Women’s rights are human rights -- the struggle persists

AI Index: ACT 77/02/00

Women in the world today

`All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights`  
*Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

All human beings are supposed to be guaranteed the same rights, regardless of who they are and their status in society. Yet women are routinely denied their rights around the world.

* Discriminatory laws and practices remain in many societies. More women and girls die each day because of various forms of gender-based discrimination and violence than as a result of any other type of human rights abuse.
* Every year a vast number of infant girls are killed simply because they are female. Millions of women are mutilated, battered to death, burned alive, stripped of their legal rights and bought and sold in an unacknowledged but international trade in slaves for domestic or sexual purposes.
* Human rights violations against women are rampant partly because the abuses remain largely hidden. In most countries, domestic violence is the cause of the majority of violent attacks against women even when it is prohibited by law.
* In many countries, women’s civil and political rights are violated primarily because they are prevented from exercising their economic, social and cultural rights fully. For example, countless numbers of women are denied access to economic resources on an equal footing with men, and have no right to — among other things — education and health, including reproductive health.

Women’s persistent and arduous struggle all over the world for equal rights is renowned. They have won on many fronts, including the adoption by the UN in 1979 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, more popularly known as the “Women’s Convention”.

165 of the UN’s 188 member states have ratified this Convention and are therefore obliged to take all the necessary steps to eliminate discrimination against women — the major obstacle to women’s enjoyment of their rights and attainment of equal status. Even though the Women’s Convention has had a tremendous impact on women’s lives in the past 20 years, no state has yet to realize fully the promises it contains for women. Amnesty International reaffirms the principle that “women’s rights are human rights” and commits itself to support the struggle by women for their human rights all over the world.

Amnesty International firmly believes that the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for women remains a key challenge for all states and for all of us. The continuing failure to protect women’s rights is reinforced by many governments’ lack of political will to bring about real change in the lives of women.

Women’s rights are human rights!

The rights outlined here are just some of the broad range of rights to which women are entitled, which also include the rights to health, work and education.

Know your rights!
You are entitled to all human rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind such as your race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or class
Rigid codes imposed by the Taleban — the ruling armed group in Afghanistan — severely restrict women’s freedom of movement, expression and association. Girls are not allowed to go to school and women may only work in the health sector. For much of the time they must remain indoors, almost like prisoners. If they do go out, they must be accompanied by close male relatives and wear clothes that conform to strict dress codes that further restrict their movement.

You may not be arrested or held arbitrarily. You have the right to challenge your detention in a court of law; if charged with a crime, you have the right to a fair trial
Rebiya Kadeer, 52, a well-known businesswoman from the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in China, was a member of China’s official delegation to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. She has been arbitrarily detained apparently because of her husband’s criticism of China’s treatment of the Uighurs — the majority ethnic group among the local population in the region — and her own activities. She founded the “Thousand Mothers Movement” in Urumqi to support socio-economic and entrepreneurial initiatives for and by Uighur women. In August 1999 she was arrested in Urumqi while on her way to meet representatives of the US Congress Research Service and was eventually charged with “providing secret information to foreigners”. She remains in Liudaowan jail, notorious for its torture and ill-treatment of prisoners.

You have the right to seek asylum from persecution in another country, including if you are at risk of gender-based abuses
Adelaide Abankwah fled Ghana for fear of female genital mutilation (FGM). She sought asylum in the USA. After two years of legal battles, she was granted asylum by the US Board of Immigration Appeals in 1999 after a federal court in New York decided that she had a well-founded fear of being subjected to FGM if returned home. A landmark US court case in 1996 ruled that fear of FGM can be a ground for granting asylum. Millions of women and girls continue to suffer the trauma of FGM in many countries.

You have the right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; all acts of torture are criminal offences and should be punished
Members of the Peruvian security forces have tortured women in their custody, including by raping or sexually abusing them. On 29 August 1996 Juana Ibarra Aguirre and her five-year-old daughter went to the “Monzón” military base in Huamalies province, department of Huánuco, in response to a call by a member of the base who had allegedly left a firearm in her shop. Mother and daughter were held incommunicado for 13 days and tortured and ill-treated. Officers repeatedly forced water, salt and detergent down Juana Ibarra’s nose until she choked. They burned her breasts with cigarettes and pulled her nipples with pliers until she bled. She was beaten and her nose was fractured. They also tied up and ill-treated her daughter and threatened to kill her unless Juana Ibarra accounted for the lost weapon. Later, Juana Ibarra was forced to take some tablets which left her unconscious. When she came around, she realized she had been raped. The case was reported to the Special Human Rights Prosecutor’s Office in the judicial district of Huánuco-Pasco, but to date no one has been brought to justice for the torture and ill-treatment of Juana Ibarra and her daughter.

You have the right to join and form trade unions
Dita Indah Sari, a labour rights activist connected to the People’s Democratic Party (Partai Rakyat Demokrati — PRD) in Indonesia, spent three years in prison for her peaceful activities defending workers’ rights. While in prison, she was elected Chair of the National Front for Indonesian Workers Struggle (FNPBI), a trade union. Since her release in July 1999 she has continued to play a key role in the movement for workers’ and democratic rights in Indonesia.

