

Statement by

**H.E. Minister Nabeela Tunis, Minister of Planning and Economic
Development**

at the IDPS Side Event, 12th March 2019

on

**“The Centrality of Gender Equality to National Cohesion and Sustainable
Peacebuilding”**

Your Excellency, representatives of the various Permanent Missions to the United Nations, representatives of the IDPS constituencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be here as Co-chair of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, and Minister of Planning and Economic Development of Sierra Leone. And as we gather here this week discussing the status of women, I feel gratified that I sit here as a female leader in my country.

As you may know, Sierra Leone embraced the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and State Building since its inception and has been a long-time supporter and leader of the International Dialogue, assuming its co-leadership since 2014. I am, as always, delighted to be able to put my full political weight behind this initiative. For far too long the role of gender equality in building and maintaining peaceful societies has been downplayed. Today, and indeed over the coming months and years, the International Dialogue intends to contribute in changing this narrative by providing political leadership on this important issue at the global level.

The International Dialogue is a unique tripartite forum working towards the delivery of peaceful, just and inclusive societies as envisaged in SDG 16. To this end, Sierra Leone is a member of a number of initiatives such as the Pathfinders for Peaceful Just and Inclusive Societies, the Global Alliance for Peaceful Just and Inclusive Societies and the 16+ Forum. Our strength is our ability to bring together representatives of 20 g7+ conflict-affected countries, donors, and civil society partners for dialogue, shared learning, exchange and to find solutions to problems that no one constituency can solve alone. In October last year we were delighted to host the second annual 16+ Forum in Freetown, which we believe was a huge success in terms of lessons learned and proposed next steps.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, our strength, as an International Dialogue platform is our ability to bring together representatives of 20 g7+ conflict-affected countries, donors, and civil society partners for dialogue, shared learning, exchange and to find solutions to problems that no one constituency can solve alone.

Together we created the *New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States* to improve engagement in conflict-affected states and were instrumental in bringing about SDG 16 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We are in the process of finalizing a new Vision statement to guide our activities for the next two years that places gender equality and women's participation in peace processes and peacebuilding front and center in our work, alongside the importance of national cohesion and a peace-promoting private sector.

Why are we focusing on gender equality as part of peacebuilding? This is because men tend to dominate in peacebuilding processes, with women having little or no voice in local and national-level decision making. Politicians, negotiators and mediators all tend to be male in our societies, due to an unequal distribution of power. Yet as we all know, behind the scenes women play what is often a crucial, but largely unrecognized role, in local peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives. They do this through their tireless involvement in grass roots organisations and civil society groups.

Research indicates that women's lack of empowerment in our societies underpins the conflict and violence that we experience. High levels of gender inequality and gender-based violence are associated with increased vulnerability to conflict. This means that the larger the gender gap in a country, the more likely it is to be involved in inter-and intrastate conflict, the more likely that violence during a conflict will be more severe, the more likely it is to use violence as a first response in a conflict setting, and the more likely that the post-conflict peace will be fragile.

On the other hand, there is a growing body of research showing that globally, women's participation in peace processes and gender equality more generally are associated with more stable and peaceful societies. As the seminal *Pathways for Peace* report released by the World Bank and UN noted in 2018: '*The degree to which women are included in political, economic, and social life is a key factor influencing a society's propensity for conflict.*'

For us in the g7+ Group which Sierra Leone chairs, there is clear evidence that women's participation in public life and empowerment can contribute to conflict prevention and sustainable peace in these countries. Take the example of women's involvement in peace negotiations. Women have played central roles in peace negotiations that have led to political settlements in many countries, including my country, Sierra Leone. Despite this, women still remain a minute percentage of mediators, negotiators and witnesses; and signatories in all major peace processes globally. What this means is that we still have a long way to go before we can say our work is done in this area.

By including women in efforts to prevent and rebuild from conflict, we increase the chances of sustainable peace. By mobilizing women's leadership and participation in peace processes and conflict resolution, we

create a unique opportunity to create more inclusive, equal and stable societies. Indeed, Peacebuilding and Statebuilding processes in conflict-affected countries can provide a whole set of new opportunities to advance gender equality and empowerment that in turn sustain stability in our societies.

Women and women's networks and organisations are the backbone of our societies and must be allowed to prevent and resolve conflicts as equal members of our societies. Not just as a superficial token, as a late addition to an otherwise male team of negotiators or mediators, or as part of a parallel process or advisory body that is unable to contribute to main processes and outcomes. As the UN Secretary General highlighted recently in a report on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, *'the exclusion of women is not about culture; it is about power. The meaningful participation of women is often prevented on this basis.'* To counter this, women must be allowed to participate *meaningfully*, as equal partners, throughout the entire peace making and post-conflict rebuilding cycle.

Some of you gender experts in the room may be wondering what is new in my message; you have known about the centrality of gender equality to Peacebuilding, Statebuilding and national cohesion for a very long time. Indeed, the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which began with UN Security Council resolution 1325 and has long promoted women's participation in peace processes, will celebrate its twentieth anniversary in 2020. In fact, we are aiming our message today, not so much at the gender experts among you (although we really value your participation and views), but rather at governments in conflict-affected states and their donor and civil society partners, who may not have this kind of gender expertise or awareness. We want governments in conflict-affected countries and their development partners, to recognise that by investing in gender equality and participation - and it is a *long-term* investment - they are investing in a more peaceful future. This will not just lead to the delivery of SDG 5 on gender equality and empowerment; it also has the potential of delivering *sustainable* peace and stability over the long term, which will in turn facilitate the delivery of all the other SDGs as envisaged in SDG 16+. For conflict-affected countries in particular, the delivery of SDG 5 and 16 are therefore closely linked.

More broadly, building and sustaining national cohesion by strengthening relations among citizens, as well as the social contract between citizens and government, will also be necessary to achieve SDG 16+. Lessons on this can be learned from my country, Sierra Leone, where after eleven years of civil war that ended in 2002, national cohesion has recently become a top national priority as a means of creating social harmony and unity among our peoples. To this end the Government has released a green paper with the objective of establishing a Commission on Peace and National Cohesion, and of course it will have a balanced gender representation.

Building a cohesive society in ways that enable it to heal its wounds after a conflict is critical for conflict prevention and sustaining peace over the long term. Furthermore, women in Sierra Leone have succeeded in creating an independent voice that articulates a non-partisan, female perspective on a wide range of fundamental issues, including reaching out to political parties across the board following last year's elections.

With all of this in mind, we look forward to hearing from the panelists on their experiences and insights. As Co-Chair of the International Dialogue, I reiterate my appreciation for the unique space that the tripartite partnership occupies and my support for its new Vision statement. I stand ready to provide leadership on this important agenda, together with my colleague Chair and partners from Canada.

Thank you for your attention and being here to discuss this critical issue!