MOBILISING FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE
WILPF Regional Cooperation in Africa
Foreword

The story of Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) began in 1915, when women from both sides of the First World War gathered in The Hague to find a peaceful solution to the on-going conflict. Their meeting aimed at finding a way to mediate in order to end the war and the suffering that had come with it, rather than arguing about who was to blame for the misery. Their peaceful approach to conflict has survived a whole century and has thus shaped the WILPF community as it is today, with the common vision of a world free from violence and armed conflict, with justice and equality for all. Feminist pacifists within WILPF share the approach that root causes of violence must be addressed through a feminist lens with the common understanding that peace and security is not possible without women’s engagement in politics on all societal levels and in all conflict prevention efforts. Feminist peace starts with the idea that another world is possible. A world where women’s power to create nonviolent societies is recognised, and where women have the possibility to act jointly, in order to build a world of gender equal participation and justice.

The work of WILPF has repeatedly proved that women are a powerful force for peace. WILPF gathers activists who organise in the face of war, risking their lives on a daily basis and keeping a critical eye on those in power. Some of these women, standing on the frontline for a global feminist peace, met on two occasions in 2017 to hold WILPF African Regional Meetings. They are all representatives of WILPF Sections and Groups in their respective countries in the African region: Ghana, Cameroon, DR Congo, Chad, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Burundi, Uganda, Nigeria and Central African Republic. The two regional meetings were occasions to share experiences, thoughts, fears and knowledge as well as lessons learnt in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, and to discuss successful strategies in the building of a feminist peace.

The objective of this report is to summarise the information that the women’s rights activists shared and the conclusions that were drawn during the two WILPF African Regional Meetings that were held in 2017. It will also describe the joint work that the African Sections and Groups do at regional, national and local level to end war and injustice and replace it with peace and gender equality. This report also aims to shed light on the challenges that arise along the road towards peace.
WILPF Regional Cooperation in Africa

WILPF Africa has been growing rapidly and with great success during the past years. The increase in numbers as well as in activities and engagement has resulted in successes at both regional and national level. The cooperation between WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region deepens every year. In 2017, two African Regional Meetings were held, the first in May in Stockholm, Sweden, and the second in December in Kinshasa, DR Congo. Both meetings provided the opportunity to share experiences on how to strengthen the feminist peace movement, address common challenges, and build capacity and support for mobilising for feminist peace.

At the meeting in Stockholm, the main focus areas were sharing national political contexts, funding issues, conflict mediation, the Women’s Situation Room (WSR) model and the global trend of shrinking civic space. We also held a full-day training on security, where many aspects of personal, digital and organisational threats were discussed and practised. The experiences of shrinking space in the African region were concluded in a joint statement. The group also had a successful meeting with staff from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, where concrete examples of shrinking space were discussed. At the meeting in Kinshasa, sessions included reports from WSR in Nigeria and Cameroon, the work regarding the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), gender and militarised supply chains in DR Congo, how to conduct advocacy work on UNSCR 1325, communications and outreach, security and organisational development.

At the time of writing this report, there are eleven WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region, and several more on the rise. They all operate in more or less problematic contexts, characterised by low levels of women’s participation in public institutions and decision-making, ready access to weapons and with the constant threat of violent conflict and political instability undermining their work. Civil society organisations in Africa have a central role in conflict prevention, due to the fact that they are often closely linked to the local communities and at the same time scrutinise the government by keeping a critical eye on those in power. This position enables WILPF and other civil society organisations to understand local contexts and detect early warning signals before a conflict breaks out. The fact that the work of WILPF spans from grass root level to national and international level is an advantage that gives each Section and Group greater legitimacy to conduct political advocacy work.

Many of the challenges that African countries face are regional matters, which stresses the need for solutions that cross national borders. Issues such as corruption, terrorism and radicalisation, violence as a consequence of weapon proliferation, and wars forcing people to flee their homes, must be counter-
acted through regional cooperation. To physically gather WILPF activists is a necessary strategy in order to find regional solutions and establish cooperation across borders. The WILPF activists that participated at the two African Regional Meetings emphasised the high value of meeting in person to build mutual trust and facilitate continued cooperation and support in the fight for peaceful societies.

