

# AWEPA Newsletter: Special Edition

## Belgian EU Presidency Seminar and side events

### Towards a Parliamentary Strategy for African Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Brussels, 21-23 October 2010



In the photo (L-R): Hon. Jan Roegiers, Hon. Abdirahin Haithar Abdi and Hon. Sabine de Bethune

From 21-23 October 2010, the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA) in collaboration with the Belgian Senate, organised the EU Presidency Seminar and side events. The main seminar held on 22 October 2010 included 200 parliamentarians from the European and African continents gathering to discuss the role of parliaments in ending violence against women in Africa and Europe. The subject matter was framed around the cultural practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and violence against women in conflict zones. •

## Introduction

The first session focussed on how parliaments can play a role in ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Africa and Europe, followed by a second session, which related to the framework of the UNSC Resolution 1325, on violence against women in conflict areas in Africa.

The seminar was an example of effective North-South cooperation, including various stakeholders who discussed the institutional framework of violence against women, the prevalence and policies around female genital mutilation (FGM) in Africa, and the role of civil society in banning violence against women and the practice of FGM. •

## RFPAC Seminar

Prior to the EU Presidency Seminar, the Network of Women Parliamentarians of Central Africa (RFPAC) came together on 21 October 2010. The purpose of the RFPAC programme is to offer a platform for women parliamentarians to exchange experiences, enhance their participatory and leadership skills, and to share knowledge and practices in how to improve the situation of all women. The meeting discussed the legal and institutional framework of parliamentary equality and the role of civil society.

After the seminar on 23 October 2010, AWEPA also coordinated a high-level

AWEPA Partnership Council Meeting. The AWEPA Partnership Council is an organ consisting of members of the AWEPA Eminent Advisory Board, AWEPA's major African Partners and the AWEPA Executive Committee. It is jointly chaired by Ms. Graça Machel, co-chair of the Eminent Advisory Board, and Minister of State Ms. Miet Smet, President of AWEPA. The Council convenes once a year to discuss issues of a strategic and visionary nature, where northern and southern stakeholders meet to dialogue around issues that concern all in the collective endeavour to improve human rights in Africa. •



# EU Presidency Seminar and side meetings

## Partnership Council Meeting

This year's Partnership Council meeting was co-chaired by Hon. Mary Mugenyi, Vice President of the Pan-African Parliament. The meeting began with Hon. Miet Smet reiterating that the Partnership Council is in essence a North-South Partnership between African and European Parliamentarians for the improvement of the democratic process. The meeting was then launched by Prof. Ben Turok, Network of African Parliamentarians (NAP), who sparked a stimulating discussion about the decline of the parliamentary system in terms of votes and party support. Prof. Turok emphasised the importance of AWEPA in supporting the development of parliamentary democracy in Africa and how this can be achieved. One suggestion that came about was how to retain the body of knowledge of former African Parliamentarians. In Europe, former Members of Parliament can share their knowledge and experiences of parliamentary processes through the activities and functions of AWEPA. How can the Pan-African Parliament or NAP play a similar role? Another important discussion that came to rise was on how parliamentarians perceive the topic of gender. In a theoretical sense, gender refers to both men and women; however, the more practical or applied sense often views gender as a women's issue, which is evidently represented in most gender committees. •



## EU Presidency Seminar: Towards a Parliamentary Strategy for African Women's Rights and Gender Equality – Uniting parliamentary efforts to end violence against women in Africa

The main event descriptions are only a snapshot of the presentations and speeches delivered at the conference. For full presentations and speeches, please visit [www.awepa.org](http://www.awepa.org).

### Opening Session:

The opening session was chaired by Hon. Ms. Sabine de Bethune, President of AWEPA Belgian section, Member of the Belgian Senate; Hon. Ms. Olga Zrihen, Member of Senate; and, Hon. Mr. Jan Roegiers, Member of Parliament of Flanders.

