

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 5TH HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD

LAUDATION SPEECH

By Delphine Djiraibé

Dear Magodonga Mahlangu, dear Jenni Williams, dear Trust Muziwa, dear Bokani Nleya, dear friends from Amnesty International,

ladies and gentlemen,

imagine you open the cupboard in your kitchen and you find nothing to eat. Nothing, not even some mealie meal (or maize flour), the staple food for Zimbabweans. If you are lucky to have a fridge, it will be empty anyway. Or there is no electricity. Or no water running from the tap. Or no tap at all.

Imagine you have to go to another country, travelling for hours, for days, to buy food and other provisions.

Imagine that to organize the daily living for you and your children is, in the very sense of the word, a struggle that keeps you running from morning till night –

Would you go out on the street, singing and distributing roses?

Would you be able to convey hope to other people, smile to them, mobilize them, encourage them?

And would you do this knowing perfectly well that the police will soon arrive, and they will take out their long sticks, and beat you? They will

beat you, young woman, even though you might be pregnant; and they will beat you, old lady with white hair, and you, mother of four children; you will go to prison, for a night, for two days, for weeks even, leaving your children without care?

This is what the women of WOZA are doing and bearing. They are ordinary people like you and me, but they live in a country in which nearly half of the population is starving, where not only decently paid jobs, but jobs in general are a rarity, and where it has become more and more likely in the past months that you will be beaten up, your house put to the ground/demolished, your livestock destroyed if you criticize the government or dare to think of voting for an oppositional party.

Both Magodonga and Jenni Williams, the speakers of WOZA, have by now been arrested more than 30 times. They have been detained and beaten. They just came out of prison some days ago, where they had to stay for three weeks under extremely harsh conditions. Over days, they were denied contact to the outside world. They had almost nothing to eat. Again, the reason was a peaceful protest. Ever since her first arrest on Valentine's Day 2003, Jenni's "crime" has been basically the same: to hand out roses to people on the street and saying: "Zimbabweans, it's time to learn to love again".

As these women show us that, to be a Human Rights Defender is far from just doing a kind of job. Rather, it is a decision you have to make, an option for the people, and a commitment for the future, for your own, for

your family's, for your country's future. Human Rights Defenders in Zimbabwe are lawyers, community activists, business people, students and workers who have made this option.

WOZA members are right in their midst, and this is why we have come together here tonight. We have come together to honour an outstanding commitment, an impressive courage and a contagious readiness for activity with which they have decided to say no, we don't accept that human rights, political and civil as well as social and economic rights, are constantly and increasingly violated in their (our) country. And to say yes, yes to another Zimbabwe fighting solely with peaceful means. WOZA calls its approach the "tough love". They are proving, on the streets, that "the power of love can conquer the love of power". WOZA's guns are roses, what they fire at their opponent are not bullets but disarming facts. And they will have gained their victory not when bodies lie on the ground but when people stand up against oppression, when they feel that something can be changed if they stand together.

WOZA today unites women and men in this struggle. But it started as a women's organization, and female members by far outnumber their male fellows. Women are the foundation of every society. Yet for many women in the world's poorest regions, life is extraordinarily difficult. So it is in Zimbabwe: "The suffering caused by the governing crisis is on a woman's shoulders more than it is on a man's shoulders", Jenni explains.

Women in Africa are always seen just as housewives and mothers and as such are relegated in a second place. That means that they are fighting a

twofold battle. First of all, they need to struggle to be recognised as a human being with full rights and equal capacities as their male fellows. Their second battle is to advocate for the respect of human rights and to improve the live conditions of the whole society. women have the power to give life, they have a natural incentive to protect it. the hope to make the heart a better place to live relay mainly on women.

Therefore: What WOZA is doing is a call for every woman in Zimbabwe and in Africa: to arise, to stand up and fight for the respect of human rights.

Without advocates to champion them, human rights remain just a concept on paper. The change of our societies in Africa must be promoted from within, by our own people. Individuals and organisations defending human rights are key to this process. This is why the commitment from Magodonga Mahlangu, Trust Maziwa, Bokani Nleya, Jenni Williams and all women and men from WOZA is marvellous and so important.

As we sit here together, the situation in Zimbabwe is one of absolute emergency. The nation is wrecked by repression and economic collapse. Torture and murder are being used by the state to silence dissenting voices. Social human rights are violated every day. People live in constant fear and complete uncertainty of the future.

What happened after the 29 March 2008 elections has shocked the world. People suspected to have voted for the opposition parties, human rights defenders (HRDs) and officials of the MDC were targeted for

beatings, arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention, torture and other ill-treatment, arbitrary killing, abduction, forced eviction and displacement. Zimbabwean forces documented over 180 violence related deaths and more than 9,000 people tortured and beaten. An estimated 28,000 people had to flee their homes.

Two months ago, the three main political parties in Zimbabwe finally agreed to form an inclusive government; but they have not come to concrete terms yet. The situation of political impasse continues. There is no government in place, Parliament is not sitting.

Food aid cannot adequately be distributed or is deliberately withheld by Mugabes ZANU-PF still in power.

Change in Africa will come about through the battles women are fighting. To meet their aims, they need respect, they need support and protection from the international community. It is crucial that their work is recognized and made public. Amnesty International's award combined with its tradition of solidarity is feeling very well those needs. But we need more: first of all, the states of the African Union should not accept that their member state, Zimbabwe is violating human rights.

Then, African and European leaders should speak out publicly and strongly and demand that Zimbabwe ends impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations.

We need to remember that we have a culture of dialogue deeply enrooted in our African culture. Our leaders must then stop fighting, stop violating

human rights and engage in a truly non mockery dialogue to reach the acceptable level of good governance that could be a source of peace and respect of human being.

European countries must take into consideration the well being of the civilian population and act consequently to support them rather than supporting non democratic, corrupt and criminal leaders to oppress more and more vulnerable civilian population.

Magodonga Mahlangu, Trust Maziwa, Bokani Nleya and Jenni Williams I am deeply honoured to be part of this award ceremony and so proud of you, sisters! I urge you just to stay engaged and committed. Never step back, the victory is yours, it is just a matter of time. The truth never fails. May God bless you and give you strength to keep WOZA going for the better of Zimbabwe.

May God also bless Amnesty International and all of you.

Thank you!