



PSIO PROGRAM FOR THE STUDY OF
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION(S)

Women leaders from African armed opposition groups express themselves on international humanitarian and human rights law

Geneva Call and the Program for the Study of International Organization(s) of the Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva sponsored a landmark workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November 2005, bringing together 40 women leaders from armed opposition groups in Africa that are currently in conflict or that have recently moved into post-conflict phases. The impetus for the workshop includes the recent calls of United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan for both the UN and international actors to engage in dialogue with armed opposition groups and increase actions in support of women, peace and security to address the impact of armed conflict. Impetus is also provided by the solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, in which the Heads of State of the African Union agreed to ensure the full and effective participation and representation of women in peace processes, including the prevention, resolution and management of conflicts, as well as in post-conflict reconstruction.

The “African workshop” was built upon the lessons learned from a similar international workshop sponsored by Geneva Call in Switzerland in August 2004. That earlier workshop brought together about 30 women members of armed opposition groups currently or recently in armed conflict from Africa, Central and South Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.

The objective of the 2005 “Africa workshop” was to identify ways of strengthening the understanding and observance of international humanitarian and human rights law within the African armed groups and their political wings. At the same time, the workshop sought to contribute to African and international organizations’ understanding of and ability to work with armed opposition groups to promote and uphold international humanitarian and human rights norms. Four topics were discussed during the workshop: humanitarian law, human rights law, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and transition into governance role.

- During the working group on humanitarian rules, participants deliberated on the limits of action in armed conflict and where these limits arose from, including their own traditional and religious values, personal beliefs, the groups’ ideology or code of conduct. Those limits were then compared to the limits within international humanitarian law. They then discussed ideas and strategies on how

to improve knowledge and compliance of the international humanitarian rules, and their ability, as women, to influence the conduct of other members of their armed groups.

- In the working group on human rights, participants exchanged views on the meaning of human rights from their experiences as women within armed groups, the interpretation of the laws from the various conventions, and strategies of enforcement of these rights. Sexual and gender-based violations were frequently raised throughout the discussions, with the participants making clear statements regarding that as women, their rights and those of other women and girls, were consistently not upheld. The participants highlighted that a strong understanding of women's human rights was a necessary step in working towards the realization of those rights.
- The working group on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes discussed what occurred in those processes and who was able to benefit and who was excluded. They came up with concrete actions that needed to occur in order to have more successful DDR programs that benefited men and women combatants and the communities into which they sought to reintegrate. The participants also exchanged views on what security means for women, including women ex-combatants, in the presence of the numerous weapons that remain in communities even after a DDR process.
- The working group on governance deliberated on the leadership roles the participants undertook in their armed groups and which of these skills were transferable to leadership capacities in a civilian setting. The group furthermore discussed the challenges women in armed groups face in participating in peace negotiations or constructing peace agendas. They also strategized on how to address and overcome some of the challenges they face as women in transitioning into civilian leadership roles.

The participants emphasized the importance of advocacy, networking nationally and regionally, information-sharing, capacity-building, and training to strengthen women's leadership abilities to help them gain a greater voice:

- In promoting humanitarian and human rights norms;
- In the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants;
- In taking on meaningful roles in governance;
- In addressing injustice in their societies.

A final workshop report authored by Dr Dyan Mazurana, will be published and widely distributed to participants, the African Union, key donor governments, NGOs and other relevant constituencies by March 2006. The report will present the main discussions and insights garnered from the workshop.