The seminar was opened with speeches from Hon. Ms. Helga Stevens, Vice President of Senate of Belgium; a video speech by H.E. Ms. Viviane Reding, Vice President of European Commission, Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship; Hon. Mr. Abdirahin Haithar Abdi, Speaker of East African Legislative Assembly (EALA); and H.E. Ms. Miet Smet, President of AWEPA. Presenters began with a discussion of the current state of violence against women and girls in Africa and Europe. Minister of State Miet Smet, expressed "one of the greatest violations of human rights can be witnessed in the abuse that many African women and girls still suffer." She went on to describe the ancient and cultural practice of FGM/C on young girls, quoting WHO statistics, "approximately 92 million girls over the age of 10 are affected by this practice." She further examined the changing nature of war explaining that in the previous century war was "concentrated between armies and militaries and today the targets of war are civilians" and due to this "women and girls are a target for acts of sexual violence including torture, sexual slavery, rape and forced prostitution, which may lead to pregnancy and/or HIV/AIDS." •

### Session 1:

The first session titled *Violence against women: ending Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) in Africa* was chaired by Hon. Ms. Magda De Meyer, Vice President of the AWEPA Belgian section, former Member of House of Representatives of Belgium; and Hon. Ms. Safina Kwekwe Tsungu, Chair of the



East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) Women's Forum, Member of National Assembly of Kenya.

The first session was sparked by a provocative and graphic video of the practice of FGM/C on young girls in Ethiopia, produced and created by UNICEF. Following the emotional and shocking reality, **Ms. Francesca Moneti, Senior Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF**, delivered a talk on accelerating the abandonment of FGM/C, including evidence and opportunities. She discussed that FGM/C is a particular form of violence against women and girls, one that is considered a social norm that will continue to be practiced if communities who practice it are not informed differently. Ms. Moneti stated, "People need to become aware –and in time be convinced –that others are considering and ultimately taking the decision to stop the practice". She explains that by gaining critical mass on a subject, the group expands, which in turn, further expands the truth. Ms. Moneti said "when the group is large enough to ensure retention of social status, also manifested through marriageability of the girls, abandonment is self-sustainable." Following Ms. Moneti, the Role of



Civil Society was discussed by **Doctor Bogaletch Gebre, gynaecologist and Executive director of Kembatta**

**Women's Self-Help Centre** in Ethiopia. Dr. Gebre discussed the situation of violence against women and the practice of FGM/C in her community in Ethiopia. Over the last 10 years there



has been spectacular turn around showing 97% of men and women opposed female genital mutilation. She explains that this is due to “the consent of communities that have learned the reasons these traditional practices are harmful.” Dr. Gebre further elaborates that “eliminating violence such as FGM is a collective responsibility; it needs solidarity of humanity, we need a global movement.” She explained that meetings between North-South countries must be organised in the areas where the problems occur, that further research needs to be sought out, and that the distribution of aid money “must be conditional to how well a country is doing on its Gender Index”. •

## Session 2:

Session 2 titled *Violence against women: Women, peace and security*

was chaired by Hon. Mr. Alain Destexhe, Vice President of the AWEPA Belgian section, Member of Parliament of the French Community of Belgium, Member of the Brussels Regional Parliament; and Hon. Ms. Mary Mugenyi, Vice President of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP).



The second session was launched by **Ms. Dagmar Schumacher, Director of UNIFEM - Brussels Office**, on the subject of Violence against women in conflict areas. Ms. Schumacher began with the policy framework on addressing violence against women issues in conflict and post-conflict situations, with a special focus on SCR 1325. She presented that sexual violence against women during conflict is a very powerful tactic to destroy communities and traumatize societies beyond recover. It creates “devastating situations for individuals, families and communities who must cope with unwanted pregnancies and children, stigmatization and rejection, diseases and reproductive health issues, psychological trauma, and disintegration of the social fabric.” Followed by situations of conflict, Ms. Schumacher

stressed that women often end up in displaced persons camps, further making their situation vulnerable. The adoption of 1325 has recognised that sexual violence is used as a tactic of war and since then has led to the development of gender quotas and programmes aimed at reconciliation and reparations for victims of sexual violence during conflict.



