

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

Public

October 2007

AI Index: ACT 60/020/2007

Jenni Williams and WOZA: Determined to be free



Jenni Williams with the WOZA banner she brought to the IS © AI

When Jenni Williams, national coordinator of activist organization Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) spoke to Amnesty International staff during a visit to London in September, she asked us to join her in making an L-shape with our thumb and forefinger. WOZA members often use this symbol, which they refer to as a "Love Spear". "When we hold up our hands like this we're showing what is in our hearts,

which is love for our country", Jenni says.

This love is what lies at the heart of WOZA, a membership organization which since 2003 has been mobilizing women in Zimbabwe to demonstrate in defence of civil, political, economic and social rights. Despite being a movement dedicated to peaceful protest, its members have been arrested, beaten and threatened. Jenni says that the reaction of the authorities

to their protests had initially been a shock: "We started off thinking that as mothers, as women in Zimbabwe, we would be allowed to go out into the street and say, 'Come on leaders, it's time for us to love again, it's time for us to end this hatred.[T]he police decided to take exception... and arrest us".

There is great anxiousness in Zimbabwe as its economic and social structure continues to deteriorate. The World Bank has noted that the economic decline in Zimbabwe is unprecedented for a country in peacetime. Official inflation is over 7000%, meaning that men and women are finding it increasingly difficult to buy food, pay for medical care and earn a living to support their families. When Amnesty International delegates visited the country in March, they witnessed the desperation caused by daily increases of prices of basic goods such as food and transport, while most people's wages remained static.

Curbs are tightening on freedom of expression. In rural areas many people are denied access to government subsidised maize, Zimbabwe's staple diet, simply because they belong to human rights organizations, or an opposition political party or speak out against discrimination or other violations in their communities.

Since 2000 the government has used the law to violate human rights defenders' rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, preventing them from freely mobilising, meeting together and criticizing government policy. Individual defenders are arbitrarily arrested and detained, assaulted and harassed by state agents.

It therefore takes courageous individuals such as Jenni Williams and the other members of WOZA to defend their rights by protesting and teaching others that these rights cannot be taken away from them. Jenni brought a WOZA banner when she visited London, which read,

"Beaten, jailed, but still determined to be free."



Jenni Williams makes the "Love Spear" sign. © AI

There are numerous occasions when the authorities have tried to silence the group. In 2005, some 53 women were arrested after a WOZA demonstration in Bulawayo to mark Valentine's Day. The activists had been marching with banners proclaiming "The Power of Love can conquer the Love of Power" and handed out roses to the public. On the evening of 31 March 2005, the day of the most recent parliamentary elections, police arrested approximately 260 women, some carrying babies, when WOZA attempted to hold a peaceful post-election prayer vigil at Africa Unity Square in Harare. Several of the WOZA activists were badly beaten during arrest and while in police custody. Some were forced to lie on the ground and were beaten on the buttocks by police officers. Amongst those beaten by police was a 74 year-old woman, who reports that she was told to "pray because you are going to die"

On 29 November 2006, the group was singing songs of protest outside government buildings when police officers arrived, and shouted "Beat them". Jenni Williams says, "since then we've seen an incredible [level of] violence... they don't want to listen to the songs we're singing, or read our placards, or see what it is we're trying to achieve... they just let fly with baton sticks." She acknowledges that "the baton stick is our next challenge... we are trying to fight, to

activate, to think of a better future, whilst trying to survive today."

Jenni is certain that Amnesty International's work to publicize the violence faced by WOZA and others who defend human rights has been vital: "We have the international solidarity of Amnesty International, we have your Urgent Actions, we have some of you sharing this burden with us, and they say a burden shared is a burden halved. That's what makes us brave enough to do the work that we are doing... it's important for you to keep [writing] your letters and Urgent Actions, and it's important for you to tell people so that we are not alone".

Sections such as AI UK have taken up WOZA's call for solidarity, not only writing letters but also making paper roses for WOZA to hand out, and creating solidarity chains made from strips of fabric, which the women have used as security cordons during their demonstrations.

The Amnesty International team working on Zimbabwe has developed a campaigning action calling upon the police to protect and respect the rights of human rights defenders through positive action. Research conducted by Amnesty International has identified a number of

police stations where human rights defenders have faced torture and other ill-treatment. Members are now taking long-term action sending friendly messages to the Officers-in-Charge of these police stations, and raising awareness in the media in their own countries of the torture and ill-treatment that has occurred there. This approach sends the signal that the world is watching the authorities in Zimbabwe. There is evidence that this approach is starting to work, making it easier for activists like Jenni Williams to spread their message about the universality of human rights.

Jenni Williams has resolved to continue this work, saying, "they [the authorities] will not be able to criminalize freedoms of expression and assembly, unless they take away our mouths and our ears and our eyes, so the best way is for them to engage us... Please keep us in your minds and your hearts, and see what you can do to help make sure we hold this government accountable."

To take action on behalf of WOZA, please contact individuals@amnesty.org.