



*African and Diaspora Women Fact Sheet Series:*

## **The Struggle for Human Rights**

Human rights are entitlements due to every man, woman, and child as members of the human family. These rights have been codified to inform, guide, and restrict human interaction. They include the security of the person; the right not to be deprived of life or liberty; the right not to be tortured or subjected to cruel or inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment; the right not to be held in slavery or servitude; the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion to name a few. In addition there are economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to food, shelter, health care, and social services; the right to work; the right to education; and the right to water<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, these rights are *nonderogable*, in that their violation can never be justified, even in a state of national emergency.

According to *Teaching Human Rights*, an educational document by the UN:

*“human rights may be generally defined as those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights and fundamental freedoms allow us to develop fully and use our human qualities, our intelligence, our talents and our conscience and to satisfy our spiritual and other needs. They are based on humankind’s increasing demand for a life in which the inherent dignity and worth of each human being are accorded respect and protection. Their denial is not only an individual and personal tragedy but also creates conditions of social and political unrest, sowing the seeds of violence and conflict within and between societies and nations”.*<sup>2</sup>

However, the actualization of human rights is far from being realized, particularly for women. Take for instance this example; a female born in Norway will have an excellent chance of living to old age.<sup>3</sup> However, if she is born in a country located in the global south, like Sierra Leone, she has a one in four chance of dying before her fifth birthday.<sup>4</sup> A Norwegian girl can expect to go to a good school, followed by university, and to be healthy and cared for right through old age.<sup>5</sup> This same trajectory is alien to a little girl in Sierra Leone, as only two in three girls start school at all. Those who are able to find a way to go to school eventually drop out due to the inability to pay user fees levied by the school, low standards of education, forced to care for brothers and sister, or they simply must go to find work in order to support their families.<sup>6</sup> For these young women, the opportunity to attend a university is rendered an unattainable dream. Compounding this,

for millions of African women, perpetual conflict,<sup>7</sup> limited access to adequate food<sup>8</sup> and water<sup>9</sup>, abject poverty<sup>10</sup> are all generational gifts.

Despite the inherent contradictions between the world of ideas and reality, African women are addressing both in their efforts to create more stable societies. Chandra Mohanty (1991) argues that for too long, women in the third world have been considered not agents of their own destiny, but victims. A potent image has been constructed, even in feminist scholarship, of an average third world woman who leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, women's activism in the 'Developing World' has shown that women are mobilized not only as women but also as mothers, workers, peasants, and citizens. Accordingly, women's movements in the 'Third World' are highlighted by the women and their own conceptualizations of their lives, needs, and desires, which affect not only identity and interest formation but also mobilization based on them.<sup>12</sup>

### **Women of Zimbabwe Arise - Standing Up for Human Rights**

What follows is one of the many instances where African women are addressing their needs and those of their communities. The Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA)<sup>13</sup> is a grassroots movement working to empower women from all walks of life to mobilize and take non-violent action against injustice. WOZA helps its members to stand up for human rights and speak up about the worsening economic, social and political conditions in Zimbabwe, at great personal risk to themselves. Since its founding in December 2002, WOZA has staged hundreds of peaceful marches in support of democratic reform and women's empowerment. The Government of Zimbabwe has jailed Magodonga Mahlangu along with WOZA founder Jenni Williams over 30 times and thousands of WOZA members have spent time in police custody.

On November 23, 2009, Magodonga Mahlangu and WOZA won the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award for their work in addressing injustices and calling for real equality. Speaking from Washington, D.C., Ms. Mahlangu remarked that 'arrests do not deter us because WOZA has empowered them to believe that they deserve better. Among this are roofs over our heads, food in their stomachs, children in schools and the nation working.' She goes on to say, "*we deserve to live in dignity and free from fear; and it is our right to have our voices heard and respected. That is why I joined WOZA. While Mugabe boasts of having degrees in violence, I and 75,000 WOZA members who stand beside me, have degrees in non-violence.*"<sup>14</sup>

Jenni Williams, WOZA founder, adds, "*We are not fighting a revolution in Zimbabwe, we are leading an evolution. And civic education is our tool to evolve the hearts and minds of Zimbabweans to build a strong, new, African democracy where respect, tolerance and accountability are key*".<sup>15</sup> Powerfully articulated and substantively

universal, this instance is just one example of the various movements that African women are creating in an effort to change their societies. Shaking off centuries of marginalization, oppression, and invisibility, African women are grasping at means to bring about the change they wish to see in their communities, their nations, and around the globe.

