

## 2005 CARDOZO INTERNATIONAL ADVOCATE FOR PEACE AWARD: ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

*By: Betty Kaari Murungi*<sup>1</sup>

Thank you very much for this truly inspiring award, which I am honored to accept on my own behalf and on behalf of the many women with whom I have been privileged to work over the years. The award is presented against the backdrop of two historic international events: the passing of Rosa Parks and the announcement of the victory of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as the first elected female head of state of an African country.

It is appropriate that we were brought into in a collective reflection on the legacy of Rosa Parks and the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the culmination of a political settlement in the election of Johnson-Sirleaf in a country that has been torn apart by civil war and dictatorship for the last two decades. Rosa Parks, an icon of non-violent struggle and the first African American woman to lie in honor at the U.S. Capital, reminds us of the incredible political currency of change. Johnson-Sirleaf's victory demonstrates the tenacity of women's struggles to participate in political processes.

However, in the arena of peace-building and conflict resolution, in the sixth year of the historic United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 ("UN SCR 1325")<sup>2</sup>, women are still being excluded from peace negotiations and post-conflict processes; key sites for their self-representation of experiences and lessons learned from conflict. This is unacceptable. Women's inclusion in the justice process is the only way we can ensure that the social contracts made on their behalf will represent their own values and norms. Survivors of political violence must be able to access local, national, and international processes in order to use national and international laws to protect and advance their rights. The United

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

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Nations itself has failed to implement UN SCR 1325 in its own appointments in the field with respect to positions that affect peace and security mandates. To date, the United Nations Secretary General has appointed only four women as Special Representatives, none of whom were from Africa despite the oft-repeated platitudes about the value and importance women bring to the process of conflict transformation.

As I have meditated over the past weeks on what I could say to you that might inspire you on your paths as advocates for peace, I was reminded of certain experiences growing up in Chogoria, a small town on the slopes of Mt. Kenya. My grandmother, a respected mediator in the community, was someone to whom conflict resolution came naturally. Her wisdom was legendary. Without formal education herself, she nonetheless educated all of her own children and foster children. She knew and practiced “human rights” way back in the 1940’s and 1950’s. She gave voice to young girls and women by offering shelter, food, and counsel. She was the first negotiator/mediator/peace-builder I ever knew.

My grandmother, a deeply religious woman who lived a full happy life and passed away at the age of 92, demonstrated the art of conflict resolution through her daily actions and instilled in me a sense of its necessity and even inevitability. There are many such women all over the world to whom this art of resolving and transforming conflicts comes naturally. They represent the power that women have within their own communities that somehow fails to translate into political power within the formal structures that have evolved into exclusive male clubs within the peace and security structures of the United Nations, the African Union, and sub-regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West Africa (“ECOWAS”)<sup>3</sup> and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (“IGAD”). This exclusion of women as peace mediators has taken place despite the existence of UN SCR 1325.

African women’s lives and struggles are shaped by diverse realities. Experiences of colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, Christianization, Islamization, globalization, and militarism – all expressed within patriarchal structures – represent some of the more pervasive influences. In spite of these experiences, women have remained custodians of the old and trusted methods of building peace within communities. Women of Africa have done this over the years, without recognition or fanfare, and they will con-

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.ecowas.int](http://www.ecowas.int) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

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tinue to do it. The positive, self-effacing, unsung efforts that characterize the African women's peace movement are what inspire me and my organization, the Urgent Action Fund-Africa. We are honored to accompany these remarkable women and support their efforts.

The Urgent Action Fund-Africa works to promote the human rights of women and girls around three thematic areas: rapid response grant-making, peace-building, and transitional justice. We believe that supporting women who respond to escalating violence or conflict is imperative to the creation of sustainable peace and to ensure participation of women in all aspects of conflict transformation and post-conflict reconstruction. Urgent Action Fund-Africa undertakes collaborative projects with women and organizations working in conflict and post-conflict situations. We operate in a context of escalating violence, violent conflict and uncertain political transitions which makes the realization of women's rights extremely difficult. Many of our initiatives include the promotion of women's perspectives in peace-building and reconstruction efforts. It is because of this work that you, at the Cardozo Journal for Conflict Resolution, have bestowed this honor. I will now turn briefly to some of these efforts to illustrate women's agency in peace-building and conflict resolution.

