



Puente Democrático

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The struggle for a democratic Zimbabwe

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By Glanis Changachirere

Speech by Glanis Changachirere, Institute for Young Women Development, Zimbabwe: On the Occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the 7th World Assembly, October 14th, 2012 in Lima, Peru.



Puente Democrático is a project within the area "International Promotion of Human Rights" of the Center for Opening and Development of Latin America (CADAL). Its objective is to realize international acts of solidarity and to support the efforts of the democratic people who live within dictatorial countries as well as to influence the implementation of a foreign policy that is committed to Human Rights on the part of the Latin American countries.

Traditionally, I would have been very afraid and intimidated to be standing before you today, noting well that the vast majority of you are adults and of renowned portfolios, I being a youth, a young woman to be precise. However, because I have come to appreciate what it entails to embrace the very notion of democracy, in its inclusiveness context, I am humbled to be part of this platform of the 7th Assembly representing the younger generation. As I stand here, I will share a testimony that ‘democracy’ is not a far-fetched concept that speaks to the elite and socially privileged, but that embracing democracy signals liberation, freedom, and dignity more importantly for the undermined, disadvantaged, oppressed, unrecognized and minorities. It is my pleasure to share my personal story as a young woman who was born and grew up in the rural communal lands of Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe. My family like other peasant families relying on farming struggled to fund my education, and although they tried hard, it was not easy with society dictating that the girl child is not worth investing in. Religion also made the situation worse as some church doctrines emphasized that the girl child has no right to choice but should only be recognized as subjects of their husbands.

By the time I reached university level, my parents had succumbed to societal demands and realities and I was left alone to find myself menial jobs during vacations for my self-sustenance and ultimately to finance my education after the government removed the grant system to university students in 2006.

While I celebrated that I was successfully laying a strong foundation for my future and a decent

life ahead, in the eyes of society including church and even close relatives I was being a ‘rebellious girl child’. I was defying societal norms, religious norms and as such I was not a normal girl child. Questions like, “if she is a normal girl child like other obedient and respectful girls in this community, why does she want to be more educated than boys and young men, what will she use the education for? Which man would want to marry such an educated woman?” It was such sentiments that gave me more strength to soldier on, more power and courage to fight for the rights of girls and young women in my community.

So in University, I joined the Students Representative Council, and was the only female in the council. Due to the high levels of polarization that prevailed in the country and more specifically in Mashonaland Central Province, I saw myself in police incarceration several times - my charge “fighting for and representing students’ rights. Even though people close to me called me a jailbird, I had a deep conviction that I am the only normal one here and I was fighting for the right cause, the right to education and the rights of girls and young women in a free Zimbabwe. So no arrests, intimidation or threats of abductions could stop me.

As I did my voluntary work and subsequently as the Gender and Women’s Rights Officer at Youth Forum from 2008 up to 2009, I felt that I was a bit restricted and not doing enough to fulfill my vision of fighting for the rights of my fellow sisters in marginalized communities to include rural, farming and ,mining areas, the majority of whom could not see the door of a classroom, the majority of whom are married off as young as the age of 12 because religion allowed it, the

majority of whom were born in abject poverty, knew only of poverty and never believe that there can be another life outside their confines, the majority of who contented to Violence Against Women even after the country had passed an anti -domestic violence law, the majority who despised and labeled other girls and young women because they were going outside the societal dictates and boundaries and pursued their studies.

So in 2009 I resigned from Youth Forum and went back to Mashonaland Central to start organizing young women under the initiative Institute for Young Women Development, which is the organisation I am representing today. The organisation works to:

- To promote sustainable livelihoods among the young women in poor communities and encourage them to send their girl children to school
- To educate young women of their human rights
- To encourage young women to be active political actors (this is where things happen)
- To read and write

Our strategy is to also target community leaders, particularly traditional leaders because they are the custodians and gatekeepers of culture and some of its harmful practices to girls and women; but above all they are also opinion leaders and makers in these communities. This strategy has largely worked to gain us acceptance in the polarized communities of the province.

I have profound gratitude to the World Youth Movement for Democracy as it has provided me with an opportunity to grow beyond my own vision of fighting for democracy through a gender lens. Their activists' seminars specifically the Cape to Cairo Conference held in South Africa in February of this year added value to my work, passion and beliefs. It gave me an opportunity to interact with other young people and seasoned activists from various countries across the globe hence broadened my ability to influence even young men. The follow up 'Zimbabwe Youth Civil Society conference' which we held in June in Zimbabwe under the World Youth Movement for Democracy, led to youth activists, and including activists and representatives from various organizations agreeing to start focusing on building a vibrant movement to fight the country's common enemy of autocracy before other pertinent issues such as national development. This platform for movement building which was agreed to is the Organizing for Zimbabwe initiative which I totally subscribe to and presents me with another opportunity to fight with all other sectors in the country; to fight for a democratic Zimbabwe, where there is social justice and everyone is deemed equal regardless of their age, gender, geographical orientation, spiritual beliefs among other natural differences. This initiative aims to help build a movement, led by young people to champion objective activism, and lead the unlocking of a democratic transition in Zimbabwe.

So as we gather here and engage in the discourse of democracy around the globe, let us all remember that we are in a struggle that will not only see us as activists, social workers and development strategists celebrating realization of our dreams, but a struggle that will incredibly

and sustainably transform the lives of the usually down trodden, marginalized and socially vulnerable groups I represent here today, the girl child, the young, the women in general.

I will conclude by a quote from the former US Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Ambassador Charles Ray that ‘Where you come from matters less than where you are going’. It is the struggle that lies ahead of us in my country Zimbabwe, *aluta continua* in Venezuela, Belarus, Syria, Cuba, what Egypt and Tunisia are still to realize among other democratically challenged countries, that we should think of and act on - your struggles are our struggles too!.

It is with much hope and appreciation that I am here today among other Zimbabwean delegates

here present that this Assembly will provide me with lessons from best practices in fighting for democracy, uplift my energies and continue to inspire me in fighting for a democratic Zimbabwe, especially as my country prepares for a constitutional referendum and election in the near future.

I want to thank the World Movement for Democracy and World Youth Movement for Democracy for the support they are rendering to Zimbabwe. Your efforts for a democratic Zimbabwe better for all Zimbabweans will definitely not go unnoticed and unmentioned. I thank you all.