

**SOLIDARITY FOR
AFRICAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

A force for freedom



**MOUVEMENT DE SOLIDARITÉ
POUR LES DROITS
DES FEMMES AFRICAINES**

Une force pour la liberté

August 10, 2011

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

I am writing on behalf of *Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR)*, a pan African coalition of 39 organizations and regional networks that are working for the recognition and promotion of the rights of women in Africa as laid out in the landmark Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa adopted in July 2003 by the African Heads of State and Government at the Second African Union Ordinary Summit held in Maputo, Mozambique. In spite of the very 'underdeveloped' status of women's rights as a whole, the Protocol, in recognition of the magnitude of unsafe abortion and its implications for maternal morbidity and mortality rates in the region, makes specific provision for women's sexual and reproductive rights in its Article 14 (2) (c) which calls upon States parties to ensure the protection of reproductive rights of women by authorizing medical abortion including in cases of sexual assault and rape.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1820 which was proposed by the US recognizes rape as a weapon in armed conflict: *"rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide."* In addition to health implications, rape destroys women's dignity through terror and humiliation which in turn has negative repercussions on entire communities. Even in normal situations the toll of unsafe abortion in Africa is unacceptably high. The WHO estimates that, worldwide, almost 20 million unsafe abortions take place each year, with 95% of these (19 million) performed in developing countries; the risk of death from unsafe abortion is about 1 in 150 procedures in Africa with the gap between developing and developed countries in terms of risk of death from unsafe abortion stands at an all time high of 1/150 000 in developing countries versus 1/150 in developed countries. Sadly, in situations of armed conflict where women often have fewer if any options, pregnancy resulting from rape and sexual assault more often than not becomes a death sentence in itself.

The US "no abortion" policy attached to all US humanitarian aid for victims of rape in armed conflicts, is particularly devastating in its implications for women in Africa where the status of women's rights remains a matter of great concern currently being addressed at the highest continental levels including the Protocol's Articles 4 on the *Right to Integrity and*

Membres de la coalition

Action for Development (ACFODE), African Centre for Democracy And Human Rights Studies (ACDHRS), Akina Mama wa Afrika, Association des Juristes Maliennes, Cellule de Coordination sur les Pratiques Traditionnelle Affectant la Sante des Femmes et des Enfants, Coalition on Violence Against Women, Equality Now-Africa Regional Office, FAHAMU, FAMEDEV-Inter-African Network For Women, Media, Gender and Development, FEMNET - African Women's Development and Communication Network, Foundation for Community Development, Inter-African Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices (IAC), Oxfam GB, Reproductive Health and Rights Alliance (RHRA), Sister Namibia, Union Nationale des Femmes de Djibouti, Voix de Femmes, University of Pretoria Center for Human Rights, Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternatives, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDFAF)

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Security of Person, 11 on the Protection of Women in Armed Conflict, and 14 on Health & Reproductive Rights.

August 12, 2011 will mark the 62nd anniversary of the adoption of the Geneva Convention of 1949 which makes provision for civilians' right to comprehensive and non-discriminatory medical care during armed conflict. We thus urge you, Mr. President, as we celebrate the creation of this milestone instrument for the promotion of human rights, to rescind the blanket abortion restrictions placed not only on all US humanitarian aid for women and girls in armed conflict, but on all US foreign assistance, and all foreign governments, NGOs and humanitarian aid providers that receive US funds, or whose donor funds are commingled with US funds, from offering abortion information or services with no exception made for rape or to save the life of a woman. This constitutes a gross violation of the rights of these women who find themselves in already dire situations.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Respectfully,

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