Opinion

The strength of an African Woman

ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEF is to be congratulated — and to be commiserated with, all at once. As Africa’s first elected female president, she goes down in history for going where angels fear to tread and turning up trumps.

In that sense, Johnson-Sirleaf’s triumph is a victory for all African women who have dreamt of pushing the boundaries as far as they can go. The message that Johnson’s victory sends out is this: Hang in there, do your best, and you will overcome.

Yet the story of African leadership is a road filled with many pitfalls, some manufactured and most self-inflicted. With Liberia, especially, Johnson-Sirleaf can expect to work round the clock if she is to make something of her tenure in a land ravaged by civil war.

We have no doubt that she is up to the task. Whether Liberia is up to the challenge of democratic leadership is another thing altogether.

Today we celebrate the election of Johnson-Sirleaf as a triumph of justice over the forces that would put the women of this continent down. She has overcome the biases and limitations that have made politics a veritable graveyard for African women.

Africa's girls and young women will no longer have to look East and West for role models when it comes to the pinnacle of political leadership.

Much as one-time British premier Margaret Thatcher was vilified for her conservative politics, many African girls looked on from afar and cited her as their role model.

They had every reason to. She came through as a strong leader.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

RAPE: TIME TO TAKE ACTION

More women are sexually assaulted than people killed

By Florence Machio, regional coordinator

“The state has not proved the accused guilty beyond reasonable doubt. I therefore find the accused not guilty.” — Judge Willem Van Der Merwe of the South African High Court in a landmark ruling that saw the country's former deputy president, Jacob Zuma, acquitted of rape.

IT WAS a case that pitted women’s rights activists against Zuma’s supporters and many hoped that it would set a precedent and help garner support for the Sexual Offences Bill that is due to be tabled in the South African Parliament.

Zuma had been charged with raping a 31-year-old HIV-positive woman who was a family friend. African women keen on the four-hour ruling were reminded of the many versions of the Bill under consideration through the continent and the debate — most of it nonsensical — that has attended attempts to crack down on rapists and other sex offenders.

At the end of the day, the judgement hinged on the sexual history of Zuma’s accuser, with the defence arguing that she had set out to seduce him — even though she had argued strongly that she would never have had sex with him without a condom, knowing her status. At some point, she was even told that she didn’t know the difference between making love and rape.

Zuma, who was once the head of the local Aids council, demonstrated an appalling sense of judgement, if what he told the court was true, when he said he believed that hav...
**The fight for equality is still far from won**

By Lilian Kemunto, Kenya

_**DESPITE** _positive trends in African women’s representation in parliament and government positions, they still face tremendous challenges breaking through the glass ceiling.

One of the key barriers to the greater participation of women in politics is verbal abuse during the primaries, which is designed to intimidate and humiliate them.

“Women sometimes find themselves trivialised by men,” says 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, who is also an elected MP representing a Central Kenya constituency. “The challenges, whether verbal, written or in suggestions, can be violent in terms of men using disrespectful language against women, especially in campaigns.”

Matters are not helped by the fact that many male candidates enlist the support of private “armies” not only to protect them but also unleash violence on those they perceive to be their strongest challengers.

In the 2002 General Election, several women protested about such tactics. Only 44 women eventually made it to the list of the 1,605 parliamentary candidates. In simultaneous local and municipal council polls, they comprised 120 out of 7,008 candidates competing for 2,093 seats, according to Electoral Commission of Kenya statistics.

“We have to continue struggling,” says Maathai. “Women should realise it’s never going to be easy and support each other by forming a girl network.”

Her views receive support from Nominated MP Cecily Mbarire: “A woman is not just to be peaceable and mature during the electioneering, but men go outside the rules. The vile that women are subjected to is no different from that of men.”

Yet the sex predators inevitably get away with it — if not in the name of culture, then simply because of a legal regime that makes it virtually impossible to prosecute sexual violence cases conclusively.

We at Africawoman refuse to buy into the idea that the much-maligned culture is an acceptable defence in situations where men rape their wives even after they’ve just had babies and even when they know that their sexual adventures have exposed them to HIV/AIDS. Anyone who forces himself on an infant should not be allowed the plea that he believed it was for the baby’s sake.

If any culture condones torture and killing, it can never be a valid way of life. Yet loose laws and social norms that celebrate macho conduct have encouraged and allowed men all over Africa to rape and destroy the lives of their women and girls.

Those who value African women must not be discouraged by the high failure rate of laws against violence targeting females. The desire to look at the fact that they are raped in the streets is not the same as the desire to look in the streets.

