

Ursula Gelis, WILPF Norway, July 2015

Challenging Patriarchy in Ghana

“We seek to liberate women’s power to stop war.” WILPF-Manifesto, 2015



WILPF Congress in The Hague. In front of the Peace Palace. April 2015. Photo: Ursula Gelis

Since 2011, the oldest women’s organization in the world, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), has had a branch in Ghana.

In April 2015 WILPF celebrated its 100 years of existence in The Hague. In April 1915 courageous women from several countries came to this city to call for an end to the carnage of the First World War.

At the centennial congress where women from WILPF and other relevant women’s organizations were demanding a peaceful future with equal rights for everybody, I spoke with the President Ayo Ayoola-Amale and Olivia Anaman from WILPF Ghana.



Ayo Ayoola-Amale (in the middle) at the international WILPF congress. The Hague, April 2015. Photo: Ursula Gelis

The current stage of women rights

The political and social discrimination of women is a main concern in Ghana. Equal rights for men and women have not yet been achieved. Many women have no access to schools and in some cases work as porters, thereby supporting their families by bearing goods from one place to the other – a situation women can rarely survive on.

Rites of widowhood are another area of concern. For instance, on the death of a husband, the wife is usually held in confinement, where in some cases she is subjected to physical as well as emotional abuse. She may be forced to walk barefoot for a considerable period of time.

Women are also called names which are highly derogatory. Some communities view old and frail women as witches or representatives of evil forces. As a result they are held in small hamlets known as witch camps created for that purpose. These are often considerable distances from the large towns. Ghana faces these problems just like other African countries. These problems are usually due to old traditions and imbedded culture.

In rural areas you will find a lot of deprivation. For instance there are little or no medical facilities in rural areas. Domestic violence is also a major problem and women are often excluded from decision making.

The elders, usually old men, are normally the decision makers so therefore women do not have a voice in public debates. It is a patriarchal concept which makes such structures possible.

However it is interesting to mention that there are more women now in Parliament. This is a plus for the government, yet women still face discrimination.

Yet there are also positive developments to mention, like the focus on rural women who are encouraged to participate in the next elections in December 2016. At present we can hear the voices of women because women activists and the media are pushing issues and programs relating to women forward. “The problem is that many women are still hesitant to come forward to make their views heard in the media or the society itself. This is rooted in our culture. Fortunately, significant but promising steps are being taken to change those patterns,” Olivia emphasizes.

Education is Key

WILPF Ghana is focusing on women's rights and their implementation in the midst of the society. Peace and character education; the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security; domestic violence and gender issues; addressing the ruling culture patterns, are crucial. WILPF Ghana is one of the social mobilisers helping to educate women about the importance of their right to vote and encouraging them to do so in the upcoming general elections.

Education plays a vital role in raising our awareness of social issues - political, gender, human rights, economic, health etc. – not only issues that affect our personal lives but also issues that impact on the global village. “The purpose of education is to free the mind and the spirit, we want women to become more conscious about their living conditions,” Ayo says.

Children are the key to the future. If a young child will enjoy peace education, the likelihood that the adult is becoming a troublemaker is diminished.

Mahatma Gandhi once stated, “If we are to reach real peace in this world we shall have to begin with the children.” The WILPF members are talking about peace in schools, reaching out to villagers. It is a grass-roots approach.

There is a collaboration with the Kofi Annan International Peace Keeping Training Centre (<http://www.kaiptc.org/>) WILPF Ghana works with the center's branch focusing on UN resolution 1325, women, peace and security explicitly.

The centre organized a forum with media practitioners to deliberate on the issue of UN Resolution 1325. “This interaction has given us, representing WILPF, a better platform for our advocacy work!” Olivia says.

WILPF Ghana is seeking to research small arms proliferation because not much work has been done on this urgent topic so far. There are cases in which unlicensed, locally manufactured small arms have been employed in armed robberies. In the heady days of the 1980's various weapons fell into wrong hands and their retrieval has not been very successful.

However, the main problem is the discrimination against girls and women. A family still promotes a boy, sending him to school first. Especially in the rural areas, PEACE education is very important. In rural areas WILPF has more members than in the urban surroundings.

Geographically speaking it is the underdevelopment mainly located in the North, the poorest region of the country, that girls sometimes younger than 18 years work as porters and have little access to appropriate education.

The ongoing shadow of colonialism

“African governments do not score human rights very high on the political agenda. Not many thoughts are contributed to women's rights either,” Ayo points out. This is an overall statement about African countries, while Ayo is stressing that Ghana cannot be categorized completely under this estimate. Here the government is recognizing women, visible in the structure of representation in the Parliament.

Until today, colonialism is affecting women mentally. The fact that we have been enslaved for a long period, referring to the colonial past of Africa, still keeps women in disadvantaged roles. “We are talking about an economical slavery, the absence of women's empowerment and lack of opportunities to enjoy a good education.” Firstly, women were affected by the alienation of land experienced by most Africans; colonialism led to the complete loss of access to land by women.

It is clear that colonials had devastating economic impacts on African women. As the colonial government entrenched itself into the African nations, women found their labor being increasingly exploited, their autonomy decreased and their levels of dependence on males increasing.

WILPF Ghana, in cooperation with other sections, would like to investigate this crucial social complex as part of its women empowerment activities.

The book, ‘How Europe underdeveloped Africa,’ by Walter Rodney, depicts the policies used to keep colonized people under control.

“Today, one of the major issues of neo-colonialism is the influx of illegal miners from China. Ghana faces serious water supply problems because the mining industry uses cyanide which pollutes water bodies.

Farmland is destroyed too. These negative developments are especially catastrophic for women as caretakers of their households. Deficiencies in water supply are a threat. So instead of going to school, young female porters have to look for clean water by walking longer distances. The problems are repetitive”.



Olivia Anaman at the WILPF congress in the Hague, April 2015. Photo: UG.