Many advances have been made on the road to sustainable peace; moments of brilliance and successful mediation, similar to those under consideration today at this symposium. In the last two years, Sudan and Somalia have concluded comprehensive peace accords, resulting in transitional governments that are now in place in both countries.

Ordinary women from Sudan, Somalia and Liberia organized themselves effectively and became very involved in the respective peace negotiations; some were admitted into the official processes while others were not. Playing the role of shuttle diplomats, they registered successes in breaking deadlocks and getting movement on seemingly intractable positions. They employed innovative strategies to get their voices heard. For example, in the early stages of the 2000 Somali Peace Talks in Arta, Djibouti, the women hit on a brilliant idea. The conflict was being played out and peace negotiated among Somalia's five major recognized clans. Since women were not, and could not become, permanent members of any of those clans, they formed themselves into a sixth clan. This gutsy maneuver allowed the women to remain engaged in the peace process and eventually to negotiate reasonable quotas for

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women's participation in the political arrangements that were finally agreed upon at the signing of the accords in 2004.

Liberia has just held elections following peace negotiations that saw the exit of Charles Taylor. Women played critical roles in these peace processes, and we, at Urgent Action Fund-Africa, were privileged to support them in their efforts. One such organization is the Women in Peacebuilding Network ("WIPNET"), a program of the West African Network for Peacebuilding ("WANEP"), an organization dedicated to, and focused on, building relationships for peace. Utilizing innovative tactics, such as refusing to attend church and staying away from their homes for weeks on end, the women were able to meet with then President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, and with members of the LURD Resistance Army. These efforts won WIPNET a place at the negotiation table between the Liberian government and LURD. This was an unprecedented achievement, as an indigenous women's group had never before attended negotiations of this kind in Liberia. This presented an incredible opportunity for women's perspectives to become part of the dialogue that defines the peace process in Liberia.

We, as international advocates for peace, must consider means to support true agents of change in these creative efforts and to help bring women activists together to share their best thinking as they strive to rebuild civil society. That is one of the challenges we at Urgent Action Fund-Africa struggle with daily.

Allow me, if you will, to speak about victories in the advancement of justice and peace, which, in the words of Benjamin N. Cardozo, are "not to be taken by storm, but wooed in slow advances." I want to acknowledge the impact of true solidarity and friendship, through several processes of transformation that I have been honored to serve at the international, regional, and local levels.

The first is the Coalition for Women's Human Rights in Conflict Situations,<sup>4</sup> whose main focus is to promote the adequate prosecution of perpetrators of gender-based violations in transitional justice systems in Africa. The Coalition facilitates the creation of precedents that recognize violence against women in conflict situations and assists in finding ways to obtain justice for women survivors of sexual violence. The members of this Coalition are drawn from diverse backgrounds, continents, and professions. They include persons drawn from academia, the legal profession, and civil society. The Coalition has had enormous success in monitoring the

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.womensrightscoalition.org](http://www.womensrightscoalition.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

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work of the ad hoc U.N. tribunals investigating and prosecuting crimes of gender violence.

In accepting this award, I want to pay special tribute to all the wonderful women and one man who are part of this Coalition. Over the last nine years, they have worked tirelessly in pursuit of justice for female survivors of the most egregious crimes known to humanity. Many of the women in this Coalition were also part of the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice and campaigned tirelessly for the inclusion of a gender perspective in the International Criminal Court Statute.

Regionally, the Urgent Action Fund-Africa has benefited enormously from the shared knowledge and expertise of its partners who include, but are not limited to, other regional organizations such as the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)<sup>5</sup> and Isis-WICCE.<sup>6</sup> Both organizations are engaged in promoting the understanding of mechanisms and instruments available for advancing women's rights at the regional level. The power of expanded influence that comes with genuine collaboration in this work cannot be overstated. I thank all of them.

Locally, a coalition of Kenyan women's and human rights organizations came together in 2003 to advocate for the maintenance of progressive provisions in the draft constitution that was negotiated by the Constitutional Conference. This Coalition was pivotal in highlighting issues promoting women's concerns as provided in the draft, and advocated for their adoption. These organizations provide much-needed support in the struggle for social justice. They are: the Kenya Human Rights Commission, the Institute for Education in Democracy, the Federation of Women Lawyers-Kenya, and the League of Women Voters in Kenya. In accepting this award, I would like to salute their efforts.

