

Be bold for change

PAX statement on the occasion of International Women's Day 2017

International Women's Day provides a moment to reflect upon the progress made in advancing gender equality, to celebrate the inspirational work of women and to recognize the challenges facing women. This year will mark the 17th anniversary of the pivotal United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, which addresses not only the impact of war on women, but also the important role women play in conflict management, conflict resolution and achieving sustainable peace. Yet implementation remains erratic and the status of women around the globe remains dire. This year's theme #BeBoldForChange reminds us of the courage and strength women and men in Iraq and South Sudan demonstrate in taking on the problems women face, and of their perseverance.

Iraq

#BeBoldForChange makes us think of the courage exhibited by Nadia Murad, taken captive by ISIS in Iraq. "We were not worth the value of animals. They raped girls in groups. They did what a mind could not imagine," Ms Murad said after she had escaped. Some of the women who were kidnapped killed themselves, but Ms Murad did not think of doing so herself. "I did not want to kill myself — but I wanted them to kill me" ([The Independent](#), 1/1/2016). She escaped after three months of abuse and torture, and now travels the world to demand accountability for the crimes committed against her and other women kidnapped by ISIS. Together with fellow activist Lamiya Bashar, Nadia Murad was awarded the Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament for her efforts last December.

Ms Murad and Ms Bashar are not alone. Other bold women in Iraq speak up every day to demand justice and equality. Scores of Iraqi women, particularly Yazidi women, are still held by ISIS - despite progress in the fight against the terrorist group. Many women continue to speak out and call the world's attention to the fate of the kidnapped.

Self-esteem

Women on local levels in Iraq also continue to work day in and day out to support survivors of sexual and gender based violence. "The most valuable thing I have is my self-esteem and my dignity," says Um Marwan, an internally displaced person (IDP) who was living in a camp in Kirkuk. "My life before was to wash dishes and sweep the floor, but when I came here, I learned about power, and how to solve whatever problem is facing us."

Um Marwan is one of the women local activists Suhood Ahmad has trained to become a mediator in IDP camps. These women solve local conflicts arising from the tension of living in tents without privacy and the stress resulting from war traumas. "These women come from more traditional areas than ours and were often not able to read and write. Some of them hardly ever left their house before they were displaced. We have started to teach them to read and write, which gave them a sense of achievement and self-worth," says Ms



Ahmad. "After that, we taught them about leadership and conflict resolution. Now they feel they have a role, and on a daily basis show they can help each other to solve conflicts and stand up for themselves." Ms Ahmad works with one of the local women's organizations PAX supports, implementing the Iraqi National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 on all levels.

South Sudan

Women in South Sudan are facing similar challenges. While conflict is escalating yet again, women increasingly face the risk of sexual violence as they try to take care of their families under severe economic disadvantages, food insecurity and displacement. Although gender was included in the August 2015 peace agreement to a certain extent, the agreement has yet to be implemented. This is something women's organization are demanding. In the future, peace processes, whether local or national, need to include women as negotiators and as participants, to ensure that the treaty text strengthens the position of women in decision making mechanisms, and include a broad understanding of gender in transition to peace.

One South Sudanese woman working with PAX, who also knows how to #BeBoldForChange, agrees. "Women should engage in peace processes. Even though we have busy lives with many household responsibilities, how can we take care of our children, of our lives, when there is danger and insecurity everywhere? How can we leave it up to the men to mediate peace when they don't talk about how we are affected by all this violence?" Another woman explains how deeply embedded inequality is at all levels of South Sudanese tradition and culture: "When talking to the local traditional authorities about our participation, or when we bring cases of domestic violence to them, most chiefs hide behind the notion that 'this is our culture'." In areas most affected by the current famine, PAX's partners work to make sure members of traditional courts are more gender sensitive and better able to deal with cases brought by women.

Women at the table

South Sudan and Iraq are but two examples of how gender plays an outsize role in areas under conflict. These countries are, unfortunately, representative. How is it possible that women all over the world hardly participate in peace processes? Or that when they do, their efforts remain unnoticed? Between 1992 and 2011, only four per cent of signatories to peace agreements and less than 10 per cent of negotiators at peace tables were women. When women are at the table, peace agreements last longer. Research shows that when women participate in creating a peace agreement, it is 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years.

Enough reason for all us to #BeBoldForChange. As a signatory to the Dutch Action Plan (NAP) 1325, PAX calls upon the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be #BeBoldForChange next year when the country assumes the Presidency of the United Nations Security Council. The Dutch government should strive to ensure equal participation of women and men in peacebuilding processes, in line with the NAP 1325, and continue to champion the UN Security Council resolutions on Women Peace and Security.