Either way, the sex predators inevitably get away with it — if not in the name of culture, then simply because of a legal regime that makes it virtually impossible to prosecute sexual violence cases conclusively.

Wanted: A few good men of goodwill

“Male predatory sexual behaviour is killing women in Africa at an alarming rate.” — Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa

The statistics are damming enough — when they are available, that is. But rape is so much more than data that can be documented, especially in the African context.

In the recent past, there have been attempts in several countries to deal legally with the question of rape in whatever form. Those efforts generally take the form of Bills in parliament intended to change the law to provide for tougher sentences and a more conducive reporting process. Those efforts generally take the form of bills in parliament intended to change the law to provide for tougher sentences and a more conducive reporting process.

Those bills, going by names such as sexual offences or domestic violence, have inevitably hit a rocky patch. That’s just how politics is verbal abuse during the electioneering, especially in campaigns.

“Lack of interest by their children and communities”

In neighbouring Uganda, there are 73 women legislators making up just 23.9 per cent of the House. The country’s constitution provides for affirmative action executed via special district seats contested by women only.

The 1990s were the decade of decent beginnings for women in politics in Africa, and all the indications are that they will continue into more women in government if she is to pull her country back from the brink and knock Liberia off the list of the 1,035 parliamentary candidates making up just 73 women legislators making up just 23.9 per cent of the House.

The fight for equality is still far from won. The strength of an African woman

From Front Page

capable of striking out on her own, and standing up for what she believed in. It didn’t matter that some of her policies were definitely not pro-women; it didn’t matter that her years at the helm did not translate into more women in government.

All that counted was that she was the person in charge. Power is androgynous, after all, and she simply had a job to do. She did it to the best of her ability and chose not to play to the popularity gallery. This is all that we can ask of women as national leaders, though it would be a bonus if they were to bring peculiarly female perspectives to the job.

There is no shortage of tough women in Africa. We see them every day, struggling against the odds to eke a living out of circumstances that would break the backs of many a man. Yet they continue to take it all in their stride and do their duty by their children and communities.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf will have to fall back on the strength of the African woman in the face of adversity. If she is to pull her country back from the brink and knock Liberia off the list of the 1,035 parliamentary candidates making up just 23.9 per cent of the House.

The challenge is tremendous — two civil wars have left the country shattered. Healing the wounds of war should be as much her priority as getting the country back on track.

The task will be daunting, at times even frightening; how do you give a country its soul after the excruciating pain that Libyans have lived through? How do you re-institute the basic tenets of democracy in a country long used to rule by the gun? How do you give your people the faith in their own humanity that will enable them to rise above the anger and anguish?

The basic principles of governance are one thing, and rebuilding a nation another. The first is achievable in short time.

The second will require strength of will comparable to that of Paul Kagame, who has painstakingly and systematically moved towards reconstructing a sense of nationhood in Rwanda.

It is to the doggedly principled leadership of Kagame that Johnson-Sirleaf must look if she is to leave a lasting legacy of peace to her people, who broke the stereotypes about women leading in electing to her.

She will have to rule with a firm and decisive hand yet with empathy for the spiritual needs of her people.

Africa’s political landscape is full of leaders who romp to power promising to take their people to Canaan only to get distracted by the three African diseases — ethnic politics, self-aggrandisement and corruption. Never let it be said, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, that Africa’s first female elected head of state fell into the same trap as the myriad men ahead of her who became fallen angels rather than the true liberators that the people cried for.

Look south to Nelson Mandela, Madam President, and expend all your energy on forging towards a nation that will stand on its feet.

God bless you. God bless Liberia.
In this special report dedicated to gender-based violence, you will notice that much of the reportage focuses on sexual violence. This was a curious development since the brief to our writers was not designed to limit African women’s experience of violence to just the one thing. Yet everywhere we looked, we were confronted with the fact that rape is the worst nightmare for women all over the continent.

**Saying it all:** For women, knowledge is often not enough, it is a question of power relations

**Dicing with death on the marital bed**

Women will continue to be infected with HIV in the absence of laws to protect their interests

By Christian Benoni, Kenya

Should we? Should we not? This is the challenge facing Kenyans in the big debate over whether or not to pass laws to punish those who deliberately infect their partners with HIV/Aids.

Organisations working in this area have been breathing fire over the 2003 HIV/Aids bill which, they say, insinuates punishment for those who infect others, including their spouses.

“Yes, the bill is leaning in that direction,” says Michael Angaga, national coordinator of the Network of African People Living with HIV/Aids. “What is not clear is how one comes to the conclusion that it is this person who infected the other. We can’t allow such a bill to be passed because it will give individuals the leeway to blackmail others.”

