Chief Justice of Ghana Discusses Women’s Access to Justice

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By DIVYANSHA SEHGAL

Georgina Theodora Wood, Chief Justice of Ghana, spoke about Ghanaian women and children’s access to justice at a talk Monday.

Wood said she believes justice lies at the heart of human rights and that the constitution should be one of the key elements driving governance in Ghana.

“Therefore the courts remain the lead institution responsible — through judicial pronouncements — for the rights and responsibilities for the Ghanaian people as has been spelt out in the constitution of The Republic of Ghana,” Wood said.
Women and children suffer the most from human rights violations, including war crimes, human trafficking and domestic violence, Woods said, arguing for increased representation of women in Ghana.

“Women must be represented at all decision making levels,” Wood said. “The more and more we include women, it is more likely that the views of their children, of their larger families and the perspectives that they have would all be factored in.”

Wood pointed to three main factors she believes hinders access to justice in Ghana: physical access, legal access and financial access.

“Physical access refers to how close the courts are to the places where women live and work. The farther away the courts are from the people, the less likely it is that they are willing to spend time and resources in order to access justice,” Wood said. “They’d rather find a more economic activity to do.”

While the Ghanaian government has taken several steps recently to help women gain better access the courts, Wood said there is still more progress to be made to improve justice for women.

“We have made some significant progress with court infrastructure. In July, we put up one of the biggest and the most modern high court complexes in Africa. We have established more gender violence courts in almost every capital city,” Wood said. “We have also increased the number of district courts and that has made life substantially better for our women.”

Similar to physical access, women often lack knowledge of their legal rights, which poses a significant challenge, according to Wood.

“There are many women who are ignorant of their rights and responsibilities, and what the courts can do for them. This restricts legal access to justice,” Wood said. “There are institutions mandated to undertake legal, civic and other literacy programs to effectively educate everybody in the society of their individual rights and responsibilities.”

Additionally, Wood said lack of financial access discourages women from pursuing legal measures.

“Unfortunately, court fees are going up because we must provide better service,” Wood said. “Lawyer fees are also going up, and this shows that women are bound to be the biggest losers.”

However, the judiciary is finding innovative ways to “make justice less costly,” according to Wood.

Wood said she believes that despite these obstacles, Ghana has the “commitment and the political will” to confront those challenges.

“Challenges are many for us in Ghana, but the opportunities to excel by exploring innovative approaches to resolving these barriers abound in equal measure,” Wood said.

The lecture was sponsored by the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice at Cornell Law School and the Berger International Legal Studies Program.

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