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THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN CONFLICT  
SITUATIONS IN AFRICA: A KEY CONCERN FOR WILDAF

A paper prepared and presented by FLORENCE BUTEGWA at the UNIFEM-AFWIC Conference on women in conflict situations in Africa  
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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) is a network of organizations and individuals working to promote a respect for women's rights. Founded in February 1990, WILDAF's membership is spread over 18 African countries. These are Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. WILDAF's head office is in Harare, Zimbabwe. WILDAF also has national offices in Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho and Zambia. Where there is no local office WILDAF functions through a local WILDAF Advisory Committee, composed of representatives of WILDAF members in the country.

WILDAF's goal is to promote and strengthen regional and local strategies that link law and development to improve women's status in Africa. Specific objectives are as follows:

1. To facilitate communication among network members so as to learn from each other's experiences;
2. To strengthen legal rights programmes for women at the local, national and regional levels;
3. To provide assistance and training to groups for the development and improvement of legal literacy programmes, simple legal education materials, lobbying, mobilization and networking strategies;
4. To respond to violations of women's rights, regionally and internationally;
5. To exchange and coordinate activities with other African and international human and women's rights networks.

**WILDAF AND WOMEN IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS**

It is within the framework of these objectives and mandate that WILDAF has situated its concern and emerging work on the issue of the human rights of women in conflict situations in Africa. The 1994 Human Development Report states that 79 countries were involved in armed conflict and political violence in 1993 alone. Of these countries 65 were in developing countries. Africa accounted for almost a third of these. Almost all the conflicts were internal and protracted in nature. The extent to which non-combatants have been affected is unprecedented. It is estimated that 90% of casualties in recent armed conflicts are civilians.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Human Development Report at 47.



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Human Rights abuses have also escalated. Of particular concern to WILDAF's membership is the increasing evidence of gender-specific abuses committed systematically by all sides to the conflicts. WILDAF members have felt concerned by the failure of many human rights and humanitarian organizations working in Africa to appreciate, investigate and expose such gender-specific abuses. Women's rights advocates in Africa have also failed to support the survivors of the violations and contribute towards ensuring that women will in future be protected against similar abuses. Despite the extensive media coverage of the conflicts in Somalia, Angola, Liberia and Rwanda (among others), gender-specific abuses have not been highlighted by the African and foreign media. Neither have human rights activists and advocates focused attention on such abuses preferring to limit their interest to killings and detentions.

The publicity and international outcry over rape and other abuses in former Yugoslavia had a significant impact in Africa. The outrage among African women was compounded by the knowledge that women in the various conflicts of Africa have been suffering similar abuses in the recent past. The subsequent appointment of the War Crimes Tribunal put pressure on African women to participate in and influence international developments in this field. The need for an African perspective into definitions of conflict and war, of war crimes, of appropriate responses, including punishment and reparation and the role of the international community cannot be overemphasized.

With this background in mind, WILDAF members started advocating for greater government and NGO attention to the violations of the human right of women during situations of conflict. In early 1993 during the preparations for the World Conference on Human Rights, WILDAF issued a statement calling upon the World Conference and governments to effectively address human violations by all parties to a conflict. The statement pointed out that women suffer horrendous abuses because of their gender. These include rape, mass abductions for purposes of sexual molestation, forced pregnancies and forced female genital mutilation. WILDAF called upon the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to undertake an urgent study on the magnitude of the problem and to recommend to the General Assembly and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 appropriate measures to protect women from abuse during armed conflicts.

But a sustained advocacy effort requires a more thorough knowledge of the magnitude of the problem, the nature of the violations that women suffer and at whose hands. More information is also required to narrow down the period during the conflict when women are most at risk. What responses, however inadequate, are currently in place and by whom? What did women survivors feel are their most urgent needs?

To find some data on these and other questions relating to the complex situation of armed conflict, WILDAF members in East Africa undertook to carry out pilot studies in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Sudan. The Kenyan study looks at the situations of women in the refugee camps housing Somali nationals in the north of the country. It also looks at the human rights situations of

women who have been internally displaced during the armed clashes in the Rift Valley Province of central Kenya. The Tanzania case study focuses on the Benaco camp housing Rwanda refugees in the north of the country. WILDAF members in Uganda look at women who have been internally displaced by Uganda's protracted internal armed conflicts. Sudan members looks at the camps housing internally displaced people from Southern Sudan. The studies do not limit their inquiry into what is going on in the various places of refuge but seeks to gather information on the experiences of the women in the camps during actual fighting, as they flee to safety and in the camps where they are now.

My interest is not so much to share with you the preliminary findings of the studies. My colleagues who have been in the field and talked to women, survivors of various violations of their human rights will do justice to that. Rather, what I would like to do is share with you and tap your insight and ideas on what WILDAF is to do in this critical area of concern. I would like to deal with this in terms of roughly defined time frames and range of activities:

#### Immediate future:

In the immediate future, WILDAF plans to publish its findings from the studies referred to above. The small publication will seek to do more than just describe the testimonies of the survivors and the observations of the researchers. It will attempt to provide an analysis of applicable human rights and humanitarian laws and explore issues of accountability. These are issues which are currently intractable in the internal conflicts and political insecurity prevalent in Africa, where armed bands and dissidents at times hardly qualify to be organized and or under responsible command and/or occupy any identifiable territory as is envisaged by Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions 1949. The report will also seek to have a stab at the issue of accountability for the violations which women suffered. It is hoped that the report will be launched during a WILDAF panel discussion on the theme at the NGO Forum in Beijing.

In Beijing, WILDAF will seek to influence the language of the Platform for Action to be adopted by governments at the Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995). The aim will be three-fold: to strengthen the language that confirms that various gender specific abuses as violations of human rights and to urge governments to make definite commitments to address issues of abuse and to promote peace; to demand that women must play a key role in peace-making and international, regional and national responses to conflict situations and to ensure that women who are internally displaced due to armed conflict will in future be given as much attention, protection and assistance as refugees. We also hope to provoke and generate frank discussions among African women at the NGO Forum on our current and future role in raising and responding to violations of the human rights of women in Africa's armed conflicts.

Soon after the Fourth World Conference, WILDAF will convene a meeting of NGOs interested in working in this area. The meeting

will review the situation of women in a number of conflicts, the findings of the study, commitments of governments and NGOs in Beijing and map out strategies for the way forward.

#### **Mid-term and long term**

In the mid-term and long term, WILDAF will, in collaboration with other national, regional and international organizations, seek to expand its advocacy role in the area of conflict situations. Emphasis will be on public education on human rights and humanitarian law, monitoring, reporting abuses, working with governments and others to press for greater protection of women, punish perpetrators and ensure rehabilitative redress to survivors. This commitment will, of course require that the WILDAF network builds its capacity. In this regard WILDAF is planning annual training workshops in international human rights and humanitarian law, monitoring and reporting and non-legal responses in conflict and post-conflict situations. These workshops would be open to NGOs interested in and having the capacity to implement programmes in the area. One such training workshop was held last year. These sessions will facilitate the involvement of local and national NGOs in the process of advocating for an end to women-specific abuses in conflict situations and in sourcing and channelling assistance, including legal aid services to survivors.

#### **Conclusion**

Although I speak mainly about WILDAF, the challenge is really for all of us Africans not only to promote peaceful co-existence but also to ensure that women do not suffer just because they are women. Where armed conflict breaks out, let not women be raped to avenge a defeat or to celebrate a victory, to solicit information or to punish a community. All of us gathered here, together with those not here, share this responsibility and I will appreciate your ideas as to how we proceed and collaborate in discharging this responsibility.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.