One of the obstacles that WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region have in common is the challenge to find sufficient funding for their sometimes controversial, critical and political work. It is a global phenomenon that donors’ grant policies do not always meet the organisational reality of women’s rights organisations. One example is the difficulty in covering organisational costs, such as office costs, which forces WILPF activists to set up their offices in their homes. This issue is a vicious circle, as having an office space often is a prerequisite for applying for grants, while receiving a grant would enable them to pay the rent. Another issue when it comes to funding is the fact that application criteria are often very demanding and unrealistic for small women’s organisations with voluntary staff to live up to. Seeking funding is complicated and time-consuming and risks coming at the expense of quality. Long and complex application processes take focus from the work that WILPF is all about, which is improving women’s lives and building sustainable global peace. Although war and violence constitute the major obstacle to peace, justice and
gender equality, it is clear that the international aid system also entails limits and slows the development. The funding insecurity may potentially jeopardise the work and activities of women’s rights organisations but it also increases the vulnerability of activists on a personal level, by constituting a serious threat against their health and wellbeing. Reliable funding is therefore a crucial part of creating a stable civil society that contributes to long-term sustainable development and peace.

WILPF activists in Africa trying to raise funds testify that it is both a blessing and a curse to be part of the global WILPF community while at the same time being a small national organisation. Donors and institutions often have the impression that they, as a WILPF Section, should have access to a big pocket of money, and there is little understanding concerning the fact that WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region are small national and autonomous organisations with limited resources.

Throughout the years, WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region have participated in joint communicational and networking efforts. These efforts have proven successful and led to information being spread about the work of WILPF and our vision of a feminist peace. It has also inspired people all over Africa, who share the belief that a peaceful world is within reach, to initiate new WILPF Groups in their countries. To be recognised as a WILPF Group, a national organisation must live up to a list of requirements and then be approved by the WILPF Executive Committee. To become a WILPF Section, which is the next step in the organisational development, a Group must be approved by the WILPF Triennial International Congress. Already existing WILPF Sections and Groups have had huge importance for the establishment of emerging WILPF Groups through sharing knowledge, experiences and strategies as well as through inspiring and engaging them to take action.

DR. AYO AYOOLA-AMALE, WILPF GHANA “From the Regional Meeting, I brought with me the recognition and support of women organisations’ solidarity across borders in the African region as a key measure to enable and facilitate conflict prevention by finding common ground, lessons learned, identifying challenges and best practises.”
EDWICK MADZIMURE, WILPF ZIMBABWE  “I must say the Regional Meeting was a great opportunity. Being there together, sharing our experiences as new group and hearing the older sections telling us about their work and their history. It feels good and rewarding knowing I have other sisters who are equally fighting for the same principles and values with us. The whole experience was educating and inspiring as well. I left the conference feeling energized and empowered.”

PASCASIE BARAMPAMA, WILPF BURUNDI  “All those new aspects of shrinking civic space came to improve our global understanding of shrinking space and raised our awareness of similar threat to civic activism in our country.”
WILPF IN AFRICA

WILPF in the African region has been growing rapidly and with great success during the past years. The increase in numbers as well as in activities and engagement has resulted in successes at both regional and national level. There are currently eleven WILPF Sections and Groups in Africa, and several more on the rise.

WILPF SECTIONS AND GROUPS:

Burundi, South Africa, Chad, Ghana, Cameroon, DR Congo, Zimbabwe, Central African Republic, Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria.
The Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The UN Security Council adopted the Resolution 1325 in October 2000. It is a very central document to WILPF and it is used as a normative framework. Since the launch of UNSCR 1325, the UN Security Council has adopted seven additional resolutions, which together constitute the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. The agenda highlights women’s particular vulnerability in wars and conflicts but also emphasises the importance of women’s participation in preventing and solving violent conflicts. It acknowledges that women’s right to participate in peace processes and decision-making is not only a human rights issue; it is also a prerequisite for attaining a sustainable and long-lasting peace.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which all UN member states have agreed to work towards until 2030, have complemented the WPS agenda with seventeen goals, two of which explicitly address women’s situation. Goal 5, to achieve gender equality, and goal 16, to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, are relevant for WILPF’s work, as they add to the WPS agenda and provide a roadmap for transformation to a more inclusive and peaceful world.

WILPF in the African region has repeatedly proved that women are not only victims of war, but also agents of peace, and they have done so through pushing governments to not only talk the talk but to also walk the walk. One way of ensuring that women’s participation is taken into account is to demand a National Action Plan (NAP) on the WPS agenda. The NAP is a way to take the step from rhetoric to action and it can be a powerful tool to refer to when advocating for women’s right to full inclusion. It is imperative that a NAP is adapted to national conditions, needs and challenges but also that it comes with a budget, in order for its commitments to even have a chance to be implemented. Unfortunately, that is not always the case, which is why shortage of funding is a constant obstacle even after a government has adopted a NAP on Women, Peace and Security. WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region do a persistent work on making sure that NAP’s are being drafted, funded and implemented.

