

## **UN Resolution 1820 – an overdue step on the road to strengthening women’s rights**

“Historic”, “long overdue”, “an important step forwards”, this is how United Nations Resolution 1820 of June 19 was received by many. And indeed, for the first time ever the use of sexualized violence is officially designated as a war tactic – a tactic used to degrade and humiliate people, dominate them, instill fear in them, force them to relocate. Also for the first time, it affirms that sexualized violence is a potential threat to world peace and international security.

The resolution demands that all parties to armed conflicts immediately cease and desist from any and all forms of sexualized violence against civilians; it establishes that rape and other forms of sexualized violence may be considered as war crimes or crimes against humanity and it demands that the member states fulfill their obligation to criminally prosecute violators; and it provides for country-specific sanctions against participants in armed conflicts who commit crimes of sexual violence against women and girls.

### **What is new?**

With Resolution 1820, the Security Council as the most powerful body of the United Nations established that it is time to take action. Women’s organizations around the world have repeatedly lamented the fact that peace missions do not include mandates against sexualized violence, that mass and brutal acts of violence do not constitute grounds for weapons embargos and sanctions, and that there is no systematic compilation of data on sexualized violence in the Secretary General’s reports to the Security Council. In the past, the Security Council’s response has always been that the subject of sexualized violence did not fall within its jurisdiction, that wartime rape was not a question of international peace and security. This subject of contention is now resolved thanks to Resolution 1820. According to the Resolution, sexualized violence in armed conflicts “may impede the restoration of international peace and security” and thus there is no question that it lies within the jurisdiction of the Security Council.

### **The Resolution points out important steps:**

- With the acknowledgement that wartime rape and other forms of sexualized violence are within the jurisdiction of the Security Council, measures against guilty parties are possible. Mention is made of sanctions against involved parties and steps to protect against and prevent violence, such as

military disciplinary measures, checking armed and security forces for past actions of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women, evacuation of endangered women and children to safe havens, and the “debunking [of] myths that promote sexual violence.”

- The importance of such crimes no longer going unpunished is expressly emphasized. Member states must fulfill their duties of legally prosecuting persons responsible for sexualized violence. There must be no amnesty for crimes of sexualized violence.
- Great importance is attached to the reporting of sexualized wartime violence. According to Resolution 1820, the Secretary General shall submit a report on the enactments by June of next year. Along with current data on United Nations peace keeping missions and an analysis of the frequency of sexualized violence in armed conflicts, this report shall contain information on the Secretary General's plans for facilitating future data collection on sexualized violence.
- The Resolution acknowledges the importance of participation of women and affirms their role in conflict prevention and settlement, as well as in peace consolidation after conflicts. Mention is also made of including women's organizations in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes, and in protecting women in refugee camps.

### **What is lacking?**

In spite of all of the progress, the Resolution is not without controversy. Many critics point out that a resolution that focuses exclusively on sexualized violence reduces women to the role of victims. *medica mondiale* also recognizes the danger with Resolution 1820 of women being relegated to their role as "objects to be protected" and of their potential to change things being toned down. But women are neither just victims nor exclusively forces for social activism – and saying that they are detracts from the fact that many activists were themselves victims of sexualized violence. Sexualized violence holds women hostage and makes any activity impossible – whether it is going to the market or to work, attending school, or political work. Physical safety and hence the requirement for protection are therefore prerequisites for women having an active role.

The mere enactment of Resolution 1820 obviously still leaves the question of how it will be implemented wide open – certain possibilities raise some concerns. The resolution as justification for future international military missions, for example, could be convenient for certain political interests. Such conceivable military measures based on the resolution are no guarantee for women's safety. Usually the opposite happens with military missions: women once again find themselves caught in military cross-fire, and militarization of the society leads to an increased threshold for violence, and thus even more violence committed against women by men. The deployment of UN troops to protect women is likewise not without problems: In spite of all of the lip service paid to "zero tolerance" directives, the fact is that international soldiers on peacekeeping missions are also guilty of sexually exploiting women; this group has already been brought up on rape charges on numerous occasions <sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Save the Children, “No One to turn to – The under-reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers”, May 2008

Preventive training of soldiers to raise awareness has been a rarity so far, and peacekeeping soldiers under suspicion face a transfer at the most. Another open question regarding the implementation of Resolution 1820 is whether threats of sanctions will be followed through with actions, whether steps will be taken to arrest and prosecute violators under the resolution, whether the local civil society will be given sufficient means for helping women, whether the reporting of sexualized violence will actually improve.

## **Summary**

UN Resolution 1820 is thus neither a guarantee for the safety of women nor a guarantee that societies will change. Nevertheless, it is another element, another tool in an approach to the fight against sexualized violence, an approach that needs to be wide and diverse in its scope, needs to apply to civilians and military, police, justice systems, and educational institutions, and to local communities and international policy if there is ever to be an end to sexualized violence. The resolution can and must be used as a basis for political argumentation and for making demands.

At the forefront, however, there needs to be an overall strategy for change, for empowering women, and assuring them a role in the political system. That is precisely the content of UN Resolution 1325 of October 2000. This resolution presents a more comprehensive approach: accordingly, women have a special role as key persons in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and in consolidating peace. Women having a role in all social decision making on all levels of society is a surer way of preventing sexualized violence.

Most countries, however, lack the political will for implementing Resolution 1325. So far only Denmark, Great Britain, Iceland, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Switzerland, and Spain have developed national action plans. Only through the actual application of the women's rights outlined in UN Resolution 1325 is there a chance of preventing conflicts before they start, or resolving them effectively and peacefully, and thus eliminating sexualized violence against women.

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