With the relatively high HIV/Aids prevalence rate among women and girls, gender activists say that females will continue to be susceptible to infection in the absence of laws to safeguard their interests.

Says Joyce Majiwa, the immediate former chair of Fida-Kenya: “The absence of such a law leaves women in the situation we are in now, where women are infected in high numbers and yet we are unable to protect ourselves because we lack the capacity, including financial power.”

Majiwa, who has been involved in studies highlighting women’s vulnerability to HIV/Aids, argues that most married women get infected on their marital beds “more than through other means.” Government statistics indicate that HIV prevalence among women aged between 15 and 49 is nine percent while that for men in the same age group is five percent.

Even though the pre-independence Public Health Act, revised in 1986, spells out provisions for dealing with syphilis and gonorrhoea, it is silent on HIV/Aids. Generally dismissed as archaic, the Act prohibits anyone from contracting a marriage before syphilis and gonorrhoea has been treated. You do so on pain of a fine up to the equivalent of $54 and a six-month jail term.

There is the argument, along these lines, that punishing those who deliberately infect their partners may go some way in addressing the disparity in the prevalence rates for men and women. About two-thirds of those infected here are reportedly women.

But Angaga argues that the solution to women’s vulnerability lies in tackling issues such as violence against them. A 2004 Aids Epidemic Update by UNaids shares a similar concern, noting that violence has been largely responsible for the spread of HIV/Aids in women and girls. “The fear of violence, not just from partners but also from the wider community, prevents many women from accessing HIV information, from getting tested and seeking treatment, even when they suspect they have been infected,” says the report.

This is certainly the case for Leonida Akinyi, who recently discovered she was HIV-positive. Even though she is aware that her husband has many partners, she continues to have unprotected sex with him. He beat her when she asked him to use protection and hurt her seriously.

She says: “He came home late that night and demanded sex with me. I told him I would do so only if he used a condom. He punched me heartlessly, accusing me of having other men. I had no choice but to give in to his demands.”

According to the Kenya Demographic Health Survey 2003, over half the women of Kenya have experienced violence since they were 15. Sixty percent of the beatings were inflicted by their husbands.

Nevertheless, laws surrounding domestic violence remain wanting. Having been drafted in 2001, the Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Bill is still pending. “If passed and enforced, this bill can greatly reduce cases of violence in the home, particularly on women,” says Atsango Chesoni, a human rights activist.

“The bill provides for women to be taken to safer shelters and to get protection orders upon reporting violence so that they are distanced from their abusers, even if it is their husbands.”

Women’s rights groups have blamed the rising rape cases on weak legislation. The Criminal Law Amendment Act approved by the government two years ago provides for tougher punishment for rape and defilement, from a maximum of 14 years to life imprisonment.

But it falls short of stipulating a minimum, which is left to the discretion of magistrates.

They may decide to lock up offenders for just days, hours or even seconds. Some magistrates have even been known to let child defilers go scot-free “because they have shown remorse.” How about some sympathy for their victims, then?
Going to a safe house was a tough call …

'It scares me to think that I stayed that long with him'

By Lifugane Nave, Zimbabwe

Pauline Ncube has every reason to be pleased with her achievements.
At 30, she is the managing director of a publishing company. She has
done everything right — getting excellent re-
results in school, graduating from university with
distinction and marrying the man of her
dreams.
On the face of it, her husband Donald, a
doctor, is the kind of son-in-law every family
would wish for. Ncube is the last person you
would expect to meet at the Musasa Project's safe house for battered women in
Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo.

Says Ncube: It took me two years to
accept that I was a battered wife and to
seek help. I have never failed at anything in
my life and facing up to a disastrous mar-
triage was something I had been condi-
tioned to accept. What would people say? I
was too ashamed to confess that the dream
had turned into a nightmare and the man of
my dreams into a monster. Going to a safe
house was a tough call, but ultimately it
was either that or risk being killed in her
home.

The beatings started just over a year into
the marriage, and she can't even remember
what set off the whole thing. "He was late
home and arrived as I prepared supper. I
remembered that I had been trying to reach
him on the phone and he spun out of con-
trol. He accused me of keeping track of him
and not giving him enough space. When I
tried to explain, he slapped me and the plate
I was holding went flying. The maid came
running, and he shouted at her and stormed
out of the house. For more than a week, I
couldn't look him in the eye."

