

The African Women's Alliance for Mobilizing Action: A Unique Sisterhood

By Margaret S. Buse`

"Landmines may take a limb or lives, but not the heart or spirit of the African Woman"- AWAMA

Originally formed in 1997 as an advocate for African 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 heartbreaking to tell them we had to wait for money for supplies," says Venichand.

"Landmines, while horrific for all involved, are especially worse for women. When men are injured in their community, they are taken care of by the women, when women are injured, they still have to take care of the family, cook, clean, and take care of the children."

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 the 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," says 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 insure that people with disabilities are included in the community and that they can be a part of it," says Venichand.

Through AWAMA, women are called on to become "caregivers to their native 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." 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 God. The connection with their ancestors adds another dimension to the catastrophe of the landmine epidemic. "We can not walk in the land that our ancestors cultivated, played with their families and raised children. We can not walk on the paths that our grandmothers walked on," says 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-clearance programs in agriculturally viable areas.
- ◆ Victim and 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.