**Strengthening protection networks for women human rights defenders to combat discrimination. Thursday 18 May 2017, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

**Intervention of Winnet Shamuyarira, JASS Southern Africa**

**How is discrimination and violence expressed and how does it impact WHRD in Southern Africa?**

*Melania Chiponda is a Zimbabwean feminist activist who has personally experienced what mining does to African women’s lives. She remembers a time when people came to the Marange area in Zimbabwe to buy cattle or to pick fruit from the majestic baobab trees. Today, recently discovered diamond mines have displaced both the people and the trees. Families have been forcibly relocated, and cut off from the land that sustained their lives and livelihoods. Mining companies have since taken over the area. With the expansion of mining and oil extraction, military and police forces have moved in to back up the companies. They use violence and sexual violence to intimidate local women and girls and repress resistance. In some cases, soldiers or police gang-rape women as a form of punishment—for artisanal mining, for “trespassing” on diamond fields that were once their ancestral lands, or for demanding greater compensation for their land and labor.*

*Melania was moved to devote her life to women’s rights when one day, during the diamond rush, police stopped the bus she was riding to Marange and demanded that the women strip naked for body searches. She responded to this violation with outrage, asserting her rights and demanding to see a warrant. She hasn’t stopped since then, despite frequent arbitrary arrests and intimidation. Since Melania began her work, state security agents working with the industry have broken into her car, stolen her laptop, and arrested and detained Melania multiple times—sometimes holding her for days before releasing her.*

**Zooming in on Southern Africa**

Melania’s story and experience is not peculiar as violence, intimidation and discrimination against women who call truth to power is rife and common place in Southern African. Some of such factors include:

**Deeply entrenched patriarchy within society:** Throughout much of the continent, patriarchal mores govern society with the odds stacked against women both in the workplace and at home. Women in civil society have to fight an uphill battle against cultural norms used to exclude women from decision making forums and downplay their voices. Women human rights defenders defying or speaking out against these norms are seen as challenging the fabric of society itself.

**Women Silenced and Unsafe in Public and Private:** in addition to an established pattern of structural violence to subordinate women in both their private and public lives, government repression means that women activists are confronting new levels of violence intended to silence them. In such situations, the work of these women is often criminalized, particularly in the case of those who challenge anti-democratic and discriminatory practices and poor political, economic and legal governance that worsen the living and working conditions of poor and vulnerable groups. In addition, women carry the burden of struggle to survive and obtain necessities such as food, water, medicines.

**Fundamentalisms:** religious fundamentalisms are on the rise – reversing and stalling key agendas for gender equality, and fueling a backlash against women and women activists. In conjunction with patriarchal tradition and culture, religion holds increasing sway over policy, politics, and public debate. The impact of this is reflected in the restriction of women’s basic freedoms and reinforcement of narrowly defined gender roles and sexuality.

**Heteronormativity**: Women who identify as and fight for the rights of lesbian, bisexual and transgender have been subjected to death, rape, family ostracisation, and in some cases denied work. Legislation in most Sothern African countries save for South Africa have legislation that criminalises same sex relationships. However, even in South Africa where legislation is in place, WHRDs fighting for the rights of LBT women have been subjected to violence. Just last week, Emy Simeane a South African lesbian activist was raped and burnt to death. In the same week, a young woman Karabo Mokoena was also murdered. While the murder of Mokoena sparked media attention and different sectors of society speaking out, this is in stark contrast to the silence around similarly violent homophobic femicide of Emy Simeane. The response to the two cases speaks volumes to the increased violence that LB and gender non-conforming WHRDs have to face given the social context that encourages heteronormativity.

**Increased militarisation and securitisation**: These adverse trends are accompanied by increased militarisation – an increase in the police, army and military presence within civilian life. The state actors are also colluding with non -state actors to inflict violence and intimidation against perceived human rights defenders particularly in mineral zones.

All these factors have and continue to weigh heavily on WHRDs leading to:

**Dwindling Wellbeing, Self-care, and Security:** decades of surveillance, arrests, and fear have led to trauma, exhaustion, burn out, and even guilt. Women’s bodies are a site of struggle and hold the residual effects of this assault, limiting their capacity to imagine alternatives and come together around common struggles. With women’s organizations strained and fragmented, there is no sustained support for women to recover and build the foundations for renewed work.