Donald apologised the following morning
and promised it would never happen again.
But it did often enough that she could no
longer find excuses for her husband.
After six months of this, she reported the
abuse to police who dismissed it as a pri-
vate matter and told her she should bring
him in for coun-
selling.
She adds: There
was no way I could
raise the issue with
my husband. By then,
he was not the man I
had married. Looking
back, it scares me to
think I stayed that
long with him. The
police made me feel it
was my fault and I
just needed to
understand my hus-
tand. I knew there
were laws to help me
but the police officers
were not interested
in arresting him.
They wanted me to
talk to him. I don't
know how. They
made me feel that all
marriages were like that.

She heard of the Musasa Project from a
friend and went there for a chat but still
lacked the courage to walk out of her mar-
riage. It would take a severe beating that
nearly crippled her before Ncube sought
refuge at Musasa.

"They offered an alternative, a safe
haven. I could go to them because they were
strong. They were not afraid and understood
how I was feeling. At that moment, I couldn't face either my face or
the police. I couldn't imagine the shame of having to
stand in an open court and relating to the
world what had been happening to me. I
couldn't face the hostility of the room and
the audience. My dignity was all I was left
with." She understands, at the intellectual
level, that the shame is not hers but for the
man who constantly abused her. But there's
no getting away from the social perceptions
that conspire against women worldwide
who are battered by their partners.

At Musasa, she has been receiving coun-
selling that has helped her slowly rebuild
her 'confidence in herself as a person who deserves the best and has
a right to expect it from society.'

According to the director of Musasa Project, Sheila Murehe, one in four
women in Zimbabwe has been assaulted by a man.
Contrary to the belief that Musasa Project destroys homes, we are here to build vio-
ence-free homes, she explains. By provid-
safe houses, we offer refuge and an
alternative to those who have been made to
feel they have nowhere to go. Ncube knows
she will have to leave the safe house at
some point and get on with her life. Musasa
Project has given her a chance to get her
life back on track without outside pressures
from family, friends and society and the
courage to take the next step.

Where wives are not allowed to say 'No'

By Margaret Nakitima, Uganda

Janet Nantume's joy at putting her
young baby to bed was short-
lived. Only seven months after being
discharged from Mengo hospital,
she was back, bleeding profusely and suf-
ferring severe abdominal pains. She
had been raped by her husband.

Although her doctor had advised her not
to have sex for 30 days and then get the all-
clear from him, her husband would not hear
of it. Five days after she returned home,
he forced her into it, claiming he would rather
hurt her this way than go out with other
women who could infect him with HIV.
He was being faithful, he reasoned, and his
wife's pain would be a small sacrifice.

The doctor who treated her
on-re-admis-
sion ensured she spent two weeks in hospi-
tal to protect her from her husband's
demands. Although she eventually healed
physically, Nantume has never been the
same emotionally. She fears having sex with
her husband, who has taken to battering
and raping her.

Although organisations such as Hope
After Rape provide support for survivors of
rape and other forms of violence against
women, Nantume and others who live with
marital rape will not seek help for fear of
being ridiculed.

Culture is one of the key barriers to
women seeking help, says Lorna Kagwaya,
an administrator at Hope After Rape.

Ugandan women are traditionally taught
ever to deny their husbands sex regard-
less of their own needs and desires.

Among the Banyankole of western
Uganda, a woman was married to the entire
family and they were not expected to speak
of rape should any member of the family
force them into sex. Sharing of women with-
in the family is now increasingly frowned
up, but has not been entirely wiped out.

In Central Uganda, the Baganda aunties
who are the cultural providers of sex educa-
tion for girls advise their charges to give in
to their husbands' demands wherever and
whenever they come. It is stupidity in
today's women that makes them accuse
their husbands of raping them, says
Namusoke, one of the renowned aunties
who now sell such counsel to brides-to-be.

What did you marry for if not to satisfy
your husband's sexual desires?
It is paternal aunties that are culturally
assigned the task of resolving marital prob-
loms, and many women would rather suffer
in silence than be subjected to such ridicule.

Only 181 rapes were reported here in 2003,
92 in 2002 and 32 in 2001, according to a
report from the inspector-general of police.

Defilement cases amounted to 804 in 2001,

Many rape survivors come in suffering
from withdrawal and we give them psy-
chosocial counselling and teach them self-
defence, says Kagwaya. Many women also
choose to stay in abusive relationships
because they simply don't have the means
to provide for themselves.

Yet the Domestic Relations Bill, which
women banked on to help deal with issues
such as marital rape, has been shelved by
Parliament for the past decade or so. It was
cast adrift after men protested the two-year
prison term for rape.

Musatis also argued that the bill ran counter to their
right to polygamy because the bill would
require men to get consent from their first
wife and also that each wife be given her
own home.

