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A Unique Sisterhood
The African Women’s Alliance for Mobilizing Action

“Landmines may take a limb or lives, but not the heart or spirit of the African Woman”—AWAMA

by Margaret S. Busé

Originally formed in 1997 as an advocate for African women’s education, The African Women’s Alliance for Mobilizing Action (AWAMA) quickly undertook the cause to support landmine victims and landmine removal. Working in the province of Zambézia in central Mozambique, Thelma Venichand, its director, used AWAMA’s success, has no shortage of volunteers, and victims requiring assistance and integration. But, what AWAMA lacks is funding. Currently, their landmine-assistance programs and supportive services are on hold all funding and financial aid for their project is received. They are hoping an organization and/or donor will step forward to coordinate efforts with them.

“The communities are very excited that we are here, and about the integration issues we hope to make progress in. When I came here and was ready to start setting up, people from the community showed up with bags of food ready to go to work and clear land for buildings. It was very heartbreaking to tell them we had to wait for money for supplies,” said Venichand.

The organization is dedicated to the community and has a grassroots campaign to keep its programs personal and community oriented, in keeping with the African culture. AWAMA also strives to be responsive to the needs of the individual. While medical care and help are prominent, the socioeconomic impact on families and individuals is a paramount consideration. She also realizes that in general, people in the community are very supportive of each other. In rural communities, women will help with the childcare and the sick of families in the community. In the African culture women are expected to take care of the family and housekeeping, regardless of their own landmine injuries.

A woman’s predominant role is to “love and support others, asdaughters, sisters, mothers and wives.” For young girls who are landmine victims, injuries can have far-reaching consequences. “In our society, marriage is important,” said Venichand. “In a society that values marriage, not being able to marry would cause additional psychological and emotional suffering for a young woman in addition to the physical trauma.”

AWAMA wants to be successful in incorporating and integrating people who have been victims of landmines as vital members of their communities. “Many organizations deal with just the prosthetics, but we want to make people feel useful. We want to ensure that people with disabilities are included in the community and that they can be a part of it,” said Venichand.

Through AWAMA, women are called on to become “caregivers” to their native homeland,” and to be an active force in addressing the challenges created by 50,000 landmines in Africa. “We will not wait over 100 years, estimated by the experts, before all landmines are cleared from our village pathways and lands. We intend to honor our great grandmothers’ caring spirits,” said Venichand. This is the vital foundation of this sisterhood of women. In African culture death is not taken as a definite separation with ancestors, rather, through their connection with their ancestors that threads the living to the God. The connection with their ancestors adds another dimension to the catastrophe of the landmine epidemic. “We cannot walk in the land that our ancestors cultivated, played with their families and raised children. They cannot walk on the paths that our grandmothers walked on,” said Venichand.

AWAMA hopes to utilize the spirit of African women in mobilizing their communities for a strong future for their families and children. Under the leadership of women they are hoping to fund:

- Landmine-clearance programs in agriculturally viable areas
- Victory Fund for survivor assistance
- Socially and economically productive activities with emphasis on agriculture, health and education
- Rehabilitation programs targeted to those injured and/or members of war-affected families

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Landmines are multipliers of misery for hundreds of thousands, turning communities into theaters of war long after the combat is over. Yet now at 52, his injuries make it difficult for him to earn a living.

These two are among nearly 21,000 multitudes in the Cuando Cubango province of Angola. Their tragedy is compounded by the fact that the same thing can happen at any time to their friends and loved ones. Fenced in by landmines, the people of Menongue struggle to see the future. Until the mines are gone they cannot pass on their traditional livelihoods, rebuild their country, or pause to dream.

As I waited at the attempt to leave, I caught sight mass with a prosthetic foot. He was shy, but I managed to learn that Pedro is 10 years old, an orphan, and he lost his leg in a landmine explosion. I saw behind his story gave a look of keen intelligence, reminding me of my 14-year-old daughter.

Some U.S. military experts contend that anti-personnel mines are “a combat multiplier,” freeing our forces for other operations. For me, two things are certain: one, landmines are multipliers of misery for hundreds of thousands of innocents, turning communities into theaters of war long after the combat is over; and two, this is a pivotal moment for the establishment of a new international standard of decency. This standard will have no place for landmines.

The Clinton administration said it would go to Oslo, Norway, to seek a quick ban on this treaty. By seeking special status in its demands for exceptions, the United States risked diluting, even killing, the possibility of a treaty of any value. The multitudes of today and tomorrow seemed far from Clinton’s mind as his delegates pushed to accommodate Pentagon demands to exempt anti-personnel mines on the Korean Peninsula, continue the use of smart mines and allow a loophole through which to cop out of its obligation.

Talking with them, the policy arguments fade and one is left staring into wounded eyes. Baptista, Manuela, and the others shared their experiences with me, understanding that I would convey their words as a testimony of the powerless to those who have the power and who share in the moral responsibility to eradicate the scourge of landmines.