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<sup>1</sup> Wisberg, Laurie S. Introductory Essay in the Encyclopedia of Human Rights, edited by Edward Lawson, Taylor & Francis 1999.

<sup>2</sup> UNOHCHR, *ABC: Teaching Human Rights*, 2003, available: <http://www.fd.uc.pt/igc/enciclopedia/manuais/abc.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> UNDP *Human Development Report 2007*

<sup>4</sup> Green, Duncan. *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States can Change the World*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxfam International, 2008; UNDP *Human Development Report 2007*

<sup>5</sup> Green, , p. 2

<sup>6</sup> Green, , p. 2

<sup>7</sup> Using the situation in Sudan as an example, according to the IDMC (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre) in Southern Sudan, an estimated 4 million IDPs and half a million refugees were displaced by conflict between the north and the south. Additionally, since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005 it is estimated that 2.24 million people have returned, but face a number of obstacles, including extremely limited access to opportunities for livelihood as well as basic services. Accordingly, an estimated 10% of all returnees have thus far been unsuccessful. Moreover, as of May 2008 renewed conflict in Abyei has led to the displacement of between 50,000 and 60,000 people. At the end of 2008 it was estimated that over 200,000 people remained internally displaced in Blue Nile State, and more than 100,000 in Southern Kordofan; **Women and girls represent on average 49 per cent of persons of concern to UNHCR. They constitute 47 per cent of refugees and asylum-seekers, and half of all IDPs and returnees (refugees).** (Data from IDMC; available here: <http://www.internal-displacement.org>).

<sup>8</sup> 1.02 billion people do not have enough to eat - more than the populations of USA, Canada and the European Union, New release from *FAO*, 19 June 2009; 25,000 people (adults and children) die every day from hunger and related causes, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, 2008; The number of undernourished people in the world increased by 75 million in 2007 and 40 million in 2008, largely due to higher food prices, News release from *FAO*, 9 Dec 2008; 907 million people in developing countries alone are hungry, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> An estimated 2.5 billion people lack adequate sanitation and 884 million people are without access to safe water (UNICEF and WHO, 2008); Globally, more than 125 million children under five years of age live in households without access to an improved drinking-water source, and more than 280 million children under five live in households without access to improved sanitation facilities (UNICEF, 2006); 90% of wastewater in developing countries is discharged into rivers and streams without any treatment. (UNDP, UNEP, World Bank, and the World Resources Institute, *World Resources 2000-2001*); In the past ten years, diarrhea has killed more children than all the people lost to armed conflict since WWII (Water Supply and Sanitation Collaboration Council, 2004; WHO 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Almost half the world — over three billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day (World Bank Indicators, 2008); More than 80 percent of the world's population lives in countries where income differentials are widening (2007 Human Development Report HDR, United Nations Development Program, November 27, 2007, pg. 25); Above **80 percent** of farmers in Africa are women; More than 40 percent of **women in Africa** do not have access to basic education; If a girl is educated for six years or more, as an adult her prenatal care, postnatal care and **childbirth survival rates**, will dramatically and consistently **improve**; Educated mothers immunize their children **50 percent more** often than mothers who are not educated; AIDS spreads **twice** as quickly among uneducated girls than among girls that have even some schooling; The children of a woman with five years of primary school education have a survival rate **40 percent higher** than children of women with no education; A woman living in sub-Saharan Africa has a **1 in 16 chance of dying** in pregnancy or childbirth. This compares with a **1 in 3,700 risk** for a woman from North America; **Every minute**, a woman somewhere dies in pregnancy or childbirth. This adds up to **1,400 women dying each day** — an estimated 529,000 each year—from pregnancy-related causes; **Almost half** of births in developing countries take place without the help of a skilled birth attendant. Data available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/UNMP-FastFacts-E.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ray, R & A. C. Kortwag. 1999. Women's Movements in the Third World; Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy, Annual Review of Sociology, 25, pp. 47-71; Mohanty C.T. 1991. Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. C.T. Mohanty, A. Russo, L. Torres, pp. 51-80. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 56

<sup>12</sup> Ray, R & A. C. Kortwag. 1999: 66

<sup>13</sup> Women of Zimbabwe Arise, <http://wozimbabwe.org/>

<sup>14</sup> Magodonga Mahlangu remarks from 2009 Robert F Kennedy Human Rights Awards ceremony

<sup>15</sup> Jenni Williams remarks from 2009 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Awards ceremony