The solidarity and friendship of urgent toil with so many brilliant and dynamic women constantly refuels my hope and nourishes my own visions of peace. As you young advocates continue on your paths, hold on to your dreams and always remain open to new ideas – this is how the law remains committed to the principle of growth.

We are reminded daily of the need for vigilance; our wounds are still raw from recent and recurring hurricanes, famine, earth-

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.femnet.or.ke](http://www.femnet.or.ke) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See [www.isis.or.ug](http://www.isis.or.ug) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

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quakes, drought, wars, and their devastating aftermath and disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable fellow human beings. The situation in Western Sudan's Darfur region, the escalation of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the continuation of hostilities in Cote d'Ivoire and Northern Uganda – all are examples of sites of conflict. The “War on Terror” has fueled religious and cultural fundamentalism that has, in turn, produced repressive anti-terror legislation in a majority of the countries in which we work. This legislation undermines human rights and sets back progress for women, including their participation in peace processes. These worrisome trends widen the gap between the genders in every aspect of life and severely curtail the ability of women to participate fully in decision-making for their communities and societies.

My own country, Kenya, is currently embroiled in a very divisive debate around the adoption of a new constitution. The choice for Kenyans, who will vote at the referendum on November 21, 2005, does not appear to be for or against the proposed new constitution, but rather between politicians of little vision and their ideologically bankrupt political parties. This constitution making process may yet produce a conflict of gigantic proportions, however, as we spiral towards “D-Day,” we do little to transform it. This failure by the state, citizens, and civil society to act to prevent an escalation of the conflict is an example of how deadly conflicts are ignited. I am concerned that we, as Kenyans, may lose the moment before the storm to avert the disaster; I call upon my compatriots to act to *prevent* further conflict.

I thank you again for this great honor, and accept the award of International Advocate for Peace on behalf of the thousands of women with whom I have worked over the decades, all of whom I am unable to name here, but whose courage and conviction has allowed me to collaborate in their work for justice and a sense of peace in their lives. I particularly want to recognize the wonderful women of the Coalition for Women's Human Rights in Conflict Situations,<sup>7</sup> the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice,<sup>8</sup> the Urgent Action Fund and Urgent Action Fund-Africa,<sup>9</sup> the wonderful women of WIPNET Liberia,<sup>10</sup> Save Somali Women and Children,

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.womenscoalition.org](http://www.womenscoalition.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.iccwomen.org](http://www.iccwomen.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.urgentactionfund.org](http://www.urgentactionfund.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> See [www.wanep.org](http://www.wanep.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

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and Rwanda Women's Network.<sup>11</sup> They have all been indefatigable in their struggles for peace and gender justice. They have taught us many valuable lessons.

I must also mention my fantastic colleagues at the Urgent Action Fund-Africa and the Urgent Action Fund<sup>12</sup> who continue to transform the face of donor advocacy in Africa and around the world. I salute my compatriots from the Federation of Women Lawyers-Kenya (FIDA-K)<sup>13</sup>, the Kenya Human Rights Commission<sup>14</sup> the Institute for Education in Democracy<sup>15</sup> and the Kenya League of Women Voters<sup>16</sup> for their commitment to the rights of women in Kenya. Their professional resolve and dedication has accompanied the growth and expansion of my work.

Finally let me acknowledge all my family and my spouse, James Orengo, who has been a true partner in my life's struggles and whose commitment to women's human rights has enabled him to support my work with women in post-conflict situations from Kigali, Arusha, Kitgum, Freetown, and beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.rwandawomennetwork.org](http://www.rwandawomennetwork.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> See [www.urgentactionfund.org](http://www.urgentactionfund.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See [www.fidakenya.org](http://www.fidakenya.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> See [www.hri.ca/partners/khrc](http://www.hri.ca/partners/khrc) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> See [www.iedafrica.org](http://www.iedafrica.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See [www.leaguekenya.org](http://www.leaguekenya.org) (last visited Jan. 30, 2006).

