



Senegal's Bineta Diop pushes African women into spotlight

By Fran Blandy (AFP) – 1 day ago

DAKAR — A group of 12 women from Ivory Coast, Guinea and Uganda reduced members of an African Union panel to tears as they told their personal stories of rape and police brutality.

"I can tell you those ambassadors in Addis (Ababa in Ethiopia) were crying," said Bineta Diop, who organised the meeting about a month ago with the AU peace and security council to highlight the plight of women on the continent.

The 61-year-old, who travels between conflict-torn countries in a gruelling schedule which leaves little time for her grandchildren, has dedicated her life to getting Africa's men, dictators and rebel leaders to listen to women.

It is this work which saw her named amongst Time magazine's 100 most influential people in the world for 2011.

In her Dakar office, the walls are lined with faded photographs of leaders such as Nelson Mandela and his wife Graca Machel who Diop has worked with over the years and who themselves have appeared on the list.

"I think it really took me by surprise. It is always me putting out the red carpet for the celebrities and heads of state," Diop told AFP in an interview at Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS) which she founded 15 years ago.

Born in a Senegalese village to a traditional, religious family, Diop's feminist mother -- one of the leaders of the then ruling party's women's wing -- taught her about breaking the mould.

For Bineta Diop, this would become the relentless campaign for gender parity on the continent.

These days she has offices in eastern Congo and Darfur and she has also worked in Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia and Sierra Leone to get women involved in peace-building.

Diop says getting parity in the African Union was "one of my first battles" - but now there are five male and five female commissioners in the continental body.

As African countries increasingly follow suit and boost their parliaments with women -- half of Rwanda's lawmakers are female -- Diop warns it is not all about the numbers.

"Women are making it in Africa, women are the backbone of development. But still there is a glass ceiling ... power is still in the hands of the man. Still our voices are absent."

She says women in Europe are economically independent, and have more choice about the path their lives take, whereas in Africa women from war-torn countries are forced to take the reins as the male population has often been obliterated.

To Diop the role of women in the peace process is crucial.

When working with Mandela at peace talks on Burundi in the 1990s, she said a rebel leader reproached her for bringing women to the table.

"He said: 'Why are you pushing the women to come here, it is not a women's discussion, it is for those who are holding the guns.'"

Diop is still incredulous at this view.

"Women are not recognised because they are not killing, women are mobilising in the street, that is all they can do. If you are clever you understand the continent will not develop unless women occupy the right place."

But, she stresses, changing men's attitudes lies in the hands of the women.

"They are the guardians of the traditions. No one can fight for them, they have to liberate themselves."

But as in the case of the 12 women who stood in front of the AU peace and security council, mobilisation can go horribly wrong when women are seen as spoils of war.

In Ivory Coast, a peaceful women's march turned into a nightmare when security forces opened fire and killed seven of them.

In Guinea, women protesting a military junta were publically raped with rifles and bayonets in the wake of the massacre of some 150 people in a national stadium.

"We want justice. The people using rape as a weapon of war, one day they have to be accountable," says Diop.