

Mozambique's progress on women's rights honoured

By Fred Katerere 12-04-2010

Femmes Africa Solidarité has honoured Mozambique's President Armando Emilio Guebeza with its African Gender Award for his efforts in championing wider participation of women in his government.

The award came on 4 April, just a few days before the southern African nation celebrated its national Women's Day on 7 April, which acknowledges efforts of women in the liberation struggle.

This year Mozambique also observes 35 years of independence from its colonial ruler Portugal. Commemorations to honour some of the southern African nation's unsung heroes kicked off on Women's Day with the lighting of a 'peace torch,' in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.

Brigades will carry the torch throughout the country's 11 provinces to the capital Maputo in time for independence celebrations on 26 June. Launching the peace torch on the country's Women's Day is a symbolic gesture of how central women are to the nation's independence and development. Every year celebrations on 7 April are held countrywide, marking the day that in 1971 Josina Machel - then wife to Samora Machel, the country's first president at independence - died in combat.

While still ranked at the bottom of the United Nations' Human Development Index, Mozambique has produced one of the largest numbers of women in leadership positions in Africa. As of January 2010, Mozambique's parliament comprised 39.2 percent women, the second highest number in Africa, and ninth highest in the world.

Luísa Dias Diogo made history when she became one of the first African women to ascend to the position of Prime Minister in 2004, a post she held until January 2010. Under Guebuza's leadership since the 2004 general elections, the number of women ministers and heads of departments has steadily increased.

His party, Frelimo, also increased the number of women legislators in the national parliament, which culminated in the election of the country's first woman speaker this year as Guebuza began his second term. Women head key posts such as in the Departments of Justice, Mines and Mineral Resources and Labour - to name a few. Almost half of the provincial governors are women.

Arminda Joaquim, a 35-year-old mother of four who works for a mobile phone company in Maputo said in an interview that the decision by politicians to light the 'peace torch' on women's day was an added present to the sisters.

'It will be ideal for the government to declare the period between April 7 and June 25 - this year - as a women's holiday,' quipped Joaquim.

Mozambique's commitment to promoting the status of women was launched with the revision of the

constitution in 2004 which included clauses for promoting and protecting women.

Guebuza's gender successes have not only been limited to the political sphere. He also signed into law legal instruments such domestic violence act and the anti-human trafficking act, a move to help enhance the protection of women's rights in the country.

The anti-trafficking legislation is designed to protect women and prosecute perpetrators who have for decades profited in trafficking women and children for sex work and cheap labour to destinations like South Africa.

This is not to say that women still do not face such problems as gender-based violence and less access to economic empowerment than their male counterparts. However, at the same time that local and international media heap praise on the elevation of women in decision making position, it has also been highlighted that women still face oppression and there was therefore a need to open up debate on gender issues.

Guebuza has said that he will go in retirement after his current term which ends in 2014. What remains to be seen is whether there will be continued progress forward in elevating the status of women. Or better still, could we see next a woman president for Mozambique? Fred Katerere is a freelance journalist based in Maputo, Mozambique. This article is part of the Gender Links Opinion and Commentary Service.