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## EDITORIAL

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January has been all about self-assessment here at MEWC. With the start of a new year, we wanted to look back at all we have achieved and what we can improve as a start up charity. We have come a long way in the past year and we still have a long way to go in the future, but here is a quick recap of what we have done in the past year. Please read our [Annual Report](#) to find out, more in depth, all that we have accomplished in 2011.

The MEWC website was launched in March of 2011 with our initial content including: news, events, resources, initiatives, countries, the African Women's Decade, and our "Of the Month" series. Over the past year, we have expanded to include MEWC publications, MEWC Projects like our blog and Election & Political Participation Monitoring, information on scholarships & fellowships and fundraising, and plenty more unique features. The website, virtually unknown in the first half of 2011, has grown to have over 600 hits a day and our publications have been publicized on various websites such AWID and LandPortal.

2011 helped us to establish the mission of MEWC and 2012 will help put our mission into action. In 2012 we will continue to focus on maintaining our website and publishing MEWC reports, but we will also start launching our own workshops to empower African women. We cannot wait to see all of our hard work come to fruition by hosting different events that will help to mobilize women and women leaders to make a change in our society.

Lastly, the MEWC team would like to take a moment to thank all the individuals and organizations that have helped MEWC change from an idea to an official charity. Without our dedicated readers and viewers, and without the help of our partner organizations, we would not have been able to accomplish all that we have in 2011. Thank you for your commitment to MEWC and our campaign, and we hope that you will stay along with us as we grow.

Emily Elizabeth-Anne Meyer & the MEWC Team

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## INTERVIEW OF THE MONTH

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### [AFRICA: Interview of the Month with Naana Otoo-Ovarty](#)

*Naana Otoo-Oyortey is the Executive Director of the Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD), an African Diaspora women's support and campaign organisation working in the UK and Africa on female genital mutilation, child marriage and obstetric fistula*

#### **What are the most pressing issues for women in Africa? and what are the primary actions to take in response to those issues?**

In my view some of the most pressing concerns for women and girls in Africa relate to gender disparities and gender-based discrimination. Just as an illustration: we know that over 42 % of girls are married before they attain 18 years, about 50% of women are subjected to gender based violence; 140 million are affected by female genital mutilation, women and girls comprise 60% of all Africans living with HIV; women own a mere 1% of agricultural land despite providing 70% of its labour and maternal mortality rates are as high as 640 per every 100,000 births compared to 12 in the UK.

This adversely affects the social, civil, political and economic lives of girls and women and manifests in discriminatory and conflicting civil and customary laws and policies, lack of choices in sexual matters; marriage and reproduction and ultimately poverty. Many women and girls lack access to basic entitlements as citizens; particularly access to resources, health services, information on their rights and means to seek justice. This is further compounded by lack of political will and accountability to women and girls, including representation in decision making spaces. Girls and women in rural communities of Africa are often worst affected. Today millions of girls are forced to marry while still children, some as early as 9 years often to older men, making them mothers who are ill prepared and poorly equipped to shape the future of Africa. This increases the risks of maternal mortality, unsafe abortions and maternal morbidity. Social attitudes on domestic violence and sexual abuse and female genital mutilation need to shift to enable women and girls attain their potential and contribute to national economic and social development.

In my view some of the primary actions needed to tackle these challenges, should centre on strategies to shift discriminatory social norms to value girls and women and provide an enabling environment that safeguards their health and rights. We need to make a case to invest in girls before they become women, providing them the skills, education, choices and confidence for them to contribute to society as equal citizens and have the capacity and agency to achieve. There is need for political will to enact and enforce protective laws and policies; provide access to legal justice and health services especially in rural areas. Building leadership skills; strengthening collaboration and engagement and creating platforms for public accountability and dialogue are key actions which have not been adequately explored in Africa. Finally there is need for stronger voices for social change.

## **What do you think has been achieved in relation to Female Genital Mutilation on the continent?**

FORWARD's primary focus has been on responding to female genital mutilation in the UK and being real optimists we have seen progress on the legal front. Today over 21 countries have some legal provision that is applicable to FGM. However, female genital mutilation, which requires the removal of healthy female genitalia to satisfy socio- cultural norms in many societies, continues to evoke passions among those who are for and those against the practice. This issue has featured in high level international, regional and human rights conferences, meetings and debates. However, progress in ending this human rights violation in the continent is still slow and patchy. New data shows marked reductions among the younger generation in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana and Kenya. In countries where majority of the population practice FGM, the decline has been slower. Similarly in communities where FGM is part of secret society requirements and governed by traditional leaders, it has been more difficult to mobilise communities against the practice.

We have also seen worrying developments including citing FGM as a religion duty and changes in the terminology as well some calling this as "sunnah". Within FORWARD we continue to use the term female genital mutilation and recognise this as part of our advocacy work that the practice violates the dignity and rights of women and girls.