Followed by the stimulating speech delivered by Ms. Schumacher, AWEPA had the honour to welcome **H.E. Ms. Vabah Kazaku Gayflor, Minister of Gender & Development of Liberia** who shared African common action plans for women in conflict. Ms. Gayflor opened with stating that she is no stranger to war, and Liberian women are too familiar with the situation of violence during time of war. She explained that the civil war in Liberia saw the collapse of social structures and public institutions, and now Liberia is making steps towards peace and reconciliation. Although the exact numbers are unknown, Ms. Gayflor stated it is estimated that 60% of women were raped during the conflict, and even more women are dealing with the post-war psychological and debilitating trauma. “However”, she elaborates, “Despite the injustice and violations that Liberian women suffered during the war, they emerged as key players in bringing about the end of the conflict. The women of Liberia grew tired of being victims, of having their lives hijacked by self-serving governments and warlords, of being bystanders in the processes that determined their fate – so they took action”.



## Media and Resources

Please click on the links below to view the documents.

### In the News

[We need a more robust effort to eradicate female genital mutilation](#)

By Hon. Mary R. Mugenyi and Hon. Safina Kwekwe Tsungu; 5 November 2010 - The Guardian

[Séminaire AWEPA : Vers une stratégie parlementaire pour les droits des femmes et l'égalité des genres en Afrique](#)  
Centre d'études Africaines & de Recherches Interculturelles

[AWEPA/CD&V: Stop genitale verminking en seksueel geweld in Africa: Politics.be, October 2010 \(NL\)](#)  
[www.politics.be](#)

[L'AWEPA veut la fin des mutilations sexuelles des femmes: lalibre.be, October 2010 \(FR\)](#)  
[www.lalibre.be](#)

### Conference and UN Resolutions



[Conference Resolutions](#)



[Résolutions de la conférence](#)



[Conferentie Resoluties](#)



[UNSC Resolution 1325](#)



[Résolution 1325 du Conseil de Sécurité de l'ONU](#)

### Presentations



[Speeches](#)

### Photos



[Seminar Photos - AWEPA](#)



[Seminar Photos - Belgian Senate](#)



[Videos](#)



[Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting](#)



[Women's Caucuses](#)



For nine years women joined in nonviolent protests and demonstrations, which in 2004 led to the “Strategic Women’s Action Plan, which identified barriers preventing women’s full participation in politics, outlined steps to be taken to address those issues, and helped steer the efforts to restore and strengthen democratic governance in Liberia.” Ms. Gayflor concluded by stating, “Women can be leaders of reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation, but for this potential to be met, we must ensure their stories, their unique experiences and their needs are heard.” •



## Conclusions

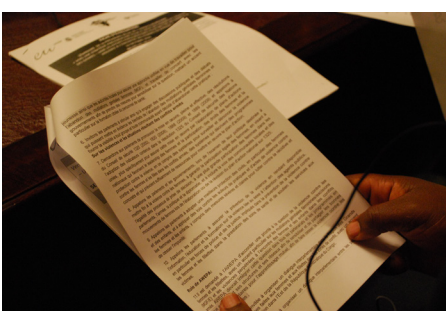
After a series of confrontational and motivating presentations and speeches, the seminar resulted in a series of conclusions brought forward by participants from 50 countries, who shared their challenges and their best practices in creating legislation and implementing laws. **Hon. Sabine de Bethune, President of the AWEPA Belgian section, Member of the Senate of Belgium**, moderated a concluding debate which resulted in the seminar resolutions that are now accessible to all parliamentarians to distribute. The resolutions are available in English, French and Dutch. In addition, the seminar resulted in the creation of two parliamentary handbooks, one focussed on FGM/C and the other on Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones. They will be available in the first quarter of 2011. •



## About AWEPA

AWEPA is an international Parliamentary association which works in cooperation with African Parliaments to strengthen parliamentary democracy in Africa, to keep Africa high on the political agenda in Europe, and facilitate African-European Parliamentary dialogue.

AWEPA has served as a unique tool for complex democratisation operations through: a membership skills base of more than 1500 European parliamentarians who devote their wide-ranging expertise to peer learning with African colleagues; long-term partnerships with African parliamentarians, which ensures local ownership and accountability; and an infrastructure of political and parliamentary entry points, which spans 9 African and 2 European offices as well as 25 parliaments in African and 28 in Europe, including the Pan-African Parliament and the European Parliament. •



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