

Women Human Rights Defenders Leaflets (Refugee)

19th November 2005

AI Index: ACT 77/032/2005

[Front cover]

Defending the rights of refugee women

Defending women defending rights

(pic) © UNHCR / N. Tsinonis (end pic)

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The right to defend...human rights

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998, affirms the right to defend human rights and urges states to protect human rights work and those who carry it out. To bolster implementation of the Declaration, the office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on human rights defenders was created in April 2000.

The Special Representative, Hina Jilani, has highlighted the role played by women human rights defenders and the challenges they face as a result. Her 2002 report to the UN Commission on Human Rights stated that “while women defenders work as indefatigably as their male counterparts in upholding human rights and the rights of victims of human rights violations, there exist some characteristics that are specific to them as women involved in the defence of human rights” and that “they face risks that are specific to their gender and additional to those faced by men”.

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Women on the frontline

Women are at the forefront of the global movement of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), actively promoting, protecting and defending human rights across the world. Women HRDs include activists, professionals, and victims and survivors of human rights abuses and their families. Women HRDs have founded the human rights movement in many parts of the world. They have documented and exposed violations of civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights, and often highlighted the gender-specific manifestations, causes and consequences of such violations.

Women HRDs often form the backbone of movements working for the rights of, among others, women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, refugees and other displaced people, trade unionists, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. They protest against widespread impunity for all forms of violence against women, and promote women’s right to live free of gender-based violence. They support countless victims of human rights violations in demanding justice. In particular, they lead projects dedicated to supporting victims of gender discrimination, sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women.

Women HRDs face marginalization, prejudice, violence and threats to their safety and wellbeing on multiple levels: as HRDs, as women and as individuals who challenge societal gender stereotypes. Their aggressors may be the state, political groups, the community – even their partners or relatives.

Governments and social movements often do not prioritize the rights that women HRDs fight for, thus undermining the credibility and legitimacy of their struggle. Women HRDs have been killed, abducted, and made to “disappear” as a consequence of their work. They face gender-specific repercussions, such as sexual harassment and rape.

Women HRDs may have to flee their country to find effective protection of their rights, often encountering gender-specific hurdles on the way.

(Pic) below: Women protest against gang-rapes in housing projects in French cities, 7 March 2003. The experience or threat of violence affects the lives of women everywhere, cutting across boundaries of wealth, race and culture. © Gamma/Katz (end Pic)

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Living her convictions

Layla Mohammed

From flight to exile

After nine years in exile, Layla Mohammed has finally returned home. “I always knew I would come back to Baghdad and continue to work on women’s rights,” she says. Yet it was precisely this work that forced her to leave Iraq.

Threatened with imprisonment, Layla fled with her husband in 1991 – first to the Kurdish-controlled north, and then to Turkey, eventually gaining refugee status in Australia. While there, she continued her work, setting up the Iraqi Women’s Association. A friend and colleague, Yanar Mohammad, established a sister group while in exile in Canada. “We believed it was our task to defend the women of Iraq, and to put pressure on the government to protect women’s rights,” says Layla.

Working for the future

In 2003, Layla, Yanar and others who had lived in exile returned to the northern Kurdish region to help plan the rebuilding of their country. They expected the chaos that followed the fall of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq. But they did not anticipate the further degradation visited on women by the current civil and political instability rife within the country.

Layla has since formed the Women’s Freedom Organization with Yanar and other women. Every day, she meets women in need of emergency help or protection. Layla manages all these requests, all the while working for a future where women’s rights are embedded in the new constitution and laws of Iraq.

(pic) above: Layla Mohammed, Baghdad, Iraq, 29 September 2003. © Rick McDowell/Mary Trotochaud, AFSC (end pic)

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I always knew I would come back to Baghdad and continue to work on women's rights [end pull quote]

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Against the odds

Exiled women activists struggle for human rights

Across the world, women human rights defenders (HRDs) have been forced to flee their communities – even their countries – simply because they act on behalf of the victimized and the abused.

Driven from their homes by hostile circumstances, they are made refugees or are otherwise displaced. Yet they continue their struggle for human rights – a struggle which can endanger or compromise their situation even further.