The other dimension of this practice is that it has migrated into Europe, North America and other parts of the world and created numerous challenges for receiving countries. Many statutory agencies do not have the skills to respond effectively to FGM and fail to identify girls at risk. In the UK the government approach to FGM has been adhoc and inconsistent. In my view this is because affected communities are mainly refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and often not adequately protected by existing laws and policies on FGM. There has also been little attention put on building bridges between African communities in Europe and those in Africa as part of a holistic approach.

## **What needs to be done and how women around the continent are to be aware of their rights and the fact that these rights are violated in so many aspects?**

Interventions to promote awareness of rights should also include strategies to improve the agency of girls and women to exercise their rights and to seek justice when their rights have been violated. Schools can play a valuable role in this agenda on rights and should form part of citizenship education. But firstly teacher training institutions should be targeted and supported to enable them have skills and information to promote gender equality and rights within schools. In many parts of Africa schools fail girls because they perpetuate gender inequality. We often hear of countless stories of girls being sexually abused by teachers and where girls lack voice and mentoring opportunities in schools. Investing in spaces for girls to learn about their rights and share with other girls makes economic sense and governments need to take this more seriously. School policies on teenage pregnancy and child mothers are often very punitive and fail to protect and safeguard rights of girls.

There is a huge role for women's civil society organisations to facilitate the process of women's rights education; we need to build women's leadership and networking skills to enable women create a critical movement to realise rights and basic entitlements. Why have we not collectively stood up against women dying just to give birth in Africa; we need to hold

policy makers accountable not only during election time, but need to ensure that we have more women in policy making positions – Rwanda has set good example for Africa and we all need to learn from them. Unfortunately we so often see poor collaboration, partnership and joint working among women's organisations, which is again very problematic. Many women's national machineries in Africa seem to be in competition with women's civil society organisations, which does not help; there is urgent need to shift the power base to ensure more collaboration and synergy.

**Do you think there is enough will from African governments to push a/the gender agenda in Africa?**

On paper there seems to be political will. According to the new UN report on "Progress of the World's Women 2011-12", African countries have made progress in provision of laws on inheritance; family and 21 African countries now have new laws on domestic violence. Additionally, we have a woman President in Liberia who has recently been re-elected, and seen tremendous progress in women's representation in parliament in Rwanda, with 51 percent representation this is the highest in the world. 31 countries have ratified the Maputo Women's Protocol.

However, political will is measured through commitment of resources to enforce laws; gender equity in budgetary allocation and improved access to services including access to justice, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalised. The sad reality in most African communities is that rural and poorer women and girls have least access to services, have no representation in decision making processes and worst off in terms of gender inequalities and discriminatory practices.

**The AU launched the AWD in October 2010, an entire decade dedicated to women and girls in Africa. What are your impressions and what changes could this decade bring to women and girls in Africa?**

We African women in the Diaspora were extremely excited about the launch of the AWD and see this as a good opportunity to galvanise support for action. The global women's movement got a huge boost with the 1995 Beijing women's conference, this was a major platform for action and turning point for women's human rights and it is possible for African women to use this agenda for change and hold governments to commit on women's human rights. Similarly the AWD should be used by Africans globally as a spring board for action. We have limited time to make this vision a reality and what is really needed is a movement to make this change shift minds and bodies. As a Diaspora African woman in Europe, I see a huge role that we can play in mobilizing action among African women and girls in the Diaspora to be part of this change and FORWARD initiated a consultation in December to start to engage African young women in the UK on gender and rights issues pertaining to girls in Africa. The changes for women can only be realised if people are engaged with the process. I am positive that African women in the Diaspora can be mobilized to play a crucial role in the attainment of the ADW agenda and this is really a challenge for us at FORWARD.

[Read More](#)

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## **TOP WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY NEWS**

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### **[SIERRA LEONE: SIERRA LEONEAN WOMEN ROOT FOR PEACEFUL CAMPAIGNS](#)**

*Source: Africa Review*

A coalition of Sierra Leone women groups plan to stage a march to push for better security in the country. The women singled out the government for failing in its responsibilities to maintain peace during political rallies. "Our political leaders are a disgrace," Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, one of Sierra Leone's leading women activists, said.

### **[LIBERIA: JAPAN BOOSTS GENDER EMPOWERMENT](#)**

*Source: New Democrat*

In an accelerated drive to promote youth empowerment, especially adolescent girls across the African continent, the government of Japan has granted US\$86,206 to Youth Crime Watch of Liberia (YCWL).

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## **TOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN NEWS**

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### **[EGYPT: EGYPT'S BRUTALIZATION OF WOMEN CONTINUES](#)**

*Source: Albawaba*

Thousands took to the streets in Egypt to protest against the military junta. By late Wednesday night, the conversation had turned away from the military council and on to Egypt's most pressing social problem: sexual violence against women.

### **[ZIMBABWE: SUFFERING IN SILENCE – ABUSED WOMEN IGNORANT OF LAW](#)**

*Source: The Standard*

FIFTY-YEAR-old Anna Nyoni's married life has been a nightmare. She remembers no bliss in her seven-year marriage, just beatings from her husband, which has left permanent scars all over her body. Her relatives and friends have on several occasions told her to persevere to keep her marriage, saying the battering will end, as it was common in most marriages.