You have the right to work in safe conditions
Women around the world face dangerous working conditions. Particularly vulnerable are migrant workers.

In Saudi Arabia, the law and customs severely restrict women’s freedom of movement, and workers’ basic rights are not protected. When foreign women employed as domestic workers are ill-treated by their employers, restrictions on their freedom of movement and lack of access to legal protection against abuses that take place in private homes make them vulnerable when they come into contact with the law. They often have no money or influence and little understanding of Arabic or Saudi Arabian society, law and traditions, which puts them at risk of abuse and denial of their basic rights by the state.

Thousands of foreign women domestic workers were brought to the United Kingdom (UK) by their employers from abroad. Highly restrictive and discriminatory legislation in the UK prevented them from leaving abusive employers and seeking new jobs. If they did so, they risked deportation. After years of campaigning, these women won better employment and immigration rights under new legislation, which now regards them as workers in their own right and offers them protection under the law.

You have the right to protection by the state from all forms of violence, including from within the family

In Bangladesh, many young women have been disfigured in acid attacks after they rejected suitors or were involved in dowry disputes. Ajufa Khatum was asleep when her rejected suitor threw acid into her face, blinding her permanently. Responsibility for these abuses rests with the government if it systematically fails to bring these attackers to justice and neglects its obligations to protect women against this form of violence.

For 11 years Indravani Pamela Ramjattan from Trinidad and Tobago suffered appalling domestic abuse by her common-law husband. Countless other women in the country suffer from abuse and violence in their home because of the state’s failure to protect and support them. Indravani Ramjattan has now spent more than eight years in prison for the murder of her common-law husband. During her trial, her physical and mental state was never assessed by the court and for over a year she was not provided with a lawyer. She was convicted of murder and told she would be hanged. In October 1999, after spending four terrifying years on death row, the Court of Appeal reduced her sentence to manslaughter, but ruled that she should serve a further five years in prison.

You are entitled as a refugee or internally displaced person to protection from torture (including rape), ill-treatment and other threats to your physical safety and integrity

Many cases of rape of women and young girls by members of the Burundian security forces are reported to have taken place in or near regroupment camps, or during counter-insurgency operations. In September 1999, 260,000 people in the province of Rural Bujumbura, which surrounds the capital Bujumbura, were forced to leave their homes and were forcibly relocated to over 50 camps in the province. Many of the camps are inaccessible and conditions are appalling. Amnesty International has received scores of reports of the rape of women and young girls by members of the security forces in the camps. Little or no medical care is available. The camps are controlled by the armed forces.

Yudaya Nanyonga, an asylum-seeker from Uganda, was assigned in 1998 to the maximum security section of the York County Prison, USA, where she was stripped naked, injected with sedatives and placed in a four-point restraint by prison officials. She suffered loss of memory and frequent nightmares as a result. She was eventually granted asylum in August 1999.

What you can do
* support the work of women’s groups in your community who are involved in protecting women’s human rights
* report to the authorities any human rights abuses of women and girls
* help raise awareness about women’s human rights in your family and community
* set up support groups to protect and promote women’s rights in your community
* find out what your government has committed itself to at the UN on human rights; support
the work of organizations demanding government accountability in fulfilling these commitments

For more information on women’s rights, contact:
International Women’s Tribune Centre (IWTC), 777 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA.
Tel: (1) 212-687-8633
e-mail: iwtc@igc.apc.org

UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM),
304 East 45th St, 15th Floor,
New York, NY 10017, USA.
Tel: (1) 212-906-640
Fax: (1) 212-906-6705
e-mail: unifem@undp.org
website: www.unifem.undp.org

For more information on Amnesty International and its work on women, contact:

captions

Women in Sri Lanka’s capital Colombo demanding equal rights on International Women’s Day. © Reuters

From Rights of Women (A Guide to the Most Important UN Treaties on Women’s Human Rights), a 1998 publication by the International Women’s Tribune Centre, USA

(Left) A young woman, Mayela Rojas, attends a candlelight vigil in Central America to call attention to violence against women. © Reuters/(Centre) Students protest outside the United Nations office in Jakarta, Indonesia, to mark International Women’s Day. © Reuters/(Right) Chechen women run for cover after hearing explosions nearby the village of Tsotsin-Yurt during the Russian-Chechen conflict in October 1999. © Reuters

Front cover: Mother and child in Ghana. © Mark Edwards/Still Pictures

Women displaced by the armed conflict in El Salvador learn to read and write. © Jenny Matthews

Women demonstrating outside the Palestinian Legislative Council, 1999 © LAW

Ethnic Albanian women refugees from Kosovo in a camp in the Albanian town of Kukës. © Reuters

Dita Indah Sari © Reuters

Bena Akhter, aged 17, a survivor of an acid attack, works with a non-governmental organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to help other victims of acid attacks. © Martin Adler/Panos

Zimbabwean riot police beat a woman in Harare during a protest against government corruption, 1998. Women continue to fight for their rights despite setbacks, such as a 1999 court decision which effectively declared unmarried women to be minors. © Reuters