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. Buse

Originally formed in 1997 as an advocate for 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 Zambezia in central Mozambique, Thelma Venichand, director of AWAMA, has no shortage of volunteers, and victims requiring assistance and integration. But, what AWAMA lacks is funding. Currently, their landmine-assistance programs and other support services are on hold till 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 heart-breaking 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 that also needs to be addressed, says Venichand. She also mentions that in general, people in the communities are very supportive of each other. In rural communities, women will help with the childcare and 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, as daughters, 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.

Throughout AWAMA, women are called on to become “caregivers to their own homelands,” 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. It is 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, engaged with their families and raised children. We 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-cleanup programs in agriculturally viable areas.
- Women’s and children’s 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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Caretaking for ‘muritlados,’ Portuguese for the mutilated ones, gathered outside the CARE office in Menongue, Angola. Among them were a few with prosthetic limbs, mostly ill fitting. As for the rest of the legs, they got around on crutches that looked like found objects. Several people in the crowd had lost an arm, one person was missing both. Another man had the requisite number of arms and legs, but no hands. These were survivors of landmines.

Missing from the group were the women, except one, a young woman, her prosthetic leg covered to the knee with a dainty white sock. As is commonly the case with women who have survived the trauma and mutilation of landmine explosions, her family still depends heavily on her. With water to fetch, meals to prepare, and children and elders to care for, she had found the time to come, along with 50 men that day last month. They had heard that a stranger from America was there to talk with them about their lives and their future.

Angola is twice the size of Texas, yet within its 481,000 square miles are an estimated 15 million-plus landmines, about 1.5 mines for each person. Even half that in the United States would be seen as a crisis of staggering magnitude. Mine victims are a Cold War legacy that many choose to forget. They were laid during the decades of superpower-supported Civil War that followed Angolans independence from Portugal. Twenty years later, nearly 77,000 of Angola’s citizens are landmines.

I spoke with a “mutilada” named Domingos Manuel. A pretty 25-year-old who looked more like 16, Manuel’s face was calm, even a little wisful, as she told me about her life. Shamed to show a mine on her right leg in 1992 on her way to buy cassavas for her family. Abandoned by her husband after her injury and no longer able to farm her own field, she still suffers from grief and shock. Her plans to provide for her parents and children have been turned upside down. Still, she relies to contribute to the household, buying oil to sell in the market. Oil is heavy, so she makes many trips on her prosthetic leg, and earns just enough to survive.

Jean Baptiste was 10 when his father died at a local hospital for 20 years before he was drafted as a military nurse. One day as he accompanied an injured soldier to find medical treatment, the car ran over a mine, killing the driver and injuring Baptiste’s legs. After a grueling year-long journey, his colleagues finally got him to doctors who could amputate both legs and save his life. Baptiste’s desire to help others was not diminished. Once able, he returned to work in the hospital and has since been made the elder of his commun-