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## **TOP POLITICAL PARTICIPATION NEWS**

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### **[SOUTH SUDAN: SOUTH SUDANESE WOMEN CALL FOR GREATER PARTICIPATION IN CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW](#)**

*Source: Sudan Tribune*

A South Sudanese women's alliance on Wednesday said the National Constitution Review Commission (NCRC) did not fully represent their interests after its swearing ceremony on Tuesday.

### **[GHANA: WOMEN STILL SIDELINED POLITICALLY AS 2012 ELECTION APPROACHES](#)**

*Source: Africa Arguments*

Last September a striking story stole the headlines of newspapers and media outlets all across Ghana. Samia Nkrumah, the daughter of the nation's founding father, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, became the first female chairperson of a political party in the country's history as an independent state.

## **TOP ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT NEWS**

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### **[GAMBIA: BANJULINDING WOMEN GARDENERS CRY FOR HELP](#)**

*Source: FOROYYA*

Women working at the Banjulinding horticultural garden have expressed their concerns regarding the high cost of electricity, lack of water and markets for their produce. The women gardeners made these complaints when this reporter visited the garden over the weekend.

### **[ERITREA: WOMEN GRADUATES IN WEAVING REGISTER IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR LIFE](#)**

*Source: Shabait*

Women who engage in weaving activities after receiving training by the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare said that they have been able to generate income, and that their life is improving.

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## **TOP HIV/AIDS & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

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### **[TANZANIA: REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH LAW IN OFFING](#)**

*Source: Tanzania Daily News*

A Law to protect rights of mothers and adolescent girls in accessing reproductive health services is in the offing. A draft bill will be presented to a group of Parliamentarians in February, this year, to kick-start the process of enacting the law.

### **[ETHIOPIA: ETHIOPIA GETS ON THE PILL, AND THAT MATTERS FOR AFRICA](#)**

*Source: RH Reality Check*

African countries are too often lumped together as one big composite of grave statistics and chronic epidemics. Because of this, it's especially important that the global development and reproductive health communities recognize and amplify those success stories that can be told. Especially when these stories are designed and driven by local efforts.

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## **HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN**

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### **[EGYPT: SURVEY OF POLITICAL PARTIES' VIEWS REVEALS 'DISTURBING' OPPOSITION TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS](#)**

*Source: Amnesty International*

Most of the biggest Egyptian political parties have committed to delivering ambitious human right reform in the country's transition, but have either given mixed signals or have flatly refused to sign up to ending discrimination, protecting women's rights and to abolishing the death penalty, Amnesty International said today.

### **[MALI: GOVT ENACTS NEW FAMILY LAW ROLLING BACK WOMEN'S RIGHTS](#)**

*Source: RNW*

Mali's President Amadou Toumani Toure has signed a new family law, an official said Friday, after it was revised due to pressure from Muslim groups to cut out sections providing for greater women's freedoms.

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## **GENERAL**

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### **[RWANDA: WOMEN TODAY](#)**

*Source: The New Time*

Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult. ~ Charlotte Whitton. The above popular saying is one that emphasizes the need to understand women in their various capacities of strength, endurance, creativity and love. We believe that every woman has a capacity of compassion and understanding that is deeply embedded within their very nature.

### **[ZIMBABWE: EMPOWERMENT – WHAT’S IN IT FOR WOMEN](#)**

*Source: The Herald*

The furious noise around the enactment of the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act seems to have quietened down and many institutions are going about the business of complying with the law or, at least, making the right noises and gestures.

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## **FEATURED RESOURCES**

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### **[REPORT: ENABLING RURAL WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT](#)**

*Source: UN WOMEN*

In accordance with its multi-year programme of work for 2010-2014, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will consider 'The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges' as its priority theme during its fifty-sixth session in 2012.

In order to contribute to a fuller understanding of the issue and to assist the Commission in its deliberations, the UN Women) in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) will convene an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on 'Enabling rural women's economic empowerment: institutions, opportunities and participation' from 20-23 September 2011 in Accra, Ghana.

### **[EXPLORING LINKAGES: WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT, MICROFINANCE AND HEALTH EDUCATION](#)**

*Source: UN FPA*

The year 2010 marked the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995). Among its many recommendations for achieving gender equality and equity is a call for access to financial services as a means of empowering women, especially the millions of women who live in impoverished and marginalized conditions around the world.

This e-publication highlights the results of a survey of women clients of microfinance institutions in 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with a special focus on the effects of the social services provided by those institutions. It finds that microfinance, when offered in conjunction with health education services, can both empower women and improve their sexual and reproductive health.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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### [2012 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EMERGENT ISSUES IN HUMANITIES IN AFRICA IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM AND CHINUA ACHEBE ANNUAL LECTURES](#)

*Source: University of Nigeria*

*Date: 03 Feb 2012, 10:00-17:00*

*Location: Nsukka, Nigeria*

This conference aims to assemble scholars from across the globe who are interested in the issues now emerging in discourses in humanities in Africa. With the star-studded team of resource persons, it promises to be intellectually rewarding.