

# Beyond Declarations: Ensuring the Rights of Women in Peace and in Conflict

By Paschal Chem-Langhee\*

In 2009, *The Economist* declared that there was no better time in history to be a woman than in the 21st century. In Africa, the increasing numbers of educated girls and women, continued improvement of their socio-economic conditions, improved maternal health and the rising presence and influence of African women in business, politics and civil society are testament to this. African Union Member States have enhanced constitutional protections for women – particularly in regards to women’s rights, equality and access. African states have also demonstrated their commitment to the protection of women in conflict and their inclusion in peacebuilding.

Solidifying this commitment in 2014, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), H.E Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, appointed the Special Envoy for Women Peace and Security, to “ensure that the voices of women and the vulnerable are represented clearly in peacebuilding and in conflict resolution.” She entrusted Mme Bineta Diop, a long-standing civil society women’s advocate, with the role, and a clear mandate to promote the protection and advancement of the rights of women and children in conflict. Anchored on the priority pillars of the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, following UN related resolutions and African Union instruments and policies, her mandate includes: ensuring the prevention of violence against women and girls in conflict and other situations of insecurity; protecting women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, including in humanitarian situations; and enabling the participation of women at all levels of decision-making in peace-building.

In dispensing her duties, the Special Envoy has recurrently noted that, “Africa has sufficient and progressive normative instruments like the Protocol to

the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.” Beyond declarations, she has stressed that what Africa needs now is implementation. Indeed, Africa needs to walk the talk. The AUC Chairperson often called for women to “transform and not conform”.

## **So how is the Office of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security (OSE) leading this transformation for women’s rights?**

In the Central African Republic (CAR), in May 2014, together with UN Women and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the OSE engaged with political leaders, met with internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in camps, and with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), where they agreed to launch a long-term project, known as “Wali Tisiriri”, Women for Peace, to support women in CAR to participate in peace-making, peacebuilding and the reconstruction of the country. The OSE also supported the women of CAR in their preparations for the National Reconciliation Forum that took place in Bangui from 4 to 11 May 2015.

In Somalia, the Special Envoy relayed the women’s call for more participation in political processes and for increased participation in elections. Their demands for all-female police contingents and for more female officers in order to ensure better safety were also met. On Women’s Day 2016, the Special Envoy met with African heads of police in Algeria, where she encouraged them to share best practices in combatting sexual and gender-based violence. She highlighted the need for police forces to be more gender sensitive, equally ensuring the recruitment and promotion of more women within their ranks.

In Nigeria, the OSE supported the networks led by women for peace which came together to demand for the release of the abducted Chibok school girls. It also raised concerns on the conditions of IDPs, and of women in refugee camps.

In addition to supporting local women's networks in their engagements nationally, the OSE has supported the creation of women's networks for peace at the sub-regional levels. The Regional Platform of Women of the Sahel which comprises of women's groups from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania

and Niger to address the deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in the region; the IGAD Women and Peace Forum; and the Women's Platform for Peace in the Great Lakes. These networks are important vehicles for women from across parliaments, civil society, and government to engage in actions to advance the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda.

The OSE's action-oriented approach includes promoting the AU's zero-tolerance policy on sexual and gender-based violence within its own peace sup-



*During a solidarity mission with the people of Nigeria, Bring Back Our Girls campaign*

port operations. We have seen an increase in gender officers and gender focal points in AU missions, and concerted efforts to train peace enforcement officers on gender issues before and during deployment. Indeed, this constituted an area of extensive engagement during her visit to Somalia.

A central part of the work of the OSE is the formulation of a “Continental Results Framework to monitor the implementation by AU Member States and other relevant stakeholders of the various instruments and other commitments on WPS, including women’s rights, in Africa”.

The OSE also engages in high-level advocacy activities. During the June 2015 AU Summit, the OSE hosted the Former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of the United Kingdom, William Hague and American Actress Angelina Jolie-Pitt, co-founders of the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), to amplify calls for an end to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), to highlight the importance of strengthening the capacities of women as well as the need to create centres of excellence on WPS.

With a keen understanding that conflict cannot be resolved without addressing the structural causes of conflict, the OSE is also engaged in issues of governance. In line with efforts to enhance the participation of women in election observation and mediation, the OSE has embarked on the training of women in election observation and dispute resolution in partnership with regional centres of excellence including the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Ghana and the Pan-African Centre on Gender, Peace and Development in Senegal. To date, the OSE has undertaken two rounds of training, which will form the basis of a roster of qualified women for senior-level mediation and election observation roles. Ultimately, OSE aims to establish partnerships with a number of centres of excellence in each region of the continent to ensure continuity and sus-

tainability of the endeavour to build capacity for women who will champion a rights-based women, peace and security agenda.

In a bid to influence policy, the OSE has also convened and participated in high-level discussions on women’s rights. On the 17th of March 2016, the Office of the Special Envoy co-organized a high-level panel discussion on, *Africa’s Year of Human Rights with a particular focus on the Rights of Women: Opportunities and Challenges*, during the 60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW60). On that occasion, Mme Diop stated that, “The prevention of violence, in all its forms, against women, their protection and their participation in decision-making at all levels are rights, not privileges.” From April 1st to 5th 2016, Mme Diop attended the 17th Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) between the AU and the UN and participated in a panel on, *Human Rights, with particular focus on Women’s Rights*. She called on all African countries to ratify the Maputo Protocol and for more men to support and champion greater participation of women in governance and peace.

The OSE’s work is guided by the principle that, “Women’s rights are human rights”. It continues to deliver on its agenda to secure women and sustain peace, thus leading to transformation in Africa. It has brought a unique combination of focus and a determination that, “Now is the time for solemn action”.

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