WILPF Cameroon celebrating the launching of a National Action Plan

One of the WILPF Sections that has had a particular focus on its country’s NAP on Women, Peace and Security is WILPF Cameroon. They have for several years been a key contributor to the process of advocating for a NAP, and in November 2017 they finally proudly participated in the official launch of Cameroon’s first NAP. Throughout the process, they have, together with other women’s rights organisations, conducted political advocacy work and trained members, civil society, journalists and authority representatives on the importance of a clear commitment to the implementation of the WPS agenda. They have also conducted field research, mapping the awareness of the UNSCR 1325, which contributed to the empirical background of Cameroon’s NAP. Now that they have celebrated the milestone of the launching of the NAP, they will continue to be at the forefront of its implementation.
Celebrating the launch of Cameroon’s first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

Marie Thérèse Abena Ondoua (Minister of Women’s Empowerment and the Family), Annie Matundu Mbabi (WILPF DR Congo) and Sylvie Ndongmo (WILPF Cameroon) at the launch ceremony.
Violence or other intimidations during election cycles is a phenomenon that occurs in conjunction with half of all elections held in Africa. Flawed electoral processes tend to trigger and fuel latent conflicts, which can turn into armed conflicts and civil wars. Harassments and threats of violence on an individual level is also a serious democratic problem, as it can deter citizens from voting and discourage people from engaging in politics and running for political positions. Various initiatives have been implemented in response to these electoral challenges and among them is the Women’s Situation Room (WSR), which was first introduced in Liberia in 2011. WSR is a women-led approach that aims to prevent and reduce different kinds of violence during the electoral cycle, but also to increase and improve women’s meaningful participation in electoral processes. WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region carry out persistent work on implementing WSR, with the purpose of ensuring transparent, open and competitive elections while having a particular focus on preventing violence and ensuring women’s participation – either as voters, political candidates, actors, supporters or observers.

The WSR model can be divided into two components, where one is an actual physical room and a call centre, which is established during the days of the election to monitor reports of violence and unrest across the country in connection to the election. This method makes WSR very dependent on the inflow of raw information from the field. The other component of the WSR model is the long-term efforts to empower women to play an active role in all steps of the electoral cycle, including engagement in political and peace processes as well as conflict prevention and peace and security efforts. The WSR model of connecting women’s essential role at all levels of society has been recognised as best practice in conflict and violence prevention by the UN and other international agencies, and is well in line with UNSCR 1325.

WSR in Nigeria – A Success Story

WILPF Nigeria is committed to women’s participation in peace and electoral processes and they have, together with other women’s rights organisations, launched the Nigerian Women’s Platform for Peaceful Election, which was mandated to implement the WSR model. Nigeria has an electoral history filled with violence, rigging and lack of viable opposition parties. However, since the implementation of WSR, elections have been relatively peaceful and it has turned out to be an effective movement builder and an encouragement for women to speak out about violations that they have experienced. It is clear that in order to achieve peaceful elections it is critical to inform and advocate at an early stage, which is why the WSR model should be applied all through the electoral cycle. The implementation of the WSR, in conjunction with conflict and violence prevention mechanisms, has resulted in fairly peaceful elections, with reports indicating a decrease in sexual violence during elections due to the early warning preventive approach.
Shrinking civic space

Today we see the trend, in the African region and globally, of what is commonly referred to as “shrinking civic space”. The term describes efforts to limit civil society engagement through restrictive legislation, human rights abuses and intimidation. Although it is a trend that affects all mobilising efforts, women are particularly exposed to specific obstacles and threats, which is why the shrinking space for civil society also has a gendered aspect that must be taken into account.

Shrinking space is often associated with repressive political regimes, but can also develop slowly over time as an indirect effect of other socio-political phenomena, such as increased militarisation, weapons proliferation, extensive military expenditure, populism, and nationalistic movements. In many cases it is used directly as a tactic to silence opposition leaders, human rights advocates, and other change agents within civil society.

