

## **Statement by the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice on International Women's Day**

8 March 2012

Today, as we celebrate International Women's Day (IWD), we take stock of the progress and challenges towards the legal recognition of women's rights around the world and to the participation of women in the development of international gender justice norms.

For the 6,000 members represented by the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice, the majority of whom are grassroots women's rights and peace organisations, networks and advocates living in armed conflict countries under investigation by the International Criminal Court, IWD is a day of celebration for surviving another year and for localised gender justice victories, both large and small. It is also a time of renewing our collective determination to promote human security and peace within communities beset by conflict and to end impunity for gender-based violence including through the ICC and domestic mechanisms in countries where women experience significant levels of violence and limited legal standing.

The ICC continues to be the most significant global institution for addressing gender-based crimes because for many women the Court represents their only hope of accountability for crimes their state is unable or unwilling to prosecute. The ICC is also the only international criminal body with the positive obligation to prosecute such crimes as mandated by its visionary treaty. The Rome Statute contains the most advanced articulation in the history of international criminal and humanitarian law of acts of violence, gendered in nature, predominantly sexual and most commonly perpetrated against women.

This year, the Women's Initiatives and our partners celebrate the first conviction of a senior military figure in the Congolese Army for crimes against humanity for his role in leading an attack on the remote town of Fizi in South Kivu where more than 60 women were raped. We celebrate the statement made by women from Northern Uganda to the judges of the domestic war crimes court at the start of the first hearing ever to be held within the country in relation to the longest running conflict on the African continent. We celebrate the voices of women living in IDP camps in Darfur who, despite their impoverished existence in makeshift dwellings, continue to demand justice and accountability of those within their Government responsible for the Darfur violence and the violations against women human rights defenders. We also celebrate the election in December 2011 of Fatou Bensouda as the first woman and first African to be appointed as the Chief Prosecutor of the ICC, the voice of Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the work of Margot Wallström as the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, and the efforts undertaken on peace and security issues by the new UN agency for Women led by Michelle Bachelet.

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## Statements from some of our partners:

“As we tirelessly advocate for gender justice, accountability and meaningful peace, we, women from the Greater North Women’s Voices for Peace Network in Uganda, during International Women’s Day remember and call for the immediate release of women and children still held in captivity by the Lord’s Resistance Army rebels. The community and women in this region must focus on quality education of the girls for the development of our country. Our partnership with the Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice has strengthened our capacity and promoted a tremendous growth in our membership.”

– *Santa Oketta, Chairperson, The Greater North Women’s Voices for Peace Network, Uganda*

“The whole world celebrates the anniversary of International Women’s Day by trying to show some support to women. While on this day women should celebrate the advancement of women’s rights and equality, Sudanese women are shot in the street in Khartoum and our sisters from Darfur and South Kordofan in camps are suffering all types of crimes and experiencing injustice, while the perpetrators enjoy impunity. Women around the world, please, on this day give special attention and thought to the Sudanese women and in particular to our sisters from Darfur and South Kordofan.”

– *Zainab, women’s human rights and peace activist, partner in Sudan*

“On this day we should remember that in Sudan, struggling for women’s rights is struggling for women’s lives.”

– *Nahid, women’s human rights and peace activist, partner in Sudan*

“International Women’s Day is not only a day to celebrate, but it is an occasion to assess the situation of women around the world. In the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women continue to suffer from the violent attacks of negative forces such as the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the Mai Mai, the outlawed elements of the national army (FARDC) and police forces, as well as of other armed groups scattered in the forests. Life becomes therefore unbearable for them while their tormenters operate without concerns.

The theme of this year’s International Women’s Day in the DRC is ‘Investing in rural women to decrease poverty, and foster peace and modernity in the DRC’. We think that investing in rural women for the eradication of hunger and poverty requires some preconditions: the restoration of peace in the locations where serious gender-based crimes are committed; the restoration of the State’s authority on the entire territory; the prosecution of all perpetrators of gender-based crimes both under the jurisdiction of the ICC and national tribunals; and the indemnification of all victims. We therefore call upon the ICC to expedite the current trials and to start new investigations and prosecutions for crimes recently committed in the East of the DRC; and to the Congolese government to consolidate its cooperation with the ICC and to quickly establish the Mixed Specialised Chambers that victims of gender-based crimes have been waiting for so long.”

– *Claudine Bela Badeaza, Director of the Centre d’éducation et de recherche pour les droits des femmes (CERDF) and Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice Focal Point in Kisangani, Province Orientale, DRC, on behalf of Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice partners in the DRC*

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