Political bills such as the one lifting presi-
dential term limits have since taken prece-
dence. The government is too busy playing
politics to care whether women are being
raped and society simply couldn't care.
Why Africa needs laws to protect women

Martial rape may be an all too familiar matter to women here, but it threatens the Domestic Violence Bill that is expected to go to Parliament soon. Though the bill seeks to remedy anomalies in the law and provides protection orders for those subjected to violence in the home, it has met resistance from critics who argue it will destroy the sanctity of marriage and encourage a rush to police stations by wives seeking to prosecute their husbands.

Supporters of this theory see no irony in their argument, preferring to go with the standard thinking that, by consenting to marriage, women automatically lose the right to reject sexual overtures from their partners regardless of their reasons.

Says Angela Dwamena-Aboagye, executive director of the Ark Foundation, a non-governmental organisation which works on the protection of women and children: “This bill makes provision for protection from sexual abuse. It calls for the repeal of Section 42 (g) of the Criminal Code of 1960, which justifies the use of force within marriage.

It’s all about an archaic provision dating from 17th Century English Law that can be traced back to statements made by Sir Matthew Hale, chief justice of England then. He wrote: “The husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife for, by their mutual matrimonial consent and consent, the wife hath given herself in kind unto the husband which she cannot retract. Yet the British have themselves expunged that provision from its law books.

At a forum on the domestic violence bill in Accra, Henry Tackie of the ministry of justice argued that people who were contesting this had not taken the time to study it. How can anyone justify a situation where a partner forces himself on his weaker partner and intentionally infects her with HIV/AIDS?

There are several things going against the domestic violence bill. The common belief in Ghana is that violence in the home is a family matter. Even police themselves are often reluctant to interfere in what they consider private issues. At any rate, the law does not give them the power to step in.

Worse still, many women simply don’t know that the violence perpetrated against them is wrong. They often don’t even know where to report. Most women don’t even know what options are available to them when they are abused, says Dwamena-Aboagye. There is so much social pressure on them that they refuse to bring the perpetrators to the sanction table.

Even when they seek help, most Ghanaian women don’t want their abusers jailed; they just want an order to have them stop the abuse. With the setting up of the Women and Juvenile Unit of the Ghana Police Service, now called the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit, there has been a rise in the number of women and men reporting assault and battery.

More than 100 human rights groups have come together to form the National Coalition on the Domestic Violence Legislation in Ghana in an attempt to respond to the challenges that face the bill.

The coordinator of the coalition, Adolf Amuku-Bekoe, disagrees with the notion that it is better to educate people to live in harmony than to put in place laws to govern life at home. “How can education alone help when a highly educated person as a high court judge assaults his wife so badly that she fled to a police station in her morning coat,” he asks. “What kind of education does such a person need, other than laws to check him?” The bill, which had gone to the Cabinet, has been sent back to the ministry of women and children affairs for more consultation.

Minister Hajia Alima Mahama argues that the bill is non-discriminatory and will protect men, women and children. She highlights the main areas of public concern as martial rape and sexual harassment and argues for a need to consult further and reach consensus on how they should be tackled in the proposed law.

Says Dwamena-Aboagye: “Ghana believes in its stated commitment to the international human rights instruments and documents it has ratified and its own constitution, which states that the dignity of all persons shall be inviolable, then it is just and right that measures be taken to uphold the rights of citizens, no matter where they find themselves. It is good to have protective measure that victims can take advantage of. We must understand that women are the majority of our citizens and anything that concerns them is a matter for the whole country, not just women alone.”
"If Parliament and the country can't protect women, children and boys, who will?"

Proof beyond reasonable doubt – but in whose interests?

FROM FRONT PAGE

ing a shower immediately after would wash away the virus that causes Aids. He also said he believed women were more likely to be infected with HIV than men and therefore saw no reason to protect himself.

Not that all this presumed ignorance of HIV/AIDS mattered to his supporters, who had not only ransacked her mother's house but tried to assault the woman herself. At the last count, there were efforts to relocate her to a third country to protect her from the elderly Zuma's supporters.

But if the Zuma case was farcical, it wasn't that far different from the sentiments expressed in Kenya's Parliament that eventually reduced the Sexual Offences Bill to a battle of the sexes. And this despite the latest crime report (2004) indicating that rape now tops the list of crimes in the country.

More women are raped in Kenya than there are people murdered or vehicles stolen. New studies by the Steadman Group show that 310 adults are raped hourly and over 37,000 every month. It further states that 1,240 cases of rape happen daily. Further statistics from the Nairobi Women's Hospital show that more men are now seeking help at the hospital's Gender Recovery Centre.