The issue of shrinking civic space was discussed thoroughly during the Regional Meeting in Stockholm, where all participants agreed that they experience narrowing possibilities to organise in their home countries. As already mentioned, it has become more difficult in many countries for civil society organisations to receive funding from abroad, which is a support system that has a huge impact on their possibility of carrying out their work. They also witness an increase in administrative restrictions, making it more difficult for them to register their programs and access financial aid.

Political policies that acknowledge the importance of women’s rights and participation come with sufficient funding for implementation. The work of women’s rights activist as well as peace organisations continues to be underfinanced, which increases insecurity, complicates mobilisation and counteracts long-term solutions. Therefore, secured funds and support to women’s rights organisations is fundamental for a sustainable change.

With today’s shrinking space we can see an increasing number of attacks on the rights of groups that already suffer from structural discrimination and oppression, notably women and minorities. In many cases, civil society has become a natural place for these groups to organise and to access power, due to the lack of access to official power. Women activists promoting women’s rights and nonviolent alternatives for mobilisation of civil action have always been exposed to threats and violence, in particular to sexual violence. We are now witnessing an increase in threats and violence, which leads to difficulties in terms of personal security and mobilisation efforts. As such, feminist and peace activism is often met with opposition and violence from both state and non-state actors.

During the Regional Meeting in Stockholm, the WILPF Sections and Groups agreed on a number of recommendations, directed to Swedish state actors, on aspects that should be taken into account in order to counteract the trend of shrinking civic space. The publication included recommendations on topics such as contact with embassy staff, visa procedures, early warning systems, funding and prevention of violence.
In December 2017, WILPF DR Congo celebrated 10 years of tireless activism for a feminist peace. In a tense political, humanitarian and security context, with a constant threat of conflicts and instability undermining their work, WILPF DR Congo found their role as a women’s peace organisation mobilising for the rights of women particularly important.

As part of the celebrations, WILPF DR Congo organised a high level international conference on the theme “10 years of women’s peace building by women, for women and for all” in Kinshasa. Given its importance, the conference was attended by government ministers and representatives of the UN as well as national authorities and civil society organisations. WILPF peace activists from the provinces of Bandundu, Kongo-Central, Upper Katanga, North and South Kivu also attended, as well as international peace builders representing WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region, WILPF Sweden, WILPF International Office and the diaspora of Belgium.

The conference was an opportunity for the participants to assess the last decade of initiatives by women to promote non-violence and gender equality in DR Congo. It also allowed youth and women’s organisations defending Congolese women’s rights to contribute to the peace building movement. The conference gave focus to the WPS agenda and WILPF DR Congo’s long-standing work on the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 to ensure women’s participation in peace processes in their country. The overall objective of the conference was to celebrate resilience, perseverance and the unwavering commitment of women in DR Congo for the ideal of lasting peace, justice and universal freedoms. After the two-day conference, a final declaration was adopted, stating key recommendations to governments, the UN, civil society organisations and political leaders. The declaration called for an earnest commitment to the implementation of the UNSCR 1325, transferal of money from economies of war to peace building initiatives, and a reintroduced focus on improving the economic, social and political status of women in the region. More broadly, the document appealed for a renewed interest in the protection of democratic governance, fair elections, disarmament as well as combating climate change.

10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY IN DR CONGO
Looking towards the future

The work of WILPF Sections and Groups in the African region challenges prevailing structures of power, injustice and militarisation. With the understanding that patriarchal structures fuel violence and that there are gendered impacts of weapon proliferation, WILPF counteracts conflicts by making sure that women are at the tables during decision-making procedures. It is obvious that weapons cannot solve any of today’s security threats, such as injustice, poverty or climate change. WILPF will therefore continue our work for disarmament in Africa and improve our strategies for translating the WPS agenda and its commitments into accomplishments that make a difference for women at regional, national and local levels.

As a natural part of WILPF African Regional Meetings, the participants also took the opportunity to discuss ways to proceed as well as plan the 32nd Triennial International WILPF Congress, which will be held in Accra, Ghana, in August 2018. It will be the first WILPF Congress to be held in an African country and our theme is “Rebuilding a Feminist Peace movement”.

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THANK YOU!

As authors of this report, WILPF Sweden would like to express our deepest appreciation to the participants of the two Regional Meetings during 2017; WILPF Burundi, WILPF Cameroon, WILPF Central African Republic, WILPF Chad, WILPF DR Congo, WILPF Ghana, WILPF Nigeria, WILPF South Africa, WILPF Uganda and WILPF Zimbabwe. Your work is a true inspiration and we are proud to be building feminist peace with you!