

**PARTNERS FOR GENDER JUSTICE**  
**CONFERENCE**  
**ON**  
**THE ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY IN PROMOTING GENDER JUSTICE**  
**IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES**

Accra, Ghana  
19-21 November, 2008

**WELCOME ADDRESS BY HER LADYSHIP THE CHIEF JUSTICE OF GHANA**

**MRS GEORGINA THEODORA WOOD**

Madam Chairperson,  
My Lord and Lady Justices,  
H.E Dauda Toure, UNDP Representative in Ghana  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with great pleasure that on behalf of the Judicial Service of Ghana and on my own behalf, I welcome you all to this important Colloquium on the **Role of the Judiciary in Promoting Gender Justice in Africa**.

I extend a very special welcome to our male friends and participants here with us. We thank you for your support.

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates, your presence here is an eloquent testimony of your commitment to promote gender justice in your respective countries in Africa in particular, and I warmly applaud you!

This Colloquium, Madam Chairperson, My Lord and Lady Justices, Distinguished Delegates, is a follow up to the previous Partners for Gender Justice (PGJ) meetings held in Liberia (October 2006) and in South Africa (March 2007). It is also expected to build on the momentum generated by the two West African Judicial Colloquia held in Dakar (January 2006) and Accra (October 2007)

The PGJ, an initiative launched in 2004, is an informal partnership of interested State actors, NGOs, UN actors, international and regional organisations and academic institutions devoted to promoting gender justice.

The PGJ achieves this through the development of a framework that ensures that programmes aimed at strengthening gender justice in Africa responds to the specific circumstances and needs of the societies concerned.

While the concept of gender justice is quite broad, the PGJ have narrowed their focus to empowering women to hold positions of authority in, and have access to justice.

Distinguished invited guests, I think we are all agreed that in many countries, and more particularly in Africa, where the illiteracy rate is quite high, the justice system has never been kind to women; it fails them.

The obstacles, both formal and informal, that women encounter in their attempt to access justice are quite numerous. Most national Constitutions, Laws and international Conventions, Instruments, Protocols etc, seek to promote equality between men and women but the reality is still a mirage.

Therefore, although there are constitutional and other statutory provisions that on paper afford women a fair measure of protection, policies, procedures and practices often prevent women from the full and equal enjoyment of these rights and privileges and hinder them from accessing justice. So for example, some of the greatest barriers to accessing justice are harmful or corrupted cultural and traditional practices.

It is critical, Madam Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, for the Judiciary to promote gender justice in Africa, in its effort to contribute to the full realization of Women's Empowerment as declared under the Beijing Platform For Action. (BPFA).

**“Women's empowerment aims at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision making. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and conditions for social justice, and is a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace!”**

The African Woman is the creation of culture, tradition and religion that subject and relegate her to an inferior position. Women in Africa produce 80% of the food crops yet their contribution is undervalued and invariably taken for granted. **Women are at the Centre of Production, but at the periphery of Benefits. Women count but are not counted.**

In most African countries, equitable and sustainable development has been stunted because women are marginalized and gender consideration not given the needed attention. It has to be noted that **human development, if not engendered is endangered.**

Women issues are now recognized as Human Rights issues and are required to receive maximum attention at both the national and international level. Unfortunately, the status of most women is still deplorable compared to that of men. True, there have been modest gains made towards the promotion of gender justice in most African countries through the concerted efforts of Governments, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

and Development Partners, but sadly, Madam Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, entrenched gender disparities still exist.

In Ghana, there has been an increase in the appointment of women judges to the bench. My own appointment as the first woman Chief Justice is an honour to all women, and a feat to be celebrated by all women!

The Ghanaian Judiciary has itself taken steps to ensure that our overarching theme for the next couple of years, “Access to Justice”, is a reality and not just a sound bite. The establishment of a cluster of courts in the metropolis, to deal exclusively on a daily basis with juvenile justice and other family law related issues pertaining to women and children, more often than not, the most vulnerable group in society, is one of the strategies we have employed.

The Legal Aid Board and the Domestic Violence and Support Unit (DOVSU) of the Police Service are rendering worthy services by providing access to justice to the vulnerable, mostly women.

Advocacy, Legal Aid, Legal Literacy and Paralegal Training programmes of Civil Society Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) have contributed tremendously in the promotion of gender justice.

Laws need to be demystified and made accessible to the public especially women. **The legal maxim that presumes everybody to know the law is a fiction and has no place in Africa where majority of the population is illiterate.**

The cost and time of accessing justice should be considerably reduced, and lawyers encouraged to offer pro bono services to the vulnerable.

The main objective of the current Accra Colloquium is to provide an appropriate platform for African judiciaries to hold frank discussions on the challenges and best practices deployed by various courts in promoting gender justice. Other important matters that will engage our attention include the exchange of ideas on the international and regional standards for gender justice and how these impact national courts, and the national, regional and international tools available to judiciaries.

Madam Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, it is my expectation, that our deliberations will not only assist us to identify the challenges facing our judiciaries as we strive to make justice accessible to women, but will also help us to identify practical measures, strategies, tools and workable solutions for addressing the identified challenges. I have no doubt that this meeting will empower all of us to promote women’s effective participation in the judicial process and create the foundation for a network of judges that will enhance gender justice in Africa.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge the support of the Ghana Government, The Ghanaian Judiciary and the PGJ partners: United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), International Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC), International

Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) and Brandeis University, and in so doing, register my profound gratitude to the organisers for inviting the Ghanaian judiciary to host this historic colloquium.

**Once again, you are very welcome!**

**I wish all of you successful deliberations. Do enjoy the beautiful sights and scenes of Ghana, but more importantly, enjoy the legendary warmth, friendship and hospitality of the beautiful people of Ghana. Have a happy stay.**

**God bless you and God Bless Mother Africa.**