State prosecutors

Kenya's Sexual Offences Bill makes the State the prosecutor in cases of sexual violence, making it impossible for families to negotiate private settlements and withdraw cases without the consent of the victim – which has been one of the biggest problems, especially when children are affected.

Prosecuting sexual offences has been made especially difficult by the fact that the law demands proof of the presence of the suspect’s semen in the victim. Rape suspects have found their way round this simply by using condoms. Besides, the red tape surrounding the reporting process has meant that all evidence has been destroyed by the time the legal machinery comes round.

Worse still, even should the man be apprehended, rape is a bailable offence and the offender will more often than not continue to harass the victim.

Mass walk-out

Against this background, women’s rights activists were quietly confident that the Bill would meet little or no resistance from politicians. They learnt otherwise right from day one of the debate, when male MPs staged a mass walkout the moment the sponsor of the Bill, Nominated MP Nyuki Ndir'u, got up to state the case.

Indeed, newly-elected Paddy Ahenda said in his maiden speech: “Mr Speaker, sir, you know as much as I do these creatures (meaning women) are somehow shy. They are not as open as men are...” He was referring to Section 23, which says: “Any person who undertakes unlawful, unsolicited and unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favours is guilty of the offence of sexual harassment.” He continued: “This section prohibits any male person from marrying because before you marry you must make advances.”

But worse was to come. He went ahead to say that the African woman always says ‘no’ when she means ‘yes’. It should be noted that some MPs have been accused of sexual harassment and even rape.

He was backed by colleague Jimmy Angwenyi, who described the Bill as good but full of ‘rubbish’. He added: “Mr Speaker, in Kisii culture, if you approach a girl for the first time and she says ‘yes’, you leave because she is a prostitute. She has to pretend that she does not agree to your request, and you make more advances... I do not condone rape but this Bill interferes with culture.”

The mood in Parliament was so acrimonious that women politicians also ended up walking out in protest at the way some of their male colleagues were trivialising the debate. Yet there were voices of reason in the debate-turned-into-slaughtering match.

Anyang’ Nyong’o pointed out the loopholes within the legal system, saying women should not be criminalised for reporting rape or sexual assault. He said: “In my experience, when one goes to report, the officer at the desk usually asks, ‘what were you doing there?’ or even more perversely, ‘what were you wearing?’ Or, ‘At that time of the night, where were you going?’”

He continued: “I have looked at the Constitution of Kenya and there is nowhere it is said that women must not be out of their homes at night, or where it states how long or short a woman’s dress should be. So for a police officer to ask a woman such questions is a violation of her human rights and fundamental rights as a Kenyan citizen.”

Gather evidence

According to Nduku Kilonzo, programme officer with Liverpool VCT centre, which has started offering services to rape victims outside Nairobi, “for the system to work, we have to literally gather evidence for the police and sometimes it is difficult to follow-up.”

She not only worries that the Bill will not sail through Parliament but also the fact that there are no systems in place to ensure that evidence is gathered properly.

ACQUITTED: Jacob Zuma may have been cleared of rape, but his conduct is hardly anything to write home about

Liverpool offers treatment to those who report rape or incest within 72 hours. Patients have been known to travel across the country to this one hospital, but often arrive way past time and also when most of the evidence has been destroyed.

Liverpool's services have gone a long way to help police gather evidence, but more work needs to be done to ensure that the judicial system works. As MP Mutula Kilonzo put it: “If Parliament and the country can’t protect women, children and boys, who will?”

Nduku is quick to point out that, much as the law is important, all other systems, and especially the health sector, have to work for justice to be achieved. “We train personnel and have managed to integrate this service in eight district hospitals,” she adds.

There is hope in the recent turnaround in the debate, with voices of reason calling for amendments to the most contentious issues rather than throwing out the baby with the water.

As judge Van der Merwe said in his ruling, it is important to make sure that the state is the prosecutor in sexual offences so that the burden of proof is not left to the claimant.

And MP Kirugi M’Mukindia captured the sentiments of most Kenyans when he said: “If we do not pass this Bill, we shall be telling our wives that we don’t care, that we don’t feel the pain they suffer. To fail to support this bill is cowardly of us.”
In Africa we cry for more representation of women in decision making positions in the hope that it will make a difference. Florence Machiko explores the women who have made it on the top seats in their countries and wonders whether they have fallen in the same trap as their male counterparts.