In their search for protection, women HRDs may be confronted with multiple obstacles. Some are imprisoned, tortured or even killed before reaching safety. Others are barred from fleeing as a result of gender discriminatory laws, lack of economic means, or restrictive migration controls. They are thus confined to a lifetime of threats from the state, armed political groups or their own families.

Those women who manage to flee their country of origin, most often by paying smugglers or traffickers, face possible injury or even death in overcrowded boats or trucks on their way to “safety”. They may also be vulnerable to rape and sexual or labour exploitation, either in their countries of transit or upon arrival in their countries of asylum.

Thwarted by socio-economic hardship and attacks on their right to physical and mental integrity, many refugee women HRDs are additionally hampered by legal “blindspots”. The UN Refugee Convention and other international human rights instruments do not recognize such women as being explicitly in need of international protection. Lack of gender sensitivity in asylum laws, policies and practices can result in states denying refugee or other protective status to women HRDs at risk.

Authorities in countries of asylum may also underestimate the risk of persecution faced by women HRDs who have fled their countries of origin after transgressing gender-discriminatory societal norms.

Despite considerable hardship before, during and after flight, many women bravely continue to challenge injustice, while others begin their human rights work having left their homeland. Some may be women HRDs in refugee camps or camps for Internally Displaced Persons. Others may set up organizations in exile. Though the obstacles may be many, greater still is the will of these women to prevail. For them, only justice will do.

(pic) above: A family shares a mattress in a temporary shelter for refugees in Algo Agrio, Ecuador, after fleeing fighting in Colombia, July 1999.

© Scott Dalton/Network

cover: Marguerite Barankitse, known as the "Angel of Burundi". Over the past 12 years she has helped more than 10,000 children whose lives have been devastated by the civil war in Burundi and other conflicts in the region, including many refugee children affected by HIV/AIDs.

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Risking it all

Sarah

Imprisonment and beatings

As a student activist in Sudan, Sarah (not her real name) organized meetings and peaceful demonstrations and wrote anti-government newsletters. She helped to bring convoys of health workers into poor rural areas and organized discussions for students about the banning of books from university libraries. Through her work, she resisted violent pressure to conform to the restrictions placed on women by the National Islamic Front.

Because of her human rights work, Sarah was detained in a "Ghost House" – a private house used as a secret detention and torture centre – three times. There, she suffered sexual violence, beating and threats. She was made to drink from a bowl on the floor and forced to witness the torture of other prisoners.

Despite the threat of detention, she continued her activities, but with her life in serious danger, she eventually fled Sudan.

Struggle for recognition

Once in the UK, she faced an arduous and lengthy legal process for recognition as a refugee. Undeterred, Sarah continued her efforts, tirelessly working with Sudanese women's rights and human rights organizations to improve the lives of women in the UK and in Sudan. She has also carried out crisis and fundraising work for African countries and assists a prominent children's organization.

Sarah has finally been recognized as a refugee in the UK. Her struggle for the rights of women in Sudan continues.

(pic) above: Undermined by the war and discriminatory traditional attitudes, women bear society's greatest disadvantages in Sudan. © Evelyn Hockstein/Polaris

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[pull quote] She was made to drink from a bowl on the floor and forced to witness the torture of other prisoners. [end pull quote]

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Take action – make a difference

Call on your government to recognize the rights of refugee and other displaced women activists. Ask them to:

- Ensure that all asylum-seeking women human rights defenders (HRDs) have access to a fair and satisfactory asylum procedure, including access to adequate legal assistance and competent interpretation. Remind the authorities that everyone has a right to seek and enjoy asylum, and that no women HRDs should be returned to a country where they might face serious human rights abuses.
- Clarify what measures they have taken to ensure that asylum law, policy and practices are sensitive to the specific needs of asylum-seeking women HRDs.

To find out more about Amnesty International's work in this area, visit www.amnesty.org/refugees.

What you can do

I would like to join the Stop Violence Against Women campaign. Please send me more information.

I would like to join Amnesty International. Please send me details.

I would like to make a donation to support Amnesty International's work.

Credit card number:

Expiry date: Amount:

NAME:

ADDRESS:

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Signature:

Please send your form to the address in the box above or to:

Amnesty International, International Secretariat,
Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street,
London, WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom
or visit www.amnesty.org/actforwomen

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