequent peace-building initiatives. Ms Adams concluded by noting false patriarchal assertions persisting in society that relegate women to domestication with little regard for their abilities to meaningfully contribute to peace-making and conflict transformation. She stated that women are marginalised from key political negotiations and decision-making, and that has an impact on the conflict transformation, reconciliation, post-conflict reconstruction and development that follows.

### **Litlhare Rabele: Programme Coordinator for Peace, Security and Gender Project at the Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HRISA)**



Ms Rabele expressed her disappointment with the absence of the media reports on the situation in South Sudan. She stated that women cannot solve the situation alone. Men have a role to play to empower women since they hold senior positions in the UNSC, the Special Envoys to these conflict countries and other positions even those on the ground perpetrators of rape and torture. When combatants attack hospitals, clinics and schools; Ms Rabele emphasised that women and children suffer more and this is in light of the fact of the high numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). She made an example of how women do not have access to their rights to sexual and

reproductive health services and children cannot go to school.

Ms Rabele stated that the institutions are weak in South Sudan, many of whom have largely experienced the war economy in their lifetime. Ms Rabele argued that capacity-building is key for free and fair electoral processes and functioning institutions such as the police, the judiciary and the legislature. She pointed out that in South Sudan, various parties are at work including the UNSC's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the AU. Moreover, the bilateral agreements exist between South Africa, China, Russia and then the 'troika' of Norway, UK and USA. Ms Rabele believed therefore that, without mechanisms to safeguard South Sudan's resources, outside interests would take advantage. She shared her thoughts on possible strategies for solving the conflict in South Sudan, which include the need to work towards having women as mediators or leaders in the mediation efforts. Deadlines would also be critical for peace processes to be effective which could be a time line for mediators and a guideline should mediation fail. Ms Rabele argued that the IGAD should be first in the hierarchy of external intervention supported by the AU and lastly the UN.

### **Carmen Smidt: ANC International Relations, South-South Cooperation**



Carmen started with a quote from Dorothy Thompson; *“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict, alternatives to passive-aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.”*

Ms Smidt stated that concerted efforts are needed in order to mobilise women and the broader society to promote peace, harmony and development on the African Continent. The lack of solidarity within civil society is a key element that prevents lasting solutions. Referring to South Sudan, Ms Smidt argued that there are seventy-four tribes but only two of which are included in the proposed solution. The solution

therefore, did not seem to be appropriate for the South Sudanese people as it is not inclusive, she maintained. Many South Sudanese women feel that there is no core component of the female element in the negotiations and thus women's issues are not taken into consideration. Reflecting therefore on previous trends, Ms Smidt argued that non-inclusive solutions to the conflict are imposed and that restrictions and sanctions have not yielded benefits to greater society.

The South African government and the ANC have been involved in a range of conflict resolutions efforts and peace-building missions. Ms Smidt pointed out that this has been informed by South Africa's foreign policy objectives, which seek to promote a better life for all, to eradicate poverty, and to promote development, good governance and prosperity on the African continent. She mentioned a Special Envoy has been appointed to South Sudan and that the government is also involved in other areas such as the DRC, Sudan, Palestine Somalia, and Sri Lanka amongst others. She indicated that it should be asked, how can women support government in promoting South Africa's foreign policy and actively participate in peace-building missions. She then proposed several ways for strengthening conflict resolution and peace-building. First, women can support peace initiatives in line with what is required by other women and society in those countries.

Secondly she believed that all people should be involved in humanitarian efforts to not only galvanise the local population, but also build international solidarity in the international community. She also believes that the tools used during the negotiations and post–negotiations to promote peace in South Africa should be utilised to assist in forming the foundation of our involvement in conflict resolution and peace-building efforts and new tools were also needed for early warning alerts to outbreaks in violence. Lastly, Ms Smidt called for Institutions that are women- and children-orientated upholding non-violent values should be identified and be empowered financially and technically.

**Pregs Govender: Deputy Chair: South African Human Rights Commission; former ANC MP and Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on women ('96-02); SALO Reference Group Member**



South Africans are able to celebrate National Women's Day because of the powerful sense of solidarity between women in the country and the world. Ms Govender argued that what is central to solidarity is how to ensure that those, whose voices are silenced, are not silent and how to ensure that these efforts can be supported throughout the world. She indicated that it is important to understand gender-based violence, because it needed to be asked what causes that vulnerability, who causes that vulnerability and why that vulnerability is being caused. Ms Govender indicated such vulnerability is linked to conscious policy choices that are made by those in power. The question of power and the question of resources are central to understanding many of the

conflicts, and to understanding what happens when people's resources are not there. She stated that when water and land are taken away and when jobs are destroyed, that creates vulnerability, brutalisation. She pointed out that unless those issues are addressed, vulnerability will never end.

Ms Govender argued that the global community must use the power it has to ensure that the voices of women from Sri Lanka to Palestine, to Sudan, to the CAR, to the DRC, in every part of our world, are heard loudly and clearly. She pointed out that this will ensure that the religious fundamentalists - from the Zionists to Boko Haram, to the Hindu fundamentalists who led the killings in Gujarat, to the Christian fundamentalists who promote the killing of the LGBTI people are constantly challenged globally.

### **Contribution and Discussion**

The following points were raised from the floor and panellists:

- ❖ It is important to understand that the wars are part of a war economy; as such peace-building processes must address inequality.
- ❖ In the spirit of *Ubuntu* solidarity knows no borders and recognises the intersectionality of issues. It is up to civil society to address poverty and inequality and encourage policy revision of peace-building processes.
- ❖ Both men and women suffer in conflict, thus a gendered perspective is required in analysis.
- ❖ Where governments are hard-pressed to maintain relationships with countries in conflict, it is civil society that has the tenacity to uphold human rights.

- ❖ The problem of accountable and inclusive leadership has led to the rise in rebel groups; therefore, elections have not successfully dealt with many conflicts. The mechanisms under the AU do not seem to be successful in dealing with conflict from the viewpoint of civil society and this must be inquired.
- ❖ Access to justice is a key concern that has not been addressed by leaders; as a result, there is little consequence to violence against women and children.
- ❖ The overthrow of Gaddafi, former President of Libya has affected not just central Africa, but destabilised northern Africa.
- ❖ Root causes of the conflict identified include: under-development, absence of a formal state structure, institutional capacity, exclusion based on religion and or ethnicity, and external interests.
- ❖ Neo-colonialism in the form of economic ties aggravates conditions of inequalities.
- ❖ The recognition that all religions can be used in extremism is critical in the first step of dialogue.

### Concluding Remarks Chair: Venitia Govender

Reflecting on the discussion Ms Govender emphasised the complexity of conflicts. She stated the role of South Africa is significant in particular, due to its own history in peace-making but also due to the continued dialogues South African civil society and government continue to share through forums like SALO.



*The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Dialogue Report do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of SALO, and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.*

#### About the Southern African Liaison Office:



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

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