LEADING THE WAY: German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Britain's Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher, and Pakistan's former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

First Ladies

One in five politicians elected to parliaments worldwide last year was a woman, according to a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union unveiled at the United Nations 50th Status of Women Conference.

This not withstanding, there are six female presidents in the world today – in South Africa, Spain, the Philippines, Chile and Liberia. There is also German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is riding an unprecedented wave of popularity, not to mention prime ministers and deputy heads of state elsewhere.

How appropriate then is it that the theme for this year's International Women's Day was, "Women in Decision-making: Addressing challenges and creating change"?

So let's take an up close and personal look at some of the most famous women ever to have been on top said diet: "Any woman who understands the problems of running a household is capable of understanding the problems of running a country," said the Iron Lady, also known as Margaret Thatcher - she of the "woman's ability to stick to the controversial statements, including: "I have a quick mind and faster line spirit but to express the feminine; if you want anything done, ask a woman." By trying to lead the women's way, she made as many enemies as admirers. Robinson’s tenure at the UN and in Ireland could well be summed up by another Thatcher quote: “It may be the cock that crows, but it is the hen that lays the eggs.”

In 1980, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the world's first female elected prime minister and in 1976, Isabel Peron, at Argentina became the first woman president. In 1999, Sweden became the first country to have more female ministers than men at 11 women and nine men.

We now have the first African female president, who will hopefully see a fresh look at Liberia, where Johnson-Sirleaf inherits a war torn country after the first democratic election in Liberia. Will women's leadership in Liberia be any different and yield results? Kyingi, who was then the prime minister, was able to retain control of the government and facilitate an election. Florence Machiko of Sri Lanka became the world's first woman prime minister in 1996.

Kyingi, who was then the prime minister, was able to retain control of the government and facilitate an election. Florence Machiko did not have to worry about the country's peace and stability.

Florence Machiko explores the women who have made it on the top seats in their countries and wonders whether they have fallen in the same trap as their male counterparts.

By Rebecca Kwei, Ghana

Health workers here heaved a sigh of relief when the demand for female condoms shot up recently. Finally, they believed, this method of contraception was catching up with local women. They had no idea just how wrong they were.

While reports indicate that the female condom is getting increasing-ly popular in the suburbs of Accra such as Adabraka, Jasmin Town, Bukom and Chorkor, the women buy them for a purpose the inventors would never have imagined. They have proved handy as fashion accessories.

Some use the flexible plastic rings on the tips of the condoms as bracelets and seamstressess here have taken to using the rings for new designs. "I have seen the bracelets on some women, says Araba Essahwah. They are very attractive and match anything you wear. Until they tell you they got them from the female condom, you wouldn’t know."

The rush for female condoms began last June. Young women would buy up to seven condoms then cut them up and use the flexible plastic rings at the ends as bracelets. According to Clement Ahankwa, a pharmacist at A. Anstii Chemicals, the demand for the condoms rose from two to three pieces a day to more than 40.

What should have been good news for health workers quickly turned to yet more frustration when the new fashion trend became apparent on the streets.

Education on the use of the female condom will be intensified in order to create the right awareness among women, says Henrietta Oduo Agarko of the reproductive health unit of the ministry of health.

While the virtues of the male condom are widely-publicised in multi-media advertising campaigns, little is heard of the female condom. Those who have tried it also complain of having difficulties inserting it and that its size is intimidating. In some parts of Africa, women have also complained that it is too noisy for their peace of mind.

A study conducted in 2003 by the Ghana chapter of the Society for Women Against Aids attributed the low uptake to poor publicity when the new female condom was first introduced here in 2000.

Now organisations such as SWAA have the task not only to publicise the female condom but also to strengthen the community outreach element of their work if they are to address contentious issues to do with culture, perceptions and stigma.

As a country where record-keeping is hardly a priority, Ghana may well take the cue from Brazil, where all the blows keep records of female condom distribution.

This allows follow-up, which may establish detailed records of female condom use and may help chart and adjust marketing strategies.
Peaks of hunger, depths of despair

By Florence Machio, Kenya

FROM the Horn to southern Africa, the cycle of drought and famine has become as familiar — and predictable — as the back of our hands. Indeed, the USAid early warning systems network (FEWS) calls January to March the peak hunger season. And so it has been again this year.

Children looking for hunger, mothers with shredded breasts holding children with unnaturally large heads, animals in their death throes.... These are the images that we have presented to the international community for the past decade.

Africa is now entering what the UN calls a persistent famine phase. Drought strikes more often than ever before, followed by famine in a cycle that we can almost take for granted.

And relief efforts have become continuous emergencies. Can we dream of a time when we will not need the World Food Programme?

