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PANEL I

**Key Policy initiatives to eliminate all forms of discrimination and
violence against the girl child**

Written statement

Submitted by

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**Statement by Radhika Coomaraswamy at the Fifty-first session of CSW
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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 are the same whether the violence occurs in internal or external wars. The International Criminal tribunals of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia have also convicted people for such crimes and made pronouncements on the law. There is no longer any ambiguity about international consensus on these issues

4. And yet, despite the standards, the norms and the punishment, sexual violence against women and the girl child persist. I just returned from the Sudan where women in IDP camps greeted me with hostility, angered by the fact that the United Nations was not

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 Principles¹ girls remain ‘invisible’... They are often not included in the programme because some of them do not own a gun or they do not benefit from reintegration programmes as they are considered the ‘wives’ of combatants. Even when they do there are often no special programmes for them catering to their needs. Very young girls are rarely encouraged to go back to school because in many of these communities schools have been destroyed or are occupied by soldiers.

8. In recent times there has been a great deal of “exotica” around girl combatants. But girl child combatants are extremely vulnerable to being manipulated, exploited and abused. Health-wise they are also neglected. Young girls in some groups are given contraception injections which affect their fertility and this is often done against their will. Some of those who are unfortunate enough to get pregnant while on mandatory contraception are forced to abort the fetus, causing serious health problems and other traumas to the girl. Others have cocaine and gun powder mixed and injected in them to become good fighters and this creates a drug dependency that is hard to eradicate even after the war is over.

¹ “Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups” – Paris 2007 – an update of the Cape Town 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 but with no real capacity for enforcement. The obligation of states toward their own IDPs and the obligations of the international community as part of their responsibility to protect cannot be underscored when it comes to the girl child. We must work toward an effective legal framework to enshrine the guiding principles for internally displaced persons, drawn up by Mr. Francis Deng and we must ensure proper procedure for their implementation.

Despite this legal lacuna, there is still a great deal that can be done. In this regard the campaign by many organizations like UNICEF and Save the Children to put an emphasis on education as a protection issue is most welcome. Education and schools keep young children away from high risk enticements such as being combatants, sex workers or drug hustlers. Schools can also become zones of peace where children may be protected from the exigencies of war. All of us in the international community should promote this campaign and hope that IDP communities will also benefit from the message.

Fourthly, increasingly in some conflicts girl children are becoming mothers and lead child headed households. Either because of rape, or because rebel and government soldiers take them as wives, young girls give birth to children at very young ages. This creates a complex web of relationships between mother and child, mother and the father and mother and her co wives. These relationships are of a formal and informal nature. In this context, the condition of the girl child mother is a particularly heartbreaking since girl children not only lose their childhood but have to take on the responsibilities of adulthood, of being focal points for nurture and care before they are old enough to

understand what is happening to them. Again, donor agencies, NGOs and international funds and programmes are only now beginning to deal with this phenomenon and we still have a long way to go in finalizing an adequate response.

Finally, in armed conflict, wherever there are military armies, the military camps become attractions for traffickers. Girl children, who are seen as less likely to have Aids, are prime targets for these traffickers who want to make money from these large encampments. Girls sometimes volunteer themselves for sexual exploitation. In a society where there is no line of survival, the relationship with armed personnel may be seen as a possible avenue for social advancement or as a way to receive basic necessities such as food, clean water, a small job or transportation. However, most of the stories end bitterly and the girl children either enter a life of prostitution or become child mothers. Even UN peacekeepers are not immune from committing this exploitation. When I was in Sudan recently, the question of peacekeeper behaviour was constantly raised. I reiterated that the Secretary General has a zero tolerance of sexual exploitation and abuse, that DPKO has formulated guidelines, training and procedures, that the Office for internal oversight services (OIOS) has begun investigations but many of these explanations fall on deaf ears. The women claim they are not compensated and there is no redress for the victims' families. The enormous damage that these allegations do to the reputation of the UN cannot be understated. It is therefore important that we support DPKO as they try to get this issue under control by ensuring better training and better discipline. It is also important that troop contributing countries prepare their soldiers adequately for peacekeeping including instilling in them the guidelines for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. It is also important that in situations of rape, when the offenders are repatriated, the troop contributing country must prosecute the offender under their domestic criminal laws so that there is no perception that the UN is above the struggle against impunity.

In conclusion, ending violence against the girl child in armed conflict situations and the promotion of policies to support the reintegration challenges in the aftermath of conflict will be one of the main research and advocacy priorities of my office. We have outlined this in our strategic plan for this year. We look forward to working with our partners - member states, fellow agencies and NGOs in stopping the abuse and exploitation of the girl child in situations of armed conflict. Thank you.
