

Women Human Rights Defenders Leaflets (Health)

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[Front cover]

Defending women's right to health

Defending women defending rights

(pic) © Reuters/Jorge Silva (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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Support in conflict

Bernadette

A sympathetic ear

Bernadette heads the counselling section of a local women’s organization in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where thousands of women and girls have been raped in the context of the conflict. The organization works to protect and promote human rights, particularly women’s and children’s rights. “Since we started, we’ve supported and listened to more than 900 women,” she says, “but we face many difficulties.”

Counsellors at the organization listen and advise women as best they can. Their clients are not only victims of rape, but have suffered all forms of sexual violence. Without money to pay for transport, many walk for miles to speak to someone at the centre.

“We listen to the women, try to help them psychologically, help them to get medical care,” says Bernadette. “We try to give them a small amount of money, because typically the soldiers who rape the women will also take everything they own, even down to their clothes and cooking pots.”

Overcoming obstacles

But workers at the organization face threats. Bernadette recalls how she was stopped on the street by three soldiers who “said that we exaggerate the rapes and tried to take the documents I was carrying.”

Bernadette highlights a need for training, well-stocked health centres and more reception centres closer to the communities where women need help. “And I also ask our own government to begin to punish the rapists,” she concludes, “because as long

as the rapists are left undisturbed, we can't repair the moral and psychological damage, and the women won't have the courage to look forward."

(pic) above: Rape survivors speak to an Amnesty International mission delegate in the Democratic Republic of Congo, March 2004. © AI (end pic)

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the soldiers who rape the women will also take everything they own, even down to their clothes and cooking pots [end pull quote]

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Protecting the right to health

Women activists champion the health needs of all

Whether as health care providers, legal professionals or family members, women human rights defenders (HRDs) help to improve access to essential health care services and information for all.

They continue to promote the right to health despite harassment, intimidation and other challenges from their government or community.

The "right to health" is the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to health contains both freedoms and entitlements. Among these freedoms are the right to be free from torture, as well as to control one's health and body, including one's sexuality and reproductive capacity. Individuals are also entitled to a system of health protection which, for example, provides equality of access to health care. The right to health includes the right to resources that have a direct impact on an individual's wellbeing, such as water, food, housing and access to health-related information.

In their efforts to protect and uphold the health needs of individuals, women HRDs promote preventive measures such as access to adequate nutrition and protection from unwanted pregnancy and infection, including HIV. They encourage access to general, maternal and mental health services. They advocate an end to harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and ensure access to health care for women at risk.

Women HRDs also work for appropriate medical and psychological care for women and men who have been sexually assaulted or who have suffered other gender-based violence, including domestic violence. They call for better medical documentation of sexual assaults so that perpetrators can be more effectively prosecuted. Women HRDs campaign for improvements in access to health care for residents of social care homes and for those deprived of liberty, including prisoners.

Such work often leads to clashes with traditional norms, values and practices which can leave women activists in this area vulnerable to threats and attack. In numerous countries, pressure is placed on health workers to force them to stop providing certain kinds of treatment or advice – for instance contraceptive advice – or treatment to

certain groups of people. For many years Amnesty International has documented cases in which health professionals have been subjected to torture and imprisonment for providing medical treatment to members of opposition groups. Health professionals may also be targeted for criticizing their government's health policy.

(pic) above: A home care AIDS team advises a 19-year-old woman in Murambinda Hospital, Zimbabwe, 2000. Both she and her child are HIV-positive.

cover: A health worker wears a fake bandage during a protest in Caracas, Venezuela, 11 June 2003. Medics demanded better conditions and more funds to protect the health system.

© Panos/Tim Nunn

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A voice that won't be silenced

Mao Hengfeng

Detained for speaking out

Mao Hengfeng was released from a "Re-education through Labour" facility in Shanghai, China, in September 2005. She was sent there in April 2004 for having petitioned the authorities for many years about human rights issues, including reproductive and labour rights.

While there, she was reportedly subjected to torture and ill-treatment. In October 2004, she was suspended from a ceiling for two days, severely beaten and denied food. She was also held in solitary confinement for short periods, strapped down to her bed and forcibly medicated.

Pregnancy and dismissal

This was not the first time that Mao Hengfeng had endured such treatment from the authorities. In 1988, the mother of twins was reportedly dismissed from her job because she was pregnant for a second time, in contravention of China's family planning regulations. She protested against the forced one-child policy, refused to have an abortion and was subsequently detained in a psychiatric hospital where she was forcibly medicated. Shortly after the premature birth of her daughter, she was dismissed from her job for missing 16 days of work.

In 1990 she was coerced into having an abortion when she was pregnant again.

Though released, Mao Hengfeng has reportedly been threatened by officials with "serious consequences" if she persists with her protests. Undaunted, she has continued her campaign and has suffered further abuses along with her husband, Wu Xuwei, as a result.

(pic) above: Mao Hengfeng outside the Shanghai petition office with her three daughters, China, June 2003. © www.secretchina.com (end pic)

[pull quote] In 1990 Mao Hengfeng was coerced into having an abortion [end pull quote]

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Take action – make a difference

Call on your government to encourage and protect women activists working to promote the right to health. Ask them to:

- Allow women human rights defenders (HRDs) working on the right to health to carry out their peaceful human rights activities without interference.
- Protect women HRDs working on health issues, including sexual and reproductive rights, especially where their work is seen to conflict with traditional norms and practices.
- Encourage health professionals to provide health care and advice to all regardless of political affiliation, ethnic background, gender or any other consideration.

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

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