Not as long as African governments persist in shooting themselves in the foot. Drought is a function of hostile weather conditions but famine is a process, not an event. If our leaders chose policies that work for their people rather than those that enrich them and their cronies, we would have been able to reduce the cycle of hunger crisis with their excesses.

But that is only half the story. In 2004, US leaders came up with a strategy with the grand title “Ending Famine in the Horn Africa.” They and then, “We are raising in our belief that famine is preventable in the 21st century. Famine, food insecurity and malnutrition have many causes and defeating them will require a global partnership. We renew our commitment to help build this partnership, particularly in Africa, where more than 200 million people remain threatened by famine and food insecurity.”

The reality is rather more complex. While many of their companies want to invest in Africa because of cheap labour and raw material, they have in fact fueled corruption in striking the deals to enable them operate in these countries.

Who benefits from famine may also be a useful angle to follow. When Zimbabwe and Zambia recalled their governments had modified staple foods from the US, the question was how hungry people could refuse help. The governments of those countries were accused of not caring for their citizens.

The point to note, though, is that the US genetically modified staple foods of grain needs a home in itself. Created though a vast subsidy programme, the grains cannot be sold to the European Union or Japan because they have burdens on GM food for human consumption.

The US spends over $1 billion buying food from local agricultural corporations and shipping it to the starved. Food aid, therefore, serves as a de facto means of support for local industry while presenting a veneer of humanitarianism. As the political games continue, Africans need to find innovative and lasting solutions to deal with this perennial problem. Soil scientist Peter Gicheru says, “If we are to conquer famine, we have to be serious about growing the right crops in the right environment.”

Gicheru, who is in charge of Kenya’s soil survey, knows only too well that not all crops are fit for what he calls second and third liberation.

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Inside Mathato’s garden of hope

Lilaphane Nare in Lesotho

The house is dilapidated. Falling stones and missing windowpanes tell the story of the family that lives here more vividly than words ever can. Some of the rooms are boarded up, old, rusty iron sheets. An old brown sofa sits on two legs in what used to be a side room that has now fallen in. A turn around the house reveals a few water containers lying on the ground. The sound of sheep bleating attracts you to the kraal built of corrugated iron sheets that have seen better days.

In the midst of all this is Mathato Alice Faku’s garden. It is her pride and joy and has been planned with the precision of a drill sergeant. There is no weed in sight.

MmeMathato’s garden has vegetables in five colours, all chosen for the nutritional value, spinach, carrots, onions, beetroot and cabbage. Nine beds are in full bloom, one filled with an almost ready for harvest bean crop. Another three have been prepared and are ready for planting.

The keyhole bed is striking with its leafy vegetables that are a sharp contrast to the surrounding vegetation, which has dried up. MmeMathato’s garden is more than just a piece of land with a few vegetables growing in it. It represents her struggle to provide for her family and hold her head high. Her garden is one of 3,140 that villagers in Maefeng district, 120 kilometres from the capital city, Maseru, have built with the help of Care Lesotho South Africa and The Employment Bureau for Africa.

After undergoing a lot of screening, I was taken into the programme and taught how to prepare a vegetable plot for planting,” she says. “When the instructors came to inspect our gardens, everyone was asked to redo their gardens as they did not meet the set standards. But not me. I had put in a lot of work and followed instructions. It was the only one declared fit for planting.”

MmeMathato has every reason to be proud. This was not just digging. She had to go two metres deep, then followed this with the separation of good soil from bad. Manure was put in, then ash and the bad soil and finally the good soil on top.

She says: “I had been planting vegetables for a long time before the drought. But what struck me and attracted me to this project was this new type of gardening I was shown and the new mantra I had to use.”

Care’s approach emphasises knowledges transfer and empowering people with no source of livelihood and no outside income. Funded by USAid through its Food for Peace Agency, the project seeks to improve and maintain household food security for vulnerable people.

They are aiming for food security and not direct food relief, according to Henry Khonyongwa, project manager for the Consortium of Southern Africa Food Emergencies.

“These communities were devastated by the 2002 drought and have not recovered,” he says. “Our aim is to help them get where they were before by equipping them with survival strategies and help them gain assets.”

The garden next door to Mme Mathato is overgrown and it is clear that she is not part of the project. How does she manage to save her vegetables from thieves and other desperate people in the village? She has a ready answer “Thieves don’t bother me at all. I have a huge and fierce dog that keeps everyone out of my garden.”

This garden has taken Mme Mathato from the status of beneficiary of food handouts to producer of her own food, perhaps not all that she requires but enough to restore her dignity and ability to care for her family.