

Speech by the Ambassador of France on the occasion of the presentation of the award
of the *Ordre National du Mérite* to Mr Jenni WILLIAMS

Dear Jenni Williams,
Distinguished guests,
Dear friends,

We are gathered this evening for reasons solemn, friendly and happy.

Solemn because, on the proposal of the French Embassy in Zimbabwe, the President of the French Republic has decided to welcome you, Dear Jenni Williams, into the French National Order of Merit.

Friendly and happy, because we are all gathered today to celebrate a defender of democracy, human rights and, in particular, the rights of women.

But what exactly is the National Order of Merit? It is an award given to women and men bestowed with outstanding military or civil virtues and whose purpose above all is to serve – serve their country, serve their values and also serve in favour of other people.

Following the example of Napoleon the 1st with the Legion of Honour, General de Gaulle created the Order of Merit in 1963 to distinguish not only those who brought the highest contribution in defending the country, but also to its intellectual, moral and economic development. The Order of Merit is a consecration, which rewards a fulfilled life, but is also a tribute that salutes your destiny and opens a future. It gives the holder the strength to do even more, proving furthermore their qualities that have justified their distinction. The laurels just above the cross that I will give you in an instant, weave, in this regard, in a circle of hope.

The hope that you give to this country, by your action in favour of human rights, the hope you give to people around the world to see the core values of humanity, beyond cultural differences, defended everywhere on this planet. It is the action of a lifetime, as you continue today at the head of the institutions you created : Woman of Zimbabwe, Arise ! (WOZA)

In a challenging political environment, WOZA, that you created in 2003, has helped countless women in many aspects of their lives : to provide them with a platform where they can express their concerns about their everyday life ; to encourage them to fight for their rights and freedom ; to give them the possibility to access to political and social responsibilities so that they can take part in finding solutions to their own problems ; to defend and explain to the various authorities what is at stake with women and their families.

We are very sensitive to the activities of WOZA, as they are based on principle of non violence and peaceful actions. You managed to create a political space that allow Zimbabweans to express their claims, in particular, freedom of expression and of assembly, right to education, right to health and the rights to live with dignity.

Despite harassment, arrests or ill treatment, the success of WOZA is tangible, as your membership can be evaluated to 70.000 people. I would like to pay tribute to the courage of all the members of WOZA and to express the recognition of the French government to its work. I

also would like to mention that WOZA has already received other international prizes, like the Amnesty International Prize or the Robert Kennedy Human Rights Prize.

However, the distinction awarded tonight is not to WOZA, but to you, personally, Dear Jenni Williams. So allow me to add to these words I have just consecrated to your association, the tributes that I dedicate to you personally.

Dear Jenni, you began your carrier as an executive officer at a marketing and communication company. There, you became aware of the negative effects of some government's policies, including the beginning of human rights violations against opponents.

This awareness led you to create WOZA. In defending human rights relentlessly and promoting freedom of expression, you have been at the forefront to condemn intimidation and violence. You also became a prominent human rights defender at your own risk, as you were arrested, if I am correct with this gruesome counting, not less than 39 times.

Despite all the personal risks, you continue this long struggle in favour of human rights in all their aspects, and especially the rights of women, as well as in favour of a democratic transition in Zimbabwe through nonviolent action.

All your achievements have contributed a lot to the cause you defend. I hope they will encourage other people to follow your steps. Your fight, your passions, your perseverance have been considered exemplary by the President of the Republic and justify the recognition by France, who awards you today the National Order of Merit, in which we receive the foreigners who are beyond their countries an example for the French people, an example to the world.

This explains the honour I feel when handing you this medal, because by honouring you, France shows its attachment to the protection of human rights, that it consistently defends in all the international forums and of which the rights of women are a critical aspect.

Jenni Williams, on behalf of the President of the Republic, we knight you in the National Order of Merit.