**Responses by community based women: How have community based women contributed to understanding and confronting discrimination against WHRDs?**

* From community organising work, to informal networks of support to advocacy at all levels– women are at the cutting edge of these issues. They may not define as WHRD defenders, but they do the work of defending and fighting for more rights for us all.
* Across the region, communities are responding to this dangerous mix of suffering and repression. In particular women activists are organising on a range of issues – those that impact on their ability to survive (e.g. water, sanitation, ARVs, land) as well as those that continue to place women in marginal positions in regard to men (e.g. fights for gender equality laws).
* **Women activists and feminists are speaking out**: Despite suffering threats and intimidation for their work, these women activists, continue to fight on the frontlines of social justice, democracy and rights battles. These women include community leaders, teachers, mothers, union members and LGBTI activists, feminists, market women, sex workers, pastors, lawyers, journalists, and academics. They work to defend social and economic rights and advance political and civil rights. Their security concerns range from the intimate to that of their communities and organisations. They are using social media and creative arts as strategies to access information, debate feminist ideas and mobilize action for change. For example, the young women from Katswe Sistahood in Zimbabwe are using theatre and dance to unleash women’s voices and courage to resist traditional roles, break the silence and challenge taboos around sex and sexuality. Their presence is disrupting social expectations that young women should be seen and not heard.
* Organising on issues – Women have also been organising on issues that affect them specifically as women (e.g. reproductive health rights) including issues of women on the margins of society like sex workers and the Lesbian Bisexual Transgender and Intersex (LBTI) community. *In 2014, Katswe Sistahood held the miniskirt march which was mainly inspired by the experience of a young woman who had been stripped by touts for allegedly for wearing too short a skirt. There had generally been an increase in random attacks on women perceived to be under-dressed, mostly by touts at bus termini. The march was part of a broader campaign that sought to put across the message that we condemn any acts of violence or sexual harassment perpetrated against women, particularly on the issue of how they choose to dress. It is an infringement on their right to freedom of self-expression, and to freedom of movement. We were making a clear statement that women’s bodies are not battle grounds and this idea that touts have the role to police women’s bodies, and dressing, has to be addressed. Building a culture of freedom and equality for women has a protective effect for women human rights defenders.*
* **Rebuilding Women’s Organizing with Fresh Strategies:** one of the critical lessons emerging from JASS’ long time work with women activists in various contexts is that the very things that make us stronger – deep community organizing, strong social fabric, critical awareness, alliances – are the same things that make us safer. JASS has invested in processes that build trust and common ground among a wide range of women and organizations, equipping them with tools for organizing and assessing risk, and support new strategies and collaboration across identities and movements. These include self-defense classes that are built around a movement building strategy as a political act.
* **Safe Spaces & Heart-Mind-Body:** given the context, JASS has developed the Heart-Mind-Body (HMB) approach, a methodology that centralizes women’s experiences and well-being as foundational to organizing and creating support and solidarity among women. *For example, in Malawi, women have created safe spaces to talk about their bodies and organize on issues that affect them and the conversations also provide an entry point for creating an informal network for sustained dialogue on everything from sex and sexuality to issues of class and privilege that relate to women’s bodies—including gender-based violence and reproductive health and rights. These networks of mutual support are linked and, with JASS’ involvement, are being transformed into a platform for joint action and self-protection against violence.* *Providing safe spaces for women to talk about their deepest and most immediate physical concerns often brings women with very different backgrounds and beliefs to a point where they can more easily identify common ground for joint action, and develop mutual understanding across seemingly big differences. This is critical not only for increasing women’s organizing power; it also provides a sense of hope and support that many desperately need to continue working to change their lives and communities in a difficult context.*

**Recommendations**

**-**Creation an official protection mechanism in Southern Africa, similar to attempts made in places like Mexico and Honduras ensuring gender and intersectional perspective to address the needs of WHRDs

-States have the responsibility to ensure that cultural and religious norms and social practices are used to justify or tolerate women’s rights violations including WHRDs.